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I - FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Summary

Foreign Affairs

As reported in Indian print media, the contours of US foreign policy in the Asia Pacific region are more clearly defined with the passage of the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) by the US Congress and its signing by the US President Donald Trump on the last day of 2018. The act, according to media reports, aims at countering the Chinese influence in the region. The act aims at reiterating the US commitment to its enduring partnership with India in the so-called Indo-Pacific region and calls for ‘strengthening of diplomatic, economic, and security ties with India’. The act has allocated USD 1.5 billion over a period of five years ‘to enhance cooperation with America’s strategic regional allies in the region’. It is also reported to have reiterated “US commitment to all bilateral and security agreements and arrangements between the two countries including the New Framework for the United States-India Defense Relationship, and the United States India Defense Technology and Trade Initiative.” With the passage of this law, in which reference to China is clearly and unequivocally made as a country undertaking “illegal construction and militarization of artificial features in the South China sea and coercive economic practices”, the US seems to have abandoned its previous practice of avoiding using clear terminology when referring to China and its policy to contain its rising power.

Almost a week after the passage of the aforementioned Act, US President Trump was reported to have made a telephone call to Prime Minister Modi in which the two were said to have discussed “reducing the US trade deficit with India and increase their cooperation in Afghanistan”. President Trump also reiterated his commitment to strengthening the strategic partnership between the two countries.

Some analysts in Indian print media are not convinced by those who state that the recent Wuhan summit between Prime Minister Modi and President Xi has greatly helped in promoting understanding between the two neighbours. They are of the opinion that India should strengthen its navy in the Indian Ocean and Pacific region as, according to them, Beijing is working on strengthening Pakistan’s navy to counter India in the Indian Ocean. They cite reports in the Chinese media which state that ‘China has begun constructing one of its advanced warships for export to Pakistan’. The said report also says that ‘one of China’s most advanced guided missile frigates, the ship will be equipped anti-ship, anti-submarine, and air defence capabilities.’ Therefore, according to these analysts, ‘India would do well to develop Andaman and Nicobar Islands as the strategic hub for its Indo-Pacific strategy’.

Print media in Pakistan has commented on relations between Pakistan and India. India recently agreed to allow experts from Pakistan to inspect the hydropower projects it is building at the Chenab basin. Pakistan’s team of experts is scheduled to visit India in the coming days. Moreover, Islamabad and New Delhi are reported to have exchanged lists of prisoners in line with a bilateral consular access agreement which the two countries had signed in 2008.

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THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 2-1-2019
**Donald Trump signs law to step up India
 defence ties, call out China**

It was passed by the US Senate on December 4 and approved by the US Congress on December 12. It was one of the 13 Bills signed into law by President Trump on the last day of 2018.

Express News Service

Just before ushering in the New Year on December 31, US President Donald Trump signed an Act designed to counter the encroaching influence and growing threat from China and to reinvigorate US leadership in the Indo-Pacific region.

Calling for strengthening of diplomatic, economic, and security ties with India, the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) allocates a budget of \$1.5 billion over a five-year period to enhance cooperation with America's strategic regional allies in the region. The new law cites "China's illegal construction and militarization of artificial features in the South China Sea and coercive economic practices", and mandates actions for "countering China's influence to undermine the international system".

The Act notes "the increased presence throughout Southeast Asia of the Islamic State and other international terrorist organizations that threaten the United States". The law states that US "recognizes the vital role of the strategic partnership between the United States and India in promoting peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region" and "calls for strengthening and broadening of diplomatic, economic, and security ties between the United States and India".

It reiterates US commitment to all "bilateral and security agreements and arrangements" between the two countries, including the New Framework for the United States-India Defense Relationship, and the United States-India Defense Technology and Trade Initiative. Stressing the "designation of India as a major defense partner, which is unique to India," the new law states that this designation "elevates defense trade and technology cooperation between the United States and India to a level commensurate with the closest allies and partners of the United States".

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 8-1-2019
**Donald Trump, PM Narendra Modi discuss
 trade deficit, Afghanistan in phone call**

The leaders agreed to exchange perspectives on how to expand security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific, and increase cooperation in Afghanistan, the White House said in a statement.

By Reuters

US President Donald Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi discussed reducing the US trade deficit with India and increasing their cooperation in Afghanistan in a telephone call on Monday, the White House said.

"The leaders agreed to strengthen the US-India strategic partnership in 2019 and exchanged perspectives on how to reduce the US trade deficit with India, expand security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific, and increase cooperation in Afghanistan," the White House said in a statement.

The United States has slapped tariffs on imports of steel and aluminum from India, part of Trump's drive to reduce the US trade deficit and boost American manufacturing jobs.

India has threatened to retaliate but said it would not take action until the end of this month.

In Afghanistan, Trump is planning to withdraw more than 5,000 of the 14,000 U.S. troops there, a US official said last month.

With a reduced military presence in Afghanistan, the United States would almost certainly have to curtail its missions, which include training and advising Afghan forces and waging an air campaign against the Taliban and other militant groups.

HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 4-1-2019
**China's Indian Ocean plans are decidedly
 anti-India**

Beijing sees Pakistani Navy as a helpful partner in tying down Indian resources in the Arabian sea – far away from the choke points in the eastern Indian Ocean region.

The Beijing state media has reported that China has begun constructing one of its advanced warships for export to Pakistan. One of China's most advanced guided missile frigates, the ship will be equipped with anti-ship, anti-submarine and air-defence capabilities. The China Daily report goes on to say that the ship will not just strengthen Pakistan Navy's capabilities but also help in maintaining the "balance of power" in the Indian Ocean region.

It is increasingly becoming clear that the frequency of Indian and Chinese navies brushing past each other in the Indian Ocean is set to rise. The contest over small atoll nations like Maldives and Seychelles is part of this bigger story. If China's presence in Gwadar was already a worry, advanced frigates like the one under construction can throw a spanner in Indian plans to block Pakistan's maritime supply routes in case of a conflict across the line of control (LoC). This also comes on the heels of a detailed report by The New York Times on the militarisation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The confidential CPEC plan involves, the Times revealed, cooperation on building military jets and other lethal weapons. Pakistan is also the only country that has been granted access to the military services of China's Beidou satellite navigation system. The revelations essentially unmasked China's real goals behind CPEC and, more broadly, its belt and road initiative (BRI).

China has always seen Pakistan as a balancer against India. Beijing has been generous with economic aid and military supplies (both conventional and nuclear) to Pakistan. Now as China's interest in the Indian Ocean is increasing, it sees Pakistani Navy as a helpful partner in tying down Indian resources in the Arabian sea — far away from the choke points in the eastern Indian Ocean region. India would do well to develop Andaman and Nicobar Islands as the strategic hub for its Indo-Pacific strategy. New Delhi has neglected the strategic potential of these islands for far too long. The domestic debates on balancing China often miss one crucial point: the latter has had no qualms in using Pakistan to balance India. The post-Wuhan rapprochement has not made China reconsider its support for Jaish-e-Mohammad in the United Nations. With no let up in

Chinese hostility, the hesitation in India on balancing China is entirely unwarranted and should be jettisoned.

THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI 11-1-2019

India-Nepal Ties: Create momentum by harvesting low-hanging fruits

Rudroneel Ghosh

In a free-wheeling interaction with the media, visiting foreign minister of Nepal Pradeep Kumar Gyawali elaborated on the current status of India-Nepal ties. After clarifying that his meeting with Indian foreign minister Sushma Swaraj mainly focussed on ongoing bilateral projects, Gyawali expressed satisfaction with the overall direction of the relationship in the changed context. The changed context here presumably refers to a subtle reset in ties following the 2015 Madhesi blockade and the election of a stable Leftist government in Kathmandu 2017. This was further exemplified by the visits of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Nepali Prime Minister KP Oli to each other's countries last year.

Those visits resulted in new focus in three areas – railway connectivity, inland waterways utilisation and agriculture cooperation. In addition, Gyawali informed that Oli's visit had also resulted in the proposal of an energy banking model. The latter sought to harness the energy consumption patterns in the two countries for mutual benefit. Nepal needs more energy in the winter months when the flow of water in rivers is less, while India needs greater electricity in the summer-monsoon months when river water flows are higher. Thus, the surplus generated from Nepali rivers during the summer-monsoon months can be banked and exported to India, while the same amount of electricity can be imported back to Nepal during the winter months.

Similarly, modalities are being explored to exploit inland waterways with Nepali rivers linking up to the Ganga river system. This is slated to help transport Nepali cargo to Indian ports more efficiently. Plus, four cross-border rail links are envisaged with the Raxaul-Kathmandu line being pegged as a crucial route. This is all very well but as Gyawali pointed out there are certain issues that still need to be ironed out. First, Nepal is still facing the fallout of India's 2016 demonetisation exercise with roughly Rs 7 crore worth of demonetised notes still lying with Kathmandu. Talks between the two sides on this issue are yet to produce a solution and it's understandable why the Nepali side wants assurances that it won't face such problems in future. Then there are complications regarding India's implementation of Goods and Services Tax that need to be worked out.

Plus, despite India providing Nepal with a \$750 million line of credit in 2016 for reconstruction following the devastating earthquake of 2015, majority of the fund remains unutilised due to failure to match the terms of credit. As Gyawali explained, majority of the reconstruction work involves rebuilding individual households but this is not covered by the Indian credit line. Nepal has already asked for the funds to be rechannelled towards other projects. This goes to show that while India-Nepal relations remain strong and complementary, bilateral ties need a momentum boost.

There's no denying that the two countries have a special relationship given their open border, cultural connect and the freedom of Nepali citizens to live and work in India. But it's also clear this special relationship has made us complacent in some areas. And with Nepal now single-mindedly focussed on socio-economic development in the changed context, India can't expect to score brownie points just by citing the closeness of people on both sides. Instead, India needs to deliver on its promises to Nepal, many of which have been hanging fire for a long time. A good way forward would be to adopt the early harvest approach and focus on a clutch of projects that can be easily delivered to create momentum in two-way ties. This can then help New Delhi and Kathmandu resolve the big legacy issues.

In this regard, easy low-hanging fruits that can be harvested early are the Jayanagar-Janakpur rail link and the hydropower projects of Pancheshwar and Upper Karnali (the latter told to me by Gyawali himself). It's time for India to get cracking and start delivering on its Nepal projects. Otherwise, there's no reason why Nepal shouldn't rely on next-door-neighbour China to meet its development needs.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 8-1-2019

Putin calls Modi, talks defence, counter-terror

Tribune News Service

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin had a telephonic conversation on Monday during which they focused on bilateral cooperation, including in defence and counter-terrorism, and current international issues.

Both the leaders decided to sustain the political momentum in ties following the informal summit in Sochi last year which was aimed at arresting a perceptible drift in bilateral relations.

"The two leaders confirmed their mutual willingness to increase cooperation in fighting international terrorism and solving other pressing world issues," said an official Russian statement. As India now gears up for the 2019 electoral battle, "Putin wished Narendra Modi success in connection with the upcoming parliamentary elections in India", added the statement. President Putin also reiterated the invitation to Modi to attend the annual Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok in September 2019. He had earlier extended the invitation during his visit to Delhi in October for the annual India-Russia summit.

"Both leaders agreed that India-Russia cooperation plays an important role in the global multilateral order. Both countries, therefore, will continue their close consultations in the UN, BRICS, SCO and other multilateral organisations," said the Indian statement.

THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI 14-1-2019

India is committed to Afghanistan's economic reconstruction: Sushma Swaraj

PTI

SAMARKAND (UZBEKISTAN): India on Sunday said it was committed to the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan and to promote an inclusive "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-

controlled" peace and reconciliation process in the war-torn country.

India's position was enunciated by external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj at the historic India-Central Asia Dialogue here, with the participation of Afghanistan, which focussed on regional issues, including enhancing connectivity to the country ravaged by terrorism.

"I would like to point out that our region is facing serious challenges posed by terrorism. India, Central Asia and Afghanistan are societies which are tolerant and plural. The ideology of hate which the terrorists would like to spread has no place in our societies," Swaraj said while addressing the first session of the dialogue. "We need to ask who these terrorists are, who funds them, how do they find sustenance, who protects them".

"No business development can take place in a country suffering from terrorism," Swaraj said, adding that terrorism erodes all avenues of development which a country can have. Development partnership has emerged as an important component of India's engagement with Afghanistan. Swaraj offered to extend this partnership to Central Asia as well. She said efficient connectivity will lead to the full realisation of the growth potential of the region.

THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI 3-1-2019

Understanding the big picture

MK Bhadrakumar

Bangladesh is a test case of efficacy of Indian policies to curb Chinese influence

The victory of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League in the parliamentary poll in Bangladesh was a foregone conclusion. Yet, the scale of the victory causes embarrassment. The Awami League's grand alliance won 288 of the 299 seats in parliament, increasing its tally by 54 seats. Sheikh Hasina now joins a rare pantheon of democratically-elected leaders like Kim Jong-un. She could have done without the dubious honour, because she is doubtless a popular leader.

It remains a mystery why even charismatic politicians fear the mystique of elections. Probably, they regard themselves as indispensable. Sheikh Hasina's government had a good record in executing the development agenda, and she could as well have emulated Indonesia's Joko Widodo who is approaching the people for a renewed mandate in April. But she, instead, chalked up the landslide win by suppressing the opposition parties. The restrictive electoral environment and the crackdown on civil liberty, the opposition and the media have been widely reported. The government went to the extent of slowing down 3G and 4G Internet services in an attempt at censorship. Over half a million security personnel, including army soldiers, were deployed on 'election duty' to intimidate political opponents, giving a free run to Awami League activists at polling booths.

The really alarming part is the disdain with which Hasina has brushed away the criticism of her government. In an interview to the New York Times, she retorted, 'If I can provide food, jobs and healthcare, that is human rights... What the opposition is saying, or civil society or your NGOs — I don't bother with that.' True, on Hasina's watch, the GDP growth in Bangladesh

increased from 5.57 per cent for 2009-2010 to 7.28 per cent in 2016-2017, and per capita income from \$500 to nearly \$1,800. But then, that is also India's dismal story. The impressive growth largely benefited the elite. Make no mistake, there is a groundswell of protest building up in the country among workers, teachers and youth. Democracy is much more than about holding elections at regular intervals. Empowerment and inclusiveness are important prerequisites, and rule of law, freedom of opinion and pluralism are the lifeblood of democracy. This is where India could have played a helpful role. Sensing the appalling drift in the democratic values, New Delhi could have used its influence with Hasina to counsel moderation. On the contrary, passivity replaced the frenzy that was apparent over the practice of democracy in the Maldives. If New Delhi went overboard to prescribe democratic values to the Maldives (country of half a million people), it went into hibernation with regard to Bangladesh (country with a population of 165 million.) Three things emerge here. One, it is about self-interest! Under the garb of democratic values, India pursues an interventionist policy in the neighbourhood to buttress its self-interest. Two, the interventionism as such is highly selective. India prescribes only to the weak and humble. Three, across the board, the 'China factor' has come to be the leitmotif of India's neighbourhood policies.

The China factor merits particular attention. Bangladesh becomes a test case of the efficacy of Indian policies to curb the expanding Chinese influence in our region. Bangladesh has been the biggest recipient of Indian credit and aid since the Modi government came to power — an estimated \$9 billion. However, this has not prevented the dramatic expansion of Bangladesh's relations with China, especially since the state visit by President Xi Jinping in 2016, when Sheikh Hasina government officially joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Since then, the two countries have signed eight Chinese-funded projects estimated at \$9.45 billion. China has factored in that Bangladesh's sustained economic growth is rapidly increasing the demand for energy and transportation. Beijing has offered \$30 billion for infrastructure investment as part of its massive BRI plans. Simply put, China has successfully dovetailed the BRI with Bangladesh's development agenda.

