

An election of 'real' issues, role of a credible alternative: Ways to read the battle ahead

Before the Pulwama terror attack and IAF strikes on the Balakot Jaish camp, the crisis of farms and jobs was the biggest talking point of the Lok Sabha election campaign. In this Conversation held before the slide in ties with Pakistan, political scientist and activist Yogendra Yadav discussed the nature of the twin crises with *The Indian Express* editors Ravish Tiwari and Harish Damodaran



On whether agrarian distress could be the Narendra Modi government in 2019 what corruption was to the Manmohan Singh government in 2014

Democracy and secularism are not the issues on which the government is on the back foot, it is on the back foot on the economy, and principally on the issues of farmers and unemployment. They are playing out somewhat differently, even though it isn't as though one is a bigger crisis than the other — but on farming, I think it is fair to say that there is a very deep anger.

By and large, the BJP has not been the preferred party of the Indian farmer. 2014 was an exception. A lot of farmers in Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh voted for the BJP for the first time — because there was this sense of hope and positivity, that sound development and growth was going to take place, etc. But thereafter there has been a series of disappointments, and the ordinary farmer appears to have made up his or her mind that this is not his or her kind of party.

This is probably not so much the case on the unemployment issue, which may be a bigger crisis, but at the moment the farmers' crisis has become politically very important. The results of the Assembly elections in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh were only a partial reflection of that crisis. In Rajasthan, the Congress should have won 150-160 seats, but they won barely 100. So, there is anger, there is resentment, but there isn't a good agency that can channelise it, that can provide an alternative. If that were to become the case, or if that appears to be the case, one could expect almost a rural wave against the BJP. As of now, we cannot be sure — but that is a possibility.

On whether farmers' issues have decided any earlier election, and why they should do so this time

The last time the farmers' agenda was on the national centre stage was I think in 1988... at the time of the famous rally by Mahendra Singh Tikait, the time when M D Nanjundaswamy in Karnataka and Sharad Joshi in Maharashtra were carrying out these big agitations.

Which was the last general election in which farmers' issues were the prime issue? None. In the last 15 general elections, I can't think of even one in which rural, agrarian, farmers' issues were centre stage. I can think of some state elections where they may have played a role, for example, when Chaudhary Devi Lal in 1987 offered farm loan waivers and swept to power... but nationally, none.

In this sense, this is the most exciting thing (in this election). After a long time, you may be looking at a general election in which real issues may be foregrounded, issues of farmers, issues of unemployment, may come to the fore. That's a big change.

Why should it happen now? Well, the supply side of politics and the demand side of politics often don't match... the idea that you have the biggest rebellion at the biggest pain-point is simply not true. For example, a lot of us tend to measure farmers' distress by suicide figures. But suicide figures do not reflect farmers' pain-point, at least in the specifics. The worst affected areas of Indian farming — Bundelkhand, a part of Rayalaseema, a part of Marathwada, some parts of Gujarat and Rajasthan, parts of Bihar — see some of the lowest suicide rates. So suicides and farmers' distress do not have a strong one-to-one relationship. Similarly, times of farmers' distress and times and occasions of farmers' movements are not directly related.

Mr Modi's regime saw two drought years followed by a global and domestic fall in prices. When there was drought, the farmer blamed God, and when in the third year he at last had a bumper crop, he found that prices had crashed. That was the time when his patience wore thin; that was also the moment that saw a significant coming together of farmers' movements. The All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee put more than 200 organisations on the same platform, and farmers from Tamil Nadu and farmers from Himachal, farmers from Gujarat and farmers from Assam, all came together. Remember, the three big leaders of Indian farmers in the 1980s, Tikait, Joshi and Nanjundaswamy, never sat on the same stage.

Second, instead of giving a large, 40-point agenda to the government, the movement focussed on just two points: remunerative prices and freedom from indebtedness. There is so much diversity in Indian agriculture, say from the coffee plantations of Tamil Nadu and Kerala to the rice cultivators of Punjab and Haryana, that they could be living on two dif-



Yogendra Yadav with Ravish Tiwari (left) and Harish Damodaran; the engaged audience at the Express Explained Conversation in New Delhi. Yadav explained a range of issues related to the coming Lok Sabha elections and the farms and jobs situation to readers of *The Indian Express*. Amit Mehra

ferent continents... But this movement found a common thread that could be articulated. So, organisational effort plus a structural crisis created this situation, and of course, rather indifferent handling by the government. Whatever Mr Modi might say today, the fact is that for the first three years, farmers did not exist in his mindspace at all. That's what gave farmers a certain sense that they were excluded.

On the similarities and the differences between the Anna Hazare movement and the farmers' movement — the BJP gained from the first one

This happens across the world. An organised political party, which is in a position to displace the ruling party, takes advantage of a movement. Think of the 1970s student movement in Bihar and Gujarat. In terms of differences, the anti-corruption movement being a 'middle-class' movement, it attracted media attention of a scale and quality that was unprecedented. Let me give you an ex-

ample of how this works. In October 2015, a drought year, we did a 4,700-km yatra from northern Karnataka to southern Haryana. The situation in Marathwada and Bundelkhand was critical, so we did a *padayatra* there. We wrote a series of letters, called journalists every day, tried everything, but got no coverage. None at all! And then, an extraordinary thing happened: a cricket match... an IPL match, was cancelled in Mumbai. That evening, my phone just wouldn't stop buzzing: "Mr Yadav, there is a drought, what are your opinions on droughts?" And this was the *tenth* month of the drought! We had carried out *yatras* after *yatras*, called everyone up, but until the drought disrupted the Indian deity, cricket and IPL, it did not even exist!

It's only in the last one year that the tide has turned and the distress of the Indian farmer has come to be noticed. That is a very big difference. The farmers' movements of the 1980s used to be very anti-city. When farmers marched to Delhi, they wouldn't care

about the disruption they caused; it would be like India vs Bharat. But if you see the recent Mumbai march, it was in a sense a turning point. These were largely *adivasi* farmers — and they decided that no, we don't want to leave the people in the city disturbed and disrupted. We want to make friends. And this is what turned the media tide. In the march that we held on November 30, we distributed a leaflet that said 'Please forgive us for the inconvenience that we have caused you; that was not our intention'. It was picked up by FM radio. So, farmers' movements have learnt some new techniques, but in terms of media attention and coverage, there is still a long way to go. I talk about media because honestly, governments and policy makers care only if media pays attention.

On the reasons for the BJP's defeats in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh — farmers' anger, unkept promises, or anti-incumbency?

The initial buzz was that farmers' anger



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had defeated the BJP. But the situation is more nuanced. While these three states are similar in many ways, where was the farmers' crisis the worst? I would have said Rajasthan, then MP, and then Chhattisgarh. There is the factor of general acceptance of the government — the factor of 'anti-incumbency', as it is generally called. Anti-incumbency was the highest in Rajasthan, then in MP, and then in Chhattisgarh. Or so I thought. Then there was the factor of availability of an alternative — and its viability. In Chhattisgarh, Raman Singh's government had established some reputation for doing better PDS than other states, and had initially also set up a better procurement system, but it had also made a very big promise — a certain price for paddy and a bonus — on which it reneged.

