

Newspaper Clips **November 9, 2013**

Business Standard

IIT, Delhi, forms committee to coordinate with world ranking

As part its efforts to position itself among the top in the global ranking list, IIT, Delhi, has set up a four-member body to coordinate with ranking agencies and provide appropriate information and data sought for.

The move comes in the backdrop of the HRD Ministry setting up of an 18-member committee to review existing arrangements, develop a strategy and a framework for research evaluation to drive up research activities, the lack of which is hampering Indian institutions from featuring in the global ranking list.

A group of IIT Delhi professors would be engaged in a more focussed activity, understand the relevant information sought by the ranking bodies and provide inputs in proper format, IIT, Delhi, Director R K Shevgaonkar told reporters here.

Coordination among the peers, the faculties and alumni is the other objective of the group as providing correct information is important for the rankings, he said.

According to Times Higher Education's (THE) World University Rankings list 2013-14, IIT, Delhi, along with IIT, Kanpur, IIT, Kharagpur and IIT, Roorkee, are clubbed in the group of institutions between 351-400.

The QS world university ranking puts IIT, Delhi, at 222.

Concerns over absence of any of India's institutes among the top has been flagged several times by President Pranab Mukherjee who would be attending IIT Delhi's 44th convocation function tomorrow.

The institute, considered among the best in the country, would be having a Centre of Policy Studies to evolve policies for science and technology. It would be set up under the Department of Humanities.

It would also set up a Centre for Cyber Security in collaboration with the University of Nebraska, an MoU for which is expected to be signed early next year.

"The Centre wanted that we should have research on cyber security given that it is a big challenge in the coming days for national security of the country," the IIT Director said.

Ministries of Home and HRD are supporting the IIT in this endeavour.

IIT-Delhi to address ranking issue

Vijetha S.N

A dedicated team formed to send the right info across, says Institute Director R. K. Shevgaonkar

“Incorrect information or lack of know-how of getting the right information across is perhaps the only reason for our poor world ranking and we are taking care of this. A dedicated team has already been set up to see to it that the right information gets across,” said Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, Director Prof. R. K. Shevgaonkar on Friday.

This dream destination for every aspiring engineer in the country did not induce any gushing when the QS World University rankings released its latest report. A poor 38 in Asia and an embarrassing 222 in the world, although it topped the list in every major ranking carried out in India.

“Around 40 per cent of the rankings depend on reputation or perception, and to get this information, they usually contact alumni or other academics around the world. We are the most reputed in the country but we feel that whosoever was contacted did not have the correct information about us. This new team that is formed will provide the correct information about the various areas we are ranked on as well as the people to contact for peer review,” he said, hastening to add that the action plan for better rankings did not include lobbying in the strictest terms.

“Another thing that we did not properly understand was how we were supposed to supply the right sort of information. For example any faculty serving more than three months can be included in the faculty availability ratio, but the information that we sent was only about our permanent faculty,” he added.

Faculty strength

Faculty strength which is ideally supposed to be in the ratio of one teacher for 10 students had suffered because of the OBC expansion, admitted Prof. Shevgaonkar. “It is not as if we are lacking in faculty but we will need time to break even,” he said, adding that this was another area where they lost out, in addition to not being able to convey the right information when the rankings were being done.

They were doing whatever was expected of an institute, he said adding that faculty was constantly reviewed using the same parameters like any global institute. “International publications, research work, student recommendations and the like.”

Rankings are important to most global universities for the purpose of attracting the best talent and in this sense IIT-D had a definite advantage.

“Already, the best students flock our institute. At the moment at least we are not affected by the rankings at a practical level,” said Prof. Shevgaonkar.

He added that in an increasingly global world all this might soon change. “We do not teach our students how to network unlike many global universities and we also never lobby for rankings or getting our faculty’s works published in international journals. Here its all about academics but we are not blind to the substantial advantages that networking has in today’s world, one of the main reasons why we are going to arrange an open alumnus meet. Our students can be introduced to our alumni who are well placed in the world,” he said, adding that while a degree from their institute is a launching pad for an enviable career, this could not guarantee it. “In the end, rankings or no rankings, it all depends on the student.”

