

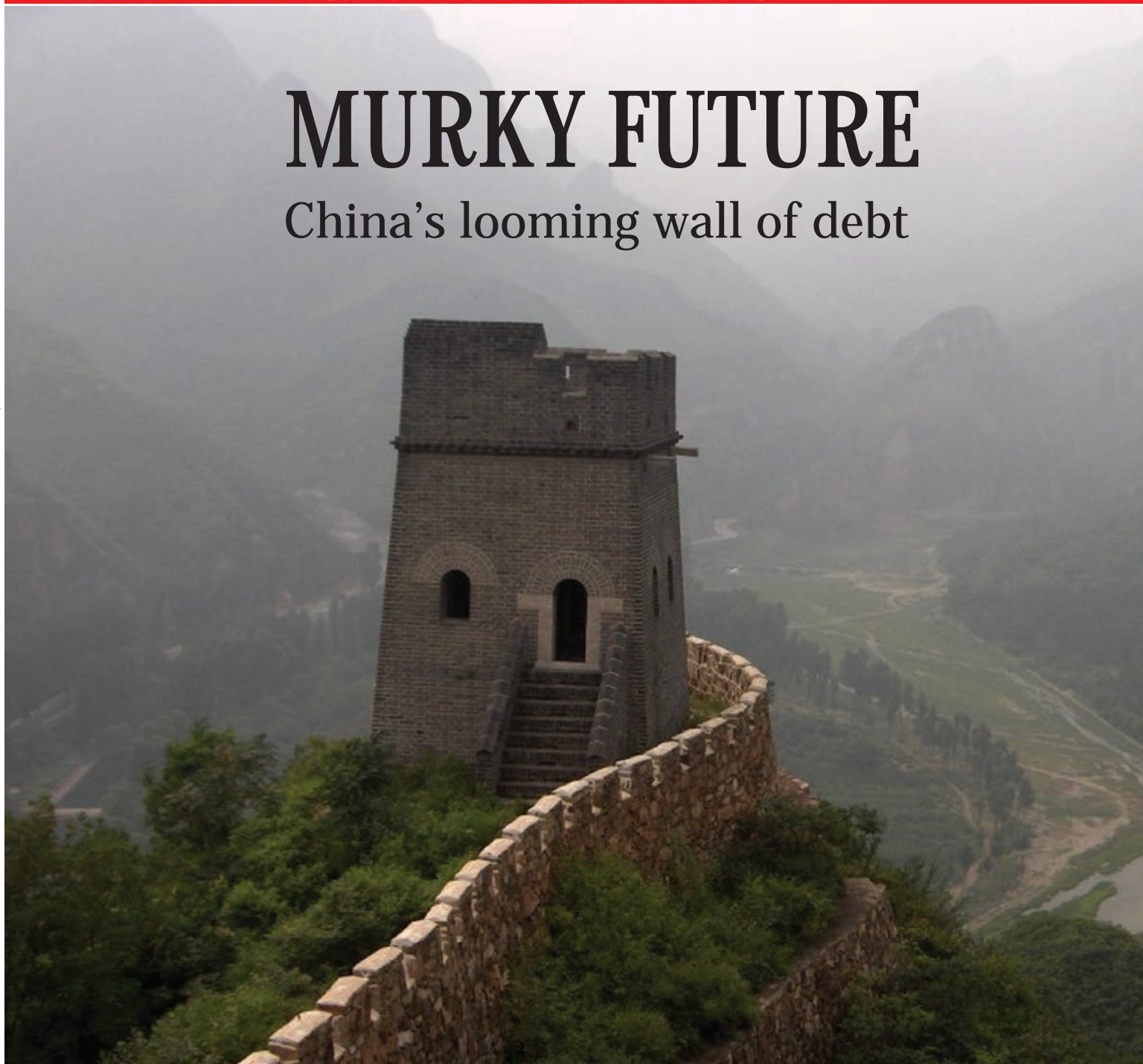
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POLITICS BEGIN AT HOME

Among the many stories emerging from China, one that has captured less of the global eye is the swine fever epidemic sweeping the country for the past year or more.

Swine fever is a highly contagious virus that can kill within a fortnight. So far, it has wiped out around half of China's pig population and the price of pork, a staple element of the Chinese diet, has been rocketing. In August, prices peaked to almost double what they had been a year ago.

A sudden rise in commodity prices, be they pork, fuel or crops, has a history of stirring dissent. It exposes flawed government at the rawest grass roots level, impacting on household budgets and the day-to-day needs of citizens. The role of high food costs in triggering the 2011 Arab Spring and the recent unrest in Iran over fuel are cases in point.

In China the government's failure to contain the swine flu epidemic adds to the argument that Beijing may be losing its grip and taking on more than it can handle.

Chinese citizens are already facing rising inflation and slowing growth, putting at risk the economic dream that is the ballast of the Communist Party's legitimacy. A more powerful America is buffeting it in the trade war, while fearless Hong Kong protesters are rejecting its right to rule.

Against all this comes a breathtaking debt that in the first quarter of this year reached more than 300 per cent of Gross Domestic Product, according to the Washington-based Institution of International Finance. The total is more than \$40 trillion, some 15 per cent of global debt.

The US Peterson Institute of International Economics estimates that a one percentage point lowering of Chinese growth could take as much as 0.2 percentage points off overall global growth. Beijing has already conceded it will be difficult to sustain its six per cent growth target, with some provinces reaching far lower levels.

China is an autocracy. It does not contain the safety valves of a democracy and is, therefore, more vulnerable. Its system is a labyrinth of shadow banks and financial institutions, part market forces, part dictatorial paralysis. Once knocked, it could collapse like a house of cards with far-reaching consequences.

Efforts to rein in risky lending have been cur-

tailed because of the trade war with the United States and there has now been a resurgence in borrowing.

Inward foreign investment has not been helped by the trade war. Some companies are moving elsewhere in Asia to countries such as Vietnam, Thailand and Bangladesh, where they judge the atmosphere to be more predictable.

A slow-down in China means unemployment and dissatisfaction that could quickly translate into anti-government unrest, taking a lead from Hong Kong that used to exemplify drive, imagination and forward-looking pragmatism.

The semi-autonomous territory has shown that, once beyond a tipping point, the dream of higher living standards takes second place to a sense of lost dignity and freedom. Hong Kong is now in recession.

All this is testing to the extremes China's reputation as an unassailable juggernaut of economic strength, and it is incumbent on Beijing, the US and other strong economies to guide the situation to a smooth landing.

China was a pivotal ally to Western democracies during the 2008 financial crisis. The West should prepare itself to return the favour, should the need arise.

To achieve this, it should examine more closely how to manage this critical relationship and to define within its own political arc exactly what China is. No longer can it one day be a strategic enemy and the next a bottomless treasure chest.

Nor should it exploit a Chinese economic downturn for its own political gain, however tempting it might be to argue that democracy, rather than autocracy, is the real path to prosperity and stability. The West's wounds from the Lehman Brothers collapse and austerity remain unhealed.

Beijing, too, should take steps by drawing back from the uncompromising global expansion it has been using to mould its international reputation and, in Hong Kong's case, showing that it understands the aspirations of this particular Chinese community.

Whether democratic or autocratic, all politics begin at home.

Chinese citizens will think little of South China Sea military bases, the Belt and Road Initiative and Communist Party slogans if the leadership is unable to keep the books balanced, its citizens in work and the pigs healthy. ■

LETTERS

Beware fair-weather friends**Dear Sir**

Thank you for highlighting, in your excellent November Editorial, the 'evolving canvas' being drawn in the Middle East and its potential to have positive repercussions throughout Asia. Also of note was the cautionary tone in the piece vis-à-vis the United States' planned desertion of the Syrian Kurds in their hour of need, showing how much it has become 'an unpredictable fair-weather friend' to its supposed allies.

Then the world witnessed President Trump's mind-boggling statement that he will, after all, keep American forces in Syria to 'secure' its oil fields and the US may even 'have to fight for the oil' – not only a wild U-turn in policy but also a possible violation of international treaties of war, even as Trump sees seizure of oil as part of the spoils of war.

America is not going anywhere any time soon as a major global power. But that should not stop us from seriously questioning the warped values of the incumbent in the White House – especially those of us in nations that, post-Brexit, may have to increase our reliance on this fair-weather friend.

Grace T. Fletcher
London

A move in the wrong direction

Rahimullah Yusufzai is right to say that Pakistan's opposition parties will not let the PTI-led government rule in peace. True, it is performing poorly. True, too, that Imran Khan came to power under a cloud of mistrust over the allegedly rigged election and his military backing. But calls for a more 'democratic' Pakistan are, disturbingly, led not by

centrist parties such as the PML-N and PPP, but by the head of an Islamic party. The 'Azadi March' organisers apparently even banned women from taking

part. This is not the direction in which Pakistan should be heading.

Anita Roy
Birmingham

Don't let Hong Kong hit the self-destruct button

The continued protests in Hong Kong represent a major challenge to the authority of China's leader, Xi Jinping, as Duncan Bartlett noted in the November edition of Asian Affairs. But we have also seen signs of pointless and puerile acts by protestors, including hurling Molotov cocktails at metro carriages. There may be agitators among them, but that is insufficient an excuse. It behoves those who are more politically astute to rein in the destructive tendencies of those who have shown themselves to be ineffectual at building a movement, let alone being able to win the argument for democracy where it matters most – in Hong Kong itself, as well as its surrounding hinterland.

The real losers are likely to be the two million or so locals who initially supported the protestors' actions and demands. And the ability to have mobilised so many was a significant feat for a movement with its origins in a not inconsiderable element of petty-separatist and anti-nationalist tendencies.

But the increasingly directionless acts of rage point to a movement unable to build on, let alone sustain, its initial gains and momentum.

Of course, freedom and democracy have never been gently handed down to people by those in positions of power and authority. Those secretly hoping that Beijing would wade in heavy-handed have been sorely disappointed thus far. This restraint may be testament to the importance Hong Kong still has to a regime unable to establish its own currency in world money markets. Or it may be that, now especially – sensing the end-game for this particular round of protests – the Communist Party knows it can simply sit and wait, as even those who supported them in their initial phase grow weary of their growing imbecility.



Bill Durodie

**Professor in the Department of Politics, Languages and
International Studies
University of Bath**

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The views expressed in these letters are not necessarily those of Asian Affairs

LESSONS FROM EAST ASIA'S BUBBLES

Asia's economy faces serious challenges, with rising levels of debt and disruption to established networks having a negative impact on the region's economic growth. But as **Duncan Bartlett** reports from Tokyo, from some perspectives, Japan appears to be as energetic and ambitious as ever

Visitors to Tokyo are able to climb a new skyscraper to gain a fresh perspective on one of the city's most famous landmarks, a bustling pedestrian crossing known as 'the Scramble'.

From the observation deck on the 45th floor of the Neo Tower in Shibuya, tourists can look down on people scurrying across the streets below, like ants. Since it opened at the end of October, shops on the tower's lower floors have been doing brisk business. From early morning to late at night, they are crowded with people buying luxury goods, such as banana-flavoured cakes. The designers say the building aims 'to embody the future of a dynamic, international and ever-changing city'. It is a clear sign of their confidence in Tokyo's future.

Yet such building projects are notoriously expensive and depend on borrowed money. And those who have studied Japan's recent history will know that excessive borrowing creates risk.

Risk factor

In the early 1990s, the world looked on in awe at the property boom in Japan, when Tokyo's skyscrapers symbolised a seemingly unstoppable Asian economic powerhouse. But when the property and stock market bubbles burst, Japan entered

a prolonged period of economic strife, marked by decades of weak growth and spells of recession.

