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I - FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Summary

Foreign Affairs

Relations between India and the US continue to be commented on by political analysts in Indian print media. The defence ministers of the two countries recently met in the US as part of the 2+2 dialogue, a process in which the foreign and defence ministers of the two countries meet regularly. US Defence Minister, James Mattis, when asked about procurement from Moscow by New Delhi of S-400 air defence missile system and the possible sanctions which it can lead to under Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAASTA), is reported to have said that the two allies will find ways to resolve the issue as the said law contains provisions under which countries can be exempted from sanctions. He is reported to have further stated that the US government understood the fact that India procured most of its defence equipment from the USSR during New Delhi's non-aligned days. India is reported to have told the US, on different occasions, that its military relations with Russia far pre-dated its relations with the US, and that the same be kept separate from their bilateral relationship.

The Kartarpur Corridor between India and Pakistan continues to get significant space in Indian print media. The details of what needed to be done on the ground, for example construction of link roads on the two sides of the border, the need for making a bridge on the Ravi, and so on, are being discussed by commentators. Moreover, at the time of the foundation-laying ceremonies on the two sides, much hope and enthusiasm was created among peace activists and commentators. Pakistan wanted to invite Indian prime minister to the much delayed SAARC summit, but their expectations were shattered, as discernible in Indian press, by a statement issued by Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj in which she was reported to have said that India will not attend the said conference, and that the Kartarpur Corridor episode should not be seen as a step towards resumption of India-Pakistan dialogue process.

Pakistan-US relations remain one of the main theme of reporting and opinion in Pakistan's print media. Islamabad is reported to have welcomed US Defence Secretary Mattis' statement in which he was quoted as saying that "the United States wants every responsible nation to support peace efforts in the sub-continent and Afghanistan." Pakistan re-iterated its stated position of its support for an inclusive Afghan-led peace process. Officials at the foreign office are reported to have said that we always maintained that there was no military solution to the crisis in Afghanistan.

The United States House of Representative recently passed a resolution with a bipartisan support to condemn atrocities against Rohingya Muslims. The statement said that it was a moral obligation of the US. Resolution called atrocities 'genocide'. It also urged immediate release of two journalist Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, sentenced to seven years jail for breaching state law. Another refugee issue is pending with Nepal, where more than 6,500 Bhutanese living in eastern Nepal under the decade-long third country resettlement program (by World Food Programme for Bhutanese). This 26 year-old humanitarian program is going to be ended this month, however, no permanent solution is on the table.

I - FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 5-12-2018

US ‘sorting’ out CAATSA sanctions waiver for India

Sitharaman meets Mattis, credits 2+2 for improved ties

Ajay Banerjee

Tribune News Service

The US is trying to “sort out” the issue of giving India a waiver from sanctions after New Delhi, on October 5, ignored US threat and went ahead with the purchase of S-400 air defence missile system from Russia.

US Secretary of Defence James Mattis has expressed confidence on getting India a waiver from the threat of sanctions saying “we will sort out all issues”.

Mattis’ remarks came at a media briefing before he met Indian Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and her high-level delegation in the US. Asked specifically about the waiver, he said: “India has spent many years in its non-aligned status. It has drawn a lot of weapons from Russia. We are here to talk about all issues that bring us closer. We will sort out all issues here today and in the days ahead.”

In June, the US had passed the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) that requires imposing curbs on nations that have “significant” defence relations with Russia. There is a provision for a waiver and New Delhi has argued out its case to the US.

“The waiver authority is not a blanket waiver. Waivers are considered on transaction basis. We cannot prejudge any sanction decisions,” the US had said after the India-Russia deal.

India needs a presidential waiver to get around the punitive CAATSA sanctions.

In the past, India has argued that it has a strategic partnership with the US, but also made it clear to Washington that India-Russia military relations stand separate from the India-US ties and that these are not inter-connected.

At the India-US meeting, Sitharaman, meanwhile, said: “The inaugural 2+2 inter-ministerial dialogue hosted by India in September was a landmark in our relations and has set the stage for strategic consultations.”

This was the fourth meeting in a year between Sitharaman and Mattis. On October 10, just five days after the India-Russia deal, US President Donald Trump had said India would find out what action the US took against it for defence deal with Russia “sooner than you think”. “India is going to find out, aren’t they,” Trump had told reporters at the White House.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 5-12-2018

Long road ahead for corridor

Amid reports of Pakistan opening an immigration centre at Kartarpur for pilgrims desiring to visit the gurdwara there, sources in the government on Tuesday downplayed the development, saying that among the major works required for easy access from Indian side was a bridge over the Ravi.

“While corridor on the Indian side should be ready in the next two-three months, a bridge would have to be built to withstand the strong currents of the river,” top government sources said here.

To a specific question about reports on the immigration office at Kartarpur under Pakistan Federal Investigation Agency, sources said much should not be read into the development on the other side.

The current focus for India, sources said, was to complete the 4-km corridor work for which the Vice President laid the foundation stone at Dera Baba Nanak on November 26 at a function attended by Punjab Chief Minister Capt Amarinder Singh and others. On the Pakistan side, PM Imran Khan was at the groundbreaking ceremony held at Kartarpur on November 28.

In the wake of reports that pilgrims for the gurdwara would not require visas, sources said these were matters of detail that would have to be taken up in due course.

Soon after the Kartarpur corridor project became public and Pakistan announced it would invite PM Narendra Modi for the SAARC meeting, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj rejected the offer and said the corridor initiative would not result in resumption of dialogue with Islamabad, reiterating the stand “talks and terror cannot go together”.

THE HINDU, DELHI 4-12-2018

Two Punjab, one South Asia

Kanak Mani Dixit

India-Pakistan rapprochement and the South Asian future require subnational engagement, starting with Punjab

For a flickering moment in the last week of November, it seemed as if Congress provocateur and Punjab Minister Navjot Singh Sidhu might set the geopolitical agenda, when he unabashedly spoke of the need for India and Pakistan to mend fences. He was in Lahore on the occasion of the start of work on the Kartarpur Corridor, meant to ease the travel of Sikh pilgrims to the resting place of Guru Nanak.

Unfazed by ridicule on Indian television, the cricketer-turned-politician spoke of peace, trade and people-to-people contact, all of them lost causes of the ‘track two’ dialogues of past decades.

His confidence seemed to emanate from being a Sikh and Punjabi reaching out to Pakistani Punjab, and in his wordy sermons one actually detected the formula for India-Pakistan cohabitation, which would also catalyse cooperation in the larger South Asian region.

Ultra-nationalist fog

Peace in the Subcontinent presupposes amity between India and Pakistan, and more than 40 years of efforts at regionalism has been held hostage by hostility of the two, with the other countries watching askance.

The abuse hurled by the state establishments of each side is a populist political tool that distracts the public from pressing matters of growth, equity, democracy and accountability. That the cost of maintaining massive militaries in each country drags down efforts at social justice is lost in the fog of ultra-nationalism.

India, as the more stable democracy, should inculcate empathy for the neighbour, but the New Delhi commentariat tends not to recognise the difference between the Pakistani state and its people, the latter struggling against extremism, military supremacy and state-centralism all at one go.

Indian media by and large is not bothered by the travails of Pakistanis, as right-wing trolls rule the airwaves and social media. Similar to how dissent is sought to be silenced with the 'Urban Naxal' tag, since long those seeking India-Pakistan amity and South Asian regionalism are rejected as romantic peaceniks lighting meaningless candles at Wagah-Atari.

The trolling and abuse on all matters related to Pakistan can be expected to peak as India's general election of 2019 draws near, which will only help Islamabad's military-intelligence complex tighten its grip on the society. It is high time to try once again for a plan for South Asian regionalism.

Opportunity costs

The potential of South Asia for sustained high growth has been blocked by the tightened national borders, with India playing its part by building barbed wire fences on the Pakistan and Bangladesh frontiers. In all of seven decades, the economic history of the Subcontinent has been forgotten, with the ultra-nationalist narrative having us believe that this separate living is how it has always been.

Until Cyril Radcliffe drew the map of Partition, the economic synergy across the different parts of the Subcontinent was an unquestioned historical reality. There is no one to remember or remind that this reality of sealed borders was set only in 1947 for most parts of the Subcontinent, or that the door actually slammed shut only after the India-Pakistan war of 1965.

As the historical 'connectivity' of the Subcontinent crumbled, it created massive dysfunction as economies of scale and

production chains were disrupted. The opportunity costs have been incalculable in terms of infrastructure, production and commerce, and the loss in livelihoods would be heart-rending if only we cared to calculate.

The present-day failure of South Asian academia is its unwillingness to theorise on the promise of economic growth and social justice that regionalism holds, through soft/open borders. Of the Indian intelligentsia, the failure is also in seeing economic geography through the New Delhi lens rather than those of the 'peripheral' regions, from Rajasthan to the Northeast.

'South Asia' must be understood as a project for social justice, to be achieved through economic rationalisation, sub-regional interactions and reduced military budgets – and open borders such as exists between Nepal and India.

Counter-populism

The goal of the future should be to learn to compartmentalise one's perceptions of the 'other', that Pakistan is made up of its state and its people just as India too is made up of its state and its people. The mutual demonisation has to do with conflating the two, state apparatus and citizenry, as one.

While the Pakistani state is rightfully critiqued for the way the military/intelligence calls the shots — from the Kargil misadventure to cross-border militancy, to even denying Punjab province the right to import energy from India — the self-perception of India as 'good' and Pakistan as 'bad' should have been abandoned long ago.

In Pakistan, the space of the public intellectual is circumscribed by the jihadists, the army and the military intelligence. In India, a much freer country no doubt, there is the rise of pernicious ultra-populism that keeps public figures from speaking up.

In the age of Narendra Modi, proposing South Asian solidarity is frowned upon to such an extent that academics and opinion makers, not to mention bureaucracy and even international funding agencies, all think it is better to keep aloof of the concept. Since 2016, the Prime Minister has been consistent in his refusal to attend the 19th SAARC Summit slated for Islamabad, which has rendered the regional organisation comatose. His vision of South Asian regionalism is where the neighbours dance to India's tune.

The fear that South Asia as a concept heralds some kind of supra-sovereignty is misplaced, for there is no plan afoot for supplanting of the nation-state and associated group privileges. No, the capitals are not being asked to relinquish their powers to a Subcontinental centre.

Instead, a realistic formula for South Asian regionalism lies in allowing the federal units of the two largest countries — the provinces of Pakistan and the states of India — autonomy, which

today exists only on paper. This is where the Punjab-Punjab formula comes in.

Even as television sought to lampoon Mr. Sidhu, we saw what was required to push for peace in South Asia — chutzpah. The Yiddish word implies the gall or audacity of a showman, and the gift of repartee to challenge the harshest of televangelist anchors.

It does seem that ultranationalist populism can only be cut by counter-populist hyperbole. Responding to the Pakistan Foreign Minister's invitation to the Kartarpur Corridor ground-breaking, the Punjab Minister replied in a letter: "As our nations take this first step, the Kartarpur Spirit can make pilgrims of us all, venturing out on a journey that breaks the barriers of history and opens the borders of hearts and the mind, a journey that our people can walk together towards a future of shared peace and prosperity for India and Pakistan."

If you read the words and not the perception some have of the gentleman, the future of Punjab-Punjab, India-Pakistan and South Asia as a whole can be found in the paragraph.

Punjabiyat

Nothing has been left untried in the effort to ease India-Pakistan tensions — Atal Bihari Vajpayee visiting Minar-e-Pakistan in Lahore; Mr. Modi flying in for Nawaz Sharif's birthday; secret emissaries rushing hither and yon; and 'track two' and 'track three' events of every kind.

Nothing has worked, and we are today in suspended animation between Mr. Modi's India-centric vision of the region and the Pakistani military's control of the geopolitical discourse in Islamabad. At such a time comes the possibility held out by the Kartarpur Corridor.

Punjab province is by far the most powerful sub-national unit of Pakistan. The Indian Punjab may not be as powerful within India in relative terms, but it is no pushover either. The two Punjabs have one history, as the stepping stone for invaders, battlegrounds that go back millennia, the shared tragedy of Partition, and the shared culture and language of Punjabiyat.

Given that South Asian regionalism can only come from a turn towards genuine federalism in India and Pakistan, Punjab Province and Punjab State are the places to start anew. It may just be Punjabiyat is the concept which will help bring India and Pakistan closer to peace, and make South Asia a safer and more prosperous place.

THE HINDU, DELHI 1-12-2018

Together in an uncertain world

Harsh V. Pant

The EU's road map for strengthening ties with India must be acted upon by both

Last week saw the European Union releasing its strategy on India after 14 years. Launching the strategy document, the European

Union (EU) Ambassador to India, Tomasz Kozlowski, underlined that "India is on the top of the agenda of the EU in the field of external relations... this strategy paper reflects that EU has taken India's priorities very seriously. We are ready for a joint leap." The 2004 EU-India declaration on building bilateral strategic partnership, which this road map replaces, has not had much of a success in reconfiguring the relationship as was expected.

Transformative shift

The new document is sweeping in its scope and lays out a road map for strengthening the EU-India partnership, which has been adrift for a while in the absence of a clearly articulated strategy. The new strategy underscores a transformative shift in Brussels vis-à-vis India and talks of key focus areas such as the need to conclude a broader Strategic Partnership Agreement, intensifying dialogue on Afghanistan and Central Asia, strengthening technical cooperation on fighting terrorism, and countering radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorist financing. More significant from the perspective of the EU, which has been traditionally shy of using its hard power tools, is a recognition of the need to develop defence and security cooperation with India.

Despite sharing a congruence of values and democratic ideals, India and the EU have both struggled to build a partnership that can be instrumental in shaping the geopolitics and geoeconomics of the 21st century. Each complain of the other's ignorance, and often arrogance, and both have their own litany of grievances.

But where India's relations with individual EU nations have progressed dramatically over the last few years and the EU's focus on India has grown, it has become imperative for the two to give each other a serious look. In this age when U.S. President Donald Trump is upending the global liberal order so dear to the Europeans, and China's rise is challenging the very values which Brussels likes to showcase as the ones underpinning global stability, a substantive engagement with India is a natural corollary.

Delhi's overture

The Narendra Modi government too has shed India's diffidence of the past in engaging with the West. New Delhi has found the bureaucratic maze of Brussels rather difficult to navigate and in the process ignored the EU as a collective. At times, India also objected to the high moralistic tone emanating from Brussels. Where individual nations of the EU started becoming more pragmatic in their engagement with India, Brussels continued to be big-brotherly in its attitude on political issues and ignorant of the geostrategic imperatives of Indian foreign and security policies.

The result was a limited partnership which largely remained confined to economics and trade. Even as the EU emerged as India's largest trading partner and biggest foreign investor, the

relationship remained devoid of any strategic content. Though the Modi government did initially make a push for reviving the talks on EU-India bilateral trade and investment agreement, nothing much of substance has happened on the bilateral front.

But as the wider EU political landscape evolves after Brexit, and India seeks to manage the turbulent geopolitics in Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific, both recognise the importance of engaging each other. There is a new push in Brussels to emerge as a geopolitical actor of some significance and India is a natural partner in many respects. There is widespread disappointment with the trajectory of China's evolution and the Trump administration's disdain for its Western allies is highly disruptive. At a time when India's horizons are widening beyond South Asia and the Indian Ocean region, Brussels is also being forced to look beyond its periphery. The EU will be part of the International Solar Alliance, and has invited India to escort World Food Programme vessels to transport food to Somalia. The two have been coordinating closely on regional issues.

Taking it forward

The new India strategy document unveiled by the EU, therefore, comes at an appropriate time when both have to seriously recalibrate their partnership. Merely reiterating that India and the EU are "natural partners" is not enough, and the areas outlined in the document, from security sector cooperation to countering terrorism and regional security, need to be focussed on. India needs resources and expertise from the EU for its various priority areas, such as cybersecurity, urbanisation, environmental regeneration, and skill development.

As the EU shifts its focus to India, New Delhi should heartily reciprocate this outreach. In the past, India had complained that Brussels does not take India seriously and that despite the two not having any ideological affinity, the EU-China relations carried greater traction. Now all that might change.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 3-12-2018

The new trilateralism

Indian diplomacy may be taking a welcome turn. All major powers are engaging each other and Delhi must do the same

That Prime Minister Narendra Modi could sit down with the leaders of the US and Japan on the margins of the G-20 Summit in Buenos Aires over the weekend and, soon after, parley with the presidents of China and Russia, has generated some surprise and much appreciation of India's new international standing that the two trilateral summits underlined. This is the first time that the trilateral engagement between India, Japan and the United States has been elevated to the highest political level. Not surprisingly, PM Modi came up with a new acronym, "JAI", for the trilateral partnership. His meeting with President Xi Jinping

and President Vladimir Putin has taken place after a gap of nearly 12 years. Cynical observers would say nothing much should be read into this kind of summitry — brief conversations on the margins of multilateral summits are not uncommon.

Yet, given the history of Indian foreign policy and its deep suspicion of the West, there is no question that the trilateral summit with President Donald Trump and the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, is an important marker in the evolution of India's foreign policy. Although India's bilateral relations with the US and Japan and other Western countries have grown significantly in the 21st century and its officials have engaged with those from Washington, Tokyo and Canberra in the trilateral and quadrilateral format, Delhi has been hesitant to participate in these meetings at the summit level. The domestic concern about abandoning "non-alignment" was one reason. The fear of annoying India's friends in the East — in Beijing and Moscow — has been cited as the other. Although the trilateral and quadrilateral diplomacy with the US and its Asian allies — Japan and Australia — began under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, his colleagues in the UPA government and the Congress party were deeply conflicted about intensifying the partnership with the US.

Modi, however, has shed, in his own words, the "hesitations of history" in dealing with the United States and allies in Europe and Asia. Many critics of his foreign policy had warned against the dangers of drawing too close to the US and distancing India from old friends like Russia and confronting China. But as Modi's renewed trilateral summitry with Putin and Xi proves, India does not have to choose between one camp or the other. After all, Xi's main focus at the G-20 summit was on cutting a deal with Trump on trade issues. All major powers are engaging each other and Delhi must do the same without any inhibitions. If India's strategic opportunities with the major powers are real, Delhi's main weakness has been the inability to fully translate this extraordinary political leverage into substantive economic and military gains.

THE HINDU, DELHI 1-12-2018

Neighbourhood first?

Suhasini Haidar

In a calibrated move, the Modi government is dialling down aggressive postures in bilateral ties

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi touched down in the Maldives in mid-November to attend the swearing-in of Ibrahim Mohamed Solih as the country's President, it was easy to count the "firsts" in his visit. Among them: this was Mr. Modi's first visit to the Maldives, the only country in South Asia he had not yet visited in his tenure, and the first by an Indian Prime Minister

in seven years. The only time a visit by Mr. Modi had been planned, in 2015, he cancelled his travel plan abruptly, to register a strong protest at the treatment of opposition leaders, who are now in government. The one “first” that was not as prominent, however, was that despite inviting all South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) leaders to his own swearing-in ceremony in May 2014, the Maldives visit marked the first time Mr. Modi attended the swearing-in ceremony of any other leader. The fact that he did, and chose to be one among the audience rather than on stage, may be a more visible sign of a new, softer neighbourhood policy than the one Mr. Modi’s government has pursued in previous years.

All in 2018

The current year, 2018, has marked a year of reaching out in the region by the Modi government in general, with a view to dialling down disagreements that otherwise marked ties with major powers such as Russia and China. But while Mr. Modi’s “Wuhan summit” with Chinese President Xi Jinping and the “Sochi retreat” with Russian President Vladimir Putin merited much attention, it is important to take stock of attempts at rapprochement in the immediate neighbourhood.

With Nepal, the government’s moves were a clear turn-around from the ‘tough love’ policy since the 2015 blockade. Then, the government seemed to want nothing more than to usher Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli out of power. In 2018, however, when Mr. Oli was re-elected, despite his anti-India campaign, the Modi government wasted no time in reaching out and, in a highly unconventional move, despatched External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj to Kathmandu even before Mr. Oli had been invited to form the government. Since then, Mr. Oli has been invited to Delhi and Mr. Modi has made two visits to Nepal, with a third one planned in December to be part of the “Vivaha Panchami” festival. The frequency of visits in 2018 is in stark contrast to the three preceding years, when Mr. Modi did not visit Nepal at all.

Similar comparisons abound with India’s reaction to major developments in the neighbourhood. In the Maldives, when emergency was declared by the previous regime of Abdulla Yameen, New Delhi made no attempt to threaten him militarily despite expectations of domestic commentators and Western diplomats. When Mr. Yameen went further, denying visas to thousands of Indian job seekers and naval and military personnel stationed there, New Delhi’s response was to say that every country has a right to decide its visa policy.

With elections in Bhutan (completed) and Bangladesh (to be held in December), as well as the ongoing political crisis in Sri Lanka, India has chosen to make no public political statement that could be construed as interference or preference for one side over the other. Earlier this year, the government even allowed a delegation of the Bangladesh opposition to visit Delhi and speak

at Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-affiliated think tanks, although it later deported a British QC lawyer for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

Perhaps the biggest policy shift this year was carried out as a concession to the Ashraf Ghani government in Kabul. After a policy of more than two decades of refusing to engage with the Taliban, or even sit at the table with them, in November India sent envoys to the Moscow conference on Afghanistan, where the Taliban’s representatives were present. The U.S. chose to send a diplomat based in Moscow as an “observer”, but the Indian delegation of former Ambassadors to the region represented non-official “participation” at the event. The shift was palpable. Earlier, the government had stayed aloof from the process, explaining that any meeting outside Afghanistan crossed the redline on an “Afghan-owned and Afghan-led solution”. While the change in position was eventually achieved by a high-level outreach by the Russian government, which has projected the conference as a big diplomatic success, India’s participation had been nudged by President Ghani himself. He had made a strong pitch for backing talks with the Taliban during a visit to Delhi in mid-September. Both in his meeting with Mr. Modi and in a public speech, Mr. Ghani had stressed that the Islamic State and “foreign terrorists” were the problem in Afghanistan, as opposed to the Afghan Taliban itself, and talks with them had the support of the Afghan people. Whatever India’s reservations may have been about the Taliban, the Modi government eventually decided to extend its participation to the Moscow event.

The Kartarpur link

Given the context, it may be possible to see the government’s latest shift, in sending two Union Ministers to Pakistan this week to join Prime Minister Imran Khan for the ground-breaking ceremony for the Kartarpur corridor, as part of the larger pattern of softening towards the neighbourhood. No Indian Minister has visited Pakistan since the Uri attack in September 2016, and after the cancellation of Foreign Minister talks at the UN this year, it was assumed that the government would not pursue conciliatory proposals with the new government in Islamabad. It is also significant that the BJP and the Prime Minister have chosen not to make Pakistan an electoral issue in the current round of State elections, as they did during last year’s Assembly polls. While it seems unlikely that the larger shift required for a Prime Ministerial visit to Pakistan for the SAARC summit is possible before elections next year, it is not inconceivable that people-to-people ties, of the kind Mr. Modi spoke of in his speech comparing the transformative potential of the Kartarpur corridor to the falling of the Berlin wall, will be allowed to grow.

All these moves lead to the question, why has the government decided to make the change from playing big brother in the neighbourhood to a more genial and avuncular version of its previous self? One reason is certainly the backlash it received

from some of its smallest neighbours like Nepal and the Maldives, that didn't take kindly to being strong-armed, even if New Delhi projected its advice to be in their best interests. Another could be the conscious rolling back of India's previous policy of dissuading neighbours from Chinese engagement to now standing back as they learn the risks of debt-traps and over-construction of infrastructure on their own. India's own rapprochement with China post-Wuhan in the spirit of channelling both "cooperation and competition together" has also led to this outcome.

Temporary or durable

It must be stressed, however, that retreating from an aggressive position must not give the impression that India is retrenching within the region, opening space for the U.S.-China rivalry to play out in its own backyard. The most obvious reason for the government's neighbourhood policy shift of 2018, that resounds closer to the "neighbourhood first" articulation of 2014, is that general elections are around the corner. This leads to the question, is the new policy simply a temporary move or a more permanent course correction: Neighbourhood 2.0 or merely Neighbourhood 1.2.0?

AFGHANISTAN TIMES, KABUL 4-12-2018

China welcomes Afghanistan's roadmap for peace

AT-KABUL: Minister of Foreign Affairs Saifuddin Rabbani met the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China Mr. Liu Jinsong, where they discussed and exchanged views on a wide range of aspects of bilateral ties, as well as the upcoming Afghanistan-Pakistan-China trilateral meeting.

Ambassador Jinsong congratulated Foreign Minister Rabbani on the successful Geneva meeting, welcoming Afghanistan's roadmap for peace, Ministry of Foreign Affairs said Monday.

The Afghan Foreign Minister appreciated China's participation in the important meeting, noting with gratitude the articulate statements by the country's Foreign Minister.

The two sides talked about the 2nd trilateral meeting due to bring together Foreign Ministers of Afghanistan, Pakistan and China in Kabul, next month. They exchanged views on the details of the one-day meeting and the document to be signed.

The discussions also included some important projects, involving a hydro-power dam and connectivity.

AFGHANISTAN TIMES, KABUL 10-12-2018 **The Role of Afghanistan in China's Belt and Road Initiative and China's Policy on Afghanistan**

Qi Zhenhong

It is a great pleasure to be here. First of all, please allow me to extend my sincere thanks to Dr. Davood Moradian and his team from the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies(AISS) for inviting me to attend this Dialogue and also for their thoughtful arrangements. The Herat Security Dialogue now enjoys growing influence and has evolved into an important platform for all relevant parties to exchange views on issues such as peace, cooperation and nation building that are important for Afghanistan's future.

I would like to start by saying that Afghanistan has a long history and has formed a unique and splendid civilization. Afghan people are very kind, wise and hardworking. What I have seen here for myself is in a striking contrast to the image of Afghanistan portrayed in some Western media, and I am quite optimistic about Afghanistan's future.

