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KISHIDA CALLS FOR UNIFIED STAND ON GLOBAL ORDER



Deepening ties: Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Japanese PM Fumio Kishida at Buddha Jayanti Park in New Delhi. PTI

Japanese Prime Minister discusses Ukraine issue, G-7 and G-20 agendas and bilateral ties with PM Modi during his visit to India to launch the 'New Plan for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific'

Russia's war in Ukraine "obliges" Japan and India to take a common stand on the importance of maintaining the international order, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said here on Monday.

Mr. Kishida and PM Narendra Modi discussed coordinating the agendas of the G-7, to be held in Hiroshima in May, and the G-20, to be held in Delhi in September, on a number of issues like debt financing, food and energy security.

Mr. Modi accepted Mr. Kishida's request to be one of the special invitees to the G-7 summit of the world's seven most developed countries on May 19-21. Among other special invitees announced on Monday are leaders of Brazil, Indonesia, Australia, South Korea, Vietnam, the Cook Islands and Comoros.

Mr. Kishida's remarks were significant as they came the same day Chinese President Xi Jinping landed in Moscow to discuss the Ukraine conflict with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"I explained in detail to Prime Minister Kishida about the priorities of India's G-20 Presidency. Giving voice to the priorities of Global South is an important pillar of our G-20 Presidency," said Mr. Modi, in a statement at Delhi's Hyderabad House after their meeting. "The India-Japan Special Strategic and Global Partnership is

based on our shared democratic values, and respect for the rule of law in the international arena," he added.

"I reaffirmed with Prime Minister Modi our commitment to strongly upholding international order based on the rule of law," said Mr. Kishida, adding that views of the G-7 and G-20 groupings concur on issues like "development finance, food security, climate change and energy".

Speaking to journalists, Japanese Cabinet Secretary for Public Affairs Noriyuki Shikata said Mr. Kishida was "straightforward" about the fact that no country should "condone" a unilateral change in the status quo anywhere in the world. "PM Kishida is clear that today's Ukraine could be tomorrow's Asia," he said, indicating Japan's concerns over China's actions in the Senkaku Islands, South China Sea and Taiwan Straits. Mr. Shikata said the issue of "shared responsibilities" on the rule of law between India and Japan was discussed by the two leaders during bilateral talks. The Japanese Prime Minister went on to launch Japan's "New Plan for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP).

Common perspective

"Russia's aggression against Ukraine obliges us to face the most fundamental challenge; defending peace," Mr. Kishida said at the Sapru House lecture organised by the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), adding that it was necessary for countries to build a common perspective on what international order should be. "This was clearly demonstrated by the considerable discrepancies in the attitudes across various countries toward Russia's aggression against Ukraine," Mr. Kishida said, indicating countries like India, that have not criticised Russia's actions openly.

Mr. Kishida praised Mr. Modi's statement from September 2022 that "this era is not of war", and officials said Japan is hopeful that India would be more "forthcoming" during the upcoming G-7 summit, which would see a number of documents calling for Russia to end the war in Ukraine. While his appearance has not been confirmed, Ukrainian President Zelensky has reportedly been invited to address the summit virtually.

The two leaders, who met again in the evening to visit the Buddha Jayanti park together, also discussed a number of bilateral issues, as well as plans to cooperate on countries in south Asia. They also exchanged documents on the financing of the next (IVth) tranche of Japanese funding for a loan of 300 billion Yen for the Mumbai-Ahmedabad High Speed Rail (MAHSR) or "Bullet Train" project, as well as an MoU on Japanese language education for the MEA. Mr. Kishida also said Japan plans to mobilise a total of U.S. \$75 billion in public and private funds by 2030. In particular, he mentioned about coordinating with India for projects as a part of a "Bay of Bengal-Northeast India industrial value chain" concept.

CONSULATE VANDALISED IN SAN FRANCISCO; INDIA LODGES PROTEST WITH U.S.

