

# INSIGHTS

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India's North-East security dimension



Moscow protestors increase Putin's pain



Hong Kong's democracy hanging by a thread



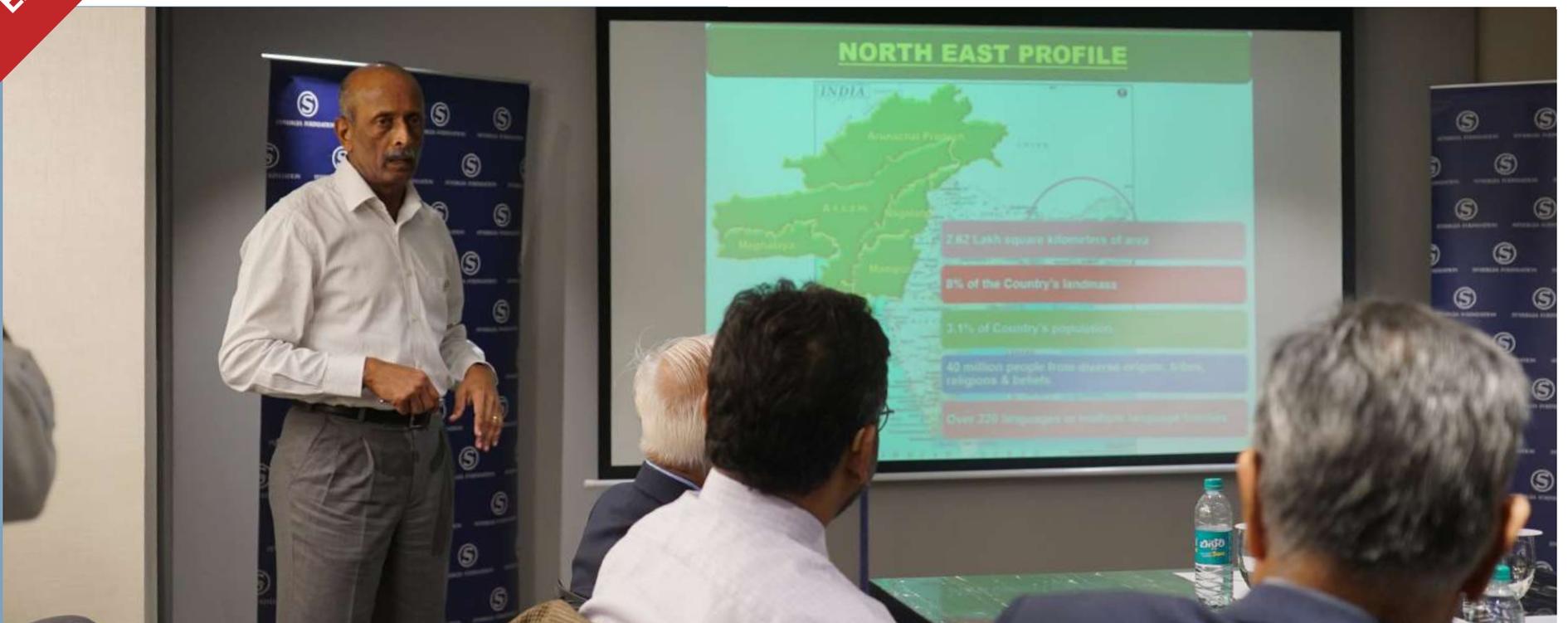
Indian economy in choppy waters



Pakistan's dwindling options on Kashmir



Combating the curse of deep fakes



## I Future of India's security: the North East dimension

Synergia Foundation hosted its 59<sup>th</sup> Roundtable Conference titled “Future of Security: The North East Dimension”. The roundtable discussion featured a keynote address by Major Gen N George (Retd), Former Chairman of the Ceasefire Monitoring Group in Nagaland. Maj Gen George has rich operational and administrative experience in the North East. Here are some key insights from his address

### Background

The situation in India's North East is consequential to both its history and geography. The entry of the British into the region in the 1820s was in response to a request from the Ahom rulers of Assam for help in countering frequent raids by the Burmese to the South.

The British introduced tea plantations in Assam, which was followed by the discovery of oil and coal in the last decade of the same century. Exploitation of these resources required an educated local populace that was lacking. It resulted in the British facilitated migration of an educated non-local population that was primarily Bengali. The build up to the partition of India witnessed accelerated migration of mainly Bengali Muslims into the region. This was an effort at incorporating Assam or at least parts of it into what was to be East Pakistan, on the basis of religious identity. It gave rise to the most fundamental issue that has plagued the North East, demographic change arising out of prolonged migration of primarily Bengali Muslims. The effect of climate change that is denuding arable land in present day Bangladesh at an alarming rate has aggravated the situation further. The States most impacted by demographic change are Assam and Tripura, with the latter experiencing demographic inversion in the process.

