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FOREWORD

We, at Team Vedhik is happy to introduce a new initiative - "Daily Current Affairs_The Hindu" compilations to help you with UPSC Civil Services Examination preparation. We believe this initiative - "Daily Current Affairs_The Hindu" would help students, especially beginners save time and streamline their preparations with regard to Current Affairs. A content page and an Appendix has been added segregating and mapping the content to the syllabus.

It is an appreciable efforts by Vedhik IAS Academy helping aspirants of UPSC Civil Services Examinations. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Babu Sebastian, former VC - MG University in extending all support to this endeavour. Finally I also extend my thanks to thank Ms. Shilpa Sasidharan and Mr. Shahul Hameed for their assistance in the preparing the compilations.

We welcome your valuable comments so that further improvement may be made in the forthcoming material. We look forward to feedback, comments and suggestions on how to improve and add value for students. Every care has been taken to avoid typing errors and if any reader comes across any such error, the authors shall feel obliged if they are informed at their Email ID.

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Straining relationship: Activists hold placards from a vehicle after being detained during a protest against India's newly inaugurated link road, near the Indian embassy in Kathmandu on May 12, 2020. ***AFP**

FROM THE ARCHIVES

For a reset in India-Nepal relations

The urgent need today is to pause the rhetoric on territorial nationalism and lay the groundwork for a quiet dialogue

THE GIST

RAKESH SOOD

Following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech at Haldwani where he stated that road construction was ongoing at Lipulekh and even further, top authorities at Nepal have asked their Prime Minister to note Mr. Modi's comments and demand a response. The Indian embassy in Kathmandu has conveyed that India's position on the India-Nepal border remains consistent and unambiguous. In this article dated May 30, 2020, Rakesh Sood sheds light on the Kalapani issue that has gripped India and Nepal and suggests a realignment of ties. Edited excerpts:

■ The history of the long-standing territorial issue surrounding Kalapani, a patch of land near the India-Nepal border, close to the Lipulekh Pass on the India-China border, which is one of the approved points for border trade and the route for the Kailash-Mansarovar yatra in Tibet, shows the complex relationship between the two countries.

■ The origins of the Kali river are at the heart of the conflict. The Survey of India issued a new political map (the ninth edition) on November 8, 2019. While the delineation between the two nations remained identical the name of the Kali river had been deleted. Predictably, this led to strong protests, with Nepal invoking Foreign Secretary-level talks to resolve issues. Nepal in retaliation, on May 22, 2020, tabled a constitutional amendment proposal to add a new area of 335 sq km to Nepali territory. This action has never been reflected in a Nepali map for 170 years.

■ India has allowed strong anti-India sentiments to rise in the Nepali public's mind which has spawned distortions in Nepali history textbooks and led to long-term negative consequences for the relationship between the two.

The maps mentioned in this article can be accessed at <https://bit.ly/3QcmCE6>

Once again, relations between India and Nepal have taken a turn for the worse. The immediate provocation is the long-standing territorial issue surrounding Kalapani, a patch of land near the India-Nepal border, close to the Lipulekh Pass on the India-China border, which is one of the approved points for border trade and the route for the Kailash-Mansarovar yatra in Tibet. However, the underlying reasons are far more complex. Yet, Nepali Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli's exploitation of the matter, by raising the banner of Nepali nationalism and painting India as a hegemon, is part of a frequent pattern that indicates that relations between the two countries need a fundamental reset.

Kalapani and the maps

India inherited the boundary with Nepal, established between Nepal and the East India Company in the Treaty of Sugauli in 1816. Kali river constituted the boundary, and the territory to its east was Nepal. The dispute relates to the origin of Kali. Near Garbyang village in Dharchula Tehsil of the Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand, there is a confluence of different streams coming from north-east from Kalapani and north-west from Limpiyadhura. The early British survey maps identified the north-west stream, Kuti Yangti, from Limpiyadhura as the origin, but after 1857 changed the alignment to Lipu Gad, and in 1879 to Pankha Gad, the north-east streams, thus defining the origin as just below Kalapani. Nepal accepted the change and India inherited this boundary in 1947.

The Maoist revolution in China in 1949, followed by the takeover of Tibet, created deep misgivings in Nepal, and India was "invited" to set up 18 border posts along the Nepal-Tibet border. The westernmost post was at Tinkar Pass, about 6 km further east of Lipulekh. In 1953, India and China identified Lipulekh Pass for both pilgrims and border trade. After the 1962 war, pilgrimage through Lipulekh resumed in 1981, and border trade, in 1991. In 1961, King Mahendra visited Beijing to sign the China-Nepal Boundary Treaty that defines the zero point in the west, just north of Tinkar Pass. By 1969, India had withdrawn its border posts from Nepali territory. The base camp for Lipulekh remained at Kalapani, less than 10 km west of Lipulekh. In their respective maps, both countries showed Kalapani as the origin of Kali river and as part of their territory. After 1979, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police has manned the Lipulekh Pass. In actual practice, life for the locals

(Byansis) remained unchanged given the open border and free movement of people and goods.

After the 1996 Treaty of Mahakali (Kali river is also called Mahakali/Sarada further downstream) that envisaged the Pancheshwar multipurpose hydel project, the issue of the origin of Kali river was first raised in 1997. The matter was referred to the Joint Technical Level Boundary Committee that had been set up in 1981 to re-identify and replace the old and damaged boundary pillars along the India-Nepal border. The Committee clarified 98% of the boundary, leaving behind the unresolved issues of Kalapani and Susta (in the Terai) when it was dissolved in 2008. It was subsequently agreed that the matter would be discussed at the Foreign Secretary level. Meanwhile, the project to convert the 80-km track from Ghatbagar to Lipulekh into a hardtop road began in 2009 without any objections from Nepal.

The Survey of India issued a new political map (eighth edition) on November 2, 2019, to reflect the change in the status of Jammu and Kashmir as two Union Territories. Nepal registered a protest though the map in no way had changed the boundary between India and Nepal. However, on November 8, the ninth edition was issued. The delineation remained identical but the name Kali river had been deleted. Predictably, this led to stronger protests, with Nepal invoking Foreign Secretary-level talks to resolve issues. With the Indian Ambassador Manjiv Puri in Kathmandu retiring in end-December and Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale retiring a month later, the matter remained pending despite reminders from Kathmandu.

