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I - FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Summary

Foreign Affairs

Resignation of US Defence Secretary from office and the possible implications for India-US relations has come under discussion in Indian print media. Commentators have analyzed the pros and cons of the departure of James Mattis, and his replacement by a relatively inexperienced Patrick Shanahan, a former Boeing executive, for this important bilateral relationship which was built over a period of time, and in which James Mattis is reported to have played a significant role. He recently participated in the so-called India-US 2+2 dialogue. He is reported to have worked hard to emphasize to President Trump the importance of an enduring strategic partnership with New Delhi, with a special focus on the defence aspect, for a peaceful Indo-Pacific region, and as a counterweight to the rising power of China. Now, according to analysts, with an important pro-India voice in Washington DC gone, New Delhi should be ready to deal with surprises, which is the hallmark of Trump administration, in this bilateral relationship. At the same time, they argue, the permanent security establishment in Washington DC, which, by and large, see Indo-US partnership positively, may keep the relationship insulated from the instinctive decisions of Trump. Moreover, James Mattis had served in Afghanistan and was for a strong and sustained US presence in that country. Now with his departure, India can find itself in a precarious position in case President Trump follows up on his promise of troops withdrawal.

Relations between India and China remains one of the other important topics covered by Indian print media. Foreign Minister of China, Wang Yi recently paid an official visit to India. During his visit, the two sides are reported to have launched a new people to people bilateral mechanism between the two countries as a follow up to the decisions made during the Wuhan summit. The two sides are reported to have emphasized the importance of people to people contacts as an important step towards stronger state to state relations. Ten areas of cultural interactions are reported to have been identified which include cultural exchange, cooperation in film and television, cooperation in museum administration, cooperation in sports, exchanges between youths, cooperation on tourism, exchanges between states and cities, cooperation in traditional medicine, cooperation in yoga, and cooperation in education.

Print media in Pakistan reported on Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi day-long visit to Qatar in which he held meetings with Qatari leadership and briefed them on Pakistan's efforts to help in the negotiations process in Afghanistan. Moreover, the press also reported on China's reiteration of its support to Pakistan's efforts for peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. Mr. Qureshi was on a tour of regional countries which included China, Iran, Afghanistan and Russia. The tour aimed at apprising the leadership of these countries about the recent US-Taliban talks in Abu Dhabi which was facilitated by Pakistan.

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THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 31-12-2018

Age of policy insecurity

After exit of James Mattis, India must brace for less predictable moves by Trump administration

Written by Sumit Ganguly

On December 20, James Mattis, the US Secretary of Defence, had resigned stating that he had significant policy differences with President Donald Trump. He had, however, offered to stay on in the job until February 1, 2019, to help ensure a smooth transition. However, in what can only be construed as an act of petulance, within 72 hours, Trump chose to fire Mattis and replace him with Patrick Shanahan, the Deputy Secretary, a former Boeing executive, as the Acting Defence Secretary.

Mattis, as is well-known across South Asia, and especially in New Delhi, had for the most part sustained the policies of the Barack Obama administration toward India. Specifically, he had participated in the first US-India “two plus two dialogue” with Secretary of State Michael Pompeo. More to the point, in his tenure, the two countries had moved the security partnership forward, signing the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement. This accord was of importance and had been hanging fire for over a decade. New Delhi has also been pleased with the Trump administration’s decision to cut off assistance to Pakistan for its unwillingness to end its support for terror in Afghanistan. This decision had constituted a marked departure in American policy as previous administrations had only admonished Pakistan, with few, if any, material changes in its behaviour.

What are the possible implications of Mattis’ departure for US policy towards India and South Asia? There is little or no question that his resignation (and subsequent removal) from office will have an impact. Unlike his predecessor, Shanahan hails from the corporate world. He may have had extensive dealings with the department he now heads but he brings little or no foreign or security policy experience to the office. More, he has no particular grasp of regional affairs or any sensitivity toward key strategic issues in South Asia.

His lack of policy experience and his lack of knowledge of regional security issues is likely to prove consequential. Almost inevitably, the momentum that Mattis had so ably sustained over the past two years in building the strategic partnership with New Delhi is bound to lose steam. Among other matters, it is believed that Mattis had developed a rapport with his Indian counterpart, the Minister of Defence, Nirmala Sitharaman. It remains an open question if Shanahan can pick up where Mattis left off. That said, it is also unlikely that he will seek to substantially alter the course that the Trump administration had embarked upon after assuming office. As is evident from other policy areas, in this administration, the president remains the ultimate arbiter of policy choices.

That said, there are at least three compelling reasons to believe that there will be policy continuity. Mattis felt obliged to leave office (before being summarily dismissed) because in his own words his policy preferences were not aligned with those of the president. Shanahan, who according to press reports, is close to

Trump, is unlikely to take issue with the president’s stated policy goals. In fact, there is some evidence that Trump chose him for this position because he is unlikely to take issue with his “America First” policy orientation.

Additionally, it also needs to be borne in mind that as in New Delhi, there is a substantial permanent bureaucracy in Washington, DC. These men and women, who are able civil servants, provide a degree of institutional ballast to every administration. Trump’s policy vagaries notwithstanding, they will make every effort to ensure that the incoming Acting Secretary is kept abreast of the policies that had been formulated and implemented toward South Asia under his predecessor.

Finally, despite the American aid cut-off, the new regime in Pakistan under Prime Minister Imran Khan has evinced little inclination to substantially change its policy orientation on the future of Pakistan’s role in Afghanistan. For informed observers of the country, this should come as no surprise. The security establishment within the country is so deeply entrenched that even a flamboyant prime minister has limited room for policy manoeuvre. Since Trump has convinced himself of Pakistan’s perfidy in Afghanistan, the lack of any visible policy shift will only reinforce his instincts.

All these factors do underscore the likelihood of policy continuity. However, there is an important straw in the wind that New Delhi would be wise to pay careful heed to. This involves the future of American policy towards Afghanistan. Mattis, as the former head of the United States Central Command, had overseen operations in Afghanistan between 2010 and 2013. Earlier, as a colonel, he had actual combat experience in the country. Consequently, it is entirely reasonable to surmise that he would have attempted to dissuade Trump from pursuing a precipitate withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan — one of Trump’s campaign promises and one that he is inclined to keep.

With Mattis out of office, with a more pliant Acting Defence Secretary and faced with a range of recent domestic political setbacks, Trump may well decide that the moment has indeed arrived to cut America’s losses of blood and treasure in Afghanistan. Since paying scrupulous heed to policy advice on strategic issues from specialists within the administration is hardly Trump’s hallmark, an abrupt drawdown of American forces from the country cannot be dismissed out of hand. This would especially be the case if he sees his poll numbers sag further than the current 40 per cent or so.

Such an American departure from Afghanistan, needless to say, would have dramatic adverse consequences for the future of the troubled land. It would also redound significantly to Pakistan’s benefit and to India’s detriment. It hardly requires any great leap of imagination to see that the security establishment within Pakistan would gleefully step into the breach. Almost invariably, an expanded Pakistani footprint in the country would threaten India’s hard-won gains. Since the possibility of a significant American withdrawal of forces cannot be written off, policymakers in New Delhi should carefully weigh their options in the event this outcome were to materialise.

THE ASIAN AGE, NEW DELHI 26-12-2018

US' Afghan exit to leave India in a difficult spot

K C Singh

The surprise resignation by America's defence secretary James Mattis last week came alongside the news of US President Donald Trump's decision on significant US troop withdrawals from its last two major military engagements in Syria and Afghanistan. Although Mr Trump, on assuming office in January 2017, had sought American military disengagement abroad, his Cabinet members, like Mr Mattis, a highly decorated retired Marine general, had ensured continuity and in Afghanistan a slight surge without specifying an exit date. This improved the Barack Obama policy of linking withdrawal to deadlines, which encouraged the Taliban to wait out the US' exit rather than accepting reconciliation and dialogue. Mr Trump has now repeated former President Barack Obama's error.

Similarly, Syria remains without a final settlement although the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria has been largely eliminated. The US had backed the Syrian Kurds to clear out ISIS. Consequently, the Kurds have consolidated control over a large area in northeastern Syria. But the last thing that either Iraq, Iran or Turkey want is any quasi-independent Kurdish enclave as it will fire separatist tendencies in their considerable Kurdish populations. Additionally, the Sunni population and the remnants of rebel and jihadist groups, numbering an estimated 2.9 million, are aggregated in Idlib — the last stronghold of the forces ranged against the Bashar al-Assad regime in Damascus. The dominant group there is Hayat Tahir al-Sham (HTS), an Al Qaeda affiliate. To the north are the Turkish forces, which do not want the Syrian regime to attack Idlib and thus cause more human carnage, besides adding to Syria's three million refugees.

Russia, an ally of the Assad regime, has declared that the Syrian government had every right to "liquidate the terrorist threat on its territory". An American troop withdrawal at this stage on the pretext of the primary role of eliminating ISIS being accomplished ignores the endgame in Syria, which now seems left to Russia, Iran and Turkey. Israel is watching warily, as crucial Parliament elections have been announced for April, as it wants Iranian influence in any future Syrian political arrangement to be minimal, perceiving Hezbollah's threat from its Lebanese redoubt.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has managed to rebuild his damaged relations with the United States, shrewdly using the Jamal Khashoggi murder by a Saudi squad in Istanbul. President Trump and the US administration have been trying to exculpate Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, while the Turks have countered this by selectively leaking from an elusive tape of the actual murder. President Trump tweeted that President Erdogan informed him that "he will eradicate whatever is left of ISIS... and he is a man who can do it, plus Turkey is 'next door'. Our troops are coming home!". Syria is thus being outsourced to Turkey, which has its own geopolitical priorities. The Assad regime and Turkey would love to carve up the Kurdish enclave between them. Having used the Kurds to counter a local menace, the US would be abandoning them yet again, like after the

liberation of Kuwait in 1991 when the Kurds rose in revolt against Saddam Hussein.

Of much greater concern to India, of course, is Afghanistan, where the US is training the Afghan armed forces, conducting counter-insurgency and air operations. Zalmay Khalilzad, the US special representative on Afghanistan, is due to visit India to brief the leadership in New Delhi on his Taliban talks. But the unilateral US announcement poses the question of whether there is some understanding with Taliban or it is an anticipatory concession. It defies normal negotiating logic as a reward for the Taliban joining the reconciliation and dialogue process should have followed, not preceded, their assent. It is also unclear how US pressure on Pakistan, by denial of military assistance funds and complicating of a IMF bailout, ties with troop reduction, which if anything eases future Pakistani machinations in that country.

The outcome will depend on what troops are actually withdrawn. For instance, if the air assistance component is kept intact and only trainers leave, then perhaps the effect may be gradual. The other point will be the funding gap as the US withdraws support. On both these counts India could work with others, like Russia and Japan, to ensure that the Afghan defence forces, already facing large desertions, do not fall apart or stall due to the resource constraint.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has defiantly named known Pakistan and Taliban critics, Assadullah Khalid and Amrullah Saleh, as the ministers for defence and interior respectively. His spokesman Harron Chakansuri asserted that the US troop withdrawal will have little impact as the Afghan military has managed well despite Nato withdrawing 100,000 troops in 2014. How this bravado translates into reality remains to be seen.

Meanwhile, reports indicate that the Taliban penetration may be deeper in Afghanistan than visible as they have modified their approach. Instead of a frontal assault on government-controlled-urban areas, which Afghan forces with American help eventually regain control of, they are slowly assuming control over tax collection, reopening of schools, and providing stricter but fairer justice. As Ashley Jackson writes in Foreign Policy magazine, they have realised there is "no need to attack symbols of the state if you can instead capture their resources and redirect them to your aims".

It is reported that India has begun running its designated berths at Iran's Chabahar port. With Taliban control increasing and Iran having channels open to them, perhaps a modus vivendi can be worked out for meaningful operation of the port for accessing Afghanistan and Central Asia. But the Iranian conduct would be conditioned by their larger standoff with the US over their nuclear programme, their leadership of Shia forces in West Asia via Iraq and their use of surrogates in a contest with the Saudi-led Sunnis, including in the war in Yemen. India will find few reliable allies as it tries stabilising after the US troop withdrawal Afghanistan. An election-distracted BJP government in New Delhi, with its fringe forces baiting the Muslim minority on a daily basis, is poorly equipped to devise a coherent strategy for an Islamic world that has just got much more complex.

THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI 23-12-2018

Wang Yi's Visit: India-China people-to-people and cultural cooperation takes wings

Rudroneel Ghosh

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi's latest visit to India and the launch of the first high-level people-to-people and cultural exchange mechanism certainly mark a bright new chapter in relations between New Delhi and Beijing. Under the new mechanism, which was decided upon during the Wuhan summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping earlier this year, India and China agreed on 10 pillars of cooperation to enhance cultural and people-to-people exchanges. These are cultural exchange, cooperation in films and television, cooperation in museum administration, cooperation in sports, exchanges between youths, cooperation on tourism, exchanges between states and cities, cooperation in traditional medicine, cooperation in yoga and cooperation in education.

All of these are very good ideas. As I have mentioned in my previous articles, enhancing people-to-people interactions is vitally important to improving India-China relations. This is because the two countries have very different political systems. This in turn has moulded processes and systems in different ways. Therefore, India cannot interact with China the way it does with other democracies. The presumptions and effects of policies and actions won't apply in China's case. Thus, a different paradigm is needed to deal with China. And this can only be formulated through better understanding and people-to-people interactions between the two sides.

The Chinese Communist party is not a monolith although it may appear so to outsiders. There are huge internal consultations that take place within the party. And when a policy or doctrine is arrived at, it remains solid for a significant period of time. To change or modify this will take another round of huge internal deliberations. This is the Chinese system that puts a premium on order and stability.

Given this context, for positive India-China relations in future, we need to enhance people-to-people interactions and understanding today. As more Chinese people, especially Chinese youth, understand Indian people's aspirations, this will eventually start reflecting in Chinese policies towards India.

Similarly, as more Indians learn about Chinese cuisine, language and culture, they will realise that there are many similarities between the two societies that are uniquely Asian. And by focussing on these commonalities, the two countries can eventually create enough political and social capital to resolve all outstanding issues. In this context foreign minister Wang has talked about setting up more Confucius Centres in India. These centres have run into some controversies in recent years in other countries like the US. But the logic of advancing Chinese studies remains strong, and these should be encouraged by the Indian government in acceptable shape and form.

At the end of the day, India and China are neighbours. We cannot conflict with each other. This will be detrimental to both nations. It makes far more sense to evolve a *modus vivendi* and work together for the benefit of this part of the world. And for that we need to understand each other, learn about each other's

motivations and reveal to one another what lies deep in our hearts.

THE HINDU, DELHI 18-12-2018

Restoring the balance

Harsh V. Pant

India must remain invested in strengthening democratic institutions in the Maldives

Maldivian President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's three-day visit to India this week seems to have brought a tumultuous phase in India-Maldives ties to a close. This is Mr. Solih's first overseas visit after becoming the President of the Indian Ocean nation of 400,000 people. He defeated Abdulla Yameen in a surprise victory in the Maldivian presidential elections in September and, since then, has recalibrated his country's ties with India. While Mr. Yameen had drawn the Maldives closer to China and brutally crushed the Opposition, Mr. Solih's victory has been a shot in the arm for those who favour strengthening democratic forces in the island nation.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had attended the swearing-in ceremony of Mr. Solih as the President of Maldives in November, his first visit to the nation as Prime Minister and the first by an Indian head of state since 2011. Even as Mr. Modi enthusiastically reached out to all of India's neighbours after his election in 2014, he remained reluctant to engage Mr. Yameen. His planned visit to the Maldives, in March 2015, was cancelled as the political environment deteriorated under Mr. Yameen. In a strong endorsement of Mr. Solih's victory, Mr. Modi underscored that the recent elections in the Maldives represented the collective aspirations of the people for democracy, the rule of law and a prosperous future. He made it clear that India desired "to see a stable, democratic, prosperous and peaceful Republic of Maldives".

Points of engagement

Mr. Solih's India visit has seen the two sides emphasise their traditionally close bond. He called India the island nation's "closest friend" and "reaffirmed his government's 'India-First' Policy", committing to working together closely with India. India, for its part, announced a financial assistance package of \$1.4 billion for the Maldives in the form of budgetary support, currency swap agreements and concessional lines of credit. Both have agreed to ensure that they would keep other's security interests in mind as they consolidate cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). They have agreed to strengthen maritime security cooperation in the IOR through coordinated patrol and aerial surveillance. In an attempt to boost trade ties, Mr. Modi "welcomed the expanding opportunities for Indian companies to invest in the Maldives". Areas such as fisheries development, tourism, transportation, connectivity, health, education, information technology, new and renewable energy and communications were earmarked for enhancing bilateral cooperation.

The China factor

It is important from New Delhi's perspective that Mr. Solih succeeds in the Maldives. Under Mr. Yameen, the Maldives had veered too close to China for India's comfort, welcoming Chinese money for major infrastructure projects and signing a

controversial free trade agreement (FTA). India's entreaties for political moderation and closer security ties were summarily ignored. China's role in the Maldivian economy is under the scanner today amid growing concerns about the money the Maldives owes to China for infrastructure projects undertaken by Chinese construction companies. These infrastructure projects include the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, which connects Malé's eastern edge to the western corner of the island of Hulhulé. It is now estimated that China's loans to the Maldives total at least \$1.3 billion, or a quarter of the island nation's gross domestic product. Faced with this crisis, the new Maldivian government is looking to India for more budgetary support to help meet its development goals and is also planning to revise the FTA with China.

The Modi government is also trying to ensure help reaches Male in time so that New Delhi regains some of its lost space in the Maldives' foreign policy and politics. Malé has also made it clear that while the neighbourhood will clearly be a priority for the Solih government, China will continue to play an important role as an economic partner. So China is not going to disappear from the Maldivian foreign policy matrix. Nor should India expect it to. But the logic of geography dictates that India's role will be critical in determining the trajectory of political developments in the Maldives.

India's patient handling of the Maldives crisis over the last few years has positioned it well. By coordinating its response with other like-minded regional and extra-regional players, India increased the costs for Mr. Yameen and also underscored that there are options available to the Maldives should it decide to move away from China. After a meeting of the 'Quad' countries in Singapore in November, the U.S., for example, released a statement expressing support for the new Maldivian government.

The domestic dynamic

Going forward, the Maldives would need the support of India as its challenges remain acute. The institutional fabric of the country has been battered under Mr. Yameen's assault even as the threat of Islamist extremism has grown in potency. Governance will continue to be challenging as the forces which came together to bring down Mr. Yameen may not be cohesive enough in running the nation and strengthening its democratic foundations.

India should not be deterred by temporary setbacks. Instead of perpetually viewing the dynamics from a China-centric perspective, it must keep its eyes firmly on the long term. The more invested New Delhi is in strengthening democratic institutions in its neighbourhood, the better returns it will get in its foreign policy.

THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI 29-12-2018

Doklam fresh on mind, India promises Rs 4,500 crore to Bhutan

TNN

NEW DELHI: PM Narendra Modi on Friday announced that India would contribute Rs 4,500 crore to Bhutan's 12th five-year economic plan after a meeting with visiting Bhutanese PM Lotay Tshering, a significant outreach with an important neighbour who occupies a strategic geography between India and China.

A transitional Trade Support Facility of Rs 400 crore over a period of five years was also announced to strengthen bilateral trade and economic linkages. Modi assured Tshering, who took over as PM last month, that India would continue to play the role of a reliable friend and partner for Bhutan. The meet was aimed to cement ties with the new government and though India's relations with China have improved, shadow of the military standoff at Doklam in 2017 only underlined the importance of stable relations with Bhutan.

The new five-year plan of Bhutan began this year and will end in 2022. Underscoring the importance of hydropower projects in India's relations with Bhutan, Modi said work on the Mangdechhu project would soon be completed. Mangdechhu is a 720 mw hydroelectric project on the Mangdechhu river in central Bhutan. The river projects will serve to increase the already close economic linkages with the Himalayan nation.

"Today, we discussed this crucial sector and reviewed cooperation on all the major projects. Work on the Mangdechhu project will be completed soon. We have agreed on the tariff for this project. Work on other projects has been happening at a very satisfactory pace," Modi said.

Tshering, said to be contemplating plans to diversify Bhutan's economy, acknowledged that hydropower had been the main source of revenue for Bhutan. "We are very happy that the government of India is fully committed to support whatever negotiations that are going on for determining tariff for power from Mangdechhu project as well as to make Sankosh (hydropower) project happen as soon as possible," Tshering said. The two leaders reiterated their commitment to jointly develop 10,000 mw of hydropower generating capacity in Bhutan.

Modi thanked Tshering for deciding to introduce in Bhutan the Indian RuPay card which is a debit and credit card payment network. Tshering said Modi had assured him of helping Bhutanese traders hit by implementation of GST in India.

"We are very very happy that PM Modiji has personally committed to be with us, to support us... Government of India has extended full support for our XII Five-Year Plan and also to our traders who are being affected by the GST that has come into action in India," the Bhutan PM said.

Tshering arrived here on Thursday on his first foreign visit after taking charge as PM.

THE STATESMAN, NEW DELHI 27-12-2018

India lodges protest with Pakistan over cross terrorist infiltration at LoC

MEA summoned a senior Pakistan High Commission official to the foreign office and conveyed to him New Delhi's grave concern at Pakistan's continued support to cross border terrorist infiltration into India, including supporting cover fire provided by Pakistan forces

Statesman News Service

India on Thursday lodged a strong protest with Pakistan over the incidents of cross terrorist infiltration at the Line of Control (LoC) and targeting of Indian civilians and security forces on 21 and 26 December, leading to loss of lives on the Indian side.

The External Affairs Ministry summoned a senior Pakistan High Commission official to the foreign office and conveyed to him

New Delhi's grave concern at Pakistan's continued support to cross border terrorist infiltration into India, including supporting cover fire provided by Pakistan forces.

The Pakistani official was told that despite repeated calls for restraint and adherence to the ceasefire understanding of 2003 for maintaining peace and tranquillity, Pakistan forces have this year carried out over 1962 incidents of unprovoked ceasefire violations in which 50 Indians have lost their lives.

"Pakistan was once again asked to fulfill its bilateral commitment to not allow any territory under its control to be used for terrorism against India in any manner," the MEA said in a statement.

India has ruled out the possibility of any diplomatic initiative for the resumption of talks with Pakistan until the Lok Sabha elections, likely to be held in April-May next year.

According to top sources, the laying of the foundation-stone of the Kartarpur Saheb Corridor by Pakistan did not mean the two countries were close to resuming their stalled dialogue. There was no change in India's stand that terror and talks could not go together. "The opening of the Kartarpur Saheb Corridor was a cultural and religious issue and not a diplomatic engagement between the two countries," they added.

Sources observed that even on the Kartarpur Saheb initiative, Pakistan had shown insincerity with its Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi describing it as a 'googly' bowled by Prime Minister Imran Khan, a former Pakistan Cricket captain.

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THE HINDU, DELHI 26-12-2018

Being a good neighbour

Happymon Jacob

India must shed its zero-sum style foreign policy-making, and work towards South Asian integration

If South Asia is one of the world's least integrated regions, India is one of the world's least regionally-integrated major powers. While there indeed are structural impediments (posed by both India and its neighbours) in fostering regional integration, the most significant handicap is New Delhi's ideational disinclination towards its neighbourhood. Successive regimes have considered the neighbourhood as an irritant and challenge, not an opportunity. Seldom have India's policies displayed a sense of belonging to the region or a desire to work with the neighbourhood for greater integration and cooperation. Today, we have become even more transactional, impatient and small-minded towards our neighbourhood which has, as a result,

restricted our space for manoeuvre in the regional geopolitical scheme of things.

At a critical juncture

Whichever way one looks at it, India's neighbourhood policy is at a critical juncture: while its past policies have ensured a steady decline in its influence and goodwill in the region, the persistent absence of a coherent and well-planned regional policy will most definitely ensure that it eventually slips out of India's sphere of influence. India's foreign policy planners therefore need to reimagine the country's neighbourhood policy before it is too late.

The Narendra Modi government's neighbourhood policy began exceptionally well with Mr. Modi reaching out to the regional capitals and making grand foreign policy commitments. But almost immediately, it seemed to lose a sense of diplomatic balance, for instance, when it tried to interfere with the Constitution-making process in Nepal and was accused of trying to influence electoral outcomes in Sri Lanka. While India's refugee policy went against its own traditional practices, it was found severely wanting on the Rohingya question, and seemed clueless on how to deal with the political crisis in the Maldives. Despite their characteristic bravado and grandstanding, the BJP government's foreign policy mandarins looked out of their depth. While it is true that 2018 seems to have brought some good news from the regional capitals, it has less to do with our diplomatic finesse than the natural course of events there. The arrival of an India-friendly Ibrahim Mohamed Solih regime in Male has brought much cheer, and the return of Ranil Wickremesinghe as Sri Lankan Prime Minister is to India's advantage too. Nepal has reached out to India to put an end to the acrimony that persisted through 2015 to 2017. Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh are also positively disposed towards India, though the relationship with Pakistan continues to be testy and directionless. What this then means is that New Delhi has a real opportunity today to recalibrate its neighbourhood relations.

Lessons from the past

First, let's briefly examine what should not be done in dealing with a sensitive neighbourhood. For one, India must shed its aggression and deal with tricky situations with far more diplomatic subtlety and finesse. The manner in which it weighed down on Nepal in 2015 during the Constitution-making process is an example of how not to influence outcomes. The ability of diplomacy lies in subtly persuading the smaller neighbour to accept an argument rather than forcing it to, which is bound to backfire.

