

Combating terrorism

Direct communication among countries is essential

IN a three-day dialogue of top police officials from 14 South Asian and neighbouring countries, and representatives from other organisations held recently in Dhaka, the Inspector General of Police rightly pointed out that police forces of countries need direct channels of communication for sharing real-time information for swift response to terrorist threats. The IGP decried the cumbersome diplomatic procedures that make it extremely tough to share intelligence and track down terrorists.

We completely agree with the IGP's statement that establishing communication links between police forces of countries is crucial for tackling security threats. We know that terrorism is not an isolated phenomenon but a global menace that requires the joint efforts of law enforcement agencies and intelligence communities of countries. We also know that Bangladesh cannot turn a blind eye to the threat of terrorism any longer, especially in the aftermath of the deadliest terrorist attack in the country's history that we witnessed last July. The government's strong-handed response to the attack has been impressive, as we saw a number of successful anti-terror raids on militant dens in the last couple of months.

However, the Bangladesh government alone cannot wipe out the scourge of terrorism from its soil. What we need is multilateral cooperation and a coherent counter-terrorism strategy in the sub-region. A mechanism also needs to be put in place that allows for the quick passage of information. In an era where the radicalisation of youths is accelerated by social media, direct modes of communication for effective intelligence-sharing among law enforcement agencies in the region are indispensable.

BCL running amok in DU

Rein in these errant elements

ON March 14, a faction of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) took it upon itself to try and force residents at Dhaka University's Bijoy Ekattor Hall to make room for their cadres. When teachers and the hall provost arrived at the Hall upon receipt of complaints these BCL men had the audacity to argue with the teachers. What circumstances have led the ruling party student wing to behave in such an unruly manner where they show little regard for their peers, we wonder? In the past, at the height of student agitation in the '60s, no student organisation had ever displayed such criminality. Why such a mindset has been created where violence and force has become a mode of arbitration and indeed, the mainstay of the ruling party's student wing.

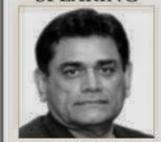
Awami League (AL) has been in power for the last eight years and the unruly behaviour of BCL has been taken to a new height. So precisely what is the ruling party's view of the situation and what is it going to do about it? BCL is intimidating the university administration through force and coercion as if it is its god-given right to decide who will get seats in the dormitories. We wonder why the university administration remains strangely silent when acts of hooliganism keep recurring on the campus and we are sorry to see the rather inert reaction of the university authorities to curb such hooliganism.

We appeal to the ruling party to put a stop to BCL's unruly behaviour, which ultimately undermines the government's image. Otherwise the good academic environment that one expects to see in the nation's premier public university will be difficult to achieve.

Bangladesh-India defence cooperation

Reading between the lines...

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



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NDC, PSC (RETD)

A very important visit of our prime minister, the twice rescheduled visit to India will now take place between April 7 and April 10. And of the several "deals", "understandings" and "agreements" that one hears about likely to be signed, a defence deal between the two countries has been the most talked about issue. But regrettably it is only through the Indian media that we have come to know, whatever little that we know, of a likely "agreement" in the defence sector. The first to break the news about a possible Bangladesh-India defence "agreement" was the Indian print media. And that too is very scanty. And what our media has done is at best reproduce and rephrase those reports. Thus there is perhaps very little to read between the lines since there are very few substantive lines to read.

To start with, we do not know what the character of the deal would be. Will it be a defence "pact" as one Indian journalist would have us believe, or will it be, as per several others, a "comprehensive defence agreement" or a "treaty"? And will it be time bound or open ended? Whatever may be the compact, it is likely to encompass the entire gamut of military activity – training, sale of military hardware and military to military cooperation in other fields. And Delhi is even willing to cough up 500 million dollars in line of credit for military cooperation. Interestingly, this marks a significant shift in India's policy of offering credit for purchase of weapons and equipment, which heretofore India has been unwilling to offer. This is quite a lot of money, and God knows India needs every penny to refurbish its own arsenal, a good percentage of which is becoming obsolescent. And all this to offset the so-called Bangladesh's dependence on PRC in the defence sector.