At the same time, the Congress as a party was uncharacteristically active on the ground in Chhattisgarh, leading agitations, protests, etc. Also, it made a specific promise about purchasing paddy for Rs 2,500, and this promise was believed. Farmers actually withheld their paddy for the elections, and they actually got the price. That was the critical thing in Chhattisgarh.

In Rajasthan, the principal reason why the extent of the BJP's defeat did not reflect the extent of farmers' anger, was the Congress party, whose leaders proposed nothing, and were seen as investing less in defeating the BJP and more in defeating each other.

In Telangana, there was distress, but the government was seen to be addressing that

through the Rythu Bandhu scheme. Raman Singh's reputation too, was initially of someone who was trying to do something, responding to farmers — as was Shivraj Singh Chouhan's, but never Vasundhara Raje's. So to my mind, the political factors of how good the opposition is and how much of a credible alternative it is seen to be offering, played a very significant role and did not allow anger to be translated into votes.

On whether it will be agrarian distress or other political factors that would dominate the discourse in the elections

Saying 'rural distress' probably captures the situation better than saying 'agrarian distress'. I think it is fair to say that rural distress will be one of the factors, though obviously not the only factor, because for the Lok Sabha, we don't have one election across the country. In the 80s, people voted for a CM as if they were choosing a PM, in the 90s, they started voting for a PM as if they were choosing a CM. That continued in the first decade of the new century. 2014 was different. The country voted as if they were all choosing a PM. We can be reasonably sure that we are now back to the standard model of 1996, 1998, 1999, 2004, 2009. Which is, the principal choices will be made at the state level — and the moment that happens, we have a fractured verdict.

The issue of the rural will play out in different ways in different states. So in Tamil Nadu for instance, rural distress is clearly not the real thing. There is a joke of a government there right now, and obviously people will respond to that first of all. Again, Kerala has such a different polity that it won't be correct to expect some national issue to play out in Kerala.

To my mind, the arena where we should focus on, which is going to be the real 'happening place' in this election, is the Hindi belt. This is because the BJP's principal success in 2014 came almost entirely from this belt, which, from Bihar to Rajasthan, including Himachal and Haryana, has 226 seats. The BJP won 192 out of these 226 seats; with allies, they controlled 203. This is where rural distress can become a factor cutting across states. In a mild way, not as the only factor — but to my mind, rural distress, which has a component of farmers' distress as well as a component of unemployment, is something that could hurt the BJP. And although there would be statewise distinctions — like in UP, the SP-BSP alliance will be the real way of aggregating it — to my mind this would be the underlying factor that would work to the BJP's disadvantage in this entire belt.

My broad sense is that all the BJP's gains and losses outside the Hindi belt would cancel each other out. The BJP would gain a bit in Odisha and Bengal, and would lose a bit in Gujarat, Maharashtra and Karnataka, so the real action will be in these 226 seats — and that's where the economy will really play a role.

(Edited excerpts from the Conversation)

NEXT WEEK: PART 2, MUMBAI, WITH SUHAS PALSHIKAR



The Indian EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Justice and the manifesto

In election season, let's talk of access to justice and judicial infrastructure



UPENDRA BAXI

UNHOSTILE TAKEOVER

In Mindtree vs L&T, there is need to divest battle of its sentimental charge, leave decision to shareholders

IN THE WORLD of fiercely fought corporate takeovers, it is rare to hear words such as pyaar (love) and dil (heart) being used by a bidder and aimed at the target company for acquisition. That's what makes the ongoing battle for control of the Bengaluru-based mid-size software services firm, Mindtree, which is facing a threat of a takeover by one of India's engineering conglomerates, L&T, a unique case in this country's relatively brief history of such acquisitions. L&T, which bought 20.4 per cent of the stake held by VG Siddhartha, the single largest shareholder of Mindtree, when he sought to exit the company after staying invested for two decades, has made an open offer to bump up its shareholding to well over 51 per cent — offering Rs 981 a share to the software firm's shareholders. The original promoters of Mindtree are fiercely resisting L&T's unsolicited offer, terming it as a hostile bid and posing questions to the bidder including whether it could build a great technology business without destroying another firm.

That the attempt to acquire the company has become an emotional issue for the software services firm is clear from the fact that one of its founders, Subroto Bagchi, has said that Mindtree has not been designed as an asset to be bought or sold and that it is a national resource with a unique culture. Mindtree's promoters now plan to ward off the attack by offering a buy-back of shares. Unlike some of the takeover battles of the past, this one is different. There is no foreign predator involved, nor is the potential acquirer in a business that is completely alien to that of the target firm. Indeed, it could be argued that there are some synergies in terms of both being professionally managed enterprises without the overhang of any family groupings.

Takeovers, even if hostile, can be value accretive for shareholders as they have the potential to lead to greater efficiencies and scale and can shake up complacent managements. To that extent, such attempts should be welcome as long as there is no asset stripping and the bidder's interest is not transient. It is true that new age firms with a dispersed shareholding face the threat of a takeover but ultimately, the best shield for them and in this case, Mindtree, are the company's shareholders. The emotional appeal by the original promoters may be in order, but it is important that they too recognise that having chosen to publicly list their firm, it is for the shareholders to take a hard look at the financial metrics of both the acquirer and the incumbent, the cultural fit and prospects, and decide whose offer is to be welcomed.

TO MALE, WITH CARE

As Solih renews the Maldives' traditional political warmth to Delhi, India can't afford to return to its complacent ways

EVER SINCE THE general elections in the Maldives last September, Delhi's political position has begun to rapidly improve in the island republic. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was an honoured guest at the swearing-in of the new prime minister, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, in November. Now, the external affairs minister, Sushma Swaraj, has returned from what appears to be a productive visit to Male. On his part, the foreign minister of Maldives, Abdulla Shahid, reiterated the new government's commitment to the "India First" policy. He also promised that Male "would remain sensitive towards India's security and strategic concerns". Shahid and Swaraj also agreed that India and the Maldives would step up coordination to enhance regional maritime security. The context of these affirmations is the comprehensive tilt towards China by Solih's predecessor, Abdulla Yameen, during 2013-18. As China embraced Yameen, there was speculation that the Maldives was slipping into Beijing's strategic orbit.

As Solih renews Male's traditional political warmth to Delhi, India can't afford to return to its complacent ways. For one, Delhi should be acutely aware that China is here to stay in the South Asian waters. China's impressive economic muscle, ability to deliver on massive infrastructure projects on short order, and a clear determination to raise its naval profile in the Indian Ocean, make Beijing a formidable rival in the Maldives. The present government in Colombo came to power in early 2015 on a platform critical of Mahinda Rajapaksa's sweetheart infrastructure deals with China. It did not take long for Colombo to extend some of the very same projects on more favourable terms to China. If Beijing could leverage its debt diplomacy and political pressure to make the new rulers in Colombo fall in line, it could do the same in Male.

