



## War for war

With missile strikes, the United States has irresponsibly escalated the Syrian conflict

By launching a missile attack on Syria, U.S. President Donald Trump has made good on his threat to use force if chemical weapons are used in the civil war-stricken country, but he has also escalated the devastating, multi-sided conflict. This is the second time Mr. Trump has ordered a missile attack on Syria. Last year, after a chemical attack in Idlib province, the U.S. fired 59 cruise missiles at an airbase of President Bashar al-Assad. This time, after a suspected chemical attack in Douma near Damascus, the U.K. and France joined hands with the U.S. to punish Mr. Assad's regime. On Friday night, over 100 missiles targeted three regime facilities; with this, the Pentagon said, Syria's chemical weapons programme has been gutted. While the use of chemical agents against civilians cannot and must not go unpunished, the manner in which the U.S. and its allies have acted raises serious questions. The U.S. undertook the strike before the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons even began its investigation in Douma to ascertain if chemical weapons had in fact been used. It should have waited till the inter-governmental watchdog completed its investigation and then presented the case for action in the UN Security Council with requisite evidence. By acting merely on the basis of inputs from their intelligence agencies, the U.S.-led alliance flouted international law.

It is also doubtful if Mr. Trump's "mission accomplished" bravado is justified. The fact that a provocation was perceived for a second strike within a year suggests that the first one failed to deter the Assad regime. On the other hand, Mr. Trump has dragged the U.S. deeper into the Syrian civil war. If there is a future chemical attack, either by Mr. Assad or by his rivals, the U.S. will be forced to act again, perhaps more harshly. Worryingly, every time the U.S. bombs Syria, the chances of a military confrontation in the country between the U.S. and Russia heightens, given that Moscow remains firmly behind Mr. Assad. What Syrians need is not more bombs and missiles, but an end to the war, which has killed at least 400,000 people in seven years. There is no dispute that Mr. Assad is presiding over a monstrous military machine that has used brute force against his own people. But the ground reality in Syria is so complex that a sudden collapse of the regime would push the country and the millions who live in relative stability in regime-held territories into further misery. That is the last thing anyone wants. The focus of the West needs to shift from unilateral military action to aggressive multi-lateral diplomacy to find an immediate end to violence and then a long-lasting political solution. For that, the U.S. and Russia have to work together under a UN mandate. There is no other path to peace in Syria.

## A golden hue

Indian athletes make a mark in diverse sports at the Commonwealth Games

The Olympics has a global allure and the Asian Games basks in its continental spread. Compared to these two, the Commonwealth Games may look like an unflattering vestige of Britain's colonial past. Yet there is no denying the CWG's relevance as a stepping stone to greater sporting glory. For India, the relatively limited competition means it remains a frontrunner. This was underlined over the last fortnight at the Gold Coast in Australia, where India won 66 medals and improved on the haul of 64 from the 2014 edition at Glasgow. Importantly, the number of golds rose from 15 to 26. In wrestling, weightlifting, shooting, boxing, badminton and particularly table tennis, India dominated. There were world-class efforts from the Indians. Five-time world boxing champion Mary Kom, two-time Olympic medalist wrestler Sushil Kumar, world champion weightlifter Mirabai Chanu, 2016 world junior javelin champion Neeraj Chopra and teen shooting sensations Manu Bhaker and Anish Bhanwala produced splendid performances to clinch gold. In badminton, the unexpected gold in the mixed team event, the much-anticipated women's final featuring P.V. Sindhu and Saina Nehwal, and the emergence of some doubles combinations were the high points. From the table tennis arena, India provided the biggest surprises. It won a medal in all seven events – an unprecedented sweep of team golds and a historic gold in the women's singles for Manika Batra, highlighting the hard work done also by the coaching and support team. The 22-year-old Delhi player returned with four medals, including two golds, and proved to be India's most valuable player.

However, India's reputation took a beating when A.V. Rakesh Babu and K.T. Irfan were packed off from the Games for violation of the 'no needle' policy after needles were found in their rooms. This aberration must not go unaddressed against the backdrop of successes of other Indian athletes. With the next Asian Games scheduled in August-September in Jakarta, Indonesia, India is expected to build on the gains from the Gold Coast. Based on the quality of recent performances, India could improve upon its 2014 tally of 11 gold, 10 silver and 36 bronze medals. Considering the Asian standards of table tennis, badminton, shooting, wrestling, weightlifting and field events in athletics, it will be over-optimistic to expect a gold haul anywhere close to what the Indians managed from the Gold Coast. Chopra, Chanu, Sushil, the badminton players in singles, besides select shooters, will hope to do well. But India will certainly try to register a better show in hockey where the men's team will defend its Asian Games title, and automatically qualify for the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo. Till then, the CWG has held a mirror up to Indian sport and found a refreshing reflection.

