
Post COVID-19: Challenges for India

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Since December 2019, when the first case of Covid-19 (the illness caused by SARS CoV-2) was detected in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei province of China, the spread of the virus, also called the China virus or the Wuhan virus by some has spread to all corners of the globe, causing death and destruction in its wake and severely disrupting the world's economy. China, which was the only country impacted when the virus first appeared in Wuhan, has now controlled its spread, but large parts of Europe, the US, Africa and Asia to which the virus spread in a later time frame are still grappling with containing the virus. India, with a population in excess of 1.3 billion people has done fairly well in restricting the spread of SARS CoV-2, but like other countries in the world, its economy has taken a severe hit and India now has to grapple with a fresh set of challenges in an increasingly volatile world.

Till the virus hit India, the nation's major concerns were getting the economy to double-digit growth, with the hope of moving on to a USD 5 trillion economy by 2024 or 2025. This appears to be a distant dream now, with the current year's projection for economic growth being pegged at a mere 1.9%.¹ However, growth for the calendar year 2021 is expected to rebound to 7.4%.² How to get the economy back on track in a changing international environment will remain the primary focus of the government, while simultaneously also dealing with the earlier challenges on the security and energy front.

Cross Border Terrorism

Despite the onslaught of SARS CoV-2, the sponsors of terror have shown no let-up in their activities. Pakistan continues to support cross border terrorism and has not closed any of the camps it has set up for the training of terrorist groups like the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) and others. Pakistan continues to use terrorism as an instrument of its state policy, as seen by repeated attempts being made to infiltrate such elements into India across the Line of Control (LoC) to unleash violence. Some of these terrorists like Masood Azhar and Mohammed Saeed are on the counter-terror map of the world and remain in the list of the world's most-wanted terrorists, but continue to find safe refuge in Pakistan. The period from 1 January 2020 to 23 April 2020 saw repeated attempts by terrorist groups to create mayhem in the Valley, most of which were foiled by effective counter-terrorism operations which resulted in 50 terrorists being eliminated including several top commanders of JeM and LeT. In the operations conducted, 17 security forces personnel also laid down their lives.³ During the same period in 2019, a total of 72 terrorists were eliminated, with 59 security forces personnel laying down their lives⁴. While this shows the positive impact of India's countering terrorism effort, it also is indicative of the fact that there is no let-up in the intent of inimical forces to unleash terror on the hapless citizens of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir.

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Ceasefire violations by the Pakistan military remain a constant feature across the Line of Control (LoC), though the Indian Army continues to give an appropriate response for every act of transgression. More insidious, however, is the use Pakistan is making of the social media to unleash a vicious propaganda war against India. This is being done not only within India, to create communal discord, but also in the Arab world. An example of one such attempt was the creation of a fake account of the Omani Princess HH Dr Mona Fahad Mahmoud Al Said, tweeting about Muslims getting prosecuted in India. While the Omani princess has come out openly and declared the account as fake,⁵ many people fell victim to the subterfuge. Many Pakistanis are also posing as Saudi businessmen, to target the Modi government.⁶ Pakistan has been actively using social media as part of its influence operations strategy since long. A marked increase in these efforts took place post 5 August 2019, when the Indian Parliament revoked the provisions of Article 370 and Article 35A and divided the erstwhile state of J&K into the Union Territory of Ladakh and the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. To create dissonance in the minds of India's Muslim population, these efforts have now significantly increased, suggesting the need for appropriate countermeasures.