Second, it must be kept in mind that meddling in the domestic politics of neighbour countries is a recipe for disaster, even when invited to do so by one political faction or another. Preferring one faction or regime over another is unwise in the longer term. Take the example of incumbent Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena. There was a great deal of cheer in New Delhi when he took office in January 2015 (with some saying India helped him cobble together a winnable coalition) after defeating Mahinda Rajapaksa, considered less well disposed toward India. However, Mr. Sirisena's political transformation was quick, as were India's fortunes in Colombo, at least temporarily.

Third, New Delhi must not fail to follow up on its promises to its neighbours. It has a terrible track record in this regard.

Fourth, there is no point in competing with China where China is at an advantage vis-à-vis India. This is especially true of regional infrastructure projects. India simply does not have the political, material or financial wherewithal to outdo China in building infrastructure. Hence India must invest where China falls short, especially at the level of institution-building and the use of soft power. However, even in those areas China seems to be forging ahead. India must therefore invest a great deal more in soft power promotion (and not the Hindutva kind of outreach). To begin with, India could expand the scope and work of the South Asian University (SAU), including by providing a proper campus (instead of allowing it to function out of a hotel building) and ensuring that its students get research visas to India without much hassle. If properly utilised, the SAU can become a point for regional integration.

Looking for convergence

Finally, while reimagining its neighbourhood policy, New Delhi must also look for convergence of interests with China in the Southern Asian region spanning from Afghanistan to Nepal to Sri Lanka. There are several possible areas of convergence, including counter terrorism, regional trade and infrastructure development. China and India's engagement of the South Asian region needn't be based on zero-sum calculations. For example, any non-military infrastructure constructed by China in the region can also be beneficial to India while it trades with those countries. A road or a rail line built by China in Bangladesh or Nepal can be used by India in trading with those countries.

Going forward, New Delhi must invest in three major policy areas. There needs to be better regional trading arrangements. The reason why South Asia is the least integrated region in the world is because the economic linkages are shockingly weak among the countries of the region. The lead to correct this must be taken by India even if this means offering better terms of trade for the smaller neighbours. While it is true that long 'sensitive lists' maintained by South Asian countries are a major impediment in the implementation of SAFTA, or the South Asian Free Trade Area, India could do a lot more to persuade them to reduce the items on such lists. Second, several of India's border States have the capacity to engage in trading arrangements with neighbouring countries. This should be made easier by the government by way of constructing border infrastructure and easing restrictions on such border trade.

Resurrect SAARC

Second, India prefers bilateral engagements in the region rather than deal with neighbours on multilateral forums. However, there is only so much that can be gained from bilateral arrangements, and there should be more attempts at forging multilateral arrangements, including by resurrecting the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Third, India must have a coherent and long-term vision for the neighbourhood devoid of empty rhetoric and spectacular visits without follow up. We must ask ourselves, as the biggest country in the South Asian neighbourhood, what kind of a region do we want to be situated in, and work towards enabling that.

THE HINDU, DELHI 25-12-2018

Chabahar tidings: on Indian taking over port operations in Iran

As India takes over operations in the Iranian port, the possibilities and challenges are huge

The opening of the first office of Indian Ports Global Limited at Iran's Chabahar and the takeover of operations of the Shahid Beheshti port is a milestone in India's regional connectivity and trade game plan. Chabahar port opens up a permanent alternative route for trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia, given the hurdles in the direct route through Pakistan. It facilitates India's role in Afghanistan's development through infrastructure and education projects. And it gives India's bilateral ties with Iran, a major oil supplier and potential trade market for India, a big fillip. India has helped develop the Shahid Beheshti port with these outcomes in mind, and has been given the contract to manage it for 18 months. It will be important to operationalise the port quickly and smoothen the route to Afghanistan. The decision by India, Afghanistan and Iran to hold an international event in February 2019 to promote Chabahar and to study ways to make the route more attractive and decrease logistic costs is timely. About 500 companies have registered with the Free Trade Zone authority there. While keeping timelines and delivery of New Delhi's commitments will be key to the port becoming a regional hub for transit trade, steel and petrochemicals, it will be necessary to encourage Afghan companies to use the route more, in line with President Ashraf Ghani's desire to have a commercial fleet under the Afghan flag setting sail from Chabahar.

Visions of Chabahar's immense potential as a game-changer for prosperity and stability in the region must, however, necessarily be tempered by the reality of geopolitical challenges. The Chabahar port has received a waiver from the U.S. sanctions on Iran for the moment, but these concessions could be withdrawn any time, given the constant upheaval in the administration. The possibility of the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, after the pullout from Syria, will add to security concerns for Afghanistan and impact on the Chabahar route as well. Meanwhile, the reconciliation process with the Afghan Taliban is likely to see the regional powers, the U.S. and Russia engaging Pakistan more. This could give Islamabad space to play spoiler in Chabahar, which is seen as a rival warm water port to Pakistan's Gwadar. That the Afghanistan government is hedging its bets on trade via Chabahar too is clear: in recent months, special cargo corridors have been opened with China, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Europe, Russia, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, with more trade diverted through them than with traditional partners Pakistan and India. With Chabahar, India has done well to keep a place in the intricate connectivity network of the region. Given all the competing interests that criss-cross over Chabahar, it will require sustained and nuanced diplomacy to stay ahead in this game.

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 16-12-2018

China Pledges to Help Afghanistan and Pakistan Bridge Divisions

KABUL - China pledged to help Afghanistan and Pakistan overcome longstanding suspicions, as officials from the three nations met on Saturday in the latest round of diplomacy aimed at opening talks with the Taliban to end the Afghan war.

China, a close ally of Pakistan, has lately deepened its economic and political ties with Kabul and is using its influence to try to bring the two uneasy South Asian neighbors closer, at a time when the United States has sought Pakistan's help with faltering Afghan peace talks.

The Chinese government's top diplomat, State Councillor Wang Yi, met the foreign ministers of Afghanistan and Pakistan in Kabul to put into effect a memorandum of understanding on security cooperation and support for Afghanistan's efforts to open talks with the Taliban.

"China approves of this, and is willing to provide support and help for Pakistan and Afghanistan to improve their ties," Wang told reporters after the meeting.

The meeting, which followed initial talks between the three countries a year ago, is the latest sign of China's increasing engagement in the region, where it has invested massively in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a central part of its global Belt and Road initiative.

Direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban collapsed in 2015, and the Taliban, fighting to drive out international forces and re-establish their version of strict Islamic law, have repeatedly rejected the direct peace talks offered by the Western-backed Afghan government.

However, they have opened contacts with the United States to prepare for possible talks to end a war that has killed and maimed tens of thousands in the 17 years since a U.S.-backed campaign overthrew the Taliban in 2001.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani recently formed a 12-strong team to negotiate with the Taliban, but has said any deal could take at least five years to implement.

"We support Afghanistan and Pakistan efforts for peace and we call on the Taliban to join the peace process," said Wang, adding that both countries have agreed to resolve disputes through "friendly consultations."

Political tensions, coupled with allegations that security agencies in both countries support militant groups that bring deadly attacks against one another continue to strain relations between Kabul and Islamabad.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi said Islamabad was committed to stability and peace in Afghanistan.

"By blaming, no one moves ahead, we have to stop pointing fingers at each other that why I am here to build mutual political trusts and facilitate the peace process of Afghanistan," he said.

Earlier this month U.S. President Donald Trump requested Pakistan's support for the U.S. effort to advance the Afghan peace process.

The officials also signed agreements to enable the expansion of CPEC to Afghanistan through road and rail links. **(Reuters)**

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 25-12-2018

Qureshi Had 'Productive Meetings' with Afghan Leaders

KABUL - Pakistan's Foreign Minister Qureshi says the Afghan peace process is making positive headway.

Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and his delegation met with President Ashraf Ghani in Kabul on Monday, Presidential Palace said in a statement.

The two sides discussed Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, bilateral issues, Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process and next steps after intra-Afghan talks, the statement said.

In this meeting, the importance of regional and world countries' cooperation was highlighted in the peace process of Afghanistan, the statement said.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Qureshi said he had productive meetings with Afghan leaders.

"I've had productive meetings with the Afghan leadership this morning. The peace process is making positive headway. Next stop is Iran. Regional connectivity and a collective outlook is essential for progress," Qureshi tweeted.

Qureshi arrived in Kabul on Monday morning.

Pakistani media reported that Qureshi left Pakistan for a four-nation tour as part of Islamabad's policy of outreach in the neighborhood.

The Pakistani delegation consists of the foreign secretary and senior officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who will visit Afghanistan, Iran, China and Russia from December 24-26, 2018, a statement issued by the Foreign Office of Pakistan said on Sunday. **(Tolo news)**

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 27-12-2018

Iranian National Security Council Secretary in Kabul for Talks

KABUL - Iranian Leader's envoy Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani has arrived in the Afghan capital Kabul this morning for a one-day state visit, according to a media report.

Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani, accompanied by a number of high-ranking security, military and political officials, is in Kabul at the invitation of National Security Adviser of Afghanistan Hamdullah Mohib.

His one-day visit aims at holding talks with his counterpart, as well as Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and some other senior political and security officials of the neighboring country.

Reviewing ways to expand bilateral ties in political, economic and security sectors, combating terrorism and organized crime, as well as joint border and regional cooperation are among the key objectives of the Leader's envoy to Afghanistan. **(Pajhwok)**

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 26-12-2018

Iran, Afghanistan, India Sign MoU for Chabahar Port Agreement

Tehran - At the first meeting of the Chabahar executive committee, the Memorandum of Understanding on the operation

of Chabahar port agreement was signed by the representatives of Iran, India and Afghanistan.

The Deputy Director of Port and Economic Affairs of the Iran's Organization of Ports and Marine announced that the Memorandum of Operating Procedures for the Chabahar Agreement has been signed by the representatives of Iran, India and Afghanistan.

"Consideration of customs and land transport issues was one of the important issues at the meeting, which stipulated that the relevant working group would carry out the necessary executive studies," the deputy head of Ports and Maritime Organization of Iran for port affairs, Mohammad Ali Hasanzadeh said, Trend reports via IRNA.

"The second meeting of the committee will be hosted by India in the first half of 2019," he said.

Hasanzadeh went on to say that "The Chabahar Day Meeting", in order to develop trade and transit of Chabahar port with the participation of Iran, India and Afghanistan along with Central Asian countries, will be held on 26th February 2019 in Chabahar port.

"The Tripartite Transit Agreement between Iran, India and Afghanistan aims at expediting, facilitating and promoting the transit of Chabahar, connecting India and Afghanistan to the countries of Central Asia through the Chabahar port, developing exports of the three countries, and establishing an international corridor between the countries, was signed by the presidents of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Afghanistan and the Prime Minister of India in June of 2016," he said.

"According to the agreement between the three countries, the IPGL Company, as Chabahar Port Operator, is responsible for the discharge, supply and marketing activities," the official said. Economic and political representatives of India, Afghanistan and Iran, in addition to holding meetings to review the obstacles and important solutions for the implementation of the Chabahar Port agreement, in addition to visiting different parts of the Shahid Beheshti port, also visited the facilities of the Chabahar port, and learned about the port's investment, commercial and transit opportunities. (Trend)

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 31-12-2018

Pak-Qatar coordination to help stabilise Afghanistan: Qureshi

APP

ISLAMABAD: Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi has emphasised that close and regular coordination between Pakistan and Qatar would be helpful in the ongoing efforts to achieve a broad regional understanding for long-term stability in Afghanistan and the region.

During his daylong visit to Doha on Sunday, the foreign minister briefed the Qatari leadership on recent developments concerning peace in Afghanistan and underlined the foresight of the Qatari emir in providing an early foundation for peace and reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan.

Mr Qureshi called on Deputy Emir of Qatar Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad Al-Thani and Prime Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa Al-Thani. He also held a meeting with his Qatari

counterpart and Deputy Prime Minister, Sheikh Mohammad bin Abdul Rahman Al-Thani.

The Qatari deputy emir reiterated his country's desire for working to achieve peace and stability in the region.

The two sides stressed the importance of synergy to overcome common hurdles and devise a consensus-based approach to achieve wider regional development and progress, the Foreign Office said in a statement.

Qatari firms offered investment in special economic zones under CPEC and joint ventures

They expressed satisfaction over the improvement in relations between Pakistan and Qatar, reflected in exchange of recent high-level visits starting with the visit of the Qatari foreign minister to Islamabad in October. This was followed by visits to Doha of Pakistan's minister of state for interior the same month and of the finance minister and the army chief this month.

Foreign Minister Qureshi highlighted Prime Minister Imran Khan's desire to strengthen relations with important regional countries and neighbours, including Qatar.

As part of high-level engagements, the prime minister is now due to visit Doha on mutually agreed dates next month.

The foreign minister assured the Qatari leadership of Pakistan's commitment to further solidifying political, economic and defence relations. He said the opening of Qatar visa centres in Pakistan would fast-track the process of recruitment of 100,000 Pakistani workers by Qatar.

He offered the services of professional Pakistani workforce for 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar.

Qatar is already home to 140,000 Pakistani workers, who provide a strong bond in bilateral brotherly relations.

Both sides agreed to further speed up progress in economic, trade and investment sectors. It was noted that an increase in Pakistan's exports to Qatar by 70.53 per cent, mainly due to exports of food items during the last financial year, was a highly encouraging achievement. The export trend now needed to be replicated in export of non-perishable items as well. Pharmaceuticals, construction, shipping and maritime sectors held the best potential in this regard.

Pakistan offered considerable investment opportunities for Qatari companies in special economic zones under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and for joint ventures. It was agreed that potential avenues would be explored during upcoming JMC and Bilateral Political Consultations in the first quarter of 2019 in Doha.

Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad Al-Thani thanked Foreign Minister Qureshi for his visit to Qatar and conveyed his best wishes for continued peace, progress and prosperity of Pakistan. He reiterated the desire of Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani to strengthen relations with Pakistan in all areas, particularly to achieve regional peace and stability as well as to promote bilateral economic and cultural cooperation.

He reiterated that Qatar's commitment of brotherhood with Pakistan was beyond doubt and the relationship could only move from strength to strength. Qatar hoped that the visit of Prime Minister Imran Khan would add a fresh chapter to the bilateral ties, he added.

Later addressing the Pakistani community at the Pakistan Embassy, Foreign Minister Qureshi assured them that they would

get good news soon as the country had been put in the right direction. He said the government had formally launched an economic diplomacy and his visit was part of that initiative, according to the PTI's official Twitter handle.

The foreign minister resolved that the government would steer the country out of the economic crisis through prudent strategies. He said Pakistan enjoyed cordial ties with the Gulf states, including Qatar which was also home to a huge number of Pakistani expatriates. He said the government would give an opportunity to only those ambassadors who give better output, take care of the Pakistani community and bring investment to the country.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 26-12-2018 **China backs Pakistan's efforts for Afghan peace**

Baqir Sajjad Syed

ISLAMABAD: China on Tuesday expressed its support for latest developments in efforts for revival of Afghan peace and reconciliation process.

Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi is currently on a regional tour of four countries — Afghanistan, Iran, China and Russia — to apprise leaders of these countries about the meeting between the United States and the Taliban in Abu Dhabi last week, which was facilitated by Pakistan.

He met Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at Beijing in the third leg of his visit.

“FM Shah Mehmood Qureshi, on his tour to regional countries, has held discussions with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi. Bilateral and regional issues, especially peace in Afghanistan, were discussed,” FO spokesman Dr Mohammad Faisal said.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said that Mr Qureshi, who made “a special trip” here, in his meeting with Mr Wang discussed “the latest developments surrounding the situation in Afghanistan” and the two sides reached “broad consensus”.

Qureshi, Wang reach ‘broad consensus’ at their meeting in Beijing

She said that “miscellaneous efforts” made by different parties were “welcomed” and the two sides pledged to stay “in close communication and strategic coordination”.

China, Pakistan and Afghanistan have trilateral framework for enhancing their cooperation on peace and reconciliation, security, connectivity and in other areas.

The second meeting of the trilateral process was held in Kabul on Dec 15 in which the three sides signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for intensifying their counterterrorism cooperation.

Ms Hua further said that Mr Qureshi and Mr Wang in their meeting agreed to deepen China-Pakistan all-weather strategic cooperative partnership and continuously elevate all-round cooperation.

Mr Qureshi will meet his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov in Moscow on Wednesday.

The US decision to pull nearly half of its troops from restive Afghanistan was high on the agenda at the meeting between the Pakistani and Chinese foreign ministers, add agencies.

“The two sides agreed that a military means cannot solve the Afghan issue, and that promoting a political solution focused on reconciliation is the only realistic and feasible way,” the Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman said.

President Donald Trump's decision to pull around half of the 14,000 US troops in Afghanistan has stunned and dismayed diplomats and officials in Kabul, and comes during a renewed push for talks with the Taliban to end the 17-year war.

China has not announced an official stance on the US troop pullout, but Pakistan on Saturday welcomed the decision to slash US troop numbers calling it “a step towards peace” in war-torn Afghanistan.

In recent months, China has played a more active role in brokering peace in the region as stability in Afghanistan is critical to its Belt and Road policy of expanding trade links across Asia.

Beijing has hosted Taliban leaders in an effort to bring the warring sides in Afghanistan to the negotiating table.

It has been long worried about the effect of instability in Afghanistan on China's violence-prone far western region of Xinjiang, home to the mostly Muslim Uighur people and where China says it faces a threat from militants.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 17-12-2018

Pakistan asks OIC to take up Kashmir issue

Amir Wasim

ISLAMABAD: Urging the world community to “intervene” and stop ongoing bloodshed in India-held Kashmir, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi has asked the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to immediately convene an inter-ministerial meeting of its Contact Group on Kashmir, saying Pakistan is ready to host the event.

Speaking at a press conference on Sunday, Mr Qureshi said he had contacted the OIC secretary general to apprise him about the latest situation in occupied Kashmir and Pakistan's desire for convening of the meeting of the member states in Islamabad.

Mr Qureshi said he had told the OIC secretary general that the proposed meeting could also be held in Jeddah, if the participants had any difficulty in travelling to Islamabad. According to the minister, the OIC secretary general responded positively and asked him to submit a formal request.

Imran condemns killing of Kashmiri people, Qureshi seeks international community's intervention

Condemning the killing of 14 Kashmiris by Indian forces in Pulwama on Saturday, he said, “It appears Indian forces are on killing spree. The forces are not resorting to aerial firing to quell protests and disperse crowds. The yesterday's events show that their aim is to kill.”

Prime Minister Imran Khan through his official account on Twitter also condemned the killings of innocent civilians at the hands of Indian forces in the Pulwama area.

“(I) strongly condemn killing of innocent Kashmiri civilians in Pulwama IoK by Indian security forces. Only dialogue and not violence and killings will resolve this conflict. We will raise issue of India's human rights violations in IoK and demand the

UNSC fulfill its J&K plebiscite commitment,” Mr Khan tweeted. “Kashmiris must be allowed to decide their future,” he said.

Mr Qureshi said he was also sending letters to the secretaries general of the United Nations and the UN Human Rights Commission drawing their attention to recent surge in the acts of barbarism and brutalities by Indian forces against innocent and unarmed Kashmiri people. He called upon the international community and human rights organisations to take notice of the ongoing killing spree by the occupation forces in held Kashmir.

Hoping the world would not remain silent to such incidents in held Kashmir, he urged the human rights watchdogs to “at least distinguish between an issue and the ruthless killing spree.”

“I am not talking about the [Kashmir] issue; I am talking about humanity. Even if you have some difficulty raising your voice about the Kashmir issue, there shouldn’t be any hesitance raising your voice against the brutality towards humans,” Mr Qureshi said, while addressing the international community.

He also said they wanted to host an international conference on Kashmir in London on Feb 5. He urged all political parties of the country and the Kashmiri community living in London to participate in the conference in a large number to highlight the Kashmir cause.

In reply to a question, Mr Qureshi, who is also the vice-chairman of the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf, said all the political parties of the country had unanimity of views on the Kashmir issue and, therefore, they should not wait for any formal invitation. However, he said, he would contact Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz and Senator Sherry Rehman of the Pakistan Peoples Party and invite them to the Foreign Office to give their suggestions. He said if the parties wanted to organise the conference from the platform of the parliament, then the Foreign Office was ready to provide all assistance in this regard.

The foreign minister said all political parties should show solidarity for the just and human cause and gather under the national and Kashmiri flags, instead of their party flags.

He said Pakistan would also attend a public hearing being arranged by the European Parliament on Feb 19 on the Kashmir issue.

Besides, he said, he planned to talk to National Assembly Speaker Asad Qaiser so that a unanimous resolution could be passed in the parliament to condemn the Indian forces’ atrocities in occupied Kashmir.

Meanwhile, the Foreign Office issued a separate statement, saying that “Pakistan strongly condemns the horrific bloodbath in Indian occupied Jammu and Kashmir by the Indian occupation

force that has resulted in the martyrdom of 14 innocent Kashmiris and injuries to more than 200 protesters.”

“The mindless killing spree carried out by the Indian occupation forces on Saturday is yet another example of the Indian atrocities against the innocent Kashmiris,” it said, adding that “India continues to kill and maim, under the garb of combating terror”.

It said in held Kashmir, every man, woman or a child who protested against India’s illegal occupation and brutalities against innocent and hapless Kashmiris was declared a “terrorist”.

It said India continued to ignore legitimate demands for an international investigation into gross and systematic human rights violations, including use of pellet guns, excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests and detentions, as well as continued sexual violence as part of overall impunity enjoyed by the Indian security forces.

It further said to try to deflect international attention from occupied Kashmir, “India continues to launch a volley of attacks along the Line of Control, killing and maiming innocent civilians, living along the border.”

Asking Indian to allow investigations by an independent fact finding Commission of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights, the Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission and the OIC into ongoing gross human rights violations in occupied Kashmir, the FO said India would have to fulfil its obligations under the United National Security Council resolutions on Jammu and Kashmir.

APP adds: The foreign minister lamented the ongoing incidents of state aggression and barbarism were unprecedented and recounted casualties of students, including Aaqib Bhat, and unarmed Kashmiri people like Gulzar Shaikh.

Even 18-month toddler Hiba Nisar was not spared, who lost her eyesight due to pellet guns shots, he added, condemning the act as a grave human rights violation.

Mr Qureshi said the Pakistani missions abroad had been directed to highlight the issue and draw attention of host governments, asking them to play their role to end inhuman atrocities in occupied Kashmir. He said Indian forces had killed 50 innocent Kashmiris during the current year so far.

To a question, the foreign minister said even people in India felt their government must revisit its hawkish policy on Kashmir. Owing to political interests, he added, the Modi government was reluctant to engage with Pakistan.

He said held Kashmir was the most militarised territory in the world where one soldier had been deployed per 17 people. India had been using all tactics to achieve its objectives in held Kashmir, including labelling the freedom movement as terrorism, he added.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 29-12-2018

PM appoints advisory council to seek input on foreign policy

Iftikhar A. Khan

ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Imran Khan has appointed a 19-member advisory council on foreign affairs to obtain impartial input on the foreign policy.

The council, headed by Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, comprises former ambassadors and foreign secretaries.

The members of the council include former ambassadors Salman Basheer, Ashraf Jehangir Qazi and Muhammad Sadiq, Dr Riffat Hussain, Dr Huma Baqai, Dr Hasan Askari Rizvi, Dr Adil Najam, Dr Rabia Akhter and Qasim Niaz.

The minister for law and justice, minister for finance and economic affairs, adviser on commerce, textile, industry and production and investment or their representatives, foreign secretary, director general of the Institute of Strategic Studies, director general of the Foreign Services Academy and additional secretary of foreign affairs will also be ex-officio members of the council.

According to a notification issued here on Friday, all members of the council will serve in honorary capacity. The minister for foreign affairs may appoint ad hoc additional council members with expertise and specialisation in different areas, if deemed necessary.

Headed by Qureshi, panel comprises ex-ambassadors and foreign secretaries

The council will be assisted in its work by a secretariat comprising designated officials of the foreign affairs ministry.

Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi said in a statement that the advisory council comprised seasoned and experienced people. He said that the members of the council would give their expert opinions based on their rich experience.

He said that veteran academicians associated with renowned universities had also been included in the advisory panel so that they could enrich the foreign policy with credible research carried out in their respective universities.

He said that much-ignored problems like national resource constraints and different social issues would also be focused.

“That is why we have included internationally recognised scholar Adil Najam in the council,” he said.

The foreign minister said that the foreign policy was often criticised for focusing on defence and ignoring social aspects.

“Keeping in view this criticism, we have also included in the council personalities associated with the fields of economy and trade,” he said.

He expressed the confidence that in line with comprehensive guidelines given by the members of the council, the foreign policy would encompass wide areas. The foreign minister said that the first meeting of the advisory council would shortly be convened where all rules and regulations of the council would be presented.

He said that the council would later meet on a regular basis.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 25-12-2018

Dhaka-Beijing Ties

Chinese envoy for broadening people-to-people contact

UNB, Dhaka

Chinese Ambassador in Dhaka Zhang Zuo yesterday said his country wants to give a further push to broaden people-to-people contact with Bangladesh, taking the mutual bilateral relations to a new height.

“Our hearts get closer now, our friendship is strengthened,” said the Chinese ambassador, adding that the friendship between the two countries will be even deeper.

Ambassador Zou was addressing an experience-sharing event at the embassy on medical treatment and tourism.

Deputy Chief of Mission and Counselor Chen Wei and Irving Group Chairman and Chief Executive Officer HBM Lutfur Rahman, among others, spoke on the occasion.

