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## Policymakers must use data to finesse governance

Researchers using randomised evaluations in development economics continue to bring new frameworks to persistent policy problems, and test solutions that are based on the intricacies of people’s lives, their decisions, and their realities

**ANALYSIS** Updated: Oct 21, 2019 13:04 IST

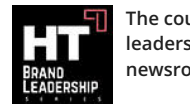
ht Shagun Sabarwal



As the associate director of J-PAL South Asia, an organisation founded by Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerjee in 2007, the mainstay of my team’s work has been to act as an enabler and facilitator for policymakers to use the insights generated by Esther, Abhijit, and other researchers doing similar work, and to initiate new, policy-relevant research through regular government engagement and partnership. (AFP)

In the first chapter of *Poor Economics*, Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerjee share their observation that “ideology drives a lot of policies, and even the most well-intentioned ideas can get bogged down by ignorance of ground-level realities and inertia at the level of the implementer.” Now almost eight years after the book’s first publication, in India, we can safely say that the idea of evidence-based policymaking is not as unheard of as it was back then.

This year’s choice for the Nobel Prize is a testament to the influential role that rigorous



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Research organisations in South Asia to push beyond business as usual, and into the policy backed by hard research.

As the associate director of J-PAL South Asia, an organisation founded by Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerjee in 2007, the mainstay of my team’s work has been to act as an enabler and facilitator for policymakers to use the insights generated by Esther, Abhijit, and other researchers doing similar work, and to initiate new, policy-relevant research through regular government engagement and partnership.

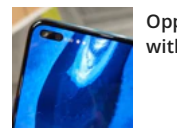
The reason why our government partners find what we have to say compelling more often than not is because what our evidence reveals is often a natural fit for the needs of the policymakers who want to see change in their block, district or state where they work. Our government partners have genuinely sought to change the status quo and displayed a sincere desire to understand what programmes work, what programmes fail on the ground, and why.

For example, in September 2019, the National Health Mission (NHM), government of Haryana formalised a partnership with J-PAL South Asia to systematically integrate the use of data and rigorous research to improve the implementation of state health and immunisation programmes. Through this partnership we also seek to support the government of Haryana’s efforts to build the capacity of health service providers and departmental staff to collect high quality, usable data through the state government’s health information systems.

Researchers using randomised evaluations in development economics continue to bring new frameworks to persistent policy problems, and test solutions that are based on the intricacies of people’s lives, their decisions, and their realities. This search for practical policy solutions focuses on how to contextualise research conducted in various parts of the world, so that they can apply to a particular state or localities systems and resources at hand. The most powerful and policy-relevant research not only answers the question of whether a specific programme impacted its target outcomes or not, but also answers how and why the programme either failed or succeeded.

During the press conference after her Nobel win, Duflo referred to her work as a “collective effort” and said that “we could not have created a movement without hundreds of researchers and staff members.” She continues to acknowledge the role that government partners have played in taking that research into account when designing policy.

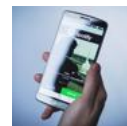
At this juncture, I hope that more and more policymakers will begin to challenge the status quo and push the boundaries of governance by adopting data-driven, evidence-based



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the movement of governments demanding evidence, and embarking on a learning journey with organisations whose mission it is to improve people's lives through the use of evidence on what works, and why.

Shagun Sabarwal is the associate director of policy and training at J-PAL South Asia

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# Judge the budget by its tax revenue growth figure | Opinion

If it is a lot higher than nominal GDP, either it is false, or taxes will increase, or tax harassment will intensify



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Two weeks ago, India recorded its lowest nominal GDP growth in over four decades. (ANI)

“Supervision is fine but not suspicion”. These are not the words of an irate teenager to her parents, as one would suppose. These are the words of the chairman of India’s largest industrial group, the Tatas, to the prime minister (PM) of India and his government. That the employer of three-quarters of a million people should say this reflects the current hapless state of India Inc.

