



The Indian EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Two other towers that fell

Crisis of liberal statecraft, and the crisis of authority from Saudi Arabia to Afghanistan, are still with us



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

THE INFLATION RISK

If it remains elevated, Monetary Policy Committee could lose credibility. This must be avoided

RECENTLY RELEASED GDP data suggests that the economic fallout of the second wave of the pandemic, amid the localised restrictions imposed to curb its spread, was less severe than last year. In the first quarter of the current year, the economy was about 9 per cent lower than its pre-Covid levels. In the period thereafter, high frequency data indicates that parts of the economy are near their pre-Covid levels, though the contact intensive services sectors continue to lag. On Thursday, Shaktikanta Das, governor of the RBI, expressed optimism over the state of the economy. Speaking at an event organised by *The Indian Express* and the *Financial Times*, Das noted that the economy will witness a sequential improvement in the second quarter, as "fast-moving indicators are looking quite upbeat." However, not only will the second quarter numbers also be distorted owing to the base-effect — the economy had contracted by 7.4 per cent in the same period last year — there is also considerable uncertainty over the momentum of the recovery. The Nomura India Business Resumption Index fell to 100.6 in the week ending September 5 from 102.8 the week before. Equally uncertain is the extent to which the distress in the informal economy has receded.

Das also sought to burnish the RBI's inflation fighting credentials. "The RBI is an inflation targeting organisation", and is "very serious about anchoring inflation expectations and inflation around the target", he said. These comments come in the midst of growing concerns over the continuing accommodative policy stance of the central bank in light of retail inflation continuing to stay elevated. Das defended the stance, pointing out that the MPC was taking advantage of a flexible inflation targeting regime: "Instead of the exact target of 4 per cent, the MPC has decided to operate within the band of 2-6 per cent". Worryingly, however, inflation, contrary to expectations of being transitory, has remained dangerously close to the upper limit of the inflation targeting framework. And though the RBI expects it to moderate, inflationary pressures are showing persistence, and may well turn out to be sticky on the downside.

On the pivot towards policy normalisation, Das has argued that the RBI/MPC which are "very closely watchful of inflation", are also "watchful of the growth impulses becoming sustained and taking deeper root". These comments suggest that the RBI is unlikely to withdraw the accommodative measures in a hurry, unless it sees a durable recovery taking shape. However, it needs to be mindful of the costs of ignoring inflation. If inflation continues to stay elevated, the MPC risks losing credibility vis-a-vis achieving its objective of price stability, which could lead to the unanchoring of inflationary expectations. This must be avoided, if space is to be created for the MPC to navigate this tumultuous period.

INDISCRIMINATE FORCE

Report on Chhattisgarh police firing in 2013 shines light on grievous failure. There must be accountability

AS THE COUNTRY has grappled with insurgencies, from Kashmir and Punjab, to the Northeast and Maoist-affected areas, the security forces have often invited accusations of strong-arm tactics and heavy-handed conduct. In such incidents, across areas of conflict, the facts can be disquietingly similar: The men in uniform claim they had no option but to open fire; the victims are then accused of being insurgents, who had launched an attack in the first place. The veracity of such accounts has been challenged in multiple cases and inquiries have revealed that a trigger-happy force had trained their guns on innocents. One such probe has found that on the night of May 17-18, 2013, the CRPF's CoBRA unit fired 44 rounds, killing eight people, including four minors in Edesmetta in Chhattisgarh's Bijapur district. The judicial inquiry report submitted to the state cabinet on Wednesday has concluded that none of those killed were Maoists, as was alleged by the security forces.

About 30 people had come together to celebrate a seed festival on the night of the shooting, when a 1,000-strong contingent of the CRPF showed up. The gathering, the report points out, was unarmed. The paramilitary forces had not followed marching norms, there was no intelligence behind the operations and there was no crossfire. Similar transgressions had been reported in a judicial inquiry into another incident, also in Bijapur, about a year before the Edesmetta shooting. In 2019, a one-judge commission had found that the CRPF had opened fire unilaterally, killing 17 people, seven of them minors. In conjecturing that the firing could have been a panic response of some officers to "an unexpected gathering", the two inquiries give the paramilitary force some benefit of the doubt. But they also punch holes into the CRPF's own investigation into the incidents. In Edesmetta, for instance, no items "recovered from the field were sent for forensic analysis".

