

One-way traffic towards China

The economic benefits of CPEC will not accrue to Pakistan

There is a fairy tale story that says Islamabad, following the yellow bricks of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), will find prosperity in the embrace of Beijing. The plot line says Chinese funds will flow into Pakistan and help modernise the latter's infrastructure; this in turn will usher in a boom period for Pakistan's domestic economy, part of which will derive from an ability to export more.

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Trade figures for the first half of 2016 show that Chinese imports into Pakistan have surged by nearly 30%. This reflects a surge in power-generating material, construction and mining equipment and agricultural machinery. However, there has also been an 8% drop in Pakistan's exports to China. Islamabad has blamed barriers to Pakistani exports that Beijing has put in place and a free trade agreement that is tilted against Pakistan, throwing into question Beijing's motives in building the corridor. The Chinese imports have contributed to a surge in Pakistan's trade deficit: This rose 77.34% in March, year on year. Worse, Pakistan's current account deficit widened a staggering 121% between July last year and February. Pakistan is heading for a current account deficit, as a percentage of GDP, about double that of India's. The deficit is remarkable given the supposed billions of dollars of Chinese investment that was supposed to come with the corridor. In fact FDI into Pakistan during that same eight-month period was less than \$1.3 billion, underlining how much of the corridor is being financed by debt or by intra-Chinese transfers.

Some Pakistani economists are already fretting about what this could mean. Estimates show Pakistan will have to pay \$90 billion back to China over the next 30 years because of the corridor. This is not impossible, so long as Pakistan attracts capital and exports more during that time. The present export and FDI figures, however, show no evidence of this happening. So far, the benefits seem to be accruing solely on Beijing's side of the ledger. If this trend continues as the CPEC expands and develops, Pakistan's fairy tale may slowly metamorphose into a horror movie.

Why Mithali Raj richly deserves the Khel Ratna

The BCCI's snub to the women's cricket captain is a sign of gross discrimination

She may have won the adulation of millions and shattered the world record for scoring the most runs in ODI cricket during the recent World Cup in England, but Mithali Raj continues to get a raw deal from sports administrators back home. At least that is the impression one gets from the snub that the Board of Control for Cricket in India has given to India's women's cricket captain by not nominating her for the Khel Ratna this year. Not only has Ms Raj steered the team to two Cup finals (in 2005 and 2017), she was on the cusp of creating a world record for the most ODI runs at the time of the deadline to send in the nominations.

Although the deadline for nominations ended on April 30, in light of outstanding performances in subsequent time periods, there have been instances where other non-cricket associations have pushed for names well after the deadline. Last year, for instance, following their medal-winning exploits in Rio, the sports ministry had allowed for belated nominations for shuttler PV Sindhu, grappler Sakshi Malik, gymnast Dipa Karmakar and shooter Jitu Rai. It was the first time since the award was instituted in 1991 that the Khel Ratna was awarded to four sportspersons. This could have been done for Ms Raj, an athlete who was even felicitated by the Prime Minister himself.

Instead the, the panel appointed by the ministry of sports to shortlist those worthy of the Ratna has recommended two highly deserving men - former hockey captain Sardara Singh and Paralympic gold medalist Devendra Jhajharia - for the honour. All this makes us wonder whether merit - the primary requisite to get the highest sporting honour in the country - is the only criterion for becoming a Khel Ratna? How many times does a woman athlete have to prove herself before the BCCI acknowledges that she deserves the same recognition as her male counterparts for outstanding achievements?

beyondthebite

RAJDEEP SARDESAI



Communal or corrupt? A false binary

Is anti-Modiism the only badge of secularism? Nitish Kumar, after all, spent 17 years in the NDA

