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SAUDI ARABIA'S QUEST FOR STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

A restructuring of dynamics in West Asia

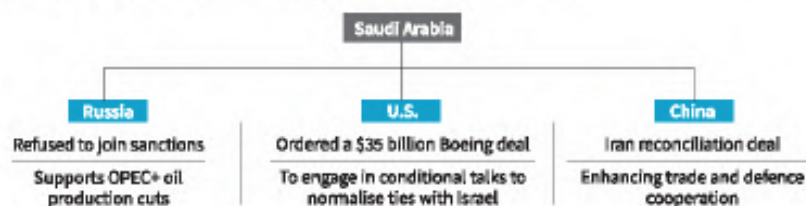
For decades, Iran has driven Saudi Arabia's security concerns in the region. However, recent events show that Saudi Arabia's response to the Iran problem is shifting from strategic rivalry and proxy conflicts to mutual coexistence and tactical de-escalation



New balance: Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian, with his Saudi Arabian and Chinese counterparts Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud and Qin Gang in Beijing on April 6. AP



How Saudi Arabia is balancing between global powers



Saudi Arabia, a nation with a foreign policy which has always centred around Iran, is now reaching out to old rivals, holding talks with new enemies and seeking to balance between great powers, all while trying to transform its economy at home

The story so far:

Saudi Arabia, which had adopted an aggressive foreign policy in recent years seeking to expand its influence in West Asia and roll back that of Iran, its bitter rival, is now following a dramatic course correction. It's reaching out to old rivals, holding talks with new enemies and seeking to balance between great powers, all while trying to transform its economy at home. If the Saudi drive to autonomise its foreign policy and build regional stability through diplomacy holds, it can have serious implications for West Asia.

How is Saudi foreign policy changing?

For years, the main driver of Saudi foreign policy was the kingdom's hostility towards Iran. This has resulted in proxy conflicts across the region. For example, in Syria, Iran's only state ally in West Asia, Saudi Arabia joined hands with its Gulf allies as well as Turkey and the West to bankroll and arm the rebellion against President Bashar al Assad. In Yemen, whose capital Sana'a was captured by the Iran-backed Shia Houthi rebels in 2014, the Saudis started a bombing campaign in March 2015, which hasn't formally come to an end yet. One of the demands the Saudis made to Qatar when it imposed a blockade on its smaller neighbour in 2017 was to sever ties with Iran. However, the Qatar blockade came to an unsuccessful end in 2021.

Last month, Saudi Arabia announced a deal, after China-mediated talks, to normalise diplomatic ties with Iran. Soon after, there were reports that Russia was mediating talks between Saudi Arabia and Syria, which could lead to the latter re-entering the Arab League before its next summit, scheduled for May in Saudi Arabia. Earlier this week, a Saudi-Omani delegation travelled to Yemen to hold talks with the Houthi rebels for a permanent ceasefire. All these moves mark a decisive shift from the policy adopted by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman after he rose to the top echelons of the Kingdom in 2017. Aggressiveness makes way for diplomacy and loyal alliances make room for pragmatic realignments. This is happening at a time when Saudi Arabia is also trying to balance between the U.S., its largest arms supplier, Russia, its OPEC-Plus partner, and China, the new superpower in the region.

Why are there changes now?

To begin with, these changes do not mean that the structures of Saudi Arabia's relations with Iran are undergoing a transformation. In fact, Iran would continue to drive Saudi Arabia's security concerns and strategic calculus. But Saudi Arabia's response to the Iran problem has shifted from strategic rivalry and proxy conflicts to tactical de-escalation and mutual coexistence. A host of factors seem to have influenced this shift.

The Kingdom's recent regional bets were either unsuccessful or only partially successful. In Syria, Mr. Assad, backed by Russia and Iran, has won the civil war. In Yemen, while the Saudi intervention may have helped prevent the Houthis from expanding their reach beyond Sana'a and the north, the Saudi-led coalition, which itself is now in a fractured state, failed to oust them from the capital. Also, the Houthis, with their drones and short-range missiles, now pose a serious security threat to Riyadh.

