



Slippery slick

The Centre has tied itself up in knots over its policy on oil pricing

After a sharp fall at the beginning of the year, oil prices have risen dramatically in recent weeks. The price of Brent crude has risen by around \$10 since it touched a short-term low of around \$62 in early February, hitting its highest mark since late 2014. Tensions in West Asia after U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to strike Syria helped push up prices. But it is important to separate short-term volatility in oil prices owing to geopolitical tensions from longer-term trends in the oil market. In its latest market report, the International Energy Association (IEA) noted that with oil prices ruling over \$70, the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) has “accomplished” its goal of ending the glut in global oil supply. Notably, OPEC cut production by around 201,000 barrels a day in March compared to February. Yet, total world oil supply actually rose by 180,000 barrels a day in March, as output from non-OPEC countries, including the U.S., has been increasing in response to higher oil prices. IEA executive director Fatih Birol said last week that the next wave of shale supply may be in the offing as oil prices have remained high for some time now.

In India, rapidly rising international crude oil prices have failed to push local petrol and diesel prices upwards in equal measure. The retail selling prices of petrol and diesel across major Indian cities have in fact risen by less than a rupee since the beginning of April. That is, they are not in sync with the upward rise in crude oil prices. Last week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for more ‘responsible’ oil prices, which he said have been in “roller coaster” mode for too long. Oil prices, he argued, need to factor in the interests of both consumer and producer. This assertion, along with the talk of allying with China and other Asian countries now to buy oil from OPEC members at lower prices, would have held more weight if the government's actions matched the sentiment. It has imposed high duties on petroleum products ever since crude oil prices started moderating in 2014, but has been reluctant to scale down those duties in the face of rising prices, leading to record pump level prices. This clearly doesn't benefit the consumer. Now, with the general elections about a year away and critical Assembly polls in Karnataka just a month away, the Centre is being cautious not to have higher oil import costs passed on to consumers. This flies in the face of the pricing freedom it had ostensibly granted to the oil marketing companies and packaged as a major deregulation reform. So its stance hasn't benefited the producers either, as is reflected in their falling stock prices. How the Centre responds to rising international crude oil prices was always going to be the litmus test of its commitment to fuel price deregulation. In the current situation, it appears that the government has only tied itself up in knots over the petroleum pricing policy, and with it, its reformist credentials.

In the Lords' hands

The U.K. government faces a tough Brexit week with a crucial vote in Parliament

Theresa May's government faces another bracing week in its Brexit calendar. With the House of Lords expected to vote in favour of continuing in the common customs union, this may set the tone for Parliament's final vote later this year on Britain's withdrawal from the European Union. This week's vote on an amendment to the exit bill is likely to be a replay of the scenario that played out in the House of Lords last year, when peers across party lines handed a bruising defeat to Prime Minister May on the rights of millions of EU citizens in post-Brexit Britain. The controversy over the future status of London in Europe's customs union has taken centrestage in recent months, deepening divisions among the ruling Conservatives over a hard or soft exit. Fuelling the rift was a leaked Whitehall secret analysis in January of the economic fallout of leaving the EU. It forecast a meagre 0.2-0.4% rise in GDP from a U.K. trade deal with countries outside the bloc, including the U.S. and China. Meanwhile, Jeremy Corbyn, the opposition Labour leader, has signalled a shift in his party's stance and called for remaining in the customs union as the only realistic guarantee of duty-free access to the EU after Brexit. The veteran eurosceptic's current disposition to forge strong links with the single market is significant. Staying in a customs union will limit the loss of trade with EU. It would also reduce the risk of a hard border between Britain and the Republic of Ireland, a prospect that Dublin sees as a potential danger to the integrity of the 1998 Good Friday Accord with Northern Ireland.

However, sharing the same tariff rates within the EU would severely limit Britain's room for manoeuvre in negotiating trade agreements with non-EU nations. Whereas a customs deal is necessarily restricted to commerce in goods, bilateral trade pacts typically include several menu items besides goods, such as services and investment. The U.K.'s retention of the EU customs union would therefore subject London's trade deals with third countries to the tariff terms they may have already settled with the EU. Such an eventuality would expose the bluster behind the Brexiteers' rhetoric of 'taking back control' of the country's economic and political sovereignty. In the event of a defeat in the House of Lords, Ms. May would have the option of going to the Commons, where she has a slender majority. But there is no denying the fluid state of the negotiations over Britain's withdrawal, or Brussels' increasingly strong position when it comes to dictating the terms of the departure. The hope must be that all the parties concerned will make the best of a rather bad situation.

