



## Sabre-rattling

Direct talks are the only way out to de-escalate the crisis in the Korean peninsula

North Korea's adventurism continues unabated. On Sunday, it tested what it claims was a "hydrogen bomb", its sixth nuclear weapons test, cocking a snook at non-proliferation and international test ban laws, as well as at U.S. President Donald Trump. Even as the tests drew global condemnation, this was clearly a response to Mr. Trump's sabre-rattling rhetoric claiming that the U.S. would rain "fire and fury" over the country and implying that its nuclear weapons were "locked and loaded" to respond to any threat from North Korea. Mr. Trump's response to Sunday's development was to ratchet up threats, besides calling out U.S. ally South Korea for "appeasement" and threatening to cut trade ties with countries that conduct any form of business with the North Koreans. Clearly the tough talk is not working – it is only pushing North Korea's totalitarian regime to take even more provocative steps in a quest to attain the status of a *de facto* nuclear power. In response to the exacerbated tensions in the region, South Korea and Japan have significantly enhanced their defence capabilities, including spending on missile defence. South Korea's new President Moon Jae-in, who is in favour of talks, has now accepted the U.S.'s missile defence system, THAAD, which is opposed locally by many South Koreans.

North Korea relies on increasing militarisation and show of missile and nuclear prowess for various reasons. Part of its ploy is to convince its impoverished and isolated citizenry of the need for the country to attain military parity in light of the presence of the U.S. military shield in South Korea and Japan. Another part of it is to justify the years of the Kim family rule, as these tests add to the myth of strong leadership by its 33-year-old, third-generation dictator, Kim Jong-un. The unpalatable prospect of the escalation of a possible military conflict into a nuclear war is also a way to stave off any external intervention against the dictatorship, the likes of which were seen in Iraq and Libya. Mr. Trump's latest Twitter threat against nations doing business with North Korea is clearly targeted at China, the only regime with some degree of influence – though it is not clear exactly how much – over the North Korean regime. The Chinese, however, seem to be willing to live with a nuclear North Korea as opposed to applying drastic trade sanctions that could lead to a crippled economy and a refugee crisis besides other unpredictable responses by a beleaguered regime. In light of all this, it is important to de-escalate the conflict by having direct talks involving the U.S., China, South Korea and North Korea. Multilateral talks are, in fact, by far the best option, given the trigger- and Twitter-happy supreme leaders in Pyongyang and in Washington DC.

## Down but not out

The failed PSLV attempt to launch a navigation satellite is unlikely to affect future missions

After 39 consecutive successful launches, the Indian Space Research Organisation had almost made it appear that launching satellites was indeed child's play when it used its workhorse rocket, the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle. But the PSLV, which has been placing satellites in their respective orbits for the past 24 years, faced a setback on August 31. The PSLV-C39 rocket carrying the eighth satellite of the Indian Regional Navigation Satellite System (IRNSS) had a normal lift-off and flight events but ended in an unsuccessful mission. The heat-shield failed to separate, resulting in the satellite separation occurring within the shield. This is just the second instance when the PSLV has had an unsuccessful mission in all of its 41 launches; the first setback was back in 1993. Over the years, the PSLV has played a pivotal role in ISRO's programme, and this February it set a world record by launching 104 satellites in one go. With such an enviable track record, the failure of the mission this time almost comes as a surprise. This is especially so as the lift-off and the stage separation of the first and second stages, which are the most challenging parts of the mission, went off smoothly. In comparison, the heat-shield separation is a relatively minor operation which takes place once the rocket crosses an altitude of 100-110 km, and the temperature in the absence of the heat-shield will no longer damage the satellite. The failed mission serves as a reminder that utmost care and scrutiny are required before every single launch. While scientists are working to identify the cause of the anomaly in the heat-shield separation event, the failed mission should have no impact on future launches involving the vehicle.