In parallel, the U.S.'s priority is shifting away from West Asia. So the choices Saudi Arabia is faced with, is to either double down on its failed bets seeking to contain Iran in a region which is no longer a priority for the U.S., the kingdom's most important security partner, or undo the failed policies and reach out to Iran to establish a new balance between the two. When China, which has good ties with both Tehran and Riyadh, offered to mediate between the two, the Saudis found it as an opportunity and seized it.

Is Saudi Arabia moving away from the U.S.?

It is not. The U.S., which has thousands of troops and military assets in the Gulf, including its Fifth Fleet, would continue to play a major security role in the region. For Saudi Arabia, the U.S. remains its largest defence supplier. The

Kingdom is also trying to develop advanced missile and drone capabilities to counter Iran's edge in these areas with help from the U.S. and others. But at the same time, the Saudis realise that the U.S.'s deprioritisation of West Asia is altering the post-War order of the region. What Saudi Arabia is trying to do is to use the vacuum created by the U.S. policy changes to autonomise its foreign policy. The early signs of this autonomisation was visible in Saudi Arabia's recent decisions.

Unlike most other American allies, Saudi Arabia refused to join anti-Russia sanctions. Despite protests from Washington, Saudi Arabia joined hands with Russia to effect oil production cuts twice since the Ukraine war began, aimed at keeping the prices high which would help both Moscow and Riyadh. (Saudi Arabia is currently undertaking massive infrastructure projects aimed at transforming its economy and to sustain those projects and meet its economic goals, the Kingdom needs high oil prices). It has also built stronger trade and defence ties with China, and the Iran reconciliation deal, under China's mediation, announced Beijing's arrival as a power broker in West Asia. At the same time, Saudi Arabia has placed orders for Boeing aircraft worth \$35 billion and entered into conditional talks with the U.S. on normalising ties with Israel. De-Americanisation of West Asia is not a Saudi goal. Rather it is trying to exploit America's weakness in the region to establish its own autonomy by building better ties with Russia and China and mending relations with regional powers without completely losing the U.S.

What are the implications for the region?

Saudi Arabia's normalisation talks with Syria or its talks with the Houthis cannot be seen separately from the bigger picture of the Saudi-Iran rapprochement. If Syria rejoins the Arab League, it would be an official declaration of

victory by Mr. Assad in the civil war and would help improve the overall relationship between Damascus and other Arab capitals. Likewise, if the Saudis end the Yemen war through a settlement with the Houthis (which would probably split Yemen), Riyadh would get a calmer border while Tehran could retain its existing influence in the Saudi backyard. Such agreements may not radically alter the security dynamics of the region but could infuse some stability across the Gulf.

But the path ahead may not be smooth. While the Saudis are trying to build cross-Gulf stability, another part of West Asia remains tumultuous — which was evident in the Israeli raid at Jerusalem's Al Aqsa, Islam's third holiest place of worship, last week. This triggered rocket attacks from Lebanon and Gaza and in return Israeli bombing of both territories. Israel also keeps bombing Syria with immunity. The impact of escalation of tensions between Israel and Iran on cross-Gulf stability remains to be seen.

Another challenge before Saudi Arabia is to retain the course of autonomy without irking the U.S. beyond a point. Though the U.S. publicly welcomed the Saudi-Iran rapprochement, CIA chief William Burns made an unannounced visit to Riyadh and complained to Mohammed bin Salman about being "blind-sided" on the Iran deal, according to a report in The Wall Street Journal. The U.S. would also not be happy with Syria, where it once sought regime change, being re-accommodated into the West Asian mainstream. In post-War West Asia, the U.S. had been part of almost all major realignments — either through force or talks, from the Suez war to the Abraham Accords. But now, when China and Russia are mediating talks between rivals successfully and Saudi Arabia, a trusted ally, is busy building its own autonomy, the U.S., despite its huge military presence in the region, is reduced to being a spectator.

WE ARE SEEING MILITARISATION OF SPACE, STEADY PROGRESS TOWARDS WEAPONISATION: CDS

The very nature of warfare is on the cusp of major transformation and what is being witnessed is militarisation of space and steady progress towards weaponisation, Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Anil Chauhan said on Tuesday, while stating space is being used to enhance combat capabilities in land, sea and cyber domains.