India lodged a strong protest on Monday with the United States over vandalism by pro-Khalistan elements targeting its consulate in San Francisco. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) summoned Charge d'Affaires Elizabeth Jones and reminded the U.S. of its "basic obligation" to protect India's diplomatic missions on its territory.

In addition to vandalism at India's diplomatic missions in San Francisco and London, there were reports that the Indian High Commissioner to Canada, Sanjay Kumar Verma, had to cancel an event after sword-wielding individuals

gathered at a venue demanding an end to police action against fugitive Waris Punjab De leader Amritpal Singh in Punjab.

The incident in San Francisco came hours after a group of pro-Khalistan agitators on Sunday protested against the manhunt launched by Punjab Police for the preacher and brought down the Tricolour outside the Indian High Commission in London. One man had been arrested, according to the U.K.'s Metropolitan Police. An Indian diplomat said the individual was "apparently released on bail". The Hindu was unable to confirm this.

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XI IN MOSCOW FOR TALKS WITH PUTIN ON TIES, UKRAINE CONFLICT



Peace push: Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin shake hands at the Kremlin in Moscow on Monday. AP

Xi says he is confident that the visit will be fruitful and give new momentum to the development of Chinese-Russian relations; Kremlin says Beijing's Ukraine peace plan will be discussed

Xi Jinping hailed his landmark visit to Moscow on Monday as giving "new momentum" to Chinese-Russian ties ahead of talks with Vladimir Putin on Beijing's proposals to stop the fighting in Ukraine.

The summit between the Russian President and the Chinese leader comes as China seeks to portray itself as a neutral party in the Ukraine conflict. Washington has accused Beijing of mulling arms exports to Moscow — claims China has vociferously denied.

Landing at Moscow's Vnukovo Airport, Mr. Xi was greeted by Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Chernyshenko on a red carpet as a military brass band played the countries' anthems, Russian state media showed.

"I am confident the visit will be fruitful and give new momentum to the healthy and stable development of Chinese-Russian relations," Mr. Xi was quoted by Russian news agencies as saying shortly after landing.

"In a world of volatility and transformation, China will continue to work with Russia to safeguard the international system with the UN at its core," he said.

The two leaders are due to discuss China's 12-point position paper on the Ukraine conflict, which includes a call for dialogue and respect for all countries' territorial sovereignty. "One way or another, issues raised in (Beijing's) plan for Ukraine will be touched upon during the negotiations. Comprehensive explanations will be given by President Putin" of the Russian position, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

Mr. Putin and Mr. Xi are set to have an "informal" one-on-one meeting and dinner later on Monday before talks on Tuesday

CAD TO NARROW, BOLSTER RUPEE AGAINST GLOBAL RISKS: FINMIN

Buffer against risks

Finance Ministry sees the current account deficit progressively narrowing, helping cushion the rupee in 'uncertain times'



- Macroeconomic stability to get a boost this fiscal year as CAD is set to narrow from the year-beginning estimates

- Moderation in oil prices, slump in import-intensive consumption demand have aided

- Cites contraction in manufacturing GVA as a key factor in slower Q3 growth

Finance Ministry concedes that economic growth could have been higher in Q3 FY23 but asserts that growth momentum has not been lost; sees jump in services exports helping current account

GDP growth may have slowed to 4.4% in the third quarter (Q3) from 6.3% in Q2, but "growth has not gotten shallower" and the momentum has sustained through the course of 2022-23, the Finance Ministry asserted on Monday.

Macroeconomic stability was likely to get a further boost this year as the current account deficit was "set to narrow from year-beginning estimates", the ministry said, citing the jump in net services exports, moderation in oil prices and the recent decline in import-intensive consumption demand.

The current account deficit is estimated to narrow in FY24 as well, providing a buffer to the rupee "in uncertain times", it said. "This will provide a much needed cushion... at a time when the Fed is likely to raise rates further and ensure that India's external finances are not a major cause of concern," the ministry noted in its economic review for February.

Arguing that the growth momentum could have been higher but for the contraction of Gross Value Added (GVA) in the manufacturing sector, the ministry partly attributed the shrinkage to subdued export growth owing to weaker demand in advanced economies.