Swaraj's visit did not see the announcement of any major Indian projects. Nor is it clear if India's limited budgetary support would be enough to overcome Male's current challenges. Delhi must never forget to see Male's proclamations on "putting India first" in the domestic context of the Maldives. The political elite of tiny Maldives is fractious and the structures regulating competition are fragile. All of the factions are acutely aware of the geopolitical value of the Maldives in the Indian Ocean. In their competition for wealth and power, different factions are ready to mobilise support from the major powers and play one against the other. It is up to the next government in Delhi to devise a long term strategy that builds on India's geographic proximity to the Maldives, the imperatives of economic integration, the logic of mutually beneficial security cooperation and the commitment to sustained tending of bilateral relations.

AGAINST THE ODDS

A Nigerian refugee wins a chess championship. But in Trump's America, Adewumi may need more than determination

IN 2017, THE year Donald Trump was sworn in as president of the US, a child and his family of three fled their home in northern Nigeria fearing persecution by Boko Haram terrorists. Eventually they reached New York and settled in a homeless shelter. A little over a year later, the child, eight years old now, has been declared the winner of his age category at the New York State chess championship.

Tanitoluwa Adewumi's story follows the kind of incredible arc that inspires — and provokes questions about the nature of global political power, its imbalances and the steely resilience of the human spirit that can override them. Forced out of home and into a homeless shelter in Manhattan, a pastor helped Adewumi get into the local elementary school. The school had a part-time chess teacher who taught his class how to play. The story of his journey, though, might only remain a blip on the radar of a post-Trump world. POTUS has been vocal about the need to aggressively curb illegal immigration. In 2018, Trump tinkered with the refugee resettlement programme, portraying all refugees as a security threat, and cut resettlement admission numbers to a historic low — 22,491 refugees were resettled in the US in fiscal year 2018, roughly half the 45,000 cap. Resettlement agencies have been squeezed out of operations financially. In September, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced official plans to admit no more than 30,000 refugees in fiscal year 2019, in a bid to ostensibly improve national security.

It is hard to tether talent to circumstance. However, the stark reality is, in Trump's America, opportunities for refugees like Adewumi, are on the slide. Adewumi is gearing up for the elementary national championship in May and his family's asylum request hearing is in August. Talent might pull Adewumi through in the former. But without the privilege of a secure livelihood, the universality of talent holds true only in theory.

NOW THAT THE "festival of democracy" — the schedule for the 17th general elections to Lok Sabha — is announced and the season of manifesto drafting has begun, is it not the solemn duty of all citizens to advance their suggestions for meaningful changes in the administration of justice? Effective programmes for action should engage all political parties as a matter of people's basic human rights, not as acts of political largesse or grandstanding.

Manifestoes will do well to acknowledge the paramount constitutional governance obligation as per Directive Principle Article 38-A, providing a fundamental obligation of the state to "secure that the operation of the legal system promotes justice, on a basis of equal opportunity, and shall, in particular, provide free legal aid, by suitable legislation or schemes or in any other way, to ensure that opportunities for securing justice are not denied to any citizen by reason of economic or other disabilities".

Far from being a provision only for legal aid, this Article guarantees a basic human right to a just social and political order under the Constitution. And "other disabilities" go beyond economic disability and also need to be fully deciphered lest, as Justice Krishna Iyer memorably used to say, the administration of criminal justice become criminal administration of justice.

Access to justice now also means access to judicial infrastructure. The Supreme Court in 2012 has held that "it is the constitutional duty of the government to provide the citizens of the country with, judicial infrastructure and means of access to justice" so that "every person is able to receive an expeditious, inexpensive, and fair trial". And it rules that "financial limitations or constraints" may not be urged to defeat this right.

Already, a leading national party is reported as considering deletion of the offence of sedition (Section 124-A of the IPC) — a colonial legal provision wholly at odds with the values and rights under the Constitution. Surely, sedition as a way of governance is opposed to the Constitution and may itself be regarded as seditious. One hopes that a re-

view of similar colonial laws (like the Officials Secrets Act) will find a place in all manifestoes.

Adjudicatory polices on bail and some procedures that allow long periods of pre-trial detention also need a close review; the present position where suspects are arrested and detained in jails for a long time only to be acquitted after a decade or more is simply unconstitutional because co-citizens have a fundamental right of access to justice, well recognised by the Constitution and the Supreme Court. Locking up suspects and throwing away the keys evades the constitutional discipline on power.

As a first step, we should reiterate the basic assumptions of a civilised criminal justice system that maintains a few self-evident truths: One, one is sent to jail as punishment and not for punishment; two, the difference between prosecution and persecution is civilisationally precious; the law is not a programme of revenge but a tableau of legal punishments for well-defined crimes; three, a custodial inmate, or a prisoner has all the rights (save freedom of movement) of a citizen, person and human being not to be taken away by degrading, cruel and inhumane punishment or treatment; four, presumption of guilt should never rule or replace the presumption of innocence; and five, no one should be allowed to forget that the accused, defendant, or the convict has a right to be, and to remain, fully human.

Second, the miscarriage of justice even under the rarest of rare situations has been highlighted by the Supreme Court as late as 2019. Ankush Shinde, Rajya Shinde, Raju Shinde, Ambadas Shinde, Babu Shinde and Surya were acquitted and ordered to be released from Yerawada Central Prison by the Supreme Court on March 5 after having spent most of their jail time of 16 years on death row. Three courts — Nashik Sessions Court, Bombay High Court and Supreme Court — between June 2003 and April 2009 had found them guilty and sentenced them to death. On a reappraisal of the evidence, they were acquitted and an inquiry against the investigating officer was ordered, Anup

Surendranath (IE, March 12), commenting on this "incredible tragedy" and "a deep scar on our humanity", concluded that "such a grave error must trigger the moral honesty to accept that we are playing with fire by keeping the death penalty".

While the Supreme Court's auto-critique and self-correction must be applauded, we may note its rarity as well. Competitive populism at the hustings must flag off a concern, still, by mandating a constitutional amendment requiring that the Supreme Court shall sit as a full Court and with unanimity decide on the award of death penalty till the next Parliament's considered abolition. Already, 160 state members of the United Nations have done so, under the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1989, and one hopes that the Indian exceptionalism knows some limits.

Third, election-eve manifestoes may not any longer turn a Nelson's eye at the widespread practice of torture in custodial institutions, euphemistically called "third degree methods". A poignant example was provided as recently as March 6, when Gufran Alam and Taslim Ansari were reportedly picked up by the police from Ramdiha village (Bihar), in connection with a motorcycle theft case. In the evening, they were found dead and their bodies returned the next day. The family discovered on the bodies marks of nailing on hands and legs. An inquiry has been ordered and an FIR has been made against unknown persons and probably some ad hoc compensation will be awarded.