"The aim for all of us should be towards developing dual-use platforms with special focus towards incorporating cutting-edge technology and we must expand our NAVIC constellation, provide agile space-based Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) and ensure secure satellite-assisted communications," he said at the Indian DefSpace Symposium organised by the Indian Space Association (ISpA) in association with the Defence Research and Development Organisation.

Referring to the development of new kinetic weapons resulting in war in space "becoming a reality", Gen. Chauhan gave examples of recent tests by Russia and China, and stressed the need to build India's own offensive and defensive means in this domain.

The event is part of deliberations under 'Mission Def-Space', under which 75 challenges have been identified for development by the industry, said Lt. Gen. A. K. Bhatt (retd.), Director-General, ISpA, an industry association of space and satellite companies.

"The populating of space domain and the emergence of dynamic threat environment to our space assets also demands that we enhance our space situational awareness capability. There's also a requirement to safeguard our assets with counter space capabilities. We must build resilience and redundancy in a space-based infrastructure."

DRDO chief Samir V. Kamat said they have started increasing their focus on the very critical space domain with focus on space-based surveillance, space situational awareness, protecting our space-based assets.

"The interaction went on for several months and was then vetted by ISRO and DRDO to create these 75 challenges which cover all requirements upstream,



CDS Gen. Anil Chauhan

mid-stream and down-stream," Lt. Gen. Bhatt told The Hindu. The challenges are now being implemented in batches and the process is on.

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DATA PROTECTION BILL IN MONSOON SESSION

New privacy Bill

India plans for a new Digital Personal Data Protection Bill to bolster online privacy. A lowdown:



■ The Digital Personal Data Protection Bill 2022 was announced by the government aiming to enforce individual privacy online

■ The new Bill will replace the existing Information Technology Rules

■ The Bill aims at balancing the right of individuals to protect their personal data and the need to process it for lawful purposes

■ Definitions of data fiduciary, data principal, and data processor are outlined within the Bill to provide clarity

It will be tabled in Parliament in July, govt. informs Supreme Court, which is hearing petitions against WhatsApp sharing users' data with FB firms

The Union government informed the Supreme Court on Tuesday that a new law, namely the Digital Personal Data Protection Bill, 2022, to enforce individual privacy in online space was "ready".

"The new Bill will be tabled in the Monsoon Session of Parliament in July," Attorney General R. Venkataramani, appearing for the Union, informed a Constitution Bench led by Justice K.M. Joseph. Mr. Venkataramani's submission

came during the hearing of petitions challenging WhatsApp's policy to share users' data with the Facebook group of companies.

The new Bill, if passed by Parliament, will replace the current Information Technology (Reasonable Security Practices and Procedures and Sensitive Personal Data or Information) Rules, which was notified in 2011.

The Supreme Court had recognised privacy as a fundamental right in 2017 and highlighted the need to protect online personal data from prying eyes. In January, the government, in an affidavit filed in court, said that the Information Technology Ministry had initiated a stakeholder consultation exercise on the draft Bill, and invited comments from the public.

It had then briefed the court that the Ministry was in the process of "collating and analysing the feedback and suggestions received, with a view to take the draft Bill forward". It had assured the court that the Bill would be presented in Parliament at the earliest. The purpose of the Bill is to "provide for the processing of digital personal data in a manner that recognises both the right of individuals to protect their personal data and the need to process personal data for lawful purposes".

'Data' under the new Bill is defined as a "representation of information, facts, concepts, opinions or instructions in a manner suitable for communication, interpretation or processing by humans or by automated means".

The Bill separately defines data fiduciary as persons who determined the purpose and means of processing of personal data; data principal as the individual to whom the personal data related to; data processor as any person who processes personal data on behalf of a data fiduciary.

Senior advocate Shyam Divan, representing the petitioners, sounded skeptical about the enactment of the Bill, saying the government had been giving assurances for months. "Please do not link our court hearings with the legislative process. It (the Bill) may go to some committee or other. Our petitions have been pending since 2017..." Mr. Divan said. "The Bill had to go through a qualified consultative process. You have to do that if you want a good law," Mr. Venkataramani countered.

