

EVA STALIN IAS ACADEMY

12/24, Muthuranga Mudali St, next to Deepam Hospital,
West Tambaram-600045

In poll season, the perils of scorching bilateral ties

All geopolitics is local" is the unwritten rule of policymaking in the 21st century era of populism. As a result, most leaders around the world make foreign policies that ensure that there is no adverse impact on domestic politics, and if possible, even gain them some votes. However, rarely do general elections get conflated with foreign policy issues as the upcoming elections in India seem to have become.

Take, for example, the recent statements by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar calling into question the 1974 India-Sri Lanka agreement. Not only did they both castigate former Prime Ministers and their party for the decision to recognise Katchatheevu island as part of Sri Lankan territory, but the External Affairs Minister also went on to say that a "solution" must be found for the continuing "situation" Tamil Nadu fishermen find themselves in as a result of the agreement. The merits and demerits of the 1974 agreement and 1976 exchange of letters, replete with the "loss" of Katchatheevu and the "gain" of the oil rich Wadge Bank, have since been thrashed out by both sides of the political spectrum.

Commentators have since pointed to government statements, Parliament and Right to Information (RTI) replies and depositions in court (on the Katchatheevu issue and fishermen's rights) that are at variance with Mr. Jaishankar's criticism of the 1974 agreement.

While the aim of the statements is to have an impact during the first phase of India's general election where Tamil Nadu will vote next week, the long-term impact that the statements will have on bilateral ties with Sri Lanka, which is headed for both presidential and parliamentary elections later, seem to have been ignored. Ties with Sri Lanka have been seeing new strength over the past few years after the Modi government extended crucial support of an estimated \$4 billion to help Colombo handle the economic crisis in the country. To have strains over a campaign issue would dampen some of the Wickremesinghe government's goodwill.

Credibility could take a hit

Other than the bilateral strain, the government's hints about reopening the 50-year-old agreement raise other international questions. Could other agreements, signed on the basis of the 1974 settlement, also be revised? Could negotiations that India is undertaking right now, or has already agreed to, such as the maritime boundary settlement with Bangladesh that was accepted by New Delhi in 2014 after a United Nations tribunal verdict, or as an Indian Opposition leader asked, the land boundary agreement (India-Bangladesh) to exchange enclaves, be revised by another government in the future? The recognition of maritime agreements by international bodies



Subasini Haider

such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) makes any revisions difficult. It will also put in doubt India's credibility as an interlocutor if New Delhi chooses to pursue this line after the general election. New Delhi has already seen the challenges to doing this with the World Bank-guaranteed 1960 Indus Waters Treaty. It has been five years since the Modi government threatened to revoke the treaty with Pakistan, and more than a year after New Delhi wrote to Islamabad calling for a renegotiation, but the matter has not yet moved.

On the CAA, transnational involvement

Days before the announcement of the general election, the government's decision to notify rules for the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, or CAA, that it had refrained from doing since the law was passed in 2019, is another example of domestic moves that could put a dampener on otherwise strong ties with a neighbour. Although the government has consistently held that the CAA is purely a domestic law, its foreign policy implications are inescapable. It accuses India's neighbours, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, of persecuting minorities. The CAA's exclusionary nature, accepting only people of six faiths other than Muslims from the three countries, has been seen as discriminatory by countries in the neighbourhood. While ties with Afghanistan under the Taliban, and Pakistan appear to be of little consequence to New Delhi today, the accusation against a friendly government in Bangladesh is significant.

The fear over the long term, that as a result of the subsequent implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), hundreds of thousands of those believed to have come from Bangladesh could be deemed stateless citizens also has the potential to strain ties with Dhaka. There were protests against the CAA in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, but the most vociferous were in Bangladesh – during Mr. Modi's visit to Dhaka in 2021, 12 people were killed in police action against protesting mobs. While there has been no official comment from the Sheikh Hasina government in Bangladesh on the recent decision on the CAA by New Delhi, India's diplomats in Dhaka will have their work cut out for them if and when the policies are fully implemented.

Apart from areas where the government itself has brought foreign policy into contention at a time of the general election, there are those issues that others in the political arena are raising. In recent weeks, the Opposition has been issuing statements at regular intervals questioning the Modi government about India's standoff with China at the Line of Actual Control, and the fact that the China's People's Liberation Army has not yet vacated land that it took control of in April 2020.

The issue of alleged transnational killings by

Indian agencies is another thorn in the government's side, and is being raised internationally just as the general election gets underway. The trial of an Indian national in the United States for an alleged assassination plot to kill a Sikh political activist is expected to begin this summer. The Trudeau government in Canada is expected to do something similar as Canada alleges that 'agents of India assassinated a Sikh community leader in British Columbia'.

Meanwhile, Pakistan has also sought to align its claims that Indian agents killed two Pakistani nationals, with the cases in the U.S. and Canada, and has endorsed a British media report that says Indian intelligence is possibly behind the killing of 20 other Sikh and Islamist separatist operatives in Pakistan. Although it is Pakistan which should be on the back foot explaining the presence of those men on its soil, New Delhi's discomfiture is underlined by the three completely different responses it has presented to Canada, Pakistan, and the U.S.

An assertion by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh that it is government policy to "kill terrorists that go into Pakistan" is at odds with India's rubbishing of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's allegations of Indian involvement in the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, India's strong retaliatory measures against Canadian diplomats in India, and New Delhi's tacit acceptance of the validity of U.S. government claims of Indian involvement in a botched assassination attempt on Gurbatwam Singh Pannun. Unlike its stand with Canada and Pakistan, New Delhi even agreed to examine U.S. evidence in the Pannun case and set up a "high-level" inquiry panel, for what Mr. Jaishankar called an investigation that is in "India's national security interests".