Perhaps, the Supreme Court may expedite its directions to the executive, as urged by Ashwani Kumar in his anti-torture petition. But given 70 years of not so benign neglect of custodial and investigative torture, would it be unreasonable of the people to expect that there will be an all-round consensus towards priority legislative action against torture in the next Parliament?

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YOGINDER K ALAGH

IT'S THE ECONOMY, STUPID

Low growth may have a bearing on poll outcomes

IT'S TOO MUCH to expect any major initiatives aimed at resolving serious problems, before June. When the election commissioners were on the move — in scenic Northeast and Kashmir, us mere mortals were biting our nails, waiting for the election dates to be announced. Now that the dates have been announced, the government has run out of next generation projects to announce.

This really does not mean that serious non-Pakistan problems should be totally ignored. At least, business-as-usual decisions could be taken and carried on with the polling fanfare on the side.

The economy is in a coma. Quarterly GDP growth has set a record. It's at a six quarter low. Now we said so, and its well known, given the lags, that seeds of low growth are planted six months earlier. So this writer's forecasts then were kosher, and are coming home now, but that doesn't soften the suffering. At least an attempt can be made to raise investment. The corporate sector will definitely respond, unlike the inaction of investment to the interest rate cut. Incidentally, the reversal of former Reserve Bank governor Urjit Patel's sound interest rate policy meant that the one bright spot, namely inflow of funds, also reversed showing that the government persons on the monetary policy committee (MPC) had caused the dam-

age, which deputy governor Viral Acharya tried to unsuccessfully stop. He seemed not to have the ear of the new central bank governor and was voted out.

Money spent now would add on an element of sincerity to the photo ops of project inaugurations because it could be announced that work is starting and "X" amount is available. Having done scarcity relief, a collector can get going straight away.

Our woes are compounded by the disaster in agriculture. Growth in 2018/19 is sharply lower at 2.7 per cent. Quarter after quarter growth is also disappointing, showing that the basic impulses are missing in each agricultural season. Farm growth at 2.7 per cent in the last kharif (October-December quarter), year-on-year, is distressing, since it reflects policy inadequacy in implementation.

Given this background, the numerous marches by farmers' organisations are understandable. All indications are that the terms of trade for the agricultural sector continue to deteriorate, indicating that our market policy reforms, well-designed at the national level, are not well structured to cover the last mile and do not really reach farmers, particularly the smaller ones, who are in the majority.

Again, it is possible to fund the procurement agencies — the Food Corporation of

India, NAFED, not to mention the NABARD cafeterias planned and available to be started in each state. NABARD also champions farmer producer companies, which in turn are friends of NABARD and so can help in implementation and spending productively at short notice.

In the background of all this not happening, it is not at all surprising that employment surveys show an increase in unemployment rates. It would be good to address this problem rather than shoot the messenger. If funds are spent on employment schemes, despite the leakages, the outcomes will be better, partly because local resources of the pre-requisites of and for rural employment works are available. But of course, such schemes are for the majority poor and not a direct inducement, to use a polite word, to the voter. Hopefully, this will now be an election issue rather than personal abuse.

Bad ideas in a short-sighted system drive out good ones — a policy variant of a banking rule called Gresham's Law, which says that bad money drives out good money. I guess this rule is well-known to people used to those who fled with thousands of crores of rupees!

The writer is an economist and a former Union minister



MARCH 21, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

RURAL POOR STRIKE
THE CAPITAL TODAY witnessed the largest ever gathering of the country's rural poor when thousands of agricultural workers from all over the country gathered at the Boat Club lawns. The march was organised by the CPI-affiliated Bharatiya Khet Mazdoor Union to demand land reforms, jobs for all able-bodied peasants, stoppage of brutalities on Harijans, a machinery for the effective implementation of minimum wages and houses for the rural poor.

INDO-PAK RELATIONS
THE PAKISTAN PRESIDENT, General Zia-ul-Haq has again raised the bogey of Kashmir

by saying "this question is the only hindrance in the quick normalisation" of Indo-Pakistan relations, Radio Pakistan reported today. The Pakistan president told an American columnist in an interview that the problem should be solved in accordance with the UN resolution giving the people of Kashmir a "choice" between India and Pakistan. General Zia also spoke of Kashmir as "Pakistan's lifeline which we cannot forget". He also described the US as a close ally of Pakistan and said the relation between the two countries were "very good."

TEACHERS' PAY
THE JOINT COUNCIL of Delhi Teachers'

Organisations said in a statement late tonight that the teachers will go on a stay-in strike from tomorrow and will boycott the board examinations as well which are scheduled to begin tomorrow. The statement said that the teachers of the New Delhi Municipal Committee schools had also joined their struggle. The chief executive councillor of the Delhi municipality, Kidar Nath Sahani, today made a "last minute appeal" to those teachers who want to boycott the school examinations beginning tomorrow, not to do anything that might spoil the future of about one lakh students. The teachers have been protesting against their low salaries for some weeks.

13 THE IDEAS PAGE

Once upon a hijack

Could the Punjab Police have prevented the hijacked IC 814 flight from taking off to Kandahar? The then Punjab DGP recalls the sequence of events on that fateful day in December 1999



SARABJIT SINGH

A LOT HAS been written about the dramatic hijacking of the Indian Airlines flight from Kathmandu in December 1999. There is currently a political blame-game on. The then BJP-led NDA government is accused of surrendering to the demands of the hijackers. They are accused of escorting the Jaish-e-Mohammad supremo, Masood Azhar, to Kandahar after releasing him from Kot Bhalwal jail in Jammu. Senior intelligence officers were involved in the negotiations with the hijackers and the release of Azhar and the two others, who were exchanged for the hostages.

It is a matter of public record that the then foreign minister, Jaswant Singh, went with the three to Kandahar, where they were released to the Afghan Taliban. In all this revived interest, the apparent failure of the Punjab Police to take action at Amritsar, the only point in India where the hijacked flight landed, has also been dredged up.

As the then Director General of Punjab Police, I would like to place on record my version of the events of that fateful day. There has been much finger pointing against the Punjab Police. But barring a report in one national magazine, then based on a perfunctory talk with me, and AS Dulat's remarks in his book, *Kashmir: The Vajpayee Years*, based on an afternoon lunch on the banks of the Serpentine in Hyde Park, London, no one has bothered to check with me as to what happened at Amritsar that day.

For what it is worth, here's my version.

I had come home to my official residence, in Chandigarh, from a dental appointment that evening. Switching on the television, I saw the news of the hijack. For a few minutes initially, I was blasé about it. In any case, there were few details then. But my own training as a pilot (I hold a private pilot's licence) made me realise that owing to the flight being on a possible flight path to Pakistan, there was a more than even chance that Amritsar might come into the picture, as in an earlier incident.

