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FEDERALISM AND FOREIGN POLICY

DYNAMICS OF CENTRE-STATE DISSENSIONS IN INDIA



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The Institute has initiated an academic debate capturing the essence of federalism in India and how the federal units play an important role in shaping India's outlook towards its neighbors.

Earlier, the Institute pursued an online debate inviting scholars from New Delhi and the rest of India to comment on various issues relating to the subject. Over the course of 2013-14, scholars from New Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, and Guwahati took part in this debate. This compendium is the outcome of that online debate.

During 2014, the Institute will follow this debate through panel discussions and publications. While the discussions would aim at providing a platform for scholars to meet and discuss various issues on the subject, the publications would carry forward that debate as reports, commentaries, and policy briefs. The discussions would not only be limited to scholars from India, but also from other countries, especially those with federal governing systems, to aid better understanding of best practices.

This is an ongoing project and the Institute would welcome contributions from New Delhi and the rest of India on various subjects.

Edited By

Ayesha Khanyari

India: Limits of Federalism

P R Chari

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The Indian Constitution distributes political, financial and legislative authority between New Delhi and the States, with the centre enjoying primacy due to its control over finance, defense, trade, telecommunications and foreign investment. But, the states, too, have wide authority on vital issues that have significance for India's investment climate, like power, agriculture, land, domestic investment and police. The system works well when the Center and the States are in synch, which is by no means assured when narrow parochial interests supersede the demands of national interests.

India remained a centralized democracy while the Congress, in the initial few decades ruled the Centre and the states, which changed radically in later years. It is arguable that the federalization of India's polity has enabled its conversion into a true democracy, with the unexpected result that the regional parties have now become more assertive in several of the larger states. They will increasingly decide who will govern New Delhi in future. A hodgepodge of regional parties seems likely, therefore, to shape the structure of the new Government in New Delhi and guide its security beliefs, with distressing implications for peace and conflict in South Asia.

Domestic and electoral politics, incidentally gained ascendancy in 2013, and this process seems likely to continue into 2014 with the flawed Bangladesh elections of January 5 bidding fair to create more problems for the region that what they were designed to resolve. India will go to the polls in mid-2014; presentiments are that neither the Congress Party, nor the Bharatiya Janata Party will reach within striking distance of crafting a stable Government. The Aam Admi Party, for its part, had too little time to organize itself on a national scale; all that could be expected of it is some presence being registered in the metropolitan centers of India. All realistic analyses points to New Delhi being ruled post- elections by a coalition of parties owing allegiance either to the Modi-brand nationalist Right or the Rahul- Sonia led left-centrist party. These developments have serious implications for India's internal and external security.

Several of these security challenges arise for conceptual reasons. The workings, for instance, of the federal principle in South Asia have revealed how parochial interests have acquired disproportionate influence on national security and foreign policy. Instances of the periphery and core coming into contention were visible all over South Asia in 2013, as, for instance, between the Madhes and Kathmandu, Balochistan and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa provinces with Islamabad, Jaffna and the Eastern province with Colombo. In Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka the national interests as discerned by their respective central Governments clashed with the regional interests of their federating units (states/ provinces). Local perceptions of the need for greater autonomy and even independence have informed dissent, which came into conflict with the Centre's need to maintain national unity.

Significantly, the political support available within the federating units has made it difficult for the Center to peremptorily reject their demands.; indeed, the elections held in 2013 revealed an aggressive provincialism developing in the region. The growth of regionalism is inevitable appreciating that the political map of South Asian countries must reflect its social and cultural diversities, yielding contrary trends and mixed conclusions. In Nepal, the Madhes parties failed to muster any great support, which strengthened the hands of Kathmandu in dealing with their constant threats of secession. But, in Jaffna, the success of the Tamil National Alliance highlighted

the unresolved problem of Tamil disaffection, which the Rajapaksha government in Colombo seems determined to ignore. The situation in Khyber-Pakhtunwa remains delicate with the prospect of its provincial parties making common cause with either the tribal elements in the FATA region or the warlords in Afghanistan or with both to loosen their ties to Islamabad.

Another example. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's tame acquiescence to DMK pressure in November 2013 by not joining the CHOGM summit in Colombo can be variously interpreted. Some 6 entries in the Union List under the Indian Constitution embed foreign policy firmly within the exclusive authority of the Union Government. Apparently, the PMO and MEA had strongly favored the Prime Minister joining this meeting. A brief visit to Jaffna was also planned to promote India's relations with the Tamil-dominated Northern Province. Tamil Nadu's success in swaying New Delhi's foreign policy decision would be anathema to federal purists. But, this incident illustrates how parochial considerations acted to the detriment of India's federal and national interests.