Failures to distinguish between insurgents and civilians, intended and unintended, are costly. They precipitate a cycle of violence, extracting a heavy toll on the common people, especially those belonging to the marginalised communities. In Chhattisgarh, 27 people were killed in a Maoist attack a week after the Edesmetta incident. But the flip side of the story, from areas that have put their insurgency-tormented past behind them — as in Punjab, parts of the Northeast, even some erstwhile Maoist bastions — is equally telling. Persuading people of their stakes in the country's democratic process and its developmental goals has proved the most potent counter to militancy. Security forces must learn the right lessons and they must be held accountable when they don't.

HOME SWEET HOME

It turns out that getting people back to work isn't all that easy for Silicon Valley

IT SEEMS LIKE yesterday when, as most working people suffered salary losses and professional precarity, and tried to thread the needle of "work-life balance" while being trapped at home, tech companies across the world were celebrating "the new normal". Now, the biggest IT giants in the world — who saw their profits soar in the last two years as the demand for digital products and services soared — are facing a bit of an HR problem. It turns out that there is no normal any more when it comes to workplaces. And since Silicon Valley set the template for work-from-home during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, how it deals with return-to-office will be closely watched.

While many companies have decided to postpone return to office until next year, others — including Zoom — are trying to come up with some sort of hybrid model. After all, for the longest time, tech companies promoted the idea that innovation was significantly accelerated by informal interactions in professional settings. This is why the offices of Google and Facebook provide recreational activities for their employees. Unfortunately, two years on, most workers have gotten used to the rhythm of working from home and the old theory of "office breeds innovation" has fewer and fewer takers.

The problem, really, is this: The new normal has indeed become normal. Struggling through domesticity while trying to be professional certainly took a toll and now that the challenge has been overcome, the long commutes to work don't look all that inviting. In fact, even for the bottom line, it's likely cheaper to pass on the overheads of running workspaces — electricity, canteens, etc — to the worker. Why, then, many are asking, should they return to work, especially given the fear around the Delta variant? Some sociologists have a cynical answer: It's the managers who need workers, not the other way around. After all, if the office is empty, what's the point of being the boss?

THE UNPRECEDENTED ACTS of terror on 9/11, when death literally fell from the sky, were ostensibly motivated by an impulse to revenge and restoration. The perpetrators who carried it out sought to teach a lesson to the West, and re-position their version of Islam as a powerful political force. But like a blast whose reverberations fly in all directions, the deepest impulses behind the attack were less strategic and more apocalyptic. They set in motion two crises that are still with us.

The first was the crisis of the West. It is often said that more than 9/11, it was the over-reaction and response to 9/11 that shaped its meaning. There is a great deal of truth to that: 9/11 became the pretext to start two wars, put in motion the perpetual war machine, legitimise unaccountable exercise of executive power, institute the surveillance state, provide mendacious justifications for torture and reinstate the idea that civilian casualties could be counted as mere collateral damage.

The West was weakened in two ways. The United States was drawn into wars that it could neither win nor sustain. They also left a trail of political dislocation from Iraq to Afghanistan. This weakened the US's geopolitical credibility and authority. But the West was weakened through a betrayal of liberalism domestically and abroad. In response to terror, liberals tried to steer a path between what Michael Tomasky, at the time, had called the choice between Cheney and Chomsky. But, in effect, they wound up all in the Cheney camp, as the war careers of Barack Obama and Tony Blair testify. Liberalism has still not found that foreign policy that does not leave the world open to terrorist regimes and their sympathisers on the one hand, and does not devolve into arbitrary overreach causing needless suffering on the other.

As an idea, liberalism depends upon a presumptive trust in the world, and in the dignity of individuals. It depends upon, even if feigned, a sense of innocence about the world, where the "other" is not an object of suspicion. It can rarely survive a climate of fear. The most consequential outcome of 9/11 was to enshrine terrorism as an abstract and all-per-

vasive idea in our imagination. It showed that even very small groups, under the right conditions, can produce spectacular effects. It created a disposition to believe that any location or person could be a target, or that threat lurked in the most unlikely of places. It is true that the West unconsciously overreached. But this is exactly the psychological alchemy terrorism produces.

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But if perpetrators of 9/11 wanted revenge against the West, they also wanted to reconfigure Islam. This created a second crisis. In its semiotics, 9/11 was a modern event. Not only did it use modern technology, it used a modern communicative strategy: Create a spectacular event to establish a new norm and get more recruits to the cause. It also wanted to destabilise all forms of authority in the Middle East. Al Qaeda and the response to it also marked the death nail of varieties of Arab nationalism. These trends predated 9/11. But 9/11 accelerated the crisis of authority from Egypt to Afghanistan and beyond.

