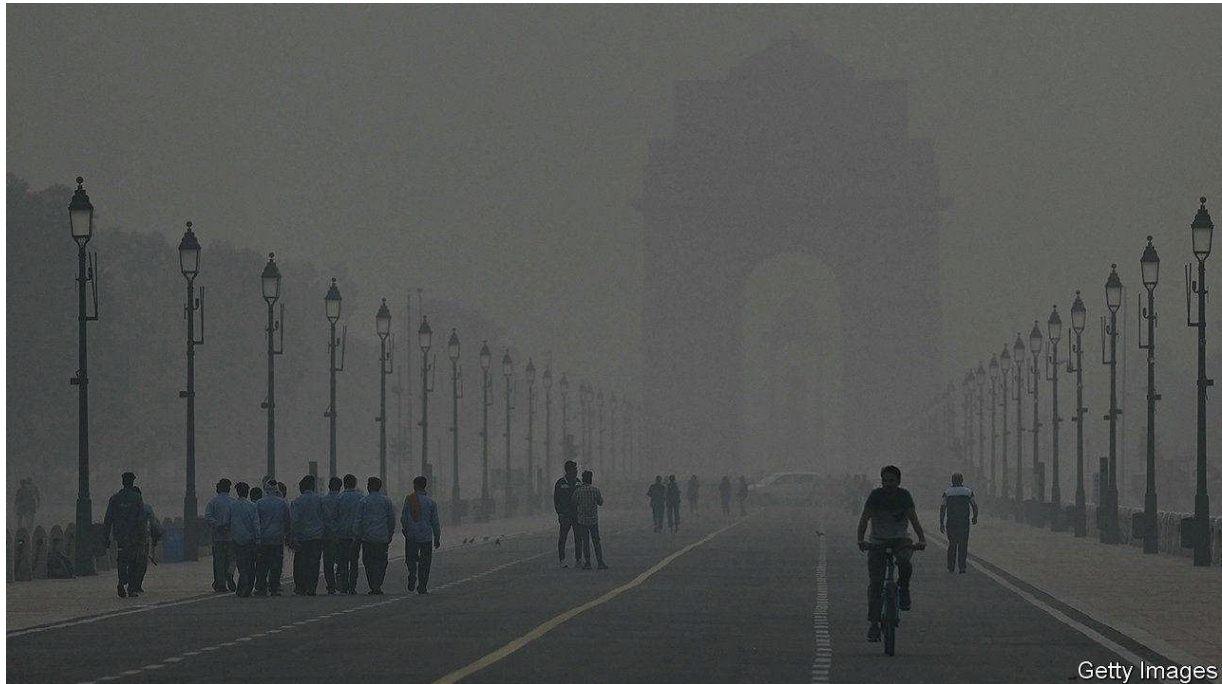


Choking a city

Politics hampers Delhi's fight against air pollution

Narendra Modi's central government is at war with Delhi

Nov 2nd 2023 | Delhi



DURING THE last week of October, Delhi's air quality began its seasonal shift from unpleasantly foul to sickeningly filthy. As temperatures dropped and clouds heavy with brown particulate matter drifted in from neighbouring states, the official rating of air quality in India's capital went from "poor" to "very poor" and then "severe" in places. This means that Delhi's air, the most polluted of any big city, is now hazardous to breathe even for healthy people. It is likely to remain so for much of the next three months.

Air pollution in South Asia is estimated to claim over 2m lives a year. Partly caused by agricultural practices, including stubble burning, it is most severe in northern India, especially in winter, when cold air traps pollutants in the mostly windless Indo-Gangetic Plain bordered by the Himalayas. A recent study suggests that the average resident of Delhi loses up to 12 years of life to air pollution. According to official figures, in 2022 Delhi's air was considered "good" or "satisfactory" on only 68 days. The average concentration of particularly harmful PM 2.5 particles—which can enter the bloodstream and cause heart disease and respiratory problems—was 98 micrograms per cubic metre. That is nearly 20 times the level considered safe by the World Health Organisation.

As sources of air pollution are often far from the worst-affected places, it can only be significantly mitigated by different authorities acting in concert. Yet partisan rivalry often gets in the way—as is illustrated by the latest row between Delhi’s government, which is run by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), and the central government of Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The argument pits Delhi’s environment ministry against the city’s pollution control committee, which is headed by a bureaucrat on secondment from the national home ministry. In late October the capital’s environment minister claimed this official had unjustifiably withheld funding from a years-long study to measure the source of pollutants in Delhi’s air. The pollution control committee claimed to have identified methodological flaws in the study which, it said, were designed to absolve the AAP government of blame for the problem. The city administration, in turn, claimed the scuppering of the study was part of a pattern of government officials loyal to the BJP deliberately undermining the AAP’s work. Whoever is right, the study is unlikely to be resumed—a serious setback for pollution mitigation in the world’s filthiest city.