Thanks to its natural geographical proximity and long-time people-to-people exchanges, Afghanistan was a key part of the ancient land-based Silk Road, and our two peoples forged close and friendly relations. The outstanding Chinese diplomat and explorer Zhang Qian living in the 2nd Century BC during China's Western Han Dynasty was one of the pioneers who blazed the trail for the ancient Silk Road and he is the first Chinese known to have engaged in official exchanges between China and Afghanistan.

As we all know, five years ago, Chinese President Xi Jinping first proposed the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative(BRI), as they are now collectively known. Now this Initiative has gradually evolved from planning to practice and from vision to reality. It has made progress and achievements beyond expectations and has won an enlarged circle of friends. President Xi said in his opening remarks at the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in Beijing in 2017 that "for wild geese to weather through storms and fly steady and far, the key to success lies in their relying on each other's strength by flying together." This analogy is a vivid depiction of the spiritual core of the Belt and Road Initiative, which is more a choir of participating countries than a solo by China alone.

So far, a total of more than 100 countries and international organizations have expressed their support for the Initiative and over 40 economies and international organizations have signed related cooperation agreements with China. Batches of influential pilot projects have been kick-started.

As a transportation hub connecting Central Asia, South Asia and West Asia, Afghanistan is a significant juncture within China's Belt and Road Initiative. And thus Afghanistan has unique geographic advantages and huge potential for development. Afghanistan has been consistently supporting the Initiative and it is expected to board China's express train of development with its participation. In May 2016, China and Afghanistan signed a memorandum of understanding on the BRI, which aims to foster cooperation in various areas including policy coordination, infrastructure development, energy cooperation, and trade and investment facilitation. China and Afghanistan are now cooperating to develop the Belt and Road, and have achieved positive results in such key areas as policy communication, facility connectivity, trade facilitation, financial cooperation and people-to-people exchanges.

The host province of this Dialogue, Herat, is an important economic, cultural and transportation center in West Afghanistan, and serves as a key hub for many regional connectivity projects. The province of Herat is actively expanding exports of its competitive goods such as marble and saffron by means of the Belt and Road Initiative, and trying to attract more direct investment from China.

Here I would like to mention that the 71st General Assembly of United Nations has unanimously passed Resolution A/71/9 on the issue of Afghanistan. The Resolution appealed to the international community to further consolidate consensus on assistance to Afghanistan, and provide Afghanistan with aid in political, economic and security areas; it welcomed economic cooperation initiatives including the Belt and Road Initiative, urged all relevant parties to help boost economic development in Afghanistan and the wider region through the Initiative, and appealed to the international community to provide a secure environment for the development of the Belt and Road.

As a traditional friendly neighbour to Afghanistan, China will continue to play its role as a major responsible country and take firm action to uphold Afghanistan's peace process and national reconstruction.

As far as I am concerned, China's policy towards Afghanistan advocates "four firm supports" namely:

1. Firmly supporting Afghanistan's political reconciliation.

The inclusive reconciliation process of "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned" is the only path to realize lasting peace and development in Afghanistan. Therefore, the Chinese side will continue to support this process, and we hope the Kabul Process will continue to contribute its efforts. In addition, China advocates for the agreements to be reached between the Afghan government and the anti-government parties, including the Afghan Taliban, so as to initiate the process of peace. China also calls for operations in accordance with relevant resolutions of the UN

General Assembly to be conducted by the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) of Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the United States to promote the realization of peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban at an early date.

2. Firmly supporting Afghanistan's peace and reconstruction.

China will, through its own approaches, continue to support the Afghan government in strengthening its capabilities, support state reconstruction and finally, lead Afghanistan to the path of independent development. Since 2002, China has assisted several engineering projects in Afghanistan and trained over 800 talents annually within multiple areas. Also, China has worked together with the United States and India to host training projects for Afghan diplomats. I believe that in the future, China and Afghanistan will work hand in hand to implement the China-Afghanistan Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Jointly Pushing Forward the "Belt and Road" Construction and enhance bilateral cooperation in areas such as the economy and trade, energy resources and infrastructure construction. Afghanistan's independent choice of political system and development path should be widely respected. We anticipate that political parties within Afghanistan could bridge their differences to jointly promote national development. Meanwhile, in order to counter terrorism and transnational crimes such as drugs smuggling, the Chinese side will keep coordinating within the international society, enhancing the capacity building of Afghan National Security Forces for national security and strengthening Afghanistan's self-defense and anti-terrorism capabilities.

3. Firmly supporting Afghanistan-Pakistan mutual understanding and cooperation.

Since the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Dialogue held by China for the first time in September 2017, China has hosted the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Vice Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue as well as the Trilateral Vice-Ministerial Consultation on Counter-Terrorism and Security in May 2018. This shows China has been zealous in promoting discussions to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan properly and is always willing to reinforce the trilateral cooperation to cope with challenges posed by terrorism and extremism with shared efforts.

4. Firmly supporting Afghanistan's integration into regional development.

In accordance with the resolutions of the UN General Assembly, China is determined to improve the economic cooperation and interconnectivity in this region and facilitate Afghanistan's integration into the regional trend of development through the promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative. In May 2018, China conducted a vice-ministerial meeting of the SCO Afghanistan Liaison Group in Beijing. And in early June, President Ghani, as the leader of the observer state, attended the 18th Meeting of the

Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Qingdao, China's Shandong Province. These activities are intended to further Afghanistan's integration into the tide of regional development and the cooperation under the framework of SCO.

To sum up, Afghanistan is at a crucial phase where triple transformation of politics, economy and security is ongoing. Under cooperation frameworks such as the Belt and Road Initiative, China will remain firm in enhancing practical cooperation with Afghanistan and providing further assistance for its peace and reconstruction within its capacity so as to deepen and consolidate our bilateral strategic partnership. I firmly believe the dust on the "Shining Pearl" of the ancient Silk Road will be wiped out for the benefit of our two peoples and contribution to the peace and prosperity of this entire region.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 6-12-2018

Pakistan welcomes US statement on political solution to Afghan problem

Mariana Baabar

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan on Wednesday welcomed remarks by US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis who said the United States wants every responsible nation to support peace efforts in the Sub-Continent and in Afghanistan.

He also said that the Trump administration was focused on ending the war with regional and UN support. Pakistan says it has always focused on rebuilding ties with eastern and western neighbours and creating peace in the region.

"We are glad that the United States is pointing towards a political solution for Afghanistan. Pakistan, has always maintained that there was no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan. The only viable way forward is a politically negotiated settlement through an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process, and we urge all sides to focus on resolving the internal Afghan dispute through dialogue," spokesman at the Foreign Office told The News.

Mattis was speaking at a joint news briefing with Indian Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman at the Pentagon. Earlier, the spokesman had said that during the past 17 years, the pursuit of a military option has only added to the sufferings and miseries of the Afghan people.

This week, in response to a letter from President Donald Trump seeking Pakistan's full support for a peaceful solution for Afghanistan, Pakistan had reiterated that it had always advocated a political settlement to end war in Afghanistan, and would continue to play a facilitation role in good faith, since peace and stability in Afghanistan remains a shared responsibility.

Jim Mattis pointing towards peace in the region had said, "It's time for everyone to get onboard, support the United Nations, support Prime Minister (Narendra) Modi, support (Afghan) President (Ashraf) Ghani and all those who are trying to maintain peace and make for a better world here."

"Pakistan has always maintained that we want peace on our western and on our eastern borders and we welcome the defence minister talking about peace on our eastern borders as well.

Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood has clearly told New Delhi that Pakistan wants to rebuild ties with eastern and western neighbours and create peace in the region," commented the spokesman.

Pakistan says it wants to resolve all issues with India through talks for which a continued and uninterrupted dialogue is the only wise course. "I want to say to Indian foreign minister that we are not only neighbours but also nuclear powers. We have old issues and we both know what these issues are. We need to address these issues.

We cannot afford any adventurism as response time is so short. The only option is to engage with each other. We cannot live in enmity and we have to accept that there are outstanding issues," Shah Mehmood Qureshi had said as soon as he took office.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 5-12-2018

US assured of support for peace in Afghanistan

Baqir Sajjad Syed

ISLAMABAD: Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi on Tuesday reaffirmed Pakistan's support for the Afghan peace process in his meeting with US Special Envoy for Afghan reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad.

"Pakistan will continue to cooperate with sincerity for political settlement in Afghanistan. Long-lasting peace in Afghanistan is in Pakistan's best interest," Mr Qureshi tweeted after his meeting with the visiting US special envoy.

Ambassador Khalilzad is on his third visit to Pakistan since he took charge of the office dealing with peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan in September. He accompanied Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Islamabad just a day after his appointment and later again came here in October. His planned visit in November was cancelled because of scheduling issues.

Despite reservations over his appointment, Pakistan extended full support to him because of its principled position about supporting efforts for peace in Afghanistan and secondly to capitalise on the shift in the Trump administration's policy towards negotiations with the Taliban.

American Special Envoy Khalilzad meets Foreign Minister Qureshi, leads delegation-level talks with Foreign Secretary Janjua

In a major gesture to Washington in October after Mr Khalilzad's visit, Pakistan had set free former Taliban deputy chief Mullah Baradar. Foreign Office spokesman Dr Mohammad Faisal had on that occasion said that Baradar was released "at the US request in order to move forward on the shared objective of pursuing a political settlement in Afghanistan".

There was, however, a brief hiccup afterwards due to US President Donald Trump's interview and a twitter exchange with Prime Minister Imran Khan in which he questioned Pakistan's contributions in the fight against terrorism, saying it did not "do anything for us, they don't do a damn thing for us".

However, in an effort to salvage the situation, Mr Khalilzad's Islamabad trip was preceded by a letter from President Trump to Prime Minister Khan in which he sought Pakistan's help for the peace process and at the same time acknowledged that Pakistan suffered from terrorism. The letter managed to set a positive tone for the special envoy's visit.

"It was a pleasure meeting Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad," Mr Qureshi said.

FO spokesman Mohammad Faisal, meanwhile, said: "The FM assured the US side of Pakistan's steadfast support for a negotiated settlement." He said Mr Khalilzad reiterated President Trump's desire to seek Pakistan's cooperation for peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Ambassador Khalilzad and his team held delegation-level talks with Foreign Secretary Tehmina Janjua. "Officials from diplomatic, security and defence from both sides were present at the meeting. Peace and political settlement in Afghanistan was discussed," the FO spokesman said.

Mr Khalilzad had in an interview before he embarked on his latest trip to the region said that he had been reassuring Pakistani leaders that the US was "not seeking an Afghanistan as the result of a political settlement that's hostile to them". He said that it was time for Pakistan to "play a positive role" for peace in Afghanistan.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 4-12-2018

Letter from Trump

The unravelling of the relationship between Pakistan and the US was largely over the war in Afghanistan. As the Trump administration decided to ramp up its troop presence in the country, it expected Pakistan to take decisive action against the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network. When that didn't materialise, it accused Pakistan of essentially being in bed with

terrorists, and cut off most security aid. The Trump plan for Afghanistan was always destined for failure. Adding a couple of extra thousand troops to Afghanistan was never going to dislodge the well-entrenched Taliban. It didn't take long for the US to realise that peace negotiations were the only way forward. The push for talks gained impetus with the conference in Russia where the Taliban sent representatives from their Qatar office.

Given Pakistan's past associations with the Taliban, it was always likely that the US would ask for our help and now President Trump appears to have done just that with a letter to Prime Minister Imran Khan asking for our assistance in the Afghan peace process. The letter is significant because it is the first direct communication between the two leaders since Imran took over – with their only roundabout interaction being a series of hostile tweets about aid and US failures in Afghanistan.

We should not get too excited about this one letter. For one, all we know about its contents are what we have been told at a briefing on Monday. We must also remember that US policy in the age of Trump has tended to be capricious. It is also not clear exactly what role Pakistan would have to play in the Afghan peace process. The Afghan Taliban have made clear that they would rather negotiate directly with the US than through intermediaries. The Afghan government has been reluctant to be involved in direct negotiations but it would still prefer doing that to relying on Pakistan. The picture should become clearer as US envoy to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad visits the region, including Pakistan, over the next week. Pakistan's aim should be to have a seat at the table since Afghanistan's future has a direct impact on us. It would be too optimistic to believe that one letter will change the steadily downward trajectory of Pakistan-US ties. The US is too firmly committed to India to substantially change its policy towards Pakistan. We should, of course, support a peace process that is led by Afghanistan but should also avoid getting needlessly entangled in a war that has destabilised our own country and shows no signs of ending anytime soon.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 3-12-2018

Talking to India

No one expected that Pakistan's decision to open a corridor for Sikh pilgrims would lead to peace with India overnight. But it has still been startling to see how quickly the Narendra Modi government has dissipated the goodwill that was created. Prime Minister Imran Khan hadn't even inaugurated the Kartarpur corridor before Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj said she wouldn't attend the upcoming Saarc summit in Islamabad. Then, in response to Imran's statement that Pakistan and India could make peace if traditional enemies like France and Germany can now be so friendly, Indian Army Chief General Bipin Rawat said that there can be no peace until

Pakistan becomes a secular state. The hypocrisy here is breathtaking. The Indian prime minister is the man who presided over the pogroms of Gujarat and was banned from entering multiple countries because of his role in the massacre of Muslims. India's ruling party has an explicitly Hindu-supremacist ideology and has encouraged the lynching of Muslims for eating beef. Its occupation of Kashmir is directed at the Muslim majority in the area. India may be secular in name but the reality does not match up to its ideals.

Bipin's comments are part of a general Indian strategy to demonise Pakistan. It wants to distract from its terrible human rights record on Kashmir by pointing out our faults – of which there may be many to be sure. This makes it clear that it is India that does not want peace. To its credit, the PTI government has done all it can to engage with India. The Kartarpur corridor was meant to ease travel for pilgrims and show that the two countries can work together for the common good. India clearly does not see it that way. It wants to continue portraying Pakistan as a terrorist state and to sow discord within our own borders. Under such conditions peace is impossible. Talks on any issue, be it trade, cross-border travel, terrorism or Kashmir, are only possible if both countries are willing to engage in good faith. Bipin's remarks and before that the dismissive attitude of Swaraj show that this is not the case. We should still keep trying to pursue peace and launch worthwhile initiatives like the Kartarpur corridor while realising that it may not be possible as long as the BJP government is in power.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 2-12-2018

FO rejects Indian media's negativity about Kartarpur corridor

The Newspaper's Staff Reporter

ISLAMABAD: Rejecting Indian media's negativity about the Kartarpur corridor, the Foreign Office on Saturday called for preserving the 'Kartarpur spirit' and hoped to engage with New Delhi for finalising details about connecting the Indian and Pakistani parts of the corridor and other related modalities.

"Pakistan would now proceed with the development of the physical infrastructure for the corridor on its side of the international border. We also look forward to working out necessary details and modalities with the Indian side concerning the passage through the corridor," a statement issued by the Foreign Office said.

Pakistan and India earlier this week broke ground for the visa-free corridor connecting international border with the shrine of Gurdwara Kartarpur Sahib, the shrine of the founder of Sikhism.

Pakistan in response to Bipin's statement asks if Modi's control over Indian military has weakened

The corridor is being seen in Pakistan as a sign of hope for normalisation of frayed bilateral ties and it is, therefore, being dubbed as the 'Corridor of Peace'.

The Foreign Office, while re-emphasising its optimism about the passage, said: "The inauguration of the corridor project on both sides has created another moment of hope for the peoples of India and Pakistan."

However, Indian media has been deeply critical about the project and has cast aspersions on Pakistan's move.

Indian media, which had been searching for reasons to spread scepticism about the project, used Gen Bajwa's handshake with Sikh leader Gopal Singh Chawla to further their propaganda against Pakistan.

The FO hoped that the Indian propaganda would not succeed.

"We are convinced that those seeking to sow negativity around this initiative for partisan purposes or due to their known anti-Pakistan proclivities will not succeed in their designs. The government of Pakistan will continue to do what is right for advancing this noble initiative," it said.

Army spokesman Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor had earlier said: "Indian media taking a myopic view is selectively showing Mr Gopal Chawla meeting COAS. Army chief met all guests at the venue, irrespective of identity. A peace initiative should not be subjected to propaganda."

Indian army chief's remark

Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry, in his reaction to Indian army chief Gen Bipin Rawat's statement, said that Pakistan would now be justified in asking if Indian civilian and military leaders are not on the same page and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's control over his military has weakened.

Gen Rawat, while talking to journalists in India on Friday, asked Pakistan to become a secular state if it wanted to engage with India.

"If they have to stay together with India, then they have to develop as a secular state. We are a secular state. If they're willing to become secular like us, then they seem to have an opportunity for engagement," Gen Rawat had said.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 5-12-2018

Pakistan, Iran agree to fully support Afghan peace efforts

The Newspaper's Staff Reporter

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan and Iran have agreed to extend full support to the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned efforts for peace in Afghanistan.

This consensus was reached during the 10th round of Pak-Iran Bilateral Political Consultations held here. Foreign Secretary Tehmina Janjua and Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Syed Abbas Araghchi led their respective delegations at the meeting.

An official statement about the meeting said: "It was noted that fully supporting an Afghan-owned, Afghan-led peace and reconciliation process was the best way to overcome the serious security and politico-economic challenges faced by Pakistan and Iran."

The two neighbours also agreed on having a "coordinated approach" on Afghanistan for "safeguarding their core interests".

Understanding reached for enhancing bilateral trade to \$5bn

The statement noted that "Pakistan and Iran, as the major geographic neighbours of Afghanistan, also have commonality of views and future approach to restore complete peace and stability in the country".

The two countries expressed their concern over the rise of new terrorist outfits like the militant Islamic State group, or Daesh, in Afghanistan due to prolonged instability there.

They, moreover, recalled other challenges, like narcotics trade, illegal migration and refugees, they faced because of the protracted Afghan conflict.

The meeting also reviewed progress on the measures that had previously been agreed by the two countries for enhancing trade.

There is an agreement to increase their annual trade to \$5 billion. In this regard the two sides deliberated on steps like facilitation of business communities, scaling down of trade barriers and speedy progress on facilitating preferential trade.

It was agreed that the 21st session of the Joint Economic Commission would be held early next year and steps would be taken to further improve railway connectivity between the two countries.

"Ways and means were also discussed to facilitate the growing number of Zaireen [pilgrims] traveling every year to Iran from Pakistan," the statement added.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 14-12-2018

It's genocide

US resolution passed to label atrocity against Rohingyas

Diplomatic Correspondent

The US House of Representatives yesterday passed a resolution with overwhelming bipartisan support declaring the violence against Myanmar's Rohingyas genocide.

"Today, the House of Representatives took a stand by passing H. Res. 1091, declaring those crimes genocide," the House Foreign Affairs Committee said in a press statement.

"With this resolution, the House will take the important step of naming the atrocities committed against the Rohingya people in Burma [Myanmar] what they are: genocide," said the committee Chairman Ed Royce while speaking on the House floor.

The statement said the Myanmar's military and security forces had unleashed a targeted campaign against the Rohingyas -- killing unarmed civilians, raping women and children, burning down villages, and planting landmines along border areas transited by refugees fleeing for their lives.

The passage of the resolution is particularly striking because it brought Democrats together with House Republicans. Republican House leadership pushed for the vote to come up before the end of the year, according to ABC News, sending a signal to the White House that more should be done to punish Myanmar for the atrocities.

The resolution also condemned the arrest of two Reuters journalists who helped uncover one of the Myanmar military's mass graves.

It called for their immediate release.

Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo were arrested around a year ago on December 12, 2017 and sentenced in September this year to seven years in prison for breaching a law on state secrets -- charges that have been roundly criticised and described as trumped up.

Myanmar has long oppressed the Rohingyas and other ethnic minorities. Starting last August, the country began what the United Nations called a systematic campaign to eradicate the Rohingyas and drive them from their homes into Bangladesh.

More than 700,000 refugees escaped to make the journey and joined hundreds of thousands who already lived in camps in Cox's Bazar. There are now close to 1 million there.

"It is time we call these atrocities against the Rohingya what they are: genocide," Steven Joseph Chabot, a member of the Republican Party, had said in a statement on September 27 this year when he introduced the bill.

He even cited the US State Department's own report, saying, "If this determination wasn't obvious before, the recent report ... should leave little doubt in anyone's mind. The perpetrators must be held accountable."

Chabot introduced the resolution this week with a bipartisan group of cosponsors, including the top Republican and Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Ed Royce of California and Eliot Engel of New York.

While the legislation has faced some stops and starts, including a delay last week because of former President George HW Bush's funeral, it finally got its vote at the request of leadership like Ed Royce.

Ed Royce said the Rohingya people in Rakhine state, are often called the world's most persecuted minority and are essentially stateless people, as the Myanmar government refuses to recognise them as citizens -- despite the fact that the Rohingya people have lived in Myanmar for generations.

The most recent wave of persecution began in August of 2017, when Myanmar security forces and civilian mobs began a horrific wave of attacks. Mass murder, rape and destruction of villages throughout Rakhine State has been documented.

“A year and a half later, the evidence is overwhelming. As I said at our hearing on the subject this past September, it is time that we take the next step in declaring that these crimes amount to genocide,” Royce added.

The US State Department's investigation revealed countless heart-wrenching pieces of evidence, like the account of one woman who hid in bushes as she watched Myanmar soldiers throw infants and toddlers into a river to drown and shot their mothers who tried to save them.

The United States has a moral obligation to call these crimes genocide, the statement said. “Failing to do so gives the perpetrators cover and hinders efforts to bring those accountable to justice. With this resolution, the House fulfills its part of that duty”.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 6-12-2018

A place to call home

*Government must reconsider its stance against integrating
Bhutanese refugees*

The 6,500 Bhutanese refugees living in two camps in eastern Nepal face an uncertain fate with the decade-long third country resettlement programme drawing to a close. The 26-year-old humanitarian assistance scheme conducted by the World Food Programme for the Bhutanese refugees will also come to an end by the end of this month.

Presented with two options—repatriation to the country that exiled them decades ago, or assimilation in the host country whose constitution denies them citizenship—the émigrés living in the Beldangi and Sanischare camps in Jhapa are between a rock and a hard place.

The government, for its part, has always maintained that Nepal is in no position to assimilate them and hence, repatriation is the only way out. But the issue is more complex for the refugees themselves as there is no singular ‘refugee experience’. True, the government must almost always engage in a complex balancing act. Ensuring security in the broadest sense of the term and

maintaining social cohesion is a fundamental concern of all governments, but just as essential is protecting the vulnerable.

Since the early 1990s, some 108,000 refugees of ethnic Nepali origin from southern Bhutan have been living in Nepal after they were stripped of their citizenship and forced to flee. They took shelter in Nepal and lived in camps run by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). To seek a more permanent solution to the refugee problem, the UNHCR offered three solutions: Third country settlement, repatriation to Bhutan, or assimilation in the host country. The UNHCR has resettled around 100,000 refugees in foreign countries since the launch of its resettlement programme in 2007.

Repatriation is a viable solution under conditions where the country of origin has publicly declared a guarantee to safeguard the rights of previously expelled communities. This has not been the case for Bhutan. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have issued concerns over the country’s ongoing discrimination against its Nepali-speaking Lhotshampa communities. Ethnic Nepalis who reside in Bhutan also reported to Human Rights Watch that unfair government policies had made it especially difficult for them to obtain ‘no objection certificates’ (NOCs). The move essentially deprives the group from accessing key state resources such as government employment, higher education, business licences and travel documents.

Bhutanese officials have also historically denied that any forcible expulsion took place, and have continually claimed that ‘voluntary migrants’ would have to endure the country’s profoundly strict citizenship process.

For the past 16 years, Nepali authorities have also curtailed basic freedoms for Bhutanese refugees. From prohibiting employment or income-generating activities even within the camps to severely limiting their movement around Nepal, the state has severely barred their capacity to salvage even the slightest semblance of ‘ordinary life’ in this country. Rejecting integration outright without even offering the refugees a chance to demonstrate their economic and social potential seems unjustifiable.

Bhutanese refugees have been marginalised at the national, international and regional forums for too long. But the issue that is both painful for the refugees and damaging to the relations among the nations in this region can no longer be deferred. At this critical juncture, our policies must be guided by humanitarian considerations rather than from a purely national security perspective. The government must do all it can to not let down the dispossessed when they need us the most.

II – INTERNAL AFFAIRS

Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad

Summary Internal

The results of recent states' assembly elections, in which the Congress won majorities in three states out of five, remains the main topic on which Indian commentators have written in its print media. The Congress won in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh, all in the so-called Hindu belt. Conventional wisdom would have seen the BJP coming into power as the party has traditionally relied on its Hindutva rhetoric so far. In 2017, the party had faced similar setback in the state assembly election of Gujrat, another state in the Hindi heartland.

Political pundits see these results as the warning shots for the general elections to the Lok Sabha, which are scheduled for 2019. According to these experts, the aforementioned adverse electoral outcome indicates that Indian public in the rural areas is interested more in agricultural reform, rather than grandstanding ideas such as Prime Minister Modi's much publicized campaign for 'make in India' in which he encouraged local manufacturing in different fields.

This kind of reforms, according to analysts, have little value in the rural areas, where farmers are more interested in farm support, such as better prices for their yields, support in procurement of farm inputs, and so on. It is this realization by the BJP government that it so desperately wants release of funds by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to public sector banks, so as they could spend the same on the welfare of farmers before the 2019 general elections. The resignation by the chief of RBI is said to be the result of undue pressure from the BJP government. According to experts on electoral politics, the BJP will find it hard to woo the voter in the short span that it is left with before the 2019 Lok Sabha polls.