New groups like ISIS that rose in the wake of al Qaeda deepened the crisis of authority within Islam, replacing the old conservatism with a new and more repressive radicalism. But they also deepened an already incipient crisis of authority of the nation-state form in West Asia. If the West had an interest in, and overreached in its strategy, the same could be said of states in the Middle East and North Africa. One of the less talked about aspects of the war on terror is how much these states feared the destabilising effects of transnational groups like al Qaeda and ISIS that could in turn threaten their legitimacy. The irony of all this is, of course, that the West had to ally with repressive regimes, from Saudi Arabia to Egypt; they served each other's interests. But, ironically, it made the West an ally of the

very repression that had spawned religious radicalism in the first place. If the intent of the attackers was to induce a paroxysm of self-destruction in the West, it was equally to introduce a repressive, fratricidal and apocalyptic violence amongst its Muslim co-religionists. Yemen, Afghanistan and Iraq were just three of these battle grounds.

So, in some ways, the aftermath of 9/11 became, not a war between Islam and the West, but states of all kinds and radical Islamic groups whose playbook was shaped in the aftermath of 9/11. India, despite being a prime target, weathered the storm relatively well, because democracy provided a safety valve and inoculation against the temptations of apocalyptic terrorism. Its biggest challenge came from support for cross-border violence in Pakistan. Countries like Pakistan spectacularly played both sides of the argument, positioning themselves as indispensable allies to the West, while doing their best to create an environment propitious for terrorism.

In one sense, the twin crises that 9/11 unleashed, the crisis of liberal statecraft, and the crisis of authority from Saudi Arabia to Afghanistan, are still with us. Biden would like to think that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan might help mitigate the first crisis. But the victory of the Taliban on the 20th anniversary of 9/11 will likely politically exacerbate both crises. It will deepen the contest over authority in a number of states and embolden fundamentalists. Critics of liberalism will seize on its seeming inability to push back the Taliban. Domestic divisions within democracies will likely make a coherent response difficult. While all established states fear the destabilising effects of transnational terrorism, they will also be tempted to both fish in troubled waters, and secure themselves first. So a coherent international response is also unlikely. Twenty years, and hundreds of thousands of lives later, we are back where we started: In grip of a fear we still don't know how to address politically.

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HILAL AHMED

THE MUSLIM POLITICOPHOBIA

In India, merger of global anti-Islamism and communalism has led to new consensus

THE TERM ISLAMOPHOBIA is rather inappropriate to map out the nature of post-9/11 Indian public debates on Muslim identity. Islamophobia, which simply means an intense dislike or fear of Islam or prejudice towards Muslims, is a western notion. It captures the anxieties of the middle-class white population in the US and Europe in the aftermath of the war against terror.

The Muslim identity, on the other hand, is an established *problem category* in India. The political class, including the so-called secularists, has never been fully comfortable with Muslim presence. The involvement and participation of Muslim communities in political processes is often reduced to an imagined Muslim vote-bank politics, while their social life is always seen as a symbol of backwardness. The events of 9/11 intensified such apprehensions. Popular global phrases like jihadi Islam, Islamic terrorism, sharia rule and so on, offered new meanings to already established debates on Muslim separatism and Muslim isolation.

