



## Old friends

India must maintain its steady course of strengthening ties with Iran

In purely bilateral terms, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's visit to India was pitch perfect in content and optics. After his meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India and Iran signed agreements and memorandums of understanding on a wide variety of issues. Among the announcements was the decision to award India the contract to operate the Chabahar Shahid Beheshti port terminal after the project is completed. While no announcement was made on the Farzad-B gas field that India has expressed an interest in, the joint statement indicates that positive deliberations may follow. There were discussions on enhancing trade and investment and ease of doing business between India and Iran, including a double taxation avoidance agreement and an expert group to recommend "trade remedy measures". Just before Mr. Rouhani's visit, India announced it would allow Indian investment in Iran to be done in rupee terms. The concession, which has so far been extended only to Bhutan and Nepal, allows money lying in Indian banks as payment for imports from Iran, mostly oil, to be repatriated. Till now these funds have been blocked because international banks and insurance companies refuse to facilitate trade to Iran fearing further U.S. sanctions on Iranian entities. In turn, Iran is understood to have reversed last year's decision to slash the credit period for oil payments from India, and issue more generous guidelines.

Mr. Modi and Mr. Rouhani also drew broad strokes highlighting the importance of bilateral ties between the two countries, stressing the strategic imperative for their growth. Mr. Modi called the talks "substantive and productive", while thanking Mr. Rouhani for his leadership on regional connectivity. Mr. Rouhani endorsed India's bid for a permanent seat at the UN Security Council with the veto, and praised India as a "living museum of religious diversity". The joint statement issued contained tough language on the "sanctuaries for terrorism", an issue important to both countries. But there is a broader global context to Mr. Rouhani's visit and the red carpet rolled out by the Modi government. The visit came amid uncertainty over the U.S.'s next move on Iran, given the Trump administration's line on the Iran nuclear deal. On the very day Mr. Modi and Mr. Rouhani met, U.S. National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster asked countries to track their investments in Iran as these might be supporting terrorism and "murder across the Middle East". It will be important to see what, if any, implications the Indian overtures would have on India's ties with the U.S. and its recently upgraded relations with Israel. However, it is crucial that India maintain a steady course on its strategic interests with Iran, a key source of energy, and as Mr. Modi put it, a "golden gateway" to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

## Right behind?

Voters turn out in large numbers, as Tripura sees a rare challenge to the formidable LF

Voters in Tripura once again came out in large numbers for the Assembly election on Sunday, with initial estimates putting the turnout at almost 90%. This is close to the 91.82% turnout in the previous Assembly election in 2013 and more than the 84.72% for the 2014 Lok Sabha election. One explanation for these high figures is that the electorate is more organisationally mobilised than in other States. The CPI (M)-led Left Front has been in power in Tripura since 1993, and until recently another victory for the Left Front would have been regarded as a given. After all, the LF's popularity had steadily increased in its years in power, peaking in 2013 with a 52.33% vote share and a harvest of 50 of the 60 Assembly seats. Its support base has encompassed both tribal and non-tribal regions of the small State. This is largely due to the good work done by the government in improving primary health and education in Tripura; as a result the State has improved its human development indices. Apart from the delivery of essential welfare services, the personal popularity of Chief Minister Manik Sarkar, who has been in office since 1998, has helped the LF retain power. But if pointers from the campaign phase are anything to go by, the Sarkar government seems to be facing a stiff challenge from the BJP, a non-player in the electoral area until now, sensing an opportunity to make good.

Lack of diversification in a largely agrarian and forestry dominated economy and high unemployment levels among the youth have given the opposition some talking points. The BJP sought to tap what it believes is a latent yearning for change, through its slogan, "Chalo Pal-tai" (let us flip). After its triumph in Assam, the BJP has grown more confident of making serious inroads into the Northeast; its expansion in some of the States has been aided by a weakening of the Congress in the region. In Tripura, the BJP made no secret of attempting to occupy the opposition space by reaching out to traditional Congress voters. The shift of a large number of Congress legislators and candidates to the BJP is a result of the organisational decay in the former. The Congress had traditionally been stronger in the non-tribal regions and aligned with the ethnic tribal parties such as the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura in its electoral challenges to the LF. The IPFT and other tribal groups have hitched their wagon to the BJP this time round. In trying to match the Left in terms of organisational muscle, the BJP banked on the RSS and the larger Parivar to provide it the heft it needed in the campaign. But the fact is that in the 2013 Assembly election, the BJP could win a mere 1.53% of the vote. It will have to register a spectacular increase in vote share to even be a strong opposition, let alone form the government.