In Pakistan, print media commented on the convening of federal cabinet by Prime Minister Imran Khan so as to evaluate the performance of different ministries. News were doing the rounds of the possibility of reshuffle of cabinet portfolios. Political commentators, by and large, commended the exercise, dubbing the same as something which should be a regular feature for public officials to improve their performance and hold them accountable. Moreover, the statement by Prime Minister Imran Khan, in which he expressed his government's resolve to resort to legislation by ordinance if the opposition continued to be non-cooperative, attracted criticism from political commentators. According to experts, the instrument of legislation by ordinance was meant for situations which necessitated urgent legislation, and when the parliament was not in session, not for ordinary situations.

London based Economic Intelligence Unit has projected ruling party Awami Leagues AL' victory. According to various local opinions, Sheikh Hasina remains the most popular figure. However, on Bangladesh National Party BNP side, two notable issues, helping gain sympathy vote; one is government hardline response to student's protest, earned sympathy among youngsters for BNP and second is widespread arrests of BNP leaders. Despite, AL still in a better position to hold office again, however, above mentioned factors will largely reduce margin of victory.

BNP Chairperson, Khalida Zia, has filed three petitions with High Court (HC) against Election Commissions (EC)' rejection of her appeals on violation of electoral code of conduct. In recent petitions she challenged the legality of EC for cancellation of all three nomination papers Bogura-6, 7 and Feni-1 constituencies. Khalida's lawyer maintained that the violation of code of conduct is out of question as she has been in jail since February. Hearing continued in HC.

Twist in Sri Lanka politics. Much-awaited Supreme Court verdict announced in jam-packed court room. A seven-member bench unanimously ruled that President Sirisena' act was unconstitutional. Added that 'President lacks power to dissolve parliament at will before four and half years from the day of its sitting unless resolution passed with two-third majority in the parliament.' Petition was filed by Tamil National Alliance leader R. Sambanthan.

Another petition filled by former PM Ranil along with other 121 parliamentarians being taken up for hearing. 'seeking an order in the nature of Quo Warranto declaring that Mahinda Rajapaksa is not entitled to hold the office of Prime Minister'.

Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad

II – INTERNAL AFFAIRS

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THE HINDU, DELHI 5-12-2018

Hues of a new political landscape

Shaikh Mujibur Rehman

The BJP's electoral dominance is contributing to the saffronisation of other political parties

The president of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Amit Shah, while addressing a national executive meet in New Delhi in September said that the party would continue to remain in power for the next 50 years if it won the 2019 general election. From ruling seven States in 2014, the party runs many States by itself or in an alliance. For a party that has earned such unprecedented electoral success, the feel of invincibility is natural, but Mr. Shah's claim sounds pompous.

In 1984, the Congress party won 404 Lok Sabha seats but tasted inglorious defeat in 1989. Likewise, its leader Indira Gandhi, who was venerated in 1971, had to bite the dust in 1977. India's electoral world is dangerously precarious. Moreover, the Indian voter's mind is very difficult to read. Looking at various political trends, however, the BJP's dominance as single largest party for some time regardless of the outcome of the 2019 election is a fact.

The BJP's dominance partly hinges on what sort of political resistance it faces from the Opposition. The clue that we get from the history of resistance is this: the most organised resistance to the BJP took place in 1996, when the party led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee was isolated and restricted to running the government for not more than 13 days even though he was seen to be more moderate than Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

A strategising

Such an event is not possible in 2019 or later for at least three reasons. First, having led the National Democratic Alliance coalition, the BJP has developed working relations with various regional parties who no longer see the national party as politically untouchable or are scared of its ideology; Second, the leaders of regional parties, most often dynastic in nature, have very limited stakes in the national polity and a limited interest in fighting a battle outside their turf. Third, the Narendra Modi-Amit Shah leadership, which presented itself as one with a difference in elections held 2014 onwards is also accommodative of their opponents. For instance, the Congress's Rita Bahuguna in Uttar Pradesh or Himanta Biswa Sarma in Assam or the Janata Dal (United)'s Nitish Kumar were accommodated generously. So why is an ideological party so forgiving towards its opponents? Because its key objective is to drain the Opposition politics of vital resources so that any future consolidation against it is weak.

Anti-Congressism

Another crucial factor is the emergence of anti-Congressism as an ideology — a major source of political dissent and resistance in Indian politics that acquired concrete shape during the anti-Emergency movement in the mid-1970s. Political formations owing their origins to anti-Congressism are deeply sceptical of going with the Congress or its coalition as an alternative even if broadly they pretend to champion secular politics. The

ambivalence shown by parties led by the Biju Janata Dal leader Naveen Patnaik, Mr. Nitish Kumar, and the Telugu Desam Party Leader N. Chandrababu Naidu (though he has now warmed up to the Congress) can be traced to this. On the other hand, this has led to some advantage for the BJP in seeking partners in the short and long term. Consequently, we are now witness to the rhetoric of the Opposition leaders being more about anti-Modi-ism than anti-BJPism or anti-Hindutva as such.

Looking ahead

While the Modi-Shah leadership deserves credit for helping craft the electoral dominance of the BJP, the fact is that this team is not going to hold sway forever. On the other hand, political history shows that parties fragment for a variety of reasons such as ideological differences or a clash of personalities. Take, for example, the Left or the Congress party, both of which experienced fragmentation. The Janata Party, in the 1970s, imploded though it was more a coalition of various formations. Thus, the BJP's fragmentation is inevitable. What is hard to predict, however, is when this will happen. Given the almost symbiotic relationship between the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the BJP, some argue that the BJP would defy such a fate. But such an ideological grip could not stop B.S. Yeddyurappa, the former Karnataka Chief Minister, from abandoning the party to form the short-lived Karnataka Janata Paksha.

What must be highlighted is this: parties that had an umbilical link with the Congress party such as the Trinamool Congress or the Nationalist Congress Party have a secular thread in them. In the event that the BJP fragments, such parties could pursue an identical Hindutva line. The campaign and programmes of these parties could cause disruptions to minority and human rights.

The sharpening of these majoritarian tendencies would grow in both rhetoric and practice without bringing any change to the Constitution and the term secular remaining intact. Moreover, the BJP's electoral dominance could contribute to the saffronisation of other parties, as they could emulate the BJP's electoral strategies. This is evident in the workings of some of the non-Hindutva political parties. Such a development would also aggravate an already fragile secular polity.

HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 12-12-2018

The BJP is in an unenviable position

As it prepares for 2019, where neither voters nor markets are very pleased with the party

Roshan Kishore

That rural distress would be a big headwind for the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) political fortunes was evident in the 2017 assembly elections in Gujarat. The Congress actually won a majority (67 out of 126) of rural seats in the state. The results of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in 2018 have further strengthened this narrative. These three states are predominantly agrarian, with the share of agriculture in GDP and

total workforce in agriculture being higher than the all-India average.

The Congress has won back Rajasthan in keeping with the state's trend of alternating between the Congress and the BJP. It has got an unprecedented (almost two-thirds) majority in Chhattisgarh and is neck-to-neck with the BJP in Madhya Pradesh. Once again, the Congress has outperformed the BJP in rural seats. An analysis by Ashoka University's Neelanjan Sircar in these pages shows that the BJP's strike rate in the three Hindi belt states actually goes down as the share of cultivators and agricultural labourers increases.

There is not much the Narendra Modi government can do to counter rural anger before the 2019 elections. It did announce significant, although not unprecedented, hikes in Minimum Support Prices (MSPs). But these have failed to boost farm prices and hence incomes. The GDP data for the September quarter showed that nominal growth in the agriculture sector was lower than the real growth. This suggests that farm prices have actually gone down. Recent reports of a crash in prices of crops such as onions and garlic suggest that this trend is continuing.

These are not fluke developments. India adopted inflation targeting as the anchor of its monetary policy under the present government. Demonetisation and the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) were a big disruption for the informal sector including agriculture. The government expected a fiscal windfall from demonetisation, which could have allowed it to significantly increase welfare expenditure or investments. This did not happen. The benefits of GST were anyway expected to accrue in the long-term. Its costs however have manifested themselves in the short run.

The short point is that the Modi government placed its economic bets outside agriculture. Promises of generating 20 million jobs per year, pitching Make in India as the flagship initiative of the government etc. all point to this. While there are no conclusive numbers on job-creation under this government, it can be said with a reasonable degree of confidence that employment-generation has been anything but extraordinary.

The 7%-plus growth rate of the GDP has prevented a massive anger against the BJP in urban India, but the government is unlikely to push a convincing economic narrative as part of its re-election pitch in 2019 even in urban India.

There is another factor which could add to the BJP's problems. In its eagerness to provide some sort of a last-minute stimulus to the economy before the Lok Sabha polls, the government seems to have triggered a crisis at the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). The government has been demanding that the RBI transfer an additional amount of its corpus funds to it and does not impose restrictions on lending of public sector banks with stressed balance sheets. Governor Urjit Patel's resignation is a strong indication that there was no amicable resolution to this debate. Given the fact that the government has appointed one of its former bureaucrats in the finance ministry as the new RBI governor, it is likely to push its agenda in the forthcoming board meeting. Such an attempt is bound to spook financial investors both in India and abroad. This could trigger a potential crisis in

the currency and capital markets. Any such development will damage the pro-reform credentials of the present government, which it had sought to champion through the slogan of Minimum Government, Maximum Governance.

As it prepares for 2019, the BJP is in an unenviable position where neither voters nor markets are very pleased with it.

HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 12-12-2018

Assembly election results: Voters have fired a warning shot

The 2019 general election is now well and truly an open contest

Tuesday's electoral outcome reveals the inherent checks in Indian democracy and its ability to maintain a degree of balance in the polity. The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) dream run began with the Gujarat elections at the end of 2012, when Narendra Modi won for the third time, setting the stage for his Prime Ministerial bid. In 2013, the BJP won Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. And it swept to power in Delhi, becoming the first party in 30 years to win an outright majority. Since the Lok Sabha elections four and a half years ago, there have been 22 elections. The BJP has been able to form the government after 14 of those polls. This has resulted in the outright dominance of the party across the polity, especially in north, west, central, east and northeast India (the south remains an exception). Till Tuesday's results came in, it was in power in 18 Indian states. This dominance has resulted in a deep penetration of state institutions by those loyal to the party. And it has resulted in the public discourse being fundamentally driven by the ideological world view, priorities, and rhetoric of those belonging to the ruling party and its ideological parent, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

With the Congress — the only national challenger to the BJP — returning to power in the heartland states, which exercise a disproportionate influence in national politics, this changes. One need not be a partisan political player to recognise that a democracy needs political competition. It needs challenges to power. It needs State authority to be constrained. It needs santulan, balance.

Here is what the verdict means for the BJP. Yes, it had been in power for 15 years in MP and Chhattisgarh. Yes, there is a cyclical pattern in Rajasthan. And yes, it was not a major player in Telangana. But the fact is that there is resentment that has built across the very classes and social groups which voted for the BJP in the past. There has been a dip across the board in terms of the party's vote share. Farmers are angry for not getting prices they hoped for. Traders are unhappy with the continuing slowdown because of demonetisation and the implementation of GST. The young are upset at the absence of jobs. The upper castes feel the BJP has turned against them, while Dalits are getting increasingly furious at what they see as the upper caste character of the party. And moderate voters are jaded with what they see as the continued thrust of the ruling party to push religious polarisation, which is a distraction at best, and deeply dangerous

at worst. Modi's integrity is still not in doubt, notwithstanding the Rafale allegations, but his economic and governance delivery is increasingly coming under question. The BJP's machine is still powerful, but its ability to maintain a balance among its various constituents is now under strain.

All of this has helped the Congress return. But its leaders, too, must recognise that it is disillusionment with the BJP, rather than deep attraction for the Congress, that has led to a shift in mood. It is getting the mix of leadership, caste, organisation, and economic narrative right. But this is an increasingly impatient electorate. If the Congress fails to deliver to farmers and does not manage to create jobs — both are challenging policy puzzles — and if it goes back to being perceived as corrupt, then power will slip away. The Congress also must know that voters are very aware of how to distinguish between national and state elections. A win now is no way a guarantee of a win in 2019. Modi's track record shows he cannot be underestimated.

The outcome had a mixed message for regional parties. While the Bahujan Samaj Party across the three heartland states and Ajit Jogi in Chhattisgarh could not emerge as the swing forces as they would have liked, the Telangana Rashtra Samithi's sweep in Telangana indicates the resilience of regional parties which cater to sub nationalist sentiments and supplement it with welfare politics. The non-Congress, non-BJP parties will continue to play a big role in 2019.

For now, though, the message from the citizens is clear. They do not want outright hegemony of one party. They have warned the ruling party. They have clearly outlined their priorities as fundamentally concerned with livelihood and economic well being. And they have given a much needed morale booster to the opposition. The 2019 election is now well and truly an open contest. And irrespective of who wins, that is good news for democracy.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 12-12-2018

Samajwadi Party offers support to Congress to form govt in MP: Akhilesh Yadav

In a shot in the arm for the Congress, the Samajwadi Party on Wednesday announced its support to Rahul Gandhi's party to form government in Madhya Pradesh.

The announcement by SP chief Akhilesh Yadav came less than an hour after Bahujan Samaj Party supremo Mayawati made a similar offer to the Congress for government formation in the Hindi heartland state of Madhya Pradesh.

"The SP supports the Congress to form government in MP," Yadav tweeted in Hindi.

The Congress, which was locked in a tantalising see-saw battle with the BJP in Madhya Pradesh, has emerged as the single-largest party with 114 seats after the vote count ended on Wednesday morning, according to the State Election Commission Office.

The party is, however, two short of the simple majority mark, 116 seats, in the 230-member Assembly. The BJP was close behind with 109 seats.

HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 12-12-2018

BJP strike rate drops in both rural, urban areas

Will 2019 mirror 2018? It depends. To the extent that disenchantment with the BJP is driven by local factors, it should do little to diminish the aura of Prime Minister Narendra Modi

Neelanjan Sircar

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) lost three the key Hindi belt states of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh (MP), and Rajasthan in these elections. But what do these results say about the upcoming 2019 national election?

During the Modi wave in 2014, the BJP achieved a highly geographically concentrated victory, sweeping much of the Hindi belt, to win 282 seats (out of a total of 543) on just 31% vote share. In order for the BJP to come back to power, it will likely need a commanding performance in the Hindi belt again. Indeed, in Chhattisgarh, MP, and Rajasthan, the BJP won 62 out of 65 parliamentary constituencies (PCs) in 2014 — 22% of the 282 seats it won in the election.

The BJP also won these three states handily in the previous state elections in 2013, whose results corresponded highly with those in the national elections. In 2013, the BJP won 49 seats (out of 90) in Chhattisgarh, 165 (out of 230) seats in MP, and 163 (out of 200) in Rajasthan. At the assembly constituency level in the 2014 general election, the BJP won 72, 192, and 180 in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, respectively. While the BJP performed better in 2014, the sweeps in 2013 (particularly in MP and Rajasthan) foretold what was coming in 2014.

So, will 2019 mirror 2018? It depends. To the extent that disenchantment with the BJP is driven by local factors, it should do little to diminish the aura of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. But if these losses are connected to a larger national narrative, then the BJP has reason to worry. As a first cut one can look at the relative performance of the BJP in 2013 and 2018 in urban and rural areas in these three states to see if disenchantment with the BJP is restricted to rural areas where it is typically weaker.

Using the data from the most recent Indian Census (2011) broken down to the assembly constituency (AC) level in these three states, and characterizing an AC as "urban" if it has less than 30,000 rural citizens and as "rural" if it has more than 200,000 rural citizens (a typical constituency has approximately 400,000 citizens), about 9% of ACs are urban constituencies and about 77%, rural (the rest are semi-rural). The BJP's strike rate (the percentage of seats it wins among those it is contesting) across both urban and rural constituencies in these three states has fallen between 2013 and 2018. Clearly, the BJP's losses point to a much larger narrative than rural disenchantment.

At the same time, it is important to note that rural areas are not synonymous with farmers. Much of rural India commutes to cities or works in some other form of labour. Recently, farmer distress has been in the news, with significant drops in agricultural procurement prices, increases in the price of diesel, and lingering effects of demonetisation. Characterising a rural constituency as “agricultural” if more than 20% of the population is engaged in agricultural labour or cultivation, it emerges that about 90% of the rural constituencies in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh are agricultural, while about 70% in Rajasthan are. Figure 2 displays the strike rates for the BJP in 2013 and 2018 across the three states in agricultural and non-agricultural constituencies. The erosion of support for the BJP in agricultural constituencies is very noticeable.

The results spell trouble for the BJP. In Gujarat, too, there was a significant erosion of support among farmers, but the BJP largely held its urban vote banks and won the state. But Gujarat is a highly urbanized state, while much of the Hindi belt is still engaged in agriculture and a party cannot hope to win these states without significant support from the farming community. More worryingly for the BJP, its erosion of support seems to have spread to urban areas as well. This shows that disenchantment with the BJP cuts across demographic groups. If the BJP is to return to power in 2019, it will have to find a way to win back the Hindi belt -- quickly.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 12-12-2018

Lessons from a Congress victory

*Its win in Rajasthan could have been much more comprehensive.
For greater success in 2019, it must take corrective actions.*

By Sanjay Lodha

Since the the last decade of the 20th century, political competition in Rajasthan has attained a fair degree of stability, marked by a regular oscillation of political power between the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The outcome of the 15th Vidhan Sabha election in the state followed this pattern. The Congress is in the driver’s seat once again and the BJP has suffered a major debacle, losing almost 100 constituencies over its tally of 163 seats in 2013. However, the BJP’s loss is not completely the Congress’s gain. Other political parties which have shown their influence are the BSP, CPM, the newly-formed Rashtriya Loktantrik Party and the Bharatiya Tribal Party. Rebels, mostly from the Congress, but also from the BJP, have won about a dozen seats.

If a comparison is made between the 2013 and 2018 verdicts, one can clearly infer that though the BJP has lost this time, its performance is not as poor as that of the Congress in 2013. There is not much difference between the two parties as far as the voteshare is concerned. The 2018 election has thus been a close contest. The outcome has surprised many because most pre-poll and exit poll surveys were predicting a comfortable victory for the Congress. Early this year, the BJP had suffered a severe drubbing in the by-elections for the Alwar and Ajmer Lok Sabha constituencies as well as the Mandalgarh assembly seat. There

was a strong feeling of discontent with the BJP government led by Vasundhara Raje. This dissatisfaction itself was a result of perceived poor performance, a deteriorating law and order situation and corruption.

In many parts of the state, especially in north-west and central Rajasthan, the farmers were up in arms against the government. Unemployment, price rise and the inadequate delivery of essential services were regarded as major failures of the government. In a pre-poll survey conducted by Lokniti-CSDS towards the end of November 2018, more than half the respondents said that the BJP government must not be given another chance. Faced with this widespread anti-incumbency, one expected a more comprehensive mandate for the Congress.

The Congress has won but even in its victory, the party must be thinking as to what prevented it from sweeping the polls despite the negative sentiment against the Raje government. To initiate the debate, a number of factors can be flagged to explain this lower-than-expected performance. Early on during the election process, the party could not work out a mutually agreeable alliance with the BSP. The half-hearted alliance with parties such as the Nationalist Congress Party, Rashtriya Lok Dal and the Janata Dal of Sharad Yadav carried no political salience. In fact, these tie-ups became a liability for the Congress, as the results have proved. The Congress stumbled once again with the delay in declaring its candidates. Once it finally did, there was an avalanche of disgruntled leaders who left the party on being denied a ticket. That their anger was justified is vindicated by the fact that many rebels have won. The Congress was also slow to declare its manifesto, which has not projected as to how the party differs from its principal rival. All this had an adverse impact on the party’s campaign.

One may even say that the focus of the Congress campaign was to denounce the misdeeds and non-performance of the Narendra Modi-led central government. In a lighter vein, people pointed out that the Congress is campaigning for the Lok Sabha election. But on a more serious note, it must also be pointed out that there is strong political affection for Narendra Modi among the voters of Rajasthan. Therefore, this strategy of targeting Modi and central government does not seem to have served the Congress well.

One final factor is the choice of the Congress to not declare its chief ministerial candidate. This issue kept dogging the party all throughout the campaign. The BJP used the indecision to the hilt and the media never relaxed its sharp questions to both Ashok Gehlot and Sachin Pilot. Both had rehearsed answers that appeared far from convincing. On the other hand, the BJP knowing full well the high degree of unhappiness with Vasundhara Raje still projected her as the potential chief minister. The question is: Did this strategy of the Congress to not project a leader help the party at the hustings? Not really. The Lokniti-CSDS survey not only gave Gehlot a formidable edge over Pilot but a substantial number of respondents observed that their vote for Congress depends upon Gehlot being projected as the CM candidate.

Notwithstanding the above, the Congress has won the elections. The party will have to take a call on the chief minister question. It has to keep local sentiments in mind while making a decision. The party also has to look ahead at the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections. Although the “iron law of electoral democracy” in India does say that when two major elections are held at close intervals, the result of one impacts the outcome of the other, the Congress cannot take this for granted. Learning from the Vidhan Sabha elections, the party must make necessary amends in its strategies and programmes.

HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 12-12-2018

The 3-0 victory margin heralds the emergence of candidate Rahul

Narendra Modi remains the tallest national leader, but the results of the recent assembly elections show that Rahul Gandhi has done enough to at least be the face of the grouping that will take him on in 2019

R Sukumar

For Congress President Rahul Gandhi, the December 11 results of five state elections mark the biggest victory of his political career. Apart from the outcome itself, the party’s performance increases the chances of an alliance coming together to take on the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections even as it strengthens the Congress’ claim to lead this grouping.

The BJP was in power and in serious contention in three states of the five that went to the polls and lost all of them. The Congress was in serious contention, on its own or in an alliance, in all, and won three, including the key Hindi heartland states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh.

The win needs to be seen in the context of the fortunes of the Congress as well as the BJP over the past five years.

The BJP ruled 18 states (on its own or through alliances) till these elections and has a clear majority in the Lok Sabha. Over the past five years, it has emerged the most powerful political force India has ever seen. It has also perfected the art of the campaign across several dimensions: caste; choice of candidates; use of social media; and public relations. To snatch power from such a party, in not one, but three states, is something that would make even experienced political campaigners very proud.

The Indian National Congress was reduced to being in power in three states before the Karnataka elections in April and to a minority of 44 in the Lok Sabha elections in 2014.

For the BJP, there are two clear messages in the result: one good; the other, bad.

Local factors were largely responsible for its loss in the three Hindi-heartland states, but underlying the strong anti-incumbency in these states is a mélange of issues that is common across several states: the agrarian crisis which has left farmers feeling helpless and angry; demonetisation and the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax that have hurt the informal economy and small businesses; and unemployment. Caste and religion do not seem to have played as important a role in the elections as these have. In the case of some of these issues, the BJP’s response has been delayed or inadequate. In the case of

others, the party has simply relied on aggressively pushing an alternative narrative. Worryingly for the BJP, all of these are issues that will find resonance in the Lok Sabha elections.

If the BJP didn’t do as badly as it was expected to in Rajasthan, and almost managed to hold on to Madhya Pradesh, at least some of the credit should go to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the most potent weapon in the party’s campaign arsenal. He campaigned relentlessly in both states, and the party’s performance indicates that he remains the most popular political leader in the country. The BJP will be hoping that this popularity will win it even more votes in a Lok Sabha election in which national issues should ideally matter more (and national leaders have more appeal) than they do during state elections. The party will clearly emphasise national issues more in the run-up to 2019, perhaps even try to create some even as it tries harder to make the parliamentary election a mano-a-mano contest between Modi and Gandhi.

As both parties prepare for 2019, Gandhi, and the Congress, would do well to remember what worked for them, especially in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

In both states, the party has powerful local leaders who represent a combination of age and experience. In Rajasthan it has Ashok Gehlot and Sachin Pilot. In Madhya Pradesh, Kamal Nath and Jyotiraditya Scindia. Sure, Gandhi will now have to choose chief ministers for the two states from among them, but the results have highlighted the value of having strong regional leaders driving the campaign.

The Congress backed this up with the use of data analytics, a smartphone enabled booth-level network of workers (both were hitherto used only by the BJP), and a reasonably scientific way of picking candidates, although the process wasn’t entirely glitch-free, especially in Rajasthan, where the party may have lost as many as 10 seats to rebels.

The BJP, which, over the past five years, has become used to not losing, will be disappointed with the results that came out on December 11, although it will take them because it knows that things could have been much worse.

The Congress will be happy about the results, although it will be left with the feeling that it could have done better.

At 48, nearing the end of his first year as the party’s president, Gandhi seems to have finally come of age as a political leader — not enough to take on Modi, perhaps, but definitely enough to become the face of a grouping that does.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 11-12-2018

Five States, Same Absence

The silence on and of Muslims in assembly poll campaigns rang loud and clear

By Zakia Soman

Elections enable people’s participation in decision-making and governance. We are witnessing protests and agitations by different sections of society in the run-up to the 2019 general elections. Most political parties are forced to take note of the demands by farmers, Dalits, informal workers or the Marathas. Demands by various groups find reflection in the manifestos of parties or at least draw lip-service from political leaders. But

Muslims, comprising the largest religious minority in India, remain absent from public discourse despite their poverty, educational and economic backwardness and persistent political onslaught from the Hindutva forces.

Muslim leaders and politicians from so-called secular parties are silent. The silence of Muslim leaders signifies their helplessness as *sabka saath, sabka vikas* has proved to be a mere slogan. The community, which was already poor and deprived, is now besieged. There has been hardly any action in cases of lynchings by *gaurakshaks*, while there has been a steady stream of polarising statements from members of the ruling dispensation. The debate around who is anti-national has led to fear in the minds of many. The election agenda is being set by the aggressive rightist forces. The Congress is in the race for “Hindu votes” and is desperate to shed the “Muslim appeasement” label. Muslim leaders realise that the Congress, and most other parties, cannot be counted upon to speak up on their behalf. The silence also owes to the fact that there is no democratic social leadership within the community.