A few days later, the front pages of newspapers flashed the picture of former FICCI president and chairman of Edelweiss Capital, Rashesh Shah, being escorted for investigation by officials of the Enforcement Directorate on charges that the company has refuted vehemently. Given

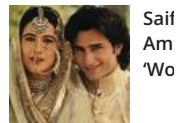
Shah’s spotless image among his industry peers, WhatsApp groups in Mumbai that day were flooded with memes spoofing “Minimum Government, Maximum Governance”, the 2014 electoral promise of the PM.

The very next day, the commerce minister, ostensibly responsible for improving commerce in the country, heaped scorn on the chairman of the world’s largest e-commerce company, who was visiting India to announce a large-scale investment in the country. This baffling behaviour set tongues wagging in the technology startup industry, perhaps the only sector that has provided growth and jobs in recent years.

All these incidents happened in just one week. Recall, just five months ago, the chairman of India’s largest coffee chain, Café Coffee Day, jumped to his death, claiming, in a suicide note, that he was ending his life due to the ignominy and harassment inflicted on him by income tax

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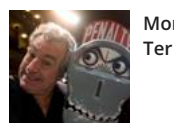
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Also, two weeks ago, India recorded its lowest nominal GDP growth in over four decades.

These are not unrelated events.

Former PM Manmohan Singh, in an eloquent article in *The Hindu*, diagnosed the roots of India’s current economic crisis as the breakdown of trust between economic agents and the governors of the economy. He warned about the unhealthy climate of palpable fear and panic pervading Indian society and business.

Back in August, in an article for the *Hindustan Times*, I pointed out the perils of the current government’s “morality governance” paradigm in which every policy decision is characterised as “good versus evil” and the triumph of good over evil. The Goods and Services Tax (GST), demonetisation, the formalisation of the economy were all policies that followed this playbook.

Here is where we are now — the lowest economic growth in over four decades, the highest unemployment in four decades and so on. Where do we go from here?

There will be yet another budget presented shortly. A lot has been written, providing policy advice to the government about improving demand or rationalising expenditure.

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But the most vital ingredient for economic recovery is the revival of business confidence. This cannot be done just through big policy announcements of tax cuts or sector-specific incentive schemes, but by removing the lens of suspicion and ending acts of tax harassment, as the chairman of the Tata Group pleaded.

Watch for one number in the budget that will signal if the Narendra Modi government is serious about ending distrust and tax harassment or not — the budgeted growth in tax revenues for the next year.

The argument is straightforward. Tax revenues of any economy grows in line with its nominal GDP growth. In other words, there is a tight relationship between nominal GDP growth and tax revenues collected, also called “tax buoyancy” by economists. In the past, India’s gross tax revenues have largely grown in line with nominal GDP, except during the years of severe



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rates have to be linked or collection targets for tax officials have to increase to come from existing taxpayers and/or bring new tax payers, a license for tax harassment.

Nominal GDP is now growing at roughly 7%, the lowest in roughly 45 years. There has been no increase in income tax rates and, if any, there has only been a reduction in corporate tax rates. So, in these circumstances, if the finance minister budgets next year's tax revenues to grow significantly higher than nominal GDP (greater than 10%) in her upcoming budget, then it can only mean that either she is misleading us, or that the government is looking to increase tax rates substantially in the course of the year, or that the tax harassment of business and individuals is only going to intensify in an effort to increase tax collections, or a combination of these.

Whatever the case, it is bad news if the budget assumes overall tax revenue growth that is significantly higher than nominal GDP growth.

Formalisation of India's economy and widening its tax base has been a much-vaunted doctrine of the government's policy over the past several years. The flip side of coerced formalisation is suspicion, harassment and distrust. No major economy in history has set out on an explicit path of formalisation of its economy as a goal. Formalisation is an outcome of economic development and growth. If India Inc today feels victimised and is pleading for mutual trust, it is the result of this explicit goal to formalise India's economy by force.

