

Trouble In Middle Kingdom: Xi-Li Tussle Comes To The Fore

By Srikanth Kondapalli

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Chinese Premier Li Keqiang is a worried man these days. He is now at the forefront of the “people’s war” to counter the pandemic but also to restore the economy battered by Communist Party chief and Chinese President Xi Jinping’s “zero-Covid” lockdowns and curbs on booming economic powerhouses.

This is in sharp contrast to how Li was feeling when I, as part of a group of scholars and think-tankers, met him only a few years ago. In a 90-minute extempore presentation to us, Li was upbeat about the “medium-high growth” targets and the economic pivoting to domestic consumption and services. He was only concerned about the falling purchasing power in the rural areas and to the growing income disparities.

Li’s confidence seems eroded now with the massive fall in the economy in the past two years, triggered by mass lockdowns, stringent border controls and quarantine procedures. These were aggravated by a sudden crackdown last year on big businesses such as Alibaba, Tencent and Meituan, while allowing the free fall of real-estate giants like Evergrande and others. Alibaba chief Jack Ma went into hiding after he made comments on the country’s banking system. Its shares tumbled.

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Xi defended these radical policies under the rubric of “common prosperity”, essentially the same old idea of “robbing the rich to help the poor.” In reality, all it did was to lead to economic disruption and slowing growth.

Two distinct economic policies have emerged: Xi’s policy of Communist Party control over businesses versus Li’s “street vendor” economy. Xi bulldozed through a model that allowed big State-owned and private enterprises to flourish under his absolute control. His ‘anti-corruption drive’ targeted only the political and economic base of rival factional leaders Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. Jiang’s “Shanghai gang” and Hu’s communist youth league (to which Li also belonged) suffered the most, while Xi consolidated his control.

While Xi had grandiose plans for China’s “rejuvenation” and the “Chinese dream” till 2050, Li’s down-to-earth policies were trying to address the economic problems afflicting the country. While Xi declared victory over poverty alleviation and the ushering in of a “well-off society” last year, Li pointed out to the extensive work needed to alleviate poverty in urban areas, with the per capita income of over 600 million Chinese still under \$140 a month.

Li addressed 100,000 officers and cadre on May 25 on the restoration of the economy. This is unprecedented. The last time such a meeting was held – though on half the scale of Li’s meeting -- was in the aftermath of Mao’s disastrous Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s. Li admitted to a fall in the value added by Chinese industry and thus to a fall in revenues.

Li’s biographers have noted the studious upbringing he had. In fact, then party supremo Deng Xiaoping had noticed Li’s talent on a visit to Henan province and notified his intent to promote Li to the top post in the State Council.

In the run-up to the crucial 20th Communist Party congress this November, the Xi-Li tussle is expected to intensify as the stakes for each faction are high.

There is, of course, play around the age limit criterion, as well. Li, born 1955, is approaching the age limit for a Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) member – 68 years. Xi, born 1953, has already crossed this limit, but at the parliament session in March 2019, he had his term as President, if not the General Secretary’s post, extended, for possibly an unlimited number of terms.

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Arab Nations Should Restrict Ties With India To Trade, Not Comment On Our Internal Dynamics

By Dr. Seshadri Chari

Author is a commentator on foreign policy, strategy, and security affairs. He is Secretary General of the Forum for Integrated National Security (FINS) and former editor of English weekly Organiser.

An innocuous sounding spat during a television debate has turned out to be a subject matter of international condemnation, knee-jerk reaction and a hotly debated topic on social media. If civility in television news debates, which was once the hallmark of visual media, is difficult to find these days, it is even more difficult to locate the blame for this lack of graciousness and point a finger at the culprit for this. BJP spokesperson Nupur Sharma probably thought it appropriate to vent her anger at her opponent who was ridiculing the icons of her faith. If she was wrong in quoting the Islamic scriptures revered by Muslims in somewhat unsavoury manner, the other panellist’s remarks on Hindu deity was equally inappropriate, and insulting. Both crossed the line and forced the Ministry of External Affairs to work overtime.

