

Cuba calling... but are we listening?

DEEPAK BHOJWANI

The visit of the First Vice President of Cuba was an opportunity for India to get to know Cuba's world view. India should focus its leadership on a country and region that has been low priority for too long

INDIA'S diplomatic agenda recently included an important but low-key visitor. On March 23, the First Vice President of Cuba, Miguel Diaz-Canel met India's President and Prime Minister, apart from holding talks with his counterpart, Vice President M H Ansari, who had visited Cuba in September 2013.

In a region that evokes exotic images, Cuba stands out as a serious political example. Fidel Castro ranks with the best-known global leaders. Popular Indian familiarity with the largest nation-state in the Caribbean ends there, or perhaps extends to Cuban cigars. Indian historians and analysts recall Fidel Castro's visit to Delhi for the Non-Aligned Summit in 1983 and his embarrassing bear hug of Indira Gandhi; Rajiv Gandhi's visit there in 1985; Manmohan Singh's visit (for the Non-Aligned Summit in 2006); perhaps even Jawaharlal Nehru's call on Fidel in Harlem, New York in 1961. Then there is the recent thaw in Cuba's relations with the US, marked by a historic telephone conversation between US President Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro in December 2014, when they agreed to work on the normalisation of bilateral relations.

Cuba became — and stayed — communist not because of external pressure, as in Europe, but through an internal process. The Cold War rivalry between the US and the USSR enabled it to stand off the former with extensive support and aid from the latter. With the Soviet Union gone, Cuba got a lifeline from Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, a soulmate of Fidel. The geopolitical scenario has since undergone radical transformation. Today China, Russia, Brazil have a growing presence on the island. The European Union is probably seeking a lifeline to jettison its 1996 "Common Position" that calls for more gestures on human rights by Cuba before



India and Cuba can do business together. The First Vice President of Cuba, Miguel Diaz-Canel with Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his recent visit to New Delhi. PTI

full normalisation of relations. François Hollande travels to Cuba in May, the first-ever visit by a French President. Fumio Kishida will make the first-ever visit by a Japanese Foreign Minister to Cuba in late April. To be fair to President Obama, he had reached out early in his term to the Left-wing regimes in the region. He has had to contend with entrenched US political opposition to the New Left in Latin America, personified by Hugo Chavez — and his nominee Nicholas Maduro — in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and others.

Cuba poses even bigger issues. Full normalisation of relations would require the repeal of the Helms-Burton Act of 1996, which extended the territorial application of the initial US embargo (Cuba calls it a

blockade) to apply to foreign companies trading with Cuba, and penalised foreign companies that allegedly "trafficked" in property formerly owned by American citizens but confiscated by Cuba in the 1960s. Obama expects to meet Raúl Castro at the VIII Summit of the Americas in Panama on April 10-11, the first Summit of the Americas — which commenced in 1994 — that Cuba will attend. Cuba is trying to untangle its economy. It has set up a special economic zone around the Mariel port, 45 km west of Havana, will modernise Havana airport and several industrial plants, and has permitted small private businesses. Cuba's offshore reportedly stores several billion barrels of hydrocarbon deposits, a potential bonanza. Prospecting has been slow and unsus-

cessful, complicated by the embargo. Tourist arrivals, to this island of 10 million, went up to one million in the first quarter of 2015. US companies have been allowed to provide telecom services, the luxury cruise industry is waiting in the wings, and hotel chains are gearing up for the boom. Miguel Mario Diaz-Canel Bermúdez, a university professor, became a member of the political bureau of the Cuban Communist Party in 1997, long after Cuba left the Soviet orbit. At 53, he belongs to the post-revolution generation of Cuban leaders. Minister of higher education (2009-12), he became one of the five Vice Presidents of the Council of Ministers in 2012. In February 2013, the Cuban National Assembly, which elected him First Vice President, also ratified Raúl Castro in his post as President of Cuba for a second five-year term. Castro declared he will not continue beyond 2018. This quelled speculation over the leadership transition to the next generation.