Nepali nationalism

By April 2020, Mr. Oli's domestic political situation was weakening. Under the Nepali Constitution, a new Prime Minister enjoys a guaranteed two-year period during which a no-confidence motion is not permitted. This ended in February unleashing simmering resentment against Mr. Oli's governance style and performance. His inept handling of the COVID-19 pandemic added to the growing disenchantment.

The re-eruption of the Kalapani controversy, when Defence Minister Rajnath Singh did a virtual inauguration of the 80-km road on May 8, provided Mr. Oli with a political lifeline. A subsequent comment by the Chief of the Army Staff (COAS), General Manoj Naravane, on May 15 that "Nepal may have raised the issue at the behest of someone else" was insensitive, given that the Indian COAS is also an honorary general of the Nepal Army and vice-versa, highlighting the traditional ties between the two armies.

Mr. Oli had won the election in 2017 by flaunting his Nepali nationalism card, the flip side of which is anti-Indianism. This is not a new phenomenon but has become more pronounced in recent years. Mr. Oli donned the nationalist mantle vowing to restore Nepali territory and marked a new low in anti-India rhetoric by talking about "the Indian virus being more lethal than the Chinese or the Italian virus". A new map of Nepal based on the older British survey reflecting Kali river originating from

Limpiyadhura in the north-west of Garbyang was adopted by parliament and notified on May 20. On May 22, a constitutional amendment proposal was tabled to include it in a relevant Schedule. The new alignment adds 335 sq km to Nepali territory, territory that has never been reflected in a Nepali map for nearly 170 years.

This brief account illustrates the complexity underlying India-Nepal issues that cannot be solved by rhetoric or unilateral map-making exercises.

Rewriting the fundamentals

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has often spoken of the "neighbourhood first" policy. He started with a highly successful visit to Nepal in August 2014. But the relationship took a nosedive in 2015 when India first got blamed for interfering in the Constitution-drafting in Nepal and then for an "unofficial blockade" that generated widespread resentment against the country. It reinforced the notion that Nepali nationalism and anti-Indianism were two sides of the same coin that Mr. Oli exploited successfully. In Nepali thinking, the China card has provided them the leverage to practise their version of non-alignment. In the past, China maintained a link with the Palace and its concerns were primarily related to keeping tabs on the Tibetan refugee community. With the abolition of the monarchy, China has shifted attention to the political parties as also to institutions like the Army and Armed Police Force. Also, today's China is pursuing a more assertive foreign policy and considers Nepal an important element in its growing South Asian footprint. India remained content that its interests were safeguarded by quiet diplomacy even when Nepali leaders publicly adopted anti-Indian postures – an approach adopted decades earlier during the monarchy and then followed by the political parties as a means of demonstrating nationalist credentials. Long ignored by India, it has spawned distortions in Nepali history textbooks and led to long-term negative consequences. For too long India has invoked a "special relationship", based on shared culture, language and religion, to anchor its ties with Nepal. Today, this term carries a negative connotation – that of a paternalistic India that is often insensitive and, worse still, a bully. It is hardly surprising that the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship which was sought by the Nepali authorities in 1949 to continue the special links it had with British India and provides for an open border and right to work for Nepali nationals is viewed as a sign of an unequal relationship, and an Indian imposition. Yet, Nepali authorities have studiously avoided taking it up bilaterally even though Nepali leaders thunder against it in their domestic rhetoric.

The urgent need today is to pause the rhetoric on territorial nationalism and lay the groundwork for a quiet dialogue where both sides need to display sensitivity as they explore the terms of a reset of the "special relationship".

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India's watchwords in a not so bright 2022

There are risks that could be both domestic and geopolitical and New Delhi must take care to read the signals properly



M.K. NARAYANAN

An intense debate is on among political strategists and commentators about what is in store in 2022. Most hew to the view that a rules based international order is a remote possibility. Instead, uncertainty and impermanence are likely to be the dominant aspect in world affairs.

Risks in 2022 could be both domestic and geopolitical, with many precepts that the world has been accustomed to being at risk. Democracy itself could face serious headwinds this year.

A paramount issue as 2022 begins, is the future of democracy. Admittedly, the world has recently seen the rise of authoritarian rulers in many countries – though by this this can hardly be viewed as a new phenomenon. What is worrisome is that democratic tenets which have been under attack in recent years appear set to face more onslaughts this year. Adding grist to concerns about democracy's future, is that the United States, which was widely viewed as a major bulwark for democracy, appears to have developed certain pathological infirmities. This situation does not augur well for the future of democracy worldwide.

China as disruptor

Equally daunting as we enter 2022 are the geopolitical challenges and risks. The role of China is possibly the most disrupting one, given the challenge it poses to the existing international order. With a GDP of \$15.66 trillion in 2020, its net worth today is estimated to be higher than that of the U.S.; and, hence, it demands to be recognised as much. Militarily, China is openly challenging U.S. supremacy in many areas, including 'state-of-the-art weaponry' such as hypersonic technology.

China has abandoned the 'one country two systems' policy, stripping Hong Kong of its freedom and inviting international opprobrium.

It is now threatening Taiwan, which could well become one of the flash points of conflict in 2022. The West meanwhile does not realise what could happen if the stakes of 'cross-strait relations' between China and Taiwan get higher in 2022. It might well be that in order to 'save face' with regard to Taiwan (which China regards as its territory), China could provoke a serious conflict.

The dip in China's economic profile in the past year and more (which China hardly acknowledges) could also lead to new tensions in the Asia-Pacific region in 2022. To outsiders, the Chinese economy has entered a period of relative uncertainty and is looking more vulnerable. Under Chinese President Xi Jinping, however, China is unlikely to acknowledge that this would entail any reduction in its military capabilities, at least as far as the Asia-Pacific is concerned. Instead, it might well be tempted to demonstrate that it still has the ability to get the better of the U.S. in the Pacific region – where it holds more cards than the U.S. – and also demonstrate that it has the ability to ramp up its military capabilities, while the U.S. is reducing its forces in the Indo-Pacific region. Uncertainty *per se*, could constitute a serious risk.

