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Index

Is the emerging global order bipolar?	2
A lot at stake: The Hindu Editorial on India and the impact of the indictment by the U.S. Department of Justice	6
Making this Israeli-Palestinian war the last.....	8
Needless diversion: On Venezuela’s Referendum and its claim over Essequibo	11
A dark shadow on New Delhi’s credibility.....	13
Gaza in flames: The Hindu Editorial on Israel’s expanding offensive.....	16
India’s growing neighbourhood dilemmas.....	18
Bridge this deficit between India and Sri Lanka.....	21
The hypocrisy of Western democracy.....	24
Decoding Putin’s dramatic visit to the Gulf.....	27
US judge to hear Meta privacy dispute with FTC next month.....	30
End the uncertainty: The Hindu Editorial on the Sri Lankan refugees in Tamil Nadu	32
Gaza, a new pointer to India’s changed world view	34
Keeping it relevant: The Hindu Editorial on the United Nations Conference of Parties meetings..	38
Principled shift: The Hindu Editorial on India’s stand on Gaza	40
A time-honoured connect that will help bridge the Gulf.....	42
Cabinet approves Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between India and Tanzania on Cooperation in the field of sharing successful Digital Solutions implemented at Population Scale for Digital Transformations.....	45
Cabinet approves Memorandum of Cooperation signed between India and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on cooperation in the field of Digitization and Electronic manufacturing.....	47
The stormy Red Sea, the complexities of global events.....	49
Debarring Donald: On the Trump ruling by the Supreme Court of the U.S. State of Colorado....	52
Sisi again: On the result of Egypt’s presidential elections	54
Israel is fighting in the dark in Gaza.....	56
Mint.....	59
Stabilising frayed ties, yet hurdles ahead.....	60
Growth charts — WHO standards versus India crafted.....	63
The quest for ‘happiness’ in the Viksit Bharat odyssey.....	66
Old and strong: On India-Russia ties	69
A quiet reprieve: On former Indian naval personnel and the Qatar court’s verdict	71

IS THE EMERGING GLOBAL ORDER BIPOLAR?

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

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December 01, 2023 01:16 am | Updated 07:53 am IST

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President Joe Biden greets China's President Xi Jinping at the Filoli Estate in Woodside, California on November 15, 2023, on the sidelines of the APEC conference. | Photo Credit: AP

The world has witnessed several disruptions in recent years. China's phenomenal rise has unleashed a superpower competition between Washington and Beijing. Russia is challenging the post-World War security architecture in Europe through military means. In West Asia, Israel is engaged in a brutal war with Hamas. The world is also witnessing the rise of several middle powers such as India. Is the emerging global order bipolar? **B.K. Sharma** and **Swaran Singh** discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Stanly Johny**. Edited excerpts:

Some say that the global order today is economically multipolar, but militarily unipolar. Some say there is multipolarity, while some others argue that we are back to bipolar rivalry between the U.S. and China. What is your take on the emerging global order?

B.K. Sharma: Everything is in a state of flux. I would look at the present world order as one of asymmetric bipolarity in which the U.S. still remains a pre-eminent power, but China is closing in very fast. Meanwhile, there are other power centres emerging and they will play a significant role in the balance of power. I'd say an asymmetric, diffused world order is taking shape. With the passage of time, maybe these contours will be clearer.

Comment | [India's dilemmas in an Asian century](#)

Professor, let's look at China, which has seen a phenomenal rise economically and militarily over the past four decades. How is China's rise affecting the global order?

Swaran Singh: In the last 40 years, if you have to identify a single factor influencing international order, China stands out. Its GDP in 1990 [was] \$300 billion, [moved] to \$1 trillion-plus at the turn of century and is now \$19.3 trillion. That is an unprecedented event or process to take place in human history. And the fact that China is controlled by one party and virtually one man makes this economic lever particularly powerful in redefining the order.

Comment | [The middle path for India in the new world disorder](#)

But let me also mention here that power has been the defining feature of how world orders have

been built and destroyed over the years, and this power has often been military at its core. And if you use that yardstick, you will see that in the 19th century, countries that developed steam engines and developed naval fleets, [that is] small European countries, became great powers. In the 20th century, we had nuclear evolution, so we devised a new concept called superpowers. Great powers could control multiple events around the world and superpowers could control multiple events around the world simultaneously.

The 21st century is one of people's power. The connectivity that the world sees today is unprecedented. That results in interactions, sometimes even interdependence, to some extent global integration, and therefore there could be bipolar impulses.

Comment | [Fathoming the new world disorder](#)

But they [China] are never likely to produce a rigid bipolar world because the world is much more interdependent and integrated now.

General, you are now in Moscow attending the Primakov Forum. The war in Ukraine has been going on for the past 20 months. Do you think the war has driven Russia deeper into China's embrace? What are the implications for India?

B.K. Sharma: Before 2014 (when economic sanctions were imposed on Russia), the Russians were extremely circumspect about having close ties with China because of their memories of the Cold War during which the Chinese had sided with the U.S. But with the imposition of economic sanctions, Russia was not left with many choices and gravitated towards China. Then the invasion of Ukraine took place and a second set of economic sanctions was imposed on Russia. But let me tell you, the Russians are extremely conscious of the fact that they cannot put all their eggs in one basket. There are still simmering undercurrents of mistrust between the two sides, particularly regarding the balance of power in Central Asia. The relationship looks cosy from the outside now, but deep down, there are misgivings on both sides. Therefore, Russia would not like to go the whole hog into the Chinese orbit.

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There are enough signals from Russia that in pursuance of its policy, or pivot to Asia, it would like to diversify its relationship, particularly in terms of energy, with the developing economies of Asia, especially East Asia and India. The Russians are seriously looking at reinventing their ties with India. There are two important corridors which will give some gravitas to the relationship. One is the International North-South Transport Trade Corridor and the other is the Chennai–Vladivostok Maritime Corridor. Once we are able to make these corridors operational, Russia's dependence on China will probably reduce. And this is the direction in which we should be.

Professor, India has very good ties with both the U.S. and Russia. But at the same time, it has a testy relationship with China. If the great power competition heats up between China and the U.S., and between Russia and the U.S., do you think India's options will shrink further?

Swaran Singh: There is often a temptation to view India's relations with the U.S. and China in contrasting terms, which makes it easier to highlight the differences. But all is not hunky dory [with the U.S.]. India and the U.S. had signed a joint statement in July 2005, which opened up a new relationship and a nuclear deal was finally signed in 2008. And India was supposed to get six nuclear power reactors from the U.S. These have not come yet. So, it's not that everything is fantastic. On the other hand, China's has a trade of \$138 billion with India, so it's not that in China's case we only have difficulties. With both countries, relations are complex because India,

just like China and the U.S., is a major global player. Indeed, if the competition between China and the U.S., and Russia and the U.S., heats up, it does reduce the manoeuvrability of India in terms of how to manage good relations with Russia, China, and the U.S. At the same time, I don't see those heating up to the extent that our options get closed completely because these countries are enormously dependent on each other. So, I don't see a rigid bipolar system happening in the future.

General, what in your view should be India's strategic approach towards a rising China?

B.K. Sharma: First, we have to acknowledge the fact that China is going to be a long-term competitor in Asia. And the border is just one of the pressure points that China uses against India. In the foreseeable future, I do not visualise any major breakthrough on the border aspect. We also have to recognise that there is a huge power asymmetry between India and China. And with time, this will remain, if not grow. Therefore, fundamental to India's dealing with China is the growth of our own comprehensive national power. India is going to be the third largest economy perhaps in a decade or more. With that economic clout, India has to spend more on military modernisation, with the added focus on disruptive technologies.

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The second issue is about internal balancing. We have fault lines. Rather than mending those, those fault lines get accentuated because of political calculations. Societal cohesiveness is important. [We need to] particularly bring about peace and tranquility in the border States.

Then, as part of our external balancing, I think we need to balance our relations with the U.S. so that in some form we are able to perpetuate China's two-front dilemma: the Western Pacific on one hand and the Line of Actual Control on the other.

Professor, we have a war in Eastern Europe and one in West Asia. In Eastern Europe, the U.S. is supporting Ukraine against Russia, and in West Asia, it is supporting Israel in its attack on Gaza. How do you look at the global security situation?

Swaran Singh: These wars have become televised now and the world is far more aware of what is happening. But if you look at the last 100 years of inter-state wars, most of them ended up in fatigue. Some of that is happening in the case of Ukraine. [U.S. President Joe] Biden's support to Israel is partly driven by the fact that Republicans stand by Israel. So, there are political compulsions that make leaders do that. I think the deeper point here is the military-industrial complex. Industries are producing destructive weapons all the time, and they're spreading their instruments of death and destruction around the world. That is a deeper question that needs to be addressed. So, violence is going to be widespread because there is a huge military-industrial complex behind it.

Listen to the podcast [here](#)

General B.K. Sharma is Director General of the United Services Institution of India; Swaran Singh is Professor, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University

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A LOT AT STAKE: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON INDIA AND THE IMPACT OF THE INDICTMENT BY THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

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The impact of the [15-page indictment](#) filed by the U.S. Department of Justice [against an Indian national](#), believed to be directed by an Indian government official for attempting an assassination plot against U.S.-based Khalistani separatist Gurbhagat Singh Pannun, is likely to be felt in more than just the U.S. and India. The indictment is based on details of communications between the accused, an illicit drugs and arms dealer, Nikhil Gupta, with a serving senior Indian government intelligence officer, who is identified but unnamed, as well as with two men in the U.S., who were allegedly engaged to kill Mr. Pannun. The twist in the tale, unreported on so far in the U.S., or Canada, is that the two U.S.-based men were working for U.S. law enforcement, making it clear that American agents have been following the investigation since at least May. There have been meetings between the U.S. President Joseph Biden and Prime Minister Narendra Modi — other senior officials have met too — since then. The allegations raise troubling questions about how much was shared between the two countries, and whether the Modi government, which had been outraged by [similar allegations made by Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau](#), has been less than honest about what it knows. If the government had knowingly authorised the targeting of Sikh separatists who are on [India's UAPA terrorist designation list](#), then that implies a dramatic change in Indian policy, which it should be more upfront about. If top officials had no inkling about the “plots”, and as the Ministry of External Affairs has stated this is not “government policy”, it is also a matter of grave incompetence and ‘rogue’ officers. If, however, the U.S.’s and Canada’s allegations are unfounded, and Indian officials are not linked to the plots, then the government needs to furnish evidence. In any case, the management of public messaging in the matter, especially India’s reaction to Canada versus the U.S., appears inconsistent.

Whatever the factors behind the government’s responses thus far, it is significant that it has now instituted a high-level inquiry committee to look into the U.S.’s allegations. Much hinges on its outcome. To begin with, India’s U.S. ties could be impacted by what transpires, as White House expects India’s full cooperation. India too, must ask the U.S., which is rightly placing such emphasis on the plot, why it is not keen on extraditing to India a man facing terror charges. Second, the U.S. and Canadian allegations will directly impact India’s ties with all “Five Eyes” intelligence partner countries, which must not be overshadowed by this one case. Finally, it is India’s reputation as a consistent and credible power — one which has earned respect worldwide for its sagacity and principled approach on such issues in the past — that hangs in

the balance, and New Delhi must judge its next steps in the case extremely wisely.

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MAKING THIS ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN WAR THE LAST

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Palestinians shopping in an open-air market amid a temporary truce | Photo Credit: REUTERS

All wars end. The Israeli-Hamas war will also end. When and how are still to be determined. But doing so is urgent.

The United Nations says 1.3 million of the 2.3 million residents of the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip have been displaced, and almost half of all homes in Gaza have been damaged or destroyed.

One outcome of a war is when both sides gain something of value to them. The Israeli-Hamas war is likely to end in that kind of scenario.

Israel will win in military terms, no doubt about that. But Hamas is likely to win in terms of a greatly increased following among Arab populations everywhere, including, especially, in the occupied West Bank.

The Palestine Authority, which has been ruling there for the past 30 years, has become vastly unpopular and corrupt. Palestine Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, the most moderate Palestine leader Israel could have ever hoped for, has failed singularly in making any progress towards the objective of establishing a Palestinian state in the West Bank. He is perceived as collaborating with Israel in its hunt for 'terrorists'. The peace process has long been dead.

As United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has reminded the international community, the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, condemnable and despicable as it was, did not happen in a vacuum. Under Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, Israel has the inherent right of self-defence. The same article lays down that after acting in self-defence, the state concerned must report the action taken by it to the UN Security Council (UNSC). This does not seem to have been done.

In any case, self-defence does not authorise the disproportionate or indiscriminate use of force against civilians. It has been reported that Gaza's rate of death during Israel's assault has few precedents in this century — almost 15,000, a majority of them women and children. This goes well beyond the prevailing customary law of self-defence.

The most important and troubling issue is: what happens when Hamas has been subdued?

What takes its place? Some, including the U.S. President Joe Biden, have suggested that the Ramallah-based Palestine Authority should take over administering the Gaza Strip, once the situation becomes ready for that. 'The rich Arab states', a phrase widely cited in the media, would be asked to finance the rebuilding of Gaza. The only problem is that the Palestinians, in Gaza as well as in West Bank, do not want the Palestine Authority led by Mr. Abbas to rule anywhere, let alone Gaza.

