

# A misstep could prove costly

## N Korea's nuclear ambitions are straining US-China ties

**A** bad boy has got himself a big gun and the neighbours don't know what to do. That crudely sums up the predicament that the US and, to some degree, China find themselves with North Korea's first successful testing of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM).

Whether the missile could make it all the way to North America is uncertain. But that is almost certainly just a matter of time. There will be a longer lag before Pyongyang can prove it has developed a miniaturised nuclear warhead for use on the missile. Again, this is also a matter of time. What is clear is that North Korea has fast forwarded closer to the day it can credibly say it can strike continental US with a nuclear weapon. This, in turn, raises the question as to the nature of Washington's response, especially if it concludes it cannot accept the threat of nuclear blackmail by the most renegade government on earth.

US President Donald Trump has not helped matters by blowing hot and cold on North Korea. While his administration seems to accept that North Korea is their thorniest foreign policy issue, its messaging to Pyongyang has been all over the place. One of the reasons for North Korea's nuclear-cum-missile brinkmanship has been dictator Kim Jong-un's demand that the US agree to negotiate with him as an equal partner. The US has refused. But Mr Trump initially declared he would be "honoured" to meet the North Korean dictator directly. This was eventually rolled back by his staff but not before encouraging Pyongyang to continue down a path of provocation.

China's unwillingness nor inability to control North Korea will at least allow US-Chinese relations to shift to a more natural and thus more belligerent status. Washington however needs to provide much more clarity on what exactly its red lines and responses will be to Pyongyang's actions. This is doubly important given the incoherence that has marked the Trump administration. More than anywhere else in the world, a diplomatic misstep in the Korean peninsula could result in the first use of nuclear weapons since World War II.

# The dilution of NGT is bad news for India

## The green tribunal has been crusading for a healthy and pollution-free environment

**I**n 2010, Parliament enacted the National Green Tribunal (NGT) Act, which said that a judge of the Supreme Court or a chief justice of high court will be eligible to be chairperson or judicial member of the Tribunal. In six years since its formation in 2011, the NGT has emerged as an independent voice when it came to protecting the environment. It has pulled up the Centre for fast-tracking approvals and corporate groups for violating green approval conditions. But in the first week of June, the Centre modified the process of appointments to the NGT: Instead of a senior judge, its chairperson will now be recommended by a five-member panel, which will be led by the chief justice of India (CJI) or a nominee of the CJI, but a majority of the other members in the panel will be recommended by the environment ministry.

The NDA has been trying to curtail the NGT's powers for some time. It set up the TSR Subramanian committee to review the country's environment laws in 2014, which recommended dilution of the tribunal's powers. The NDA, however, could not act as it would have led to a political backlash. But it later merged eight autonomous tribunals with other tribunals, and also gave itself the power to appoint and remove the members in another 19 such bodies. The new uniform appointment rules for 19 tribunals were notified on June 1. They have taken away powers of the CJI to appoint and remove chairperson and judicial members to the tribunal; now it will be the environment ministry's call.

Giving power to the executive to sack a retired judge is unprecedented. All this would ensure that judges may not join the tribunal and it could become a parking lot for retired bureaucrats, rendering the tribunal ineffective for protecting the citizens' rights to a clean, healthy and pollution-free environment.

## lineofsight

SRINATH RAGHAVAN



# Arrest the slide in ties with China

## We need an agreement on restraint that aims to address mutual interests and concerns

**T**he ongoing standoff near Sikkim underlines the deterioration in India-China relations over the past few years. As ever, the Chinese have chosen the place and time carefully. India and China have a delimited and demarcated international border in Sikkim, going back to the Anglo-Chinese convention of 1890. But the boundary between Tibet and Bhutan is disputed and hence the location of the trijunction remains contested. Bhutan does not directly negotiate with China and its stance on the disputed boundary has developed in close consultation with India.

So, the Chinese can claim with a straight face that this is a bilateral problem between them and Bhutan. Similarly, when Indian troops support Bhutanese opposition to road construction in the disputed area, it is easy for Beijing to accuse New Delhi of violating an established international border. Never mind that the two sides have also agreed that the trijunctions with Bhutan and Myanmar will finally be decided in consultation with these countries.

That said, we need to understand the Chinese action at three interconnected levels.

At the operational level, there are a couple of considerations in play. The Chinese have

long sought to widen their room for manoeuvre in this area. The construction of the road could enable them to outflank Indian military deployments in east Sikkim and make straight for the vital Siliguri corridor connecting West Bengal with the northeastern states. More broadly, such attempts at altering the status quo along the IB and the Line of Actual Control are aimed at compelling the Indian Army to stretch itself thin.