# Mandate and allocations

The terms of reference of the 15th Finance Commission raise questions about constitutional propriety



M. GOVINDA RAO

It is not without reason that the presidential terms of reference (ToR) of the Fifteenth Finance Commission have raised questions, and the recent conclave of Finance Ministers of the southern States to discuss contentious issues in the ToR is only the beginning. In the months ahead more debate on this is likely. But the line by the media that this conclave was about concerns over the directive to use population data in the ToR for the present Commission could have been silent on which population figures should be used and avoided a controversy. In any case, from the perspective of economic objectives, there is no justification in using 1971 population data as a factor in the horizontal distribution of funds. From a political perspective, the use of 1971 population data will result in losers and gainers.

To be fair, the meeting was called to discuss all contentious issues. Of course, for the southern States the issue of population was a point of concern and provided a common meeting point for the Ministers. But this was not the only area.

### Using population data

Conceptually, general purpose transfers to States by way of tax devolution and grants are meant to enable them to provide comparable levels of public services at comparable tax effort. Public services have to be provided to the current population and not just the population of either the 1971 Census or the 2011 Census. The earlier Finance Commissions were issued the directive to use population data of 1971 based on a parliamentary resolution.

In fact, the Thirteenth Finance Commission expressed its frustration when it said: "We are bound by our ToR to take into account population figures for the States



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based on the 1971 Census" and assigned 25% weight to the factor. The Fourteenth Commission, after examining various factors to represent demographic changes, chose population figures of 2011 and assigned 10% weightage in addition to the 17.5% weightage given to the 1971 population data. The ToR for the present Commission could have been silent on which population figures should be used and avoided a controversy. In any case, from the perspective of economic objectives, there is no justification in using 1971 population data as a factor in the horizontal distribution of funds. From a political perspective, the use of 1971 population data will result in losers and gainers.

### Fiscal federalism

States need to debate a number of contentious issues in the ToR which affect the very structure of fiscal federalism. These include: asking the Commission "to examine whether revenue deficit grants be provided at all"; considering "the impact of [the] fiscal situation of the Union government of substantially enhanced devolution by the Fourteenth Finance Commission, coupled with continuing imperative of the national development programme including New India 2022"; looking at the conditions that may be imposed by the Central government while providing consent to States

when they borrow under Article 293(3); asking the Commission to propose measurable performance-based incentives to States in respect of a number of areas such as the implementation of flagship schemes, progress towards replacement rate of population growth, a control or lack of it in incurring expenditure on populist measures; and finally, promoting ease of doing business.

It must be noted that issuing directives and guidelines to the Finance Commissions has been done even in the past and there are cases of States taking serious objection to such directives. Although the basic ToRs of the Commission are laid down in Article 280 of the Constitution, guidelines and directives are given by the Union government under clause: "any other matter referred to the Commission by the President in the interests of sound finance". However, the ToR of the Fifteenth Commission raise questions about constitutional propriety and has implications for the federal fabric of the nation itself.

Take, for example, the suggestion that the Commission may examine whether the revenue deficit grants should be given at all. The very objective of Article 275 is to enable the Commission to give grants to offset post-devolution gaps between normatively assessed revenues and expenditures. If the Commission takes this

suggestion seriously, it will have serious ramifications for States with genuinely large resource gaps.

### National plans

Never before in the history of the country has a Finance Commission been asked to review the recommendations of the previous Commission on the grounds that it gave "substantially enhanced devolution". It has been clarified several times that the Commission had to include the grants for State Plan Schemes in its devolution. Furthermore, it desisted from giving discretionary and sector-specific grants including those for the environment.

Analysis shows that the increase was just about 2-3% of the divisible pool. Nudging the Commission to leave larger fiscal space for implementing national development programmes under New India 2022 is to ask it to leave more funds for making further intrusions into State subjects. The ToR seek to reduce the role of Article 275, which is a legitimate channel for grants, and asks the Commission to leave it more fiscal space to expand grants under Article 282, which is questionable.

