

THE WEDNESDAY INTERVIEW | ARUN K. SINGH

‘We can defeat terrorism by upholding the unity of our society’

The former diplomat on the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, India-Pakistan ties, and the security situation in Kashmir

VARGHESE K. GEORGE

Arun K. Singh was Indian Ambassador to the U.S., France and Israel, and served in various capacities in the Ministry of External Affairs, including dealing with Afghanistan post-2001. Now a teacher, commentator and keen observer of geopolitics, Mr. Singh discusses in this interview the evolving situation in Afghanistan and how it is linked to the security scenario in Jammu and Kashmir. Excerpts:

The U.S. appears to be planning an exit from Afghanistan after making a deal with the Taliban. How do you assess the evolving situation?

■ The U.S. under President Donald Trump clearly wants to pull out of Afghanistan. This is not something new. Even under former President Barack Obama, there was a concerted attempt to pull out of Afghanistan. There is a certain amount of wariness in American society about this prolonged involvement in Afghanistan. It has now gone on for almost 18 years. There have been costs, economic and social. Obama was not able to do it, partly due to the push from the U.S. military and partly because he was worried that if there was a major terrorist attack in the U.S. after the pullout, and sourced from Pakistan or Afghanistan... that would have been devastating. The U.S. also did not want to convey the message that it lost in Afghanistan. Then there would have been wider consequences.

Trump and his politics are different. I think he is in a position to handle the consequences of pulling out even if there is a subsequent attack in the U.S. Their challenge now is that the military is pushing for a slow draw-down, as they don't want to create the impression that they have been defeated and leave, like they did in Vietnam. They would like to make an agreement on a political solution, and even if that collapses after a few

months, the U.S. cannot be held responsible.

This is causing a lot of anxiety among groups within Afghanistan. The Afghan President has concerns. The Taliban is reaching out to different countries and groups within Afghanistan, barring the government. Much will depend on whether the Taliban is negating what happened over the last 18 years or accepting the broad parameters of the Afghan Constitution; whether it accommodates others, shows more moderation and also talks to the government. If it is not willing to do that, there will be further instability.

What chances do you see of the Taliban moderating and accepting the broad parameters of the present Constitution?

■ At the moment it looks difficult. The Taliban has managed to create an impression that the present effort is not succeeding, and it has an edge militarily. It also perceives the U.S. as being keen to withdraw from Afghanistan. I don't think it would be willing to make much compromise. Also, there is the question of whether Pakistan is willing to accept an independent and autonomous Afghanistan. Pakistan will be tempted to think that it sustained the Taliban for 18 years and now if the Taliban is back in power, it can re-establish its pre-2001 equity in Afghanistan. That then raises the question of how much independence the Taliban will be able to exercise with re-



B.V. MOORTHY

gard to Pakistan.

Regardless of how the U.S. withdrawal happens, the Taliban will consider this as its victory, right?

■ The Taliban will consider it a victory, many in Pakistan will also consider it a victory. Since 2001, Pakistan has been under tremendous pressure from the U.S. to give up support for the Taliban, for the Haqqani network. Pakistan has managed to sustain its support for these groups, risking its ties with the U.S.

After the exit of the Soviets from Afghanistan, Islamists had claimed they would defeat the Western capitalist system. Will they feel vindicated?

■ Yes, they will. There will be a reinforced argument that the radical Islamists forces defeated the Soviets, and now they have defeated the world's most powerful country. It will certainly encourage extremist tendencies in the Islamic world. We will see the impact of this in diffe-

It is clearly at the behest of Pakistan that China is giving Masood Azhar cover. All the reports suggest that there are very deep links between Azhar and the ISI.

rent parts of the world. In Syria, Iraq, and other parts of the Gulf, Africa, and even European countries.

For the Islamists, Kashmir is also part of the same continuum. How do you think the situation in Afghanistan will influence the situation in Kashmir?

■ Clearly, there are some links. If you see reports about the Pulwama attack, people who were fighting in Afghanistan earlier put together the IED that was used. Afghanistan was, in the past, used to train terrorists for action in India. When the IC-814 hijacking happened [in 1999], the released terrorists were taken to Kabul and they reportedly had meetings with Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden. There is a

link between Afghanistan and Kashmir: the entity that controls both is the ISI [Inter Services Intelligence]. In the 1990s, when the challenges in Kashmir flared up, one of the factors fanning those was the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Besides being a morale booster, this could also lead to redeployment of personnel from the Afghan front to Kashmir.

