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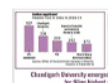
Home / Analysis / WTO has a point in objecting to India's food security act

WTO has a point in objecting to India's food security act

Concentration of price support on select few crops and their excessive stockpiling is in nobody's interest. The need is to disentangle the producer support from the consumer support through cash transfers. Ashok Kotwal, Milind Murugkar and Bharat Ramaswami write.

ANALYSIS Updated: Jan 06, 2014 02:21 IST

HT Ashok Kotwal, Milind Murugkar and Bharat Ramaswami
Hindustan Times



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Misunderstandings about the World Trade Organization (WTO) are pervasive.

The media coverage of the recent WTO meetings at Bali has added to the confusion. The bone of contention was the government procurement of the food grains in India under the National Food Security Act. The final outcome is a stopgap arrangement that has bought the Indian government some time; most importantly, it does not have to undertake any changes before the parliamentary elections.

Some people have celebrated this outcome as a victory. Others have bemoaned it as a



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It is as if it were a zero-sum game. If the US wins, India loses and vice-versa. What does it even mean when we say that India wins or loses? Is it Indian producers or consumers or both?

Are their interests aligned? Do we have to support the domestic producers in order to protect the poor consumers? What is the rationale for having a measure such as Aggregate Measure of Support (AMS)?

Are the worries of the US and other like-minded countries totally misplaced? Is there a plausible solution that would allow the Indian government to build a safety net for the poor without violating the WTO agreements?

The WTO's mission is to dismantle impediments to free trade and this means disallowing special support by governments to their domestic producers. All the member countries have joined the WTO to ensure that their producers will not be at a disadvantage while competing in the markets of other countries. Therefore, in principle, all member countries would agree with the notion of limiting the level of support to domestic producers measured by the AMS.

There is, however, a methodological issue. The AMS is calculated as the product of the quantity procured multiplied by the difference between the procurement price and a fixed external price derived from world prices during 1986-88. It is also limited to 10% of the value of agricultural output. Given that international prices have increased substantially since 1986-88, it would make sense to update this benchmark level. Clearly, with such a change in the formula, some cases now judged to be exceeding the allowable support would then be considered legitimate.

However, even after this change, India may have to be cautious about how high it can set the procurement price. The grain procurement required for implementing the food security Act is roughly 25% of the annual output. To satisfy the limit of 10% of the value of the output at the international market price, the procurement price would have to be no more than 50% higher than the market price.

However, the main point of contention is not merely technical. The G33 proposed that procurement from poor farmers should be exempt from this bound. This would have given a blanket exemption to the price support for the farmers in developing countries and predictably the US objected. This was the beginning of the argument that erupted at Bali.

Union minister of commerce and industry Anand Sharma argued that India be allowed to exceed the AMS on the grounds that the present system of government procurement and distribution ensures food security to the poor in India. How valid is this argument? Are the developed countries opposed to providing support to poor consumers in India?

First, note that the WTO agreements do not inhibit governments from providing consumer support since that does not harm the interests of producers in other countries. If the Government of India wanted to give direct cash transfers to all the consumers that it deems qualified to receive them, it would not be a WTO issue. It will also not be a WTO issue if the

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government procured the grain at market prices and distributed it cheaply.

It is a WTO issue only because our present system of delivering food subsidy involves producer support. The central government procures wheat and rice not at market price but at an administered minimum support price (MSP).

There is another WTO issue. Over the last decade it has consistently procured more than it has dispensed through its public distribution system. The stocks thus have grown way beyond what would be necessary for dampening price volatility. Such massive stocks are perceived as a threat by other countries because India could be dumping them in the international market. These are legitimate fears as India is a big player in the world grain market.

By sucking out the supply of grain from the market, excessive stocks are harmful to consumers. The rising MSP locks the country's resources disproportionately in grain production at the cost of other foods such as pulses, vegetables and fruits. Thus, if the WTO disallows excessive stockpiling, it could hardly be deemed harmful to India as a whole.

The crux of the problem is that in India the support to producers is entangled with the protection for consumers. This need not remain so.

Ideally, direct cash transfers to consumers would obviate the need for the government getting into the logistics of storage and distribution and provide a more effective safety net for consumers. If the infrastructure of rural banks is not quite ready for organising cash transfers, the delivery of food subsidy through fair price shops can continue until such infrastructure is ready.

But there is no need for procuring more than the PDS distribution (plus 5 or 6 Mtons required for other social programmes such as mid-day meals) as long as there are enough reserve stocks maintained for dampening price volatility.