The trouble is far from over. The International Monetary Fund says Japan's growth is expected to slow from 0.9 per cent this year to 0.5 per cent next year, partly due to the impact of a sales tax hike. The IMF has also warned that low interest rates are encouraging companies to take on levels of debt which could become a serious liability in the event of another recession.

It says that almost 40 per cent of the world's corporate debt is held in eight countries – including the United States, China and Japan. If there is a serious downturn in the global economy, as there was a decade ago, repayments could become extremely troublesome.

China worries

Concerns about the situation in China are particularly acute, given the difficulties in assessing its true level of government and corporate debt. This issue was on the minds of experts at November's FT Commodities Tokyo Summit, organised by the *Financial Times*.

The newspaper's Chief Economic Commentator, Martin Wolf, said that the Chinese authorities have noted the Japanese experience and are keen to avoid a prop-

erty bubble, followed by an economic slump.



China's outstanding debt hovers around \$35 trillion and, as a share of GDP, it is among the highest in the world. But Mr Wolf noted that the pace at which the debt is accumulating has slowed in the past few years, partly because, since 2017, the administration of Xi Jinping has been aiming to mitigate the risks posed by unsustainable loans, offered through non-official channels.

'A lot of money which China has invested has been wasted,' claimed Mr Wolf, adding that he often meets Chinese experts who express anxiety about the sustainability of economic growth.

'It's pretty clear that the Chinese economy has slowed dramatically from the heady days of ten per cent growth, marking a downturn which

Japanese companies are 'watching developments carefully' in China

is almost certainly much more severe than the numbers which are officially recorded,' he said.

Watching carefully

The IMF projects China's growth to slow to 5.8 per cent in 2020 from

6.1 per cent this year, falling below the 6 per cent target set by Beijing. This is significant for the whole of Asia, as China is the main trading partner for most countries in the region and is the biggest destination for Japanese exports.

Toshitaka Sekine from the Bank of Japan told the FT conference that Japanese companies are 'watching developments carefully' in China and are particularly concerned about the impact of the trade war with the United States. Nevertheless, he said so far the Japanese have not fundamentally changed their approach towards China.



THE ROAD MORE TRAVELLED:
Tokyo's famous Shibuya 'Scramble'
Crossing

East Asian economy



(L to r) FT reporters Robin Harding and Martin Wolf with Toshitaka Sekine from the Bank of Japan and Kikuko Takeda from the IIMA at the FT Commodities Tokyo Summit

Looking at the global situation, Mr Sekine noted that companies around the world are postponing capital investment. This impacts many of the major Japanese firms which supply multinational companies with goods and services. For example, Panasonic recently reported a sharp fall in its sales of electronic components to factory owners.

Korea tension

The US-China trade dispute is not the only concern for Japan. There is also worry about another trade spat, linked to a diplomatic row with South Korea over the legacy of the Second World War.

Japan's Economy Minister, Yasutoshi Nishimura, told reporters that this has had 'a big impact' and is one of the key factors holding back economic growth. 'Exports will remain weak, due to slack demand for cars and electronics parts,' he warned. 'In addition, declines in tourists from South Korea are having a large negative effect.'

The Japanese government usually

responds to faltering growth with attempts to stimulate the economy. It encourages investment in big infrastructure projects and is presently awarding contracts to firms which offer to repair damage caused by powerful cyclones such as Typhoon Hagibis, which recently caused devastation when it hit the Kanto region of Japan.

This approach to spending is one of the so-called 'arrows' of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's policy of 'Abenomics', which is designed to put an end to deflation and boost economic growth. Yet successive waves of spending have brought diminishing returns. They have also pushed Japan's government debt to record levels. The Bank of Japan enables companies to borrow money at almost no cost, due to a zero interest rate policy it has been following since 1999.

At the FT Commodities Tokyo Summit, the newspaper's Tokyo's Bureau Chief, Robin Harding, asked the principal economist from the

Institute of International Monetary Affairs, Kikuko Takeda, if Abenomics is finished.

Ms Takeda acknowledged that there are no simple answers to Japan's economic challenges. 'We need a lot of incremental small steps towards big solutions,' she said, adding: 'We can see very clearly what we need to do to help Japan thrive in the global economy. We need to help people prepare for an ageing society and we need to help businesses increase their productivity.'

Many other countries in Asia have similar aims. The need for robust action is made clear in the World Economic Outlook, released by the IMF in October. It said that 'although Asia and the Pacific is still the world's fastest growing major region, contributing more than two-thirds of global growth, near-term prospects have deteriorated noticeably with risks skewed to the downside'. ■

Duncan Bartlett is the Editor of Asian Affairs and a former BBC Correspondent in Tokyo



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EXIT WOUNDS

Without appropriate planning, the departure of US troops from Syria and Afghanistan could, warns **Lawrence Sellin**, have unintended and disturbing geopolitical consequences

Any major geopolitical withdrawal has the potential to produce a power vacuum. A successful outcome achieves burden shifting while securing US national interests and ensuring that America's adversaries do not unduly benefit.

It remains to be seen if President Trump's Syria withdrawal meets those criteria or amounts to an unforced strategic retreat.

By many accounts, President Trump's wildly swinging Syria policy has not only led to a betrayal of an ally, the escape of Islamic State prisoners, a resurgent refugee crisis and a loss of American prestige, but created opportunities for Russia to significantly change the strategic dynamics of the Middle East in its favour.

It was widely expected that as a consequence of the meeting between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, both Ankara and Moscow would capitalise on the abrupt US troop pull-out by dividing influence in Syria and rebalancing power in the region.

It now appears that Turkey and Russia have reached a *modus vivendi*, agreeing to set up a 30-km deep safe zone inside Syria from the Turkish-Syrian border and at least partially patrolled by Russian troops.

The Turkish-Russian agreement may also involve an amendment to the 1998 Adana Pact to include former US-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which Turkey claims is affiliat-

ed with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a group that had waged an armed insurgency against the Turkish state for decades. The Adana Pact spelled out the terms under which Turkey could carry out cross-border security operations inside northern Syria and required Damascus to stop harbouring members of the PKK.

More ominously, Turkey plans what many describe as an unlawful resettlement of 'refugees' into the areas occupied by Turkish forces in an effort to permanently change the demographics of the region to produce a pro-Turkish majority.

Contrary to his earlier statements that he is trying to 'end endless wars' and that the US 'should have never been there [in Syria] in the first



ONE ACCORD: President Tayyip Erdogan (l) and President Vladimir Putin shake hands following talks in Sochi on Oct. 22, 2019



A convoy of US troops in Qamishli, in Syria's Hasakeh province

place', President Trump has now made a complete 180-degree turn, proposing that US troops occupy the Syrian oil fields and conduct a joint development venture with the Kurds, who would receive the revenue from the oil sales.

Such an arrangement would require a long-term deployment of large numbers of US ground troops in Syria and readily-available air power to back them up, as well as a *de facto* commitment to under write Kurdish autonomy, something both the Syrians and the Turks vehemently oppose.

All the moves made or planned by the Trump Administration may now be moot because Russia is now the dominant player in Syria. It could represent a diplomatic and military victory for Moscow or a pathway to a quagmire.

In that case, it might be advantageous for the US should take steps to ensure the latter.

A similar precipitous withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan could also have cascading effects even greater than we have seen in Syria.

South Asia has long been a geopolitical battleground for Russia, China, Pakistan, India, Iran and Afghanistan, where there will likely never be a clear winner but, at best, only an unstable balance of power.

Like the Middle East, the Sunni-Shia rift and other forms of religious enmity in South Asia are not only between countries, but within them. South Asia is also divided, not just by ethnic groups, but by tribes.

Ultimately, America's most formidable adversary in South Asia will be China

The competing nation-states exploit the religious and ethnic differences to advance their own agenda, but are also potential victims of them, making South Asia an explosive geopolitical cocktail of national ambitions and Islamic extremism.

Ultimately, America's most formidable adversary in South Asia will be China.

China seeks global domination. One vehicle to achieve it is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a collection of infrastructure projects and a network of commercial agreements designed to link the entire world directly to the Chinese economy through inter-connected land-based and maritime routes.

The guarantor of that soft power approach is the hard power of Chinese military expansion. An element of that effort is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), an infrastructure and development project, the backbone of which is a transportation network connecting China to the Pakistani seaports of Gwadar and Karachi located on the Arabian Sea.

China plans to establish a naval base on the Jiwani peninsula, just west of Gwadar and within easy reach of the strategically important Strait of Hormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf. That military facility will complement China's already operational naval base in Djibouti located at another strategic chokepoint, the entrance to the Suez Canal.

US foreign policy



Pakistan has always viewed Afghanistan as a client state, a security buffer against what they consider potential Indian encirclement and as a springboard to extend their own influence into the resource-rich areas of Central Asia.

With China growing in geopolitical strength, Pakistan now has significant strategic and economic incentives to exclude western countries from maintaining any influence in Afghanistan.

An extension of CPEC to Afghanistan would benefit both China and Pakistan, whose economic goals include exploiting the estimated \$3 trillion in untapped Afghan

mineral resources. The withdrawal of the US and NATO from Afghanistan would allow China to reap rewards from the reconstruction of the war-torn country, possibly as a quid pro quo for mining rights.

Islamic fighters were found to be useful proxies for the Pakistani military

US presence has always been an obstacle to Chinese ambitions to incorporate Afghanistan into CPEC and BRI as well as a number of other China-centric economic & military pacts so that,

together with Pakistan, Beijing could dominate South Asia.

The wild card in that scenario is Islamic extremism because Pakistan, not Afghanistan, is its true epicentre.

Islamic militancy has long been one element of Pakistan's foreign policy. As early as the 1950s, it began inserting Islamists associated with the Pakistan-based Jamaat-e-Islami into Afghanistan.

In 1974, then Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto set up a cell within Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI) to begin managing dissident Islamists in Afghanistan.

Since the late 1970s, under



President Zia ul-Haq (1977-1988), Pakistan pursued a policy of aggressive 'Islamisation' with the proliferation of religious schools, 'madrasas', and religious political parties, resulting in a society that became ever more extreme and intolerant. Ethnic separatism was suppressed and Islamic fighters were found to be useful proxies for the Pakistani military.

It is an undisputed fact that the Taliban were created by the ISI, beginning in 1994, as a means of intervening in the Afghan civil war to influence the outcome in favour of Pakistani national interests. Since its founding, the ISI and the Pakistani military have never stopped providing financial, logistical and military support to the Taliban and the tens of thousands of madrasas have offered a fertile recruiting source, not just for the Taliban, but for other Pakistan-based militant groups, such as Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba, responsible for attacks against India.

It is, therefore, not just a proper power sharing arrangement between the Afghanistan government and Taliban that is needed as a prelude to an exit of US forces from Afghanistan, even if another civil war in Afghanistan can be averted.

The interests of nation states and the threat of terrorism are potentially on a

collision course. China, Russia and India are major regional players, whose interests do not neatly overlap. China and Pakistan seek to jointly dominate the region economically and militarily, which includes the incorporation of Afghanistan into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and, more broadly, into Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, the consequence being the relative isolation of both Russia and India.

Layered on top of that is the increase of regional jihadi terrorism that will be an inevitable outgrowth of what will be construed as a Taliban victory in Afghanistan, to which the already considerable presence of Pakistan-based terrorists will be a major contributor and a major complicating factor in the strategic dynamics of the region.

President Trump's aim to 'end endless wars' is a laudable one, but geopolitical withdrawal nearly always produces unintended consequences, for which proper planning and execution is a *sine qua non* for a successful foreign policy. ■

Lawrence Sellin, Ph.D. is a retired US Army Reserve colonel, trained in Arabic and Kurdish, an IT command and control and cyber security subject matter expert and a veteran of Afghanistan, Iraq and Africa. He receives email at lawrence.sellin@gmail.com and can be followed on Twitter @LawrenceSellin

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FALL OF A BRUTAL LEADER

Following the death of IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the United States is seeking to cut off grassroots support for the group and is counting on friendly countries in Asia to join the latest front in the war on terror. **Sam Kessler** reports

As the head of Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was the leader of a violent militant group which ran rampant across the Middle East and inspired terrorists around the world. He regarded the United States as enemy number one and encouraged his followers to engage in a 'war of civilisations'.