The row is part of a broader fight between the AAP and centre over control of Delhi’s entire bureaucracy. In August the central government passed a law in effect awarding control to itself. This superseded a Supreme Court verdict on the issue in the AAP’s favour. A constitutional challenge by the AAP government is pending.

The row is threatening a rare hopeful anti-pollution effort. A regional anti-pollution body, encompassing Delhi, its neighbouring states and several central-government ministries, was recently launched to co-ordinate smog mitigation policies. The fact that the AAP also governs Punjab, where much of the stubble-burning happens, made that seem all the more promising. Yet the body will not achieve much so long as the central and Delhi governments prize partisan advantage over making Delhi’s air safe to breathe. ■

Banyan

Narendra Modi has shifted India from the Palestinians to Israel

The pivot reflects Indian domestic politics and new interests in the Middle East

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FOREIGN NEWS usually gets short shrift in India. Yet for the past month the country's television channels have been dominated by wall-to-wall coverage of events in Israel and Gaza, mostly from Israel's perspective. News anchors in bulletproof vests stand in the desert delivering breathless reports on the aftermath of Hamas's atrocities in Israel on October 7th. Talk-show hosts restage the Palestinian terrorist group's attack from Gaza with toy soldiers and miniature bulldozers. Weeks into the war, coverage remains intense.

The media's fascination with Israel's plight and retribution coincides with a marked shift in the Indian government's stance on the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. It has moved from backing the Palestinians to more or less unqualified support for Israel. The pivot is based on a realist reappraisal of Indian interests in the Middle East. It has also met with strong public backing from Narendra Modi's domestic supporters, which is gratifying for Mr Modi's government ahead of state elections this month and a general election next year.

In the past, like many countries in the global south, India tempered any expression of support for Israel with expressions of concern for the Palestinians' plight. No more. Mr Modi took to X (formerly Twitter) within hours of Hamas's assault to express his horror at the "terrorist attacks" and declare that "we stand in solidarity with Israel". It took five days for India's Ministry of External Affairs to reiterate, in response to questions from reporters, that India continued to support a two-state solution to the conflict. On October 27th, in a departure from its usual voting record, India abstained as the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution calling for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza; it objected that the text did not condemn Hamas's assault.

The shift reflects India's growing defence and commercial ties to Israel. Co-operation between the two countries has been deepening ever since Israel provided India with military help during the Kargil war against Pakistan in 1999. That was long before America took a serious interest in military co-operation with India. Over the past decade India has bought missiles, drones and border-security equipment (and probably surveillance software, though it has not admitted this) from Israel, making it the Israeli defence industry's biggest foreign customer.

A bromance between Mr Modi and Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, has deepened the relationship. So has the two countries' shared preoccupation with fighting terrorism, especially the Islamist variant. Explaining the abstention in the UN vote, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, India's foreign minister, said in a speech on October 29th that India took a strong position on terrorism "because we are big victims of terrorism".

India has also been increasing its ties with Gulf Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. And it can ill afford to alienate them; it depends on them for much of its oil and goodwill towards an estimated 9m expatriate Indian workers. Yet the fact that both countries have recently moved closer to Israel has allowed Mr Modi to effect his shift with alacrity. Even in the current crisis, the Saudis and Emiratis appear reluctant to allow the events in Gaza to cause a rupture in their long-term rapprochement with Israel.

Domestically, the Modi government's pivot is essentially all upside. The Congress-led opposition has condemned it; leaders of India's 200m Muslims have heavily criticised Israel's military response. Yet the Indian middle-class that mostly backs Mr Modi is especially concerned about Islamist terrorism. Its members look on Hamas's attack and recall the tragedy Mumbai suffered in 2008, when Pakistani Islamists killed 175 people and wounded more than 300 during a four-day rampage. It included an attack on a Jewish community centre in the city, where the terrorists murdered the rabbi and his pregnant wife.

There is a small risk the government will overplay its hand. As the civilian death toll in Gaza rises, India's Arab partners might turn against the Israelis and their backers more aggressively. Mr Modi has latterly hedged against that possibility. He has reached out to Palestinian leaders, offering Indian condolences and humanitarian aid. Meanwhile, his

Hindu-nationalist henchmen are unrestrained in using the conflict to stoke the Islamophobia that has propelled their party's rise. Even if Mr Modi's pivot becomes difficult abroad, it will probably help him win elections. ■

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