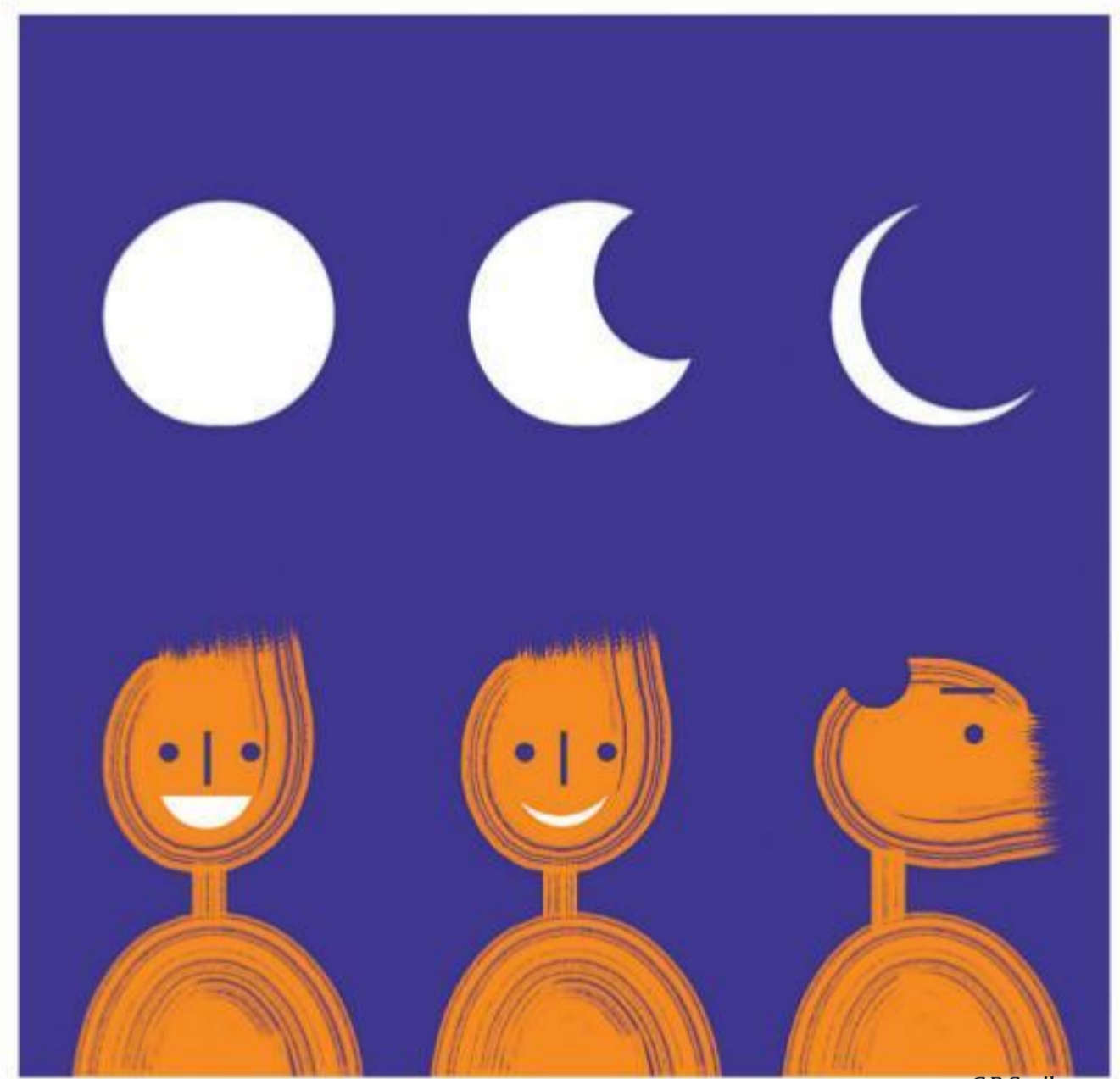
This interesting merger between global anti-Islamism and anti-Muslim communalism led to a new political consensus, which may be called the "Muslim politicophobia". Political parties adopted this refined mode to address Indian Muslims in the post-9/11 scenario not merely as a problematic religious minority but also as a part of a global Islamic *umma*.

Three defining features of Muslim politicophobia are relevant to understand the changing political attitudes towards Indian Muslims in the last two decades.

One, the slow and gradual transformation of the Indian Muslim identity into a reference point for global Islamic terrorism. The Islamic connection between India's Muslims and the Islamists/jihadi organisations is evoked as the most legitimate template for making sense of violent events associated with Islam and Muslims.

Two completely different statements made by Indian prime ministers in the aftermath of 9/11 are relevant to elaborate this point.

In 2002, Atal Bihari Vajpayee argued stridently that Muslims "want to spread their faith by resorting to terror and threats. The world has become alert to this danger". Three years later, Manmohan Singh made a very different argument. He took pride "in the fact that, although we have 150 million Muslims in our country as citizens, not one has been found to have joined the ranks of al Qaeda or participated in the activities of Taliban."



CR Sasikumar

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Although these statements offer us two completely opposite conclusions, the manner in which Muslim identity is linked to the global terrorism clearly underlines the fact that Muslim presence in India is seen as an imprint of global Islam.

The recent Afghanistan crisis is a good example of how Muslim politicophobia functions in public discussions. A section of the media has been trying to interpret this crisis by evoking a strange speculative fear. They work hard to find evidence that Indian Muslims subscribe to the ideology of Taliban. There is a popular conception that India (read Hindus) must not rule out the possibility of an internal version of Taliban or an "Indian Taliban" precisely because there is a sizeable Muslim population.

The fear of active Muslim political engagement (or even the lack of it) is the second feature of Muslim politicophobia. The renewed debate on a Muslim vote bank in the last three decades is a good example. Muslims are alleged to vote as a collective in favour of a particular party at the national level. In the post-Babri Masjid scenario, the scope of this

argument has been expanded. It is now claimed that Muslims primarily take part in electoral politics to teach a lesson to BJP.