Towards a regional reset?

Bold moves to normalise ties with China and Pakistan will enhance India's standing



SUHASINI HAIDAR

Change often comes unannounced, and the government's foreign policy moves over the past few months represent an unannounced but profound shift in its thinking about the neighbourhood. This could change the course of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy before the general election next year.

On the mend

The most obvious in this is what is now being called the “reset” with China. While the trigger for the rapprochement between the two neighbours was the peaceful resolution of the Doklam standoff and Mr. Modi's meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Xiamen last year, the outcome of the easing of tensions is being seen in New Delhi's public postures this year.

To begin with, the government has taken care not to respond with any heat to reports of the Chinese build-up at Doklam. Construction by the People's Liberation Army of new bases, bunkers and helipads, as well its troops staying in the erstwhile grazing grounds there through the winter is far from normal activity. Keeping its responses cool, New Delhi has been repeating that the Doklam standoff point is untouched and Chinese construction on their side of the boundary is “not a threat” to India. The government has also gone to some lengths to tone down planned celebrations marking the anniversary of the Dalai Lama's arrival from Tibet. New Delhi and Beijing have now embarked on a flurry of high-level visits that are meant to lead up to a summit meeting between the two leaders; they may even meet more than once. The

shift has given rise to speculation that the two sides are intent on making significant progress in smoothening ties on outstanding issues such as boundary negotiations and also narrowing the trade deficit, an issue discussed during the Chinese Commerce Minister's visit to India recently.

This flexibility is also mirrored in the government's dealings in the South Asian region. Despite several appeals by the Maldivian opposition, and nudges from the U.S., the Modi government decided not to exert hard power in bringing Maldives President Abdullah Yameen around after he declared a state of emergency in the country. Nor did it engage China in a confrontation when Mr. Yameen sought Beijing's support in this regard. The government remained silent as Male went a step further and held discussions with Pakistan's Army Chief, Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa, on joint patrolling of its Exclusive Economic Zone, an area of operation in the Indian Ocean considered to be India's domain.

With Nepal, instead of seeing red when a victorious Prime Minister K.P. Oli made it clear that he would step up engagement with China in infrastructure development, India rolled out the red carpet for him earlier this month. Nor did India raise concern over Nepal's Constitution which had sparked the confrontation between India and Nepal in 2015-16. There has also been outreach to Bhutan and Bangladesh in recent weeks. Both Bhutan and Bangladesh are to hold elections this year, and with incumbent governments more favourably disposed to New Delhi than their challengers in the opposition, the results will have an impact on India's influence in these countries as well.

Quiet progress with Pakistan

One area of foreign policy where few would bet money on a reset, namely Pakistan, has also seen



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some quiet movement. This year, the government admitted in Parliament for the first time that National Security Adviser (NSA) Ajit Doval had met his Pakistani counterpart, Nasser Khan Janjua, as a part of “established channels of communications at various levels” between the two sides in the past few years, post-Pathankot. Officials have confirmed that talks between the two NSAs have also taken place on the sidelines of conferences as well, and quite regularly telephonically. Meanwhile, the resolution of the standoff over the treatment of diplomats in Delhi and Islamabad indicates that neither government has the appetite for escalation at this point.

All around, it would appear that India's hard power strategy in the region is being replaced with a more conciliatory one. However, the next steps will be defined not by a quiet or defensive approach to redefining India's foreign policy in the region, but with a more bold and proactive one. The reset with China will work only if there are transactional dividends for both New Delhi and Beijing, in case the two governments go back to the default antagonism of the past after the summit meetings. Two issues on which both governments can show flexibility are China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and India's bid for Nuclear Suppliers

At home and in exile

We need to adequately plan for internal migration due to climate change



SUJATHA BYRAVAN

At the height of the Syrian and Rohingya crises, much of the world's attention turned to forced displacement and refugees. Both exemplified the typical conditions under which people are forcibly displaced: war, political persecution, economic instability and repression. Still, most of the world's migration is internal, i.e. within the same country. Among the tens of millions displaced in 2015, 21.3 million were refugees, but 40.8 million were internally displaced. People usually change their homes to improve household income, for marriage or other purposes relating to family.

