



Bolton goes

India must not allow its ties with the U.S. to be dictated by the dynamics of the Trump regime

The departure of U.S. National Security Advisor (NSA) John Bolton from office, after he was forced to leave by President Donald Trump, won't evoke much sadness in most world capitals. Mr. Bolton's term in office was marked by his ultra-hawkish positions; he pursued hostilities with Iran, sanctions with Russia, brinkmanship on trade with China, opposed talks on Afghanistan, and with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, and pushed for regime change in Venezuela. A former U.S. envoy to the United Nations, Mr. Bolton inflicted the greatest damage on multilateral institutions and agreements, as he advocated the U.S.'s exit from the Human Rights Council and UNESCO, presided over the cancellation of the multi-party nuclear deal with Iran, and informed Moscow that the U.S. was pulling out of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. His final act, one that is regarded with relief in India, was to ensure that the U.S. deal with the Pakistan-backed Taliban was scuttled. The relief, however, may be temporary, given that Mr. Trump has publicly criticised his outgoing NSA, and may reverse many of the positions the U.S. had taken with Mr. Bolton at the helm. The first such reversal is an offer to meet Iranian President Hassan Rouhani without any preconditions on the sidelines of the UNGA session this month made by U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo.

While New Delhi must continue to keep a keen eye on all the changes in the White House and Cabinet, it is clear that investing too much in any one adviser, or expecting consistency in American policy as a result, would be a folly. Since he assumed office in 2017, Mr. Trump has run a revolving door for recruitments and retrenchments, and is now on his fourth NSA, third Secretary of Defense and second Secretary of State. India would do well to not allow its bilateral relationship with the U.S. or other relationships to be determined by such a fluid dynamic. A case in point is ties with Iran, where New Delhi may have been better off not acceding to the tough Bolton line, and instead, like China, Russia, Iraq and Turkey, keeping its own counsel on the issue of oil sanctions. On the bilateral front, India must build its strategic and economic relationship with the U.S. with a keener eye on the transactional thinking that now prevails in Washington. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi heads to the U.S. this month, with a plan to meet the U.S. President, it may be best to keep in mind the words of Mr. Pompeo, a contender for the NSA position; asked about the impact of Mr. Bolton's exit on U.S. foreign policy, he said the only person who determines who works for Mr. Trump, and what that means for the policy of the U.S., is Mr. Trump himself.

Futile fines

Better enforcement and infrastructure are key to mitigating anger over higher road fines

The steep penalties for violation of road rules that came into force on September 1 under the Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Act, 2019 have produced a backlash, with several State governments opting to reduce the quantum of fines, or even to reject the new provisions. Gujarat has announced a substantial reduction in the fines, West Bengal has refused to adopt the higher penalties, Karnataka and Kerala are studying the prospects to make the provisions less stringent, and others are proceeding with caution. Motorists have reacted with outrage at the imposition of fines by the police, obviously upset at State governments pursuing enforcement without upgrading road infrastructure and making administrative arrangements for issue of transport documents. Union Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari has reiterated that it is left to the States to choose the quantum of fines, since it is their responsibility to bring about deterrence and protect the lives of citizens. Mr. Gadkari's argument is valid, and the intent behind amending the Motor Vehicles Act cannot be faulted. After all, India has some of the deadliest roads in the world, and 1,47,913 people died in road accidents only during 2017. The question that has arisen is whether enhanced fines can radically change this record when other determinants, beginning with administrative reform, remain untouched.

The core of reform lies in Section 198(A) of the amended law, which requires any designated authority, contractor, consultant or concessionaire responsible for design or construction or maintenance of the safety standards of the road to meet those laid down by the Central government. This provision, which prescribes a penalty for a violation leading to death or disability, can be enforced through litigation by road users in all States. Since the standards are laid down, compliance should be ensured without waiting for a road accident to prove it. Until infrastructure meets legal requirements, fines and enforcement action are naturally liable to be challenged in courts; the condition of roads, traffic signals, signage and cautionary markings which affect motorists, cyclists and pedestrians, would all fall within its ambit. State governments also cannot escape responsibility for failing to reform their Regional Transport Authorities, since these offices are generally steeped in corruption. The Transport Ministry could well have made electronic delivery of RTO services mandatory, something that a lapsed UPA-era Bill promised. It should act on this now. Ultimately, ending the culture of impunity that allows government vehicles and VIPs to ignore road rules will encourage the average citizen to follow them. Mr. Gadkari should lose no time in forming the National Road Safety Board to recommend important changes to infrastructure and to enable professional accident investigation.