Following this spat, Sharma, now suspended from the BJP’s primary membership for six years, received threats to her life, and uncouth remarks were posted against her on social media. Even rewards were announced for her beheading. The Delhi Police had to give her protection and she had to make public appeals not to reveal her address. Considering the gruesome murder of editor and journalists of Paris-based Charlie Hebdo media house by Islamic radicals and many such incidents of death sentences, executions and punishments meted out to people in the name of Islam, there was every need to protect Sharma lest she becomes yet another victim of such lawlessness in the name of religion.

As part of damage control, the Narendra Modi government distanced itself from the controversy and the BJP suspended Sharma and expelled its Delhi media in-charge Naveen Kumar Jindal for posting similarly disparaging remarks against Prophet Muhammad on Twitter. The BJP’s knee-jerk reaction was seen as unwarranted by a large section of the neo-Hindu protagonists. There was a time when the BJP could proudly flaunt its highly trained, suave, sober and good-mannered spokespersons who, above all, were extremely effective in conveying the party’s position without offending the opponents. The party, especially when it is in power at the Centre and many states,

probably needs to bring back some of the ‘tried and tested’ spokespersons who would be assertive but not aggressive in media debates.

Duality of Arab nations

At the same time, the BJP and the government should have had their ears to the ground and prepared for the backlash from Islamic countries and organisations. About five Arab nations protested the comments and called Sharma and Jindal’s remarks insulting to their Prophet and faith. Qatar, Kuwait, and Iran summoned Indian ambassadors to lodge a protest, and the Grand Mufti of Oman described the “obscene remarks” as a war on Islam.

Many of these Islamic monarchies, oligarchies and institutions took strong note of the insult to their religion but conveniently overlooked the contemptuous, scornful and disrespectful remarks against Hindu deities and religious symbols. The proverbial last straw on the camel’s back was the irresponsible comments by Pakistan and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which sought to link the comments to alleged human rights abuse of minorities in India. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) strongly and rightly refuted these comments, and pointed out the human right abuses against not only Hindus but also Shias and Ahmediyas in Pakistan. Ironically, the OIC is tight-lipped on the atrocities of Muslims in Xinjiang by China. None of these countries speak about the “worst of the worst” countries that have witnessed systematic and brutal abuses of human dignity and total absence of fundamental rights.

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Akhand Bharat: An Economic Concept for Political Unity and Prosperity in South Asia

By Swami Pranavashudhan Jnana Thapaswi

Author is a Sanyasi, Santhigiri Ashram, Kerala

The ongoing Sri Lankan crisis has once again raised the importance of having an economically unified South Asia—Akhand Bharat—for political unity, peace and prosperity in the region.

India, as usual, put on the robe of the magnanimous big brother in the region and promptly responded to the needs of the Island nation. India has so far extended support worth 2.5 billion US dollars to Sri Lanka over the last few months to overcome the economic crisis.

Likewise, when the Taliban took over Afghanistan a few months ago, India had supplied wheat and other essential food items and 500,000 COVID-19 vaccines as humanitarian aid to the country. Carrying this engagement forward, the Indian government has just announced financial assistance of 27 million US dollars to Afghanistan in its 2022-2023 budget.

Earlier, generous India had announced many big-ticket projects in the Muslim nation of Maldives. India has been constantly maintaining good socio-economic relations with Muslim-majority Bangladesh, Hindu-dominant Nepal, Buddhist nations of Bhutan and Burma (Myanmar).

The prudent deeds show that New Delhi is determined to have an economically unified South Asia—Akhand Bharat—eventually leading to political unity, peace and economic prosperity in the region. As the South Asia region—since the post-colonial period after the unholy division of the region based on religious line in 1947—has been a bloody theatre of civil wars, liberation movements, nuclear rivalry, military dictatorships, insurgencies and state-sponsored religious terrorism.

India's determination to have a unified South Asia— Akhand Bharat—also stems from the fact that geographically India shares borders with all other South Asian nations whereas no other South Asian nation (except Afghanistan and Pakistan) shares borders with any other South Asian nation.