The failure of the mission is particularly disheartening as the IRNSS-1H satellite was jointly assembled and tested by ISRO and a Bengaluru-based private company, the first time a single private company, rather than a consortium, was involved in building a satellite. The satellite was in no way to blame for the failure of the mission. The space organisation has thrown open its doors to private companies to build as many as 18 spacecraft a year beginning mid or end-2018. The IRNSS-1H satellite was launched as a replacement for the IRNSS-1A satellite, which became inoperational in terms of surveillance following the failure of all three atomic clocks. As only six of the seven satellites are operational, there are gaps in the navigation data sent by the IRNSS. With the failure of this mission, India will have to wait for some more time before the next mission to send a replacement for the IRNSS-1A satellite is ready. The IRNSS was created so that the country would not need to rely on American-based GPS data – the encrypted, accurate positioning and navigation information provided by the system will make Indian military operations self-reliant.

# Making up for lost time

In the past half century, India and Myanmar have lost the habit of thinking of themselves as neighbours



GAUTAM MUKHOPADHYAYA

Prime Minister Narendra Modi embarks on an official bilateral visit to Myanmar from September 5. This follows upon his earlier ASEAN-related visit in November 2014 and former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit in May 2012. Though overdue, taking into account Mr. Modi's 'Neighborhood First', 'Act East' and diaspora policies, international and domestic developments since then have clarified the political context of the visit to an extent not possible earlier. These include the impact of elections in Myanmar in November 2015 and in the U.S. in late 2016 that brought Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) to power in Myanmar and Donald Trump in the U.S.; the finalisation of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its assertiveness in the South China Sea; the India-China border stand-off; and Myanmar's travails over the peace process, the Rohingya issue and the economy.

### The Rohingya crisis

The visit is taking place amidst some of the worst violence involving Rohingya militants and the Myanmar security forces ever resulting in a full-fledged international crisis triggered by large-scale, co-ordinated attacks by Rohingya militants under a recently formed Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA, now designated as 'terrorists') against government and security outposts in northern Rakhine state on August 25-26.

The attacks and clearance operations against it have resulted in some 400 (and mounting) deaths, mostly Rohingya; widespread arson and burning of villages allegedly by both sides; displacement of thousands within Rakhine state and across the Naf river to Bangladesh; and severe disruption in food and humanitarian supplies. The Modi government has unequivocally condemned the "terrorist" attacks at a time when the security forces and Ms. Suu Kyi herself face heightened international criticism on the handling of the issue. This is likely to resonate in Mr. Modi's favour in Myanmar.

The visit is also taking place against the backdrop of uncertainties in the future India-China relationship caused by the now defused Doklam stand-off and the BRICS summit. Sensitive to its location between the two Asian giants, Myanmar is keen to leverage the growth potential of good relations with Asia's two fastest growing economies. But it is also wary of its economic dependence on China, characterised by a largely extractive relationship focussed on natural resources and access to the Bay of Bengal where it already has an oil and gas terminal, concession to build a Special Economic Zone and seeks a possibly controlling stake in a natural deep sea harbour at Kyaukpadaung that could form part of its ambitious BRI. The shadow of China is thus likely to loom large over the visit. Myanmar would welcome closer economic ties with India to balance and offset its dominating ties with China. Characterisations of a 'Great Game East' between India and China are, however, greatly overstated.

fundamentals of the bilateral relationship: the substantive development partnership, trade issues, and revival of cultural and people-to-people ties. Defence relations too have been growing steadily, especially between the two armies and navies. Security related talks have been taking place at the National Security Adviser (NSA) level. A number of bilateral agreements in the areas of capacity building, health, culture, and development, and one on maritime security are on the anvil, building on India's nearly \$2 billion development partnership with Myanmar so far. These cover large directly funded and executed connectivity infrastructure projects like the Trilateral Highway, the Kaladan Multi-modal Transport and Transit Project; high value capacity and human development projects like the Myanmar Institute of Information Technology in Mandalay; more modest ones in industry, IT, health, entrepreneurship and language training; small border area development projects in Chin and Nagaland areas of Myanmar; and soft lines of credit for other infrastructure projects amounting to nearly \$750 million. Much of this still remains to be utilised.

