

ACROSS THE AISLE



P CHIDAMBARAM

If there is a change in China's attitude to India, what are the circumstances that led to the change? I believe the Government of India when it said: "India has conveyed to the Chinese government that such construction would represent a significant change of status quo with serious security implications for India." However, that is not enough. The government owes a duty to the people to explain what has changed and why. Such a statement can come only from the PM

Ping pong of words, or worse?

THE WORLD is nowhere close to embracing Pope John's impassioned declaration "No more war, never again war".

Since the end of World War II, the world has witnessed hot wars, cold wars, civil wars, secessionist wars, *jihad* wars, invasion, annexation and many other kinds of violent conflict. Not a day has passed without loss of lives in armed conflicts.

India and China fought a war in 1962. After the war ended, there was a fragile peace. In 1988 Rajiv Gandhi was invited to China. It was a historic visit. Remember the famous I-o-n-g handshake with Deng Xiaoping! The two countries agreed to talk to each other and resolve all differences about the border/boundary through negotiations. Shortly afterwards, special representatives were appointed.

INDIA, CHINA GAINED TIME

From time to time, there were incidents. Talks followed. Issues were resolved. More recently, armed conflict was avoided in Depsang (2013) and Demchok and Chumar (2014). "Understandings" were arrived at. In 2012, an agreement was reached that the tri-junction issue between India and China will be resolved in consultation with the third party, Bhutan, in whose territory the tri-junction was located (and because of the special relationship of India with Bhutan).

Both countries, by avoiding armed conflict, gained valuable time to focus on economic development. China is well on its

way to be described as a middle-income country; it has lifted all but 5 per cent of its vast population of 1,380 million from poverty. It has become the world's factory and its exports have helped it build a foreign exchange reserve of over USD 3,000 billion. It is a nuclear power, it has the largest active standing army in the world, it has the capacity to venture deep into the South China Seas and the Indian Ocean, and it is believed to have the capacity to strike at distant targets.

India has also made considerable progress notwithstanding loud noises that nothing happened in the years up to 2014 (including, presumably, the Vajpayee years 1998-2004), but India is a few steps behind China. Since 1991, India has lifted over 250 million people out of poverty. Its foreign exchange reserves stand at USD 380 billion. It is a nuclear power, it has the second largest active standing Army in the world, and it has the capacity to defend itself against any aggression by a foreign power.

For these very reasons, India and China should guard against being drawn into a shooting war. Every time — and I mean, every time — diplomacy must succeed and the sabres must remain sheathed. Wordfare (if I may coin a word) should not become warfare.

IS IT DIFFERENT NOW?

The development near the tri-junction of India-Bhutan-China in the Dolam plateau (that lies in the Doklam region) on

June 16, 2017, should remain an 'incident' that can be resolved through talks. But, I am afraid, indications are to the contrary. The 'incident' has acquired sinister proportions. No one can deny that there is a marked difference between the 2017 incident and the incidents of 2013 and 2014.

Just look at the public statements of India and China. On the Indian side, statements have been made by the Army Chief (June 8, 2017), Ministry of External Affairs (June 30), Finance Minister (June 30), Foreign Secretary (July 11), MoS, PMO (July 12), and External Affairs Minister (July 20). The responders on the side of China have been only 'spokespersons' of the Foreign Ministry or the Army — until Mr Wang Yi, the Foreign Minister, spoke on July 25, 2017, at Bangkok. Besides, the true intent of China was reflected in stinging write-ups that appeared in *Global Times* and *Xinhua*. The language of the Chinese side's responses was, to put it mildly, undiplomatic.

What has changed? If there is a change in China's attitude to India, what are the circumstances that led to the change? I believe the Government of India when it articulated its position in the following words: "India is deeply concerned at the recent Chinese actions and has conveyed to the Chinese government that such construction would represent a significant change of status quo with serious security implications for India." However, that is not enough. The government owes a duty to the people of India to explain what has changed and why it has changed. Such a statement can come only from the Prime Minister.