# A Nepal-India win-win

The new Prime Minister in Kathmandu needs a hands-off New Delhi to ensure mutually beneficial stability and growth



KANAK MANI DIXIT

Without doubt, like every nation-state, India seeks its own advantage in international relationships, including within the South Asian region. But the repeated experience is that of New Delhi generating animosities, with attitudes and actions that go against its own interests. This forces one to ask from nearby Kathmandu, is there a structural issue with India's foreign affairs oversight – or is this question itself taboo?

Take the case of Nepal, a country where friendship with India comes naturally even more than being a necessity, due to cultural, social and economic linkages over the open border. But, perhaps because of global preoccupations, New Delhi seems to constantly under-estimate Kathmandu's fierce sense of self. The strategem over the decades has been to try to influence Kathmandu's politics, forgetting that they too survive within the milieu of Nepali politics.

The legacy of 'big brother' started with Jawaharlal Nehru – Nepal's statesman B.P. Koirala in his memoir has pinpointed the precise moment in 1950 during a meeting at Teen Murti Bhavan when he realised that the fellow-revolutionary was now transformed as Prime Minister of India, inheriting the geopolitical inclinations of the departed colonialist.

### The big stick

More recently, India became progressively interventionist as Nepal got mired in internal crisis during and after the Maoist 'people's war', and as the hill-plain polarisation escalated during the constitution-writing. India has tended to speak loudly while wielding a big stick, based on a sense of entitlement and exceptionalism. But evidently, Indian nationalism for all its vigour cannot suppress nationalism across the frontier.

While there are of course nume-



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rous domestic factors, a key reason for political instability in Nepal has been India's overt and covert intercessions. This involvement explains in part why Nepal has not had a Prime Minister in office for more than a year-and-a-half over two decades now. Meanwhile, Indian analysts fail to appreciate how political stability in Nepal can deliver economic bounty to the bordering Indian States on its three sides. And economists should study the Pew Research Center figures showing Nepal as one of the larger sources of remittances to India, that too to the poorest regions such as north Bihar, east Uttar Pradesh and Odisha.

India is understandably apprehensive as the Chinese geoeconomic juggernaut infiltrates the Subcontinental countries, including Nepal. Rather than imperious warnings against consorting with Beijing, however, better to leave each society to develop its own method on dealing with China. In the case of Nepal, the arrival of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway at the northern border point in 2020 will be a game-changer, and the Indian market too is set to benefit.

With Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli sworn in as Prime Minister on February 15, there is now opportunity to start afresh on India-Nepal. It is true that India has never had as adversarial a Prime Minister in Kathmandu as Mr. Oli, but this is mainly the result of New Delhi's own short-sightedness.

Mr. Oli has been a moderate (if loquacious) politician who does not bend easily to populist pressures, but it fell on him during his previous term to stand up to the devastating Great Blockade of 2015.

It became his job to rally a populace under humanitarian distress



and seek connectivity northward through a set of 10 agreements with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing.

Tagging Mr. Oli as 'anti-Indian' is not sensible, for being 'pro-Nepal' does not *ipso facto* mean animosity towards India. And New Delhi may be surprised to find Mr. Oli more than willing to reciprocate its overtures, providing reassurance that Kathmandu will never act against India's security interests, while insisting that in all areas Nepal will take its own decisions. Nepal's politicians are masters at realpolitik, and the art of balancing India *vis-à-vis* China is not outside of Mr. Oli's personal skill-set.

### Desire for harmony

Thankfully, it does look like India is seeking a recalibration, and no one is asking for a public apology. The desire for rapprochement is seen in the three phone conversations Prime Minister Narendra Modi has had with Mr. Oli since December, and the dispatch of Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj to Kathmandu before the new government was even formed.

Nepal's topmost politicians, who never seem to retire, have got so used to revolving-door leadership that they are finding it hard to stomach the five-year term that the new government will probably get. On the other hand, the people's expectation is that the longevity will *ipso facto* make for better governance.

Mr. Oli's ascendance to prime-ministership marks the final turn of the key in implementing the Constitution of Nepal (2015), which was adopted despite India's fervent lobbying. The promulgation marks an end to the extended derailment of the last two decades, with numerous tragedies

# In Turkey, ruling by decree

The Erdoğan regime's onslaught against dissenters continues unabated



VIJAY PRASHAD

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, it is said in Turkey, now channels the French monarch, Louis XIV – l'état, c'est moi (I am the state). Anyone who crosses Mr. Erdoğan is seen as an enemy of the state, regardless of his or her politics.

Most recently, some intellectuals have been found guilty of this crime and sentenced to 'aggravated life imprisonment', the highest sentence in the country (the death penalty is banned). These people are distinguished journalists, novelists and academics and hold differing political opinions.

