



Historic handshake

Trump and Kim have traversed a remarkable distance; they must build on it

The historic summit between U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore is an affirmation of the power of diplomacy. Until a few months ago, the two countries had been trading nuclear threats, as the North raced along with its nuclear weapons programme. Now, as Mr. Trump shook hands with Mr. Kim, who had once said the U.S. President was “mentally deranged”, it was a reminder of Richard Nixon’s ground-breaking 1972 visit to Beijing. Through the day, both Mr. Trump and Mr. Kim were keen on casting the “comprehensive” meet in a positive light. The two whimsical leaders deserve full credit for this thaw in relations, given the decades of hostility and the quick diplomacy that pulled the Korean peninsula back from the brink of war. It all began with the new South Korean President Moon Jae-in’s expansive outreach to the North. Mr. Kim reciprocated by sending athletes to the Winter Olympics in South Korea in February. As the relationship between the Koreans improved rapidly, Mr. Kim invited the U.S. President for a meeting. Mr. Trump accepted at once, surprising America’s allies and rivals. However, it was not certain whether the meet would take place. Mr. Trump once called it off after threats and counter-threats escalated. But the appetite for rapprochement was clearly greater on both sides, and the rendezvous was back on track.

In the brief joint statement after their meeting, Mr. Kim iterated his “firm and unwavering commitment to complete denuclearisation” of the Korean Peninsula, while Mr. Trump offered security guarantees to the North. Mr. Kim had earlier promised to denuclearise the peninsula in return for security assurances, while Mr. Trump had promised that the North would be welcomed into the international community as a respectable member and be allowed to prosper economically. The two leaders have put these demands and promises into a document that could guide future diplomatic engagement. Mr. Trump also announced that he would end the regular American “war games” with South Korea, a concession to the North. While the summit itself was a big success given the distance both countries covered in a relatively short span of time, it is too early to say whether Mr. Trump and Mr. Kim can pull off a Nixon-Mao type breakthrough. The joint statement provided few specifics on how denuclearisation can take place or how North Korea’s steps to dismantle its arsenal will be monitored. There are no deadlines mentioned. There is no reference to China, North Korea’s only ally. There has been no word on whether the two will establish formal diplomatic ties. Besides, being unpredictable and impulsive, Mr. Trump and Mr. Kim must also stare down hardline elements in their respective administrations. This bold beginning must not be wasted.

Ethics first

There must be an inquiry into how allocations for organ transplants are made in Tamil Nadu

Transplantation of human organs is today a mature programme in many States, making it possible for people with kidney, liver, heart and lung failure to extend their lives. Heart and lung transplants are expensive and less widely available, compared with kidney and liver procedures. State governments, which have responsibility for health care provision, are expected to ensure that the organs that are altruistically donated by families of brain-dead people are given to recipients ethically, and as mandated by law. Priority for citizens enrolled in the State and national waiting lists over foreign nationals is laid down in the Transplantation of Human Organs and Tissues Rules. When the law is clear, it is extraordinary that seemingly preferential allotment of hearts and lungs has been made to foreign patients in Tamil Nadu – in 2017, foreigners accounted for 25% of heart transplants and 33% of lung transplants. The State is a pioneer in orderly and transparent allocation of deceased-donor organs, and has worked consistently to eliminate commerce in kidneys procured from poor living donors. The Transplant Authority of Tamil Nadu has served as a model for other States that now have their own programmes. Every effort must be made to ensure that it retains this high reputation, and organs go to the most suitable recipients on the rule-based parameters of domicile, citizenship, Indian origin and foreign nationality, in that order.

Organ transplants display a maturity curve over time, with a rise in the number of procedures improving outcomes and reducing costs. Heart and lung transplants are complicated procedures. Few Indian patients are willing to opt for one, compared to kidney and liver. Kidney and liver programmes have reached a high level of maturity, resulting in rising demand. Most of these organs go to citizens. Tamil Nadu offers a subsidy for poor patients for a liver transplant. Any inquiry into the allocation of hearts and lungs to foreigners should, therefore, shed light on the factors that led to the decisions, including whether registered citizens were overlooked. It should cover such issues as the capacity of district-level hospitals to perform transplants, and arrangements to air-lift organs, since domestic patients are unable to afford flight facilities. Such measures will make it possible to utilise more hearts and lungs, and offer them to domestic recipients. Enrolling all domestic patients through State registries should be the priority for the National Organ and Tissue Transplant Organisation, set up by the Centre with that mandate. Nothing should be done to erode the confidence of the kin of brain-dead people who donate organs with no expectation of gain. Hospitals and professionals who engage in commerce or unethical behaviour should have no place in the system.