WILL IT STOP WITH WORDS?

The rhetoric on the Chinese side is getting shriller by the day. Every overture by India has been spurned. The NSA's visit to China was first belittled, then a perfunctory reference was made to talks among NSAs during which China set forth its position on "bilateral issues and major problems". Contrary to the usual rules of diplomacy, China seems to have left no negotiating room for itself. It has laid down a non-negotiable condition and, at the same time, closed every avenue for negotiation. *Xinhua* wrote on July 15, 2017, "China has made it clear that there is no room for negotiations on this incident and India must withdraw its border-crossing troops from Doklam."

Discerning observers in India are naturally concerned but there is no such concern expressed by any one in China. The United States was the first country to openly advise restraint and urge talks. Many other countries which had been briefed by both India and China have strangely remained silent.

The gathering clouds are ominous. I am clear in my mind that under no circumstances should there be a shooting war between India and China. I am sure that is also the view of the Government of India, but I doubt if it is the view of the Government of China. Only time will tell what and when misjudgments were made.

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FIFTH COLUMN



TAVLEEN SINGH

A bad week for corrupt politicians

WHAT A week! In Pakistan corruption charges felled a powerful prime minister. In Bihar corruption charges felled a powerful political leader. So it was a good week for higher standards in public life, and a bad one for political leaders who become inexplicably rich. Lalu Prasad and sons run a small enterprise compared to Nawaz Sharif and family, and so, did not make the Panama Papers like the Sharifs did. But, it's basically the same story on both sides of the border. It is a story of political leaders who in the name of public service end up putting their family's commercial interests above the public good. When Pakistan's Supreme Court forced Nawaz Sharif out of office, our 'nationalistic' TV anchors reported the story gleefully as if this was an area in which India's democracy made us less vulnerable to the depredations of corrupt politicians. This is sadly not true.

It is a shame that regime change and (ancien) regime restoration in Patna was so melodramatic that political commentators have mostly ignored the reason why the Chief Minister of Bihar did what he did. Nitish Kumar has proved that he is a cynical, ruthless politician, but not even his worst enemies can accuse him of corruption. So when tax inspectors began unravelling the vast commercial interests and expensive real estate that Lalu and family allegedly own, he had no option but to cut and run. Having escaped relatively untainted once before from the BJP's 'communal' embrace, he chose communalism over corruption.

His move brings to the fore two separate but equally important issues. Corruption and the inability of our opposition parties to find a stronger glue to bind them together than sham secularism. Since this is corruption week, let's begin with analysing the corrupt practices of our political class. It is a sad admission to make but what Lalu Prasad allegedly did is what a long list of Indian politicians do, which is to use public office for private gains.

It has been said in this column before but needs constant repetition, that the only Indians who have huge stashes of 'black' money are our political leaders, because they are the only ones who do not earn their money through legitimate business practices. Businessmen and rich movie stars, routinely raided by tax inspectors, are guilty only of evading taxes on money they have earned through years of hard work. In politics, making money is much easier. It is possible for a chief minister or a minister to make in one deal what a successful movie star would make at the end of a lifetime of blood, sweat and tears.

It is no accident that we have seen such a proliferation of political dynasties across the Indian subcontinent. Our political leaders may not be honest in money matters but they are honest family men, and so bring their children into politics to enable them to share in the spoils. It is sometimes the only way to conceal filthy lucre by passing it off as money earned by a business-minded son or daughter. The question Tejashwi Yadav is being asked, about how he could have become so rich without ever having a real job, is a question that can and should be asked of the progeny of many political leaders. So, one way to reduce corruption is by ensuring that political leaders do not bring their sons, daughters or wives into politics. The Prime Minister initially tried doing this but recent state elections have seen the advent of many mini BJP dynasties.