The RSS-VHP is making the case for an ordinance to facilitate the building of a Ram temple at Ayodhya. Muslim leaders remain silent; rightly so, given that the matter is sub judice. But there have been no efforts to respond to the issue, either socially or politically, while the proponents of the Ram temple have tried to capitalise on the issue for electoral gain. Although a mosque in Ayodhya would hardly matter to most Muslims — most would be happy at a Ram temple there — it signifies a much larger question of justice. The Muslims have been abandoned by political parties on this question. A cursory look at the election campaign in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh suggests that no political party would like to risk their electoral prospects by assuring safety and security to Muslims.

Political support and articulation are important for the welfare of any community, especially the minorities and backward communities. Community leadership and a progressive social tradition are equally vital. The trajectory of Dalits offers ample evidence in this regard. There have been many Dalit leaders who have engaged at the grass roots to take forward Babasaheb Ambedkar’s vision of social democracy. The popularisation of a democratic discourse within the community has led to a consistent demand for accountability from elected leaders.

Unfortunately for the Indian Muslims, their leadership has remained mired in conservatism and short-sightedness around perceived religious issues. They have not fully comprehended the idea of citizenship in a secular democracy, comprising rights and duties emanating from the Constitution. I have witnessed this gap in the understanding of several leaders during the course of my work following the Gujarat and Muzaffarnagar riots. The idea of demanding accountability from state institutions and simultaneously fulfilling one’s obligations as citizens remains distant to a leadership obsessed with religious conservatism. Ordinary Muslims pay a price for this lack of vision. On the one hand, there are no means of a democratic participation and on the other hand, there is increased stereotyping. The irresponsible statements and unjust positions from religious leaders, such as around triple talaq, are highlighted leading to cause further

polarisation in society. This leads to a situation where there is little awareness about the condition of ordinary Muslims and nobody cares for the absence of Muslims in a crowded public discourse.

It may, perhaps, be a bit late for long-term corrections within the community towards building a democratic social leadership as far the 2019 general election is concerned. But a vibrant, plural, democratic and inclusive society is not the burden of Muslims alone. It is a collective responsibility that the political parties appear to be shying away from.

THE HINDU, DELHI 4-12-2018

Secular democracy in peril

Mohammed Ayoob

Indian politics today reminds one of the first decade of the existence of Pakistan

India is literally at the crossroads with the very future of its secular democracy at stake. With five important State Assembly elections in various stages of completion and the general election around the corner, the political temperature is at boiling point. Competitive Hindutva has become the name of the game, with the ostensibly secular Congress party trying desperately to demonstrate its Hindu credentials to cut into the base of the Hindu-nationalist BJP.

Congress president Rahul Gandhi is busy visiting Hindu temples and publicising his caste genealogy for electoral gains. This is the first time since Independence that the religion and caste of a candidate for the job of Prime Minister is overtly portrayed as the defining basis for his/her claim to lead the country.

The Congress party’s passive Hindutva will in all probability lead to its crushing defeat in the forthcoming general elections because, as a pale imitation of the BJP’s aggressive Hindutva, it cannot compete with the genuine article. Mr. Gandhi and his advisers are confusing contrived demonstrations of personal religiosity with Hindu nationalism. The last is a clearly defined political ideology that, in direct contravention of the letter and spirit of the Constitution, is based on the notion that Hindus have exclusive claim to the country and Muslims and Christians are interlopers who can be treated as second-class citizens at best. It has nothing to do with personal piety and the religious tenets of Hinduism.

Rising intimidation

The Congress’s passive Hindutva is ceding the ideological ground to the BJP by heavily diluting the tenets of secularism enshrined in the Constitution. The well-established secular norm of not overtly using religion for electoral gains is now a thing of the past. A very dangerous aspect of this unfolding drama is the escalation in the politics of intimidation, which is undermining the rule of law and threatening the democratic fabric of India. The recent mobilisation of thousands of devotees in Ayodhya by the Vishva Hindu Parishad, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Shiv Sena and related Hindu nationalist organisations is a prime example of this.

This mobilisation was a part of the strategy to put pressure on a government seen as friendly to the cause to build the Ram temple immediately on the site of the Babri mosque demolished in 1992. However, even more important, it was a direct challenge to the power of the Supreme Court where the matter is under adjudication, thus drastically undermining the judicial system itself. RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat made it clear in a speech during the rally in Ayodhya that “society does not move only by the words of law, but also by its own wishes”. Other speakers indulged in even more intemperate language. What started as a property dispute has thus been turned into a matter of faith beyond the purview of the courts.

Simultaneously, there is an anti-democratic wave sweeping through the country. Populism rather than liberal democracy is increasingly coming to define the nature of the Indian polity.

The opposite of patriotism

A jingoistic form of ultra-nationalism has become very popular. Politicians regularly engage in such rhetoric with discussants on TV channels, some of them retired military officers, also contributing in great measure to its legitimisation. This is the polar opposite of patriotism combined with liberal values that was enshrined in the Constitution and was held dear by the first generation of independent India’s leadership.

A further indication of the erosion of democratic values is the tendency of highly placed serving military officers to comment publicly on sensitive issues of domestic and foreign policy. They intervene in debates such as those regarding illegal immigration and India-Pakistan relations, which should be the exclusive preserve of civilian leaders in government and in the opposition. This would not have been tolerated in an earlier era because the founding fathers of the republic were emphatic that civilian supremacy over the military brass must be safeguarded at all costs and the military isolated from the political arena.

The current trajectory of Indian politics reminds one eerily of the first decade of the existence of neighbouring Pakistan. Mounting majoritarianism fuelled by religious intolerance, hyper-nationalism born out of insecurity, deliberate erosion of political and judicial institutions, and creeping military intervention in the political arena finally led to the first military coup in Pakistan in 1958. This paved the way for a succession of military takeovers. One of these resulted in the division of Pakistan in 1971 and another in the creation of terrorist outfits in the 1980s that continue not only to threaten India and Afghanistan but also to tear apart Pakistan’s social fabric. Pakistan has never recovered from the tragic errors committed in its early years and is paying a very high price for it today. One hopes that India will not go down the same path because otherwise, the largest democracy in the world could face an equally bleak future.

AFGHANISTAN TIMES, KABUL 10-12-2018

Polls controversy

Once again like of past, controversy erupted over October 20, 2018 parliamentary elections in all over Afghanistan when

the Electoral Complaints Commission couple of days back has termed all votes polled for Kabul constituencies as invalid. According to complaints commissioner total of 2,767 complaints were registered in Kabul, from where electorates have cast votes for electing 33 representatives to Wolesi Jirga. The complaints commission while declaring the polled votes as invalid, diverted attention towards reports of massive fraud among others as a reason behind its decision to invalidate Kabul votes, adding “There were serious outstanding problems in Kabul that could hurt the fairness, transparency and inclusiveness of the election.” Through such a decision, the complaint commission has declared around four million votes as invalid throughout the country, civil rights association already made allegations pertained to using of black money, systematic fraud and other illegal, unlawful and unethical acts of getting/buying berths in the lower house. Even the Election Commission personnel were also found guilty in the election fraud in return of bribe and kick backs as well. And now according to election commissions, the only remedy is the review the overall scenario. But one thing is very clear that amidst chilly cold, rough weather and snow fall, arranging re-polling in Kabul will not be an easy task for the Election Commission, government and law enforcing agencies as well. Election Commission data reveal that over 800 candidates contested against each other on 33 seats from Kabul and all these aspirants have consumed million of Afghanis on their election campaign. And now it could be hard for some of them to afford more expenditure on their campaign or go for re-contest. In fact, Election Commission has already declared a schedule for the Presidential polls in coming April. But the Presidential election is being held at the time when the US Special Envoy Dr. Zalmay Khalilzad has expedited efforts for peace deals and reconciliation. So far outcomes of renewed US Envoy efforts are satisfactory whereas the Taliban Qatar Office is now on grounds for conditional talks with the US. Similarly, Pakistan which is the major stake holder has made some shifts in its stances regarding Afghanistan. On such grounds, holding of Presidential and re-polling for parliament berths in Kabul etc... could cause hardships and confusion. Instead of going for making scattered the attentions, the Afghan government needs to realize its responsibilities of extending maximum support to the US peace mission. After ensuring induction of all Afghan segments, especially Taliban into political main stream, then traditional assembly of Loya Jirga could be approached for amendments in constitutions. The existing electorates, constituencies and delimitation needs reforms and changes. Unless addressing such anomalies, each and every elections in Afghanistan would generate criticism and confusions.

AFGHANISTAN TIMES, KABUL 12-12-2018

Expediting peace efforts

In the wake of US Special Envoy Dr. Zalmay Khalilzad proposal, Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani has announced a new body comprising almost top politicians, religious figures and high ranking dignitaries. Such steps on the part of Afghan government confirm its enthusiasm and curiosity for return of peace and

stability in war devastated motherland. Voice for peace is not of an individual but is the voice of whole nation, therefore, it attracting attentions of world countries. In recent days, Khalilzad made frequent shuttle-cock visits to the region whereas he remain for three days in Islamabad and has held results-oriented talks with high ranking Pakistani authorities including Prime Minister Imran Khan, Army Chief Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi and others. It is premature to say something about outcomes of such an important trip to Islamabad but two days ago Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi announced visiting Kabul on December 15. This visit could be in continuation of Qureshi's previous trip to Kabul in August. But it could be different as after previous visit, certain developments registered regarding Afghan/Pak relations and US stance on war stricken Afghanistan. Besides bringing Taliban leaders to table talks, the US President Donald Trump has also addressed a letter to Prime Minister Imran Khan, requesting for Pakistan contribution in the reconciliation efforts. Pakistan as good will gesture also made certain leading Taliban leaders including co-founder of Tehrik Taliban Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. Similarly, the US also made certain other decisions including putting Pakistan on its list of those countries where human rights are insecure. According to US documents, non-Muslim minorities are lacking safety and security especially in performing of their religious obligations. This decision of US was followed by suspension of already approved loan/grant by the World Bank to Pakistan, thus making further hardships and complications for its leadership. From last several years Pakistan is also providing sanctuaries to terrorists involved in violent acts inside Afghanistan and now its Premier Imran wants to address all such complaints and allegations. Its country's Foreign Minister Qureshi is likely to deliver some good messages to Afghan people who are desirous for peace and normalcy in their motherland. It is the high time for Pakistan, considered as a key stake holder in Afghan conflict to help sincerely in the reconciliation process in Afghanistan, which might be in interests of both the neighboring countries. Afghanistan and Pakistan due to prolong turmoil and unrest are ahead with similar socio-economic, social, political and law and order problems and its leaders must initiate joint steps for overcoming all such identical issues.

AFGHANISTAN TIMES, KABUL 10-12-2018

US peace talks

The US ambassador to Afghanistan, Mr. John R. Bass, has made it clear that US making all out efforts to convince the warring Afghan factions to go for internal dialogues, which could be the suitable way out for resolving of long standing conflict. In recent days, certain media sections in and outside Afghanistan reported that Taliban Office in Qatar is willing to talk with US but it is reluctant to talk with the Afghan government. Such a statement resulted for heated debate not only inside Afghanistan but also throughout the world in countries and forums desirous for an early to end violence and hostilities in Afghanistan. For the purpose of getting an early negotiated, acceptable and durable

solution to over four decades Afghan conflict, US Special Dr. Zalmay Khalilzad making frequent flights to the region in recent days. Almost Afghans are attaching great hopes with these peace efforts and praying for success of Khalilzad peace mission. But unfortunately the recent reports regarding alleged reluctance on the part of Taliban leaders are generating too much rumors and apprehensions. However, US ambassador said the US is not negotiating on behalf of the Afghan government as he pointed at the efforts by the United States on Afghan peace. Such a clarification confirms the US sense of urgency to see negotiations begin between Afghans because they see the overwhelming demand for peace. Return of peace and stability is not only beneficial to Afghanistan and its people but is also in favour of all those members of international community sincerely wants peace. Frequent visits on the part of US now confirm that President Donald Trump is eager for an early resolution to long standing Afghan conflict. Afghans have already been time and again reaffirmed their stance on early return of peace and ending of hostilities on their soil. But they are facing hardships from certain other neighbouring and regional countries including Pakistan. US President Donald Trump in his recent letter to Pakistan reminded about Afghan Conflict's negative impacts on Pakistan and suggested him to realize his responsibility at this stage. And Ambassador John R. Bass also reaffirmed, "Pakistan has not played a constructive role in Afghan peace as it should have played so far." But it is the time for Pakistan to realize its responsibilities at this stage by accepting the fact that war brings nothing but devastation.

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 2-12-2018

Geneva Conference: A Reliable Path to Ensure Afghanistan's Transformation Decade

The National Unity Government and the international community met on 27-28 November 2018 at the United Nations in Geneva to renew their partnership and cooperation for Afghanistan's peace, prosperity and self-reliance. Delegations from 61 countries and 35 international organizations, and representatives of civil society, the private sector and the media attended the Geneva Conference on Afghanistan, co-hosted by the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United Nations. Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and Rosemary A. DiCarlo, Under Secretary-General of the United Nations, delivered keynote addresses. The conference was co-chaired by Minister of Foreign Affairs Salahuddin Rabbani, Minister of Finance Mohammad Humayon Qayoumi, and Special Representative of the Secretary-General Tadamichi Yamamoto. At the end of Conference, Abdullah Abdullah, Chief Executive of the National Unity Government, concluded the conference.

Background

In 2011 at the Bonn conference on Afghanistan, the international community agreed on a "Transformation Decade" for the

country. During this period, Afghanistan was promised very considerable amounts of international assistance so that the country could achieve self-reliance by 2024. At the Tokyo Conference in 2012 a system of high-level periodic reviews was put in place with ministerial meetings (invitation to Foreign Ministers because of the comprehensive and political nature of the meetings) every two years and senior officials meeting in the intervening years. The ministerial conferences in 2012 (Tokyo) and 2016 (Brussels) became major pledging conferences obtaining over \$16 billion and \$15 billion respectively for the years that followed. The next major pledging conference is in 2020.

The Tokyo conference (2012) also introduced the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework (TMAF) as a means to provide direction for the development of Afghanistan through mutual commitments between the Government and the international community. A system of high-level periodic reviews takes place via either the ministerial conference or the senior officials meeting every year. The senior officials meetings are held in Kabul and the ministerials are held outside Afghanistan in order to garner continued political support from capitals. The London Ministerial of 2014 strongly reaffirmed the continued support of the international community and continued monitoring the implementation of commitments by the Afghan Government.

The Brussels Ministerial of 2016 was a pledging conference and included political and strategic elements. The 2018 Geneva conference will not be a pledging conference like those in Tokyo and Brussels, but more focused on policy and strategy. In line with the Security Council mandate for the UN to coordinate international donor assistance to Afghanistan, the UN has been co-chairing ministerial and senior officials meetings. Following the senior officials meeting held in Kabul on 5 October 2017 the Afghan Government (President Ghani and the Minister of Finance) asked the United Nations to hold the ministerial conference of 2018 at its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland.

The way forward

Afghanistan has taken tangible steps towards self-reliance since 2016. As a result, the report of progress achieved by the government since the Brussels Conference, including on enhanced public financial management and streamlined national budgeting; reviewed remaining challenges was warmly welcomed by the participants; And called for increased efforts to fight corruption and illicit narcotics, and promote peace, stability and the rule of law; and, adopted the Geneva Mutual Accountability Framework. Afghanistan was ensured to be support on its policies strengthening national and subnational governance, regional economic cooperation and connectivity. The experience of Afghanistan shows that efficient and transparent monitoring and review of reform can further strengthen mutual accountability.

Afghanistan parliamentary and presidential elections were among the top agenda of the conference and the participants acknowledged that holding parliamentary elections in October 2018 was an important step in the consolidation of democracy. Presidential elections scheduled for April 2019 and future

elections need to draw on the lessons learned in order to continually enhance the transparent, credible and participatory process to the benefit of all citizens.

Afghanistan peace process has started a new critical phase. As a result, participants called on all concerned to seize this opportunity for an Afghan owned and led peace process as the only viable path to satisfy the citizens' desire for an end to conflict, sustained and broad-based economic growth, and a more prosperous tomorrow. This can strengthen the Afghan government to achieve peace based on the important steps it has taken this year.

According to the decisions of the this conference, the senior officials will meet in 2019, and the next ministerial conference will be held in 2020 at which future commitments to Afghanistan's long-term development will be discussed in light of the government's achievements and growth agenda and the Geneva Mutual Accountability Framework.

The international community strongly reaffirmed their continued support to the progress and the programs of the National Unity Government on peace, reforms and development and pledged to continue their support, aid and cooperation during the Afghanistan's Transformation Decade (2015-2024).

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 12-12-2018

Cabinet review

It is a good idea, but perhaps its time has not come as yet. With a new session of the National Assembly set to begin, Prime Minister Imran Khan convened the federal cabinet for a marathon session of ministerial performance audits. The performance of more than two dozen ministries was assessed, and it was indicated that another quarterly review will be undertaken before yet another cabinet reshuffle around the six-month mark. That slightly longer horizon is perhaps more reasonable than demanding that ministers show the desired results in their first three months in office. Not much is known about what the yardsticks were and how Mr Khan assessed his cabinet colleagues, but a review as vast as 26 ministries in a single day will inevitably be superficial. Perhaps the prime minister intended to signal to the public that he is a different kind of prime minister, and to his cabinet colleagues that 'business as usual' will not be tolerated. On both counts, a clearer picture should emerge in three months' time. What Mr Khan ought to be aware of is that other governments have attempted to introduce some discipline and systematic accountability to the functioning of the cabinet, but none succeeded.

In the previous PML-N government, first Nawaz Sharif and then Shahid Khaqan Abbasi made a show, at least initially, of demanding more from their cabinets. Mr Sharif also announced performance audits of ministers after the first year of his last spell as prime minister, but the fanfare quickly died down, and he did not shuffle his cabinet until his ouster from office. And while Mr Abbasi held cabinet meetings regularly and adopted a more inclusive approach towards decision-making, there were few tangible gains when it came to ministerial accountability. Indeed,

the most high profile departure from Mr Abbasi's cabinet — that of then finance minister Ishaq Dar — was a result of pressure from NAB and the courts. Certainly, Mr Abbasi's tenure was marked by deep national political turmoil and the threat of imprisonment of Mr Sharif, but true cabinet accountability is very difficult to enforce in most circumstances.

Prime Minister Khan may also want to consider the effect of drawing further attention and work away from parliament. The very start of a new session of the National Assembly on Monday was rendered uncertain by the marathon cabinet meeting that the prime minister was holding. With parliamentary committees yet to be formed, the presence of ministers in parliament is even more important than usual, if parliament is to have even a semblance of oversight activity. Mr Khan's cabinet selections are his prerogative, but the government's performance needs to be examined in parliament too. The prime minister is the chief executive, but parliament ought to be the focal point of democratic activity.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 5-12-2018

Rule by ordinance?

IT may be a legal instrument, but its overuse, or use in circumstances other than a genuine emergency, amounts to a subversion of the core legislative duty of parliament.

Prime Minister Imran Khan's suggestion that the PTI-led federal government may opt for presidential ordinances to push through the government's legislative and reforms agenda is a statement of intent that ought to be reconsidered.

The parliamentary maths is clear: the PTI and its allies can muster a majority in the National Assembly, but are significantly short of one in the Senate.

The numbers in the upper house are likely to shift somewhat in favour of the ruling coalition in the next Senate election; however, those elections are not scheduled for another two and a half years, in 2021, by which time the PTI government would be halfway through its term.

But that is not a justification for the PTI to turn to the presidential-ordinance route to legislate, bypassing parliament. What is also unclear is how the PTI government intends to introduce durable legal reforms via presidential ordinances.

The ability of governments to use presidential ordinances to circumvent parliament has been curtailed, and after the 18th Amendment the lifespan of an ordinance can be no more than two 120-day periods, the second 120 days requiring approval by one of the houses of parliament.

The range of issues mentioned by Prime Minister Khan — from the early disposal of cases to strengthening the inheritance rights of women and widows — will require durable legislative fixes rather than ad hoc and time-bound interventions, which is what presidential ordinances are.

Perplexing, too, is the justification that Mr Khan gave for wanting to use ordinances to legislate.

The PTI cannot legislate with the main opposition parties because to do so would mean condoning their corruption, according to Mr Khan.

What is unclear is why legislation drafted and presented in parliament by the government itself would be tainted merely because other political parties choose to support it. Mr Khan appears to have a remarkably myopic, even faulty, understanding of the current parliament.

Perhaps most troubling are the implications of Mr Khan's statements for the functioning of parliament. Already parliament has been effectively paralysed by a dispute between the government and the opposition regarding the chairmanship of the Public Accounts Committee.

That dispute has prevented the National Assembly speaker from notifying the committees that do much of the core parliamentary work.

Mr Khan's assertion that his government will seek to legislatively bypass parliament could inflame tensions in the house and reduce the opposition's incentive to work with the government even when there are legitimate and shared interests to further.

The PTI must accept the realities of parliament and its own numerical position rather than wage a struggle that will ultimately damage its own legislative and reforms agenda.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 12-12-2018

NAB arrests PML-N leaders in housing scam case

Zulqernain Tahir & Wajih Ahmad Sheikh

LAHORE: The National Accountability Bureau (NAB) on Tuesday arrested former railways minister Khawaja Saad Rafique and his brother former Punjab health minister Khawaja Salman Rafique after the Lahore High Court dismissed as withdrawn their bail pleas in the Paragon housing society scam.

Their arrest has been made ahead of the December 13 by-polls on the Lahore (PP-168) seat, which was vacated by Mr Saad after winning the National Assembly seat from Lahore (NA-131) in October by defeating ruling Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf's Humayun Akhtar. At the same time NAB also started examining a complaint against former information minister and spokesperson of the main opposition party Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz Marriyum Aurangzeb for allegedly possessing assets beyond her known sources of income.

NAB tightened the noose around the Khawajas after Paragon housing society director Qaiser Amin Butt consented to turn approver in the case.

Anti-graft body also begins probe into a complaint against party spokesperson; Fawad says arrests show country is moving in 'right direction'

Scores of PML-N workers gathered outside the court and chanted slogans in favour of their leaders and a few of them lifted Mr Saad on their shoulders when NAB personnel tried to arrest the

former ministers. On his appeal, however, the charged workers did not resist their arrest.

In a brief address to the workers, Mr Saad said: “The voice of people cannot be silenced. The patience of the PML-N is being tested but we will get justice soon.” He claimed NAB had failed to produce any evidence against him and his brother. “We brought the facts before the NAB chairman and the court but did not get relief. However, we will continue respecting the courts,” he maintained.

During the proceedings on their bail petitions for a fourth consecutive time, a two-judge LHC bench asked the lawyers for the Khawajas to advance their arguments on the report filed by NAB. The bench said it could adjourn hearing for a day if the counsel needed time for preparation of arguments. However, it added that the counsel for both Mr Saad and Mr Salman would have to conclude their arguments the same day as the court was not going to hear them on alternate days. At this, counsel for the Khawajas Azam Nazir Tarar and Amjad Pervez resumed their arguments and denied the allegations levelled by the anti-corruption watchdog.

Advocate Pervez said the Khawaja brothers owned 40-kanal land in the 7,000-kanal Paragon housing society. He said the petitioners had provided their commercial plots for the scheme and received residential plots in return. The petitioners also paid Rs200 million as development charges for the 40-kanal land, he said, while rejecting NAB’s allegation that the society was a “benami” property of the Khawaja brothers. In their tax returns, he argued, the petitioners disclosed each and every penny they earned.

The counsel alleged NAB had been forcing people to make confessions against opposition party leaders. NAB “tortured” Paragon housing society director Qaiser Amin Butt and made him turn approver against his clients under the “influence of drugs”. The counsel argued that an “approver” had no value in the eyes of law.

The prosecutor said the allegation of political victimisation was baseless, explaining that NAB’s Lahore director general had been asked to seek prior permission from the chairman before initiating any other investigation against the Khawaja brothers. He admitted that the NAB chairman had rejected the Khawaja brothers’ application seeking transfer of the inquiries against them from Lahore to any other region.

The bench, headed by Justice Tariq Abbasi, after hearing both sides observed that no case was made out of pre-arrest bail in light of the reasons submitted by NAB for the arrest. At this, the counsel for the petitioners said they wanted to withdraw the petitions. Therefore, the bench dismissed the petitions as withdrawn.

NAB will produce the Khawajas before an accountability court on Wednesday (today) to get their physical remand.

Giving grounds for their arrest, NAB claimed that suspect Saad Rafique, through his ‘benamidar’ wife Ghazala Saad, brother Salman in association with Qaiser Amin Butt and Nadeem Zia established a housing project in the name of the Air Avenue that

was converted into a new housing project namely M/s Paragon City Pvt Ltd.

“Record shows the Paragon city is an illegal society. The suspect in collaboration with Zia and Butt cheated the members of public at large and obtained illegal pecuniary benefits from the funds of said illegal housing project. Saad Rafique is operating this illegal housing project through the co-accused persons who are collecting deposits from general public despite clear directions of the Lahore Development Authority that this project is unapproved. The suspect has been continuously obtaining illegal/illegitimate funds/ benefits from the said project as he obtained 40-kanal plots in his own name and in the name of his brother [Mr Salman],” NAB alleged.

Misusing his official position, Mr Saad obtained undue benefits in the form of sale of numbers of commercial plots worth of billions of rupees which were actually not owned by the Paragon City, thus the buyers had been cheated, NAB prosecutor argued.

Only last week the former railways minister had told a press conference that his “difficult days” would be over if he became a “good boy” and kept mum on the wishes of the powers that be.

The PML-N described the arrest of Khawaja brothers as “unholy NAB-PTI government” alliance. PML-N president Shahbaz Sharif in Islamabad condemned their arrest and termed it the “worst example of civilian dictatorship”.

