

Living in uncertain times

Given the uncertain times we live in, nothing can be taken for granted. Much of the world seems to be in a state of bewildering confusion. Across the spectrum, people appear euphoric, angry, fearful or confused. Many do not even want to think of what lies ahead. Therein, perhaps, lurks the biggest danger. Not wanting to understand what is taking place has its own perils.

Age of disruption

Disruption is the dominant sentiment today. It is leading to major political upheavals. It has resulted in escalating levels of violence. Technology is the biggest disruptor of all. Many large firms are being challenged by start-ups. Artificial Intelligence is threatening everything that we are aware of. This breeds uncertainty, apart from confusion.

How else can anyone explain the extraordinary spectacle of a U.S. President effecting a meeting with a North Korean leader. Till very recently, North Korea was seen by the U.S., and much of the West, as the principal part of the “axis of evil”. Not only has this been exploded with the leaders of the U.S. and North Korea meeting in Singapore in June, but the U.S. has announced that North Korea no longer poses a nuclear threat, nor is it the “biggest and the most dangerous problem” for the U.S. No diplomatic rigmarole, no joint communiqué on the details and guarantees, just a simple endorsement that North Korea would eschew the use of nuclear weapons and dismantle its nuclear arsenal is considered enough.

The rest of the world, meantime, is in various stages of disarray. Russia’s Vladimir Putin is pitted against almost the entire Western world, and is being blamed for an array of human rights violations. Several regions of Asia are akin to powder kegs waiting to blow up. Afghanistan is rocked almost daily by terror attacks by the Taliban, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, or the Islamic State. West Asia is embroiled in several wars. Syria is the worst-affected and has almost ceased to be a state. Tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia have intensified. Tensions between Israel and the Muslim world have peaked. The war launched by the Saudi Arabia-led alliance of Arab States against Yemen is turning into a war without end. In South Asia, even tiny countries like the Maldives are challenging bigger neighbours like India.

Europe may not be convulsed with the same degree of violence, but political uncertainty is the prevailing order. Germany, which appeared the most stable of European countries till recently, is in deep crisis politically and Chancellor Angela Merkel’s government hangs by the proverbial thread. In France, despite President Emmanuel Macron’s reassuring presence, strong undercurrents of political disruption are evident. A fluid political situation prevails across much of southern Europe.

Stable dictatorships

In a topsy-turvy world, it would appear that autocracies or dictatorships remain more stable, while democracies seem increasingly dysfunctional. Under President Xi Jinping, China, for instance, is making steady progress, despite the occasional dip in economic forecasts. The party remains in tight control of affairs. Mr. Xi and the Chinese Communist Party have on their radar milestones such as ‘wiping out poverty and becoming a moderately prosperous society by 2021’ (100th anniversary of the founding of the party); a ‘Made in China target to be completed by 2025’; and turning ‘China into a fully developed nation by 2049’ (100th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China). No hiccups are in sight.

Russia is, again, not constrained by contrarian pulls and pressures. It has entered into a strategic

relationship with China, is seeking to consolidate its influence in Eurasia, and has been able to stand up to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the West. Its economy is also on the mend. Other dictatorial regimes, such as Turkey, are proving more resilient than democratic regimes across the world, and better able to manage turmoil within and outside their borders.

Most democracies, on the other hand, reveal a far from homogeneous state of affairs, with ruling and opposition parties increasingly working at cross purposes. Germany's plight today is largely due to Ms. Merkel's Christian Democratic Union and coalition partner, the Christian Social Union, pulling in different directions. Such trends are a common occurrence today.

Equally disconcerting is the plight of political parties themselves in many democracies. Many act in a manner that appears like an indictment of democratic politics. In the U.K., for instance, the Conservative and Labour parties face serious internal divisions. In the U.S., both Republicans and Democrats appear in poor shape. Political parties in France are hardly better situated. What all this presages for the future of democracies is a matter of conjecture.

Indian democracy, unfortunately, is not an exception. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) currently projects an image of a strong centralised party. Most other parties are riven by internal dissensions. Yet, the BJP has been unable to ensure the smooth functioning of Parliament. The BJP's inability, despite its brute majority in the Lok Sabha, to 'manage' a determined Opposition is a serious chink in its armour. More unfortunate, it has resulted in a paralysis of informed discussion and debate. Absence of a debate of this nature in Parliament has a direct impact on the conduct of affairs of state.

For example, there had existed for a long time a broad consensus among parties in Parliament about the conduct of foreign affairs. Today, the consensus appears to have broken down. This has happened precisely when India's external policies have come under strain. The nation, however, has the right to know the correct state of affairs, which is possible only through a detailed discussion in Parliament. The ruling party seems in no hurry to restore the consensus.

Friction in ties

Without this, it will be difficult for the nation at large to discern why India-U.S. relations, after more than a decade and half of steady improvement, seem to be slowing down. It was only early this year that U.S. President Donald Trump had announced suspension of military aid to Pakistan, and pointed an accusing finger at it for backing terror. All of a sudden, whether due to U.S. imperatives in Afghanistan, or some other reason, there are signs of renewed engagement between Pakistan and the U.S. This cannot but adversely impact India's position in the region. Simultaneously, the U.S. has of late taken to upbraiding India on trade issues, lecturing it on reducing military ties with Russia, and insisting that it abide by U.S. sanctions on Iran. It also peremptorily postponed the 2+2 dialogue. Without a serious debate in Parliament, it would be difficult for the government to reach a consensus on how to deal with this situation.

This applies in equal measure to the state of India's relations with China. Despite the Wuhan summit, our relations with China remain equivocal. There has been no give by China on contentious issues such as the border. The Doklam stand-off has yet to be resolved. Further, China continues to aggressively cultivate countries in India's neighbourhood to India's detriment. Nepal and the Maldives are conspicuous examples. It is little understood, again, why many of our neighbours seem to be drifting away from India.

A debate in Parliament would be even more critical to understand where our relations with Russia stand today. On the surface, India-Russia relations remain unaffected, but there are enough signs that the nature of the relationship has undergone a change, even though defence ties may be

unaffected. If the U.S. continues to insist that India resile from its commitment to buy the Triumf missile defence systems from Russia, we will have a first-rate crisis on our hands. India needs a national consensus to tide over the crisis and withstand U.S. pressure, since succumbing to it would be detrimental to our claims to 'strategic autonomy'.

Some of the policy imperatives of recent years, including possibly the current transactional nature of India's foreign policy, may well need to be reformulated, given the present state of affairs. This cannot happen without a detailed debate in Parliament. The time has, hence, come for the government to seek out the Opposition to debate some of these issues inside Parliament, so that foreign policy, at least, remains on an even keel and is not buffeted by the cross-winds of adversarial party politics in the country.

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