

A strategic and tactical reshuffle

Sitharaman as defence minister is a bold move. Allies get nothing

Cabinet reshuffles can generally be categorised as tactical or strategic. But the one Prime Minister Narendra Modi carried out this Sunday is a mix of both, the headline grabbing changes happening in the ministries of defence, power and railways. The elevation of

Nirmala Sitharaman as the country's first full-fledged woman minister for defence is at once bold and progressive.

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Of the eight women in the council of ministers, six now are of cabinet rank. External affairs minister Sushma Swaraj and Sitharaman will sit on the key cabinet committee for security (CCS) which also has as its members the PM, home minister Rajnath Singh and finance minister Arun Jaitley. Sitharaman's work in the commerce ministry will be carried forward by Suresh Prabhu, who has been shifted out of railways to make way for Piyush Goyal. The chain is completed with Bihar MP and former home secretary RK Singh succeeding Goyal as minister of state (independent charge) in the power ministry.

Others rewarded with cabinet rank are: Dharmendra Pradhan, who retains petroleum and natural gas with additional charge of skill development, and minority affairs minister Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi. In injecting fresh blood, Modi seems to have relied on domain specialisation. But the work assigned to former diplomat Hardeep Singh Puri and former IAS Alphons Kannanthanam, both lateral entries as MoS (Independent charge) isn't in consonance with their known expertise. Be that as it may, Kannanthanam's induction gives Marxist-ruled Kerala a representation in Modi's team. The other surprise was the non-representation of the JD (U) that was expected to join the government. In fact, no ally including the Shiv Sena and Akali Dal has got anything. The reshuffle was restricted to the BJP.

After the third rejig in as many years, the NDA ministry is 76-member strong as against the constitutional ceiling of 82 — which is 15% of the strength of the Lok Sabha. Half a dozen slots are still available to Modi to accommodate allies and streamline governance. The need for that could arise sooner rather than later. Several BJP ministers continue to hold concurrent charge of unrelated departments.

Spare the rod and nurture the child in schools

Corporal punishment scars the child both physically and psychologically

The horrific video of a teacher repeatedly slapping a Class 3 student has brought the issue of corporal punishment back to the limelight. Under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, 'physical punishment' and 'mental harassment' are prohibited under Section 17(1); and are both punishable offences under Section 17(2). In Delhi, corporal punishment in schools has been banned by the Delhi High Court since 2001 for undermining the dignity of the student. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) has issued guidelines for eliminating corporal punishment in schools.

In spite of this, there is widespread belief among teachers and caregivers that hitting or insulting a child is the best way to ensure obedience and discipline. Psychological studies have shown that beating or otherwise assaulting a child is extremely deleterious to their mental health, and teaches them that hitting is an acceptable means of dealing with conflict. The NCPCR draft guidelines even go so far as to say that corporal punishment can lead to several adverse physical, psychological and educational outcomes in students — including an increase in aggressive and destructive behaviour, poor attention spans, school phobia, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and even suicide. Such abuse in early childhood has the potential to scar children for life.

That some progress in the area has been made is visible in the outrage seen on social media in response to the video. It is heartening to see that many people see this as cruel. But as is also evident from the presence of the video in the first place that there is yet a long way to go in training teachers in schools to be sensitive to the emotional and mental needs of children. Since schools are the first spaces in which children learn about power structures and social relations, society owes it to its children to provide an environment that can effectively protect and nurture them

straightforward

SHASHI SHEKHAR



India is learning to be a superpower

Before sending out troops, mature governments will explore all possibilities on the diplomatic front

Heading towards the 75th anniversary of its independence, has India learnt to behave like a superpower? The sequence of events over the last few months would seem to suggest this. You must have got it by now — I mean the standoff with China and its resolution.

The Indian government deployed a judicious mix of strength and wisdom during the Doklam episode. Two videos may be fresh in your memory. The first was in Doklam in which Indian soldiers can be seen pushing back the intruders in Red. In the second, at Ladakh's Pangong Tso Lake, the physicality of the conflict is palpable. Pelting stones, raining fists and blows on each other, Indian and Chinese soldiers appear to be engaged in a wrestling match. Episodes such as these have taken place on the border with China in the past too, but it was the first time that the videos were being watched by people in their drawing rooms, in a matter of hours.

The places where these skirmishes took place are inaccessible for tourists. There isn't even a village in the vicinity. So who shot these videos and why did they go viral? The answer to this may still be a mystery, but by destiny or design, it served a larger purpose. The videos kindled a confidence in the com-

mon citizen that our defence forces are second to none. When the occasion demands, they can put up resistance and push back the Chinese.