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CREDIT SUISSE'S \$17 BN AT1 HIT HURTS BONDS



European bank bonds slumped on Monday following the state-backed rescue of Credit Suisse by UBS as a wipeout of some bondholders raised concerns around broader bank capital.

Under the rescue deal, 16 billion Swiss francs (\$17 billion) worth of Credit Suisse's bonds, known as Additional Tier 1 (AT1) debt or CoCos (contingent convertibles), will be written down to zero on the orders of the Swiss regulator as part of the merger with UBS, a decision that surprised bondholders.

AT1 bonds — a \$275 billion sector also known as “contingent convertibles” or “CoCo” bonds — can be converted into equity or written off if a bank's capital level falls below a certain threshold.

FINMIN PERMITS CPSUS TO ISSUE LOCs

The Finance Ministry on Monday allowed central public sector firms (CPSUs) to issue letters of comfort (LoCs) to financiers, provided no liability will devolve on the Government.

The Centre's move, partially lifting a bar imposed on government entities last March, followed requests, over the last two months, from the Ministry of Power as well as the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas pressing for a relaxation of the prohibition.

“It was informed issuance of letter of comfort, based on own financial strength, is a part of regular business practice, enables the entities to raise resources at competitive rates for their capex and working capital needs, as well as furthering the business interests of their joint ventures, subsidiaries and group companies,” the Department of Economic Affairs noted in a memo.

ARE FOREIGN LAW FIRMS NOW ALLOWED IN INDIA?

What are the Rules for Registration and Regulation of Foreign Lawyers and Foreign Law Firms in India, 2022? How is this move mutually beneficial to Indian and foreign lawyers?

The story so far:

Five years after the Supreme Court allowed foreign law firms and foreign lawyers to visit India on a temporary period for giving legal advice to their clients, the Bar Council of India (BCI), a statutory body governing legal practice in India, has framed Rules that allowed them to open offices in India.

What did the Supreme Court say?

On March 13, 2018, a division bench of Justices A.K. Goel and U.U. Lalit had ruled that foreign law firms or foreign lawyers cannot practise law in the country either on the litigation or non-litigation side. However, the court said that there was no bar on foreign law firms or foreign lawyers visiting India for a temporary period for giving legal advice to their clients. The court had also asked the BCI to make appropriate rules in this regard.

What are the Rules?

On March 10, the BCI notified the Rules for Registration and Regulation of Foreign Lawyers and Foreign Law Firms in India, 2022. This will enable foreign lawyers and law firms to practise foreign law, international law, international arbitration, joint ventures, mergers and acquisitions, intellectual property matters etc on a reciprocal basis. The Rules mention, “This would also help to address the concerns expressed about the flow of Foreign Direct Investment into the country and would help make India a hub for international commercial arbitration. Foreign lawyers and firms have to submit an undertaking that they shall not practise Indian law in any form or before any court of law, tribunal, board or any other authority legally entitled to record evidence on oath”. The legal fraternity in India is not likely to suffer any disadvantage in case law practice in India is opened up to foreign lawyers in a restricted and regulated manner. This is mainly because the principle of reciprocity in the Rules ensures that it would be mutually beneficial for lawyers from India and abroad.

What powers does the BCI have?

For foreign lawyers and firms to practise in India, a primary qualification is required in the form of a certificate by a competent authority of their country

which states that they are entitled to practise law in that country. Their registration in India with the BCI is mandatory and must be renewed every five years. Moreover, the BCI has the right to refuse to register any foreign lawyer or law firm if it is likely to become disproportionate to the number of Indian lawyers or law firms registered or allowed to practise law in the corresponding foreign country.

What are the implications?

Nihans Basheer, Partner Banking & Finance, Wadia Ghandy & Co., states that “Some clarity is required around what ‘reciprocity’ means before we see foreign law firms registering in India. If the foreign law firms do set up, it would be huge for the corporate legal practice in India as competition can only lead to improvement in legal services”. Advocate Abhay Nevgi states that, “Foreign law firms will now be allowed to hire Indian lawyers and advocates registered as foreign lawyers, expanding the legal job market. This move will definitely bring in AI (artificial intelligence) based technology into legal service delivery, pushing the Indian law firms to adopt.”