Russian games in Syria

As the civil war winds down, the once overlapping interests of Moscow and Tehran are disentangling



STANLY JOHNY

As the new Cold War gets hotter, Russia now faces a big dilemma in West Asia of defending its allies. When President Vladimir Putin decided to send Russian troops to Syria in September 2015, the regime there of President Bashar al-Assad was on the brink of collapse. The Islamic State (IS) had already declared Raqqa in eastern Syria as its de facto capital. Rebels and jihadists had captured eastern Aleppo, Damascus suburbs, including Eastern Ghouta, Idlib province and southern towns like Daraa and Quneitra; they had also established a strong presence in Hama and Homs. Several rebel factions were breathing down on Damascus and the Mediterranean coastal belt, the stronghold of the regime. Three years later, Mr. Assad is safe, while his regime has recaptured most of the territories it lost in the early days of the war.

A successful partnership

Both Russia and Iran have played a crucial role in this turnaround. Though Russian air power was the most critical factor, especially in the battles for Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta, the Iran-trained militias, including Lebanon’s Hezbollah, fought alongside the Syrian army on the ground against the rebels and jihadists. But even when they were partnering in the war against common enemies, the Russians and Iranians had different goals in Syria. For Mr. Putin, the Syrian intervention was a big gamble. He

sensed that the Obama administration was indecisive despite its threats against the Assad regime and that the rebels were divided. His immediate plan was to salvage the regime, bolster Russia’s position in West Asia (Syria hosts a Russian naval base at Tartus) and send a message to his rivals in the West.

With the survival of the regime, Mr. Putin has achieved his immediate goal. But in the long run, he doesn’t want Russia to get stuck in Syria, like the Soviet Union or the U.S. later got caught up in Afghanistan. Therefore, Moscow is continuously pressing the Assad regime to be ready for a lasting political solution to the crisis.

Iran, on the other side, does not want any radical change in the current composition of the regime. Its immediate goal, like that of the Russians, was the survival of the regime. This was the common ground that brought both countries together in Syria. If Russia wanted to protect its naval base and expand its influence in West Asia through Syria, Iran does not want to lose its only ally in the region and a vital link with the Hezbollah. But in the long run, Iran wants to build permanent bases in Syria, stretching its military influence from Tehran through Baghdad and Damascus to southern Lebanon. Both Lebanon and Syria share borders with Israel. In Lebanon, Hezbollah has already established a strong military presence along Israel’s northern border. Iran’s plan was to apply strategic pressure on Israel by building more military infrastructure and deploying Shia militias closer towards the Israeli-occupied territories of Syria.

When the war was on full swing, these apparent differences



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were played down. The Russians and Iranians fought together alongside Syrian troops. But after Mr. Assad stabilised his rule over most of Syria’s population centres (rebel/jihadist factions now control Idlib province and Daraa and Quneitra, while the Kurdish rebels have established autonomous rule in the northwest), the cracks in the pro-Assad coalition began to emerge.

Some cracks

With the war winding down, Russia may now now be feeling less reliant on Iran, and Tehran is growing wary of Moscow’s game plans. From the early days of the Russian intervention, Mr. Putin has been specific on not widening the scope of the war. There were several attempts aimed at provoking Russia which could have escalated the conflict. In November 2015, a Russian warplane was shot down by Turkey. Russia’s response was a rather tame one, of economic sanctions. The U.S. bombed Mr. Assad’s forces twice since Donald Trump became U.S. President. On both occasions, Mr. Putin over-

A plastic charter

Mandatory segregation and recycling of plastic waste must be implemented before it is eventually phased out



MEGHA SHENOY

Every piece of plastic ever disposed of (this includes the toothbrush your grandfather used) is damaging the earth. It’s lying somewhere in the earth, floating in the ocean, or been broken down into micro-particles and in the food chain. Although a fraction of the plastic disposed of is recycled, most of it eventually ends up in the ocean or in dump sites outside city limits.

The best way to reduce plastic pollution is to reduce and phase out its consumption. Solutions range from carrying your own reusable steel glass, box, spoon and cloth bag while eating out or shopping for groceries to using alternatives to plastic for household items.

Rules and results

India’s Plastic Waste Management Rules (published in March 2016) called for a ban on plastic bags below 50 micron thickness and a phasing out, within two years, of the manufacture and sale of non-

recyclable, multi-layered plastic (plastic that snacks come in). More than 20 Indian States have announced a ban on plastic bags. Cities such as Bengaluru announced a complete ban (gazette notification), in 2016, on the manufacture, supply, sale and use of thermocol and plastic items irrespective of thickness. These include carry bags, banners, bunnings, flex, flags, plates, clips, spoons, cling films and plastic sheets used while dining. The exceptions are plastic for export, packaging material for use in forestry, milk packets and hospitals. There are stiff fines that cover manufacturing and disposal.