In addition, India is the only stable country in the region, moving ahead on the fast tracks of development. Democracy and rule of law as instruments of political governance has been a hallmark of India. Transfer of power has been peaceful and transparent.

Despite having the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) for over 37 years; South Asia is considered as the least integrated of the global regions.

However, before the foreign invasion of Mughals and European colonialists, Akhand Bharat was prosperous. Akhand Bharat was the one of the largest economies in the world, for about two and a half millennia starting around the end of 1st millennium BC and ending around the beginning of British rule in India. The Akhand Bharat allowed for a common economic system and enhanced trade and commerce, with increased agricultural productivity.

Akhand Bharat had the largest economy of any region in the world for most of the interval between the 1st century and 18th century. Up until 1000 AD, the Akhand Bharat GDP per capita was higher than subsistence level.

European Union Learned from Akhand Bharat

The idea of unity making economic progress has been well received by European countries by the end of World War II. The European Union (EU) has now 27 member countries, working together to maintain political unity and economic prosperity.

The European Union started with only six countries: Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. The organization expanded from the Western Europe to Central and Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 21st century. Later, 19 more countries joined the bandwagon.

These are: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden.

What began as a union focused solely on economic stability has since evolved to policy creation and implementation, touching upon the climate, environment and health, justice, security and migration.

As it expanded over the years, the scope progressed from purely economic to a more holistic mission. It promotes peace, offers freedom, security and justice, without internal borders.

The EU is the world's largest trade bloc and the biggest manufactured goods and services exporter. For over 100 countries across the globe, it is the biggest import market.

When it comes to diplomacy, the EU also plays a significant role, with the 27 member countries together voicing global concerns. It is the most successful peace concept in human history, as there has been no war for a long period at least in Central and Western Europe. For this, in 2012, the EU was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Akanda Bharat through Economic Goodwill

At a meeting in Delhi on August 17, 1965, Bhartiya Jansangh (BJS), passed a resolution which stated, "India's tradition and nationality has not been against any religion. Modern Islam should also not be an obstacle in the way of unity of Indian nation. Real obstacle is separatist politics. Muslims will integrate themselves with the national life and Akhand Bharat will be a reality, unifying India and Pakistan once we are able to remove this obstacle (separatist politics)."

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) firmly and logically believes that one day ungodly divided parts 75 years ago will again, through popular goodwill, come together and Akhand Bharat will be created.

The economic necessity is sowing the seed of that “goodwill”.

The Sri Lankan economic crisis is the best example. If the region is not economically and politically united, foreign powers will exploit and destabilize the region to their advantage.

In Sri Lanka, China has played a smart game—not only to gain a strategic advantage in the island nation but also to keep its economy hostage. China is involved in more than 50 projects in Sri Lanka. Chinese economic support for Sri Lanka was never meant for trade and economic considerations, rather a means to destabilize the region to gain strategic advantage.

Initially, for instance, China provided financial assistance for infrastructure development. But the latter assistance was consumed in budgetary support to mitigate the balance-of-payments crisis. This financial support has thrown Sri Lanka deeper into the “Chinese debt trap”.

However, India continues to be a well-wisher of Sri Lanka, as New Delhi has so far provided Colombo financial aid worth almost 2.5 billion US dollars, including a 500-million US dollar line-of-credit in February for fuel purchases and another 1-billion US dollar line-of-credit in March for buying food, medicines and other essential items. India has provided a currency swap of 400 million US dollars under the SAARC facility and deferred the payment of 515 million US dollars to the Asian Clearing Union.

Looking at the current crisis, a clear narrative and plan of action to have a single unified region for political unity and economic prosperity is on the horizon.

India is willing to create an atmosphere of “goodwill” and friendship among its neighbors to have a unified entity— Akhand Bharat. New Delhi will earnestly work to ensure that the “goodwill” and thus earned thrust to get translated into concrete political and economic unity.