The fear of being overwhelmed by “Hindu India” which was in no small measure the influence of Christian evangelism in Nagaland, served to abet a secessionist movement that led to the declaration of independence of the State on 14th August 1947. Central intervention, primarily influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, resulted in the issue of Naga independence being withheld. The Naga-Hydari Agreement of June 1947, brokered by Shri Akbar Hydari, then Governor of Assam, provided interim respite. Dispute over the interpretation of the provisions of the Agreement prompted the Nagas to resort to violence in the early fifties and non-participation in India's first General Elections in 1951-52. The armed forces were inducted into the region to quell the insurgency. The conflict spiraled thereafter. A series of ceasefires with insurgent groups that splintered with each Agreement is legacy that is still awaiting resolution. The armed insurrection in Nagaland gradually spread to other parts of the North East. It highlighted the second core issue at the root of the turmoil – recognition, or the lack of it, of Tribal identity.

### Analysis

The Naga insurgency escalated due to a combination of internal and external factors. Naga intransigence can be attributed in some measure to western evangelical intervention that elevated the Naga issue to the global stage. Chinese meddling through the training of insurgents and supply of weapons was an important factor. Pakistan was equally complicit in the supply of weapons up to 1971. Conflict resolution and diplomacy was simultaneously found lacking internally.

The prolonged insurgency in Nagaland had its spillover effect on other parts of the North east. Lack of understanding of the region and its people was the cause for neglect and poor governance. Reasonable demands of the Mizos to assert their identity was neglected and hence exploited locally to initiate the next insurgency in

Major Gen N George (Retd),  
Former Chairman of the  
Ceasefire Monitoring  
Group in Nagaland

“  
Various central government agencies  
often deal directly with regional groups  
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”

the region. Fear of territorial compromise in the hill districts of Manipur, to appease Naga demands, led to violence by Meitei groups. Demographic change in Assam and Tripura rattled the indigenous people, thus leading to violence. Assertion of Tribal identity in other parts of the North East similarly gave rise to myriad other insurgencies. Talks with the Government of India through the Naga Peoples Convention (NPC) led to the grant of Statehood to Nagaland in 1963. The first ceasefire between the Naga National Council (NNC) and the Government of India

was brokered by the Rev. Michael Scot in 1964. Subsequent talks failed and violence resumed. A concerted campaign by the Army after the 1971 war resulted in the signing of the Shimla Accord in 1975. A tenuous peace was shattered with the breakaway formation of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in 1980. Tribal dynamics within the NSCN resulted in its further split into the NSCN (IM) and the NSCN (K) in 1988. The Indian government's patronage of one group over the other did not help matters. Govt. of India finally signed a ceasefire with the NSCN (IM) in 1997 and with the NSCN (K) in 2001. The latter split once again in 2011. One more group calling itself NSCN (R) was formed out of the NSCN (K) in 2017. The ideology of the early days has given way to personality cults based on tribal loyalties. The business end of insurgency is the glue holding it all together.

Open ended ceasefire agreements, extending over decades, is NOT conducive to conflict resolution. In fact they aggravate a bad situation to make it worse. Nagaland is a classic case. Sidelining the State Government in talks with Naga insurgent groups is less than ideal process for the future. Signals sent to myriad other groups in the region is negative. Dialogue with insurgent groups that equate themselves with the central government is dangerous.

Institution building within States has to precede conflict resolution. It is severely lacking at this stage. Presence of Insurgent/militant groups looms large in respective areas of their influence, thereby hampering initiatives of the Government. It is a major hindrance to progress. Extortion and corruption are endemic. The central government has considerably enhanced funding into the North East in the recent past. Visible signs of progress are mainly infrastructure development projects related to the Centre's Act East policy. It has had little impact on the population at large.