The only available option is to hold fresh elections, in Gaza as well as in the West Bank, under international supervision as and when the situation allows. The UN should be asked to deploy a peace-keeping contingent on the border between Gaza and Israel to ensure security for both. The suffocating blockade of Gaza would be lifted. Israel does not like the UN, and likes the UN Secretary-General even less. It should be remembered that it was the UN that gave birth and legitimacy to the insipient state of Israel. The U.S. will need to take the lead on this in the UNSC.

Meanwhile, the proposal for a two-state solution, long pushed aside, has come alive. Everyone seems to be repeating the two-state mantra.

But how feasible is the two-state concept today?

The 1993 Oslo Accord envisaged Palestine to be based in the West Bank. Today, the West Bank is heavily populated by Israeli settlers, 4,50,000 at latest count. No Israeli government will succeed in persuading the settlers to return. Force would be required. The land is like Swiss cheese, having settler roads and innumerable settlements, with more planned. The current Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, will never agree to a Palestinian state, however truncated.

What is needed, as soon as conditions permit, is to have a reality check of the two-state proposal — what is feasible and what is not. Painful concessions will be required, including land swaps, and a monitoring mechanism established to hold each side to the commitments they make.

The only lasting solution is for Israel to vacate its occupation of the West Bank and let a viable Palestinian state emerge.

To ensure Israel's legitimate concern for the safety of its people, the new state should be demilitarised. Other measures can be thought of to assure the Israelis of their safety. Israel's neighbouring Arab states should all be engaged in this process. The Abraham Accords provide a foundation.

If Israel has the vision of living in harmony in the region with its Arab neighbours, this is the only way. When that happens, Iran will lose its proclaimed reason for its anti-Israel tirades; Hezbollah will, likewise, lose its most important plank for threatening Israel.

For decades, Israeli-Palestinian relations have been locked in a never-ending cycle of death, destruction and misery. The war in Gaza is the latest iteration. It should be the last. The Middle East could, finally, enjoy stable peace and security.

Chinmaya R. Gharekhan served as India's Ambassador to the United Nations and as India's Special Envoy to the Middle East, 2005-09. Karl F. Inderfurth served as the United States Deputy Ambassador to the United Nations Security Council and was Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, 1997-2001

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NEEDLESS DIVERSION: ON VENEZUELA'S REFERENDUM AND ITS CLAIM OVER ESSEQUIBO

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Venezuela's [move to hold a referendum](#) on whether it should exercise sovereignty over Essequibo, a vast, oil-rich disputed region that is now part of neighbouring Guyana, has cut open old wounds and inflamed tensions between the South American nations. According to Venezuela's electoral authorities, more than 95% of the voters supported the country's claim. It is not clear what the government of President Nicolás Maduro is going to do next, but the fact that he held the referendum with just months left for the next presidential election suggests the leftist leader might keep the border tensions alive. Venezuela has always retained claims over Essequibo, which it says was stolen when the north-south border was drawn by colonial powers over a century ago. In 1966, Venezuela and the U.K. entered into a temporary Geneva Agreement on the border (Guyana was a British colony) to maintain the status quo while seeking to find a practical, peaceful and satisfactory solution for all. Tensions eased when Hugo Chávez, Mr. Maduro's leftist predecessor, was the President. But when an oil boom began transforming Guyana's economy, Mr. Maduro's regime started becoming more vocal about the country's claims over the region.

Guyana, the only English speaking country in Latin America, maintains that the 1899 border agreement between international arbitrators (from Britain, Russia and the U.S.) is final and approached the International Court of Justice in 2018, requesting a ruling. Venezuela on the other side has always argued that it was not part of the 1899 agreement, which it calls null and void. When Guyana moved the world court requesting a ban on the referendum, the court refused to do so but asked Caracas not to take any action based on the referendum altering the status quo. But Mr. Maduro has already dismissed the world court's jurisdiction over the dispute. He is under growing international pressure to hold free elections. Recently, the U.S. eased sanctions on Venezuela as the Maduro government reached a deal with the opposition for next year's election. While Mr. Maduro retains a tight grip over state institutions, he is also unpopular with sections who are increasingly frustrated with the state of the economy, particularly shortages of essentials, and hyperinflation. While a border crisis could be a welcome distraction for him from domestic woes as elections are approaching, it does not offer any solution to the myriad crises that the oil-rich South American country is facing. If anything, a border conflict would make the situation worse. Mr. Maduro should refrain from taking any unilateral action and continue to try and resolve the territorial issues with Guyana through talks in the true spirit of the Geneva Agreement.

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A DARK SHADOW ON NEW DELHI'S CREDIBILITY

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'A deeper investigation would reveal whether India's actions align with its values and interests.' | Photo Credit: REUTERS

In the shadowy world of espionage, intelligence and covert operations, the only rule is to never get caught carrying out a mission. In the more visible world of public diplomacy, the only rule is to never get caught telling a lie or denying what might turn out to be true. The recent publication of a [United States Department of Justice indictment](#) against an Indian national for targeting wanted Khalistani separatists in North America, at the behest of a government official who may or may not have been acting alone, is as yet an unproven allegation that must stand trial, but is one that has nonetheless cast a dark shadow on New Delhi's credibility in terms of both covert capacity and public messaging, which must be addressed.

The indictment also comes on the heels of a number of intelligence operations that have been challenged in courts in other friendly countries in recent years: from [the forcible return of a United Arab Emirates princess, Latifah](#), by the Indian Coast Guard in international waters in 2018 that has been criticised by a court in the United Kingdom, to the "attempted kidnap" of [businessman-on-the-run Mehul Choksi from Antigua](#) to Dominica by British nationals alleged to have been working for Indian agencies in 2021, and the conviction of [eight former Indian naval officers in Qatar](#) for espionage, which is now in appeal. While the extra-judicial military court trial against former [Indian naval officer Kulbhushan Jadhav](#) in Pakistan since 2016 has been challenged by India at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the fact that he was operating his business from Iran, a friendly neighbour, has no doubt been noted. Meanwhile, the circulation of a list of alleged operations against wanted Khalistani and Pakistani operatives not just in Pakistan but also in Nepal, Italy, the United Kingdom and Thailand, has been hailed in the media as proof of the Indian security establishment's global reach. It must be remembered that the government has so far not accepted that it ordered any of these operations, but is not averse to the larger narrative that security agencies have been "empowered" to carry them out.

It is in this context that the government must engage with the troubling questions thrown up by the latest allegations — by the U.S. of a conspiracy to murder [Gurpatwant Singh Pannun](#) in New York, that also indicates a link to the murder of Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada, and the [direct allegation by Canada](#), made by its Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on the Nijjar killing. To begin with, the text of the American indictment unravels two conspiracies — one carried out by the Indian who has been indicted, Nikhil Gupta, who was allegedly directed by a senior government intelligence official, and the other carried out by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Drug

Enforcement Administration, to entrap him by providing an undercover officer to him as the hitman. The fact that the U.S. government did not share all that it knew with India questions the claims made otherwise that the two countries have, between them, reached the pinnacle of security cooperation this year. To not have shared them even when Mr. Trudeau made his statement in Parliament might have spared New Delhi the blushes when the details of the U.S. indictment were published. Instead, despite two meetings between U.S. President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, four between Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and several between National Security Adviser (NSA) Ajit Doval and his U.S. counterpart NSA Jake Sullivan, as well as Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Intelligence chiefs, the U.S. appears to have cautioned India, but not revealed the full extent of information it had gathered.

For the U.S., it is also obvious that it does not trust the information India has shared on Mr. Pannun, Nijjar and the Khalistani separatist movement, and hence is more focused on the plot against them than it is on curbing their activities. For India, given India's deep concerns with Mr. Pannun's radical rhetoric, even broadcasting a threat against Air India flights, and threats to diplomats and embassies, the U.S.'s actions are a breach of trust.

The actions hark back to the nature of intelligence sharing in 2008, when the U.S. warned India about the impending 26/11 terror threat (November 2008 Mumbai attacks), but did not divulge that the source of the information was Lashkar-e-Taiba operative David Coleman Headley, who even re-entered India with another diabolical plan in 2009. After the U.S. arrested Headley, it entered a plea bargain, that meant the man who decided the targets and planned the attacks to precision could never be brought to justice in India, and the government was forced to take his testimony via video-camera for the trial.

What this indicates is that while bilateral ties and strategic ties are growing in different spheres, trust between both countries has not kept apace. While much commentary is focused in the short term on whether Mr. Biden will confirm his attendance at the Republic Day parade and the Quad summit (Australia, India, Japan and U.S.) in January, it is the impact on the longer arc of the relationship that both sides must focus on.

By extension, South Block must also look at the impact of its actions among western allies including the "Five Eyes" intelligence partnership (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the U.K. and the U.S.). By rejecting Canadian allegations outright, expelling diplomats and suspending visas, while accepting the U.S.'s allegations more calmly and setting up a high-level inquiry to investigate them, New Delhi has demonstrated a double standard in its international engagements. The difference between India's reactions to Khalistani protests, and the attempted firebombing of the San Francisco consulate, to protests in the U.K., Australia and Canada is also stark: while their envoys have been summoned and Mr. Modi has publicly raised the Khalistan issue and protection of Indian-origin minorities with their leaders, the government has been more discreet in its concerns with the U.S. Conversely, there is a well-recorded double standard from the West when it comes to extra-judicial covert operations and assassinations — the CIA, MI6 and Mossad have often eliminated those they see as a threat on foreign shores, while sanctioning Russia for the Skripal attacks, Saudi Arabia for the Khashoggi killing, and publicly shaming India over the alleged claims on Mr. Pannun and Nijjar, and all Five Eye nations including New Zealand have issued statements criticising India for its actions against Canada. While such double standards are as old as time, it is significant that they have not been whittled down by the significant strengthening of the India-U.S. relationship, billed as the "most consequential partnership of the century".

Further afield, India must address the impact of the case on the neighbourhood. Countries such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh stood with India on the Canada issue, but as details of the U.S.

indictment are revealed, South Asian capitals, and not just Islamabad, will be studying the footprint of Indian agencies in their countries as well. South Block and its embassies in the neighbourhood will have to go the extra mile to assure the neighbours, especially in Kathmandu, Dhaka, Male and Colombo, where reports about India's "hand" in domestic politics is often discussed in exaggerated tones.

Eventually, the lasting impact of the episode will lie in the image India wishes to project to the world — as a "hard power" that is willing to risk international ire and ties in pursuing those it considers a threat in any corner of the world in any manner it deems fit. Or that of an adherent to international law that builds its case through its diplomats, turning global opinion in its favour to achieve its ends, albeit at the risk of being seen as a "soft power". The Ministry of External Affairs has said categorically that covert, extra-judicial assassinations are not this government's policy and that the allegations will be investigated. A deeper investigation would reveal whether India's actions align with its values and interests.

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GAZA IN FLAMES: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON ISRAEL'S EXPANDING OFFENSIVE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

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December 08, 2023 12:10 am | Updated 12:20 am IST

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Two months after Israel launched its attack on Gaza following [Hamas's October 7 cross-border raid](#) in which some 1,200 Israelis were killed, the tiny Palestinian enclave, with razed buildings, a maze of rubble and unprecedented human suffering, looks battered beyond repair. But the war is far from over. Over 1.7 million of Gaza's 2.3 million people have been forced out of their homes; some 16,000 Palestinians have been killed, and tens of thousands more wounded. Israel has taken over parts of northern Gaza and pushed its population towards the south. And now, the Israeli forces are [expanding the offensive towards the south](#) , particularly targeting Khan Younis, a city of 4,00,000 people in normal times that has seen its population more than double since the war. The widening offensive has displaced more Gazans who are now forced into a sliver of territory in Rafah, on the Egyptian border. Israel, which has witnessed mounting international criticism, seems unfazed by the unfolding humanitarian tragedy. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says Israel will continue the war until its goals are met — primarily the dismantling of Hamas.

When Israel stormed the al-Shifa hospital in northern Gaza, its claim was that a Hamas command centre was located in underground bunkers. Weeks after raiding the enclave's largest medical facility, Israel is yet to provide any proof that it was a command centre. Now, the IDF claims that top Hamas leaders, including Yahya Sinwar, are based in southern Gaza. The world did nothing when Israel turned northern Gaza into what the UN called a "graveyard of children". It should not be allowed to repeat the same in the south. The war has already exposed tensions in America's support for Israel's war. Secretary of State Antony Blinken travelled to Israel last week and reportedly told the war cabinet that the conflict should end in days not in months. Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin warned Israel against civilian casualties, saying "if you drive civilians into the arms of the enemy, you replace a tactical victory with a strategic defeat". But these warnings are not enough. The U.S. continues to send aid to Israel and President Joe Biden still refuses to call for a ceasefire. The violence has already triggered regional tensions with Hezbollah firing rockets into Israel and the latter retaliating, and the Houthis of Yemen launching drones and missiles towards Israel, which are mostly being intercepted by American systems. An end to the violence in Gaza has become imperative for regional stability. Israel is unlikely to pause the offensive on its own. But the U.S. and other major regional powers should press Israel and Hamas to restart negotiations to find a lasting ceasefire and the release of hostages.

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INDIA'S GROWING NEIGHBOURHOOD DILEMMAS

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December 08, 2023 12:16 am | Updated 01:04 am IST

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'India needs more hands for its diplomatic pursuits' | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

The proverbial Achilles heel of Indian foreign policy continues to be its neighbourhood. Contemporary Indian foreign policy has an ambitious vision — from being the leader of the global South, to be an arbiter in global geopolitical contestations, to making a serious claim to be a pole in world politics. But South Asia is not only not keen to jump on the bandwagon of the India story, but it is also seemingly holding India back, albeit indirectly. Neighbourhoods are difficult for any major power, but contemporary India is faced with an exceptionally hard one, complicated by a rising superpower in its neighbourhood, for the first time in its history.