INDIA SET TO GROW BY 5.9% THIS FISCAL: IMF

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has projected that India's economy will grow by 5.9% for the current fiscal year April 2023-March 2024, a downward revision of 0.2 percentage points since the January forecast.

The IMF estimated a 6.3% economic growth rate for India for the next fiscal year, a downward revision of 0.5 percentage points from the last forecast. The IMF maintained an optimistic outlook on India, explaining the down revision as an adjustment for historical numbers that were better than expected. "We realised that 2020-21 has been actually a lot better than we thought," IMF economist Daniel Leigh said at a press briefing on Tuesday, responding to a question from The Hindu.

The growth numbers were released as part of the World Economic Outlook (WEO): A Rocky Recovery report, launched at the start of the World Bank and IMF Spring Meetings in Washington.

"And so actually, there's less room for catching up," Mr. Leigh said. For the fiscal year that ended March 31, the IMF had estimated a 6.8% growth rate for India. "And that pent-up demand, from consumption that was informing our previous forecast, is going to be less because they've already had more catching up before," Mr. Leigh said.

"Again, a very strong economy, which is necessary to allow India to

continue to converge towards higher living standards and create those jobs that are necessary," said Mr. Leigh. The Hindu had asked about the outlook for jobs and employment. Global output growth is projected to slow to 2.8% in 2023, picking up to 3% in 2024.

"The global economy's gradual recovery from both the pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine remains on track," IMF chief economist Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas said, adding that China's reopened economy was strongly rebounding and supply chain disruptions were unwinding, and negative impacts of the war on food and energy prices were receding.

"At the same time, serious financial stability related downside risks have emerged," he added. "Stubbornly high inflation" and recent financial sector turmoil have dimmed prospects of a "soft landing" for the global economy, the report said.

If the recent financial sector stresses are contained, the IMF projects global growth to settle at 3.0% five years from now — this is the lowest five-year projection in decades. The IMF suggested that central banks remain steady with their anti-inflation stance, but also adjust and use their full set of policy instruments, while providing targeted support for those hit by the cost of living crisis.

BUILDING SAFEGUARDS

Misuse of detention power renders need to stick to procedure paramount

The Supreme Court's observation that preventive detention laws are a colonial legacy and confer arbitrary powers on the state is one more iteration of the perennial threat to personal liberty that such laws pose. For several decades now, the apex court and High Courts have been denouncing the executive's well-documented failure to adhere to procedural safeguards while dealing with the rights of detainees. While detention orders are routinely set aside on technical grounds, the real relief that detainees gain is quite insubstantial. Often, the quashing of detention orders comes several months after they are detained, and in some cases, including the latest one in which the Court has made its remarks, after the expiry of the full detention period. Yet, it is some consolation to note that the Court continues to be concerned over the

misuse of preventive detention. In preventive detention cases, courts essentially examine whether procedural safeguards have been adhered to, and rarely scrutinise whether the person concerned needs to be detained to prevent prejudice to the maintenance of public order. Therefore, it is salutary that the Court has again highlighted that "every procedural rigidity, must be followed in entirety by the Government in cases of preventive detention, and every lapse in procedure must give rise to a benefit to the case of the detenu".

Some facts concerning preventive detention are quite stark: most detentions are ultimately set aside, and the most common reason is that there is an unexplained delay in the disposal of representations that the detainees submit against their detention to the authorities. Failure to provide proper

grounds for detention, or delay in furnishing them, and sometimes giving illegible copies of documents are other reasons. In rare instances, courts have been horrified by the invocation of preventive detention laws for trivial reasons — one of the strangest being a man who sold substandard chilli seeds being detained as a 'goonda'. An unfortunate facet of this issue is that Tamil Nadu topped the country (2011-21) in preventive detentions. One reason is that its 'Goondas Act' covers offenders who range from bootleggers, slum grabbers, forest offenders to video pirates, sex offenders and cyber-criminals. The law's

ambit is rarely restricted to habitual offenders, as it ought to be, but extends to suspects in major cases. Across the country, the tendency to detain suspects for a year to prevent them from obtaining bail is a pervasive phenomenon, leading to widespread misuse. Preventive detention is allowed by the Constitution, but it does not relieve the government of the norm that curbing crime needs efficient policing and speedy trials, and not unfettered power and discretion.