Diaz-Canel is clearly a lead player in the transition from a closed economy to a more flexible system that recognises the need for foreign involvement. Cuba's Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez, on a visit to India in May 2013, outlined his government's strategy. Cuba is determined to overhaul archaic laws on taxation and salaries; eliminate dual currency; redistribute idle lands for cooperative and private farming; and attract foreign investment in key sectors of the economy. Sugar, rum and cigars will continue to be produced and exported. Tourism, biotechnology/medicine, information technology will be the primary focus. India has been invited to participate in these areas.

India's relations with Cuba were close during the Cold War. Thereafter the Cuban establishment, which emphasises solidarity, looked askance at India's moves to integrate with an increasingly globalising world. India wrote off Cuba's

debt of approximately \$68 million in 2008. Trade has been abysmally low (\$37.93 million in 2013-14), economic cooperation restricted to the extension of a few lines of credit to modernise some Cuban industrial plants. Offers of further credits, dating back almost a decade, have still to be available by the Cuban bureaucracy.

India financed a Centre for Excellence in Information Technology in Havana. ONGC (Videsh) Ltd. was allotted sizeable tracts in Cuba's offshore in 2006, but exploration was hampered by the US embargo, and financial constraints. The company shut down its office in Havana in early 2014. The lack of engagement has much to do with the lack of economic substance, partly due to the embargo, but also restrictive and dilatory Cuban regulations. Diaz-Canel's visit yielded an agreement to exempt diplomats and officials from visas and talks touched upon India's strengths in IT, nanotechnology, biotechnology, sports medicine and training, and human resource development. Cuban scientists have been working at Bicocon's facilities in Bangalore for several years. The easing, and eventual abolition of restrictions on dollar transfers to Cuba, shipping connections, etc. under the US embargo, a psychological dampener for Indian business, will make a huge difference. Deeper involvement with Cuba will also require government financing. In its classification of June 1, 2014, the Export Credit and Guarantee Corporation (ECGC) upgraded Cuba from B2 (Moderate Risk) to B1 (Moderately Low Risk). Cuba will be a more reliable creditor than Venezuela, where hundreds of millions of India's petrodollars are held by a government in crisis. An admiration for Fidel Castro's undisputed heroism should not conceal the fact that Cuba needs to ensure that India will enjoy the special status it is entitled to for its consistent support.

— The writer was India's Ambassador to Cuba 2010-12

PATRICK COCKBURN

A decisive outcome is the least likely prospect for the conflict in Yemen. Arab intervention risks entrenching the Sunni-Shia divide and handing a victory to the Isis

FOREIGN states that go to war in Yemen usually come to regret it. The Saudi-led military intervention so far involves only air strikes, but a ground assault may follow. The code name for the action is Operation Decisive Storm, probably an indication of what Saudi Arabia and its allies would like to happen in Yemen, rather than what will actually occur.

In practice, a decisive outcome is the least likely prospect for Yemen, just as it has long been in Iraq and Afghanistan. A political feature common to all three countries is that power is divided between so many players it is impossible to defeat or placate them all for very long. Saudi Arabia is backing President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi but the humiliating speed of his defeat shows his lack of organised support. The threat of further intervention by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council may be intended to redress the balance of power in Yemen and prevent the Houthis winning a total victory. But Saudi actions and those of the Sunni coalition will be self-fulfilling if the Houthis — never previously full proxies of Iran — find themselves fighting a war in which they are dependent on Iranian financial, political and military backing.

Likewise, the Houthis, as members of the Zaidi sect, were not always seen by Shia in other countries as part of their religious community. By leading a Sunni coalition, Saudi Arabia will internationalise the Yemen conflict and emphasise its sectarian Sunni-Shia dimension. The US

Saudi strikes fuel Gulf strife

position becomes even more convoluted. Washington had sought to portray its campaign in Yemen against Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) as a success. Drone attacks were supposedly wiping out important AQAP operatives, but the humiliating end result of America's covert war in Yemen came recently when US Special Operations personnel blew up their heavy equipment and fled the country for the US base at Djibouti.