■ Yes, unless there is continued instability in Afghanistan. If they get free, they could be deployed elsewhere.

Pakistan is at the centre of all these calculations. The U.S. was categorical in calling out Pakistan after Pulwama. How does it square with its priorities in Afghanistan?

■ India must continue to explain to the world the challenge that Pakistan is posing to global stability. Not every country faces those challenges in the same fashion as India does. We are right next

door. But it is not just India. Recently, Afghanistan and Iran came out with statements directly accusing Pakistan. Attacks in the U.S. and the U.K. have been sourced to Pakistan. At the same time, we should be aware of the limit to what one can achieve in the short term. Each country looks at its relationship with Pakistan from the perspective of its own interest. Of all statements from other countries on Pulwama, one can say there is widespread support for India, but very few countries have directly named Pakistan. The U.S. specifically named Pakistan and asked for measures against terrorists; in the French statement, there is a reference to cross-border terrorism. All the other countries made general statements on terrorism. So one has to understand the limits. Three countries are critical for Pakistan. One is China, for political support, military equipment and investment. China will not discontinue its support. Saudi Arabia will continue its support for Pakistan, which it sees as a large Muslim country where its interests are critical. When MBS [Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman] was under international pressure, [Pakistan Prime Minister] Imran Khan went to support him. Similarly, the U.S., despite all the current challenges in the relations, does not want to burn all its bridges with Pakistan. Despite all that has happened, it has not declared Pakistan a terrorist state as that would disrupt diplomatic engagement.

India-China ties also keep oscillating. How will China respond to the current tensions between India and Pakistan?

■ We will have to wait and watch. China has not come

100% to the side of Pakistan. China sees Pakistan as a useful partner to challenge India, but it will not come fully in support of Pakistan and against India. In Kargil, in 1997, it did not fully support Pakistan. It also made the right noises along with the international community during Kargil and after 2008, asking Pakistan to control terrorism. It would not want to lose India completely. Due to two issues - China's opposition to India's membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group and on the question of declaring [Jaish-e-Mohammed chief] Masood Azhar a global terrorist - the mood about China in India is negative. But I think it would be very careful to not get 100% on the side of Pakistan.

Why do you think China is staking so much on one individual, Masood Azhar?

■ I think it is clearly at the request of Pakistan. All the reports suggest that there are very deep links between Azhar and the ISI. Pakistan does not want to be in a position where it is compelled to take action against him. Azhar has remained loyal to the Pakistani establishment through thick and thin, and has been a great leverage for it in Afghanistan and India. It is clearly at the behest of Pakistan that China is giving him cover.

Given this context, how should India approach the conflict in Kashmir?

■ There are two dimensions to the problem in Jammu and Kashmir. One is the external - cross-border terrorism, state support from Pakistan, the situation in Afghanistan, etc. Then there is an internal dimension - the relationship between the Central government and the State government and the people of Jam-

mu and Kashmir. The two have to be addressed, broadly speaking, in separate tracks. The radicalisation of youths in the State must be addressed urgently and politically. It has to be a battle of hearts and minds.

After every terrorist strike, there is a flurry of comments that broadly say India is paying the price for being soft. The argument is that India should have used more military force earlier. How do you see that?

■ A challenge like this has to be handled in a long-term framework, though short-term steps are necessary. In 2001-2002, after the attack on our Parliament, the government took a lot of short-term measures - diplomatic and military, including mobilisation at the border. It had some impact and a message was conveyed to the world and Pakistan. President Pervez Musharraf made some moves, such as banning Lashkar-e-Taiba and JeM. But short-term measures cannot do away with a problem of this nature. If one were to look at what the U.S. has done since 2001, nobody would accuse it of being a soft state or not having used power. But despite having used all that power, it has not quite achieved the objectives it set out to achieve. Or look at France and its use of hard military power in Africa. That has its utility, but that cannot resolve a problem. So it has to be a sustained effort, a multidimensional effort. It has to be handled with care and patience. One clear objective of Pakistan is to use terrorism to create a divide among communities in India, and that must be thwarted. If the people of India show unity and solidarity as these challenges are mounted, that would be a clear defeat of terrorism.