Ahmet Altan (journalist and novelist) and his brother Mehmet Altan (professor of economics) are both left-liberals. Nazli Ilıcak (journalist) is an archconservative. Ahmet Altan has been accused of giving "subliminal pro-coup" signals

on a television programme two years ago.

### Mass purge

After the failed coup of July 15, 2016, Mr. Erdoğan began a purge of all institutions in Turkey, removing anyone who he felt differed with his agenda. Taking its orders from the President, the state machinery has since detained and arrested thousands. Well over 100,000 people have lost their jobs. For the past 19 months, the government has ruled by decree, an emergency form of government that has been enacted in the name of preserving Turkey from a military coup. A coup against democracy, in other words, now operates to prevent a coup against democracy.

Anyone who opposes Mr. Erdoğan's war in Syria or in Turkey's southeastern provinces is seen as anti-national. After the Turkish Medical Association issued a declaration that stated the truism that "war is a matter of public health", the authors of the declaration were arrested and removed from their jobs. When 1,200 academics signed a petition that stat-



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ed that 'they shall not be complicit' in the Turkish government's war against the Turkish Kurds in the south-east, the government got them all fired and has filed criminal charges.

Selahattin Demirtaş, the squeaky-clean leader of the People's Democratic Party (HDP), has been in prison for more than a year, along with others from his party. Numerous elected parliamentarians and mayors belonging to the HDP have been removed from office, arrested or accused of supporting terrorism. This is despite the fact that the HDP – Turkey's third largest party in Parliament – has stated its opposition to terrorism and commitment to the peaceful resolution of the Turkish-Kurdish con-

flict. What Mr. Demirtaş and the HDP did, however, was to prevent Mr. Erdoğan's monopoly over political power. In the general elections of June 2015, the HDP won 13% of the vote, denying Mr. Erdoğan a total majority in Parliament. He has sought to punish the HDP ever since.

from the Maoists 'people's war' to the Great Blockade.

Nepal is now a federal and secular republic, experimenting with three levels of fully empowered government – central, provincial and local. But there is confusion on the division of powers between the tiers, and foot-dragging by the national bureaucracy and many powerful politicians, besides an untested Constitutional Bench of the Supreme Court.

### Ensuring inclusion

Mr. Oli inherits the share-the-spoils *bhagbanda* politics of the transitional years, which has led the police, bureaucracy and judiciary politicised. The decay in each sphere cries out for reform, from the private sector cartels that control the economy to corruption that has seeped to the village terraces.

The central socio-political task is to ensure inclusion in governance, giving the Janjati ethnicities as well as the Madhesi plains people and others a feeling of ownership of the state. While seeking to restore Nepal's position internationally, Mr. Oli has to implement the connectivity agreements he signed with Beijing in 2015, while lifting the relationship with India above the patron-suppliant status. He will have his hands full trying to raise employment through tourism, industry, agroforestry and agriculture, ensuring energy self-sufficiency through hydro projects and rescuing the post-earthquake reconstruction effort, which has been a scandal. With international assistance in decline, investors have to be attracted by the promise of the rule of law and due process if Nepal is not to remain the playground of carpetbaggers.

Speaking of the rule of law, the human rights community is worried that the ongoing truth and reconciliation process might be used as a sham exercise to pardon wartime atrocities. With Nepal recently elected to the UN Human Rights Council, there is opportunity to raise Nepal's international profile while finally putting the 'people's war' behind us all.

Mr. Oli is fortunate that the new Constitution ensures extended tenure, by not allowing a no-confi-

dence vote for the first two years. Besides, he rides a strong public mandate, having led the Left Alliance in its sweep of the local, provincial and national elections and forming governments at each tier. The field is also clear because the parties representing the Hindutva ideology and the deposed king, Gyanendra, were roundly defeated at all levels.

### Reaching out

Mr. Oli's primary preoccupation will be managing the government's relationship with the opposition. The atmospherics between his Communist Party of Nepal (UML) and the Nepali Congress (NC) are at their worst, the latter sullen and vulnerable after the trouncing at the polls. He must reach out to build a working relationship with the NC and the Madhesbaadi plains-based parties, also because hundreds of new laws need to be urgently drafted under the Constitution.

The Prime Minister's immediate challenge, however, has to do with Pushpa Kamal Dahal ('Prachanda'), his Maoist partner in the Left Alliance. Mr. Dahal prefers to ignore the reality that his party was rescued from decimation by the electoral bonding with the UML. The voters gave him a respectable showing, hoping that the promised unification would subsume the Maoists within the UML, helping finally to neutralise the former.

As this is being written, the two parties are preparing a unification document. Meanwhile, bargaining for plum posts, Mr. Dahal is demanding an *alopalo*, rotating prime-ministership. This would mean a jump back to *bhagbanda* politics, endangering both stability and growth, dishonouring the electoral mandate.