PPP parliamentary leader in the Punjab Assembly Hassan Murtaza also condemned the arrest of the Khawajas, alleging that NAB was “targeting only opposition members”.

Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry said the arrest [of PML-N leaders] showed that the country was heading towards “a right direction”.

“The government has no role in the arrest of the Khawaja brothers [by NAB] and stopping Hamza [the son of PML-N president Shahbaz Sharif] by the Federal Investigation Agency from travelling abroad. They [the Khawaja brothers] have been arrested in the cases which the PTI government had not made. Those arresting them are also not appointed by the PTI government,” said the information minister in a reference towards NAB chairman retired Justice Javed Iqbal.

Mr Chaudhry claimed that the state institutions were “independent” and they were acting independently. “What we know is that they [PML-N leaders] have made a lot of money,” he added.

Complaint against PML-N spokesperson

NAB spokesperson Nawazish Ali Asim confirmed to Dawn that the bureau had received a complaint against former information minister and opposition party spokesperson Marriyum Aurangzeb (regarding income beyond means). “We are examining the complaint as per law,” he said.

Ms Aurangzeb declined to comment. However, another PML-N leader said “this complaint” carried a message for Ms Aurangzeb to “observe silence or face the music”.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 13-12-2018

It's businessmen's parliament again?

Shakhawat Liton and Mohammad Al-Masum Molla

Businessmen are likely to retain their dominance in the next Jatiya Sangsad.

Participation of a large number of businessmen in the polls indicates that their presence in the new parliament will be overwhelming and money will influence the election.

In the alliances led by the Awami League and BNP, around 62 percent of the contestants are businessmen, according to the data from 286 of 300 constituencies.

The Daily Star accumulated the data by analysing the affidavits of 572 nominees of the two tents. Information about aspirants of 14 seats is not available yet.

Things were different in the years following the country's independence.

Law, business and farming were the three most common occupations of the lawmakers elected to the country's first parliament in 1973. Of the MPs in that parliament, 31 percent were lawyers and 18 percent were businessmen.

But the rise of businessmen in politics took place over the decades, particularly after the restoration of the country's democracy, following the ouster of the autocratic Ershad regime in December 1990.

In the fifth parliament constituted through the election of 1991, businessmen outnumbered lawyers. In that parliament, 38 percent were businessmen and 15 percent lawyers.

In the 2008 polls, 57 percent of the lawmakers elected were businessmen. That was the last competitive and participatory election. The 2014 election was boycotted by most of the parties, but the number of businessmen increased.

Political analysts say the major political parties' dependency on businessmen has effectively turned politics itself into a business.

Addressing a rally on October 12, 2015, President Abdul Hamid decried this trend. "It's a matter of regret that today's politics has gone into the pockets of businessmen.... We have to get rid of it."

The trend negatively impacted the functioning of parliament.

"In our neighbouring country, India, parliament sits in the morning. But in our case, as most of the MPs are businessman, the parliamentary session in most of the time starts in the afternoon because businessmen lawmakers remain busy with their business the whole day," said parliamentary affairs expert Prof Nizam Ahmed, a teacher of public administration at Chittagong University.

Despite limitations imposed by the article 70 of the constitution, MPs still can play an important role in the parliamentary committees that enjoy the power to hold the government accountable, he said.

"From our experience, businessmen cannot give enough time in politics and they are also not that much serious in parliamentary functions.

"Businessmen join politics to become politician but now a days we see people joining politics to become businessmen within a very short span of time," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

There is no substitute to full-time politicians in an effective parliament, he added.

According to available data, only 12 nominees of the two major alliances are full-time politicians.

Political science professor at Jahangirnagar University Al-Masud Hasanuzzaman said the number of businessmen in politics is increasing because money dominates politics.

The data gathered by The Daily Star from the nomination forms also exposed how money plays a role in the polls.

In the nomination forms, they mentioned the sources of the money they would spend for campaigning.

As many as 329 of 572 candidates mentioned that they would not need to depend on others for election expenditure. They can spend up to Tk 25 lakh each.

The remaining 243 say they will meet their election expenditure from their own sources, as well as contributions from relatives and friends.

In the December 30 polls, a candidate can spend Tk 10 per voter for election campaigning. The ceiling of maximum expenditure is Tk 25 lakh, even if the number of voters in a constituency is more than 2.5 lakh, according to a notification issued by the Election Commission.

But exceeding the limit of expenditure is an "open secret". None of the past ECs had been able to take any effective measures to contain the influence of unauthorised money in electioneering.

A Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) study on the 2008 parliamentary polls revealed that candidates who contested the ninth parliamentary election spent about Tk 30 lakh each on average in excess of the expenditure limit set by laws.

The study published in April 2009 also said the money was spent for campaigning between the last day for withdrawal of nomination and day of the voting. Electoral laws had allowed a candidate to spend a maximum of Tk 15 lakh. The EC had fixed Tk 5 per voter.

Money spent beyond the limit is considered to be unauthorised money in polls.

Election experts fear that influence of such unauthorised money may appear as a major obstacle to ensuring a level-playing field for all political parties and candidates in the campaign that began on Monday and will continue until December 28 midnight.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 13-12-2018

EIU forecasts AL's return to power

Star Report

The ruling Awami League is expected to return to power with majority of parliamentary seats in the upcoming election partly owing to its well-entrenched system of patronage at local level and also because it has overseen a period of solid economic growth, according to London-based Economic Intelligence Unit (EIU).

The next steps

The EIU, however, says the risks to its call of an AL victory have risen markedly. The Jatiya Oikyafront is led by Kamal Hossain, a veteran politician and key author of Bangladesh's first constitution. He is seen as a secular icon who will help to soften the impact of the BNP's nationalist reputation on the overall image of the alliance. The government's hardline response to recent student protests over road safety has reduced AL support among younger voters. In addition, recent arrests of opposition leaders may play on voter sympathy in favour of the BNP.

Nevertheless, the EIU report adds citing numerous local opinion polls, that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina remains the most popular candidate.

“We believe that the country's impressive record of economic growth and socio-economic development under the AL administration, coupled with a lack of an effective opposition election campaign, will be enough to fend off any challenge posed by the BNP or the Jatiya Oikyafront more broadly. It is likely, however, that the BNP's participation will reduce the AL's margin of victory to some extent.”

UNB adds: The EIU country report on Bangladesh forecasts that the country's economic growth would remain robust and real GDP will grow by an average of 7.7 percent in 2018/19-2022/23, bolstered by strong increases in private consumption and gross fixed investment.

It observed a win for the Awami League will be important in sustaining foreign investment, and will also support the administration's drive to expand and deepen private sector participation in the economy.

Following such a win, Bangladesh is expected to continue to exploit its strategically important location on the Bay of Bengal to extract concessions and economic assistance from India, China and Japan, said the report.

But Bangladesh's relations with Myanmar will remain tense in the medium term owing to the Rohingya refugee crisis which will remain severe, at least in the early part of the forecast period.

The Economist Intelligence Unit is a specialist publisher serving companies establishing and managing operations across national borders. For 60 years it has been a source of information on business developments, economic and political trends, government regulations and corporate practices worldwide.

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The Supreme Court on Thursday delivered the highly anticipated verdict on the dissolution of Parliament as per a Gazette notification issued by the President. The Court ruled that the dissolution of the House was unconstitutional, as the President can do so only after the lapse of four and a half years into a Parliamentary term.

All political parties have respected this decision, regardless of their own viewpoint on the dissolution. This is a good sign that restores our faith in the political system despite the recent incidents of acrimony witnessed in Parliament and elsewhere. There were occasions in the past when the houses of Supreme Court judges were pelted with stones after they gave verdicts unfavourable to the Government in power.

Thursday's verdict is yet another instance of the Courts ruling against the Government in power in recent times. The credit for creating a climate for courts to function independently must go to President Maithripala Sirisena, who promised independence for the Police, Judiciary and the Public Service upon his ascension to the Presidency in January 2015. The President has humbly accepted the verdicts of the Courts, regardless of whether they were in favour of or against the Government's actions. This too is a welcome sign.

The separation of powers among the Executive, Legislature and the Judiciary is a time tested principle in functioning democracies. These checks and balances are necessary to curb any excessive use of power or authority by any of these instruments of the State. It is essential to retain these features of our democracy lest the people lose faith in the governing structure. There is a healthy debate in our society and in the media on whether Sri Lanka needs a Presidential or Parliamentary system of Government but what matters in the end is that one component should not become too powerful.

It is also heartening to note that in spite of the recent political developments, there were almost no acts of violence apart from the sad deaths of two Ceylon Petroleum Corporation employees. Leaders of all political parties must impress upon their supporters and activists the need for calm and restraint, regardless of the outcomes in Courts and Parliament. It is quite acceptable to celebrate what is perceived a victory by one camp, but it must be peaceful. A few black sheep who overstep the boundaries of decency can ruin the reputation of a party or individual.

It is into this category that those who created an unruly scene in front of Lake House on Thursday night belong. This posse of provincial level politicians, who were probably acting on their own without any instructions from their leaders, tried to attack Lake House employees and worse, even forcefully grabbed a crutch from a disabled individual who was passing by with the

intention of attacking someone with it. The timely intervention of a policeman saved the disabled person from falling over on the pavement, which would have resulted in certain injury. The UNP has promised an inquiry into this incident and stern disciplinary action against any UNPers involved. Indeed, any individuals in any party who do not respect the rights of the disabled, leave alone their other offences, must actually be barred from politics for life.

All political parties must ensure that their members behave responsibly, respecting the rights of all others. There should be no place in modern politics for violence as we are a mature democracy now, where recent elections have been conducted without any major incidents. We must set an example for other countries in the region where election and political violence is the norm rather than the exception.

It goes without saying that the present political impasse must be ended soon, at least by end January next year as some of the lawsuits filed in connection with the various political developments have been postponed for that month. Many options have been discussed – a referendum, a General Election or even a Presidential Election. A Presidential Election makes no sense at the moment because according to the Supreme Court verdict, whoever becomes President will have to work with the present Parliament for nearly two more years.

It has been pointed out that there is a way out for the Parliament itself to circumvent the four and a half years rule – by calling for dissolution with a two-thirds majority. Given the fracas and the bad blood that were evident during recent Parliamentary sessions, going in for a brand new Parliament may be a sensible option. Granted, a General Election is a very costly exercise for an emerging economy like ours, but that could be one of the options. That way, the people will be able to decide on a new Government to guide their fortunes for the next 5-6 years. If such an opportunity is granted, political parties as well as voters must ensure that only educated, honest, hardworking men and women are sent to the Hallowed Chambers to speak on their behalf. This will start a new political culture in the island.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 11-12-2018

Fault lines in federalism

Unless the concerns of the states are addressed, stagnancy will prolong

The first meeting of the Inter-State Council took place on Sunday in Kathmandu, three months after it was abruptly postponed. This marks a good beginning. But expectedly, the chief ministers were loaded with complaints regarding the centre's apathy towards handing over authority and resources to the provinces. The centre and the provinces have been on a collision course

with each other over a number of issues including mobilisation of personnel and resources, and jurisdiction. We decided to adopt a federal system because it was acknowledged that power had long been concentrated at Singha Durbar—the main administrative building in the country. Yet, almost a year on, there has been little change on the ground. Unless the concerns of the states are addressed, the fault lines in Nepali federalism could deepen.

The prolonged absence of infrastructure and legal instruments has continually made our transition to a federal system an uphill battle. The draft law for the Public Service Commission (PSC) and subsequent Provincial PSCs are yet to be put in place. This delay has continually impaired service delivery at the provincial level as there is no legislation with whose support the vacant seats can be filled. According to the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration, only around 12,900 civil servants have been mobilised at the provinces against the need for 21,000. This shortage of bureaucrats has in turn hit their ability to spend the budget allocated for them.

In the first five months of the current fiscal year, the provincial governments have spent only 2 percent of their budget on average. The combined budget of all the seven provinces for the current fiscal year is Rs113.43 billion whereas their combined spending stood at Rs2.36 billion as of December 5. Singha Durbar, or the centre, on the other hand, spent 20.91 percent of its total budget during the same period, as per the federal Finance Ministry. Even when it comes to construction works, around 1,100 regional road projects have been halted for more than a month as they have not been handed over to the provinces. Only one project, the Seti Highway, was handed over to Sudurpaschim Province, and that too just a few weeks ago.

What is evident from this is that there is a tussle between the centre and the provinces at the moment. The provinces are rightly demanding their autonomy that the centre is reluctant to hand over. This dynamic relation of competition, cooperation and conflict that was hardly apparent before is what makes a federal system more enticing than other systems of government. Of course, federalism will be futile unless power is dispersed and diversity is permitted. At a time when there are already doubts whether federalism will work in Nepal or not, the government should make sure those statements won't amount to anything more than mere speculation. Like the chief ministers rightly highlighted at the meeting, the centre must divulge power. The provinces and the local level, on the other hand, should work with utmost sincerity and ensure effective service delivery. Only when the two complement each other can federalism come to fruition.

III – ECONOMIC, CULTURAL AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad

Summary

According to experts in economics as reported in the Indian print media, the economy has reached a point where the government has to make hard decisions on second generation reforms to keep the pace of GDP growth rates witnessed in recent years. The economy grew at the rate of 6.4 percent during 2012-14 and increased to 7.3 percent during 2015-17. Factors which contributed to this higher growth rates included low crude prices in international markets, and since 1992, due to the then government opening up the economy by removing industrial and trade policy restrictions.

Therefore, according to experts, the first phase of high GDP growth rates post-1992 were due to the first generation structural reforms in the economy, while the second phase of growth rates, which remained above seven percent, were due mainly to other more transient factors such as low oil prices and so on. In this context, economists believe that “the country now needs a second generation of reforms wherein factor markets including land and labour are liberalized.”

During the last quarter (July-September), the current account deficit has increased to as much as 2.9 percent of gross domestic product as against the 1.1 percent where it was in the same quarter last year, thanks to rising oil prices which led to increase in trade deficit from 32.5 billion USD last year (July-September) to 50 billion USD this year.

Experts have advised the government in New Delhi that instead of tampering with the financial regulatory authorities and pressurizing them to release funds, to which the markets can respond negatively, the government needs to undertake the long overdue second generation structural reforms so as to maintain high GDP growth rates.

In Pakistan, print media has reported on PTI government’s resolve to increase industrial output and to introduce reforms in the economy. In that connection, it was reported that the government was in the process of reforming the federal board of revenue. After these reforms, the FBR “would not form policies on taxation matters and would not impose duties as those were the responsibilities of the ministries of finance and commerce. The FBR must collect revenues only”, a government functionary involved in the reform process was quoted as saying.

After a decade-long gap, the World Bank has pledged budgetary support of total US 750 million dollars to Dhaka for three years in three equal installments. Qimiao Fan, the country director of WB, said that Bangladesh has made a remarkable progress in accelerating growth rate and reducing poverty, however, still lagging behind in job creation. This loan is intended to support government capacity in this regard, he added.

The Tripartite Agreement signed between United Nation’s Food and Agriculture, FAO, China and Sri Lanka, aimed at boosting Sri Lanka’s fruit production in order to commercialize fruit crops among value chain actors in the country. The project value under this agreement is US 1.1 million dollars being initiated under the FAO-China South-South Cooperation Programme.

III - ECONOMIC, CULTURAL AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

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Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 15-12-2018**Lost opportunity***India missed the chance to usher in second generation reforms and free up private enterprise***By Amartya Lahiri**

Legend has it that a governor in 18th century Russia tried to impress Empress Catherine during her tour of Crimea by building facades of impressive villages along the way. These facades would be dismantled as soon as she passed them and reassembled further along her path. The recent schizophrenic commentary on the state of health of the Indian economy cannot but raise questions on the true state: Is India doing really well or are we just seeing a sequence of Potemkin villages?

After averaging an annual GDP growth rate of 6.4 per cent (yoy) during 2012-14, growth in India increased to 7.3 per cent during 2015-17. Indeed, the growth rate for the latest available quarter was 8.2 per cent. And all of this despite the collective headwinds created by the demonetisation of November 2016 and introduction of the Goods and Service Tax (GST) last year. Simultaneously, the inflation rate has declined from 8.6 per cent during 2012-14 to 4.4 per cent during 2015-17.

Ordinarily, this growth and inflation record combined with improvement in indices like the “Ease of Doing Business” would end all debate about the health of the economy. Yet, we are treated to the spectacle of the same government that cites the positive growth and inflation statistics also claiming an imminent collapse of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), an implosion of the economy due to the absence of liquidity, a huge credit squeeze due to regulatory restrictions on banks, export weakness due to the rupee being too strong, rupee weakness due to interest rates not being raised enough, etc! How can all of these be simultaneously true?

To form a better understanding of the story, it is instructive to start by noting that world oil prices (WTI price) fell from \$91 to \$44 per barrel between July 2014 and July 2017. Given our daily imports of 5 million barrels of oil, this represented a cumulated saving of around \$228 billion, or approximately \$76 billion annually (around 3 per cent of annual GDP). The fall in oil prices did not, however, translate into a reduction in pump prices for consumers in India. Rather, it turned into a gigantic increase in government revenues to the tune of 3 per cent of GDP annually through an incipient increase in the excise tax on fuel.

This increase in revenue could potentially have been used to reduce the consolidated fiscal deficit, which had been running at an average of 6.7 per cent during 2012-14. However, the combined fiscal deficit of the Centre and states during 2014-17 actually increased to 6.9 per cent of GDP. In effect, government spending during this period grew by over 3 per cent of GDP annually. A different way of summarising this is that the growth pick-up in India over the past 3-4 years has come almost entirely out of this huge increase in government spending.

The oil party unfortunately has now ended. Over the past year prices have risen by around \$20 per barrel. The choices have become stark. Either pump prices have to be raised in order to

protect the tax revenues of the government. But this becomes politically unpalatable quite quickly. Alternatively, government spending has to be reduced to absorb the fall in oil tax revenues. But cutting government spending is problematic since it has been the main source of growth for the past few years.

How does one solve this political-economic conundrum? One option is to find alternative sources of fiscal revenues. The current attempts at extracting \$50 billion from the RBI’s capital reserves are one possibility. There are two problems with this. First, two-thirds of the RBI capital base of \$145 billion are actually revaluation funds, which are only accounting entities rather than reflecting earned income. Moreover, the optics of raiding the central bank’s capital in order to fund a fiscal deficit is so fraught with institutional degradation of the RBI that markets might react negatively to such a move.

The second option is to get non-governmental agencies like scheduled commercial banks to open up the spending tap by lending much more. But this is problematic since a bunch of them are rife with non-performing assets and whose balance sheets are undergoing significant restructuring under the direction of the RBI. The increasingly shrill demands to weaken the Prompt Corrective Action (PCA) norms as well as the demand to ease up liquidity for SMEs are ways of squaring this circle. Unfortunately, forcing the RBI to relax existing regulatory norms has the rather big downside of the government owning responsibility for any subsequent banking sector problems.

The last option is to somehow convince the RBI to lower real rates by cutting the policy rate. This runs the risk of undoing the gains on inflation that have been achieved over the past few years. Those who ignore this risk need only think back to the years between 2008 and 2012 when the RBI accommodated booming growth by delivering negative real interest rates for most of that period. The cost was that inflation ticked along at double digit rates.

The story of the Indian economic turnaround after 1992 was one of large productivity gains induced by removal of industrial and trade policy restrictions. Those reforms worked mainly through a better allocation of resources across different sectors of the economy. But that was a one-shot gain. The country now needs a second generation of reforms wherein factor markets including land and labour are liberalised. The last four years blessed India with a wonderful external climate along with widespread domestic support for reforms to free up private enterprise. Having missed that opportunity we are now reduced to parading Potemkin villages.

THE HINDU, DELHI 9-12-2018**Current account woes***Proper structural reforms are needed to boost exports, reduce dependence on imported oil*

The latest trade figures published by the Reserve Bank of India confirm the damage caused by high global oil prices in the last few months. India’s current account deficit (CAD) widened to 2.9% of gross domestic product (GDP) in the July-September

quarter, a four-year high, under increasing pressure from the oil bill. This is in contrast to the same quarter a year ago when the CAD was only 1.1% of GDP. The widening of the CAD was due to an increase in the trade deficit, which jumped to \$50 billion in the September quarter as compared to \$32.5 billion a year ago, due to a higher import bill. The government, however, may not be too worried about the widening CAD figures as the major factor that was behind the phenomenon has abated; global oil prices have dropped sharply since early October. Brent crude is down almost 30% from the high it reached in early October. So the size of the deficit is likely to come down in the quarter ending December. This is not to suggest that all is fine. As usual, medium to long-term risks to the external sector remain. For one, there is the threat of price volatility faced by heavy importers of oil. Unless India manages to diversify its energy base by tapping into local sources of energy, this will remain a perennial threat to economic stability.

A widening current account deficit per se should not be a cause for worry as long as foreign capital inflows into the economy are brisk enough to fund its huge import needs. The trouble arises when foreign inflows dry up and restrict the ability to purchase essential imports. So as liquidity conditions continue to tighten across the world, India's heavy import dependence is a cause for concern. Meanwhile, when Western central banks tighten their monetary policy, the RBI will be forced to tighten its own policy stance in order to retain investment capital and defend the rupee. This will impact domestic economic growth negatively. Each time the external account has come under pressure, the government has simply tried to bring in piecemeal emergency measures, such as a little opening up of the capital account or ill advised restrictions on imports. Such a policy obviously manages to only kick the can down the road rather than bring a permanent solution to the problem. In order to bring about any meaningful change, the government should also try implementing proper structural reforms that can boost exports, thus helping fund imports through means other than capital inflows, and end the over-reliance on imported oil.

THE ECONOMIC TIMES, NEW DELHI 5-12-2018

The Action is in Policy, Not Rates

The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) has lowered inflation expectations, but retained policy rates as well as its estimate of likely GDP growth in the current fiscal. If the government maintains fiscal discipline, this scenario is likely to hold, it believes.

So, the major monetary development lies outside the MPC's own statement on rates and is located in Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) statement on developmental and regulatory policies.

Increasing the liquidity coverage ratio to 100% has the potential to further crimp the banks' ability to make short-term loans. This is offset by two developments. One is the lowering of the statutory liquidity ratio, now at 19.5%, by 25 basis points every quarter till it reaches 18%.

The other is the decision to inject large volumes of liquidity into the system. RBI had taken the stand, in the face of pressure from the government in the wake of the IL&FS fiasco to open a special liquidity window for non-banking finance companies, that it would ensure adequate systemic liquidity. It is delivering on that commitment, as well as the one to set up a committee on small industry loans.

RBI's move to permit non-residents to participate in the rupee interest rate derivatives market is welcome. The wider and deeper this market, the better the ability to deal with currency fluctuations. Welcome, too, is the shift prescribed in how banks benchmark their lending rates, albeit its restrictions.

Banks can, starting April next year, fix their floating rates at a premium over a chosen benchmark, whether RBI's repo rate, or T-bill rates.

But why bar any change, over the life of the loan, in the spread over the benchmark, unless the credit rating of the borrower changes? It betokens a seller's market for credit. Ideally, RBI should create conditions in which competition among banks, rather than RBI diktat, would determine what rates banks offer their borrowers.

RBI's caution on cutting rates or liberalising its stance on liquidity would appear to be justified, given the stickiness of non-food prices and poor reservoir storage levels, following a weak northeastern monsoon.

THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI 3-12-2018

Hope revives: GDP headline number was disappointing but investment revival augurs well

Gross domestic product data for the second quarter of 2018-19, which was released last week, had a sobering message. The growth rate dipped to 7.1% in the second quarter from 8.2% recorded in the first quarter. But even if the overall number was disappointing, there were signs of hope in the data on investment demand. At the same time, some parts of economy such as agriculture and mining are clearly under stress. Careful economic management and sensible interventions can take India to a higher growth path as investment is reviving after a long gap.

Investment data for the first half of 2018-19 conveyed the message that its revival is now steady. Fresh investments in the first half were Rs 21.63 lakh crore, higher by 11.25%. More importantly, as a percentage of GDP investment has begun to increase. In the first half, investment rose to 32% of GDP as compared to 30.9% last year. Revival is corroborated by data on bank credit which is growing at about 15%. On the flip side, a section of the GDP data indicates that farmers are facing an income squeeze. This may have been partly responsible for the slowdown in growth in consumption expenditure.

In the second quarter of 2018-19, consumption growth slowed down to 7.01% from 8.59% recorded in the previous quarter. Rural demand influences consumption growth and a slowdown doesn't augur well for the economy. With investment picking up,

it is important to build on the momentum. However mining, especially for coal, is going through a challenging period. It's important for government to come up with a plan which removes bottlenecks in coal production.

The growth rate of 7.1% is lower than market expectations. However, the steady momentum in investment demand suggests that the foundation for a durable pickup in growth rate is being put in place. Government now needs to ensure that hurdles to investment revival are not only removed, but its ongoing exercise to ease doing business continues as this has an important role to play in catalysing fresh investments. While not part of GDP data, the dip in international crude price is a positive development as it eases pressure on the macroeconomic front. On balance, even if the second quarter growth rate was disappointing, there are enough indicators to suggest that ingredients to enhance India's growth rate are in place.

THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI 6-12-2018

India inks pact with Iran to pay crude bill in rupee

PTI

Sources said Indian refiners will make rupee payments in a UCO Bank account of the National Iranian Oil Co (NIOC)

Half of these funds would be earmarked for settling payments for exports of Indian goods to Iran, they added

NEW DELHI: India has signed an agreement with Iran to pay for crude oil it imports from the Persian Gulf nation in rupees, sources in know of the development said.

The memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed following the US letting India and seven other nations + to keep buying Iranian oil despite sanctions were reimposed on the Islamic state on November 5.

Sources said Indian refiners will make rupee payments in a UCO Bank account of the National Iranian Oil Co (NIOC).

Half of these funds would be earmarked for settling payments for exports of Indian goods to Iran, they added.