Earlier, New Delhi's decision to enter an agreement for sharing the Teesta river waters was given up under pressure from Mamata Banerjee and the West Bengal government. Further, India could not finalize the Land Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh that envisioned the transfer of enclaves and straightening out portions of the border, that was concluded in September 2011, and ratified by the Indian Parliament. Hardliners in Bangladesh have already raised the pitch against India on these issues; which is egregious since it was with the help of Sheikh Hasina government that India was able to neutralize the terror outfits operating against India from Bangladesh soil.

Expanse of Federalism: South Asia Sui Generis?

D Suba Chandran

Director, IPCS

PR Chari, in his commentary titled 'Limits of Federalism' in South Asia, makes several important assertions on the nature of federalism evolving in the region. Both his assertions and the nature of evolution need larger debate and understanding. But this debate need not have a negative perspective, but be seen as the evolution of a South Asian form of federalism. 'Hodgepodge of Regional Parties': 'Distressing Implications' for South Asian Peace and Conflict?

While explaining the nature of evolving federal practices, PR Chari makes the argument that the "federalisation of India's polity has enabled its conversion into a true democracy, with the unexpected result that the regional parties have now become more assertive in several of the larger states." And is there a "A hodgepodge of regional parties...with distressing implications for peace and conflict in South Asia"

Two important issues need to be addressed here. First, why should the regional assertion be seen as an 'unexpected result'? Is that not a logical extension of federal principles? Or is it a general expectation that in a federal set-up in South Asia, regional parties should not be assertive?

Second, do the assertions of regional parties in federal politics essentially create a 'hodgepodge' with negative implications for regional security? This perception in fact is increasingly becoming common, especially in New Delhi - that assertions by regional parties (in case of West Bengal and Tamil Nadu

vis-à-vis Bangladesh and Sri Lanka respectively) have affected India's foreign policy. These questions demand a larger debate – both in national capitals and sub-regions.

Who Decides the Composition of a Federal Government?

The government at the centre has generally been formed by national parties such as the Congress and BJP (with minor exceptions). In the last two decades, regional parties, especially from South India and West Bengal, have been playing a substantial role in the formation of federal governments. Should one be alarmed by this phenomenon?

The above also means something significant for regional politics. There is a remarkable decline of national parties in the regions. Alternatively, an argument could also be made that the regions support regional parties more than the national ones. Why? Perhaps the national parties are no more 'national' or are unable to address regional sentiments.

The mandate to rule at the federal level cannot be limited to one sub-region or a few states. Since independence, the states of undivided Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar decided the Prime Minister, with other states having a lesser role or no role at all. Even today, India's Northeast, Sikkim, J&K and Himachal Pradesh have no major role in deciding the outcome of the government in New Delhi. Is such a structure essentially representative and federal? Why is there a hullabaloo today in New Delhi against regional politics? Should that only remain the domain of only a few states in central India?

What is happening today – the assertion of regional parties – is essentially a balancing act and good for the federal structure of India. Ideally, this should have been the case since independence. Parties such as the Congress used the 'divide, exploit and rule' strategy vis-à-vis regional parties by piggybacking on one party or another; to a large extent, this has been the case from J&K to Tamil Nadu.

This balancing act by the regional actors, however unstable it appears, should be seen as transition or evolution of a truly federal structure. Assertive Regional Politics: Bad for Foreign Policy? Or Correcting the Imbalance?

In recent years, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu have been criticised for sabotaging India's foreign policy objectives. Undoubtedly, there is an element of truth in such accusations. But there is another side to this story. This is where one has to have a re-look at foreign policy-making in a federation in South Asia.

What role should the sub-regions play in foreign policy-making, especially vis-à-vis the neighbours?

In this context, India's foreign policy since independence has been far from federal. The regions were neither taken into confidence nor even consulted in deciding the foreign policy vis-à-vis the neighbours. Foreign policy is drawn in New Delhi, that too by a few ministries and individuals. Even the consultation process in New Delhi, with ministries outside the PMO and MEA, has been minimal.

