

The political standoff over a controversial citizens' list

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

THE standoff over a controversial list of Indian citizens in Assam is escalating into a full-blown political crisis by the day and has become a national issue. The key players in the faceoff—the Bharatiya Janata Party, Congress and Trinamool Congress—have toughened their stands and both Houses of parliament have witnessed uproar each day ever since the publication of the National Register of Citizens that left out over four million people, setting out the battle lines.

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee scaled up the rhetoric on the NRC issue in Assam by warning a civil war and bloodbath. The BJP responded by upping the ante with party president Amit Shah linking the issue of illegal migration from Bangladesh to national security. Shah's senior colleague Arun Jaitley ratcheted up the attack on the Congress and the Trinamool Congress by accusing them of compromising the sovereignty of India on the NRC issue. Jaitley further sought to corner the Congress saying in his blog that Congress, despite being a mainstream party, has increasingly started taking "fringe" positions in contrast to stands taken by Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. Mamata also sought to give an external dimension to the subject when she said that it has the potential to hit ties with friendly neighbour Bangladesh.

The political temperature went up further due to the high drama over how a delegation of Trinamool Congress leaders and lawmakers was not allowed by Assam police to enter Silchar town,

an area dominated by Bangla-speaking Hindus from Bangladesh. The heat is expected to soar when Amit Shah addresses a public meeting in Kolkata on August 11. There are indications from the BJP that the party will take the battle over the NRC issue to Mamata-ruled state. Shah had dared the Mamata government to arrest him if the Kolkata police did not allow the meeting on August 11. However, the police did give the permission, averting what could have been another showdown.

The Congress party called a meeting of its highest decision-making forum—the Congress Working Committee—to discuss the Assam citizenship issue on August 4 and firm up its strategy to deal with it both in and outside the parliament.

What tended to get drowned in the heat of the political rhetoric over the citizenship issue were efforts by Home Minister Rajnath Singh and Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal to bring down fears among those excluded from the list by reiterating that they would get full opportunity to seek redress. The Supreme Court-appointed coordinator of the NRC, Prateek Hajela, also chipped in by saying that it would be premature to term those excluded from the draft NRC as "infiltrators" and that such a divisive issue could get a finality only from the judiciary which is a long haul.

Political firestorm notwithstanding, the BJP, the Congress and the Trinamool Congress face challenges; they need to go through some introspection as they grapple with the issue. There are already rumblings in Assam units of the Congress and the

Trinamool Congress whose state chief and two other leaders have quit protesting the party's stand on the NRC.

The BJP, which has accused the Congress of playing vote-bank politics, needs to strike a balance in its opposition to illegal migrants without being seen as against migrant Hindus. It has sought to draw a distinction between religious minority Hindus and Sikhs from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan and illegal migrants propelled by economic factors. A senior BJP leader said the party wants the return of the names of Hindus gone missing from the NRC. That is easier said than done, as such a development is frowned upon by its ally Asom Gana Parishad in Assam. The BJP is apprehensive that the exclusion of Hindus from the NRC might have an adverse impact in West Bengal, where the party is eyeing larger electoral footprints, and will give its rivals a handle to attack it by claiming that the saffron party cares little for Hindus.

The Congress party, which has charged the BJP with indulging in communal politics, is of the view that it faces the task of countering the BJP's campaign that the NRC, perceived to be directed at Muslim migrants, was a baby of the Congress and that one of the signatories to the 1985 Assam Accord stipulating the NRC was the Congress government at the Centre. It remains to be seen how effectively the Congress can play up at the national level that the final draft list of citizens has left out both Hindus and Muslims who have been the traditional support base of the party. But the party also has an Assam

specific worry. It had ruled the state for 15 years at a stretch before being voted out of power by the BJP in 2016 elections. The Assam unit of the Congress wants the party's national leadership not to send any signal that it is against the NRC, not only because it

Front, it used to cry hoarse over the presence of "infiltrators" in the state's voters' list. Most of the Muslim votes in West Bengal used to go in favour of the Left as long as it was in power but that scenario has changed since the May 2011 assembly elections which



PHOTO: TWITTER

BJP chief Amit Shah addressed the Rajya Sabha on the NRC issue.

brought Trinamool Congress to power in the state.

It is unfortunate that the political fight over the citizenship has contributed to sharpening of the religious, ethnic and linguistic divides in Assam even as the NRC's objective was to address them.

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From Russia With Fatal Love



KAUTILYAN KRONICLES
I AN Fleming's trademark narrative has returned: Russia playing the same old game he wrote so much about (if one remembers James Bond, his boss, M, and their Soviet obsession). Donald J Trump's summit with Vladimir

like Adolf Hitler's 1936-8 Sudeten infringements, which paved the way to World War II, not a finger was raised: NATO noise was more apparent than action, least of all, a deterrent; and though a German-led European Union also registered stern opposition, its own political map was being drastically reconfigured from within. Even Angela Merkel, its beleaguered Chancellor,

Syria was much more action-packed. At least here Obama did commit troops (up to 50 in 2015, 450 more in 2016), indicating both Islamic jihadis and Syria's brutal Assad regime could and would be on the line. Even uprooting Islamic State (IS) took far more from the west than was anticipated: Putin's Russia stepped in to revitalise Basher Assad's forces. Not only with direct Russian military

and Poland's Andrzej Sebastian Duda began dismantling whatever held them together with their EU partners.