In general, there are three types of dilemmas that India faces in the neighbourhood. One, the rise of politically anti-India regimes in South Asia such as the one in the Maldives where the new government is effectively asking Indians to pack up and leave. While the Maldives is anti-India in an instrumental sense, a Khaleda Zia-led government in Dhaka, which goes to the elections early next year, could turn out to be ideologically anti-India. The second type of dilemma India faces in the neighbourhood is structural, resulting from Beijing's growing influence in South Asia.

Three things stand out. The growing entanglement of the region's smaller states in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other Chinese projects. Beijing's assiduous outreach to South Asian states when the rest of the international community abandons or avoids them for normative or other reasons — as was the case with Taliban-led Afghanistan, military-ruled Myanmar and crisis-hit Sri Lanka. India does too, but the overall impact of China's outreach is far higher than that of India primarily as a function of deeper pockets. Finally, China's desire to settle border disputes with its neighbours (minus India), as seen in the case of Bhutan, is also a strategy to win over the region.

The net result, or one that could potentially develop overtime, is somewhat alarming. If we do not take innovative measures, there is a good chance that we will be geopolitically locked in within an unfriendly South Asia. This may well be a case of overstating the point, but is to lay emphasis on a potential future scenario.

There are three broad sets of causes behind the dilemmas India faces in the neighbourhood. The first is the regional geopolitical architecture characterised by five overlapping elements. Contemporary South Asia is characterised by a diminishing presence of the United States, which, for a long time, was a geopolitical constant in the region. For New Delhi, Washington's

presence in South Asia was not always advantageous, but its departure is definitely disadvantageous, in particular given how China has filled the power vacuum created by Washington's departure. The aggressive and stupendous rise of China has come as a 'geopolitical buffer', at least for now, for the smaller states in the region which have become adept at using the 'China card' in their foreign policy assertions. While our neighbours are keen to practise strategic autonomy with us, there is little appetite to do so vis-à-vis China.

Third, in one of the least interconnected regions in the world, and poor, it is natural that the inhabitants of the region will tilt towards a power with the ability to cater to their material needs. With India's ability to meet those needs being limited, China is that power. Fourth, India, for the most part, has had a normative and political approach towards the region, with the states in the region acquiescing, rebelling, and falling in line given the absence of choices. Beijing has changed that India-centric calculus by offering itself as the no-frills non-normative alternative. For the first time in modern South Asian history, the region is a 'norms-free-zone'.

Finally, for much of its independent existence, New Delhi enjoyed unrivalled primacy in the region. Today, the downside of being the resident power in South Asia — with all its attendant cultural, ethnic, refugee and other spillovers — is felt more sharply than being the primary power. China, on the other hand, is the region's non-resident power which benefits from the absence of complications — ethnic, linguistic, religious — arising out of being a resident power.

The second cause behind India's regional dilemma is related to its policy stance which exhibits a deep-seated status quo bias when it comes to dealing with the region's domestic politics and the multiplicity of actors/power centres therein. Dealing only with, for the most part, those in power in the regional capitals, elected or otherwise, is perhaps the right thing to do as well as less risky. However, such a one-track policy generates path-dependencies often alienating other centres of power or opposition leaders. Bangladesh is perhaps one such example.

Furthermore, India's dilemmas are also caused by two mistaken assumptions that we have long held. For one, there has, for some time, been a strong belief in India that South Asia minus Pakistan would be amenable to Indian geopolitical reasoning which prompted an attempt to deal proactively with South Asia without Pakistan. However, in retrospect, one has to admit that this policy has not exactly panned out that way India imagined. The second (mistaken) assumption that New Delhi approached the neighbourhood with was that India's special relationship with the region rooted in culture, soft power, history and ethnicity would help the country deal with the neighbourhood better than those without intimate knowledge of the region, namely China. Has India's culture-connect with its neighbours indeed become a liability in the conduct of foreign policy towards them?

To begin with, it is time India made a mental switch and acknowledged that South Asia and its balance of power have changed fundamentally. Old South Asia where India enjoyed primacy no longer exists. 'Southern Asia' which has pretty much replaced South Asia is a space where China has emerged as a serious contender for regional primacy. India's neighbours and periphery are China's too, even if we do not like it. Such a realistic and pragmatic framing would help India deal with the reality as it is rather than working with the mental frame of Indian primacy which is long gone.

Second, New Delhi must proactively pursue the involvement of friendly external actors in the region. That is the only way to deal with the impending possibility of the region becoming Sino-centric.

Third, Indian diplomacy must be flexible enough to engage multiple actors in each of the neighbouring countries. The art of diplomacy is not about hating the anti-India elements in the

neighbourhood, but, instead, lessening their anti-India attitude. In a similar vein, dealing with whoever is in power is a good policy, but engaging only those in power is bad policy.

Finally, here is the highlighting of an issue that has been spoken of ad nauseum — India needs more hands for its diplomatic pursuits. The glaring shortage of sufficient diplomats to implement the foreign policy of a country of 1.4 billion people will prove to be India's single most crucial challenge going forward. The more India's role in world affairs grows, the more the shortage of personnel will be felt by us and others. If the current state of affairs continues, there will be no one to show up with the Indian flag when opportunities beckon or crises emerge.

Happymon Jacob teaches at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and is the founder of the Council for Strategic and Defense Research

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BRIDGE THIS DEFICIT BETWEEN INDIA AND SRI LANKA

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December 09, 2023 12:08 am | Updated 01:13 am IST

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'The momentum generated by certain developments in the last one year should be sustained and improved upon' | Photo Credit: Shanker Chakravarty

The announcement by Sri Lanka's President Ranil Wickremesinghe, recently, about a proposal to establish land connectivity with India has come none too soon. Twenty years ago, in Chennai, Mr. Wickremesinghe, then Prime Minister, while delivering a lecture, floated the idea of building a bridge linking Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu with Talaimanar in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. This was part of his larger vision of regional economic integration, encompassing his country and the southern States of India and aimed at generating more opportunities for economic growth.

He has been discussing the concept of economic integration on many an occasion and at several international fora. But, whenever groups and parties claiming to represent the interests of Sinhalese-Buddhists expressed their opposition to the proposal on the ground that this would not benefit Sri Lanka, the talk of having expanded physical connectivity would die down. In December 2015, when India's Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari informed the Lok Sabha that the Asian Development Bank was willing to fund the bridge project of 24,000 crore, Sri Lanka's response was muted followed by sharp criticism from the project opponents.

However, to the credit of Mr. Wickremesinghe and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the idea of land connectivity was not abandoned. It found a mention in a joint statement issued in July after the two leaders met in New Delhi. The document even stated that "a feasibility study for such connectivity will be conducted at an early date." As a follow up, Mr. Wickremesinghe, who is also Finance Minister, in his Budget address on November 13, referred to the project of land connectivity and said "we expect to utilise Colombo port to meet the supply needs of south west India and Trincomalee port to meet the supply needs of south east India".

But, the relationship between the two countries in the area of infrastructure development should have been much deeper than what it is. For example, the idea of connecting the electricity networks of the two countries was floated even in 1970.

Over 13 years have lapsed since the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding on the bilateral grid, but not even one unit of electricity has been transmitted. In the case of

Bangladesh, India has been exporting at least 7,000 million units (MU) annually for the last couple of years. About a month ago, Mr. Modi and Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina jointly commissioned, in virtual mode, the second unit of the Rampal Maitree Power Project (660 megawatt), apart from launching two other infrastructure projects. In fact, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh had inked memoranda of understanding with India in the same year (2010) for collaboration in the power sector.

It is not that no energy projects are being taken up by the former, as there are certain projects underway involving Indian participation in the energy sector, particularly renewable energy. Besides, the island-nation needed time to recover from the protracted civil war of 25 years. Yet, the progress of the transmission network project, envisaging the transfer of 1,000 MW and the establishment of a High Voltage Direct Current overhead link between Madurai (India) and New Habarana (Sri Lanka), does not reflect well on the two countries. Had the facility been in place in 2022, Sri Lanka would not have suffered power cuts and blackouts then. A day may come when India will be able to source cheaper power from Sri Lanka. The two countries should be focused to ensure that the deadline of 2030 is met.

Energy is not the only area where progress has been tardy. The India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement was signed in December 1998, yet the two countries have not yet been able to go beyond it despite holding talks for years on entering into an economic and technology cooperation agreement. After a break of five years, negotiations resumed a few weeks ago.

Notwithstanding several constraints, even now, bilateral economic ties seem to be on better footing with India regaining its position last year as the largest source of imports and accounting for about 26% of total imports of Sri Lanka, though certain portions of imports were through credit lines offered by India in the wake of the economic crisis. In the area of tourism, which is a major source of revenue for Sri Lanka, India remained the largest single country of tourist arrivals, with its share being 17% of the overall number of arrivals. But, the potential is much higher and the underperformance of Sri Lanka is telling, going by India's bilateral trade in 2021 with its southern neighbour and Bangladesh, whose recent economic growth has been impressive. The size of the former was \$5.45 billion in 2021 whereas that of the latter was \$18.14 billion.

Sri Lanka, which has a long track record of the incumbent government ensuring the smooth transition of power to its successor after electoral defeat, should not be bogged down in the baggage of history. The presence of anti-Indian nationalist forces in the political class is nothing unique to this country. Still, Bangladesh has shown the way to have a mutually-beneficial economic relationship.

In fact, with respect to Sri Lanka, the momentum generated by certain developments in the last one year (resumption of air services between Chennai and Jaffna, the launch of passenger ferry services between Nagapattinam and Kankesanthurai and a joint venture agreement among India's National Dairy Development Board, the Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation and Cargills of Sri Lanka for self-sufficiency in the dairy sector) should be sustained and improved upon. There is every reason why Sri Lanka, once viewed as a high standard of living and stable economy, should be keen on making this a reality.

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THE HYPOCRISY OF WESTERN DEMOCRACY

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December 11, 2023 01:43 am | Updated 01:43 am IST

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U.S. Deputy Ambassador to the U.N. Robert A. Wood raises his hand during a United Nations Security Council meeting on Gaza at the U.N. headquarters in New York City on December 8, 2023. | Photo Credit: AFP

With a staggering 17,000 Gazans already killed since October 7, Palestine is seeing one of its greatest tragedies. The West has shockingly enabled this in various ways: it has supported Israel's "right to defend" by reducing Palestine to Hamas; conflated critiques of Zionism and the Israeli state with anti-Semitism; weaponised the Holocaust; and attempted to erase history (the White House described Hamas' attack as "unprovoked").

Western societies that profess democracy have also scotched their own people's freedom of expression — not with official diktats but by demonising and targeting citizens speaking in support of Palestine. Western universities have become the major ground for this. In Ivy League institutions such as Harvard and Columbia, the private details of students who signed pro-Palestine letters have been made public. Prominent Jewish donors (and supporters of the Israeli state) have withdrawn funding from universities including Harvard and Pennsylvania alleging inaction against anti-Semitism and anti-Israel speeches on campuses (note: 45% of Harvard's revenue of \$5.8 billion in 2022 came from philanthropy). University administrations in North America put out official statements condemning only Hamas. And scholars working on Palestinian freedom have faced various unwritten codes of harassment.

The media has been key in framing the Palestine-Israel conflict for Western citizens for 75 years. The fundamental problem here, with a few honourable exceptions, has been the overwhelming bias towards Israel. As 1,200 academics and educators from North America noted in a recent open letter, the historical roots of the violence as well as the illegality of Israeli occupation in international law are not discussed. Words such as apartheid, ethnic cleansing, genocidal intent, settler colonialism — used by scholars, human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch, prominent Israeli rights group B'Tselem, and the United Nations, to describe Israeli actions — go missing in discourse.

The liberal face of institutions like Hollywood now stands exposed. The initial lack of response to the Hamas attack by unions such as the Writers Guild of America led to a backlash. Then, about 700 people from the entertainment industry signed an open letter declaring their support for Israel. On the other hand, pro-Palestinian voices chose to remain anonymous in their letters to avoid being doxxed or blacklisted as anti-Semitic. Some actors, artist agents, and magazine

editors have had to face professional consequences.

The most egregious actions have taken place in Europe, the supposed bastion of free speech. Countries including the U.K., France, Germany, and Italy emphatically declared their support for Israel and imposed various kinds of bans (some of them blanket) on pro-Palestinian protests. Austria, for instance, banned a pro-Palestinian demonstration citing the inclusion of the phrase “from the River to the Sea” in invitations, as a justification. Ironically, this is the same “free” Europe where blasphemy laws are abolished (Denmark, Sweden) and caricatures of religion are allowed (France) and have led to burnings of the Koran and cartoons on Prophet Muhammad.

There is no denying that there are inflammatory positions, fake news articles, and also celebration of brutality on both sides of the divide, all of which are not conducive to reasoned debates. If incidents of racism towards Palestinians/Arabs have increased, so has anti-Semitism.

But the root cause of Western complicity in Palestinian oppression lies in colonialism and imperialism, which is masked by the façade of liberal democracy. Democracy has seemingly thrived in the West, which has perpetuated colonialism and imperialism elsewhere. But even those democratic freedoms at home seem under threat now.