Though this may not be adequately realised even in Myanmar, few countries are undertaking such large infrastructure and human development projects out of government funds as India is. When they are all completed and fully operational by about 2020, they will amount to a substantial mass and base for an expanded relationship.

### Focus on basics

Beyond these topical issues, and the issue of Indian insurgent groups in Myanmar, which remain a matter of concern, the optics of Mr. Modi's much anticipated visit will most likely be taken up by the

splitting this ethnic Assamese vote base, some of which still retained its loyalties to the regionalist agenda. Thus the BJP was able to mount a successful campaign that melded its Hindutva agenda with Assamese subnational aspirations. The dissonance inherent in this force-fitting is however something an electoral campaign can paper over but which everyday governance must negotiate.

Governments in Dispur have historically tended to pander to the Assamese caste Hindus, to the marginalisation of significant sections of the population, to the extent that even prominent leaders from other communities such as the late Santosh Mohan Dev from Silchar, and Paban Singh Ghatowar from Dibrugarh – both Congressmen and from the Bengali and tea tribe communities, respectively – have often had to chart out a ministerial career at the Centre instead of Guwahati. It is this hubris of jatiyotabad (regionalism) and 'Assam for Assamese' that the BJP is running into as it seeks to sublimate that sentiment into the broader rubric of a Hindutva identity.

The project has already weathered choppy waters in the Centre's attempt to extend citizenship to minorities persecuted in India's neighbouring countries, a Bill cur-

Lamentably, the same cannot be said of commercial trade and investments. Both stand on narrow bases, primary agricultural and forest products from Myanmar in the case of trade, and oil and gas in case of investments, underlining a strong need to expand, diversify and upgrade commercial ties in ways that also contribute to Myanmar's development needs and meet India's \$3 billion trade target set in 2012.

To an extent not often realised, trade has been the keystone of our post-independence relationship that survived both the nationalisation of the 1960s by the military government of Ne Win and the Western economic sanctions since the crackdown on democratic aspirations starting from the 1980s. Critical to this trade are Indian imports of beans and pulses that play a vital part in our food security and Myanmar's economy. Standing at around a million tonnes and \$1 billion in value, over 90% of which is exported to India, it is vital to Myanmar's farmers and foreign exchange earnings, greater even in the value of its exports of rice to China that are prone to periodic restrictions, tough inspections and crackdowns on informal trade at the Myanmar-China border. Past attempts to open a limited market for Myanmar rice in India as an alternative to China, have floundered on vested public distribution interests in India and should be re-opened.

Unfortunately, the recent decision to impose quantitative restrictions on the trade in pulses does exactly the opposite, notwithstanding recent relaxations on orders already paid for. In part, this is because of our own concerns *vis-à-vis* speculative global trade in pulses that has resulted in incentives to increase and protect domestic production in India and induce Myanmar to move towards a government-channelised trade to stabilise prices and in part on account of resistance to such a move in Myanmar.

Older ties Underlining our strong cultural, people-to-people and diaspora relationship, Mr. Modi will also visit

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Bagan where the Archaeological Survey of India is in the final stages of a face-lift to the venerated Ananda Temple and where the Cabinet has approved Indian assistance for the restoration of pagodas damaged by the powerful 2016 earthquake; and Yangon, where he will address the Indian-origin and Indian community and visit places religious, cultural and historical importance.

In his official meetings with President Htin Kyaw and State Counsellor Suu Kyi in Nay Pyi Taw, Mr. Modi is likely to forge a bold strategic vision for bilateral relations, taking advantage of the consensus cutting across political parties and civil and military pillars of Myanmar's polity towards stronger ties with India and project India's economic and strategic footprint in the region between the Bay of Bengal to the South China Sea.