Now Baghdadi is dead after US special forces coordinated a raid on his compound near the Turkish and Syrian Idlib borders. President Donald Trump said he ended up committing suicide rather than being caught and put on trial for his actions, which ended a reign of ruthless bloodshed and regional instability, forged by his militant attempts to set up an Islamic caliphate within the Middle East.

US Secretary of Defence Mark Esper said that fewer than a hundred American troops were involved in the ground operation and the goal had been to capture rather than kill the target. 'We tried to call Baghdadi out and ask him to surrender himself. He refused and went down into a subterranean area. We were in the process of trying to get him out but he detonated a suicide vest, and we believe killed himself,' Esper explained in an interview with CNN.

Bigger than bin Laden

Baghdadi eclipsed Osama bin Laden as the pre-eminent jihadi threat in spring 2010, when he took over what was then known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

But counter-terrorism experts question whether his death will be enough to destroy the network. After all, many of the previous leaders of the group were either killed or captured, yet elements fought on. In some cases, the disruption appeared to cause a power vacuum which provoked ever more extreme actions by surviving members.

This is why, for the United States, the death of Baghdadi is not the end of the affair. It aims to continue the battle against Islamic extremist groups through various means. In an

interview with the Military Times, Esper spoke of the recent airstrikes that targeted Islamic State fighters in Libya. 'We continue to mow the lawn, and that means every now and then, you have to do these things to stay on top of it so that a threat doesn't grow, doesn't resurge.'

Waiting for more war

Other experts such as Colin P. Clark of the Rand Corporation note that there are several possible scenarios regarding the leadership and structure of Islamic State. He remarked



DEATH OF A MONSTER: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi died in a US Special Operations raid on Oct. 26



MAKING FRIENDS IN ASIA: US Secretary of Defence Mark Esper (l) shakes hands with South Korean President Moon Jae-in during his Nov. 15 visit to Seoul

that Baghdadi's death 'will likely weaken its command and control network and cause some of its affiliates to either assert more independence or retreat back into the localised conflicts they were previously engaged in'.

Clark also said the remaining members of the Islamic State remain in flux as they continue their fighting and decide on a new round of leadership. Baghdadi was renowned for his 'cult of personality', noted Clark, which inspired thousands of foreign nationals to follow him on military campaigns that focused primarily on setting up an established Islamic caliphate. This leads to the concern that many battle-hardened soldiers are seeking a new leader and a new cause for which to go to war.

Allies in Asia

The Americans are aware that the international jihadi network has supporters in many parts of the world, including Asia. Ambassador Nathan Sales, the State Department's counter-terrorism coordinator, said on a recent visit to the Philippines: 'We have to be working closely with regional partners who share our concern about these threats to bring to bear all the tools of national power.'

The US will establish a centre in the Philippines to train Southeast Asian authorities on how to counter Islamic State sympathisers in the region and respond to terror attacks. Southeast Asian nations will also get US assistance to boost border security and cooperation to cut off the flow of fighters, weapons and money used for terrorism.

On another front, the US is watching carefully the actions of Turkey, following its recent incursion into Syria. Mark Esper stressed in a recent meeting with NATO defence ministers that it was crucial to bring Turkey 'back in the fold' since it has recently purchased arms from Russia.

President Trump is of the view that even America's rivals have much to gain by suppressing the threats from ISIS and associated militant groups. He specifically called on Russia, China, Iran, Turkey and Iraq to co-operate in preventing the spread of terrorism. ■

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Siachen Glacier



COLD CALCULATION

As one of Earth's most beautiful but inhospitable terrains prepares to open up to tourism, **Sudha Ramachandran** considers the design behind the decision

The world's highest and coldest battlefield, the Siachen Glacier, will soon figure on the list of dream destinations for adventure tourists and selfie-seekers.

On October 21, India's Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh, announced that the Siachen region will soon be thrown open to tourists, who will be allowed to visit the entire area, from the Siachen Base Camp, located at the tail of the glacier at an altitude of 3,658

metres, to Kumar Post at a height of around 4,572 metres.

The 76-km-long glacier nestles in the eastern Karakoram Range of the Himalayas, between the Salto Ridge to its west and the main Karakoram Range to the east. It snakes down from the Indira Col at an altitude of 5,753 meters to a height of around 3,620 metres, where it forms the source of the River Nubra.

Singh says that opening the glacier

to tourists is aimed at providing a boost to tourism in Ladakh. According to Indian Army chief Bipin Rawat, it would also provide civilians with an insight into the tough conditions under which soldiers serve the country.

However, there are cold calculations, too, underlying the Indian government move, for this is strategic territory. Not only does it lie at the tri-junction of India, Pakistan and China but it also overlooks the Karakoram Pass. And the



SNOW PATROL: *Indian soldiers at the Siachen Glacier, which is opening to tourists*

India-Pakistan boundary here is blurred. So behind New Delhi's professed desire to boost tourism is another agenda: to strengthen its claim over the Siachen area and secure international endorsement of India's control over it.

Of course, the stunning beauty of the Siachen area can be expected to enthrall visiting tourists. But a trip there will be more a test of human endurance.

The Siachen area is notorious for its hostile climate and treacherous terrain. Deadly crevasses dot its geography. Temperatures at the glacier drop to around minus 50 degrees centigrade in winter. Blizzards are known to touch speeds of around 300 km per hour and avalanches are routine. An avalanche on 7 April 2012 hit the Pakistani military base at the Gayari sector, killing 129 soldiers and 11 civilians, while another on February 3, 2016 swallowed

an Indian military base in the northern Siachen region.

Since it lies at an average altitude of 5,500 metres above sea-level, the air at the glacier is rare and the combined impact of high altitude and crippling cold weather can cause hallucinations,

Temperatures at the glacier drop to around minus 50 degrees centigrade in winter

severe depression, memory loss, blurred speech, frost bite, pulmonary and cerebral oedema, and even death.

Clearly, this is not a destination for the faint-hearted.

The Siachen Glacier is disputed territory, with India and Pakistan both laying claim to it. The origin of the dispute

can be traced back to the ambiguous text of the 1949 Karachi Agreement, which ended the 1947-48 India-Pakistan war over Kashmir. That agreement described the Ceasefire Line in Kashmir as running up to map coordinate NJ 9842 and 'thence north to the glaciers'. What it meant by 'thence north to the glaciers' was not clarified either in 1949 or 1972, when the Simla Agreement converted the Ceasefire Line to the Line of Control (LoC). The indistinctness of the boundary beyond NJ 9842 remained.

In the late 1970s, India woke up to reports that western publications were carrying maps showing the LoC extending northeast from NJ 9842 to the Karakoram Pass. In effect, these maps were putting the glacier under Pakistan's control.

Additionally, Pakistan was allowing western mountaineers to scale peaks

Siachen Glacier



EXTREME BEAUTY: *The Siachen Glacier*

such as the Salto Kangri and Teram Kangri, which flank the glacier, from the part of Kashmir that is under Pakistan's control.

Pakistan's cartographic aggression and its use of oropolitics (using and abusing mountaineering for political purposes) evoked concern in India. But it was only when India learned that the Pakistani government was purchasing high-altitude fighting equipment that New Delhi swung into action. Anticipating a Pakistani military operation to capture the Siachen, India carried out Operation Meghadoot in April 1984. Two platoons of soldiers were sent to take control of the Bilafond La and Sia La, two important mountain passes on the Salto ridge.

India beat Pakistan to the Siachen by a week and since then it has controlled not only the main glacier but also all its tributary glaciers and key passes as well as the Salto Ridge. Indeed, India has fully sealed off Pakistan's access to the glacier.

For two decades thereafter, the ridges around the Siachen have resounded to gunfire as India and Pakistan engaged in fierce fighting on this icy wasteland. That fighting ended in November 2003, when India and Pakistan agreed to a ceasefire

along the International Border (IB), the LoC in Jammu and Kashmir and the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) in Siachen. While India and Pakistan have repeatedly violated the ceasefire along the LoC over the past decade, the truce along the IB and AGPL has held since.

However, the bilateral dispute over the Siachen lingers and the issue was among the disputes that were being discussed under the composite dialogue framework.

The dispute over the Siachen has

The bilateral dispute over the Siachen lingers

cost India and Pakistan dearly. Neither country has made public the financial costs of keeping troops at this high altitude, though it is estimated to cost around \$1 million per day. Both sides have lost many soldiers, with most of the deaths caused not by enemy fire but by Nature's fury and pulmonary and cerebral oedemas.

India and Pakistan are reported to have discussed the question of withdrawing troops from this brutal battlefield. But they differ on what should precede the demilitarisation of the area.

Since Pakistan has little to lose from

pulling out as it does not control the disputed territory, it is willing to remove its soldiers provided India does so simultaneously. As for India, it wants Pakistan and the world to acknowledge first that it is Delhi which controls the glacier, the surrounding ridges and mountain passes. It wants the ground position in the Siachen area to be authenticated first as an international safeguard before any troop disengagement, withdrawal and the final demilitarisation of the glacier.

It is in this context that India's opening of the Siachen Glacier to tourists must be seen. India had opened up the area to civilian trekkers, even those from abroad, in 2007. Its recent decision to lay out the welcome mat to tourists as well is an extension of this strategy. India is engaging in oropolitics to have its control of Siachen authenticated by the world.

Tourists to the Siachen can expect to witness extreme scenic beauty. But they will also see Indian soldiers holding the dominating heights on the Salto Ridge and, importantly, that Pakistani soldiers are nowhere near the Siachen Glacier. ■

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SMOG CLOUDS OVER DELHI – AGAIN

The Indian capital was smothered in smog for much of November, a recurrent situation caused by an excess of ‘particulate matter’ in the air, making life – and breathing – difficult for the city’s 20 million inhabitants.

Nicholas Nugent, himself smog-afflicted in southern India, questions why central and state governments have not yet found a way to solve this annual problem

Delhi’s smog clouds appear even more regularly than the country’s yearly monsoons. They emerge at Diwali, the festival of lights in late October, and extend through November, when farmers in the capital’s adjoining states of Haryana, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh finish harvesting their rice and begin planting wheat. The resulting pollution affects all of north India and is felt most acutely in Delhi and its neighbouring cities.

The timing suggests the causes of the smog may have something to do with the explosion of fireworks at Diwali and the tendency of north Indian farmers to burn away the stubble of one crop before planting the next. Yet this year’s response by the Delhi government was to reintroduce what is known as the ‘odd-even’ restrictions on vehicles entering the capital – those with odd numbered registrations allowed on Delhi’s roads on one day, even numbers the next – with steep penalties for violators.

Allowing for public transport exceptions, this reduced traffic on Delhi’s roads by as much as a third. Nonetheless, the impact on air quality readings this year was relatively slight, probably because ‘three wheelers’ – auto-rickshaws – and ‘two wheelers’, major polluters, were exempt. The damage comes from a high concentration of particulate matter – also known as PM2.5 – present in the air. A safe level is under



POLLUTED CITY: A traffic policeman in protective mask, New Delhi

60 micrograms per cubic metre, while levels in Delhi and cities in UP and Haryana have reached or exceeded 500 this past month. Above 250 is categorised as ‘severe’.

Leading Indian pulmonologist Dr Arvind Kumar says levels this high are equivalent to smoking 25 cigarettes

Air pollution levels this high are equivalent to smoking 25 cigarettes a day

rettes a day. The pollution particularly affects children and the city’s many street dwellers, who have no means of escape. The World Health Organisation implicates such industrial pollution as the cause of as many as 7 million premature deaths a year globally, without specifying how

many of these are in India – although it does say that 22 of the world’s most polluted cities are in India.