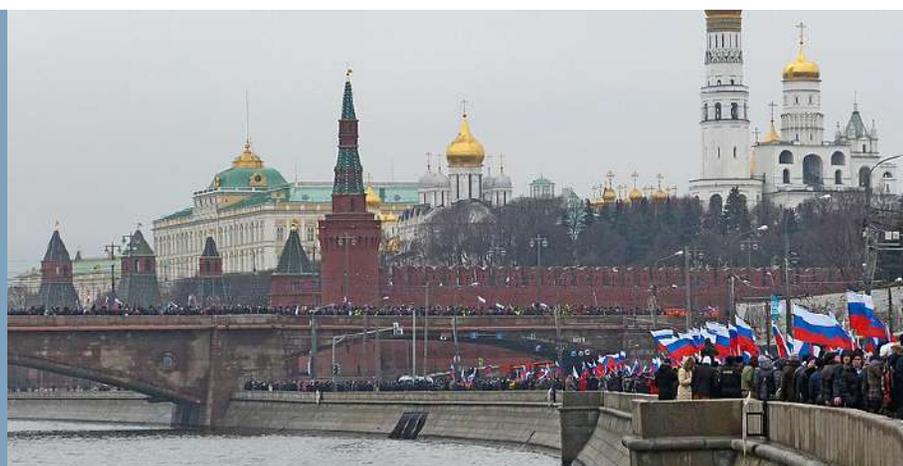
The biggest challenge facing Govt. of India is resolving the conflict in Nagaland. Talks are in progress with erstwhile insurgent groups whose demands are clearly influenced by their future status rather than that of the Nagas as a whole. It is a sensitive situation that demands deft handling. Tribal dynamics dictate that no final agreement with the NSCN (IM) will achieve the desired acceptance of Naga Society. The environment needs to be infused with a level of positivity with development that reaches the people. The scope in the areas of agriculture, horticulture and tourism are immense. Education and health care are areas of considerable neglect that need to be addressed on priority, to be able to create a conducive environment that will engender greater acceptability of a political solution.

Just as the Naga insurrection of the 1950's served as a beacon to other insurgencies in the North East, resolving the Naga imbroglio can be the precursor to resolution of other conflicts that continue to simmer in the region.

### Assessment

- The North East region of India retains crucial space in the security calculus of the Nation. An unresolved border dispute with China holds potential to escalate with little notice. "Incidents" can often lead to serious conflict, the Doklam incident of 2018 is a typical case in point. The situation was diffused through astute diplomacy. A more belligerent China cannot be taken for granted at any stage. It is a situation in which an insecure internal environment will adversely impact outcomes.
- The North East is blessed with abundant resources and a talented and skilled people. It is in the country's interest that this resource is harnessed to its full potential. Building institutions in the region will require induction of suitable expertise, with due consideration for local sensitivities. A bottom up process of bettering the lives of the locals, with simultaneous effort at conflict resolution through talks, will yield positive outcomes.

## Protestors pile on pressure on Putin



Over 60,000 Russians staged what has become the country's biggest political protest, defying a clampdown by authorities, demanding free elections to Moscow's city legislature. What does the largest political protest in Moscow in over eight years mean for Putin's government and what is in store for the future?

### Background

Muscovites took to the street in droves to protest the disqualifications of several independent candidates including Lyubov Sobol for the city council elections. While that was the immediate provocation, the protest soon turned into a platform for the expression of several other long-festering disaffections. Several polls show that in 2019, Putin's approval ratings have taken a tumble. The deteriorating health of the Russian economy is at the heart of why Russians are increasingly vocal against the government. The country's geopolitical isolations and the perception of the government as corrupt add to their disgruntlement. The controversial pension reforms announced last year seem to have lit the touch paper. Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev embarked on a fundamental reform of Russia's pension system last year as the football World Cup was in progress that increased the pensionable age for men from 60 to 65. Sixty five is pretty much the life expectancy of men in Russia.

Although city elections do not usually make a difference to national politics, the protesters talk about rampant inflation—food and other essentials have become significantly more expensive; unemployment remains high and several small businesses are downing shutters.

To make matters worse, the Russian riot police have met the largely peaceful protestors with violence. Sobol, one of the disqualified candidates, was arrested before she could

reach the venue of the protest. Opposition leader Alexei Navalny, a long-time critic of President Putin, was jailed for a month. Navalny was hospitalized briefly when he took ill in jail, with doctors suspecting foul play. Putin, who recently celebrated twenty years in power, is yet to speak or make an official statement on the protests.

### Analysis

Political protests in Russia had subsided in recent years. It was awash with a new wave of patriotism after the annexation of Crimea. Putin's aggressive foreign policy, that increased Russia's power abroad had served well to pacify public opinion domestically. The current demonstrations were billed as an act of defiance against the country's increasingly repressive law enforcement agencies, who have responded to peaceful protests over the past four weeks with truncheon beatings and large-scale arrests.

Former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, currently Chair of Russia's Accounts Chamber, has cautioned that the country risks an "explosion" of protests caused by declining living standards and widespread poverty.

Sobol and other individual candidates were denied a ticket to stand for elections citing the reason that they did not get enough signatures in favour of their candidature. This has been criticized as a ploy to ensure that opposition-minded candidates are blocked from standing for elections.

It is important to note that most protesters do not have one specific demand--rather, there are multiple issues being flagged. Opposition leaders are taking this opportunity to loosen Putin's totalitarian control of the state. They are urging more people to protest and asking protesters to boycott the elections if their demands are not met.