The IIT-D will be holding its annual convocation on Saturday with President Pranab Mukherjee set to deliver the address. Around 188 students will receive Ph. D, 968 a post-graduate degree and a total 637 students will be awarded a degree.

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IIT, Delhi, forms committee to coordinate with world ranking agencies

PTI Posted online: Fri Nov 08 2013, 19:52 hrs

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NBT

आईआईटी दिल्ली : ग्लोबल रैंकिंग बढ़ाने के लिए कमिटी

■ विस , नई दिल्ली : आईआईटी दिल्ली का दीक्षांत समारोह शनिवार को है, जिसमें 188 पीएचडी, 968 पीजी और 637 ग्रेजुएशन डिग्री स्टूडेंट्स को दी जाएगी। दीक्षांत समारोह से पहले प्रेस कॉन्फ्रेंस में आईआईटी प्रशासन की ओर से बताया गया कि आईआईटी दिल्ली की ग्लोबल रैंकिंग बढ़ाने के लिए चार मंबर कमिटी बनाई गई है। अभी यह एशिया के टॉप 300 संस्थानों में से 38वीं रैंक पर है।

IE

IIT-Delhi to set up cyber security training centre

Naveed Iqbal Posted online: Sat Nov 09 2013, 02:44 hrs

New Delhi : Keeping in mind the rising number of security threats on the web, the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi will start a new centre for capacity building in cyber security since "national security will be based on cyber security in the future".

Stating that the country faces a strong cyber security threat, director of the institute R K Shevgaonkar said, "Cyber security is a hot area today. All the ministries want trained manpower for this purpose and we want to start a consolidated centre."

The centre will aim to create trained manpower through courses for industry and academia. "We want to partner with the Ministry of Defence as well as the telecom and home ministries for this. They can spell out their requirements and we can address that through research here."

A letter of intent for setting up such a centre was signed between IIT-Delhi and the University of Nebraska during the India visit of US Secretary of State John Kerry.

Shevgaonkar also said University of Nebraska was a first choice since it is known for its cyber and space security programmes, but IIT-Delhi will partner with other universities too for this centre. The new centre will be called Centre for Cyber Systems and Information Assurance.

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IIT-D to set up research academy in Mauritius

Manash Pratim Gohain | TNN

New Delhi: Expansion and improving its global image are twin goals Indian Institute of Technology Delhi is currently focused on. Thirty-eighth amongst 300 institutions in Asia with its electrical and mechanical engineering departments topping the QS World University Rankings, the institution has constituted a four-member committee to work towards improving its global position.

IIT is also setting up a research academy in Mauritius by the end of the current academic year. With land having been allocated for its two extension campuses in Sonapat and Jhajjar, it's also planning a number of centres and executive programmes there.

Speaking about expansion plans and setting its first footprint abroad, IIT Delhi di-

With land having been allocated for two extension campuses in Sonapat and Jhajjar, IIT is also planning a number of centres and executive programmes

rector R K Shevgaonkar said it has formalized setting up an IIT Delhi Research Academy in collaboration with the Mauritius government.

Back home, IIT is planning a number of centres including one on cyber security. "We are coming up with a cyber systems and information assurance centre in collaboration with University of Nebraska. We are also coming up with a policy research centre, partially funded by the department of science and technology," he said.

The IIT is having its 44th convocation on Saturday in which President Pranab Mukherjee will be the chief guest. He will inaugurate an innovation exhibition before conferring the alumni awards. This year, the institute will confer degrees to 1,793 students.

HT New Delhi

IIT, JNU join hands for common course

HT Correspondent

htreporters@hindustantimes.com

NEW DELHI: Nearly a year after Delhi University and Jamia Millia Islamia embarked on the Master of Mathematics Education programme under the meta university concept, Jawaharlal Nehru University and Indian Institute of Technology (Delhi) are gearing up to set up a programme of their own.