Mid-crisis, the UN Secretary General, speaking in Bangkok, alluded to another potential cause when he criticised Asian countries for their continuing use of coal to generate electricity and their ongoing investment in coal-fired generators. India burns 12 per cent of all coal consumed globally and, while this is much less than China – which burns a massive 50 per cent of all coal – it is way above the totals for Europe (8 per cent) and North America (9 per cent).

As in previous years the main blame once again was directed at farmers burning stubble, though emissions from Delhi’s 5000 factories are also implicated. An interesting development is how India’s

Supreme Court has taken a lead in finding a solution. Last year it banned Diwali fireworks from Delhi and a wide swathe of surrounding territory, damaging the economy of Sivakasi, the town in south India where as many as 800,000 people make most of the country's fireworks, and triggering a 'green firework' industry, which substitutes other chemicals for the pollutant barium nitrate.

This year the court ordered state secretaries to enforce a ban on stubble burning by farmers, which had continued despite earlier rulings. Criticising their failure to enforce court orders, Justice Arun Mishra told the state chiefs, 'Stubble burning must stop immediately.' Suggesting the failure to enforce earlier rulings was a violation of the right to life protected by India's Constitution, he went on: 'Delhi is choking while the Delhi government and Centre are simply passing the buck. People aren't safe even inside their houses. This can't happen in a civilised country.' He warned them against blaming farmers, saying that state administrations were responsible for enforcing the rules. More than 5000 incidents of stubble burning were reported during the first week in November.

The Supreme Court may have felt it was shouldering responsibility

for tackling pollution because of a lack of coordination between the authorities concerned. India's central government is led by Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party, while the Delhi administration is controlled by the Aam Aadmi (Ordinary Man) Party, and Congress rules in Punjab, the state where most of the stubble burning has taken place.

Ordinarily the Supreme Court is accused of exceeding its powers when it orders the central or state governments to take action. But on this occasion it appeared to be the only body doing anything.

There are solutions, according to farming and other experts. While farmers say burning off the rice stubble is the cheapest and quickest way to prepare the ground for the new crop, India has developed technological solutions. Much favoured are the Happy Seeder and Roto Seeder machines, which take up stubble while reseeding, discarding it either to act as mulch or to be sold for commercial use. According to Confederation of Indian Industry expert Chandrajit Banerjee, both machines are 'equally effective in checking straw burning'.

However, together with the powerful tractor needed to pull such machinery, the purchase costs exceed 8 lakh rupees – more than 11,000 US

dollars – putting them beyond the reach of all but the largest farmers, even with government subsidies, given the low margins farmer make on their crops.

Another lobby challenges government policy in subsidising wheat and rice farming to build up large reserves of grain, far more than is needed to feed India's population. A *Times* of India editorial railed against what it called an 'outdated food security doctrine' that subsidises rapid crop rotation, which began as a buffer stock of rice and wheat but morphed into a policy 'heavily subsidising farmers to produce excess rice at great economic and environmental cost'.

'North India's air pollution woes,' the editorial went on, 'are just one manifestation of farm/water policies gone horribly wrong.' The paper criticised as unnecessary the hurry to prepare the ground for new crops.

While authorities in the north argued over blame and solution, the pollution spread eastward to Kolkata and southwards to Chennai, the two cities where this correspondent was based during November. Climate and air pollution authorities may have discounted any connection with the Delhi smog, but it was little solace for the inhabitants of these two cities to think that what the capital has failed to check over several years could soon threaten all of India.

Nor was it any reassurance when drinking water quality figures, based on 28 parameters including taste and smell, were issued mid-month. While Delhi had the worst quality of piped water, Kolkata and Chennai came second and third. Of India's largest cities only Mumbai met all parameters for good drinking water.

India clearly has more immediate concerns to tackle than climate change. ■

Nicholas Nugent, who previously reported on Asia for the BBC, is currently teaching at the Asian College of Journalism in Chennai, India



CLEAN MACHINE: A tractor fitted with a 'Happy Seeder'

Pakistan

KEEPING THE WOLVES FROM THE DOOR

While the PTI-led government may be keeping a disgruntled opposition at bay, its hold on power depends on a greatly improved performance, argues **Rahimullah Yusufzai**

Pakistan's political drama is still playing out as Imran Khan's government continues to face pressure from an alliance of nine opposition parties led by Maulana Fazlur Rahman's Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F), which recently staged a big protest in Pakistan's federal capital and has now extended the campaign to the provinces to demand the prime minister's resignation and a fresh election.

Though the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)-led government has survived the protests and is in no real danger yet, it does seem to have weakened only 15 months after coming to power. Questions are now being asked about whether it can complete its five-year term, given that it depends for its survival on small parties that form part of the coalition government and are known to demand a heavy price for their support.

The government also came under pressure from the judiciary when the Lahore High Court allowed deposed premier Nawaz Sharif, convicted and imprisoned for seven years on corruption charges, to travel to the UK for urgent medical treatment, despite this invoking the prime minister's displeasure. Imran Khan, who has always considered Nawaz Sharif his main political rival, even expressed doubts about the veracity of the medical tests, which showed the latter's critical condition resulting from cardiac complications, diabetes and kidney disease. The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), the former ruling party led by Sharif and his younger brother Shahbaz Sharif, reacted angrily to this comment, saying the premier should be tried for delivering hate speeches. This demonstrates the

UNDER PRESSURE:

Pakistan's PM Imran Khan



Pakistan

intensity of confrontation between the PTI and PML-N, Pakistan's two major political parties.

Despite Prime Minister Khan's claim, on November 19, that his government had allowed Nawaz Sharif to travel to Britain on humanitarian grounds, in response to the recommendations of a board of senior doctors constituted by the provincial government of Punjab, and his insistence that there should be no politics concerning Sharif's health, he was still upset by the Lahore High Court's decision.

Moreover, the court overruled the government's condition that Sharif should submit an indemnity bond of Rs7 billion before flying abroad, as a surety that he would return to Pakistan after undergoing treatment. In his comment, Imran Khan appealed to the chief justice and his successor, Justice Gulzar Ahmad, who is next in line to head the Supreme Court of Pakistan, to restore the public's trust in the judiciary so that the weak, not just the powerful, get justice.

Chief Justice Asif Saeed Khosa, who is retiring from service on December 21, reacted strongly, advising the prime minister not to taunt the judiciary about powerful people, as only the law is powerful in the court. Khosa reminded the premier that he himself had given Nawaz Sharif permission to go abroad, while the Lahore High Court only settled the modalities of his departure. The country's top judge maintained that the post-2009 judiciary is powerful as a result of the lawyers' movement; it had convicted one Prime Minister (Yousaf Raza Gilani) and disqualified another (Nawaz Sharif) and was soon going to decide a high treason case against a former army chief, General (Ret'd) Pervez Musharraf. Denying that the courts represented only powerful people, he pointed out that Pakistan's 3,100 judges and judicial magistrates ruled on 3.6 million cases, the majority of them concerning the poor and weak.



Prime Minister Khan knows he cannot afford to challenge the judiciary, which has grown increasingly influential over the last decade. Politicians have been approaching the superior courts to settle issues that are largely political, thus further empow-

ther pressure on political parties.

However, the prime minister followed up his concern for vulnerable prisoners languishing in jail by issuing directions that they should be assisted to seek early release. A petition has also been filed in the Islamabad High Court, which directed that lists of prisoners who are ill should be prepared so that their cases can be reviewed. The relief given to Nawaz Sharif, who thrice served as prime minister and heads one of Pakistan's wealthiest families, has opened a window of opportunity for the voices of other, much less powerful prisoners to be heard.

As if all this wasn't enough, the Imran Khan government received a jolt when the head of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), retired

The judiciary has grown increasingly influential over the last decade

ering the judiciary. A serious case of foreign funding availed by his party, filed by a former PTI activist, is presently being heard by the Election Commission of Pakistan amid demands that it should be decided expeditiously. Such cases usually end up in the superior courts, putting fur-



CHAOS: The JUI-F's 'Plan B' blocked major roads

Justice Javed Iqbal, warned that no one should think the country's present rulers are exempt from accountability, as the cases of those in power for the past 12 months would now be investigated. He added that the NAB's actions were not one-sided, as alleged by opposition parties, because the anti-graft body must first look into the cases of those who were in power over the past 30-35 years.

The challenge to the government from Maulana Fazlur Rahman's protest campaign remains a concern. The Maulana, whose party was comprehensively defeated by the PTI in the July 2018 general election, spent more than a year trying to unite eight token opposition parties and persuade them to join the anti-government protests. He brought thousands

of his party workers and supporters to Islamabad to stage a peaceful protest sit-in, or *dharna*, for two weeks. He called it 'Plan A' and warned that 'Plan B' and 'Plan C' would be tougher, culminating in the collapse of the PTI government.

Ultimately, his 'Plan A' did not work as the government felt confident enough to allow the protestors to enter Islamabad and then bound the JUI-F through an agreement not to allow its supporters to cross road barriers to reach the so-called 'Red Zone', where the most important government offices are located. To the JUI-F's credit, it managed to keep the protestors peaceful and disciplined, despite the cold weather. However, the Maulana's maximalist demands, calling for

Retired Justice Javed Iqbal warned that no one should think the country's rulers are exempt from accountability

the prime minister to resign and hold a new election, were unacceptable to the government and were summarily rejected.

'Plan B' was next implemented. The JUI-F – again with token representation from the other parties – started blocking highways and major roads in the four provinces to pressurise the government into accepting its demands. But instead, the blockade simply caused problems for the general public as scuffles erupted between the protestors and civilians. So ineffective was the protest, in fact, that the JUI-F had to abandon it.

Now it is holding consultations with the eight other opposition parties to start working on 'Plan C', under which anti-government public meetings would be organised across

the country. There have also been reports that the demonstrators may court arrest as a mark of protest.

Having overcome the two-week long Islamabad dharna which was the biggest challenge to its rule, the Imran Khan government is confident it can handle other mass protests. It claims Maulana Fazlur Rahman left empty-handed after failing to dislodge the prime minister, and although the Maulana asserts that he was offered positions in the government and chairmanship of the Senate, there is no evidence yet that he was tempted in such a manner to help end his protest. He and Imran Khan remain bitter political rivals and there is no way they can compromise with each other.

For now, the protest is likely to fizzle out and the PTI to stay in power. However, the government will no doubt have to keep looking over its shoulder, keeping its prickly allies from the smaller parties happy so that they don't abandon the ruling coalition.

What is more, the PTI government will need to perform better in order to stabilise the economy, reduce inflation, improve governance and fulfil its 2018 election campaign promises. It must also check any misuse of power and corruption by its ministers and advisors, as the NAB seems set to hold them to account for any misdeeds. Most importantly, Prime Minister Imran Khan needs to maintain his seemingly smooth working relations with the powerful military, as any mistrust between the two will not augur well for the future of the PTI government. ■

Rahimullah Yusufzai is a Pakistani journalist and Afghanistan expert. He was the first and last reporter to interview Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, and twice interviewed Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan in 1998. His achievements have been acknowledged by several prestigious awards, including Tamgha-e-Imtiaz and Sitara-e-Imtiaz

Japan & South Korea

HEADACHES AND HEADLINES



The media in Japan show great enthusiasm in covering their country's dispute with South Korea, but not all of the many opinion pieces on the issue are credible. Now the US and China are weighing in to see if they can help ease the simmering tensions.

Duncan Bartlett reports
from Tokyo

The images of South Korea which appear in the Japanese media can be either friendly or frightening, depending on which articles you read.