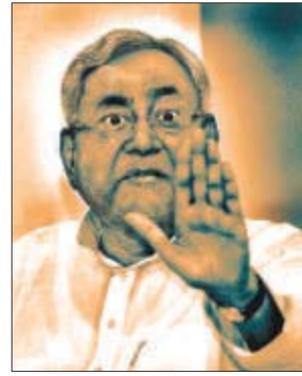
We are coming together to defend secularism by defeating Narendra Modi, Amit Shah and the RSS," proclaimed Lalu Prasad with typical bombast in September 2015 just ahead of the Bihar assembly elections. "Our biggest challenge is to defeat the forces of communalism represented by Mr Modi," argued Nitish Kumar vehemently. The die had been cast: in the autumn of 2015, the citadel of secularism had to be protected from the saffron army led by the strongman from Gujarat. Almost two years later, the rules of the political game have changed once again: now, with Nitish switching sides to Mr Modi, secularism it appears is no longer an ideal worth fighting for because, in the words of the Bihar chief minister, there must be 'zero tolerance' to corruption.

Corruption and communalism are being projected as two adversarial forces engaged in a bitter tussle. The narrative has been artfully spun as if you have to make a conscious choice between battling the corrupt or ostracising the communal: you no longer can seek to do both and survive politically. In the process, the moral bankruptcy and rank opportunism of our netas has been bared once again. Indeed, this is now a case of 'secularism'

and 'anti-corruption' on call, catchy slogans that have become a purdah for political duplicity. Does Nitish Kumar, for example, become 'secular' when he is part of the anti-Modi 'mahagatbandhan' and 'communal' when he joins hands with Mr Modi? Is anti-Modiism the sole defining badge of secularism? Nitish, after all, spent 17 long years as part of the BJP-led NDA and kept silent during the Gujarat 2002 riots. Did the RSS's Hindutva ideology only become anathema for him in June 2013 when Mr Modi took over the BJP leadership?

Nor is Nitish the first instance of such short-sighted, selective politics. The Mumbai Congress chief Sanjay Nirupam, for example, started his political career as a Shiv Sena MP who even edited a Sena mouthpiece that poured communal venom during the post-Ayodhya Mumbai riots in 1992-93. Can Mr Nirupam really be at the vanguard of the fight for 'secularism' simply because he has now switched sides? In Gujarat, Shankersinh Vaghela was the face of the Congress for the last 15 years even though he was a devout member of the sangh parivar for much of his political life. Does he now suddenly lose his 'secular' identity because he has resigned from the Congress?

Moreover, the despair in the secular camp



Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar at a press conference, Patna, July 31

at the ascent of Modi did also seriously compromise the fight against corruption. In 2015, Lalu Prasad was convicted in the fodder scam but still a valued member of the anti-Modi coalition because he had the crucial vote bank to offer: the spectre of 'jungle raj' was forgotten because an election had to be won. Can Rahul Gandhi explain how he tears up an anti-corruption ordinance that was brought in by the UPA government to protect Lalu in October 2013 and then aligns with the same individual two years later?

The hypocrisy cuts across parties: can the BJP, which now targets Lalu as the ultimate symbol of political corruption, explain how it ran a government in Karnataka with the support of the Reddy brothers, the mining barons charged with massive fraud? Or how it happily made peace with Congress defectors in Uttarakhand who they once accused of corruption? Or why cases against the BJP's political rivals are being fast-tracked by the CBI even as those in BJP-ruled states like Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh are being buried? Or is the yardstick of corruption a measure of the state's brazenly partisan approach: you are corrupt only when the state agencies pronounce you as such?

Truth is, both corruption and communalism need to be resisted in an uncompromising, non-discriminatory manner. The dangers of creating any false binary between the two are apparent in the BJP's choice of Yogi Adityanath as UP chief minister. A leader with a record of stoking communal hatred was cheered when he promised to rid UP of corruption: is Yogi's past to be forgotten because he now is a crusader against corruption?