Russia-Ukraine conflict

The other major risk of a war in 2022, stems from the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine – the latter being backed by the U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces. It is difficult to discern as to which side is indulging in provocation, but what is not contested is that during the past three decades, NATO has expanded its reach almost a 1,000 miles to the east in violation of an earlier tacit understanding. Russian President Vladimir Putin appears determined that Ukraine should be the 'last frontier' and, if need be, ensure this through military force. The situation has grave possibilities and could result in a series of cyclical outcomes with considerable damage potential.

Apart from the grave risk of a possible war or conflict, what is also evident is that 'peace is not at hand' across vast regions of the



GETTY IMAGES/STOCKPHOTO

globe in 2022. The current unrest in Kazakhstan, which till recently was one of the more stable Central Asian nations, is perhaps symptomatic of what is in store. Whether recent events in Kazakhstan reflect a new round of 'colour revolutions' or not, it demonstrates a sharper cleavage between the U.S.-led West and its principal opponents, Russia and China. This bodes ill for a world already wracked by a series of coups or internecine strife as in Ethiopia, Libya and certain regions of West Asia and North Africa.

Return of the Taliban

Of particular significance to India is that the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan has led to a material shift in the balance of power in an already troubled region on India's periphery. Notwithstanding the general belief that the Taliban's return to power represents a significant victory for Pakistan, it has become evident, more lately, that this comes with a great deal of baggage – both for Pakistan and much of Asia. Developments in Afghanistan have fuelled the ambitions of quite a few 'anti-state militant groups' across the region. Even in Pakistan, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has become energised and is enlarging its sphere of action to other parts of Asia, notably Kazakhstan. More important is that it is well known that the TTP is a by-product of al Qaeda jihadi politics and still has covert links with the al Qaeda. This will have an unsettling effect across large parts of Asia.

Adding to such concerns is new evidence that on India's eastern flank, *viz.* Indonesia, a resurgence of radical Islamist activities is taking place. The Jemaah Islamiyah has reportedly become more ac-

tive in Indonesia. All this provides fertile ground for other radical Islamist terror groups to enlarge their activities across the Asian region, providing a fillip to groups like the Islamic State, specially the Islamic State of Khorasan.

Border issues for India

As 2022 dawns, India's problems are only likely to intensify. The most serious issue that India confronts today is how to deal with a China that has become more confrontational. The transgressions across the Line of Actual Control in different sectors in Ladakh – which were till now seen as merely an attempt by China to restrict and limit India's options – could well be expanded in 2022. India's membership of the four nation Quad (the U.S., Japan, Australia and India) still rankles as far as China's psyche is concerned, and during 2022, may well result in China embarking on new adventurist actions at many more points on the Sino-Indian border compelling India to react. Hence, 2022 is unlikely to see any reduction in tensions across Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh and the Middle Sector.

Additionally, India will need to determine how best to respond to China's sabre-rattling. India will need to develop a strategy on how to counter the publicity given by China to its low-yield nuclear weapons meant for battlefield use even during conventional military operations and against conventional targets. India would need to strengthen its military posture, both as a means to deter China and also to convince India's neighbours that it can stand up to China. Simultaneously, India cannot avoid, in 2022, suitably positioning itself on how best to deter China's naval force projection in the Indian Ocean Region and the publicity it has given to the additions made of new type nuclear power ballistic missile submarines to their existing fleet. In the battle of wits and strength, much will depend on how India responds to the situation.

Diplomatically, in 2022, India may find itself vulnerable in dealing with the turmoils which have occurred in two areas of strategic

interest to it, *viz.* Central Asia and West Asia. Both areas are undergoing a churn – not all of it to India's liking. In Central Asia, India will be challenged on how best to manage its traditional friendship with Russia with the pronounced tilt seen more recently in India-U.S. relations. In West Asia, the challenge for India is how to manage its membership of the Second Quad (India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and the U.S.) with the conflicting interests of different players in the region. Membership of the Quad makes India a key player in a region which has become a quagmire of intense rivalries notwithstanding the 2020 Abraham Accords. Indian diplomacy will be under severe test to manage the extant situation in both regions.

Path to tread

It is easy to say that what India and India's foreign policy need to do is to demonstrate more flexibility to manage the contradictions that exist. However, this is hardly feasible in practical terms, in most instances. There is a limit to the kind of balancing act that India can perform, whether it be with regard to buying S-400 missile systems from Russia, risking potential sanctions from Washington under Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) or manoeuvring between the Arab States, Israel, Iran and the U.S. in West Asia.

For India, the outlook is, hence, not particularly bright in 2022. No grand strategy is evident as of now but it is important that India finds rational answers to a rash of problems that it cannot keep on the back burner for much longer. What India must do is avoid blind spots that arise due to cognitive bias and take care to read the signals properly. Facing a host of unprecedented challenges, India's leaders and diplomats must not only take stock of the dangers that exist but also be ready on how to manage the risks that are well evident.

M.K. Narayanan is a former Director, Intelligence Bureau, a former National Security Adviser and a former Governor of West Bengal

Two Indians, a Pakistani killed in UAE tanker blasts

Yemen's Houthi rebels claim responsibility for attack

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

Two Indians and a Pakistani were killed in a massive explosion in three petroleum tankers in Abu Dhabi on Monday. The blast is believed to have been sparked by a fire near the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) facilities, in what is claimed as a “drone attack” by Yemen's Houthi rebels.

In a strongly worded statement, UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan called the explosions a “cowardly act of terrorism”, and promised to hold Houthi militia “accountable”, indicating there could be reprisals.

If confirmed, this is the second attack this month by Houthi rebels affecting Indians, after they seized a UAE-flagged ship in the Red Sea off the Yemeni coast and took its crew, including seven Indians, hostage.

The Indian Embassy in Abu Dhabi said it was awaiting confirmation on the identity of the two Indians killed, and was in “close touch with UAE authorities”. An ADNOC statement said all three who died were employees.

“Those responsible for this unlawful targeting of our country will be held accountable,” a statement issued by the UAE Foreign Ministry said, expressing condolences for the deaths. “The UAE reserves the right to respond to these terrorist attacks and criminal escalation,” it added, describing them as crimes committed in flagrant violation of international law.