One of the most sensational recent stories suggested that in the event of a war, the majority of South Koreans would side with North Korea in attacking Japan. This wild claim was based on a completely unscientific survey, yet it nevertheless generated plenty of coverage, especially on social media, which cares little for credibility.

By contrast, South Korean pop stars, such as the girl band Twice, are winning positive press as they undertake a musical charm offensive. Next year, the group will play the Tokyo Dome, Japan's



POSTIVE PRESS: K Pop stars Twice are hugely popular in Japan

Japan & South Korea



Moon Hee-sang, speaker of South Korea's National Assembly

largest venue. Tickets on secondary markets are already selling for the equivalent of 500 US dollars.

Shining Moon

But the Japanese media coverage enjoyed by even the most successful K-Pop stars pales in comparison to the headlines generated by South Korea's president, Moon Jae-in, whose photograph appeared everywhere following an eleven-minute meeting with Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on the sidelines of a regional forum in Thailand in early November.

The liberal daily newspaper, the *Asahi Shimbun*, noted that 'nothing substantial emerged from the meeting, which produced only vague remarks by the two politicians about the current diplomatic crisis'.

The lack of a communiqué with tangible proposals only served to fuel media speculation. The topic filled airtime on serious television discus-

sion programmes and became a hot issue in the weekly gossip magazines.

Trilateral tension

Many media commentators pondered the outlook for the defence alliance between South Korea, Japan and the United States. South Korea is threatening to break off an intelligence sharing agreement with Japan, citing a breakdown of trust.

'Both governments are responsible for the biting chill in bilateral ties'

America warns strongly against such a move. David Stilwell, the US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, has been shuttling between Seoul and Tokyo, pressing for a truce.

He will have realised that the region's problems run deep and have lasted many decades.

Relations have been particularly fraught since last year, when South Korea's Supreme Court began a series of rulings ordering Japanese businesses, such as Nippon Steel, to compensate Koreans who worked as labourers during the colonial period in the early 20th century.

The Japanese government has rejected the Korean court rulings. It maintains that all wartime compensation claims were settled in 1965 through a bilateral treaty, which restored diplomatic relations between the two countries.

For the *Asahi Shimbun*, 'both governments are responsible for the biting chill in bilateral ties that has caused a dampening effect on a wide range of areas including trade, tourism and grass-roots exchanges between the two countries'. The newspaper's editors advise the Japanese Prime Minister to meekly offer more concessions.

One option, suggested during a visit to Tokyo by the speaker of South Korea's National Assembly, Moon Hee-sang, is to set up a new fund for compensation, to which both countries contribute.

Patriotism in the press

However, this suggestion has been rejected outright by conservative daily paper the *Sankei Shimbun*, which is noted for its nationalism.

'We don't need the South Koreans economically – they're a relatively insignificant market,' said one of its editors – although he went on to express concern at the potential damage to the trilateral security alliance.

The *Sankei* seems to be underestimating the economic impact. For example, according to the Korean automobile importers and distributors association, new registrations of Japanese cars have plunged by more than 50 per cent since last year. There has also been a sharp fall in the number of South Korean tourists visiting Japan, as well as a high profile boycott of Japanese goods, including beer.

Economist Shigeto Nagai and his team at Oxford Economics say that

prolonged political uncertainty will affect investment decisions by both Japanese and Korean companies, as they reconsider their previously win-win supply-chain relationship.

'We expect South Korea to try to lessen its dependence on high-end Japanese products, which may not only damage Japanese companies but also make regional supply chains less efficient,' says Mr Nagai.

One of the opinion column writers from the *Nikkei* newspaper told me that these economic issues are a matter of deep concern for the business lobby. He said that many executives wish Prime Minister Abe would use diplomacy to resolve the dispute. But he added that Nippon Steel – which is facing extensive compensation claims – is standing firm against concessions.

Politically weak

Both South Korea's President Moon Jae-in and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe face domestic political trouble. Mr Abe has lost both a justice minister and a trade minister to corruption scandals, while, in Korea, the justice minister Cho Kuk, one of Mr Moon's closest aides, resigned follow-

ing massive street protests.

President Moon's opponents are attempting to block his reform agenda and some critics caution against stoking up further animosity against Japan at a time of weak exports and sluggish investment.

The economy is a key issue in South Korea, ahead of a general election in April 2020. Mr Moon must leave office at that point. In Japan, Shinzo Abe has said he will not seek re-election when his current term ends in September 2021.

Defence issues

In the time that he has remaining, Mr Abe claims his principal goal is to reform the Japanese constitution. He hopes to change the status of the Japanese Self Defence Force, turning it into a regular army, which would have the capacity to fight abroad in support of foreign allies.

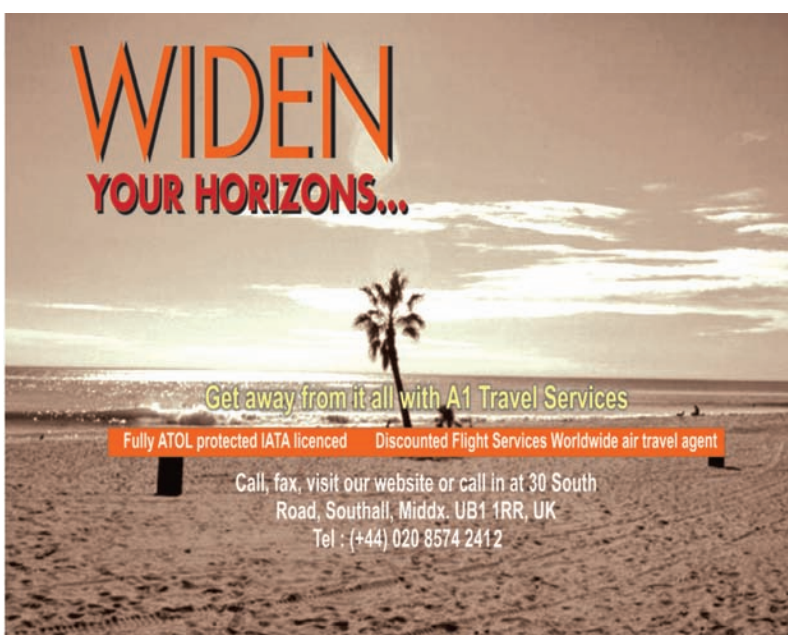
This plan is condemned by South Korea, China and North Korea. The North's official media has called Mr Abe an 'idiot and a villain'. Pyongyang is also rejecting offers of more direct talks with the South, insisting that all communication must be conducted through exchanges of documents.

China's role

China has said that, despite the tension, it will press ahead with a three-way summit next month. The Chinese Premier, Li Keqiang, plans to meet Mr Abe and Mr Moon in the southern city of Chengdu, in the province of Sichuan.

If the South Koreans suspend the joint intelligence sharing commitment with Japan before then, the atmosphere in China will become very tense. The journalists and commentators who cover the Chengdu meeting will no doubt attempt to get a story out of it, even if it is founded on speculation. ■

Duncan Bartlett is the Editor of Asian Affairs and a former BBC Correspondent in Tokyo



WHY INDIA NEEDS A ROBUST CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

A deficient criminal justice system not only hinders the rule of law but also impedes internal security and social harmony, which are critical for economic development and national security, observes **Jitendra Kumar Ojha**

India's national capital witnessed an ugly fracas on November 2 between members of two crucial wings of its criminal justice system. Policemen in uniform were assaulted and chased by groups of lawyers around various court complexes in the city.

The provocation was an illegal arrest and custodial beating of a young lawyer over a petty dispute in a district court complex. A spokesman for the lawyers alleged that the police opened fire, injuring scores of them. The police, however, denied any firing from their side.

Over 20 policemen were injured and dozens of their vehicles torched by protesting lawyers. Clashes continued even on the subsequent day. In an unprecedented protest, members of the lower rung of Delhi Police staged a massive demonstration in front of their HQ on November 5, booing their Chief, who sought to pacify them. Lawyers too boycotted work for nearly a week, dislocating the judicial process in New Delhi. However, sustained efforts by senior lawyers and police officers eventually restored peace and both sides resumed their respective duties.

The episode may pass off as an aberration in India's sustained pursuit of a credible criminal justice mechanism. Nevertheless, playing out as it did in the national capital of the world's biggest democracy, it was a shocking spectacle. Members of neither the police force nor the legal profession showed any respect for the due processes of law, which they are expected to uphold for the entire citi-

zenry. The incident exposed a larger ailment within the entire criminal justice system.

By any global standard, the Indian police has produced some first-rate professionals and leaders. Almost every year, a significant number of men and women from police agencies lay down their lives in the call of duty. But India's police forces, especially the lower rungs, have a longstanding record of notoriety.

Last year, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) of India recalled an observation, made half a century ago by Justice A N Mullah of Allahabad High Court, describing the police force of India's biggest state, Uttar Pradesh, as 'an organized gang of criminals'. Dealing with complaints of extra-judicial killings, wrongful detentions, custodial murders, sexual assaults, false implication of innocents and cover-ups, the apex human rights body of the country observed: 'There is not a single lawless group in the whole of country whose record of crime comes anywhere near... that of the single organised unit which is known as the Indian police force...'

The Indian police has retained many of its colonial features, even after seven decades of independence. It continues to be governed largely by an archaic 1860 Act, with only minor modifications, and remains more a tool in the hands of the executive, lacking the autonomy and accountability necessary to serve as an instrument of the rule of law to protect citizens. A large number of retired police officers with strong professional credentials have beseeched successive governments for

comprehensive police reforms to align the country's police forces with the requirements of a modern representative democracy.

Flawed induction, deficient training, seniority- and loyalty-based promotions, which often disregard professional and leadership attributes, have crippled the capacity of Indian states to administer laws efficiently and impartially. Malevolent sections of police agencies are suspected of patronising, abetting and colluding in virtually all shades of crime. Similar sections in the political and corporate worlds, the legal profession and media have emerged as their partners to create a powerful nexus. In recent years, even the top officers of the country's most credible investigative agency, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), have come under the scanner on charges varying from graft to collusion with high-profile law-breakers.

There is conflicting data on the total number of complaints registered against police personnel in India; they vary anywhere between 50,000 to half a million or more. The National Crime Record Bureau placed the figure at 54,916 for the year 2015, while one media report quotes that in 2018 alone there were 1.1 lakh complaints against Delhi police personnel. Yet only one out of every 400 was investigated. Most state police agencies lack an effective independent police complaint commission, which one finds in developed democracies, to rein in erring police personnel. A protracted judicial process ensures that most crimes committed by men and women in police uniform go unreported.

Such a scenario must be demoralising for the large number of police men and women who do their duty diligently. Recent years have witnessed a spurt in assaults on working police personnel. Several entities, including Human Rights Watch (HRW), have recorded inhuman working conditions among lower rung police forces. These utterly desensitise them, often inducing brutal responses in their dealings with the public. Indeed, multiple videos doing the rounds on social media show policemen abusing and assaulting unarmed people, including one involving a blind student on the streets of New Delhi.

A cop in uniform is the most direct symbol of the state. Any assault on such a person is an assault on the sovereignty of that state. In a democratic state, the police is expected to protect citizens and command their trust through exemplary conduct and integrity. India needs to build a larger ecosystem that fosters such a relationship between the police and the public.

As for India's legal community, although it too boasts some of the most brilliant minds observing the highest levels of scruples, in practice, the entire profession lacks well-defined yardsticks, including transparent fee structures, hourly working mechanisms or professional specialisations. High quality legal services are unaffordable, not only for the masses but even for most of the middle classes, as good lawyers charge fees in the range of \$5000 to \$50,000 per appearance in cases that involve multiple hearings.

Perjury by lawyers, even senior ones, is rampant as no effective deterrent exists. Many who have earned law degrees from some of the colleges in the hinterland lack even a passing familiarity with the basics of law. Many legal practitioners, especially in the lower courts, are known for their own criminal records, which was amply manifest during their clashes with the police.