Prime Minister Oli is tasked today to land Mr. Dahal where he can do no further harm to Nepal's state and society, and to reset the relationship with India at a new normal. On the latter, he seems keen to take the olive branch held out by Mr. Modi, which can only result in a 'win-win' for Nepal and India.

Kanak Mani Dixit, a writer and journalist based in Kathmandu, is founding editor of the magazine, 'Himal Southasian'

### Another myopic instance

For the past four months, liberal businessman Osman Kavala, who has supported worthy causes his entire life, has been in prison. The pro-Erdoğan press has dubbed him the "Red Soros" and claims that he supports terrorism. There is no need for facts when the judgment is so quickly produced by a jingoistic media and a myopic government.

About 150 journalists are now in prison, many never having been charged. On the day that the sentence was announced against the Altan brothers and Ms. Ilıcak, Turkey released Turkish-German journalist Deniz Yücel, part of a deal worked out between Mr. Erdoğan and German Chancellor Angela Merkel; he is like much of his fraternity.

Many of the journalists in prison are from the opposition newspaper, *Cumhuriyet*. One of them, Ahmet Şık, has a strange story to tell. He was arrested, prosecuted and imprisoned for writing a critical book about Fethullah Gülen, the Turkish cleric who lives in the U.S. At one time, Mr. Erdoğan and Mr. Gülen were friends, but have since fallen out. So Mr. Şık is now accused of being a follower of Mr. Gülen. Logic is dispatched and Mr. Erdoğan has begun to resemble the Queen of Hearts from Alice in Wonderland; "off with their heads" is the common cry.

We are in the age of the strongmen. Democracies such as Turkey, the U.S. the Philippines and India are now ruled by caprice, with the full force of the state being used to cast dissenters as anti-national. Turkey is in the lead here. It is important that democratic and progressive people awaken to the dangers posed by strongmen and their will to power.

Vijay Prashad is the Director of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research and a columnist for the Turkish daily, 'BirGün'

## 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.

### Origin of life

One can challenge the line in the article, "Science should have the last word" (Editorial page, February 17) which said: "... the origin of life on earth is still unexplained by science." While it is true that Charles Darwin didn't mention the origin of life on earth in any of his books – mainly because there were no theories on this subject which were built on firm foundations during his period – he mentions his guesses about the possible means of the appearance of life in some of his letters. But this does not mean that we still have doubts about the origin of life. All theorists now agree that life on earth appeared around 4 billion years ago, which

evolved into much complex forms. These conditions on early earth are known from geological evidence. Present theories about the chemical evolution of life on earth are mostly accepted. The Stanley Miller and Harold Urey experiment is one such example. Theories of science are based on certain generalisations and offer the best possible explanations. We have come far from Darwin's age today and have evidence of molecular evolution. Complex life evolved from lower forms. The origin of life is basically chemistry that is rooted in quantum processes. The origin of the cell is the most astonishing phenomenon

that gave rise to the complexity of life. All theories of sciences are accepted hypotheses that are based on certain generalisations. They can be proved again and again or disproved. This is what scientific progress is all about.

A. RAJAGOPAL KAMATH,  
Kottayam, Kerala

### Restoring faith

In my childhood, I remember my father justifying depositing his savings in government banks as being secure, safe and trustworthy. On the contrary now, it is fearful to think of the magnitude of the rot that has set in in the banking sector. Have dynamic systemic checks and balances, accounting

and auditing systems in place kept pace with the ever changing nature of the banking business? On what basis has Punjab National Bank been winning awards for excellence in banking vigilance? We need a thorough audit of the health of our banking system and a series of steps to be undertaken for us to regain our trust and faith in the system.

In the absence of these measures, no amount of recapitalisation of a sick banking system is going to be of any help – for us, banks and the economy.

S.G. JAIDEV,  
Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu

### Faraway islands

It is welcome that there is a report on one of the

foremost public issues in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands ("Sunday Special" – "It is 2018, but still tough to get online in the Andamans" February 19). It is a lack of bandwidth which keeps most parts of these islands offline. There are many factors, with their geographical isolation being the foremost one. With tourist footfalls increasing by the day, tourists are visibly the most

frustrated after facing poor connectivity. While the rest of mainland India is surging ahead technologically, it is unfortunate that poor Internet connectivity is holding these islands back. One hopes that the submarine optical fibre cable project becomes a reality soon.

RAM MURUGAN,  
Haddo, Port Blair, A&N Islands

MORE LETTERS ONLINE:  
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### CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The footnote in "Bank FD Interest Rates (%)" (Your Money page, Section 2, Feb. 18, 2018) erroneously said that the data was taken from respective banks' websites as on February 16, 2017. It should have been February 16, 2018.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com