6 GHz SPECTRUM PITS WIRELESS TELCOS AGAINST FIXED-LINE BROADBAND ENTITIES

It's not often that we hear that a band of wireless spectrum is "close to our hearts" from the lectern of a hotel ballroom.

But the emerging interest in gaining access to the 6 gigahertz (GHz) band — which ranges from 5,925 to 7,125 megahertz (MHz) — is pitting wireless telecom operators against fixed line Internet Service Providers (ISPs), with both groups keen to lay claim to a band of spectrum that could enable the next generation of 5G, or WiFi — or as some modestly insisted, both.

The Broadband India Forum, which represents tech giants and some ISPs, on Tuesday held an event, sponsored in part by Meta, that advanced this demand. Delicensing the 6 GHz range would benefit fixed line broadband providers and software giants, as some of the latter try to get into the public WiFi hotspot space.

Spectrum worries

Telecom operators, meanwhile, worry that since India's mobile data consumption is growing so rapidly — having risen sixfold in 5 years as per a Nokia estimate — that they need to earmark further spectrum for licensed use on their networks. Newer WiFi routers in India largely use the 2.4GHz and 5GHz bands. As frequency increases, the range of the signal drops, but the bandwidth goes up significantly.

The WiFi 6E standard, launched in 2020, uses 6 GHz, enabling speeds upwards of 9.6 Gbps; and, 6GHz spectrum supports multiple devices on a wireless network more harmoniously than the 5GHz band, even on slower connections, enticing telecom providers and ISPs.

Battle for turf

The competition is for spectrum that could enable the next generation of 5G or WiFi or both

■ **Newer WiFi routers in India largely use spectrum on the 2.4GHz and 5GHz bands**

■ **As frequency increases, the range of the signal drops, but the bandwidth goes up significantly**

■ **The WiFi 6E standard, launched in 2020, uses 6 GHz, enabling speeds upwards of 9.6 gigabits per second**



Delicensing the 6 GHz range would benefit fixed-line broadband providers and software giants, as some of the latter try to get into the public WiFi hotspot space; these firms are pushing back on telcos laying claim to this specific spectrum band

PUNJAB — BEWARE THE IDES OF MARCH

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

Three decades after sectarian violence mauled Punjab, the radicalist threat appears to be raising its head again. Eddies of this are already visible in areas of the globe where a sizeable concentration of the Sikh diaspora exists. Sectarian violence is hardly unknown to India, but what is not clear is why Sikh extremism has, of late, gained a new lease of life. The emergence of a self-styled Sikh extremist preacher, Amritpal Singh, modelling himself on Bhindranwale of yore is, hence, to be seen at best as a cover for something that has deeper roots.

Inaction will be dangerous

Resemblance of the 'impostor' to Bhindranwale is, at present, limited to style, lacking in substance, but it seems to be galvanising the extremist fringe among the Sikh youth, including the Sikh diaspora in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States. The 'impostor's' attempts to revive the Bhindranwale mystique may be doomed to fail as the inner circle of the Bhindranwale coterie has declared that "there is no successor to Bhindranwale as yet". Yet, it cannot be denied that links have been established by this 'core group' with pro-Khalistan groups such as the 'Sikhs for Justice (SFJ)', the Babbar Khasla, and the Khalistan Liberation Force (KLF). Hence, it would be a grave mistake to ignore what is happening.

In a country with a diverse population that has different religions, there is hardly any segment that has not, at one time or the other, displayed concern about feeling neglected, or even worse, discriminated against. What adds grist to the current situation, even though it is confined to a few districts in the Punjab, is memories of the 'dark days', from the late 1970s to the 1990s, which witnessed an orgy of violence, and of a Prime Minister of India having to pay the price for it with her life.

The real cause for concern is that the current security dispensation does not appear to have learnt the right lessons from past mistakes. The Bhindranwale phenomenon was not a sudden development, which, if properly handled, could have been checkmated well before 1984, and the subsequent violence leading to 'Operation Blue Star' and the damage caused to Akal Takht

avoided. This was what inflamed Sikh opinion and the lesson was to ensure that this is not repeated any time in the future. Effecting the arrest of Amritpal Singh is but an initial step. More important is how to deal with him and his coterie.

