



Towards 2019

What the Congress needs above all is a clear and granular action plan

As president of the Congress, Rahul Gandhi seems to be taking on a more aggressive *avatar*, attacking the BJP for its divisive ideology and its failings on the governance front. But at the Congress plenary in Delhi, he had little to say by way of presenting an alternative vision, other than claiming for his party the space given up by the BJP. Most of his speech was a tirade against the party and its two main leaders, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP president Amit Shah. Mr. Modi was linked to corruption with a reference to the bank scam, and Mr. Shah to murder with a reference to the Sohrabuddin encounter killing. To the BJP's quest for absolute power, Mr. Gandhi posited the Congress's fight for truth. He contrasted the BJP's commitment to an organisation (the RSS) with the Congress's voice for the entire nation. But mere aggression is not enough and such words will ring inevitably hollow in the absence of a clear and granular action plan. Even the resolutions passed at the plenary had little use for particulars. The party's economic resolution faintly echoed Karl Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "We have heard the clamour for change. It is now time for change." There was no point beyond this. The resolution on agriculture, employment and poverty alleviation seemed more like a budget proposal, the highlight being a 5% cess on the richest 1% to help the poor. The party is clearly seeking the middle ground: equal economic opportunities for all without, however, instilling the fear of tax terrorism or overbearing regulation. So, fostering of business confidence and rewarding of risk-taking were mentioned in the same breath as promoting employment and security. The relevance of the public sector in critical areas such as defence, transportation and financial services was noted, while resolving to win back economic freedom for India's entrepreneurs. Couched in such vague generalities, there is little to separate the Congress's policies from those of the BJP.

If the economic resolution took the middle path, the political resolution was open-ended with a call for a "pragmatic approach of working with like-minded parties and evolving a common workable programme to defeat the BJP-RSS in 2019". Although the Congress will undoubtedly be the single largest party in any anti-BJP alliance, it will have to play the role of a very junior partner in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. In States such as Gujarat and Karnataka where it is a dominant party, it needs the help of smaller allies. Besides allies, the party will need post-poll backing from the Left, however reduced in numbers, to piece together a coalition against the BJP. A common workable programme will thus have to be forged with parties with very different orientations. In this context, the vague generalisations are understandable, but will they find favour with voters?

Bending the rules

The Neutrino Observatory is important, but it must get all environmental clearances

A year after the National Green Tribunal suspended the environmental clearance granted to the India-based Neutrino Observatory (INO), the Expert Appraisal Committee (Infra 2) of the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change has overturned the NGT verdict and granted environmental clearance for the project. The observatory, which is to come up in Bodi West Hills in Theni district, Tamil Nadu, is regarded as a symbol not just of India's push for research in particle physics; it also signals the intent to nurture centres of excellence. Neutrinos are subatomic particles that are extremely difficult to detect. The laboratory cavern will be located 1,300 metres underground, with an access tunnel. The rock cover is necessary to minimise the naturally occurring cosmic ray backdrop. The project has become controversial on environmental grounds, given the proposed site's proximity to the Mathikettan Shola National Park in Kerala's Western Ghats, a global biodiversity hotspot. However, considering the project's national importance, the Environment Ministry had taken up the proposal for clearance as a "special case". The green signal is conditional on getting the consent of the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board and the National Board for Wildlife. Despite the 17 conditions laid down by the Expert Committee while granting approval, the manner in which the clearance was granted leaves much to be desired.

The project has been approved under category B item 8(a) – building and construction projects – of the Schedule to the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006. But it should have been treated as category A as the project lies just 4.9 km from the national park in Idukki district of Kerala. The NGT had ruled that it was indeed a category A project and the Tamil Nadu State expert appraisal committee also noted that it could not be appraised under category B 8(a) as tunnelling and other activities went beyond the scope of the section. According to the 2006 notification, projects or activities that come under category A require "prior environmental clearance" from the Environment Ministry. Side-stepping the EIA requirement on technical grounds both by the project proponents and the Ministry is surely not the ideal way to go about such matters. For one, the EIA was done by the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History, which is an "unaccredited agency". And though a public consultation with local people who have a "plausible stake" in the project was conducted in July 2010, the details of the meeting were submitted only by the end of February 2018. The importance of the project notwithstanding, treating it as a special case and bypassing the environmental clearance protocol sets a wrong precedent.