‘Drone attack’

Eyewitness accounts and videos shared on social media showed columns of black



Threat again: Yemeni rebels seizing a UAE-flagged ship with seven Indians in the Red Sea some days ago. ■AFP

smoke billowing from the Musaffah Industrial City of Abu Dhabi (ICAD)-3 area outside the UAE capital. The fire is believed to be the result of a drone attack in the port area where the ADNOC storage facilities are housed. Another smaller fire was extinguished at the new construction area of the Abu Dhabi international airport. “Initial investigations found parts of a small plane that could possibly be a drone at both sites that could have caused the explosion and the fire,” the Abu Dhabi police said, according to a Reuters agency report, but added there was no significant damage to the areas.

Houthi rebels, who have been fighting the Yemeni government backed by a Saudi-UAE coalition, claimed they

had carried out a “military operation” in the UAE, but this was not confirmed by Emirati officials.

Houthi spokesperson Mohammed Abdul Salam was quoted in Arabic media, saying the alleged attack was a “warning” to the UAE to “stop interfering in Yemen”.

Houthi militia, believed to be supported by Iran, have in the past claimed to have carried out a number of drone attacks on oil installations in Saudi Arabia as well.

The explosions come days after Houthi rebels captured a cargo ship *Rwabee* off the Yemeni port of Hodeidah and have held its crew, including seven Indian nationals, hostage since January 2. India had spoken out at the UN Security Council to condemn the detention of the Indians.

Germany vows 'to do all' to guarantee Ukraine's security

NATO, Kiev sign agreement to bolster cybersecurity

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
KIEV

Germany will do everything in its power to guarantee Ukraine's security, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said on Monday on her first visit to Ukraine, amid rising fears of a Russian invasion.

"We will do our all to guarantee Ukraine's security. We will do our all to guarantee Europe's security," she said at a press conference following talks with her Ukrainian counterpart, a day before she is due to meet Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Moscow.

Ms. Baerbock's visit comes amid attempts to revive the so-called Normandy Format grouping of Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine whose aim is to de-escalate the conflict.

Her Ukrainian counterpart, Dmytro Kuleba, told reporters following discussions that Ukraine and Germany were "committed to a diplomatic settlement of this conflict".

"Our joint goal is the effective work of the Normandy Format and the holding of a summit of leaders of the Normandy Format," Mr. Kuleba said.

He reiterated, however, Ukraine's intention to re-



Lending support: Dmytro Kuleba and Annalena Baerbock during a meeting in Kiev, Ukraine, on Monday. ■ REUTERS

ceive weapons from the West, after Kiev in December accused Berlin of blocking the supply of NATO arms. "Our dialogue with Germany on this issue will continue," Mr. Kuleba said.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov is due to hold his first meeting with Ms. Baerbock on Tuesday.

He said in a statement ahead of the meeting that there would be "an in-depth exchange on current international issues, above all on the realisation of Russian proposals on security guarantees".

Deal inked

NATO on Monday inked a deal to bolster its cyber support for Ukraine, after a sweeping hacking attack against Kiev heightened tensions amid fears that Russia

could be plotting an invasion. Ukraine said on Sunday that it had evidence Moscow was behind the attack last week that knocked out government websites.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said on Friday that experts from NATO and its members were already on the ground, working with Ukraine to tackle the latest cyber attack.

He said the new agreement would involve "enhanced cyber cooperation, including Ukrainian access to NATO's malware information sharing platform."

"We have successfully worked with Ukraine for several years, delivering key capabilities and exchanging knowledge," Ludwig Decamps, the head of the NATO Communications and Information Agency, said.

Xi Jinping rejects ‘Cold War mentality’

Chinese President pledges to send an additional 1 billion doses of COVID vaccine to other countries

ASSOCIATED PRESS
GENEVA

Chinese President Xi Jinping called on Monday for greater world cooperation against COVID-19 and pledged to send an additional 1 billion doses of vaccine to other countries, while urging other powers to discard a “Cold War mentality” at a time of rising geopolitical tensions – a veiled swipe at the U.S.

The Chinese leader touted his country’s efforts to share vaccines, fight climate change and promote development at home and abroad as he delivered the opening speech of a virtual gathering hosted by the World Economic Forum. The online event is being held in place of its annual January meeting in Davos, Switzerland, because of health concerns linked to the coronavirus pandemic.

He touched on standard themes from his previous



Bold statements: Xi Jinping addressing the 2022 World Economic Forum virtual session in Beijing on Monday. ■ AP

talks to international audiences, including responding to complaints by China’s trading partners by promising to open its state-dominated economy wider to private and foreign competition.

His comments come as tensions between the U.S. and China have simmered on dossiers as diverse as Tai-

wan, intellectual property, trade, human rights and the South China Sea.

‘Peaceful coexistence’

“We need to discard Cold War mentality and seek peaceful coexistence and win-win outcomes. Our world today is far from being tranquil,” said Mr. Xi,

through a translator. “Protectionism and unilateralism can protect no one. They ultimately hurt the interests of others as well as one’s own. Even worse are the practices of hegemony and bullying, which run counter to the tide of history.

“A zero-sum approach that enlarges one’s own gain at the expense of others will not help,” he added. “The right way forward for humanity is peaceful development and win-win cooperation.” Mr. Xi, who hasn’t left China since the coronavirus emerged in early 2020, said China had already sent abroad more than 2 billion doses of its COVID-19 vaccines and plans to provide an additional 1 billion, including a donation of 600 million doses to Africa and an extra 150 million to Southeast Asia.

By comparison, managers of the UN-backed COVAX

programme to ship vaccines to developing countries announced over the weekend that it has now delivered 1 billion vaccine doses.

‘Stands ready’

Mr. Xi said China “stands ready to work with” other governments on climate but announced no new initiatives and offered no resources. He said it was up to developed countries to provide money and technology.

The Chinese leader repeated official promises that the Communist Party will open the state-dominated Chinese economy wider. The ruling party has taken steps over the past five years, including ending ownership restrictions in its auto industry, but business groups say foreign banks, technology and other companies still face restrictions that limit access to the most promising industries.