"America should know... it is not capable of preventing the export of Iran's oil," Iran's President Hassan Rouhani said at a televised rally in Semnan province. Since the 1980s, Iran has said repeatedly it would blockade the Gulf in response to international pressure but has never carried out the threat.

Under US sanctions, India can export foodgrains, medicines and medical devices to Iran.

India had won the exemption after it agreed to cut imports and escrow payments.

Under the 180-day exemption, India is allowed to import a maximum of 300,000 barrels a day of crude oil. This compares to an average daily import of about 560,000 barrels this year.

India, which is the second biggest purchaser of Iranian oil after China, has since then restricted its monthly purchase to 1.25 million tonne or 15 million tonne in a year (300,000 barrels per day), down from 22.6 million tonne (452,000 barrels per day) bought in 2017-18 financial year, sources said.

Two of its refiners -- Indian Oil Corp (IOC) and Mangalore Refinery and Petrochemicals Ltd (MRPL) -- bought 1.25 million tonne of oil from Iran in November and December.

India, the world's third biggest oil consumer, meets more than 80 per cent of its oil needs through imports. Iran is its third largest supplier after Iraq and Saudi Arabia and meets about 10 per cent of total needs.

US President Donald Trump in May withdrew from the 2015 nuclear accord with Iran, re-imposing economic sanctions on the Persian Gulf nation. Some sanctions took effect from August 6, while those affecting the oil and banking sectors will start from November 5.

Prior to this, India paid its third largest oil supplier in euros using European banking channels. These channels got blocked from November.

During the first round of sanctions when EU joined the US in imposing financial restrictions, India initially used a Turkish bank to pay Iran for the oil it bought. Beginning February 2013, India paid 45 per cent of the oil import bill in rupees while keeping the remainder pending till the opening of payment routes. It began clearing the dues in 2015 when the restrictions were eased.

Sources said New Delhi may export goods, including wheat, soybean meal and consumer products, to Iran during the exemption period.

Iran was the India's second biggest supplier of crude oil after Saudi Arabia till 2010-11 but Western sanctions over the Persian Gulf nation's suspected nuclear programme relegated it to the seventh spot in the subsequent years. In 2013-14 and 2014-15, India bought 11 million tonne and 10.95 million tonne crude, respectively from Iran.

Sourcing from Iran increased to 12.7 million tonne in 2015-16, giving it the sixth spot. In the following year, the Iranian supplies jumped to 27.2 million tonne to catapult it to the third spot.

Iranian oil is a lucrative buy for refiners as the Persian Gulf nation provides 60 days of credit for purchases, terms not available from suppliers of substitute crudes -- Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Nigeria and the US.

Besides blocking of banking channels from November, shipping firms are unwilling to transport Iranian oil. To get around this, Iran is using its own ships to transport crude to India. Its insurance companies are also providing insurance cover for such shipments, sources added.

HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 8-12-2018

India, UAE sign currency swap deal; seek to forge partnership in new areas at Joint Commission Meeting

Sushma Swaraj, who arrived in Abu Dhabi on Monday on a two-day visit, was received by Abdullah bin Zayed ahead of the UAE-India Joint Commission Meeting in Abu Dhabi.

Press Trust of India

India and the UAE Tuesday signed two agreements, including one on currency swap, as External Affairs Minister Sushma

Swaraj held exhaustive discussions with her counterpart Abdullah bin Zayed to step up bilateral cooperation in areas like security, defence, counter-terrorism, trade and energy.

Swaraj, who arrived in Abu Dhabi on Monday on a two-day visit, was received by Abdullah ahead of the UAE-India Joint Commission Meeting in Abu Dhabi.

“Advancing the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership...EAM Sushma Swaraj & Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan co-chaired 12th India-UAE JCM. Held exhaustive discussions on cooperation in energy, security, trade, investments, space, defence & consular, among others,” External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Raveesh Kumar tweeted.

This is the 12th session of the India-UAE Joint Commission Meeting for Economic and Technical Cooperation.

“Institutional mechanisms guiding the multifaceted cooperation...Two documents signed during the visit of EAM **Sushma Swaraj to UAE** : Agreement on Currency Swap and MoU for Development Cooperation in Africa,” Kumar tweeted.

Currency Swap is such a pact between two countries that allows trading in their own currency and payments to import and export trade at pre-determined exchange rate without bringing in a third benchmark currency like the US dollars.

The second agreement would enable both sides to undertake development projects in Africa.

“Reinforcing the strong bonds of friendship...The ministers looked forward to continuing the trend to strengthen & seek partnership in new areas,” Kumar tweeted.

Later, an MEA official said the two leaders discussed several areas of mutual interests including defence, security, counter-terrorism, trade, economic, energy, science and technology, and civil aviation among others.

They identified several new areas of cooperation, the official said.

Following the meeting, the two leaders signed and adopted the agreed minutes of the JCM, Kumar said.

Swaraj also called on Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan

Both the leaders expressed satisfaction at the pace of the bilateral relations in a range of areas, attesting to the two countries comprehensive strategic partnership, Kumar said.

With nearly USD 50 billion bilateral trade, the two countries are one of the largest trade partners for each other and have made robust investments bilaterally. The UAE is the sixth-largest source of Indian oil imports and hosts a 3.3 million-strong Indian community.

Swaraj and Abdullah also jointly inaugurated a digital interactive museum showcasing the life, works and philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and the founder of modern UAE Shaikh Zayed.

The Gandhi-Zayed Digital Museum, which will promote peace, tolerance and sustainability, is part of the celebrations by the two countries to mark 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi and centenary celebrations of the birth of Shaikh Zayed.

Later in the evening, Swaraj interacted with the Indian community and appreciated their contribution in enhancing relations with the UAE.

UAE hosts a 33 lakh-strong Indian community – the largest number of Indians outside India.

THE STATESMAN, NEW DELHI 3-12-2018

India and Sweden sign MoUs in Renewable Energy sector

The MoUs were signed on the sidelines of the inauguration of the first of its kind ‘Sustainability by Sweden – Showroom India’ by Swedish Energy, Agency Business Sweden, and The Embassy of Sweden under the Sweden India Nobel Memorial Programme.

SNS Web

India and Sweden on Monday signed two memorandums of understanding (MoUs) in the Renewable Energy sector to enhance the technology and bring in energy efficiency in India. The first MoU was signed between Swedish solar pump manufacturer Spowdi and Bangalore based EMVEE for setting up local manufacturing/assembly in Bangalore. The second MoU was signed between Swedish Earth Fault Protection System provider Swedish Neutral and India’s leading distribution company Tata Power DDL for setting up a pilot for earth fault protection in Delhi.

The MoUs were signed on the sidelines of the inauguration of the first of its kind ‘Sustainability by Sweden – Showroom India’ by Swedish Energy, Agency Business Sweden, and The Embassy of Sweden under the Sweden India Nobel Memorial Programme. The showroom was inaugurated at Business Sweden, New Delhi by AK Verma, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Power, Josa Karre, counsellor and head of Economic Affairs, Embassy of Sweden, and Josephine Bahr Ljungdell – Director of International Affairs, Swedish Energy Agency.

India and Sweden share a long history of collaboration which is guided by MoUs in the fields of energy, environment, science & technology, and sustainable urban planning. To further strengthen the collaboration, this showroom has been set up in India as the next step towards bi-lateral programme—India Sweden Innovations Accelerator (ISIA). The showroom will present over 20 Swedish innovative technologies which have been introduced and filtered through the dedicated ISIA programme.

The programme has been recognised as the flagship programme to expand research, innovation, and business cooperation on new innovative energy technologies between India and Sweden.

Arun Kumar Verma, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Power, Government of India, said, “India is a growing country and equally contributing to the global Energy sector. Going further, there is a need to add renewables and sustainability solutions. We are looking forward to stronger India-Sweden association and programmes to support innovations and new technologies. I wish this initiative by Sweden a success and look for a stronger bond in bringing newer expertise and innovations.”

Ludvig Lindstrom, Country Head India, Swedish Energy Agency, said, "India and Sweden share the common objective on the need for innovation to cater to the growing need for sustainable and green energy. The India-Sweden Innovations' Accelerator (ISIA) programme is a part of intergovernmental cooperation between India and Sweden in the area of new and renewable energy technology. Sweden is one of the most sustainable countries with a growing share of renewables and complete carbon neutrality by 2045. Our aim of the showroom is to initiate talks on sustainability and joint innovation, research, development, and deployment in India."

The first exhibition at the showroom was themed as "Sustainability is Everybody's Business." It showcases how various innovative Swedish technologies introduced through ISIA programme fit into the Indian context along with projects set up by Swedish companies in India. In addition, different systems based on Swedish technologies to track, power quality, energy savings etc. were on display at the showroom.

THE STATESMAN, NEW DELHI 2-12-2018

China says no to India's proposal for bilateral trade in domestic currencies

India's exports to China stood at only \$13.4 billion, imports aggregated to \$76.4 billion in 2017-18, leaving a trade deficit of \$63 billion. It was \$51.11 billion in 2016-17.

PTI

China has not accepted India's proposal to carry out bilateral trade in local currencies which was aimed at bridging the ballooning trade deficit with the neighbouring country, an official said.

India's exports to China stood at only \$13.4 billion, imports aggregated to \$76.4 billion in 2017-18, leaving a trade deficit of \$63 billion. It was \$51.11 billion in 2016-17.

India had suggested China for renminbi-rupee trade to boost its exports and tackle the widening trade deficit concern.

"They have not accepted the proposal," the official said.

The issue was discussed in an inter-ministerial meeting in October. In the meeting, it was suggested to the Reserve Bank of India and the Department of Economic Affairs would look at the possibility of exploring renminbi-rupee trade with China.

India has also proposed trade in national currencies with some other countries, including Russia, Iran and Venezuela. New Delhi has trade deficit with these three countries, too.

The Federation of Indian Export Organisations (FIEO) President Ganesh Kumar Gupta said that the government should promote exports from India in the domestic currency.

"This will help in bridging trade deficit with countries like China," Gupta said.

Trade experts have stated that bilateral trade in domestic currencies will help India only in the case of those countries with which it has a trade balance.

"Trade imbalance should not be there with the country with which we want to do trade in rupee. It will not help in bridging the deficit. The partner country should have an opportunity to invest in India to use the rupee," said Biswajit Dhar, professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

The Indian industry and exporters have time and again raised the issue of increasing trade deficit with China and have asked the government to seek greater market access for domestic goods in the Chinese market.

Recently, China has permitted exports of rice and sugar. But India wants to increase exports of several other items, including pharmaceuticals, engineering and services.

THE HINDU, DELHI 4-12-2018

The architecture is not the force

Pulapre Balakrishnan

How a business friendly government has failed to arrest the slide in private investment

It may appear that the recent hullabaloo over GDP (gross domestic product) growth in the past decade has cast a shadow over assessment of the economy's progress since 2014, but it is not so. There exists enough information for this as GDP is not the sole indicator on which one needs to rely in such an exercise. Arguably, investment is another, mainly private investment, for governments can always raise their capital outlay ignoring the calculus of profitability.

The profit-economy link

For a private investor, on the other hand, financial commitments are based closely on anticipated profit. The expectation of profit is itself tied to the expected state of the economy. As much of the future is uncertain, some part of its expectation is likely to be based on current trends. Thus, private investment is tied both to the present state of the economy and its anticipated vigour. For a government interested in invigorating the economy, then, it is essential to inspire confidence in the private investor. The investment meant here is the expenditure on productive capacity as opposed to buying shares or even durable goods in secondary markets.

Private investment in relation to output has in most years since been lower than what it was in 2014. This may come as a surprise to some as the government of Narendra Modi had appeared a business friendly one. While noting the slide in private investment, two points may be made. First, the private sector comprises two segments, the corporate and the unincorporated, termed household, in Indian national accounts. Since 2014, after initially declining private corporate investment has shown a mild rise while household investment has fallen sharply. The overall effect has been downward. This despite the pro-business reputation of this government and the strong and repeated communication of the Prime Minister that it would support those who 'Make in India'. Clearly this talk has not been enough to convince private investors, who probably find insufficient dynamism in the economy today and are unsure of

the likely impact of the government's policies on its future. The most business friendly government at the Centre in recent times has not had success in turning around a slide in private investment. This is the second point to note.

While 'adventurist' has been pronounced as a verdict on the economic policy since 2014, a purely economic explanation is at hand. The government may have mistaken the architecture for the force. For an economy, by architecture we would mean the framework within which activity takes place while force is the ebb and flow of the demand for and supply of goods.

Elements to the architecture

It is possible to see four elements of the architecture as visualised by the Modi government: the presence of foreign direct investment (FDI), a digital payments network, a streamlined indirect tax regime and less government. The government has had some success in moving the economy towards such an architecture. Almost the first significant economic move of the Prime Minister was to have met American CEOs while in New York in 2014. This has been followed by an increase in FDI to record levels since. But the fact remains that FDI is not a large part of total capital formation in India, and, therefore, even at the heightened level cannot really make too much of a difference. Also, FDI into India has generally flowed to sectors with a lower multiplier effect on output. Then came the demonetisation, initially spoken of as a 'surgical strike' on black money hoards but subsequently rationalised as nudging Indians towards adopting digital payment. The inevitable formalisation of the economy was to lead to more tax revenue for the government enabling greater spending on infrastructure.

Next came the launching of the Goods and Services Tax (GST). The government cannot claim all the credit for this desirable move, for a restructuring of the indirect tax regime has been on the books, if not in the works, since the 1970s and there has been a high degree of participation of the States in its launching. However, in the haste to appear as reforming, the Central government may have overlooked the need for a strong information technology (IT) network, education of the taxpayer and a facilitating tax bureaucracy. The States may well have agreed to the date of launching as they were to be compensated for any loss of revenues. Finally, the counterpart of the election slogan, 'minimum government', has materialised in the form of a steadily declining share of public expenditure in the economy. So the government has been able to achieve the architecture that it aspired to. Extensions of it have reached the two arms of macroeconomic policy. First, there was the move to what is referred to as a 'modern monetary policy framework'. This has meant that the sole objective of monetary policy would be inflation control. That there can be collateral damage to growth is considered inconsequential. Fiscal policy has been guided by 'fiscal consolidation' or a focus on deficit reduction. That this could be achieved by varying combinations of the revenue deficit and public investment appears not to have been considered.

A significant part of the promise of demonetisation and the introduction of the GST, namely higher public revenues from formalisation, has not materialised. In fact, there are reports of

the possibility of the fiscal deficit target for this year being breached due to lower than expected indirect tax revenues. On the other, it is clear that the dip in the growth rate in 2016-17 was due to demonetisation. The economy had slowed in the very next quarter after it was implemented, with the manufacturing sector actually contracting. As for the macroeconomic policy that has been pursued since 2014, it has acted as a pincer movement on aggregate demand. Rising interest rates, presumably needed to ensure that the inflation target is met, and fiscal consolidation are sure to have crimped it. Apart from any immediate effect of lowering the fiscal deficit, the route it has taken may also have consequences for long-term growth. In 2017-18, Central government capital expenditure was lowered in real terms. A less recognised aspect of the modern monetary policy framework is that the real exchange rate has appreciated since its adoption. This could only have reduced the demand for India's exports, further lowering aggregate demand and holding back private investment.

Unimaginative maxim

The economic policies of the Modi government have failed to enthrone the private sector. Private investment has continued to slide during its tenure. A most natural thing for the government to have done would have been to raise substantially its own investment. This it has not done. A rising public investment can nudge the private sector to follow suit as the latter perceives superior growth prospects raising the latter's expectation of profits. Actually, "minimum government" is an unimaginative maxim for governing the economy.

The government must respond imaginatively to the emergent economic situation. In the context, to the extent that sliding private investment reflects declining profit expectations, economic policy must anchor profit expectations. Under India's new monetary policy framework, institutionalised by this government, the monetary authority aims to anchor inflationary expectations but this by itself can do little to convince firms of improved profits in the future. That this is how the economy works may be surmised from the fact that inflation has trended down steadily since even before 2014 but that has not revived private investment.

THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI 6-12-2018

Cabinet clears agriculture export policy to take shipments to \$60 billion by 2022

PTI

NEW DELHI: Seeking to double agricultural export to \$60 billion by 2022, the Union Cabinet on Thursday approved a maiden export policy for the farm sector that imposes no restrictions on export of all organic and processed products.

However, export policy for primary agricultural products, like onion, would be reviewed periodically on a case-to-case basis depending on price-supply situation, said commerce minister Suresh Prabhu after the Cabinet meet.

"The policy aims at doubling agricultural shipments to over \$60 billion by 2022," he said, adding that achieving the target was "doable".

He said the farm exports have grown by 20 per cent in a year.

Agricultural exports are currently estimated at \$30 billion.

Prabhu said there was a time when India used to import agricultural products, but now it is exporting in a big way.

He rued India had no export policy for agricultural products despite a major producer.

Prabhu said the first ever 'Agriculture Export Policy, 2018' would help the government in achieving the target of doubling farmers' income.

The policy aims to boost exports of agriculture commodities such as tea, coffee and rice and increase the country's share in global agri-trade.

The policy would focus on all aspects of agricultural exports including modernising infrastructure, standardisation of products, streamlining regulations, curtailing knee-jerk decisions, and focusing on research and development activities.

It will also seek to remove all kinds of export restrictions on organic products, the minister added.

The implementation of the policy will have an estimated financial implication of over Rs 1,400 crore.

As per an official release, the objective of the policy is to diversify export basket, destinations and boost high value and value added agricultural exports.

It will also provide an institutional mechanism for pursuing market access, tackling barriers and deal with sanitary and phytosanitary issues.

Other objectives of the policy is to strive to double India's share in world agri exports by integrating with global value chain at the earliest and enable farmers to get benefit of export opportunities in overseas market.

Prabhu said the policy has arrived at after consultation with state governments. He said states have also agreed to remove 'mandi tax' and reforms in Agriculture Produce Marketing Committee (APMC) norms.

To operationalise the policy the government would focus on creating agri clusters, promote value added shipments, attract private investment and infrastructure development.

THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI 7-12-2018

Centre OKs dam on Ravi, will cut water flow to Pakistan

TNN

NEW DELHI: The Centre on Thursday approved implementation of the Shahpurkandi Dam project on the Ravi in Punjab. The move will allow India to use the water which at present goes "waste" flowing through the Madhopur Headworks downstream to Pakistan. Once completed in June 2022, it will

improve irrigation potential of farmers in Jammu & Kashmir and Punjab.

Though the project was planned 17 years ago at an estimated cost of over Rs 2,285 crore, it could not be implemented due to paucity of funds with the state.

The Centre will provide financial assistance of over Rs 485 crore (for irrigation component) to the state for implementing the project over five years from 2018-19 to 2022-23.

The decision in this regard was taken by the Union Cabinet, keeping in view the provisions of the Indus Water Treaty between India and Pakistan. Under this 1960 treaty, India has full rights for utilisation of waters of the three eastern rivers namely Ravi, Beas and Satluj.

The project will create an additional irrigation potential of 5,000 hectares in Punjab and 32,173 hectares in Jammu & Kashmir. In addition, Punjab will also be able to generate 206 MW of hydro-power.

The project was initially approved by the Planning Commission in November, 2001 and was included under the accelerated irrigation benefits scheme (AIBP) of the ministry of water resources for funding its irrigation component.

Revised cost of the ShahpurKandi Dam national project was approved by the advisory committee of the ministry in August, 2009. Though the central assistance of Rs 26 crore was released during period 2009-11, the works could not progress much due to non-availability of funds on the part of the Punjab government for power component and later due to inter-state issues with J&K.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 3-12-2018

Inequities have strained our democratic polity

Ashwani Kumar

In these testing times, commitment to nationhood and aspirations for a just social order demand a frontal encounter with injustice and infraction of our foundational values. The choices that we make now and in 2019 will determine the course of our evolution as the largest democracy.

When a former President of the nation endorses 'widespread cynicism and disillusionment with governance' and pleads for a Parliament that debates, a judiciary that dispenses justice and a leadership committed to the nation (Pranab Mukherjee's Address reported on November 24), we can be certain that the Indian state is in decline.

Faltering performance of key institutions of democracy and rising social inequities strain our democratic polity and enlarge the fault lines of our politics. Those who seek comfort in GDP numbers and improvement of the country's ranking in the Ease of Doing Business Index, need only to be reminded of the country's 113th position out of 158 in the World Happiness Report (2018), 103rd out of 119 in the Global Hunger Index and 143rd position in the Global Peace Index of 2015, down from 123rd in 2008.

India is ranked as the eighth most dangerous country for journalists in the 2016 Report of the International Federation of Journalists.

The nation confronts an unprecedented environmental challenge that can devour the gains of development and we suffer an ignominious reputation of having the most polluted capital and 13 of the world's 20 worst polluted cities. Three thousand air pollution-related premature deaths reported in February 2017, the nation's description as the world's rape capital and 1,674 fatalities resulting from custodial torture between 2017 and 2018, that is five custodial deaths per day (ACHR Report, 2018) put us to shame. The purity of our political processes and the quality of democratic representation stand dented with almost 30 per cent of all legislators sharing a criminal background.

The project of national renewal anchored in an unswerving commitment to a vibrant democracy demands an end to the incestuous relationship between unaccounted wealth and politics. Obsessive cynicism about the political class as a whole has destroyed its credibility and weakened our democratic processes. The resultant imbalance in diffusion and exercise of state power ill serves popular expectations in a parliamentary democracy.

Endless tales of insensitivity and indifference to extreme poverty point to a narrowing 'circle of human empathy' that mocks our status as a rising economic power. Our politics, captive to an endless debilitating discourse rooted in personal animosities, defined by shrill rhetoric and laced in choicest vitriol exposes its bankruptcy on a daily basis. Neither can we claim to have vindicated law as 'something above the state' in matters of governance and preservation of rights, despite an ennobling national charter that celebrates the majesty of law.

Given these painful realities of a nation fraying at its edges, can we really stand tall in our own estimation and of the world despite being home to the tallest statue of a great son of India?

The diminishing indices of the republic mirror the incapacities of a nation limited by the smallness of its politics when compared to the gravity of challenges we face. We know that a nation divided within itself and cabined by politics that has yielded a fractured polity, glaring inequities and a divided society cannot address the daunting challenges without a broad political consensus on the way forward.

The challenges include ecological collapse, technological disruption altering the very 'nature of humanity, pandemics, international terrorism, water wars, food shortages, drugs, human trafficking, assault on freedom and the suborning of democracy at the altar of ultra-nationalism et al.

In these testing times, commitment to nationhood and aspirations for a just social order demand a frontal encounter with injustice and infraction of our foundational values. Having suffered repeated assaults on our constitutional conscience in recent years, the nation must assert to reclaim its social cohesiveness and national unity based on inclusion, tolerance, plurality, equity, equality and benign patriotism.

The choices that we make now and in 2019 will define the future and determine the course of our evolution as the world's largest democracy.

An informed and assertive citizenry alone can reshape the contours of flawed politics by rejecting '.....political language designed to make lies sound truthful and give an assurance of solidity to pure wind.....' The triumph of democracy rests on our ability to vindicate truth, particularly when, to use the Shakespearean idiom, '.....duty shall have dread to speak; when power to flattery bows.....'

An elevated politics imbued with the missing moral dimension in its processes can alone secure the triumph of principle over power, freedom over identity. A constitutional democracy with its distrust of absolute prerogatives is safe only in the custody of those who recognise the difference between totalitarian politics and accountable power.

And therefore, we need leadership that is daring and humble, caring and responsible. Thus far, we have defied the 'tyranny of homogeneity' and walked together to travel far. Bound as we are by our allegiance to the Constitution and lofty ideals of the founding fathers, we are obliged to reclaim and defend our political legacy by locating the larger purposes of politics in the dignity and esteem of the people. Hopefully, we will gravitate towards moderation in the conduct of our politics and yield to the dignitarian commands of the Constitution rather than navigating around it.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 4-12-2018

False choices

The stock market reacted in chaos to the State Bank's decision to announce a hike in the policy rate. No one expected the SBP to increase the policy rate by 150 basis points, bringing it into double figures for the first time in almost a decade. The Pakistan Stock Exchange fell by 3.1 percent on Monday in response. Both the stock and currency markets have been plunged into extreme volatility – and one can only hope that there is someone in the PTI's economic team that has a grip over what it is doing. The fear over our economic situation is a product of the chaotic decision-making at the helm. Businesses cannot predict how the government is going to act – something which was not true about the last two governments. Both the PML-N and the PPP were fairly clear about their economic agenda, whatever its limitations, which meant that at least big businesses could respond in a predictable manner. This did not do away with volatility in the stock markets, but it did breed a strange equilibrium that allowed some key indicators, such as economic growth and inflation to show positive signs.

The PTI government has decided to throw both of these recoveries out of the table to 'solve' the balance of payments crisis – but it hardly makes sense that the balance of payments crisis would be solved by higher interest rates, devalued currency and cutting down public-sector spending. Clueless on what to do on its own, the government has seemingly swallowed the IMF's prescription wholesale, without doing its own analysis. For critics, the policy instructions from the IMF are looking more and more dodgy by the day.

Let's start with the fact that the decision to reduce the policy rate itself over the last two decades had come from the IMF. With the SBP having reduced its growth prediction once again to just over four percent, one would wonder what the final readjustment at the end of the fiscal year will be. Let's remember that the SBP itself had been the one to predict over six percent growth in May this year. Unless SBP officials are incompetent, the blame for the shift must fall on the PTI government. The high exchange rate and high interest rate make for an environment that will be catastrophic to any investment in the country. Investors will hold back their decisions to invest until the exchange rate is stabilised – but this might not have happened if the government is firmly in the IMF's clasp by January as expected. The government has presented itself a false choice: growth or stability. The fear is that its choices are going to result in neither.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 3-12-2018

'FBR not to form policies on taxation matters in future'

Staff Correspondent

SIALKOT: Adviser to Prime Minister on Trade and Textile Abdul Razak Dawood has said that the government is sincerely trying to take measures to uplift the industrial sector and boost the national exports.