US policy across the Middle East looks contradictory. It is supporting Sunni powers and opposing Iranian allies in Yemen but doing the reverse in Iraq. US aircraft for the first time started pounding Islamic State (Isis) positions in Tikrit, 87 miles north of Baghdad. The city has been under assault for four weeks, with 20,000 Shia militia and 3,000 Iraqi soldiers pitted against a few hundred Isis fighters. The Shia militiamen are now reported to have withdrawn. Effectively, the battle for Tikrit is being waged by Iranian-directed Shia militia backed by US air power, even if the two sides are rivals as well as allies. Ultimately, the US may not have much choice. If it refuses to back anti-Islamic State combatants for whatever reason it will be to the benefit of Isis. The numbers tell the story: There are between 100,000 and 120,000 Shia militiamen in Iraq, compared with only 12 brigades in the Iraqi army capable of fighting, about 48,000 soldiers, although this total may be inflated. Isis has been



People gather at the scene of Saudi air strikes in Sanaa, the capital of Yemen. REUTERS.

conscripting young men across its self-declared caliphate since last October and may have over 100,000 fighters. If the US relies on Iraqi government and Kurdish Peshmerga ground forces alone to put Isis out of business, it will be difficult.

Why did the US finally use its air power at Tikrit, formerly a city of 200,000? First, it was the only help the Baghdad government formally asked for. The US may have concluded, as it did with the 134-day siege of the town of Kobani last year, that it could not allow Isis to succeed in Tikrit. Second, if the city did fall, Washington did not want Iran and the Shia militia to get all the credit.

A further motive is that both the US and Iran want to restore some credibility to the Iraqi government and army after their crushing defeats by Isis forces last year. So far the Iraqi army has not recaptured a single city or substantial town from Isis

since the fall of Fallujah, 40 miles west of Baghdad in January 2014. Such limited military successes were won by the militias in the provinces neighbouring Baghdad. The US-led international coalition needs to bolster its credibility. Despite some 2,500 coalition air strikes launched against it since last August, the Islamic State has lost little territory. Isis may be battered but shows no signs of being anywhere near to defeat.

The Sunni Arab communities in Iraq and Syria are not being offered an acceptable alternative to Isis rule. They are all terrified of becoming the victims of a pogrom that does not distinguish between Isis supporters and ordinary Sunnis. It emerged from interviews of those who left Isis that it is well organised: it taxes salaries and sales, it conscripts young men of military age, controls education and mercilessly strikes down any oppo-

nents. Only a string of military defeats might shake it. This has not happened.

Air strikes have made it revert to semi-guerrilla tactics, not holding ground against superior forces backed by airpower but counter-attacking briskly when they have moved on or their lines of communication have become longer and more vulnerable. Given the difficulty in capturing Tikrit, it does not look as if an assault on Mosul will be possible for a long time. There seems to be no enthusiasm on the government side to retake Fallujah, although it is so much closer to the capital.

Whatever happens in Iraq and Yemen, the political temperature of the region is getting hotter by the day. Looked at from a Saudi and Gulf monarchy point of view, Iran and the Shia are on the advance, becoming either the dominant or the most powerful influence in four Arab capitals: Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and Sanaa. Sunni Arabs in Iraq and Syria have linked their futures inextricably and fatally to Isis and other Al-Qaida-type organisations. These have military strength, but they make many powerful enemies.

Confrontations between Sunni and Shia, and between Saudi Arabia and its allies and Iran and its allies, are becoming deeper and more militarised. Conflicts cross-infect and exacerbate each other, preventing solutions to individual issues. The Saudi intervention in Yemen reduces the chance of a US-Iranian agreement on Tehran's nuclear programme and sanctions. As these conflicts and divisions spread, the chances of creating a common front that is capable of destroying the Isis are getting fewer by the day. — The Independent

ON THIS DAY... 100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, APRIL 2, 1915

Senate meeting

THE meeting of the Senate of Punjab University held on Wednesday evening lasted just half an hour. It was the annual Budget meetings. The VC presided and there was a full attendance of Fellows. The Budget estimates did not elicit any discussion, nor was there any division on it. The Budget shows that during the current year, the university will make the two ends meet and leave a small closing balance to be added to the balance from last year. The Senate approved the appointment of examiners made by the Syndicate for a number of examinations of 1915 and sanctioned courses of reading for the examinations of 1917. The only subject which evoked a lengthy and general discussion was the rules for the award of Government of Indian scholarship for further study in England. The age was raised to include persons under 23 years of age in April of the year of selection, while the rule providing that an M.A. was to be preferred to a B.A. was expunged, to enable brilliant B.A. to obtain the scholarship.