Asking the Commission to take into account the performances in implementation of various Central schemes is equally contentious. The Seventh Schedule of the Constitution assigns the respective functions in terms of Union, State and Concurrent subjects. It is ironical that the Union government has been intruding into State subjects through Central schemes by forcibly using fiscal space. Performances must be built into the implementation of schemes and not into the tax devolution formula. It must be noted that devolution of taxes to States is not a charity; it is their right. As pointed out by the

Sixth Finance Commission, "It is misleading to speak in terms of redistribution of resources between the Centre and States. It will be more appropriate to view the problem as one of distribution of resources as between the subjects coming constitutionally within the competence of the Centre and those coming within the purview of States. The resources belong to the nation and they should be applied at points where they are needed most."

Although it has by now become customary to issue guidelines, those issued this time raise questions of constitutional propriety. The ToR of the Ninth Finance Commission had raised considerable disquiet among States when it was asked to adopt a normative approach. The Chairman of the Commission had to allay their apprehensions in his letter to all the Chief Ministers saying: "It is the Commission's prerogative to adopt such approach and method as it considered fit and appropriate on subjects covered by (a) and (b) of Article 280(3) of the Constitution. In view of the Presidential notification, however, the Commission would consider, inter alia, adopting a 'normative approach' wherever appropriate in the interest of sound finance. But by doing so, the Commission would apply a uniform, just and equitable yardstick both to the Centre and States."

The ToR of the present Commission raise even more serious issues of constitutional propriety and, hopefully, States will safeguard their turf to preserve the federal fabric of the country.

M. Govinda Rao, Emeritus Professor, National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, was a member of the Fourteenth Finance Commission. The views expressed are personal

# Reimagining governance

Getting the Centre, States and district administrations to work in tandem is crucial



DHIRAJ NAYYAR

The 115 Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP) conceived by Prime Minister Narendra Modi is radical not because this is the first time that a government in India has focussed on India's most backward districts but because the exercise envisages a serious re-imagining of government and governance, and deepens cooperative federalism. The programme is informed by the failures of the past and therefore has a more contemporary vision of how public services are best delivered to those who need them most.

### Aspirational districts

The 115 districts were chosen by senior officials of the Union government in consultation with State officials on the basis of a composite index of the following: deprivation enumerated under the Socio-Economic Caste Census, key health and education performance indicators and the state of

basic infrastructure. A minimum of one district was chosen from every State. Unsurprisingly, the largest concentration of districts is in the States which have historically under-performed such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, or which are afflicted by left-wing extremism such as Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. Moving forward, the areas that have been targeted for transformation are: education, health and nutrition, agriculture and water resources, financial inclusion, basic infrastructure and skills. Deliberately, the districts have been described as aspirational rather than backward so that they are viewed as islands of opportunity and hope rather than areas of distress and hopelessness. Attitudes and narrative matter for outcomes.

There is no financial package or large allocation of funds to this programme. The intent is to leverage the resources of the several government programmes that already exist but are not always used efficiently. The government doesn't always need to spend more to achieve outcomes but instead to spend better. Many schemes of the Centre have flexible spending components which permit autonomy at the level of lo-



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cal governments but these are seldom used in practice due to controlling Central and State machineries.

Achieving success in this programme requires three tiers of government, the Centre, States and district administrations, to work in tandem. There is a structure in place. Each district is assigned a prabhari (in-charge) officer from the Centre (of additional secretary or joint secretary rank) and a prabhari officer from the State (of the rank of Secretary to State government) who will work in cooperation with the district administration. It is necessary for the Centre and States to be involved because not all decisions can be taken at the level of district. For example, if there is a shortage of teachers in a local school or a shortage of health personnel in a primary health

centre, it needs the State capital to act, possibly through transfers of personnel from over staffed areas. On financial inclusion, the full cooperation of banks is necessary and only the Central government has leverage over them. But most crucial is the District Magistrate or Collector who is familiar with the challenges of his or her geography and has considerable power to implement government schemes. Partnership is not something which comes easily to the upper tiers of government, which are used to dictating terms to lower tiers.

The spirit of cooperation needs to be supplemented by a culture of competition. This programme takes the principle of competitive federalism down to district administrations. Each district will be ranked on the focus areas which are disaggregated into easily quantifiable target areas. So as not to bias the rankings on historical achievements or lack of them, the rankings will be based on deltas or improvements. The rankings will be publicly available.

India's long history of a dominant state apparatus has led to an entrenched perception that government is the sole actor capable of and responsible for the transfor-

mation of India. The ADP has opened its door to civil society and leveraged the tool of corporate social responsibility to form partnerships which will bring new ideas and fresh energy with boots on the ground from non-government institutions to join the "official" efforts. The force multiplier on outcomes from such participation is potentially massive.