The way out of the complicity in Israel’s colonisation of Palestine can only be through an exposé of the hypocrisies of Western democracy. This has been undertaken by those on the margins of this democracy. For instance, the Canadian government-appointed National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls was forced to acknowledge that the Canadian state has perpetrated genocide against the Indigenous people. There is resistance to the war in Palestine, not just by Arabs and Palestinians but also by Jewish dissenters. The horrors unfolding in Gaza are also changing opinions. Mainstream Western media has given more space to Palestinian stories this time, even if they are not enough. In recent U.S. opinion polls, almost 70% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning voters under 35 years disapproved of President Joe Biden’s support to Israel.

As the Israeli carnage in Gaza resumes, the West has to listen to people such as Israel-born Omer Bartov, one of the world’s foremost Holocaust scholars, who, while rightly expressing empathy with the Jewish victims of Hamas’ heinous war crimes, warned of genocide and asked leaders and scholars “to publicly warn against the rage- and vengeance-filled [Israeli] rhetoric that dehumanises the population of Gaza...”

As another Holocaust scholar Raz Segal asserted, “No justice is possible... without a truthful reckoning of how we got here.” The West must acknowledge its own monstrous role in getting Palestine to this precipice.

Nissim Mannathukkaren is Professor, Dalhousie University, Canada, and posts @nmannathukkaren

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DECODING PUTIN'S DRAMATIC VISIT TO THE GULF

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December 12, 2023 12:15 am | Updated 12:15 am IST

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Russian President Vladimir Putin and President of the United Arab Emirates Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed attending a welcome ceremony ahead of their talks in Abu Dhabi on December 6, 2023. | Photo Credit: AFP

Russian President Vladimir Putin, largely confined to the Kremlin due to western restrictions, on December 6 dramatically set out on whirlwind tours to Abu Dhabi and Riyadh in one day. The next day, he received Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in Moscow. And on December 8, Mr. Putin announced that he would be standing for elections in 2024, affirming that he would be leading Russia at least up to 2030 and possibly beyond.

Mr. Putin's visit to the Gulf was marked by considerable pomp on the part of the hosts and affirmations of mutual goodwill and camaraderie. The UAE ruler, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, spoke of the "importance of strengthening dialogue and cooperation", while Mr. Putin told his Saudi host that "nothing can prevent the development of our friendly relations".

A Russian spokesman described the talks in the Gulf capitals as "a concentrated shot". The agenda was self-evident: continued cooperation among "OPEC +" members on oil policy; exchange of views on the Ukraine and Gaza conflicts; increasing humanitarian assistance to the Palestinians trapped in Gaza; and enhancing bilateral-political-economic ties. Cooperation among "OPEC +" countries led by Saudi Arabia and Russia, for instance, has ensured that the agreed production cuts are adhered to and oil prices, much to the U.S.'s chagrin, remain at levels that serve the producers' interests.

Despite their long-standing alliance with the U.S., both the UAE and Saudi Arabia have in recent years been asserting "strategic autonomy" and have prioritised expanding ties with China and Russia. The UAE is now Russia's most important trade partner in the Gulf. Neither the UAE nor Saudi Arabia have supported the U.S.-sponsored sanctions on Russia or criticised the latter for the Ukraine war.

In fact, thousands of Russians have set up alternative homes, businesses, and investments in the UAE. Cooperation is thriving between the two countries in the technology sector. As a result, the West has placed the UAE under scrutiny to ensure that restrictions on export of hi-tech products to Russia are complied with. Russia has also conveyed it is standing by to support Saudi Arabia's civilian nuclear programme at the opportune moment.

Iran and Russia, as targets of increasingly onerous western sanctions, challenge the West's global strategic leadership and seek the realisation of a multipolar world order. Flowing from this, they have built substantial bilateral relations in the energy and military areas: in March this year, the Russian, Chinese and Iranian navies carried out joint exercises in the Gulf of Oman. In November, it was reported that Iran would get Sukhoi Su-35 aircraft from Russia, as also training aircraft and attack helicopters. Iran has boosted Russia's military prowess in Ukraine with supplies of drones, ammunition and body armour.

During Mr. Raisi's visit to Moscow, the two sides had "extremely intensive discussions" covering the Gaza war, Ukraine, and oil prices. Mr. Putin and Mr. Raisi called for an immediate end to Israel's "genocide and crimes against humanity" which, they said, was backed by the U.S. and western powers.

Was there something more to Mr. Putin's recent engagements with the major Gulf states? The Reuters correspondents in Moscow have noted that "mystery still surrounds the Kremlin chief's hastily arranged trip" to Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, and wondered "what issue was so important for Putin to make a rare overseas trip". The most obvious response is that the trip itself was a message – Mr. Putin was signalling that Russia was not isolated and that it had some close friends, such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, that, till recently, had been the U.S.'s closest allies in the region.

But beyond this, Mr. Putin would have had a more ambitious agenda. First, on the basis of Russia's close ties with Iran, he would have told the UAE and the Kingdom that the Gaza war will not spread across the region, conveying the assurance that Iran will restrain the Hezbollah and the Houthis in Yemen in the interests of regional stability.

Second, Mr. Putin would have sought a deeper strategic and political alignment between the Gulf Cooperation Council states and Iran, presenting Russia and China as guarantors of regional peace. In this context, Mr. Putin would have recognised China as the lynchpin in regional politics and, given Russia and China's close alignment on global security issues, projected Russia as complementing China's diplomatic role in the region.

Third, Mr. Putin would have sought the support of his Gulf interlocutors to the consolidation of this regional alignment so that, in the post-Gaza war scenario, they would act unitedly with Russia and China in managing regional political and diplomatic challenges, while excluding the U.S. from this arrangement. This should resonate well with most regional states as, with its unconditional support for Israel, the U.S. has excluded itself as a credible player in West Asia.

Above all, Mr. Putin would have assured his Gulf interlocutors that there would be continuity in Russia's regional approach, by giving them advance notice that he will be seeking re-election in March 2024 and lead Russia at least till the end of this decade.

Mr. Putin's recent interactions with Gulf leaders have brought Russia into the mainstream of West Asian affairs and affirmed that the Sino-Russian alliance will challenge U.S. hegemony and seek to redefine the regional political order.

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US JUDGE TO HEAR META PRIVACY DISPUTE WITH FTC NEXT MONTH

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December 12, 2023 09:57 am | Updated 09:57 am IST

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US judge to hear Meta privacy dispute with FTC next month. | Photo Credit: AP

A judge [overseeing a lawsuit brought by Meta Platforms](#), owner of WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook, said he would hear arguments in late January on a request that he temporarily stop the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) from unilaterally reopening a 2019 privacy agreement.

This latest dispute between Meta and the FTC began in May, when the agency said the company had misled parents about how much control they had over who their children had contact with in the Messenger Kids app, among other issues.

The agency proposed tightening a 2019 consent agreement, that had forced Facebook, which became Meta in 2021, to pay a \$5 billion penalty. The proposed changes include a prohibition on Meta from making money off young users, including in its virtual reality business. It would also expand restrictions on facial recognition technology.

Meta has asked for the FTC process to be paused until a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the reopening is resolved. Judge Randall Moss of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia said he would hear briefings on the preliminary injunction on Jan. 29.

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The new lawsuit is part of a battle between Meta and the FTC as the agency works to promote privacy and competition among Big Tech firms who in turn seek to halt any changes that could hurt profits.

In November, Meta filed a separate appeal against a judge's ruling that it should be an FTC judge, not a district judge, who decides whether the consent agreement should be tightened.

Separately, the agency has an antitrust fight with Meta. It asked a federal court in 2020 to order the company to sell Instagram, which it bought for \$1 billion in 2012, and WhatsApp, which it bought for \$19 billion in 2014. That case has no trial date.

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END THE UNCERTAINTY: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON THE SRI LANKAN REFUGEES IN TAMIL NADU

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

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December 14, 2023 12:10 am | Updated 12:10 am IST

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The Madras High Court has demonstrated how the judiciary can provide succour to a person waiting for over 40 years to get Indian citizenship. In *T. Ganesan vs The Government of India & Others*, the Madurai Bench of the High Court, in its judgment on November 30, directed the authorities [to treat the petitioner and his family as Indian citizens](#), thus extending to them relief measures that the Tamil Nadu government provides to repatriates from Sri Lanka. The 69-year-old petitioner, now a resident of a refugee camp in Karur, reached India in 1990 after having been issued an Indian passport in Kandy in August 1982 on repatriation under two bilateral treaties that concerned hill country Tamils or Indian Origin Tamils (IOT). He had approached the court as the authorities treated him only as a Sri Lankan refugee even though he is an Indian citizen. The government accepted the genuineness of his passport but doubted his identity because the photograph was the image of a “far younger” person. But the court rejected this position. Ganesan is not the only such person. The court has recorded that around 5,130 applicants (IOT category) have sought citizenship. In official data of March 2023, Tamil Nadu had about 91,000 refugees, with around 58,000 in camps.

This is not the first time that the Bench, especially Justice G.R. Swaminathan, has gone to the rescue of those in the camps. In the last 15 months, the judge had established that the petitioners concerned were Indian citizens, interpreting provisions of the Citizenship Act, and should be issued passports. Otherwise, the general legal position of the Union government is that every refugee is an illegal migrant though entitled to benefits. A DMK State government study found that nearly 8,000 refugees are eligible for Indian citizenship as they do not come under exclusions of the law. The Union government’s stand has been that despite not being a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol, it adheres to the principle of non-refoulement. The government also favours the voluntary repatriation of refugees to Sri Lanka. This was a reason why the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 did not include Sri Lankan refugees. The Centre should ensure follow-up action on the DMK government’s study. It should first identify those eligible for citizenship under the legal framework and ascertain their consent. For those who wish to pursue higher studies or go abroad for a livelihood, permission can be granted if the applicant has no criminal record. The Union government should initiate talks with Sri Lanka on voluntary repatriation and a structured assistance programme worked out. A proactive approach should be followed to ensure that those tagged as refugees are able to lead a life of dignity.

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GAZA, A NEW POINTER TO INDIA'S CHANGED WORLD VIEW

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

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December 14, 2023 12:16 am | Updated 08:11 am IST

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Display monitors show the result of voting in the United Nations General Assembly, in favor of a resolution calling on Israel to uphold legal and humanitarian obligations in its war with Hamas | Photo Credit: AP

India's tortuous stand on the ongoing [Israel-Gaza conflict](#) reveals a fascinating portrait of the recent evolution of its foreign policy. For decades after Independence, India's approach to the world was guided by its historical experience of western colonialism. After 200 years of a foreign country speaking for it on the world stage, newly-independent Indians, led by the fiercely anti-colonial Jawaharlal Nehru, were not willing to surrender their freedom to make their own decisions by joining either alliance in the Cold War. "Strategic autonomy" thus became an obsession, leading to the birth of "non-alignment", or equidistance between the superpowers.

It was a complicated stance. As a leading voice for decolonisation, Indian moralism against imperialism and apartheid often manifested itself as anti-westernism, and indeed on such matters it often found itself ranged alongside the USSR and against the West, even while the country's steadfast adherence to democracy and diversity at home endeared it to liberals in the West.

When the United Nations voted in 1947 to partition the former British Mandate Territory of Palestine into two states, Israel and Palestine, India voted against. As the victim of a British-driven partition of its own territory to favour a religious minority (when Pakistan was carved out of India's stooped shoulders by the departing imperial power), it had no desire to acquiesce in another partition to create a Jewish state. India argued for a single secular state for both Jews and Arabs in Palestine, much like the state it had established for itself. It was, however, outvoted on the matter.

When Israel was indeed established, India duly extended recognition, but kept relations at consular level for more than four decades. In the meantime, it became the first non-Arab country to recognise the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) in 1974, and to formally extend recognition to the Palestinian state in 1988. It was only in 1992 that relations with Israel were also upgraded to Ambassadorial level.

The onset of Pakistan-enabled Islamic militancy against India, however, prompted New Delhi to

see greater merit in warmer relations with Tel Aviv. With both countries sharing similar enemies in Islamist extremists, and both enduring terrorist attacks from self-declared holy warriors, security and intelligence co-operation between the two countries began to grow. Gradually, political and diplomatic relations blossomed.

At the same time, successive Indian governments, conscious of the sympathies of India's own substantial Muslim population, continued to extend support to the PLO. When Yasser Arafat abandoned the gun for a peaceful solution to the long-simmering conflict, India too became a votary of the two-state solution, calling for Palestinians and Israelis to live in security and dignity behind recognised borders in their own lands. Today, India is one of a handful of countries to maintain Ambassadors in both Tel Aviv and Ramallah.

Editorial | [Bridge to nowhere: On India's voice, Israel and the Palestinian cause](#)

The India-Israel relationship has appreciably strengthened in recent years, with Israel becoming a vital source of defence equipment, intelligence co-operation and, reports allege, of surveillance software for use by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's increasingly autocratic government against its own domestic opponents and critics. The personal warmth exhibited by Prime Ministers Benjamin Netanyahu and Narendra Modi in their meetings symbolises the extent of their closeness. Mr. Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Israel and Mr. Netanyahu has twice travelled the other way.