Congress, stuck in a quagmire

Plagued by ideological schisms and impaired by defections and arrests, the grand old party has hit a dead end



VIDYA SUBRAHMANIAM

In the wake of the divide within the Congress Party on the Narendra Modi government's unilateral moves on Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), an idealistic party insider pointed to me the irony of the chorus against the party's 'first family' – when push came to shove, it was the Gandhis, Sonia and Rahul, supported by sections of the much-derided 'old guard', who had proven to be ideologically and constitutionally committed and correct.

A good chunk of the party's younger generation, among them Jyotiraditya Scindia and Milind Deora, lined up behind the government. They either cited the gung-ho public support for the forced integration of J&K with the Union or held the government's actions, even if unconstitutional, to be in the 'national interest'. If this falsified the dichotomy between the 'old' and the 'young' in the Congress and challenged the assumption that a younger, non-Gandhi member would necessarily be a good candidate to lead the party, it also brutally exposed the ideological schisms within the party ranks.

'Nothing succeeds like failure' The Congress had once again shown itself to be riven by confusion on the possible approach to fighting the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led regime – which paradoxically has had little to boast about and whose tag line could well be 'nothing succeeds like failure'.

For five years, Mr. Modi and BJP president Amit Shah embarked on adventures that shattered the country's communal and social

peace and pushed the economy to ruin. But with every setback, every blunder, their party gathered more followers and more victories, its success run culminating finally in the humongous second term it pulled off in May 2019. The BJP thundered home on strategic brilliance and majoritarian bluster while the Congress's lack of strategic vision, compounded by a brain fog on its core belief, brought it a second humiliating defeat in the Lok Sabha.

The Congress's official line on the J&K moves has, in a way, taken the party back to its ideological moorings – something its leadership seemed to have forgotten in the race to compete with the BJP for the heart and the mind of the Hindu majority. Rahul Gandhi's first tweet on J&K on August 6, 2019, which charged the government with unconstitutional action and abuse of executive power, predictably had the Hindutva troll army descend on him and savage him as an 'anti-national' and a 'Pakistani agent'.

The Congress Working Committee's resolution was even more explicit. Alongside deploring the "unilateral", "brazen" and "undemocratic" way in which Article 370 was revoked, it made the point that the Article represented the terms of the Instrument of Accession between J&K and India and therefore deserved to be "honoured" until it was amended, after "consultation with all sections of the people". The emphasis was on honouring the Article and wide consultations. For once, the official line was emphatic, unequivocal and unexceptionable.

With the strongly spelt-out resolution, the missing clarity seemed to have returned to the party. However, the dissenting, mostly younger Congress members were unconvinced and reiterated the need to align the party's position



with the public sentiment. Former Union Minister Kumari Selja apparently asked how there could be a debate on a core ideological issue which should have been automatically clear to the party. However, the battle lines were drawn – the Gandhis, the now-jailed former Finance Minister P. Chidambaram, Ghulam Nabi Azad, Ms. Selja and a few others on one side and the rebels on the other side.

It will surprise no one if the endpoint of the dissent turns out to be 'destination BJP', the way forward having already been shown by Bhubaneswar Kalita, the Congress's chief whip in the Rajya Sabha. Mr. Kalita himself joined the hordes, especially from the Congress units in Karnataka and the North-Eastern parts of the country, that have bought themselves better lives in the BJP, using in each instance the catch phrases 'nationalism' and 'national interest'.

When 'nuance' is purged

Clearly, even a minimally non-sectarian approach, such as the one followed by the Congress, has become unacceptable in an environment that will tolerate nothing less than robust support to exclusivism directed against Muslims.

The Congress leadership, Rahul Gandhi especially, mistakenly believed that Hindutva could be de-

feated by Hinduism. Mr. Gandhi's Shiv bhakti, his visits to temples and his flaunting of his *janeu* (sacred thread) were all aimed at showing that he was a real Hindu as opposed to his rabid Hindutva counterpart in the Sangh Parivar. He should have known that the BJP had changed the lexicon of national debate: 'Hindutva' is the new 'Hinduism' and 'nuance' is a word long purged and excised from people's memory and understanding. The BJP's followers, growing in numbers and shrillness, have been conditioned to demand full adherence to a belief system that excludes Muslims by thought, action, and now, even by law, as demonstrated by the unapologetically sectarian Citizenship Amendment Bill.