Headlines and narratives of the budget aside, look out for just one metric in the budget — tax revenue growth of overall taxes, corporate taxes, income taxes and GST.

If any of these numbers are significantly higher than 10%, then you have the answer — the government has not learnt its lessons and the harassment of Indian industry will continue.

*Praveen Chakravarty is a political economist and a senior office bearer of the Congress  
The views expressed are personal*

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# The roots of the US-China rivalry | Opinion

The theatres of conflict include trade, geopolitics, technology, climate, and political values

ANALYSIS Updated: Jan 22, 2020 19:33 IST

ht Janmejaya Sinha



An assertive China and an unpredictable US make geopolitics uncertain(AP)

The global economy has grown over the last decade at 3.2% per annum to \$86 trillion in nominal terms. What has been markedly different in the last 10 years has been the dominant contribution of China to global growth. China's contribution to global growth at 37.6% has, in fact, exceeded the contribution of the United States (US) at 30%. The size of the Chinese economy at \$14 trillion is today 66% the size of the US economy. It is worth recounting that in 2000, Chinese GDP at \$ 1.2 trillion was just 10% of US GDP. The full impact of the rise of China has begun to deeply influence not just the global economy and trade but also geopolitics, technology standards, sustainability and climate change, and the shift in consumption away from developed markets.

The immediate positive development is the emergence of new consumption demand by the four billion new emerging markets consumers, many of whom are in China but also in India and Southeast Asia. By 2025, \$30 trillion of demand will come from the consumers of emerging

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In other ways, China's rise comes with its challenges. Back in 450 BC, when the Greek historian Thucydides wrote that "it was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable", he could have been writing about China and the US today. Dominant countries are always insecure about another rising power that could challenge them. The fast growth of China in the first decade of the 21 century was welcome, as it provided cheaper manufacturing locations and efficiently integrated global supply chains. The last decade has changed all that. Its continued dramatic rise has made it an economic giant. Its massive investments in technology and the manner in which it extracted intellectual property from foreign companies has made other countries resentful. Whatever the misgivings, China today is like a superpower in economic, military, nuclear, and most importantly, in its technological strength.

With Donald Trump's presidency, the underlying hostility in the US has been given expression. There is direct conflict in trade, contested geopolitical spheres of influence, and in deciding the underlying standards in modern technology. Trump has forcefully taken on the adverse terms of trade by imposing tariffs on China, and, more broadly, heralded a new nationalism with his America First policy. China, on its part, has always objected to its insignificance in the post-World War II institutional structure. To correct this, China has created new institutions that it can dominate — Asia Infrastructure & Investment Bank and New Development Bank — to challenge the US and European control of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. It has also asserted its newfound status in developing a more muscular foreign policy, with its best expression being the Belt and Road initiative. It is working hard to create its own sphere of influence.

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This clash is most apparent in the area of technology — Artificial Intelligence (data), quantum computing and cyber standards. What is making a compromise more difficult is the differing underlying beliefs and values underpinning this superpower rivalry. A clash between individual enterprise and public good, between privacy and State rights, and between checks and balances and authoritarian rule. This is making a search for acceptable global standards for data and its storage and use very difficult. The race in quantum computing, 5G and cyber is on, and is creating a fundamental challenge to rule-based institutions because of the disparate starting position of the two superpowers on underlying values. Splitting the world into two technology standards will be unfortunate, but the current path is headed that way.

Global warming is another deep area of global concern. China's rapid rise, which brought with it great improvements in its per capita income, taking millions out of poverty, was accompanied by accelerated CO2 emissions, making it one of the world's worst polluters. Most developing countries had long argued that on their journey out of poverty, tight global



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conceive crisis. Our planet is already one degree hotter. On its current path, it will be three to four degrees hotter by 2100. That will seriously challenge how future generations live. It is clear that the world has lost its first battle against global warming and needs to adapt to living on a hotter planet, but if serious and urgent actions are not taken today, we may have an unlivable planet.