SEBI mulls ‘alternate dispute resolution’ tool

‘Aim is to help empower investors’

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

MUMBAI

The Securities & Exchange Board of India (SEBI) is now examining, in consultation with regulated entities, the possibility of introducing ‘alternate dispute resolution mechanism’ in various agreements – wherever possible – between the regulated entities and their clients.

“This is with a view to providing efficacious mechanism for resolving disputes between the investors and the regulated entities,” SEBI said in a statement.

The regulator had published ‘Investor Charter’ for the securities market last year besides announcing several other steps towards empowerment of investors.



Since then, various steps had been taken to implement the Charter, it said. Separate Investor Charters regarding investor-related activities of various intermediaries had been developed by SEBI in consultation with the respective entities.

“These charters are expected to help investors to improve their ease of investing in Indian securities market,” SEBI added.

EXPLAINER

Inequality Kills: A study of the new Oxfam report

How has the pandemic aggravated global inequality? What measures does the study propose to tackle this?

VASUNDHARA SIRDANE DRENNAN

The story so far: The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened economic inequalities across the world. Not only has the pandemic led to the deaths of millions of people globally, but it has also exposed the weakness of public health systems and social and income protections for people worldwide. In short, the coronavirus pandemic has brought into relief that peoples' life chances are directly linked to their access to wealth and healthcare, their positions of power in society, their racial and caste identities, and their geographic locations.

What is the "Inequality Kills" report? "Inequality Kills: The unparalleled action needed to combat unprecedented inequality in the wake of COVID-19" is a report released in January 2022 by Oxfam, a U.K.-based consortium of 21 charitable organisations that have a global presence. It is authored by Nabil Ahmad, Nafkote Dabi, Max Lawson, Megan Lowthers, Anna Marriott and Leah Mugehera. The report argues for sustained and immediate action to end the pandemic, address global inequality and initiate concerted measures to tackle the climate emergency. The central argument of the report is that inequality is a death sentence for people that are marginalised by social and economic structures and removed from political decision making. The report points out a startling statistic: 160 million people were rendered poor during the pandemic, while the ten richest people doubled their fortunes since the start of the pandemic. Therefore, extreme inequality should be seen as a form of 'economic violence'.

The report also argues that the climate crisis is undergirded by inequality between countries. It points out that the "wealthiest 1% of humanity are responsible for twice as many emissions as the poorest 50%".

Identifying this process as "the billionaire variant", the report says that this vertical aggregation of global wealth into the hands of a few is "profoundly dangerous for our world".

Why does the report say that inequality kills?

For the writers of the report inequality is not an abstract theory. Instead, they see it as institutionalised violence against poorer people. The report categorically states, "Extreme inequality is a form of 'economic violence'—where structural and systemic policy and political choices that are skewed in favor of the richest and most powerful people result in direct harm to the vast majority of ordinary people worldwide." The report identifies higher inequality with more crime and violence and less social trust. The brunt of inequality and the violence it begets is borne, for instance, by women across the world, Dalits in India, Black, Native American and Latinx persons in the United States and indigenous groups in many countries. Pointing to the example of women, the report demonstrates how lockdowns led to an increase in violence against women worldwide. However, the report says that the problem runs a lot deeper as 13 million women have not returned to the workforce and 20 million girls are at risk of losing access to education. This means that the goal of gender equality has suffered a huge set back which will take at least 135 years to correct. To summarise, women who were already unequal before the pandemic are now more unequal because of increased economic inequality.

The report also argues that the climate crisis is undergirded by inequality between countries. Extreme neoliberal models of economic growth have led to a skewed system of carbon-intensive production, that favours richer countries while shifting the risk onto poorer countries. The report points out that the "wealthiest 1% of humanity are responsible for twice as many emissions as the poorest 50%". Finally, the report shows how poverty, caused by rising inequality, also leads to hunger and deaths due to hunger. For instance, 369 million



children have reportedly lost access to school meals during the pandemic. For millions of these children this was their most nutritious meal of the day.

How does the report propose to rectify global inequality?

The "Inequality Kills" report proposes far-reaching changes to structures of government, economy and policy-making to fight inequality. It urgently asks for "vaccine recipes" to be made open-source so that every qualified vaccine manufacturer can manufacture them. In doing so the report asks for monopolies over vaccines held by pharmaceutical giants and anchored in place through the World Trade Organisation, to end. The report then asks for governments to "claw" back the wealth from billionaires by administering solidarity taxes higher than 90% especially on the billionaires that have

profited during and because of the pandemic. In addition to this, the report asks for permanent cancellation of tax havens, progressive taxation on corporations and an end to tax dodging by corporations. The report then suggests that all of this regained wealth be redirected towards building income safety nets, universalising healthcare for everyone, investing in green technologies and democratising them, and, investing in protecting women from violence. Finally, the report advocates for redistributing power along with wealth by strengthening workers' unions, boosting political representation of marginalised groups, and asserting human rights.

Vasundhara Sirdane Drennan is a political scientist and journalist. She is also the creator of the India Violence Archive, a citizen's data initiative aimed at recording collective public violence in India.

Towards equity: Members of the South Korean Confederation of Trade Unions wearing face masks attend a rally demanding enhanced labor rights in Seoul, South Korea on January 15, 2022. The signs on masks read "Inequality and Let's change the world." AP

THE GIST

■ "Inequality Kills: The unparalleled action needed to combat unprecedented inequality in the wake of COVID-19" is a report released in January 2022 by Oxfam, a U.K.-based consortium of 21 charitable organisations that have a global presence.

■ The report points out a startling statistic: 160 million people were rendered poor during the pandemic, while the ten richest people doubled their fortunes since the start of the pandemic. Therefore, extreme inequality should be seen as a form of 'economic violence'.

■ The report also argues that the climate crisis is undergirded by inequality between countries. It points out that the "wealthiest 1% of humanity are responsible for twice as many emissions as the poorest 50%".

EXPLAINER

The revised testing strategy of the ICMR

Why is there a change in testing protocol? How is the spread of Omicron going to be monitored?