At the strategic level, the current standoff serves China's wider objectives along the border. In recent years, Beijing has sought an agreement with India that would freeze the operational status quo on the border. Having built impressive military infrastructure and capability in Tibet, China seeks to prevent India from catching up. During the incursion in Depsang in 2013, for example, the Chinese wanted India to dismantle its bunkers in Chumar. In agreeing to stop military construction in the Doklam area, China may insist that India should extend that principle to the entire border.

At the political level, the Chinese move signals an acceleration of Sino-Indian competition along the South Asian periphery. By picking on Bhutan, Beijing is testing New Delhi's ties with its closest partner in the region. The timing of the incident is important too. It



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping at the BRICS Summit, Brazil, 2014

comes on the heels of India's unwillingness to participate in the Belt and Road jamboree in Beijing. We may debate the wisdom of staying out of this initiative altogether, but in refusing to participate in the meeting New Delhi sent out a clear signal that it would not accept China's hierarchical notions of reordering Asian politics. It is no coincidence either that the stand-off occurred just ahead of the Prime Minister's visit to the United States. Beijing has orchestrated several highly visible incursions along

side diplomatic visits in order to assert its ability to embarrass India.

In attempting to wind down the standoff, India must take into account considerations at each of these levels. Operationally, we cannot afford to allow the Chinese to change the status quo near east Sikkim. Nor can we admit any suggestion that infrastructure development should be put on hold all along the border. Rather we must insist that this is a discrete event and that the Chinese attempt to change the status quo near the trijunction area is unacceptable.

At the same time, New Delhi must make a strong diplomatic effort to arrest the slide in ties with China. We need an agreement on mutual restraint that aims at addressing the core interests and concerns of both sides. The discussions between the Prime Minister and President Xi Jinping in May 2015 provide an ideal platform on which to mount such an effort. But this also requires a conceptual shift in our approach to China.

We must abandon the notion that our grand strategic choices boil down to either balancing against China in concert with the United States or bandwagoning with China.

The history of international politics suggests that this is too simplistic a reading of the options open to us—especially in the current global conjuncture. It is time we demonstrated strategic creativity and diplomatic agility.

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The views expressed are personal

## AERIAL VIEW



An MQ-9 Reaper drone aircraft (File photo for representative purposes)

REUTERS

# What does the US' sale of drones to India symbolise?

## By offering unmanned patrol aircraft, Washington has recognised New Delhi as a maritime partner



JOHN SCHAUS

**P**resident Narendra Modi's visit to Washington last week was an effort by both Modi and United States President Donald Trump to demonstrate that India-US ties remain strong and continue to deepen. The repeated embraces—three by most counts—serve as a visual reminder of the continued closeness between the two countries. The joint statement presents a range of issues where India and the United States will work closely. One item was particularly important: The US "offered for India's consideration the sale of Sea Guardian Unmanned Aerial Systems." This is significant for three reasons.

First, if India and the US are able to reach an agreement on a deal for this type of an unmanned aerial system (UAS), it could mark the first transfer by the US of such a system to a non-ally country. The Sea Guardian, a large payload, long-endurance UAS platform, is designed to provide advanced surveillance capability for maritime and littoral missions—an increasingly important mission for India as it seeks to play a larger role in securing lines of communication in the Indian Ocean.

Second, in announcing this offer to India, Trump effectively signalled that the US has

staked out a new policy position in India's favour regarding potential constraints imposed under the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). This voluntary arms control agreement calls for a "strong presumption of denial", for transfers of large UAS to other member-states. The regime, of which both India and the US are members, was established to limit the proliferation of missile technology (including UAS) that could deliver weapons of mass destruction. The Sea Guardian falls into the most tightly constrained Category I under MTCR.

Third, in offering India Sea Guardians, the US recognises that India is a maritime partner and the interests of both nations are aligning. Should India choose the Sea Guardian for its maritime surveillance missions, it would enable even greater cooperation.

As India and the US work to deepen bilateral ties, a necessary condition will be aligned interests. Over the past two Indian administrations, and the third consecutive US presidential administration, we are seeing that.

Equally important, however, will be continuing to find concrete areas of cooperation where rhetorical ambitions are translated into tangible progress and both countries working more closely together on mutually beneficial efforts. In offering a large unmanned maritime patrol aircraft, the two leaders have achieved just that.

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# Can a divided society have a common market?

## There is a glaring mismatch between the NDA's economic (read GST) and social policies



VINOD SHARMA

**A**re governments at the Centre and in States doing enough to curb vigilantism? The question is pertinent. For gau rakshaks are on the prowl, underpinned by citizens' protests, un mindful of appeals by constitutional functionaries.