### Assessment

- The Putin regime responding with such aggressive tactics is an indication of its nervousness at a time of widespread discontent over the state of Russia's economy.
- Social unrest in Russia could be much more than economic frustration. It could be more fundamental: the struggle for dignity.
- Boycotting elections if the administration does not concede to demands, may be an unwise move on the part of the Opposition. If the protesters do not vote to show support for the opposition candidates, they will be forfeiting their votes to the majority candidates, as the ballot is based on a simple majority.
- Regionalization of Russia's economy remains a big worry. Over a fifth of its wealth is generated in Moscow and its surrounding areas. The central government keeps Russia together by redistributing wealth to the interior. They see the situation worsening over the course of a generation, and possibly reaching a tipping point in the next 20 years.

# Pakistan's limited options in Kashmir



Following India's scrapping of Article 370 and bifurcation of Jammu-Kashmir and Ladakh into two Union territories, Pakistan has severed bilateral trade and downgraded diplomatic relations with India. What are the other options available to Pakistan?

## Background

At the time of partition in 1947, Maharajah Hari Singh of Jammu and Kashmir found himself with a critical decision to make. Hari Singh was the Hindu ruler of a Muslim majority province. He harbored the idea of independence without joining either India or Pakistan. Even as he was trying to cut a deal with both India and Pakistan, the latter only weeks after Independence sent armed local tribes and Pashtoon militiamen to annex Jammu and Kashmir. A panic-stricken Maharaja requested India for troops to defend the kingdom. India offered military support on the condition that he sign the instrument of accession to India. At the time of ceasefire, India held nearly two-thirds of Kashmir's territory and Pakistan the rest. The position of the troops back then became what is today known as the line of control (LoC). India then decided to take the matter of Pakistani aggression to the United Nations (UN). The UN resolution held that a plebiscite be held to figure out the will of the Kashmiris. But the precondition for the plebiscite was that Pakistan would withdraw its forces from the region and for both sides not to alter the demographic status quo of Kashmir. Both parties did not adhere to any of the UN stipulations. India accorded the Kashmir it controlled greater autonomy through an Act of Parliament called the Article 370. Last month, the Indian government led by Narendra Modi abrogated Article 370 thereby making Jammu and Kashmir a province similar to other states of India without any special privileges or powers of autonomy.

## Analysis

On 5th August, a Presidential decree revoked Article 370 of India's constitution that guaranteed special rights to the Indian administered Kashmir. Since 1954, the territory has held special status and was given its own constitution, a flag, and autonomy over all matters except for foreign affairs and defence. The scrapping of the Article will allow non-residents of the state to purchase property, apply for jobs and scholarships.

Pakistan government said that revoking the special status was a breach of international law and several UN Security Council resolutions. After the joint session of its parliament, Pakistan announced that it would call back its high commissioner from India, expel the Indian envoy, Ajay Bisari and suspend bilateral trade.

India has sent additional troops to the region, arrested political leaders and imposed a curfew.

During the meeting between the US President and Pakistan's Prime Minister, President Trump had offered to mediate and resolve the Kashmir issue. Pakistan had not anticipated this move even though it was part of the ruling party's manifesto. Pakistan raised the issue at the UN Security Council (UNSC) which held an informal, closed door discussion on the issue. Except China, (also a party to the dispute since Pakistan had ceded some of Jammu and Kashmir's north eastern territory to China), it found no real support from other permanent members of the UNSC.

Pakistan has not received much support from most of its friends and benefactors in the Islamic world. Turkey President Erdogan's was the lone voice of support. China predictably reacted very strongly to India's latest move in Kashmir. Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Hua Chunying said, "China is always opposed to India's inclusion of the Chinese territory in the western sector of the China-India boundary into its administrative jurisdiction," Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid called for not linking Afghanistan issue with that of Jammu & Kashmir. Many countries have supported India, including the UAE and Sri Lanka as they would consider this an internal matter that concerns India.

Pakistani Prime Minister, Imran Khan warned the possibility of Pulwama like attacks while the military leadership has stated that it is "prepared to go to any extent". Although Washington has sought Pakistan's help on the Taliban, it has repeatedly demanded the country to dismantle its terrorist infrastructure. Senior US officials met in Islamabad after Imran Khan's visit to the US to discuss Pakistan's exclusion from the grey list of Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

## Counterpoint

If there are grave and serious human right abuses in Kashmir following the recent developments and continued lockdown for a long time in the Kashmir region, then it can lead to a different global opinion. The spokesperson for the United Nations expressed concern over the information blackout. The High Commissioner of Human Rights has already earlier issued two reports in 2018 and 2019 on human rights abuses in Kashmir, which India rebuked as biased and lacked credible facts. US and European Union will keep close watch over human rights situations in Kashmir.