While IIT Delhi said the initial formula required all four universities to participate together, the concept got divided after DU and Jamia embarked upon the Masters course.

“The meta university concept was supposed to have all four universities on board. But then, DU and Jamia went ahead and started their own mathemat-

ics course. We are now working out the modalities with JNU to launch the programme and will sign the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) by this month,” said RK Shevgaonkar, director, IIT Delhi.

While the finer nuances of the programme are yet to be worked out, officials said the programme would be meant for post-graduate students in humanities. At the same time, they claimed they were looking at tapping JNU’s science streams as well.

“Humanities students from both JNU and IIT will get to select courses from the institutes and there will be an arrangement for calculating credits. The modalities are still being worked out, but the stress is on facilitating this programme for PhD students, research scholars and master’s students,” he added.

JEE: online application causes concern

Vasudha Venugopal

Students who wish to get into prestigious engineering institutes such as IITs and NITs in 2014 will have to compulsorily apply online.

This is the first year that the entire application process for JEE— including uploading of photograph and signature and payment of fees — is being done online, said CBSE officials. The online application process will start from November 15, 2013. The last date for application is December 26.

The admission process going wholly online may not be good news to many students who are not comfortable with computers, said S. Rajan, headmaster of a Corporation school here.

He said the CBSE must set up help centres, especially in the districts, to help parents and applicants. P. Sankari, a parent from Urapakkam, said they would have to depend on her son's school teacher to fill up his online forms. "We are not clear about how to submit money and signature online," she said.

S. Vaidhyasubramaniam, Dean (planning & development), Sastra University, said with states such as Gujarat, Maharashtra and Odisha adopting the test, the number of applicants was bound to increase this year. "To move the application process completely online is risky considering the low levels of internet penetration. It may be made online for those appearing in the online mode and should be optional, keeping the physical forms in place too."

Gita Prabhu, managing director, AIMS Education, said the online admission process might force students and parents to depend on cyber café owners, agents, and others to fill up and submit their forms. "Parents seek others' help in scanning and uploading documents, ticking preferences and other details. Many of these people may be unreliable and could make mistakes in the process."

CBSE officials said the students need not worry and the process had only become simpler as there was no need to send documents anywhere.

All communication, an official said, will be sent to the registered email ids and mobile numbers of parents and students.

The offline examination is on April 6 while the online test will take place on April 9, 11, 12 and 19. Last year, over 14 lakh students took the test.

Keywords: [JEE](#), [online applications](#), [JEE applications](#)

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IIT-M to assess strength of Pamban Bridge

D.J. Walter Scott

Centenary celebrations of bridge likely on February 24, 2014

The Southern Railway has awarded a consultancy project to the Indian Institute of Technology–Madras to assess the strength of Pamban rail bridge, India's first cantilever bridge, completing 100 years on February 24, 2014, and suggest the need for a new bridge, G.Narayanan, Additional General Manager, Southern Railway has said.

Talking to reporters here on Friday, Mr.Narayanan who was here to discuss the arrangements for the centenary celebrations of the world famous bridge said besides assessing the strength of the bridge, the IIT–Madras experts would suggest whether to build a new bride adjacent to the existing bridge with a split span (Scherzarspan) for navigation.

The IIT–M would also suggest whether the new bridge had to be built at a higher level like the existing road bridge to completely eliminate the split span to allow navigation under the bridge, he said.

The IIT was expected to present its report to the railways before the centenary celebrations in February next, he said.

Mr.Narayanan pointed out that he held discussions with Divisional Railway Manager (Madurai) A.K. Rastogi as how best the railways could organise the centenary celebrations, tentatively fixed for February 24. "We want to showcase the bridge, an engineering marvel, to the world in a fitting manner coinciding with the 160th anniversary of Indian Railways," he said.

