

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS- BILATERAL, GROUPINGS, ORGANISATIONS**Terror next door**

The Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka could widen ethnic faultlines, threaten to disrupt a decade of calm.

Background

- Sri Lanka's decade of peace after the LTTE's military defeat in May 2009 has been shattered with a diabolical plan to drag the country back into its darkest days.
- The death toll is nearly 300 from the chain of eight bombings on Easter Sunday targeting churches and hotels across the island nation, worse than anything it has experienced at the hands of the LTTE in the three decades of civil war.
- The scale and the ferocity of the attack has no precedent in Sri Lanka's troubled history, one from which it believed it had finally emerged.
- In the last decade, a generation of Sri Lankans has come of age for whom conflict was history, who have no experience of curfews and emergency regulations or the Prevention of Terrorism Act.
- Now all this is threatening to engulf Sri Lanka again.

Fault in action on intelligence

- It is Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's acknowledgment that the country's security apparatus had "prior information" on the attacks that causes more anguish.
- The differences between President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe appear to have played a good part in the security warning not being taken seriously.
- The PM has alleged that he was not kept in the loop about the intelligence warnings.
- If so, the inability of the country's top functionaries to get along has had deadly consequences. It casts their leadership abilities in extremely poor light. However, the administration has done well to prevent any backlash on the Muslim community.

Reasons for attack

- Rise of extremism and fundamentalism –Given that investigators believe this was the handiwork of radicalised local Muslims, there have been straws in the wind of such radicalisation for years, as a reaction to attacks by the LTTE on Muslims through the 1990s, and after the war, to the rise of Buddhist fundamentalism that began targeting Muslims.
- Spread of Wahabism- Sri Lanka, where nearly 10 per cent of the 22 million population is Muslim, has also not been insulated from the global spread of Wahabism.
- Politicisation- Mainstream Muslim parties, major players in Sri Lanka's robust democratic political space, had managed to keep the radicals at bay all these years despite the failure of the political class to repair the ethnic faultlines.
- Local Grievances- The targeting of Christians, who are an even smaller minority in Sri Lanka than Muslims, and in a manner similar to anti-Christian incidents in other parts of the world, also points to more than a local grievance.

Conclusion: But it seems too early to say if the Easter bloodbath was the handiwork of ISIS, which would be searching for new spaces to compensate for its total loss of territory. Solving these puzzles will help Sri Lanka, also the rest of South Asia, to craft responses that ensure there will be no repetition of this nightmare.

Sovereignty And A Road

India has, once again, decided to not participate in China's second Belt and Road Forum (BRF) due on April 25, which is likely to be attended by around 40 heads of government.

Situation after Wuhan Summit

- The admiration of India's attempt to engage China through the Modi-Xi Wuhan informal meeting has faded away in recent months
- For instance, for the fourth time in a row, China blocked India's bid to designate the Jaish-e-Mohammad Chief Masood Azhar as a global terrorist at the UNSC, the CPEC is going on

regardless of India's stern objections vis-à-vis PoK, and the balance of trade is still hugely in China's favour.

Loopholes in criticism

High Expectations –

- First, thanks to the overpublicising of the Modi-Xi meeting, the expectation bar was set to an unrealistically high level.
- The Wuhan meeting was not about resetting India-China relations. It was an initiative to engage each other in a constructive dialogue.
- Wuhan and subsequent steps were intended to only manage the differences and prevent relations from getting derailed.
- The popular perception in the Indian media that because of Wuhan, China would not go ahead with the CPEC or support India on MasoodAzhar and the belief in the Chinese media that it would lead India to join the BRI, are misinformed at best.

Not a stand-alone dialogue –

- Second, Wuhan was not a stand-alone dialogue, it was deeply embedded with the Doklam standoff. For the two countries, facing an eyeball-to-eyeball situation in Doklam, Wuhan came as an opportunity to re-start the dialogue.

India's response to BRI: India's response to the BRI is not linked with the Wuhan spirit.