SINGLE FILE

Real tests of leadership

Where does Rahul Gandhi stand on jobs, secularism and democracy?

ANITA INDER SINGH



Rahul Gandhi's leadership of the Congress is being tested. Where does he stand on jobs, secularism and democracy? His promises of farm loan waivers and a minimum income guarantee scheme are populist. In the long run, more Indians will need jobs and the economic changes necessary to create them. If voted to power, what will the Congress do to generate employment? Unless he spells out his plans in detail, Mr. Gandhi's talk of progress will ring as hollow as that of the ruling BJP.

Mr. Gandhi's idea of a minimum income guarantee resonates with the BJP's idea of a universal basic income (UBI), which was presented by Arvind Subramanian when he was Chief Economic Adviser. It was rejected by then Vice Chairman of NITI Aayog, Arvind Panagariya, on the grounds that India lacks the fiscal room to implement such a scheme. The only country that has experimented with a UBI is Finland, which has a per capita income of about \$41,000, compared to India's \$2,134. Finland's UBI reportedly made more people happy, but did not create jobs. It also imposed an extra burden on the state. More generally, many Scandinavians and Germans would probably say that a country has to create wealth in order to create welfare. How does that sound to Indians?

Then there is the question of religious issues. Recently, the Congress government in Madhya Pradesh invoked the National Security Act against three men accused of cow slaughter. While Mr. Gandhi's Congress is making the BJP's authoritarianism an election issue, this act shows that the Congress government can be as high-handed as the BJP government it seeks to displace.

Especially at a time when high unemployment figures are making headlines, it should be remembered that the cow slaughter ban not only impacts the beef export industry, which is worth about \$4 billion, but also implies coercion against those Indians who are not Hindus. Will Mr. Gandhi's soft Hindutva build new social bridges? Divided on the issue, some Congresspersons have asked whether cows are more important than human beings. It is precisely these divisions that will test Mr. Gandhi's mettle.

Mr. Gandhi has also lambasted the BJP's use of Aadhaar as an instrument of authoritarianism, intended to disempower citizens. Will the Congress do away with the relevant legislation on Aadhaar if it comes to power? What will the party do to ensure that a Congress government will not misuse authority in an analogous manner?

All these issues - jobs, equality, and secularism - are intertwined. Voters would like to know how Mr. Gandhi's Congress will handle them. To paraphrase Martin Luther King Jr., leadership is about moulding consensus and showing the way.