The Bangladeshi paradigm ought to compel us to think through the phobia that whatever China is doing in the region is 'India-centric'. China's interests are increasingly global and there is growing evidence that it is moving toward a new phase of engagement that goes beyond dealings with individual countries to dealing with regions as a whole. In the excessive focusing on the 'debt trap' syndrome, we have overlooked that the BRI is actually about creating global standards and new value chains. According to figures released by the ministry of commerce in Beijing in August, there has been a massive expansion of China's trade and investment ties with countries along the Belt and Road in the past five years, estimated to exceed \$5 trillion, with China's combined direct investment in those countries growing at 7.2 per cent annually. China has become the largest trading partner for 25 countries amongst them. Clearly, India lacks the 'big picture'. The era of sphere of influence is long past.

Again, China's financial support for other countries is based on pragmatic considerations. Take Latin America, the backyard of a

superpower. Panama has emerged as the hub of China's trade and logistics in the Americas. It is the regional headquarters of the Bank of China. The right-wing governments in Chile and Brazil are signalling interest in doing business with China. The salience here is that on a global scale China is de facto becoming the last-resort lender for countries that have limited access to international credit markets. Indeed, money talks in today's globalised and multipolar world. The RSS recently praised Hasina as India's 'most trusted and tested ally'. Aren't we losing the plot? If there is no SAARC, let us create one.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 7-1-2019

A new phase in US pivot to Asia?

Shyam Saran

Trump's revisit of the region heralds India's inclusion and a sharper US-China confrontation

ON December 31, 2018, US President Donald Trump signed into law the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA), initiated by the Congress. It spells out a long-term strategy for the Indo-Pacific. It conveys willingness of the Congress to support financial appropriations for initiatives the US Administration may bring before it in realising various components of the strategy.

The amount indicated is modest, a mere \$1.5 billion per year for the next five years, hardly commensurate with the scale of ambition ARIA manifests. When compared to the vast sums that China is deploying for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Asia and beyond, the US effort would appear anaemic. But it represents a relatively greater level of commitment to the region than the earlier 'Pivot to Asia' declared by President Obama in 2013 that turned out to be mainly a rhetorical flourish. It coincided with China's militarisation of offshore islands in South China Sea and the declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone in the East China Sea which went unchallenged. Will ARIA make a difference? Will it reassure US military allies and partners in the region?

ARIA is important because it manifests a change in US perception of China from it being a competitor to now an adversary. The Act expresses 'grave concerns with Chinese actions that seek (i) to further constrain space for civil society and religion within China; and (ii) to undermine a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region'. The fact that in a highly polarised political environment, the Act was passed by consensus in the Senate, and by a very large majority in the House of Representatives, is significant. It demonstrates a broad consensus in the US that China is a threat not only to its security interests, but also an economic and even ideological rival. This is also reflected in the explicit commitment to helping Taiwan maintain 'asymmetric' military capabilities vis-a-vis China. The Act could be a warning to Trump that in dealing with the China threat, his alienation of allies and partners is inimical to US interests. It may constrain his transactional approach to China, relieving pressure on that country if he is able to get a favourable trade deal, for example. Trump may still go his own way, the trade war may subside, but ARIA signals that the underlying trend is unmistakably towards sharper US-China confrontation.

ARIA embraces the concept of Indo-Pacific in place of the earlier focus on Asia-Pacific. The difference between the two

concepts is the inclusion of India as an integral part of the geostrategic space that the US sees as the main theatre of contestation with China. The Act defines Indo-Pacific as stretching from the western shores of the Pacific to the western shores of India, or more colourfully as stretching from Hollywood to Bollywood. India occupies a prominent place in the text which recognises 'the vital role of the strategic partnership between the US and India in promoting peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region' and welcomes India being designated as a 'major defence partner' enjoying cooperation at a level 'commensurate with the closest allies and partners of the US'.

Despite India's hesitancy, the Act regards the Quad as being 'vital to address the pressing security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. India has not linked its embrace of Indo-Pacific with the Quad and has been cautious in projecting its role and future evolution. However, the US sees the Quad as integral to its Indo-Pacific strategy and this may pose a challenge to India's intent of not being seen as a participant in an overt containment of China.

In his speech at the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore in June, PM Modi had defined Indo-Pacific as encompassing the entire oceanic space, from the western Pacific all across the Indian Ocean to the eastern shores of Africa. However, in a joint statement with the Indonesian President, reference is made to peace and security in the Indo-Pacific being realised through ASEAN-led institutions and processes, recognising ASEAN centrality. It would appear that India has tacitly accepted that in operational terms the more restricted definition applies. There is also the obvious contradiction between the Quad and ASEAN centrality as key mechanisms for a new security architecture in the Indo-Pacific. Reconciling the two will be a diplomatic challenge.

ARIA expresses strong recommitment to US military alliance partnerships in the region, but it also underscores the importance of expanding US economic and trade ties with countries in the region, in particular with ASEAN countries. The importance of engaging with ASEAN, the East Asia Summit process and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) is emphasised. How much of this will be followed through by a Trump administration allergic to trade pacts and multilateral arrangements remains to be seen.

Predictably, the legislation has a prominent focus on North Korea and the continuing threat from its pursuit of a nuclear arsenal and the goal of 'complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement' of its N-programme is reiterated, linking the lifting of any sanctions to concrete measures undertaken by the North Korean regime. The Congress has, through the Act, sought to keep itself abreast of the progress of negotiations, thereby seeking to prevent Trump from any impulsive giveaways. There is no mention of the Trump-Kim summit or the agreement reached between them and this reflects the concern over his unorthodox initiatives.

There is an entire section of the Act which seeks to 'promote US values in the Indo-Pacific region'. There is a reiteration of US commitment to upholding rights and promoting democratic values. China is mentioned specifically, as is Myanmar and the

Philippines. We should therefore expect greater activism on the ideological front from the US or at least in its Congress. For India, US pressure on China is helpful, but a confrontation, which forces countries to take sides, may not be welcome. Some serious diplomatic tight-rope walking lies ahead.

THE HINDU, DELHI 5-1-2019 **After the inevitable exit**

Suhasini Haidar

India must be prepared for the potential consequences of withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan

Despite the White House's spirited denial of reports that it has issued no orders for the pullout of U.S. troops, the course seems set for a thinning of American presence in Afghanistan. U.S. President Donald Trump had promised this during his campaign, and several advisers have said since then that he is keen to bring back most, if not all, troops before his re-election bid in 2020. If anything, Mr. Trump's ill-judged remarks this week only underline his desire to leave: he suggested that regional players like Russia, India and Pakistan should be more involved in stabilising the situation, and mocked India for not doing enough. As a result, the U.S. war in Afghanistan, that began as revenge for the 9/11 attacks, evolved into a mission for ensuring democracy and prosperity in Afghanistan. In recent years, challenged by the resurgence of the Taliban, it has now become a mission mainly to ensure an honourable exit. This isn't the first time the U.S. has sought to do this: President Barack Obama had faced similar challenges in 2010, just before he announced the big drawdown. As Mr. Trump now moves to cutting American presence to a few well-guarded military bases, India must consider the consequences closely.

Shift in policy

To begin with, it is time to recognise that the U.S.'s South Asia Strategy for Afghanistan, as announced by Mr. Trump in August 2017, has been discarded. Mr. Trump had defined the strategy with three features: that U.S. troops would remain involved in the country until "conditions", not a timeline, mandated their return; that the U.S. would put Pakistan on notice for its support to the Taliban and a political settlement with the Taliban would only follow "after an effective military effort"; and that the policy would hinge on further developing the strategic partnership with India

Sixteen months later, it is easy to see that each element of the U.S.'s policy on the ground has shifted, if not been entirely reversed. The appointment of special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad in September to lead talks with the Taliban after a particularly brutal year shows that the U.S. is no longer waiting for military operations to take effect. According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report to the U.S. Congress, casualties of Afghan National and Defence Security Forces (ANDSF) in May-September 2018 were the "greatest it has ever been" compared to corresponding periods since 2001, and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan "documented more civilian deaths in the first nine months of 2018 than they had during the same nine-month reporting period since 2014".

Mr. Khalilzad's direct talks with the Taliban that cut out the National Unity government (NUG) in Kabul reportedly didn't even have President Ashraf Ghani in the loop until after the first talks were held in Qatar — this reversed the previous U.S. position not to engage the Taliban until it engages the NUG. Far from the tough talk on Pakistan for support to the Taliban, Mr. Trump wrote a letter to Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan thanking him for his efforts. Afghanistan's High Peace Council members also disclosed that Mr. Khalilzad was on a deadline: Mr. Trump has reportedly given him six months to show results with the talks process, failing which the pullout may be speeded up.

The departure from the avowed U.S. position on an "Afghan-owned, Afghan-led" process has clearly ruffled feathers in Kabul. In December, Mr. Ghani appointed two aides of former President Hamid Karzai known for their hardline position on the Taliban and Pakistan as his Defence and Interior Ministers. Putting the seal on the clear drift in the U.S. Afghanistan and South Asia policy from the past was the exit of Defence Secretary James Mattis, author of the South Asia policy. Mr. Mattis had pushed most strenuously to keep India in the Afghan game by swinging a waiver for India on Chabahar and Iran oil purchases. It remains to be seen whether Mr. Trump will continue those waivers past May this year.

The internal situation in Afghanistan is aggravated now by the uncertainty of the democratic process. Parliamentary elections were held in October after being delayed by more than two years, but even their preliminary results haven't yet been declared, casting doubt on the government's ability to conduct elections. Presidential elections have been postponed till July, despite the constitutional clause that they were to be completed by April 22, 2019. Meanwhile, Mr. Ghani has been unable to keep his commitment to hold a Loya Jirga (grand council of representatives) to turn Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah's post in the NUG into an executive Prime Ministership.

The way forward for India

For India, these developments may appear discouraging, but a more pragmatic view is necessary to deal with all possible outcomes. The U.S.'s eventual pullout as Afghanistan's peacekeeper is inevitable, and it would make more sense to prepare for it than to deny it will happen. New Delhi was caught off guard in 2010 when Mr. Obama planned the drawdown and discouraged India from a stake in projects there in an effort to placate Pakistan.

Mr. Trump's administration has no doubt been much more welcoming of Indian investment in Afghanistan, but that itself is symptomatic of his desire to pare down "Pax Americana" in every part of the world. The removal or reduction of the U.S. presence from most theatres of action has created space for regional players: leaving Syria to Iran and its allies; Yemen to Saudi Arabia; Afghanistan to players like Russia, Pakistan and Iran; and Pakistan to China.

Some other hard truths must be faced: India cannot replace Pakistan's position geographically, nor can it ever offer the U.S. or any other force what Pakistan has offered in the past, including bases and permission for U.S. forces to bomb its own territory. The decision to abandon the SAARC in favour of groupings like BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-

Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal) and IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) may have provided some short-term returns in “isolating Pakistan”, but it has had the effect of cutting Afghanistan loose from Indian leadership of South Asia as well. India’s best course with Afghanistan remains its own regional strategy, not becoming a part of any other country’s strategy. Close bilateral consultations like this week’s visit to Delhi of National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib may not always yield dramatic headlines, but are the basis of India’s ability to help Afghanistan according to its needs, not India’s ambitions, and the reason for the immense popularity and goodwill India continues to enjoy in Afghanistan.

Finally, it is necessary to recognise the cyclical nature of interventions in Afghanistan, which has been called the “graveyard of empires” for forcing all world powers to retreat at some point or the other. The words of Rev. George Gleig, a soldier who survived the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-42), are worth remembering: “A war begun for no wise purpose, carried on with a strange mixture of rashness and timidity, brought to a close after suffering and disaster, without much glory attached either to the government which directed, or the great body of troops which waged it.” Greig’s description of the British retreat could ring true for Soviet forces in the 1980s, and American forces post-9/11 as well.

THE ASIAN AGE, NEW DELHI 4-1-2019

Afghan: India outmanoeuvred

India has consistently resisted US pressure to put boots on the ground, preferring to invest in training and equipping the Afghan security forces.

As US President Donald Trump rattles the Afghan security matrix by threatening to halve the number of American troops in that country, leaving a vacuum that the Pakistan-backed Taliban are already readying to step into, India’s efforts must be to ensure that Pakistan does not get a backdoor entry into this vital strategic space.

Friday’s talks between national security adviser Ajit Doval and Afghan NSA Hamdullah Mohib, ahead of a long-overdue visit to Delhi by Mr Trump’s pointsman on Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad early next week, are thus of huge import. India must place its concerns, front and centre, over the growing prospects of a Taliban blowback, and the danger it poses to its many development projects, including hospitals, highways, dams and the schools and scholarships it offers Afghan students. Even the notional “library” (err... Parliament) that Mr Trump now scoffs at!

India has consistently resisted US pressure to put boots on the ground, preferring to invest in training and equipping the Afghan security forces. As new dates in July are announced for the presidential elections, Delhi, which has backed both former Presidents, Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, can’t but ensure a friendly, legitimate government is in place in Kabul. And therein lies the problem. As part of his brief to ensure a safe exit of US troops, Mr Khalilzad has not only held unprecedented talks with the Taliban, who have refused to meet Mr Ghani’s

representatives, he also offered the Taliban a power-sharing arrangement in any future setup.

If pressured to back the US move, India must know its soft power will amount to nothing in the face of what is effectively a hard-nosed Pakistan-Taliban takeover.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 14-1-2019

India, 5 Central Asian nations agree on joint fight against terrorism

India and five Central Asian countries along with Afghanistan on Sunday condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and agreed to cooperate in countering the menace that poses a threat to people across the world.

This was part of a joint statement issued at the end of the first-ever meeting of the India-Central Asia Dialogue that also saw the participation of Afghanistan at the ministerial level in Samarkand. External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj along with the foreign ministers of Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan took part in the meeting.

“All sides condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and agreed to cooperate in countering terrorism, which posed a threat to the people and economies of the world,” the statement said.

It referred to the ancient civilisational, cultural, trade and people-to-people links between India and central Asia and expressed commitment to dynamic and fruitful friendly relations and mutually beneficial cooperation between India and the central Asian countries at bilateral and multilateral formats. — PTI

THE ASIAN AGE, NEW DELHI 2-1-2019

Wrong to think Pak might mend ways, says PM Modi

The Asian Age

It may be recalled that the surgical strikes were carried out days after a terrorist attack on an Army camp in Kashmir’s Uri had killed 20 soldiers.

New Delhi: Flexing his muscles, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made it clear in an interview to ANI that India will continue keep up its pressure on Pakistan. At the same time, he felt that it would be a “huge mistake (to think) that Pakistan would mend its ways soon”. Mr Modi said though India “favours a dialogue and good relations with

Pakistan, the neighbouring country is not going to mend its ways of promoting cross-border terrorism anytime soon”.

When it was pointed out that cross-border terrorism had not waned even after the surgical strike, the PM said that “whatever needs to be done is being carried out at an appropriate level”. Refusing to divulge the government’s strategy on carrying out further surgical strikes in public, Mr Modi argued: “Ek ladai se Pakistan sudhar jayega, yeh sochne mein bahut badi galti hogi. Pakistan ko sudharne mein abhi aur samay lagega.” (It will be a big mistake to think that Pakistan will start behaving after one fight. It will take a long time for Pakistan to start behaving.)