Many global financial institutes and economic experts often suggested that only through regional economic unity—Akhand Bharat—can South Asia be a part of the Asian century.

Nature-Based Solutions For Protecting Environment

By Udaya Kumar Varma

Author is a former IAS Officer of 1976 batch of Madhya Pradesh Cadre. He retired in 2013 from the post of Secretary, Information and Broadcasting, GOI.

World Environment Day was observed last week with a little more than usual fanfare and ostensible concern. There were platitudes galore. It is a different matter that most of the high-sounding statements were as hollow as they were insincere. The articulation of vested interests patently manifested in articles and discourses reminded one of the descriptions of an elephant in the poem, The Blind Men and the Elephant by John Godfrey Saxe (who called it a ‘Hindoo’ fable). Their erudition emphasised the splendid isolation of their respective fields delivered with uncommon competence.

Mindful and Deliberate Utilization

A few initiatives, however, merit attention, consideration and support. Save the Soil Campaign led by Sadguru claims to focus on soil rejuvenation, and crop productivity enhancement for sustainable and environment friendly practices – a literal down-to-earth effort for adaptation and soil restoration. The campaign, importantly, is more about changing our perspective and attitudes. Another bold and paradigm changing thought is what Indian Prime Minister mentioned in his address in COP26 at Glasgow. He said,: ‘One-Word , in the context of climate, can become the basic foundation of One World.

This word is- LIFE...L, I, F, E, which means Lifestyle For Environment. Today, there is a need for all of us to come together and take Lifestyle For Environment (LIFE) forward as a campaign. This can become a mass movement of Environmental Conscious Life Style. What is needed today is Mindful and Deliberate Utilization, instead of Mindless and Destructive Consumption.”

This brings into sharper focus the urgency to rely more on Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) in our endeavour to deal with climate changes. The purpose of this article is to argue the necessity, a pressing one, to accord precedence to NBSs.

Nature-Based Solutions and Natural Climate Solutions

The terms NBS and Natural Climate Solutions (NCS) are often but mistakenly used interchangeably. NCS focuses primarily on carbon dioxide mitigation and maximising its co-benefits. NBS is a far more comprehensive term. As defined by the European Commission, NBS are “inspired and supported by nature, which are cost-effective, simultaneously provide environmental, social, and economic benefits and help build resilience.” It encompasses broader challenges including issues such as climate change, water scarcity, water pollution, food security, human health, biodiversity loss and disaster risk management. It refers to the sustainable management and use of natural features and processes to tackle socio-environmental challenges. In other words, NBS treats the problem holistically and is both mitigation and adaptation and at once material and inspirational, physical and intellectual, backed by a moral and popular participation. The inter-connections and inter-relations among all factors that affect environment is a key principle.

Green Roofs, Rain Gardens, Constructed Wetlands can minimise damaging runoff by absorbing storm water, reducing flood risks, and safeguarding fresh water ecosystem. This is one example of a NBS as opposed to engineering solutions that focus on construction of concrete walls to protect habitations from ravages of floods.

Adaptation versus Mitigation

Adaptation and mitigation serve different purposes. Adaptation is long term, its impact is almost permanent, and it addresses the root cause of crisis. Mitigation is short term, cost-intensive and temporary; as the term suggests, it mitigates the problem and does not offer a lasting solution. The emphasis so far has been mostly on mitigation, or at least the flow of resources indicates that. Instead, it is important to bring adaptation to centre stage as the core of the strategy. If environmental protection is to become a people’s movement, it has to place adaptation on top of our priority pedestal.

With billions of people potentially in harm’s way as climate change negatively accelerates, the stakes for making a success of nature-based adaptation and mitigation are immense. Following the Glasgow promises to ramp up funding for adaptation, I wish to argue for a preference for these solutions as opposed to engineering solutions involving mostly constructions and creation of structures.

NBS can help people adapt to effects of change and disasters while slowing warming and protecting biodiversity, with many positive consequences, fewer risks and lower costs than engineering-based solutions. So, nature-based initiatives such as planting mangroves and revitalizing wetlands have not only succeeded in tackling flood and water scarcity, but have also proven effective in making communities more resilient to climate change.