Addressing local industrialists and exporters at the Sialkot Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI) here on Sunday, he said that least attention had been paid for the promotion of industry and exports during the last 10 years. He said that the government truly wished to create ease in business for all the businessmen with minimum hurdles in their way.

Abdul Razak Dawood said that steps were being taken to change functions of the Federal Board Revenue (FBR), which in future would not form policies on taxation matters and would not impose duties as those were the responsibilities of the ministries of finance and commerce. He opined that the FBR must collect revenue only. He said that the government was going to reduce duties against imports of raw materials to be re-exported. He assured that in the near future there would be zero duty against the import of any raw material used in the products to be exported. He said that active consultation would be done with the business community for taxation purpose under the National Tariff Policy.

Abdul Razak Dawood urged the exporters to come forward and try to search new world markets, particularly South American markets, for their top quality goods. He also suggested that the local industrialists must adopt the reverse engineering in order to manufacture new and non-traditional products for exports. He said that the government too would help the exporters in getting access of markets of different regions. Abdul Razak Dawood said that matching grants would be given to revive the Sialkot City Package and to help the local business community accomplish projects of social welfare. He praised the Sialkot's unique export

based culture of small and medium entrepreneurs and termed it a great example.

SCCI president Khawaja Masood Akhtar, senior vice-president Waqas Akram Awan, secretary general Malik Tariq Mehmood, Lahore Chamber of Commerce and Industry president Almas Haider, Riazuddin Sheikh, Sarfraz Butt, Alamgir Meyer, Farooq Meyer, Ch Ghulam Mustafa, Khawar Anwar Khawaja, Mian M Anwar and others were also present.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 3-12-2018

The FBR reforms the govt needs

Khaleeq Kiani

At the outset of his term, the first step Prime Minister Imran Khan promised was to set the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) right, raising public expectations. Just before the completion of his first 100 days in office, the cabinet has approved the separation of revenue policy from administration.

Most importantly, the internal revenue audit wing will be placed directly under the prime minister and will be fully resourced unlike in the past 18 years, starting with Shaukat Aziz's preference for self-assessment schemes, when the audit machinery was kept understaffed.

The top economic team led by the finance minister has been getting impatient with FBR chief Jehanzeb Khan to set the direction right within the Board. To show results, he has surrendered a lot of 22-grade officers to the Establishment Division.

In terms of overall reform, the change has struggled. On the customs side, for example, the reform has not gone beyond the separation of customs into operations and policy wings. On the Inland Revenue Service (IRS) side, the greatest innovations have been to catch last year's late filers, subjecting them to a fine of 25 per cent.

The authorities have ignored a significant part of the FBR reforms

The authorities have ignored that a significant part of FBR reforms lie in true compliance of the provisions of the Federal Board of Revenue Act, 2007. Even separating customs into operations and policy wings is not an innovation in itself but merely a compliance of section six of the FBR Act. This provision seeks a separate policy board for the FBR and has so far remained confined largely to the pages of statute book.

The provisions of the FBR Act, if implemented properly, can emerge in the shape of innovative and promising tax reforms. The implementation of section 4(g) can deal a fatal blow to the corruption now rampant in the tax machinery and eroding performance. The provision provides for internal controls, checks and feedback procedures on corrupt practices to combat corruption.

To implement this provision, a separate Performance and Integrity Management (PIM) Wing can be set up within the FBR with an interactive website, postal address and contact numbers,

all well publicised so that the public, when it detects instances of corruption, can complain against them.

All the pending and future departmental enquiries into corruption — currently conducted as a formality by seniors of the accused officials, working in the same organisation and in many cases also partners in crime — may be entrusted to this PIM Wing.

Most importantly, the Wing may be headed by a BS 21 officer from outside the taxation services to guard against the possibility of collusion among old acquaintances in the tax machinery. Complaint verification may be made briskly and, on availability of a prima facie evidence of corruption, the accused officer may be relieved of his duties.

Section 4(j) provides for a system of accountability for competence and performance. There is hardly any trace of implementation of this provision within the FBR. The current performance evaluation system has long outlived its utility. In this system, some of the known corrupt and desperately incompetent officers succeed in getting outstanding and very good performance evaluation reports (PERs) and in securing their elevation to BS 21 and 22, if they possess the skills to please their seniors.

To implement this provision, performance evaluation through a system of Management by Objectives (MBO) may be launched in which senior and junior officers discuss and agree upon the performance standards and objectives to be achieved for the specified future period. Senior officers then continuously keep watch that the juniors are on track, facilitate and guide them in the process while documenting all proceedings and agreed upon achievements, and reflect them in the PERs of junior officers.

Section 5(a) and 5(f) respectively focus on making and implementing a human resource policy and transfers of officials on the basis of transparent criteria. The power of the top tax persons in the FBR currently flows from a blatant violation of this provision.

Within the Board, there is hardly any concept of a posting policy and officers' career management. Personal likes and dislikes built on irrelevant factors determine officers' placements irrespective of their performance and competence.

Section 5(k) provides for the formulation of performance standards and criteria for grant of rewards. Section 14(1) provides that the performance of each employee be evaluated on the basis of a databank maintained in the FBR and containing information from third parties.

In stark violation of this provision, rewards worth Rs400 million were dished out by top men of customs and IRS in the FBR in June this year on the basis of seniority and favouritism.

The provision can be implemented by empowering the PIM wing to maintain a data bank of performance as evaluated through the MBO system, its own intelligence and neutral third parties' information to spot each year around 15 to 20 performers in terms of innovation, initiative and exceptional contribution opening new revenue channels, as an incentive for others to follow.

Several other provisions exist in the FBR Act that can transform the revenue body. However, top tax men have been taking undue advantage of relative ignorance of outside chairmen about the FBR's legal framework and have been trampling the very law which created their offices.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 12-12-2018

Trade deficit narrows 2pc to \$14.5bln in five months

Staff Correspondent

KARACHI: Trade deficit slightly narrowed two percent to \$14.5 billion during the first five months of the current fiscal year of 2018/19 as exports inched up, while imports remained flat during the period, official data revealed on Tuesday.

Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) data showed that trade deficit amounted to \$14.8 billion in the July-November period of the last fiscal year.

In July-November, exports marginally improved 1.2 percent year-on-year to \$9.1 billion, while imports were a tad down 0.78 percent to \$23.6 billion during the period.

Rupee has lost a quarter of its value against the US dollar since December last year, which provides inducement to the exporters to improve their competitiveness.

While rupee fall is increasing profit margins, exporters anticipate loss of foreign orders in days ahead on high cost of raw materials which are mostly imported.

Tax incentives announced in January 2017 also encouraged exporters to market products in the international market. The exports incentives package ended on June this year.

Imports remained flat as regulatory duties discouraged inbound shipments of non-essential goods into the country.

In November, trade deficit shrank 0.25 percent year-on-year and 5.2 percent month-on-month to \$2.7 billion.

Exports, during the month, amounted to \$1.8 billion, down 6.3 percent year-on-year and decreasing 3.1 percent month-on-month. Imports were also down 2.7 percent year-on-year and 4.4 percent month-on-month to \$4.6 billion in November.

PBS data further showed that trade deficit in services significantly narrowed 33.7 percent to one billion dollars in the first four months of the current fiscal year with exports up two percent and imports down 15.4 percent during the period.

In July-October, exports of services rose to \$1.76 billion from \$1.72 billion and imports of services fell to \$2.85 billion from \$3.38 billion during the same period a year ago.

In October, trade deficit in services narrowed 49 percent year-on-year and widened 26.9 percent month-on-month to \$195 million.

Services export increased 14.2 percent in October from \$411.2 million in the corresponding month a year earlier. Exports of services increased 11.9 percent in October from \$419.9 million in September.

Services imports decreased 16.2 percent in October from \$794 million in the same month a year ago, while imports of services increased 15.9 percent in October from \$573.4 million in September, according to the PBS.

THE EXPRESS TRIBUNE, ISLAMABAD 7-12-2018

Deficit — of trust and trade

Trust promotes trade, and trade fosters trust, interdependency and constituencies for peace. It is the deficit of trust between Pakistan and India that the volume of trade between the two countries is just around \$2 billion; and it is this little volume of the bilateral trade that speaks of the growing bitter relations between the two neighbours. The World Bank believes that the two nuclear rivals have barely scratched the surface of their bilateral trade potential that stands somewhere around \$37 billion, due to the absence of a normal relationship between them almost all through the seventy-plus years of the existence of both.

The Bank has released a report in Islamabad titled 'Glass Half Full: Promise of Regional Trade in South Asia', mentioning four barriers to effective regional integration. These barriers are tariff and para-tariff barriers to trade; complicated and non-transparent non-tariff measures; disproportionately high cost of trade; and trust deficit.

The report says that continued political tensions and lack of normal trade relations between Pakistan and India have cast a shadow over cooperation efforts within South Asia, contributing to the lack of progress in the regional cooperation agenda of Saarc [South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation] and Safta [South Asian Free Trade Area]. The author of the report, Sanjay Kathuria, cites the opening of Kartarpur corridor by governments of the two countries as a step towards minimising the trust deficit.

That both Pakistan and India are struggling in the context of balance of trade has no two opinions. Pakistan's trade deficit rose to \$37.7 billion in the fiscal year 2017-18 from \$32.5 billion in the previous fiscal year. Similarly, India's trade deficit widened to \$156.8 billion in 2017-18 as compared to \$108.5 billion in the previous fiscal. Bridging the trust deficit can certainly help the two countries bridge their trade deficit, to the benefit of the whole region.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 7-12-2018

Rights of rivers

Zubeida Mustafa

CAN a river have legal rights as, say, a human being? Why not, a Maori would say. Te Awa Tupua, New Zealand's third largest river located in the North Island, was recognised as a legal entity in March 2017 by an act of parliament. This move came in response to a 140-year-old demand of the Whanganui tribe of the region which has traditionally treated the river as its ancestor. This in effect means that a close link between man and nature has been recognised and man's obligations towards the river — his lifeline — acknowledged.

This is a unique concept which makes much sense. Within the span of a few weeks, an Indian court followed suit, and the Ganges and Jamna, sacred rivers of the Hindus, were also given legal rights. These initiatives have reinforced the personhood rights of rivers movement, which is rapidly gaining ground worldwide. It has significantly caught the attention of Pakistani environmentalists as well. I first heard of it the other day from Muhammad Ali Shah, the chairperson of the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum, who spoke of this in his speech on dams at a meeting organised by the Irtiqa Institute of Social Sciences. Who else but the fisherfolk would be the first to ponder the implications of the savage abuse of rivers in Pakistan?

A few facts and figures quoted by Shah should be eye-openers. Of the thousands of rivers in the world, only 292 are defined as large — that is, they carry over 1,000 cubic kilometres water — but only 21 of them reach the sea. The remaining have been depleted by dams and mega irrigation projects.

The worst form of social injustice in Pakistan can be found in water distribution.

What about Pakistan? The Indus, the only river to reach the sea in the country, is in its death throes. Dams and canals are draining the waterway while garbage and solid waste are choking it. As a result, the sea is encroaching on the delta, strangling the mangroves and affecting the ecological health of the coastline and the river mouth. Pollution is another major enemy of the Indus and its tributaries.

And the dams? According to the International Commission on Large Dams, Pakistan has 150 dams of the height of at least 15 metres, including the world's largest earth-filled dam (Tarbela). Yet we seem to be desperate for another one.

If the personhood rights of the Indus were to be accepted in principle, we would have to ensure that the river is not polluted, no more dams are built on it and water is drawn judiciously so that the river's ecology is not damaged further or marine life decimated. Many lakes have also been affected by the pollution and depletion of river waters.

Pakistan is a water-scarce country, we are told, and our exploding population needs water to live. What is strange is that the many options available have not been explored seriously. There is no discourse on reservoirs to store the excess water that the heavy monsoon rains and the floods bring. There is no mention of conservation in agriculture (drip irrigation has never been tried on a large scale) and industry, or of the need to check the wasteful practices of the rich. And what about the leaking pipes which drain away as much as 30 per cent of the water in Pakistan's largest city where the Karachi Water & Sewerage Board rules over the water kingdom. Muhammad Ali Shah's was a lone voice that spoke strongly of conservation at the Irtiqa meeting.

The worst form of inequity and social injustice in the country can be found in water distribution. It is no wonder that the Supreme Court-mandated commission on water and sanitation in Sindh expressed its "serious resentment" on the "unfair" distribution of water in Karachi recently. Water theft, the operation of a tanker mafia and the prevalence of illegal water pumps are the sad story

of Karachi's water supply system. These illegalities are provided cover by allowing half of the 2,600 flow meters installed on the intervention of the Supreme Court to remain out of order. And who are the beneficiaries? Naturally, the rich and the privileged who can buy water at exorbitant prices to meet their needs, while the indigent continue to be denied even this basic necessity of life.

With the lack of availability of water is in itself the first major issue that has to be addressed, no one speaks about the quality of the water that is being supplied. It is not fit for drinking. As a result, water has become a commodity that is sold in the market and that has made many people wealthy. But there is no guarantee that bottled water is always safe for drinking.

The root of the problem lies at the source. Alas, rivers have no rights in Pakistan. But neither do the citizens, not on paper but in reality. This is certain though, when the rivers die, so will the citizens.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 3-12-2018

The quest for water security

Dr. Murad Ali

Chief Justice Saqib Nisar's appeal for donations and participation in fund-raising events in the UK to build dams and increase the country's water-storage capacity has revitalised the debate about the need, justification, feasibility and implications of constructing large water reservoirs in the country.

In this article, I will discuss the challenge of water scarcity in Pakistan, the factors responsible for it, and the policy measures that the country can take to overcome acute water scarcity. I am also going to discuss the global trends regarding construction of larger dams, and whether Pakistan can accumulate sufficient finances through donations to successfully fund the construction of proposed water reservoirs.

In May 2018, the Pakistan Council of Research in Water Resources (PCRWR) came up with a somewhat startling revelation that Pakistan is faced with a severe water crisis and it is estimated that there will be very little or no clean water available by 2025 if tangible short-term as well as comprehensive long-term measures are not taken.

Similarly, the IMF has warned that Pakistan is ranked third among countries facing water scarcity. It is a precarious situation as the per capita water availability in the 1950s was approximately 5,000 cubic metres per year, which has now declined to below 1,000 cubic metres per year. This is an internationally recognised threshold of water shortage.

Climate change coupled with unabated deforestation, threats to the country's glacial reserves, drying lakes and rivers and poor water supply will severely affect agriculture, ecology and local biodiversity. It must be noted that the previous government identified food, energy and water security among the seven key pillars in its key long-term policy document 'Vision 2025'. Similarly, access to clean water and sanitation is also one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed upon by all

UN member states under the 2030 Agenda. It must be emphasised that Pakistan was the first country that adopted the UN 2030 Agenda through a unanimous parliamentary resolution in February 2016. To achieve water security and accomplish SDG 6, the country must come up with short- and long-term plans and initiatives to address the challenge of water security.

However, due to our unsustainable and unregulated usage of water, where it is largely considered a free-of-cost commodity, Pakistan has the fourth highest rate of water consumption across the world. Comparing our GDP per capita and the consumption of water per unit of GDP, Pakistan is considered to be among the most water-intensive economies in the world, as per an IMF report. There are various factors responsible for this.

The country is an outdated agricultural economy, with an efficiency rate of a just over 50 percent. For instance, out of the country's fresh water resources, a colossal over 90 percent is consumed by the agricultural sector. According to some estimates, about half of this precious water is wasted even before it reaches the fields due to massive leakages in the feeble water-transportation infrastructure.

For example, about 100 million acre-feet of water (maf) enters the canal system where 40 million acre-feet (maf) doesn't reach the farm gate. The water volume wasted approximately amounts to the storage capacity of five Kalabagh dams. While there will always be demands for dams, which are, of course, necessary in its own place, there is a greater need to minimise the leakages and wastage of water caused by dilapidated water-supply infrastructure as well as its unregulated free-of-cost extravagant usage. And as for the remaining 50 percent of water that actually reaches fields, much of it is virtually wasted by outdated practices in agriculture, such as flood irrigation.

The result is that Pakistan's productivity per unit of water is 0.39 kilogrammes per cubic meters, which is one-sixth of China's and one-third of India's. We need to think about how to improve our water transportation system and usage efficiency. One solution could be a major overhaul in the country's water and agricultural infrastructure if we want to surmount the issue of severe water scarcity. Both federal and provincial governments need to invest in initiatives that could minimise the current leakages and wastages in water-transportation structures.

Apart from enormous wastage in the agricultural sector, a huge amount of water is wasted in our unrestrained daily routine. For example, some estimates suggest that an average of 400 gallons of fresh water is used to wash a car, over 10 gallons is wasted during a shower, and about four gallons while we brush our teeth. While brushing their teeth, most people rarely turn off the tap. As a result, a considerable amount of water is wasted.

All these are substantial statistics for a country of over 210 million people with relatively meagre natural resources, including water. The situation looks all the more grave as we are aware that most of the water consumed at household levels is primarily groundwater, which is considered to be a last resort if the country runs out of water. Loosely regulated and ineffective water governance coupled with our resistance to adopt latest

technology, techniques and practices are some of the principal factors responsible for the current situation.

A recent research study titled ‘Sustainable hydropower in the 21st century’, authored by professors at the Michigan State University, has come up with some startling findings regarding the role of hydropower and mega dams as sustainable and viable options of cheaper energy in the modern era.

The study states that hydropower remained one of the leading sources of renewable energy around the globe, “accounting for up to 71 percent of this supply as of 2016”. Most of this capacity was developed in Europe and the US in the 20th century when thousands of hydropower projects were successfully executed. But unlike the trend in numerous developing countries across the globe, including Pakistan, there is a completely contrary propensity in developed countries concerning the construction of larger dams.

Various factors are responsible for this trend. These include the fact that there are no more suitable sites available for dams and there are increasing environmental and social concerns about the construction of larger dams. Nowadays, more dams are being removed in North America and Europe than those that are being built, the study reveals. It further elaborates that dam removal rather than construction has become the norm in North America and Europe because many of the reservoirs built before 1950 are at the end of their useful lives.

The study argues that it would be too costly to repair these old dams as many no longer serve their initial purpose, and their social and environmental negative externalities have become unacceptable. However, unlike the US, some European countries with favourable topography and rain patterns – such as France and Switzerland – continue to have hydropower as an important part of their energy mix through technological innovations at existing dams.

In contrast, 3,450 dams have been removed to date in Sweden, Spain, Portugal and the UK. Similarly, hundreds of dams have been demolished successfully in the US (a total of 546 from 2006 to 2014). On average, over 60 dams are being removed in the US annually – a trend that started in 2006. It is because the cost of repairing and renovating a small dam could be up to three times the cost of removing it.

However, because of diverse and acute need for cheaper energy, this situation stands in stark contrast with what is happening in developing countries. For example, a total of over 3,700 dams that produce more than 1 MW are either planned or under-construction primarily in developing countries. The principal reason behind this line of thinking is that despite rising trends of using alternative energy sources in developed countries, hydropower still represents the largest renewable source of electricity (70 percent of the global production of renewable energy).

In addition, it is believed that less than 25 percent of the global hydro potential has been exploited to date, and there is enormous potential in many developing countries. It is one of the key tenets of the 2030 Agenda, as agreed upon by all UN member states in

2015 at the 70th UN General Assembly (UNGA), to substantially increase the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix by 2030.

It goes without saying that access to clean and affordable energy is among one of the 17 SDGs because one in seven people still lack access to electricity and a majority of such people live in rural areas in developing countries.

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 15-12-2018

Afghanistan Opens New Trade Route with Aim of Building Link to Europe

HERAT - Afghanistan on Thursday opened a new international trade route aimed at establishing direct access to Central Asian and Europe as it seeks to build up an economy wrecked by decades of war and reduce reliance on Pakistan.

President Ashraf Ghani inaugurated the route, known as the Lapis Lazuli corridor, at a ceremony in the western province of Herat.

“For over 47 years Afghanistan was in isolation, today Afghanistan is connected with its neighbours and beyond,” Ghani said at the ceremony, which saw the first trucks set off with dried fruit, herbs and textiles bound for Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey.

The corridor is the latest in a series of energy and transport projects aimed at opening Afghanistan up as a hub at the heart of Central Asia.

Ghani, a former World Bank official, has pushed such projects, including the \$10 billion TAPI - Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India - natural gas network launched this year, as essential to building a functioning Afghan economy.

The new corridor - which includes stretches of road, rail and maritime routes - runs from Afghanistan to Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Georgia before crossing the Black Sea to Turkey and eventually Europe.

Ghani is trying to reduce land-locked Afghanistan’s dependence on its eastern neighbour, Pakistan, with which it has long had complicated relations.

Afghanistan accuses Pakistan of providing safe haven and support to Taliban insurgents, a charge rejected by Pakistan. Major crossings on their border are regularly closed for political and security reasons.

“Afghanistan has to reduce its dependency on Pakistan for international trade, the country has to establish new trade routes to improve the domestic economy,” said Abdul Nasheed, a senior member of the independent Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce.

Last month, Afghanistan inaugurated an air cargo service to China by sending 20 tons of pine nuts. It has a similar cargo link with India. **(Reuters)**

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 10-12-2018

The Reasons of Our Economic Failure

After the formation of National Unity Government (NUG), the citizens of the country were determined to see a change in the economic life of the country, but so far, they have not been able to experience anything worthwhile.

The reasons for the current state of affairs in the economy are rooted in the failure of Mr. Karzai's thirteen-year-old government and lack of political will, vision, plan, and administrative mismanagement in NUG. These two cases are the cornerstone of this flawed evolution.

As we know, Afghanistan had an exceptional opportunity since the end of 2001 after the US military intervention and the end of Taliban regime and the establishment of a somewhat democratic regime, but it failed to use it efficiently and purposefully.

The new government began its economic activity in 1381, when its economy had undergone an exceptional opportunity after a period of stagnation and a decline in the economy. The interim government immediately estimated the financial damages at about \$30 billion after the Bonn Accords in December 2001. After the preliminary assessments of the damage to the economy, the United Nations at the Afghanistan Reconstruction Conference in Tokyo in January 2002 promised that it will pay for reconstruction in Afghanistan an estimated amount of \$10 billion for the past year, and some other countries and institutions participated in the \$5 billion program in five years, which provided Afghanistan with \$1.8 billion in the first year of 2002 and about \$2 billion in 2003.

But even after the success of National Solidarity Program at that time and over a five-year period, and with the support of billions of dollars from the international community, the government was not able to determine its strategy for reconstruction and development. However, the government presented the second plan of a five-year program called the "National Development Strategy of Afghanistan" for funding in the Paris Conference on June 12, 2008, and again it implemented the program with a lot of deficiencies. It continued until 2012 (of course, the cost of the program was worth tens of millions of dollars, and the control of it was left to several individuals). The growth rates were not accurately predicted.

In brief, Mr. Karzai's rule over thirteen years was not able to take advantage of the time, financial, monetary and military support and the presence of the international community (about forty countries), including the active presence of the United States, the United Nations and other institutions.

NUG is the direct product of the Karzai regime and the outcome of differences and conflicts that ensued at the start of its formation. As mentioned, the Karzai's thirteen-year-old government failed to pave the way for economic growth and posterity.

The national unity government started work with the empty treasury, reducing aid, mistrusting citizens from security, and many other such issues. They made people over-optimistic through promises during the election campaign. The lack of a strong political will, a proper understanding of national interests,

and the government's inability to control the internal affairs made the situation even more difficult for NUG leaders.

The new government should, in the first step, should have carried out an accurate assessment of the overall state of the country, including the performance of thirteen years of the previous regime, and clearly set out all requirements and facilities (internal and external), based on a comprehensive National Development Strategy Plan. However, government had no strategy to offer except empty promises.

The government began to accelerate its work by launching a series of anti-corruption investigations in the Kabul Bank and the Ministry of Defense, where hundreds of embezzlers were involved; however, it was never able to reach all the culprits and the complete depth of the corruption that was carried out in such institutions of great importance. At the same time, it was not able to focus on new economic initiatives for the country.

Now, as a result of the weakness of the leadership and management of the national unity government, our country and our people are seeing the following unfavorable conditions:

- a. Increased insecurity and decrease in foreign investment (reports from the relevant department shows a 26% drop in investments over the past 9 months compared to 9 months of the previous year).
- b. Youth escape and increased immigration to Europe (according to UN Commissioners, around 122,000 Afghans have applied for asylum in 44 countries worldwide). 90 percent of these people are educated youth, which is the human capital of the country.
- c. Reducing domestic production and thus reducing economic growth.
- d. 96% trade deficit.
- e. Inflation and depreciation of the Afghani.
- f. Increasing poverty rates

It is time for the government to come to terms with its failures, to review all the affairs on the basis of national interests and to take urgent measures to prevent the collapse of economic and social conditions. In the long run, it should start working on a major national and strategic plan. In these programs, internal and external opportunities and capacities should be accurately measured and pursued.

Strong political will, proper understanding of the situation, effective management, and the practicable national development plan will undoubtedly remove all barriers in way to progress, and the country will take steps to develop and provide its deprived people prosperity and peace.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 14-12-2018

WB to provide budget support after 10 years

Star Business Report

The World Bank is set to provide \$750 million as budget support for three years after a gap of ten years, which is the largest

amount yet for Bangladesh from the Washington-based multilateral lender.

The loan will be given in three instalments of \$250 million each to help the government strengthen its capacity to create more, better-paid and quality jobs. The first instalment was approved yesterday by the WB board.

“Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in accelerating growth and reducing poverty, but the rate of job creation has not kept up with economic growth,” said Qimiao Fan, WB's country director for Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal.

Creating more and better jobs is a prerequisite for the country to achieve its vision of upper-middle income status, he added.