Key elements of this vision could be greater attention to emerging political forces, ethnic states and the peace process as part of our democratic political outreach; converting our investments in the Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan to fuller trade and investment corridors and use Indian investment in the Greater Mekong Sub-region as an arm of our foreign policy with a focus on agriculture, agro-industries and light industry; a broader development partnership reaching to the grassroots with the help of civil society; specific prongs in our 'Act East' policy through the North-east and Bodh Gaya as a pilgrimage centre; and a new political approach to the IIG issue (Indian Insurgent Groups) beyond an intelligence-based approaches. These could perhaps find expression in a joint document sooner or later.

The objective should be to restore the balance in Myanmar's relations between East and South Asia that has been lost with the eastward tilt in Myanmar's external relations over 50 years of insular military rule during which the two countries have forgotten the habit of thinking of themselves psychologically as immediate neighbours.

Gautam Mukhopadhyaya was Ambassador to Syria, Afghanistan and Myanmar before retiring from service in May 2016

## Mind the mandate

The BJP walks a tightrope in Assam to reconcile its wider agenda with subnational aspirations



ABDUS SALAM

Who has the greater authority to interpret an electoral mandate? Is it the commentator with their post-haste explanations? Or is it the politician at the centre of it all who criss-crossed constituencies and waded into the crowds on the poll stump? Senior Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, the putative number two in the Assam Cabinet and widely credited as one of the architects of Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) first ever win in the State in the Assembly elections last year, thinks it's decidedly the latter.

Mr. Sarma, especially, and Sarbananda Sonowal, now Chief Minister, mounted the BJP's campaign on the rallying cry of 'jati, mati, bheti' (community, land and home), which resonated with the Assamese population and resulted in a landslide for the National Democratic Alliance, ending 15 years of Congress rule. But attempts to inject a Delhi-Nagpur agenda in the State, from the now-on-hold plan to introduce Sanskrit in schools to the Ganga-like deifica-

tion of its arterial river during the government-organised Namami Brahmaputra festival, have sparked some unease.

The latest government salvo is the setting up of 22 Deen Dayal Upadhyaya colleges in the State, which led to an outcry of excess, and the counter-question of whether Assam didn't have enough home-grown luminaries to be acknowledged and memorialised.

### A new interpretation

As the State government brazens it out, it is Mr. Sarma as Education Minister who is leading from the front. He has clarified just what 'jati, mati, bheti' he was talking about during the electoral campaign – of an inclusive, pan-Indian identity where Assam, as part of the national mainstream, becomes an exemplar among Indian States; and definitely not a parochial son-of-the-soil pitch for the Assamese populace. Moreover, he reasoned, the BJP's rich haul of 61 seats – and 88 for the NDA – wasn't courtesy the (Assamese-dominated) Brahmaputra Valley alone; the party won handsomely in the Bengali-dominated Barak Valley and other parts of the State as well.

If Mr. Sarma's recourse to redefining – or restating, as he sees it – the mandate appears to betray the government's discomfiture, at the heart of it is the disparate nature of



electoral vote banks the party tapped into during its successful campaign.

### Assamese dominance

Barring the Janata wave of 1978-79, the State had been a Congress preserve until the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) swept to power in 1985 on the back of the six-year-long Assam agitation. The BJP, prior to its spectacular performance in the 2014 general election in which it won seven of the State's 14 Lok Sabha seats, had made inroads in the Barak Valley as early as the 1990s apart from urban concentrations such as Guwahati. While the Hindu Bengali voter has had a longer history of going with the party, her Assamese counterpart's overwhelming support is of recent vintage, 2014 constituting the point of departure. Part of the reason why the BJP was compelled to tie up with a weakened AGP in the last Assembly elections was the urgency of not

renewly being examined by a joint parliamentary committee. Aimed in part at rehabilitating Hindu migrants from Bangladesh, the proposal is being vociferously opposed by regional (read Assamese caste Hindu-dominated) outfits including the AGP, the All Assam Students' Union and Asom Jatiyatbadi Yuva Chhatra Parishad. It is telling that on this issue, the ethnic Assamese fronts are united in opposition with Badruddin Ajmal's All India United Democratic Front – a party largely seen as espousing the cause of the State's Bengali-origin Muslims – although from very different standpoints.