To be fighting fit

The government must order a comprehensive strategic review of the future threats to India



D.S. HOODA

"Army critical of defence budget," was a headline in this newspaper on March 14, with other newspapers also focussing on the "dashed hopes" of the Army while reporting on Vice-Chief of Army Staff Lt. Gen. Sarath Chand's interaction with the parliamentary standing committee on defence. Television debates which followed had the all too familiar trend. The ruling party's spokespersons talked about how the government had worked to strengthen the military while the Opposition accused them of paying inadequate attention to the forces.

Reality check

What is the reality? As usual, it lies somewhere between the two extremes. According to a recent report by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, India was the largest arms importer in the last five years, accounting for 12% of global imports. The Indian defence budget has now overtaken that of the U.K. to become the fifth largest in the world.

Despite this, as the Vice-Chief of Army Staff pointed out to Parliament's standing committee on defence, the current capital allocation is insufficient even to cater for "committed liabilities", which is payments for equipment under contractual obligation. Also, 68% of the Army's equipment is under the 'vintage' category and the situation is unlikely to improve in the near future. Equally worrying is the adverse impact on infrastructure development and strategic roads where there is a severe shortage of funds.

An insufficient defence budget impacts not only modernisation but also the current operational readiness of the force. Reduction in revenue allocation means cutting down on training requirements and routine replacement of items like surveillance and protective equipment.

The strategic environment in Asia is well known. Asia is developing into a multipolar system, with Russia, China, India and the U.S. jockeying for greater influence. As John J. Mearsheimer points out in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, "(Asia) will be an unbalanced multipolar system, because China will be much more powerful than all other Asian great powers, and thus qualify as a potential hegemon... And when you have power asymmetries, the strong are hard to deter when they are bent on aggression."

It is a reality that conventional state-on-state conflict is on the decline, particularly between nuclear nations. However, one region where such a possibility exists is South Asia. India faces not only a long-term strategic challenge from China but also the continuing efforts by Pakistan to somehow maintain a semblance of military balance with India by keeping the Indian Army tied down in Kashmir, and developing a credible nuclear force.

India's dilemma is neatly summed up in the U.S.'s National Intelligence Council report, 'Global Trends: The Paradox of Progress', "Geopolitically, [South Asia's] greatest hope is India's ability to use its economic and human potential to drive regional trade and development. At the same time, Afghanistan's uncertain prospects, extremism and violence in Pakistan, and the ever-present risk of war between India and Pakistan probably represent the greatest challenge to unlocking the region's potential."

Can India, India ranked at 131 in



the 2016 Human Development Report, and with 55.3% of the population living under "multidimensional poverty", afford a higher defence budget? Conversely, can a weakened military support India's ambition to achieving great power status? Japan, despite being the second largest economy at one time, was never considered a great power because of its limited military capability.

Regular strategic consultations between the political and military leadership are rare, and when they do take place it is generally for crisis-management, not long-term strategy. But the security challenges, both internal and external, facing the country have to be squarely addressed. The government and the military need to quickly come together and be on the same page. Currently, there does not seem to be a coherent or common assessment, and one example of this is the debate on the two-front war.

The two-front war

The service chiefs have constantly reminded the government that a two-front war is a real possibility and of the need to prepare for it. It is quite obvious that the government does not take this too seriously, as evidenced from budgetary allocations and glib statements that the forces are 'reasonably and sufficiently equipped'. The first step to resolve

this contradiction is for the government to order a comprehensive strategic review of the future threats to India. This will provide a clear picture to the political leadership, and also directions to the military on its doctrine and force structures. A long-term capability development plan can then be prepared by the military and approved by the government. This will form the basis for the defence budget. The annual bickering over the mismatch between what the military demands and the actual allocations made will be avoided.

The government must also take a holistic look at all border-guarding forces – the Army, Assam Rifles, the Border Security Force and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP). While the Army leads in responding to all Chinese provocations such as Depsang, Chumar and Doklam, the border is technically the responsibility of the ITBP under the Home Ministry.

Recently, it was announced that the government was planning to raise nine ITBP battalions to "reduce the inter BoP (border out-post) distance" along the China border. Not only does this reflect an inadequate understanding of how the border is to be manned but completely ignores the existing deployment of the Army. A comprehensive and an integrated approach to border management could result in considerable savings.

The military's challenge

The military also must understand the realities of India's finances and look to reconstruct itself. Military capability is not all about money. As a RAND monograph, "Measuring Military Capability", points out, "Military effectiveness (is) the outcome of the resources provided to the military and its capability to transform these resources into effective warfighting capability. A country may provide its military with generous budgets and large

cadres of manpower, but if the military's doctrine is misguided, the training ineffective, the leadership unschooled, or the organization inappropriate, military capability will suffer."