Earlier, China opened its doors for Bangladeshi citizens to get “affordable and quality medical treatment” in a bid to further boost people-to-people contact between Bangladesh and China.

Chinese Embassy in Dhaka is now granting medical visas for Bangladeshi citizens, said the embassy.

“We want to boost people-to-people contact between Bangladesh and China under the Road and Belt Initiative,” said the Chinese ambassador. He said this medical tourism will help strengthen relations between the two countries.

Chen Wei said there is a necessity of building bridges and roads, but people-to-people contact is also very important.

A group of patients who availed treatment in Kunming with funding provided by the embassy, lauded the quality, affordability and advanced medical equipment there, but they urged to address the language barrier.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 23-12-2018**Violence slammed***UN, US, UK, HRW issue condemnations***Diplomatic Correspondent**

Expressing concern over reports of violence in the run-up to the December 30 polls, the United Nations, the United States and the United Kingdom have condemned the incidents.

Meanwhile, the Human Rights Watch (HRW) yesterday said widespread electoral violence started as soon as the candidate lists had formally been approved, and campaigns had begun. It also said there had been violent attacks by supporters of all rival political parties and that the authorities failed to act impartially.

Stéphane Dujarric, spokesperson for the UN secretary-general, said they were concerned by the reports of incidents of electoral violence and arrests of opposition men in Bangladesh.

“We call on all stakeholders to do their part to make sure that the election is inclusive and transparent,” he said at a press briefing at the UN headquarters in New York on Friday. “It’s, of course, very important that the security forces act to ensure free and unhindered campaigning by all candidates.”

He said Bangladeshi citizens should feel confident in their ability to safely exercise their right to vote. “Civil society and electoral observers also need to be fully supported to play their role in this process.”

The United States said it encouraged the Bangladesh government to uphold its commitment to a democratic process by ensuring that all Bangladeshis were free to peacefully express themselves and participate in the coming election.

“In the lead up to any democratic election there must be space for peaceful expression and assembly; for independent media to do its job covering electoral developments; for participants to have access to information; and for all individuals to be able to partake in the electoral process without harassment, intimidation, or violence,” said Robert Palladino, deputy spokesperson for US Department of State, in a press statement on Friday.

British Foreign Office Minister for Asia and the Pacific Mark Field condemned recent political violence in Bangladesh and emphasised on a democratic election.

“I take this opportunity to condemn on the record the political violence that we have seen in Bangladesh in recent days...” he said while speaking in Parliament (House of Commons) on Thursday.

Political instability and violence would not help the people of Bangladesh to prosper, he said.

“We urge all in Bangladesh to refrain from further violence, to deliver a democratic election, to give Bangladeshis a properly representative Parliament that can propel their country to greater economic prosperity,” he added.

HRW

A repressive political environment in Bangladesh ahead of the election is undermining the credibility of the process, the HRW said in a report released yesterday. “The Bangladeshi authorities should impartially investigate allegations of election violence and ensure that those responsible are held to account.”

The 37-page report, titled “Creating Panic: Bangladesh Election Crackdown on Political Opponents and Critics”, finds that authoritarian measures, including widespread surveillance and a crackdown on free speech, have contributed to a widely described climate of fear.

The police have arrested and detained opposition members, but failed to act properly against ruling party supporters when they target opposition candidates, it said.

“To ensure that the elections meet international standards, the police and the Election Commission should not appear to be acting like extensions of the ruling party,” said Brad Adams, HRW Asia director.

“The violence during the campaign that has mainly targeted the opposition bears out their misgivings about unfair treatment.”

Political leaders in Bangladesh should instruct their followers to end the rapidly escalating campaign of violence, the statement added.

The global rights watchdog has also found that the Bangladesh authorities have tried to stifle dissent and criticism including on newspapers, television networks, and on social media. Journalists said that the Digital Security Act (DSA) effectively prohibited investigative journalism. Bangladeshis are under pressure to self-censor on social media or risk arrest. A newspaper editor told the HRW, “You have a culture of fear, an environment of fear.”

Bangladesh should take immediate steps to uphold its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), including rights against arbitrary arrest and detention, the right to freedom of expression, and the right to political participation, the statement said.

“International actors who care about stability and democracy in Bangladesh should continue to publicly press the Bangladesh government to create the conditions for a credible election.”

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 17-12-2018**Exploitation of Rohingyas****increasing with time***A permanent solution must be urgently found*

Rohingyas living in Cox's Bazar and Rakhine State are increasingly at risk of becoming victims of trafficking following the Myanmar Army's brutal crackdown last year, law enforcement agencies and aid organisations have said. A number of UN agencies and international rights organisations had earlier come to the same conclusion through their own investigations

which revealed that Rohingya men, women and children were being trafficked to different parts of Southeast Asia in greater and greater numbers, as the crisis drags on.

Over the last months, law enforcing agencies in Malaysia, Indonesia and other countries managed to rescue a number of such victims. To take just one example, Myanmar's naval authorities intercepted two boats carrying around 200 Rohingyas being trafficked in November on two separate occasions. However, concerns remain that despite some victims being rescued, the majority of those trafficked are escaping law enforcers' radar and being severely exploited—with women and children, both male and female, being forced into the sex trade.

Given the conditions that the Rohingyas have been compelled to live in—in Rakhine and within the confines of various refugee camps outside of Myanmar—for years now, it comes as no surprise that traffickers are easily deceiving them with false promises of greener pastures, only to have them back in chains of one form or another.

The bottom line is that the longer the crisis continues, the greater their vulnerability to internal and external exploitation—while allowing criminal networks to strengthen themselves through victimising the Rohingyas. That is why, international and regional organisations at all levels urgently need to put sufficient pressure on Myanmar to end the crisis, and to ensure that the Rohingya people can live safely, without having their basic rights violated, in their own country.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 28-12-2018

Commonwealth Sec. Gen. welcomes peaceful resolution, congratulates PM

Commonwealth Secretary-General Patricia Scotland QC in a letter to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe while welcoming the peaceful resolution of the political crisis in Sri Lanka also congratulated him on being sworn in as the Prime Minister.

The release: “I write to welcome the peaceful resolution of the political crisis in Sri Lanka and to congratulate you on occasion of your swearing in to mark your re-installation as Prime Minister.

“In particular, I commend you and other political stakeholders for your steadfastness in defense and support of the rule of law and the Constitutional framework.

The way in which the crisis was resolved is a testament to the strength and resilience of Sri Lanka’s democratic institutions and to the commitment of political stakeholders to the democratic process.

“As communicated to His Excellency President Maithripala Sirisena, the Commonwealth remains ready to support Sri Lanka’s efforts to improve political reconciliation, progress Constitutional reform and entrench the rule of law.

“In the above context, I trust we will be able to progress a number of engagements which we are hoping to take forward with Sri Lanka, and very much look forward to building on the longstanding and fruitful partnership between your country and the Commonwealth Secretariat.

“Please accept, Prime Minister, the continued assurances of my highest consideration”.

Commonwealth offers to improve political reconciliation in SL

The Commonwealth Secretary General Patricia Scotland has offered Sri Lanka support to improve political reconciliation in the country by mentioning it in a letter to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe

Scotland welcomed the end of the political crisis in Sri Lanka and the appointment of Wickremesinghe as Prime Minister.

She also commended Wickremesingh and others for their steadfastness in defense and support of the rule of law and the constitutional framework.

Scotland said that she had informed President Maithripala Sirisena the Commonwealth remains ready to support Sri Lanka’s efforts to improve political reconciliation in the country, progress constitutional reform and entrench the rule of law.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 27-12-2018

Lanka votes in favour of death penalty moratorium at UNGA

Disna Mudalige

Sri Lanka voted in favour of a resolution on the “Moratorium on the use of the death penalty” during the 73rd United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) plenary sessions last week.

The UNGA adopted the draft resolution on December 17 by a recorded vote of 121 in favour to 35 against, with 32 abstentions.

This resolution was proposed by Brazil on behalf of an Inter-Regional Task Force of member states and co-sponsored by 83 states.

The UN in a statement said that “it called on all States to respect international standards on the rights of those facing the death penalty and ensure that the practice is not applied on the basis of discriminatory laws or as a result of discriminatory or arbitrary application of the law”.

A fresh dialogue on the ‘death penalty’ erupted in Sri Lanka following President Maithripala Sirisena’s announcement in July that he was ready to implement the death sentences on the convicted drug dealers, who continue drug trafficking in the country from within prisons. The President subsequently appointed a committee to look into that proposal.

The President’s announcement met with strong opposition from the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka and other human rights activists.

According to the Amnesty International, 103 out of 193 UN member states have abolished the death penalty for all crimes, and 139 have done so in law or practice. In 2017, executions were reported in 22 UN member states.

“Since 2007 the UN General Assembly has adopted, with increased cross-regional support, six resolutions calling on all states that still retain the death penalty to establish a moratorium on executions with a view to abolishing this punishment.

The overall number of votes in favour of these resolutions grew from 104 in 2007 to 117 in 2016” the Amnesty International said in a release.

Sri Lanka has not executed the death penalty since 1976.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 24-12-2018

Gyawali refutes reports about Nepal joining US Indo-Pacific strategy

ANIL GIRI, Kathmandu

Minister for Foreign Affairs Pradeep Gyawali has outrightly rejected reports about Nepal supporting the Indo-Pacific strategy of the US.

During his recent visit to the US, Minister Gyawali had held a meeting with the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, where the two leaders reportedly discussed the US Asia policy, also known as Indo-Pacific strategy.

As the policy has been viewed by many as the Washington’s way of countering the growing influence of China in Asia, reports about Gyawali—who represents the government of Nepal Communist Party—expressing allegiance to the US strategy has raised eyebrows of many including his party leaders. But Gyawali has refuted the reports.

He called a press conference at the Ministry of Home Affairs on Sunday and said that though Nepal’s role in the Indo-Pacific region was discussed during his meeting with Pompeo, they did not talk about the Indo-Pacific strategy.

“Since Nepal is the chair nation of SAARC and a member state of BIMSTEC, the US reckons that Nepal can play a crucial role in the Indo-Pacific region. But the reports about the US including Nepal in its Indo-Pacific strategy are false,” he said, emphasising that region and strategy are different things.

The foreign minister also briefed the media about the issues that he discussed with the US officials.

“I shared our development priorities with them and about resumption of overseas development assistance to meet our goal to become a middle-income country by 2030,” he said.

“I also thanked them for providing access to 77 Nepali products in the American market and urged them to waive taxes and customs duty for garments manufactured in Nepal,” he added.

Gyawali claimed that his US visit was successful.

“My visit has taken the Nepal-US bilateral relations to a new height,” he said.

II – INTERNAL AFFAIRS

Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad

SUMMARY

INTERNAL

Significant space in Indian press is taken by analysis of Political pundits about the 2019 Lok Sabha elections in India. The election win by the Congress in three key Hindu heartland states recently has proved many analysts wrong when they predicted an almost sure win for the BJP-led alliance in the aforementioned upcoming elections. These states elections are referred to as semi-finals, indicating difficult days for BJP. They now seem to be inclined to change their predictions and believe that the Congress might have got a chance at victory provided that it plays its cards well. The main challenge that the Congress is said to be facing is to be able to put together a winning electoral alliance. Congress is said to be wary of pre-poll alliances, however, the same is necessary because Indian President, after elections, in case no party wins a majority, has in the past invited electoral alliances to form a government. Although the Congress has won smaller state-level parties to its side for a pre-poll alliance, these might not be sufficient and it may have to bite the bullet and approach more difficult prospective allies such as the BSP of Mayawathi in UP and Mamata of the Trinamool Congress. Both are said to be tough interlocutors, yet necessary for congress to woo for a shot at government in New Delhi.

Some sober voices who lament the decline of institutions have put forward their concerns in Indian press. They are of the opinion that institutions, such as the RBI, CBI, and the media are tempered with in ways so as to promote partisan political agendas, rather than allowing these institutions to play their healthy role as impartial arbiters. They say that terms such as 'Hindu', and 'Muslim' are used without any regret. In the past, according to these analysts, these divisions existed, but they were referred to only shame-facedly and abashedly. Now these are used without any pretention of shame. More alarming is the fact that it is not only one party that has perpetuated the phenomenon, all the main political forces are inclined to promote their agendas through muzzling institutions. The more depressing fact is, they argue, that there is no political force in sight which might be hoped to make serious efforts to stop these dangerous trends as every party has its vested interest in manipulating the system. They lament the descent of democracy and are not optimistic about any substantial change in the trend post 2019 general elections.

In Pakistan, the placing of a large number of PPP leaders on exit control list as a result of a Joint Investigation Report issued by a committee which was constituted by the Supreme Court to probe allegations of corruption against Asif Ali Zardari and his colleagues dominated the press. The PPP leaders are under intense pressure from different groups of the society to respond to the allegations leveled in the report. They in return have dismissed the report as something which meant nothing at this stage, and have shown their dismay over the findings, dismissing the same as aiming at maligning them without any solid proof.

II – INTERNAL AFFAIRS

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Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 25-12-2018**The knotty affair of Congress bandhan****Arati R Jerath**

Will the Congress and its allies win enough seats to streak past the NDA and be in the pole position for government-formation? Or, must the Congress bite the bullet and also woo prima donnas like BSP chief Mayawati and Trinamool Congress boss Mamata who display no love for the BJP but remain cold to overtures from the other side?

With the five Assembly elections, billed as the semi-finals, out of the way, the Congress will have to turn its attention to the all-important business of stitching up alliances for the big battle looming ahead — the 2019 Lok Sabha poll.

The 3-0 score card against the BJP in the Hindi heartland is a huge morale booster for a party that seemed to be heading for oblivion after losing almost every election since 2014. But the failure to win a clear majority on its own in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan is a grim reminder that it lacks the muscle and organisation to take Narendra Modi head on without help from friends and partners.

Here lies the dilemma, and several headaches, for the Congress as it crafts its strategy for 2019 with single-minded determination to stop the Modi juggernaut from scorching its way to a second term.

Firstly, it must stop waffling about a formal pre-poll alliance. The Congress has made a lot of noise about opposition unity. But so far, it has done little to actually put together a front that will contest the upcoming election under one omnibus banner. It would be imprudent for the Congress to ignore the criticality of going into the 2019 election without a defined coalition of like-minded parties. In the event that no party gets a clear majority (the probability of which is very high after the BJP's slide in the Hindi heartland), President Ram Nath Kovind is likely to turn to precedent to decide who gets the first shot at government formation.

It was the late President KR Narayanan who established the norm of calling either the single largest party or the largest pre-poll alliance if no one party crossed the majority mark.

Four sure allies

As things stand, the Congress has four sure allies and is in the process of finalising a fifth one. The four on board with the declared intention of contesting the Lok Sabha polls together with the Congress are the DMK in Tamil Nadu, the RJD and more recently NDA rebel Upendra Kushwaha's RLSP in Bihar, the NCP in Maharashtra and the JD(S) in Karnataka. Talks are on for a tie-up with the JVM and the JMM in Jharkhand.

But these are scattered, state-specific arrangements and hardly likely to impress the President, particularly if the BJP-led NDA makes a strong counter-pitch and stakes claim.

Being the common factor, the onus is on the Congress to be the pivot of an anti-BJP front and give it form and shape before the

election. This was the subtext of DMK chief MK Stalin's surprise proposal to anoint Rahul Gandhi as the opposition's PM contender. He was simply trying to push and prod the Congress into getting its alliance act together asap.

It doesn't really matter whether the Congress leads the front or whether the alliance announces its nominee for prime minister going into the campaign. What's important is that it should have a name, some kind of structure and, hopefully, a document to give the opposition a common narrative. The Congress would probably want to christen the front UPA 3.0, but some partners are likely to be allergic to the moniker because of unpleasant memories associated with the UPA brand.

Factoring in Maya, Mamata

Now comes the second and possibly more difficult question confronting the Congress. Will a coalition with these four or five parties win enough seats to streak past the NDA and be in the pole position for government-formation? Or, must the Congress bite the bullet and woo prima donnas like BSP chief Mayawati and Trinamool Congress boss Mamata Banerjee who display no love for the BJP but remain cold to overtures from the other side?

There is no doubt that a pre-poll front that includes a winning UP component consisting of the BSP, SP and RLD will be a showstopper. And the UP behemoths are well aware of the value they bring to the table. If the results of the three Lok Sabha bypolls held earlier this year are any indication, the SP-BSP-RLD combo will sweep UP. Remember, it trounced the BJP in all three bypolls, including the closely watched contest on Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's home turf of Gorakhpur.

But there's a high price tag attached to a handshake with the UP satraps, particularly BSP chief Mayawati, who is as hard as nails and a tough negotiator. Experience with the lady has made the Congress chary. Most recently, it burnt its fingers trying to tie up with her in MP, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh for the Assembly elections.

Similarly, Mamata has been playing cat and mouse with the Congress. She stays aloof from opposition meetings called by the party, but keeps her foot inside the door by sending a representative. At the same time, she flirts on and off with the idea of a non-BJP, non-Congress federal front floated by TRS chief K Chandrasekhar Rao to scupper Congress efforts for a united opposition fight against the BJP.

The Congress will have to consider carefully the gains and losses of an alliance partnership with Mayawati and Mamata. A complex numbers game is afoot in table-top calculations of the two women who hope to be kingmaker, if not king, in the next dispensation, should the NDA lose. They are vying to win more seats than the other and be the second largest party after the Congress.

Mamata has Bengal's 42 seats to play with. Since she will have to share UP's 80 seats with the SP and RLD, Mayawati has to necessarily explore options beyond the state to get ahead of Mamata. This is both an advantage and disadvantage for the Congress. It can think of offering her select seats to contest in

MP, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Punjab and Haryana. But it means sacrificing space in the few states where it is still a political force.

Much depends on the sagacity and humility the Congress displays as it negotiates the minefields that lie on the road to 2019. It promises to be an interesting battle.

THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI 31-12-2018

2018: The Descent of Democracy?

Santosh Desai

Democracy is running out of excuses, it seems. A report card on the health of democracy in the country makes for depressing reading. Over the years, institutions meant to provide adequate checks and balances have been hollowed out, but under this government, this process has taken on a new, more urgent dimension. The difference this time is that total control is seen as a necessary pre-requisite for being able to govern. Unlike previous governments, including the one led by Mr Vajpayee, which was at home with the idea of managing contradictions, and finding ways to navigate criticism and as well as questioning, the leadership of this government seems to believe that it can operate only in an environment of absolute dominance and unquestioned obedience.

The diversity and complexity of India has meant that this desire has not been met fully, but it has had a far-reaching impact. Even institutions that were so far kept reasonably insulated from political interference have been penetrated, and attempts have been made to align them with the government's desires. The mental model at work fundamentally resists the idea of institutions being able to regulate those at the helm of affairs. The desire for control is not necessarily linked to the achievement of specific goals; it is an overriding need to not be subject to another point of view. Regulation is decoded as subservience and hence resisted.

The astonishing battles in the Supreme Court, the RBI, and the CBI are pointers to this new atmosphere within which our democracy needs to operate. The CBI was never remotely free of political control, but what we saw in 2018 was a new low even for this 'caged parrot'. For judges of the Supreme Court to hold a Press Conference to denounce the way in which things were being run was truly unprecedented. The RBI too has faced the kind of pressure it has seldom experienced in the past. Even the CSO now appears to be calculating its numbers on the basis of what the government wants to hear.

Equally remarkable has been the descent of media. It is true over several years, well before this government came into power, media has been the intent of debasing itself in a variety of inventive ways. Also, while every government of recent times has striven to exercise strong influence over the media, no government has managed to instill fear and to be able to control the narrative the way the present regime has. It is one thing for media to have a political slant, but what we have seen is an

abandonment of the most basic journalistic values in the name of a political leaning. The government is not entirely responsible for this fall in standards; much of it is voluntary, in the name of catering to the market.

The gradual shift in emphasis from a transformative agenda to a revivalist one has normalised a vocabulary that had been banished from public discourse. The freedom with which we now use the labels, Hindu and Muslim, without feeling the need to couch our statements, points how deeply the divisions in society have been internalised. This is a government that unabashedly looks after Hindu interests, and takes pride in doing so. Again, while it is true that previous Congress-led regimes did nurture minority communities as voting blocs, the difference is in the scale and the brazenness involved.

In some ways, one can argue that we have really lost is the veil of legitimising hypocrisy that made democracy look nobler than what it really was. Institutions were always being dismantled, the media was never truly allowed full freedom, divisions in society were a fact of life; we just pretended otherwise. That pretence is now gone, and with it, democracy is now naked. We see it for what it has become, an enabler of the crude exercise of power for partisan purposes. The problem with dispensing with hypocrisy is that with it, we lose any connection with the ideals that animated the need to believe in the right things and end up normalising what should have been thought of as aberrant behaviour. Yesterday's shamefaced mutters have become today's confident roars.

Those that take hope from the possibility of a regime change come 2019 may have nothing much to cheer about. The issue is not one of who is in power, but what they do with it once they are. While some of the more divisive aspects of this government's actions might be absent, it is very unlikely that any succeeding government will reverse the damage to institutions. Once power moves away from institutions designed for impartiality, there is little incentive for any political formation to restore it. The temptation is to pay back the previous government in its own coin. No political party has shown that it has any new ideas. The possibility of structural reform at the lowest administrative unit continues to look bleak.

What we are confronted with is the inability of electoral politics to make a difference. In a world where ideological positions are so entrenched, what gives us passion is not that we have a better way, but that we are convinced that the other way is the root of all that is wrong. Electoral politics has become an argument in competing wrongs, rather than a choice between two kinds of solutions. It is possible to get so focused on the political players, that we forget the reason why politics exists.

There have been islands of hope, but even these are not products of our political system. Judicial action saw to the removal of Section 377. The #metoo movement marked an organic push-back to a deeply embedded form of discrimination and exploitation. Interestingly, the politics of the day seems incapable of pushing along any significant social change. In fact, the application of power seems designed to preserve status-quo

rather than challenge it. And no change seems to be at hand as far as this goes. 2019 or not.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 25-12-2018

Moment of the strongman

Liberal challenge is to show that coalitions and collegiality are more effective than one-man shows.

Written by Christophe Jaffrelot

After its recent setback in Rajasthan, MP and Chhattisgarh, the BJP will probably rely even more on what has been its trump card since 2014: Narendra Modi. The party is already arguing that it has at its helm a strong leader whose authority is undisputed, whereas the Congress-led Opposition neither has a strong leader, nor is cohesive enough to govern the country at a time when external threats, including China's expansionism, are mounting.

Certainly, India's governance has been affected in a not-so-distant past by unstable coalitions. Between 1989 and 1999, five prime ministers were not necessarily in a position to conduct consistent policy. But things changed with the making of formal coalitions, the NDA and then the UPA, which have resulted in a near bipartisan restructuring of the political system. Even before that, some of the governments which made the most significant reforms were not led by strongmen: Narasimha Rao started one of the most ambitious transformations of India despite the fact that he had no clear majority in Parliament.

In fact, between 1999 and 2014, the NDA and UPA governments have shown that coalitions were not synonymous with paralysis — evident from the India-US 123 agreement and laws such as RTI or NREGA — and that policies could be more effective when decided collegially. India is a federation where states have so much power that a consensus has often to be built for the state governments to be on board at the time of implementing any reform. A top-down approach based on vertical diktats is not sufficient. In this context, coalitions help because they imply decentralisation of power and inclusion of regional forces in the Union government.

Since Indira Gandhi, the concentration of power in the hands of a strong leader has resulted in two kinds of problems. First, the ruling party has tried to prevail over the states in such a manner that it has become counterproductive: Chief ministers who did not belong to the ruling party have been neglected and the chief ministers of the ruling party have often been selected because of the allegiance they paid to the strong leader. Second, solitary decisions are often not properly informed, compared to those resulting from deliberations, especially when the inputs of political advisors, experts and relevant institutions are factored in: Demonetisation is a case in point and in the past, some of Indira Gandhi's measures were similarly flawed.

But the main risk lies elsewhere: Strongmen have hardly any respect for liberal democracy. The populists who are taking over power in the world today, in Hungary, Poland, the US, the

Philippines, Brazil, indulge in "sultanism", a notion that Max Weber introduced a century ago to describe situations when power "operates primarily on the basis of discretion" under the aegis of a strongman. Analysing the "sultans" of the 20th century, Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan have defined a regime in which "all individuals, groups and institutions are permanently subject to the unpredictable and despotic intervention of the sultan, and thus all pluralism is precarious".

In India, the attempt at establishing the hegemony of one party — be it under Indira Gandhi in the 1970s, when it culminated in the Emergency, or under the new dispensation in the name of a "Congress-free India" — reflected such illiberal views. One of the differences between the 1970s and the present-day situation comes from the open support for authoritarianism that sections of public opinion are expressing. The 2017 Pew report revealed that in India 55 per cent of the respondents backed "a governing system in which a strong leader can make decisions without interference from parliament or the courts", while 53 per cent supported military rule. Commenting upon this result, the Pew team added: "Support for autocratic rule is higher in India than in any other nation surveyed", 38 per cent in total and India is "one of only four nations where half or more of the public supports governing by the military". An even larger proportion — two-thirds — says "a good way to govern the country would be experts, not elected officials, making decisions according to what they think is best for the nation". Interestingly, BJP supporters and urban dwellers are over represented in the three groups — of those who support personal rule, military governance and a technocratic regime.

The demand for a strong leader is related to an acute feeling of vulnerability. According to the Pew survey, while "crime takes the top spot on the list, with 84 per cent Indians seeing it as a very big problem", "terrorism" follows immediately for 76 per cent of the interviewees (before corruption and unemployment). This is in tune with the idea that the ISIS appeared as the main threat to India to 66 per cent of the interviewees, ahead of every other threat. Strongmen cultivate insecurity and use the politics of fear across the globe.

