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India's economic crisis is compounded by the high number of daily Covid cases



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In the first four days of this month, India has had the highest number of fresh Covid-19 cases as also the daily death count, barring Friday, when Brazil reported 1,215 deaths in 24 hours against 1,043 deaths in India. The number of fresh cases in India has also been consistently over 50,000 per day, with the daily count on Friday registering a staggering 83,883 cases — almost double that of the US (42,662) and Brazil (42,659). While it is true that India's population is about four times that of the US and six times that of Brazil, the absolute numbers tell a story. It has been 40 days since the US reached its peak. However, India appears to be still peaking. Besides, the disease is now more evenly spread — the hinterland is adding more hotspots while the existing ones, the metros, continue to contribute significant numbers to the overall spread.

The metropolises were somehow able to cope with this rapid spread, as super speciality hospitals, doctors and health providers are concentrated here. The danger underlying the spread in backward districts of West Bengal, Assam and Bihar is that, besides the lack of awareness, the number of hospitals, ICU beds, doctors, nurses and health providers is abysmally low. There are some significant takeaways here. Awareness needs to be raised dramatically in the rural parts where the perception is that Covid is a mere flu leading to a disregard for observing precautions such as social distancing and wearing masks. This could be aggravating the spread. Testing, which now is focussed on the urban agglomerations, needs to be ramped up in the rural hinterland and the infected quarantined. Health infrastructure, with respect to labs and personnel, needs attention in the northern and eastern regions in particular, where it is woeful. For instance, Covid test samples from Jharkhand are being sent to Gurugram, a process that takes days.

Even if India has among the lowest case-fatality rate of 1.87 per cent, the absolute number of people requiring intensive care would be high. Protective gear to health workers, who are already under extreme stress, must be reached on a war footing, while delays in disbursements of their salaries should be addressed. A population hit by the worst economic crisis in four decades should not be subjected to the high out-of-pocket expenditure that treatment for Covid-19 patients entails. Public health infrastructure must be beefed up especially because insurance penetration is almost zero in the hinterland. India must do what it takes to beat back Covid, as the economic and human costs can mount further.

A new dimension: On India-U.S.-Australia-Japan Quadrilateral

Militarisation of the Quad will not alleviate the territorial threat India faces from China

In what will be seen as a significant shift of the government's posture towards the **India-U.S.-Australia-Japan Quadrilateral (Quad)**, Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Bipin Rawat stated on Thursday that India believes the Quad would be a "good mechanism" to **ensure Freedom of Navigation Operations** (FONOPs) in the Indian Ocean and surrounding oceans including the Indo-Pacific. Unless he misspoke, the suggestion is that India is now prepared to join Quad military patrols, which marks a departure from its earlier reticence and public statements by the leadership. The Indian Navy has not taken part in any joint patrols outside of the Indian Ocean, and even within it, held its first one, with France, only recently. In terms of the engagement with the Quad, India has not yet formally announced a decision to include Australia in the annual **Malabar exercises** with the U.S. and Japan, although it is expected to do so. However, the move from conducting exercises together to joint operations would take time, something that makes the CDS's assertion significant. It is easy to surmise that his contention that the Quad operations are needed to ensure there is no "fear of any other nation singularly trying to dominate the oceans", is a veiled reference to China. It is also clear that the LAC tensions and clashes, as well as the PLA's refusal to implement border agreements, have convinced New Delhi that new strategies will be required to deal with Beijing. While India continues to engage China diplomatically, and External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh have spoken of the importance of a resolution through talks, there is no doubt that an outcome of the tensions will be a strengthening of India's ties with global powers such as the U.S., as well as formations like the Quad. An indication of this is the government's plans to host a ministerial-level meeting of the Quad in the next month, possibly when the India-US "2+2" meet of Foreign and Defence Ministers is held.

While India considers its options, it is necessary to remember some of the reasons for its reticence in terms of militarising the Quad in any way. Prime Minister Modi said in 2018 that India sees the Indo-Pacific as a "geographical concept", not a "strategy or a club of limited members", and it would be important to know whether that formulation has changed. India is the only Quad member not already tied in a treaty alliance with the others, and Mr. Jaishankar's statement that India would never be part of any "alliance system" would run

counter to what the CDS suggests. Finally, India is the only country in the Quad that shares a land boundary with China, and it is unclear how the militarisation of the Quad in Indo-Pacific waters would alleviate the territorial threat it faces. If, however, New Delhi's view of its Quad engagement has shifted, clarity and an expansion of Gen. Rawat's statement are essential.

Appropriate strategy: On India banning more China apps

Whatever the threat from Chinese apps, India needs a better approach to tech regulation

The **blocking of a hundred more Chinese mobile applications** suggests that the Indian government, not for the first time in recent months, wants to make it amply clear that it will not shy away from leveraging its position as a massive market for technology in dealing with potentially dangerous geopolitical issues. Since June, when border tensions between India and China turned ugly, the government has till now stepped in thrice to block many Chinese applications in one go. In the latest such decision, on Wednesday, it blocked 118 apps, including the widely popular gaming app, PUBG, as well as WeChat Work and Baidu, owing to these being “prejudicial to sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of State and public order”. Over 200 Chinese apps, which were accessed by millions of Indian users, have been blocked in all till date. The decision has been taken based on several complaints, a press release said, of these apps “stealing and surreptitiously transmitting users’ data in an unauthorized manner to servers which have locations outside India”. It could be argued that loss of access to the Indian market will sharply affect the ambitions of the Internet giants emerging from China, but it remains to be seen if this tech-side intervention is effective as a counter in a geopolitical fight. Also, how far can India go to keep the Chinese players, who are well entrenched in the global tech supply chain, off the Indian market without prejudicing its own growth?

It is difficult to argue against decisions that are taken on the plank of national security, especially one arrived at by invoking the government's power under Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, a section upheld by the courts previously. But it would be well argued that the Indian approach should have followed due process, where the focus was on ensuring compliance with the law. Instead, the Indian response to complaints has been to straight away block these apps en masse. Meanwhile, millions of Indians who were engaging with these platforms, some gainfully, have to scramble for alternatives. To add to this, the **data protection law**, a dire need in this age, is not yet there. All this does not bode well for a country with aspirations of global leadership of tech, an industry which thrives on global networks and rules. Ironically, China, which for years has unleashed widespread censorship of information and kept apps from outside off its Internet, has found a rare chance to take the moral high ground. It has **criticised India's move**, accusing it of “abusing the concept of national security”. The last thing India needs is to be compared with China as far as its Internet regulation goes. It certainly needs a more considered approach to tech regulation.