## Assessment

- Pakistan has one month to live up to the commitments made to FATF to avail further bailout packages from the International Monetary Fund. If it resorts to teaming with terrorist outfits against India, it is most likely to be blacklisted. Pakistan may not have any hard options except giving a new narrative to low-intensity conflicts if they find an opening.
- Tactically, Pakistan can influence people within India and instigate them to counter right-wing groups. Islamic State may try to take advantage of the situation and may activate its contact with some fringe groups.
- With the Middle East being pre-occupied with multiple conflicts like those with Yemen and Iran, it is unlikely that Pakistan will be able to get adequate support from the Organization of Islamic States.
- It is likely that China may align with Pakistan because they may not like India to assert its claim over Aksai Chin.
- Afghanistan and the Taliban may distance from the India - Pakistan standoff for the present.
- In the current context of China's differences with the Uyghur Muslims, it is not likely to support Pakistan's stance on ethnic cleansing. But, Pakistan is likely to garner support in the upcoming session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva against the treatment of Muslim minorities in India.
- The J&K assembly elections are likely to be postponed and the composition of the state may change with Jammu having more seats.
- Pakistan will definitely use this opportunity to change the narrative and increase its relevance in the region.

# Democrats hanging by a thread in Hong Kong



The protests in Hong Kong started out over an unpopular extradition bill but they quickly turned into something far bigger. At stake is the very existence of Hong Kong as a semi-autonomous island and the relevance of its Legislative Council.

## Background

In February 2018, a young couple from Hong Kong went on vacation to Taiwan, but only the boyfriend returned home. A month later, he confessed to murdering his pregnant girlfriend, stuffing her body in a suitcase and leaving it near a transport hub in Taipei. As the gory details of the murder emerged, what was essentially a local news story became the ruse for Hong Kong's Chief Executive Officer, Carrie Lam's strategy to introduce the controversial extradition bill.

When Chan Tong Kai admitted to having murdered his girlfriend Poon Hui-Wong, there was a problem. Hong Kong authorities found themselves unable to charge him for murder since he had committed the crime in Taiwan. Further, they could not send him to Taiwan to be charged since Hong Kong and Taiwan did not have an extradition agreement. So, in 2019, the Hong Kong government proposed new legislation that would allow crime suspects to be sent to Taiwan for prosecution. There was however a concern. Hong Kong could pack a suspect off to any country, even those with which it did not have an extradition treaty. Mainland China is one of them.

Demonstrators took to the streets in large numbers to block this bill since they felt it would threaten the freedoms enjoyed by Hong Kong's citizens. China and Hong Kong have an uneasy political relationship. If the proposed legislation is approved, it will give China immense power over Hong Kong.

Technically, Hong Kong is still a part of China, and functions as a semi-autonomous state. The state's separation from mainland China happened when China lost a series of wars to the United Kingdom in the late 1800's, resulting in the former ceding Hong Kong to the British for 99 years. Hong Kong was a British colony until 1997, when it was returned to China under a special agreement called 'One Country, Two Systems'. Although the agreement made it a part of China, it also gave Hong Kong a large amount of autonomy and democratic freedoms which made it very different from authoritarian mainland China. The agreement also made it clear that the concept of one country, two systems would not be around forever. In 2047, Hong Kong will become an integral part of China.

## Analysis

What began as protests over the extradition bill has now become about growing Chinese encroachment; and the paradoxical way the Legislative Council (LegCo) in Hong Kong works.

China it seems doesn't want to wait until 2047 to absorb Hong Kong in full. Chinese premier Xi Jinping's government has facilitated the arrest of many pro-democracy leaders in Hong Kong and many outspoken critics ranging from journalists to academicians. Many have gone missing. Hong Kong, however, has been pushing back against China. The 2003 protests against legislation that would have made speaking out against China punishable and the 2014 protests against Chinese influence over Hong Kong elections were noteworthy. But these latest protests against the extradition bill are substantially bigger. The sheer number of people who have taken to the streets show just how much opposition there is to the bill. However, if Hong Kong's legislature does vote on the bill, which has been at present suspended to appease the protesters, the bill shall pass.

This is solely because of the unique nature of the Hong Kong democracy. Its leaders are not elected by the people. The office of the Chief Executive Officer, currently led by Lam, is filled by candidates selected by a small committee, following approval from China.

Law making is reserved for the legislature which like most democracies, has elected representatives. This body has seventy seats and is called the Legislative Council or LegCo. While Hong Kong has a plethora of political parties, the main distinction is based on whether they are pro-democracy or pro-China. Since 1998, pro-democracy parties have won the popular vote, yet they occupy less than half of the seats in the LegCo.