The challenge facing the liberals today, therefore, is two-fold. First, they have to show that coalitions and collegiality are more effective than the strongman's rule. In fact, to compete more effectively with a strongman in office, an Opposition leader would be well advised to refer to an alternative repertoire, of a team-player. Second, liberals have to demonstrate that democracy is still the best regime, not only because freedom is an important value, but also because democracy is more conducive to development. Those who do not value freedom but believe more in discipline, a China-like development pattern, may realise that India never experienced the kind of Chinese revolutionary moment that erased a lot of diversity. In the Indian context, authoritarian rule has usually been dysfunctional, it has resulted in separatism, violence and resistance. More importantly, democracy helps development because it implies more education for the largest numbers and less inequalities, giving the poor the means to move forward.

The main supporters of strongmen often come from the middle class, not from the poor. Most of the populist leaders have been elected by social groups fearing for their status — be they white supremacists protecting themselves from the “migrants” and the blacks in the US or upper caste Hindus worrying about the rise of OBCs and Dalits. This elite reaction or counter revolution sometimes takes place in the name of development, but it inhibits development by restricting its benefits to a minority. As a result, the urban-rural divide deepens and a key pillar of development, agriculture, is damaged largely because of the urban consumer bias of the rulers and their lack of interest in the peasants for decades. Populists are often instruments of elite groups: They mesmerise the people with words during their election campaigns and betray them once in power.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 24-12-2018

BJP gives in to Bihar allies, JD(U) gets 17 seats, LJP six

The 2019 seat-sharing deal suggests a victory of sorts for the LJP, which had adopted an aggressive stand, seeking a better bargain from the BJP and early announcement of seat-sharing after the recent exit of RLSP leader Upendra Kushwaha.

Written by Lalmani Verma

Sealing the seat-sharing arrangement for the 40 Lok Sabha seats in Bihar, BJP president Amit Shah announced on Sunday that his party and the JD(U) would contest 17 seats each, while the LJP would field candidates from the remaining six seats.

Shah also said that LJP president Ram Vilas Paswan would be sent to the Rajya Sabha at the earliest opportunity.

Shah made the announcement after a meeting with JD(U) leader Nitish Kumar and LJP president Ram Vilas Paswan at his residence in the morning. The meeting was also attended by Chirag Paswan and Bhupender Yadav, who is the BJP leader in charge of Bihar.

“After a long discussion, it has been decided that the BJP will contest 17 seats, JD(U) will contest 17 seats and LJP will contest six seats in Bihar. Also, Ram Vilas Paswan will go to Rajya Sabha as the NDA nominee in the next Rajya Sabha elections,” Shah said.

In 2014, the BJP fielded candidates from 30 seats, out of which it won 22. It gave allies LJP and RLSP seven and three seats respectively — LJP won six seats, RLSP won all three seats. The JD(U) fought the polls separately, and won two seats.

The new seat-sharing arrangement means that BJP will have to let go of at least five of its winning seats.

In 2009, the JD(U) contested 25 seats, out of which it won 20. The BJP fielded candidates from 15 seats, out of which it won 12. The LJP, which fought the polls in alliance with RJD, contested from 12 seats, but didn't win any.

The 2019 seat-sharing deal suggests a victory of sorts for the LJP, which had adopted an aggressive stand, seeking a better bargain from the BJP and early announcement of seat-sharing after the recent exit of RLSP leader Upendra Kushwaha from the ruling alliance. Kushwaha has joined the Opposition's alliance.

While Chirag Paswan had recently made comments seen as critical of the BJP-led government at the Centre, including questioning the benefits of demonetisation, Ram Vilas Paswan said on Sunday that there was no problem in the alliance. He asserted that Chirag plays a key role in the LJP's presence in the NDA.

Shah said Nitish, Paswan and his son Chirag, and Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Sushil Modi have jointly drafted a rough sketch of the NDA's joint campaign for Bihar. “After giving it a final shape in the coming days, we will soon reach out to the people with the NDA's political agenda,” he said.

Stating that the allies would soon decide on distribution of constituencies, Shah asserted that the NDA would improve its 2014 performance.

Commenting on the decision to send Paswan, currently a Lok Sabha member from Hajipur in Bihar, to the Rajya Sabha, Nitish said it was a recognition of his long service to the country and thanked the BJP for taking care of Paswan's dignity. Paswan (72) is a nine-term member of the Lok Sabha and the decision to enter the Rajya Sabha means that he is unlikely to contest any Lok Sabha election in the future.

Meanwhile, reacting to NDA's seat-sharing announcement, RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav said the LJP and JD(U) had benefitted from questioning Prime Minister Narendra Modi on demonetisation after two years. He tweeted that despite having 22 sitting MPs, the BJP had agreed to give an equal number of seats to Nitish. “Now you can understand the dire straits the NDA is in,” he said.

THE HINDU, DELHI 19-12-2018

Change in Mizoram

The MNF faces the task of upgrading infrastructure and diversifying the economy

In the din over the Bharatiya Janata Party's losses to the Congress in three States in the Hindi heartland, the dismal defeat of the ruling Congress party to the Mizo National Front in Mizoram has gone insufficiently noticed. With this, the Congress has lost its last remaining State in the Northeast, a region in which it was traditionally dominant. The BJP managed to mark its first and only victory in the State by winning the Chakma refugee-dominated Tuichawng seat in south Mizoram's Lawngtlai district. But the BJP will consider the MNF's victory as a significant accretion to its set of fellow-travellers and alliance partners in the Northeast. The MNF is part of the North-East Democratic Alliance, an anti-Congress front formed by the BJP that includes all the other ruling parties in the region. While

the MNF has come to power on its own, without an alliance with the BJP, its membership in the NEDA means it is an ally of the BJP for all practical purposes. Despite an improvement in social indices in the State over its decade-long tenure, the Congress was always expected to face an uphill task to retain power because of growing anti-incumbency sentiment following allegations of corruption in recent years. The MNF's victory was also aided by its strong positions on total prohibition, a promise that carried a lot of weight with conservative and influential Christian civil society groups in the State, which had implicitly lent support to the party.

The presence of the Zoram People's Movement, a collective of seven parties formed just a few weeks before the Assembly elections, hit the Congress's chances even more. The candidates of the ZPM contested as independents but garnered close to 23% of the vote, damaging the Congress in particular. The Congress's vote share dipped to 30.2%, a 14 percentage point swing from its 44.6% share in 2013. The Congress's total tally of five seats is its lowest-ever in the 40-member Mizoram Assembly. The MNF faces the task of diversifying the economy, given the disproportionately large section of the population dependent on agriculture and horticulture. The New Land Use Policy launched by the Congress did bring a significant pause to jhum cultivation (the practice of slash and burn), but fell short of encouraging sustainable agricultural practices as the scheme effectively provided patronage for commercial crop-growing by select beneficiaries. Mizoram has the potential to be a gateway in the Act East and BIMSTEC connectivity schemes to extend trade routes from the Northeast to Myanmar and onwards. But it requires better road connectivity and infrastructure. This should be an important priority for the new MNF government.

THE HINDU, DELHI 16-12-2018

Old vs new: how the Congress chooses CMs

The Congress must strengthen its democratic processes while choosing CMs

Whether the Congress erred in privileging members of the old guard to lead the governments in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh has become a subject of debate. Those who argue that it missed a trick in not picking Sachin Pilot and Jyotiraditya Scindia as Chief Ministers of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh may well be right. These choices may have signalled a readiness to be bold and break the old mould. But the real question to ask of the party is how it arrived at the choice of its Chief Ministers. Members of the Congress Legislature Party in the three States left the choice to Congress president Rahul Gandhi, making a mockery of democratic conventions and the electoral mandate. Although the Congress is not the only party that is guilty of such practices, it has become something of a custom, mirroring the leadership's distrust of developing strong regional leaders. In this case, the final choice may well have reflected the wishes of a majority of the members of the CLPs of the three States, but the Congress still needed to signal the all-

powerful nature of the office of the party president in the selection. Closed-door discussions and opaque deal-making preceded the final announcement of the nominees, to be elected "unanimously" in another meeting of the CLP. In Rajasthan, the party opted for two-time Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot, who had lost two elections, over Mr. Pilot, the State Congress president. Mr. Pilot, despite his role in the campaign, did not have the support of the old guard. His detractors like to point out that he did not take the Congress to a comfortable majority, what Mr. Gehlot had done as the campaign spearhead in 1998 and 2008. But the Congress leadership has opted in the end for experience over youthful dynamism. The compromise was in the form of the deputy chief ministership for Mr. Pilot.

In Madhya Pradesh, the decision was relatively easy. It was the president of the Madhya Pradesh Congress Committee, Kamal Nath, who fronted the campaign. Former Union Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia had his fair share of supporters, but it was Mr. Nath, who is far senior, who was perceived as having a bigger claim to the post. Those in the Congress calling for blooding youngsters may well have to accept the sober reality that this will only come about as part of a longer, deeper process. Of course, it takes more than a change at the helm to bring about a political reorientation. The process will have to start at the organisational level and extend to the distribution of the party ticket. To allow the space for the party to grow, Mr. Gandhi needs to accelerate the process of letting leaders from the grassroots to emerge. Youth leaders of any significance today are of the second or third generation in the party. A good way to start would be by decentralising power and not concentrating it in the so-called high command, a feeble euphemism for the Nehru-Gandhi family.

THE STATESMAN, NEW DELHI 17-12-2018

Telangana's pink wave

The TRS won 88 seats, almost a three-fourths majority, against 19 seats by the Congress, seven by the All India Majlis-e-Itthadul Muslimeen, two by the Telugu Desam Party and two independents. Of the 88 TRS MLAs, 70 hold graduate or post-graduate degrees.

For the people of Telangana, polling day was payback time for K Chandrasekhar Rao, Chief Minister and founder-leader of the Telangana Rashtra Samithi, for all the good work he has done in the last four-and-a-half years in restoring their dignity and self-respect compromised in composite Andhra Pradesh by the Telugus of coastal Andhra.

Post-election result, there was no haggling for ministerial posts so common in other political parties. KCR was chosen leader of the TRS Legislature party and was sworn in as Chief Minister along with Mohammed Mahmood Ali as Deputy Chief Minister in a five-minute ceremony on the lawns of the Raj Bhavan.

The Opposition kept away from the function. Out of the 119 Assembly constituencies, more than 100 registered above 80 per

cent polling which is seldom heard of. People in rural areas more than the urbanites exercised their franchise.

The TRS won 88 seats, almost a three-fourths majority, against 19 seats by the Congress, seven by the All India Majlis-e-Itthadul Muslimeen, two by the Telugu Desam Party and two independents. Of the 88 TRS MLAs, 70 hold graduate or post-graduate degrees.

Their victory margins are huge. The BJP won a solitary seat in spite of Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing five meetings and the BJP president 10 meetings. Whatever chances they might have had were spoiled by fielding UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on the campaign trail.

His promise of changing the name of the state if the BJP was voted to power impressed none of the voters. KCR's national ambitions should not be dismissed lightly. Even before his swearing-in he unfolded his plan to launch a federal front sans the BJP and the Congress. It could well turn out to be a Trojan horse to help Modi get a second innings.

Victory of the Congress in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan has given a new impetus to the Congress and the People's Front it is leading to face the coming Lok Sabha election. KCR is not opposed to the BJP per se. His real political opponent is Chandrababu Naidu, Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh and leader of the Telugu Desam Party, who is one of the leaders of the People's Front.

KCR had made the just concluded Telangana Assembly election Chandrababu Naidu-centric by painting the TDP leader as an opponent of separation of his State from Andhra Pradesh.

The people of Telangana had been opposed to the forced union of their State with the erstwhile state of Andhra to form the composite AP in 1956. While many leaders took up the cause of separation of the two Telugu-speaking States, it was KCR who led the battle to victory. Emotionally he is close to the BJP.

THE ASIAN AGE, NEW DELHI 21-12-2018

J&K: Stop civilian killings

At the end of six months of Governor's Rule, Jammu and Kashmir transited to President's Rule on Thursday, casting an even greater burden on the Centre than before to end the continual cycle of violence for the past two years, in which a greater number of civilians are being killed.

While the PDP-BJP government lasted, the Centre practically rejected all advice to listen to the voice of reason and experience and open conversations with all concerned in the Kashmir Valley. This was also the experience through the six months of Governor's Rule that began in June this year after the toppling of the Mehbooba Mufti government through indelicate methods.

In an irony, the governor himself was jettisoned under Governor's Rule, with the upright former civil servant N.N. Vohra being replaced by the voluble ruling party politician Satyapal Malik, who has given little indication that he has

acquired a meaningful understanding of the wider perspectives on the Kashmir issue.

Citing phoney grounds, Mr Malik did not permit the PDP-National Conference-Congress coalition to form the government when the state Assembly was under suspended animation, although this combine enjoyed a comfortable majority. He then dissolved the House. It had become amply clear that People's Conference leader Sajad Lone, whom the Jammu-based BJP had cultivated in the Valley, did not stand a ghost of a chance of forming a government with the help of defections.

Under President's Rule, the least that the Centre can do is to take active steps to ensure that civilians are not killed. Emotional rage is spreading in Kashmir on this account.

HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 21-12-2018

Let's not alienate Kashmiris further

A spike in violence only adds to a deep political freeze that the state has been pushed into since the November 22 dissolution of the state assembly.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. It is back to President's rule in Kashmir with all parties seeking another round of elections. Kashmir is again on the edge following the killing of seven villagers last week in firing by the army in the hinterland of South Kashmir. The Pulwama incident fits well into a now-familiar but fearful pattern of protesting locals swarming the sites of gun fights between security forces and militants to disrupt the operations so as to help the trapped militants flee.

But, a high civilian toll, the highest in a single such incident in recent years, underscores a dangerous drift in Kashmir that is not only fuelling the popular rage, but also calls into question the government's claims about dwindling public support for militancy. In fact, the violent clashes between security forces and locals have emerged as a key trigger for young people to join militant ranks, radically changing their complexion in favour of the locals vis-à-vis foreign militants.

Alarming, it may negate whatever little gains that have been made by the completion last week of a multiphased polls to local bodies and panchayats in the state. The two-month-long exercise, though marked by a low turnout in the Valley, was by and large free of violence despite ominous threats from militants. It was an audacious gambit by the Centre to revive and empower the stalled politics at grassroots level after the BJP pulled the plug on its coalition government led by Mehbooba Mufti of the Peoples Democratic Party in June.

But Saturday's setback represents a heightening of the alienation of ordinary Kashmiris while strengthening a negative narrative on excessive use of force in dealing with civilian protestors. This was clear from the outrage articulated both by Kashmir-based mainstream political parties and secessionists. The secessionists went beyond the customary shutdown call by asking the people to march to the Badami Bagh cantonment, the Srinagar-based

headquarters of 15th Corps that is in the vanguard of the anti-militancy grid in Kashmir. Such exhortation, last seen in the tumultuous 1990s, is seen as a part of Pakistan's sinister strategy to pitch the local people against security forces.

Already, 2018 is turning out to be the bloodiest since 2012, with 587 terror-related incidents till December 2, according to the home ministry's annual report. It put the number of militants and security personnel killed at 238 and 86 respectively — the highest in six years. Even more disconcerting is the rise in civilian killings by 167% in the last two years.

A spike in violence only adds to a deep political freeze that the state has been pushed into since the November 22 dissolution of the state assembly which was a precursor to the imposition of President's rule. The government has hinted at holding the J and K assembly elections along with the Lok Sabha polls next summer. Before that, however, halting the civilians' killings in anti-militancy operations and stabilising the security environment will be the biggest challenges

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 17-12-2018

Record attrition in JK

Clutching on to peace straws in an unending cycle of violence

THE year is yet to end but the number of security personnel losing their lives this year in Kashmir has touched a decadal high. Another soldier joined this list in the encounter on Saturday that also extracted a horrendous toll of civilian lives. Is there any end to the interminable cycle of violence? India's security managers draw solace from the record number of militants killed and the demolition of their infrastructure. There can be hardly any beef in eliminating forces that are perpetuating a climate of fear and unsettledness with little desire to bring about normalcy.

But the story in the Valley is not just about terrorism. There is a large population that is sullen over New Delhi's blindsiding of the human and political aspects of the problem. Last month's Kashmir visit by a former Norwegian PM Kjell Magne Bondevik has come as a sliver of hope. It is no secret that South Block invariably vets such sensitive missions and it is significant that the last foreign dignitary to visit the Valley was almost five years back. The Norwegians do not dabble in peace efforts unless invited by all the parties, even though their past record has not exactly been a roaring success. The Centre's concurrence to the visit marks a turnaround in its unyielding stand of blackballing anyone who sought to interact with the Hurriyat leaders.

The elephant in the room will be Pakistan, especially after Bondevik ruled out a solution without talks involving all the sides. India had walked into a diplomatic cul de sac when it refused to talk to Pakistan till terrorism continued in the Valley. The breakthrough on the Kartarpur corridor suggests a certain dilution of that position, especially after Central ministers attended the inauguration ceremony in Pakistan. Kashmir needs to go through a cycle of talks and elections to extract itself from the black hole of endless violence. The Norwegian and the

Kartarpur initiatives are some straws in the wind that need to be explored.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 24-12-2018

When communalism gags a great actor

Salil Desai

It's up to us ordinary citizens to rebuff the demonisation of minorities and their relegation to second class status by right wing political parties. If we seek to be a progressive nation, the onus of secularism and equality lies with the Hindus.

One of India's best actors, Naseeruddin Shah, recently expressed his deep anguish as a Muslim in post-2014 India, when, speaking on the tragic Bulandshahr incident, he remarked, "I feel anxious for my children because tomorrow if a mob surrounds them and asks them whether they are Hindu or Muslim, they will have no answer...." More importantly, in the same video interview with Karwan-e-Mohabbat, a unique communal harmony initiative by former civil servant and noted activist Harsh Mander, Naseeruddin Shah went to the heart of what ails present-day India when he pointed out that "the death of a cow is given more significance than the killing of a police officer."

Within 24 hours, the predictable toxic reactions have come thick and fast. Naseeruddin Shah has been mercilessly trolled on social media, politicians from the BJP and Shiv Sena have accused the actor of being irresponsible and anti-national and of indulging in scaremongering; his event at the Ajmer Literary Festival was cancelled following protests by the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM), the youth wing of the BJP; and the Uttar Pradesh Navnirman Sena, one of the many obscure right wing groups, has claimed to have booked an air ticket dated August 14 for the actor to fly to Pakistan.

As if that was not enough, wrestler Yogeshwar Dutt waded into the controversy, advising Naseeruddin to refrain from calling himself a patriot after expressing such sentiments, especially because he had supported Yakub Memon's mercy plea earlier.

If anything, the vicious responses prove the very point Naseeruddin Shah made that "the poison has already spread and it is difficult to put this djinn back into the bottle."

Quite simply put, the ruling party and its affiliated right wing organisations have so successfully managed to normalise blatant communalism in our minds, that we now expect minorities, especially Muslims, to quietly accept Hindu dominance and intimidation, without a word of complaint, as if it were a natural fact of life even in a secular republic. In other words, society has started believing that Hindus are first-class citizens and have a right to treat minorities as second-class citizens.

Moreover, such inequality and the abuse, injustice and violence that follows is now considered to be a perfectly reasonable state of affairs, since certain minorities, especially Muslims, need to be kept in their place to maintain the natural order of Hindu hegemony in a predominantly Hindu country.

Thus, any voice of concern is attacked and condemned by right wing organisations with such vehemence that its genuineness starts getting perceived instead as a foul articulation of betrayal and hostility toward the land of Hindus, who can do no wrong.

Why otherwise would Naseeruddin Shah's statement be considered as an affront at all? As a Muslim married to a Hindu, actress Ratna Pathak Shah, why shouldn't he be able to talk about his uneasiness at the polarised atmosphere prevalent in the country and the safety of his children in the context of the growing impunity with which mobs can get away with lynching and murder under the garb of religion?

About two years ago, a similar outrage was generated by majoritarian outfits, led by the BJP, when Aamir Khan and his wife Kiran Rao (another inter-faith couple) talked about not feeling secure sometimes.

The fact is that many ordinary Hindus too disapprove of the strain of aggressive cow politics and belligerent Hindutva promoted by the ruling party and its affiliates, but don't lend their voice of support to minority concerns like the kind expressed by Naseeruddin Shah or Aamir Khan, because they have a deeply ingrained, subliminal prejudice against Muslims in general.

Perhaps, it's high time we asked ourselves: what exactly is behind this bias? Why are we Hindus so insecure despite being an 80 per cent majority in our country? Why do we feel so threatened by Muslims? Why do we see them as an alien community, just to be tolerated? There was a time when we wouldn't admit it, but now many people seem to say it openly, as if there is nothing to be ashamed of hating or treating them unequally?

Some of the many reasons for this dislike, which have been exploited and insidiously propagated by the right wing are:

- The alleged oppression of Hindus during the Mughal rule.
- Partition of India as some kind of a grand betrayal by Muslims.
- The practice of so-called pseudo-secularism and excessive minority appeasement by the Indian National Congress during the many years of its rule.
- The unfortunate global image of Islam, since 9/11, as a religion of fanatics.
- Kashmiri militancy and Pakistani terrorism.

In addition, there is dissatisfaction stoked against certain Muslim personal privileges in India, like polygamy, triple talaq and beef-eating, as well as a general revulsion about their social backwardness, attire and lack of hygiene. In fact, we simply look down upon Muslims as human beings. And that is exactly where the danger looms because we, as a country, are perilously close to reaching a point where we start believing that our largest minority community does not deserve normal humanitarian consideration.

That is a terribly slippery road to go down for any country. The 20th century is testimony to that. Therefore, it's up to us ordinary citizens to consciously rebuff the demonisation of minorities and their slow relegation to second class status by right wing political parties. If we seek to be a progressive, modern nation, the onus of secularism and equality lies squarely with the Hindus. Minority-bashing only enhances a community's sense of persecution and isolation and nothing good has ever come out of it. If not for any loftier principles, the majority needs to halt communalism for its own sake.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 28-12-2018

Babri: Is there a way forward?

Rajeer Dhavan

'Coercion' by the State is bound to complicate the issue and get us nowhere

Is the Babri masjid/Ram mandir a legacy for resolution in this millennia? Destruction of Babri masjid on December 6, 1992, is the biggest blot on India's multi-religious and cultural portrait. India has the biggest diversity, more than Europe, the Middle East, Africa, America, and the Far East put together. Its demography makes it the largest Hindu, one of the largest Muslim, a fairly large Christian, Buddhist and Jain civilisation state, with hundreds of other faiths and multiplicity of language, dialects, art, culture and music. This uniqueness is under siege by bigotry religious and ethnic cleaning, riots, ghar wapsis, lynchings masquerading death. Terrorism exists amongst some Muslims and is punishable, but nothing near the collective onslaught of the Sangh Parivar on India itself and its minorities with animus and cruelty. Is there an 'India' we want to protect? Or do we want to go down the route of Pakistan? India forms the greatest civilisational experiment in diversity the world has ever known.

For a legal perspective, let us go back to 1855 when Muslims claimed that Hanumangarhi replaced a mosque. The Muslims were routed. Different reports came from nawabs and British committees. Having given grants to all, the nawabs moved the capital to Lucknow and were absorbed into the Empire. In 1857, Nihang Sikhs were evicted from Babri. Tension came from the Bairagis, who were made to pay compensation to the mosque. The British recognised the mosque with grants; and an 1885 case confirmed Muslim titles, with some worship rights to the Hindus. The story moves to attempts to destroy the mosque in 1934, which was rebuilt. In 1949, idols trespassed into the mosque claiming divine intervention. Locks opened less miraculously in 1986, the mosque was destroyed in 1992 with riots to follow. In 1994, the Supreme Court prescribed a resolution by court through law, with the Union government as statutory receiver, and with UP to remain neutral.

The Lucknow judgment was unsatisfactory to all. One-third each of the site went to the Deity, Nirmohi Akhara and Waqf, in a judgment across 8,000 pages in foolscap and over 4,000 pages in

small print in three volumes. It was a 'panchayati judgment'. Everyone appealed. The Lucknow decision provided no decisive answers. The only resolution by 'law' was a first appeal to the Supreme Court. If it is a mere title suit, the Muslim case is strong. But the Lucknow court drifted into innumerable questions of ancient texts, unreliable accounts of travellers and archaeology revealing conjecture. In 2018, the Supreme Court's record was still not in order. Even in January 2019, the office report shows the Hindu parties are still in default. After flagging the 'reference' on Justice Verma's unfortunate sentence on mosques being unessential to Islam obviating protection, I told the court that I was ready, on that very day, to begin the main argument. How long will a first appeal on a judgment of 8,000 pages, with a further over a hundred volumes of evidence, take? If the solution is to follow legality, justice appeals cannot be heard slipshod. A schedule is workable. The fate of India as a nation depends on it.

Hindu fundamentalists have always relied on a coercive solution. Attacking the masjid in the 19th century, trying to destroy it in 1934, trespass in 1949, massive rath yatras and destruction in 1992, after which the mob cried 'mandir banega'. Given the Central government's judicial duty to remain, is it not Modi's duty to declare that he was bound by the court's decision? Defying this, the BJP and the Sangh Parivar can think of only one solution — coercion, coercion, coercion. The cry for legislation is doubtful in law and majoritarian coercion. The legislative cannot sit in appeal over the Supreme Court. The vast celebration in Ayodhya on December 6 was coercive. The attempt to abolish Faizabad district is coercion. The threatening cry of the so-called sants is coercion. To link it with politics is coercion. Coercion is not an answer. The stampede of demands with violence is not just to Muslims, but to the whole country, to accept Hindu supremacy, or relent. Of course the Religious Worship Act of 1991 preserves status quo on all other sites. But will coercive solutions follow on other sites?