This is a clear sign of a shift in India's military strategy. What is significant is that even as India was changing its spots, China was steeped in the old mould: trespassing followed by hollow threats. When its defence ministry said India should remember what happened in 1962, its foreign ministry joined the chorus and added: The way the Indian army went to Doklam, imagine what could happen if the Chinese went and ensconced themselves in Nepal? They unleashed a series of challenges and warnings. For Indians who love sensationalism, this was a different kind of thrill. The two video clips had become a good antidote for their anxieties.

All through this turmoil, the ruling dispensation in India displayed great restraint. Defence Minister Arun Jaitley's brief but consequential response to the Chinese was that the India of today wasn't the India of 1962. A few days later, Prime Minister Modi said India was ready to resolve every issue through dialogue. That's why world opinion kept turning against them and ultimately China had to drop its road-building plans. This was the second jolt to our powerful neighbour. First, India boycotted Xi Jinping's pet One Belt One



Tact and maturity are a sign of India's new-found confidence

AFP

Road Project (OBOR) and now this.

Some people believe that after the setback to its ambitious OBOR project, China could not have accepted India's absence from the BRICS summit. This had the potential of inflicting a serious blow to China's economic interests. So, it made amends. There is a possibility that India's policy architects had anticipated this and accordingly taken the blow-hot blow cold decisions. Before sending out troops on the border, successful governments explore all possibilities on the diplomatic

front. That's what New Delhi did.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is in Beijing at present. In the evolving scenario, he will certainly meet his Chinese counterpart with renewed confidence. One hopes both the countries will prioritise peace and prosperity over other issues. Chanakya wasn't wrong when he said we can change everything but our neighbours. Alertness, understanding and cooperation are the best policy to deal with a neighbour. China should understand this. Their companies conduct their business in India. If our people turn against China, who'll buy their products?

It will be wrong to assume that previous governments have not done enough to defend our borders. In 1967, during a skirmish near Nathu-La, Indian troops neutralised more than 300 Chinese soldiers but the general public didn't get a whiff of it. In 1999, it took a long time for the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government to declare the Kargil conflict as a war. Those were the days of hesitant diplomacy.

In a way the present government led by Narendra Modi has bid goodbye to that policy. Whether it is action against insurgents in Myanmar, surgical strikes against Pakistan or skirmishes with Chinese soldiers, New Delhi hasn't been reluctant to talk about them. Till now the United States and its allies have been pursuing this policy. We should welcome the tact and maturity that New Delhi has displayed over the last few months. It is a sign of India's new-found confidence.

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URBAN DISASTER



Heavy, erratic and extreme rainfall is now unavoidable. But what are we doing to protect ourselves and make our cities less flood prone?

REUTERS

Chennai will flood again thanks to govt indifference

How encroachments on the Ennore Creek are dealt with will decide whether the city will survive the next deluge



NITYANAND JAYARAMAN

Mumbai went under water last week; Chandigarh the week before, and Agartala, Bengaluru and Ahmedabad earlier on during this south-west monsoon. The jury is out on whether the extreme rain events were caused by climate change. But there is little doubt that detrimental land-use change played a big part in turning the rains to floods. Heavy, erratic and extreme rainfall is now unavoidable. But what are we doing to protect ourselves and make our cities less flood prone?

Exactly one year ago, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs submitted its report on the 2015 Chennai floods. The report concluded that "encroachment of lakes and river beds played a major role in causing massive flood in Chennai." Noting that the lessons from Chennai floods are "an eye-opener and other cities must also learn from it," the committee urged the state government to "check mafia involved in illegal construction for business and usurping water bodies for their real estate business."

The Tamil Nadu government has been quick to use the floods as an excuse to evict the poor from their dwellings on the margins of Chennai's stinking rivers. But, it has done

nothing to check the "mafia." The largest conversion of wetlands into real estate in Chennai is happening on the sprawling Ennore Creek to the north of the city. The crime of encroaching is being committed by an organised body of offenders led by Public Sector Units, and facilitated by the very agencies that were set up to protect the environment.

Kosasthalaiyar, Chennai's lesser known river is also its biggest. Kosasthalaiyar exists to sea through the 8,000 acre backwaters of the Ennore Creek. Seen solely from a flood mitigation perspective, what Chennai does to the Kosasthalaiyar and the Ennore Creek will decide whether the city will survive or succumb with the next above-average rains.

In his submission to the parliamentary committee, former home secretary Rajiv Mehrihi defended the lapses of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) by claiming that it is not possible to prepare for a once-in-a-century disaster. This was echoed by the then chief minister of TNMs, Jayalalitha who declared that "swift rescue and relief alone are indicators of a good government." Both responses are attempts to normalise a man-made disaster and gloss over the pathology of urban development.

When the Kosasthalaiyar floods — and flood it will — and the lives of Chennai residents are imperilled, it should be remembered that those in power could have, but did nothing to avert certain disaster. Like the 2015 floods, the next Chennai floods too will be man-made.