The Railways had proposed to invite former President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, a native of Rameswaram, who played a vital role in strengthening the bridge during gauge conversion in 2007. "We will be honoured if Mr.Kalam accepts our invitation and grace the function," he said.

The Southern Railway would invite Delhi Metro's architect E. Sreedharan, the then Assistant Engineer, Southern Railway, who with a team of engineers had salvaged the girders and put the bridge back on the rails in a short span of time when it was damaged in the 1964 cyclone, Mr.Narayanan noted.

Honour

Central and State Ministers would be invited for the function and all the railway engineers who contributed for the maintenance of the bridge would be honoured in the function. "We are contemplating whether to hold the function in Pamban or in Mandapam but the date has been tentatively fixed for February 24," he said.

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Request to HRD minister for lowering the fee of JEE offline test

pransv chaudhary, TNN Nov 7, 2013, 10.45PM IST

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PATNA: Super 30 founder and mathematician, whose innovative initiative has helped talented students from underprivileged families make it to IIT, has termed [the move](#) of the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) administration to go fully online from 2014 for the main examination and charge higher fee from those applying offline as "heavily loaded in favour of the rich and the elite".

Anand has written a request letter to the union minister for human resource development, with a copy to the JEE chairman, requesting them to sympathetically look into the matter and lower the fee for offline test.

IIT-B to create life-size sculptures

By editor

Created 8 Nov 2013 - 00:00

The first session of the Dandi Marchers Sculptures workshops was inaugurated on Thursday at the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay (IIT-B) by eminent Gandhian and Chairman of the Institute for Gandhian Studies, Wardha, Padma Bhushan, Justice C.S. Dharmadhikari. The Industrial Design Centre (IDC) of IIT-B has been entrusted with the task of making a memorial consisting of a life-size sculpture of Mahatma Gandhi and the 80 people who marched with him in the Dandi march, which will be placed at Dandi on completion.

The workshops are being organised as a part of the 'National Dandi Salt Satyagraha Memorial' — a project of the ministry of culture, Government of India for which IIT-B is the design coordination and implementing agency, in association with an international design team. "Under this project, full-size sculptures of all 80 people who marched will be created within the campus. The sculptures will be prepared by sculptors and students from across the globe selected by the institute for this purpose, under the guidance of IDC, IIT-B and expert sculptors. The participants will work within an overall visual framework, and make use of the 2-inch high reference images generated by our team," said an IIT-B spokesperson.

The stoneware sculptures will be on permanent display at the Dandi Salt Satyagraha Memorial at Dandi, Gujarat. "This memorial should be able to make people experience the day, time and moment of the actual march and make them feel a part of it. It should evoke some spiritual feelings inside, just as it did to Mahatma Gandhi and those who participated in the march," said Dr Sudarshan Iyengar, vice-chancellor, Gujarat Vidyapeeth, who was also present for the inauguration.

President for revision, upgradation of curricula in universities

Staff Reporter

Not a single Indian university or institution finds a place in the top 200, pointed out President Pranab Mukherjee on Thursday as he called for a revision and upgradation of curricula, introduction of choice-based credit system, examination reforms and promotion of a culture of excellence.

Addressing the first-ever conference of Directors of National Institutes of Technology (NIT) at Rashtrapati Bhavan here, Mr. Mukherjee said at least one or two departments in every NIT must be turned into centres of excellence.

“It is not difficult to see where our institutions stand today vis-à-vis the best in the world. In two reputed international rankings of universities – the QS ranking and Times Higher Education ranking – not a single Indian university or institution finds place in the top 200,” he said.

“Apart from leading universities of the West, the universities in countries like China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa and Malaysia are ranked higher than Indian institutions. The highest ranked Indian institution in the QS Ranking is IIT-Delhi at 222nd position. Not a single NIT is amongst these institutions,” Mr. Mukherjee said.

Calling for wide-spread changes and improvements in the education system, the President said the ranking process needs to be taken seriously not just for the ranks *per se* but for the fact that high ranking helps attract the best faculty from across the world.