Speaking on the 2016 surgical strike, the PM said that Army Special Forces’ commandos, who conducted the strikes across

the Line of Control (LoC), “were told to come back before sunrise, irrespective of the mission’s success”.

Speaking to ANI, Mr Modi said the date of the attack was changed twice, keeping in mind the safety and security of the troops. “I gave clear orders that whether you get success or failure, don’t think about that but come back before sunrise. Don’t fall for the lure and prolong the operation,” he said. Mr Modi said though he knew “it was a big risk”, he did not “care about any political risk to me... and the biggest consideration for me was the safety of our soldiers”.

It may be recalled that the surgical strikes were carried out days after a terrorist attack on an Army camp in Kashmir’s Uri had killed 20 soldiers. Mr Modi said the surgical strikes were carried out because “rage” was building inside him and within the Army after the attack. The Prime Minister revealed he was “anxious” the entire night, while he was keeping a tab on the operations, and things became “extremely difficult” when live information stopped flowing for about one hour in the morning.

Saying that neither the UPA or NDA governments were against any dialogue with Pakistan, the PM made it clear that “amid the noise of bombs and guns, dialogue cannot be heard and cross-border terrorism must end”. Asked if he would go to Pakistan if he was invited by Pakistan PM Imran Khan for the Saarc summit, the PM said that he would “cross the bridge when it comes”.

On his government’s policy towards China, Mr Modi said “India should be judged on the basis of what it did in Doklam”. He reiterated “our principle position is that we want friendly relations with neighbours”.

On criticisms and controversies on his foreign tours, the PM claimed that his “travel schedule was similar to (that of) his predecessors”. He said there “are a number of multilateral forums, summit-level meetings... Manmohan Singhji also had to go to these summits. It has become mandatory”.

Mr Modi then said he “tries to make India’s voice heard in each part of the world” The PM claimed that “earlier, when Prime Ministers used to go, nobody used to notice at the place they arrived in or even from the place they left”. Mr Modi added: “My visits are noticed because interact with people and take decisions.”

THE HINDU, DELHI 2-1-2019

India, Pak. move ahead on prisoners’ release

Activists have welcomed the bilateral move, saying this will help long suffering prisoners in each other’s custody. Peace activist Jatin Desai of Pakistan-India Peoples’s Forum for Peace and Democracy reiterated that both countries in fact claim that the exact number of prisoners in each other’s custody is “a bit higher” than the official numbers shared.

Mr. Desai said the cases of prisoners who have served jail terms should be taken up at the earliest. “The process of nationality confirmation should be completed before the completion of the jail term and the persons should be immediately released as the jail term ends,” Mr. Desai said, urging both countries to grant consular access to prisoners.

The exchange of lists comes despite continued military tension, which has, however, not dampened humanitarian moves by both

sides. In December 2018, Pakistan sent back Indian prisoner Hamid Nehal Ansari who had completed both regular and irregular prison terms. India subsequently released Pakistani Imran Warsi, who was awaiting repatriation after serving a jail term.

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 13-1-2019 **Mohib Commends China’s Role in Afghan Peace Process**

KABUL - National Security Advisor (NSA) Hamdullah Mohib and his Chinese counterpart Guo Shengkun have conferred on bilateral ties and the Afghan peace process.

At a meeting in Beijing, the two NSAs discussed changing political dynamics in the region, threats to and opportunities for the peace process in Afghanistan.

Both sides discussed various issues, especially counterterrorism, regional cooperation and efforts for an end to the 17-year-old conflict, a statement from the National Security Council said.

Mohib hailed China’s role in the Afghan peace process as decisive and urged Beijing to encourage regional states to work for reconciliation in the war-torn country.

Afghanistan remained committed to eradicating terrorism from the region and wanted other countries to do so, the NSA was quoted as saying

Shengkun reiterated his country’s continued cooperation on Afghan reconciliation and said there were also opportunities in the region for stability.

He added both Afghanistan and China were victims of terrorism and they had common objectives in this regard.

On Friday, Mohib met Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi. China and Afghanistan share a narrow border and have cooperated on frontier security.

China is also a close ally of Pakistan, accused by Afghanistan and the US of providing safe havens for the Taliban and other groups opposing the government in Kabul.

Wang emphasised the mutual understanding and mutual support the countries have offered each other and China’s backing of efforts to promote domestic peace and political reconciliation in Afghanistan.

“At such an important moment, we know you have been entrusted by President Ashraf Ghani to pay this visit to enhance mutual understanding and coordination. We think this is timely and necessary,” Wang said.

On Wednesday, the Afghan president’s special peace envoy, Mohammad Omer Daudzai, expressed hope that the war that had cost the United States about \$1 trillion would end in 2019.

“We have declared 2019 as a year of peace for Afghanistan,” Daudzai said in an interview with The Associated Press.

Washington’s special peace envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, is also on a tour of the region, visiting India, China, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The Taliban have refused direct talks with Kabul despite pressure from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and even Pakistan.

In response, Washington has suspended hundreds of millions of dollars in reimbursements to Pakistan. Islamabad says its influence over the Taliban is overstated. **(Pajhwok)**

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 6-1-2019 **Afghan, Indian NSAs Agree on Deeper Security Cooperation**

NEW DELHI - The agreement came at a meeting between Afghan National Security Adviser (NSA) Hamdullah Mohib and his Indian counterpart Ajit Doval met in New Delhi on Friday.

After the meeting, Mohib tweeted: "Held productive meetings in India with my counterpart NSA Ajit Doval and other security officials on regional stability, democratic progress and ongoing peace efforts in Afghanistan..."

Bilateral security cooperation also came up for discussion, wrote the NSA, who was officially invited to India by Doval. He is likely to meet other Indian officials also during the three-day visit.

In a statement, the Ministry of External Affairs said Mohib briefed the Indian side on the security situation, holding of parliamentary elections, the presidential vote and Kabul's efforts for peace and reconciliation.

Doval reiterated that India would continue to support all efforts for peace and reconciliation that are Afghan-owned, Afghan-led and Afghan-controlled.

US representative for Afghanistan peace talks Zalmay Khalilzad is scheduled to visit Delhi next week for talks on India's role and efforts in Afghanistan in partnership with the Trump administration.

"Be it military supplies or the leadership role that India should take up in the region, Afghanistan has a wish list of what it wants India to do and help with," reported India Today.

Mohib was quoted as saying that Kabul should be able to ensure self-reliance in terms of security if the US troops pulled out of Afghanistan.

"The news leak of US troop withdrawal has in a way favoured Afghanistan. They (Afghans) are beginning to wake up to the fact that this bloated economy and aid will come to an end and so it is time to be self-dependent," a source told the daily.

India promised continued support for efforts by the government and people of Afghanistan to bring peace, security and prosperity to that country.

Doval said regional and international partners of Afghanistan needed to work in line with priorities, wishes and desires of the Afghan people.

India welcomed Afghanistan's faith in democratic governance and hoped the forthcoming presidential elections would further deepen the roots of democracy in the war-hit country.

Mohib invited Doval to visit Afghanistan. The invitation was accepted but dates will be firmed up through diplomatic channels. (Pajhwok)

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 5-1-2019 **Kabul Calls for Clarification on Washington's Policy**

KABUL - The Afghan government on Thursday said it has asked the United States to provide clarification on certain statements, established through diplomatic channels on some policies, saying the Afghan National Security and Defense Forces (ANDSF)

continue to deal with heavy sacrifices in the battlefield, for the sake of international peace and security, particularly security of the friendly nations.

"There is a difference between official statements and the official policy of the country. For that reason, we have asked the United States to provide clarification regarding some statements, through diplomatic channels about certain policies, and we hope this will be shared with us in the near future," the Presidential Palace (ARG) said in a statement on Thursday.

The National Unity Government (NUG), the Afghans and Afghanistan's defense and security forces have rendered tens of thousands of sacrifices for the sake of peace of the people so far. Every country values its interests and with consideration of the current sensitive situations of the country, we are trying to speed up efforts for self-reliance, reads the statement.

The statement continues: "Our relations with the world are outlined on the basis of common interest and the international forces in Afghanistan are present in Afghanistan, not only for Afghanistan but for the sake of security of the world and friendly countries too.

"At this critical stage of history, where the world is full of confusion and changing, the majority of world countries have new assessments in every sphere."

On the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan: "After the occupation of Afghanistan by the former Soviet Union, the Afghan people started their sacred Jihad for the sake of their liberty and freedom. There was a consensus in the world about the Jihad of the people of Afghanistan against the invasion of the country by the Soviet Union, and the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution condemning the aggression by the former Soviet Union.

"Also, foreign ministers from 34 Islamic countries issued a joint statement in which they blamed the former Soviet Union and demanded the conditional withdrawal of the Red Army from Afghanistan. After the invasion of former Soviet Union, all US presidents did not condemn the aggression, but remained supporters of the sacred Jihad of the Afghan people. The Afghans did not carry out suicide attacks during the Jihad and they did not pose any threat to any country," the statement concluded.

The statement comes amid reports on a possible withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan.

On these reports, US President Donald Trump, at a cabinet meeting on Wednesday, insisted on regional countries' role in Afghanistan and said Russia and Pakistan should be fighting in Afghanistan, not the United States.

“So you take a look at other countries - Pakistan is there. They should be fighting. But Russia should be fighting. The reason Russia was in Afghanistan was because terrorists were going into Russia. They were right to be there. The problem is it was a tough fight,” Trump said.

Trump seemed to misstate the former Soviet Union's involvement in Afghanistan by saying: "Russia used to be the Soviet Union. Afghanistan made it Russia because they went bankrupt fighting in Afghanistan. The reason Russia was in Afghanistan was because terrorists were going into Russia. They were right to be there."

Trump brought up India's aid during a rambling press appearance at the cabinet meeting as he defended his push for the United States to invest less overseas.

While stating that he got along with PM Modi, the US President said Modi was "constantly telling me he built a library in Afghanistan".

"You know what that is? That's like five hours of what we spend," he said.

"And we're supposed to say, 'Oh, thank you for the library.' I don't know who's using it in Afghanistan," Trump said.

It was unclear to which project Trump was referring, but India has committed \$3 billion in assistance to Afghanistan since US-led forces toppled the Taliban regime after the September 11 2001, attacks.

Projects have included the reconstruction of an elite high school in Kabul and scholarships to India for 1,000 Afghan students each year.

The remarks during the 95-minute cabinet meeting at the White House gave new insight into Trump's vision of Afghanistan and his frustration with the stalemate in the war-torn country - as well as with the generals who have advised him to stay, including his just-departed defense secretary, James Mattis.

“What’s he done for me? How has he done in Afghanistan?” Trump said of Mattis. “I’m not happy with what he (has) done in Afghanistan, and I shouldn’t be happy.” Trump added that he’d “essentially” fired Mattis, though the Marine general resigned in protest over Trump’s announced withdrawal from Syria.

(Tolo news)

AFGHANISTAN TIMES, KABUL 11-1-2019

Pakistan can help facilitate intra-Afghan dialogue

KABUL: Optimism is increasing in the government regarding Pakistan's assistance in the peace process as a delegation visited recently Islamabad to demand the neighboring country persuade Taliban militants to join the peace talks.

Umer Daudzai, head of the state-run High Peace Council's secretariat met with different officials and politicians in a four-day trip to Islamabad.

“Mr. Daudzai is optimistic to his meetings with Pakistani authorities and hopes that we can hold an intra-Afghan meeting soon. The government of Pakistan has an important role and can put a positive impact on the intra-Afghan meetings if it wants,” Mohammad Ismael Qasemiyar, a senior council' official said Friday.

He added that Pakistan's new administration led by Prime Minister Imran Khan has a good view regarding Afghanistan, but did not provide details what promises Pakistan gave to Kabul.

Imran Khan's government pays more attention to Pakistan's economic growth and has realized that stability in Afghanistan is in their benefit.

Meanwhile, political analysts say that Pakistan has abandoned its “dual game” regarding Afghanistan under increasing international pressures.

“Although the government of Pakistan has lost part of the US donations and Afghanistan has changed the route of its export-import. So, pressures from different sides on Pakistan have made it cooperate with the government of Afghanistan regarding the peace process,” said Hamid Azizi, a political expert.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 4-1-2019

Trump makes volte-face on ties with Pakistan

Mariana Baabar & Wajid Ali Syed

WASHINGTON/ISLAMABAD: US President Donald Trump on Wednesday said he wanted a great relationship with Pakistan for which he would be meeting with its new leadership soon. "I look forward to meeting with the folks from (...) and the new leadership in Pakistan, and we will be doing that in the not-too-distant future," he announced during his first meeting with the cabinet members this year.

This offer to meet with the new government in Pakistan is a breakaway from Trump's negative tone adopted around a year ago that he was cutting off security related aid to Pakistan because it was providing "a safe haven to terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help."

However, this time in the cabinet meeting, Trump repeated the allegations as a reason to cut off \$1.3 billion aid, but added that he wanted "to have a great relationship with Pakistan." Recounting a list of countries that were not getting the US foreign assistance anymore, he hinted at cutting corners and

blamed Congress for approving \$55 billion in foreign aid but not enough for spending within the country.

The willingness to meet with the new government in Pakistan comes a month after President Trump wrote a letter to Prime Minister Imran Khan, seeking "full support for the US effort to advance the Afghan peace process."

The contents of the letter were not made public, but the National Security Council and State Department had confirmed that in the letter "the president recognises that Pakistan has the ability to deny the Taliban sanctuary on its territory." The letter also makes clear that "Pakistan's assistance with the Afghan peace process is fundamental to building an enduring US-Pakistan partnership."

Responding to questions during the meeting, Trump appeared frustrated over the US extended involvement in Afghanistan, and suggested that he wanted the regional countries involved and taking charge including India, Russia and Pakistan to fight the Taliban.

"Why is Russia not there? Why isn't India there? Why isn't Pakistan there? Why are we there? We are 6,000 miles away," Trump told the cabinet meeting adding that even though war in Afghanistan had cost billions of dollars to the US, he wanted to be treated fairly.

To another question, Trump said, Russia used to be Soviet Union. Afghanistan made it Russia because they went bankrupt fighting in Afghanistan. So you tend to look at other countries. Pakistan is there. They should be fighting. Russia should be fighting." Trump also expressed disappointment over New Delhi's role in Afghanistan and criticised Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. "I get along very well with India and Prime Minister Modi, but he is constantly telling me, he built a library in Afghanistan. Library! That's like five hours of what we spend (in Afghanistan)."

Meanwhile, Pakistan on Thursday appeared pleasantly surprised with President Donald Trump's remarks and said it "supported" his remarks about such a meeting at the "leadership level".

It was clear that the government was completely taken aback by Trump's statement that he would be meeting with Pakistan's leadership "in the not-too-distant future". Trump's comments came the same day that Ambassador-designate to the US Dr Asad Majeed Khan met with Prime Minister Imran Khan.

"Actually, there is nothing planned as we speak. Pakistan's ambassador will be reaching Washington this weekend, so then we will have a clearer picture about Trump's remarks," a senior official told The News. The official said for the time being there was no visit abroad by the prime minister in which Trump will also be participating and neither were there any plans for the premier to travel to Washington.

Later, when a question was put to the Foreign Office Spokesman Dr Muhammad Faisal, he responded, "We support Trump's remarks, and are currently assessing developments in the bilateral relationship. President Trump's remarks are indeed departure from his Tweet of 1 January 2018. We look forward to a positive engagement with the US at the leadership level".