Sardar Daljit Singh's appointment

THE following is the text of the Resolution passed by the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee at its meeting on the 27th March against the appointment of Sardar Daljit Singh to the India Council: "That the committee protest the appointment of Sardar Daljit Singh to the Secretary of State for India's Council; who, in its opinion, does not possess the necessary qualification for discharging the duties of this office. The committee considers that such appointments impair public confidence in the right use of discretion by the authorities and emphasises the necessity of creating an elective system for filling the vacancies in the India Council."

QUICK CROSSWORD

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8						
9			10			
11				12	13	
14						
15		16		17		18
19						
20				21		

ACROSS

- Brief inspection (4-3)
- Macaroni, spaghetti etc. (5)
- Shrewd business operator (7-6)
- Have strong longing (5)
- Become a sailor (2,2,3)
- Oil-rich sultanate in Borneo (6)
- With a light touch (6)
- Middle West US state (7)

DOWN

- An unexpected defeat (5)
- Dismay and bewilderment (13)
- Each single (5)
- Gracefully slim (7)
- Flattened fold in cloth (5)
- Smug (4-9)
- By this time (7)
- Light slightly sweet bread (7)
- Provide schooling for (7)
- Large amphibious tusked mammal (6)
- In a suitable manner (5)
- Deny right to speak (7)
- Infuriate (6)

YESTERDAY SOLUTION

- Across
1 Cobra, 8 Hoge about, 9 Adage, 10 Uncle Sam, 11 Musty, 12 Hog, 16 Ormolu, 17 Anyhow, 18 Map, 23 Steel, 24 Bear with, 25 Petty, 26 On the way, 27 After.

DOWN

- 2 Old guard, 3 Right now, 4 Go into, 5 Fault, 6 Boost, 7 Stamp, 12 Hum, 13 Gap, 14 By itself, 15 Do battle, 19 At that, 20 Abhor, 21 Catty, 22 Sweet.

SU DO KU

			9		2	1		
		4	5	6			9	
	6				1	5		3
					4		6	5
4								7
5	2		6					
7		9	2				8	
	5			1	8	3		
		1	3		9			

Yesterday solution

5	2	1	9	8	6	3	7	4
4	3	8	1	7	2	6	5	9
7	9	6	5	3	4	8	1	2
9	7	3	6	5	8	4	2	1
8	1	4	2	9	3	7	6	5
2	6	5	7	4	1	9	8	3
6	4	7	3	2	5	1	9	8
3	5	9	8	1	7	2	4	6
1	8	2	4	6	9	5	3	7

CALENDAR

- APRIL 02, 2015 THURSDAY
 ■ Shri Vikrami Samvat 2072
 ■ Shaka Samvat 1937 (Chaitra Shaka 12)
 ■ Chaitra Parviste 20
 ■ Hijari 1436
 ■ Shukla paksh tithi 13 up to 12.47 pm
 ■ Gnd yoga up to 1.40 pm
 ■ Puraphalguni nakshatra up to 5.52 pm
 ■ Moon enters Virgo sign at 12.37 am
 Shri Mahavir Jayanti (Jain)

FORECAST

SUNSET: THURSDAY 18.42 PM
 SUNRISE: FRIDAY 06.10 AM

Sunny Partly Cloudy Cloudy Rainy Foggy

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	29	18
New Delhi	33	18

PUNJAB

Amritsar	28	16
Bathinda	28	19
Jalandhar	28	17
Ludhiana	28	17
Patiala	29	18

HARYANA

Ambala	29	18
Bhiwani	31	19
Hisar	32	18
Karnal	28	16
Sirsa	29	19

HIMACHAL PRADESH

Dharamsala	21	09
Manali	13	04
Nahan	23	15
Shimla	14	08
Solan	20	09

JAMMU & KASHMIR

Jammu	22	13
Leh	09	01
Srinagar	08	05

UTTARAKHAND

Dehradun	26	16
Mussoorie	16	08
Nainital	17	10

TEMPERATURE IN °C