### Smart data

One area which is being given serious attention is the collection of quality data on a real-time basis. Too often in India, data collection is delayed or lacking in quality which ends up leading to policy-makers shooting in the dark. With continuously updated data dashboards, those running the programme on the ground can alter strategies after accurate feedback.

In a way, the ADP is a big pilot programme for reorienting how government does its business of delivering development. A decisive shift in the paradigm of governance is likely to finally fulfil the many broken promises of the past.

Dhiraj Nayyar is Officer on Special Duty and Head, Economics, Finance and Commerce, NITI Aayog. The views expressed are personal

## 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.

### Syrian strikes

The massive aerial attack on Syria by the U.S. and its allies in the name of retaliation for Syria having unleashed chemical weapons on its civilians demonstrates the U.S.'s global policeman attitude. The U.S.-led attack that grossly interferes with the democratic functioning of a country was neither discussed in the U.N. nor sanctioned by the Security Council. The West's wars on Iraq, Libya, and now Syria are nothing but a fallout of its imperialist instincts. All those concerned with the task of addressing the menace of uncivilised aggressions must evolve a system that curtails such unilateral actions. It is also time to recollect that all such attacks by a caucus of aggressors, and carried out under the pretext of preserving democracy, have only plunged the targeted countries into severe crisis.

A.G. RAJMOHAN, Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh

■ The West's claim cannot be taken at face value as its earlier claim that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction to justify its invasion turned out to be untrue. The loss of life and suffering in Syria are too overwhelming to be described in words. The revival of the political process by diplomatic means without compromising the right of Syrians to self-rule is the only way forward.

G. DAVID MILTON, Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

### For safer roads

Accidents in India involving 'heavy goods vehicles, especially coaches and lorries with trailers, occur all too frequently despite calls for responsible behaviour, observation of loading regulations and the highway code, as well as the need for drivers to adapt their driving speed, which in turn affects stopping distances. Accident prevention should be ensured by strict application of laws, technical and police controls, ongoing training for drivers (especially those

involved in the transportation of dangerous substances), and by legal and administrative penalties'. Many two-wheeler riders, who also form a significant percentage of those involved in accidents, are often not driving appropriately for conditions on the road (Editorial - "Preventing accidents", April 14).

K.M.K. MURTHY, Secunderabad

■ There is no denying that faulty road designs and potholes are factors in accidents. Besides these, drunk and rash driving and fatigued drivers must get the attention of officials. To deter drunk drivers, alcohol detection centres must operate on the main highways. Hawk-like patrolling on highways should also be ensured.

DEEPAK SINGHAL, Noida

■ High-speed vehicles, vulnerable road users, 'unsafe road infrastructure and inadequately trained

drivers' all contribute to India's high road accident rates. Urban planning has also 'not kept pace with the increase in the number of vehicles, while driving licences are not issued based on a road user's knowledge, skill and road etiquette'. The main drive of accident prevention and control across the world is 'based on the four Es: education, enforcement, engineering and emergency'.

R. SIVAKUMAR, Chennai

### Ambedkar's journey

It was distressing to read about B.R. Ambedkar's struggle in his academic journey and how officials in the West made him run from pillar to post (Editorial page, "The enigma of arrival", April 14). Nevertheless, his travails are a source of inspiration for those who want to emulate him for his indomitable spirit. One hopes that the British government has more proof of his inspiring journey which will help historians

uncover many more interesting facts.

E.S. CHANDRASEKARAN, Chennai

### End the alienation

At first glance, it would appear as if tharugh the Adivasis in Jharkhand are intent on disruption ('Ground Zero' - "The Pathaladi rebellion", April 14). But if one digs deeper, it is obvious that the issue is all about a lack of political, social and economic opportunities. Extension of

### CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the Sports page report headlined "Roy's daredevilry makes it Delhi's day" (April 15, 2018) there was a reference to seamers Roy and Pant. Actually, Roy is the opener and Pant is a wicket keeper. The report also erroneously mentioned that Evin Lewis and Suryakumar Yadav [of Mumbai Indians] showed their mettle against Hardik Pandya, Akila Dhananjaya and Mayank Markande. Actually, all three are Mumbai Indians.

In "Starc Contrast: cricket is not Brandon's sport" (April 12, 2018), it was mentioned that Starc won *long jump gold*. It should have been *high jump gold*. The caption of the photograph titled "Not good enough" (April 12, 2018) said that Tejaswini Shankar figured 6th in the *long jump final*. It should have been *high jump final*.

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