In this new world order, what has caused most countries the greatest consternation is the desire of the US, under Trump, to vacate the global stage. Trump’s foreign policy has been unpredictable and shaken its former allies like South Korea and Europe when he has favoured deal making with North Korea and Russia over them. Trump believes that being a global superpower on a continuing basis does not serve the US well – it costs too much, the recipients do not appreciate the US, and it is not politically popular to send US troops abroad. He also believes bilateral deals serve US better than a multilateral system which can constrain it. Geopolitics has become both more important and more difficult between the assertive Chinese and the unpredictability and global retreat of the US. For most countries, including India, as Singapore’s PM Lee Hsien Loong says, “Choosing between the US and China will be painful.”

*Janmejaya Sinha is chairman, BCG India*

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
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China has made its hostility clear. Hosting the SCO summit at this time can turn out to be counterproductive

ANALYSIS Updated: Jan 22, 2020 19:31 IST

ht Jayadeva Ranade



At the SCO, China could muster support to persuade India to soften its stance on Pakistan and Kashmir(VIA REUTERS)

Within days of the beginning of the new year, China made clear that its attitude towards India will not change. The all-spectrum China-Pakistan compact will stay intact and get further consolidated through closer diplomatic and military coordination. At the same time, China will retain, as cosmetic window dressing, the semblance of cordiality in bilateral relations with India through summits and official-level meetings, which have yielded negligible results. Additionally, there will be the dissimulation that it is under compulsion to support Pakistan. Beijing will simultaneously strive to advance its commercial interests by blending economic incentives with threats, as it has in the case of Huawei and the bid for 5G. Beijing would have interpreted India's recent decision to allow Huawei to participate in the 5G trials, at the risk of introducing vulnerabilities in national security, as succumbing to China's pressure.

Just look at three of China's recent actions. One, Beijing attempted, for the third time in barely five months, to convene a session of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to discuss the Kashmir issue. This was blocked by the United States (US), France and Russia and, for the first time in a seeming change of policy, by the United Kingdom. This will not be the last such attempt.

Two, it publicised the first large-scale military exercises in 2020 by Chinese troops in Tibet.

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Commission (CME) in Beijing headed by Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Three, it held the first nine-day joint “Sea Guardian” exercises with Pakistan in the Arabian Sea, starting on January 6. For the first time, these included warlike air defence systems, anti-missile technology, anti-submarine warfare capabilities, and live-fire and joint marine training drills, as well as submarine rescue and amphibious landing operations by 60 Chinese Marines from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)’s Southern Theatre Command. The PLA Navy did add the ritual anodyne comment that the exercise “wasn’t targeted at any third party”.

Together, the two sets of exercises reflect the land and sea-based threats to India.

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UNSC talks will ease Kashmir tension, most members concerned, says China

These have been preceded by other statements in China’s official military media that underscore the extent of China-Pakistan cooperation in military matters. Late last year, reports proposed the sale a few years later of China’s first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, to Pakistan. The discussions suggested that the sale would help rectify the existing imbalance in maritime power between Pakistan and India, be more affordable for Islamabad, and financially benefit China.

Later, following the Indian airstrikes at the Jaish-e-Mohammad terrorist training camp at Balakot inside Pakistan, the Chinese military media reported extensively on the performance of Pakistan Air Force pilots and aircraft. They lauded the performance of the Chinese-made JH-7 jet aircraft, saying its performance would be good for the sales of Chinese military products. At the time, China’s media also discussed further assistance to Pakistan. One suggestion was that China’s air force should position its “electronic” JH-7 jet aircraft on the Sino-Pakistan border to “loan” it quickly to Pakistan when conflict breaks out. The report was recommending deployment of these aircraft in the South Xinjiang Military District, subordinate to the PLA Western Theatre Command, which exercises operational jurisdiction over the areas opposite Ladakh and Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir, Gilgit and Baltistan, and which is tasked to protect the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