Now let us talk about why the lines between communalism and secularism have begun to blur enough for the very 'secular' Chief Minister of Bihar to throw himself back into the BJP's supposedly communal embrace. He knows, like most Indians now do, that secularism has become a sham behind which shelter political leaders who encourage the worst kind of minority communalism to win votes. Cow vigilantes may have given the BJP a bad name in recent months but it would be stupid to ignore the opposite syndrome. This is that jihadist groups have been patronised by 'secular' chief ministers in Kashmir, Kerala and West Bengal.

Stupid also to ignore the reality that some of the worst violence against Muslims, Sikhs and Dalits has occurred in states run by chief ministers who wear 'secularism' like a badge of honour. India needs genuine secularism today more than ever, but it cannot be genuine if political leaders encourage jihadist groups while condemning the rise of Hindutva. Atal Bihari Vajpayee once warned, in the context of Kashmir, that if mosques were used for politics, it was simply not possible to stop politics being played from temples. What he said then remains true today and applies in a much wider context. Only a genuinely secular opposition can challenge the BJP in 2019.

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INSIDE TRACK



COOMI KAPOOR

NOTABLE OMISSION

In his farewell address to Parliament, President Pranab Mukherjee nostalgically recalled his 37 years as a member. He mentioned the names of many former colleagues, some not so well known, and praised them for their contributions. He waxed eloquent on Indira Gandhi, praised the wisdom of P V Narasimha Rao, the oratory of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the calming presence of Dr Manmohan Singh, the mature advice of L K Advani and Sonia Gandhi's passionate support for social issues. But, according to a minister, who was given an advance copy of the speech, Sonia's name was missing from the original text. It seems to have been added as an afterthought, when the President saw the Congress president sitting in Central Hall. A noteworthy omission from the speech was late prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. Rajiv had sidelined Mukherjee, the senior-most minister in his mother's Cabinet, suspecting that he had prime ministerial ambitions. As a result, Mukherjee spent some years in political wilderness.

FALLING IN LINE

Two BJP women leaders who were in the bad books of party president Amit Shah are back in favour. When Shah first took over as chief, Vasundhara Raje and Smriti Irani did not feel it necessary to pay obeisance. They soon learnt the hard way that it does not pay to cross his path. Irani was riding high as HRD Minister and believed she could do as she pleased. On a trip to Goa, she created headlines alleging that there were hidden cameras in the changing room of a well-known chain of stores. The news overshadowed coverage of a meeting of the BJP National Executive, of which Irani had not been made a member by Shah. Irani woke up to reality when she was abruptly transferred from the HRD Ministry to the relatively low-key Textile Ministry. She got back into Shah's good books by working hard for the party — touring Uttar Pradesh frequently, particularly Amethi. Recently, she was rewarded with the high-profile I&B Ministry.

In case of Raje, the Centre did not come to her rescue when the Lalit Modi issue blew up yet again. Many believed that Raje would not get the party's nomination for the 2018 Assembly elections. So when the party president visited Rajasthan last week,

Raje pulled out all the stops, according Shah a maharaja's welcome. Uncharacteristically, she and her entire cabinet were at the airport when he landed and she accompanied him wherever he went. The former royal even squatted on the floor and ate a meal with him at a Dalit worker's residence.

TOO PERSONAL

Indian ministers and officials were somewhat taken aback by the background on Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, who was in India recently. The CV, handed out by the Ministry of External Affairs, included Bishop's status on the personal front. It noted that she was once married, had three live-in partners at different times, and that her current status was unknown.

SPORTING ATTITUDE

TV correspondents who visited the homes of Indian women cricket players reported a gloomy atmosphere, with most of the parents in tears over the team's loss to the English. The exception was the home of allrounder Harmanpreet Kaur, in Moga, Punjab. Her father Harmander Singh Bhullar, a former basketball and volleyball player, beamed with joy. He offered sweets to all, saying, "Victories and defeats are part of sports." Since the team's spectacular show in the World Cup, politicians too have taken notice of the players. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Congress vice-president Rahul Gandhi were quick to tweet their best wishes to the team, Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh appointed Kaur to the Punjab Police. Her application had been ignored in the past.