This anomaly is due to the situation that when citizens are voting, they are voting for only forty seats while the remaining thirty are voted upon by different establishments like the medical, finance and insurance industries. Seats from these thirty are also voted upon by corporations. Since these big businesses have much to gain from cultivating good ties with China, they elect pro-China parties. During the time of the handoff to China, the One Country Two Systems deal promised that eventually all members of the LegCo would be elected by the people. This has never happened. Hence, the LegCo has been dominated by pro-China parties without even once having won the popular vote.

## Assessment

- While this is not the first protest in Hong Kong, it is the largest and the most widely documented thanks to social media. More importantly, this protest has brought together people from all walks of life. The youth are at the forefront because they simply have too much to lose being the first generation born under the One Country Two Systems deal. In 2047, which is when China is set to take over Hong Kong, they will be the professional class.
- For the first time since the Umbrella Movement of 2014, pro-democracy parties have found themselves a situation that highly justifies their cause, because the problem is easy to understand. If the citizens do not protest now, they open themselves to a future where if arrested, they will be sent to China. This applies not only to those who break the law, but anyone who upsets the Communist Party. With the present global scenario, especially the US, highly concerned over growing Chinese power, global support for the citizens' protest is immense.
- In May, Taiwan said it would not allow extradition from Hong Kong even if the bill passed because its sympathies lie with anti-China protestors. Given Taiwan's own charged relationship with China, Taipei would never agree to help increase Chinese power in Hong Kong.

# I An antidote to economic slowdown



India's economic engine is stalling. What can get it revving up?

The last quarter of FY 18-19, India logged 5.8% growth. India's statistics keeper, the CSO, will be releasing the GDP data for the first quarter of 2019-20 on August 30<sup>th</sup>, but some economists expect the number to be lower than 5.8%, suggesting that there is a structural issue with the economy. That shouldn't surprise anyone. After all, the India economy has been caught in a perfect storm. First, there was the demonetization of 500 and 1000 rupee currency notes that inflicted a severe shock on an economy that was traditionally cash-dependent. Announced suddenly on November 8, 2016, the decision made small and large businesses seize up as the cash that oiled their engines disappeared. Then, starting July 2017, India moved from a complicated tax regime to a simpler Goods and Service tax framework. A much-delayed-and-needed move, but it has upended thousands of small businesses whose only source of profit was the tax not paid to the government. They are hard-pressed to compete in a regime where tax breaks can be claimed only when you are part of a legitimate supply chain.

As if these shocks to the system weren't enough, large non-banking finance companies started to fail. IL&FS, the biggest of them, had built an empire on debt, but with most of its projects hanging fire and no cash flow, it simply collapsed. Dewan Housing Finance Ltd, another NBFC, also defaulted on its payments. As a result, the suppliers of credit in the economy—which includes already-stressed banks and NBFCs—have locked up their wallets. That, in turn, has made businesses slow down their plans, resulting in job losses and wage stagnation (relative to inflation). Rural wage growth in FY19, for example, was less than 5% compared to the once-robust growth of 27.7% in FY14. And that's how the biscuits are simply spoiling on shop shelves.

Amidst all that, the government decided to increase the tax on India's super-rich and foreign portfolio investors. The equity investors read the move as a throwback to India's socialist era, when to be rich or to make money was considered sinful and hence needed to be punished with high taxation. The government's intention may

have been to use the extra tax collection for the benefit of the poor, but no country has managed to make the poor rich by making the rich poor. The fact that there's also a massive US-China trade war being staged in the background is only adding to investor jitters.

The fact that the government didn't quite anticipate things to play out this way was evident when on August 23 Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a slew of moves aimed at soothing frayed nerves. The surcharge on gains of FPIs and domestic investors was withdrawn, the higher tax on short-term and long-term

capital gains was also withdrawn, and the auto industry (reeling from its worst slowdown in years) was given sops that would encourage new purchases both by the government and individuals.

The Finance Minister's decision is unlikely to set the economy galloping, but what it does is to improve the sentiment, even if just a bit. Putting the economy back on track will take a mix of short-term and long-term measures, which address both procedural/regulatory impediments in the way of industry and structural issues like dwindling private sector investment, household savings and jobless growth. The ideal solution would be for the government to take the lead in reviving investment. There's much infrastructure—be it roads, airports or utilities—that the country needs. The government could announce a few to get the engine humming again. Of course, the government's own finances are severely constrained. But at Synergia Foundation, we believe that there's nothing like good old-fashioned dose of public spending to turn things around.

Large private sector companies—especially in telecom and auto—are under stress. These are vital players for economic well-being. We cannot afford another Jet Airways to go down in either telecom or auto. What's needed is a government-industry partnership to find solutions to the challenges that face the country. By rolling back punitive

taxes, the Finance Minister has already shown her willingness to fix what isn't working. It's just a matter of taking another step or so to engage industry and other financial market stakeholders in a meaningful dialogue to find solutions that work for both the government and industry and, therefore, the economy as a whole.