The sub-regions criticise New Delhi for being arbitrary in deciding foreign policy. There is an

element of truth as well in this argument. Was the government of Tamil Nadu consulted fully when New Delhi decided to support the Sri Lankan Tamil militants? Were the governments of J&K and West Bengal consulted before making major decisions regarding Pakistan and Bangladesh respectively?

Today, New Delhi perhaps finds it convenient to cover its own incompetence and shift the blame to regional governments in making crucial foreign policy decisions. As in the case of internal politics, the regions are bound assert their sentiments and interests on foreign policy matters as well, especially those relating to the neighbourhood with which they share a boundary. Instead of perceiving this as a negative phenomenon, it should be seen as a positive transition. All transitions will have a negative component attached to it.

There is perhaps a new federalism evolving in the region, with its own unique features.

Do National Political Parties have ‘Regional Outlooks?’

Wasbir Hussain

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Mr PR Chari appears to be happy with the ‘federalisation of India’s polity,’ which, he says, has ‘enabled its conversion into a true democracy’. One can understand his point of view given that federalisation has rendered the states more assertive; the medium through which this aggression has been demonstrated to the Centre has been through the regional political parties – who have managed to capture the imagination of the electorate through local issues. Mr Chari is right in stating that regional parties would increasingly be able to decide who would come to govern in New Delhi. However, one senses a fear in his mind when he says, “a hodgepodge of regional parties seems likely, therefore, to shape the structure of the new Government in New Delhi and guide its security beliefs, with distressing implications for peace and conflict in South Asia.”

However, the emerging trend in the game of vote-catching that is being played rather efficiently by politicians and political parties in India must not be overlooked.

In regions such as the Northeast, it has been seen that national parties frame their politics a certain way - the Congress calls itself a ‘national party with a regional outlook’. In fact, this particular slogan of the Congress party has paid rich dividends in Northeast India for years. It is certainly not a simple debate, but simply speaking, a mainstream national party like the Congress is in power now in five of the eight Northeastern states, including Assam and Manipur, that are severely hit by insurgency. This is despite the insurgent groups standing their ground to fight the Indian State to achieve ‘self determination’ for the people or ethnicities they seek to represent. This means that despite forces of separatism constantly at play, integrationist political forces like the Congress and others have managed comfortable electoral victories.

The re-focusing that the national parties have done vis-à-vis their policies or approach towards large regions such as the Northeast has yielded good results for them. In Assam, for instance, the regional

Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) emerged on the political scene in 1985 with the sole promise of ridding the state of illegal foreign migrants and building what it called a 'golden Assam'. It swept the State Assembly polls in 1985, lost in 1991, returned to power in 1996, and has lost almost every form of election in the state since then. The AGP's prime demand in its heyday had been a federal restructuring of Assam with the Centre retaining responsibilities only of defence, foreign affairs, currency and communication, and the state, the rest. However, with political parties like the Congress refusing to employ rhetoric and instead bombarding states with flagship programmes aimed at generating employment, providing free healthcare and food, the federalism card of the regional parties, including that of the AGP in Assam, has lost its sting.

On his part, Dr D Suba Chandran, in his commentary, 'Expanse of Federalism: South Asia Sui Generis?', seems to support the idea of the Centre taking regions or states into confidence on matters of foreign policy, at least while formulating policies towards nations neighbouring such states. That should perhaps be the case, but the grave differences in the points of view between regional parties that may be ruling a state and the party in power at the Centre regarding critical issues make it difficult for the government in New Delhi to co-opt the states during foreign policy formulations. For example, the Chief Minister of West Bengal and Trinamool supremo, Mamata Banerjee, blocked the Teesta water-sharing agreement between India and Bangladesh, leaving New Delhi in the lurch. Similarly, there was uproar by the regional parties in Assam over the India-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement that envisages the exchange of 161 enclaves adversely held by India and Bangladesh in each other's territories, and the alterations of boundaries between the two countries in certain places.

A classic case of New Delhi not really including the views of states or regions in foreign policy-making is over the execution of the much-touted Look East Policy being pursued since the early 1990s. In fact, all the big talk about integrating India's Northeast with the emerging Southeast Asian 'tiger economies' is sought to be done by New Delhi without much policy consultation with the Chief Ministers or the political class of the region. This approach has thus resulted in little or no enthusiasm among the key stakeholders – the people of the region – over the policy that is suspected to serve as a bridge between West Bengal and Southeast Asia, with the Northeast Indian states remaining, as earlier, the underbelly.

