



The Akali factor

With its alliance in Punjab, the BJP admits the need to take a back seat in some States

The Shiromani Akali Dal has been among the most steadfast allies of the Bharatiya Janata Party, the two parties having been in coalition since 1998. It comes as no surprise that they have aligned again in a seat-sharing arrangement in Punjab for the Lok Sabha election, with the Akalis as the dominant partner to contest 10 seats in the State and the BJP contesting the other three. In 2014, the alliance won 35% of the vote to secure six of the 13 constituencies in a tripartite contest. The Congress, which won three seats, will seek to build on its victory in the Assembly elections in 2017 as State-level incumbents usually enjoy some momentum going into a national election. The Akali-BJP alliance took a beating in the Assembly election after having been in power for two terms, but still managed a substantial 30.6% vote share, which could keep it competitive in the Lok Sabha election. There is also the emergence of the Aam Aadmi Party as a viable contestant in the State (especially in the southern Malwa region). For the BJP, a coalition with the Akalis, despite being allotted only three seats, was therefore an imperative. As with its other coalition partners such as the Shiv Sena, the alliance in Punjab too went through degrees of rough weather, but there was too much at stake for seat-sharing talks to fail. Besides reasons of arithmetic, the SAD also presents a strong and traditionally anti-Congress position in its ideological core, tinged with a certain degree of sectarianism. This coheres well with the overall vision of the BJP.

In allocating a larger share to the Akalis in Punjab, the AIADMK and other partners in Tamil Nadu, besides retaining its alliance with the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, the BJP has signalled its awareness of the efficacy of coherent pre-poll coalitions based on the party's strengths in these States. The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance has seen some attrition since 2014, with the loss of the Telugu Desam Party. But it has compensated with additions such as the Janata Dal (United), besides the retention of other allies. Even though it has projected a certain personalised form of administration with Prime Minister Narendra Modi being the dominant face of the government, the BJP is crucially dependent on the support of its allies. In the last five years, the party has steadily lost parliamentary by-elections and its current tally in the Lok Sabha is below the majority mark. Only with the support of the allies does the NDA now have a comfortable majority. The BJP might scoff at attempts made by the Opposition to form a grand coalition and portray them as an incoherent mishmash of organisations, but the fact that coalitions in Indian politics are here to stay is not lost on its leadership.

Hanoi hiccup

Despite the collapse of talks, the U.S. and North Korea must persist with CBMs

The abrupt end of talks between U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Hanoi is clearly a setback to attempts to find a peaceful solution to the Korean nuclear crisis. Both sides cut short a two-day summit on the second day on Thursday without even signing a joint communiqué. They also gave conflicting versions on why the talks collapsed. Mr. Trump said Mr. Kim insisted on a full withdrawal of American sanctions in return for the closure of only one nuclear facility. However, North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho later said Pyongyang had sought only partial sanctions relief in return for dismantling the Yongbyon nuclear site, the North's main facility. Whatever the actual reason, one thing is clear: the bonhomie between the two leaders after last year's Singapore summit was missing in Hanoi. After the Singapore meet, both sides had agreed to have "new U.S.-DPRK [North Korea] relations" and establish a "lasting and stable peace regime" on the Korean peninsula. Pyongyang had also promised to work toward "complete denuclearisation". No such comments about the future course of the peace process were issued this time. The North Koreans have ruled out any immediate plans for a future meeting between the two sides.

A part of the problem was the failure of both Washington and Pyongyang in following up on commitments made in Singapore. A few weeks ahead of that summit in June, North Korea had announced a complete freeze on nuclear and missile tests as a reconciliatory gesture. It had asked the U.S. to reciprocate – its main demand was a formal declaration of an end to the 1950-53 Korean War, but the Trump administration refused to do so. Lack of confidence-building measures too blunted the momentum created in Singapore. When U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo first visited Pyongyang, Mr. Kim refused to meet him. Later, the American intelligence community reported that North Korea continued its ballistic missile programme after the first Trump-Kim summit. With these problems still in place, the second summit between the leaders was announced. Any hopes of clinching a big agreement in Hanoi fell as both sides stuck to their respective demands. However, the setback need not necessarily bring the peace process to a halt. Mr. Trump himself has said denuclearisation is a long process. The freeze on nuclear and missile tests that Mr. Kim announced is still in place. The Korean peninsula has been calm, while inter-Korean relations have markedly improved. Before the Hanoi summit, there were reports that the U.S. would declare an end to the Korean war and that both countries would open liaison offices in each other's capitals as part of normalisation of ties. They should go ahead with such measures and build confidence and mutual trust while also taking a phased approach to dealing with more contentious issues such as denuclearisation.