There have also been reports that Pakistan is now pushing Coronavirus infected terrorists into India. As per Shri Dilbagh Singh, DGP, Jammu and Kashmir, "...It is a matter of concern that Pakistan is pushing COVID-19 infected militants from across...Till now, Pakistan had been supporting terrorists and now it is exporting

coronavirus patients to infect people of Kashmir. This is something on which there is a need to take precaution".⁷ While no concrete proof of such attempts being made by Pakistan is available, such acts by the Pakistan military appear unlikely. Such personnel would invariably come in contact with the normal public in Pakistan as well as their handlers on the border areas before induction. A patient suffering from Covid-19 is unlikely to bear the rigour of the journey and the probability of him infecting his own colleagues is far higher than in infecting any person from the Indian side. Perhaps this is a ploy by Pakistan to spread concern within the Indian security establishment, but its practical manifestation is extremely doubtful

The Regional Security Environment

The region continues to simmer with violence, with the Afghan peace process in tatters, and the situation in the Gulf also remaining extremely tenuous. The US-Taliban peace deal is as good as dead, with the Taliban paying scant heed to observing any sort of ceasefire with the Government forces. In fact, the Taliban has even rejected President Ashraf Ghani's appeal to the group to lay down arms for the Islamic holy month of Ramzan, which began on 24 April 2020.⁸

With the US deeply committed to addressing home concerns in combatting the Coronavirus, it perhaps is less focussed on what is happening in Afghanistan, where Taliban forces continue to attack government troops. Post the signing of the troop withdrawal agreement with the United States in February, attacks by Taliban on Afghan forces recommenced within a week of the ceasefire, though the Taliban has, for now, held back on

attacking foreign forces. The attacks come at a time when Afghanistan is reeling with the Coronavirus outbreak and has limited resources to take the necessary measures to control its spread. As per a New York Times report, at least 262 government troops and 50 civilians have lost their lives in April 2020.⁹ These are very high casualty figures and do not augur well for peace in the region. We could well be looking into a scenario where Afghanistan slips into civil war. Indian concerns get magnified as a great deal of political capital as well as treasure has been invested by the government of India in building infrastructure in that country, and all that could well go up in smoke. Also of concern is the fact that instability in Afghanistan would greatly increase Pakistani influence in that region. The possibility of some elements of the Taliban jumping in the fray to fight in the Union Territory of J&K after crossing the LoC, cannot be ruled out.

The situation in the Gulf also remains worrisome, as Daesh (Islamic State) remains active in the region along with elements of Al Qaeda. Turkey is in conflict with Syrian Government forces which in turn are being supported by Russia and Iran. Relations between Iran and the US continue to remain tense, though thankfully, after the killing of Maj Gen Soleimani in January 2020, the region did not slip into war, which could well have led to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and caused a serious shortage of energy resources across the world. On 22 April, in a move that could once again stoke conflict, the US President ordered the US Navy to “shoot down and destroy” any Iranian gunboats that harass US ships.¹⁰ This has created yet another flashpoint in the region on the high

seas, which could potentially impact the transportation of energy resources through the Strait of Hormuz.

Another factor for consideration is the hostility that exists between Iran and Israel. Israel feels threatened by Iran’s nuclear and precision-guided munition (PGM) programme. In Mid-April, Iran also unveiled a range of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), with a range in excess of 1000 kms and which could reach Israel from Iran.¹¹ Israel considers increased Iranian capability to target Israel as an existential threat and thus could respond unilaterally against Iran to obviate the threat at source. Israel is cognisant of the fact that it was a drone attack by Iran’s proxies that destroyed the Saudi Aramco oil facilities on 14 September 2019, which led to a fifty per cent loss of production for about a month and highlighted Iranian drone technology. They, thus, cannot take lightly, any potential threat from Iran. According to Jonathan Schanzer, Senior Vice President Research of FDD (Foundation for Defence of Democracies), Iran’s PGM programme could be the issue that prompts the region’s next war.

All this is taking place in the Gulf in the backdrop of heightened tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with both countries jostling for increased influence in the Muslim world. This is playing out in Yemen, where the Saudi forces are embroiled in a military campaign against the Houthi rebels. A unilateral ceasefire was declared by Saudi for two weeks which ended on 22 April, but which was rejected by the Houthis. As a condition for agreeing to a ceasefire, the Houthis are demanding a lifting of air and sea blockades imposed by the Saudi coalition to the regions which the Houthis

control, but that as yet is not forthcoming. In the meantime, the Saudi led coalition has extended the ceasefire for another four weeks, to support efforts to contain the spread of Covid-19. Yemen is perhaps one of the poorest countries in the world and the conflict is another potential flashpoint which could spin out of control.