The federalisation of the polity in India has both positives and negatives, and even dangers. Any attempt at drastically altering the powers of the Centre and the state is certainly fraught with danger. Caution alone can keep the nation integrated.

Regional Inputs in India's Neighbourhood Strategy

V Suryanarayan

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The IPCS should be complemented for initiating a healthy debate on what role federal units should play in the making of India's foreign policy.

This essay is a perspective from Chennai. India borders Pakistan, China, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Maldives. India's relations with each neighbouring country will therefore have its immediate fallout on the contiguous Indian states. India-Pakistan relations will have an effect on Gujarat, Rajasthan, Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir; India-China relations will affect Kashmir, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. India-Nepal relations will spill over to Bihar, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Sikkim and West Bengal; India-Bhutan relations will impinge upon West Bengal, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam; India-Myanmar relations will have its fall out on Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram; India-Bangladesh relations will affect West Bengal, Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Assam; India-Sri Lanka relations are closely intertwined with the politics of Tamil Nadu and India-Maldives relations will have its impact on Minicoy Islands. Relations with Thailand and Indonesia have yet to take off in a big way and have thus not been mentioned.

During the era of one-party dominance, New Delhi pursued a foreign policy that it considered to be in India's national interest. In that process, on several occasions, the interests and sensitivities of the contiguous Indian states were not taken into consideration. To illustrate, the Sirimavo-Shastri Pact of October 1964, by which large sections of the people of Indian origin in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) were given Indian citizenship was concluded without taking into considerations the wishes of the affected people. It was also opposed by important political sections in Tamil Nadu. Rajagopalachari, Kamaraj Nadar, Krishna Menon, Annadurai and Ramamurthy criticised the inhuman agreement as a betrayal of the Gandhi-Nehru legacy. Similarly the India-Sri Lanka maritime boundary agreements of 1974 and 1976 which ceded the island of Kachchatheevu to Sri Lanka and bartered away traditional fishing rights enjoyed by Indian fishermen in the Palk Bay region was opposed by the ruling party and the opposition in Tamil Nadu.

Even constructive suggestions made by the government of Tamil Nadu for improvement of bilateral relations were ignored by the Mandarins in outh Block. Chief Minister CN Annadurai was deeply concerned with the involuntary repatriation of Tamil labourers from Burma consequent to the nationalisation of retail trade and the related issue of non-payment of compensation due to them. After analysing the pros and cons of the issue, Annadurai wrote a letter to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suggesting that India should enter into a long-term trade agreement with Burma for import of rice, and compensation due to Burmese repatriates could be adjusted in the proposed deal. It may be recalled that in the mid-1960s, India was facing an acute shortage of food grain. It is unfortunate, but true, that this concrete proposal did not elicit any favourable response from New Delhi.

With the formation of coalition governments at the Centre and regional parties playing a national role, the situation has undergone a transformation. The regional parties began to make their inputs towards the making of foreign policy; what is more, the Central government succeeded in softening the chauvinist demands of their regional allies. To illustrate, the inclusion of the Sethusamudram project in the policies and programmes of the Manmohan Singh government was due to persistent efforts of the DMK. Similarly, the DMK government led by Karunanidhi went along with the Centre's policy on Sri Lanka during the last stages of the Fourth Eelam War.

New Delhi understandably permitted Karunanidhi to indulge in political gimmicks to enable him to portray himself as the saviour of the Tamils. What vitiates the atmosphere in Tamil Nadu is competitive one-upmanship between the two Dravidian leaders as to who is the true spokesman and saviour of

Tamils. In this competitive game, rhetoric becomes more important than reality. The demand that Mahinda Rajapaksa should be tried by the International Court of Justice for war crimes; India should cut off diplomatic relations with Sri Lanka; opposition to training of Sri Lankan military personnel in defence establishments; attack on Sri Lankan pilgrims and delegates participating in international conferences – can be understood only if the competitive game is kept in mind. With impending parliamentary elections, the mad race between the two Dravidian parties is likely to intensify.

The running of foreign policy by federal units is not advocated, but they can and should make benign inputs into its making. Think-tanks specialising in foreign relations and Area Studies Departments in Universities can play a meaningful role in this direction.