There will be no continuous build up of stocks under this system. The MSP does not have to be as high as it is now. It can serve as a price floor and typically the market price will be above it.

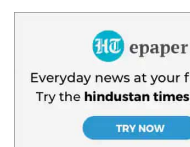
To sum up, concentration of price support on select few crops and their excessive stockpiling is in nobody's interest. The need is to disentangle the producer support from the consumer support through cash transfers. This would be a win-win situation par excellence.

Ashok Kotwal is professor at University of British Columbia, Milind Murugkar is policy analyst at Pragati Abhiyan and Bharat Ramaswami is professor at the Indian Statistical Institute

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To take on China, boost local defence capabilities

To start with, how about focusing on producing an Indian-designed and manufactured personal weapon that will compare with the best in the world by August 2023?

ANALYSIS Updated: Sep 03, 2020 20:40 IST

HT C Uday Bhaskar



That India is among the world's largest importers of arms is a shameful reality, and it is to the PM's credit that he had acknowledged this fact in his first term (2014) and had sought to enhance the indigenous production of military inventory. (HTPhoto)

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India and China are currently engaged in a low-intensity opaque war (LIO), and renewed tension has been reported in recent days along the already troubled Line of Actual Control (LAC). These developments have taken place at the southern bank of the Pangong Tso and New Delhi has charged Beijing with attempting a second “provocative action” on August 31, even as talks were being held at the local military commanders’ level.

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Pre-emptive action by Indian troops has evidently foiled any further Chinese intrusions. China has displayed lack of sincerity and engaged in deception. The steady build-up of troops and related inventory by both sides is indicative of heightened military tension, with a probability of skirmishes leading to unintended escalation, and a long winter vigil. For India, the monitoring and safeguarding of the claim line along LAC with China will demand a higher level of sustained military presence.

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Against this backdrop, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi’s address, at the end of August, on defence manufacturing acquires critical salience, particularly for the candid manner in which the inadequacies and structural flaws of equipping India’s military machine were highlighted. He noted, “It is not hidden from anybody that India has been one of the main defence importers in the world for the last several years. When India became Independent, it had huge capabilities in defence production. There was a well-established 100-year-old ecosystem in defence production in India. Not many countries had the resources and potential of India. But it is unfortunate that not much attention was paid on this issue for several decades. No serious attempts were made. But, the situation is changing now”.



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The PM’s statement merits scrutiny in relation to how India will manage the China factor in the long-term from a military perspective. He was right when he referred to a 100-year-old ecosystem since India’s first gunpowder factor was set up in Ishapur (Bengal) in 1787 and a modern rifle factory was established by the British in 1904. Slowly, a defence production base was created in India, but only to serve the imperial interest. During World War II, the Indian contribution was considerable by way of war goods — but they were at the lower end of the spectrum and included ammunition, clothing, footwear, animals, among other items.

When the British left India in 1947, this production infrastructure was denuded of its critical human resource and funding; further, it was irrevocably fragmented due to Partition. Lethal stores were destroyed and platforms such as bomber aircraft damaged and rendered non-operational. So the PM’s suggestion that India inherited “huge capabilities” apropos defence production at the time of Independence is not accurate. But the PM was spot on that while India had the potential to build a defence industrial base, it was “unfortunate” that no serious attention was paid to this strand of national capability for decades. The onus for this omission lies with those entrusted with the higher defence management. There has been no dearth of reports and recommendations about how to fix the problem but the under performance of the Indian defence manufacturing ecosystem has been overwhelming.

That India is among the world’s largest importers of arms is a shameful reality, and it is to the PM’s credit that he had acknowledged this fact in his first term (2014) and had sought to enhance the indigenous production of military inventory. However, the empirical truth is that, six years later, the 100-year-old “ecosystem” that the PM referred to has not enabled or nurtured any significant progress in the indigenous design and manufacture of military

inventory. The most stark indicator is that India is still floundering with the basic personal weapon for the soldier — the Kalashnikov equivalent — and is dependent on Russia for this item.

Modi 2.0 has another four years to pick up the military equipment gauntlet, and having a full-time defence minister in the seasoned Rajnath Singh is positive. India has to invest in design and research and development in a far more sustained and effective manner, and not succumb to short-term measures such as urgent imports when there is a crisis. This happened in Kargil 1999, and most recently, post-Galwan. The PM has outlined India's indigenous defence manufacturing challenge with commendable candour. The challenge is to irrigate the ecosystem in a manner that will enable India to acquire the appropriate level of military capability and confidence (atma nirbharata) to deal with the China challenge along the LAC and beyond.