In the records of the conciliation meetings before the destruction, Muslims clarified that if there was any tangible proof that Lord Ram was born on that spot, they would yield. No proof emerged. Nor, in my view, was temple destroyed to build a mosque at that spot. The Hindus are not sure, even suggesting Aurangzeb destroyed the temple. The 'belief' that Lord Ram was of Ayodhya is a sustainable myth. The fact that Babri existed and destroyed is not a myth. This now becomes a blinking game. Will the Muslims build a mosque somewhere else? Will the Hindus build a temple elsewhere? Our perspective has to start from 1947. Mosques cannot be vindictively destroyed and shifted at will. To rebuild what existed post 1947 is a statutory constitutional and moral duty. The Hindus have enough land to build a temple or even several temples in Ayodhya. If a temple has to be built, let it coexist — the mosque where it stood and the temple nearby. The entry of the Deity into the case as a 'minor' in 1989 blocks solutions. Is Lord Ram a minor claiming Ayodhya or the world? If there is some play here, examine it. Or abide by the legal solution. The Sangh Parivar will not abide by an adverse legal result, which the Muslims will accept. Lord Ram gave up Ayodhya to interact with many cultures, pledging them to peace. In this kalyug, Lord Ram would say: 'Build the temple

anywhere if you must, but protect all my people of all faiths'. Is not that Ram Rajya?

AFGHANISTAN TIMES, KABUL 27-12-2018

Presidential polls delayed

Reportedly the presidential polls scheduled in coming April was delayed in the wake of expedited peace efforts being brokered by the United States Special Representative Dr. Zalmay Khalilzad. Recent round of talks held at Abu Dhabi whereas next round of talks is scheduled to be held in Riyadh Saudi Arabia. Though the US representative succeeded in holding of face to face talks with Taliban leaders in Abu Dhabi and earlier at Moscow. But so far the facing hurdles in arranging of direct talks between Afghan government and Taliban representatives. In ongoing peace talks, the US envoy offered Taliban to join the main stream of politics, and ensure their active role in political and democratic process. Taliban are willing to be part of political process but they have also presented several other conditions. So far these conditions are under thorough discussion and debates. But one thing is very clear that the 2019 Presidential election process is already under controversy and debates as the National Unity Government failed to bring reforms in the electoral bodies. Earlier it was agreed upon convening a meeting of the Loya Jirga during tenure of President Ashraf Ghani 2014-2018 for addressing anomalies in the constitution as well as making the political system of Afghanistan most friendly towards all segments. But unfortunately neither leadership in NUG nor the US authorities made an attempt to honor such promises and commitments with the war stricken Afghans who wants peace and reconciliation. Similarly, the US government had also failed in honouring of commitments made through Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA). Though BSA was approved by traditional Loya Jirga but former President Hamid Karzai had refused to ink in the wake of certain observations and reservations. But the leaders in the NUG soon after assuming the office in last quarter of 2014 had signed the BSA. And now apprehensions of former President Hamid Karzai is proving true as the US had failed to help in return of peace and tranquility in Afghanistan as well as combating increasing interference in internal affairs of Afghanistan by some of the regional and neighbouring countries. The Afghans have experienced worst kind of violence and terror during the October 2018 parliamentary elections. And now they couldn't afford more bloodshed, therefore, the US needs to help in addressing wishes and expectations of war affected people through every possible way.

AFGHANISTAN TIMES, KABUL 30-12-2018

Kabul, Washington at loggerheads over election delay

KABUL: The governments of Afghanistan and the United States are in deep discord over a delay in the next year's presidential polls, a government source revealed on Saturday.

The source who wished to speak anonymously told Kabul News that President Ghani's administration has agreed a three-month delay, while the foreigners especially US authorities want a six-month long postponement.

The foreigners have also demanded basic and wide reforms in the electoral commissions, according to the source.

Meanwhile, the Independent Election Commission reports of negotiations with political and jihadi leaders over election postponement and the result of the talks would be announced within three days.

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 31-12-2018

Taliban Dismisses Afghanistan's Peace Talk Offer

KABUL - The Taliban has rejected Kabul's offer of talks next month in Saudi Arabia where the armed group, fighting to restore strict Islamic law in Afghanistan, will meet the United States officials to further peace efforts, a Taliban leader said.

Representatives from the Taliban, the US, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Pakistan met this month in the UAE for talks to end the 17-year war in Afghanistan.

But the Taliban has refused to hold formal talks with the Western-backed Afghan government.

"We will meet the US officials in Saudi Arabia in January next year and we will start our talks that remained incomplete in Abu Dhabi," a member of the Taliban's decision-making Leadership Council told Reuters news agency on Sunday.

"However, we have made it clear to all the stakeholders that we will not talk to the Afghan government."

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid also said the leaders of the group would not talk to the Afghan government.

In a statement released on Saturday, Mujahid accused media outlets of spreading "baseless" rumours that the group would hold talks with the Kabul administration in Saudi Arabia.

It also stressed the Taliban position "remains the same and has not changed".

The armed group has insisted on first reaching an agreement with the US, which it sees as the main force in Afghanistan since US-led forces toppled the Taliban government in 2001.

"We are advancing [the] negotiations process [with] the US under a strong and extensive plan to bring an end to the occupation of our country Afghanistan," the Taliban says.

Diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict have intensified after Taliban representatives started meeting US envoy Zalmay Khalilzad earlier this year.

Officials from the warring sides have met at least three times to discuss the withdrawal of international forces and a ceasefire in 2019.

But the US has insisted that any final settlement must be led by the Afghans.

According to data from the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission published in November, the government of President Ashraf Ghani has control or influence over 65 percent of the population but only 55.5 percent of Afghanistan's 407 districts, the lowest since 2001.

The Taliban says it controls 70 percent of the country.

A close aide to Ghani said the government would keep trying to establish a direct line of diplomatic communication with the Taliban.

"Talks should be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned," the aide said on condition of anonymity. "It is important that the Taliban acknowledge this fact."

US President Donald Trump has announced a pullout of American troops from Syria, a decision that prompted the resignation of Defense Secretary James Mattis, and there have been reports that he is considering a partial pullout from Afghanistan. (Aljazeera)

AFGHANISTAN TIMES, KABUL 24-12-2018

Peace is imminent, but at what cost?

Undoubtedly, it is time to be optimistic in Afghanistan as peace process backed and lead by US administration is getting momentum. Key officials within the National Unity Government believe peace will be definitely restored in Afghanistan in the near future and that promising peace development has hitherto been made. Peace is the right way to unlock the conflict gripping the country—peace is imminent, if not within weeks but in the coming months. Winning current war through military means is not wise even seems impossible as international community and the US now looking to a political settlement with the Taliban group which showed their frustration over military mission as it did not bear results. But this did not mean Taliban or other terrorist groups are making head in battlefield. The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces have been proved bitter taste for the extremist groups, killing them in hundreds, wounding them in thousands. But this war must be ended. Peace must prevail. Optimistically, right time has come for the Taliban to join intra-Afghan dialogue. However, their rejection to meet Afghan peace team in Abu Dhabi has exhibited the most complicated face of the group that even casted doubt to their independence. The United Arab Emirates has hosted the US-Taliban reconciliation talks with the participation of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Taliban did not accept to talk with Afghan negotiation team which has raised many eye-brows. First—Taliban are likely not independent, what their leaders says they do that. Second—something which is against national interest of Afghanistan is being discussed by the Taliban where they afraid to share with the Afghan peace team. Third, which is very important, the possibility of recognizing Durand Line might be

discussed. Since we all know that Pakistan is key player, and its prime minister already took credit for arranging Abu Dhabi talks, none can rule out Pakistan's effort in maintaining its interest during talks—where one of it could be reorganization of Durand Line. It's crystal clear that Pakistan pushed the Taliban to set in talks with US rather than Kabul administration. For the reason Pakistan is likely, or definitely looking to achieve something bigger during peace talks in disguise of Taliban's demand. Surely, we, the Afghan masses want peace. Every day we are suffering from the ongoing war. At the same time we want a dignified peace, where there is no compromise to our national sovereignty. The Afghan government must be vigilant in any sorts of peace deal or talks.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 30-12-2018

The elephant in PPP's room

According to the political narrative that the PPP boss and his supporters are attempting to craft, Mr Zardari's political and alleged financial empire are under attack because elements within the state are threatened by the party's policies and politics.

But while there may be some truth to the PPP's allegations, there is now firmly lodged in the party's living room a rather large elephant: the JIT report that was ordered by the Supreme Court and which has become the basis for Mr Zardari and numerous of his political and alleged financial partners being placed on the Exit Control List.

The JIT report may not be the same as facts proved in a court of law, but the report has certainly created a problem of political standing and perhaps even legitimacy for Mr Zardari and the PPP that he unquestionably dominates. Mr Zardari and the PPP leadership must address the specific allegations against them in the JIT report.

The JIT report covers a vast number of alleged corrupt business practices and ostensibly confirms what has been politically apparent for a number of years.

From mills to factories and land deals to bank loans, the JIT report has tied Mr Zardari to an empire of financial corruption on a staggering scale.

If Mr Zardari denies, for example, that his family has ties to the Bahria property empire, then surely the wildly lucrative projects that Bahria has won in Sindh can be audited by an independent third party.

After all, if the JIT report is not to be trusted because of the implicit political bias of its authors, the deals it has flagged can surely be audited by credible financial investigators.

Similarly, if certain banks have not been used to lend enormous sums of money to entities and individuals who did produce adequate collateral according to the prevailing rules, then the loans ought to be proved to have been properly made and adequately secured.

The many rackets and several figures identified in the JIT have long been speculated about in the political arena.

It is Mr Zardari's right to fight the allegations against him in the judicial arena and he must be given the same due process and rights that the law and Constitution guarantee to all citizens.

But in the court of public opinion and the political arena, Mr Zardari will need to do more than just dismiss the allegations against him as wild conspiracy. Indeed, from a democratic perspective, the foundations of the elected order in the country could be weakened further if serious allegations of financial fraud and corruption are simply shrugged off politically.

The public has a right to choose its leaders, but the leaders have a duty to the public to be transparent about their financial affairs. Mr Zardari must do more.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 24-12-2018

Crisis in tribal districts

WHILE the cut and thrust of politics continues to dominate the national discourse, a very real constitutional crisis has erupted in the settled tribal districts of KP, the region known as Fata until the 25th Amendment to the Constitution. In late October, the Peshawar High Court declared unconstitutional the Fata Interim Governance Regulation and gave the KP government until Nov 30 to establish a judicial system in the region formerly known as Fata that is fully separate from the executive. The FIGR allowed political agents and deputy political agents renamed as district commissioners and deputy district commissioners to wield judicial powers and decide civil and criminal cases, a fact that the high court objected to because it violates the constitutional separation of powers. With the FIGR struck down by the Peshawar High Court but the KP government appealing to the Supreme Court for its restoration for a transition period of at least five years, since Dec 1 there has been a judicial and administrative vacuum in the settled tribal districts. Commissioners and deputy commissioners stand stripped of their judicial and administrative authority and are effectively operating on the goodwill of the people of settled tribal districts.

The judicial and administrative crisis in the districts surely merits attention at the earliest by the Supreme Court, which must now decide the KP government's appeal against the high court's declaration that the FIGR is unconstitutional. If the court's deadline for establishing a functional and independent judicial system in the settled tribal districts within 30 days was unrealistic, the FIGR itself appears to have been poorly thought out. And arguably the architects of the 25th Amendment themselves erred in failing to provide for an adequate transition: while the FCR certainly needed to be abolished, the gap between the mainstream judicial system in the provinces and the political agent-led system in Fata was so large that a meaningful transition period was all but necessary. A few months from the passage of the 25th Amendment, a complex set of constitutional, juridical

and administrative problems have mired that historic success in deep controversy.

Seemingly compounding the problem is a power struggle in KP, with the PTI government riven with factions and Chief Minister Mahmood Khan struggling to impose his authority. The merger of Fata and KP is certainly a complex, gargantuan task, but the PTI's inexperience guiding the executive elsewhere in the country does not hold true in KP. Arguably, having led the KP government for the past five years, the PTI was best placed to deliver quick and meaningful results in the newly merged province. Perhaps Prime Minister Imran Khan will need to intervene and bring some much-needed direction and purpose in the functioning of the KP government, too.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 28-12-2018

Money laundering, fake accounts: Zardari, Bilawal, Talpur placed on ECL

Muhammad Saleh Zaafir & Mumtaz Alvi

ISLAMABAD: The federal cabinet on Thursday put 172 suspects, including the Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians (PPPP) President Asif Ali Zardari, his sister Faryal Talpur and the PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, on the Exit Control List (ECL) for their involvement in money laundering and fake bank accounts case.

Chaired by Prime Minister Imran Khan, the federal cabinet reiterated its resolve to continue the accountability process without discrimination. The Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Media Affairs, Iftikhar Durrani, told a private TV channel that Bilawal Bhutto Zardari was among the 172 suspects whose name was placed on the ECL.

It was also decided to take up the issue of hate speech and inciting violence in Pakistan by Altaf Hussain with the British government and approach the South African government too in relation to the use of their soil for target killings by his gangs, who were active again. "There are South African gangs active in Karachi. It's very important that these gangs are squeezed where they are being operated from. The Foreign Office has been directed to take up this matter with the South African government as well," he added.

Briefing journalists about the decisions taken during the cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Imran Khan, Fawad said the Omni Group's Anwar Majeed and his son Abdul Ghani Majeed, former Pakistan Stock Exchange chairperson Hussain Lawai and Summit Bank Senior Vice-President Taha Raza were among those being investigated by the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) for alleged money laundering through at least 29 fake accounts.

They all were added to the no-fly list along with Asif Zardari and Ms. Faryal Talpur, who is currently a member of the Sindh Assembly.

Referring to the recently submitted joint investigation team (JIT) report, the information minister alleged that the government means were used to launder the money. He said the decision to put 172 names on the ECL was taken after some persons involved in the fake accounts and money laundering cases, including the PPP Co-chairperson Asif Ali Zardari, were found saying they were not taking the JIT report seriously. He explained that keeping in view the JIT report submitted to the Supreme Court, the federal government has decided to put as many as 172 people on the ECL. Fawad hoped that Zardari would take the JIT seriously, as this was not the old Pakistan, where people would compromise. He said the independent accountability process would continue and the JIT members would get adequate security. When told that Zardari's counsel Lateef Khosa had said that Zardari would be arrested before December 31, the minister replied: "Inshallah. Well, what can I say about it?" He laughed off the PPP leadership's threat of agitation if what they alleged political victimisation of Zardari and others was not abandoned. He wondered why the people would do that.

Asked about the anniversary of former prime minister and PPP chairperson Benazir Bhutto, he said Ms Bhutto was a very important leader, whose martyrdom had caused a big setback to politics. He said Zardari's party was different from Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto's party, which in 1970s was a revolution for the rights of the downtrodden. He said Zardari's party and the Omni Group had other designs.

The cabinet, he noted, held deliberations on the Karachi situation, which it felt, had deteriorated abruptly and the target killing of ex-MNA Ali Raza Abidi was also part of that. The port city had witnessed a phenomenal improvement in the law and order and security owing to the sacrifices by the Rangers and other forces, he added. The minister acknowledged the fact that the country's economy was linked to peace in Karachi and said the cabinet reaffirmed its commitment to ensure peace in Karachi at all costs. He said there are concerns about the security of the PTI and MQM lawmakers in Karachi for which Prime Minister Imran Khan had directed the minister for interior to ask the Sindh government for their security, otherwise, the Rangers would be directed to do the needful.

Fawad said adequate security measures would be taken in the wake of the use of abusive language and hurling threats, particularly on the social media, to the NAB chairman and his team. He said the cabinet had validated the government's decision to hold provincial assembly elections in the tribal districts before June 2019 to bring the tribal people into the mainstream, providing them with all their constitutional rights promised by Prime Minister Imran Khan soon after coming to power.

He said the federal cabinet approved the launch of Panda Bonds for the first time to enter the Chinese market. The minister announced the government's decision to extend the deadline for the registration of imported mobile phones to January 15. "After January 15, phones would still be registered but on payment of 10 per cent of duty," he explained.

The minister said the cabinet also approved the tabling of a constitutional amendment bill that would seek an extra reserved seat for women from Islamabad in both the Houses of Parliament. He noted that the prime minister commended Education Minister Shafqat Mehmood for his contribution to the planned conversion of the PM House into a university. In the first phase, the PM House's name would be Darul Hikma for the integrated research purposes, while in the long run it would be converted into a university, he added.

The minister said regulatory duty on newsprint was being slashed to just one per cent and expressed the hope that it would bring relief for the working journalists. He pointed out that about 50 per cent dues of the media houses have already been paid by the Centre and the provinces. The minister said the cabinet lauded the Federal Investigation Agency for unearthing money laundering of billions of rupees.

Replying to a question, he claimed that the PPP and PML-N legislators in the parliament would support the government in legislation. When asked why the NAB was not pursuing cases against the PTI-related cases as proactively it was pursuing against the PPP and PML-N, the minister said cases against the ruling party people were made deliberately and cited the helicopter case, claiming there was nothing in it.

The minister said the cabinet had also approved allocations for the Pakistan Steel Mills for 2019 and PM's Adviser on Commerce Abdul Razaq Dawood would soon come up with a comprehensive plan for the revival of the PSM. "God willing, the government would run the mills again successfully," he said.

Fawad noted that millions of rupees were spent on the installation of the closed-circuit TV cameras in Islamabad and Karachi under the Safe City Project, but majority of the cameras were either dysfunctional or not able to provide legible pictures. He said the cabinet had also ordered an inquiry into these projects to fix responsibility for failure.

The cabinet, he said, also approved extending the mobile phone services to North Waziristan district and to review provision of the same facility in the Makran area of Balochistan. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority and Mobilink have signed an agreement for provision of mobile services to North Waziristan.

He said a task force under the chairmanship of Prime Minister Imran Khan was being constituted to modernize research in Pakistan. He said eminent scientist Dr Atta-ur-Rehman will head this task force.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 31-12-2018

People's power helped defeat pseudo Govt. - Ravi

The UNP could not provide benefits to its party supporters because it practised "Yahapalana" ideals within the party unlike other sections which engaged in politics.

October 26 created a black scar for democracy in the country. But the people's power enabled them to restore the Ranil Wickremesinghe government in power defeating the pseudo government.

We hope to make use of this opportunity to bring about massive development hitherto unprecedented in the country Power and Renewable Energy and Enterprise Development Minister Ravi Karunanayake said.

He was addressing the gathering at a ceremony held at Summitpura grounds, Mattakuliya on December 28.

Minister Karunanayake who pointed out that the rupee had rapidly depreciated added that it should not be allowed to depreciate since a strong government was back in power.

"We consider it our prime duty to bring down the cost of living for the benefit of the common masses," he said.

Karunanayake said material and human development should go hand in hand in developing the country. The future generation was the country's most valuable asset and it should be nurtured in the education and mental spheres.

The minister distributed a stock of exercise books and educational equipment among a group of 1,000 students belonging to low income families.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 29-12-2018

Speaker urges religious leaders to act against racism

Disna Mudalige

Speaker Karu Jayasuriya made an earnest plea from religious leaders to raise their voices against racism and in support of the abolishing of the Executive Presidency in the coming year.

The Speaker's Media Division in a press statement yesterday said that the Speaker made the above request during a special meeting with multi-religious representatives at the Speaker's official residence on Wednesday.

The Speaker spearheaded a "multi-religious conference" following the racial tensions in Kandy and Ampara early this year. With the multi-religious representatives of this initiative, he held special meetings in Kandy and Ampara to promote national harmony and reconciliation.

Speaker Jayasuriya meeting those multi-religious representatives on Thursday requested their leadership to denounce the attempts to incite ethnic and religious hatred in the North and the South while observing that certain political figures were also behind such attempts.

The Speaker also requested not to let the politicians spread racism using temples and other religious places as the hub. The Speaker also made a special request from the multi-religious representatives to support the people's long-standing call to abolish the Executive Presidency.

The Speaker was of the view that the excessive powers of the Executive Presidency are too heavy for Parliamentary democracy.

The Speaker at the meeting pledged his unwavering commitment to abolish the Executive Presidency in the same way he committed to uphold good governance and ethical conduct from the very first day he entered into politics.

He made that comment recalling how hard he committed to the 17th Amendment to the Constitution.

The Speaker also recalled that it was late Ven. Maduluwawe Sobitha Thera who lined up the masses against anti-democratic and emerging autocratic rule in the country then.

“That social movement was necessary not to bring in one individual to power but to empower democracy by implementing a set of common policies. Setting up of the Constitutional Council and independent commissions, and establishing the right to information law and independence of judiciary were achievements within a short period, but it is unfortunate that we could still not achieve the goal of abolishing the Executive Presidency,” the Speaker commented.

The Speaker also pointed out that the trust between President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe gradually deteriorated after the Local Government polls were declared.

“I continuously tried to make peace between them. It was true that the President offered me the Prime Minister post on several occasions, but I didn’t want to accept any post which the people had not given me a mandate,” he added.

The Speaker, explaining on the challenges he faced during the seven weeks from October 26, said that he was determined not to give in to thuggery.

“I knew the risk. There were threats of acid attacks against me inside the Chamber, but had I not taken that risk, it could have been a dark day for the Parliamentary system of our country. Who won in the past two months is not important as the country lost a great deal during that time,” he remarked.

He however pointed out that the assurance that we have an independent judiciary was a positive outcome of the political crisis. “From now on, nobody will talk about the need for the intervention of international judges into our country’s affairs,” he said.

The Speaker requested the religious leaders to play the role of reconciliation as disputes between the President and the Prime Minister, being two centres of power, are harmful to the country though there seems to be temporary settlement.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 26-12-2018

Dr KC issues January 1 ultimatum to address his demands

Sanjaya Lama, Kathmandu

Senior orthopedic surgeon Dr Govinda KC has warned of staging another round of hunger strike from January 1 if his demands are not met. He said those against the reforms in country’s medical sector are involved in deceptive manoeuvrings against the Medical Education Bill.

Issuing a statement on Wednesday, Dr KC urged the government, parliament committee and the political parties to immediately endorse the bill as per the agreement signed with him.

The anti-corruption crusader said every government, who signed deal with him before he ended his fast, had tried to blackmail him in signing the agreements to fulfill the vested interests of agents and mafias rather than the welfare of people and students.

He said the government has been working against the people and students by violating the agreements instead of showing honesty by implementing the agreements.

Dr KC said that the situation has not changed until now even though he signed agreements 15 times following indefinite hunger strikes.

He said that a report presented by Kedar Bhakta Mathema-led task force has not been implemented fairly.

Dr KC said that his serious attention has been drawn towards the recent developments regarding the Medical Education Bill, claiming that attempts are being made to fulfill the vested interests of medical mafias in the parliament committee.

He said the government and senior leader of the political parties in collusion with medical mafias are hell bent on subverting the bill.

“It is unfortunate that party and people’s representatives are trying to fulfill the vested interests of mafia by altering the agreement signed with us,” said Dr KC, adding, “We will not tolerate such maneuverings.”

Dr KC said there will be no progress in the medical sector until private medical colleges are brought under the government. He said there is not alternative to bring the private medical colleges under the government to bring reforms in the medical sector.

He stressed on the need to scrap the license of private medical colleges found involved in anomalies.

III – ECONOMIC, CULTURAL AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad

Summary

Economy

Government in India has come under criticism, as media reports suggest, for its lowering down the Goods and Services Tax (GST) on certain items for the upper and middle classes. Prime Minister Modi is also criticized for his failure to bring down the number of tax slabs, which currently stands at four. According to analysts, the Prime Minister can be given the benefit of the doubt when he states that one cannot do much with regard to the tax slabs, as he stated recently that milk and Mercedes could not have the same tax rate for obvious reasons, however the same can be brought down to two, from the current four slabs. Moreover, with the recent reduction in GST, 'the government is expected to forgo 50000 crores annually because of these cuts and it has yet to disclose how it expects to fill this gaping hole'. According to political commentators, such steps by the incumbent government at a time when elections are just round the corner, aim at electoral gains rather than for the economic justification of the step. The government, they argue, probably does not care much as it thinks that the next government should be dealing with the consequences.

The looming trade wars between the US and China, both major trade partners of India, are reported to be posing serious challenges for the economy of India itself. 2019 is said to be a year of uncertainty for New Delhi to deal with in the context of the growing US protectionism and rising trade tariffs under President Trump. In addition to this uncertainty, government in New Delhi is hard pressed to follow suit in loan waivers for farmers by the states at a time when economic profligacy would have made sense, argue economists in Indian press. All this, when seen in the context of stagnant savings and private investment, adds to the difficulties in Indian economy.

Print media in Pakistan has reported on a recent visit by Russian trade representative to the Karachi Chambers of Commerce in which he was quoted as saying that 'some 200 companies are keen to explore opportunities in Pakistan'. He was also reported to have stated that trade between the two countries stood at 660 USD which would reach to 800 million USD by the end of 2018. Moreover, press in Pakistan also reported on the federal government's decision of floating 'Panda bonds' in the Chinese market 'to raise foreign exchange from global markets'. The bonds will be denominated in Chinese Yuan.