This, in turn, improves the prospects of good placement for graduating students and provides a benchmark for continuous quality enhancement.

“During my recent visit to Belgium and Turkey, I had the privilege of being accompanied by a delegation of Vice-Chancellors of Central Universities as well as the UGC Chairman. I used the visit to provide impetus to the international collaboration efforts of these Universities,” he said, encouraging NITs to look for similar collaboration.

He said engineering programmes must be also periodically evaluated based on industry trends and emphasis should be on research and innovation in NITs.

“India ranks 12th among top 20 countries in terms of publication on science and technology. We have 119 researchers in research and development per million people, as compared to 715 in China and 468 in United States. NITs must evolve clear strategies to encourage research and development, which then leads on to innovation and patents,” the President said.

“The Government is investing huge amount of resources in higher education. The effort to increase ‘quantity’ exponentially must be matched with commensurate efforts to improve ‘quality’. We must lead our institutions into the ranks of the best such institutions in the world,” he said.

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‘Indian researchers not keen on patenting’

Correspondent

Sharan Gouda, Assistant Controller of Patents and Designs, Intellectual Property Organisation (IPO), has said that the Indian scientific community was not utilising the benefits of patenting of products.

He said that only 20 per cent of the total applications received for patents in the country were from Indians. The rest were from foreigners and foreign companies.

Dr. Gouda was here on Friday to inaugurate a workshop.

“Although India is part of the World Intellectual Property Organisation for more than two decades, patents obtained by Indians are negligible. Indians and Indian companies started applying for patents only from 2005 and they were confined to rice, pharmaceuticals, agro-chemicals and industrial food products. Most of these inventions have gone unnoticed due to the reluctance to apply for patents. This may be owing to reasons such as lack of support or the fear that their inventions may be used by others in the event of its rejection,” he said.

Low cost

Dr. Gouda said there was no need for such fear as the IPO maintained secrecy about applications and they would not be revealed to others even if they were rejected. He said the cost involved in renewal of patents in India was considerably low compared to the cost involved in the United States of America. “In India, the annual cost ranged from Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 15,000 while in the U.S., it was more than Rs. 1 lakh.”

Dr. Gouda said universities and centres of higher education should release funds to research scholars for getting patents from the IPO.

He lauded the efforts of Vaijnath Karanje, founder of the Integrated ENT and Allergy Research Academy, for applying for a patent for his invention on Integrated Immunity Management System’s (IIMS) Causo-Vac for Allergy and Allergy Related Chronic Diseases. The IIMS claims to cure iatrogenic diseases caused by multiple drug administration and unnecessary surgeries.

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Isro ex-chief's Mars remark irks PM aide

Nair Had Called The Project A Publicity Stunt

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Bangalore: C N R Rao, chairman of the Scientific Advisory Council to the Prime Minister, has lashed out at former Isro chief G Madhavan Nair for criticizing India's Mars mission.

"It's unbecoming of Nair as an Indian to make such comments. I'm extremely critical of them," Rao said on the sidelines of an event on Friday, adding that Isro's achievement is laudable.

Nair, who has been extremely critical of the Mars Orbiter Mission (Mangalayaan), has said the project is "nothing but a publicity stunt". The day before MOM's launch on November 5, Nair had said "a successful launch will help the space agency cover up its Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle failures". He also said the Rs 450 crore used for the project "was of little use as the scientific instruments on board will not discover much on Mars".

Rao said: "Scientifically, I don't want to comment on



C N R Rao, chairman of PM's Scientific Advisory Council, said the ₹450 crore spent on the mission was peanuts compared to other budgetary allocations

the mission. But their efforts need to be applauded. They could've taken more time and done a better job. As an Indian, it's a good feeling."

About the Rs 450 crore spent, he said the sum is "peanuts" compared to other budgetary allocations. "Do you've an idea of the numbers we deal with in our budgets?" Rao said. "Rs 450 crore amounts to nothing for a project like this."