To start with, how about focusing on producing an Indian-designed and manufactured personal weapon that will compare with the best in the world by August 2023? That will be the best symbolic gift for India's national security, as the nation completes its 75th independence celebrations.

C Uday Bhaskar is director, Society for Policy Studies

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Old boys, Cobra Kai and the viral comfort of nostalgia

So here's the wisdom distilled from Lawrence's experiences in Cobra Kai — to move forward, you've got to learn from the past, change with the times, and chuck your smartphone into the sea.

ANALYSIS Updated: Sep 03, 2020 20:06 IST

HT Deepanjana Pal



Actors Ralph Macchio and William Zabka of Cobra Kai in Beverly Hills, California(AFP)

The second season of *Cobra Kai* opens with an epic fight between Johnny Lawrence and John Kreese. The two men, one middle-aged and the other certifiably old, go at each other in an empty dojo whose emblem is an upright snake, to establish who is the alpha — if there is an

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afterlife, Dr Freud must have had goosebumps when this scene was being filmed. It's hard to take the Lawrence and Kreese fight seriously even though both give it their all. At one point, Lawrence (perhaps inspired by the bottle cap challenge from last year?) unleashes an almighty kick just so he can dislodge a fat cigar from Kreese's mouth. You'd think there would be easier ways to stop a guy smoking, but no. That cigar lands neatly in a wastepaper basket and starts a small fire. At the end of the fight, when both men are flat on their backs and gasping for breath, a sprinkler bursts forth to extinguish whatever little ego the victor may have wanted to pat.

Cobra Kai is all about the hangover of the past reaching into the present. The original rivalry between the teenaged Lawrence and Daniel LaRusso from iconic *The Karate Kid* is rinsed and repeated in different settings for *Cobra Kai*. Much of the show's appeal lies in seeing how Lawrence, the old bully, evolves into a grouchy, but soft-hearted sensei. The roles of LaRusso and Lawrence being reprised by the same actors (Ralph Macchio and William Zabka), who played these parts in the 1984 film is a masterstroke. With a soundtrack full of '80s tracks and visual tropes from that period's cinema — Los Angeles somehow looks as sunny and pristine as it did back then — *Cobra Kai* simultaneously pokes fun of the past while milking it for nostalgic appeal.

The show also adds details that help *Cobra Kai* take a bat to toxic masculinity. The dojos are mixed-gender now, and the show repeatedly underscores just how little there is to be gained from violence. The last fight of the season begins with comic undertones, as two girls circle each other, fighting over a boy. It seems to be a reversal of *The Karate Kid's* love triangle, but in no time, *Cobra Kai* taps into 21st-century bloodlust. Soon, violence has spread like wildfire through the high school, and everyone, down to the cutest nerd, is kicking their way down hallways.

In *Cobra Kai's* second season, we've seen Lawrence emerge out of the cave of the 1980s, and change the way he thinks. The scene has now been set for Season 3, in which we'll presumably see Lawrence and LaRusso assemble (a la *Avengers*) against Kreese's machismo (and hairdo). For streaming platforms such as Netflix, the age of Covid-19 has delivered a flurry of surprise hits. From the kidnap erotica *365 Days* to the contemporary ode to arranged marriages that was Indian Matchmaking, and now the second season of *Cobra Kai*, there seems to be no telling what we'll turn to for comfort. Yet there is a connection. Despite belonging to starkly different genres, there's been a strong element of nostalgia to many audience favourites during the lockdown. Frequently, the old ideas and formulae are packaged in modern storytelling. While Indian Matchmaking suggests arranged marriages can adapt to the present, *365 Days* has stereotypes (like the bad-boy hero) from the pulpiest paperback romances of the '80s and '90s. *Cobra Kai* doesn't just reference the past; it revives the '80s by showing scenes from *The Karate Kid* films. Contrasting with the contemporary *Cobra Kai*, the films seem to hark back to a mellower, easier time than the one that Lawrence and LaRusso have to negotiate.

When the future is uncertain, it's not surprising that we're looking to the past for comfort. So here's the wisdom distilled from Lawrence's experiences in *Cobra Kai* — to move forward, you've got to learn from the past, change with the times, and chuck your smartphone into the sea.