III - ECONOMIC, CULTURAL AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

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Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad

THE ASIAN AGE, NEW DELHI 24-12-2018

GST tweaking may worsen cash crunch

In this season of giving, Prime Minister Modi has taken the lead in bringing down the Goods and Services Tax (GST) on the favourite items of the upper and the aspirational middle classes. It was disappointing, however, that he was not able to reduce the number of tax slabs from the present four to, say, just two. Understandably it cannot be one as, he said, milk and Mercedes cannot be taxed at the same rate. Fair enough. But in the interest of simplicity, Mr Modi could have rationalised the GST as it has been in existence for over a year and has already seen about 200 tweaks according to one report. Even the World Bank has commented that India has one of the most complex tax systems in the world where 115 countries have a unified tax system and 49 countries have just one slab. It also has the second highest rate of tax. Saturday saw the fifth round and still there seems to be much more that needs to be tweaked or rationalised. For instance, how does paan masala and personal aircraft and yachts come in the same bracket of 28 per cent. Since when is paan masala a luxury or sin item? Tobacco one can understand, since it can cause cancer, but paan masala is second nature to a large number of Indians as chewing gum is to Americans. It would be interesting if the bureaucrats or whoever designs the GST and does the tweaking could explain why some taxes are reduced and others are not.

Mr Modi obviously has his eye on the 2019 elections that are barely four months away as he seeks to woo the middle class. This is specially important considering the drubbing that the party got at the recent polls, specially in a major state like Madhya Pradesh.

The government is expected to forego ₹50,000 crore annually because of these cuts and it has yet to disclose how it expects to fill this gaping hole. Its finances are in a precarious condition and this was reflected in its unsuccessful attempt to dip into the huge reserves of the Reserve Bank of India. That it has denied this is immaterial. Union finance minister Arun Jaitley is confident that with this reduction there would be more tax compliance. So far this has not happened. Earlier Mr Jaitley had said demonetisation had helped to bring more people into the tax net. But results showed that the increase could have been achieved without demonetisation that wrecked colossal damage on the economy. Time will show if this present tweaking is merited. The Central government has to compensate the states for the full year so one does not know where these funds will come from. Perhaps the government feels it will be the headache for the next government.

THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI 28-12-2018

Rocky ride ahead: Global headwinds as we enter 2019 make economic reform and fiscal prudence imperative

What a difference a year makes for the global economy. 2018 started on a buoyant note, boosted by the previous year's

increase in manufacturing activity and global trade. However, a few months later the US-China trade war broke out threatening to set the world back. More than any other event, it's the shadow of protectionism with its bouts of tariffs and retaliatory tariffs which will influence global economic activity next year. And India is bound to be affected.

The main economic theme for 2019 is uncertainty. The confluence of trade wars, growing risks to economic growth in US and the roll back of an accommodative monetary policy by US Federal Reserve are likely to keep the environment uncertain. The domestic scenario is no better. The run-up to 2019 general election has allowed an old economic risk to resurface: fiscal profligacy. It's not just state governments which are reallocating expenditure to accommodate farm loan waivers, the Centre finds itself under pressure to match it. This has come when savings and private investment are stagnant and there's no catalyst for a spurt in economic growth rate.

India has been lucky that over the last four years international commodity prices have been largely benign. It's kept energy and transportation costs at manageable levels and eased fiscal pressure. A slowdown in global growth is likely to keep oil prices low. Therefore, it's important that government use this benign period to proceed on the path of fiscal consolidation. India remains vulnerable to sharp swings in capital flows and the best protection is a prudent fiscal policy.

Another item which shouldn't fall off the agenda is economic reform. Enhancing economic growth is of paramount importance as it has a positive spin-off in diverse areas, including job creation. An essential reform is to bring India's overall economic policy and sectoral laws in sync with the changing nature of economic activity. Digitisation is the most important influence globally on economic activity. However laws, whether they pertain to income tax or e-commerce, appear to target the last century. In the face of global headwinds, government and bureaucracy must transform the policy architecture quickly if India is to attract investments and create an enabling environment for employment. 2019 should be the year in which government brings its policies into the 21st century.

THE HINDU, DELHI 30-12-2018

Mind the gap: on fiscal deficit

Revenue trends underline the government's challenge on the fiscal consolidation front

Eight months into the financial year, the Centre's fiscal deficit has already overshoot the full year's budget estimate by as much as ₹92,349 crore. And given last year's fiscal slippage — the deficit in the revised estimates for 2017-18 was 3.5% of GDP, wider than the 3.2% originally targeted — the augury is far from reassuring. While total expenditure growth, at 9.1% so far this year, has remained below the budget projection for a 10.1% increase, worryingly growth-inducing capital spending is set on an underwhelming trajectory. The 4% increase over the eight-month period is less than half the 9.9% growth the Centre had budgeted for the year. However, it is the trends in revenue that

give cause for disquiet. In his annual budget presented in February, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley had projected revenue receipts to show a healthy 14.6% increase from the revised estimates for the preceding year, on the back of a 16.6% jump in net tax revenue. Granting that tax revenue does tend to bunch up and get skewed with an upward bias into the final quarter, the April-November revenue receipts and net tax revenue growth numbers, at 8.1% and 4.6% respectively, are far from reassuring. If there is a silver lining on the revenue front, it is the buoyancy seen in non-tax revenue, which surged more than 31%, putting the government comfortably on track to meet the budget estimate for a 3.9% increase. Still, non-tax revenue is budgeted to account for just over a seventh of total revenue and it is hard to see it helping bridge anything more than the smallest of shortfalls in tax receipts.

There is another factor to contend with in sizing up the fiscal calculus this year. With the general election only a few months away, the government needs to avoid the temptation to open the spigot with an eye on the political benefits that it may see accruing. Some of the expenditure plans it has committed to recently have either been factored in or will at most impact the margins — be it public sector bank recapitalisation or an increase in the quantum of incentives for the export of onions to reverse the slide in prices. But the bigger challenge remains in finding ways to rustle up the requisite revenue to keep the deficit from slipping for a second year running. The seven public sector enterprises that have been cleared by the Cabinet for share sales as part of the disinvestment programme are, at best, only likely to partly help meet the budgeted non-debt capital receipts target of ₹92,199 crore. As the Reserve Bank never tires of cautioning, the onus is on the government to avoid further fiscal slippage as it could hurt the economy by crowding out vital private investment. This at a time when it has just been showing signs of a revival.

THE HINDU, DELHI 16-12-2018

The numbers game

Puja Mehra

A structural break can be observed in the GDP back series before and after the year 2011-12

India's national income statistics are under a cloud. The Central Statistics Office (CSO) has released official revisions of the GDP estimates for the years 2004-05 to 2013-14 in the Manmohan Singh-led government's tenure. The revisions make the Narendra Modi government's performance on the economic front appear better than that of its predecessor.

In 2015, when the CSO had first computed this set of estimates, the growth rates for the years in Dr. Singh's tenure were higher. The NITI Aayog rejected those numbers and blocked their release. Whether the CSO should have yielded to the NITI Aayog on a purely statistical matter is not clear.

In the recomputed estimates, which were released last month by the CSO under the guidance of the NITI Aayog, GDP growth does not exceed 9% even once during Dr. Singh's tenure. The fastest growth rate reached was in the year 2010-11 (8.5%). The

growth rate for this year, before this revision, was estimated at 10.3%. The best year in Mr. Modi's term so far has been 2015-16 (when GDP growth reached 8.2%). In fact, the growth rates for the majority of years in Dr. Singh's term have been cut drastically. Besides 2010-11, the growth rate was slashed quite sharply for 2007-08, from 9.8% to 7.7%.

Naturally, these revisions have stoked a controversy. Besides the political duel between former Finance Minister P. Chidambaram and his successor Arun Jaitley, eminent statisticians have posed questions over the technical issues at hand. The CSO has offered no satisfactory answers. Even the Chairman of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council, Bibek Debroy, is concerned about what he calls the use of "less than perfect" deflators by the CSO.

Statistical stunts

Mr. Jaitley is at pains to stress the CSO's credibility, and has emphasised that the revisions are compliant with the international guidelines, the System of National Accounts (SNA), 2008. The truth is, many of the proxies and techniques that the CSO has used are, in fact, not recommended by the SNA. At best, they are tolerated under the SNA system.

One particular statistical stunt that the CSO has introduced is a structural break in its back series in 2011-12. Let us understand this in detail.

Macroeconomic aggregates such as GDP and GVA (gross value added) are estimated every year at the prices of a selected year, the base year. Base years are periodically updated, and the GDP for every year all the way back to 1950-51 is then re-estimated. In 2015, the base year was updated from 2004-05 to 2011-12. Improvements in estimation methodology were also carried out. But there was a problem: non-availability of appropriate databases complicated the re-estimation backwards.

Three years ago, at the time of re-basing the GDP series, the forward computation was done using data sourced from the Ministry of Corporate Affairs' MCA-21 database of balance sheets. Its use led to growth getting revised upwards substantially for the years after 2011-12, including for the last two years of Dr. Singh's term. But the MCA data are available only 2011-12 onwards. So, what was to be done for computing the series before 2011-12? This was the principal difficulty in backcasting the rebased series.

The CSO worked out a proxy. Its use would have led to growth rates getting revised upwards in the years before 2011-12. This was not agreeable to the NITI Aayog, and the back series computed with it was withheld. For three years, the CSO and the NITI Aayog could not resolve the problem. Now, the CSO, under the rather controversial guidance of the NITI Aayog, has for a proxy used data extracted from the Annual Survey of Industries (ASI), the database that was used for the earlier 2004-05 base year series. Combining MCA data with the ASI data is technically problematic. There is no statistically robust way of seamlessly linking these two datasets. Their coverage differs significantly.

Complications

Consider one of the complications introduced by the ASI's relatively smaller coverage than the MCA's. Take a company that has manufacturing establishments across the country. Such a company may also have non-manufacturing establishments as part of its set-up. The total corporate GVA should ideally be the sum of manufacturing and non-manufacturing establishments. While the MCA would cover both the manufacturing and non-manufacturing GVA of this company from 2011-12 onwards, the ASI has been found to cover only manufacturing establishments in such cases. Non-manufacturing GVA inside a manufacturing corporate enterprise is not captured by it. This GVA, in fact, does not get covered at all as the service sector surveys also leave it out.

Some of the GVA in the years before 2011-12 in the back series has escaped estimation altogether due to such holes in the ASI's coverage, making the year 2011-12 a point of discontinuity.

A structural break can be observed in the back series before and after the year 2011-12. The upgradation to MCA from ASI data 2011-12 onwards had led to upward revisions. Going backwards, the revisions are by and large sharply downwards.

Glossing over challenges

The statistical challenge before the CSO is to estimate the GVA that remained uncaptured by the ASI. This is a complex problem with no clear solution. Whether the holes led to an underestimation or overestimation and what the impact was on the growth rates is difficult to judge. Service offshoots can lead a conglomerate or can be a drag. The now-defunct Kingfisher Airlines associated with the business group United Breweries illustrates how a service establishment can ensure that a conglomerate's GVA goes up but it may also drag it down. The trouble is, rather than admitting to these challenges transparently, the CSO has sought to gloss over them.

One of India's most well-regarded statisticians, T.C.A. Anant, was not willing to replace the MCA database with the ASI database in the back casting exercise when he was Chief Statistician of India. Months after his retirement, the CSO went ahead and did exactly that.

THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI 27-12-2018

Efforts on to increase Indo-Russian bilateral trade to \$30bn

PTI

CHENNAI: Plans were on to more than triple the bilateral trade between India and Russia to \$30 billion by 2025, a Russian diplomat here said on Thursday.

The bilateral trade grew by 21 per cent to \$9.3 billion in 2017 as against \$7.7 billion in the previous year, Consul General of the Russian Federation in Chennai Oleg N Avdeev said.

"A plan has been set to increase (bilateral) trade to \$30 billion and the volume of mutual investment to \$15 billion by 2025", he told reporters here.

Replying to a question, he said the consulate issued 4,433 tourist visas.

"The number of student visas we issued increased. More and more young Indian students are willing to go to Russia for higher studies", he said.

On the Indo-Russian joint venture Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant in Tamil Nadu, he said the construction work on the third and fourth units was progressing.

The first unit of KKNPP commenced operation on December 31, 2014 and the second on March 31, 2017.

HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 26-12-2018

Agriculture crisis: Farmers finding it difficult to recover their cost of production

Demonetisation and the Goods and Service Tax disrupted economic activity in the informal sector, which seems to have left a lasting effect on food prices.

Roshan Kishore

Doubling farmer incomes was a key promise made by the Narendra Modi led government after it assumed power. As its tenure comes to an end, farm distress has emerged the biggest headache for the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) 2019 campaign. For a government which takes a lot of pride in having maintained India's status as the fastest growing economy in the world intact, the contours of the current farm crisis are radically different from issues in the rest of the economy. This is because the problem is rooted in prices and not production growth.

Gross Value Added (GVA) in agriculture has grown at more than 3% since 2016-17. The 2014-15 and 2015-16 growth rates were lower because these were drought years. Yet the farm distress narrative has gained in momentum. The reason becomes clear when one looks at food inflation statistics -- it has continuously declined from double digit figures under the last phase of United Progressive Alliance (UPA) II government and has entered negative territory in the recent period. Put otherwise, food prices have fallen. A healthy production growth accompanied by a crash in prices has dealt a body blow to the viability of agriculture as an economic activity. Anecdotal accounts from across the country suggest that far from incomes doubling, farmers are finding it more and more difficult to even recover their cost of production.

A multitude of factors has contributed to this situation. India adopted inflation targeting as the anchor of its monetary policy under the present government. Food items are the biggest component of the Consumer Price Index basket. Global food prices have been declining. Demonetisation and the Goods and Service Tax disrupted economic activity in the informal sector, which seems to have left a lasting effect on food prices. To be sure, the government has tried to undo the damage by announcing a significant hike in Minimum Support Prices earlier this year, but this has not arrested the deflation in farm prices so far. The implications of the viability crisis in agriculture are far from over.

THE HINDU, DELHI 30-12-2018

Lifelines beyond farm loan waivers

Kirankumar Vissa

In addition to reforming the credit system, agriculture should be made profitable

Rural agrarian distress is firmly at the centre of the national discourse today, triggered by the recent Assembly election results in the Hindi heartland as well as continuous farmer agitations in the past two years (picture). Just a month ago, the farmers' march in Delhi highlighted the reality of their deprivation, anger and resolve. Quite remarkably, their presence rallied the urban middle classes to march in solidarity, and leaders of major political parties to pledge support.

Cry of distress

A farm loan waiver was among the first steps taken by the three new governments in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, and has understandably set off a debate about its usefulness. In fact, this is only the latest round of loan waivers. Since 2014, there have been similar moves in Telangana, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, which are States run by various parties. The political system is essentially responding to a cry of distress by addressing the direct point of pain. It is their mounting debt burden that is pushing farmers to despair and suicides. The NSSO Situation Assessment Survey of Agricultural Households (2013) shows that 52% of farming households are indebted, with rates as high as 89-92% in some States. The quantum of debt has increased enormously, especially from informal sources. Indebtedness has become the elephant in the room that cannot be ignored.

A loan waiver is only an element of immediate relief. It is an acknowledgment that farmers have been pushed into debt due to the systemic failures of the government. The burden on farmers on account of just three items (lack of compensation during drought and disasters, the failures of the crop insurance scheme, and the deficit due to prices falling below the announced Minimum Support Prices) runs to tens of thousands of crores every season. Farmer organisations can justifiably claim that it is the nation that is indebted to the farmers, and not the other way around.

Bill to tackle indebtedness

But the key questions are: how can one ensure that its benefit reaches small and marginal cultivators who are the ones who really require relief? And how does one guarantee that the same situation is not replayed five years later? Repeated loan waivers used every few years as election sops may be in the interest of political parties but are not in the interest of farmers. Immediate relief should be accompanied by a long-term systemic solution to indebtedness.

The unique aspect of the ongoing farmers' movement is that their demand goes beyond a one-time loan waiver — they want enactment of a law for freedom from indebtedness. The Bill, which has been developed by the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee, incorporates two key elements of

reform: a functional institutional credit system which is accessible and accountable to all cultivators, and protection from debt trap in bad years.

First, it guarantees all farmer access to institutional credit; this covers not only land-owning farmers but also sharecroppers, tenants, adivasi and women farmers, and animal-rearers. It requires the registration of all cultivators and providing them Kisan credit cards. This is critical because marginal and landless farmers are mostly excluded from institutional credit, thereby putting them at the mercy of predatory lending by moneylenders and input dealers. Tenant farmers who lease land from other land owners are especially vulnerable. A study by Rythu Swarajya Vedika in June 2018 showed that 75% of farmer suicides in Telangana are by tenant farmers. The NSSO Situation Assessment Survey (2013) showed that the average debt from institutional sources for small and marginal farmers was only ₹17,570 per household, and ₹1,41,804 for medium and large farmers. The Reserve Bank of India did issue guidelines in 2014 for extending loans to Bhoomi Heen Kisan (landless farmers) and for a debt-swapping scheme to convert informal loans of farmers into bank loans, but they have remained on paper.

Second, it establishes farmers' distress and disaster relief commissions at the national and State levels, based on the model of Kerala's Farmers' Debt Relief Commission. Based on incidences of natural disasters, extensive pest attack and such calamities, the commission can recommend declaration of certain areas or crops as distress-affected in any particular year. Thereafter, it has the power to order measures of debt relief, which may include loan rescheduling, interest waiver, one-time settlement, discharge of debt in instalments, or, in an extreme situation, immediate discharge of debt. The State-level commission is also empowered to pass orders regarding non-institutional loans of distress-affected farmers.

The principle is that farmers who suffer losses due to circumstances entirely out of their control deserve to be protected. Given that agriculture is a key national enterprise, the concepts of limited liability and bankruptcy protection need to be adapted to the farming sector. This approach provides targeted protection to distressed farmers when they require it, rather than allowing debt, distress and suicides to accumulate until an election year. At present, crop insurance with its inadequate coverage and payout is unable to fulfil that role, but distress relief would include any payout from crop insurance.

Act on solutions

In addition to reforming the credit system, agriculture should be made profitable by ensuring fair remunerative prices, lowering the cost of cultivation, and promoting viable farmer collectives and sustainable models of agriculture.

The challenge before political parties and governments is to deliver on the institutional solutions demanded by farmers. The farming community is not likely to relent if governments adopt a business-as-usual approach and kick the can down the road for the next term.

AFGHANISTAN TIMES, KABUL 30-12-2018**120,000 tons of commodities transited from Iran's Chabahar Port to Afghanistan****AT Monitoring desk**

KABUL: Some 120,000 tons of commodities were transited to Afghanistan from southeastern Iranian Port of Chabahar over the past 14 months, according to deputy head of Ports and Maritime Organization of Iran.

Mohammad-Ali Hassanzadeh said that the shipments to the Port of Chabahar, mostly wheat and cereal, are loaded in four Indian ports.

Referring to a meeting on ways to implement Chabahar Agreement, he said that determining the transportation corridors and agreeing on executive protocols on port, road and customs areas were among the main achievements of the trilateral meeting of Iran, India and Afghanistan.

It is rare in Iran and the entire region that a port can render both transit and transshipment services at the same time, Hassanzadeh said, adding that having the shortest distance with Asia-Europe shipping line and bordering with Afghanistan, Chabahar Port enjoys an exemplary position enabling it to render both transit and transshipment services.

Based on statistics, India trades nearly 15 million tons of commodities with Russia and commonwealth of independent states (CIS), part of which is expected to be transited via the Port of Chabahar, the official said.

With the completion of the first phase of development plan of Chabahar Port, the capacity of this port grew from 2.5 to 8.5 million tons a year so that it plays a significant role in transit of commodities from India to Afghanistan.

AFGHANISTAN TIMES, KABUL 26-12-2018**Afghanistan plans first hybrid power project, to add 340 KW to grid**

KABUL: An accord for building high voltage solar-wind hybrid power project in Nangarhar has been signed and supply to the provincial grid will increase by 340 kilowatts.

Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development signed in a project implementation agreement with South Korea and United Nation Development Program (UNDP) on Wednesday to build Afghanistan's first ever hybrid power project in eastern Nangarhar province.

Minister of Rural Rehabilitation and Development Mujiburrahman Karimi said the project with a capacity of 340-kw will contain 200 solar boards and 140 hydro turbines. The hybrid project will provide 2,000 families with access to electricity in different villages of Dar-e-Noor district of Nangarhar and will be completed within 15 months.

He stated that this project will totally cost 340 million afghanis, funded by South Korea and UNDP.

Beside 2,000 families, 31 mosques, seven schools, two health clinics and 20 small enterprises will get benefit from this project, he noted.

MoRRD plans to cover 55 boarder districts through the project of durable energy programs in the country, which will total cost \$230 million.

AFGHANISTAN TIMES, KABUL 24-12-2018**Afghanistan implements 235 irrigation projects in 2018**

KABUL: Afghanistan has implemented as many as 235 irrigation projects in 2018, benefitting over 1.2 million people in 34 provinces, the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock said on Sunday.

According to a statement, Irrigation and Natural Resources Deputy of MAIL Hashmatullah Ghafari during a press conference said that MAIL succeeded to implement 235 irrigation projects included canals, dams, water reservation and water networks at total cost of 2.9 billion afghanis in 34 provinces in the solar year of 1397.

He said that 1.2 million people and 51 hectares of lands benefited through the running of mentioned projects. Running of aforementioned project prevented wasting of water, before nearly 50 percent of water was wasting, he added. After implementation of these projects wasting of water prevented by 35 percent, he noted. MAIL has started practical work over Zamindawar, Andkhoy and Khoshtepa canals.

He elaborated that the Khoshtepa canal is one of the biggest irrigation project, which its survey, design and economic studies of that was signed with USAID last week. This canal length is 250-km and will cover 2.5 million acres of agriculture lands in Kunduz, Balkh and Jawzjan provinces.

Also the work of survey of Musa Qala and Zamin Dawar canals have been started, which the Musa Qala dam with the capacity of 290 cubic meters water in each hour will be built and it will cover 11850 hectares of lands, he mentioned.

He stated that similar Zamin Dawar canal with the capacity of five cubic meter water in very secant will cover 8,209 acres. The allocation for Musa Qala dam and Zamin Dawar canals is over 247 million afs, which their survey will be completed in early September 2019.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 29-12-2018**Russian companies keen to explore opportunities****PPI**

KARACHI: Some 200 Russian companies are keen to explore opportunities in Pakistan, a top Russian leader said during a special meeting at Karachi Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI) on Friday.

Trade Representative of Russia, Yury Kozlov addressing the same meeting revealed that bilateral trade between Pakistan and Russia improved to \$660 million during 10 months of 2018 which is expected to reach around \$750-800m by year end.

Russia has also offered its assistance to expand the production capacity of the Pakistan Steel Mills.

Pakistan and Russia are currently cooperating in numerous projects including the construction of north and south gas pipeline from Karachi to Lahore besides working on a 600MW project at Jamshoro Power Plant, he added.

He added that bilateral trade between the neighbours is huge potential but it has not grown at the desired pace due to a lack of direct banking channels.

In this regard, he said that the State Bank of Pakistan and the Central Bank of Russian Federation signed an MoU in January, but the progress was too slow as not much has happened since then; therefore, the central banks of both countries will have to act more energetically.

Deputy Trade Representative of Russia Ruslan Aliev, KCCI President Junaid Esmail Makda, Vice President Asif Sheikh Javaid, KCCI's sub-committee Chairman for Diplomatic Missions and Embassies Liaison Shamoon Zaki and Managing Committee members also attended the meeting.

While handing over CDs carrying presentations of 200 Russian companies and details of the exhibitions scheduled to be staged in Russia throughout the year, the Russian delegate said that these companies are keen to explore opportunities in Pakistan whereas the business and industrial community of the Chamber should look into the possibility of participating in numerous trade exhibitions in Russia.

He further asked the KCCI to send a trade delegation to Russia with a view to enhance the existing trade and investment cooperation between the two countries.

Earlier President KCCI Junaid Esmail Makda, in his remarks, expressed concerns over nominal trade volume between the two countries which stood at around \$600m in 2017 as Pakistan exported goods worth \$280.69m while the imports increased to \$310.94m during the said period.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 28-12-2018

Cabinet approves plan to float yuan-denominated 'Panda bonds'

Mubarak Zeb Khan

ISLAMABAD: The federal cabinet approved a strategy to issue so-called 'Panda bonds' in the Chinese market to raise foreign exchange from global markets, though the size of the issue has not been released at the moment. The bonds will be denominated in Chinese yuan.

The cabinet meeting headed by Prime Minister Imran Khan approved the strategy on Thursday.

Official Spokesperson to Finance Ministry Dr Khaqan Najeeb told Dawn that the Panda bond has been finalised "after several

rounds of discussions with Chinese banks, investment groups, regulatory authorities in China and stock exchange and traditional financial advisers."

"They will help government diversify investor base of capital market issuance and provide a source of raising renminbi (RMB)."

Size of issue not yet known

The spokesperson said the size, tenor and pricing would be determined on the market response at the time of issuance, which is to be done in several rounds.

"A good response is expected considering the interest shown by Chinese banks and investment groups," the spokesperson added.

The size of the issue has yet to be determined, but a source in the finance ministry said it will be around \$1 billion. It will be in instalments, the source said, adding it will provide the government a space to move and diversify from US dollars into RMB, as well as providing cover to pay for imports from China.

At the moment, a swap facility exists to settle payments between buyers and sellers in China and Pakistan, but it has seen virtually zero utilisation. It is not known yet how the funds raised from the Panda bond flotation will be utilised in bilateral trade between the two countries.

The Chinese yuan cannot be settle payments with countries other than China.