Why Are Nature-Based Solutions on Climate Being Overlooked?

Regrettably international funding has short-changed such solutions in favour of costlier and less efficient engineering projects. Engineering-based solutions requiring mostly constructions have dominated our thinking and action. If floods are ravaging an area, the solution is building up embankments of concrete. While their role cannot be written off or diminished, the plea is to prefer

Studies reveal that less than 10 percent of funding for climate adaptation in the least-developed nations — which are usually the most vulnerable — went into projects that harnessed nature. The remaining 90 percent only “poured concrete”. The reason for this preference is not far to seek. Most funding for climate mitigation is received from developed nations. And most funding is ploughed back to the funder by way of expert consultancies, and specialised construction work whose expertise lies with the donor countries. So, there is a hidden purpose behind the assistance that is forthcoming. A farce everyone knows but a bluff few are able to call.

A pointer to this flawed orientation of evaluating efforts on environmental protection is the recently released Environment Protection Index (EPI). India ranks last among the 180 countries ranked. Brought out by Columbia and Yale Universities, the assumptions that form the basis of such ranking reflect the bias that researchers have for measures that suit the interest of developed nations.

Another factor behind such an approach is over obsession with perpetuating and sustaining, even enhancing the present comparative levels of affluence and comfort that developed nations enjoy, unwilling to forego or reduce their craving for more. Ironically, they succeed in clothing their interest in a manner that seems to be helping the world at large. In essence, they will like to continue enjoying a safe and salubrious slice of the environment while the sacrifices must come from the poorer nations.

One thing though, is evident. We behave as if we are the last generation living on this planet, not wanting to leave behind anything for the future. The concern for the benefits of development to continue for generations requires in the least, measured exploitation of resources leaving enough for the future. This eminently obvious fact often gets obfuscated by human greed, unwillingness to give up anything and the hunger for more comfort. Regrettably, any mention of economising on the resources by reducing demand is deemed anti-development. The continuation of this mindless exploitation will ensure a perdition few will survive to rue.

Need to bring NBSs Centre-Stage

Clearly NBSs offer long term but lasting solutions. And most importantly they involve people. Each one of them requires massive participation of the populations affected.

It indeed is the solution that we want. We want environmental protection to become a mass movement, not esoteric domains where only experts and specialists, whether from sciences, economics, or politics, or in a lighter vein the polluticians deliberate and decide. Once the nature based solution becomes our priority, the save planet mission becomes universal, ubiquitous. It becomes a movement for the people, of the people and by the people.

The spin off effects are multiple and immense. Take for example, its effect on Employment. All countries, to varying degrees, face this problem. All nature based adaptation and mitigation strategies evidently become a massive employment generation programme.

Lastly, nature based mediation inhere the concern for environment in our thinking and growth process. Every action, individual or collective, local or national, will lead to a better development as it will automatically incorporate the impact on air, water, humidity, temperature of our environment as necessary outcomes. This will be a far superior, balanced and saner approach while formulating our development strategies.

Yes, it will be slow and will require time, patience, involvement, wisdom and also sacrifice. These are the most intractable intangibles for an impatient people in a particularly difficult time. As entrenched interests dig their heels, the hope lies in the leadership of the kind India has at the moment- visionary, courageous and committed. The future of the planet is indeed in serious peril as there will be a concerted and more intense and serious effort to let the status quo continue. India must lead the charge to rewrite the rules of engagement.

Will we succeed? Yes, God willing!

Great Indian wheat export mystery

By Sayantan Bera

Author is M. Phil. (Economics) from JNU. He is senior editor Rural Affairs at The Print

What really happened to a large wheat export consignment from India that business conglomerate ITC Ltd had shipped out mid-May?

Why did Turkey reject it? Did Egypt reject it too? How can wheat be contaminated by the rubella virus, which infects humans?