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The Congress has four choices now

It needs to wake up to its political marginalisation. Convert the crisis into an opportunity

ANALYSIS Updated: Sep 03, 2020 05:56 IST

 Rahul Verma

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In states, where the Congress has slid to the third or fourth position, it has struggled to revive. As the national challenge increases, the party should remember this(Sonu Mehta/HT PHOTO)

How the Congress party deals with the current crisis will prove who was right: Those who argued that the Congress must perish or those who believe that the party still remains the best available option to challenge the hegemony of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)?

It must first ask itself whether the demands made by the signatories of the letter to Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, are legitimate. The letter from 23 senior leaders of the Congress seemed a genuine attempt to draw attention to the fast-eroding support base of the party, especially among younger voters. It highlighted the leadership challenge, and made recommendations for organisational rejuvenation. And given that several of these signatories come from diverse social segments, with considerable political experience, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to suggest that many within the party (even those who rallied behind the Gandhi family) share the sentiments in the letter. No one, either during the Congress Working Committee (CWC) meeting or in television debates, has criticised the content of the letter. The criticisms were limited to the timing and the motives of the signatories.

After the showdown at the CWC meeting on August 24, there are four possible scenarios. And it seems the Congress party has opted for the least preferred outcome.

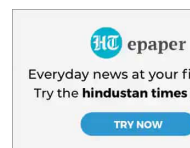
First, Rahul Gandhi takes over as the president in the next All India Congress Committee (AICC) meeting and promises to take up the demands made by the signatories. This would be the most optimal outcome. However, the optimal outcome is rarely the eventual outcome in politics as the game not only involves strategic decisions, but a range of other variables. In such a situation, shallow loyalties may be rewarded and even mild criticism would be unacceptable.

Second, there is a split in the party. With most formal positions held by pro-Gandhi family camp, it is almost impossible for dissenters to force the Gandhis to step aside. But the pro-Gandhi camp cannot also go for indiscriminate purging, as some signatories are heavyweights

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and may well walk out of the party. However, it is unlikely that there will be any major vertical split in the Congress in the near future. There is little possibility of a 1969 or a 1977 sort of national split as a large section of the Congress base still associates the party with the Gandhi family. Furthermore, during the two national splits earlier, it was a Gandhi leading the rebellion against the party.

Today, there is not a single leader within the party who can mobilise voters across states or has the resources to sustain such a formation in a lean period. There are a few who can do so in their respective states though.

Why does India's grand old party no longer have enough leaders with a substantial mass base and how did the Gandhi family become synonymous with the party? Though this history is well known, it is worth reiterating. The increasing interference of the Congress high command in state politics during the Indira Gandhi (and Rajiv Gandhi) years neutralised the emergence of independent centres of power within the party. State leaders were appointed (or dismissed) by the high command in a whimsical manner. The unwillingness to nurture strong state leaders allowed the Gandhi family to stay pre-eminent in the party.

Third, the Gandhis decide that no one from the family will be party president, and ask for a non-Gandhi to lead the party. This is not an easy option. Will the new president be given the space to act as an independent centre of authority? Will the new leader be free from pulls and pressures if the Gandhis continue to play favourites? Will the new leadership have the full support of the party cadres across the country? And, what about the fear among many that the Congress will fragment if a non-Gandhi leads the party?

And fourth, a policy of active marginalisation of dissenters is pursued. The composition of new party committees for the two Houses last week, in particular the selection of Gaurav Gogoi of the Gandhi camp as the deputy leader in the Lok Sabha over other senior figures who dissented, suggests this is the most likely course of action. This is not a fruitful option as all sides are likely to lose, but this appears to be the direction the party is taking. The Congress has opted to drift along without tackling the crisis head-on. Perhaps we may witness more examples of people expressing dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in the party with greater frequency. But it is unlikely that there will be a coup d'état or ruthless purging. As serious restructuring and re-imagining of the political agenda seem unlikely, political attrition will become a norm. Some leaders may join the BJP, others may go to regional outfits as in the case of Tripura.

What does the Congress need to do to overcome this state of inertia? The party leadership must realise that whatever the party's projections of its electoral strength, in reality, the party is getting marginalised. It can no longer continue in the belief that it is an umbrella party with a national presence. The party needs to make a realistic assessment of what revival means for it. In any state, where the party has slid to the third or fourth position, be it Uttar Pradesh or Bihar, West Bengal or Tamil Nadu, it has never recovered. With depleting resources to contest against the BJP machine nationally, the absence of a popular acceptable face to take on Narendra Modi, organisational atrophy, ideological confusion, and formidable challengers in many states, it must act wisely and urgently.

