

Navigating a world of all-round weaponisation

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opinion

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In the era of all-round weaponisation and breakdown of universal globalisation, statecraft has its task cut out to attend to constructing politically friendlier networks or clubs. In times of intense crisis, the risk of even friends turning selfish remains. But friends will at least not intentionally weaponise resources against each other



The phenomenon of weaponisation of a range of goods and services such as food, fuel, electricity, finance and shipping has stood out during the Russia-Ukraine war. (AP)

By Sreeram Chaulia

In a recent speech, external affairs minister S Jaishankar said that “everything is being weaponised in this world”, and that the distinction between a “tough world” based on national security and a “benign world” based on market economy was fading. His contention was that “civil-military fusion” has blurred the lines and made almost every resource and service vulnerable to being instrumentalised to attack and hurt adversaries. This has implications for long-term national strategy.

The phenomenon of weaponisation of a range of goods and services such as food, fuel, electricity, finance and shipping has stood out during the Russia-Ukraine war. Western countries have slammed Russia for weaponising food by blocking Black Sea grain exports

and plundering Ukraine's agricultural harvest, weaponising energy by halting gas supplies to Europe, and even weaponising weather through targeted attacks on electricity and water supply systems of Ukraine as the cold winter sets in.

Undoubtedly, President Vladimir Putin has leveraged all relative strengths and comparative advantages that Russia has to try and impose his will. But it is equally true that Western powers have mobilised and hurled various non-military weapons at Russia.

The most recent salvo fired by the West is the oil price cap on Russia, which leverages the commanding position of Western companies in maritime logistics and trade to starve Russia of revenues from its energy exports. Parallel to the physical fighting on the battlefield, non-kinetic attacks and counterattacks by both sides have also been witnessed in cyberspace and the information domain.

Utilising all means available to outdo an opponent is, of course, not a new trend in warfare. But this weaponisation has become more comprehensive in scope today because of the thick webs of interdependence that bind countries together under the umbrella of globalisation. As countries have become excessively interdependent for basic needs, the stakes on supply chains have grown tremendously. We witnessed how susceptible the world was during Covid-19, when China harnessed its control over supplies of medical devices, kits, pharmaceuticals and vaccines. The political conditions China imposed on countries desperate to access essential products for combating the pandemic underlined the importance of diversifying supply chains. Earlier, in 2010, China wielded its advantage as the sole supplier of many rare-earth industrial minerals and blocked their sale to Japan to punish it over a bilateral territorial dispute.

The art of linkage — where a conflict in one domain draws a shot across the bows from another domain — is currently deadlier and more consequential than in earlier eras. Calls for “decentralised globalisation” which is not subject to the whims and diktats of China are being heard loud and clear. India and other developing countries have also sought to find ways to protect themselves from the pressures of unilateral or plurilateral economic sanctions that entail collateral damage such as the global inflationary headwinds which rippled out of the tit-for-tat games between the West and Russia. Since weaponisation is the prerogative of countries or blocs that have monopolies or oligopolies over key resources and services, the theoretically ideal solution for the survival of less endowed or powerful nations is to be self-sufficient in a given set of basic sectors.

For instance, India went on a war-footing during the pandemic and transitioned from being import-dependent to self-sufficient in personal protective equipment kits and facemasks. But the massive costs and time barriers to gaining self-sufficiency in energy, cereals, fuel, fertiliser, pharmaceuticals, critical technologies and even armaments for self-defence mean that there is no near-term solution, except to strengthen coalitions with friendly nations or allies and enter into agreements that guarantee supply lines and non-hostile policies. Having a backup of ‘Plan B’ suppliers in case ‘Plan A’ ones fall through amid an emergency would also be prudent.

United States treasury secretary Janet Yellen has advocated a shift from offshoring to “friend-shoring”, wherein supply chains are redirected towards countries one can trust owing to shared political values and geopolitical congruence. In the era of all-round weaponisation and breakdown of universal globalisation, statecraft has its task cut out to attend to constructing politically friendlier networks or clubs. In times of intense crisis, the risk of even friends turning selfish remains. But friends will at least not intentionally weaponise resources against each other.

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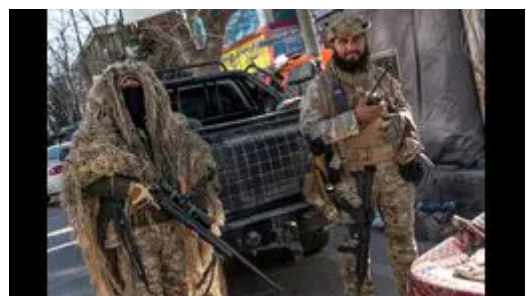
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The scrapping of Maulana Azad National Fellowship is wrong

opinion

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The sudden scrapping of MANF comes as a shock to the students of minority communities. However, to only comprehend this as a loss to the minority communities would be narrow-sighted. The entire academia stands to lose from this move



PREMIUM

The scheme's objective was to financially assist students of six minority communities: Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains and Zoroastrians, as they pursued MPhil and PhD degrees. (ht photo)

By Aruma Khan

As human beings, we are faced with choices all the time. We are always evaluating our options and making decisions. Of all the reasons that make pursuing a PhD a daunting decision, the lack of financial security is significant. Only 0.5% of all the students enrolled in higher education are enrolled in PhD programmes in India.