The region is also witnessing a serious slump in the price of crude oil which will adversely impact all the major oil producers. The Coronavirus pandemic across the globe has led to a slash in demand for oil, which in turn has led to a global economic contraction.¹² Oil prices have tumbled by half this year and saw Brent crude prices hovering between USD 31 - USD 32 per barrel, as the spread of the coronavirus coincided with a bitter price war that saw producers flood the market.¹³ Despite a deal reached by oil cartel and allies – known as OPEC+ to end the price war between Saudi Arabia and Russia, oil prices have halved from the 2019 average price of Brent crude which stood at USD 64.26 per barrel¹⁴ and which further slipped to below USD 10 per barrel on 21 April 2020.¹⁵ The drop in oil prices will see a rise as world demand picks up in a few months, but the prices are likely to stabilise at around USD 30 per barrel for Brent crude, well below the average price for Brent crude in 2019. While this will provide some solace to the consumers, especially to India and other countries in South Asia who are not oil producers, it will impact seriously the economies of West Asia which are dependent on export of crude oil.

Chinese Intransigence

The impact of Covid-19 across the world has not deterred China from seeking to impose its

influence in the South China Sea. As the virus originated from China, that country was the first to suffer its consequences, but since then China has recovered from the impact and while its economy has taken a hit, it is still projected to grow at 1.2 per cent for the current year and rebound strongly to 9.2 per cent in 2021.¹⁶ Of concern is the fact that Beijing has ratcheted up pressure on Taiwan, which it seeks to reunite. On 9 February 2020, Chinese fighters and bombers flew around Taiwan in an apparent show of force—what the Chinese call “island encirclement” drills. The exercise was described by China’s Eastern Theatre Command as a “completely legitimate and necessary action aimed at the current situation in the Taiwan Strait and safeguarding national sovereignty”.¹⁷ Next day, in yet another provocative act, Chinese jets, including J-11 fighters, crossed an unofficial middle line in the Taiwan Strait, forcing the Taiwanese Air Force to scramble its F-16 fighters, duly armed, to counter any potential threat.¹⁸ In early April, a Chinese naval flotilla led by the country’s first aircraft carrier passed by the eastern and southern coasts of Taiwan to carry out drills.¹⁹ These acts are coercive and designed to put pressure on Taiwan at a time when the world is battling the Coronavirus.

China is also ramping up pressure on its claim areas in the South China Sea. Chinese trawlers, guarded by China’s coast guard, have been fishing in waters which form part of the EEZ of Indonesia, off the Natunas. In April, a Chinese coast guard ship rammed and sank a Vietnamese fishing boat. China has also approved setting up two districts in areas claimed by Vietnam—the islands and reefs of the Paracel and Spratly Islands, to which

Vietnam has lodged a protest. A Chinese government survey ship was also involved in tagging an exploration vessel operated by Petronas, Malaysia's state oil company, in disputed waters in the South China Sea.²⁰ Chinese belligerence is a deliberate show of force, cocking a snook at the world—and this at a time when the world is engaged in battling the Coronavirus.

India: Challenges and Opportunities

India's internal and external challenges have not undergone any changes, but stand further magnified with the onset of the Coronavirus and its debilitating effect on the nation's economy. Internally, attempts continue to be made to weaken the nation's syncretic fabric by inimical elements within the country, primarily as an attempt to discredit the government with an eye on the next general elections, slated for 2024. In the event of the ruling dispensation winning the same, it would mean that the main opposition party would be out of power for 15 years—a situation they find unpalatable. External agencies too, do not find the prospect of a strong national government in India to be conducive to their self-interest, so such forces also lend support to fissiparous tendencies within the country. The agitations seen on the issue of the Citizenship Amendment Act are a pointer in this direction. Rational criticism of the actions of the Tablighi Jamaat, which paid scant heed to government directives on preventing the spread of the Coronavirus became a vehicle for propaganda, with government actions being seen as targeting India's Muslim community. How a small group of the Tablighi Jamaat became conflated with the larger Muslim society of India,

of which it does not form even a fraction of one per cent, is a matter of concern, but it points to insidious forces at work to weaken the national fabric. Such efforts to create a communal divide will only gather momentum as we move closer to the 2024 elections, and addressing this issue will remain a major challenge for the government.