Rahul Verma is a fellow at the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), New Delhi

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Home / Analysis / NEP fails to address concerns of students

NEP fails to address concerns of students

The system must stop talking down to young people, treating them as passive recipients

ANALYSIS Updated: Sep 02, 2020 20:26 IST



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If education has to provide a pathway for socio-economic mobility for our aspirational young, it can only be through publicly funded education. (HTPhoto)

While a lot has been written about the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 from the academic, political, and ideological lens, the perspective of students has been missing. This is in keeping with the discourse on education, which marginalises the most important stakeholder. NEP itself neglects the concerns and aspirations of the young, especially first-generation learners.

One, the question of access. Young people from poor and marginalised backgrounds who want to study in colleges are completely dependent on external financial support. It is thus surprising that when the policy identifies the “major problems faced by the higher education system in India” (Section 9.2), it makes no mention of the crippling lack of funds for the higher education sector.

It is this lack of public investment which explains why almost 80% of colleges are private, and why even public universities are being privatised by transitioning to “self-financing” courses. It is because of lack of public investment that many public universities shockingly don’t hold classes as there aren’t enough teachers for all the enrolled students. And it is lack of public investment that denies six out of seven students enrolled in central universities affordable accommodation. The policy barely mentions hostels, but for large numbers of first-generation learners who secure admission in state and central universities away from home, the lack of affordable accommodation is a significant barrier to completing education. For instance, average tuition fees in Allahabad University is about ~1,000 annually, but room and board costs of ~45,000 to ~ one lakh annually are prohibitive for most poor students.

If education has to provide a pathway for socio-economic mobility for our aspirational young, it can only be through publicly -funded education. Yet, when the policy talks of improving

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access to education, it says only that “there shall, by 2030, be at least one large multidisciplinary HEI (higher educational institution) in or near every district”, without mandating that this HEI be publicly-funded. The failure to highlight the lack of funding as a central problem with the education system and the absence of any timebound redress, especially in the face of declining expenditure (from 4.14% in the 2014 Budget to 3.3% in 2020) is a capitulation. A statement of intent to enhance funding isn't enough.

Two, NEP's disregard of students and their perspective is also evident when it talks of governance of HEIs (Section 19). The policy says that over the next 15 years, all HEIs will become “self-governing” through the institution of a “Board of Governors (BoG)...consisting of a group of highly qualified, competent, and dedicated individuals having proven capabilities and a strong sense of commitment to the institution”. At no point in this section, or throughout the policy, is there any mention of democratic student representation in academic and administrative decision-making. NEP wants to promote critical thinking in the students, but fails to acknowledge that the first pre-requisite of critical thinking is a democratic atmosphere where students are encouraged to participate in decision-making. This is all the more important because in universities across the country, the administration is cracking down on free speech and deploying disproportionately punitive measures to keep dissenting students in check. A policy empathetic to students would have also acknowledged the skewed balance of power between the students and the administration and faculty in most HEIs, and underscored the need for transparency (beyond financial disclosures) and grievance redress measures. In this context, the National Students Union of India (NSUI) has drafted students' rights act, which codifies the minimum non-negotiable rights of a student in any college or university and series of escalating institutional measures to help enforce these rights.

Three, a policy sensitive to the needs and interests of our young people would put online education in its place as a tool to supplement or enhance the university experience, and not supplant it altogether. The university is a place for learning more than information; it is the place where most young people get their first taste of independence, develop a sense of self and build networks. These are often a bigger determinant of a student's future trajectory, and it would be unfair to equate the university experience with the singular pursuit of education online.

And four, a sensitive policy would acknowledge that for many young people, the *raison d'être* for higher education is better employment opportunities. This leads to two imperatives. First, to eliminate the political-commercial nexus at the heart of our education system and rationalise the supply of third-rate colleges in fields such as engineering and business administration; and second, proactively using academia to structure and formalise emerging professions and employment instead of merely letting young people become fodder for the informal gig economy. Yet the policy is silent on both these issues.

For too long, the education system has talked down to young people, treating them as passive recipients of top-down wisdom. This is one of the main reasons for the poor quality of education in our country. A policy which aims to reform our education sector to produce “engaged, productive, and contributing citizens for building an equitable, inclusive, and plural society” does a great disservice to its own stated intent by bypassing students entirely.

Ruchi Gupta is All India Congress joint secretary in charge of its student wing.

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