The late Jagdish Parshad Birdi was then Inspector General of Police, Border Range, Amritsar. I asked him to move two companies of Punjab Police commandos then available with him to the Raja Sansi airport immediately. I also requisitioned the state helicopter, but the Pawan Hans pilots called and told me that they were in Bathinda on duty with the then chief minister, Parkash Singh Badal. Although CM Badal had cleared the chopper for my use, they were prohibited by the Indian Air Force from taking off after sunset.

Sometime later I was told that the hijacked plane had landed in Amritsar. Birdi, with his earthy good sense, had stationed his Deputy Inspector General, Jasmininder Singh, at the airport, and Jasmininder was already then in the ATC (Air Traffic Control) when IC 814 landed.

The plane taxied to the apron and immediately Captain Devi Sharan requested for fuel, saying he had only about nine minutes worth left. Yet he did not switch off his engines, which was odd. I refused the fuel. By now, Jasmininder from his mobile phone



Suvajit Dey

(which were then a rarity), had put me on to Devi Sharan's conversation, which the airport director, VS Mulekar, had wisely put on the ATC public address system. Despite using a pleading tone, the pilot sounded like a brave, composed man in control of himself. Jasmininder also pleaded with me for fuel but I refused. In the meantime, Jasmininder explored the possibilities, found the bowser (the refueling tanker), and called for the operating staff of the same, who had all packed off for the night. That they had to be brought back to the airport gave us a few more precious minutes, though at that time, we could hardly tell how long we had.

By then I was on the phone with Delhi, where I was told that the Central Crisis Management Group was in session. The top brass of the country were there. On their behalf, my interlocutor was my batch mate Shyamal Datta, the then director of the Intelligence Bureau. He asked if I could immobilise the aircraft, one suggestion being that we could maybe puncture the tyres by shooting at them. It was an outlandish suggestion, and I don't know if others were listening at the other end when I used some expletives and asked him if he thought those were cycle tyres. They were huge tubeless tyres, multiple to each wheel, and puncturing them would have set off huge explosions and possibly not had any impact. Shyamal asked if we could disable the plane any other way. I then explained our limitations. The only approach to the fuselage was by the ancient rolling ladder, which would be spotted the minute it rolled. That or any other action would invite reprisals and likely result in casualties among the hostages. We were well-armed with automatic weapons and long-range rifles, but their use would equally invite a response of course, which we could deal with, but also to the passengers and crew. Our own firing would be mainly blind so passenger casualties were very likely. Delhi's response was a vehement "No casualties to passengers". Also, I was asked to hold on as the National Security Guard team was coming.

Here let me clarify that in national level crisis situations, it is the Centre that has overriding authority and states are bound to obey

I was told that the Central Crisis Management Group was in session. The top brass of the country were there. On their behalf, my interlocutor was my batch mate Shyamal Datta, then director of the Intelligence Bureau. He asked if I could immobilise the aircraft, one suggestion being that we could maybe puncture the tyres by shooting at them. It was an outlandish suggestion, and I don't know if others were listening at the other end when I used some expletives and asked him if he thought those were cycle tyres. They were huge tubeless tyres, multiple to each wheel, puncturing them would have set off huge explosions and possibly not even had any impact.

their guidance/orders. The Punjab State Crisis Management Group was already in operation. The chief minister, chief secretary R S Mann, the home secretary and I were in constant telephonic contact. The only caution given by CM Badal was to be careful about the possibility of casualties.

By now, Jasmininder again pleaded for refueling. On my refusing, he told me that the hijackers had killed a passenger. Then I was relayed Devi Sharan's voice pleading for fuel as one passenger had been killed. Since no body was thrown out I stuck to my stand of no fuel. Rupin Katyal, one of the passengers, had been seriously injured after being slashed on the throat with a knife by one of the hijackers. He subsequently died.

I had gambled that being low on fuel and stationed on the apron, the plane was in no position to take off. One of the earliest lessons in flying was always to take off from the end of the runway so as to have adequate space to deal with emergencies, including an engine failure on takeoff.

But to my great shock, Jasmininder suddenly called to say the aircraft had taken off. On his own initiative, he had moved the bowser towards the plane to disable the wheels while putting on a show of refueling. But the hijackers got suspicious and ordered the pilot to take off. Devi Sharan was forced to take off a fully loaded Airbus rock bottom on fuel from the middle of Amritsar's inadequate-length runway, and was allowed to land in Lahore after he threatened to land on a road because he had no fuel.

Could the Punjab Police have done something to prevent the flight from taking off? Dulat has mentioned my telling him that I was no K P S Gill. True, I wasn't the one to take matters in my own hands to launch a commando operation of my own in defiance of Delhi. And, we had very little time with the aircraft, and instructions that there should be no casualties.

IC 814 took off after about 47 minutes from Amritsar. On being informed of the departure, Shyamal Datta's reply to me was: "Your headache is over. Ours is getting worse."

The writer is former DGP, Punjab

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

A Chinese economy forging ahead under pressure will help boost the global economy and, more importantly, help people to have a deeper understanding of economic patterns. —GLOBAL TIMES CHINA

A misunderstood scheme

There is no trade-off between primary and secondary healthcare. In Ayushman Bharat, the two sectors complement each other



INDU BHUSHAN

RECENT MEDIA reports, including ones in this newspaper, have raised raised concerns that Ayushman Bharat promotes secondary and tertiary care at the cost of primary care. These reports attribute these concerns to Amartya Sen's recent comments on the scheme, which may have been taken out of context. Sen's views on the need to strengthen primary care might have been wrongly construed as his disapproval of Ayushman Bharat. Other reports suggest that the scheme, at best, targets a narrow set of healthcare issues and, at worst, benefits only a few rich individuals. Sen's reported comments and other concerns can be deconstructed as: One, Ayushman Bharat as a solution is not consistent with the problem — in other words, the scheme is a giant leap in the wrong direction. Two, primary healthcare has been historically neglected and the resources spent on Ayushman Bharat can instead be spent on strengthening primary healthcare. Ayushman Bharat will benefit only a few rich individuals, the doubters claim.

There seems to be a perception that all health needs in India relate only to primary care and there is no need to expand support for tertiary care. There is also a perception that Ayushman Bharat is taking away resources from primary care and benefiting big private hospitals. A careful analysis shows that both these perceptions are wrong.

Even if we do our best to promote good health, there will still be a critical need for tertiary care and secondary care. First, even with the best prevention programmes, we will still have a significant prevalence of non-communicable diseases. The countries with the best preventive systems have strong provisions for secondary and tertiary care. Moreover, with the aging of population due to increase in life-expectancy, diseases related to old age will increase — even among the poor. Third, a strong primary healthcare system requires an equally strong secondary and tertiary healthcare system. Screening for cancers, for example, has limited utility if there is no system to treat the disease. Secondary and tertiary care in the country is largely provided by private sector. These services have largely been, hitherto, inaccessible to the poor. Ayushman Bharat has changed that.

