



A first step

The National Health Protection Mission requires a bold, holistic approach

The NDA government’s scheme to provide health cover of ₹5 lakh per year to 10 crore poor and vulnerable families through the Ayushman Bharat-National Health Protection Mission has taken a step forward with the Union Cabinet approving the modalities of its implementation. Considering the small window, just over a year, available before the term of the present government ends, urgent action is needed to roll out such an ambitious scheme. For a start, the apex council that will steer the programme and the governing board to operationalise it in partnership with the States need to be set up. The States, which have a statutory responsibility for provision of health care, have to act quickly and form dedicated agencies to run the scheme. Since the NHPM represents the foundation for a universal health coverage system that should eventually cover all Indians, it needs to be given a sound legal basis, ideally through a separate law. This could be on the lines of legislation governing the rights to food and information. Such legislation would strengthen entitlement to care, which is vital to the scheme’s success. It will also enable much-needed regulatory control over pricing of hospital-based treatments. The initial norms set for availing benefits under the NHPM, which subsumes earlier health assurance schemes, appear to make the inclusion of vulnerable groups such as senior citizens, women and children contingent on families meeting other criteria, except in the case of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe households. The government should take the bold step of including these groups universally; the financial risk can be borne by the taxpayer.

Universal health coverage is defined by the WHO as a state when “all people obtain the health services they need without suffering financial hardship when paying for them”. With its endorsement of the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, India will have to constantly raise its ambition during the dozen years to the deadline. This underscores the importance of raising not just core budgetary spending every year, but paying attention to social determinants of health. Affordable housing, planned urban development, pollution control and road safety are some aspects vital for reducing the public health burden. Unfortunately, governments are paying little attention to these issues, as the quality of life erodes even with steady economic growth. In some of its early assessments on the road to universal health coverage, NITI Aayog advocated a State-specific approach rather than a grand national health system to expand access. But the NHPM has a national character, with States playing a crucial role in its implementation, and beneficiaries being able to port the service anywhere. It is a challenging task to make all this a reality, and the government will have to work hard to put it in place.

Rising risks

As the U.S. continues to raise benchmark rates, India should take precautionary steps

The U.S. Federal Reserve continues to slowly pull away the punch bowl as the party gets going. This week the Fed raised its benchmark short-term interest rate by 25 basis points to 1.50-1.75%, the highest in a decade. While this is only the sixth rate increase since the financial crisis of 2008 – which pushed central banks to cut interest rates to historic lows – it portends further increases in global interest rates. Higher borrowing costs could squeeze both markets and the wider economy. If its dot-plot projections are considered, the Fed under its new Chairman Jerome Powell – who chaired the Federal Open Market Committee meeting for the first time on Wednesday – is expected to raise rates two more times in 2018. And with the American economy projected to grow at a fairly healthy clip amid quickening inflation, the increases in the Fed’s discount rate are expected to gather pace over the next two years. Now, as the Fed and other global central banks move towards normalising monetary policy, the impact on the wider credit markets is slowly beginning to show. This is particularly so in the case of the interbank lending market, which is directly influenced by central banks to affect interest rates across the board. The London Interbank Offered Rate, which is the rate at which international banks lend to each other and serves as a benchmark for lending rates, has risen for more than 30 consecutive sessions and is at its highest since the financial crisis. Its effect has spilled over into other markets, including the corporate debt market.

Rising rates amid improving global economic growth could adversely affect the capacity of private firms to service their debt. This risk of default by private borrowers has been flagged by various organisations, including the International Monetary Fund last month. It is, after all, no secret that private corporations attracted by ultra-low interest rates had heavily loaded up on debt over the last decade. Some companies borrowed heavily from across the borders, thus making them prone to exchange rate risks as well. Any widespread default on debt today would be reminiscent of the 2004-2006 period when the Fed’s raising of rates to tackle inflation led to a mass default on U.S. mortgage debt. Global markets on Friday witnessed a steep sell-off that was immediately linked to President Donald Trump’s recent decision to impose new tariffs on China. Trade wars clearly have a negative impact on global growth and corporate earnings. But the wider sell-off, under way since February, can also be linked to rising interest rates which adversely affect asset prices. India, which could be hit by fund outflows as overseas investors look homeward to benefit from the rising rates, would do well to take precautionary steps.

Tibet is not a card

India must refresh its overseas China policy and its domestic engagement with the Tibetan community



SUHASINI HAIDAR

The government’s bid to ease tensions with China has been met with some criticism, particularly over a leaked memo to officials telling them to stay away from events that commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Dalai Lama’s 1959 flight to India. This has led to the cancellation of several public events related to Tibet. Much of the criticism stems from the perception that the government is attempting to appease China by giving up its “Tibet card”. Clearly, giving in to China’s aggression on the subject is the wrong pretext to nuance its Tibet policy, and as the government has said, where the Dalai Lama goes within India is a sovereign issue. However, the bigger error may be for the government to be using Tibetan refugees in India as a card in its relations with China.