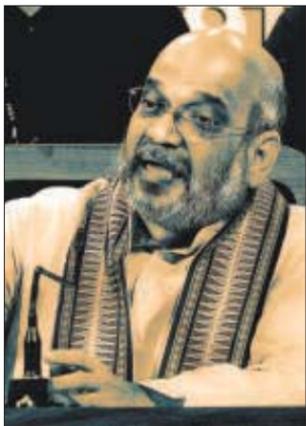
Post-script: In the past week, the BJP's internet army and Nitish supporters have been busy deleting what they said about each other on social media in the last four years. I suggest they press the pause button instead: who knows, after all, when next will the political 'hawa' change?

Rajdeep Sardesai is a senior journalist and author. The views expressed are personal.

BITTER BATTLE



Congress leader Ahmed Patel (Left) and BJP president Amit Shah are contesting the Rajya Sabha election from Gujarat



The battle for one Rajya Sabha seat in Gujarat

By putting Ahmed Patel, who was once among the most powerful in India, in a spot, Amit Shah has won this round



Prashant Jha

Rarely has a single Rajya Sabha seat been so fiercely contested. And rarely does such a contest demonstrate so much about Indian politics. Ahmed Patel's struggle for political survival in the face of the BJP onslaught reveals the fragility of power; the ruthless urges of the ruling dispensation; the staggering decay of opposition; and the state of our institutions.

Why is the BJP giving Patel a run for his money now? There are four explanations.

The first goes back to the way Narendra Modi and Amit Shah do politics. Every election matters, and the party's sole focus is acquiring power, winning as Shah memorably put it everything "from Parliament to Panchayat". In the old days, there was a nudge nudge wink wink understanding between top leaders of parties. All those elite compacts are dead under Modi-Shah.

The second explanation is Shah's personal anger at what he perceives as Patel's role in framing charges against him. Whether Shah was actually involved in giving a green signal to extra-judicial executions in Gujarat is not relevant. What is relevant is that in Shah's head, he was wounded by Patel and the rest of the UPA regime.

Third, for the BJP, every seat in the Rajya Sabha matters. The only real obstacle to BJP's move from dominance to hegemony is the fact that it does not enjoy a majority in the upper house. The UP win will improve its numbers; the Bihar acquisition will strengthen it; the elevation M Venkaiah Naidu as Vice President and thus chair of RS will help. And the third seat from Gujarat will be useful too.

And finally, remember Gujarat is headed for elections. Instead of Congress leveraging anti-incumbency, look at what's happening. Shankersinh Vaghela has already quit. MLAs have resigned. Others have had to run off to Karnataka. The party's most powerful export to Delhi in recent times, Patel, is struggling. A loss would have a debilitating impact on morale, and send a signal to voters that Congress is not a serious party.

And it is to achieve these objectives that the BJP has unleashed all its power - and institutions under its control - to ensure the defeat of Patel. It is difficult to believe that the I-T raids on the Karnataka minister hosting the Gujarat MLAs are a coincidence. The BJP can say Congress misused institutions too. This is true. But the BJP has now sought to replicate the same practices and abuse power. Irrespective of the final outcome, the victor is clear.

By putting a man who was once among the most powerful in India in a spot, by revealing his hunger yet again, by fracturing the Congress and exposing its vulnerabilities, and by sending a signal to the Gujarat electorate that there is only one party in the game, Amit Shah has already won this round.

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Is Emmanuel Macron losing his Midas touch?

The French president has been accused of acting like a monarch and has been making many mistakes



Vaiju Naravane

The glitter appears to be wearing off with unusual speed. France's 39-year-old wunderkind president, Emmanuel Macron, is slipping in the popularity charts with an astonishing 10-point slump last month.

That such a slide should occur during the first 100 days of 'grace' is unprecedented for any president in the history of the French Fifth Republic. Only 54% say they are happy with their president.

Only recently Macron appeared to have the magic touch, getting everything right. His bone crusher handshake with United States President Donald Trump went viral, and he chalked up a succession of diplomatic triumphs including his riposte to Trump's pulling out of the climate treaty.

Then came the invitation to Russian President Vladimir Putin and a sumptuous reception at Versailles, followed closely by Trump in Paris for the Bastille Day Parade on July 14. The Guardian called the young president's debut "near faultless".