Federalism & Foreign Policy: Limits of the Political-Institutional Framework in India

Zaad Mahmood

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The Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies has initiated a timely academic discussion on the dynamics of foreign policy in response to evolving federalism in India. The first instalment in this exercise is PR Chari's *Limits of Federalism* which makes important assertions regarding the disproportionate dominance of regional interests over national interests in the formulation of foreign policy. Chari attributes such a development to the regionalisation of politics and increasing currency of coalition government at the centre. He cites example such as India not joining the CHOGM summit in Colombo and non-ratification of the Indo-Bangladesh water-sharing agreement to reinforce his argument of regional parochial interests impeding broader national interests.

Such an assertion however is limited by its understanding of the evolving relationship between federalism and foreign policy. D Suba Chandran in his *Expanse of Federalism* highlights some of the weaknesses in Chari's argument and I seek to develop the leitmotif further.

Firstly, the claims of distressing implications of federalisation on foreign policy choice are farfetched and reflect a superficial evaluation of contemporary developments. Although Chari is correct in highlighting increasing assertion of regional parties, he fails to recognise that the relation is not automatic or unilinear. There are situations when contrary to the claims of Chari regionalisation has in fact provided leeway for foreign policy shifts by the centre. Most of the regional parties have specific local and political constituency and their policy orientations are geared towards such support base with little or none international focus.

The foreign policy outlooks of regional parties are largely contingent upon negotiation and trade-off with the central government and nature of political contestation in the sub-national states. It would be instructive to recall that the most prominent shift in Indian foreign policy in recent memory - the Indo-US nuclear deal could be ratified in the face of opposition from the two largest opposition

parties in Parliament (BJP and Left) only due to support from regional parties like DMK, RJD and most famously, the SP. Regional parties reflect clear provincial aspirations and the assertion that coalition government with regional players will necessarily have serious implications for India's internal and external security is untenable.

The recent centre-region conflicts over foreign policy (over Sri Lanka and Bangladesh) are not due to party system fragmentation but rather an outcome of institutional and political inertia in an altered architecture. The constitutional division of powers and responsibility was structured in a particular time and context. Unlike the constitutional devolution of power, the operation of federalism in India has undergone significant transformations over the last six decades, especially since economic liberalisation in the 1990s.

Scholars like Lawrence Saez (*Federalism Without a Centre*) and Rob Jenkins (*Democratic Politics and Economic Reform in India*) have pointed out that economic reform has coincided with increasing decentralisation where regional states have emerged as crucial actors in negotiating with global economy. Such a development along with incidence of coalition governments has provided regional governments not only greater leverage but also greater responsibilities. However the constitutional scheme of devolution of power as well as mind-set in the core continues to perceive foreign policy as its exclusive domain. This gap between altered reality and traditional institutional-political framework is the principle cause behind some of the foreign policy contradictions.

The fiasco over the Teesta water-sharing agreement is a typical example of the altered political-economy reality. Teesta is a crucial river for the state of West Bengal and the Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee opposed any water-sharing treaty that would adversely affect her support base. She has claimed that her government had not been adequately consulted during the Teesta agreement and as such she was not bound to endorse the water-sharing proposal. Similarly in the context of India's role in Sri Lanka (involvement) the state of Tamil Nadu which shares deep rooted ties with Sri Lankan Tamils was hardly consulted. Both these cases suggest that regional governments or parties are largely interested with their immediate concerns and neighbourhood and not foreign policy per se.

Just as there have been instances of divergence in the interests of the region and the centre, instances such as Tripura Governments willingness to increase trade with Bangladesh or Bihar government's interest to improve trade relation with Nepal suggest convergence.

In a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic democracy like India, regionalisation of politics and conflicts between centre and states are inevitable. D Suba Chandran correctly argues that this regional assertion is not something unexpected but a logical extension of federal principles. However the constitution and political conventions provide for mechanisms to resolve disputes like National Development Council, Finance Commission etc.

In the altered context of a decentralised and globalised world, the states have emerged (often goaded by the central government) as key actors in economic and developmental fields. Naturally regional governments have increased stake in, especially in their neighbouring countries. As such there is a necessity for institutional innovation especially in dealing with neighbourhood policy of India where regional actors and central states can discuss and negotiate policies.

This is essential because in the constitutional scheme foreign policy remains exclusive domain of

central government but the success of many policies depend on cooperation from regions. Political fragmentation and regionalisation have endowed regional interests with greater political leverage than ever before and conceptions of national interests of India must include the aspirations of these regions.