Ayushman Bharat has two legs. The Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY), covers more than 50 crore people in the country — the poorest — against serious illnesses. It has an equally important and equally ambitious leg to strengthen primary healthcare — the scheme seeks to upgrade more than 1.5 lakh health facilities to health and wellness Centres (HWC). The perception that Ayushman Bharat does not support primary healthcare might be due to greater visibility of PMJAY in the media as compared to the other leg. An ailing person treated successfully under PMJAY is more visible, emotionally more appealing

and makes for a better "news", as compared to the screening of millions of people for cancer, for example. However, actually, the scheme's two legs complement each other.

Could the money spent on Ayushman Bharat be better spent on strengthening primary healthcare? Ayushman Bharat is a very recent initiative. The chronic neglect of primary healthcare in the country cannot be attributed to it. The resources spent on the PMJAY component of Ayushman Bharat are still a very small proportion of the entire health budget. A major portion of the health budget is spent on primary care and secondary care, almost entirely focused on public sector supply of the healthcare services.

There is no trade-off between primary care and curative care; the policy challenge is to strengthen both. Ayushman Bharat does exactly that with its two legs. In the medium-term, we need to expand the public resources for the health sector. The 2017 Health Policy clearly commits to increasing the health sector allocation to 2.5 per cent of the GDP — for decades, the health sector's budget has hovered at around 1 per cent of the GDP. We have recently seen very high level political commitment for the health sector — perhaps for the first time in recent decades. We have also seen an increased allocation for the sector. If this trend continues, we should be able to provide much needed tertiary care for the poor without compromising the support for primary healthcare.

The assertion that Ayushman Bharat will benefit only few rich individuals is highly misleading. In fact, the initiative will benefit the poorest in the country. The concern that some private insurance companies will receive a windfall gain is also misplaced. States have freedom to choose the implementation model; in fact, most states, including all the large ones (UP, Bihar, MP, AP) have decided to use a trust model where the government directly purchases healthcare services from the hospitals without using any insurance company. Of the states that are using the insurance model most have resorted to public sector insurance companies. Finally, the scheme has a "claw-back" clause in its model contract, which limits the margin of the insurance companies to only 15 per cent — they will have to return the government any extra margin. This margin includes administrative expenses and therefore the potential profit is much less than 15 per cent, while the loss for the company could be quite high.

The scheme's design ensures that private sector hospitals do not unduly receive a large proportion of financial resources. The payment for services is based on fixed package rate for each procedure, which is largely based on the marginal cost. The scheme also has strong features for preventing, mitigating and deterring fraud and abuse.

The momentum gained by the scheme in a short period since its launch testifies to the huge unmet need for curative care in the country. If the momentum continues, it will dramatically change the face of the country's health sector in the country — for the better. It will prove to be a giant leap towards Universal Health Coverage.

The writer is CEO Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana



APOORVANAND

Islamophobia, theirs and ours

Until we realise our several complicities, it will continue to rage

THE MASSACRE at Christchurch in New Zealand has forced European countries into deep introspection. New Zealanders are bewildered as to how and why such a horror could visit their country. In Australia, the birthplace of the accused, people are being asked to look at the reality of increasing malice and hatred against Muslims in particular and immigrants in general. It has been pointed out that the massacre is only the end point of the Islamophobia that is spreading across public life, institutions and the media.

Amidst this recognition of Islamophobia, it was heartening to read about mosques across the globe being flooded with flowers from people from other faiths. In Singapore, New Zealanders went to mosques to express their solidarity with the Muslims. They felt it was important not only to underline that the perpetrator, who sought to speak in their name through his 74-page manifesto, was rejected by them, but also to express their active empathy.

You could see the sincerity of pain on the face of the prime minister of New Zealand and could sense the urgency in the worry expressed by the Australian prime minister. He has also supported the call for action against an Australian senator who put the blame on the victims.

In India, home to the second largest population of Muslims in the world, we saw no such initiative. Indian Muslims were killed

in the massacre but no compatriot sympathised with them. It is futile to expect the governments and political classes to join their kin in their mourning. We happily accept the foreign currency they bring but would not share their loss.

My mind went to the attacks on mosques in India — Malegaon, Mecca Masjid, Ajmer Sharif. How did the nation react then and what was the response of the governments?

Mosques, in these election times, are in the news for a different reason. The BJP in Delhi has asked the Election Commission to "appoint special observers for the mosques especially in the Muslim-dominated areas so that political and religious leaders cannot spread hate among people to influence elections on the lines of religion". It did not evoke outrage. Barring the AAP, no political party thought it necessary to call out the BJP for making mosques objects of suspicion.

In the West, there are people who work constantly to identify Islamophobia in all forms and demand action against those who promote it. In India, we have normalised it so much that if Muslims complain, they are called unnecessarily touchy. Experiences of Muslim children being mocked and bullied in their schools travel through generations. A man past his 70s tells me about how he was harassed by his schoolmates 68 years back for being a Muslim. A man in his 50s said that sitting through the classes of medieval his-

tory was painful for him. He could feel the accusing eyes of his classmates as the stories of Muslims plundering India rolled out as objective history. A Muslim girl, all of 6, studying in a "progressive" school in Delhi, thanked her Hindu mother for being so wise as to not let the surname of her Muslim father be in her name. The principal of my daughter's school refused to believe her when she complained about a teacher indulging in blatantly othering Muslims. And we are not even talking about the chain of schools under the Saraswati Shishu Mandir organisation which turn out Hindus as perfect Others of Muslims.

Policy makers and implementers unabashedly express their Islamophobia under cover of national security. Recently a friend shared his horror after returning from a mid career training of police officers and civil servants who openly denounced Muslims and underscored the need to "put them in their place". Madrasas are being asked to submit proof of nationalism by different governments. It has not shocked us that in the name of culture and economy the eating habits of a large number of people have been criminalised. The Supreme Court, by making Sri Sri Ravishankar one of the mediators in the Ayodhya dispute, legitimised Muslimophobia. You can speak against Muslims and yet remain respectable.

The ultimate form of Islamophobia ex-

perienced by Muslims is when they are told that they are so modern that they do not look like Muslims. Muslims are asked to shed their Muslimness in all forms to be accepted as equal members of a civilised society.

Elections are around the corner. We will see the open demonisation of Muslims as a means to mobilise Hindu votes. Recently, in the campaign for the assembly elections, the prime minister and his party talked about a conspiracy to make a Muslim the chief minister of a state. A minister in Assam is openly talking about the fear of some constituencies turning Muslim majority and also about the "disastrous" prospects of Badruddin Ajmal becoming the chief minister. We have made Muslim demonisers our leaders and ask Muslims to accept them to prove their tolerance and inclusiveness. We see them as our role models. It is seen as a good bargain to secure economic growth.