Most important is to avoid treating all that is happening now as evidence of a foreign conspiracy — of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and other like-minded forces — instead of facing up to the reality that this may be more than a mere emotional outburst of the Sikh extremist fringe, and that it could have deeper underpinnings.

All serious threats develop from misreading sentiments that remain unheeded by those in authority. Blaming the current violence on the drug mafia with links to Pakistan can at best be a proximate, but not the real cause. Hence, good intelligence is the key.

Prioritise intelligence analysis

One of the tragedies of intelligence today is that intelligence analysis has low priority. Modern gadgetry and the portrayal of intelligence agencies in the celluloid world as being peopled by swashbuckling heroes, employing futuristic weapons and carrying out impossible missions, are possibly a contributory cause for this. The real world of intelligence demands hours of painstaking hard work in difficult conditions to pick up nuggets of information, which then have to be carefully assessed and analysed by experts before being projected to policymakers.

Against this backdrop, it still bears mentioning that central and State intelligence agencies cannot have missed signs of growing insecurity among sections of Sikh youth and discontent prevailing among the Sikh peasantry essentially over the decline in their economic conditions, as also the threat posed to the Sikh religion from conversions to other religions, such as Christianity.

At the very least, Amritpal Singh's escapade of leading a mob armed with guns and other weapons to attack a well-protected police station (Ajnala, a few kilometres from the border of Pakistan) in February this year, should have alerted the authorities to what was taking place just below the surface. Amritpal

Singh's anointment as the head of 'Waris Punjab De' last year again was a highly publicised event, which intelligence agencies and the authorities would have known and docketed for future consideration. In the normal course, all this would also have been shared with friendly intelligence agencies abroad, specially in countries where the Sikh diaspora is present in strength.

The events of January 2021, which witnessed violent protests over the now repealed farm laws also clearly mattered, for it was not merely a visible symbol of agrarian protest but also implicitly carried the seeds of self-determination that India believed it had put to rest by the late 1990s. What transpired in 2021 on the outskirts of the National Capital, thus needs to be revisited to determine whether there were also other factors leading to the protests and violence.

The sentiment for Khalistan has, no doubt, long existed among Sikh radicals residing abroad, but it is also important now to introspect as to whether there are incipient signs of a revival of the idea of Khalistan within the country. External forces such as the ISI can at best exploit a situation when such ideas are present. Merely repeating, ad nauseam, that Pakistan and the ISI are behind all the trouble could exacerbate a situation which possibly needs better handling, rather than resorting to strong-arm methods. The government and its agencies must, hence, avoid the temptation of conjuring up sinister designs and indirectly encourage 'fake news' of a worldwide conspiracy involving disparate elements of the Sikh community. There is much ground work to be done within the country.

Convincing the world is key

Where India, however, has conspicuously stumbled is that despite its vaunted claims of being in the forefront in fighting terrorism and radicalisation, both within the United Nations and outside, it has clearly failed by means of painstaking diplomatic efforts to convince much of the world of the true nature of the radicalist Khalistan threat, and its close links with terrorist groups. India constantly claims to bring to the notice of the world issues of global principles and not that of India alone. However, its diplomats and intelligence agencies conspicuously failed to carry conviction about the omnipresent threat posed by Sikh extremist groups abroad, notwithstanding intelligence liaison arrangements being in place with several countries to exchange crucial intelligence. Criticising foreign governments after the violent events took place, and resorting to ham-handed steps by way of retaliation will not help. India needs to effectively convince the rest of the world of the threat posed by radicalised forces such as the KLF and the SFJ.

In large parts of the world, liberal values are already embattled; India should not yield to the temptation of resorting to hard measures without understanding the true causes and join the ranks of nations that solely believe in strong-arm methods, such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the Mullahs in Iran. India needs to find the ways and means to defeat the 'siren call' of radical extremists of every hue, whether they be Khalistanis or other kinds of extremists. It needs to steer between the extremes of the right and left, and ensure a greater sense of unity within the country, according due respect for individual dignity and human progress, and demonstrating leadership in the comity of nations.

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