Federalism: Centre as Coordinator and Adjudicator

P R Chari

Some verities about federalism in the context of regionalism in South Asia are becoming clearer. The proposition that "the (changing) political map of South Asian countries must reflect its social and cultural diversities" is unarguable. How, then, should the inescapable contentions between the peripheral and central federating entities be managed, apart from differences between the federating units themselves that are "yielding contrary trends and mixed conclusions"? I argue that, while respecting regional aspirations, the Centre must function effectively as a coordinating and adjudicatory authority for the whole nation to remain viable.

One is fortified here by the lessons of history. The role of village republics in Buddhist times, their tradition of democratic functioning with all decisions being taken by consensus, and the local administration being under the village assemblies has been deified. The larger lesson of history is that these village republics were easily overrun by the Mauryan rulers and incorporated into their empire, since these purely local regional units could neither defend their integrity nor implement a common foreign policy.

Coming to British India, Sir Charles Metcalfe, acting governor-general of India had minuted in 1830: "This union of the village communities, each one forming a separate little state in itself, has, I conceive, contributed more than any other cause to the preservation of the peoples of India." Metcalfe was speaking to local government. He did not appreciate the interplay between centrifugal and centripetal forces in Indian history with empires being born, flourishing, reaching their zenith, declining and finally disintegrating over and over again. This process also revealed the underlying tension between the federal (integrative) and regional (disintegrative) forces within Indian polity. The balance of power must favour the central authority if the federal entity is to survive.

These issues have been dramatised by the regional Aam Admi Party's confronting the Union Government in Delhi. It would be recollected that Delhi became the capital of British India in 1912 after excising it from the Punjab Province. It was designated a Chief Commissioner's Province, and

KDJ was directly administered by the Centre. Later, it was designated a Part C state, and, still later, pursuant to the recommendations of the State Reorganisation Committee, Delhi was designated a Union Territory. Under Article 239 of the Constitution, Union Territories are to be administered by the President through an Administrator (Lt Governor).

But, there has been a clamour over the years for granting Delhi full Statehood, which is being echoed by the Aam Admi Party, but is resolutely opposed by the Union Government. In truth, any scheme for the administration of Delhi must appreciate its urban character, and the need for the

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But, there has been a clamour over the years for granting Delhi full Statehood, which is being echoed by the Aam Admi Party, but is resolutely opposed by the Union Government. In truth, any scheme for the administration of Delhi must appreciate its urban character, and the need for the Union Government to exercise close supervision and control over the capital city. The Sarkaria Committee, appointed in end 1987 to examine this issue, studied the set-up in other national capitals of the world having a federal set-up; it finally recommended after extensive consultations that Delhi should remain a Union Territory with a Legislative Assembly and a Council of Ministers responsible to this Assembly. However, matters relating to the police, land and public order were reserved for the Centre. The Committee further recommended that to ensure stability and permanence to these arrangements, the Constitution should incorporate provisions to accord a special status for the national capital among the other Union territories, which was effected by a Constitutional Amendment in end-1991, and the insertion of new Articles 239AA and 239AB.

The major reason why the Committee (I was its Member-Secretary) recommended these arrangements was that it anticipated contingencies where the Central and Delhi governments might come into conflict, as is currently occurring, leading to practical difficulties in the governance of the national capital. For instance, the Delhi government could bring the working of the Union Government to a standstill by populist agitations and boycott movements or even organising *gheraos* of Parliament, North and South Block and other Central Government offices. For this reason, the vital subjects of public order and the police, were excluded from the purview of the Delhi government and reserved for the Centre.

This long digression has been undertaken to highlight a special problem of Indian federalism, pertaining to the administration of its national capital, and draws pointed attention to the need for privileging the central authority to counter sub-national populism in Delhi, but also other parts of the country. Regrettably, regional parties have, thus far, shown little interest in participating in the governance of the country or helping in the process of consensus-building, which further strengthens the argument for having a strong centralising authority, especially to execute foreign policy and provide national security.

How the increasingly uneasy power equations between the federal and regional authorities will work themselves out in future remains to be seen, but great maturity and restraint will be required on all sides. A hopeful sign is that Article 356 is falling into disuse in contrast to its misuse in the earlier years of one-party and central dominance.

Regional Aspirations and National Interests

D Suba Chandran

Are the regional aspirations in India essentially against the national interests? Or, is there a huge gap between the two, that the successive governments and political parties both at the national and regional levels have failed to address? Do the sub-regions and the rest of nation understand each other? True India is a huge country with different regions, which in turn are heterogeneous. But, is

India not also a democracy and federal, both being sanctified by the Constitution and considered as fundamental by the learned Supreme Court? Is it not the essential functionality of a democracy and federation to ensure that the regions and the rest of nation are on the same page?