So when terror struck Israel on October 7 with the killings of 1,400 and the abductions of 200 more of its citizens, Mr. Modi was swift to respond, tweeting that India stood in "solidarity with Israel in this difficult hour". A second tweet soon followed, in similar vein, as did a telephone call of support to Mr. Netanyahu. The Israeli retribution was loudly cheered on by supporters of Mr. Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, whose antipathy to India's Muslims is no secret.

The mounting death toll in Gaza from Israeli bombardment and the relentless media coverage of the destruction of neighbourhoods, hospitals and places of worship, however, began to erode the one-sidedness of India's stand. After some days, the country's External Affairs Ministry put out a statement voicing support for the "resumption of direct negotiations towards establishing a sovereign, independent and viable state of Palestine, living within secure and recognised borders, side by side at peace with Israel".

Editorial | [Lost voice: On India's abstention on the Gaza vote at the UN](#)

But the Prime Minister's Twitter-finger was not so quickly deployed. A call to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, to convey his condolences for the loss of innocent lives as a result of the bombing of the al-Ahli Arab Hospital, was all he managed to do to express sympathy for the victims of Israeli retribution in Gaza. Though Mr. Abbas is in Ramallah and has no control over Gaza, since he heads the Fatah faction of the PLO to which Hamas is unalterably opposed, Mr. Modi no doubt believed this would redress the balance that had been disturbed by his uncritical support for Israel.

India then announced that Mr. Modi had "reiterated India's long-standing principled position on the Israel-Palestine issue".

And yet, when the United Nations General Assembly voted by an overwhelming majority to call for an "immediate, durable and sustainable humanitarian truce", India chose to abstain, on the grounds that the resolution had failed to condemn the terror attacks of October 7. But several other countries, including France — historically an ally of Israel — had voted for the resolution while, in a speech explaining their vote, deploring its failure to condemn terrorism. India's stand

was, in other words, more pro-Israeli than France's — and France, unlike India, was historically an ally of Israel.

It struck many as odd, to put it mildly, that the land of Mahatma Gandhi did not vote for peace, and that a country which calls itself the voice of the Global South took a stand that isolated it from the rest of the Global South. Though a corrective occurred at the United Nations General Assembly this week, when India finally joined the overwhelming majority (153 to 10, with 23 abstentions) to vote, for the first time, in favour of a resolution in the UN General Assembly that demanded an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in the conflict, the echoes of the previous vote have not died down.

Despite many areas of continuity, India's foreign policy has begun to change in important areas under Mr. Modi, arguably beyond recognition on the Israel issue, and more subtly in other areas. The rise of China has already prompted a greater affinity to the United States and its strategic concerns about Beijing's intentions, concerns which New Delhi has good reason to share after the killing of 20 soldiers in Galwan in June 2020.

It was not surprising, therefore, that, in keeping with its new receptivity to U.S. strategic thinking, India associated itself with the reorientation of the geopolitics of the Middle East following the Abraham Accords, joining a quadrilateral dialogue dubbed the "I2U2" (India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and the United States). The G-20 summit in New Delhi announced IMEC (India-Middle East-Europe-Economic Corridor), an India-Middle Eastern Economic Co-operation initiative whose trade route would go from India through Saudi Arabia to the Israeli port of Haifa.

Though that scheme now lies in ruins along with most of Gaza, the intentions are clear. With Russia a decreasingly useful partner in global geopolitics, and China nibbling away at India's disputed frontier with it, the makings of a fundamental reorientation have become apparent. Gaza is the latest manifestation of a perceptible change in India's view of the world.

Shashi Tharoor, a third-term member of the Lok Sabha (Congress), representing Thiruvananthapuram, is a former Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations, former Minister of State for External Affairs, and former Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs. He has written extensively on international relations and foreign policy. Among his 25 books are Reasons of State (1981) and Pax Indica (2012), plus the co-authored The New World Disorder (2020, with Samir Saran)

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KEEPING IT RELEVANT: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON THE UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE OF PARTIES MEETINGS

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

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December 15, 2023 12:20 am | Updated 12:20 am IST

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Since 1995, when the first of the [United Nations Conference of Parties \(COP\)](#) was organised, it has undergone a remarkable shift in character. From stuffy, closed-door meetings peopled by bureaucrats and technocrats, they have morphed into a carnival. Officialdom has of course grown, with the UN climate secretariat bursting at the seams with reams of subsidiary bodies, 'working groups' and intricately convoluted agenda items. But this has been accompanied by the burgeoning of activist groups, indigenous groups, big and small business, consultancies, traders and a vast media presence. It is on the one hand fair to conclude that this is a welcome development and due to the growing awareness of how anthropogenic climate change, amplified by centuries of industrialisation, poses an existential threat to humanity. Climate denialists, vociferous and significant in power corridors even until a decade ago, are now relegated to the obscurity of the darknet, along with Flat Earthers, and their ranks filled by parvenus and the pivoting merchants of the fossil fuel era who see opportunity in the messianic espousal of renewable energy. There is no country today that will not publicly affirm its faith in the scientific assessment — that greenhouse gas emissions must be contained drastically to cap the rise in global temperatures to 1.5°C — and yet it has never inspired any sense of urgency to cut fossil fuel use, the dominant source of GHGs.

That it has taken nearly three decades for COP to acknowledge this fact, as laid out in the [Dubai Consensus](#), suggests that political expediency and strategic second-guessing has unfortunately weaponised even climate science. Thus, countries responsible for most of the human-emitted carbon point to record temperatures and their links to rising emissions when arguing for reining in emissions from developing countries. However, they are loathe to accept this link when developing and island nations demand funds as reparations for devastations already wreaked by climate change. The [Loss and Damage Fund](#), which received commitments worth \$750 million, and therefore cheered as a COP28-success, has only been approved on the condition that it not be considered as compensation for historical carbon pollution. Related to this is the larger concern that COP meetings are deemed as 'historic' only when they insert new verb phrases — phase out, phase down, transition — on cutting emissions but are banal when they consider how little money and technology have been channelled for fossil fuel de-addiction. It is time that future meetings use the science to promote justice and equity and strengthen faith in what is now one of the few working multilateral processes.

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PRINCIPLED SHIFT: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON INDIA'S STAND ON GAZA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

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December 15, 2023 12:10 am | Updated 12:10 am IST

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Two months after Israel's bombardment of Gaza residents in retaliation for the [October 7 terror attacks by Hamas](#) began, India joined its voice to the global call to stop the bombing, [voting in favour of a resolution at the UN General Assembly \(UNGA\)](#) along with 152 other nations. The resolution demanded an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, an observance of international humanitarian law, the unconditional release of all hostages, as well as "ensuring humanitarian access". India's vote was a shift from its previous vote at the last such UNGA resolution on October 27, when despite the death of 8,000 Gazans, [India had decided to abstain](#) from voting for a resolution that called for a ceasefire. The government and the MEA explained this to be a matter of principle, as part of India's "zero-tolerance" approach towards terrorism, as the earlier resolution did not contain an "explicit condemnation" of the October 7 attacks. However, while the UNGA resolution passed on December 12 bears no direct mention of the terror attacks, India has voted in favour. Although the government has yet to detail the rationale, there could be several reasons: casualty figures have risen relentlessly, with 18,000 dead and the highest such toll of nearly 90 journalists. More than 80% of the entire population is homeless. Even the U.S., Israel's biggest ally, estimates that nearly half of the 29,000 air-to-ground munitions deployed by Israel thus far are "unguided" or indiscriminate missiles. Second, Israeli Defence Forces have gone far beyond their original mandate of eliminating Hamas capacity and freeing the hostages to a large-scale flattening of Gaza and forced occupation of more territory. More than 100 Israeli hostages remain in Hamas custody. Third, global opinion, including Indian public opinion, has moved decidedly from sympathy with Israel, to horror at the unfolding aftermath, and New Delhi could not have been immune to entreaties by Palestine and the Gulf States to take a relook at its vote, even as India stood isolated in South Asia and the Global South for its previous abstention.

It may be too early to see India's UNGA vote as a reversal of its earlier position and a reversion to its original position in the conflict, where it has traditionally called for peace. Much will depend on the role India chooses for itself in ensuring the ceasefire is effected and holds, given that Israel has already rejected the UNGA resolution. Having proven its credentials as a friend to Israel following the terror attacks, as well as the odium of enabling the civilian deaths, the Modi government must be more vocal in helping the Netanyahu government out of the strategic cul de sac it has bombarded its way into, one which could cause regional instability and insecurity for decades.

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A TIME-HONOURED CONNECT THAT WILL HELP BRIDGE THE GULF

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'The ruling family of Oman has always had a strong connection with India.' | Photo Credit: ANI

The Sultan of Oman, Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, is visiting India from December 16 on a state visit. This is his first visit to India after taking over in January 2020 following the passing of Sultan Qaboos. The Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, had visited Oman in February 2018 in his first visit to Oman as Prime Minister. In what proved to be a landmark visit, key agreements on trade, defence and security were agreed upon, making it a milestone in diplomatic relations between India and Oman.

Oman is the closest neighbour to India in the Arabian Gulf region. With key Omani ports abutting the coastline along the Arabian Sea as well as the Gulf of Oman leading into the Persian Gulf and towards the Gulf of Aden, Oman's location is of utmost strategic importance to India. Along with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman completes the trio of key strategic partners of India in the Gulf region.

The ruling family of Oman has always had a strong connection with India. Sultan Qaboos was always favourably disposed towards India and invited Indian companies and professionals to undertake projects apart from sourcing supplies from India. At the people-to-people level too, India and Oman enjoy close ties. There is a large Indian community of almost seven lakh people which has contributed to the constantly evolving vibrant relations.

During the Cold War era, and even thereafter, when the Arab world was largely ambivalent towards India and was often soft and supportive of Pakistan, it was Oman which kept its doors open to India. In a conflict-prone region, Oman has always been an island of peace. It has pursued a foreign policy which is based on the twin strands of moderation and mediation, including a policy of deliberate neutrality in dealing with regional issues and conflicts. It has carefully balanced its close relations with the western powers and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, with a pragmatic approach to neighbouring Iran, maintaining that the Straits of Hormuz will not be closed. Even during the Persian Gulf crisis in 2019, when the United States and Iran were on the brink of a military conflict, it was Oman which played a key role in diffusing tensions.

Oman's key role in the Iran nuclear deal in July 2015 is well documented and acknowledged too.

During the GCC-Qatar diplomatic stand-off, Oman refused to join Saudi Arabia and other countries in breaking diplomatic ties with Qatar in June 2017. Much before the Abraham Accords were signed between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain in September 2020, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had made a surprise visit to Oman in October 2018, once again confirming the importance of Oman in the region.

Oman is a crucial pillar of India's West Asia policy, with their multi-faceted engagement increasingly taking on a more strategic shape in recent decades. The India-Oman strategic partnership was signed during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Oman in November 2008 and is based on twin pillars of mutual trust and shared interests. Oman was one of the few countries to have been invited by India to its G-20 presidency as a guest nation earlier this year.

Defence and security engagement form a key pillar of this strategic partnership and are governed by a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed in 2005. Oman is the first Gulf country with which all the three wings of India's defence forces hold joint exercises. Since 2012-13, an Indian naval ship has remained on duty in the Gulf of Oman for anti-piracy operations. Oman has allowed overflights/transit by Indian military aircraft too. In recent years, both countries have cooperated in ensuring maritime security in the Indian Ocean region.

During the Persian Gulf crisis in June 2019, the Indian Navy launched 'Operation Sankalp' to ensure the safe passage of Indian flagged ships which most often operated off the coast of Oman. The MoU on Duqm Port during Mr. Modi's visit is a historic landmark in our security cooperation, providing basing facilities, Operational Turn Round and other logistics facilities to Indian naval ships operating in the region.

Trade and commerce forms yet another important pillar of engagement. Bilateral trade during FY2022-23 reached \$12.388 billion. There are over 6,000 India-Oman joint ventures in Oman, with an estimated investment of over \$7.5 billion.

India was the second largest market for Oman's crude oil exports for the year 2022 after China. In October 2022, India and Oman launched the Rupay debit card in Oman, a key footprint of India's initiative of promoting digital public infrastructure (DPI) in the world.

India and Oman are looking forward to increased engagement in strategic areas such as space cooperation — an MoU on this was signed during Mr. Modi's visit. The possibility of an agreement on joint exploration of rare earth metals, vital to modern electronic equipment, could add strength to the partnership. The proposed India-Middle-East-Europe Connectivity Corridor (IMEEC) infrastructure project to link India to Europe across West Asia could also see Oman playing an important role. There is a proposal from the South Asia Gas Enterprise (SAGE), a private consortium based in India, to lay a 1,400 km long deep-sea pipeline from Oman to India for the transfer of gas. With IMEEC too looking at similar undersea connectivity, there could be convergence on it with Oman in the future.

The list of convergence and shared interests is thus long and limitless. As a part of its broader global outlook and its outreach in the extended neighbourhood, India is seeking deeper engagement and collaboration in West Asia, of which Oman is an important pillar. Security challenges in the region have a ripple effect in India and, therefore, any instability in the region has a direct bearing on the safety and security of millions of Indians working there, India's energy security and its steadily growing trade relations. Apart from being India's oldest strategic partner in the region and closest neighbour, Oman is an integral part of all important groupings in the region; the GCC, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the Arab League. Its ability to manage rival ideologies and power games in the region makes it vitally important to India. Both countries consider themselves as ambassadors of peace and enjoy goodwill across ideologies

in the world. Oman is, therefore, India's gateway to West Asia. And with the ongoing Israel-Hamas war testing the region to its limits, the visit of Oman's Sultan is timely and very important for India and the region.