The military must stop talking in terms of numbers, of squadrons, ships and divisions, and focus on capability. This is much more challenging than harping on raising divisions and squadrons because it confronts us with the crucial issue of defining the type of capability that India needs for future warfighting. It will force us to search for the new and the unexpected, and to look at technologies such as robotics, autonomous systems and artificial intelligence to enhance our military capability.

There is a crying need to move towards greater integration among the three services and with the Ministry of Defence (MoD). The luxury of each service running its own training, administrative and logistics system is no longer affordable. The MoD, staffed entirely by civilians, seems oblivious to defence requirements and follows a procurement process which appears completely broken. An internal report prepared late last year by Minister of State for Defence Subhash Bhamre pointed out that only 8-10% of 144 proposed deals in the last three financial years fructified within the stipulated time period. Greater integration could improve efficiency.

Civil-military differences over defence budgets are an inevitable part of any democracy. However, these differences can be minimised if there is a common understanding of the contours of a national security strategy, and of the genuine requirements of the military for putting this strategy into effect. On its part, the military must focus on capability for future warfighting, not mere numbers.

Lt. Gen. (retired) D.S. Hooda is a former Northern Army Commander

First step in a long journey

The National Medical Commission Bill seeks to make structural changes in an exploitative health-care system



RUHA SHADAB

Even as the spotlight shifts to a "maha-panchayat" of doctors under the Indian Medical Association getting ready later this month to challenge the National Medical Commission (NMC) Bill, 2017 (now before a parliamentary standing committee), it is pertinent to look at the Bill's highlights. Article 47 of the Constitution makes it clear that the state is duty-bound to improve public health, but India continues to face a health crisis, with an absolute shortage of and an inequitable presence of doctors and overburdened hospitals.

Although India has 10 lakh medical doctors, it needs 3,00,000 more in order to meet the World Health Organisation standard of the ideal doctor-population ratio. There is an 81% shortage of specialists in community health centres (CHC), the first point of contact for a patient with a specialist doctor. Those most affected by this are poor and rural patients who are then forced to consult

quacks. Another fact is that 82.2% of providers of "modern medicine" in rural areas do not have a medical qualification. Rural India, which accounts for 69% of the population, faces another issue – only 21% of the country's doctors serve them.

The quality of the health-care experience too needs attention. It is ironic that, while India is a hub for medical tourism (in 2016, India issued 1.78 lakh medical visas), it is a common sight in government hospitals to have patients sleep in corridors waiting for their outpatient department appointments.

The Bill, among other things, seeks to address these problems.

A commercialisation

The insertion of Section 10A in the Indian Medical Council Act was followed by an exponential rise in the number of private medical colleges. This was encouraged as there was, and still is, a shortfall in the number of medical practitioners. However, the high capitation fees charged by these colleges can have a negative effect in terms of affordability of medical services.

The regulatory authority has been unable to act despite the fact that over half the 60,000 medical students graduating every year are from private medical colleges.

With corruption in the issuing



of licences and regulatory requirements, many such academic institutions have a faculty of questionable standards, with obvious repercussions on the quality of education imparted.

The Bill puts in place a mechanism to assess and rate medical colleges regularly, with a high monetary penalty for failure to comply with standards. Three such failures will result in the de-recognition of a college. There is also an enabling provision for the government to regulate the fees of up to 40% seats in private medical colleges. NITI Aayog data show that this amount falls in a Goldilocks zone, wherein the regulation can be made revenue neutral for the college by nominally raising fees for non-regulated students.

The Bill goes a step further with

a relaxation of the criteria for approving a college in specific cases. Currently, there is a blanket standard for establishing a medical college in India, which disregards the contextual realities in some areas such as difficult terrain or a low population density. For instance, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Nagaland do not have a single medical college.

Inverted pyramid

India has a well-thought-out, three-tier public health-care system which rests on a base of subcentres (SC) and primary health centres (PHCs) which take care of common ailments. Patients in need of specialist consultations go up the chain to secondary centres (CHCs), or tertiary centres, which are district hospitals (DHs) or medical colleges. However, because of a poor vanguard, patients who can be treated at the "base" (SCs or PHCs), go straight to the "apex" (CHCs or DHs).

Strengthening primary centres can ensure that the pyramid rests on its base again. With the government now planning to revamp 1,50,000 sub-centres into health and wellness centres by 2022, there is need for an equivalent number of mid-level providers. For this, India's 7,70,000 AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy,

Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy) practitioners can be tapped.