However, the spokesman chose not to give a direct response when asked if Prime Minister Imran Khan had replied to a letter sent earlier by President Trump. In his letter, Trump had sought Pakistan's help and cooperation in bringing the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table. "On the question regarding the reply to the letter from President Trump, I will check and get back to you," he said.

Commenting on Pakistan's stance if the US troops were withdrawn from Afghanistan, the spokesman said being the immediate neighbour, it was interested that any development in Afghanistan led to peace and stability in the region. "Currently, efforts are underway towards a political settlement in Afghanistan. Hence, withdrawal of the US troops should be part of a peace process with a view to ensuring that there is no power vacuum in Afghanistan. It is Pakistan's genuine desire that peace returns to Afghanistan allowing the return of Afghan refugees from Pakistan and beginning of an era of prosperity and normalcy in the region," he said.

Turning to attempts by India to send drones inside Pakistan, the spokesman said Pakistan strongly condemned these violations. "As you have seen, our forces remain vigilant and have responded effectively to these threats. Any misadventure by India would be responded in a befitting manner. With regard to the Indian statements about surgical strike inside Pakistan, there was no such event. It is a figment of Indian imagination. The Indian media is itself doubting the claims of their government. However, our desire for peace must not be misconstrued as our weakness," he added.

The spokesman could not give a satisfactory response when asked why Israel was on the list of countries to which Pakistan allowed conditional access. "Pakistan does not recognise Israel. Your question pertains to the Ministry of Interior," he replied. The spokesman also gave a detailed response to cases of alleged wrongdoings in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "In Bulgaria, there was a report of embezzlement. A special fact-finding officer was sent to investigate the issue. The accountant concerned has accepted responsibility for the embezzlement. On his return, his case has been referred to the NAB. The Auditor General has just completed the special audit of the mission. Necessary action is being taken based on the observations raised by the Audit," said the spokesman. A case is being heard against the high commissioner in South Africa, and his travels to Pakistan are in line with relevant rules.

Deputy Head of Mission in Singapore has been recalled and action is being taken in this regard. To a query about the case in Portugal, he said misinformation was circulated about Ambassador Leena Moazzam.

An inquiry was undertaken which exonerated her after which she was sent to Belarus by the previous government. Regarding the case of Pakistan's ambassador in Rome, an inquiry has been undertaken by the Ministry of Commerce and MoFA and its report has been shared with the ombudsperson.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 12-1-2019

India finally allows Pakistan to inspect its power projects

Khaleeq Kiani | Khalid Hasnain

LAHORE/ISLAMABAD: India finally agreed on Friday to allow Pakistani experts to inspect its hydropower projects at the Chenab basin — 1,000MW Pakal Dul and 48MW Lower Kalnai — from Jan 28 to 31. India has formally confirmed this through a letter to Pakistan's office of Indus Waters.

“We have received a letter from Indian Commissioner for Indus Waters Pradeep Kumar Saxena. They have arranged a general tour of inspection for our three-member delegation of experts. Under the schedule, a three-member delegation headed by me will leave for India on Jan 27 and return home on Feb 1,” Commissioner for Indus Waters Syed Mehr Ali Shah told Dawn on Friday.

“The six-day tour includes four days for inspection (Jan 28 to 31) and two days (Jan 27 and Feb 1) for travelling (Pakistan-India-Pakistan),” he said.

Minister hopes New Delhi will show the same spirit in resolving other outstanding issues

The Pakistani delegation will leave for India on Jan 27 via Wagah border. After crossing the border, the experts will proceed to Amritsar for onward travelling to the disputed projects' areas. They will start inspecting the projects on Jan 28.

“The general tour of inspection is not limited to Pakal Dul and Lower Kalnai; we may also visit Rattle hydropower and other projects at the Chenab basin,” Mr Shah said.

As a result of the 115th meeting of the Permanent Commission for Indus Waters (PCIW) held in Lahore in August last year, India had earlier scheduled inspection of the projects at the Chenab basin by Pakistani experts from Oct 7 to 11. But later it postponed the inspection on the pretext of local bodies' elections in the respective areas.

The Pakistani commissioner had in the last week of October telephoned his Indian counterpart and urged him to give a schedule for the tour of experts in November or first week of December. However, the Indian commissioner was reported to have said it wouldn't be possible during the first or second week of December due to local Panchayat elections in India-held Kashmir — the area where these projects are located.

But the Pakistani commissioner kept on reminding his Indian counterpart of fulfilling the promise made at the 115th PCIW meeting held on Aug 29-30 last year in Lahore. During the meeting, India had not only agreed to allow Pakistani experts to inspect the two hydropower projects in September, but also the Kishanganga project at Jhelum basin at a later stage.

Reciprocally, Pakistan had also agreed to allow India to carry out inspection of Kotri Barrage over the Indus after September.

In its letter, India's office for Indus Waters has justified the delay behind the agreed schedule of inspection by the Pakistani experts. “They have clarified that the tour was first scheduled in September and then October. However, it couldn't be made possible due to local Panchayat elections in the area and then winter session of Indian parliament,” the Pakistani commissioner said.

He termed the scheduling of general tour for inspection of the projects a good sign towards following the Indus Water Treaty signed by the two countries.

India's gesture welcomed

Talking to Dawn in Islamabad, Water Resources Minister Faisal Vawda said: “We welcome this gesture from India. This is a major breakthrough that India has finally agreed to our request for inspection of Indian projects at Chenab basin.”

He said he believed that the issues could be resolved without raising egos and by taking care of each other's respect and expressed the hope that India would also show same spirit in resolving other outstanding issues.

The Pakistani water commissioner has been demanding for years the inspection of Pakal Dul and Lower Kalnai hydropower projects, disputing their designs.

Separately, Pakistan has been struggling for almost three years to convince the World Bank to form a court of arbitration to resolve its dispute with India over construction of the 330MW Kishanganga storage and hydroelectric project on River Jhelum and the 850MW Rattle hydroelectric project on Chenab in violation of the Indus Waters Treaty to its disadvantage after exhausting all bilateral options.

Mehr Ali Shah said the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960 envisaged annual visits by Pakistani water commissioner to inspect water

and hydroelectric projects on the western rivers, but the process had been stalled since September 2014.

Pakistan had indicated last month to invoke Article 9 of the treaty that empowered any party to seek intervention of the World Bank for appointment of a neutral expert or an arbitration court in case of breach of the treaty. That stage did not come as New Delhi agreed to reschedule the inspection tour.

The treaty requires the water commissioners of Pakistan and India to meet twice a year and exchange technical visits to projects' sites and critical river head works, but Pakistan had been facing a lot of problems in timely meetings and visits.

Pakistan has objections to pondage and freeboard of the Lower Kalnai project and pondage, filling criteria and spillway of the Pakal Dul project.

Pakal Dul is a storage-cum-power project and can have gross storage of about 108,000 acres feet of water. The project design envisages its filling in every monsoon season between mid-June and end-August. Pakistan is of the opinion that the tunnel spillway of Pakal Dul should be raised closer to the dead storage level because its placement 40 metres below the dead storage level could allow drawdown flushing not permitted to India under the 1960 water treaty.

On the Lower Kalnai project, Pakistan has raised objections to its freeboard, pondage and intake and is of the view that the depth of bridge girder and provision of freeboard should be close to one metre and considers two-metre freeboard as 'excessive'.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 2-1-2019

Pakistan, India exchange lists of prisoners

The Newspaper's Staff Reporter

ISLAMABAD: There are 537 Indian prisoners in Pakistani jails, whereas 347 Pakistanis are languishing in Indian prisons, according to the lists exchanged by the two countries on New Year's day.

"The government of Pakistan today handed over a list of 537 Indian prisoners (54 civilians + 483 fishermen) in Pakistan to the High Commission of India in Islamabad," the Foreign Office said in a statement on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, according to a diplomatic source, India has intimated the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi that there are 347 Pakistanis, including 249 civilians and 98 fishermen, in its jails.

The two countries exchange the lists of each other's prisoners in their custody twice a year under their bilateral Consular Access Agreement signed on May 21, 2008.

The lists are exchanged on Jan 1 and July 1 every year. The lists include civilians and fishermen.

The agreement doesn't cover those held on charges of espionage or other military-related offences.

Therefore, arrest of fishermen found violating the maritime boundary is common, but their release is a complicated process due to hostile relations between the two countries.

It may take a year or more for arrested fishermen to be released, but in most cases they lose their fishing boats, which are usually kept by the authorities that arrest them.

The two countries also shared lists of their nuclear facilities and installations with each other.

"In accordance with Article II of the Agreement on Prohibition of Attacks against Nuclear Installations and Facilities between Pakistan and India, signed on Dec 31, 1988, a list of nuclear installations and facilities in Pakistan was officially handed over to a representative of the Indian High Commission at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs today," the FO said, adding that the Indian Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi handed over the list of Indian nuclear installations and facilities to a representative of the Pakistan High Commission.

The agreement contains the provision that both countries inform each other of their nuclear installations and facilities on Jan 1 every year. This has been done consecutively since Jan 1, 1992.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 7-1-2019

Balancing ties

IT is welcome that Prime Minister Imran Khan reconsidered his pledge to not travel abroad during the first months of his term in order to focus on domestic priorities.

As economic and fiscal realities became clear and regional security issues assumed a fresh urgency, it would have been troubling if the prime minister had remained disengaged and entrusted the handling of such matters to subordinates and other institutions.

Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed was recently in Pakistan, where he met the prime minister.

Mr Khan has already visited the UAE twice as prime minister and the visit by the crown prince signals a re-warming of ties after a noticeably cool period in which Pakistan was considered to be insufficiently close to the Saudi Arabia-UAE axis that has arisen against Iran.

Two points ought to be made here.

A careful balancing of ties is necessary in the fraught world of Middle East politics. Last week, Prime Minister Khan travelled to Turkey to meet President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who is vying for influence in the greater Muslim world with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Pakistan has vital energy trade relations with Qatar, which is blockaded by a group of countries led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The first foreign leader Mr Khan met after being elected prime minister was Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif.

Now, US President Donald Trump has suggested he will meet with the Pakistani leadership and Mr Trump's extreme position against Iran is well known.

Amidst that bewildering array of cross-cutting international tensions, Pakistan must protect and advance its own core economic, diplomatic and security interests. Therefore, in his interactions with foreign leaders, Mr Khan should consistently reiterate Pakistan's determination to have peaceful relations with regional and international powers.

Where there are trade opportunities, they should be pursued; where the possibility for mediation exists, it should be diplomatically advanced.

Second, the economy that Mr Khan inherited and his own government's indecision have combined to create a need for international financial support.

Friendly countries like the UAE, Saudi Arabia and China have offered financial assistance to Pakistan. But hard as Mr Khan has lobbied for money to help stabilise the state's finances, he and his government have not been forthcoming when it comes to sharing the terms and conditions on which financial assistance has been extended bilaterally.

Mr Khan ought to recognise that transparency alone will help dispel suspicions of inappropriate commitments having been made by his government.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 14-1-2019

Rakhine Unrest: BGB alert over fresh Rohingya intrusion

Star Report

The Border Guard Bangladesh remains on alert since Saturday for a possible renewed Rohingya intrusion amid frequent clashes between Myanmar security forces and Buddhist rebels in Rakhine state.

The BGB has deployed additional force to patrol the country's 54km border with Myanmar fearing intrusion through the Naf

river and other border areas, said Asaduzzaman Chowdhury, director of BGB battalion 2 in Teknaf.

"Fishing and other movement in the Naf river have been restricted and BGB remains cautious.... to prevent intrusion and also yaba smuggling," he said.

Abdul Motaleb, chairman of Leda Rohingya Camp Development Committee in Teknaf, said a fresh exodus might take place if the ongoing conflicts in Myanmar affect Rohingyas.

In fact, a family of seven entered Bangladesh from Chindifrang of Bujidong on Thursday and took shelter at Kutupalong camp in Cox's Bazar.

The family is kept at the Kutupalong transit camp and will be taken to a temporary shelter camp, said Rezaul Karim, in-charge of the camp.

Meanwhile, 93 Rohingyas who came from India are also at the transit camp and will be taken to that temporary camp, he added.

On January 9 Aljazeera reported that frequent clashes between Myanmar security forces and Buddhist rebels in Rakhine state have alarmed thousands of Rohingya refugees living in no-man's-land on the country's border with Bangladesh, as concerns grow over the intensified fighting.

More than 730,000 members of the mostly Muslim minority have fled Myanmar to escape a brutal military-led crackdown that started in 2017 and have taken shelter in sprawling refugee camps in Bangladesh while many have been living in limbo on the border, unwilling to enter the settlements or return home.

They are now caught on the sidelines of clashes between Myanmar troops and the Arakan Army, an armed group seeking more autonomy for western Rakhine state's Buddhist-majority population.

"Heavy fighting is going on between the government troops and Arakan Army inside Myanmar," Rohingya leader Dil Mohammad told The Daily Star.

"The situation is very tense," he said.

On Wednesday, the United Nations said in a statement it was "deeply concerned" about the situation in the area.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 12-1-2019

Rahul Gandhi congratulates PM

All India Congress Committee Chairman Rahul Gandhi yesterday congratulated Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe on his return the democratically elected Prime Minister of Sri Lanka.

Gandhi, the scion of the Nehru–Gandhi dynasty in a congratulatory message to Prime Minister Wickremesinghe said that Parliament’s decision over the No Confidence Motion against the Premier and the Supreme Court judgement are a vindication of Parliamentary democracy.

“The vote of confidence by the Parliament in your favour and the verdict of the Supreme Court are a vindication of parliamentary democracy,” he said.

Gandhi said that the recent political developments and resulting constitutional crisis was a matter of concern for them.

The message:

“Dear Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe

“In congratulate you on your return as the democratically elected Prime Minister of Sri Lanka.

“The recent political developments and resulting Constitutional crisis, was a matter of concern for us all who wish political stability in Sri Lanka. The vote of confidence by the Parliament in your favour and the verdict of the Supreme Court are a vindication of Parliamentary democracy.

“It is reassuring that the constitution has prevailed.

“I take this opportunity, to convey my best wishes for your success upon your resumption of the office”.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 15-1-2019

First things first

Steps to avoid the loss of strategic land in Nepal-Tibet border must be taken

When Chinese authorities first began constructing an embankment in Kimathanka, one of Nepal’s smallest and most remote settlements nestled in Sankhuwasabha, it was barely 150 metres long. Five years later—following a pattern of governmental oversight—it has amassed considerably. Local leaders say that the construction of the embankment, which is now close to completion, may result in the inundation of nearly 200 ropanis of land that is strategically important for Nepal. The effects are already visible: the Arun river has already begun changing its course from Kimathanka and local residents fear that their land could submerge ‘anytime’ during the rainy season.

Alarming, the people at the forefront of negotiations have been Kimathanka’s local government and people. When the Arun river

first started cutting land on the Nepal side, the then Kimathanka Village Development Committee—now Bhotekhola Rural Municipality—had spent over Rs10 million to protect the land. Their concerns have also been continually dismissed by Chinese authorities. As their bargaining power is considerably affected by their fears of losing access to the markets across the border, on which they depend for almost all basic amenities, intervention from central and provincial governments is of vital importance.