## Slowdown Pangs

- India's GDP growth will likely be lower than 5.8%, a considerable slowdown compared to recent years.
- The 2017 shift to a simplified Goods and Services Tax regime has hurt the country's small and medium businesses.
- Businesses are starved for credit as stressed banks and non-bank lenders are shying away from offering loans to industry.
- Rural wage growth in 2019 is less than 5% compared to a robust 28% growth in 2014.
- The consumer market is contracting.

# Will Boris break up the British Union?



Boris Johnson's recent rise to United Kingdom's prime ministership has rekindled the Scottish independence debate. Scotland voted overwhelmingly to remain in the European Union in the 2016 referendum. Johnson says he's determined to leave the EU by October 31, 2019, come what may. His recent hawkish posturing and the comments post discussions with key EU negotiators suggest that he's readying Britain for a no-deal Brexit. That's anathema for a majority of Scottish people. The feeling of being shortchanged by the wishes of the more populous England at the ballot box is cranking up fresh momentum for Scottish independence. Could Boris Johnson be the last premier of a truly United Kingdom?

## Background

Scotland was an independent country until the promulgation of the Acts of Union in 1707, which united it with England and Wales. Although the union was not universally welcomed, it allowed Scotland's business and political elites and intellectuals to thrive. This resulted in Scots providing a disproportionately large share of their resources to build the British Empire. The Scottish National Party (SNP) was founded in 1934 to unite the nationalist movement through a merger of two pre-existing nationalist parties. Today, Scotland is home to one of Europe's most prominent independence movements. Since the 2014 referendum, in which voters chose to remain in the UK by 55% to 45%, the nationalists have gathered strength.

Boris Johnson has had an uneasy relationship with Scotland. He once called for Scottish citizens to be prohibited from becoming PM, citing that 'government by a Scot is just not conceivable'. While he was the editor of *The Spectator*, he republished a poem calling Scots 'vermin' and that they should be put in 'ghettos'.

## Analysis

Boris Johnson's estrangement with Scotland has hardly changed for the better. Despite calling for a renewal of the 'ties that bind the UK' along with a proposed 300 million pound pledge to Scotland, Johnson is still overwhelmingly unpopular among the Scots. Following Johnson's swearing-in, Scotland's first minister, Nicola Sturgeon, immediately announced plans to hold a second independence vote by 2021.

Johnson made a whirlwind tour of UK last month to drum up support for his tough negotiations with EU. His trip to Scotland was once again a controversial affair. His meeting with Nicola Sturgeon could at best be described as cold, and Johnson was greeted with more protestors in Scotland than most other places in the country. PM

Johnson was recently accused of 'having a weak grasp of the dynamics of devolution'. This accusation was a result of his proposed tax changes that do not account for the fact that the Scottish Parliament sets Scottish income tax rates. Since then, however, he has assured Scottish conservative MPs that he will establish a 'union unit' under the auspices of his office that will scan every policy for possible discrepancies.

Nevertheless, it has been widely predicted that Brexit will be the cause of his undoing, even in the present scenario. In Scotland, the idea of a no-deal Brexit is far more alarming than it is to the rest of the UK, as it could plunge the country into economic turmoil. To substantiate this, opinion polls indicated that 63% of Scots would vote to leave Britain if Johnson pursues a no-deal Brexit. Furthermore, the 2014 referendum was termed a 'once-in-a-generation' vote. However, the SNP argues that 62% of Scots voted to remain in the EU in 2016, a far bigger margin than the 55% who voted to stay in the UK two years prior. And in Northern Ireland, which faces the gravest consequences of no deal -- the erection of a hard border with the Republic of Ireland and the terrifying reality of a return to the dark days of sectarian violence -- Johnson was greeted by protesters holding up signs saying that "Brexit means borders." In polls conducted in Scotland since Johnson became the PM, the support for independence seems have grown significantly with a majority in favour of it. Even the Scottish arm of Johnson's Conservative party sees him as a political liability. The leader of the Scottish Conservatives, Ruth Davidson warned that a no-deal Brexit would strengthen SNP's campaign for a fresh independence vote.

Johnson faces a somewhat similar but smaller crisis of confidence in Wales. In Wales, he was criticized for not having a plan to prevent the most severe repercussions of a no-deal Brexit, especially for Welsh farmers. Mark Drakefield, Wales' First Minister, said that Johnson demonstrated a "deeply concerning lack of detail."

That's not all. The issue of Irish backstop is also a significant threat to the European union. Both Ireland and Northern Ireland simply cannot accept a hard border, or any form of policing or check posts. It is fundamental to the hard won peace in Ireland in the aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement signed in 1998.