Rajeev Agarwal, a retired colonel, is the Assistant Director of the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), New Delhi. He has served as Director in the Ministry of External Affairs and as Director, Military Intelligence

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CABINET APPROVES MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING (MOU) SIGNED BETWEEN INDIA AND TANZANIA ON COOPERATION IN THE FIELD OF SHARING SUCCESSFUL DIGITAL SOLUTIONS IMPLEMENTED AT POPULATION SCALE FOR DIGITAL TRANSFORMATIONS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The Union Cabinet chaired by Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi was apprised of a MoU signed on 09th October, 2023 between the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology of the Republic of India and the Ministry of Information, Communication and Information Technology of the United Republic of Tanzania on cooperation in the field of sharing successful Digital Solutions implemented at Population Scale for Digital Transformation.

The MoU intends to promote closer cooperation and exchange of experiences, digital technologies-based solutions in the implementation of digital transformational initiative of both the countries.

Both G2G and B2B bilateral Cooperation in the field of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) will be enhanced. The activities contemplated in this MoU would be financed through their administration's regular operating allocations.

MoU envisages improved collaboration leading to employment opportunities in the field of IT.

Background:

MeitY is collaborating with a number of countries and multilateral agencies for fostering bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the ICT domain. Over the period, MeitY has entered into MoUs/MoCs/Agreements with its counterpart organizations/ agencies from various countries to promote cooperation and exchange of information in the ICT domain. This is in consonance with the various initiatives taken by Government of India such as Digital India, Atmanirbhar Bharat, make in India etc. to transform the country into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy. In this changing paradigm, there is an imminent need for exploring business opportunities, sharing of best practices and attracting investments in the digital sector with the objective of enhancing mutual cooperation.

Over the last few years, India has demonstrated its leadership in implementation of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) and has successfully provided delivery of services to public even during COVID pandemic. As a result, many countries have evinced interest in learning from India's experiences and entering into MoUs with India for learning from India's experiences.

India Stack Solutions are DPIs developed & implemented by India at population scale to provide access & delivery of public services. It aims to provide meaningful connectivity, promote digital inclusion, and enable seamless access to public services. These are built on open technologies, are interoperable and are designed to harness industry and community participation which foster innovation. However, each country has unique needs and challenges in building DPI, although the basic functionality is similar, allowing for global cooperation.

DS

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CABINET APPROVES MEMORANDUM OF COOPERATION SIGNED BETWEEN INDIA AND KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA ON COOPERATION IN THE FIELD OF DIGITIZATION AND ELECTRONIC MANUFACTURING

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Infrastructure: Energy incl. Renewable & Non-renewable

The Cabinet chaired by Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi was apprised of a Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) signed on 18th August, 2023 between the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology of the Republic of India and the Ministry of Communications and information Technology of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia on cooperation in the field of Digitization and Electronic Manufacturing.

The Memorandum of Cooperation intends to strengthen collaboration in the field of Digitization, Electronic Manufacturing, e-Governance, smart infrastructure, e-Health and e-Education, promote partnership in research in digital innovation and the use of emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT), Robots, Cloud Computing and Blockchain, etc. This MoC would establish a framework for cooperation in the area of digitization and electronic manufacturing and establish partnerships between India and Saudi Arabia.

The MoC aims to promote ways of innovative training and development through e-Teaching, e-learning and exchange programs in the digitization and electronics manufacturing and to develop joint training programs for capacity building and access to highly skilled Information and Communication Technologies professionals, strengthen SME and start-up ecosystem by sharing information on business accelerators, venture capital and incubators of technology start-ups which would indirectly generate employment opportunities for both parties.

The collaboration activities under this MoC will promote cooperation in the area of Digitization and Electronic Manufacturing which are integral to the envisaged objectives of Atmanirbhar Bharat.

DS

The Cabinet chaired by Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi was apprised of a Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) signed on 18th August, 2023 between the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology of the Republic of India and the Ministry of Communications and information Technology of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia on cooperation in the field of Digitization and Electronic Manufacturing.

The Memorandum of Cooperation intends to strengthen collaboration in the field of Digitization, Electronic Manufacturing, e-Governance, smart infrastructure, e-Health and e-Education, promote partnership in research in digital innovation and the use of emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT), Robots, Cloud Computing and Blockchain, etc. This MoC would establish a framework for cooperation in the area of digitization and electronic manufacturing and establish partnerships between India and Saudi Arabia.

The MoC aims to promote ways of innovative training and development through e-Teaching, e-learning and exchange programs in the digitization and electronics manufacturing and to develop joint training programs for capacity building and access to highly skilled Information and Communication Technologies professionals, strengthen SME and start-up ecosystem by sharing information on business accelerators, venture capital and incubators of technology start-ups which would indirectly generate employment opportunities for both parties.

The collaboration activities under this MoC will promote cooperation in the area of Digitization and Electronic Manufacturing which are integral to the envisaged objectives of Atmanirbhar Bharat.

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THE STORMY RED SEA, THE COMPLEXITIES OF GLOBAL EVENTS

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December 18, 2023 12:51 am | Updated 12:51 am IST

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A U.S. missile destroyer | Photo Credit: AFP

At the end of October, after the audacious terror attack by Hamas against Israel, which has upended a renewed sense of regional stability, the Yemen-based and Iran-aligned Houthi militia announced that it would join the war to support the people of Gaza. This brought the critical waterways of the Red Sea, which connects the Suez Canal, into the middle of the conflict. The Suez by itself carries nearly 15% of all global trade between the West and the East.

In mid-November, the Houthis released a video of armed men in a helicopter raiding a cargo vessel that reportedly had Israeli links, which was travelling through the Red Sea towards India. While the Strait of Hormuz on the other side of the region, bordering Iran, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, and Qatar, is seen as a major geopolitical chokepoint, the Red Sea is increasingly being seen as an alternative. Saudi Arabia's new futuristic city of Neom, a pet project of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman which represents the rapidly changing face of the kingdom, is based off the coast of the Red Sea from where vast amounts of oil are also shipped.

Since the incident in November, the number of commercial vessels facing Houthi aggression has only increased, and cases are being reported on a near daily basis. The United States has been at the forefront of deploying military capacity towards the Red Sea to counter the threats in the form of drones, missiles that now include longer-range ones, and direct operations by the group's military cadre. The U.S. has now called upon partners to deploy a multinational task force around the narrow Bab al-Mandab Strait between Yemen, Djibouti (which hosts the military bases of the U.S., China, Japan, Italy, and France), and Eritrea. The Houthis have showcased an eclectic mix of military capability, including torpedoes and missiles with up to 1,000 km range capability. As of 2022, the Houthis are known to have acquired eight different types of missiles into their arsenal compared to just three previously, which had less than 50 km range and were acquired in the 1990s.

To further highlight the region's infamous geopolitical complexities, Riyadh has in fact called for "restraint" by Washington DC in taking any military action directly against the Houthis. With the Saudis having launched a war against the Houthis in Yemen in 2015, one that technically is still under way, the kingdom is now holding talks with the group's leadership on the back of the Saudi-Iran détente brokered by China earlier this year. According to recent data published by

Arab Barometer, a quantitative research institute on the Middle East (West Asia), Beijing's balanced stance on the ongoing Gaza crisis has found a positive response among Arabs on the back of the near-complete support given to the Israeli military campaign by the U.S. President, Joe Biden.

Beyond the regional crisis points, depletion of security in the Red Sea will have a global impact, specifically for Asian economies such as India, Japan, South Korea, and China, drawing in their interests as well. In the Persian Gulf for example, India has operationalised military capacities under Operation Sankalp since 2019, where the Indian Navy began escorting India-flagged ships, specifically oil tankers. Japan has worked its diplomatic channels directly with Tehran while South Korea has also experienced tensions with Iran over its ships travelling through the region.

A U.S. call for partners to mobilise is not irrational. Previously, the global community did rally to address the issue of piracy off coastal eastern Africa, specifically around the waters of Somalia. In 2012, India joined China, Japan, and South Korea for coordinated joint patrols in the Gulf of Aden. All states took point by rotation in leading these patrols. This was of course at a time when global geopolitics looked very different. While Beijing's position in such multilateral engagements is near improbable today, New Delhi, Tokyo and Seoul continue to have common security concerns as net importers of oil and gas from the region, which automatically places them as stakeholders in West Asian security both strategically and kinetically.

Through the current churn in the global geopolitical order, there is one major trend that states must factor into their calculus: that non-state militant actors are strengthening in agency, both politically and militarily, and often as part of state-promoted designs to secure short-term gains for long-term strategic victories. These are the fundamentals at play in an area such as the Red Sea which, in capitals such as New Delhi, do not enjoy the luxury of space in security debates. However, in an increasingly interconnected world colliding with an increasingly challenged stability of the western-led international security order, a more progressive, nimble, and practical development and deployment of power will have to be accepted to address challenges beyond the comforts of self-defined areas of interests.

Kabir Taneja is Fellow, Strategic Studies Programme, Observer Research Foundation

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DEBARRING DONALD: ON THE TRUMP RULING BY THE SUPREME COURT OF THE U.S. STATE OF COLORADO

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December 21, 2023 12:20 am | Updated 12:20 am IST

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The Supreme Court of the U.S. State of Colorado has [barred former President Donald Trump from running for office again](#) in the 2024 presidential election, on the grounds that he violated a constitutional clause relating to engaging in an “insurrection or rebellion”. The court found, in a 4-3 split decision, that Mr. Trump was not eligible to be on the election ballot next year in Colorado for the role that he played in egging on protesters on January 6, 2021, a section of whom then went on to [attack the buildings of the U.S. Capitol](#) in Washington. The ruling sets a historical precedent for the use of Section 3 of [the country's 14th Amendment](#) to strike a presidential candidate off the ballot — in this case the most popular Republican candidate by a significant margin and seen as highly likely to win the election. Under the Section (the “insurrection clause”), any person engaging in insurrection or rebellion against the U.S. Constitution shall not be permitted to run for public office including Congress, the military, and federal and state offices. The 14th Amendment, which was ratified in 1868, was established in part to disallow former Confederates from entering Congress and grabbing power from a government that they had previously fought. It is ironic that a similar post-Civil War logic might apply to Mr. Trump now, for his role in seeking to block the peaceful transfer of power to presidential incumbent, Joe Biden, on unproven allegations of election fraud linked to ballot voting. The Colorado ruling overturned an earlier district court verdict that declined to block Mr. Trump from contesting on the grounds that it was unclear whether the 14th Amendment covered the presidency.

Regardless of whether the inevitable appeal that his legal team will launch will succeed, and regardless of whether his inability to compete in Colorado will impair his overall prospects next year, this ruling marks the bitter polarisation of the U.S. electorate around the controversial policy stances that Mr. Trump represents. On the one hand, it is his very rejection of political propriety that has led to the democracy-threatening situation of a President who came close to refusing to demit office after an election loss. When combined with the hateful, partisan demagoguery of previous Trump campaigns, this calculated stubbornness represents the political outlook of MAGA Republicans, a world view that has little in common with the values that mainstream conservatives and liberals hold dear. This bodes ill for the quality and tenor of democratic discourse ahead, raising the likelihood that leaders on both sides will be talking past each other, instead of reaching out to build bridges for bipartisan cooperation, in short supply at the current juncture.

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SISI AGAIN: ON THE RESULT OF EGYPT'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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For [Abdel Fattah El-Sisi](#), the Egyptian President who captured power through a military coup in 2013, winning a reelection was the easy part. In Egypt's presidential elections, sitting Presidents always win with huge margins. In the December 10-12 elections, Mr. Sisi, a former general, faced three little-known candidates, while his most vocal opponent, Ahmed Tantawy, was barred from contesting. State-affiliated media ran a campaign-like coverage, touting the President's achievements. [Mr. Sisi, unsurprisingly, won 89.6% of the votes](#), extending his rule to 2030. The tougher part, however, is to govern the most populous Arab country, now struggling with economic and geopolitical crises. When Mr. Sisi toppled Egypt's first freely elected President, Mohamed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood leader, the military's narrative was that the Brothers had violated the spirit of the 2011 "revolution" that brought down the regime of dictator Hosni Mubarak. But Egypt slid back to the Mubarak years under Mr. Sisi's rule. The regime, which killed hundreds of pro-Brotherhood protesters on August 14, 2013 to restore 'order', has tolerated little criticism and dissent since then. But Mr. Sisi also projected himself as a source of stability and a bulwark against terror, and launched ambitious debt-funded infrastructure projects, including a new desert capital city outside Cairo.

When he starts a new term, what requires Mr. Sisi's attention is the economy. Hyperinflation, at 35%, has already pushed many Egyptians into poverty. External debt stood at \$162.9 billion in December 2022, some 40% of the GDP, according to the central bank. Egypt, which is facing some heavy repayments in 2024, is already in talks with the IMF and other foreign creditors for further assistance. What has made matters worse has been Israel's war on Gaza, which shares a border crossing with Egypt. Pro-Palestine sympathies have historically been high in Egypt, which signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979. While Israel's relentless bombing pushed thousands to the border, Mr. Sisi tried to walk a fine line: publicly condemning the bombardment and calling for a ceasefire but stopping short of drastic measures that would endanger peace with Israel. Mr. Sisi has also said he would not be complicit with any Israel plan for mass eviction of Palestinians from Gaza. But if the war drags on, he will come under greater pressure to let Palestinian refugees in, which may have economic and political consequences. Between a calamitous war next door and worsening economic conditions at home, his challenge is to offer a stable rule in a country that has seen regime-changing street protests and a coup in the recent past.

