

The Science, Indigenous Technology & Advanced Research Accelerator

Wednesday, August 19, 2020

Dear Gen Pant,

As you are aware, SITARA is a not-for-profit Trust dedicated to the technological upgradation of the Indian economy through indigenous efforts. SITARA has been writing since its inception and even before - to NSA’s office in 2018, and thereafter regularly to Hon’ble Prime Minister, NSCS and other bodies - to promote indigenous national capabilities.

2. We were naturally very encouraged by the slew of policies that Government had adopted to promote high-tech indigenous production, especially following the perfidious and deadly Chinese attack in Galwan. These ranged from Defence, to Surface Transport, to Power and Telecommunications, where at the instance of Officers in PMO/ NSCS/ NSAB/ DPIIT/ Power Ministry/ MOST Ministry and other Govt bodies committed to *independence from foreign subjugation* - the BSNL tender ruling out Indian companies was overturned and BSNL was tasked to ensure that 4G/ 5G national networks be built through domestic resources.

3. **We were especially glad that Hon'ble Prime Minister gave an unambiguous call for self-reliance. This sent a clear message that Prime Minister would not tolerate any deviation from Atmanirbharta** (<https://telecom.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/telecom-sector-needs-to-focus-on-security-self-reliance-pm-modi/77281124>).

4. Attacks on sovereignty can be of many kinds, and in the digital era, one of the most insidious was the penetration of India's ICT networks by Chinese and other foreign companies. Given that China had adopted an aggressive, multi-domain 360 degree Information Warfare strategy, it was in the nick of time that Government came down heavily on ICT contracts awarded to Chinese companies and removed Chinese companies from the ICT ecosystem. **This was essential for national security and would also give the space for Indian national economic strength to recover.** **In a few years,** **the dedication of these Officers and Departments under PM’s leadership would ensure that India gave a robust answer to attacks on its sovereignty. Along with our brave Soldiers guarding the frontiers with their lives, these would be the heroes of India’s Atmanirbharta revolution.**

5. **Therefore, we were truly shocked to learn that even before the ink was dry on these proclamations, attempts were being made to reverse and undo Hon'ble Prime Minister's Atmanirbharta mandate**. To start with, we wish to bring the following to your kind attention:

1. **Dilution of local content in domestic procurement:** The first one is the enclosed Public Procurement (Preference to Make in India) Order 2017 vide Order no.  P-45021/ 2/2017-PP BE (II) dated June 4, 2020. **This seeks to dilute the local content in telecom procurement supplies to 20%! This is a complete reversion to the old practice of favoriting foreign suppliers. We are 100% sure this does not have the PM / PMO/ NSCS/ NSAB’s approval as it goes completely against the calls for Atmanirbharta and your combined efforts on behalf of the Indian people.**

**Moreover, Prime Minister did not order the exclusion of Chinese companies so that FOEMs would benefit**. Independent India’s history is replete with instances of how the Leadership’s good intentions have been derailed by vested interests. This is clearly an attempt to revert to the status quo, and a few years down the line, India will still be importing high value materials and remain an impoverished, low-technology economy with all the terrible consequences that entails.

**We request all your intervention in ensuring this shocking deviation from PM’s command is cancelled immediately**. We have come across reports of lobbying our Government departments by foreign OEMs. **We request for kind consideration that access to Government departments for foreign companies and consultants be strictly controlled and monitored by the Central Vigilance Commission and our security agencies if this is what results from these meetings.**

A detailed Industry Note is enclosed. It is understood TEPC has also taken this up with the relevant Govt department. From SITARA we also make the request that this be investigated and reversed. Officials should be called to account for diluting the provisions, which can only be seen in the most negative light.

1. **Fraudulent security audit:** The second is also bizarre and designed to pull the wool over the public’s eyes which is not familiar with the complexity of cyber systems. It seems that “The Department of Telecommunications (DoT) is set to direct all telecom operators to undertake an ‘information security audit’ of their networks and submit the report by October end.” The pretext is to keep “an eye on China”

(<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/eye-on-china-dot-to-direct-full-network-audit-by-telcos-6559030/#:~:text=After%20a%20border%20skirmish%20at,out%20of%20its%204G%20network).>

**As a cybersecurity expert, you are aware that it is nearly impossible to catch “backdoors” in hardware equipment**. I enclose a Bloomberg article on this issue. It took the Americans several years of investigation to catch hardware backdoors the Chinese had inserted into Apple servers. The level of sophistication the Chinese have is something even the Americans cannot crack. **This will just degenerate into an excuse for another tender which will be won by a foreign company for a hefty fee**. Experts tell us that there’s no technology that exists for audit of such complex systems. But there is a powerful lobby of cybersecurity experts including the Big 4 (who are already being awarded lucrative contracts involving access to Indian citizens’ data, thus compromising our national security) - who will “audit” the network and certify it for a hefty fee.

**We request that Government labs and NSCS must be asked to conduct this security audit if DOT feels some bugs are going to be caught**. **If required, our “audit” capabilities must be upgraded. But the charade of foreign OEM-conducted security audits must be stopped.**

**The only safety is by inducting indigenous equipment. But then there will be no scope for discretionary tenders and cosy deals, even if these are to the terrible detriment of the Nation, national security and economic growth.**

**So departments are working overtime to find excuses to undo PM’s mandate, and this must be stopped otherwise India will remain vulnerable to more attacks. It is *really* really clever to use the China excuse, which country this department has been propitiating all along. Swadeshi Jagaran Manch was forced to address PM on the attendance of the top brass of the Telecom Department at a Huawei sponsored conference, and as late as late 2019 DOT officials were availing of “training” programs in China funded by the Chinese. All this speaks for itself.**

**We have full confidence that we are writing to Patriots in Government, and that our plea will resonate with Prime Minister and be answered.**

**We also request your office, PMO, NSAB to please henceforth be aware of and maintain the utmost vigilance in ensuring the vast armies of vested interests and lobbyists are kept at bay as they must be trying desperately to overturn the Atmanirbharta program. The nation will be grateful to you all and the strengthening of India’s indigenous capabilities will be a concrete legacy you will leave behind for generations of Indians to benefit from**. **Consistency is the key or we will lose this fight against a determined adversary.**

With regards and best wishes for all your safety,

Smita Purushottam

Chairperson SITARA