Certainly, the size of India and its heterogeneous nature cannot be seen as a problem; perhaps, it could be perceived as an excuse, as it has been done by successive governments since independence. The problems between the regions and the nation are elsewhere.

First and foremost, it is the failure of governments at the national level, irrespective of whichever political party was leading the Parliament in New Delhi. The government, its cabinet and the Prime Minister in particular should have been the biggest bridge between the centre and the regions. It is a biggest irony in India that for the government, cabinet and the Prime Minister, the regions are last in their priorities. Worse, at times, they were never even in the list of priorities. How else can one explain the dis-connect between the different governments, and at times even within the same government?

Take the case of Dr Manmohan Singh, for example and his interest vis-a-vis J&K. What has happened between 2007 and 2013 to his approach? What did the region expect from him when he appointed those five working groups and inaugurate the cross-LoC bus service? What happened to the Round Table Conferences that he himself inaugurated? The interest of the Centre and its priorities (or the lack of it) are the primary problem for creating the dis-connect between the nation and the regions. The regions rightly feel sidelined, ignored and overlooked. The case is same in the Northeast, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu.

Second, the coalition politics, undoubtedly exerts a pressure in the communication between the regions and Centre. Sri Lankan Tamil issue was not new; the entire community was under pressure and prosecution in Sri Lanka by successive governments and especially under the present Rajapakse government. But, why is that it has become an issue today, and not few years ago? As long as the DMK was a part of the coalition, there was a better understanding between New Delhi and Chennai. Worse, as long as the cases of corruption by its own MPs, the DMK went slow in pressurizing New Delhi. Today, there is an ADMK government in Tamil Nadu, and the Sri Lankan Tamil issue is an important emotional issue that the political parties are using to gain narrow political mileage within the State.

The coalition politics, and the internal politics within the States, thus do play a role in creating an emotional gap between the State and Centre. In the process, it also creates a gap between the societies.

Third, the failure of governance and the high level of corruption in the regions/States play an important role in the State government blaming the Centre for all the ills. Consider the case of the Northeast; in particular, Nagaland and Manipur are ruled by the underground, where the militant groups openly “collect” a percentage as “tax” even from the government officials! Goods cannot move easily from one part to the other, without “paying” at the multiple unofficial checkpoints managed by the non-State actors. Funds and goods from rest of India reaches the State; but, there is an organized underground, which takes it and distributes itself. As a result, the common man suffers

immensely and is extremely angry about the present situation.

The State governments in the Northeast are only happy to shift the blame on the Centre. The Centre is well aware of the problem, but it is also a part of the problem, as there is an unholy nexus between the bureaucracy, political leaders and the underground. If the States are shifting the blame on the Centre, the latter is only interested in maintaining the status quo

Fourth, the national media, especially the electronic media is jingoistic and irresponsible, in terms of projecting the regional issues and aspirations, as if only few States around Delhi constitute the Indian nation! If the national media is jingoistic, the regional media is narrowly focussed. Whether it is firing across the LoC, or Teesta river, or the Tamil issue, one could easily observe a pattern in how the regional and national media sees the problem and projects the same.

Besides the media, the research institutions and think tanks at the national and regional levels have a role to play. Again, it is unfortunate, that there are not many think tanks and research institutes at the national level understand the regional aspirations. On the other side, it is equally unfortunate, there are not many quality research institutions and think tanks in the States and regions, that could project their aspirations and alternative approaches.

Finally the role of Members of Parliament. For example, when it comes to India's Look East Policy, everyone in the Northeast complain that the Center is insensitive to the regional interests and overlook the region. Perhaps, this perception is even true. But how many Members of Parliament from the Northeast have raised this issue in a sustained manner and articulated what the region wants, and how it would like to play a positive role. What is the primary purpose of MPs? How effective they are in terms of being a bridge between the region/State and the rest of India?

There is an all round failure and all of us are suffering. How to ensure that the nation and region perceives that their interests are not antithetical, but complimentary? Can the nation move forward without taking the regions along? And can the regions move forward if they want to leave a negative impact on the rest of nation?

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Regional Research Institutions and Think-Tanks: Why are they Missing?

D Suba Chandran

In the last few years, one of the American Universities has been publishing an index of leading think tanks and research institutions at the global level. While the index has been questioned by many in terms of the parameters used, it provides a usual indicator of where think tanks and research institutions are placed.