In 2013, the State Bank had purchased a \$1.5bn worth of Chinese yuan and sold them in forex markets in the far east in exchange for US dollars to shore up the reserves.

That option may still be available, otherwise the government will have to play a more proactive role in urging local traders to use the yuan to pay for imports from China to make productive use of the proceeds of the Panda bonds.

Market sources have been expecting up to \$2.2bn worth of Panda bonds to be floated in two separate flotations of late.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 17-12-2018

Blueprint for boosting economy formally submitted to IMF

Khaleeq Kiani

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan has formally submitted to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) its Memorandum of Economic and Financial Policies (MEFP) envisaging macroeconomic stabilisation graduating into growth strategy over the next three years.

"Yes, we have given it (MEFP) to the IMF," confirmed Finance Minister Asad Umar when approached. "It's under discussion" he told Dawn and declined to go into further details saying "they (IMF) may have something to add and come back to us".

Sources said the government under the MEFP plans a fiscal adjustment of about 2.5per cent of GDP in three years — almost the same as the last Fund programme ending September 2016 — to bring down fiscal deficit to about 4pc at the end of 36-month

programme. This time, however, the programme implementation would be front-loaded compared to relatively balanced implementation schedule of the last programme. "Most of the pain would be immediate this time in the form of revenue measures and energy pricing," an official said.

Officials say the Fund has never proposed specific tax measures

In absolute terms, the adjustment would entail more than Rs1 trillion of additional fiscal space with a combination of increased revenues and reduced expenditures. Under the plan, the government will have to gradually reduce current addition of Rs30bn per month in the energy sector circular debt and bring it to zero within first two years of the programme besides addressing the bleeding of other public sector entities (PSEs). This will be followed by a long route to address the old debt stock of the PSEs.

On top of that, the government is also committing a series of taxation measures to increase revenues while the IMF wants new areas, like agriculture, real estate and others, to be brought under effective tax net to address the chronic problem of low tax to GDP ratio.

The sources said an IMF mission was expected to return to Islamabad after Christmas holidays for finalising the bailout package so that it could be taken up with the Fund executive board for approval. The mission had left Islamabad on November 20, leaving the talks inconclusive as Pakistan authorities were still unprepared to finalise the adjustment sequencing including circular debt capping plan, creation of Sarmaya Pakistan holding company to address structural reforms relating to PSEs.

In background discussions, officials said the IMF never proposed specific tax measures being reported in the media like increase in GST, income tax, etc., and highlighted broader issue of reducing budget deficit to about 3.5pc of GDP in three years, arguing that Pakistan's tax to GDP ratio was the lowest among the peers and even lower than Bangladesh despite reasonable untapped potential and its existing tax system was regressive with minimal contribution from direct taxes.

The officials said IMF's Resident Representative Teresa Daban Sanchez may remain in electronic contact with the government authorities and the IMF high-ups even during upcoming holidays even though the fund teams working on MEFP would not be available.

They said the two sides were in agreement that while tightening the fiscal and monetary policies, expenditure as percentage of GDP should be increased for social safety nets to ensure poor people remain unhurt as the tough fiscal adjustment comes into place.

The official said the authorities have been explained that they would have to navigate through changed geo-political circumstances for which they would have to produce bankable fiscal and monetary plans that could be advocated by the IMF mission and the teams on merit before the executive board for approval.

The authorities have been trying to gain time to see if the IMF's insistence on upfront implementation of fiscal and monetary

adjustment plans could be minimised through alternative financing plans but that was no more an option, the sources said, adding that they had to finally submit the MEFP to the Fund last week.

The sources said the Fund was tough this time on independent monetary policy but because of capacity constraints the monetary policy graduation to complete inflation targeting would be completed by 2020 in view of a major brain drain in recent years.

Difficulties have also stemmed from poor performance of the Federal Board of Revenue in the first five months of the current financial year that witnessed more than Rs110bn shortfall in revenue collection against the target. This necessitates not only steps to recuperate the lost ground in almost half of the year but also add on to that to meet tough targets being negotiated with the IMF.

This will be on top of an earlier adjustment of almost 2.1pc (about Rs800bn) introduced by the PTI government in September supplementary budget followed by about Rs120bn and Rs225bn additional adjustment in gas and electricity rates, respectively, together making almost 0.9pc of GDP.

Another round of energy price increase has to follow soon, beginning in January to ensure 100pc recovery of gas and electricity costs from consumers to reduce burden on the budget.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 26-12-2018

IMF talks

THERE are indications that the government's ongoing talks with the IMF for a bailout may be heading towards an impasse.

What is clearer is that, whether the talks stall or not, the rulers are moving towards a sharp adjustment that will require them to raise taxes and cut current expenditures, possibly necessitating a reduction in the size of government, and an effort to at least partially roll back some of its provincial transfers under the NFC award.

Steep political costs are involved, and time for making a decision is running out. The billions of dollars borrowed from 'friendly countries' to shore up the balance of payments might delay the decision, but there is no escaping the tough choices that lie ahead.

At the moment, it seems that the government has procured some time, thanks to the deposits from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with word going around of further support from China. It intends to use the time to try and give a boost to exports and remittances and engineer an improvement in the external account.

But the headwinds should not be underestimated. Boosting exports through subsidy payments on gas carries a trade-off that the government may not be able to afford for much longer. And while continued depreciations of the exchange rate may produce a short-lived boost in exports, it will elevate the size of the external debt, and make imports more expensive.

In short, turning around the external sector using only tools such as the exchange rate and subsidies can be a self-defeating policy — it can never be a substitute for sound reforms.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 31-12-2018**CB keeps policy rates unchanged***Inflation to remain below 5%, GDP to pick up in 2019***Rupee depreciates by 15.9%**

The Monetary Board of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, at its last meeting decided to maintain policy interest rates at their current levels.

Accordingly, the Standing Deposit Facility Rate (SDFR) and Standing Lending Facility Rate (SLFR) of the Central Bank will remain at 8 per cent and 9 per cent, respectively.

The Board considered current and expected developments in the domestic economy and the domestic financial markets as well as the global economic environment with the broad aim of stabilising inflation at mid single digit levels in the medium term to enable the economy to achieve its potential growth.

As per the provisional estimates of the Department of Census and Statistics (DCS), the Sri Lankan economy recorded a modest real GDP growth of 2.9 per cent, year-on-year, during the third quarter of 2018, compared to the revised growth of 3.6 per cent in the second quarter of 2018. As per the available economic indicators and other economic developments, real GDP growth is likely to be low in the fourth quarter of 2018 as well, before picking up gradually in 2019.

The continued low economic growth reemphasises the need for implementing broad based structural reforms without further delay.

The reduction of the Statutory Reserve Ratio (SRR) at the last monetary policy review in November 2018 released around Rs. 90 billion of rupee liquidity to the banking system. However, the liquidity deficit has widened thereafter, and the Central Bank continued its open market operations (OMOs) cautiously to manage liquidity on overnight, short term and long term basis as appropriate.

In spite of the increased cost of funds and tight liquidity conditions, the year-on-year growth of credit to the private sector accelerated since September 2018, partly reflecting the private sector advancing its activities in anticipation of measures by the government and the Central Bank to curb excessive import growth.

Headline inflation, based on both the National Consumer Price Index (NCPI) and the Colombo Consumer Price Index (CCPI), and remained in low single digit levels. Core inflation also remained subdued thus far in 2018.

Recent downward adjustments to fuel prices and selected administratively determined prices, as well as the reduction of Special Commodity and telecommunication levies, along with the ongoing recovery in the agriculture sector are expected to impact favourably on inflation in the near term.

Volatile global commodity prices, possible weather related disruptions to domestic supply chains due to unpredictable weather patterns, and the possible pass-through of the effect of the rupee depreciation in recent months to domestic prices pose risks to the inflation outlook.

The sense of comfort created by the billions in deposits from friendly countries, which are landing in the State Bank, must not give rise to complacency.

The government really has no other choice but to undertake a sharp adjustment in the fiscal accounts, follow up with painful reforms to stem the bleeding in the state-owned enterprises, and reduce the debt-to-GDP ratio. It must realise that there is no shortcut, and there is no easy way of doing this.

More than ever before, the urgent need for a clear policy direction is now upon us, while the government gives the appearance of still being stuck in campaign mode.

It is important that populist promises now be curtailed, and the focus shift towards addressing the growing fiscal and external imbalances in the country.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 29-12-2018**How the economy performed in 2018***Stability in the financial sector main worry*

This paper recently carried out an opinion poll to get a sense of what went right and what didn't in 2018. Respondents included some 37 prominent businessmen, the presidents of four leading trade bodies, CEOs of banks, non-financial banking institutions, insurance companies; economists and researchers. The positives included some major growth drivers: exports, public spending on infrastructure, remittance and agriculture. Sixty-two percent of respondents pointed out that robust export (62.8 percent) propelled the economy forward in 2018. Inward remittance grew a healthy 32.43 percent and increase in public spending on infrastructure was significant at 54.05 percent. The overall political stability in the country helped move the economy forward, but it could have done much better if nagging bottlenecks could be addressed.

Principal among these are a lack of good governance, the high cost of doing business, low domestic investment, and container congestion at Chittagong port. Bangladesh has, unfortunately, been consistently scoring low scores in the cost of doing business and this situation has to be addressed if we want more businesses (both local and foreign) to register companies. The bottleneck at Chittagong port has proved to be very stubborn because of a lack of policy initiative and the situation will pose a major challenge for the incoming government in 2019, especially in light of the fact that neighbouring India has been granted transit rights at Chittagong port and the volume of container movement is set to rise significantly in the coming year.

Business community leaders hope that stability will remain in the post-election period and there is much concern about whether the next government will take concrete steps to bring back stability in the financial sector. Nearly 46 percent respondents are looking forward to a better business environment. Fewer respondents hoped for a stable energy supply, timely completion of mega projects that would help alleviate traffic congestion—both of which could help put the economy on a much firmer footing in 2019.

The current projections show that inflation, on average, will remain below 5 per cent in 2019 and stabilise in the range of 4-6 per cent thereafter with appropriate policy adjustments.

The trade deficit widened further in the first ten months of 2018 with the expansion in import expenditure outpacing the growth of export earnings. However, a moderation in import expenditure is expected, in response to the measures adopted to curb imports of motor vehicles and non-essential goods as well as the impact of the depreciation of the rupee.

While earnings from tourism continued to grow, a slowdown in workers' remittances was observed. In the financial account, both the government securities market and the Colombo Stock Exchange experienced net outflows of foreign investment, although marginal inflows have been observed in December.

The widening trade deficit, tight conditions in the global markets and excessive speculation in the domestic market exerted pressure on the exchange rate, and the Sri Lankan rupee depreciated by 15.9 per cent against the US dollar thus far during 2018 up to 27 December.

Meanwhile, gross official reserves amounted to US dollars 7 billion at end November 2018, providing an import cover of 3.7 months.

Although inflation remains subdued and economic growth remains below potential, the Monetary Board was of the view that it is appropriate to continue the current monetary policy stance to stabilise overall economic conditions and domestic financial markets in a context where there has been an uptick in private sector credit as well as continued pressure on external reserves.

Accordingly, the Monetary Board decided to maintain the Standing Deposit Facility Rate (SDFR) and Standing Lending Facility Rate (SLFR) of the Central Bank at their current levels.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 31-12-2018

Colombo Port creates record handling 7 mn TEU for 2018

The Colombo Port has created a unique all time record handling land mark 7 million TEU for 2018.

The Ports Authority says that reaching the seven million TEU container volume is a major milestone in the history of Colombo's container handling operation. Colombo Port was also adjudged as the fastest growing port in the world and even ahead of competing ports such as Singapore, the ports of Dubai, Fujairah, Salalah in the Gulf and Tanjung Pelepas in Malaysia in the first half of 2018.

Meanwhile Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister, Minister of Ports, Shipping and Southern Development Sagala Ratnayaka made familiarization visit to the port of Colombo, recently.

The Minister visited the Chairman's office, Harbour Master's Office, Pilot Station, JCT Administration Building and several other units of the Colombo Port.

The Minister was accompanied by the Secretary to the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Southern Development Dr. Prakrama Dissanayake, Managing Director of the Sri Lanka Ports Authority Athula Hewawitharana and Director Operations of Sri Lanka Ports Authority Jayantha Perera. Several Executive directors and employees of SLPA were present at this visit.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 28-12-2018

DRUG BUSTS TO BE FURTHER INTENSIFIED

President Maithripala Sirisena has given instructions to the relevant authorities to further intensify raids targeting illegal drug dealers.

After President Sirisena took over the Police Department under the Defence Ministry, raids related to the illegal drug trade have been strengthened and a significant improvement in the detection of illegal drugs during the last two months is reported.

During the ten months from January 1, 2018 to October 31 the total amount of heroin seized was 184.6 kilogrammes.

However, after initiating a special programme to intensify drug raids from November 1 on the instructions of President Sirisena, a record 280 kilogrammes of heroin had been seized in a period of two months. The Police Department has also filed legal action against drug dealers arrested in connection with these detections.

Within the past two months 15,530 suspects have been detained for illegal drug dealing and legal action has been initiated against them.

Under the guidance of the President several programmes have been initiated with the aim of saving the future generation from illicit drugs and the President personally assesses their progress regularly.

The expectation of the President is to take every possible action to totally eliminate illegal drugs and additional powers will be granted to police to carry out necessary action efficiently. The necessary measures to further strengthen laws to combat illicit drug trade are being currently done under President's instructions, the President's Media Division said.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 27-12-2018

Nepal and India agree on energy banking

BIBEK SUBEDI, Kathmandu

Nepal and India have agreed to set up an energy banking mechanism that will prevent spilling of electricity generated in the country when production surpasses demand, a situation the domestic energy sector is expected to face in a few years' time.

Energy banking involves exchanging electricity for electricity instead of cash. Under this mechanism, one country exports electricity to the other when it has a surplus, and imports back the same amount of energy when it has a deficit.

Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA), the state-owned power utility, and Central Electricity Authority (CEA) of India on

Wednesday agreed to the draft of the guidelines on power exchange. The draft will be presented for approval before the energy secretary-level joint steering committee (JSC) meeting scheduled to be held in January.

“This agreement is a milestone in the country’s energy sector as it will secure the market for the surplus energy we are on track to produce within a few years,” said NEA Managing Director Kulman Ghising, without sharing the details of the draft.

“We will supply electricity to India during the wet season when the domestic output is high and import it back during the winter when domestic production is much lower than the demand.”

Nepal had long been advocating energy banking saying that seasonal complementarities of demand and supply of electricity in Nepal and India will make the mechanism a suitable model of power transfer. As a majority of power plants in Nepal are run-of-the-river type, they generate a large amount of electricity during monsoon. The surplus coincides with a sharp rise in demand for electricity in the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Punjab due to increased power consumption in the farm sector.

Electricity generation in Nepal drops by more than 50 percent in winter due to low discharge in the snow-fed rivers, making power import from India inevitable.

Indian officials present in the meeting were also positive about Nepal’s proposal on the operational modality of the new Butwal Gorakhpur Cross-Border Transmission Line Project.

“We told our Indian counterparts that we will use the power line to import electricity for initial 5 to 7 years and then use it for export,” said Prabal Adhikari, chief of the power trading department of the NEA, who attended the meeting. “Indian officials were positive about our proposal.”

Based on the proposed operational modality, the upcoming meeting will decide how funds will be arranged for construction of the power line.

Meanwhile, a separate meeting of the Nepal-India power exchange committee--headed by NEA chief Ghising and CEA head Prakash Maskey--decided not to increase the price of electricity that Nepal is importing from India.

“As the Indian government has recently introduced the guidelines on cross-border electricity trade, we convinced our counterparts to continue with the existing tariffs until the new guidelines take effect,” said Adhikari.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 17-12-2018

Shaking heads

New law avoiding competitive bidding could breed more corruption

Last week, the government planned a new law that would enable it to bypass the public procurement process and pick developer

for projects above Rs 50billion without bids. The law, drafted by the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) to govern the construction of national priority project, consists of a controversial provision authorising the government to select developers for projects that would require investment of Rs. 50 billion or more without competitive bidding. As per the draft bill prepared for national priority projects, the project may be awarded to a developer with direct negotiation in case no proposals are received during the public procurement process initiated by the authorities, when the project is based on a new concept and technology, and when the estimated cost of the project is Rs50 billion or more.

This latest wave of malfeasance is certainly worrisome as the provision leaves ample room for tender corruption. What’s more, this new provision does not guarantee that project execution will be expedited and it only raises questions about the intentions of the government.

Often times, public procurement processes are complicated. There will be questions about their transparency, too and they tend to be limited. But, we need to follow them for a reason: to ensure that tenders are awarded fairly and are not tainted by corruption. The Oli government’s rationale for pushing for the law is ‘it takes a lot of time to select the developer through global bidding process’. But that is not a strong enough reason to bypass the bidding process, especially as it focuses on competition, which would give all applicants an equal chance. The minute competitive bidding is bypassed, the environment for good companies being a part of the project gets significantly affected. Competition also encourages small-scale bidders and entrepreneurs to pitch ideas in the procurement process. The government is discarding the opportunity to cultivate a platform that encourages local bidders. Further down the road, such a practice will encourage favouritism, trading in influence, and cronyism. Without competition, avenues for creativity are replaced with corruption.

As it is, there is an acute lack of oversight of the implementation of many large infrastructural projects including ambitious projects like the Kathmandu-Nijgadh Fast Track and the BudhiGandaki Hydropower Project. Needless to re-iterate, a corruption-riddled picking of developers for projects leads to poor project performance as it will discourage timely reviews and subsequently make the delay of the delivery of benefits to the taxpayers inevitable.

A prime minister’s job is to steer the country to development as promised. If there are any shortcomings in the Public Procurement Act, those could be amended. It becomes unbecoming of the post when attention is shifted to not making stringent laws, but towards directly picking tenders for projects. Instead of say, stepping up capacity building programs or promoting an e-procurement system, this move from the government is simply a move in the opposite direction. It is ironic that at a time when the government has repeatedly been mentioning it would not tolerate corruption, it is introducing a provision that, if endorsed, will be the epitome of corruption.

**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 TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI 24-12-2018**N-capable Agni-IV missile test-fired successfully**

TNN

India on Sunday test fired the nuclear capable Agni-IV ballistic missile, with a strike range of 4,000 km, as part of a “user trial in operational configuration” by the Strategic Forces Command (SFC).

The test comes soon after the country’s most ambitious missile, the over 5,000 km range Agni-V, underwent its second pre-induction trial in a canisterised version on December 10.

The first pre-induction trial of this intercontinental ballistic missile, which brings the whole of China as well as parts of Europe and Africa under its strike range, took place in January after four developmental trials since April 2012.

The Agni-IV, which has suffered some glitches in the past, was tested for the seventh time on Sunday. The tri-Service SFC already has Prithvi-II (350 km), Agni-I (700 km), Agni-II (2,000 km) and Agni-III (3,000 km) missile units.

DRDO officials described the surface-to-surface Agni-IV missile test as “a complete success, which met all mission objectives”.

THE HINDU, DELHI 17-12-2018**Navy to helm centre on maritime security****Dinakar Peri**

The Information Fusion Centre will serve countries that have White Shipping Information Exchange agreements with India

The Navy will formally inaugurate the Information Fusion Centre (IFC) for the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) later this week.

Through this Centre, information on “white shipping”, or commercial shipping, will be exchanged with countries in the region to improve maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean.

“The IFC-IOR is established with the vision of strengthening maritime security in the region and beyond, by building a common coherent maritime situation picture and acting as a maritime information hub for the region,” a defence official said on condition of anonymity.

Gurugram headquarters

The IFC has been established at the Navy’s Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) in Gurugram, which is the single point centre linking all the coastal radar chains to generate a seamless real-time picture of the nearly 7,500-km coastline.

“All countries that have already signed white shipping information exchange agreements with us, about 21 of them, are IFC partners,” another official said.

“With the launch of the IFC, they now have the option of positioning liaison officers at the IFC for which we need to build up requisite infrastructure too. So we now start with their ‘virtual presence’,” the official said.

Against this backdrop, information exchange at the Centre would be initially undertaken by virtual means, telephone calls, faxes, e-mails and video conferencing. Subsequently, to enable better interconnection, quicker analysis of information and timely inputs, the IFC-IOR would host liaison officers from foreign countries.

“Additionally, the Centre would undertake conduct of exercises and training capsules in maritime information collection and sharing,” the first official stated.

Establishment of the IFR-IRO would ensure that the entire region is benefited by mutual collaboration and exchange of information and understanding the concerns and threats which are prevalent in the region.

Maritime network

In a related development, India has signed the ascension agreement to the Trans Regional Maritime Network (T-RMN) which facilitates information exchange on the movement of commercial traffic on the high seas. The multilateral construct comprises of 30 countries and is steered by Italy.

Commodore K.M. Ramakrishnan signed the agreement on behalf of the Indian Navy at the Italian Naval Headquarters in Rome last Monday.

AIS systems on ships

The information is available primarily through the Automatic Identification System (AIS) fitted on merchant ships with more than 300 gross registered tonnage as mandated by the International Maritime Organisation. The AIS information comprises name, MMSI number, position, course, speed, last port visited, destination and so on. This information can be picked up through various AIS sensors including coastal AIS chains and satellite based receivers.

“The Indian Navy is mandated to conclude white shipping information exchange agreements with 36 countries and three multi-national constructs,” the official added. Such multilateral agreements are necessitated due to the large traffic in the Indian Ocean which cannot be entirely monitored by any one nation.

HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 17-12-2018**India may cut US surveillance drone deal by half due to fund crunch**

The downsizing of the order will mean that the Indian Navy will have to prioritise the areas it wants to keep under surveillance using the SeaGuardian unmanned aerial vehicles.

Rahul Singh

India may prune by half a potential order to import hi-tech unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) from the United States due to

financial constraints, two government officials familiar with the Navy's modernisation plans said on Sunday.

Instead of pursuing the navy's original requirement of 22 MQ-9B SeaGuardian UAVs to boost its intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, India now plans to buy only 10 such systems under the US government's foreign military sales (FMS) programme, one of the officials cited above said on condition of anonymity.

The 22 UAVs, made by General Atomics, were estimated to cost \$2 billion. India began the FMS process in 2016 by issuing a Letter of Request (LOR) to the US.

"Responding to the LOR, the US has supplied us with the price and availability (P&A) data for the SeaGuardian systems. The navy has studied it and rationalised its requirement from 22 to 10 UAVs because of the cost and the requirement of the other services," said the second official, asking not to be named.

The Indian Air Force (IAF) is also keen to buy Predator Avenger UAVs from the US.

The downsizing of the order will mean that the navy will have to prioritise the areas it wants to keep under surveillance using the SeaGuardian UAVs, said a senior navy officer on condition of anonymity.

"We had arrived at a figure of 22 on the basis of our requirements. But we have to manage with the resources we have. The navy has several aerial surveillance platforms such P-8I aircraft, IL-38s, Dornier planes and other UAVs," he said.

A government-to-government deal does away with the need to float a tender. Such transactions may be complicated in their conception and execution but are more transparent to financial scrutiny.

"If financial constraints are there, then there's no choice but to order fewer UAVs," said military affairs expert Rear Admiral (retd) Sudarshan Shrikhande. The MQ-9B SeaGuardian systems will provide unmatched intelligence and surveillance capabilities to the navy, he said.

The navy currently operates a mix of Israeli-built Heron and Searcher UAVs for intelligence-gathering and surveillance. It has a vast area of responsibility in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) spanning millions of square kilometres, with warships being deployed to as far as the Persian Gulf to the Strait of Malacca and northern Bay of Bengal to the southeast coast of Africa.

With their range and endurance, SeaGuardian UAVs will provide India advanced capabilities for ocean surveillance, especially at a time when Chinese naval presence in the region has gone up. India's exclusive economic zone alone measures 2.4 million square kilometres, which is also the navy's responsibility.

Navy chief Admiral Sunil Lanba had highlighted the significance of the Indian Ocean earlier this month, calling it the navy's only front. "As we surge ahead in the 21st century, the attention of the entire world is focused on the Indian Ocean Region, where our navy is increasingly seen as a 'net security provider'...Our security strategy is aimed at providing a maritime environment

that is free from all forms of traditional and non-traditional threats to our national development," Lanba had said.

The P-8I planes, the mainstay of the navy's long-range maritime surveillance fleet, have also been imported from the US. India currently operates eight Boeing P-8I planes and four more will join the fleet by 2021.

General Atomics has also designed the electromagnetic aircraft launch and recovery system (EMALS), which is likely to be fitted on India's second Indigenous Aircraft Carrier (IAC-II).

The navy is getting more American equipment. India issued an LOR to the US government in November for 24 MH-60R Seahawk multirole helicopters under the FMS programme.

Since 2008, India has bought or ordered military equipment worth \$15 billion from the US. This includes C-130J special operations planes, C-17 transport aircraft and P-8I submarine hunter planes.

THE HINDU, DELHI 20-12-2018

ISRO's 'angry bird' takes to the skies

T.K. Rohit

Launched at 4.10 p.m., the satellite is primarily for the Air Force's communication purposes

An anxious ISRO Chairman K. Sivan on Wednesday watched the flight path of the GSLV-F11 intently as it soared into the evening sky carrying communication satellite GSAT-7A, meant to enhance the communication infrastructure of the Indian Air Force.

Three key factors had weighed on the minds of the launch team at ISRO — the weight of the satellite, changes made to the cryogenic stage and the second stage of the vehicle to increase payload capacity, and the possibility of a cyclone looming on the coast that finally changed track gave anxious moments to the team.