GOVERNING BIASES

Former president Pranab Mukherjee was concerned that a number of governors did not get on with chief ministers of their respective states. He felt that tension between constitutional authorities was not healthy. West Bengal Governor Keshari Nath Tripathi recently wrote a letter complaining against Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. In Puducherry, Chief Minister V Narayanaswamy's stand-offs with Lt Governor Kiran Bedi are frequently in the news. In Tripura, Governor Thathagata Roy often publicly expresses his partisan views. Mukherjee, however, appreciated that his successor, Ram Nath Kovind, had set a good example with his cordial relations with Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, when he was governor of the state. Another such amicable relationship is between Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh and Governor V P Singh Badnore. Though they both have different political allegiances, they share a common bond — both belong to royal houses.

ROUGH CUT

E.P. UNNY



OUT OF MY MIND



MEGHNAD DESAI

THE OMISSION of Jawaharlal Nehru's name from President Ram Nath Kovind's inaugural speech attracted criticism from the Congress. Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, B R Ambedkar and Deendayal Upadhyaya were mentioned but not Nehru. The Congress was shocked. Yet, it was fitting. The old order has collapsed. A new dispensation is in power. Raising the threat of communalism no

The house Nehru built

longer has the bite Congress expects it to have. It is corruption which is the big worry of the new generation. It was this shift that propelled Nitish Kumar back to his old friends in the BJP/NDA.

This shift is crucial. The party that Nehru led for many years and the country he ruled between 1946 and 1964 were built on the pillars of democracy, rule of law, and the Constitution. Western-style secularism and liberalism (which had only shallow roots in India) were to be the guiding principles. He won three general elections in succession, the only leader to do so thus far. He bequeathed the country and the party to those he thought would preserve his legacy.

His name was evoked, but the edifice

he had built was dismantled. Tolerance for opposite views within the party went with the break-up of the Congress in 1969. Constitutionalism went with the Emergency. The rule of law was given short shrift by his grandson Sanjay Gandhi, when as an unelected person he launched a sterilisation campaign against Muslim men.

Secularism for Nehru was a deeply held belief as he was a rationalist and an atheist. For his party, secularism was a vote-gaining ploy. When necessity for political game-playing beckoned, his other grandson abandoned secularism by the decisions on Shah Bano and allowing *shilanyas* at Babri Masjid. The passive stance of Narasimha Rao when Babri Masjid was being destroyed sealed the cynicism which Nehru's

party had about his core philosophy.

The Congress was so sure of its hegemonic power that it never apologised either about the twin bad decisions of Rajiv Gandhi nor about Rao's passivity. Secularism kept being repeated as a mantra but its meaning was merely chasing Muslim votes. No one had noticed that in an intensely religious society, where in private life Indians (including Congress leaders after Nehru) follow their traditional ways, secularism was just a superficial make-up, put on when going out to play politics. Indira Gandhi had gurus and swamis and visited temples ostentatiously. And why not? She was a Hindu, brought up as one and lived and died as one.

There is no local word for secularism in

any of the languages. Jaw-breaking words such as *sarva-dharma-samabhava* or *sarva-dharma-nirapekshata* are not right. How did anyone expect the ordinary voter to know what was being said? If you probe Nehru's personal behaviour you would label it *nirdharmic* (non-religious). It would make no sense to most Indians, and to the Westernised elite, only in their front rooms, not in the interior of their homes.

Congress hegemony ended in 2014. Narendra Modi won not on the grounds of secularism/communalism but on corruption and inclusive development. If you want to protect the lives of Muslims, or punish the cow vigilantes, argue on the basis of the rule of law and citizen rights enshrined in the Constitution, not secularism.