Last year's Bihar assembly election is an appropriate illustration of this feature of Muslim politicophobia. The Hyderabad-based party, All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen (AIMIM), won five Muslim dominated constituencies in the state's Seemanchal region. The success of AIMIM under the leadership of Asaduddin Owaisi was seen as an Islamic response to BJP's Hindutva. Even serious secular commentators and non-BJP parties accused Muslim voters of a communal Islamised voting response. No one bothered to look at the political context of Seemanchal region, where caste among Muslims played a significant role in AIMIM's victory on those five seats. The almost insignificant vote share of the party at the state level (1.24 per cent) was also neglected simply to substantiate the imagined fear of Islamic expansionism in India politics.

The third feature of Muslim politicophobia is related to the popular representation of Muslims as a politically conscious community or what I call *siyasi* Muslims. It is assumed that Muslims are fully conscious and informed of their collective right and hence always take politically motivated decisions. This perception has found a different overtone in recent years.

Every aspect of Muslim social life is seen through the prism of global jihadi politics. Muslim population growth is interpreted as "population jihad", as if Muslim couples plan their families primarily to outnumber Hindus. Muslim personal law is seen as a blueprint for a sharia-based Islamic rule in India. An impression is created that sharia is the only hurdle between egalitarian Hinduism and the modernist ideal of the uniform civil code (UCC). The anti-conversion laws (which are strangely named freedom of religion laws) are also based on this fear that poor and illiterate Hindus are being converted to expand the influence of Islam in India.

It would be completely wrong to reduce Muslim politicophobia to Hindutva politics. Although the BJP has always been a clear beneficiary of this political discourse, the role of non-BJP parties cannot be ignored. These erstwhile secular parties as well as the Muslim political elite were instrumental in creating a conducive environment for Hindutva to appropriate Muslim politicophobia.

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The triumph of the nation-state

Two decades later, the system of states looks quite robust after enduring the challenge from international terrorism



C RAJA MOHAN

DID THE BREATHTAKING terror attack on New York and Washington on the crisp autumn morning of September 11, 2001, change the course of world politics? Or was it a spectacular but minor episode? Twenty years later, 9/11 looks a lot less epochal than it seemed in the heat of the moment.

One major inference in the wake of 9/11 was about the power of non-state actors — demonstrated by al Qaeda's massive surprise attack on the world's lone superpower at its zenith. Al Qaeda's rise seemed to fit in with the age of economic globalisation and the internet, which heralded the weakening of the state system and the arrival of a borderless world.

Two decades later, though, the system of nation-states looks quite robust after enduring the challenge from international terrorism. And the ambition of the jihadists — who organised the 9/11 attacks, to destroy America, overthrow the Arab regimes, unleash a war with Israel, and pit the believers against the infidels — remains elusive as ever.

To be sure, terrorist organisations and the religious extremism that inspires them continue to be of concern. But sectarian schisms, ideological cleavages, internecine warfare, and the messiness of the real world have cooled the revolutionary ardour that the world was so afraid of after 9/11. Like Communism and many other millenarian movements before it, the violent Islamist wave has run against impossible odds.

In the battle between states and non-states, the former have accumulated extraordinary powers in the name of fighting the latter. All nations, including liberal democracies, have curtailed individual liberty by offering greater security against terrorism. Abuse of state power has inevitably followed.

The state system adapted quickly to the disruptions created by 9/11. There was much anxiety about terror groups gaining access to weapons of mass destruction or leveraging new digital technologies to increase their power over states. The state system has succeeded in keeping nuclear weapons and material away from terrorists. It has also become adept at using digital tools to counter extremism. States passed sweeping laws that permit relentless tracking of the growing digital footprints of citizens in the information age.

If 9/11 made air travel risky, the states quickly developed protocols to de-risk it. Until the Covid-19 virus threatened it, air transport in the post-9/11 world grew rapidly and boosted the global markets for travel and tourism. The trans-national nature of the new terror groups was countered by better border controls and greater international cooperation on law enforcement.

The choice of targets in the 9/11 attacks — the World Trade Center and the Pentagon — was not accidental. They were designed to strike at the very heart of American capitalism and its famed military power.



CR Sasikumar

Marking the 20th anniversary of 9/11 days after the humiliating US retreat from Kabul and domestic turmoil might suggest that al Qaeda and its associates did succeed in ending America's unipolar moment.

But a closer look suggests that the US was humbled less by al Qaeda and the Taliban than by Washington's own follies. American capitalism met its greatest threat not in 2001 but in the 2008 financial crisis that was triggered by the reckless ideology of deregulation. America lost in Afghanistan and the Middle East because it over-determined the terror threat and put security approaches above political common sense.