With climate change, however, its worsening slow onset effects such as droughts, effects from sea level rise and water shortages will cause many more to leave their homes and move to safer places. Such migration may be a choice in the initial stages; for instance, a young member may travel to a city close by during a drought to increase his or her family's income. But as the stress becomes more

severe, the decision to move may be forced. The gradual rise in sea levels wherein people are compelled to leave their island nations in the Pacific and Indian Oceans and become climate exiles is one such ongoing process that will likely increase out-migration over time

Why people move

In “Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration”, a recent report by the World Bank, it is estimated that in Latin America, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa over 143 million people would be forced to move within borders by 2050 as a result of slow onset climate events alone. In the worst-case scenario, about 40 million of these migrants would be in South Asia, which is the most populous of the regions studied, with a number of climate change effects anticipated.

The report examines countries in East Africa, South Asia and Central America more closely. Here, it dives deep into the conditions in Ethiopia, Bangladesh and Mexico. Three possible scenarios are described: high greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions along with unequal development paths, regarded as the pessimistic reference scenario; an inclusive development scenario with high GHG emissions but development paths that improve access to services for the



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poor and consider their priorities and unmet needs; and a climate-friendly scenario involving lower GHG emissions but with unequal development.

South Asia is characterised by rain-fed farmland in large parts of the region. With variability in the monsoons and warmer temperatures, crop failures will lead to migration from the Gangetic plains and from the rice-growing northeast of Bangladesh and the inundated coasts. In the pessimistic scenario, the numbers forced to move internally in South Asia are expected to increase six-fold between 2020 and 2050 and will continue to rise beyond 2050 without appropriate climate action. Even in the inclusive development and climate-friendly scenarios, tens of millions will be forced to migrate. While people normally gravitate to big cities, those along the coast such as Mumbai, Chennai, Chittagong and Dhaka will themselves be vulnerable to storm surges and

Group (NSG) membership.

On the NSG, China could remove its block to India's membership by adopting a more inclusive approach within the nuclear export control organisation. Indian membership, which the Modi government seems to have made its objective, will only strengthen the international nuclear regime. Even if withdrawal of China's objections does not soften the objections of more hardline “non-proliferationists” or Non-Proliferation Treaty-proponents, the goodwill from such a move would propel India-China relations forward.

On the BRI, if there is political will on both sides, they needn't look too far for creative solutions around India's three concerns: on territorial integrity, transparency of projects and their sustainability. The solution to the first is contained in a proposal under consideration – to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan. While it may have not been the outcome discussed, the shift from the CPEC to what could be called PACE or the Pakistan-Afghanistan-China Economic corridor would necessitate a shift away from projects in Gilgit-Baltistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Those projects may still be built and funded by China, but then would not constitute a part of the BRI route; as a result, India's concerns on sovereignty could be dispensed with.

Meanwhile, several countries, from Europe to Central and East Asia, are now echoing India's concerns about the environmental and debt trap risks that BRI projects pose. India could take the lead in creating an international template for infrastructure and connectivity proposals, one that would seek to engage China and other donor countries in a structured approach towards debt financing. This would win India goodwill in the neighbourhood too, where every other country (apart from Bhutan) has signed on

other effects from sea level rise.

The poor would be the worst affected by these slow onset events and most of them would migrate out of rural areas to nearby urban settlements, which would be cities and the peri-urban surroundings. Such “hotspots” of in and out migration would be stressed for natural resources, public services and livelihoods. In India, areas between Chennai and Bengaluru have been highlighted in the report along with those around Mexico City, Guatemala City and Nairobi. In India, there are already signs of unplanned and frontier-led growth in peri-urban areas. Past experience shows that planning that ignores the ecosystem services provided by local natural resources such as water tanks and forested areas generates further problems particularly for the poorest and most vulnerable.

The implications of these internal migrations will be significant for development in the areas and for the lives of these people. Therefore, understanding migration patterns, getting better socioeconomic data on migration and preparing in advance through appropriate planning become critical. The scenarios used in the Bank report could be extended to cover other time periods and could also be more localised. Current climate modelling methods are not accurate at high resolutions for local

to the BRI, but has felt alienated by India's rigid opposition to the initiative.

SAARC re-engagement

However, the real tipping point in India's regional reset will come if the government also decides to reconsider its opposition to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit this year, with Pakistan as the host. At a press conference recently, the Foreign Secretary repeated India's concerns over cross-border terrorism from Pakistan, saying: “Given the current state of play where there is cross-border terrorism and where this is a disruptive force in the region, it is difficult in such circumstances to proceed with [SAARC].” But the argument is beginning to wear thin.

Afghanistan, which supported India's move to pull out of the SAARC summit in Islamabad in 2016 following the Uri attacks, is engaging with Pakistan again; Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Pakistan Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi signed a seven-point Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity early this month. Sri Lanka and Nepal, both sympathetic to India's outrage over Uri, are pushing for a summit this year; their sentiments were conveyed publicly by Mr. Oli in Delhi, and by Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena on his visit to Islamabad in March.