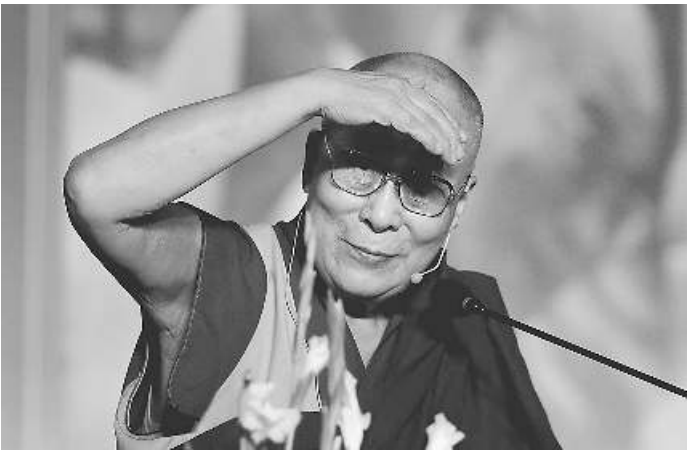
Deteriorating ties

To begin with, ties between New Delhi and Beijing have deteriorated over the past few years for a number of reasons unconnected to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan population in India: border incursions, including the standoff at the part of Doklam claimed by Bhutan; India’s strategic shift in line with the U.S.’s Indo-Pacific pivot that targets China; China’s ‘deep-pocket’ inroads into South Asia; and differences on the international stage, including over the Nuclear Suppliers Group membership and terror designations to Masood Azhar. It would be simplistic to assume that these problems would go away if India were to

make the Tibetan community and its leader less visible. Therefore, while it is a mistake to play every visit of the Dalai Lama or official meeting with the leader of the ‘Tibetan government-in-exile’, Lob-sang Sangay, as a ‘challenge to China’, it is equally ridiculous to portray strictures on their activities as a ‘peace offering to Beijing’.

Second, while Indian strategists have handed down the idea of a Tibet card for decades, it is time to revise this policy with a thorough evaluation of the ground, from New Delhi to Beijing and Lhasa to Dharamshala. For starters, the landscape of Tibet, now crisscrossed with railway lines, super-speed highways, tunnels and airports, has changed drastically in the past two decades. While many have written about the Beijing-Lhasa railway line, the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) now sees many more such engineering marvels (albeit at the cost of its environment), and downtown Lhasa has all the trappings of a modern city. All of this has made Tibet more self-reliant, with more jobs for the next generation. There’s an ongoing demographic shift in Tibet, with Beijing populating areas with majority ‘Han’ Chinese workers, encouraging mixed marriages, and mainstreaming Chinese culture into the region. At the same time, the outflow of refugees from Tibet has been curtailed by the Chinese authorities over the last decade, mainly by convincing Nepal to close a popular route. As a result, the number of new arrivals from Tibet into Dharamshala is down to a trickle and the once bustling informal trade route between India and Tibet has also dried up. Bollywood DVDs, once easily available in Lhasa’s bustling markets, have been replaced by Chinese and Tibetan films.

The new reality means that India’s population of the 100,000 or



AP

so registered Tibetan refugees are more cut off from developments in their homeland than ever before. New generations of Tibetans born in India are brought up as exiles, without a real sense of what Tibet may actually be like, should they ever return. As most live separately in about 40 settlements around India, they also have a tenuous link to the host country itself. The government’s attitude towards giving them citizenship has been stern, although it lost its case in the Delhi High Court (*Namgyal Dolkar v. Government of India*) and must give citizenship to all Tibetan refugees born between 1950 and 1987, the cut-off year. It will be equally important to devise a mechanism for those born after 1987, many now in their twenties, living in this limbo.

The bigger question that looms over the community is that of its future leadership. During his lifetime, the Dalai Lama has been a unifying force, guiding the community through their struggle in a peaceful manner, while accepting an autonomous Tibet as a part of China. While his spiritual incarnation will be chosen through a religious process, his political successor presents a more difficult task – he or she needs to be both

groomed and publicly presented to the community at the earliest. The Dalai Lama himself has retained an air of mystery on the subject, suggesting at different times that his successor may be a woman, one born in a “free” land, or there may be none at all. Another possible leader, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, recognised by the Dalai Lama as the head of the Karma Kagyu sect after he escaped to Dharamshala in 2000, has been abroad for the past year. A cryptic message from his office says he will remain in the U.S. for “rest and recovery” from undisclosed “health concerns”, with no word on when he may return to India. The Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), which is empowered to run affairs and is headed by Mr. Sangay, may be the more democratic option, but it will need to carry the entire community with it. For the moment, the CTA is following a “five-50” path, to pursue talks with China in the next five years, while committing to a struggle for a more autonomous Tibet in the next 50 years. However, the past few years have seen a rise in the younger and more radical “Rangtsen” (freedom) groups that says they will settle for nothing short of an independent Tibet.