COPS & LAWYERS: *The Nov. 2 clash in New Delhi*

Nevertheless, there are still some good lawyers—though too few—who remain committed to the pursuit of justice even under the most adverse circumstances. They take on a significant number of pro-bono cases to help the poor and needy in a system that lacks effective legal aid by the state. Such sections certainly need support and encouragement from both state and society.

The Indian judiciary, especially the apex court, has traditionally been known for consistently delivering exemplary judgments on some of the most complex issues in the public domain. Even now, the top court comes out with judicious interpretations of the most vexed issues of justice that are part of public discourse. But judges and lawyers are overworked in virtually all Indian courts.

India's Law Minister recently disclosed on the floor of the parliament that, as on June 1 this year, 43.55 lakh cases were pending in various High Courts, including 8.35 lakhs that were older than a decade. Such pendency in the Supreme Court was nearly 60,000, while in the lower courts it could be much higher. Very often judges hear 60 to 70 or even 100 matters in the course of six hours. It is not humanly possible to

comprehend complex issues in two to five minutes and then pronounce a fair verdict. Hence, miscarriages of justice are quite common unless a matter is too high-profile.

Such deficiencies within the criminal-justice system not only deny citizens fair and consistent access to rights guaranteed by the constitution, but also retard national security by breeding avoidable internal conflicts. These nullify Indian democracy's promise of the rule of law and discourage economic enterprise and industry, crippling the collective output of India as a nation. A weak criminal justice system also cedes a bigger space to subversive forces, which thrive at the cost of the country.

India's quest for stronger national security warrants greater professionalism, innovation and integrity in the entire criminal justice system to prevent, pre-empt and deter internal conflicts, and to build an ambience that fosters healthy competition and collaboration among its citizens. ■

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RAJAPAKSAS BACK IN THE SADDLE

Despite a resounding electoral triumph for the brother of Sri Lanka's former president, he will still, warns **Neville de Silva**, need the support of the minorities who spurned him

When the recently elected president of Sri Lanka, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, chose to be sworn in at the sacred city of Anuradhapura, not everyone would have understood the symbolism.

It was there that King Dutugemunu from the Kingdom of Ruhuna in the country's deep south – from where the Rajapaksa family hails – led his army into battle with the Tamil Chola King Ellalan (or Elara) who reigned in Anuradhapura, defeating him in a duel.

The Mahavamsa, an epic poem-chronicling the history of Buddhism and dynastic succession in Sri Lanka, records that King Dutugemunu, out of respect for the slain Tamil king, had a tomb built in the place where Ellalan fell, ordering that all passers-by must walk past it barefoot and no drums were to be sounded.

With the battle won, the entire country was unified under King Dutugemunu, with Anuradhapura as the capital. He had the great Buddhist *dagoba* or *stupa*, Ruwanwelisaya, built in 140 BC with some Buddha relics enclosed. This is where Gotabaya Rajapaksa chose to take his oath of office.

Today, Anuradhapura borders the predominantly Tamil Vanni district to the north. The Rajapaksa brothers, then president Mahinda and defence secretary Gotabaya, who themselves come from Ruhuna, are credited with a major role in the 2009 defeat of the minority 'Tamil Tigers' (LTTE), the separatist organisation from the north and east.

Some Sinhala nationalists often recall the Dutugemunu-Elara conflict and compare the Rajapaksas' defeat of

the Tamil separatists to that ancient *Mahavamsa* story and the subsequent unification of the country.

The LTTE's defeat saw Sri Lanka unified under the central government in Colombo and peace restored after a quarter century. But that peace was shattered when, on Easter Sunday this year, Islamic extremists bombed three churches in Sri Lanka's east and west and three luxury hotels in Colombo, killing some 270 locals and foreigners.

After nearly a decade of peace, which saw huge infrastructure projects under construction – some, financed by Chinese loans, dismissed by critics as 'white elephants' intended simply to perpetuate President Mahinda Rajapaksa's name – and major hotels opening their doors, the Islamic attacks shook the country out of its complacency.

The Sinhala majority and others living in the south were once more seized with fear that terrorism had returned. A new spectre loomed, this time created by the Muslim minority who make up almost 10 per cent of the population and are suspected of having international jihadist links.

Curiously, it is the majority Sinhala community, making up 70 per cent of the population, that felt under siege by militant minorities. The Tamils, with ethnic and cultural affinities to over 70 million people in India's Tamil Nadu, separated from Sri Lanka by the narrow Palk Strait, served as a rear base of the 'Tigers' during years of war.

But now it is extremist Muslims the Sinhala people feel threatened by, with IS leader Al Bakr al-Baghdadi (later

killed) claiming they were linked to the Easter atrocities.

Agitated Sri Lankans blamed the ruling coalition government, led by President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, for neglecting national security while they fought their bitter personal wars over power-sharing.

Evidence suggests that Indian intelligence had warned Sri Lanka several days ahead of the attacks but was ignored or treated with appalling casualness by Colombo's security apparatus. This caused an uproar within the Sinhala community, who condemned the government for its lackadaisical attitude.

Troubled by intimations of new nightmares, worried Sri Lankans demanded strong and competent leadership, not the vacillating governance of a Sirisena presidency. Into the breach stepped Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who had hitherto had only a perfunctory interest in politics, serving in the shadow of his elder brother, the then President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who himself had followed in his father's political footsteps.

When the new National Unity Government of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe leadership introduced the 19th Amendment to the constitution that hoped to eliminate – at least for a decade or more – the Rajapaksas from national politics, Mahinda and his political colleagues sought ways to make a comeback to centre stage.

Gotabaya, a US citizen, was the ultimate choice. But first he had to renounce

his US citizenship, for the new government had blocked the pathway to power for another Rajapaksa brother by declaring dual citizens ineligible to hold public office.

A former military officer and a man of deeds rather than words, Gotabaya stepped out of the shadows, castigating the government for the Easter Sunday massacre – saying it would not have happened if the intelligence apparatus he had set up as defence secretary had not been dismantled by the current administration.

The Easter massacres sparked off a concern over national security which became a core issue in last month's presidential election, much to Gotabaya Rajapaksa's political advantage. He won 52.25 per cent of the total vote and a healthy margin of 1.3 million votes over Housing Minister Sajith Premadasa from a near 84 per cent voter turn-out.

The voting showed one stark reality: the country was sharply polarised along ethnic lines. The north and north-east, which are predominantly Tamil, voted 80 per cent or over for Premadasa, with the east, collectively dominated by the Tamil and Muslim communities, also comprehensively rejecting Rajapaksa.

On the other hand, Gotabaya Rajapaksa swept the Sinhala-Buddhist south, thus debunking a long-held assumption that no candidate could secure the magic 50+1 per cent of the poll to win outright, without the minority vote.

The huge anti-Rajapaksa minority vote proves one thing: his relentless pursuit of the military option against the LTTE and defeat of the enemy, when many foreign defence analysts and western media were saying that the Tigers were invincible, has made him a figure disliked and even hated by sections of the minority Tamil and Muslim communities.

Gotabaya knows this. He also knows that, given his election promises and commitment to economic development, he needs the support of the minorities.



POLL POSITION: Voters in Colombo queue to cast their votes during Sri Lanka's Nov. 16 presidential election

His post-election appeals to the Tamil and Muslim communities to also 'become parties in this victory' is genuine enough, for he knows that without their support he cannot take the whole country forward as he hopes to.

'I expect your support to create a moral, disciplined and lawful society,' he said, on assuming office. 'As president my responsibility is to serve all Sri Lankans and I will respect the rights of all Sri Lankans.'

He is aware that he must endeavour to reach out to the minorities in efforts at reconciliation. This is not only because it will serve Rajapaksa well in the long run but also because neighbouring India wants to see it happen.

When Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi promptly dispatched External Affairs Minister Subramanyam Jaishankar as a special envoy to Colombo to invite new President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to New Delhi, he carried a special note. It said that India expects the new government to take forward the process of national reconciliation in order to meet the 'aspirations of the Tamil minority for equality, justice, peace and dignity'.

This time Indian diplomacy moved fast, even before China – perceived to be very close to the Rajapaksas, now holding Sri

Lanka's two top posts – could act. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa responded with alacrity to the Indian invitation, agreeing to a three-day visit to New Delhi on November 29, while elder brother Mahinda minded the store as prime minister.

But international relations will not be President Rajapaksa's immediate priority. He will be a domestic president until he sorts things out at home, including a date for the parliamentary elections.

Right now, he has an interim government until those elections, probably sometime between April and May. This should be a cakewalk. The presidential poll results showed he had won 114 of the 160 electorates; the opposition United National Party (UNP), currently in disarray, secured just 46.

Unless the now victorious Sri Lanka People's Front (SLPP), led by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, takes a false step between now and then, it should romp home at next year's parliamentary polls. ■

Neville de Silva is a veteran Sri Lankan journalist who held senior roles in Hong Kong at The Standard and worked in London for Gemini News Service. He has been a correspondent for foreign media including the New York Times and Le Monde. More recently he was Sri Lanka's deputy high commissioner in London

CHINA'S LONG SHADOW

G Parthasarathy considers the implications of Beijing's growing influence over India's Buddhist neighbours

Sri Lanka's presidential elections, held on November 17, produced predictable results. The fractious ruling coalition headed by President Maithripala Sirisena, a longtime veteran from the leftist Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), and Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremasinghe, from the right-wing United National Party (UNP), suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Opposition's Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, younger brother of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who routed the incumbent rulers' candidate, Sajith Premadasa, son of former President Ranasinghe Premadasa.

The president-elect previously served as defence secretary in the government headed by his brother, and both are regarded as national heroes in Sri Lanka for their decisive defeat in 2010 of the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) in a bloody ethnic conflict that lasted three decades. But internationally, the Rajapaksa brothers were also held responsible for the carnage that followed, when an estimated 70,000 Tamil civilians were killed. The reality, however, is that the war was marked by brutal human rights abuses on both sides, as the LTTE's Velupillai Prabhakaran had little respect for human lives, whether Sinhala or his own Tamil brethren.

Under pressure from the US and its European allies during and after the conflict, the Rajapaksa Government inevitably turned to China for help, which responded immediately with large amounts of military and economic assistance. In doing so, the Chinese established a strong presence in Sri

Lanka, participating in construction activities in Colombo and elsewhere, building the strategic Port of Hambantota and undertaking other projects such as constructing an airport and sports stadium in the Rajapaksa family's southern Sri Lanka constituency.

The Hambantota Port project turned out to be a white elephant, earning virtually no revenue. Unable to repay credits extended by China, Sri Lanka was forced to hand over the port. Its increasing dependence on China also led to it providing berthing facilities for Chinese submarines in Colombo. (Indeed, surrendering national assets to repay Chinese loans

The new Rajapaksa Government is committed to seeking measures to ease the Chinese debt burden

is not confined to Sri Lanka, or even to Asia: countries across East Africa are facing a similar situation.)

This is just one of a number of concerns facing this island nation. The election of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa as president has predictably caused serious misgivings amongst Sri Lanka's Tamil and Muslim minorities, although the Rajapaksa brothers managed to further strengthen their support base in the majority Sinhala community during their election campaign. They made use of the fact that the Sirisena Government totally ignored sensitive intelligence inputs provided by India,

warning that terrorist strikes by ISIS-inspired Islamic radicals were imminent around Easter Sunday this year. This negligence in dealing with the threat – which became a reality on Easter Sunday, with the loss of 259 lives, including 170 Sri Lankans – decisively turned majority Sinhala opinion against the ruling Sirisena administration.