Despite being a competitive and cumbersome process, enrolling in a PhD programme does not guarantee financial support. In central universities, only ₹5,000 and ₹8,000 per month (non-NET fellowship) are available to PhD scholars. In recent years, there has been talk of discontinuing non-NET fellowships and suggestions for replacing them with selective fellowships. As a result, students compete for other fellowships and scholarships in search of more promising financial support.

One such prominent fellowship used to be Maulana Azad National Fellowship (MANF), named after the first education minister of India -- Abul Kalam Azad. The scheme was primarily an outcome of the recommendations of the Sachar Committee that acknowledged the Muslim population's poor educational and occupational status compared to other social groups in India. The scheme's objective was to financially assist students of six minority communities: Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains and Zoroastrians, as they pursued MPhil and PhD degrees.

The ministry of minority affairs was implementing the fellowship through the University Grants Commission (UGC). However, on December 8, the student community got a rude jolt as the Union minister of minority affairs, Smriti Irani, informed the Lok Sabha that the Centre had decided to scrap MANF.

The reason: MANF overlapped with other fellowship schemes for higher education, which covered minority students. The move is bound to seriously impact students of minority communities who were counting on MANF to pursue their PhDs.

Fellows were selected for MANF through the same UGC NET-JRF exam conducted by the National Testing Agency. MANF was on par with the Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) regarding the rate. JRF is one of the most sought-after fellowships, with a stipend of ₹31,000 per month for the initial two years and ₹35,000 per month for the next three years, along with contingency and HRA.

The cut-off for JRF, however, soars exceptionally high. Consider the example of the latest cycle's JRF cut-off percentile. As disclosed by the NTA, the cut-off percentile for the unreserved category stood at 99.35 for Political Science. This means the last person to get JRF in Political Science scored more than 99.35% of the candidates' scores in the same exam.

Qualifying for JRF involves intense competition, and only some students can succeed. Although, for the disadvantaged categories, namely EWS, OBC, SC/ST and PwD, the cut-offs for JRF are different and significantly lower than the unreserved category. But for minority students, there is no provision for a separate cut-off for JRF. Instead, they had the provision of MANF, which the government has now scrapped.

Qualifying the UGC NET was a precondition for being considered for MANF; a necessary condition but not a sufficient one. Per cycle, 500 students were to be selected for MANF; in total, 1,000 students annually. The minister stated that between 2014-15 and 2021-22, 6,722 students were selected under MANF, and ₹738.85 crore were distributed for the same.

The reason for discontinuing the fellowship is not clear or convincing. It has left many agitated and sceptical.

First, not all the students who were covered under MANF are covered by other fellowships.

Second, students are already barred from availing offellowships from more than one source at a time. The students are only eligible to get MANF/JRF once they've declared that they will not receive monetary benefit from any other source. The stated problem of overlapping remains unclear. However, the problem of students availing multiple fellowships simultaneously is an implementation problem and could have been tackled by careful operationalisation.

The sudden scrapping of MANF comes as a shock to the students of minority communities, possibly with the potential of deterring a considerable number of them from pursuing PhD degrees. However, to only comprehend this as a loss to the minority communities would be inadequate and narrow-sighted. The entire academia stands to lose from this move.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) today undertake two primary functions; research and teaching. Not only do HEIs function as sites of knowledge creation (via research), but they also produce knowledge producers (via teaching). Enabling access to HEIs for students of minority communities is crucial for forging diverse and inclusive discourses with the voices of the marginalised.

Deterring aspiring researchers of such communities would not only suppress their presence in the student body but would further reduce their representation in faculty positions in the years to come. This is so because holding a PhD degree will be a compulsory qualification for recruiting assistant professors from 2023.

Maintaining an inclusive representation in university space and academia is crucial, especially in Indian society, which is highly stratified and hierarchised. This is precisely what MANF aimed to do; making higher education more accessible for the marginalised and facilitating their representation in the Indian higher education system.

There are more far-reaching consequences to this move than what meets the eye. Higher education is like an investment. The kind of education we receive, the degrees we earn, and the experiences and social contacts we gather on campuses can determine the quality of our lives.

The educational, occupational and social mobility of the marginalised groups is at stake. This central government's decision has brought into question the credibility of the spirit shown in the NEP 2020 document, which claims to envision high-quality higher education with "equity and inclusion".

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