Since then, an emboldened Macron has been making mistakes. Part of that might be due to the very nature of the French presidency and the almost limitless powers invested in the head of state. Macron might have begun overplaying his hand.

Recently, he attempted another diplomatic coup by bringing warring Libyan factions to the negotiating table. Macron got the two principal Libyan protagonists talking and they promised to hold presidential and legislative elections next year.

Neither the European Union nor Italy were either included in the talks. The reaction in Rome was one of unrestrained fury. After all, the majority of migrants coming to Europe set sail from Libya and Italy has long called for international help in dealing with search, rescue and resettlement operations, receiving only lip service from the international community.

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In his dealings with Italy, Macron has appeared to take the high-handed, somewhat condescending manner that characterises France's historic attitude towards its transalpine neighbour.

At the G20 summit last month the French president came under fire both at home but particularly abroad for suggesting Africa's challenges were "civilisational" and that providing financial aid would be pointless when "there are countries where women are having seven or eight children".

To add to Italian ire, Macron took the snap decision to nationalise (albeit temporarily) STX, the giant shipyard that makes the world's biggest ocean liners, to prevent it from falling into Italian hands, going back on a deal that had the benediction of an earlier French government.

Macron caught the popular French imagination and coasted to victory defeating the extreme Right candidate Marine Le Pen. Subsequently, his political movement, Republique En Marche won an absolute majority in parliament giving him almost absolute powers to move ahead with his agenda which is a mix of market-friendly labour reforms with a dose of old-fashioned welfareism.

But critics now say that Macron has betrayed his campaign promises with a slew of budget cuts that will affect students and the poor, whereas cuts in wealth tax will favour the wealthiest 10% in France. He also proposed deep cuts to military budgets that drew an angry response from the chief of the armed services that led to a nasty public showdown terminating in the army chief's resignation.

These incidents have sown a certain malaise about how Macron views his presidential function. "Monarchical rather than Presidential," was how one newspaper described Macron's understanding his office. He has said he would prefer to govern through decree than lengthy parliamentary debate, a proposition certainly not to everyone's taste.

The French have a strange relationship with their president. They seem unsure as to what they really want him to be. They disliked the humility and "normality" of Hollande as much as they disliked the brash, bling-bling showiness of Sarkozy. Their ideal remains General de Gaulle who managed to combine all the desired qualities: Powerful as a king, but democratic; strong, but not autocratic; self-assured, but not over the top; intellectual but not a show off, stately and not cheap.

It's a difficult balancing act. As Macron with the party that bears his initials (En Marche) is beginning to find out.

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STOP TO WATCH A CHIRPING BIRD - IT'S A NATURAL WAY TO CONNECT WITH NATURE

Chaitanya Nagar

One wonders why is it that as we grow older we often lose our sensitivity to nature. The other evening, as I was walking with a group of students, they were so attentive; looking closely at trees. It was amazing to watch their excitement when they spotted a bird. One girl commented on the sharpness of its beak. She could see the blue lines that ran down from its throat to the belly. Her eyes lit up and I could see how childlike curiosity is such a precious thing and how

essential it is to find happiness in what nature has offered us. The name or facts about the bird was not important; all that seemed important was the intent observation of a gift of nature. Unfortunately, because of our preoccupation with materialistic things, we lose touch with life that is pulsating all around us. I also noticed how bird-watching can be an easy way to take us back to nature. Birds seem to be the ideal spokespersons of the natural world. Easily seen at all places, in all seasons, they seem to be carrying a special

message for us, if we care to listen. One doesn't need to be an ornithologist in order to become interested in birds. We have an innate interest in them, but we lose it because we begin to find excitement and entertainment in artificial things. I am reminded of a beautiful quote from the famous American writer Lois Lowry: "Keep a green tree in your heart and perhaps the singing bird will come." (Inner Voice comprises contributions from our readers. The views expressed are personal.)