The change, since reinvented as 'New India', has been in the making for decades. It started with the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and the razing of the Babri Masjid and gained muscle during the 2002 anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat. There was a brief lull in the decade that the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance was in office – but even that was illusory because Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was already being pilloried for 'appeasing Muslims'. In December 2006, the BJP picked up a stray line, torn out of context, from Mr. Singh's address to the National De-

velopment Council, to insist that he wanted Muslims to have the 'first claim' over 'resources'. Several clarifications notwithstanding, the BJP continues *ad nauseam* to repeat its charge. Similarly, in 2007, the party seized on Mr. Singh's remarks concerning Mohamed Haneef, an Indian-origin doctor in Australia who was falsely accused of aiding terrorists. Today, the same BJP justifies the election to the Lok Sabha of Pragna Thakur, an accused in a Hindutva terrorism case.

The charge of 'Muslim appeasement' is now permanently stuck to Rahul Gandhi, making a mockery of his attempts to embrace Hinduism. The allegations have flowed from the BJP's highest echelons. Amit Shah has accused Mr. Gandhi of 'helping Pakistan' via his statements on J&K. One year ago, Minister Nirmala Sitharaman joined BJP trolls in heckling Mr. Gandhi for a mere meeting with Muslim intellectuals.

The Congress is in a quagmire from which there appears to be no escape. The party watches helplessly as the BJP picks and chooses its targets: men known for their intelligence or mobilising capabilities such as P. Chidambaram and D.K. Shivakumar. The people who believe that these Congress leaders are corrupt do not even ask why the BJP spares its own men and defectors to the party. All this even as more and more Congresspersons either fall to the seduction of muscular nationalism or advocate abjuring from criticism of Mr. Modi. There is no alternative in sight to the trio of Gandhis – Priyanka Gandhi Vadra included – but their appeal is failing and they don't seem capable of putting the Congress together again.

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A U.S.-Iran detente could be on the cards

The exit of John Bolton, and Israel's diminished influence on Washington, signal a possible reduction in tensions



MOHAMMED AYOOB

If it is not Afghanistan then it must be Iran. U.S. President Donald Trump desperately needs a dramatic foreign policy breakthrough before the 2020 elections to establish his reputation as a strategist who can shape afresh the contours of American foreign policy. His love-fest with Kim Jong-un has petered out without producing any noticeable reduction in North Korea's nuclear arsenal or any curbs on its ballistic missile programme. His attempt to get the Taliban to accept a ceasefire so that he could begin withdrawing American troops from Afghanistan, and thus fulfil the promise he had made during the 2016 election campaign, has also stalled because of Kabul's opposition and the Taliban's unwillingness to stop military action before a settlement is announced.

This leaves Iran as the only arena where Mr. Trump can demonstrate his diplomatic dexterity even if it means returning to the status quo that had existed when President Barack Obama left office. However, Mr. Trump would like to add a dramatic flourish to turning the clock back.

Some of Mr. Trump's closest associates, especially the recently sacked National Security Advisor John Bolton, have been promoting a policy that amounted to advocating a regime change in Iran, even if by force. However, Mr. Trump is fundamentally averse to leading the U.S. into an open-ended war with Iran. This stance is prompted largely by his attachment to his campaign promise of bringing American soldiers home that garnered a significant number of votes for him in the last election. He, therefore, abhors the idea of sending more of them to the volatile West Asia.

Zarif's visit to Biarritz

These instincts were on display at the recently concluded G7 meeting in France following an unscheduled visit by Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif to Biarritz for talks with the French President Emmanuel Macron. President Macron announced at the conclave that a Trump-Rouhani meeting was likely to take place in the "coming weeks".

Mr. Trump said that he had no intention of imposing regime change on Iran and declared that under the right circumstances, he would certainly agree to a meeting with Mr. Rouhani.

In a speech hours earlier, Mr. Rouhani had also signalled that he was willing to talk with Trump. He has since qualified his positive res-



ponse by adding that he would meet Mr. Trump only after Washington lifted the sanctions re-imposed on Tehran after Mr. Trump pulled the U.S. out of the nuclear deal in 2018. But the signal that Iranian leaders are not averse to talking with their American counterparts has been sent by Tehran and received in Washington. In turn, Mr. Trump reciprocated by stating that he has no problem meeting with President Rouhani. "It could happen. It could happen. No problem with me," he said earlier this week.

Israel and John Bolton have been the two major obstacles to a direct encounter between the two Presidents as a prelude to a possible rapprochement between the U.S. and Iran. Mr. Trump, despite his close relationship with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, seems to have concluded that the Israeli leader is too dependent on

the U.S. and especially on Mr. Trump to attempt to block such a meeting if he decides to go ahead with it. Mr. Netanyahu seemed to confirm this understanding this week when he stated: "Obviously, I don't tell the U.S. President when to meet or with whom."