Writers like Premchand and Ramdhari Singh Dinkar repeatedly asked Hindus to accept Muslims as equals. They are long dead. Islamophobia continues to run like blood in our veins. We share our lives with those who hate Muslims and yet claim to remain civilised. Unless we first recognise this duplicity, we would not be able to move towards getting rid of this disease.

The writer teaches Hindi at Delhi University

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SAWANT'S TASK

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The CM's test' (IE, March 20). The first priority of Pramod Sawant, the new chief minister of Goa, will be to prove his government's majority in the floor test and to provide political stability. This would mean a fine balancing act between his party MLAs and the BJP's allies. Diversifying Goa's tourism based-economy while keeping its fragile ecology intact will need vision and acumen.

Vijai Pant, Hemptur

LEADERS WE NEED

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Ardern's way' (IE, March 20). When the tide of populism swept across the globe, right-wing populists leaders like Donald Trump in the US, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Viktor Orbán in Hungary gained traction. New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern emerged as the new hope in such an era. She showed immense maturity after the deadly terrorist attack. German Chancellor Angela Merkel showed similar maturity earlier when all European states closed their borders for migrants.

Suchak D Patel, Ahmedabad

ONLINE DECORUM

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Foreign hand returns' (IE, March 19). The cyber

LETTER OF THE WEEK AWARD

To encourage quality reader intervention, The Indian Express offers the Letter of the Week award. The letter adjudged the best for the week is published every Saturday. Letters may be e-mailed to editpage@expressindia.com or sent to The Indian Express, B-1/B, Sector 10, Noida-UP 201301. Letter writers should mention their postal address and phone number.

THE WINNER RECEIVES SELECT EXPRESS PUBLICATIONS

space must be used responsibly given the prevalence of fake news. A road map must be framed to make social media giants accountable. The Election Commission is playing a commendable role in monitoring social media content for political purposes and regulating it.

Pranay Kumar Shome, Kolkata

EUROPEAN DEFENCE

What would happen if America left Europe to fend for itself?

Time to start thinking the unthinkable

WHY, A STRATEGIST from Mars might wonder, do Europeans doubt their ability to defend themselves against Russia without American help? The total GDP of NATO's European members is more than ten times that of Russia, which has an economy about the size of Spain's. They spend three-and-a-half times as much on defence as Russia, which has lately had to cut its budget sharply because of a broader squeeze on its economy. True, Russia has 13 times as many nuclear warheads as western Europe has, but surely Britain and France, the two nuclear powers, have more than enough to deter an attack?

For decades Europeans did not need to worry about the Martian's question, because America's commitment to their defence was not in doubt. That has changed. "The times when we could unconditionally rely on others are past," Angela Merkel told the European Parliament in November. She echoed the call of France's president, Emmanuel Macron, for "a true European army". In January the two leaders signed a treaty between France and Germany which includes a mutual-security pledge similar to NATO's Article 5 (as well as Article 42.7 of the European Union's Lisbon treaty).

This is sensitive territory. Mr Macron's talk of a European army, and of "strategic autonomy", irritates Americans. It is only prudent for Europeans to start hedging their bets against over-reliance on America, but hedging can be costly, and they have to be careful lest the hedge become a wedge, as François Heisbourg of the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, a think-tank, pithily puts it.

Still, Mr Trump's ambivalence about allies is almost an invitation to think through the implications of an end to Pax Americana. Suppose one morning a tweet announces that the United States is leaving NATO. Under Article 13 of the alliance's founding treaty, a country can cease to be a member one year after notifying the government of the United States. So, bizarrely, Mr Trump would be serving notice on himself. An optimistic version of what happens next, apart from howls of protest, is that Europe makes a concerted effort to organise its own defence. Call it Europe United.

The conventional wisdom on Europe's ability to protect its interests may be too defeatist, suggests Kori Schake of the IISS. The middle powers, in which she includes countries like Britain, France, Italy and the Netherlands, have been talking themselves into "exquisite uselessness", but they have impressive capabilities. And, she argues, "the high-end American way of war is not the only way of war."

A pale shadow

Yet the Europeans would immediately face institutional hurdles. Compared with Russia's top-down system, command and control is hard enough in consensus-bound NATO. It would be a bigger challenge for Europeans alone, especially if they did not inherit NATO's command structure. The EU may want to take the lead, but military thinking is not in its DNA. Besides, an EU-only alliance would be a pale shadow of NATO: after Brexit, non-EU countries will account for fully 80% of NATO defence spending.

There would be gaps in capabilities, too. How bad these were would depend on the mission, and how many operations were un-



German Chancellor Angela Merkel, US President Donald Trump and French President Emmanuel Macron at the G-20 summit in Hamburg, Germany, on July 7, 2017. Mr Trump's ambivalence about allies is almost an invitation to think through the implications of an end to Pax Americana. AP

der way at the same time. The European-led interventions in Libya and Mali exposed dependence on America in vital areas such as air-to-air refuelling and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. A detailed look at the sort of scenarios Europe might face would help to identify other gaps, and what it would take to fill them. Bastian Giegerich of the IISS, who is starting to work on such assessments, reckons that realistically the gap-filling could take 15 years or so. That is a long time for places like Poland and the Baltic countries that feel under threat. Fear and mistrust could quickly conspire to make narrow national interests trump efforts to maintain European unity. Hence a second, perhaps likelier, version of what might follow an American withdrawal: Europe Divided.

Jonathan Eyal of the Royal United Services Institute in London imagines a frenzy of activity, a cacophony of summits—and a renationalisation of defence strategies. Lots of countries would seek bilateral deals. In cen-

tral Europe he would expect an alliance between Poland and Romania to guarantee the eastern border. The Russians and Chinese would not sit idly by, he says, but would play their own games with the Greeks, Hungarians and others.

It is these games of mistrust that the American security guarantee has largely helped to avoid. They could all too easily resurface. "Establishing a purely European defence", warns Michael Rühle, a long-time NATO official, "would overwhelm the Europeans politically, financially and militarily."

That is why a third way forward for

Europe looks more attractive: what might be called Europe Upgraded. This would involve the Europeans doing a lot more to improve their capacity in defence, but in ways that would help persuade the Americans to stay in: less loose talk about a European army, more effort to develop capabilities currently lacking.

Europe Upgraded sounds like an easy option, but it is not. It would demand cash, creativity and care. A serious push to plug the gaps in Europe's capabilities would not be cheap. European governments, especially the big ones, would have to find a way to sell far larger defence budgets to their voters.

The Europeans would immediately face institutional hurdles. Compared with Russia's top-down system, command and control is hard enough in consensus-bound NATO. The EU may want to take the lead, but military thinking is not in its DNA.