R. PRASAD

The story so far: With the highly transmissible Omicron variant now recorded in most States, and given the mild symptoms seen in people who are fully vaccinated, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has issued a revised testing strategy advisory on January 10. The new advisory replaces the one last issued on September 4, 2020.

What is the main difference between the latest testing strategy advisory compared to the one issued in September 2020?

The previous advisory was for routine surveillance in containment and non-containment zones, and hospital settings. Thus, the advisory was for detecting cases immaterial of their symptom status. In contrast, the scope of the latest strategy is more for isolation and quick care of high-risk individuals. While the September 2020 strategy included testing asymptomatic high-risk people, the latest strategy is for testing only individuals who show symptoms unless they are at risk because of being in contact with lab confirmed cases.

Has the latest testing strategy narrowed the scope of people who will be eligible for testing?

Besides testing all individuals showing symptoms, the September 2020 testing strategy called for testing all asymptomatic individuals who belonged to the high-risk category such as people



■ NISSAR AHMAD

older than 65 years and those with comorbidities whether they had come in contact or not with lab confirmed cases in containment zones. In the case of non-containment zones, the testing strategy of September 2020 called for testing people symptomatic with influenza-like illness (ILI), individuals with travel history and those in contact with laboratory-confirmed cases.

More importantly, the September 2020 advisory had a provision of testing on demand for "all individuals who wish to get themselves tested". The latest advisory of January 2022, has removed the testing on demand provision. It also says contacts of confirmed cases of COVID-19 unless identified as high risk based on age or comorbidities do not need a test. The September 2020 and January 2022 advisories have clearly

stated that testing is not required prior to discharge from a COVID-19 facility after clinical recovery. But the January 2022 advisory goes a step further by stating that testing is not needed prior to discharge from home isolation either.

Why is there a change in testing strategy?

With full vaccination coverage reaching 64.5% and a single dose of the vaccine administered being at 89.5%, hospitalisation rates have dropped. With 67% of people showing sero positivity in the last sero survey, and increased vaccine coverage since then, a significant percentage of the population has acquired protection either through infection and/or vaccination. In a majority of cases, the Omicron variant is asymptomatic or causes only mild symptoms in fully vaccinated people, particularly in those who do not belong to any of the high-risk groups. This has led to reduced hospitalisation for now. The current focus is not on detecting all cases. The reasons: despite test on demand, a vast majority of infected people have not been detected, as the last sero survey had revealed, and testing capacity might get stretched as the Omicron variant spreads very quickly.

Will restrictive testing lead to a situation where cases go unreported?

The restrictive testing will result in further reduction in the number of

people getting tested. This in turn will result in a lower number of cases being reported. If universal testing failed to capture a large fraction of infected cases as revealed in the sero surveys, the current strategy will make it even worse. States with higher integrity in testing and reporting cases had missed detecting relatively fewer cases per 100. With the latest testing advisory, India will report fewer cases thus not revealing the actual spread of the virus.

With limited capacity to sequence the genome, the actual scale of spread of the Omicron variant is already not known. As on January 16, only 8,209 Omicron cases have been reported in India. This is a gross underreporting given Omicron's high transmissibility. Lower number of cases reported due to restrictive testing will lead to a false sense of security and prompt people to drop their guard. With the actual spread of the virus not known, States will find it difficult to deploy containment and mitigation strategies.

There is an argument that testing asymptomatic people will further stretch the testing system. But intelligent use of rapid antigen tests along with RT-PCR for testing symptomatic people will sharply reduce the burden on testing labs. The need for continued expansion of testing capabilities cannot be overemphasised, say experts.

Besides symptomatic individuals, the latest advisory restricts testing to only at risk (those older than 60 years and people with comorbidities) contacts of

lab confirmed cases. The latest protocol thus takes it for granted that community spread is absent. The advisory not to test asymptomatic people overlooks the danger of such individuals spreading the virus to the vulnerable population, and children who are still not eligible for a vaccine. Even if the treatment protocol remains the same immaterial of the testing protocol adopted, understanding the rate of breakthrough infections, particularly with the Omicron variant, will be severely hampered by the restrictive testing strategy now in place. There is no data on fully vaccinated people being hospitalised, which makes evidence-based decisions difficult for the booster rollout for other age groups.

Will wider availability of rapid antigen tests reduce the burden of RT-PCR testing labs?

Rapid antigen tests will surely reduce the burden faced by RT-PCR testing labs. But the sensitivity of rapid antigen tests is low and thus have higher chances of returning false negative test results. Though symptomatic individuals with a negative antigen test result are required to undergo a RT-PCR test, past

experience suggests that this will not be followed in practice. But even when rapid antigen test results done at home come out positive, it has come to light that such results are not reported to authorities and hence go unrecorded. Maharashtra is taking steps to address this problem in the city of Mumbai.

THE GIST

■ The main difference between the two testing strategy advisories is that the previous one was for routine surveillance in containment and non-containment zones, and hospital settings. In contrast, the scope of the latest strategy is more for isolation and quick care of high-risk individuals.

■ Since the Omicron variant is asymptomatic or causes only mild symptoms in fully vaccinated people, the current focus is not on detecting all cases. The reasons: despite test on demand, a vast majority of infected people have not been detected and testing capacity might get stretched as the Omicron variant spreads very quickly.

■ Lower number of cases reported due to restrictive testing will lead to a false sense of security and prompt people to drop their guard.

Vaccinate whole world to end pandemic, UN chief tells Davos

'If we leave anyone behind, we leave everyone behind'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
UNITED NATIONS

UN chief Antonio Guterres told the all-virtual Davos forum on Monday that the world must vaccinate everybody against COVID-19 to ensure a way out of the pandemic.

The face-to-face gathering of political and corporate power players in the Swiss Alps is online for the second year in a row due to a pandemic that shows no sign of abating.

"The last two years have demonstrated a simple but brutal truth – if we leave anyone behind, we leave everyone behind," the United Nations Secretary-General said.

"If we fail to vaccinate every person, we give rise to



Antonio Guterres called for confronting coronavirus with equity and fairness.

new variants that spread across borders and bring daily life and economies to a grinding halt."

Mr. Guterres said the international community needs to "confront the pandemic with equity and fairness."