However, advocate Sudha Bharadwaj feels this will lead to lawyers deserting the real need in India. “This is going to add to the “corporatisation” of law practice. Already we find that students burdened with high fees of private colleges are turning away from litigation and joining corporate firms. We will see more Indian lawyers going abroad and deserting the real need in India — defending and fighting for the rights of the poor.”

THE GIST

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However, foreign lawyers and firms have to submit an undertaking that they shall not practice Indian law in any form or before any court of law.

The legal fraternity in India is not likely to suffer any disadvantage in case law practice in India is opened up to foreign lawyers in a restricted and regulated manner.

WE AIM TO INSPIRE YOU

REVERSE THE HOSTILITY

Kerala Assembly events could have been avoided with non-partisan Speaker

Adversarial relations between the ruling party and the Opposition are inevitable in a democracy and, in a way, such relations that bring strong differences of opinion and contentious views to the fore are critical. Democracy flourishes when there is reconciliation through legislative debate. Yet, adversarial relations resulting in confrontation following the lack of discourse over differences on issues of public import, speak poorly of legislative conduct. This holds true of Kerala, where legislative business has come to a standstill after a severe deterioration in relations between the ruling coalition and the Opposition. What began as an issue of the Speaker repeatedly disallowing discussion on Rule 50 notices by the Opposition United Democratic Front last week has grown into a full-blown confrontation, with legal cases being filed against legislators after incidents that resulted in a ruckus in the Assembly. A case can be made that it ill behoves the Opposition to resort to parodying Assembly proceedings after the Speaker's denials or to protest in an unparliamentary way against the Chair, currently held by A.N. Shamseer. But the onus is on the Speaker and the ruling front to ensure that the Opposition's legislative privilege to have discussions on pressing issues is respected and allowed. Clearly, the repeated denial of discussions on Rule 50 notices and the filing of serious legal cases against Opposition

members have only deepened the confrontation. Other grievances expressed by the Opposition that their legislators do not get sufficient play on Sabha TV, the official broadcaster, also seem to have merit.

On Monday, the Speaker struck a conciliatory note by expunging remarks made by him against a Congress legislator. He also assured the Opposition that he would uphold their rights that included the privilege to move Rule 50 notices on matters of "vital public importance" and ensure that the Assembly broadcaster was non-partisan. This should be the cue for both sides to begin a dialogue leading to the reversal of vituperative legal actions and the resumption of normal legislative discourse. Kerala is India's bellwether on socio-economic issues, but it faces unique challenges as an ecologically fragile State that has to work on a balance between development and ecological sustainability, as the Brahmapuram fire incident also exemplified. Healthy discussion and debate over ideas, even if adversarial, would go a long way in ensuring good governance by keeping the LDF government on its toes. How the ruling coalition and, by extension, the Chief Minister, responds to the Opposition's call for non-partisan conduct of legislative proceedings will determine the course of normalisation of relations between the two fronts in the State.

UNDERMINED BY RELIGIOUS ABSOLUTISM

Faizur Rahman is Secretary-General of the Islamic Forum for the Promotion of Moderate Thought

There is a growing tendency in India to aggrandise Muslim religious organisations for their tokenistic gestures. For instance, the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind (JIH) is thought to have embraced secular polity because it no longer considers it against Islam to participate in democratic elections, and the Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind (JUH) is praised for having accepted the existence of caste among Indian Muslims because it has legally sought reservation for "Dalit Muslims" in educational institutions and government jobs.

The truth

As researcher Irfan Ahmad reminds us in his essay in *Islam in South Asia in practice* edited by Barbara Metcalf, the original mission of Abul Ala Maududi's Jamaat-e-Islami was the "establishment of an Islamic state/Allah's Kingdom (hukumat-i ilahiyya ka qayaam)", and as such it had considered participating in elections in an "infidel (kafirana) state" an open violation of shari'a and Islamic monotheism.