However, a Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) report has said that this ban is barely effective. Citizens need to be aware of these rules, governments need to work with citizens to collect fines and companies need to be held accountable in terms of their environmental and social responsibilities. Additionally, there should be research on ways to implement these rules, waste generation quantities and trends and find innovative alternatives to plastic.

We also need strategies to deal with the plastic that has already been disposed of. The same report says that India generates an estimated 16 lakh tonnes of plastic waste annually. If sold at the global



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average rate of 50 cents a kg, it can generate a revenue of ₹5,600 crore a year. Why then is most of this waste around us? In order to realise the potential for recycling, waste must first be segregated at source. This segregated waste should be then transported and treated separately. If plastic waste is mixed with organic and sanitary matter, its recyclability drastically reduces and its value lost. As mentioned in the Solid Waste Management Rules 2016, waste has to be segregated separately at source. This includes separation of dry (plastic, paper, metal, glass) and wet (kitchen and garden) waste at source.

The primary responsibility for collection of used plastic and multi-layered plastic sachets (branded chips, biscuit and snack packets) lies with their producers, importers and brand owners. Companies should have already submitted plans, by September 2016, for waste collection systems based on extended producer responsibility

looked the provocation. He did the same when Israel targeted Hezbollah positions within Syria.

But the crisis escalated despite Mr. Putin’s stance when Israel started directly attacking Iranian positions within Syria. In February, after Israel claimed an Iranian drone entered its air space, it carried out a massive bombing campaign in Syria against Iran. In May, immediately after Mr. Trump pulled the U.S. out of the multilateral Iran nuclear deal, Israel launched another major attack against Iranian targets. Interestingly, when the attack was under way, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was in Moscow. He watched Russia’s Victory Day parade in Red Square marking the Soviet victory in the Second World War against Hitler’s Germany. Israeli officials later told their Russian counterparts, “Israel will continue to maintain its operational freedom to act against Iranian entrenchment in all of Syria.”

Russia practically controls Syria’s airspace. But it has entered into deconfliction mechanisms with the U.S. and Israel so that the three countries can carry out air strikes without hurting each other. While the U.S. has mostly carried out strikes against the IS, Israel has used Syrian air space only to attack Iran and Hezbollah, both of which are Russia’s partners in the civil war. Yet, Mr. Putin hasn’t done anything to defend his allies. He has also become more receptive to Turkey expanding its role in Syria. The increasing crack in the Russia-Iran axis was again on display when in May Mr. Putin called for all foreign troops to leave Syria once the war is over. Later Russia’s Ambassador in Damascus clarified that the troops which Mr. Putin referred to include Iran’s. Iran’s Fo-

reign Ministry was quick to respond, saying that it would remain in Syria “as long as the Syrian government wants Iran to help it”.

Lonely Tehran

Mr. Putin is likely conscious of Iran’s vulnerability. Tehran does not have many allies. And after Mr. Trump threw a spanner into the Iran nuclear deal, it also faces the return of biting sanctions. It cannot afford to antagonise the Russians, certainly not at a time when the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Israel are teaming up to contain its influence. This Persian vulnerability allows Mr. Putin to maintain a delicate balancing act in a highly complex war theatre. For how long is now the question. Russia’s tame responses to repeated aggression in Syria by other powers have already cast a shadow on its Syria strategy. Mr. Putin may be balancing his relations with several players for now to avoid a conflagration. But Israel and Turkey are not Russia’s traditional allies. In West Asia, Israel is the strongest ally of the U.S., which remains Russia’s most powerful geopolitical rival. And Turkey is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, an overhang of the Cold War, aimed at checking the Westward creep of Russia’s influence. In contrast, Tehran is Moscow’s ally and partner, but Russia either doesn’t want to or is not in a position to defend Iran’s interests in Syria.

This is the dilemma that confronts Mr. Putin: how he can restore Russia’s lost glory in the new Cold War if he cannot even defend the interests of his partners in a country (Syria) where he appears to be in control.

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(EPR) either through their own distribution channels or with the local body concerned. Here, the onus of disposal and recycling of products and materials is with producers, rather than on taxpayers and governments. However, none of this has happened at any perceivable scale. Companies say that plastic waste is too complex or pretend to be completely unaware of these rules.

From pollution to solutions

Admittedly, the complexity of dealing with plastic waste is because of its ubiquity and distributed market. Several companies produce the same type of packaging so it is impossible for a given company to collect and recycle only its own packaging. Instead, these companies can collectively implement EPR by geographically dividing a region into zones and handle the waste generated in their designated zones. This strategy was used in Switzerland to recycle thermocol used for insulation of buildings. This also reduces collection, transportation and recycling costs. Companies and governments should interact and research on how to implement such plans.