Ensure a minimum income for all

A basic income scheme will deliver benefits to the poor only if it comes on top of public services



RAM SINGH

The idea of a universal basic income (UBI) is gaining ground globally. It has supporters among the political left and right, and among proponents as well as opponents of the free-market economy. A UBI requires the government to pay every citizen a fixed amount of money on a regular basis and without any conditionality. Crucial to the appeal for such a demand – for a UBI – is that millions of people remain unemployed and are extremely poor, despite rapid economic growth in the last three decades. The National Democratic Alliance government has already unfolded a limited version of the UBI in the form of the Pradhanmantri Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana (PM-KISAN) which promises ₹6,000 per annum to farmers who own less than 2 hectares of land. Going by media reports, the election manifesto of the Congress Party may announce an even more ambitious version of the scheme.

Where it will work

The UBI is neither an antidote to the vagaries of market forces nor a substitute for basic public services, especially health and education. Besides, there is no need to transfer money to middle- and high-income earners as well as large landowners.

However, there is a strong case for direct income transfers to

some groups: landless labourers, agricultural workers and marginal farmers who suffer from multi-dimensional poverty. These groups have not benefited from economic growth. They were and still are the poorest Indians. Various welfare schemes have also failed to bring them out of penury.

A case in point is the access to institutional credit issued by banks and cooperative societies. According to National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) data from the 70th round, institutional credits account for less than 15% of the total borrowing by landless agricultural workers; the figure for marginal and small farmers is only 30%. These groups have to borrow from moneylenders and *adhatiyas* at exorbitant interest rates ranging from 24 to 60%. As a result, they do not stand to benefit much from the interest rate subsidy for the agriculture sector. Likewise, the benefits of subsidised fertilizers and power are enjoyed largely by big farmers. In urban areas, contract workers and those in the informal sector face a similar problem. The rapid pace of automation of low-skill jobs and formalisation of the retail sector mean the prospects of these groups are even bleaker.

An income support of, say, ₹15,000 per annum can be a good supplement to their livelihoods – an amount worth more than a third of the average consumption of the poorest 25% households, and more than a fourth of the annual income of marginal farmers.

This additional income can reduce the incidence of indebtedness among marginal farmers, thereby helping them escape moneylenders and *adhatiyas*. Be-



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sides, it can go a long way in helping the poor to make ends meet. Several studies have shown that at high levels of impoverishment, even a small income supplement can improve nutrient intake, and increase enrolment and school attendance for students coming from poor households.

Better productivity

In other words, income transfers to the poor will lead to improved health and educational outcomes, which in turn would lead to a more productive workforce. It seems to be a good idea to transfer the money into the bank accounts of women of the beneficiary households. Women tend to spend more of their income on health and the education of children.

The effect of an income transfer scheme on unemployment is a moot point. In principle, cash transfers can result in withdrawal of beneficiaries from the labour force. However, the income support suggested above is not too large to discourage beneficiaries from seeking work. In fact, it can promote employment and economic activities. For instance, income receipts can come in handy as interest-free working capital for several categories of beneficiaries (fruit and vegetable vendors and small artisans), thereby promoting

their business and employment in the process.

Moreover, such a scheme will have three immediate benefits. One, it will help bring a large number of households out of the poverty trap or prevent them from falling into it in the event of exigencies such as illness. Two, it will reduce income inequalities. Three, since the poor spend most of their income, a boost in their income will increase demand and promote economic activities in rural areas. Nonetheless, an income transfer scheme cannot be a substitute for universal basic services. The direct income support to the poor will deliver the benefits mentioned only if it comes on top of public services such as primary health and education. This means that direct transfers should not be at the expense of public services for primary health and education. If anything, budgetary allocation for these services should be raised significantly. Programmes such as the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme should also stay. With direct income support, the demand for the programmes will come down naturally. However, in the interim, it will serve to screen the poorest in the country and give them a crucial safety net.

Using datasets

If basic public services are maintained, there is limited fiscal space for direct income support. It will have to be restricted to the poorest of poor households. The Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) 2011 can be used to identify the neediest. Groups suffering from multidimensional poverty such as the destitute, the shelter-

less, manual scavengers, tribal groups, and former bonded labourers are automatically included. The dataset includes more than six crore landless labourers. It also includes many small farmers who face deprivation criteria such as families without any bread-earning adult member, and those without a pucca house.

The other needy group, small farmers, missing from the SECC can be identified using the dataset from the Agriculture Census of 2015-16. Together, these two datasets can help identify the poorest Indians, especially in rural India. However, many households such as marginal farmers belong to both datasets. The Aadhaar identity can be used to rule out duplications and update the list of eligible households.