Collateral gains have whetted Putin's gains. After briefly skirmishing with Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey during the peak onslaught against IS jihadis, he swiftly turned to rapprochement, benefiting from Erdogan's personal vendetta against the west: the European Union for withholding Turkey's membership, and the United States for not returning Erdogan's bitter foe, the exiled Fethullah Gulen, from Saylorburg, Pennsylvania.

Capitalising on solid Syrian relations that go back to the 1970s and the Baath emergence under Basher's father, Hafez al-Assad, Putin craftily plucked Iran out to complicate western interests. Trump's bitter opposition to Iran's P5+1 2015 agreement, which Russia partly brokered, helped lubricate this particular rapprochement. Iran's simultaneously solid relations with Syria, nevertheless, helped Putin not only make Assad "king" of the Syrian hills, but also dared the United States to cross the regional Rubicon.

Free-riding China is paying off handsomely. It is helping Putin flaunt his line of allies: in Iran, where Trump has Israeli-fed designs; in Afghanistan, where Trump did what he said he would not do as president, expand troop deployment (of more than 3,000, to add to the 18,000 already there); and even with both Israel and Saudi Arabia, whose leaders visited Moscow, fully cognizant of where the balance-of-power was shifting. He went out of this way to galvanise the Shanghai Cooperation Organization at its Wuhan summit this year, and goaded Kim Jong-un to not fall head-over-heels for Trump.

Behind all of this lies his most coveted gain. Though the 15-year-old 1995 Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START), which began in 1982, ended in December 2009, it was renewed in 2011 until 2021. Both sides agreed to cap their arsenals so that, by 2018, neither side would have more than 700 deployed

missiles (both intercontinental and submarine-launched) and bombers, 800 deployed and non-deployed launchers, and 1,550 deployed bombers. Not only is Trump bristling to scrap this so US arsenals can be revamped, but Putin is also poised to free-ride even Trump's intentions: he too seeks more cutting-edge nuclear missiles for his "America First" campaign. One ruefully recalls how Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defensive Initiative (SDI), or Star Wars, proposal stumped the Soviet Union in the 1980s, first financially, then pushing Mikhail Gorbachev into negotiating with the United States, before the Soviet Union crashed in November 1991. Putin is too blunt to want to avoid such an embarrassment again.

In the second decade of the 21st Century, as US leadership wanes, China is not the only country polishing its spurs. The recently humiliated Russia may be back in the game, playing by the book, hook, or crook. Though China carries all the cards, resources, and strategic advantages, Putin knows the craft, how to leverage, and supply the proper tactics.

Yet, he no longer has to dip into his own trick-bag anymore. He has, for the lack of a more appropriate adjective, a jester in the very White House that haunted the Russians since World War II who will play Putin's cards independently. That he is doing so on the back of a solid voter "base" that does not represent a majority, but remains strong enough to thwart any majority viewpoints (much as Russia has historically done), adds to the unfolding tragic-comedy.

Perhaps it's time for the rest of the world to switch off the Trump soap-opera and tune in to that destructive "base." It is here that the world's welfare is being held hostage. How James Bond bonds with the new setting may be the more quixotic box-office question, but that we would get the no-frills answer quick enough suggest the value in reviving his model.

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U.S. President Donald Trump and Russia's President Vladimir Putin talk during the family photo session at the APEC Summit in Danang, Vietnam November 11, 2017.

PHOTO: REUTERS

could not find a partner to wag her finger robustly with her across Europe. An impending election in France and referendum in Great Britain stymied Europe's two other loud voices; and the populist sword overhanging West European countries had already notched its greatest victory across the Atlantic. Thus Barack Obama's passive foreign policy approach, especially with the military, could not rescue the west-leaning Ukraine. Nor was Trump's interest to challenge Putin evident anywhere. Ukraine was left as ready for Russia to swallow as it was for the Soviet Union after World War II.

action and troops, but also an alliance forged with Iran, Syria's patron state. We see before our very eyes the last rebel stronghold succumbing to Assad's (Russia's) forces, with western input and presence virtually nullified under Trump's woeful watch.

Strategically, both Russian gains were US/western losses. With Ukraine, Russia is back on the verge of East European borders just when East European countries, previously under Soviet control, cannot hide their west-directed frustrations, and particularly against the European Union: riding on populist sentiments, Hungary's Viktor Mihály Orbán

192 Putins master strokes were played over Ukraine, inside Syria, and with Turkey (and through the latter two, with Iran). His 2013 Ukrainian intervention, following that country's 2009 indebtedness from Russian gas purchases, was universally unpopular. Just

True, how Trump backtracked just as soon as he got out of Finland, where that "superpower" summit was held, should not surprise us. He had backtracked just a week earlier in London, sharing a less flattering view of Prime Minister Theresa May in a *Sun* interview than he showered upon her during their summit's culminating press conference. True, he betrayed his own intelligence agencies, but as long as Putin's reputation was skyrocketing, he, like Russian spies, did not care. He has turned Mueller's investigation into Russia's cyber espionage (to corral Russian involvement in the 2016 US presidential election), to portray as only Trump's cross to bear, not his. Yet, he was winning from much before.

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