Heaviest satellite

In its Mk-II version, the GSLV with the indigenous cryogenic stage carried on board its heaviest satellite that weighed 2,250 kg, from the second launch pad of the Satish Dhawan Space Centre, SHAR, here at 4.10 p.m.

"[In] the vehicle, the second stage propellant loading has been increased from 37.5 tonnes to 40 tonnes, and cryogenic stage propellant loading has been increased from 12 tonnes to 15 tonnes along with enhanced thrust value for the cryogenic stage," Mr. Sivan said after the satellite was placed in a 'super synchronous transfer orbit', a little over 19 minutes after launch to enhance its life, pegged at eight years.

Though the Mission Control team remained tight-lipped about the purported use of the satellite, sources in ISRO and the Indian Air Force said the satellite would enhance the communication capabilities of IAF. "This is primarily for the Indian Air Force's communication purposes, such as ground to air communication," one of the sources told The Hindu. The satellite, being dubbed as

'angry bird' by some, is likely to enhance the range of communication and also aid in aircraft to aircraft communication.

"There is always further improvements in GSLV... in the coming GSLV F10s and F12 missions we are going to make bigger payload compartment to accommodate still bigger spacecraft and that is another important challenge in front of us and we are getting ready with that change as well to make sure that GSLV continues to remain very successful and rugged vehicle like PSLV," said S. Somanath, Director, Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre.

With ISRO ending the year on a high, having completed 17 missions, Mr. Sivan said he had a 'great gift' for his staff. "This year, we completed 17 missions. It is a very good number. The gift is... next year, we are going to have around 32 missions."

Force multiplier

"It will be a major booster and force multiplier for the Indian Air Force. When we talk of a network-centric warfare, such type of systems will help achieve full network centricity. From that perspective, it's a major value addition to the IAF," said Ajay Lele, Senior Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA).

THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI 29-12-2018

Rs 10,000 crore plan to send 3 Indians to space by 2022

Surendra Singh, TNN

NEW DELHI: Giving a boost to the country's maiden human spaceflight programme, the Union Cabinet on Friday approved a budget of Rs 10,000 crore for India's Gaganyaan project, whose 2022 deadline was fixed by PM Narendra Modi during his I-Day speech from the ramparts of Red Fort on August 15, 2018.

"The Union Cabinet has approved the Gaganyaan project under which a three-member crew will be sent to space for at least seven days," Union minister Ravi Shankar Prasad announced at a press conference on Friday.

The manned mission will help India become the fourth country in the world after Russia, US and China to send humans to space.

The ambit of the cooperation includes giving ISRO access to space hospital facilities in France and combining the expertise of the two agencies in fields of space medicine, astronaut health monitoring, life support, radiation protection, space debris protection and personal hygiene systems, the president of the French space agency Jean-Yves Le Gall said.

Elated with the Cabinet decision, Isro chairman K Sivan told TOI on Friday, "We are happy that the government has approved the budget for the mission. It is an ambitious and mammoth exercise but Isro has taken up the challenge and we will meet the PM's 2022 deadline. In fact, we have been working on the project for the last four months. I have set up a team to work on the design

for the mission. The design work will be over by January. Thereafter, the realisation work will start."

Addressing a press conference after successfully launching ISRO's earth observation satellite HysIS and 30 other co-passengers into their designated orbits, Sivan, however, said the space agency may have to take outside help for some tests. HysIS means Hyper Spectral Imaging Satellite

Announcing the schedule for test launches before the final mission, the Isro chairman said, "We will launch two unmanned missions before the final mission. The first unmanned test-flight will be launched in December 2020. The second unmanned test will be conducted in July 2021 and finally the humanspace flight will be launched in December 2021."

On training of astronauts, Sivan said, "With the budget cleared for the mission, now we will work seriously on the training schedule of the crew, including the foreign training, if needed."

Earlier, Sivan, accompanied by minister of state for atomic energy and space Jitendra Singh, had made a presentation on the mission in Delhi explaining the process.

"A crew module carrying three Indians will be attached with a service module. Together, these two modules will comprise the orbital module that will be integrated with an advanced GSLV Mk III rocket. The rocket will take the crew to the low-earth orbit (300-400 km) where they will perform micro-gravity and other scientific experiments for a week," he had said.

For the return journey, the Isro chairman said, "The orbital module will reorient itself. The crew and service modules will get separated at 120km altitude. The crew module will apply aerobrake to reduce speed and parachutes will open just before the splashdown in the Arabian Sea off Gujarat. The return journey will take 36 minutes. In case of a technical problem, the module can land in the Bay of Bengal as a backup."

"The module will be the size of a small cubicle (3.4 m diameter) with a mass of 7 tonnes," he added.

The Isro chief said the manned mission, preparation for which started way back in 2004, "will provide employment to 15,000 people".

On crew selection, he had said, "The spacesuit is ready. The crew members will be jointly selected by the IAF and Isro after which they will be trained for two-three years. We will send them to a training facility in Bengaluru. We are also consulting Rakesh Sharma (first Indian cosmonaut to go to space in 1984) for the mission."

During the presentation, Union minister Jitendra Singh had said, "We won't call it a manned mission as the PM has said in his I-Day speech that a girl can also be sent to space. This programme will totally be an indigenous mission. However, we can send the selected crew for training abroad."

During the presentation, the minister had told TOI, "We are not sending robots or animals to space first. The reason being there are several advantages of sending humans to space. They can do several experiments in space and experience the changes in

human behaviour, including psychological and biological changes.”

Till date, Isro has spent Rs 173 crore in developing critical technologies for the human spaceflight. Earlier this year, Isro had carried out a crucial pad abort trial on July 5 in which a 12.5-ton crew module was tested to make sure the crew can be rescued safely in case of an accident on the launchpad.

Isro has been working on some critical technologies for quite some time.

The budget approval will now fast-track the programme. Critical technologies needed for HSP include a crew module (CM), crew escape system (CES) and environmental control and life support system (ECLSS). An advanced version of the GSLV-MkIII is designated as the launch vehicle. Isro had flight-tested an earlier version of the crew module in December 2014.

THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI 30-12-2018

Isro to build 3 sets of rockets, crew modules for Gaganyaan

Chethan Kumar, TNN

BENGALURU: The Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro), which got a shot in its arm with the approval of Rs 10,000-crore budget for the human space mission on Friday, has a long way before executing the mission, with crucial human-rating of systems, including the rocket, yet to be achieved.

Human-rating says the system is capable of safely transporting humans. It also means it has adequate technology that efficiently protects crew in the event of any failure.

Chairman Sivan K told TOI: “There is a lot of work ahead of us. We could not have gone ahead without money being approved as the mission needs a lot of new testing and development that is cost sensitive.”

At least 50% of the Rs 10,000 crore will go into human-rating, while a new launch pad that can accommodate entry of astronauts will cost a fair bit.

“We have to build three sets of rockets, crew and service module. Although I don’t have the exact break-up of figures at this moment, building three GSLV-MK III launch vehicles and the other modules and conducting various human-rating tests will definitely use about 50% of the budget,” Sivan said.

Each set will be used for three missions — two unmanned missions planned for December 2020 and June-July 2021, and the actual mission by December 2021 or early 2022.

S Somnath, director, Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC), had in a recent presentation elaborated on some pending work.

“We’ve had several meetings on the roadmap for human-rating the launch vehicle. Since GSLV has been in active development since 2002-04, we had the vision that this could one day be used for the human mission,” he said.

Explaining that all systems for a space launch are designed with redundancies, he said a human-rated mission will need a much higher degree of redundancy. “The reliability targeted for human-rated launch vehicle is 0.99, which means statistically only 1 out of 100 can be unreliable. For the crew escape system, which is very crucial, we’re targeting greater than 0.998, that’s almost 100 reliability,” Somnath told TOI.

The escape system will boast of a recently included geometry, while work on parachute enlargement — as models tested so far have been scaled down version and the actual system will be bigger—and new architecture will be ready soon. “Rockets are autonomous after launch so we cannot tolerate any failure,” Somnath said.

The crew escape system is very crucial, with key tests, including the pad abort test done on July 5 this year.

“Even if one system fails, we’ll bring the crew back. The most important thing is failure detection and onboard intelligence that tells the system to abort. For this, new algorithms to go into the system will be ready soon. An indigenous computer and microprocessor will be used. Control systems, avionics and sensors are ready,” Somnath said.

Astronaut training

Sivan said astronaut selection and training, which will include establishment of new facilities, will also take up a considerable amount of the budget. “Some things need to be done, and this aspect of the project will use up about 10% of the budget,” Sivan said.

Isro is currently creating a framework for astronaut selection. The Institute of Aerospace Medicine has some systems in place for astronaut selection and training and India is looking at a pool of 30 astronauts from which the final crew will be selected.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 26-12-2018

Defence PSU orders down 33% amid push to pvt sector

Vijay Mohan

Tribune News Service

As the government gives an impetus to the private industry to manufacture equipment for the Armed Forces, the quantum of contracts awarded to Defence Public Sector Undertakings (DPSUs) has fallen by about 33 per cent over the past three years.

The value of capital contracts bagged by DPSUs in 2015-16 was Rs15,617 crore, which came down to Rs12,374 crore in 2016-17 and further fell to Rs10,475 crore in 2017-18, according to information placed by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) in Parliament this month.

On the other hand, the number of contracts awarded to DPSUs has flip-flopped from 22 in 2015-16 to eight in 2016-17 and 15 in 2017-18, the MoD data revealed.

There are nine DPSUs in the country that function under the Department of Defence Production in the MoD that manufacture weapons, ammunition, armoured vehicles, heavy vehicles, aircraft, helicopters, warships, submarines, missiles, electronic equipment, earth moving equipment and special alloys.

“The government is pursuing initiatives to achieve higher levels of indigenisation and self-reliance in the defence sector. This is sought to be achieved by harnessing the capabilities of both public and private sector industries in the country,” the ministry stated.

Towards this end, the number of items requiring an industrial licence has been reduced. A total of 394 licenses have been issued to 239 Indian companies for manufacture of defence items since 2001.

DPSUs and Ordnance Factories, which also function under the same department, have, as a policy, been outsourcing many of their requirements to medium and small-scale enterprises apart from large-scale industries.

However, based on Budget allocation to the Armed Forces for revenue expenditure, there has been a reduction in procurement of supplies by the services, which has resulted in proportionate reduction in procurement of input materials. Consequently, some supply orders placed in micro, small and medium enterprises have been cancelled or short-closed.

HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 26-12-2018

Logistic support pact with US naval ties

India signed the LEMOA, the first of the three foundational agreements proposed by Washington to deepen bilateral military cooperation, with the US in August 2016

Rahul Singh

A significant number of at sea replenishments have taken place between the Indian and United States navies in recent months, with the bilateral Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Association (LEMOA) being fully implemented, two government officials familiar with the move said on condition of anonymity.

India signed the LEMOA, the first of the three foundational agreements proposed by Washington to deepen bilateral military cooperation, with the US in August 2016.

Indian and US warships are being refuelled regularly by each other's tankers at sea, easing logistical constraints under the LEMOA legal framework, said one of the officials cited above.

“Our warship deployed in the Gulf of Aden for anti-piracy patrols was refuelled by a US tanker earlier this month. All issues relating to cash payment or the reciprocal provision of logistics support have been straightened out,” said the second official.

Amphibious transport dock USS Anchorage, with the embarked 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), arrived in Visakhapatnam on December 22 for a four-day port visit and was

provided supplies and services under the LEMOA framework, said a navy officer requesting not to be identified.

Top Indian and US Navy officials met for the 21st Executive Steering Group on bilateral naval cooperation in New Delhi on December 12 and underlined how the naval partnership was getting stronger with a special mention of the LEMOA.

Military affairs expert Rear Admiral (ret'd) Sudarshan Shrikhande said the full scope of LEMOA was being realised by the two navies in terms of reciprocal provision of logistics support, supplies and services and the pact would serve as a template for similar arrangements with other countries such as Russia.

India and the US signed the second foundational defence partnership agreement in September, signalling the deepening of a relationship that has warmed over the recent years. The Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (Comcasa) was signed by India and the US at the inaugural two-plus-two dialogue between their foreign and defence ministers.

Valid for 10 years, Comcasa aims to provide a legal framework for the transfer of highly sensitive communication security equipment from the US to India that will streamline and facilitate interoperability between their armed forces.

Comcasa was delayed for years as New Delhi bargained hard for getting its concerns addressed before inking the sensitive pact that would effectively mean opening up its military communications network to the US military.

Work on the third foundational agreement, Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), for sharing geospatial intelligence is yet to begin.

HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 17-12-2018

Joint military drills will help neighbourhood ties in India's neighbourhood

It would be more fitting if India and China take forward the much-touted “Wuhan Spirit” to putting in place a template to address the irritants that have bedevilled their relationship.

India and China are capping a year marked by a flurry of high-level contacts with engagements in two diverse and equally important areas. One hundred troops from each side are currently participating in the fortnight-long “Hand in Hand” war game at Chengdu, and by the time the drill is over, external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj and her Chinese counterpart Wang Yi will have held the first meeting of the high-level people-to-people and cultural exchange mechanism in New Delhi. Without a doubt, these contacts have been driven by the informal summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping in Wuhan in April, a meeting that did much to address the tensions that had characterised the relationship in the wake of last year's military standoff at Doklam near the Sikkim border. Mr Modi and Mr Xi met four times during the course of the year, and both countries appeared to have realised the importance of

pulling back from the brink and imparting a semblance of normalcy to their ties. In more recent months, these efforts have been given a further boost by Beijing because of the worsening relationship between China and the US, especially in the field of trade. These efforts have also come at a time when China has faced some pushback in several countries to its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative.

Better relations between New Delhi and Beijing will obviously spell greater stability in India's immediate neighbourhood and the rest of Asia. The two sides can work jointly to ensure a more multipolar world and even launch joint projects, such as the training of Afghan diplomats that was conducted in October. And peace on the disputed India-China border will help make the process of finding a solution to the issue less complicated.

However, this is not to say that everything is hunky dory in the bilateral relationship. China continues to block the listing of Pakistan-based terrorist Masood Azhar at the United Nations as well as India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group. It has also forged ahead with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor despite India's serious concerns about sovereignty issues. On its part, China has concerns about the Dalai Lama and the other India-based elements of the Tibetan leadership. Without a doubt, most of the contacts in the aftermath of the Wuhan Summit have been aimed at managing bilateral ties and placing them back on an even keel after Doklam. But it would be more fitting if the two sides take forward the much-touted "Wuhan Spirit" to putting in place a template to address the irritants that have bedevilled their relationship.

THE ASIAN AGE, NEW DELHI 20-12-2018

House panel should examine Rafale deal

The Public Accounts Committee of Parliament, which is mandated to look at how public money is spent, is reported to be preparing to take up crucial questions that form part of the Rafale fighter deal controversy, though there are some difficulties in the way.

The PAC chairman, senior Congress leader Mallikarjun Kharge, can bring a subject on to the agenda, and once Rafale is taken up, the PAC can summon any official, including the Prime Minister, to answer questions. For this reason alone the BJP members on the committee, who are the majority, may be expected to resist Mr Kharge's efforts.

But this is par for the course in parliamentary life. If the PAC chairman succeeds in having Rafale discussed before the Lok Sabha election, the committee can summon the Comptroller and Auditor-General and the attorney-general, who presented the government's case on this matter in the Supreme Court.

Indeed, the Rafale pricing issue is already before the CAG. It is to be hoped that the work has progressed sufficiently and the CAG can offer the PAC useful perspectives, if summoned. Any delays in the CAG's work can only further the government's purpose — if the government's actions and words before the Supreme Court is any guide.

The Rafale deal is among the largest government defence contracts in history and plausible suspicion of wrongdoing has been raised, especially by Congress president Rahul Gandhi. His words gain strength from former French President Francois Hollande, whose government signed the Inter-Governmental Agreement on Rafale with the Narendra Modi government.

The Supreme Court's December 14 verdict, which lets the government off the hook on key issues, appears to be based on a cavalier treatment of the known facts, and cannot bring closure to the raging controversy and suspicions of bribery, and on the way taxpayers' money has been spent.

A probe by a parliamentary committee will help to fill gaps and further our understanding. Ideally, a Joint Parliamentary Committee should be constituted. Parliament is the right forum to question the executive, regardless of whether the Supreme Court has gone over the matter. And in this case, the court's judgment cannot carry conviction.

It has made glaring factual mistakes in the pricing case, and in the matter of the selection of an industrialist with a poor financial and non-existent work record in the relevant field as a key offset partner (which theoretically can be a conduit for irregular payments).

Ironically, even a government that is grateful for the court's judgment was obliged to ask it to correct some factual inaccuracies in the order. It is also astonishing why the court did not ask why the industrialist in question was at all taken to France with Prime Minister Modi. Parliament's intervention is warranted.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 23-12-2018

Across the Aisle: Rafale verdict and the unavoidable option

In case of Manohar Lal Sharma vs Narendra Damodardas Modi and other cases (Rafale deal cases) the judgment of the Supreme Court pronounced on December 14, 2018, will be remembered more for the questions that the Court did not decide than for the questions that were decided.

Written by P Chidambaram

A judgment is an authority for what it decides — the ratio — and not for what may logically follow from the decision. That's a settled principle of law.

In the case of Manohar Lal Sharma vs Narendra Damodardas Modi and other cases (the Rafale deal cases) the judgment of the Supreme Court pronounced on December 14, 2018, will be remembered more for the questions that the Court did not decide than for the questions that were decided.

The Court's approach was pretty simple and straightforward: there are severe limits to the Court's jurisdiction while examining a case of defence procurement. Lest the point was lost on the average reader, the Court concluded the judgment with the following words: "We however make it clear that our views as

above are primarily from the standpoint of the exercise of jurisdiction under Article 32 of the Constitution of India which has been invoked in the present group of cases.”

Limits of Jurisdiction

The lesson is clear: the petitioners erred in invoking the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court under Article 32 of the Constitution. Practically every conclusion declining to examine or decide the key issues in dispute followed from the conclusion regarding the jurisdictional limits of the Court.

“It was also made clear that the issue of pricing or matters relating to technical suitability of the equipment would not be gone into by the Court.” (Para 12.)

“We are satisfied that there is no occasion to really doubt the process, and even if minor deviations have occurred, that would not result in either setting aside the contract or requiring a detailed scrutiny by the Court.” (Para 22.)

“We cannot sit in judgement over the wisdom of deciding to go in for purchase of 36 aircraft in place of 126.” (Para 22.)

“It is certainly not the job of this Court to carry out a comparison of the pricing details in matters like the present.” (Para 26.)

“...it is neither appropriate nor within the experience of this Court to step into this arena of what is technically feasible or not.” (Para 33.)

Precisely for the reasons given by the Supreme Court, the Court ought to have, at the threshold, declined to entertain the petitions.

Dubious Claims/Statements

There is another aspect of the judgment that is unusual. The Court seems to have ‘accepted’ whatever the government had stated either in the note in the sealed cover or in the oral arguments. Sample the following: that withdrawal of the original RFP (request for proposal) was initiated in March 2015; that the contract negotiations between Dassault and Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL) could not be concluded on account of unresolved issues; that the Indian Negotiating Team had arrived at better terms relating to price, delivery and maintenance; the processes have been followed; a redacted version of the CAG’s report was placed before Parliament and the report of the CAG has been examined by the PAC; the Chief of Air Staff communicated his reservation regarding the disclosure of the pricing details; the pricing details are covered by Article 10 of the IGA (Inter-Governmental Agreement) between the two governments; there is a commercial advantage in the purchase of 36 Rafale aircraft; there were certain better terms in IGA qua maintenance and weapon package; Dassault was circumspect about HAL carrying out the contractual obligations; Dassault has signed partnership agreements with several companies and is negotiating with over hundred; there was possibly an agreement between the parent Reliance company and Dassault starting from the year 2012; and there has been a categorical denial from every side of the interview given by the former president of France, Mr Francois Hollande. None of these statements/ claims is entirely true and the Court, owing to its limited jurisdiction, did not examine their veracity. So, who can? The obvious answer is that

only a parliamentary inquiry will expose the falsity of the statements/ claims and bring out the truth.

The forbearance shown by the Court has led the Court to commit an egregious error. There is no report of the CAG yet; no version of the report, redacted or otherwise, has been placed before Parliament; and the report has not been shared with or examined by the PAC. After misleading the Court, the government has conveniently blamed the Court for ‘misinterpreting’ its note! The government has also given lessons in English grammar to the Court! Those are the perils of adopting the ‘sealed cover’ approach.

Unanswered Questions

There are at least three big questions that can only be answered by a parliamentary inquiry.

-Why did the government scrap the transfer of technology agreement and work share agreement (March 13, 2014) between Dassault and HAL when 95 per cent of the negotiations had been completed between the two (Dassault CEO, March 28, 2015, and Foreign Secretary, April 8, 2015)?

-If the new price is cheaper by 9 to 20 per cent, why did the government not buy the 126 aircraft offered by Dassault, since the Air Force desperately needs to augment its fleet of fighter aircraft?

-Why did the government not push the case of HAL, the only company that has manufactured aircraft in India, for the whole or part of the Offset contracts?

Notwithstanding the judgment of the Supreme Court, there are unverified claims and unanswered questions. The judgment has, by default, made a parliamentary inquiry unavoidable. Over to the people’s court.

AFGHANISTAN TIMES, KABUL 24-12-2018

Afghan air force receives four more warplanes

KABUL: The Afghan Air Force has received a new batch of MD-530 fighter jets from the United States, the Ministry of Defense said on Sunday.

The ministry’s spokesman Javid Ahmad Ghafoor said the four warplanes were delivered to the AAF on Saturday. Pilots for the aircrafts had already been trained and other technical staff made available. The M-350 jets would be used in combat missions, he said.

The Pentagon has said eight more fighter jets would be handed over to Afghan security forces until March 2019.

A new Pentagon report about Afghanistan says that the process of strengthening and modernizing Afghan security forces would continue and so far 30 Black Hawk copters have been handed over to Afghanistan.

According to the Pentagon, the Afghan security forces would receive the first AC-280 jets in January 2019 and seven more AC-280 fighter jets until March 2019.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 31-12-2018

ARMY TO RELEASE MORE NORTHERN STATE LANDS

Over 1,000 acres to be released on President's directions

Lahiru Fernando

The Sri Lanka Army will be releasing 1,099 acres of state lands in the Northern Province being used as Army farms within a short period.

These lands will be released without delay by the Army on the direction of President Maithripala Sirisena.

This is in addition to the process of releasing state and private lands in the North and East being used so far by the Army with no impact on national security.

Accordingly, the identified state lands for release will be as follows:

1. A total of 194 acres belonging to the Forest Conservation Department in Jayapuram North Grama Niladhari Division in Kilinochchi District (Nachchikuda).
2. Another land consisting of 285 acres belonging to the Forest Conservation Department in the same Grama Niladhari Division.
3. A total of 120 acres belonging to the Forest Conservation Department in Udayarkattukulam Grama Niladhari Division in Mullaitivu District and 4,500 acres out of total 600 acres, belonging to the Forest Conservation Department in "Wellankulam Grama Niladhari Division in Mannar District.

The documents pertaining to the release of these lands will be formally handed over to the Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu and Mannar District Secretaries in the second week of January 2019 during a brief ceremony headed by the Northern Province Governor Reginald Cooray an Army press release stated.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 24-12-2018

Government to clear legal hurdle to US arms deal

Binod Ghimire, ANIL GIRI, Kathmandu

The government has said it is ready to clear the legal hurdle to single sum payment for assault rifles purchased from the United States, even though it goes against the national procurement law that requires the sum to be paid in three tranches.

The move is expected to clear the way for importing weapons for Nepal Army soldiers who will be deployed to conflict flashpoints across the globe as part of the United Nations peacekeeping mission.

Nepal is trying to conclude the weapons procurement process urgently considering that some of the decisions taken by the United Nations recently with regard to the global peacekeeping operations. Unlike in the past, all members of the peacekeeping force have to be equipped with full logistics as soon as the United Nations orders deployment of troops.

In a government-to-government deal, the Nepal Army is procuring 6,492 M-16, M4 and A4 rifles through the US Army's Pacific Command. For months, the Nepali side has been trying to convince US authorities to receive the payment in three allotments citing legal provisions. It was on the agenda during the visit of Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali to Washington DC last week.

Nepal's procurement law does not allow the Army to make payments in a single go and requires a Cabinet clearance to bypass the law.

However, the proposal to amend the law is yet to be tabled in the Cabinet, according to officials at the Ministry of Defence.

The Cabinet, with consent from the Finance and Home ministries, will be taking the decision to release the payment for three variants of combat rifles at a single go.

Baburam Gautam, spokesperson for the Defence Ministry, confirmed to the Post that the government will clear the way soon for releasing the sum. All the arms consignments will be delivered immediately after payment from the Nepali side, officials said.

The government expects to pay nearly Rs2.19 billion for the weapons that will replace thousands of old rifles Nepal Army personnel have been using for years. "It is urgent that our soldiers get modern rifles while they serve in war-torn countries," Gautam said.

The Army acquired the M16 rifles for the first time in 2003 as part of the US government's support to containing the Maoist revolutionaries. Washington provided around 17,000 sophisticated rifles as per the deal with the Sher Bahadur Deuba administration in 2002.

Apart from procuring weapons for the Army, four Skytrucks are soon to arrive in Kathmandu from the United States. Additionally, during his recent trip to Washington, Gyawali also requested an upgrade to Nepal's only peacekeeping training centre in Panchkhal, Kavre.

Gyawali said at a press conference on Sunday that Nepal also sought assistance in modernising the Nepal Army for peacekeeping operations. "We have also asked for Washington's support to preparing the Army for disaster management," he said.