Is this ship loitering in international waters looking for a buyer? Or is this all just a grand global commodities trade conspiracy at a time the world is grappling with food inflation and grain shortages?

The answer to the last question may not be known for a while, if at all, but Rajnikant Rai, CEO of ITC's agribusiness division, set the record straight on the rest, rubbishing claims that the shipment fell short of the contracted quality parameters.

The 55,000-tonne consignment was sold to a Dutch firm named ETG Commodities, which appointed a Swiss company, SGS, for quality tests, Rai told ThePrint in an exclusive interview.

"ITC delivered the contracted quality and the ship sailed mid-May. We later came to know that ETG sold it to a Turkish buyer. End May, we learnt, the shipment was rejected by Turkey," Rai said. Both ITC and ETG have received payment for the deal, he added.

"But neither us nor ETG ever received any report on the reason for rejection. To say that the wheat was rejected due to the presence of rubella virus or it had lower than required protein content, and that after Turkey, Egypt, too, rejected it, are just rumors," he said.

"The ship never sailed to Egypt and now it is berthing at a port in Israel waiting to be unloaded," Rai added, indicating that a new buyer had been found for the consignment.

According to an official with an international commodity trading firm who wished to not be named, there could be "commercial or geopolitical reasons at play here". "Raising quality concerns looks like an attempt to tarnish India's reputation as a global grains supplier," the official said.

A handful of traders from Europe dominate and control the wheat trade in the Middle East and African markets, said S. Chandrasekaran, a New Delhi-based trade analyst, adding that the Indian wheat consignment being infected by the Rubella virus is "a myth created by Turkey".

Navigating the global wheat market

According to Rai, ITC exported about 1.8 million tonnes of wheat in 2021-22 and shipped 1.3 million tonnes of wheat in April and May this year.

"But not a single consignment ever faced any problem. What was sent to Turkey was top-quality durum wheat sourced from Madhya Pradesh with protein content close to 14 per cent."

Rai added that the rubella virus is not part of wheat contract specifications anywhere in the world.

India faced heavy criticism internationally after it banned wheat exports on 13 May to stem the surge in domestic food prices. International wheat prices were 56 per cent higher year-on-year in May, according to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization.

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Nation is Indebted to:

Anna Mani (1918-2001)



Distinguished Women Meteorologist

Back in the days when women were barely visible in the scientific domain, Anna Modayil Mani from Travancore, Kerala, was a distinguished meteorologist and physicist who astounded the world with her amazing inventions.

Among other accomplishments, she devised novel methods to gauge the weather—by standardising around 100 meteorological instruments—and established a series of stations to measure solar radiation.

She also pioneered the research to utilise solar and wind power as renewable sources of energy and set up her instruments in over 700 sites. Her study on ozone level measurement using her apparatus ‘ozonesonde’ is also strikingly remarkable.

Mani was born in 1918 to an affluent family and displayed immense interest in reading and learning from her childhood. On her eighth birthday, she rejected a gift of diamond earrings and opted for a set of Encyclopaedia Britannica instead.

Inspired by Gandhiji’s principles and the ideals of Vaikom Satyagraha, Mani started wearing only khadi garments to express her solidarity with the stirring rebellion. While all her sisters got married in their adolescent years, she persisted on her wish to pursue higher studies and enrolled for an honours degree in Physics at Presidency College in Madras (Chennai).

Later, she landed the opportunity to work as a researcher in Nobel Laureate Sir CV Raman’s laboratory.

Despite her detailed thesis on the luminescence of diamonds and rubies, unfair gender biases by the Madras University barred her from earning her PhD degree.

Undeterred, she used her scholarship savings to head to Imperial College in London to pursue higher physics research and later specialised in meteorological instrumentation.

Mani returned to a newly independent India in 1948 and designed radiation instrumentation from scratch at Indian Meteorological Department, Pune. Mani is also credited for setting up a meteorological observatory and an instrumentation tower at the Thumba rocket launching facility.

Following a paralysing stroke in 1994, Anna Mani breathed her last on 16 August 2001.

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