Realising its past mistakes, the new Rajapaksa Government is committed to seeking measures to ease the Chinese debt burden. India and Japan have jointly agreed to build a new container terminal in Colombo to enhance its port capacity, as Colombo earns the bulk of its revenue as a transit point for cargo to India. New Delhi has also undertaken railway and construction projects in Sri Lanka, and is committed to developing the strategically located Trincomalee Port on Sri Lanka's east coast. In addition, India believes that western insistence on imposing sanctions against Sri Lanka for alleged excesses during the final days of the ethnic conflict should be reviewed. The country was, after all, dealing with a long and bloody separatist insurgency by a ruthless terrorist organisation.

Eastwards in Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi is facing similar though more complex problems to those Sri Lanka has faced. There are 26 armed insurgent groups active in Myanmar, many of them located along the country's borders with China, India, Thailand and Bangladesh. A few militant groups from India have found haven in Myanmar, mostly across its borders with China's Yunnan Province.



WHITE ELEPHANT: Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port

Myanmar and India have developed a close understanding that allows them to deal strongly with armed separatist groups which move across the border. The problem is complicated by members of armed Indian insurgent groups gaining safe haven in Yunnan Province, along the Sino-Myanmar border – although this challenge has been largely addressed, as India has reached agreements with virtually all its north-eastern separatist groups to join the country's democratic mainstream.

The government of Myanmar is finding it increasingly difficult to deal with the country's ethnic insurgencies as a number of these groups – organisations such as the United Wa State Army (20000-25000 cadres) and the Kachin Independence Army (8000 cadres) – operate from across the Sino-Myanmar border with impunity. China also uses its vast economic leverage with Myanmar and its links with a wide cross-section of

armed ethnic groups to compel the Myanmar Government, and the country's virtually autonomous army, to fall in line with its wishes on a range of economic projects. India, Japan and South Korea see the serious implications of these Chinese moves, but the US and its European Allies view them largely in the context of the Rohingya refugee issue, forcing Myanmar into China's ever closer embrace.

India faces serious problems on crucial issues vis-à-vis its relations with both Sri Lanka and Myanmar, because the policies of Europe, the US and its NATO allies are propelling these neighbours increasingly towards China. New Delhi is trying to persuade the new Sri Lankan Government to desist from permitting periodic visits by Chinese submarines, as the previous Rajapaksa Government did.

While India and Japan understand this danger and are determined to help

Sri Lanka and Myanmar, distant powers inevitably have other priorities, while purportedly sharing India's concerns about China's policies and influence. Moreover, both Aung San Suu Kyi and the Myanmar Army are seriously concerned about China's growing strategic clout, so much so that the Myanmar Navy agreed to participate in Joint Exercises organised by the US navy in September this year, along with the navies of seven ASEAN members in the Gulf of Thailand, adjacent to the contested South China Sea.

Developing a stable balance of power in the Indian Ocean region will require the understanding of the US and its allies. ■

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#GandhiMustFall

INDIA'S FALLEN IDOL

While a student campaign has failed to stop a statue of Mahatma Gandhi being raised in Manchester, the row over his bigoted attitudes continues to rage – including in India. **Trevor Grundy** reports

A student campaign to thwart a 9 ft (2.7 m) bronze statue of Mohandas 'Mahatma' Gandhi being erected outside Manchester Cathedral on November 25, to coincide with the 150th anniversary of his birth, has been described by one well-known Indian human rights activist, Zareer Masani, as 'the latest political blackmail by today's Stalinist censors'.

In the age of character assassination and public 'execution' – thanks to Twitter and other social media platforms – it was a brave thing to say.

'Gandhi, like his opponent Winston Churchill,' Masani wrote in *The Thunderer* column of *The Times* on October 29 this year, 'was a product of his time, imbued with the then near-universal racial prejudices. During his youth in South Africa he supported the British against the Boers and believed his Indian community more deserving of equality than black Africans. However, like Churchill's, Gandhi's views evolved during a long career.'

Not so the views of the campaigning Manchester University students, which seem to be somewhat rigid.

Launching the campaign in an open letter, the university's Decolonise Network demanded that Manchester City Council reverse its decision to place the statue – a gift from the charitable organisation Shrimad Rajchandra Mission Dharampur – in front of the Anglican cathedral, whose Dean, Rogers Govender, is a South African by birth.

The protest is led by Sara Khan,

the Students' Union liberation and access officer who was one of a group who painted over a mural of the Rudyard Kipling poem *If*, *arguing* that the writer was a racist who 'de-humanised people of colour'.

Today, the man who led the successful campaign against British rule and inspired civil rights movements across the world is causing sparks to fly once again, just as he did in the 1930s and 1940s. Between then and now, Gandhi has been variously described as an anti-colonial protester, a religious thinker, a radical who used non-violence to fight for causes close to his heart, a clever politician and a whimsical Hindu patriarch.

Added to this list now, especially in Britain, is the tag 'racist' – despite the fact that his revolt against imperialism was an inspiration to men including Martin Luther King Junior and Nelson Mandela. The Manchester students' letter said Gandhi called Africans 'savages' and 'half-heathen natives' who were 'dirty', 'lived like animals' and should be kept away from Asians as well as Europeans.

This British version of the 'Gandhi Must Fall' campaign is not new. It started in West Africa, where Gandhi's statue was removed from the University of Ghana in December 2018. The following month, a



woman in India used a toy gun to squirt red paint on a statue of the freedom fighter, whom she held responsible for the partition of India.

Writing in the *Washington Post* on October 2 this year, the newspaper's India Bureau Chief Joanna Slater said: 'Even as admiration for Gandhi remains widespread, aspects of his life and philosophy are increasingly a source of controversy. Scholars have highlighted the racist language he used as a young man living in South Africa as well as his defence of India's caste system.'

Students say that the people of Manchester, whose 2.55 million strong population is diverse, with 24.7 per cent Muslim and 1.1 per cent Hindu, would benefit more if a statue of Steve Biko, the South African Black Consciousness leader who was murdered by South African Police in Pretoria on 12 September 1977, was raised in their city instead of one to 'racist' Gandhi.

South African academics Ashwin Desai and Goolam H. Vahed spent

seven years exploring the complex story of a man who lived in their country and campaigned vigorously and courageously for the rights of Indians living there. Their book, *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher-Bearer of Empire*, was published in 2015 and it caused a stir.

The authors revealed that Gandhi never missed an opportunity to show his loyalty to Empire. He served as a stretcher-bearer in the Boer War when the British occupied South Africa, demanded guns in the aftermath of the Bhambatha Rebellion, and toured the villages of India during the First World War as recruiter for the Imperial Army. The authors suggest that Gandhi's political strategies were concerned with Indian affairs only and that he believed state power in South Africa should remain in white hands.

Unpalatable facts abound about his attitudes to black Africans.

In 1893, Gandhi wrote to the Natal Parliament saying that 'a general belief seems to prevail in the colony that the Indians are little better, if at all, than savages or the natives of Africa'. Then, in 1904, he wrote to a health officer in Johannesburg that the council 'must withdraw Kaffirs' from an unsanitary slum called 'the Coolie Location', where a large number of Africans lived alongside Indians. He was quoted as saying: 'About the mixing of the Kaffirs with the Indians, I must confess I feel most strongly.' The same year he wrote that, unlike the African, the Indian had no 'war-dances, nor does he drink Kaffir beer'.

When Durban was hit by a plague in 1905, Gandhi wrote that the problem would persist as long as Indians and Africans were being 'herded together indiscriminately at the hospital'.

An attempt to balance claims that Gandhi was anti-black in South

Africa came from his grandson Rajmohan Gandhi, who has written that, when the 24-year-old Gandhi arrived there, he was inexperienced and ignorant about the plight of that country's blacks, leading him to voice racially prejudiced views. But, insists Rajmohan, Gandhi's ideas evolved over time and he should, therefore, be judged not for his early attitudes and the mistakes he made, but for what he became, the changes he achieved and the millions he inspired.

For the moment, with the failure of their campaign, the Manchester students' anger about Gandhi seems to have been placed on the back-burner. Will it stay there? We must wait and see.

As for what lies behind this modern desire to attack Gandhi, the respected author and academic Mary Elizabeth King asked that very question in a recent wide-ranging article entitled 'How South Africa forced Gandhi to reckon with racism and imperialism'.

She also answered it: 'Social scientists maintain that the present political environment in the Americas, Europe, South Asia and elsewhere has increased the disparagement (or worse) of the "other" along the lines of nationalism, religion, race, creed, gender and caste. Another possibility might be the current popularity of "purity tests", which have been leading aggrieved groups to demand and expect what is, in essence, infallibility on the part of those perceived to be leaders or exemplars of a cause. Their perspective leaves no room for deviance, much less error – perceived or real.'

As the great Oscar Wilde once observed, a halo doesn't have to fall far to become a noose. ■

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THE PERMANENCE OF PUNJABIAT

On the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev-ji,
F. S. Aijazuddin hails two of Punjab's great Sikh leaders whose cultural
 and spiritual legacies live on, even in an age beset by division

One wonders what might have happened had both Guru Nanak Dev, the founder of Sikhism, and Maharaja Ranjit Singh, ruler of the Sikh empire in the early 19th century, been born at the same time. Would Guru Nanak have used Maharaja Ranjit Singh's essentially secular style of governance as a practical demonstration of the universality he preached? Would Maharaja Ranjit Singh have regarded Guru Nanak as a *sant*, a living conscience but one best kept away from his raucous, rumbustious court?

Four centuries of history separated these two sons of the same Punjabi soil. Yet they are linked posthumously as twin examples of two aspects of Punjabi-ness – the spiritual in Guru Nanak Dev and the secular in Ranjit Singh.

Guru Nanak Dev's strength came from the power of meditation. He distilled his experiences of other faiths – particularly Hinduism and Islam – into a potent reaffirmation of the universality of mankind. Legend speaks of his premature self-confidence, his questioning mind, the incipient awareness that he would one day lead people to God. The revelation – if one may call it that – that commanded him to undertake his lonely mission came to him – like Buddha and Muhammad – after he had established himself as a responsible husband, father and householder.

Like them, as a mature adult, he

renounced the mortal, temporal world. He set out to imbue others with his own conviction on the oneness of God, travelling, teaching, living the new faith. With him as companions he had a Muslim Mardana and a Hindu musician, Bala. His years of travelling are said to have ended by the year 1521, when he settled on a tract of land at Kartarpur, donated to him by a rich follower. There, according to one biographer, he developed 'a simple spiritual and moral discipline that had the capacity of reproducing itself'.

That spiritual amoeba reproduced itself, split into a number of facsimiles, until it has now extended across a world Guru Nanak had

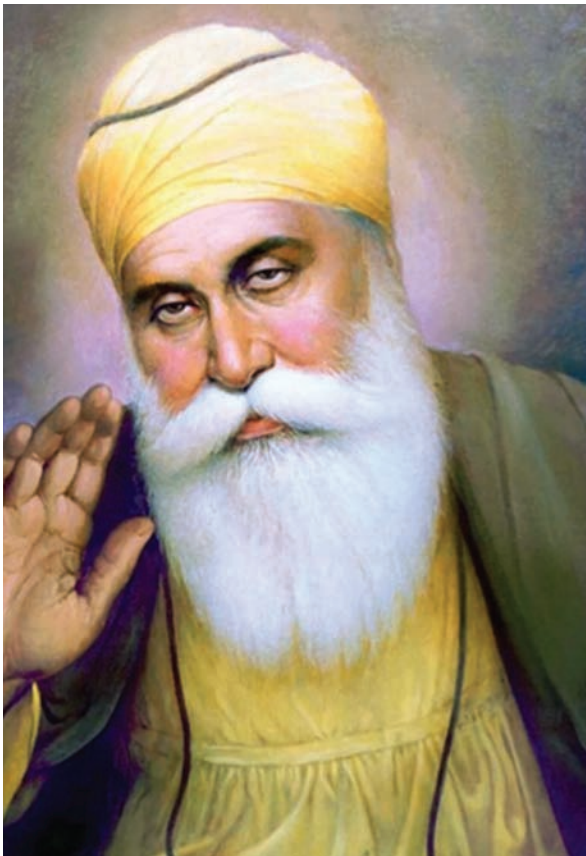
Even a truncated Punjab has an enduring identity

heard about, read about but whose limits were beyond his comprehension. Ironically, in this, the 550th anniversary of Guru Nanak's birth, his beloved seat of Kartarpur has itself, like his beloved Punjab, been bifurcated – the original site being on the Pakistan side and the later version of Kartarpur on the Indian side of the River Ravi. The flowing waters that had once filled his drinking bowl now touch the lips of two countries that are becoming symbols of state-sponsored Islam and Hinduism – the two religions he sought in his lifetime to conciliate.