He noted that the World Health Organization unveiled a strategy last autumn to vaccinate 40% of the planet's population by the end of 2021 and 70% by the middle of this year. "We are nowhere near these targets," Mr. Guterres told the World Economic Forum.

Jab rates

"Vaccination rates in high-income countries are, shamefully, seven times higher than in African countries. We need vaccine equity, now," he added.

Mr. Guterres said pharmaceutical companies should "stand in solidarity with developing countries by sharing licenses, know-how and technology so we can all find a way out of this pandemic."

China's economy grows 8.1% to \$18 tn

Fastest expansion since 2011 was driven by exports, consumption; slump in birth rate clouds outlook

ANANTH KRISHNAN
HONG KONG

China's economy grew 8.1% in 2021 and reached the \$18 trillion mark, although slowing growth in the last quarter and the lowest birth rate since 1949 emerged as concerns for policymakers.

Last year's expansion was the fastest since 2011 and marked a strong recovery after growth plummeted to a 44-year-low of 2.2% in 2020 as the country dealt with the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan and months of lockdowns.

The rebound was driven by a strong trade performance with 30% growth in imports and exports as well as recovery in domestic retail sales. Exports contributed to 20.9% of growth while consumption accounted for 65.4%, data released by the



Omicron overhang: Fresh lockdowns in several cities and the slowdown in the fourth quarter have also cast a shadow. •AP

National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) on Monday show.

Retail sales climbed 12.5% while fixed asset assessment rose 4.9%. However, overall growth slowed in the last quarter to 4%, from 4.9% in the third quarter.

A key reason for the slow-

down was a sharp decline in real estate investment, which slid by close to 14% in December from the previous year, coinciding with curbs on the property market and debt troubles at several major real estate firms in the wake of government moves

to put a stop to debt-fuelled expansion of the sector.

Heading into the country's new year, China, which avoided a major second wave with its strict 'zero-COVID' approach that enabled a domestic recovery but came at the cost of continued international isolation, is dealing with the spread of new clusters and the more transmissible Omicron variant. This has led to fresh lockdowns in several cities and could be a major concern for growth in 2022.

Alarming drop

Another significant – and longer-term – concern from Monday's data was an alarming drop in China's birth rate with the national growth rate at 0.34 per thousand, meaning the birth rate was only slightly higher than the na-

tional death rate, despite moves to relax family planning restrictions by allowing a 'three child policy'.

The NBS said 10.6 million babies were born last year, down from 12 million in 2020 and the lowest number since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 – lower even than the worst years of the famine of the early 1960s during Mao's 'Great Leap Forward'.

"The most shocking part of the data released today is that the natural growth of the population has dropped...[for] the first time below 1.0 since data became available," the South China Morning Post quoted economist Zhang Zhiwei as saying. "The demographic challenge is well known, but the speed of population ageing is clearly faster than expected."

A train to unite Kerala

The ambitious SilverLine project deserves deeper analysis and to decongest traffic, the State needs an integrated approach



B. ASHOK

Kerala is polarised over the proposed 530 km north-south semi-high speed standard gauge rail link costing a largely borrowed ₹64,000 crore. It proposes to connect metropolitan Kochi with the rest of the State in two hours, and Kasargode in the north to Thiruvananthapuram in the south in four hours, reducing the pressure on linear Kerala's heavily choked 1,800 km highways. Kerala suffers severe traffic stress due to its undulating topography and sensitive hydrology prone to recurrent floods, higher forest cover and ecologically fragile Western Ghats.

Project positives

Proponents point to the benefits of fast high quality connectivity. The new track can transport 80,000 people daily, reducing the 20,000 present passenger car trips, and 12% to 15% passenger cars sales and traffic. Kerala has a severe vehicular pressure with about 441 vehicles per 1,000 people. According to the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, the total registered vehicles in Kerala grew at a CAGR of 10.62% against the all India figure of 9.91% between 2009 and 2019. Of its 156 lakh total registered vehicles, 37 lakh are private passenger cars and SUVs, which translates to 1 private vehicle per 10 persons. Annually, 2 lakh new passenger cars/SUVs are added on the road. A vast majority of passenger cars are well over 15 years old, leading to intense pollution.

The speeding traffic also causes 40,000 accidents per annum leading to 4,000 fatalities, a high for most Indian States. Even during the COVID slowdown, Keralites purchased 1.57 lakh (2020) of passenger cars.

The gradual shift of 15% to 25% of the present passenger car traffic to a competitive transport system is, therefore, an imperative for Kerala. It is fundamental to Kerala's survival as a viable economic entity as the State is 92% urbanised with few rural urban distinctions in amenities and entitlements. Growth of cities and census towns is limited geographically and Kerala is fast transforming its building regime to accommodate highrises for its residential



Steering change: "The project is fundamental to Kerala's survival as a viable economic entity as the State is 92% urbanised." ■ GETTY

IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

and commercial demand. Without commuting for work and swift transport of mass-consumed items, its consumption economy will stagnate. Kerala's bounty from its large tourism industry due to the efficient movement of visitors between destinations at economic rates assumes significance as it enhances average retention and per capita spending.

The present semi high-speed railway proposals are not entirely new. A high speed version proposed at 350 km per hour by a previous regime with a proposed outlay of ₹1 lakh crore was abandoned in favour of a suburban train project at a lower parametric cost. Opinion is divided as to whether the present rail network speed can be enhanced through doubling, improving signalling and straightening the 600 plus curvy patches. Sceptics feel that the efforts over the last 20 years have merely improved the speed marginally to 50 km per hour. SilverLine, a project of the Kerala Rail Development Corporation Ltd., promotes infrastructure developed jointly by the State and Central governments. Subsidised external finance guaranteed by the Governments could effectively bridge the transport infrastructure gap and provide the desired results.

The concerns

Critics largely cite the burden of debt financing of the project which could impact State finances substantially, potentially pressuring a variety of other investments till the project breaks even. Other worries hinge around the displacement and generous rehabilitation

of about 10,000 families from the 1,200 hectares of private land it needs to acquire. Environmental concerns exist over the embankments elevating the track approximately for 300 km and availability of construction material aggregates. Kerala's steep drainage is oriented east to west and many speculate that the embankment may enhance the intensity of ambient flooding although the project provides leeways every 500 metres. Though the project would temporarily enhance emissions in the construction phase, the green powered electric power-train is expected to replace 150 internal combustion engines, each time a train makes a trip. These deserve deeper analysis.