As a result, the government’s misgivings about officials attending the “Thank You, India” events with the Dalai Lama are minor compared to worries about the more restive Tibetan Youth Congress’s “Bharat Jagran Yatra”, with rallies in several cities across the country to “raise awareness for a free Tibet”. In his lifetime, there is no question that the Dalai Lama holds sway over the whole community; after him, the direction the community takes will be of vital interest to India as well.

Of equal interest are possible talks between the Dalai Lama and the Chinese government. Reports that the Dalai Lama’s special emissary, Samdhong Rinpoche, travelled to Yunnan last year have fuelled rumours that the Dalai Lama is preparing to re-enter talks with China, that were dropped in 2010. Chinese President Xi Jinping, who has now secured his position for the foreseeable future, may well take a more proactive interest in the Tibet issue, which his father once discussed with the Dalai Lama.

Ground realities

In short, the idea that India holds the “Tibet card” is out of step with all the shifts on the ground, and the government needs a proactive policy that takes into account these new realities. There is an urgent need for community outreach, surveys and a referendum, if necessary, to map what the Tibetan community in India wants in its future. For those who want to make India a permanent home, especially those in the new generation, India must reconsider its citizenship laws. Above all, the Indian foreign policy establishment needs to stop seeing the Tibetan population in India as a strategic tool.

suhasini.h@thehindu.co.in

Donald Trump and the art of breaking a deal

With anti-Iran hawks getting key posts in the U.S. President’s team, the nuclear deal becomes the target



STANLY JOHNY

It was no secret that U.S. President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson did not get along on several foreign policy issues. But when Mr. Tillerson was fired earlier this month, the one point of difference Mr. Trump cited was the Iran nuclear deal. Mr. Tillerson was considered a restraining presence on Iran within the Trump White House. The 2015 deal, widely seen as a signature diplomatic achievement of the Barack Obama presidency, curtails Iran’s nuclear programme in return for lifting international sanctions. But Mr. Trump hated it – he described it as “the worst deal ever” and during his campaign had threatened to “rip up” the deal upon being elected.

A difficult choice

Under U.S. law, the deal has to be certified every 90 days by the President. Mr. Trump has grudgingly certified compliance twice since his election. In October, he re-

fused to certify the accord, but stopped short of scrapping it. Instead, he passed the buck to the U.S. Congress to decide whether new sanctions should be imposed on Iran. While Congress refused, the agreement is now back on Mr. Trump’s table. For now, he has set a May 12 deadline to the co-signatories – the U.K., China, Russia, France and Germany, besides Iran – to “fix the deal”. The Europeans and other powers have not shown any interest in renegotiating the agreement and the United Nations continues to certify that Iran is 100% compliant with its terms. So Mr. Trump faces a difficult choice here. In less than two months, he will have to decide either to live with the agreement or pull the U.S. out of it. The rising anti-Iran rhetoric, new actions and the rejig at the White House all suggest that the latter may happen.

Mr. Trump’s pick as the new Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, has been a hard-line critic of Iran. Defence Secretary Jim Mattis is another Iran hawk. And with Mr. Trump’s National Security Adviser (NSA) H.R. McMaster exiting, the last defender of the Iran accord in the top White House team is gone. John Bolton, who is known for his hawkish views towards Iran and



REUTERS

North Korea, will be the new NSA.

There’s a rational argument in favour of the nuclear agreement, which the Obama administration as well as European powers put forward. Their main objective was to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. And after the election of Hassan Rouhani as Iran’s President in 2013, Tehran had also warmed up to engagement with the West. The only alternative to a diplomatic deal to stop Iran going nuclear was war, which would have been disastrous as Iran is a much stronger and more networked country than, say, Iraq or Libya. Closer cooperation between the U.S. and Iran has other benefits as well. Both countries have a shared interest in stabilising Afghanistan and Iraq and defeating the Taliban and the Islamic State.