Discretion the key

All of these issues can only be resolved discreetly, in closed bilateral negotiations, and not in the full glare of election campaign rallies and press conferences. The government must recognise that all statements it makes catch the attention of immediate neighbours, especially when it comes to territorial and sovereignty issues.

It came as a surprise to New Delhi that the Nepal government would take umbrage to the Indian gazette map, that was published in 2019, of a reorganised Jammu-Kashmir or to a mural in India's new Parliament building depicting "Akhand Bharat" – as no doubt, would any pushback from Colombo, Dhaka or Kathmandu on cartographic disputes raised during the campaign season. While the election season is relatively short, the consequences of sacrificing bilateral ties at the altar of domestic politics can, however, linger.

Election campaign rallies and media conferences are not the places to be making vociferous statements on sensitive foreign policy issues

subasini.haider@evastalin.com

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A battle to save Ladakh, and all of humanity

When Ramon Magsaysay award winner (2018) and climate activist Sonam Wangchuk addressed a 30,000-strong crowd at Leh, Ladakh on March 6, 2024 to announce his 21-day climate fast, he was not just speaking to the people of Ladakh but also making an appeal to the world.

Tucked away between India's neighbours, Pakistan and China, at a height of 11,500 feet, Ladakh comprises 97% indigenous tribes, many of whom lead simple pastoral lives and depend on farming and animal rearing for a livelihood. Apart from border disputes, the Himalayan region also faces the damaging effects of climate change through floods, drought, landslides, greenhouse gases, and other pollutants.

There are about 15,000 glaciers in the Himalayan region, often referred to as the Third Pole. In spring and summer, these glaciers form an important part of the hydrological process by releasing meltwater to the Indus, the Ganga, and the Brahmaputra. The Himalayan glaciers, like those in the rest of the world, are at risk of melting due to global warming and climate change. This will affect both residents of the mountain region and those living downstream.

Infrastructure boom

In 2008, the Centre launched eight Missions under the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC). One of these was under the Ministry of Science and Technology, i.e., the National Mission for Sustaining the Himalayan Ecosystem (NMSHE). As the Department of Science and Technology (DST) website states, the "main objective of NMSHE is to develop a capacity to scientifically assess the vulnerability of the Himalayan region to climate change and continuously assess the health status of the Himalayan ecosystem".

So, why has NMSHE forgotten its role of protecting the Himalayan region?

Almost as soon as Ladakh became a Union



Janaki Murali
is a journalist
and author

Sonam Wangchuk's climate fast has highlighted the larger issue of the fragility of the Himalayan ecosystem

Territory, several mega infrastructure projects were launched at rapid pace. These included the construction of bridges, widening of roads, tunnels, railway lines, mega solar projects, a state-of-the-art airport terminal and wayside amenities to boost tourism. Among these were the 14.15 kilometre Zojila tunnel, the 230 km Kargil-Zaskar National Highway project, and a 10 gigawatt solar energy project covering 20,000 acres in the Changthang region. The Ladakh (UT) Industrial Land Allotment Policy of 2023 aims "to make UT Ladakh one of the preferred destinations for investment".

The Border Roads Organisation (BRO) has been spearheading many of these projects along with the National Highways & Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd. (NHIDCL). In its annual report of 2021-22, the NHIDCL states as its vision the following: "To fast-track the construction of National Highways and other Infrastructure in the North Eastern Region, near border and strategic areas like Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh and also in the state of Uttarakhand and UT of Andaman & Nicobar islands". Incidentally, all these areas are vulnerable to climate change-related disasters.

A region that has seen disasters

What is puzzling is why the various government bodies, sanctioning and executing the projects at such a feverish pace, are not paying heed to the warnings from past disasters in the mountains and learning from them.

Since 2010, there have been several disasters in the Himalayan region, with a loss of lives and livelihoods. In 2013, a cloudburst in the upper reaches of the Himalayas led to flash floods at Kedarnath, claiming 6,000 lives and sweeping away several settlements. In January 2023, disaster struck Joshimath, when water gushed down a lower slope of the mountain, submerging parts of the town. In November 2023, the rescue of 41 trapped workers in the collapsed Silkyara

tunnel project in the Himalayas garnered international attention.

Uttarakhand, where all these tragedies occurred, too has seen a slew of infrastructure projects from its formation in 2000. This has continued despite dire warnings from geologists and ecologists. A Supreme Court of India constituted expert committee even suggested that authorities limit the number of pilgrims visiting the Char Dam Himalayan shrines, at Kedarnath, Badrinath, Yamunotri, and Gangotri to carrying capacity. Carrying capacity is the maximum number of people that an ecosystem can support, without eroding it. But, instead, pilgrim numbers have only swelled every year. Some expert committees have even suggested that no hydroelectric projects are set up in the para-glacial zone.

When tragedy strikes, the human cost of environmental destruction is sadly borne by poor migrant workers in ongoing projects and by residents, tourists and pilgrims. Government bodies sanctioning the projects or the developers executing them escape the wrath of the mountains.

Scant review

What has been frustrating climate change activists is their recommendations gathering dust despite approaching the courts and the formation of expert committees. Hardly any due diligence which includes risk assessment, safety measures and geological and seismic analysis, goes into any of the multi-crore mega projects in the mountains.

In the name of development, we cannot afford to upset the fragile balance in the Himalayan ecosystem and its biodiversity. The onus is on all of us to ensure that the Himalayas and the people living under its shadow are protected.

For, Wangchuk's battle is not just about Ladakh and its people. It is a battle for all of humanity and its future generations.