Finance Minister AMA Muhith, in an impromptu press conference at his secretariat office called upon receiving the news of the loan's approval by the WB board, acknowledged that job creation in recent times was not in tandem with economic growth.

The government will take various steps in future for job creation. This is the largest loan for Bangladesh in the WB's history, according to the outgoing finance minister.

“This is an expression of the World Bank's support to the policies undertaken by the government in recent times,” said Abdur Rouf Talukder, finance secretary, at the press briefing.

Over the next three years the government will implement more reform programmes, he added.

“Despite Bangladesh's robust economic growth, the pace of job creation has slowed in recent years, and almost stalled in the readymade garments sector,” said the WB in a statement.

The growth rate for jobs fell to 1.8 percent in 2010-16 from 2.7 percent in 2003-10. Women, workers in lagging regions, and youth in particular face challenges in accessing quality jobs.

Climate change has exacerbated this jobs challenge, underscoring the need to significantly increase employment in the non-agriculture sector.

The credit aims at supporting Bangladesh develop a stronger policy and institutional framework to address barriers to creating more and better jobs for citizens, including women, youth and the vulnerable population.

“It will help develop market-oriented skills for women, youth and overseas migrants, preparing them for better employment opportunities,” said Thomas Farole, WB lead economist and task team leader.

To promote large-scale employment in diverse manufacturing sectors, the reform programme will help improve the investment environment, lift barriers to doing business and modernise customs and trade facilitation.

The programme will also help implement amendments to the labour law and reform the pensions programme to ensure works are protected, the WB said.

The rate of interest on the loan is two percent, according to Muhith.

The repayment period is 30 years including a five-year grace period, according to the WB statement.

“It is a good thing,” said AB Mirza Azizul Islam, a former advisor to a caretaker government, who was in charge of the finance ministry when Bangladesh last got budget support from the WB back in 2008.

But, such loans come with some conditions that may go against the country's interest, he added.

BASIC BANK FORMER CHAIRMAN, CPD ISSUE

Also at the press briefing reporters quizzed Muhith about Abdul Hye Bacchu, former chairman of BASIC Bank.

“I don't know what Bacchu does or how he is living. I don't know. He has totally disappeared from my horizon and I am happy about it. He is a cheat and thief. He is an out-and-out cheat and dishonest. That's all.”

On the recent report by the Centre for Policy Dialogue that said major scams in the banking sector in the past decade cost Tk 22,502 crore, Muhith said, “What CPD said about the banking sector is an old problem.”

The issues are always in discussion.

“Timing is a factor here. It seems they have a political move behind publishing such a report at such a time.” However, the report contains some good suggestions, such as merging of bad banks with others, he said, adding that he will leave a recommendation for the incoming government.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 13-12-2018

Child sexual abuse rampant

Existing measures ineffective

We are shocked by the report of a fourth-grade girl raped under bizarre circumstances in the Chakaria Upazila of Cox's Bazar on Monday night. The alleged offender is a local vaidya (indigenous medical practitioner) who, according to our report, manipulated the wife of a mental health patient to provide him with a girl of 8-9 years for his “treatment”, only to rape her later. The irrationality of the whole incident notwithstanding, this is just another confirmation of the fact that child sexual abuse is still rampant in our country. And the numbing regularity with which

it is taking place shows the futility of efforts meant to protect children from such abuses.

The continuation of a culture in which sexual predators are emboldened is as much a policy failure as a law enforcement one. An alarming number of child sexual abuse cases are recorded every year. Experts note that such cases often end without a conviction of the offenders which contributes to repeat offenses. Clearly, the existing measures are not working. We feel that while the criminal justice system has a vital role to play in punishing the rapists, what's equally important is to reduce the likelihood of such abuse in the first place—through a combination of law enforcement and social measures to create an environment in which children feel safe and potential offenders are deterred. The government has a big role to play in creating this environment, together with the local communities and social organisations, and the urgency to produce results in the fight against child abuse must be felt equally across all levels.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 11-12-2018

PITFALLS IN SINGAPORE –

Sri LANKA FTA

Committee report handed over to President

Committee Chairman and former Colombo University Vice Chancellor and Professor of Economics Emeritus W.D. Lakshman presenting the Committee report on Singapore-Lanka FTA to President Maithripala Sirisena. Picture by Sadaruwan Amarasinghe

The Presidential Committee appointed to study the Singapore-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (SLSFTA) handed over its report to President Maithripala Sirisena at the Presidential Secretariat yesterday.

The report highlighted contentious issues in the Free Trade Agreement. The Committee pointed out its flaws emphasising that the country will have to face many impediments due to it.

They informed that the agreement will adversely impact on the electricity, trade, export and import sectors.

Presidential Secretariat sources said that President Maithripala Sirisena had directed the Secretary to the President to refer the Commission's recommendations to the relevant parties involved in drafting the agreement. He ordered to amend the agreement by January 21.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 8-12-2018 **FAO-China South-South Cooperation**

Project:

Lanka's fruit value chain to be strengthened

The Tripartite Agreement being signed.

The signing ceremony of the FAO-China South-South Cooperation Tripartite Agreement between the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), China and Sri Lanka took place at the FAO headquarters on Thursday.

The aim of the South-South Cooperation project is to help Sri Lanka boost the production and commercialization of fruit crops among the value chain actors in the country.

FAO Deputy Director-General (Programmes) Daniel Gustafson, Permanent Representative of China to FAO and Ambassador Niu Dun and Agriculture Ministry Secretary K. D. S. Ruwanchandra signed the agreement.

Sri Lanka is the second country in Asia to be funded through the FAO-China South-South Cooperation Programme. The new project valued at over USD 1.1 million, will mainly focus on the increase of fruit production and trade in and out of the country, contributing to FAO's Strategic Objectives and to the Country Programming Framework for Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka has had strong economic growth since the end of its 30-year civil war, but the challenges remain critical. Poor cultivation and high post-harvest losses lead to low yield and inadequate adherence to international food safety standards.

The project will include practical field-based capacity building through various implementation approaches.

During the two years of the project, eight experts and six technicians will be fielded to offer technical guidance to local communities, transfer practical and advanced technologies and organize training courses. Priority areas will also include raising the value chain of target fruit crops and helping develop domestic and export market to increase farmers' income.

Widely regarded as a successful practice, South-South Cooperation between FAO, China and Sri Lanka will enable the effective exchange of expertise while boosting national food security and small-scale farmer livelihoods in South Asia.

Gustafson commended the notable contribution of China to the success of global South-South Cooperation since 1996.

He recognized the achievement of this collaboration now expanding to Sri Lanka under the umbrella of the FAO-China South-South Cooperation Programme.

FAO's South-South Cooperation initiatives help developing countries share and transfer agricultural knowledge and expertise among themselves, so that innovation and good practices that have been tested elsewhere in the global South can benefit other countries facing similar challenges.

China has been an active participant, strong supporter and major contributor of FAO's South-South Cooperation, granting USD 80 million to the FAO-China South-South Cooperation Programme in support of knowledge sharing and technology transfer among southern countries.

**IV – DEFENCE NUCLEAR DEVELOPMENT, SCIENTIFIC
RESEARCH AND SPACE TECHNOLOGY**

Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad

**IV – DEFENCE, NUCLEAR DEVELOPMENT, SCIENTIFIC
RESEARCH AND SPACE TECHNOLOGY**

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THE HINDU, DELHI 10-12-2018

Navy on a major capability upgrade

Dinakar Peri

Ensures presence of at least one major ship at choke points

Against the backdrop of increasing responsibilities in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) with the rising Chinese presence, the Indian Navy has embarked on a major capability upgrade. A Navy officer said that this year, on an average, 35 Navy ships were deployed every day.

“The Navy has undertaken 113 port calls including operational turnarounds this year and has participated in 21 exercises including the Indra series with Russia which began on Sunday,” the officer said.

Operational requirements have significantly gone up with the Navy ensuring the presence of at least one major ship at all critical choke points in the IOR under its mission-based deployments and increased military-to-military engagement with friendly nations as part of India’s defence diplomacy in which the Navy is at the forefront.

“As on today, 32 ships and submarines are presently under construction in Indian shipyards. These include the Indigenous Aircraft Carrier (IAC) Vikrant, Project-15B destroyers, Project-17A stealth frigates, P-28 anti-submarine warfare (ASW) corvettes, offshore patrol vessels (OPV) and Scorpene class submarines ... In addition, government approval has also been accorded for 56 ships and six submarines,” the Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral Sunil Lanba, said last week.

The 56 ships are in various stages of procurement and include replacements for existing platforms as well as new additions. “Construction activity will be spread over a decade,” Admiral Lanba stated. These include next generation frigates and destroyers, four stealth frigates from Russia, four landing platform decks (LPD), 16 shallow water craft, 12 mine sweepers, five fleet support ships (FSS), four survey vessels and two diving support vessels. All this comes against the backdrop of China increasing its presence and establishing permanent facilities in the IOR. Admiral Lanba stated that China deployed six to eight warships in the IOR at any given time.

The force enhancements were contingent on increased budgetary allocation which has not seen a major increase over the last few years.

THE STATESMAN, NEW DELHI 4-12-2018

‘Cautiously observing’ Chinese presence in Indian Ocean Region: Indian Navy

The theme for this year is ‘Indian Navy, Mission-deployed and Combat-ready.’

PTI

The Indian Navy Monday said that the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean Region has increased in recent years and they were ‘cautiously observing’ it.

Flag Officer Commanding, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry Naval Area, Rear Admiral Alok Bhatnagar N M stated this while addressing reporters to announce the celebrations for the Indian Navy Day observed on December 4 every year.

“The Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean Region has increased over the recent years. The good part is that we are aware of it. We know their movements in the region and we are observing it cautiously, he said.

They (Chinese) have the right to be in any part of the world like we have,” Bhatnagar said.

Asked if the Navy was equipped to face any threat from the Chinese in the IOR, he said the capabilities of the Indian Navy are mission-based and not targeted against any country.

“Over the years, the Indian Navy has developed its force based on a mission. Our capabilities are mission-based and not targeted against any country. Whenever we are given a mission, we will be able to accomplish it,” he said.

On the expansion of the naval base in Chennai, Bhatnagar said the talks with the Tamil Nadu government were in an advanced stage and hoped for complete support from them.

“...we are in the advanced stage of consultation. We are confident of complete support of the state government for allotting us the much-required land for infrastructure augmentation,” he said.

On talks with the Sri Lankan Navy and Coast Guard that are likely to be held in May 2019, Bhatnagar said that these are centered around smuggling of contraband goods, counterfeit currency and other illegal activities.

“Besides, we will put forth before Sri Lanka, the concerns of the Indian fishermen and tell the island nation not to harm them when they cross maritime limits accidentally,” he said.

The Navy Day is observed every year to commemorate its victory in the Indo-Pak war in 1971.

The theme for this year is ‘Indian Navy, Mission-deployed and Combat-ready.’

As part of the celebration, medical and blood donation camps, wreath-laying ceremony, visits to ships, coastal clean-up activities, among others, are conducted during the month.

THE STATESMAN, NEW DELHI 3-12-2018

Warriors of the Sea

There is little doubt that between a submarine and an aircraft carrier, the former is comparatively economical and safer to operate, is difficult to be detected (by the opponent), and does not require an accompanying flotilla of surface vessels. Further, one subsurface boat can counter potential hostility in the sea before initiating offensive operations. The visibility of the shape and size of a high-sea aircraft carrier, on the other hand, does look impressive and menacing, but only when the carrier moves as ‘carrier battle group’.

Abhijit Bhattacharyya

Who wins? Prevails? Dominates? Commands? Or, controls the sea? The submarine or the aircraft carrier? The question is as critical and debatable as the answer itself; which is likely to be charged (“for and against”) with emotion, logic, counter-logic, encounter-logic and ultimately shouting and counter-shouting with no winner or loser.

That’s the likely end of the scenario building ashore. What actually may or may not happen afloat, however, is the billion-dollar puzzle, as citing instances from chapters of world naval

warfare can be both conclusive as well as inconclusive. Suffice it to state that both the sub and the aircraft carrier are necessary and complementary to each other.

Yet, that is easier said than done for the majority of the world's navies. By its very nature, the navy has a long gestation period of construction; is capital intensive, labour intensive, technology-driven, requiring highly-skilled managers to run the naval machine. It is also high in terms of training cost and higher still on maintenance, expansion and operations.

What then should be the sea route ahead for India at this point in time? One needs to glance through the world naval scenario in general and the Indian Ocean littoral in particular; to strategise the future sea-state of the ships of the state. Thus, on date, there are 164 naval states in the world with only one (the USA) with global reach, consisting of six naval commands of the Pacific, Central, Africa, Europe, South America and North America.

Of the rest, however, only a dozen-odd nations (Russia, India, China, UK, France, Italy, Australia, Brazil, Japan, Indonesia, Spain and South Korea) could be considered to be of some substance, with China's quest for place in the sea, being three-in-one ~ promising, menacing and problematic. In fact with China's public official announcement on November 26 to the effect that the PLA-Navy is going for its third aircraft carrier, India does feel an indirect compulsion to take note, and re-calibrate, her naval policy and priorities soon.

The reason is that China is moving fast. Beijing appears to be in hurry to make up for the lost time and conspicuous lack of a naval tradition, unlike Japan, its neighbour. Nevertheless, the lost time is being recovered as can be seen by the rate of fighting ship production, which on an average is taking 30 months, compared to India's 50 to 60 months.

However, there is little doubt that between a submarine and an aircraft carrier, the former is comparatively economical and safer to operate, is difficult to be detected (by the opponent), and does not require an accompanying flotilla of surface vessels. Further, one sub-surface boat can counter potential hostility in the sea before initiating offensive operations. The visibility of the shape and size of a high-sea aircraft carrier, on the other hand, does look impressive and menacing, but only when the carrier moves as "carrier battle group". And not alone. No carrier dare operate solo, unlike the submarine, for a prolonged blue water mission.

Thus, purportedly invincible though it may claim, the reality of a lurking submarine 450 metres under the sea will always be a challenge to all types of surface vessels, however lethal their claims are, than the other way round. At the height of the Cold War, when the number of US aircraft carriers stood at 14, it was the 100 plus Soviet nuclear-powered submarines, armed with ballistic missiles of range exceeding 5000 kilometres which constituted the gravest threat to the US fleet across the world.

Nearer home, the Pakistani sub-force is an important and credible deterrent to the formidable Indian Navy's surface as well as sub-surface capability. The submarine is the best possible economic-cum-tactical option of the weak. With a relatively smaller shoreline of 567 nautical miles, compared to India's 4104

nautical miles, Pakistan has shored up its underwater and surface capability with a three-pronged strategy.

First, to resort to "fleet-in-being", implying ultra-defensive tactics to stop and interdict the superior opponent of an Indian offensive, say within three hundred nautical miles of the ports and bases. Second, try and launch a "limited offensive" to carry fire to the home port of the Indian flotilla through "harbour penetration" midgets (mini-sub) with the help and assistance of the state-sponsored, trained and guided nonstate actor (consisting of all types of lashkars, fidayeens, ghazis), which constitute a type of "landsea suicide bombers".

Taking cue from Sunday, December 7, 1941 Pearl Harbour's "kamikaze" pilots of the Japanese air force, self-destroying, as well as destroying the enemy, diving their aircraft through the funnel of the combat ships, waiting in the bay for orders to mobilise. And third, PLA navy assistance across the Indian Ocean routes.

The triangle has already been put in place. If one sees the map of the sea, and ports in of Indian Ocean littorals, Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Djibouti (Horn of Africa, at the mouth of the southern tip of the Red Sea) and Gwadar (Makran coast of Pakistan, at the mouth of Persian Gulf) form a visible geometry. This geometry makes the geography and geopolitics of naval operations come alive, posing a grave threat to the security and safety of South Asia.

Let us face it. If not today, then tomorrow, the Chinese PLA Navy will use all three ports and will go under water from there because all three ports now belong to China and with the third aircraft carrier in the pipeline, Beijing is bound to go high profile in the Indian Ocean, posing a direct challenge to the Indian Navy. All this has happened because Chinese money has bought them, as the accumulated debt burden of Chinese money failed original rulers of the ports.

In this unfolding scenario, what could, or should, be Indian response? As India traditionally has never been known to be either proactive or aggressive, being benign, reactive and on crisis-management mode, the best possible course is to strengthen the nuclear powered ballistic missile submarine squadrons.

India undoubtedly has made progress, but both the speed of construction and number of boats must be enhanced and deployed for "peaceful patrol", if need be, to areas which may not be of comfort to adversaries. This is called "forward deployment," as has been done by the West over the past two hundred years.

India need not follow the West in order to deploy ships in the South Atlantic or mid-Pacific Ocean because that is just not required. It is not concordant with New Delhi's economics, polity and geostrategy. Nevertheless, the late 19th-century Western adage ~ "Our ships are our natural bulwarks" ~ will have to be followed by Indians of the 21st century. Otherwise, the vast waterbodies around this country will turn into a lake at the hands of unwanted and undesirable pirates and practitioners of gunboat diplomacy. That certainly cannot be accepted by the 1.25 billion heads of India today.

THE ASIAN AGE, NEW DELHI 5-12-2018

India's heaviest satellite GSAT-11 launched successfully

PTI

GSAT-11 will provide high data rate connectivity to users of Indian mainland and islands.

Bengaluru: India's heaviest satellite GSAT-11, that would boost broadband services in the country, was successfully launched by an Arianespace rocket from the French Guiana in the early hours of Wednesday, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) said.

Blasting off from the Ariane Launch Complex at Kourou, a French territory located along the northeastern coast of South America at 02:07 am (IST), the Ariane-5 vehicle injected GSAT-11 into the orbit in a flawless flight lasting about 33 minutes.

"ISRO's heaviest and most-advanced high throughput communication satellite GSAT-11 was successfully launched from the Spaceport in French Guiana during the early hours today," the Indian space agency said.

After a 30-minute flight, GSAT-11 separated from the Ariane 5 upper stage in an elliptical Geosynchronous Transfer Orbit. The achieved orbit was very close to the intended one, it said.

".....the heaviest, largest and most powerful satellite ever built by India is successfully launched by Ariane-5 today," ISRO Chairman K Sivan said soon after the launch, describing the GSAT-11 as the "richest space asset" for India. Weighing about 5,854 kg, the GSAT-11 is the "heaviest" satellite built by ISRO. It is a next generation "high throughput" communication satellite configured around ISRO's I-6K Bus, and has a designed lifetime of more than 15 years. Post-separation, ISRO's Master Control Facility at Hassan, in Karnataka, took over the command and control of GSAT-11 and found its health parameters normal, the space agency said in a statement.

The satellite is initially placed in the Geosynchronous Transfer Orbit and will be raised to the Geostationary Orbit (36,000 km above the equator) through phase-wise orbit-raising manoeuvres in the days ahead, using its on-board propulsion systems.

GSAT-11 will be positioned at 74-degree east longitude in the geostationary orbit, ISRO said, adding that subsequently, the two solar arrays and four antenna reflectors of the satellite will be deployed in orbit.

The satellite will be operational after the successful completion of all in-orbit tests.

According to ISRO, GSAT-11 will provide high data rate connectivity to users of Indian mainland and islands through 32 user beams in Ku-band and 8 hub beams in Ka-band.

Calling the satellite a fore-runner in a series of advanced communications satellites with multi-spot beam antenna coverage over Indian mainland and islands, it said GSAT-11 will play a vital role in providing broadband services across the country and also be a platform to demonstrate new generation applications. Stating that GSAT-11 is going to be the "richest

space asset" for India, Sivan said ".....it is going to provide something like 16 GBPS data link services to the country."

It is the third in a series of four satellites aimed at achieving the government's ambitious target to provide high data connectivity of 100 GBPS in the country under the Digital India Mission, he added.

According to the space agency, GSAT-11 would provide high data connectivity to users across India, broadband connectivity to gram panchayats under the BharathNet project and support high data rate applications for enterprise network and consumer broadband applications.

GSAT-11 was initially planned for launch on May 25, but was rescheduled with the ISRO, citing the need for additional technical checks, recalling it for tests. Sivan thanked Arianespace for making it possible for the ISRO to achieve the launch this year itself.

The Ariane-5 vehicle (Flight VA246) also carried GEO-KOMPSAT-2A for the Korea Aerospace Research Institute (KARI), along with GSAT-11.

The 3,507.20 kg GEO-KOMPSAT-2A is designed to conduct meteorological and space weather monitoring missions. Since the launch of India's APPLE experimental satellite on Ariane Flight L03 in 1981, it has orbited 22 satellites under contracts with the Indian space agency, Arianespace said, adding that two more satellites, GSAT-31 and GSAT-30, were in the order book.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 4-12-2018

Govt rejects armed forces demand for higher military service pay

The government has rejected a long-standing demand of the armed forces for higher Military Service Pay (MSP) for over 1.12 lakh military personnel, including Junior Commissioned Officers of the Army, official sources said on Tuesday.

They told PTI that the Army headquarters is "very anguished" over the decision by the Finance Ministry, and will seek its immediate review.

Around 1.12 lakh military personnel, including 87,646 JCOs and 25,434 personnel of equivalent rank from the Navy and the Indian Air Force, will be affected by the decision.

The demand was to increase the monthly MSP from Rs 5,500 to Rs 10,000 and the total annual financial outgo would have been Rs 610 crore if the government had accepted the demand, sources said.

The MSP for the military personnel was introduced recognising their unique service conditions and hardships.

"The proposal for higher MSP for JCOs and equivalent rank of the Navy and IAF has been rejected by the Finance Ministry," said a source.

At present, the MSP has two categories-one for officers and another for JCOs and jawans.

The seventh Pay Commission had fixed Rs 5,200 as MSP per month for JCOs and jawans while putting it at Rs 15,500 for officers between Lieutenant-rank and Brigadier-rank.

The Army has been pressing for granting a higher MSP to the JCOs, arguing that they are gazetted officers (Group B) and play a very vital role in command and control structure of the force.

"Since JCOs are Group B gazetted officers and also have considerable length of service, it is incorrect to grant them MSP on par with the jawans. It is very unfair," said a military officer who wished not to be named.

The Army had taken up the issue strongly with the Defence Minister and the three services as well as the Defence Ministry were on the same page on the issue, the sources said.

The MSP was first introduced by the 6th Pay Commission, accounting for compensation for intangible aspects of military service.

It accounts for a range of "hardships and disadvantages" which cannot be evaluated while assessing pay comparability.

The concept of MSP for armed forces personnel is widely prevalent in European countries.

The armed forces were pressing for a separate slab of MSP for JCOs and equivalent rank.

In November last year, the Army clarified JCOs are gazetted officers and cancelled a seven-year-old note describing them as "non-gazetted" officers.

The decision by the Army came amid growing resentment among a large section of its officers over the controversial issue of rank-parity between them and their civilian counterparts in the service headquarters. - PTI

THE HINDU, DELHI 11-12-2018

U.S. and India call for more joint air exercises

Shiv Sahay Singh

'Cope India 2018' under way at Kalaikunda base in Bengal

As 'Cope India 2018' — the 12-day joint exercise between the U.S. and Indian Air Force being held at the Kalaikunda air station in West Bengal's Paschim Medinipur district — draws to a close, officials of both countries called for such joint exercises to be held more frequently.

More than 100 personnel of the U.S. Air Force, along with 400 personnel of the Indian Air Force, are participating in the exercise that will conclude on December 14. The exercise follows the Joint International Air Drill of Pakistan and China, which began at the Shaheen VII airbase in Pakistan earlier this month.

Huge Indian fleet

The U.S. Air Force has sent a dozen F-15 whereas the IAF is participating with a fleet of 10 Sukhoi 30, six Jaguars and four Mirage 2000. Along with the Kalaikunda Air Station, the exercise is being conducted from the adjoining Air Station Arjan Singh (located at Panagarh).

Speaking to journalists on Monday, Cope India 2018 director, Air Commodore J.S. Mann, said that mutual understanding of operational air power and the best practices learnt from each other during the joint exercise would help the countries "operate together in the times to come".

Lt. Col. Daryl Insley, who is heading the U.S. forces, said that his only regret was that the forces could train only for two weeks. "We need to train on a regular basis more often, and not after five to 10 years," he said during an interaction.

The joint air exercise between the two air forces is being held after 13 years. The last time too it was held at the Kalaikunda Air Station in 2005. Commanding officer of the Kalaikunda Air Station, Air Commodore Shaji Antony, also emphasised on the need of more such exercises and said, "We learn from each other during such exercises."

War games conducted

The collaborative and cooperative exercise over the past eight days involved formation of teams, comprising pilots and aircraft of both the air forces, participating in war games over the air space of Kalaikunda.

Officials of the IAF said that the air station was ideal for holding such exercises not only because it is one of the largest air stations in the region but also because as it has a large reserve air space of hundreds of square kilometres.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 12-12-2018

PN vessel launched in China

The Newspaper's Staff Reporter

ISLAMABAD: The launching ceremony of Pakistan Navy's Survey Vessel was performed in China, the Navy's Media Directorate said in a statement on Tuesday.

The 3,000-tonne vessel is under construction at the Jiangsu DAJIN Heavy Industries Company Limited, China, and is the largest survey vessel to be built for Pakistan Navy under Sino-Pak collaboration.

The ship is 80.8 metres in length and is equipped with modern survey equipment. It has the capacity to operate for 50 days at sea, said the statement.

The ship will be commissioned and inducted into the PN Fleet in August 2019 after completion of harbour and sea acceptance trials, the navy said, adding "the new ship will be one of the most technologically advanced survey vessels of Pakistan Navy and will strengthen Pakistan's marine scientific research capability while providing flexibility to carry out underwater search and localisation operations".

Chief Naval Overseer (China) Commodore Azfar Humayun, while speaking at the ceremony in China, said the newly launched vessel with its extended endurance and advanced survey equipment would enhance Pakistan's oceanographic survey capability.