The economy has taken a severe hit with the lockdown imposed since 25 March 2020 for a period of three weeks, which was then extended to 3 May 2020. This has led to high disruptions, especially in the unorganised sector, with millions of daily wagers and migrant workers facing the brunt. While all sections of the economy were impacted, the MSMEs (Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises) were the hardest hit and would require special schemes to get back on their feet. Also, hit to the verge of collapse are the hospitality and aviation sectors, which will continue to bear the brunt, well after the lockdown is lifted. How these sectors are revived will remain the defining challenge for the government.

On the positive side, the handling of the pandemic by the government has been outstanding. The casualty figures, which many thought would be in the millions, have been effectively contained. As of 26 April, while the world has suffered close to three million cases of Covid-19, resulting in over 200,000 fatalities, India has just over 26,000 cases of Covid-19 and just over 800 fatalities.²¹ The lockdown period has given India enough time to educate the public on preventive measures as also to build up its health infrastructure. As of date, India has 700 COVID hospitals and has built up a capacity of 190,000 beds, exclusively for Covid-19 patients. 12,000 ventilators are also available

across the country for Covid-19 patients, which are being augmented by another 10,000 ventilators by the end of April.²² While 80% of the patients report mild symptoms or are asymptomatic, the remaining 20% do need oxygen support and in extreme cases the use of ventilators.²³ Less than 3 per cent of the total cases in the hospital would require ventilators²⁴ and as such, India is adequately placed to deal with any emergency in the months to come.

As the stock markets have taken a hit, with both the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE) and the National Stock Exchange (NSE) suffering huge losses, predators are on the prowl to pick up a stake in the Indian market when the prices have bottomed out. In the March quarter, People's Bank of China (PBoC) bought 1,74,92,909 shares, or 1.01 per cent of HDFC limited,²⁵ at a time when the share prices had dropped significantly. The government was quick to prevent further Chinese predatory moves into India's financial system and revised India's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) policy, which now requires approval from the Central Government for all countries bordering India.²⁶ Such proactive measures augur well for India's financial stability.

Externally, cross border terrorism remains a major threat for peace and stability in the region. Pakistan, while no longer a conventional military threat, is unlikely to stop using terrorists as an instrument of its foreign policy. The government has taken firm steps in the political, diplomatic, economic and military spheres to counter Pakistani designs, but such measures will need to be persisted with over some time and further enhanced to bring about a qualitative change in Pakistani behaviour. More importantly, India would need to

negate the vicious propaganda war unleashed by Pakistan to subvert the minds of a section of Indians as also to show India in a negative light across the world. India's countermeasures through influence operations, encompassing both public affairs and public diplomacy, would require an organisational structure for effective execution. It may be worth considering the creation of a perception management organisation for the purpose.

With respect to China, India's major concern is China's predatory moves along its land borders and its increasing presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). India is committed to free and open navigation in the Indo-Pacific and is coordinating its efforts towards this end with all concerned countries to achieve this outcome. Of particular interest is the Quad, a grouping of US, Japan, Australia and India, which is likely to grow in momentum and capability in the years to come. India will also have to be mindful of its land borders with China and sustain an adequate force to dissuade China from any hostile action. It is appreciated that the government would require huge inflow of funds to get the economy back on its feet in a quick time frame and it has been suggested by some that the defence budget could be slashed. This, however, will prove to be counter-productive in the long run as India faces a multitude of security challenges from its inimical neighbours. It must also be remembered that military capability takes years to build and for short-term gains, it would not be advisable to weaken our defence capability.

In conclusion, India's handling of the pandemic has raised its stature on the world stage. A revised world order, following the pandemic, could well see the world's acceptance of India as a country deserving a seat on the High Table.

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