

Falling in Line

IT CAME AS NO SURPRISE THAT US SECRETARY OF STATE Hillary Clinton made a brief stop-over at Kolkata, otherwise not a 'City of Joy' for the people like Clintons, during her hectic sojourn in South Asia, not to discuss how 'women emerging to claim their rightful place in this part of the globe'. That she came here to teach poor Indians American Way (Amway) of life is now an open secret. Nor did the American consulate bosses deny it prior to her visit. She discussed some contentious issues like the 'prospects and prosperities' lying in American investment in retail and sharing of Teesta waters to thwart a fundamentalist upsurge in neighbouring Bangladesh and all that, albeit the Writers' Buildings, not quite unexpectedly denied any such discussion. In the ultimate analysis it matters little whether they deny it or admit it. That America can interfere in India's domestic affairs without being criticised even mildly by the so-called mainstream parties is a fact of life. South Asia is very much on the agenda of America for more than one reason—after the middle East it is the next flash-point they are counting. The way they have been able to subvert Pakistan's sovereignty in the name of combating terrorism for long speaks volumes about their real intention behind the veil of innocuous diplomacy.

Not that West Bengal chief minister stalled the entry of FDI in retail on ideological grounds. It is a matter of time that global retailers will have their full sway over the small trade and commerce, producing uncertainty for thousands of small traders and farmers across the country. For West Bengal's new ruling elites it was a bargaining ploy to extract more concessions from the Centre that continues to treat states as its colonial outposts, not truly federal units.

In truth Hillary had something bigger to pursue beyond FDI in retail in the region. She came to pressurise India to cut Iranian oil imports as early as possible as current sanctions against Iran work without really crippling the Iranian economy beyond management. By way of halting Iran's economic progress Uncle Sam is trying to foment middle class dissent in Iranian politics, hoping to have an Arab spring like situation. They cannot change the present regime in Tehran without the emergence of powerful Iranian voice for 'freedom' and 'change'. Hawks in Israel want immediate military action against Iran before it is too late, but their counterparts in the White House would like to wait because Iran is not Iraq. Nor is it Afghanistan where terrorism and narcotics are deeply inter-related.

The hard fact is that all oil importing countries, including India, have already reduced their oil imports from Iran. But America wants total freeze, to deny Iran much needed money for economic development. How did China, Iran's one of the major oil customers, react to Hillary's urgent call while she was in Beijing before coming to Kolkata via Bangladesh is not clear. True, they along with Russia, voted against UN, rather US resolution on Syria but they too would likely to fall in line as they are being treated by no less a person than Obama as responsible players of global elite club. In reality the Chinese began to diversify their oil sources much before the Iranian crisis got aggravated. Their involvement in two Sudans—North and South—

and the conflict the Sudanese suffer from, simply for oil, is anything but dirty. Also, China, like America and the West, is deadly against any country possessing nuclear capability outside the domain of big five.

Now American experts are coming to advise the Sultans of Delhi, on how to reduce dependence on Iranian oil and keep the 'growth engine' going. In other words India seems to have agreed to implement the Clinton agenda in principle. The advantages India now enjoys in case of Iranian crude in terms of price, mode of payment etc. are lucrative by any standards, and their negation will adversely impact on the economy, fuelling inflationary pressure further. While commenting as Clinton's demand India's external affairs minister S M Krishna had very little to say other than expressing concerns over the six million Indians who live in the Persian Gulf region, possibly to divert public attention and sell populism to remain buoyant in vote market. Not very long ago America forced India to abandon the Iranian pipeline project. And now the total boycott of Iranian oil!

Barring Samajwadi Party of the redoubtable Mulayam Singh, no political party, national or regional raised the issue of America's blatant interference in India's internal affairs, in parliament. They don't bother about national self-respect and sovereignty. What matters in their political existence is election—assembly election or parliamentary election. They can do it without storming their brain over Clinton business.

Iran remains the short-term target as also the long-term target in America's strategic equation though Syria presents a more fertile ground for regime change.

Iranian cry for solidarity to oppose American belicosity is virtually absent in India's political culture. Even the traditional left, not to speak of the far left who have no time and patience to develop mass consciousness against the growing American interference, finishes its anti-American stance by issuing harmless press statements. There are infinite ways of avoiding the 'interference issue'. Not one of them will move history forward. A successful American game-plan in this region will fail to maintain the much desired status quo and stability, but something much worse than before as it is the case in Pakistan. □□□