But when in the mid-1980s the JIH lifted its ban on contesting elections was it because it jettisoned Maududian Islam? According to Ahmad, the JIH had already declared in 1961 that competing in elections is justifiable if the purpose was to make the Indian Constitution "Islamic" rather than to sustain the current "ungodly system" (ghayr ilahi nizam).

To this end, informs Ahmad, the Koranic phrase "iqaamat-i din" (establishment of Islam) was inserted into the JIH Constitution as its new mission statement which replaced the earlier one, i.e., hukumat-i ilahiyya (Allah's kingdom). This change reflects in Article 4 of the constitution, which enjoins that "Iqaamat-e-Deen" should be "so enforced and given effect to in all aspects of human life, individual as well as corporate, that the development of the individual, the reconstruction of society and the formation of State should all conform to this very Deen".

Even the JUH, the promoter of composite nationalism against the Muslim League's two-nation theory, had piously hoped that one day, all Indians will become Muslims.

In *Muttahida Qawmiyyat aur Islam*, Hussain Ahmad Madani (1879-1957), a prominent member of the JUH, wrote that the need for liberation (najaat) from the miseries (masaa'ib) the British had heaped upon Indians would no longer remain when all citizens of India (tamaam baashindagaan-e-mulk) entered the sphere of Islam (halqa-e-Islam mein daakhil hojaayen).

As for caste among Muslims, the JUH has never questioned the tribalistic definition of marital equality (kafa'at) propounded by the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) in Section 117(3) of its Compendium of Islamic Laws: "Regard shall be had in respect of descent among the Arabs, especially the Quraish, and those non-Arab families who have preserved descent. People in the rest of the non-Arab Muslim world are mutually equal. On the basis of this principle, a girl can get terminated her marriage to a non-equal contracted by her guardian; and a guardian has the right to terminate the marriage of an adult woman to a non-equal."

The bigoted exclusivism of most Muslim religious outfits can be traced to the

pre-colonial period when Muslim sovereignty in India was equated with Islamic conquest. For instance, we know from historian K.A. Nizami's account that wiping out "polytheistic practices" was one of the reasons given by Shah Waliullah (1703-1762), the famous Hanafi theologian, for inviting the Afghan ruler Ahmad Shah Abdali to save the Mughal empire from the Marathas and Jats. Similarly, it was the fear of the dilution of Islamic ideals that forced another Hanafi mystic, Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624), to oppose emperor Akbar's religious universalism.

However, although Islam was exploited by Muslim rulers in India to idealise their rule, what they presided over was by no means an Islamic state or a caliphate. Yet, the hegemonic temporality of their empires remains subsumed under the hubristic belief of the clerics that they were iconoclastic kingdoms divinely installed to establish monotheistic Islam in a polytheistic India.

Power versus authority

Unsuccessful attempts to Islamise pre-colonial India were not just expressions of uncompromising exclusivism but a manifestation of the struggle between power (the state) and authority (the ulama) that has been going on ever since the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty in 661 CE.

The clerical demand has been simple: in a Muslim polity, Islam should be the state religion, and the authority to interpret it must be vested with the ulama. A thoughtless implementation of this condition can be found in Articles 227-231 of the Pakistani Constitution, which state that all laws shall be in conformity with the injunctions of Islam as laid down in the Koran and Sunnah, and a "Council of Islamic Ideology" will decide "as to whether a proposed law is or is not repugnant to the injunctions of Islam."

No change in attitude

What is astonishing is that some religious outfits continue to be under the delusion that even in democratic India they would be allowed to establish their authority over Muslims in the name of protecting an unreformed personal law. They are oblivious to the fact that their silences and statements on contemporary issues give the impression that they live in a medieval bubble.

For instance, there is no evidence of these outfits having condemned the conversion in July 2020 of a historic church into a mosque in Turkey, or the misuse of blasphemy laws in Pakistan.