As an approximation, the number of eligible households is 10 crore. That is, even in its basic form, the scheme will require approximately ₹1.5 lakh crore per annum. The PM-KISAN Yojana can be aligned to meet a part of the cost. Moreover, the tax kitty can be expanded by reintroducing wealth tax. Nonetheless, the required amount is beyond the Centre's fiscal capacity at the moment. Therefore, the cost will have to be shared by States. States such as Telangana and Odisha are already providing direct income support to their farmers. These States can extend their schemes to include the 'non-farmer poor'. The other States too should join in.

The income transfer scheme is costly. However, the cost of persistent poverty is much higher.

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The mixed signals from Pakistan

One can get a fair idea of the Pakistani military's thinking by analysing the politicians' statements and actions



MOHAMMED AYOOB

Now that the first round of military tit-for-tats is over, it is important that New Delhi settles down to parsing the mixed signals coming out of Pakistan. While keeping all options open, it is important for the government to make a definitive assessment regarding Pakistan's intentions before taking the next step in both the military and diplomatic spheres. This is a difficult job, among other things because the real decision-makers in Pakistan are not the Prime Minister and his cabinet but the top generals enconced in General Headquarters in Rawalpindi.

Nonetheless, one can get a fair idea of the thinking by Pakistani decision-makers by analysing the statements and actions of politicians because they are often orchestrated by the military high command. Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's pronouncements are, therefore, worth following closely. His most recent statement in the Pakistan Parliament betrays the internal conflict in both his and his generals' assessment of

the current India-Pakistan standoff and its impact on the standing of the Pakistani military in the eyes of the country's population.

Mr. Khan has, on the one hand, emphasised his desire for de-escalation without accepting blame for the initial action, the Pulwama terrorist attack, that triggered the present crisis. While ostensibly addressing the Indian government, he has attempted to present a reasonable face to the international community by expressing his yearning for peace in the subcontinent. He has especially emphasised the fact that both countries are nuclear powers and, therefore, any further escalation could lead to disastrous results.

The de-escalatory ladder

His announcement on Thursday that Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman would be released "unconditionally" falls in this category of de-escalatory signals. His statement also made it clear that he wanted to link the release to the reopening of negotiations with India in order to find a way out of the current crisis.

While India welcomed this move, it refused to give Pakistan credit for what Islamabad considers a humanitarian gesture. India has characterised it as an act undertaken in consonance with the Geneva Convention that Pakistan, as a signatory, is compelled to fol-



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low. Therefore, Islamabad does not deserve extra credit for merely fulfilling its international obligations.

In the same speech, Mr. Khan warned the Indian leadership, "Do not take this confrontation further", saying otherwise Pakistan will be "forced to retaliate". He also made no apologies for the terrorist acts committed by jihadi groups spawned by Pakistan's military intelligence. Instead, he once again asked New Delhi for proof that the Pulwama attack could be traced to Pakistan despite the Bahawalpur-based Jaish-e-Mohammad's acknowledgement, immediately after the suicide bombing, that it was responsible for the incident.

There are various reasons one can decipher for Pakistan's double-speak. Mr. Khan's de-escalatory rhetoric is in part the result of external pressure, especially from the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Foreign Minister made a dash to Islamabad to advise the Pa-

kistan government not to let the crisis get out of hand. It was also clear from U.S. President Donald Trump's statement in Hanoi, in which he suggested that good news was about to emanate from South Asia, that Washington had put pressure on Islamabad and possibly on New Delhi not to engage in further military action.

It is true that the fear of escalation to the nuclear level haunts both Indian and Pakistani decision-makers and acts as a formidable restraint preventing both from intensifying the conflict. An action-reaction dynamic, such as the one that started with the Pulwama attack, can conceivably graduate to the nuclear level if Pakistan, which does not accept the "no first use" doctrine, decides to take recourse to tactical nuclear weapons, which it has stockpiled, if it finds itself unable to withstand India's superior conventional power.

On the other hand, the Indian nuclear doctrine does not make a distinction between tactical and strategic nuclear strikes and implies that India will respond through massive retaliation even if a tactical weapon use does only a limited amount of damage. It is, therefore, difficult to predict in this context where the escalatory process, if left unchecked, would end.

However, all these very real concerns about uncontrolled esca-

lation have to be measured against the Pakistani military brass's obsession with its honour and credibility among its people. Both have been severely damaged by its inability to anticipate and thwart the Indian aerial attack on Balakot deep inside Pakistani territory. The military is the real power behind the throne in Pakistan. Mr. Khan's ascent to office was deftly managed by the military high command, which, unlike in India, is also in control of the country's nuclear weapons and delivery systems.