American ideologues used the 9/11 moment to pursue all kinds of fetishes — hunting for nuclear weapons that did not exist in Iraq, promoting democracy in the Middle East, and pursuing disastrous regime changes in the region. After 9/11, President George W Bush turned his attention to confronting an imagined "global axis of evil" — Iran, Iraq and North Korea. None of the three countries was involved in 9/11. And the US rewarded Pakistan with billions of dollars in military and economic assistance that actively nurtured the Taliban and succeeded in bleeding and defeating the US in Afghanistan.

The Middle East crusades cost America enormous blood and treasure. They took valuable resources away from America's own internal needs. They also blinded the US to an emerging challenger — China — on the horizon. Washington's obsession with the Middle East gave Beijing two valuable decades to consolidate its rise without any hindrance.

Although America's unipolar moment may have ended, the US will continue to remain the most powerful nation in the world, with the greatest capacity to shape the international system. America's size, capabilities and the resilience to reinvent

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itself have given the US vast margins for error. The US is well set to pick up the pieces and move on from 9/11.

What about the jihadist agenda for the Middle East? The Islamist effort to destroy the Gulf kingdoms spluttered quite quickly as the Arab monarchs cracked down hard on the jihadi groups. Many Arab states do not see al Qaeda and its offshoots as existential threats. They worry more about other Muslim states like Turkey, Qatar and Iran that seek to leverage Islam for geopolitical purposes. These fears have pushed smaller Gulf kingdoms towards Israel and shattered the jihadi hope to trigger the final Islamic assault on the Jewish state.

Developments in China and Pakistan reinforce the proposition that politics among nation-states is more significant than the power of the transcendental religious forces.

China has embarked on a bold mission to "Sinicise" Islam as part of a grand design to subordinate religion to Xi Jinping's thought. Beijing justifies its crackdown on the Muslims of the Xinjiang province by citing the terror threat. Few states in the Islamic world have raised their voice against Beijing; for they see cooperation with the powerful Chinese state as more important than religious solidarity with Xinjiang Muslims.

In the subcontinent, as elsewhere, violent religious extremism thrives only under state patronage. The answers to the challenges presented by the return of the Taliban and the likely resurgence of jihadi terrorism are not in the religious domain but in changing the geopolitical calculus of Pakistan's deep state.

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The India advantage

Geopolitics, economy changed radically after 9/11. Coming decades could be India's if it moves faster on the path of economic liberalisation



RAJEEV MANTRI

THE SIGHT OF the burning towers from September 11, 2001, remains seared in public memory, even two decades after the ghastly terrorist attack. The events of 9/11 marked both a culmination of old as well as an inception of new geo-strategic currents.

India had been besieged by a Pakistan-sponsored terrorist insurgency in Kashmir since 1989. The Islamic terror wave, however, simply wasn't treated with the seriousness it merited internationally. While India wrestled with terrorism, leaders of the Western power bloc such as the US and UK — closely allied as they were with Pakistan, the ultimate perpetrator of cross-border terror — conveniently underplayed the issue.

But 9/11 forced the end to this pretension and laid bare the ideological fanaticism that was the driving force for Islamic terrorist groups. Even then, Pakistan remained an important, if untrustworthy, US ally for the war on terror that commenced in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. In 2011, Osama bin Laden was eliminated by US forces on Pakistani soil, not far from the Pakistan Army's officer training academy. Fast forward 10 more years, and Pakistani security mandarins are publicly complaining about how President Joe Biden has not called their prime minister.

Simultaneously, the two decades since 9/11 have seen a sea change in India-US relations. While the foundation was constructed in the aftermath of the Pokhran nuclear tests, with President Bill Clinton's India visit in 2000 marking the turning point, 9/11 was an important catalyst in bringing India and the US closer. Critically, unlike Pakistan, India has never offered itself as a client state to any country, and the India-US relationship has been progressing as one between partners.

India faced two abominable terror strikes shortly after 9/11 — the December 13 attack on Parliament was followed by the Kaluchak massacre on May 14, 2002, when 31 people, including 10 children and 8 women from the families of Indian soldiers were killed by three Pakistani terrorists. But India never really imposed costs on Pakistan despite such grave provocation. Even in the aftermath of the heinous 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks in 2008, India elected to abide by what was dubbed "strategic restraint".