But when the Supreme Court delegitimised the practice of instant triple talaq, the JUH general secretary is alleged to have responded that the practice will continue to be recognised. The JIH echoed similar views even before the judgment when its president issued the ludicrous warning that "banning triple talaq will not benefit Muslim women".

Likewise, on the issue of interfaith marriage (under the Special Marriage Act, 1954), the AIMPLB, in an August 2021 press release, asked Muslim parents to keep a penetrating eye (gehri nazar) on the mobile phones of their children, and convince them that the life partner for a Muslim can only be a Muslim (aek Musalmaan ke liye Musalmaan hi zindagi ka saathi ho sakta hai). The Board also instructed Muslim religious organisations to go to the houses of those who

give notice of intended marriage to the Marriage Registrar and inform them that after their naam nihaad nikah (so-called marriage), they will be spending their entire lives in a prohibited relationship (unki poori zindagi haraam mein guzregi).

The fact that such blinkered advisories enjoy a free reign in India begs the question: how long will the Muslims allow religious absolutism to undermine their personal autonomy?

CONCLUDING ON A HIGH NOTE, IN MANHATTAN

T.S. Tirumurti was Ambassador/ Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations in New York between 2020-22, and President of the United Nations Security Council for August 2021

India concluded its eighth stint in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) at the end of December 2022. And, by any yardstick, its two-year stint has been unprecedented. It has been my privilege to serve as India's Ambassador/Permanent Representative in the Council for 18 out of the 24 months.

I arrived in New York in May 2020, on a relief flight, when COVID-19 was at its peak, only to find the empty roads of Manhattan. The UN had begun conducting its sessions virtually. Fortunately, by May 2021, the UNSC resumed physical meetings in the Council Chamber.

Hitting the ground running

When we entered the Council on January 1, 2021, we had clear priorities. We focused inter alia on maritime security, terrorism, UN peacekeeping, reformed multilateralism and the Global South. India was elected Chair of three important UNSC Committees: the Taliban Sanctions Committee, Libyan Sanctions Committee and Counter-terrorism Committee.

The Prime Minister of India chaired for the first time a UNSC meeting on maritime security. The Presidential Statement issued was the first holistic document on this issue which, for the first time, had a direct reference to UN Convention on the Law of the Sea as international law setting out the legal framework in the context of maritime activities. It also called for, inter alia, freedom of navigation, anti-piracy and combating terror and transnational crime at sea.

Old conflicts on the UNSC agenda festered and new conflicts were added — Myanmar, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Mali or Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Haiti, Libya, the Sahel, and of course Ukraine. The Council stood polarised, unable to act decisively. India strove to bring them on the same page.

There was a military takeover in Myanmar on February 1, 2021 soon after we came into the Council. The Permanent-5 (P-5) were pulling in opposing directions while the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) counselled caution. India shares a nearly 1,700 kilometre-long border with Myanmar and it was vital to stop violence, bring in stability and ensure democratic processes went forward. India ensured balanced and comprehensive Council pronouncements, which finally culminated in a resolution on Myanmar (adopted under our presidency) in December 2022.

Key theatres and terror

In August 2021, the Taliban forcefully seized power in Afghanistan. India was able to steer the negotiations which resulted in UNSC Resolution 2593 laying down benchmarks: on stopping cross-border terrorism from Afghan soil, including from proscribed UN terrorist entities in Pakistan; protecting the rights of women, minorities and children; ensuring an inclusive government,

and providing humanitarian assistance. With the UN Secretariat and the West trying to engage the Taliban without success, a firm position on the Taliban upholding these benchmarks continues to be the best course of action.

It was during the Ukraine conflict that India's independent stand calling for dialogue and peace struck a chord with many developing countries, since they themselves were affected by unilateral sanctions. All levers were being weaponised. India spoke out against such sanctions inter alia on oil, food and fertilizers. With this conflict spilling over into India's G-20 Presidency, it is time for India, as a credible voice, to launch an initiative to convert its proactive position into action.