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ISRAEL IS FIGHTING IN THE DARK IN GAZA

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December 23, 2023 12:16 am | Updated 12:16 am IST

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' Hamas might be a terrorist outfit for Israel and its western allies, but for a vast majority of other regional actors, it is fighting Israel's violent occupation' | Photo Credit: REUTERS

"The Jewish state would form a part of a wall of defence for Europe in Asia, an outpost of civilisation against barbarism," Theodor Herzl, one of the founders of modern political Zionism, wrote in *Der Judenstaat* (The Jewish State), a pamphlet published in 1896. In the pamphlet, he argued that security for Jews could be guaranteed only by the creation of a separate national state for them, and requested the Ottoman Sultan to give Palestine to the Jews. He promised, in return, to undertake the regulations of the whole of Turkey's finances. The movement Herzl began culminated in the creation of the state of Israel in historical Palestine in 1948. More than 75 years later, the civilisational outpost Herzl had imagined, which continues its illegal occupation of Palestinian territories, is fighting a calamitous war on the Gaza Strip.

In just 10 weeks, Israel, which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu calls the "people of light", has killed 20,000 Palestinians, a vast majority of them women and children, wounded over 50,000 and displaced almost 90% of the enclave's population. While Israel has managed to turn Gaza into what the United Nations called a "graveyard for children and a living hell for everyone else", it also faces questions on whether it is meeting its objectives after two and a half months of bombing and invasion.

Israel had two declared objectives when it launched the attack on Gaza, which followed Hamas's October 7 cross-border raid in which at least 1,200 Israelis were killed, most of them civilians. One was to free the hostages — Hamas had taken some 240 hostages during its raid. And the other, as repeatedly claimed by Mr. Netanyahu and his Ministers, was to "dismantle" Hamas. A third, undeclared, but self-evident, objective was to rebuild Israel's deterrence so that another October 7 would not happen.

On paper these were achievable goals. In terms of military capabilities, Hamas does not stand even for a distant comparison with Israel, West Asia's most powerful country. A nuclear power and a developed economy, which is politically and militarily backed by the United States, Israel, equipped with some of the world's most advanced offensive and defensive weapons, had taken quick victories in the past against its conventional rivals. Israel also controls all of Gaza's border except the Rafah crossing in the south into Egypt. Hamas, on the other side, has roughly 50,000 fighters with assault rifles and short- to medium-range rockets. Unsurprisingly, Israel has showered fire and fury on Gaza. But is it close to dismantling Hamas?

Before the war began, Israel had said Hamas leaders in Gaza, especially Yahya Sinwar and Mohamed Deif, were dead men walking. Apparently, they are still walking. So far, Israel has managed to free only one hostage through its military operation (it shot dead three hostages by mistake). The over 100 hostages who were released were part of a brief ceasefire deal that Israel had struck with Hamas. When Israel launched its ground invasion, its initial thrust was into northern Gaza, which pushed over one million people towards the south. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) claimed that the Al Shifa hospital, Gaza's largest medical facility, in the north, had hosted a top Hamas command centre in underground bunkers. The IDF stormed the hospital in November despite a global uproar, but is yet to show any evidence that Hamas's top command was based in the hospital.

While Israel has an excellent track record against its conventional rivals in the region, its record against non-state actors has always been mixed. Israel has not fought a conventional war in 50 years. In 1982, when it invaded Lebanon to push the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) out of the country, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin said the war would bring "40 years of peace". But the war itself lasted 18 years, even after Israel pushed the PLO out of Lebanon. In 2006, it invaded Lebanon again, this time to crush Hezbollah. After a month of intense ground battle, Israel had to accept a ceasefire, leaving Hezbollah politically stronger. Ever since, Hezbollah has rebuilt its military strength many times. After it withdrew from Gaza in 2005 following the second intifada, Israel carried out at least four major bombing campaigns in the enclave, barring the current war, aimed at weakening Hamas. Still, it could not prevent the October 7 attack, the deadliest cross-border attack since 1948.

In the current war, Israel's main narrative is that Hamas is like the Islamic State (IS). Just as the physical structures of the IS was destroyed, Israel wants Hamas to be destroyed as well. But this sweeping narrative overlooks some fundamental complexities in West Asia. The IS, essentially an Islamist death cult, was an outgrowth of al-Qaeda which exploited the chaos and mayhem in the region to capture territories and spread terror. The IS, which imposed itself on the peoples of Syria and Iraq from the top, was extremely unpopular and lacked any social or political cause. A vast majority of the IS's victims were Muslims and Muslim armies, be it the Kurds, Syrian troops, Iran-backed Shia militias or the Iraqi army, were in the forefront of the battle against the IS.

But in the case of Israel-Palestine, the fundamental contradiction is Israel's continuing occupation of the Palestinian territories. Hamas might be a terrorist outfit for Israel and its western allies, but for a vast majority of other regional actors, it is fighting Israel's violent occupation. Hamas has a social and political cause — the liberation of Palestine — and is deeply entrenched in Palestinian society. This makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to dismantle Hamas through military means, at least as long as Israel continues the occupation of Palestinian territories.

This time, Hamas appears to be more prepared and planned for a long resistance against the Israelis. Its strategy is to deny Israel a quick military victory — or just to survive — which it thinks would be politically self beneficial. A long war would expose Israel's weaknesses, which it already does. Israel has mobilised some 3,00,000 reservists, which is adding stress to its economy. Hamas, which uses Gaza's extensive tunnel networks to hide and fight, continues to fire rockets into Israel, terrorising communities and disrupting local economies. The high civilian casualties and the sheer brutality of Israel's offensive in Gaza have isolated the Jewish state globally. The U.S. still stands with Israel, but recent remarks by U.S. President Joe Biden that Israel's "indiscriminate bombing" would isolate it globally suggests that even Washington is coming under pressure. The Arab-Israel normalisation, on which Mr. Biden was betting big until recently, is dead, at least for now. And the Houthis, the pro-Iran Shia rebels who control much of Yemen, are widening the war by targeting tankers in the Red Sea, threatening one of the busiest

global shipping lanes and drawing the U.S. deeper into the conflict. West Asia is now a tinderbox.

If Israel's objective is to kill as many Palestinians as possible and turn Gaza inhabitable without caring for the consequences, its invasion is on track. But if its objective is to eradicate Hamas, free hostages and bolster its own deterrence, the Jewish state is nowhere close to meeting those goals, even after 10 weeks of one of the most intense bombing campaigns of the century.

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Are ripples of hostility from the Gaza War reaching Indian shores? Over the weekend, an oil tanker with 25 Indians on board—all confirmed safe—was struck by a drone in the Red Sea, according to the US, which is patrolling this trade route being disrupted by Yemen's Iran-sponsored Houthi militia. Hours earlier, a Mangalore-bound ship suffered a drone attack off the coast of Gujarat, making India rush armed forces to its defence.

The US pointed at Iranian territory as the drone's origin. Interpreting this in the context of Tehran's warnings asking Israel's backers to back off only adds to an air of mystery over what's going on. While Red Sea attacks by an Iranian proxy group hint of an attempt to widen the Israel-Hamas conflict, threatening ships on India's side of the Arabian Sea appears to serve no strategic purpose for Israel's opponents, even if the particular vessel targeted had an Israeli link, unless a larger geopolitical plot is unfolding as a global rupture worsens.

If these are loose-cannon hits, we must shield our interests. If there's something more sinister afoot that has put India in the cross-hairs of adversaries acting in concert, then we must stay on higher alert.

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STABILISING FRAYED TIES, YET HURDLES AHEAD

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December 26, 2023 12:53 am | Updated 12:53 am IST

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'The biggest unknown in U.S.-China relations in 2024 will be the outcome of the U.S. presidential elections' | Photo Credit: AP

After the meeting between United States President Joe Biden and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping, in November, the U.S and China have managed to stabilise their relationship from the free fall it was in through 2023, beginning with the spy balloon episode. The new year could bring new turbulence arising from the outcome of the elections in Taiwan and the fact that it would be an election year in the U.S. where both parties are vying to show how tough they are on Beijing.

One sign of the efforts to manage the relationship without confrontation was visible in the recent virtual meeting between their top military officials, General Charles Q. Brown, and General Liu Zhenli. China broke off military contact following former U.S. Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022.

The U.S. had been seeking such a meeting for a while, but was foiled by the sanctions it had placed on the Chinese Defence Minister, General Li Shangfu, in 2018. With the latter's purge last month, the way opened up for the meeting between the two U.S. and Chinese defence officials and a restoration of the normal dialogue between the two militaries.

A big challenge could arise almost immediately into the new year arising from the January 13 elections in Taiwan. The candidate of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party, Lai Ching-te is leading at the polls, something that China has made clear it does not particularly like. Efforts, no doubt, aided surreptitiously by Beijing, have pushed for a victory of the Opposition which leans towards China, but as of now it seems that the Taiwanese are not likely to change course. Lai is the deputy to the current President Tsai Ing-wen and is likely to keep pushing for Taiwanese sovereignty and partner the U.S. closely.

Another issue that will play out in the year is ever-tightening U.S. restrictions on technology export, especially that of semiconductors to China. Ten days ago, the U.S. Department of Commerce said that it would launch a survey of the U.S. chip supply chain and national industrial base to address national security concerns from China-sourced chips. This process would also aid in the Administration's funding of domestic semiconductor industry.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington protested noting that the U.S. had "been stretching the

concept of national security, abusing export control measures, engaging in discriminatory and unfair treatment against enterprises of other countries, and politicizing and weaponizing economic and sci-tech issues”.

In October, the Biden Administration issued an update to its existing restrictions on exporting advanced Artificial Intelligence (AI) to China and other countries. The move was aimed at preventing China from acquiring cutting-edge chips to develop AI technologies such as large language models that power applications such as ChatGPT, but U.S. officials say they also have military uses. To prevent Chinese startups from filling the void in AI chips in China, the U.S. also included two Chinese chip startups, Biren and Moore Threads, to the U.S. blacklist.

In retaliation, Beijing exercised its lever as the supplier of rare earth metals needed for chip production. In July, China placed restrictions on some gallium and germanium products. In December, restrictions were placed on several types of graphites and a ban imposed on the export of technology for making rare earth magnets and technologies for extracting and separating rare earths. China is the world's top processor of rare earths, accounting for 70% of the world's production.

But the biggest unknown in U.S.-China relations in 2024 will be the outcome of the U.S. presidential elections and a possible re-election of Donald Trump as President. The Biden policy on China has followed on from the break that was effected by its predecessor Trump Administration.

But many of the tougher measures against China today came in the Biden term. Importantly, Mr. Biden's China policy was more systematic and surefooted. His marshalling of allies such as South Korea and Japan, cementing the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, the U.S.) and creating AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, the U.S.) could not have given the Chinese much geopolitical comfort.

But even so, the return of Mr. Trump could prove to be their worst nightmare given his chaotic persona. Dealing with Mr. Biden and stabilising ties would provide much needed breathing space for the ailing Chinese economy. Mr. Biden had made it clear that he was seeking a managed competition that would prevent confrontation.

Given the nature of the U.S.-China competition, there are also other areas which could unexpectedly gain salience. One of them is growing tensions in the Philippines and China in the South China Sea near the Scarborough Reef and the Second Thomas Shoal. On December 10, the U.S. State Department spokesman said that the U.S. would stand with the Philippines and that the provisions of their mutual defence pact would kick in if there were armed attacks on Philippines armed forces, government vessels and aircraft and even the Coast Guard.

Speaking in Washington DC in mid-December, U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen, one of the architects of the Biden Administration's China policy, said that the two countries would not be able to resolve all their differences and avoid shocks, but the aim was to make “our communication resilient...[to] prevent misunderstanding from leading to escalation and causing harm”.

Manoj Joshi is Distinguished Fellow, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi

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GROWTH CHARTS — WHO STANDARDS VERSUS INDIA CRAFTED

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December 28, 2023 12:54 am | Updated 12:54 am IST

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‘A number of countries with similar or even poorer economic conditions, including those in the South Asian region, have shown higher improvements in stunting prevalence using the same WHO-MGRS standards’ | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

High levels of child undernutrition have been a persistent problem in India. It is well recognised that the determinants of undernutrition are multiple, and include food intake, dietary diversity, health, sanitation, women’s status and the over-arching context of poverty. The most common measures of childhood undernutrition are based on anthropometric standards such as height-for-age (stunting/chronic undernutrition) and weight-for-height (wasting/acute undernutrition). Monitoring these is key to tracking progress in terms of actual outcomes. India, like most other countries, uses the globally accepted World Health Organization (WHO) Growth Standards to measure malnutrition. However, there is an emergent debate on a number of issues related to the use of these growth standards in India, [some of which are discussed below](#).

The WHO standards are based on a Multicentre Growth Reference Study (MGRS) that was conducted in six countries between 1997 and 2003 (Brazil, Ghana, India, Norway, Oman and the United States). The purpose was to determine the pattern of growth (from birth to five years) of children who did not face any known deficiencies in their environments. The references that were previously used (WHO-National Center for Health Statistics references) were based on children only from the U.S., many of whom were not breastfed but formula-fed. The MGRS took a prescriptive approach, with the specific aim of setting growth ‘standards’ (how children ought to grow, provided they have a healthy environment) and not growth ‘references’ (how children of the reference group grow). The sample for India in the MGRS was drawn from a set of privileged households living in South Delhi, of children who met all the eligibility criteria for the study including having a ‘favourable’ growth environment, being breast-fed and having non-smoking mothers.