China has, since April 2015, when it announced the CPEC, been exerting pressure on India to improve its ties with Pakistan. Beijing has been insisting in official and Track 1.5 and Track-2 discussions that India commence talks and ease tensions with Pakistan, resolve the Kashmir issue, and only then look to improving ties with China. At that time, the CPEC projects were valued at around \$49 billion and now they are officially estimated by Pakistan at almost \$64 billion. For China, the stakes are undoubtedly high. To increase pressure, China has revived reference to the UNSC resolutions while referring to the Kashmir issue. Beijing has, in the past, referred to UNSC resolutions when its relations with India were under strain.

At this juncture, for India to host a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO),



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Pakistan and Kashmir

Jayadeva Ranade is a former Additional Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat and is President of the Centre for China Analysis and Strategy. The views expressed are personal

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# HT Analysis | US commander-in-chief isn't reading New Delhi's memos on Kashmir

India has consistently pushed back every time Donald Trump has raised the Kashmir issue and yet Donald Trump has gone on to offer to mediate on the issue, causing consternation in foreign policy circles in New Delhi and Washington.

INDIA Updated: Jan 22, 2020 14:14 IST

ht HT Correspondent Hindustan Times, New Delhi

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President Donald Trump listens during a meeting with Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. (Photo: AP)

US President Donald Trump’s latest comments on Kashmir have come at an inopportune moment, because he is expected to visit India next month and they were made against the backdrop of India’s efforts to negate any attempt by Pakistan to internationalise the Kashmir issue.

For the foreign policy establishment in New Delhi, the optics were worse as the comments – “if we can help, we certainly will be helping” – were made ahead of his meeting with Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan on the margins of the World Economic Forum at Davos.

India has consistently pushed back every time Trump has raised Kashmir, with the external affairs ministry roundly dismissing the US president’s claim last July that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had requested him to mediate on the Kashmir issue. And yet Trump has gone on to offer to mediate on the issue, causing consternation in foreign policy circles in New Delhi and Washington.

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## Trump's ultimate deal-maker belief

Some have contended that Trump repeatedly rakes up Kashmir because he believes he is the ultimate deal-maker and that he can broker some sort of understanding between India and Pakistan.

The Indian government has bristled at all mentions of Kashmir on international platforms, including China's recent effort to discuss the issue at the UN Security Council, as it deals with the fallout of the controversial security lockdown, communications blackout and detentions in the erstwhile state.

In the latest instance, Trump appeared to be motivated by the necessity to have Pakistan on his side for the US administration's desperate attempts to reach some sort of understanding with the Taliban to facilitate the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan before his re-election bid.

Barely two years after Trump accused Pakistan of giving nothing but "lies and deceit" in return for billions of dollars in aid, he said the US has "never been closer with Pakistan than we are right now" and described Imran Khan as "a very good friend". The Trump administration has also resumed a military training programme for Pakistan that was snapped in 2018, though other security assistance continues to be suspended.

Rajiv Dogra, a former ambassador who has served in Pakistan, described Trump's latest unsolicited offer of mediating in Kashmir as a "meeting of minds and interests".

"This is a meeting of minds because on one hand you have Trump who thinks India and China don't share a border and on the other, you have Imran Khan who thinks Germany and Japan share a border," he said.

### Imran has Trump where it hurts the most — Afghanistan

"But more importantly, this is a meeting of interests and Imran Khan knows he has Trump where it hurts him the most – Afghanistan. It's a beautiful bargain for them and all the strategic theories have gone for a six ever since Trump was sworn in," Dogra said.

Dogra said he believes Trump is fixated on Afghanistan, and the role Pakistan can play in shaping some sort of a deal in the war-torn country because of its leverage and control over the Taliban, in order to divert attention from his impeachment trial and other problems in the US.

For the foreign policy establishment in India, it is rather obvious now that the US commander-in-chief isn't reading the memos originating from New Delhi on matters such as Kashmir.

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