Instead, concerned authorities have seemingly been preoccupied with ‘the preparation of the structural designs of at least six offices’—including a customs office, a dry port, border outposts, and an immigration quarantine. While these are necessary structures, their purposes will be entirely defeated if an embankment on the Nepal side is not constructed before flooding occurs. As recommended by Rajendra Gautam, a lawmaker from the federal Parliament, the construction of a one-kilometre-long embankment should be the federal government’s first priority. If it fails to act quickly, flooding will occur before any border infrastructure can be built—defeating the entire purpose of the north-south corridor. In the geopolitical theatre, the importance of land cannot be overstated. The concerned authorities must be extremely cautious about their country’s land and territory. It goes without saying that the construction of an embankment by the Chinese will generate far-reaching security concerns for us. There is widespread belief that greater connectivity with China will help kick-start economic growth. And rightly so. But at the same time, we cannot afford to act passively in the name of greater connectivity. China’s Nepal policy is driven by its domestic concerns pertaining to domestic security concerns related to Tibetan stability. China’s regional concerns are guided by containing India’s influence. While regional connectivity is important, it is equally important for the government to take cautionary and preparatory steps in order to adopt a strategic stance.

There is an evident communication gap between high-level officials in the Chinese construction alongside Nepal-Tibet border. The concerned line ministry must take cognisance of this fact and raise the issue with its Chinese counterparts at the earliest. As neighbors, we should be seeking win win solutions to any problems, not a high-handed approach where a bigger country—in terms of its population and economy—seeks to undermine a relatively small country. And the onus is on us to make this possible.

II – INTERNAL AFFAIRS

Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad

Summary Internal Affairs

The upcoming general elections to Indian Lok Sabha continues to dominate Indian print media spaces. Till recently, Prime Minister Modi was said to win a sure second shot at the premiership. However, that has changed with the recent five states' assembly elections in which the Congress won in three states. Commentators were quick to pick on the BJP's defeat and started offering negative commentary on PM Modi's prospects of winning. But some analysts are calling for caution as according to them, given the narrow margins with which the Congress has won the afore-mentioned elections, and the expertise which the BJP leaders command in putting together political alliances, the BJP may well have a good chance at forming a government, together with allies, in New Delhi post-2019 general elections.

Pakistan and China remain one of the issues Prime Minister Modi is reported to be using as part of his election strategies. Commentators in print media are of the opinion that no substantial development should be expected to take place with regards to dialogue with Pakistan until the Lok Sabha elections in 2019. So it was in that context, with an eye on elections and keeping in view public sentiments that he recently engaged with media and offered his comments on India's relations with Pakistan and China. In his interview with ANI news agency, he dwelt in detail on the so-called 'surgical strikes'. With regard to China, he stated that 'India should be judged on the basis of what it did in Doklam'. BJP's nemesis, the Congress, reacted angrily to his interview by stating that his interview was full of "Is". It said that "the interview was that of a 'defeatist' prime minister that was full of rhetoric and didn't mention the promises made by him to the people before the 2014 elections".

In Pakistan, print media focused on the working of parliament in the context of disagreements between the government and the opposition about the constitution of different lower house committees. In that regard, chairmanship of the key public accounts committee, traditionally kept by the opposition, remained a bone of contention as the government was of the opinion that the slot could not be handed to a person who was being investigated for corruption by the national accountability bureau. They were referring to Mian Shahbaz Sharif, the leader of the opposition. The deadlock was eventually broken when the government ultimately signaled its willingness to withdraw its stance on the issue and eventually Mian Shahbaz Sharif assumed the chairmanship.

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Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad

HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 8-1-2019**It's too early to predict Narendra Modi's ouster in 2019**

While nobody thinks Narendra Modi will get over 270 seats, it is not certain that the BJP will fall to 170 either.

Vir Sanghvi

There is one thing about the chattering classes and the commentariat that you can be sure about. Any political view they adopt is so lovingly embraced by all their members that there is rarely space for a dissenting voice. Sometimes the commentariat is at least half right. Before the 2014 general election, it forecast the rise of Narendra Modi. And in the months that followed Mr Modi's triumphant sweep, it wrote bitter obituaries of the Congress.

So the Congress went from defeat to setback to humiliation. Sneering anchors decided that Rahul Gandhi was a numbskull who would never be taken seriously. After the Uttar Pradesh (UP) elections, this consensus strengthened. Nobody expected the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to win so big, and when it did, the chattering classes concluded that demonetisation was a masterstroke. Mr Modi was here for another 15 years.

This view was never very well thought out. If you took UP out of the mix, then the BJP's electoral record did not seem quite so impressive. There were too many states where majorities were either procured or negotiated. A great wave did not always wash away the opposition in every assembly election.

Now the commentariat has done an about turn. The Congress's victories in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh and Rahul's sharp attacks on the government are being used to argue that the Modi raj is coming to an end.

The chattering classes rule out a BJP victory so they fall back on a hung parliament scenario. Even if the BJP is the largest single party, they say, it will not be able to gather enough support to form a government. So the mighty Mr. Modi will walk over to the other side of the House, will lead the opposition and will function as a prime minister in exile.

Scenario Two is that the BJP (and especially the Sangh) will be relieved to be rid of Mr Modi. But it will still want power. So a new coalition will be developed around a new leader, possibly Rajnath Singh or Nitin Gadkari.

All this scenario-building is premature if not fanciful. There is, first of all, the matter of seats. Current estimates put the BJP down by 100 seats. But that can only happen if an SP-BSP alliance lasts in UP. It could but there are months to go, many opportunities for squabbles and plenty of rifts for Amit Shah to exploit. Akhilesh Yadav is frequently betrayed by his family. And Mayawati is frequently let down by her own character.

But assume that the BJP loses UP. Then Mr Modi will have about 170 seats and will be leader of the largest party in parliament. Won't the President call him to form the government? And once he has the President's letter, will he have any difficulty in finding at least some friends? He may fall short of an overall majority but he could lead the largest coalition in parliament and could well take office as head of a minority government.

Contrast this with the opposition. First of all, they won't all unite. Secondly, they will need a leader and though the Congress will be the second largest group in parliament, Rahul Gandhi has said that it will not insist on the prime ministership. But the squabbling regional chieftains may prefer Rahul to one of their number. (If you were Akhilesh who would you prefer: Rahul or Mayawati?) Will Rahul be able to hold this flock together? Can he withstand raids on his supporters from Amit Shah?

Within the BJP, the Gadkari/Rajnath option will be difficult to pull off because the cadres are so personally devoted to Mr Modi that they would rather remain in opposition than support an alternative leader.

So, a few things are worth remembering. The numbers are not clear yet, given how narrow the Congress victories were. All the anti-Modi alliances are not in place. So Modi might end up doing better than the commentariat expects.

Secondly, if government formation requires allies to be bought over or 'persuaded', this is the BJP's speciality. It will find it easier to construct this kind of coalition than the Congress.

And finally, never underestimate the love that the faithful have for Mr Modi. He may no longer be the Modi of 2014 but his image within the country is not yet negative.

So yes, Mr Modi is in trouble. But the battle is not over. There are still scores of things he could do (direct transfers to the poor through Jan Dhan accounts is one option). And while nobody thinks he will get over 270 seats, it is not certain that the BJP will fall to 170 either.

It is possible that things might get worse for Mr Modi in the months ahead. But till that happens, the commentariat needs to move out of its echo chamber and dampen its expectations.

It is too early for them to put the champagne on ice.

THE STATESMAN, NEW DELHI 13-1-2019**Why the BJP badly needs allies**

If Modi is to save the day, the BJP needs a new narrative besides new allies.

Kalyani Shankar

Is the BJP searching for new allies ahead of the 2019 polls? Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent remarks in Chennai to his party workers give an indication that the saffron party is serious about alliances. The ruling party, which looked invincible until a few months ago, seems to be attempting to keep its political alliances intact ahead of the Lok Sabha polls. While a few months ago, Modi's re-election was certain, now it is no more a cakewalk. If Modi is to save the day, the BJP needs a new narrative besides new allies. But there are not many on the horizon.

The Prime Minister said, "We cherish our old friends and our doors are always open for parties." He also recalled the successful coalition politics ushered in by Vajpayee in the 1990s. Vajpayee's government had alliance first with the AIADMK and then the DMK. Interestingly, the BJP had fought the 2014 Lok Sabha elections in Tamil Nadu leading a six party alliance comprising smaller parties, including the DMDK, the PMK and Vaiko-led MDMK, and won two of the 39 seats – one each by

the saffron party and PMK. However, all five parties snapped ties with the BJP later.

The coalition with which the BJP came to power in 2014 seems to be cracking ahead of the 2019 general elections. While some allies have already left others are making their concerns public. That is why the need for new allies. So, any successful new coalition would require a powerful narrative, and sharper strategising than that of the Congress-anchored coalition.

Secondly, the BJP had 40 odd partners till recently but some of them have quit. Just months ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, the BJP has lost three key allies – Telugu Desam in March and the Rashtriya Lok Samata Party (RLSP) and Assam Gana Parisahd this month. The first two have shifted loyalties to the proposed Mahagadhbandan.

The NDA allies have been deeply concerned about protecting their turfs in their respective states. The party has four major allies – the Shiv Sena, Akali Dal, JD (U) and Lok Jan Shakti party. Of these, the JD (U) has firmed up the alliance through a seat sharing arrangement. Shiv Sena is on the warpath and threatens to quit the NDA. While the Akalis have not crossed swords with the BJP, the party has decided to contest all the Lok Sabha and Assembly seats in Haryana. This could have a negative impact, even though the Akalis are claiming it is an anti-Chautala move. Paswan, who is known as the weathercock, has bargained for his Rajya Sabha berth and also firmed up seat sharing with the BJP. Even minor partners like Apna Dal (S) and Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party (SBSP) are also increasing. In June, the BJP walked out of an alliance with the PDP in Jammu and Kashmir. Most northeastern regional parties including the allies of BJP are opposed to the recently passed controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016.

The BJP has about 20 odd allies. In Bihar it is in alliance with the JD (U) and Lok Jan Shakti party and in UP the party has two minor partners, Apna Dal and Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj party. In Maharashtra, the BJP is continuing with Shiv Sena, Republican Party of India (Athawale), Swabhimana Paksha, Rashtriya Samaj Paksha, and Shiv Sangram. In Jharkhand, the All Jharkhand Students Union, and JMM (P) are allies of the BJP. In the North-east the party is in alliance with regional partners. The BJP is eyeing Gorkha League in West Bengal. In Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, Jammu and Kashmir, the BJP has no allies.

Thirdly, in 2014 BJP came with 31 per cent of the vote share and formed the government. In 2019, the situation has changed. Then the regional block won about fifty per cent of votes and the regional satraps are not ready to align with the BJP. There are many parties like the Biju Janata Dal in Odisha, the Telangana Rashtra Samithi and the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi and Punjab which are not ready for a BJP alliance. Post poll is another story.

Fourthly, the Congress has tied up with more allies in most of the States including Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Bihar, Kerala, Karnataka, and is hoping for an alliance with the SP and BSP in Uttar Pradesh.

The states which could determine the majority of a party in the Lok Sabha are Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar

Pradesh and West Bengal. So the BJP could also look at state-specific alliances as the Congress has done. For this it has to negotiate with individual parties in different states.

The BJP has traditionally allied with parties that bring in voters from social groups that do not support it. Whoever ties up with a significant share of parties that are expected to do well in their states in 2019 – Bahujan Samaj Party and Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh, the YSR Congress in Andhra Pradesh, the Telangana Rashtra Samiti in Telangana, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu or the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal could hope to form the government. After all arithmetic in elections is more important than chemistry.

THE HINDU, DELHI 2-1-2019

As election year dawns, Modi gives a report card

Asian News International

In an interview with the news agency ANI, Prime Minister delves into his government's initiatives and the controversies and criticisms

Two days after the Army foiled a fresh attempt by Pakistan's Border Action Team (BAT) to push infiltrators through the Line of Control in Kashmir, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Tuesday that India would make all efforts to keep up the pressure on Pakistan, but it would be a huge mistake to believe that the country would mend its ways anytime soon.

Mr. Modi said, whether through surgical strikes or action at other levels, the Indian government was working out various strategies to force Pakistan to check terrorism.

He said that while India favoured a dialogue and good friendly relations with its neighbour, it was also wary of the fact that Pakistan was not going to stop promoting cross-border terrorism soon.

Asked why cross-border attacks had not stopped despite the surgical strikes, he said, "Whatever strategy is to be adopted, how to do it, is ongoing at appropriate levels, has been happening...It will be a huge mistake to believe that Pakistan will mend its ways after a war. It will take a lot of time for Pakistan to mend its ways."

"India, whether under UPA or NDA government, has never opposed dialogue. It is our consistent policy that we are in favour of dialogue. It is the consistent policy of the country, not Modi government or Manmohan Singh government," he said.

On his government's China policy, he said India should be judged on the basis of what it did in Doklam. He said nothing had happened with India since then that could be considered deceit.

Responding to the criticism of his foreign tours as being too many and offering more photo opportunities rather than yielding anything substantial, Mr. Modi said his travel schedule had been more or less similar to that of his predecessors but his visits were noticed more because he interacted with people, took decisions and made India's voice heard.

"Come back before sunrise, irrespective of the success or failure of the mission."

This was the Prime Minister's message to the Army commandos who went across the LoC on September 28, 2016 to carry out surgical strikes.

He said the date of the attack was changed twice, keeping in mind the safety and security of the troops.

THE HINDU, DELHI 2-1-2019

Full of 'I's and lies: Congress

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

'PM's interview had nothing on promises made by him to the people in 2014'

The Congress on Tuesday described Prime Minister Narendra Modi's interview to news agency, ANI, as that of a 'defeatist' Prime Minister that was full of rhetoric and didn't mention the promises made by him to the people before the 2014 election. Congress communication chief Randeep Surjewala said the Prime Minister should have spoken about the suffering caused by demonetisation, GST, bank frauds, failure to get back black money, fragile security situation and farmers' woes.

"Summary of Modi's 'monologue' interview — 'I', 'Me', 'Mine', 'Myself'. The country is suffering your 'I's and 'lies'," Mr. Surjewala said at a press conference.

"The Prime Minister is so helpless that he can't even answer from where he is going to contest the next Parliamentary election or whether he will contest at all. This shows a defeatist Prime Minister," he added.

'Fixed interview'

Congress Deputy Leader in the Rajya Sabha, Anand Sharma said the people of the country cannot be 'fooled' through a 'fixed interview' and dared him to face Parliament and hold a press conference.

"PM Modi did not spare our people of his penchant for false promises, hollow claims and propaganda even on the New Year day. The habitual peddler of untruths and lies has signalled a nasty narrative for the 2019 election campaign," Mr. Sharma said in a series of tweets.

"People cannot be fooled through a fixed interview. Have the courage to face us in Parliament or address a press conference. Having betrayed the people, do not beg Lord Ram to save you. He did not ask you to lie in the first place," Mr. Sharma tweeted.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 7-1-2019

SP-BSP pact in Uttar Pradesh

Potential game-changer ahead of Lok Sabha polls

MONTHS before the Lok Sabha elections, the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) have agreed 'in principle' to an alliance in Uttar Pradesh. The crucial development has thrown the electoral battle wide open not only in UP, but also in other states of the Hindi belt, including Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Both the SP and the BSP had been decimated in the 2017 UP Assembly elections, winning just 47 and 19 seats, respectively, even as the BJP had recorded a thumping victory with 312 seats in the 403-member House. However, the two opposition parties' combined vote share was a sizeable 44 per cent, higher than the saffron party's nearly 40 per

cent. These numbers, coupled with anti-incumbency and the BJP's defeat in three Lok Sabha bypolls in the state last year, give Akhilesh Yadav and Mayawati considerable confidence to turn the tables in the parliamentary face-off.