Pointing out that the country has to wait till next

Mangalayaan's orbit raised again

The second orbit-raising manoeuvre of the Mars Orbiter (Mangalayaan) was conducted on Friday, three days after its successful launch by PSLV C-25 into orbit around the Earth. The manoeuvre, starting at 2.18am, raised the spacecraft's apogee (farthest point from the Earth) from 28,814km to 40,186km, with a burn time of 570.6 seconds, Isro said. TNN

September to find out if the project is a complete success or not, he said India needs to spend more on R&D and education. "Compared to many other countries, like Japan and China, we don't spend enough," he said. "We need to allocate at least 2%-3% of our budget on this."

Rao was addressing the media to announce that the Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research in Jakkur has completed 25 years.

Assam Tribute

Gauhati varsity inks MoU with CERN

GUWAHATI, Nov 8 – In a significant occasion at IIT Bombay, Gauhati University signed an MoU with CERN of Geneva for participation in the 'A Large Ion Collider Experiment' popularly known as ALICE collaboration of LHC, CERN in Switzerland, a press release received here said.

During the ALICE collaboration meeting held on April 27 and 28, the document was jointly signed by Dr Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, a professor in the Department of Physics, GU and by Prof Paolo Giubellino, spokesperson for ALICE International collaboration.

Earlier, the document was signed by Prof Sergio Bertolucci, CERN Director, Research and Computing and later by the Registrar of Gauhati University. The Department of Science and Technology (DST), Government of India recently released Rs 90 lakh to GU for the said project.

Professor Bhattacharjee, leader of GU in ALICE has embarked on a visit to CERN from November 7 to 20 to complete the other official formalities related to signing of MoU between CERN and GU.

In the ALICE experiment, two lead nuclei moving with a velocity close to light collide to recreate a situation that is believed to have existed in the early stage of the universe. ALICE is aimed to realise a new phase of matter known as quark gluon plasma, the release added.

UGC set to appoint NGO to monitor ragging cases

Arun P Mathew, TNN | Nov 9, 2013, 01:56 AM IST



COIMBATORE: The [University Grants Commission \(UGC\)](#) has invited proposals from voluntary sector organisations (NGOs) to help the body assist in monitoring anti-ragging activities in colleges.

The selected NGO will have to monitor the implementation of various laws and regulations in place with regard to cracking down on the ragging menace, especially the guidelines given by the Supreme Court, in campuses across the country. The organisation will have to verify whether institutions have included messages with regard to the action taken against ragging in its prospectus, and constituted committees to look into the matter. It will also have to see if colleges have taken a written undertaking from parents at the time of admission that if their wards are involved in ragging strict action will be taken against them, and monitor the steps taken by the institutions in developing confidence among junior and senior students.

The notice says voluntary organisations that wish to apply to UGC should have prior experience and proven managerial ability in working in similar issues across the country.

Following a spate of ragging incidents with devastating outcomes including suicides of ragging victims, state governments, especially [Tamil Nadu](#), have put in various measures to curtail the practice. Police has asked colleges to keep complaint boxes to help victims report ragging incidents to college authorities. Constables are expected to visit campuses, collect the boxes and investigate complaints if there are any. The confidentiality of the complainant has to be maintained. There is also a helpline at the national level where students can report any cases of ragging. All colleges are supposed to have anti-ragging cells. Awareness campaigns are also held in TN colleges against ragging.

In spite of the several anti-ragging measures initiated by the government, cases have been reported from many of the institutions. The recent incident at [Pondicherry University](#), where two girl students complained of ragging in which six students were suspended, is perhaps the latest, and is unlikely to be the last.

With government coming down hard on ragging incidents, complaints are sometimes hushed up in the institutions itself. Perhaps, UGC wants a body other than the colleges to keep track of [ragging cases](#) to avoid any collusion of interests.