India has enhanced the focus on terrorism. As Chair of the UNSC Counter-terrorism Committee (CTC), we brought the CTC meeting to India in October 2022. While India's attempt to list terrorists under UNSC Resolution 1267 sanctions (along with the U.S.) was thwarted, in a significant development, the proposal to list Abdul Rehman Makki, Deputy Amir/Chief of the Lashkar-e-Taiba was approved by the UNSC. This listing was the first, with India as a proposer.

On peacekeeping

India has been the largest contributor of UN peacekeepers, including as a pioneer in women peacekeeping. Its launching of the UNITE Aware technology platform to strengthen real-time protection of peacekeepers is to be noted. In August 2021, we piloted the first UNSC resolution by India in more than five decades, calling for accountability for crimes against peacekeepers. We gifted two lakh vaccines to all UN peacekeepers.

Our focus on the developing world, especially Africa and West Asia, was enhanced, given our close historical relations.

In December 2021, we thwarted a move by the West to wrest climate change from the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change-led process and bring it under the ambit of the UNSC, where the P-5 are also major historical polluters. The draft resolution was defeated in the Council when India and Russia voted against. A change in the climate change architecture would have shut out the voice of the Global South, especially Small Island Developing States.

In a first, India also raised the issue of a contemporary form of religio-phobia in the Council when, while condemning phobia against Abrahamic religions, it forcefully put forth the need to combat rising hate crimes and phobias against non-Abrahamic religions as well. With hate crimes being fuelled abroad by vested interests, India's stand needs to be robustly taken forward.

The culmination was a discussion under India's Presidency on the need for immediate reform of the Council. The Indian team's performance over two years is testimony to why India needs to be at the horseshoe table permanently.

A BOOST TO THE ZONOSSES THEORY



Source of answers: A woman walks in front of the closed Huanan seafood market in 2020. AFP
What are the two theories with regards to the origins of the SARS-CoV-2 virus which caused the COVID-19 pandemic? What is the recent evidence which has been unearthed? What are its implications? Why is it important to know where the virus came from? Has the debate finally settled?

RAMYA KANNAN

EXPLAINER

The story so far:

In the never-ending debate about the origin of the virus that set off the COVID-19 pandemic, there is now fresh grist for the mill for those who have held out for the zoonotic angle — that the infection skipped from animals to humans. Undisclosed genetic data from a food market in Wuhan has been unearthed and is being used to support the zoonoses theory over the lab leak theory. These findings were presented to the Scientific Advisory Group for the Origins of Novel Pathogens, an expert body constituted by the WHO.

What is this fresh theory about?

According to Science, Florence Débarre, who specialises in evolutionary biology at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in France, discovered the data which consists of genetic sequences posted in GISAID, a virology database, by Chinese researchers.

The Chinese team had reportedly collected samples from the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, which has been, since 2020 notoriously connected to a cluster of early COVID-19 cases. They had, in February

2022, posted a preprint with a graph that showed several environmental samples from the market containing the virus which also had human genetic material. It was this that Debarre had stumbled upon. It also reported that these sequences were later removed on the request of the authors.

The paper also records the response of George Gao, former head of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC), to the question why the sequences were not made public earlier: Gao said the sequences are “[n]othing new. It had been known there was illegal animal dealing and this is why the market was immediately shut down.” It goes on to document early published research from Gao and team that proposes that humans brought the virus to the market, having detected that some of the samples that tested positive for SARS-CoV-2 had human DNA, but none other. On the contrary, the evidence in front of the WHO now is that “some coronavirus-positive samples collected contained DNA or RNA from raccoon dogs, civets, and other mammals now known to be highly susceptible to SARS-CoV-2.”

Michael Worobey, Head of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Arizona, who has been independently researching the twin theories, says the path of evidence leads up the zoonosis path, and not of the lab leak. Writing in the LA Times last week he said: “There is now a large body of peer-reviewed scientific research consistent with a zoonotic origin of this pandemic. However, there is no credible, peer-reviewed research pointing to a lab leak. Had the evidence gone in the other direction, I’d be reporting that. But it hasn’t.” Worobey and team used cellphone mobility data to indicate that the Wuhan market was an unlikely location for the world’s first cluster of COVID cases, unless it was also from where the virus emerged.