According to reports emanating from India, Bangladesh is not agreeable to a defence pact or treaty, and if at all, would like to have a less formal and less binding arrangement like a "memorandum of understanding". Obviously, there is no compulsion for Bangladesh to go for a treaty that would inevitably, as any treaty

does, restrict the strategic options for the country, whatever the positives of such an arrangement might be.

But while Bangladesh may not feel the need for a defence agreement, India apparently does. What has raised its concern is the level of Bangladesh-China military cooperation, the addition of two Chinese submarines exacerbating India's worry, and something it has not made secret of.

Regrettably, we do not have any idea about the Bangladesh government's stand on the matter. In an ideal set up, such

importantly the modalities of operation and selection of targets and force organisation for a particular task and command and control arrangements. But while some threats may be perceived as mutual, some may not be, and the intended manner of dealing with those may vary.

Another proposal that one hears about is a joint venture to develop our maritime infrastructure. And that perhaps will involve, among other things, cooperation with our dockyards that have become a huge force multiplier. What will be the

which is involved in our defence production?

We understand that India has offered weapons and armaments at competitive price. Given that India happens to be the largest importer of weapons, and India does export weapons to several countries, will it have surplus from its stock to meet our demands and our standards? More importantly, when one goes about shopping for weapons, price is not necessarily the overriding factor that determines one's choice.

While we wait for more details of all the



Main steering wheel of INS Vikrant being handed over by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in Dhaka on June 6, 2015.

PHOTO: IANS

proposals would be thoroughly hammered out in the floor of the parliament. Of course not all memorandums are put under the scanner in the floor of the house, but a proposed MOU that deals with defence is not just another understanding, the ramifications are wide with long-term security implications.

One of the proposals, for example, is coordinated operations against mutually perceived threats. Admittedly the nitty-gritty will have to be worked out, most

long-term implications of such cooperation with India in a particular segment of our defence production and acquisition is a matter for deliberation. Any defence production of necessity involves deployment of substantial amount of resources in research and development which invariably encompasses the realm of science and technology and long-term planning. The question is how much, if at all, should we share our strategic designs that motivate our defence schemes with a second party

deals, agreements and MOUs to emerge, one feels that any sectoral agreement or deal has to be seen in the wider context of Indo-Bangladesh relations. And in any case Bangladesh as already addressed the most pressing Indian concern of Indian insurgent activities along our borders, and that without any formal "defence deal." Given that, we wonder whether there is at all need for a formal defence "agreement".

The writer is Associate Editor, The Daily Star.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Why India should scrap parliamentary democracy

AWAKENING INDIA



SHASHI THAROOR

INDIA'S parliamentary system, inherited from the British, is rife with inefficiencies. By the logic of Westminster, you elect a legislature to form the executive, and when the executive does not command a secure majority in the legislative assembly, the government falls, triggering fresh elections. The result is a vote in some or other of India's 29 state assemblies every six months or so, each one acting as a sort of referendum on the government in New Delhi. In short, India's free-wheeling multi-party democracy has become one of perennial plebiscite.

India's latest round of elections included five state assemblies. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) prevailed in Uttar Pradesh – India's largest state, which is home to more than 200 million people and has produced seven of 15 prime ministers – and in neighbouring Uttarakhand. The main opposition party, the Indian National Congress, triumphed in the northwestern state of Punjab and won pluralities in Goa and Manipur (though the BJP formed governments in the latter two states anyway, by assembling coalitions to ensure legislative majorities).

It looks like a mixed result. But India's national politics has long been skewed toward the Hindi-speaking northern heartland, and Uttar Pradesh has far more voters than the other four states combined. So the results have been hailed as a victory for the BJP, affirming Modi's popularity and vindicating his leadership – including of the campaign itself.