As for creativity, the European Intervention Initiative, championed by Mr Macron and launched last year, is an example of the sort of innovation that could help. It is inclusive: its ten members include Finland, not part of NATO, and Britain, soon to be out of the EU. The aim is to foster a common strategic culture that will help Europe respond more nimbly to crises in its neighbourhood without calling for American help.

The care is needed to make sure a more robust Europe is seen as supporting NATO rather than undermining it. America is suspicious of any duplication of NATO's efforts, such as the creation of rival headquarters. And bigger spending on defence could trigger disputes over industrial protectionism, especially if broader trade rows between Europe and America rumble on.

Even as the allies grapple with different visions of the future, a nuclear elephant has entered the room. Last October America declared (without warning the Europeans) that

of his peers, he crossed the frontier to find work. A Hazara friend of his in Iran disappeared, only to resurface nine months later in a military hospital. His friend revealed he had been wounded in Syria with the Fatemiyoun, which paid three times a labourer's wage. Moreover, Iran was handing out prized residency permits to those who fought—a powerful incentive given that around 250,000 Afghans who lack the right papers are deported from Iran each year.

There were also historical reasons for the birth of the Fatemiyoun. Many Afghans had fought for their neighbour during the Iran-Iraq War, and ties between those veterans and the Iranian security apparatus endured. The founder of the Fatemiyoun, Alireza Tavasoli, was one such veteran.

While most recruits joined the Fatemiyoun for the money, they also received religious indoctrination, Mr Qanbari and others say. Young recruits were told they would be defending Shia shrines against Islamic State. After scant training, they were sent into some of the war's worst fighting and suffered terrible casualties.

Although most Fatemiyoun veterans are thought to have remained in Iran, many have returned to Afghanistan. That is causing unease. During the most chaotic phase of

During the most chaotic phase of Afghanistan's civil war, in the 1990s, Iran backed militias as proxies, just as Pakistan backed the Taliban. The Fatemiyoun may play such a role in the future, Afghan intelligence officials fear.

it was leaving the INF treaty, claiming a blatant violation by Russia, and served formal notice in February. Russia has since responded by pulling out too, threatening to develop new missiles. To make matters worse, the New START treaty, which limits strategic nuclear warheads and has strong verification provisions, is up for renewal in 2021.

A new nuclear-arms race would be a nightmare for NATO. In Berlin, Claudia Major is "enormously worried" that arguments over INF could divide Germany, Europe and the transatlantic alliance. Radek Sikorski fears that Russia's missiles will leave Europe "defenceless" if it lacks a proportionate response to a first use of nuclear weapons by Russia, giving the Russians time to get where they want to by using conventional forces.

NATO has been here before. In the 1980s concern that Russian SS-20 intermediate-range missiles would "decouple" the European allies from America led to a dual-track approach: pursuit of arms control along with deployment of American cruise and Pershing II missiles in several European countries. The deployment went ahead despite mass protests, but the INF treaty signed in 1987 resulted in their removal and a long period of relative nuclear calm.

America is keen to maintain alliance solidarity, and officials say there are no plans to deploy intermediate-range missiles. There are other tools in the kit to keep Europe coupled. These include submarine-launched nuclear cruise missiles, currently in development, and new low-yield warheads for existing Trident missiles. A strengthening of missile defences would ramp up tensions with Russia.

The abandonment of the INF treaty is the most urgent reason to ask questions about the nuclear future. But the broader doubts about the strength of America's commitment to defend Europe are also stirring things up. Like it or not, for the first time this century Europeans are having to brace themselves for a serious debate about the role of nuclear weapons on their continent.

Taboos could tumble. In a paper last November for the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, a French expert, Bruno Tertrais, suggested a range of "realistic" scenarios for expanding French and British nuclear protection, with or without NATO. Maximilian Terhalle, of the University of Winchester, and Mr Heisbourg recently argued that France should extend its nuclear umbrella to its European partners, including Germany. They acknowledge that "great leadership skills" would be needed to win support for this at home while not "prompting the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from Europe".

The context for this debate extends far beyond Europe. Russia's deployment of its 9M729 missiles is in part a response to the growing muscle of other countries, notably China, which is not bound by the INF treaty. President Trump has floated the idea of broader arms-control efforts also involving China and others, though there is little sign of Chinese interest. The INF question is an early indicator of how China's rise might affect the future of the alliance.

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DEMOB UNHAPPY

Afghans worry about the return of Shia fighters from Syria's civil war

Will they further undermine their country's stability?



The Fatemiyoun, as the Afghan militia was known, had as many as 20,000 fighters, largely from the Hazara minority. Reuters

ALIREZA QANBARI has still not told his parents the truth about what he did when he left Afghanistan for Iran. The 23-year-old is happy for his father to believe he worked as a labourer. In fact, he fought with an Afghan militia recruited by Iran to help prop up the government in Syria's civil war. With the war now dying down, Afghan fighters are starting to come home. Just as the West agonises about the return of radicalised émigrés, many in Afghanistan worry about what the former fighters will do—and where their loyalties lie.

At its height, the Fatemiyoun, as the Afghan militia was known, had as many as 20,000 fighters, largely from the Hazara ethnic minority. Most Hazaras are Shia Muslims, as are the ruling elite in both Iran and Syria. Long downtrodden, Hazaras were especially persecuted by the Sunni Muslims of the Taliban. More recently the Afghan branch of Islamic State has launched terror attacks on Hazara targets.

Mr Qanbari, which is not his real name, was desperate to escape stifling poverty in the countryside near Herat, close to Afghanistan's border with Iran. So, like many

Afghanistan's civil war, in the 1990s, Iran backed militias as proxies, just as Pakistan backed the Taliban. The Fatemiyoun may play such a role in the future, Afghan intelligence officials fear. "It is a concern that when the national interests of the country that trained them are in danger, these people will go back and even act against our national interests," says Sayed Azim Kabarzani, an MP from Herat. Fatemiyoun veterans say they feel they are under scrutiny by the authorities. They are reluctant to talk to journalists.

Yet Iran would struggle to mobilise the Fatemiyoun inside Afghanistan, says Said Reza Kazemi, an academic. There would also be great resistance among Afghan Shias to any sort of mobilisation against the Afghan state. Hazaras have benefited from the current political order and have no desire to turn against it. A more likely prospect, says Ahmad Shuja, who has interviewed dozens of Hazara leaders and veterans for a report for the United States Institute of Peace, is that if security in the Hazara areas worsens and residents feel abandoned, veterans will form self-defence forces. When Taliban fighters overran previously safe Hazara areas in central Afghanistan last year, Fatemiyoun veterans tried to hold them off, but were not well organised, intelligence officials say.

Mr Qanbari carries many scars from his years at the front. His mental health has suffered and he is prone to seizures. But he is also unemployed and short of money. With Iran having declared victory in Syria, the future of the Fatemiyoun is uncertain. In January America blacklisted it for its ties to Iran's Revolutionary Guards. But Mr Qanbari wonders if his best hope is to return to Iran and start lying to his parents again.

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