In recent years, we have seen this euphemism consigned to the wastebin, as two factors changed domestically. First, there has been the emergence of resolute national leadership that has a strong democratic mandate to govern and concomitant political stability. Second, India's economy has achieved high growth and acquired heft. On the back of these changes, India has expanded its military and diplomatic response options in the fight against cross-border terrorism, which the rest of the world has also recognised as a grave issue. Contrast India's response to the events such as the Parliament terror attack, Kaluchak massacre and 26/11 Mumbai terror attack with the response seen after the 2016 Uri attack and 2019 Pulwama attack. In

both the latter cases, India proceeded with conviction and confidence to assert itself and stand up for its interests, taking military actions that have reset the strategic calculus.

The economic shift in India, credited to the efforts of prime ministers PV Narasimha Rao and Atal Bihari Vajpayee, undergirds India's rising influence in the world as well as the evolution of India-US relations since 9/11. One of the principal reasons the landmark Indo-US nuclear deal came together in 2008 was that the key members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, otherwise committed to non-proliferation, wanted to participate in the nuclear trade in India.

It should be remembered that India's economic success is a relatively recent phenomenon. In 1990, Pakistan's GDP per capita (in constant 2010 US dollars) was \$737, higher than both India and China. India led China and Pakistan in 1960, but three decades of anti-market, inward-looking economic policy bludgeoned the country's potential. It was only in 2001 that India's per capita GDP exceeded that of Pakistan, 36 years after Pakistan took the lead over India in 1965. Today, economic growth is attracting countries who want to invest in and trade with India, adding arrows to democratic India's diplomatic quiver.

Whether it is geopolitics that is a driver of domestic economic shifts, or economic policy changes that reshape strategic relations is a question debated by scholars. In India's case, where external pressures initially did push economic policy in a more draconian direction, one could venture that having exhausted all options, India took the path of liberalisation in 1991, perhaps a decade or two later than it should have. That delay extracted a big geopolitical price. Even the pause in reforms under the Congress-led UPA government, especially during the 2004-2009 period when the doctrinaire Communist parties wielded enormous influence, was very costly.

The last two decades have seen China decisively pull ahead of India. In 2000, the per capita GDP (in constant 2010 US dollars) for the two countries stood at \$1,768 and \$827, respectively. By 2019, China stood at \$8,242 and India at \$2,152.

The two decades since 9/11 have seen the world shift from unipolarity, with China emerging as the new pole challenging the US-led world order. The pandemic-induced economic and health crisis only accelerated those trends, with several countries realising that supply chain dependence on China is not desirable. India, too, has launched a range of reforms and policy changes to boost its share of manufacturing in economic output. China's economic heft endows it with financial and military clout that few countries can counter or resist, and the likes of Pakistan are now eagerly becoming Chinese client states.

The years since 9/11 have seen radical shifts in geopolitics and the world economy. The coming decades could potentially see India take centre stage in world affairs, provided we imbibe lessons from the past and move faster on the path of economic liberalisation. Liberalisation isn't necessary only for poverty alleviation and achieving prosperity, but arguably it is now the principal strategy for national security.

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C CHRISTINE FAIR

America destroyed America

9/11 pushed US into a war, triggered xenophobia that damaged its body politic

LIKE MANY AMERICANS, 9/11 is a day I won't forget. I was 33, living in West Los Angeles, trapped in an abusive relationship and too underpaid by RAND to move out on my own. As had become my habit, I was sleeping on the futon with my dog, Ms Oppenheimer. As I was waking up, I saw the news coverage of the first tower falling. I thought it was a movie. Like many Americans, the trajectory of my life changed for both the good and the bad.

Prior to 9/11, I was a research associate at RAND. I had fled the University of Chicago's toxic environment and was trying to recover from the myriad traumas I had experienced there while also trying to finish my PhD in South Asian languages and civilisations remotely. Before 9/11, I worked on numerous projects for the Office of the Secretary of Defence, among other clients, but rarely did I work on South Asia. One of my clients was killed in the Pentagon attack, but I never closely interacted with him. RAND was closed for several days. Its office in Virginia was right across from the Pentagon and many of my colleagues witnessed that crash first hand. When we returned to the office, I had already been contacted by various US government agencies and I casually mentioned this to a colleague. Within 15 minutes, RAND's then vice-president Natalie Crawford came to me and asked how much it would take to keep me. She also wrangled money to help me finish my PhD. The overnight raise helped me find a

new home and begin a life free of abuse with my dog. It's terrible to say that 9/11 altered the trajectory of my life in a positive way. But it did.

But there were costs. I didn't set out wanting to be a scholar of Islamist terrorism. I studied Punjabi literature in graduate school and my intellectual interest lay in the politics of the Sikh diaspora, particularly the mobilisation of Khalistan. It would be decades before I could return to the subject. Overnight, all of my language work and time in Pakistan would be harnessed to study this threat that few Americans even knew existed.