The State government has demurred, suggesting that this Malthusian burden be shared by other parts of the country too. Meanwhile, an interim report of a committee tasked with protection of land rights of the indigenous people has recommended that the base year for reservation of land for indigenous people and granting of land rights to citizens should be 1951. The underlying principle behind these proposals – of protecting the indigenous population – is at loggerheads with the new expansive spin to jati-mati-bheti. But since when did contradictions come in the way of a juggling act?

### Balancing act

The project has already weathered choppy waters in the Centre's attempt to extend citizenship to minorities persecuted in India's neighbouring countries, a Bill cur-

that the aims of the weekly RE's column to be something entirely different. The trend, in this column, to discuss issues concerning the general practices of contemporary journalism instead of specific issues concerning *The Hindu* has been going on for long. *The Hindu* is certainly welcome to carry content of the type the RE creates, yet isn't this better done by someone else? The RE is supposed to be in a purposeful position, addressing readers' issues.

DEVIKANTHAM, Alappuzha, Kerala  
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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.

### Reshuffle 2017

While Nirmala Sitharaman's appointment as a full-fledged Defence Minister is a moment to celebrate, one looks forward to a time when such events no longer make news ("In Cabinet rejig, PM Modi rewards performance" Sept. 4). Insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir and the Northeast, territorial disputes with China and Pakistan combined with growing ties between China and Pakistan, China's influence over India's neighbours, the need to modernise the Army, increase the defence Budget in terms of GDP, and also ensure more transfer of technology from the West are tough issues she faces.

SHREYASHI PANJA, New Delhi

■ The rejig reaffirms the fact that the Prime Minister does

not have many political compulsions to contend with. In the absence of the required talent pool in the party, he has endeavoured to enhance the performance levels of the Cabinet by infusing known bureaucratic talent. Only time will tell whether this experiment proves successful or not. While the promotion of the talented and articulate Ms. Sitharaman is to be appreciated, to interpret this as women's empowerment is erroneous. Though we have had many women in important positions, even as President, Prime Minister and Speaker, there has not been much improvement in the conditions of millions of Indian women.

KOSARAJU CHANDRAMOULI, Hyderabad

■ Our memory is not short in remembering that soon after assuming power, the Prime Minister said that there would be "less government and maximum governance". More than three years have passed since the BJP government took over from the Congress, but most of the promises made by the party remain to be fulfilled. Vested interests, reportedly enjoying the patronage of the present dispensation, are bent on disturbing communal harmony. Economic reforms have not yet gained speed while the issue of unemployment remains unsolved. More tellingly, the RBI's report on demonetisation has dented the government's claims of its having fulfilled its purpose.

JAYANT MUKHERJEE, Kolkata

■ The reason for the reshuffle was supposed to be with a focus on the 2019 Lok Sabha election. The non-performers have been shunted out, but most of the changes are baffling. Why was Suresh Prabhu, who was doing good work, removed and given another portfolio? The induction of a few retired bureaucrats is bizarre. Does it mean with so many elected BJP members, Mr. Modi couldn't rely on them and so he had to call for outside talent? Ms. Sitharaman might be a good speaker but is this a reason enough to have her head such an important portfolio overlooking the claims of other senior and experienced persons?

D.B.N. MURTHY, Bengaluru

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Kannanthanam, bureaucrat turned politician, is a clever political formula to build up the BJP in Kerala. The focus on minority representation is with a plan in mind to showcase the party as one with a pan-Indian presence ("Why not an inclusive Cabinet: Kannanthanam", September 4).  
B. VEERAKUMARAN THAMPI, Thiruvananthapuram

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