## Counterpoint

Despite the Scottish independence movement gaining vigour and pulling itself forward in the British political agenda, it remains unlikely that Boris Johnson will go down as the United Kingdom's last PM. This is because Westminster reserves the authority to sanction another Scottish independence referendum. The Johnson government will thereby display vehement opposition and do everything it can to block such a vote from happening.

Similarly, the inherently astute and careful Scottish government is unlikely even to contemplate employing alternate methods to gain freedom, much less put them into action.

## Assessment

- Although Scotland did vote to stay in the UK half a decade ago, the subsequent decision by the UK (primarily England and Wales) to leave the EU inexorably altered the terms of the 2014 referendum and did nullify the result up to a certain extent.
- In the case of a no-deal Brexit, Scottish public opinion might shift dramatically to independence as the better option, with the prospect of rejoining the EU post-independence.
- Nicola Sturgeon will likely hold a citizen's assembly on independence to consider what kind of nation Scotland should be and assist people in making an informed choice about its future.
- A resounding SNP victory in the recently concluded EU election hints that Scotland's inclination is far from certain if forced to pick between membership of the UK and the EU.
- Johnson's recent appointment has only cast further doubt on Scotland's leaning, with the prospect of a dissolution of the union under his watch now looming large.

## COLUMN: REAR VIEW



TOBBY SIMON

# Deep fake and targeted communication

Cybersecurity companies and scientists at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) are exploring ways to combat the threats posed by Artificial Intelligence (AI)-enabled deep fake technology to the US election system and national security at large.

The progenitor of the AI-enabled deep fake is a technique called Generative Adversarial Network (GAN). A complex system of feeding data to GAN works on two neural networks—the generator and the discriminator.

Morphed outputs such as videos, voices or handwritings are produced by the generator by mimicking the training data. It is then compared by the discriminator to the training data to determine if it is real. If there are any discrepancies, the discriminator sends it back to the generator which creates an output closer to the original. Until the output is indistinguishable from the original, there is a back and forth passing of data and a perfectly doctored video or image is recreated.

Governments are gravely threatened by the speed at which the incentive to share interesting content outweighs the need for verification.

In the 2017 "Synthesizing Obama" program, the former president appeared to speak words from an alternative soundtrack. About 14 hours of footage from the public domain was used to recreate facial and lip movements combining it with audio clips. In 2019, House of Representative speaker Nancy Pelosi was a victim of the same method. A manipulated video depicted a slightly slowed-down Pelosi making it appear as though she was slurring the words. President Trump tweeted out the video and has so far garnered more than 95,000 likes.

In the past, the deep fake label only applied to a manipulated or doctored video, audio or images, a face-swapping technique. It began in the world of pornography where celebrity faces were swapped with a porn star's face then uploaded to the internet. These videos were easier to detect.

Hollywood, too, has been doing this for years through computer-generated images or CGI. But the difference between valid CGI work and deep fakes is the malicious intent that often cloaks these videos. In today's roller-coaster technological world, hackers are incredibly more sophisticated by using open source software and machine learning algorithms, raising the bar as to how destructive they can be.

With the advent of tools that allow for the creation of artificial intelligence manipulated videos, tech companies to politicians are in a race to combat deep fake technology.

Deep fakes and targeted communication appeal to our non-rational biases and create echo chambers that help solidify the views of people inclined towards an ideology.

In July 2019, Symantec, a cybersecurity company, revealed three cases of deep fake audios being used to trick senior financial controllers into transferring money. For example, \$10m was wired to criminals who used artificial intelligence to impersonate an executive down the phone. Other potential attacks include market manipulation. For example, by producing a video of a chief executive announcing a fake merger or false earnings in order to shift the share price or sabotage the brand.

In May 2018, DARPA awarded three contracts to a nonprofit group called SRI International to work on its "media forensics" research programme. Amber, a company in New York with a bolder vision for cleaning up the internet, rolled out the plan for software embedded in smartphone cameras to act as a kind of watermark. Startups such as ProofMode and Truepic have offered a technology that stamps photos with a watermark to prove that they can always be trusted.



At the Delp's Purdue University, the research team is currently using neural networks to detect any disparity across multiple frames in video sequences. They have also been able to detect subtle differences even as small as few pixels.

Rumman Chowdhury, a consultant who leads "responsible AI" at Accenture, said another option was to look at preventive measures, such as requiring those who publish code for creating deep fakes to build in verification measures.

The weaponization of social media is a commonly used term but not enough has been done to counter targeted communication. The building blocks to develop a counter-narrative is to ensure the security of personal data. It is this data that enables the psychological profiling of individuals for targeted communication. Legal systems of all democratic countries are likely to continue to grapple with the ethical and technological issues presented by deep fakes.

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