As someone who often worked in policy circles and for government clients, I watched in horror as the US government sought to reduce a very complex challenge to "scalable projects". I watched as my government and fellow citizens began to view Muslims as a threat to our very way of life. I watched how a complicit media and pusillanimous members of Congress did nothing to stop the Bush administration's invasion and subsequent destruction of Iraq even though the justifications for doing so were rank lies.

The US Congress, keen to seem interested in and capable of protecting us, passed the ironically named The Patriot Act in late October 2001. It gave the government widespread powers of surveillance and severely compromised civil liberties. Yet Americans acquiesced to the sacrificing of their freedoms in exchange for an

ephemeral perception of security.

As America went to war in Afghanistan, it hoovered up young men without the ability to discern who was an actual combatant from who was just a person caught in the wrong place at a life-changing time. We set up prisons in Guantanamo and Bagram and other dubious places across the world where persons were held without habeas corpus while being subjected to torture which the Bush administration referred to as "enhanced interrogation techniques." The CIA hired dubious contractors to develop these torture methods and paid these so-called "torture teachers" \$80 million. The US Congress would eventually conclude what had already been known: Torture is not effective and the testimony extracted under torture did not help capture Osama Bin Laden.

It's impossible to know how many people were detained across the known eight black sites, where the United States deposited captured persons. Many of those persons were innocent but were captured due to faulty intelligence, mistaken identity, or other absurd errors. The Bush administration even paid bounties of \$3,000-\$25,000 for anyone who would hand over a "possible terror suspect." Of the 780 persons who were detained at Guantanamo, there were only eight convictions. Today 39 people are still held at the facility. They have never been charged with a crime, much less been tried.

I also believe that the so-called war on

terror spawned the fascistic, hate-filled xenophobia that is destroying the body politic of my country. The Republican Party learned that fear and anxiety motivate voters. Trump perfected baseless fear-mongering to fan the flames of white males who fear the loss of their privilege and then harnessed it for political gains. Those who espouse these beliefs are not a minority. They are about half of this country and the entire Republican Party has sought to placate these boors, who harbour the insane belief that when women, racial, religious and ethnic minorities enjoy the full suite of rights enshrined by our constitution, white men must suffer a loss of rights. It's as if they see rights as a pizza: More for us means less for them. For these Americans, Trump and the white male supremacist xenophobia we empowered were all that could block the browning of America. In this insane zeal, his supporters in and out of the US government attempted a coup on January 6.

I don't know what Bin Laden envisioned to be the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. But I can say confidently that Bin Laden didn't destroy America. America destroyed America.

The writer is a professor of Security Studies at Georgetown University. She is the author of In Their Own Words: Understanding the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

UNDER SIEGE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The uneasy campus' (IE, September 10). Visva-Bharati University is witnessing a "human crisis". Vice-Chancellor Bidyut Chakraborty took charge in November 2018, not long before the 1921-founded university was to celebrate its centenary, but his tenure continues to be marked by a string of unpleasant events, including frequent serving of chargesheets, suspension of students, notices to teachers, threatening them with disciplinary action. He should refrain from negating the very idea of universities, where freedom, inquiry, questions, dissent and debate constitute the essential foundation of learning.

SS Paul, Nadia

THIS REFERS TO the editorial 'The uneasy campus' (IE, September 10). The crackdown on students, faculty and employees of Visva Bharati University is an attack not just on free speech and expression but on an institution that symbolises the state's culture and identity. This fracas cannot have any good results, and the sooner the university administration realises this the better.

Hemant Contractor, Pune

PINCH OF SALT

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'This quarter will be better than Q1: RBI Governor' (IE, September 10). A sensible man will take RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das's statement that economically the July-September quarter will be better than the

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previous quarter ending June only with a pinch of salt. It may not be a surprise if tomorrow, the same governor says that this July-September quarter will be better than the following October-December quarter. The BJP's drum beaters will take no time to lap it up and project it also as the government's achievement.

Tarsem Singh, Mahilpur

MUNICH MOMENT

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Deal with the new Kabul' (IE, Sep 10). The surrender to Taliban recommended by the author is akin to the Munich moment. It does not stop a Hitler. The return of the Taliban to Kabul represents a defeat of universally respected human values. India must actively do everything in her power to keep the Taliban regime destabilised. A stable Taliban in Kabul means trouble in the Srinagar valley, with extremely violent consequences for the entire region.

HN Bhagwat, Chiplun