The Bill has facilitated this by providing for a bridge course for AYUSH/non-allopathic doctors. This course, to be designed by a joint sitting of all medicine systems, will ensure that non-allopathic doctors are trained to prescribe modern medicines in a limited way, within the scope of primary care. A parallel is the system of "barefoot doctors" in China.

Thirteen States now permit AYUSH doctors to prescribe varying levels of allopathic care. The NMC Bill will bring in a homogenisation of such rules without diluting the varied systems of medicines.

An added measure in the Bill prevents "cross-pathy" or the unqualified cross-over of health-care providers from one system to another. The Bill provides for two separate national registers – allopathic doctors, and AYUSH doctors who complete the bridge course, respectively.

In the end, the Bill seeks to make structural changes in a stagnant and increasingly exploitative health-care system. While it is no magic bullet, it should be looked at as a step in the right direction.

Ruha Shadab, a physician and health strategist, is with NITI Aayog

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.

Farmer friendly?

Appeasement of farmers in the run-up to any major election is the order of the day in Indian politics. 'Farm loan waiver' is one of the tools used most often in the repertoire of appeasement gimmicks ("Ahead of 2019, Congress fixes focus on farmers", March 18). The problem here is that if implemented, the balance sheets of banks begin to take a hit; if not, farmers are out demanding its implementation. But is a 'farm loan waiver' the best solution in resolving India's perpetual agrarian crisis? Political parties must take concrete steps to nurse Indian agriculture back to good health. A resolve to implement the M.S. Swaminathan Committee Report will reveal how sincere they are about this.

UTKARSH AGRAWAL,
Allahabad

■ The farmers' march in Maharashtra, organised and conducted in a spellbinding way, is an example of how protests in a democracy should function (Editorial - "A model protest", March 14). It was silent enough not to disrupt daily life in the financial capital, and at the same time powerful enough to make the government sit up and take note. The Central and State governments should be aware of the efficacy of a peaceful but resolute protest. By accepting their legitimate demands, the Maharashtra government has set the right example.

VAIBHAV CHATARKAR,
New Delhi

■ One is happy to know that besides the model protest there is 'a generation of urban dwellers which can remember what it felt like to be connected to the land in a

real sense'. They can be the 'bridges' to reconnect 'what divides' rural and urban India. The challenge is to bring urban dwellers and rural farmers together on the same page by creating understanding and supporting their different needs.

K.M.K. MURTHY,
Secunderabad

At the plenary

The speakers at the Congress's plenary session wasted a golden opportunity to restore the party's fast crumbling image by preferring instead to launch a scathing attack on the government ("Rahul quotes epics in attack on BJP", March 19). An occasion like this should have been utilised to focus on the future. The ill-founded accusation levelled at the session that the economy is being mismanaged needs to

be rejected. Congress politicians have an undeniable role in the numerous scams and their probity is far from satisfactory. Even now, the party lacks an agenda to get back to power, if the speeches are any indication.

V. LAKSHMANAN,
Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

The TB fight

As a small step towards stopping the spread of tuberculosis in India we need to stop spitting/expectorating on open spaces, especially hard surfaces. If this is done on soil, the person should take steps to cover the affected patch with soil. TB patients should assist in steps being taken by health-care workers to not only safeguard themselves but also help protect others. Effective measures at the grass-root level should begin at home as the government

cannot be expected to handle everything. Given the rise in extensively drug-resistant tuberculosis, we must recognise the urgency in ensuring a TB-free world (Editorial page, "The long fight against TB", March 17).

DR. S. MURUGAN,
Coimbatore

Scoring a bullseye

In the last-ball six hit, Dinesh Karthik not only helped India win the Nidahas T20

tri-series final but also covered himself with glory ("Sport" page - "Karthik's final-ball six dashes Bangladesh's dreams", March 19). Like Javed Miandad's last-ball sixer, Dinesh Karthik's gutsy batting performance will remain ever-green in the memory of all cricket lovers.

K.D. VISWANATHAN,
Coimbatore

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the OpEd article titled "The Skripals in Salisbury" (March 19, 2018) the reference to the first "offensive use" of a nuclear weapon in Europe since the Second World War should be corrected to read as the first "offensive use" of a chemical weapon in Europe since the Second World War.

"A summit on the hills" (OpEd article, March 19, 2018) had erroneously referred to an organisation called the Gorkha National Liberation Fund. It should have been the Gorkha National Liberation Front.

In "The ecologically subsidised city" (March 08, 2018, Editorial page article), the monetary value of nature's capacity to treat 750 million litres of wastewater per day was stated to be over \$25 billion (\$162,500 crore) annually. It should have been ₹750 crore.

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