In India, some companies have helped empower the informal recycling sector, giving waste pickers

dignity and steady incomes. Another firm has worked with the informal sector and engineered the production of high quality recycled plastic. These companies, large corporates and governments could cooperate to implement innovative means to realise the value of plastic disposed of while simultaneously investing in phasing it out. For example, a Canadian company monetises plastic waste in novel ways. It has one of the largest chains of waste plastic collection centres, where waste can be exchanged for anything (from cash to medical insurance to cooking fuel). Through this, multinational corporations have invested in recycling infrastructure and in providing a steady and increased rate for waste plastic to incentivise collection in poor countries. Such collection centres, like the ones operated by informal aggregators in India, can be very low-cost investments (a storage facility with a weighing scale and a smart phone).

It is time we rethink, reduce, segregate and recycle every time we encounter a piece of plastic so that it stops damaging our environment and our lives.

Megha Shenoy is Adjunct Fellow, Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment, Bengaluru

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.

‘Bypass’ surgeries

That “at least three hearts retrieved from brain-dead patients were given to international patients” in recent months speaks volumes about the fate of (poor) patients in India who have been waiting endlessly for a new heart (Exclusive report - “In Chennai, the hearts beat for foreigners”, Page 1, June 12). The table summed it up – a staggering figure of 5,310 Indians (June 2018) as against a paltry 53 international patients. No one knows whether monetary considerations and/or political pressure played a role but the exposé showed declining standards of ethics even in the noble profession of medicine, more so in the corporate sector. One wants to see the response to the violations (Interview - Dr. Kantimathi, “No Indian should be denied,” June 12).

J. EDEN ALEXANDER,
Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu

■ The irony cannot be starker. Access to health is

becoming a privilege of the affluent even as India is being promoted as an ideal destination for health tourism. In the process, every aspect of health care appears to be being made a commodity in order to make profits at the cost of ethics. Making money via the organ trade is insulting. There needs to be a well-empowered agency to monitor the regulation of health-care institutions, especially those in the corporate sector.

A.G. RAJMOHAN,
Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh

■ There is indeed an undeniable nexus between the agency in charge of organ and tissue transplantation and the corporate sector, apparently dictated by commercial considerations. Thousands of citizens pledge to donate their organs in the belief that they would be used for the benefit of fellow countrymen. Sadly, the unsavoury happenings have shaken this belief. A thorough

investigation is required given the international ramifications.

P.K. VARADARAJAN,
Chennai

■ Those who yearn for transplanted organs wish to live happily and with better health. These hopes now lie shattered. When our doctors have been exhorted to practise medicine out of compassion for the sick, it is inhumane to be making more money in critical medical circumstances.

A.J. RANGARAJAN,
Chennai

■ Charity begins abroad seems to be the new adage if one is to go by the unethical priorities and extra soft corner shown to overseas patients. There appear to be many grey areas in the promotion of India as the so-called prime destination for medical tourism. We already have special windows for NRIs for preferential treatment in designated schemes. We are used to a culture of “emergency quotas”,

“tatkal” and “super dynamic fares” in the transportation sector. This seems to have percolated to health care for those who can afford to usurp the rights of bona fide customers.

SIVAMANI VASUDEVAN,
Chennai

■ The only reason one can think of is the extra money involved. Those who run the racket are sure to be working in connivance with hospitals. The magnanimity of relatives of brain-dead patients for a good cause has been betrayed. Who knows, maybe the relatives too have a share of the pie. For foreigners seeking organ transplantation, India could be the destination of first choice because of lax regulation. The case also reminds us of surrogate mothers readily available in India with the foreign market in mind.

V. LAKSHMANAN,
Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

Fugitive haven?

Unfortunately, it appears as though the U.K. is fast

becoming the most sought-after haven for those accused of wrong-doing (“We’ll help in locating Nirav Modi, says U.K.”, June 12).

Prison conditions in India appear to be the “dampener” that comes in the way of British courts extraditing fugitives on the run. It is for the Indian authorities to initiate remedial action by inviting the British police and judiciary to assess in person the ground reality so that any incorrect perceptions can be set at rest.

A.V. NARAYANAN,
Tiruchi

■ Many of these so-called fugitives are reported to cite the very poor conditions in jails back in India. Jails are

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The story about the Test match between Sri Lanka and West Indies was carried under a wrong headline “Innings win for Windies” in the early editions (June 11, 2018). Actually, it was not an innings win for the West Indies since they had played both the innings.

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