- Territorial Concerns – It is deeply rooted in its territorial sovereignty concerns vis-à-vis China and Pakistan. The Chinese investments in Pakistan are complicating the matter with each passing day. India's main concern remains the much-controversial CPEC that passes through the PoK.
- It is clear that China has been selective in addressing India's concerns, and India too has adopted a similar approach.
- China is mindful of the fact that without India's participation, BRI will remain an incomplete project at best.
- That is perhaps why China is keen to have another Wuhan-like dialogue. We do need more such meetings but only to facilitate the negotiation processes.

Way Forward

- Pragmatic Approach- Considering the asymmetry in its relationship with China, India needs to continue its pragmatic and balanced policy of engaging China through dialogues while actively looking for ways to deal with the possible scenarios.
- The institutionalisation of regional groups –The quest to institutionalise the Quad and Indo-Pacific seems to be turning into reality with the restructuring of the MEA's ASEAN Multilateral Division and the Indian Ocean Region Division into the Indo-Pacific Division.
- Trilateral Dialogues – Trilateral dialogues and search for avenues to normalise and improve regular healthy conversations with China are the best way forward.
- Balance of relationships – Self-doubt over peace initiatives or hesitation in moving forward on the Quad are detrimental to India's interests. One should not happen at the cost of the other. A careful balancing of both tracks will contribute to India's stronger positioning in the region.

U.S. ends waiver for India on Iran oil

The U.S. has decided that it will not renew exemptions from its sanctions for importing oil from Iran.

Penalty for Indian Imports

- The US will not issue any additional Significant Reduction Exceptions [SREs] to existing importers of Iranian oil.
- US has continued to apply maximum pressure on the Iranian regime until its leaders change their destructive behaviour, respect the rights of the Iranian people, and return to the negotiating table.
- India, China and U.S. allies Japan, South Korea and Turkey will be the most impacted by the non-renewal of waivers.

- The other three currently exempted countries — Italy, Greece and Taiwan — have already reduced their imports to zero.

Implications for India

- India is the second biggest buyer of Iranian oil after China.
- It is being pushed by the US to restrict its monthly purchase to 1.25 million tonnes or 15 million tonnes in a year down from 22.6 million tonnes in 2017-18 financial year.
- Even during the last set of sanctions between 2012 and 2015, India had continued to import oil from Iran.
- The US decision is intended to bring Iran's oil exports to zero, denying the regime its principal source of revenue.
- Apart from oil imports, India will also have to navigate a waiver for development of the Chabahar port which is of critical strategic importance.

About India's Oil Import

- India is the world's third-largest consumer of oil.
- With 85 per cent of its crude oil and 34 per cent of its natural gas requirements is being fulfilled by imports.
- In 2016, India imported 215 million tonnes of crude oil and at 13 per cent, Iran stood third among India's biggest oil suppliers, after Saudi Arabia and Iraq at 18 per cent each.

ENVIRONMENT- CONSERVATION, BIO-DIVERSITY AND ISSUES

Indoor emissions affect air-quality standards

Household emissions remained one of the major culprits behind PM 2.5 air pollution in India.

Household emission in India

- A recent study has pointed out that the use of firewood, kerosene and coal in the households contributed to about 40% of the PM 2.5 pollution in the Gangetic basin districts.
- The results showed that by eliminating household emissions the average outdoor air pollution levels could be reduced and brought within the national ambient air quality standards.
- The paper published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Science notes that if all households transitioned to clean fuels, about 13% of premature mortality in India could be averted.
- At the national scale, mitigating household emissions is also expected to bring large health benefits.
- In many villages, they still use firewood for room heating and water heating. People prefer cheap wood fuel despite LPG being provided to many households.

Using Satellite data

- Using satellite data and chemical transport model simulations, the researchers pointed out that complete mitigation would bring down the country's average annual PM 2.5 air pollution to 38 microgram/cubic metre.
- Surprisingly, this is below India's national ambient air quality standard of 40 microgram/cubic metre and slightly above the World Health Organization (interim target 1) standards of 35 microgram/cubic metre.

Need for a multipronged approach

- But India's pollution problem is much bigger than often perceived.
- The study has demonstrated that mitigating at a household level is the easiest and more practical way out for the government to reduce not only the household pollution but also outdoor air pollution at the national scale.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Great things never came from Comfort Zones.