The gathbandhan apparently has no place for the Congress, which is again set to be confined to the Gandhis' pocket boroughs of Amethi and Rae Bareilly. The BSP has even gone to the extent of calling the grand old party an 'insignificant' force in UP. Punching above its weight, the Dalit-centric party has been keeping the Congress on tenterhooks in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Despite having just two BSP MLAs in the MP Assembly, Mayawati recently managed to push the Kamal Nath government to make a decisive commitment on dropping 'frame-up' cases registered by the previous dispensation under the SC/ST Act.

With 80 Lok Sabha seats (the maximum for any state), the Uttar Pradesh battleground can make or mar fortunes on the national stage. In 2014, the BJP had won a whopping 71 seats, while the SP had finished a distant second and the BSP had drawn a blank. The Congress obviously needs the twosome to upstage Modi and Co. As of now, both parties are playing hard to get. Their clout is likely to grow further once the nation pronounces its mandate.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 10-1-2019

The Assam gamble

BJP rashly opens a new front in the Northeast with its push for the Citizenship Amendment Bill.

The Lok Sabha passed the controversial and contentious Citizenship Amendment Bill on Wednesday. The political Opposition and several civil society groups in the Northeast responded to the introduction of the bill in Parliament by observing a bandh in the region. Irrespective of its fate in the Upper House, the proposed legislation has polarised the Northeast and triggered a process of social and political realignment. Most disquietingly, it threatens to expose the faultlines that had led to the rise of subnationalist politics in the region in the 1980s.

The BJP has been expanding its footprint in the Northeast ever since it won the 2014 general election. The party now runs governments in Assam, Manipur, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh whereas its allies are in office in Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram. However, its allies are distancing themselves from the BJP over the citizenship bill. On Wednesday, the Asom Gana Parishad, the political face of Assamese subnationalism, withdrew its ministers from the BJP-led government in Guwahati and quit the NDA. Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad Sangma has said his party, a constituent of the NDA, is opposed to the bill. The Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT), again an ally of the BJP, supported the protests in Tripura against the bill. Mizoram Chief Minister Zoramthanga, another NDA partner, has also opposed the proposed law. The political churn reflects the fact that questions concerning ethnic and linguistic identities have underpinned politics in the region for decades. However, the subnationalist narrative in the region so far focussed on opposition to the "foreigner", and has been indifferent to religion.

The Citizenship Amendment Bill, which privileges the claims of non-Muslim migrants, has sought to twist this narrative. BJP leader Himanta Biswa Sarma has painted the spectre of Muslim separatism to build support for the bill. This is a divisive and dangerous idea, especially in Assam, where Muslims constitute over 34 per cent of the population and many Muslim outfits support secular opposition to illegal migration. The citizenship bill also complicates the NRC process since it advances the cut-off date for non-Muslims seeking Indian citizenship to 2014 from 1971, the year agreed upon in the Assam Accord. This would mean that a significant percentage of the 40 lakh people who may turn stateless once the NRC is updated will qualify for Indian citizenship, a prospect that alarms subnationalist forces in the Northeast. The BJP has sought to assuage such fears by promising extra protection to indigenous communities. The emphasis on exclusivist identities is a fraught proposition. The BJP is exposing a new faultline by proposing that religious identity be the marker of citizenship.

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BJP loses Assam ally, AGP pulls out over citizenship Bill

Former Assam chief minister Prafulla Mahanta said that the decision to walk out of the alliance was in line with AGP's stand — that the alliance would break if the BJP goes ahead with the Bill.

By Pradeep Kausal, Abhishek Saha

The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) walked out of the alliance with the BJP in Assam Monday over the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016, after failing to convince the BJP that the Bill is a “threat” to the state and is considered to be against the basic principles of the 1985 Assam Accord.

In the 126-member Assam Assembly, the ruling alliance comprised the BJP (61), the Bodoland People's Front (13 seats) and the AGP (14 seats). The Congress and AIUDF have 25 and 13 members. The AGP also had three Cabinet ministers — party president Atul Bora, Keshab Mahanta and Phani Bhusan Choudhury.

Bora announced the decision to quit the alliance in Delhi after top leaders met Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh earlier in the day. “We tried to convince the Centre that the Bill is against the Assam Accord and will nullify the ongoing updating of the National Register of Citizens. But, Rajnathji told us categorically that it will be passed in the Lok Sabha tomorrow (the last day of the winter session of Parliament). After this, there is no question of the AGP remaining in the alliance,” he said.

At a gathering in Tinsukia, Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal said: “As long as we are at the helm, we won't push the community to uncertainty. We have responsibility. We are committed to the interests of the indigenous people. To protect the community is our responsibility and we will fulfil it with sincerity...I am a son of the soil and I will not allow the Assamese people to get marginalised in their own place.”

The AGP is the fourth to part company with the BJP. While the Telugu Desam Party left the NDA in March last year, Rashtriya

Lok Samata Party (RLSP) leader and Union Minister of State Upendra Kushwaha quit last month. In July, the BJP had pulled out of the alliance in J&K with the PDP and the Shiv Sena has already publicly declared that it will contest the 2019 Lok Sabha polls alone.

Speaking in Silchar on Friday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said he hoped the Bill would be passed soon and called it “atonement” of the mistakes of Partition. The next day, the powerful All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and 30 other organisations called for a state-wide bandh Tuesday to protest against the scheduled tabling of the Bill.

On Monday, Assam witnessed public protests and demonstrations by civil society groups and AASU against the Bill and in Guwahati black flags were raised against the NDA government.

Speaking to The Indian Express over the phone, AGP leader Ramendra Kalita said, “The alliance has broken. We met Home Minister Rajnath Singh today and again tried convincing him how serious a threat the Bill poses to Assamese society and culture. We urged him to stop the Bill from being tabled in Parliament in any way but he said it was not possible.”

“Breaking the alliance if the Bill is passed is a commitment we had made to the people of Assam. We have kept our promise,” he said, ruling out any possibility of a tie-up with the Congress at this stage.

Former Assam chief minister Prafulla Mahanta said that the decision to walk out of the alliance was in line with AGP's stand — that the alliance would break if the BJP goes ahead with the Bill.

Last month, after repeatedly expressing its displeasure at the BJP over the Bill, the AGP wrote to BJP president Amit Shah on Monday stating that it will walk out of the alliance if the “obnoxious” Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016, is “intended to be passed” in Parliament.

The Bill proposes to make non-Muslim minority immigrants from three neighbouring countries, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan, eligible for Indian citizenship. As per the 1985 Assam Accord, any person who entered Assam after midnight of March 24, 1971, will be identified as a foreigner.

THE HINDU, DELHI 10-1-2019
Judicial evasion and the status quo: on SC judgments
Gautam Bhatia

In high stakes cases, the Supreme Court must ensure that judgments are timely and clear

On October 26, 2018, a three-judge Bench of the Supreme Court, headed by the Chief Justice of India, was confronted with a straightforward legal question: whether the decision taken by the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) and the Central government to divest Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) Director Alok Verma of his powers and functions was legally valid. The question was a straightforward one, because it required the court to interpret three legal instruments: the Delhi Special Police Establishment (DSPE) Act (that brought the CBI

into existence), the CVC Act, and the Supreme Court's own prior judgment in Vineet Narain.

The counsel for Mr. Verma argued that the DSPE Act made it clear that the CBI Director had a guaranteed, two-year tenure, and could not be transferred without the consent of a high-powered committee consisting of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, and the Chief Justice of India. This interpretation of the Act was buttressed by the Supreme Court's exhortation, in Vineet Narain, that the Director must be protected from political influence. The Attorney-General, on the other hand, argued that the committee's role was purely recommendatory, that the power vested with the Central government, and that in any event Mr. Verma had not been "transferred".

As the Supreme Court itself acknowledged, what was at stake was a "pure question of law". Yet this pure question of law took six hearings and more than two-and-a-half months to resolve, and yielded an unclear decision where the court agreed with the principal legal contentions of Mr. Verma, but passed a judgment whose ambit left everyone scratching their heads.

Judicial evasion

The Alok Verma Case — or "CBI vs CBI", as it has come to be popularly known — reveals some of the pathologies that have plagued the Supreme Court's conduct in recent high-profile cases. As indicated above, when Mr. Verma approached the court, the legal question was straightforward: were the CVC and the Central government authorised to divest him of his functions as CBI Director? It was a question that, when the court finally got around to it, took it no more than eight pages to answer.

Why then did the case take six hearings and two-and-a-half months? A perusal of the Court's orders reveals the following: on August 26, the court directed that the CVC finish its pending investigation against Mr Verma, under the supervision of a retired Supreme Court judge. On November 16, the court received the CVC report in a "sealed cover", and allowed Mr. Verma to respond (also through a sealed cover). On November 20, the court passed a cryptic order stating that "for reasons that need not be recorded, we are not inclined to afford the parties a hearing today", and adjourned the case to November 29. It was reported that the Chief Justice was "annoyed" that some of the contents of the "sealed cover" had been leaked. On November 29, the case was listed for hearing final arguments, which then took place on December 5 and 6. The court reserved its judgment on December 6, and finally delivered it January 8.

It should be clear from the record that there were two parallel proceedings taking place in the Supreme Court. The first was Mr. Verma's original challenge to the process of his divestment — that came up before the court in October, and was heard in December. The second — which occupied the court through the month of November, and through the now familiar, depressing cycle of "sealed covers" — was the substance of the allegations against Mr. Verma, that the CVC and the government were claiming justified his divestment. However, if Mr. Verma was correct in his claim — and the Supreme Court finally held that he was — then the substance of the allegations against him was irrelevant to his legal challenge against his removal.

Effectively, therefore, by mixing up the two questions, the Supreme Court dragged on for months a case that could have been decided within days. And this was of crucial significance: Mr. Verma retires at the end of January. It is questionable what, precisely, does it really mean for the Supreme Court to "reinstate" him midway through January.

This is not the first time that an important, time-sensitive case has been dragged on in a manner that materially affects the situation of the parties. In the Aadhaar challenge, for example, the case was finally heard six years after it was filed, effectively allowing the government to present a fait accompli to the court. This is "judicial evasion": the court avoids deciding a thorny and time-sensitive question, but its very refusal to decide is, effectively, a decision in favour of the government, because it is the government that benefits from the status quo being maintained.

Strange fetters

In the Alok Verma case, the Supreme Court finally returned a clear finding that the CVC and the Central government had acted outside their jurisdiction in divesting Mr. Verma. However, the court then went on to also hold that the correct authority — the high-powered committee — would have to consider the allegations against him, and decide on the case within a week. In the meantime, Mr. Verma was restrained from taking "any major policy decisions".

As a matter of law, this is strange. Mr. Verma's challenge, to recall, was that his divestment was procedurally flawed. The Supreme Court's limited remit was to decide that question. It was not for the court to then direct the committee to consider the case against Mr. Verma. Still less was it for the court, after holding that Mr. Verma's divestment was invalid in law, to place fetters on his powers as the Director, thus presumptively placing him under a cloud of suspicion. All this suggests an attempt to chalk out a "middle ground", which would be appropriate for a *durbaar* engaging in informal dispute resolution. It is not appropriate, however, for a Constitutional Court that is tasked with providing clear answers to the legal questions before it.

In any event, what exactly is a "major policy decision"? What did the court mean when it said that Mr. Verma's role would be "confined only to the exercise of the ongoing routine functions without any fresh initiative"? None of these is a legal term, and the lack of clarity only raises the spectre of fresh litigation, thus further hamstringing Mr. Verma for the remainder of his tenure.

This, once again, is familiar: in the Supreme Court's Aadhaar judgment, although private parties were banned from accessing the Aadhaar database, the ambiguity in the court's holding meant that different parties interpreted the judgment differently — leading to an amendment to the Aadhaar Act that attempts to circumvent the judgment by letting in private parties through the backdoor. This is, once again, a reminder that — much like judicial evasion — ambiguity is not neutral: it primarily benefits the party that has the power to exploit it, and that party is invariably the government.

Setting deadlines

During the Constituent Assembly debates, there was a proposal that all cases involving fundamental rights be decided within a month. The fear was that the more time the court took, the more

the government would benefit from the status quo. Recent events have confirmed this fear. In high stakes cases, time-sensitive cases, the court must ensure two things: that the judgment is timely, and that the judgment is clear. The Alok Verma case demonstrates how, when the court fails to do so, it abdicates its role as the sentinel on the qui vive, and allows the government to get away with abuse of law.

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A paradox in the Valley

In Kashmir, those who represent people's sentiment do not participate in electoral process

By Shah Faesal, Mehboob Makhdoomi

The crimson-decade that began with more than 500 conflict-related killings in the year 2008, finally ended with almost an equal number of fresh corpses in Kashmir last year. That brutal summer of 2008, after the Amarnath land row, inaugurated a new age of mourning in Kashmir.

This brought to the fore new patterns of mass resistance, new modes of street protests and new tools of state repression. The Hurriyat's politics got a fresh lease of life and the space for the political mainstream began to shrink, yet again. Social media became an extended battlefield. Yet another generation of Kashmiris was inoculated with the germ of defiance, which manifested itself a few years down the line in the form of "scholar-led" militancy, with unprecedented social approval.

Outrage over the Shopian rape incident, invocation of collective conscience during Afzal Guru's execution, the capture of the newsrooms in Delhi, the sanctimonious politics of rescue during the September 2014 floods, a North Pole-South Pole alliance in 2015, pellet-gun-related mass blinding during the Burhan Wani agitation were some of the major provocations during this time that pushed Kashmiris towards a suicidal upsurge against the Indian state.

However, in the 2008 assembly elections, around 60 per cent polling was reported in the state, which was astonishing since the million-people marches, barely a month earlier, were ostensibly indicative of an out-and-out boycott. In the 2014 state assembly elections, the participation was even higher at 65 per cent. Ironically, true to the nature of cyclic turbulence in Kashmir and merely three years later, a voter turnout of 7.1 per cent was reported in the Srinagar by-poll. The absence of a correlation between electoral participation and people's resentment with respect to the Indian state adds an important layer to the complexity of the multi-layered quagmire of Kashmir. Meanwhile, the central government sent a special representative to listen to people's "grievances" but no one seemed interested in bartering "aspirations" for "grievances" and the dialogue couldn't take off.

Now that the state is gearing up for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, Kashmir is experiencing a severe winter of despair. The government forces are in hot pursuit of highly motivated and poorly trained armed militants, but strangely enough, the militancy is not showing any signs of fatigue.

The size of funerals accorded to the fallen rebels has grown exponentially, and the rate of new recruitment has not diminished

either. Youth have lost all fear of death and encounter sites are being attacked to rescue trapped guerillas, in an unparalleled display of militant spirit by the people, who could be made to fall in line by a lone stick-wielding cop a few years ago.

Our experience tells us that if the people's call for the restoration of their political agency is responded to only by deploying stronger and more lethal weapons, then this asymmetric war is not ending anytime soon. On the contrary, if the Indian state still takes a step back, recognises the problem and reaches out to the Hurriyat and other stakeholders with an offer of unconditional dialogue, then there is a hope that a new decade of destruction could be avoided.

At the root of the political problem in Kashmir is the paradox that those who represent the sentiment do not participate in the electoral process and those who participate in the electoral process do not represent the sentiment. Elections have been held regularly since 1996, but there is a feeling that the elected representatives are either a disempowered lot, a group of helpless "daily-wagers" with the Government of India or that the elected representatives are misrepresenting their electorate by not speaking out about the basic Kashmir issue. This needs to change.