The need for care

These facts make any future escalatory scenario look very scary. For, if pushed to the wall and in danger of losing control of the state, the Pakistani military can employ a highly reckless strategy that would unleash an unprecedented catastrophe in the Indian subcontinent. It is no wonder that Mr. Khan has to speak with both sides of his mouth in a desperate attempt to preserve the military's honour while attempting to get off the escalatory ladder that can lead to unpredictable consequences.

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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.

Step back now

It is time to stop the tensions between the two nuclear-armed countries, India and Pakistan. As the writer (Editorial page, "Living on the edge", March 1), who has in-depth knowledge about the politics of the subcontinent, says, there should be a way to keep de-escalating. God forbid if further tensions between the two neighbours become worse and more destructive. Leaders in both countries have the right opportunity now to show real statesmanship and solve all differences at the diplomatic high table. Better sense must prevail.

JAVEED BIN NABI,
Bandipora, Jammu and Kashmir

■ It is noteworthy that there were no conditions attached to the release of the Indian pilot (Page 1, "Pakistan will release Abhinandan today", March 1). With this, one hopes that the war clouds over India and Pakistan will fade away. With both nations

in possession of sophisticated weaponry, war is no option to settle disputes. There may not be any harm if there are preliminary rounds of talks to defuse the situation. This will not be construed as a sign of weakness but as one of maturity in dealing with a difficult situation. How the government can manage this just before the general election will be interesting.

D.B.N. MURTHY,
Bengaluru

■ Given the fact that a number of terror outfits operate from within Pakistan and have been moving around with impunity for decades now, one is not sure what action can be taken by Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan, or by any other Pakistan Prime Minister for that matter, on such terror organisations. As these outfits are being used to stage a proxy war, what kind of a crackdown, and a genuine one at that, can be expected is anybody's guess. Unless there is a

comprehension of the core issues, we will continue to beat around the bush till we reach the next flashpoint. International pressure should be sustained till Pakistan takes concrete measures against terrorists and terror outfits.

S. PARTHASARATHY,
Chennai

■ The Indian reaction to the deadly attack on a convoy of CRPF personnel triggered a quick, justifiable response, though it led to the downing of an Indian fighter aircraft and pilot. The pleasant and surprising response by Pakistan has, however, suggested that there may still be room for efforts to resolve the long-running India-Pakistan dispute. Could Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's move to order the release of the Indian pilot now serve as an opportunity for both sides to take a fresh look? One can only hope so. Let us recall the action of Navjot Sidhu who, in his own way, sought to improve India-Pakistan relations. Why

not have more of such people and moves in both countries?

KAMALA MENON COCHRAN,
Secunderabad

■ Pakistan's decision to release the Indian pilot is a step that will promote peace and deserves acknowledgement by India. We have taught our neighbour a lesson with the air strikes. Now that the purpose has been served, it is the duty of leaders in both countries to de-escalate and try to explore peace. It may not be an exaggeration to say that countries like the U.S. are like merchants of war and genuinely uninterested in peace.

P.H. HEMA SAGAR,
Secunderabad

■ There is the widespread perception that the political leadership in Pakistan is under the thumb of the Pakistan Army and the ISI. If Prime Minister Imran Khan has chosen to decide independently and act boldly on a crucial issue – the

release of the Indian pilot – he deserves to be complimented. Let this be a harbinger of happier things to come. But will he also see the writing on the wall and ensure that support for terror groups is stopped? Saner counsel must prevail.

S.V. VENKATKRISHNAN,
Bengaluru

Dog control

We are two holidaymakers from the U.K. entering the final week of our two-month, and the 12th, visit to Kerala. This year we have been sickened by the increase in the number of stray dogs on the beaches and by their appalling condition. They scavenge an existence, suffering from mange and fleas. Most have no hair left, and can be seen limping from injuries and desperate for some form of humane intervention. This year, two of our Indian friends were hospitalised with serious injuries caused while trying to avoid stray dogs on the road and consequently cannot work. One friend was

taking his daughter to school on his motorcycle and she received minor injuries after the incident. We hope we will be able to return next year to discover funds having been invested to remove all stray dogs from public places. Sentiment is one thing, suffering is another.

ANDY & HILDA SMALL,
Chiddesden, Hampshire, U.K.

Mutilating notes

The Reserve Bank of India issues instructions asking people not to write on currency notes. Despite this, one comes across notes that have been scribbled on with pen or pencil. Banks continue to dispense such notes even through their ATMs. When cash is credited through cash deposit machines, the same notes are often rejected. If banks themselves cannot follow the RBI's guidelines, how prudent is it to insist on us following this rule?

SHALINI MURTHY,
Bengaluru

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