

BID TO ASSERT CLAIM ON SOUTH CHINA SEA

China uses militia

Report says Beijing funding hundreds of vessels that it uses to back its expansive claim in disputed waters

AGENCIES

There may be as many as 300 vessels from China's maritime militia patrolling the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea at any one time as Beijing continues to stake its controversial claim on the disputed waters, according to new research from the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in the United States.

Composed of purpose-built militia vessels and commercial fishing fleets, China's maritime militia has "exploded" in tandem with its increasingly assertive claim to almost the entire sea, CSIS said in the report, which was published on Thursday in Washington, DC.

Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan also claim parts of the South China Sea where China has been building artificial islands with airstrips, sheltered ports and other military infrastructure, reports Al Jazeera Online.

China's maritime militia dates back to coastal defence carried out during the 1950s. Since China seized the Paracel Islands from Vietnam in the 1970s, the militia, supported by government subsidies for fuel, construction and repairs, according to CSIS,

has grown in size and scope and become instrumental in helping Beijing assert its territorial and maritime claims.

"Over the course of the 2000s, the militia shifted its focus toward surveilling and harassing foreign military activity to which Beijing objected," the CSIS report said, citing cases of suspected militia ships ramming foreign boats, damaging their sonar array or exploration equipment, throwing debris in their path, firing water cannons, and engaging in other dangerous manoeuvres.

Greg Poling, director of the Southeast Asia Program and the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative at CSIS and one of the report's authors, said there had been a clear effort to professionalise and build out the militia since president Xi Jinping came to power.

Meanwhile, the United States yesterday accused China of an escalation against the Philippines and warned that an armed attack would invite a US response after an incident in disputed waters, reports AFP.

"The United States stands with our ally, the Philippines, in the face of this escalation that directly threatens regional peace and stability," State Department spokesman Ned Price said in Abuja, where Secretary of State Antony Blinken was travelling.



A paramilitary soldier stands guard in an armoured vehicle at a street during a day-long strike called by Separatists All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) and Bar Associations to protest against the recent civilian killings by Indian government forces in Srinagar, Kashmir yesterday. Inset, a policeman searches a motorist during the day-long strike in Srinagar.

PHOTO: AFP



MODI'S U-TURN ON FARM REFORMS

Electoral politics trumps economics

Farmers' protest against farm laws provided a glue to opposition parties to join hands against BJP in the coming round of assembly elections in five states

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Electoral politics in a democracy like India is all about taking the right decision at the right time and popular perception.

So, when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi took to the televised address to the nation at the unusual time of 9:00am yesterday to announce the decision to withdraw the three controversial farm laws passed by parliament more than a year ago, the fresh assembly polls in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Goa less than six months down the line could have been uppermost in his mind.

The decision to take back the three laws, which were passed by parliament in September 2020 and which Modi had so aggressively defended as aimed at reforming the farm sector, particularly for the "benefit" of 80 percent of poor farmers with less than two hectares of land, came after the government held out for more than a year in the face of unrelenting street protests by farmers mainly from Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh on the borders of Delhi.

This was the second time the Modi government was forced to climb down on an issue related to farmers. In 2015, a year after Modi was swept to power in May, 2014, he had to revoke the Land Acquisition ordinance after sustained pushbacks against it in what was seen as a clear indication that his government remains mindful of possible electoral fallout from the issues concerning farmers who constitute nearly 60 per cent of the electorate.

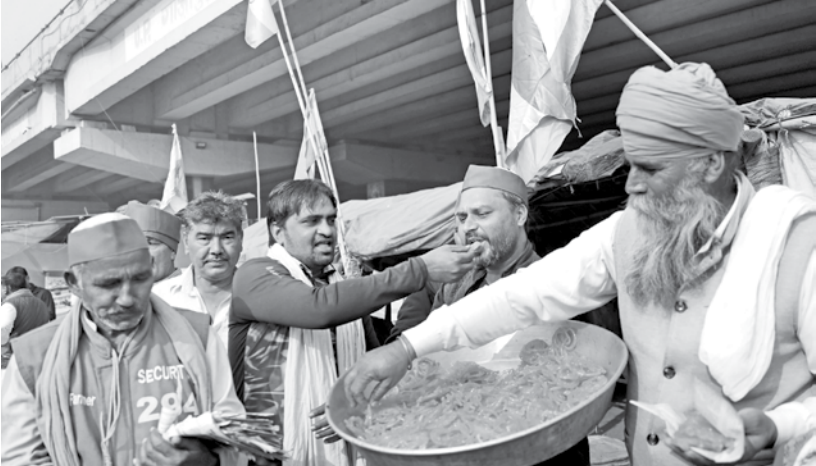
The difference between the land acquisition law withdrawal in 2015 is BJP gained a key regional ally in Bihar but in the case of farm sector laws, the saffron party's standing by them cost its key Punjab ally Shiromani Akali Dal which parted ways in 2020.