The State's investment in green power particularly in solar plants augmented by cheap solar power from national vendors through green corridors will power the variable cost of the track sustainability.

The SilverLine is, however, exclusively insufficient to answer the State's traffic crisis. Kerala also needs to harmoniously develop its eco-friendly waterways which can decongest the clogged highways by another 15%. If the transport of hazardous goods and consumable staples shifts to an integrated navigable system, along with the new high-speed green rail, it will reduce highway congestion by 15%. Together with this, if there is an annual 5-10% conversion of vehicular traffic to electric engines, it would arguably keep the road transport corridor as well as the rail and waterway tracks reasonably patent, efficient and carbon neutral.

Integrative approach

Kerala perhaps needs an integrated sectoral appraisal and synthesis of its competing traffic corridor proposals viewed simultaneously as civic amenities and investment projects. Instead of merely looking at each project as a standalone approach, an integrative approach might address the lacunae. Perhaps a lack of a sufficiently integrated and informed discourse on the potential of the multi-modal complementarities is confounding the debate. A progressive and knowledgeable society like Kerala should engage in meaningful parleys rather than take part in highly polarised debates, leaving no space for the nuances to be explored. The present discourse, therefore, needs to deepen and broaden simultaneously.

B. Ashok is a civil servant and a former Vice-Chancellor. The views expressed are personal

Just what the doctor ordered for the livestock farmer

With most of India's livestock in rural and remote areas, a game changer now will be the use of mobile veterinary units



ATUL CHATURVEDI

The twentieth livestock census indicated that India today has a livestock population of approximately 537 million; of this, 95.8% is concentrated in rural areas. Given the fact that most of the country's livestock is in rural and remote areas, access to veterinary services is a major challenge. Livestock farmers are often compelled to travel far from their villages whenever their animals need treatment – a scenario that adversely impacts the longevity and the productivity of their livestock.

The focus now

To mitigate this problem, the Government has identified a slew of measures within the revised provisions of the Livestock Health and Disease Control (LH&DC) programme; here, a major focus has been on the 'Establishment and Strengthening of Veterinary Services - Mobile Veterinary Units (MVUs)'. Until now, the Government has been providing doorstep services related to artificial insemination and vaccination for livestock. The MVUs will build on the

doorstep delivery model, as stationary hospitals cannot be easily accessed by most livestock farmers.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee of the Union Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying has observed that inadequate testing and treatment facilities for veterinary diseases pose a major challenge, especially now where there is a drastic rise in cases of zoonotic diseases. Most villages in the country lack testing facilities, and even when samples are collected, they need to be sent to blocks/districts nearby for test results. So, MVUs can play a major role in plugging the gap in this regard.

Antibiotic resistance

Quacks or untrained animal health workers have been popular in rural India as they charge less for consultations and are easily accessible. This has led to the inappropriate administration of antibiotics because of flawed prescriptions especially in cases of mastitis (inflammation of the udder in cattle). So, problems pertaining to antimicrobial resistance occur when the animal no longer responds to a drug to which it was originally responsive. And antimicrobial resistance can be caused because of factors such as high or low dosages, incorrect duration of medication, and overprescription. The World Health Organization



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

(WHO) has listed antibiotic-resistant "priority pathogens" – a catalogue of 12 species/families of bacteria that pose the greatest threat to human health. The MVU model will mitigate the issue of antimicrobial resistance and is in alignment with the 'One Health vision' laid down by the Global Action Plan of WHO.

A comparison

The M.K. Jain Committee Report has highlighted that livestock farmers face greater challenges in comparison to traditional agricultural farmers especially while accessing credit and livestock insurance. Since a majority of livestock farmers have two to four animals per household, enhancing the longevity and the productivity of their livestock will go a long way towards alleviating rural poverty. Presently, there are an estimated 66,000 veterinary hospitals, poly-clinics, dispensaries, aid centres across the country. And the LH&DC scheme seeks to plug the

challenges posed by the limitations of stationary hospitals by providing veterinary diagnostic and treatment facilities at a farmer's doorstep for ailments, diseases or any other emergency veterinary conditions by MVUs.

Now, a typical MVU is a four-wheeler van, with working space for one veterinarian, one para-veterinarian and a driver-cum-attendant. It also has space for essentials such as equipment for diagnosis, treatment and minor surgery, other basic requirements for the treatment of animals, audio-visual aids for awareness creation and GPS tracking of vehicle. The LH&DC scheme envisages one MVU for one lakh animals; however, the number of vans in use could be higher in regions with difficult terrain.

Milk loss

As approximately 70% of India's milk supply is sourced from farmers who own less than five animals, losses due to mastitis alone amount to a milk loss of approximately 10 litres per day per farm (this translates into approximately ₹300-₹350 per day). So for most farmers, death of or disease in livestock could mean the difference between sustenance and starvation. The animal health issue is compounded by the growing presence of salesmen of drug distributors in rural communities.

MVUs have been successfully

running either on hire or on State ownership basis in several States (Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Telangana, West Bengal, etc.) with positive results and increased outreach, especially in geographically difficult terrains. The main thrust for the near future will be on focused upgradation of veterinary health-care services, disease surveillance and training (CVE), and disease reporting in real time.

As a job creator

Additionally, the increasing adoption of MVUs across the country will lead to a surge in employment opportunities for veterinarians and assistants. In the lockdown/s during the novel coronavirus pandemic, we witnessed innovations by start-ups that provided video consultation sessions between livestock farmers and veterinarians, along with apps that provide detailed information to farmers on livestock health and nutrition.

Thus, there is a great deal of scope for innovations and intervention by the private sector in the context of animal health and MVUs. Further, with the growing prevalence of the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model, the MVU model is poised to generate higher returns on investment.

Atul Chaturvedi is Secretary, Ministry of Animal Husbandry and Dairying. The views expressed are personal

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| M | Laws, rules, regulations and conscience as |
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