But President Trump and his team are not driven by these ob-

vious rational arguments. First, there is a clear pattern in the President’s foreign policy. Mr. Trump wants to undo most of his predecessor’s policy achievements. He withdrew the U.S. from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Paris climate deal. The Trump administration imposed tighter sanctions on Cuba last year. Second, in Mr. Trump’s world view, Iran is the troublemaker-in-chief in West Asia. In the initial months of his presidency, Mr. Trump had travelled to Saudi Arabia where he joined a summit of mostly heads of Sunni nations to hit out at Iran. He is tilted more towards the establishmentarian, allies-centric approach towards Iran than the geopolitical realist line that Mr. Obama had pursued.

In fact, this is not really about the nuclear deal. If Mr. Trump’s problem is with Iran’s nuclear ambitions, he would go with the deal at least as long as Iran stays compliant. Pulling out of the deal would not only strengthen the hands of Iranian hard-liners but also give Tehran the excuse to resume its nuclear programme. Rather, in Mr. Trump’s view, or in the view of America’s West Asia allies such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, the nuclear deal allows Iran to join

the diplomatic and economic mainstream of the region. This has upset the existing power dynamics in West Asia. The Saudis and the Israelis are as much afraid of an Iran with nuclear power as they are of an Iran as a non-nuclear regional power. The Obama administration stopped the former possibility, but hastened the latter by lifting sanctions. This is what Mr. Trump is addressing.

Fickle superpower

It won’t be easy. Mr. Trump could pull the U.S. out of the nuclear deal but the Europeans are unlikely to follow suit, at least for now. The U.S. could impose fresh sanctions on Iran, but the possibility of the UN Security Council backing the sanctions is negligible. So the immediate consequence would be further diplomatic isolation of Washington. More important, it would damage the U.S.’s reputation as a dealmaker: While one President went to the extent of signing an agreement with a hostile nation, the next President is determined to undo it! How would it encourage other countries such as North Korea to trust diplomatic engagement with the U.S.?

stanly.johny@thehindu.co.in

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.

Protecting data

Mere encryption is not enough to protect data (“UIDAI chief defends safety of Aadhaar data before SC”, March 23). Companies like Facebook, Apple and Google have some of the best computer scientists in the world and yet we come across news reports on leakage of data. The question we need to ask is, do we have to establish a database which, if hacked into, could pose a serious danger to our democracy? Is it worth taking that risk?

PRADEEP KUMAR,
Chandigarh

Just two months back, *The Tribune*, an English language daily, had proved through an investigation how easy it is to access Aadhaar data by paying for it and yet the UIDAI chief

makes this statement. In the digital era, the death of privacy is the norm. The Facebook and Cambridge Analytica episode has once again proved this.

D.V.G. SANKARARAO,
Vizianagaram

Breaking away

It was good to see the writer talk about how Lingayats saw themselves as reformers of the dominant caste-based Vedic practices of their time, practices which, as rightly pointed out by him, had not yet been given the label of Hinduism (“Terms of separation”, March 23). In fact, this reminds us of how other reformist traditions in the subcontinent led by the Alwars and Nayanmars in Tamil, Tukaram and Dnyaneshwar in Marathi, Kabir and Tulsisidas in Hindi, among others, tried to

break away from the caste-based Vedic traditions and move towards bhakti and a less rigid social system. It is a tragedy of our times that all these attempts at reform have now been subsumed under an umbrella religion.

S. BHASHYAM,
Bengaluru

Watching every move

The Executive Chairman of Apollo Hospitals has said that the CCTVs were switched off in the ICU where former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa was undergoing treatment (“CCTV cameras switched off in Apollo”, March 22). The very purpose of CCTVs is to watch the movement of each and every person, which would be useful if something suspicious or strangely tragic were to take place. If the hospital authorities say that the

CCTVs were switched off because they didn’t want anyone to be watching the footage, will they also oblige if others ask them to do the same?

K.V. SEETHARAMAIAH,
Hassan

End of the logjam

While the Telugu Desam Party members have been waving placards demanding special status for Andhra Pradesh in Parliament, AIADMK MPs have been demanding the immediate constitution of the Cauvery Management Board (“Govt. to reach out to Oppn. to end logjam”, March 23). Unless the government sits across the table with the opposition parties, the rest of the sessions too might be washed out. It would be ironical if both Houses remain non-functional and yet MPs have their salaries

raised and their perks increased. It is time that the principle of ‘no work, no pay’ is extended to cover members of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha.

C.V. ARAVIND,
Chennai

Debating the economy

It is often said that if five economists discuss the state of the economy, six opinions will arise from that interaction (“Is the economy back on track?”, March 23). Statistics can be cherry-picked or

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: The report, “Lok Sabha drowned in din” (March 21, 2018), erroneously said that the *Telugu* Rashtra Samiti and the AIADMK protested in the well of the House prior to an adjournment. It should have been the *Telangana* Rashtra Samiti and the AIADMK.

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