President Pranab Mukherjee has spoken. So has Prime Minister Narendra Modi. They both called for an end to the beastly spectacle. But bloodletting continues, law and order machineries across states forever reactive when they need to be proactive.

For policemen and their political masters, the lesson is in the President's call to be proactively vigilant against vigilantism. Ironically, while Pranab Mukherjee spoke at a Congress-organised function in Delhi, the BJP's Amit Shah underscored the reactive part at a party meet in Goa. He said cow vigilantes were being dealt with: "There's no case where we haven't taken action."

That's where the problem lies. There are two aspects to police work: preventive and detective. When lynching (murder) happens, a case has to be registered. There's no escape from it. The catch is in taking investigations to a logical conclusion. Conviction rate is the proof of the police's pudding!

The reality more often than not is that manipulations happen after cases are lodged and suspects booked. Public memory being short, culprits move out of jail as news headlines move on to other issues.

Police probes in such matters are guided by the political will of the government. Courts go by the quality of evidence that can be vitiated by made-to-order forensic reports, witnesses turning hostile or complainants threatened. Only a proactive pursuit of faith driven vigilantes can check such brazen denial of justice. The distinc-

**TO SEW UP THE COUNTRY INTO A SEAMLESS WHOLE, LEADERS SHOULD BE WILLING TO LOSE ELECTIONS TO REGAIN THE TRUST OF ALIENATED SECTIONS, AS RAJIV GANDHI DID IN ASSAM AND PUNJAB IN 1985**

tion I've made between predatory and zealous cow protectors was flagged by the Prime Minister himself.

In August last year, Modi said the so-called gau rakshaks who claimed to be protectors during the day often resorted to criminal activities at night. The indictment failed to fetch salutary response even in BJP-ruled states, prompting him to make another appeal almost a year later—in the wake of the recent NotInMyName citizens' protests across metropolitan India.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi invoked Mahatma Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave while speaking at Ahmedabad's Sabarmati Ashram. He said nobody spoke more than them about protecting cows: "This (violence) is not something Mahatma Gandhi would've approved of."

Yet, within hours of the soft reprimand, vigilantes killed another man in Jharkhand. The audacious disregard of his counsel in a BJP-ruled state called for a response akin to fighting terror. The over-ground vigilante modules deserve to be busted and rendered dysfunctional before they get into striking mode.

The fanaticism the cow vigilantes embody has sullied India's image. Their shenanigans, as the Prime Minister alluded, have no place in Babu's India. Or in Modi's own single-market Bharat! That brings one to the PM's speech at the launch of the goods and services tax (GST) in Parliament's Central Hall: "the GST is not just a tax reform. It is a landmark step towards economic reforms. Beyond the taxation revamp, it will pave the way for social reforms."

A laudable thought indeed. But are the envisioned changes achievable without delivery systems that are equitable and fair—besides being "good and simple"? Can a society geared to honest tax compliance afford to be actively insular or communal? The answer is a no-brainer. There is, to state the least, a glaring mismatch between the NDA's economic and social policies.

Rather than quoting Gandhi to the marauders, the Prime Minister has to, if he is serious, crack down on the killer mobs having a free run of the place.

Who'd know better than a Gujarati that capital hates upheavals.

The meat of the matter is that there can be no one-market in a divided society. To sew up the country into a seamless whole, those in power should be willing to lose elections to regain the trust of alienated sections.

As Rajiv Gandhi did in insurgency-hit Assam and Punjab in 1985. He lost elections but won the states back for India.

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**JUDGE IF YOU MUST, BUT PUT YOURSELF IN OTHERS' SHOES**

## Himika Chaudhuri

Recently, a friend complained that he felt terrible because his name was not included in a list of family members who had made monetary contributions for his family temple. His complaint, perhaps justified, because he felt his efforts weren't recognised. He later got to know that the list had been prepared by a 72-year-old relative, who had volunteered to put it together because most others in the family didn't have the

time. And he inadvertently missed a name.

However, the incident got me thinking—why are we always in a hurry to presume that people are against us? The first impact of that thought is on ourselves, because it automatically triggers emotions such as anger and frustration. These are known to affect not just the mind, but also our body in a negative way. The other outcome of blaming someone without knowing the real truth, of course, is that the relationship is likely to suffer a setback.

But all the heartache and the anger may never surface if we just make the effort to take a step back and put a bit of time to think why the person may have done, what he or she did. Let's put ourselves in their shoes, and chances are we will see a logical reason for their actions and do ourselves the favour of cutting out unnecessary negativity.

(Inner Voice comprises contributions from our readers.)

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