U.S.-based virologist Angella Rasmussen of the International Vaccine Centre who studies the struggle between host and pathogen, in an interview to NPR last week said: “I think we’re all open to the fact that evidence could emerge that

shows that it didn’t come from the market — that it came from a lab. And I think every good scientist is going to be open to that. That’s literally our job — is to try to make our hypotheses not true, to falsify them — as my colleague says, to kick the tires of those hypotheses and see if they work. And so far, that hypothesis about the market origin has stood up.”

Is it important to analyse origins?

The main theoretical dualism that the world has contended with since the COVID-19 pandemic is the origin question — lab leak or zoonoses. In a letter in Science journal published nearly two years ago, scientists urged the scientific world to keep an open mind about both the theories, on the ground that they remained viable. They also called upon public health agencies, and researchers to make their data and analyses open to the public. It is expected that the recent genetic data that was presented to the WHO will also find its way to a peer-reviewed journal. Science quotes Worobey, who also attended the WHO meeting, as saying: “We are hoping to be able to talk more about our analyses once they’re completely wrapped up very soon.”

Is this the final word on the origin question?

Clearly, there will be many more pow wows in the future, most raucous on social media perhaps, as researchers on both sides of the dichotomous question endeavour to gather evidence to support their theory. This divisive debate will not die down; it is likely to continue until sufficient evidence emerges to arrive at a single cause.

Critics of the animal transmission theory are demanding specifics and details on the ‘spill over’ while virologists say it would be impossible to get that level of data. With post facto research alone guiding the investigation, the scrutiny will likely continue. But will there be sufficient nails to drive all speculation that is sans evidence into the ground? This remains to be seen.

CEREAL SOLUTION

Dietary shifts are slow processes, and India must let all grains grow

Millets, a family of coarse grains and popular staple, are having an unprecedented moment in the sun. Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently inaugurated a global conference on millets, extolling them as the “door to prosperity” for India’s marginal farmers, the “cornerstone of nutrition”, and as a potential ally against “climate change”. The United Nations has declared 2023 as the International Year of Millets and Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, in the Budget speech in February, singled them out as ‘Shree Anna’ — roughly translated as the ‘best among grains’ — adding that the Indian Institute of Millets Research in Hyderabad would be supported as a centre of excellence.

Millets such as sorghum, bajra and ragi are strongly linked to Indian dietary traditions, which is why the country has for long been the largest producer of millets in the world. It is no surprise that this cereal family is popular because it is energy dense, can be grown with ease in arid soils and, relative to grains such as rice, wheat and maize, is less susceptible to pests. Why such a ‘super food’ got sidelined by the Green Revolution of the 1960s in favour of rice and wheat has little to do with nutrition and more with the development of high yielding varieties of rice and wheat, that produced twice or thrice per acre. Coupled with guaranteed procurement by the government, the rice-wheat combination enabled India

to be food secure even in droughts and climate blights. However, this food security came at a cost such as the wanton exploitation of groundwater, a surfeit of pesticide-use, and ossified systems of grain production and procurement that, over the years, is decreasingly remunerative for the average farmer. With average global incomes having risen since the 1960s and rising demand for ‘sustainable agriculture’, India is looking to market millet as a global panacea. However, competing with the global rice-wheat-maize troika, which according to the Food and Agriculture Organization constitutes 89% of global cereal production, means that millet production must be many times more remunerative than now. Hybrid varieties of jowar and bajra exist, and that yields have not dramatically risen in decades despite this means that it would be unrealistic to expect quantum jumps in yield from technological tweaks alone. Dietary shifts are slow processes and promoting certain grains as ‘superior’ or inferior is self-defeating as it ignores the economics of production and promotes cycles of hype — as seen in cash crops. This can have consequences for marginal farmers. Letting all grains grow and helping a wider base of consumers access the cereal they want is a more sustainable enterprise.



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