There is no gainsaying the fact that Kashmir needs non-violent and democratic methods to achieve political aspirations. But at the same time, people have egregious memories of the 1987 elections and faith in the electoral process is missing. There is a feeling that if those who do not believe in solutions within the "integral part" framework wish to engage democratically, then a fair electoral opportunity is not given to them. The lack of faith in the electoral process also stems from the fear that voter-turnout is misused to negate the legitimacy of the political aspirations of the people and governance issues are used to confuse their narrative. This has, in turn, led to a situation where the people of Jammu and Kashmir are losing out both in terms of political aspirations and governance.

The way out of the deadlock in Kashmir is to strengthen democracy. The Indian state must be extra accommodating of dissent, when dealing with Kashmir. Those who win elections must have the freedom to truthfully represent their electorate. The existing "mainstream" political parties must not feel threatened by intrigues originating in Delhi.

The perception that it is not the ballot but the deep-state that changes regimes in Kashmir must end. In the true spirit of free speech, public debate must be allowed to include the whole range of issues, from governance to regional aspirations to issues of minority communities like the Kashmiri Pandits and, most importantly, the right to self-determination. That is how the environment of suffocation and siege can end in Kashmir.

The politics of day-to-day governance and the politics of larger aspirations can't remain separate for long. This dichotomy is harming Kashmir and in the absence of the right people to speak for them, Kashmiris are dying to be heard.

However, it must be understood that after a hundred thousand deaths, there is no going back. People can't be asked to forget and move on. There must be a resolution if we want that the decade ahead of us to usher in peace. Without being sincere about enlarging the democratic space in Kashmir, every call for

de-escalation will be seen by people as an invitation to surrender and will be vehemently resisted.

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The 10% answer

In a deeply unequal society, government move for upper caste quotas blurs important distinctions, opens new faultlines.

The Narendra Modi government's move to push for reservation in government jobs and higher educational institutions for upper caste poor, by amending the Constitution, raises serious questions. There is, to begin with, a question of propriety — of a government taking up something as consequential as a constitutional amendment in what are its last few months in office before general elections. More substantively, the government, by this move, seems to be redefining the very purpose of the policy instrument called reservation.

So far, the Constitution, and the Supreme Court's interpretation of its letter and spirit, allow for reservation for groups, classes or castes that are socially and educationally backward, apart from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes — not as exceptions to, or deviations from, the Right to Equality, but to give meaning to that right in a gravely unequal society. And so far, the economic criterion has not been seen to be either the sole or primary determinant of backwardness. When an earlier government in the 1990s tried to bring in a quota for the upper caste poor, therefore, the apex court firmly struck it down and also fixed a 50 per cent ceiling for reservation. Now, by seeking to open up the reservation policy to encompass even the upper castes, on an economic basis, the government can be accused of using what was meant to be an instrument of social justice as an anti-poverty measure like a safety net or a subsidy. This shift, this blurring of the governing principles of two different sets of policies that are intended to serve two different sets of goals, can be said to speak of a lack of imagination, at the very least. It will also have costs. It will take a toll.

Especially in times when the economy does not seem buoyant, when jobs are not being created at the requisite pace in the private sector and are shrinking in the government sector, a quota for upper castes will only deepen existing resentments and create new ones — while not serving its stated purpose. That is, it will promise only a symbolic representation to the caste groups it addresses, while injecting more competition and rancour within upper caste groups as well as between upper and backward castes in the fight for limited resources. It will open up the state to another set of demands that are already making themselves heard — from dominant castes like the Jats, Marathas and Patels, in states where they feel left out of both the rubric of economic development and the system of reservation. If the 50 per cent ceiling can be breached, why not for these groups too? If historical discrimination and disprivilege is not to be the only guiding principle for a policy that seeks to provide social justice through job-education quotas, then why not take into account the claims of proportional representation, or the demands of majoritarianism? The government has made a very fraught move. It must now be debated thoroughly in Parliament and scrutinised

carefully by the court. Anything less would be a travesty of due process in a deliberative democracy.

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 15-1-2019

Kabul's Initial Wolesi Jirga Election Results Announced

KABUL - Independent Election Commission (IEC) on Monday announced the preliminary Wolesi Jirga election results from capital Kabul, saying the results were not final and changes were possible in the final results.

According to the initial Wolesi Jirga results, Haji Ajmal Rahmani secured 12,192 votes, Abdul Qayum Khaikhwa 9,626 votes, Fida Mohammad Aulfat Saleh 7,406 votes, Ahmad Javid Jaihon 7,161 votes, Dr. Ramazan Bashardost 7,041 votes, Khan Agha Rezayee 6,905 votes and Amir Gul Shahin 6,765 votes or highest votes among other candidates.

Ghulam Hussain Naseri secured 6,470 votes, Mullah Mohammad Khan Ahmadi 6,348 votes, Allahgul Mujahid 6,333 votes, Sayed Mohammad Mohammadi 6,253 votes, Mir Amanullah Guzar 6,250 votes, Khan Mohammad Wardak 6,005 votes, Mir Afghan Safi 5,968 votes and Ajmal Gula 4,525 votes.

Other candidates including Ahmad Zia Azimi Shinozada received 4,431 votes, Tawfiq Wahdat 4,318 votes, Obaidullah Kalimzai 4,291 votes, Hafizullah Jalili 4,183 votes, Mohammad Farhad Seddiqi 4,174 votes, Anwar Khan Oryakhel 4,120 votes, Zargai Habibi 3,983 votes, Habib Rahman Sayaf 3,879 votes and Najibullah Naser 3,779 votes.

Fatima Nazari secured 2,897 votes, Shenki Karokhel 1,883 votes, Robina Jalali 1,529 votes, Fawzia Naseryar Guldarayee 1,470 votes, Maryam Sama 1,439 votes, Salima Nikbin 1,252 votes, Mursal Nabizada 1,319 votes, Zahra Nawruzi 1,297 votes and Gen. Nazifa Zaki 1,197 votes.

The IEC said that figures, political parties and other institutes could register their complaints about the initial Wolesi Jirga results within two days.

“No votes of any are missed, the votes of people are a trust and it is supported in the whole election process, anyone who received votes from the public would find way to Wolesi Jirga, we would give rights to those who deserve them,” the commission said.

The IEC said that the results were not final and changes were possible in final results.

The commission has previously announced the Wolesi Jirga election results of 23 provinces. **(Pajhwok)**

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 9-1-2019

‘Presidential Poll Delay to Question Govt’s Legitimacy’

KABUL - They say delaying or suspending elections is the authority of a special committee mentioned in the Election Law and the Independent Election Commission (IEC) has to share its plan with the mentioned committee, so the committee could decide according to the law and prevent high spending on security of candidates.

The article 104 of the electoral law says the elections could be delayed from the specific date for a period of up to four months in case insecurity, natural disasters or other similar conditions make impossible the principle of general and fair representation in elections and or undermine the credibility of the electoral process.

But such a decision should come from upon the proposal of the commission and endorsement of the committee to be comprised of the head and members of the National Security Council, chairmen of the two houses of the Parliament, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and Chairman of the Independent Commission of Oversight of Implementation of the Constitution of Afghanistan

Election oversight institutes say early start of the registration process of candidates and the delay in presidential election would prolong the time of campaigning and pave the ground for election tickets currently in power to hire their teams at top government posts in the capital and provinces so they are able to engineer elections in their favor, experts say.

Meanwhile, the Independent Commission of Overseeing the Implementation of the Constitution also described the delay in the presidential elections as “a clear violation of the Constitution.”

On January 1, a number of potential presidential elections including Mohammad Hanif Atmar, Ahmad Wali Massoud and Rahmatullah Nabil criticized the IEC for delaying the presidential vote from April 20 to July 20 and accused the government of pre-poll engineering.

They claimed the IEC delayed the election under pressure from the government the mandate of which would end on May 22.

The IEC has recently announced rescheduling the presidential election from April 20 to July 20, but said the candidate registration would continue from Jan 3 to Jan 20.

According to the election law, the date of presidential election should be determined 180 days before the Election Day and the schedule for it be prepared 120 days ahead.

The article 71 of the election law says, “The Commission shall announce the election date at least (180) days before the Election Day. Conducting by elections shall be an exception to this provision. (2) The Commission shall publish the Electoral Calendar at least (120) days before the Election Day.”

Shahla Farid, a political science lecturer in Kabul University, called the IEC decision to delay to the presidential ballot as ‘a clear violation of the election law’ and said the move needed to be reconsidered and the cost on the three-month delay should be measured.

She said the government was responsible to provide resources and protection to candidates. “The government must provide security for candidates after their registration but their security needs guards and vehicles which cost a lot of money.”

Article 61 of the Constitution says: “The President shall be elected by receiving more than 50 percent of the votes cast by voters through free, general, secret and direct voting.”

The presidential term shall expire on 1st of Jawza of the fifth year after elections. Elections for the new President shall be held within thirty to sixty days prior to the end of the presidential term.

Farid said the delay in elections would not only pave the ground for selling and buying votes but also for the misuse of political power and an opportunity for a pre scheduled election campaign. She further said in a country where the law was violated, everything was disturbed such as economy, the people and democracy and such steps in the long term would bring the legitimacy of the system under question.

Election watchdogs

Yousuf Rashid, Executive Head of the Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA), said the delay in the presidential election was the authority of a specific committee mentioned in the election law.

The plan for the election delay should have been shared with the committee which could have decided in this regard, he said.

He said the commission was bound to announce an election schedule 120 days before the conduct of presidential voting. Early registration of candidates would give birth to some issues including early campaigning, attracting public votes, illegal expenditures and more chances for rigging.

Rashid said the early candidate registration had disturbed the overall political environment of the country.

He criticised the IEC for taking no measures so far for the safety and security of candidate.

Ministry of Interior (MoI)

The Ministry of Interior (MoI) has said discussion on security of election candidates has been kicked off with authorities concerned.

Nasrat Rahimi, MoI deputy spokesman, said: “Initial discussion regarding the security and safety of election candidates has been started and would be shared with the people when finalized.”

The Independent Election Commission (IEC)

The IEC maintains it needs more time to make preparations for the presidential poll, keeping in mind past experiences. The decision to delay the presidential polls was made in consultation with the institutions and donor countries concerned, the commission says.

IEC deputy spokesman Zabihullah Sadaat said security of candidates was discussed at a recent meeting with security officials and the commission demanded the security strategy to be shared with the presidential palace.

He did not provide more information in this regard, but added: “We will let the media know when the strategy of candidates’ security is shared with us,” he said.

Referring to the creation of more problems as a result of early candidate registration, the IEC spokesman said everything had been clearly stated in the election schedule of presidential poll and no one was allowed to violate the schedule.

He said every candidate would be dealt with in accordance with the law in case of any violation of the IEC rules. **(Pajhwok)**

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 10-1-2019

Afghanistan Says End to War a ‘Dream’

Without Taliban Talking to Government

KABUL - Afghan Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah said on Wednesday that the Taliban’s refusal to involve the government

in peace talks means the end to a conflict that has lasted 17 years can only remain a dream.

Abdullah's remarks came a day after the Taliban called off a fourth round of talks with U.S. officials in Qatar, due to start this week, over disagreements about the involvement of Afghan officials, a possible ceasefire and prisoner exchange.

Efforts for a negotiated settlement have gathered pace in recent weeks, even as reports that U.S. President Donald Trump plans to withdraw thousands of U.S. troops triggered uncertainty.

The United States is pressing Taliban leaders to sit down with Afghan government officials but the Taliban see the United States as the main power and dismiss the Kabul administration as a puppet.

"In any peace deal in which the rights of our citizens, that have been gained with a lot of sacrifices, are not respected, the deal is a dream and will never happen," Abdullah told gathering in Kabul, commemorating the 15th anniversary of the constitution.

"Today the talk about the withdrawal of foreign forces is an excuse for continuation of war and gaining more opportunities."

A Taliban leader told Reuters that the talks, which would have been the fourth round with U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, would have focused on a U.S. withdrawal, prisoner exchange and the lifting of a ban on movement of Taliban leaders.

Taliban sources said that they had demanded that U.S. authorities release 25,000 prisoners and that they would free 3,000, but that U.S. officials were not keen to discuss the exchange.

The war in Afghanistan is America's longest overseas military intervention. It has cost Washington nearly \$1 trillion and killed tens of thousands of people.

"NO CHANGE IN TALIBAN"

Abdullah, who shares power with President Ashraf Ghani after a U.S.-brokered political deal in 2014 that led to formation of a coalition government, said the Taliban have not changed since their austere regime was toppled by U.S.-led forces in 2001.

"We haven't seen any change in the Taliban so far and that country that supports them, has not unfortunately changed its policies toward us either," said Abdullah, referring to neighbouring Pakistan which Kabul accuses of harbouring Taliban leaders.

Pakistan denies the charge and says it is encouraging the Taliban to talk directly with the Afghan government.

A senior Afghan government official said the talks also would have involved discussion about the formation of an interim administration known as the "peace government" after U.S. forces announce a withdrawal and the Taliban accept a ceasefire.

The peace government would bring all warring parties under one administration until the Taliban are fully integrated and election are held.

But Ghani has strongly opposed any interim government.

Abdullah called on Afghans to support the current administration instead.

"They say they are not the Taliban of the past and they have learnt lessons and are in favour of an inclusive government, but they instead go and talk to some individuals and call them elders which is against our national interest," Abdullah said, referring to political figures.

"They do this to show that the government is either weak or does not exist," he added.

The impasse over the talks comes as Afghanistan prepares to hold presidential elections in July with many Afghans believing the vote may be cancelled if a peace deal is reached with the Taliban.

Presidential candidates, including Ghani who seeks a second five-year term, have not officially announced they are running as coalition-building among leaders of various ethnic groups debated whom to support.

The United States sent troops to Afghanistan after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington. At its peak the U.S. deployment involved more than 100,000 troops, but Washington withdrew most in 2014 and now has around 14,000 troops in the country as part of a NATO-led mission aiding Afghan security forces and hunting militants.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said on a visit to India on Wednesday that the Taliban must have a role in Afghanistan in future, but not a dominant role. **(Reuters)**

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 4-1-2019

Beyond the PAC stalemate

Ahmed Bilal Mehboob

FINALLY, it seems that the 15th National Assembly is ready to move forward. PTI has finally agreed to the election of Leader of the Opposition Shahbaz Sharif as chairman the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), breaking the deadlock and clearing the decks for the formation of other committees. What should be the roadmap for the new NA now?

Since the ruling coalition has a thin majority in the NA and lacks even a simple majority in the Senate, the legislation will be a challenge for the government. If the PTI wants to make headway on its promised and heavily-publicised reforms agenda, it will need to pass a number of laws during its first parliamentary year. Many recommendations resulting from the numerous taskforces formed during the first hundred days will also need to be converted into legislation.

All this will require order in the two houses and at least a working relationship with the opposition on the part of the government. The PTI leadership will, therefore, be required to set an example of restraint and to ask its hawks to desist from provoking the opposition. An aggressive posture may serve some purpose while in opposition, but will be counterproductive in government. As the case of the PAC chairman's election has demonstrated, making compromises is a legitimate part of the democratic process, and should neither be condemned nor taken as a sign of weakness.

If parliamentary proceedings are to be meaningful, the leadership will have to lead by example.