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The views expressed are personal

India and China must start afresh at Xiamen

New Delhi should stare the dragon down to preserve its political space, while embracing it economically



SAMIR SARAN

Leaders of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) have gathered this past weekend for the ninth annual BRICS summit in Xiamen, China. The prolonged Himalayan standoff between India and China will cast its shadows on this meet and will certainly add a new dimension to discussions on the future of this plurilateral.

The BRICS emerged out of a global order dominated and managed by the United States (US) post the break of the Soviet Union. The US led institutions catalysed global trade and financial flows, which in turn also helped in the organic growth of most of the BRICS economies. Despite their growth, their marginal role in management of key global institutions created an undesirable asymmetry in world affairs. BRICS came about as a vehicle to respond to this, and together they hoped, they would be able to loosen the vice-like grip the Atlantic system had on existing governance institutions.

There were two unstated principles that shaped the ethics of the BRICS formation. First, each nation placed a premium on sovereignty and its importance in the conduct of world affairs, and second, each state sought greater pluralism and equity in decision-making processes in a multipolar world.

The China and India standoff at Doklam compels us to revisit these organising principles. The Doklam incident was a contest around sovereign concerns. These concerns are rooted in history and muddied by China's determination to implement a political and economic arrangement across Asia that is insensitive to the territorial rights of India. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the associated China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are but thinly veiled attempts to shape an Asian order

THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI) AND THE CHINA PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR (CPEC) ARE BUT THINLY-VEILED ATTEMPTS TO SHAPE AN ASIAN ORDER THAT PLAYS BY THE CHINESE RULEBOOK ALONE.

that plays by the Chinese rulebook alone. While BRICS symbolises a multipolar world, BRI and CPEC are the harsh face of an undesirable and unipolar Asia.

Further, China's latest attempt at creating a 'BRICS Plus' platform, comprised of states who happen to be key actors in the BRI, makes it clear that it sees BRICS as an adjunct of the BRI and merely as a vehicle to catalyse its larger ambitions.

These events make it clear that we must shed the romantic notion that ideological convergence is possible within BRICS. Each member must see the group for what it is — a twenty first century 'limited purpose partnership' among states to achieve specific sets of outcomes. There is nothing inherently improper about such an alliance, however, if progress is to be made, it will be predicated on creating effectively designed institutions.

The most successful BRICS endeavour has been the creation of the New Development Bank. The time has come to build on this initiative and focus on creating more institutions for greater cooperation in issues such as finance, urbanisation, sustainable development and the digital space. This could include setting up a BRICS credit ratings agency, a BRICS research institution and institutionalising the process of managing the global commons such as the oceans and outer space.

It is obvious that each of the BRICS members will have their own reasons for being at Xiamen. Russia continues to see it as a geopolitical bulwark against the US, all the while tacitly acquiescing to Chinese leadership. South Africa will present itself as the leading voice of the African world and will raise issues of peace and development for the continent at the summit, while Brazil, which is undergoing a period of domestic turmoil, is unlikely to be too innovative or demanding. China is far more certain of what it seeks.

For India, this year's summit becomes important. India will have to learn the fine art of staring down the dragon to preserve its political space, while embracing China for some important economic opportunities. At Doklam, it did the former; will it do the latter? India must chart a new roadmap for greater institutionalisation of the group's interests.

As we enter the second decade of BRICS, Xiamen would have to be the arena where the members recommit to upholding the founding principles of the BRICS. Thereafter, they must chart a new roadmap for greater institutionalisation of the group's interests.

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The views expressed are personal



IF AT FIRST YOU DO NOT FIND SUCCESS, TURN OVER THE PAGES OF LIFE

Satyra Pandey

Life is full of uncertainties. There is no one can say with any certainty what will happen tomorrow. But, life doesn't stop in these situations.

Uncertainties don't always bring in bad chapters in life. They can be a precursor for some good surprises for everyone. But to get to the point of receiving that surprise gift, one must remember that one needs to turn over this page of life, and reach the next page and the next chapter.

I remember the day when I failed in four entrance exams one after another for higher education.

I stopped talking to people, started questioning my abilities and was absolutely depressed. I thought I would never be able to pursue my dreams ever.

I wasted almost a month, thinking about what was the reason behind my failure. My mind wasn't ready to accept the truth.

After some days had passed, I met my uncle to take some advice on how to steer my career forward. And his simple reply

changed my life and how I perceive it.

He said, "Life is all about letting go. Leave the things you cannot control. Everyone has some special talent, but if you continue to dwell in the chapters of the past, you will never be able to learn what life has in store for you."

"To know how capable you are, give life a chance and don't let failure curb you down."

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