However many academicians feel that this will not be effective. For one, the UGC in the present situation seems to be bringing in a single NGO for the entire country which in itself a huge task. Moreover, they criticise the effectiveness of the move. "Outsourcing a job to an NGO is not a good idea," feels former Anna University vice-chancellor E Balagurusamy.

Even if several NGOs are entrusted with the task of monitoring institutions, there is a chance that the institutions can collide with these agencies, academicians say. Using the existing infrastructure and mechanism available with UGC and the universities is the only possible way. A college principal who wished to remain anonymous said that depending on the powers given to the organisation, colleges may either ignore or be forced to follow the guidelines set by the agency. "Nowadays institutions in general take strict action including suspension though informing the police may not be too common. This is because we are also concerned with the effect this can have on the future of the accused student," said the principal who requested anonymity. Therefore an additional agency like this may be a burden including more paperwork and another round to please them, he said.

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China's Coming Challenges

Fareed Zakaria



"We are all struck by the contrast between Beijing and Washington," said George Yeo, the former Singapore foreign minister. He was referring to the quality of governance in the two capitals – in particular, the sense pervasive in Asia that the US has lost its ability to execute public policy with competence (Iraq, Obamacare). Beijing, on the other hand, has been carefully and systematically planning a series of reforms that will likely make China the world's largest economy within a decade.

The contrast is particularly striking because China faces huge challenges and will need to make major economic, political and social reforms as it navigates through the "middle income trap" that has affected so many once fast growing developing countries. The US, on the other hand, remains the world's most innovative economy with a dynamic and growing society. It simply needs some common-sense policies on a range of issues – infrastructure, entitlements and immigration. And yet it's hard to foresee progress on any of these fronts in the next few years in Washington.

Yeo and I were among a group of visitors invited to China by the Berggruen Institute, a global think tank, for meetings with China's top leaders, including President Xi Jinping. They were more confident and relaxed than at any point in the more than 20 years that I have been visiting China. In the past, they talked about China's weaknesses and problems, and always about how they were far behind the US. I heard little of that on this visit. But the country continues to search for ideas and best practices from everywhere.

The task today is huge but no greater than in the past. China's original market-oriented reforms were announced by its leader, Deng Xiaoping, in 1978. The second burst of reforms, globalising one of the world's most isolated economies, was announced in 1993

ANXIETY ATTACK

by then President Jiang Zemin. The Communist Party plenum starting today will mark the third major push for reform in modern Chinese history.

In recent years, Beijing has dithered. It has known what to do but has chosen to put off things that would be politically difficult. Instead it has used cheap credit as a stimulus to boost the economy every time growth faltered. But senior officials have acknowledged this and seem determined to make good on their promises this time.

China's leaders have promised "unprecedented" market-oriented reforms that are "comprehensive", "economic, social and political". We will have to wait and watch to see what that means but, for sure, it means no moves towards democracy. It will likely involve administrative changes that make China's bureaucracy more efficient, effective and honest. Local courts, for example, long dominated by corrupt local politicians, are likely to be streamlined, perhaps with the creation of an American-style federal circuit.

In fact, so far, the country has actually moved in the opposite direction politically, clamping down on the internet as part of a Maoist campaign against dissent. One participant described this as a strategy that "moves left politically so that you can move right economically". He said it mirrored Deng Xiaoping's approach, which is summarised in a joke that he once instructed his driver to turn the left signal on while turning to the right.

Many in my group of visitors to China were confident the country would manage this process successfully. "The Chinese ruling elite is fully aware of the rising political and social tensions in the country," said Yeo, "and they respond to them and allow a good bit of openness in the society and on the internet. But they will keep intervening to stop these tensions from getting out of hand. They are engineers, and in any system, you need some friction to slow things down. Too much friction will stop the machine, but too little will cause systemic instability."

It's a powerful metaphor. But one wonders whether a political system can be run like a machine, full of mechanical parts. A nation, after all, is full of people, who are sometimes animated by passions, expectations, fears and anger. Managing those might prove a tough challenge for even the finest engineers.

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