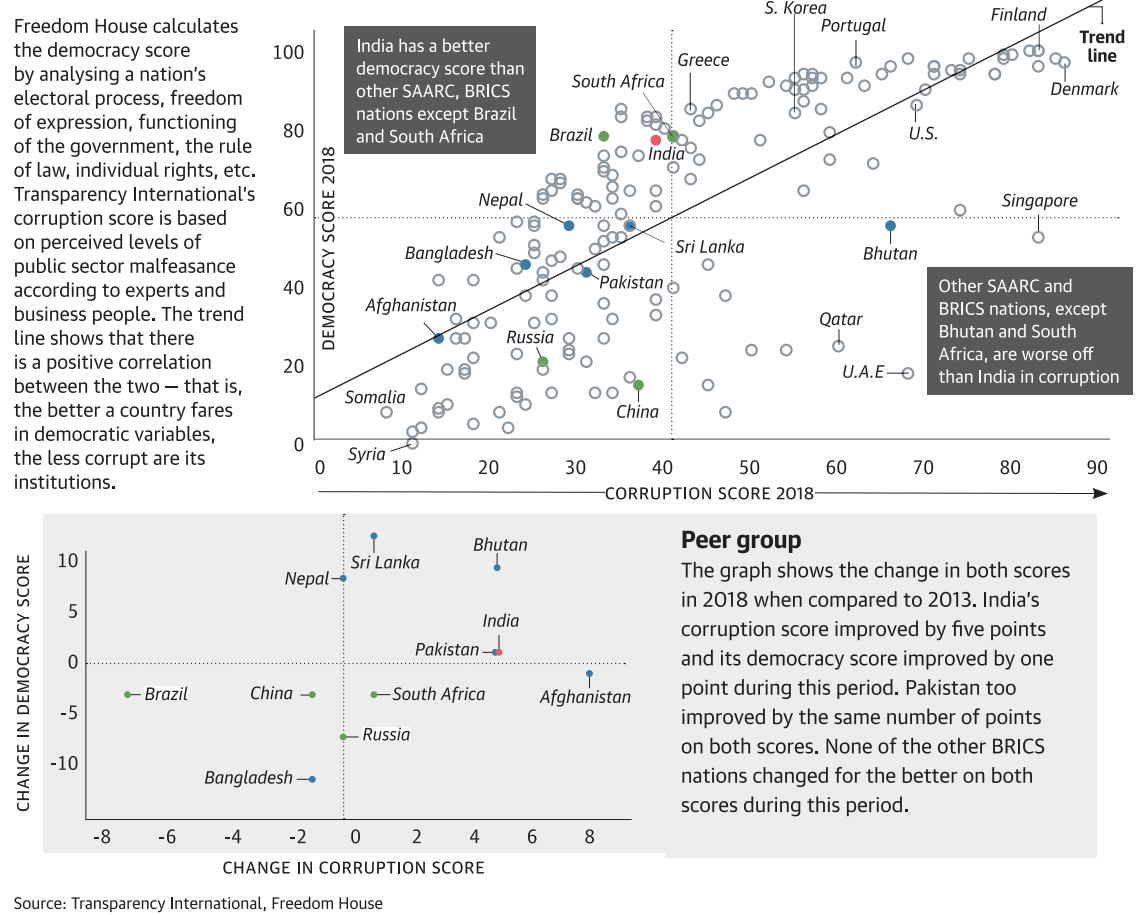
The writer is a founding professor of the Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution in New Delhi



DATA POINT

Corruption and democracy

Nations which are relatively more corrupt tend to have weaker democratic institutions. India was among the aberrations in 2018. It registered an above average democracy score of 77 (0: autocracy, 100: full democracy) and a below average corruption score of 41 (0: highly corrupt, 100: very clean)



FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 20, 1969

Surplus railway budget

The Railways have for the first time in the last four years come out with a surplus budget and that too without resort to increase in passenger fares and freights. Presenting the budget to the Lok Sabha [February 19, New Delhi], the new Minister of Railways, Dr. Ram Subhag Singh, estimated a small surplus of Rs. 1.91 crores in 1969/70 after fully discharging the Railways' dividend liability, to the general revenues at Rs. 159 crores, the highest so far. The Railway Minister said that the Railways expected to lift about nine million tonnes of additional revenue earning traffic and carry an extra three per cent of passenger traffic in the coming year.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 20, 1919

Hinduism and Sea-Voyages.

(Correspondence)

Sir, We are under the deepest debt of gratitude to Mr. Kasturi Ranga Aiyangar for the clear terms in which in his Conjeevaram speech he determined the principles of solution of conflicts between Orthodox Hinduism and Nationalism. "I have no hesitation in saying that if there be any conflict between the principles of Nationalism and Hinduism, which I believe there is not, I will pursue the path marked out by the former." It is hoped that no narrow construction will be placed on this statement saving only sea-voyages involved in political deputations from the prohibitions of orthodoxy by the weight of his authority. I trust that not only political deputations to England, but every action aimed at "the elevation and the good of the masses of our countrymen and the attainment of national unity and progress" will be included in the category of things not to be obstructed, but to be encouraged by those who heard or read this splendid exhortation.

C. Rajagopalachari. Salem, February 18.

CONCEPTUAL

Turkheimer's laws

BIOLOGY

This refers to a set of laws regarding the heritability of various behavioural traits and the relative influence of genes and environment on human behaviour. The first Turkheimer law states that all human behavioural traits are heritable. The second law states that the influence of genes on human behaviour is greater than the family environment. The final law argues that a significant number of behavioural traits may be explained neither by genes nor the family environment. Turkheimer's laws were proposed by American psychologist Eric Turkheimer in his 2000 paper "Three Laws of Behavior Genetics and What They Mean".

MORE ON THE WEB

Why is Mohammed bin Salman's India visit crucial?

http://bit.ly/SaudiPrinceInIndia