In 2015, the BJP had faced an electoral battle in the eastern state of Bihar in alliance with regional party Janata Dal (United) headed by Nitish Kumar to win power there.

The same indomitable urge to win elections appears to be in play in the

battle for Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and the other smaller states in the first half of 2022, whose results would be a bellwether for the BJP and the opposition ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha election.

It is frequently said that the road to majority in the Lok Sabha passes through Uttar Pradesh, electorally the most crucial state which has the highest number of 80 seats. So, much depends on which party gets to rule the state in the coming assembly elections.



Farmers celebrate as they pose for pictures after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that he will repeal the controversial farm laws, at the Ghazipur farmers protest site near Delhi-UP border, India, yesterday.

There has been growing concern within the BJP about the traction the farmers' agitation against the three farm laws have had not just in UP but also in the other states going to the polls in early 2022.

What has added to the worry of BJP leadership is the party's dimming prospects in Uttar Pradesh, considered the state's granary, which accounts for nearly 130 of the 400-odd seats in the state assembly. The saffron party is also concerned that the speculation about an alliance between key regional parties of UP Samajwadi Party and Rashtriya Lok Dal would be a big headache had the issue of farmers' protests remained unresolved.

Adding to the woes of the saffron party in UP was the adverse impact of the killing of four farmers who were mowed down by a SUV Lakhimpur

Kheri district.

The fact that BJP has decided to deploy Modi's key aide and Home Minister Amit Shah and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh to connect with the booth-level party workers in western Uttar Pradesh in the next couple of weeks reflected the pressure on the saffron party as far as the election goes.

Many in the Modi government, including the PM himself, often point to its penchant for many firm decisions, including demonetisation in November, 2016, scrapping of Article 370 withdrawing the special status for Jammu and Kashmir in 2019 and Citizenship Amendment Act and riding out the storms created by them.

Therefore, the decision to repeal the three farm laws has dented the image of a tough and decisive government even though it is also an acknowledgement that in politics invulnerability is often only skin-deep. The farmers' protest against the three farm laws provided a glue to opposition parties to join hands against BJP in the coming round of assembly elections in five states including Punjab and UP where the issue has a bigger resonance.

In withdrawing the three farm laws, Modi may have tendered an apology but will it be enough to disarm BJP's rivals?

'My computer is my weapon'

Afghan woman journalist stands up to Taliban

THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION, London

When the Taliban last ruled Afghanistan, Zahra Joya dressed as a boy and called herself Mohammad, allowing her to circumvent the Islamist group's ban on girls going to school.

The journalist's unusual childhood not only let her get an education, but gave her a taste of the freedoms denied to most girls in Afghanistan, where many families only celebrate the birth of sons.

An outspoken feminist, Joya set up Rukhshana Media last year - a news service reporting on Afghan women's lives, including the economic hardship and violence many endure.

Joya, 29, is among hundreds of journalists who have fled the country since the Islamist militants' shock return to power on Aug. 15.

Today she is living in a London hotel - a stone's throw from the Tower of London - after being evacuated from Kabul following the Taliban's takeover.

From her room she continues to report on events 5,800 km (3,600 miles) away, relying on six women journalists working covertly, and her network of contacts.

"Our work is now more important than

ever because most media have closed," she said, adding that more than 150 outlets in the country's once vibrant media sector had shut since August, and most women journalists had stopped working.

"Afghanistan is the only country where half the population don't have basic rights. It's crucial we show what's happening," said Joya. "My computer is my weapon," she said. "With my computer I'll continue to ... stand up against the Taliban."

When the Taliban last ruled from 1996 to 2001, they barred women from work and imposed harsh restrictions on their lives, flogging or stoning those who broke the rules.

This time they have said girls and women will be allowed to study and work in accordance with Islamic law, without clarifying exactly what this means. Most women and high school girls remain at home.

Joya said technology and social media were helping journalists monitor the Taliban in a way that was not possible when the Islamists last ruled.

But she said extremists were also using social media to spread propaganda and incite hatred.



ANTI-JUNTA ATTACKS

Myanmar arrests ex-lawmaker

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar security forces have arrested a former lawmaker and prominent hip-hop artist accused of masterminding a string of attacks targeting regime forces and officials, the junta said yesterday.

Self-declared civilian "people's defence forces" have sprung up to fight for democracy since the generals seized power in a February coup, with dissidents targeting officials perceived to be working with the junta.

Maung Kyaw, 40, was arrested from an apartment in the commercial hub Yangon following a "tip-off and cooperation from dutiful citizens," the junta's information team said. The former lawmaker was in possession of two pistols, ammunition and an M-16 rifle, it added.