What is significant in this index is the huge gap in terms of how many think tanks from South Asia figure in the top fifty at the global level. While there are only a handful of research institutions and think tanks in the global list, the Asia list is dominated by China and some think tanks/research institutes from New Delhi. What is surprising is the absence of think tanks and research institutions from the regions – from Jammu & Kashmir to Kerala and from Rajasthan to Nagaland.

Why are they missing? Are they missing because there is no space for such institutions in the regions? Or are they missing because of the lack of efforts and regional initiatives? Or, are they missing, simply because there is no capacity? In terms of space, clearly, there is a need for their presence, mainly because of the contemporary issues unraveling in the region. While the regions either within India or in other countries of South Asia are dotted with numerous NGOs for different purposes, there is a huge gap in terms of independent and non-partisan initiatives, outside the government, that have credibility and acceptability. While there are good and bad NGOs, their primary actions, irrespective of the category they belong to, are more populist and activist in nature, rather than policy or research oriented.

Clearly, a difference should be made between the NGOs and think tanks/research institutes at the national and regional levels. In terms of space, they are much needed, not only because of the contemporary needs and issues, but also because of what happens in their absence. Two things happen, when there is a lack of an adequate number of research institutions/think tanks at the regional level. First, it results in the absence of serious alternative inputs and strategies to the government as policy recommendations. While there always are numerous do's and don'ts in the opinion pages of news papers in the English and vernacular media, they are more a response and opinion to a current issue, rather than a well thought out and structured alternative.

While the universities in the regions undoubtedly produce voluminous reports in terms of thesis and dissertations, for a policy maker and even the common public, to make practical sense of them is a herculean task. Besides, these thesis and dissertations are not aimed at policy prescriptions or providing alternatives; they are scholarly and academic discourse. At least, that is what they are supposed to be. Second, in the absence of quality think tanks and research institutions at the regional level, their partners from the national capitals usurp the role in thinking and providing alternatives for the regions. While none can deny that the think tanks and research institutions based in the capitals have a role to play, given the reach and distance, it is not practical for those institutions from the capital to think long distance and provide alternative strategies for the regions.

The question of why should there be an independent initiative from such institutions at the regional level, is irredundant. Given the general mistaken belief that the government and its bureaucracy is the fountain of all knowledge and they know everything, it is important that there are independent research institutions and think tanks outside government, to provide alternative approaches. More importantly, they will provide a reality check to the policy-makers. Given that the concept of checks and balances is among the fundamental principles of democratic governance, it is important that these institutions exist and perform a great duty not only to the public, but also to the government by providing alternative approaches.

Clearly, the sub-regions in India, for that matter in the entire South Asia, need quality think tanks and research institutions. Where is the problem then? Why are they absent?

Certainly, there have been few initiatives at the regional levels, both inside and outside the University structures to establish independent research institutions and think tanks. Except for few in Mumbai, Bangalore, Kolkata and Chennai, they have not taken substantial roots in other cities and sub-regions. Even if there are, they are one man or few men/women institutions, lacking quality research and an actionable policy recommendations to the State and federal governments.

Undoubtedly, funding for such institutions is a major issue. Even at the national level, there is a constant struggle to attract adequate funding support and yet remain independent and neutral. If the governments – at the federal and State levels are a major culprit, philanthropic institutions and foundations within India are equally responsible for not supporting such independent initiatives which are the need of the hour. While it is always surprising to find how the NGOs (good and bad) succeed in mobilizing support and resources for their activities, for research institutions and think tanks, it is a herculean task. The State governments have to take the lead, and support such initiatives both within and outside the University systems. Though some of the findings and recommendations may not be palatable to the government, they are needed and in the interest of everyone. Other than the funding, an equal challenge is the capacity. While it is difficult to accept, the hard reality is, there is a serious lack of work culture, academic rigour, methodical research and scientific investigation in the regions. While same is the case even at the national level, in the region, it is worse. We as a civil society have to look inwards and address this crucial challenge. A survey of our thesis and dissertations produced in our regional Universities – irrespective of the subjects addressed from Botany to Political Science will highlight what is needed. Unless there are quality inputs and capable hands (and heads) from the region feed into the research and think tank networks, there will always be a danger of importing from the national level.

Think tanks and research institutions at the regional levels are the need of the hour. What is more important is not the quantity, but quality. Let there be more Brookings and Carnegies in our regions

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