By contrast, Maharaja Ranjit Singh received no revelation, had no premonition of his potential greatness, no ordained mission to execute. Political and social happenstances moulded his career, supremacy and survival became his goals. He came to prominence in his teens, and before he was 30 (the age that Guru Nanak received his revelation), Ranjit Singh had made himself the undisputed leader of his kingdom, the first nation-state of the Punjab.

The admixture of religions and nationalities at the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh was not the result of any premeditated policy. It was born of expediency. The talent available to him could have been better, had he a wider sea in which to cast his net. Instead he took whoever was best in his field. He used them, assessed their worth and then gave them his abiding loyalty. His price? Their reciprocation. How else does one explain why courtiers such as a Dogra Raja Dhian Singh, a Muslim Fakir Azizuddin, and a Hindu Dina Nath, should have remained in his service until his death?

Such loyalty is a younger cousin of spiritual devotion. Whatever darker motives these and other functionaries at Ranjit Singh's court may have had to enrich themselves – the Sikh darbar was a veritable cornucopia of wealth – they shared a bond (however uneasy at the time) of brotherhood.



ESSENCE OF PUNJAB: Guru Nanak Dev (l) and Maharaja Ranjit Singh

If Guru Nanak gave spiritual voice to the Punjab, Ranjit Singh gave it a temporal identity. Guru Nanak had no battalions to command, no legions at his behest. Yet his army of followers now constitute a powerful force that has produced, among other luminaries, a prime minister of India. Ranjit Singh's army, by contrast broke into fragments within a decade of his death. There is no one alive who can claim a right to his legacy, no successor in interest to the throne of Lahore. He came as a shooting star, lit the Punjab during his lifetime and then sank below the horizon of history. Guru Nanak, by comparison, is a constellation.

Today, the Punjab they knew and loved had been vivisected – first in 1947, and again when Indian Punjab was further carved

into the states of Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and the Union territory of Chandigarh. What is left of the Punjab is dominated today by the principality of Patiala, just as it was during Ranjit Singh's time, when it was the largest of the Cis-Sutlej states that lay in British-controlled territory. History has swallowed its tail.

If there is any message that Guru Nanak and Ranjit Singh can offer us today, it is that religion is too sacred to be a weapon, that secularism should not be a slogan, and that even a truncated Punjab has an enduring identity. Go anywhere in California, New York, Canada, the United Kingdom, East Africa, or Australia, and wherever you hear the syllables of Punjabi, you will receive an affirmation that Punjabi is still alive. That identi-

ty is not the self-conscious one delineated for themselves by the Welsh. It is not the irascible one woven into a tartan by the Scots, or the amorphous one that gypsies carry with themselves. Nor is it the Jewishness that is trying to reclaim its home in the Holy Land.

Punjabi is more than a linguistic, provincial tradition. It is the legacy of a cultural persona, of linguistic roots, of a tradition of tolerance that spiritual and temporal leaders like Guru Nanak and Ranjit Singh have bequeathed to us. Had we the eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts spacious enough to accommodate. ■

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ASCENT OF THE SOUTH ASIANS

In the run-up to Britain's December general election, **Ashis Ray** pinpoints key figures from the subcontinent poised to retain or win seats in the next parliament

More than 100 candidates of South Asian origin, not to mention a few of Chinese extraction, will contest the snap British general election scheduled to take place on 12 December. This constitutes a record and reflects a steadily increasing interest and involvement in public life among descendants of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent.

Conspicuously, one man missing from the fray will be Keith Vaz, of Goan origin, who became the first Asian in the modern era to enter the House of Commons, which he did in 1987, carving a niche for himself by continuously being an MP for an impressive 32 years. He was once also a minister of state for Europe in Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour government and, notably, distinguished himself as chair of the home affairs select committee. Unfortunately, alleged indiscretions caught up with him, causing him to step down and not seek re-election.

Vaz represented Leicester East, which boasts the highest Indian origin – mainly Gujarati – electorate in Britain. Now he has been replaced by a non-Asian, Claudia Webbe, who, though born in Leicester, has latterly been active as a councillor in London's Islington borough, from where Labour's current leader

Jeremy Corbyn is elected. She is a member of the party's powerful executive committee, and identified as quite left-wing.

During Vaz's tenure, Leicester East steadily became a Labour stronghold. However, in this election the Overseas Friends of BJP – an RSS front – are urging Indians not to vote for Labour, except in Ealing Southall in the western suburbs of London, where Virendra Sharma, chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for India, is the MP. In effect, Labour in Leicester East will be opposed by

On the sensitive topic of Kashmir, Labour has given the impression of being pro-Pakistan

Bhupen Dave, a person of Gujarati origin, fighting the seat for the Conservative Party, with the BJP and RSS activists in the United Kingdom throwing their weight behind him.

Otherwise, prominent South Asian faces are likely to retain their seats. These include Priti Patel, of East African Indian descent, who has speedily risen from first-time MP in 2010 to home secretary. Similarly, Sajid Javid, who is of Pakistani extraction, has become chancellor of the exchequer, not to mention Alok

Sharma, of Indian background, who is secretary of state for international development, and Rishi Sunak, chief secretary to the treasury or minister of state for finance. All are Conservatives.

Amongst other MPs who have, over the years, demonstrated durability or caught the eye are Shailesh Vara (Conservative), who has been in parliament, including as a junior minister, since 2005; Valerie Vaz, Keith's sister and a shadow leader of the Commons; Seema Malhotra and Lisa Nandy, both tipped to be ministers in the event of a Labour government; Preet Gill, from Birmingham Edgbaston, the first Sikh woman to make it to the Commons; Tanmanjit Dhesi, the first turbaned Sikh to feature in the Commons, and British Bangladeshi Rushanara Ali – all belonging to Labour.

Historically, the Labour Party, generally more sympathetic to migrants, was the natural choice of settlers from the subcontinent. Indian origin Hindus, though, with their new-found prosperity, have been slowly drifting towards other parties, particularly the Conservatives, which, under David Cameron's premiership, emerged as the most pro-India party, though this has not been sustained under successors Theresa May and Boris Johnson.

And lately Labour's radically socialist pronouncements may have scared a section of free market oriented British Indians. Of course, Sikhs by and large remain loyal to Labour, which under Corbyn is ambivalent on, if not supportive of, Khalistan.

On the sensitive topic of Kashmir, Labour has, in the post-Michael Foot period, given the impression of being pro-Pakistan. Following recent steps taken by the Indian government vis-à-vis Jammu and Kashmir, it has adopted a harder line. This has displeased India. At the same time, such situations have in the past been tackled with persuasive diplomacy, and are arguably best handled in this manner.

Correspondingly, British Pakistanis have rallied behind Labour. They do not merely provide a backbone of support in constituencies where they are dominant, but have been acknowledged by a rapid absorption of parliamentary candidates from the community. This surge continues in the selection of nominees in the ongoing campaign, and is bound to result in a further boost in the number of Pakistani origin MPs in the upcoming House. A number of safe Labour seats up and down the country, especially in the north of England, feature British Pakistani contestants.

In the Conservative party, too, British Pakistanis have made inroads, with Saqib Bhatti, for instance, put up in the cast iron seat of Meriden. By comparison, the Conservative-held seat of South West Hertfordshire has been given to Gagan Mohindra, who is of Indian descent, but he is up against the incumbent, the heavyweight David Gauke, who was a Conservative cabinet minister but, as a remainer on Brexit, fell out with Boris Johnson to now stand as an independent.

Labour has opted for Nav Mishra in Stockport, which voted to remain



RAPID RISE: Priti Patel rose from first-time MP in 2010 to current home secretary

in the Brexit referendum. But the retiring Labour MP, Ann Coffey, who held the seat for 27 years, has urged voters to support the Liberal Democrat candidate Wendy Meikle. The Lib Dems is a merger of the original Liberal party and Social Democrats, who split from Labour, then in the clutches of the hard left, in the 1980s. The Liberals, who provided the first Indian origin MP in Dadabhai Naoroji in the 19th century has in recent decades been relatively apathetic to Asian aspirations, while the Scottish National Party, which is slated to win the largest number of

seats in Scotland, does not have a single Asian candidate.

Combined with Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan lawmakers, the tally of MPs of South Asian background is likely to exceed 35 out of 640 in the incoming House. But it could be a tough fight for Bangladeshi prime minister Sheikh Hasina's niece, Labour's Tulip Siddiq, in the hip but marginal seat of Hampstead and Kilburn in north-west London. ■

Ashis Ray has worked for the BBC, the Ananda Bazar Group and the Times of India. He was CNN's founding South Asia bureau chief in Delhi and is the longest serving Indian foreign correspondent

Month in Brief



Outrage over torture claims

A former employee of the British consulate in Hong Kong claims Chinese secret police tortured him in an attempt to force him to divulge information about activists leading pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong. Mr Simon Cheng, a Hong Kong citizen who worked for the British government for almost two years, said he was accused of being a British spy and tortured while detained for 15 days as he returned from a trip to mainland China in August. Britain summoned China's ambassador to express its outrage.

Hostages freed in Taliban swap

The Afghan Taliban has released two Western hostages, completing a delayed prisoner exchange for three of the group's commanders and raising hopes of renewed efforts for peace. American Kevin King and Australian



Timothy Weeks were abducted in August 2016 from outside the American University of Afghanistan in Kabul, where both worked as professors. The US-backed government's decision to carry out the swap is seen as key to securing direct talks with the Islamist militants, who have, until now, refused to engage with what they call an illegitimate 'puppet' regime in Kabul.

Second coast guard ship for Vietnam

The United States announced plans to provide Vietnam with a second coast guard cutter for its growing fleet of ships, boosting Hanoi's ability to patrol the South China Sea and assert its sovereignty amid tensions with China. US Defence Secretary Mark Esper revealed the decision during an address in

Vietnam, which has emerged as Asia's most vocal opponent of China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. In his speech, Mr Esper accused China of 'bullying' neighbours like Vietnam, as well as threatening their access to key natural resources and increasing the risk of conflict.

DSC shortlist announced

The shortlist for the 2019 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature, announced at the LSE on November 7, revealed an equal split between debutants and established writers. Newcomers Madhuri Vijay, author of *The Far Field*, and two novelists of Pakistani origin, Sadia Abbas (*The Empty Room*) and Jamil Jan Kochai (*99 Nights in Logar*) will compete for the prize with Manoranjan Byapari (*There's Gunpowder in the Air*), Raj Kamal



Jha (*The City and the Sea*) and Amitabha Bagchi (*Half the Night is Gone*). The winner will be announced on December 16 at the IME Nepal Literature Festival in Pokhara, Nepal.



Ramgarhia Youth Forum is a not-for-profit organisation established to promote the core values of brother- and sisterhood, selfless love and seva, peace and harmony

The Forum raises and promotes awareness of community spirit through education, spirituality and sport

It also aims to foster an understanding of the history of Jassa Singh Ramgarhia and the true teachings of the ten Gurus

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