The trick is for Mr. Modi to attend the summit in Pakistan when some of India's neighbours are still asking “why”, and not when all of its neighbours begin to ask “why not”. While this may require the government's much touted “Doval Doctrine” to take a leaf out of the much derided “Gujral Doctrine” book, it may be in keeping with a larger desire for a regional reset, bringing Mr. Modi's last year in this term of office more in line with his first.

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decision-making, but these are expected to improve over time.

What can be done?

What kind of policies are needed? Reducing GHG emissions is of utmost urgency, although that seems to be taking place at a pace determined by geopolitical as well as local initiatives. Second, integrating internal migration with ongoing development planning is vital. The peri-urban areas, which are expected to be hot spots, already show problems of water shortage, waste management, nutritional deficiency, limited services such as health and education, and poor infrastructure. Ecosystems, part of the natural resources in peri-urban areas, ought to be protected as “special ecological zones”, so that as urban settlements expand, they don't eat into ecosystem services. Skill building, job training and other opportunities for education and jobs for locals and migrants would also have to become a focal point. Rights for those who are forced to migrate would be fundamental in these preparations, as studies and experience have shown that ignoring issues of social justice and equity in adaptation can lead to serious governance failure.

Sujatha Byravan, a scientist, studies science, technology and development policy

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.

Time to act

The report of another minor having been abused, tortured and killed, this time in Surat – another barbaric incident similar to the case in Kathua, in Jammu – is numbing (“Minor raped, killed in Surat”, April 16). We need to withdraw the right to call oneself as a civilised nation. In the conspicuous absence of deterrent punishment in India, it is disturbing that the crime graph against minors and women has only shown an upwards trend. It is obvious that the plethora of laws that enable the protection of women and children are ineffective. With prosecution of the accused being cumbersome, followed by prolonged litigation, justice

eludes the families of the victims.

P.K. VARADARAJAN,
Chennai

■ The despicable acts of brutality against minors, in Unnao, Kathua and Surat, only shatter one's faith in the goodness of humanity. Reading about the horrifying degree of violence inflicted on the minors is sure to leave any sane person deeply disturbed. We have failed all these minors as humans. I hope that the deep sense of disgust and outrage felt by all citizens in India will translate itself into action.

AATMIK AHUJA,
Indore, Madhya Pradesh

■ The Prime Minister now breaking his silence over the horrors and asserting that the perpetrators will not be

spared must be greeted with a frown. The belated response is not what one expects from our leader especially after his government's ‘Beti Bachao Beti Padhao’ initiative, which was launched with much fanfare. The cases have sparked outrage and the BJP has not covered itself in glory in its responses.

N.J. RAVI CHANDER,
Bengaluru

■ A disturbing and emerging trend now is the attempt to paint cases of crime against women in communal and casteist terms in an obvious attempt to diminish the severity of the crime. Those responsible for this need to remember that in the end it is India's image that is being deeply tarnished. Have they forgotten that official data

show that crimes against women in India are on the rise? India is fast acquiring the image of a nation where perpetrators are able to get away scot free while victims and survivors and their families have no hope of justice.

ASHFAQUE NADWI,
Hyderabad

CJI's role

It is difficult to share the view of the Bench of the Supreme Court that the Chief Justice of India is by himself an institution in the matter of allotting cases and constituting benches. There cannot be an institution within an institution. If this view was to be accepted, the element of accountability is lost and this goes against the principle of the rule of law and institution-building. This

is precisely why even the appointment of judges has not been left to the Chief Justice alone, but to the collegium, because in a collective decision-making process there will be checks and balances.

N.G.R. PRASAD,
RAM SIDDHARTHA,
Chennai

Finishing on a high note

The nation stands as one to salute its sports heroes who did the country proud by winning 66 medals and

finishing third in the Commonwealth Games 2018 (Editorial - “A golden hue”, April 16). Behind the attainment of their success and glory lie months of sacrifice and toil. The performance of our athletes should spur boys and girls back in India to take a keener interest in sports activities. India has hope even in the sporting arena, finally.

R. RAVICHANDRAN,
Chennai

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the report “Edappadi justifies memorandum to PM” (April 16, 2018, some editions), there was a reference to the birth centenary celebrations of former Chief Minister *Jayalalithaa*. It should have been *M.G. Ramachandran*.

In the Column Width page article titled “A Chalukyan legacy” (April 15, 2018), the author's name had been misspelt as *Rana Saqvi*. It should have been *Rana Savi*.

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