Differences with Israel

Nonetheless, this relative softening of their respective stands by the U.S. and Iran have worried the Israeli establishment. This is why, of late, Mr. Netanyahu has once again been making shrill noises about Iran's nuclear weapons capability. He has even gone to the extent of identifying a nuclear facility near Isfahan that, according to him, the Iranians destroyed after he had made its existence public. In response Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif promptly tweeted: "The possessor of REAL nukes cries wolf – on an ALLEGED 'demolished' site in Iran." It is clear that there is a fundamental disjuncture between American and Israeli objectives regarding Iran and recent events have begun to bring the fissures in American-Israeli approaches to this issue into the open.

Mr. Bolton, an outspoken foreign policy hawk, has been the standard bearer of the hard line vis-à-vis Iran and is directly or indirectly responsible for many of the harshest measures adopted by the Trump administration in regard to

Iran. He was also strongly opposed to the deal that Zalmay Khalilzad had worked out with the Taliban in order to begin an orderly withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan. Mr. Bolton's virulent opposition to any deal with Iran short of complete denuclearisation and regime change, both objectives beyond the realm of possibility, had angered Mr. Trump, especially because it ran counter to his instinctive antipathy toward getting involved in overseas military conflicts.

However, the firing of John Bolton, when combined with the visible diminishing of Israeli influence on U.S. policy toward Iran, signals that Washington is interested in easing tensions with Tehran. This is confirmed by the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's statement on September 10 that it was possible that a meeting between Mr. Trump and Mr. Rouhani could take place this month on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session in New York. Such a meeting, even if it does not immediately resolve all the contentious bilateral issues, could form the beginning of a de-escalatory process that is likely to benefit both Washington and Tehran in the long run.

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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.

Naidu's arrest

The unprecedented house arrest of N. Chandrababu Naidu and his son, who planned to take out a rally to protest against the incumbent government, is unwarranted and uncalled for (Front page, "TDP chief Naidu, son detained as they attempt to take out a rally," Sept. 12). Preventive detentions and arrests by agencies targeting mainly the Opposition leaders have become the usual norm. Any leader has the right to take out rallies to express displeasure, dissent and dissatisfaction with the government and oppose the government within the limits of law. Resorting to such house arrests amounts to a curtailment of

constitutional rights. Y.S. Jaganmohan Reddy is setting a bad precedent by undoing initiatives of the previous administration and using law enforcement agencies as tools of vendetta.

M.Y. SHARIFF,
Chennai

Dialogue with Pakistan

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres's call to both India and Pakistan to sort out their differences through dialogue reveals his anxiety over the escalating tensions (Front page, "Sit down and talk, UN chief Guterres tells India and Pak.," Sept. 12). India has always made its stand clear on all issues of conflict with Pakistan and

has been steadfast in its determination to resist attempts at third-party intervention. The onus is on Pakistan to create a conducive climate for talks but its provocations across the LoC, unwillingness to rein in terror outfits and its needless intervention in matters concerning Jammu and Kashmir have queered the pitch. India has always wanted peace but when the other side is spoiling for a fight, the prospects of dialogue are bleak.

C.V. ARAVIND,
Bengaluru

Instilling a fear of law

Road accident fatalities, mostly caused by rash and negligent driving, remains unacceptably high in India

(Front page, "Nitin Gadkari defends steep fines under Motor Vehicles Act," Sept. 12). The imposition of steep fines to penalise the wanton disrespect to traffic rules and disregard for the lives of pedestrians and fellow motorists should be seen as a belated policy effort to deter undisciplined drivers. The paying capacity of drivers and the effectiveness of using hefty fines as a tool to deter rash driving are extraneous to the primary task of infusing a fear of law in the minds of drivers. At the same time, the fact is bad roads also cause accidents. Road safety should be a collaborative effort of the society's stakeholders. The government should also do

its part by making the periodic maintenance of public roads a top priority.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

Brave exemplars

Afghanistan's victory in the Test against Bangladesh by a huge margin of 224 runs does not come as a surprise. Leg spinner Rashid Khan, who became the youngest Test captain, deservedly won the man-of-the-match award. For a country sharply divided along ethnic lines, the

cricket team has been a unifier. The team has taken giant strides in the game since 2008, when it was admitted into Division-V of the World Cricket League. Many of its players honed their skills at refugee camps across the border in Peshawar. Their unflinching desire to form a team and see Afghanistan play cricket on a world stage has finally borne rich dividends.

R. SIVAKUMAR,
Chennai

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: >>"Case filed against parents of toddler who fell off vehicle in Kerala" (Sept. 11, 2019): the opening paragraph needs to be corrected to say that the Munnar police have confirmed that the cases were registered under the *Juvenile Justice Act (Section 75)* and the *Indian Penal Code (Section 308)*.

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