Some researchers who have analysed data from other surveys for India suggest that these standards overestimate undernutrition. However, such comparisons with other large datasets would only be valid if these could provide samples that meet all the criteria of a favourable environment for growth, as defined by the MGRS. As it happens, an adequate number of equivalent samples are difficult to find in large-scale surveys in India given the high levels of inequality as well as the underrepresentation of the rich in these datasets. For instance, even among children (six-23 months) in households of the highest quintile in National Family Health

Survey (NFHS)-5 (2019-21), only 12.7% meet the requirements of a 'minimum acceptable diet' as defined by WHO. While almost all mothers in the MGRS sample had completed more than 15 years of education (in 2000-01), 54.7% of women in NFHS-5 had completed 12 or more years of schooling.

Such comparisons could also be misleading because the study norms of the WHO-MGRS were very different from these prevalence studies. For example, the MGRS included a component of counselling to ensure appropriate feeding practices, which is obviously missing in the NFHS or Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey. In fact, once it is understood that the MGRS sample was for the purpose of setting prescriptive standards, most of the sampling concerns are resolved. Some further issues raised vis-à-vis the MGRS methodology such as pooling of data from different countries have been discussed in detail [in the study reports](#).

Another important set of issues with regard to using the MGRS standards is the difference in genetic growth potential of Indians with respect to others and the influence of maternal heights on child growth. At an individual level, maternal height is undeniably a non-modifiable factor for the growth of her child. Therefore, there is a question of how much improvement is possible in one generation, if at all. However, low average maternal heights are themselves a reflection of the intergenerational transmission of poverty and poor status of women, and, therefore, a measure of an environment of deprivation. An appropriate indicator of a deficient environment, such as stunting, needs to capture this deprivation as well.

Albeit relevant a question still remains on whether the standard is too plastic to be useful, considering these issues of maternal heights and genetic potential. The fact is that a number of countries with similar or even poorer economic conditions, including those in the South Asian region, have shown higher improvements in stunting prevalence using the same WHO-MGRS standards. Regional differences within India, both in the prevalence of stunting as well as increases in adult heights, also indicate that some States such as Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala are achieving much faster reductions than others. It also needs to be considered that gene pools also shift at the population level with greater socio-economic development — a fact demonstrated by the growing average heights of countries such as Japan, refuting the immutability of genetic potential.

Another serious concern is related to inappropriately high standards leading to a misdiagnosis of the situation, and a resultant potential overfeeding of misclassified children under programmes of the government introduced to address undernutrition, thereby resulting in an increase in overweight and obesity. This is a worry, given the increasing burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in India. Nevertheless, given the dietary gaps that children have and the poor coverage of schemes such as mid-day meals and supplementary nutrition in anganwadis, such fears appear largely unwarranted. Indeed, the quality of the meals under these schemes must be improved to ensure that they are not cereal-heavy, include all nutrients, and contribute to dietary diversity. Recommendations such as including eggs in meals for children and pulses in the Public Distribution System must be acted upon urgently. It is also well understood that along with improving diets, multiple interventions such as better sanitation, access to health care, childcare services and so on are required for better nutritional outcomes.

There is also no doubt that there are also many gaps to fill in the more distal determinants of stunting, mainly; livelihoods and poverty, access to education and women's empowerment. These goals are inextricably linked to the overall development of the country, with equitable distribution of resources. Their reflection in anthropometric indicators only enhances the importance of these summary indicators rather than detract from it. It is relevant to acknowledge that individual children grow uniquely, and trained child health personnel such as treating physicians can apply judgement calls on the interpretation of growth charts in the context of

individual children in their care. What these standards are used for are mainly to understand population trends. Using the appropriate standards is also important for international comparisons and intra-country trends — an advantage that would be lost with any new country-specific standard.

In light of these discussions, the Indian Council of Medical Research has constituted a committee to revise the growth references for India. It has been reported that this committee has recommended a detailed rigorous study to be conducted across the country to examine child growth with the purpose of devising national growth charts, if necessary.

Yet, while acquiring newer, and more precise information on child growth is a welcome move — considering our high aspirations of reaching development to every last person by 2047 and its advantages of comparability — it seems logical to stick to the aspirationally high but achievable standards suggested by the WHO-MGRS.

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THE QUEST FOR 'HAPPINESS' IN THE VIKSIT BHARAT ODYSSEY

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'The need to include social indicators for development becomes more pertinent as GDP estimates fail to consider life's human and social aspects' | Photo Credit: ANI

Viksit Bharat has now been formally launched. The idea of making India a developed nation by 2047, the 100th year of its Independence, sounds exciting. This goal looks achievable, given the pace with which the country is moving ahead. This moment also gives us an opportunity to assess the idea of development intended. The focus and priorities in the choice of development planning are crucial and complex. In Viksit Bharat, economic development is overemphasised. But post-developmentalists argue that this is a Euro-centric notion of development which reflects the interests of its practitioners.

The aspects included in Viksit Bharat are structural transformation; organising labour markets; increasing competitiveness; improving financial and social inclusion; governance reforms, and seizing opportunities in the Green Revolution. Aspiring to claim the title of being the world's largest economy will not fulfil every desire and ambition this country holds dear. The need for material development can be accepted, but this will be one of many things India will aspire for by 2047. Critics of development have consistently raised concerns about the conventional models of economic growth, challenging the contentious notions surrounding modernity and progress. The current idea of Viksit Bharat needs to be reimagined to assess what other aspects of development would assume importance for India.

Instead of 'Viksit Bharat', the theme ought to be 'Happy India-Developed India' (Khushhal Bharat-Viksit Bharat). Happiness ought to be the central pursuit in this journey. Without achieving happiness, development has no meaning. Ironically, the nations have developed, but people are not happy. Rich nations are not essentially happy nations. Wealthy nations have only performed on GDP and per capita income but have failed miserably in the context of social and psychological well-being indicators. This development scheme conveniently overlooks mental health and wellness. The World Happiness Report 2023 shows many developed nations have poor happiness markers. Some nations have attained both in a balanced way. India's case is also crucial because it is ranked 126 out of 137 countries despite being the fifth-largest economy. The curious question would be whether India will have a better rank in the happiness index in the years to come. Development and the Viksit Bharat agenda will remain a dream if we fail to imagine how to rise in the happiness index.

Happiness measures have already become the goals of public policy in many countries. Happiness is no longer a subjective matter. Since its inception in 2012, the World Happiness Report has devised a robust method to measure and calculate it. The happiness matrix includes six variables: GDP per capita; healthy life expectancy at birth; generosity; social support; freedom to make life choices, and perception of corruption. The Happiness Report of 2023 placed extra emphasis on trust and benevolence in crisis situations such as COVID-19.

Lara B. Akin, one of the co-authors of the Happiness Report 2023, has said, “We see those various forms of everyday kindness, such as helping a stranger, donating to charity, and volunteering, are above pre-pandemic levels.” The report found that despite the pandemic, economic crisis, and personal losses, acts of kindness have increased globally. The report also highlighted the importance of social connections and relationships in contributing to happiness and well-being.

According to the report’s parameters, Finland, Denmark, Iceland and the Netherlands are the happiest countries. These countries achieved development not at the cost of social disruption. Instead, they have built up social connections and support systems.

A happiness-induced development model for India is highly pertinent as we are significantly governed by social relationships and cultural mandates. On the contrary, the current model of mere economic development is highly disruptive to our social order. This form of development leads to disorders and crime. All aspects of life in this development cycle do not change simultaneously, creating imbalances and contradictions. Such things are visible in our society, where industrial and economic developments are changing alarmingly, but quality aspects of life continue to lag.

The need to include social indicators for development becomes more pertinent as GDP estimates fail to consider life’s human and social aspects. The European Commission’s focus is also moving beyond GDP, shifting to a measurement of economic performance and social progress. Specific indices already developed could make the agenda for Viksit Bharat@2047 more inclusive and comprehensive. For instance, a weightage to the Human Development Index, which consists of life expectancy, educational attainment, and income level, could be considered. Further, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development in 1970 created a Social Development Index with 16 core indicators could be another inclusion.

Similarly, the World Bank’s Environmentally Sustainable Development Division has developed a ‘Green Index’ that measures a nation’s wealth by incorporating three components: produced assets, natural resources and human resources. An International Human Suffering Index also measures the country on different parameters of human suffering. In conceiving a national vision for development, indices such as the Global Innovation Index, Rule of Law Index, Poverty Index, Corruption Perceptions Index, Gender Equality Index, and World Press Freedom Index will be pretty significant to give effect to the idea of a happy India, revisiting the pursuit of a developed India as Happy-India will be pivotal in Viksit Bharat’s journey.

G.S. Bajpai is Vice-Chancellor, National Law University Delhi. The views expressed are personal

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OLD AND STRONG: ON INDIA-RUSSIA TIES

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The importance of External Affairs Minister [S. Jaishankar's visit to Russia](#) this week can be gleaned from the special effort New Delhi and Moscow have made to make the meetings successful and productive. For India, at the end of a year of prolific diplomacy, a five-day visit would seem unusually long, particularly as the Kremlin leadership normally does not see high-level foreign visits at all in this period right before its holiday season. It is equally unusual for Russian President Vladimir Putin to meet lower-ranking foreign officials, as he did while meeting Mr. Jaishankar. The warmth was significant given that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has skipped the annual leadership summit, an unbroken tradition from 2000-21, for two years now, leading to speculation about the health of the India-Russia relationship after the Ukraine war. While India took care not to criticise Russia, worries over the flagging of defence supplies, continued issues over paying Russia for imports in third currencies, and the general decline in other bilateral engagements have persisted. It is clear that a large part of Mr. Jaishankar's mission was to smooth over the perception of differences. The resultant agreements, pertaining to furthering collaboration in [future Kudankulam nuclear power projects](#), fostering connectivity, trade and resuming talks for the Eurasian Economic Union-India free trade agreement, and joint military production indicate that bilateral relations are on track. So is multilateral cooperation, especially as Russia plans to host the expanded BRICS summit next year, and India and Russia continue to coordinate positions at the UN and SCO. Mr. Jaishankar's announcement that imports of Russian hydrocarbons will continue to rise despite the West's Russian sanctions, indicated the strength of ties that continue "regardless of political fluctuations".

Mr. Jaishankar's affirmation that the annual leadership summit will be resumed in 2024, appeared to signify that both sides are working to eliminate any static in the relationship. His statement that the India-Russia relationship was the 'only constant in world politics' over the last six decades would not have gone unnoticed especially in Washington and Beijing, given some of the friction in India-U.S. relations over the Pannun investigation, as well as U.S. President Joseph Biden's decision not to accept Mr. Modi's invitation for Republic Day, while India-China relations have ended another year in impasse over the military standoff. It remains to be seen whether the bonhomie will yield concrete movement on the rupee-rouble payment mechanism, or on expediting the delayed delivery of S-400 air system units. However, the larger import of his visit, and his words that the "geopolitical and strategic convergence" between India and Russia in a multipolar world that is "rebalancing", will be watched most closely by votaries and critics of the relationship.

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A QUIET REPRIEVE: ON FORMER INDIAN NAVAL PERSONNEL AND THE QATAR COURT'S VERDICT

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The [decision of the Qatari court of appeals](#) to reduce the [capital punishment handed down in October](#) to eight former Indian naval personnel is a major reprieve for the men and their families, and spells relief for the government that has been pursuing diplomatic channels for leniency. While the detailed judgment is still awaited more than 24 hours after the pronouncement, the upholding of the conviction is a disappointment, and the government and the men's families must now reassess their legal strategy and evidence of their innocence before filing a review petition with Qatar's Court of Cassation, the highest in the system. If all avenues of judicial appeal are exhausted, the government will have three options. First, to continue to press for a review of the conviction with Qatar's ruling Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani. If that fails, the men could appeal for clemency and ask for a pardon, that Qatar's rulers have given in the past. A third option would be for the men to serve out their terms in India, once the length of incarceration is clarified, according to a 2015 bilateral Agreement on Transfer of Sentenced Persons. However, this option would require them to accept the conviction cannot be reversed. Through this process, the government must be seen to be pursuing diplomatic and political efforts at the highest level, to convey the extent that the men are a priority for India.

It is significant that the development comes after Prime Minister Narendra Modi made his first public outreach to the Qatari leadership — he met the Emir on the sidelines of COP28, on December 1. Whether such a political outreach, or a high-level mission to Doha, would have been more productive earlier, after the men were first arrested in August 2022, is a moot point now. It is commendable that New Delhi, in contrast to its stand with Canada over its allegations, has chosen not to react to the case with public rhetoric, especially the kind of targeting of Doha seen in some sections of the media, a move that would have been counterproductive. If the case implicating the men is in any way connected to India's intelligence services, then it is important to consider an appropriate review of any operations that could jeopardise Indians overseas. New Delhi has also done well by not allowing the case to become hostage to the growing tensions in the region, over the continuing bombardment of Gaza by Israel. It is hoped that a consistently calibrated position, careful of Qatar's sensitivities, and coupled with a quiet, but determined push, would bring the eight Indians back home safely.

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