Indeed, Modi personally commanded the campaign in Uttar Pradesh, whose fabled city of Varanasi he represents in Parliament. With his attendance at multiple political events and addresses to innumerable campaign rallies, Modi staked his government's image – and, some would say, his own reputation as prime minister – on the election.

The benefits extend beyond status. Victory in Uttar Pradesh was critical to enable Modi to take control of India's Upper House,

whose members are elected by state legislative assemblies. The latest election results also assure him the legislative numbers he needs to get his own candidates elected as India's president in July and vice-president in August.

But at what cost? One clear downside of India's perennial electioneering is that prime ministers must frequently leave aside their role as leader of the country to act as leader of their party. Modi is a take-no-prisoners campaigner, who revels in punchy invective and freely launches partisan attacks at opponents (including me). There's nothing statesmanlike about it, and yet it will happen again soon, with a fresh round of elections, including in Modi's home state of Gujarat, due before the end of the year.

If there ever were need for yet another clinching argument for a presidential system in India, it is the spectacle of the head of government abandoning the responsibilities of that office every few months to go on the stump for their party. The parliamentary system has not merely outlived any good it could do India; it was never well suited to Indian conditions. In fact, it is responsible for many of our principal political ills.

Like the American revolutionaries two centuries ago, Indian nationalists fought for "the rights of Englishmen," which they thought the replication of the Houses of Parliament would epitomise and guarantee. When former British Prime Minister Clement Attlee, as a member of a British constitutional commission, suggested the United States' presidential system as a model for India, the country's leaders "rejected it with great emphasis." Attlee recalled, "I had the feeling that they thought I was offering them margarine instead of butter."

But perhaps margarine might have suited India's vegetarian tastes better. Indeed, while a parliamentary system can work in a small, largely homogenous country, in India's large, diverse, and fractious polity, it has been messy, to say the least.

The system's apologists point out that it has kept India together and given every citizen a stake in the country's political destiny. But any form of genuine democracy would do that. The question is which form of democracy would also ensure effective performance, without allowing the government to be constantly distracted by

petty politics. Perhaps the answer lies in the US or Latin American model, with a directly elected chief executive – a president, at the national level, and a governor, at the state level – serving a fixed term as both head of state and head of government.

A directly elected chief executive would not be vulnerable to the shifting sands of legislative support. They could appoint a cabinet of talented officials, confident in the stability of their tenure. Above all, they could devote their energies to governance, rather than just to politics. The relentless election cycle would come to an end.

In such a system, citizens would actually be voting for the individual they want in charge. The president could therefore claim to speak for a majority of Indians, rather than a majority of members of parliament. At the end of a fixed period of time – say, five years, as India's MPs are currently accorded – the public would be able to judge their leader's success at improving citizens' lives, rather than at keeping a government in office.

Of course, in a sense, democracy is an end in itself. It is vital for India's survival. Pluralism is a fundamental element of who we are, and we are proud of it. But few Indians are proud of the kind of politics our democracy has inflicted upon us. In order to confront the challenges and meet the needs of one-sixth of the world's population, India's leaders must operate within a democracy that enables, rather than hampers, governance. Only then can they deliver progress to the people they represent.

A presidential system would do just that. It would enable leaders to focus on representing the people, instead of on staying in power. With a more expansive and predictable election cycle, India's leaders would be able to move beyond the unpleasant business of political contention, and settle down to governance. In that shift in focus lies a presidential system's ultimate vindication.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Ensure safety in construction sites

We are utterly shocked and saddened by the news of a man who was killed and two others injured - one of whom was a construction engineer when a girder of the Malibagh-Mouchak - Moghbazar flyover collapsed near the Malibagh rail gate. Earlier, the nation witnessed a similarly horrifying incident with the Bohadderhat girder collapse in Chittagong. How much longer can we go on ignoring these incidents?

The concerned authorities have once again substantiated their callousness towards safety through these events. Neglect of safety measures is under no conditions acceptable in construction sites. Strict penalties must be handed out immediately, and safety measures must be tightened in construction sites across the country.