Besides establishing a working relationship in the parliament, the PTI and other parties should organise and activate their respective parliamentary parties. Regular engagement of leadership with their respective parliamentary party — including at least weekly meetings during the session — will lead the way for developing consensus around the legislative agenda and undertaking inclusive legislation. Political leadership should

realise that the past practice of top party leadership dictating the party line, without any meaningful consultation with party legislators — and legislators complying without question — may no longer be sustainable.

Furthermore, low attendance of members in the NA sittings had been a perennial problem — to the extent that even maintaining quorum in the house, which is just 25pc of the total membership, has become a challenge. This repeated demonstration by the honourable parliamentarians of their lack of interest seriously compromises the prestige of the house. During the past terms of the Nawaz Sharif-led governments, attendance of ministers and ordinary members had been a major issue because the then prime minister seldom attended parliamentary sessions. Although Imran Khan was then in the opposition, his attendance had been even less than the former prime minister's.

If parliamentary proceedings are to be made meaningful and members encouraged to attend sittings regularly, the party leadership will have to lead by example. Prime Minister Imran Khan should now make a new beginning and start regularly attending parliamentary sittings. He should make use of his chambers in Parliament House during the sessions instead of the Prime Minister's Office. This will prompt ministers and other legislators to be regular in the house. If this were to happen, the whole culture of the parliament would transform — and everyone would then take parliament and its proceedings seriously.

Prime Minister Imran Khan took the commendable step of committing in his first televised address to personally answer questions regularly in parliament. He had initially promised a weekly but later fortnightly Prime Minister's Question Hour. But, despite more than four months having passed since the new NA was formed, the prime minister has not appeared even once in parliament to answer questions. Neither have the parliamentary rules of procedure been amended for this purpose; nonetheless, the prime minister can take the initiative without waiting for amendment in the rules.

Another critical area requiring attention is the staffing at the secretariats of the NA and Senate. The performance of parliament depends, to a great extent, on the quality of support available from its staff. In the past, a lot of attention has been devoted to the capacity-building of parliamentarians, but not to the staff. The current staff positions in the two secretariats should be upgraded with better perks. The requirement of minimum qualifications should also be scaled up. The British parliament secretariat, for example, is staffed with quite a few graduates from Oxford, Cambridge and similar top universities. Unfortunately, our parliamentary secretariats do not attract high-grade graduates from universities like Lums. The present NA speaker had made significant efforts for the capacity-building of members of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly when he was its speaker. One may hope that he pays similar attention now to the NA's staff.

One of the most important functions of the NA is to pass the federal budget every year. Sadly, the parliamentary budget process is almost superficial as it does not provide adequate time to parliamentarians to study and scrutinise the budgetary documents, which run into thousands of pages. And, unlike in

India, where budget process continues for 75 days and the ministries' budgets are scrutinised by the respective parliamentary committees, in Pakistan, the various stages of the NA budget debate run for a mere 12 days on average, and the finance bill is not referred to the committees. In addition, as per the current law, the government can spend more than the approved budget without prior approval by the NA, which compromises the essence of parliamentary approval. Therefore, if there is one reform that the assembly must undertake, it should be to reform the parliamentary budget process.

The quality of parliamentary debates can improve tremendously by shifting the focus to public policy debates. Policies on foreign relations, security, water, energy, economy and other public issues should be debated in a structured manner at least once a year.

It is the beginning of the term of the new assembly, and it is the right time for the NA leadership to steer the initiative for a comprehensive five-year plan to include the above, and other, reforms.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 3-1-2019

Election to KP Assembly's seats in tribal districts soon

Iftikhar A. Khan

ISLAMABAD: In a move that will finally lead to the first-ever provincial assembly elections in the territories formerly known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (Fata) in the next few months, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) on Wednesday determined and notified the share of tribal districts in the provincial assembly's seats.

The decision was in line with Article 106 of the constitution amended through the 25th Amendment in May last year and last-minute promulgation of an ordinance to avert disenfranchisement of contiguous tribal regions. The ordinance amends Section 20 of the Elections Act, 2017, inserting a new sub-section (2A) which reads: "For the purpose of delimiting constituencies, for the general seats of the provincial assembly of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for tribal areas, two or more separate areas may be grouped into one constituency for their elections to be held in 2019 and by-elections related therein and thereafter this sub-section shall stand omitted."

According to the share determined by the ECP, Bajaur and Khyber will have three general seats each, Mohmand, Kurram, North Waziristan and South Waziristan will have two seats each and one seat will go to the Frontier Regions.

ECP notifies share of tribal districts in provincial assembly
Under the amended Article 106, the KP Assembly will have 145 seats, including 115 general, 26 reserved for women and four for minorities. Fata will have 21 seats, including 16 general, four for women and one reserved for non-Muslims.

Under the amendment, the elections for these seats were to be held within one year after the 2018 general elections.

A senior ECP official when contacted said the elections for 16 general seats of the KP Assembly will take place in May or June this year and a notification to this effect will be issued in March.

The current calendar year appears to be challenging one for the ECP as it has ordered revision of the electoral rolls and plans to update the voters' list by June 30. That means the commission will have to give priority to tribal districts to make sure that the coming provincial assembly polls there were not affected.

The ECP is also supposed to conduct local government polls in Balochistan as the term of the LG bodies in the province would be expiring by the end of the current month. Likewise, it will be conducting local government polls in cantonments. The four-year term of local bodies in KP will also be expiring in September this year.

Meanwhile, as the deadline for around 15 million voters enrolled in areas other than their addresses on computerised national identity cards (CNICs) to get registered as voters on one of the two addresses mentioned on their CNICs expired on December 31, the ECP has ordered revision of electoral rolls under which those who failed to act would be registered as voters at their permanent addresses.

Sub-section 4 of Section 27 of the Elections Act reads: "Notwithstanding, anything contained in this section or any other provision of this Chapter, the registration of a voter at an address other than the permanent or temporary address mentioned in his National Identity Card shall remain valid till he applies for transfer of his vote or for modification or renewal of his National Identity Card in which case his vote shall be registered according to the temporary or permanent address mentioned in the National Identity Card." While a proviso with the sub-section reads: "Provided that this sub-section (4) including this proviso shall stand omitted on 31st December, 2018."

The ECP official said the votes of those who did not avail the facility of transferring votes to addresses mentioned on CNICs have rendered ineffective.

He said in exercise of its powers under Article 219-A of the Constitution and Section 36 of the Elections Act the commission has ordered revision of electoral rolls so that the fundamental right of vote of the people could be protected.

While the ECP in principle had decided to shift all those at their permanent addresses, it has given another chance to them to make a choice out of the permanent or temporary addresses by filling Form-21 and submitting the same with registration officers / district election commissioners or assistant registration officers in their areas.

The voters can get information about the registration of their votes by sending SMS on 8300.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 2-1-2019

PTI's plan in Sindh

THE potential for a perceived partisan accountability process to escalate into a full-blown national political crisis has been vividly highlighted by competing statements from the PTI and PPP camps.

Seizing on the Supreme Court-ordered JIT report on the so-called fake accounts case and the inclusion of Sindh Chief Minister Murad Shah in the list of suspects in that case, the PTI federal government appeared enthusiastic to test the political waters in

Sindh and perhaps try and dislodge the PPP provincial government.

The JIT report is incriminating but as the Supreme Court itself has clarified it is only a report at this stage — a long legal process lies ahead before the guilt or innocence of individuals implicated in the fake-accounts racket can be established.

An overenthusiastic and perhaps naïve PTI leadership appears to have mistakenly believed that political upheaval in Sindh was imminent.

To the PTI's misbegotten abortive plan, the PPP has added its own attempt at muddying the political waters. Speaking to the media, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari has claimed that if Asif Zardari signalled the willingness to do so, the PPP could oust the fragile PTI-led coalition at the centre.

Mr Bhutto-Zardari's comments may be more bombast than a genuine threat, but they are an indication of the precariousness of the political landscape at the moment.

As the governing party at the centre and in two provinces with a share of government in a third province, the PTI must surely give greater consideration to the constitutional and political responsibilities that it now shoulders.

The willingness of the PTI to consider and put into motion a plan to oust a provincial government run by the third-largest political party in the country threatens to drag Pakistan politically backwards. The making and breaking of governments, potentially with the help of anti-democratic forces in the country, is a dangerous phenomenon that should have been left behind.

The PTI leadership may be in a hurry to deliver on Prime Minister Imran Khan's promise to make the fight against corruption the core of his governance strategy, but meaningful and durable accountability are premised on fairness and due process.

Only recently, Mr Khan finally agreed to abide by the parliamentary norm of installing the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly as chairman of the Public Accounts Committee.

Shahbaz Sharif remains in NAB custody. So why must Chief Minister Shah resign or risk being pushed out by the PTI simply on the basis of a JIT report that has not been scrutinised by the courts or the accused?

The PTI has been unable to justify its stance either politically or legally. Where the PTI has erred, the PPP should avoid following suit.

Threatening to work to overthrow the federal government only lends credence to a perception that the PPP is opposed to any form of accountability.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 15-1-2019
PM's Talks Offer: BNP to decide after
knowing the agenda

Says Mirza Fakhurul

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhurul Islam Alamgir. File photo
Staff Correspondent, Sylhet

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhurul Islam Alamgir yesterday said his party would consider joining a fresh dialogue with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina only after knowing about its agenda.

“I don't know why the dialogue is being called for. But if it turns out to be like the last one [held before the national election], it would not be meaningful,” he told journalists at the shrine of Hazrat Shahjalal (RM) in the city.

Asked about the BNP's agenda for the dialogue, Fakhurul said, “We have only one agenda -- cancellation of the December 30 election.”

He said the BNP also wants a fresh election be held under a neutral caretaker government and establishment of people's rights.

Fakhurul along with Jatiya Oikyafront leaders Kader Siddique, Subrata Chowdhury, Mostafa Mohsin Montu and ASM Abdur Rab visited Sylhet as part of the alliance's movement demanding a fresh national election.

On Sunday, Oikyafront leader Dr Kamal Hossain appreciated Hasina's decision to hold fresh talks with political parties, saying it was a positive step, reported UNB.

“I call upon the government to hold talks with political parties to find an effective way for holding a fresh credible election. Now the prime minister herself has decided to hold the talks. I hail the decision. It's certainly a positive initiative.”

Dr Kamal said the alliance leaders would sit after receiving the invitation to decide on what might be discussed at the talks.

Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader on Sunday said Hasina would hold a fresh dialogue with all political parties who had joined talks at the Gono Bhaban before the December 30 polls.

He said the PM would send letters to Oikyafront, Juktafront, 14-party alliance, Jatiya Party and others inviting them to take part in the talks.

Earlier in November, Hasina held dialogues with political leaders on different major issues, including the nature of the polls-time government and dissolution of parliament before the announcement of the polls schedule, among others.

Before the announcement of the polls schedule, Jatiya Oikyafront leaders, led by Gonoforum President Dr Kamal, sat with the PM at the Gono Bhaban on November 1 and 7.

SYLHET TOUR

Reaching Sylhet around noon yesterday, the Oikyafront leaders offered prayers at the shrine of Hazrat Shahjalal (RM). They later visited the house of Balaganj upazila Chhatra Dal Secretary General Sayem Ahmed who was killed in a clash with police on the polling day.

Talking to journalists at the shrine, Fakhurul termed the national election “a black chapter in the country's history as people's constitutional rights were robbed”.

Asked whether his party would contest the coming upazila elections, the BNP leader said, “The whole world has seen how incompetent the Election Commission is. They don't have the capability to hold an election fairly. So no question arises about taking part in the upazila elections under this commission.”

Enquired if there was any problem in the Oikyafront, Fakhurul said, “There is no problem in the Jatiya Oikyafront at all. But every political party is a separate organisation and each of them has distinct features.”

About Dr Kamal's call on parting company with Jamaat-e-Islami, he said it was Gonoforum's opinion, not of the Oikyafront's. “We have not yet discussed the matter [in the Oikyafront], but we will discuss it in our party.”

Later in the day, the Oikyafront leaders left Sylhet for Dhaka.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 15-1-2019
JP won't be 'questionable' opposition

Says GM Quader

Staff Correspondent

Jatiya Party Co-Chairman GM Quader yesterday said his party would never become a “questionable opposition” in parliament.

Instead, he said, the JP would gain people's confidence by playing the role of a “real opposition party” in the House.

GM Quader came up with the statements at a reception, organised by Rajshahi city JP, at party Chairman HM Ershad's Banani office in the capital.

Addressing JP leaders and activists, Quader, who has been acknowledged by the Speaker of Parliament as deputy leader of the opposition, said the party would play its due role in the Jatiya Sangsad for becoming stronger before the next national election.

“There are a lot of possibilities for the Jatiya Party to emerge as a stronger organisation. Many popular and socially established political leaders will join the Jatiya Party due to a new political equation,” he said.

He also said many other political parties have been lost but the JP will survive “with people's love”.

Rajshahi city JP General Secretary Mostafa Rahman Dalim and many other party leaders, including Lutfur Rahman, Nazrul Islam and Enamul Haq, were present at the meeting.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 15-1-2019

New constitution and communal politics

The proposed new constitution is presently being used by interested parties to whip up communalism once again, what with major elections only months away. The pohottuwites are going full throttle these days in raising fears among the southern electorate of a looming threat of a division of the country and the preeminent status granted to Buddhism in the present constitution. There are also regular visits to Temples by leading lights of the pohottuwa to apprise the Ven. Theras of the dangers posed to the country, through the ‘federal constitution’. Leading Buddhist prelates are being regularly courted by Opposition Leader Mahinda Rajapaksa to get them to express their views on the imminent loss of the country's sovereignty through the

proposed new constitution on which the Expert Panel's report was presented to the Constitutional Assembly on Friday.

What is astonishing is that these views of a federal bogey are being expressed when there is no finality reached on any matter pertaining to the new constitution. In fact what was presented to the CA on Friday was not even a draft constitution but only a set of views of the Expert Panel. Ideas and proposals of all shades are still open for accommodation. Besides, the CA includes members of the Joint Opposition which in itself is ample security that nothing inimical to the country will be incorporated in the proposed new constitution. The fact that no finality has been reached on the final draft is clear going by a suggestion made by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe that the proposals made by the All Party Representative Committee (APRC) appointed by former President Mahinda Rajapaksa on police powers can also be considered along with other proposals when compiling a new constitution. "What the Steering Committee of the Constitutional Assembly presented was proposals submitted by the Experts Committee", the Premier said during a Thaipongol Programme held at Temple Trees on Sunday. He also told journalists after a meeting with the Most Venerable Ittappana Dhammalankara Thera at the Dharma Vijayaloka Viharaya in Rukamal Gama on Saturday that he is having regular discussions with the Most Ven. Mahanayake Theras on the steps taken to safeguard Buddhism.

Why pray then all this scaremongering about the danger to Buddhism, division of the country and a federal set-up through the proposed new constitution in the backdrop in which even the much reviled TNA front-liner M. A. Sumanthiran has stated that they are ready to accept the concept of the unitary state? On what basis is Mahinda Rajapaksa continuing with his familiar refrain of rata bedanawa when not even a vague outline of the proposed constitution has been put out?

Besides, even to a novice in politics, it will be clear that passage of the new constitution will encounter severe odds, with all likelihood that it will be stillborn. The present Parliament, constituted as it is, will never succeed in mustering the required two thirds majority and in the event of the remote chance at this being possible it will still have to stand the test of a referendum. With the southern electorate being regularly assailed by unfounded bogeys and the majority of the Buddhist clergy weighing in, the proposed new Constitution is all but a dead letter as it stands.

Hence it is clear to the discerning public that the new constitution is being used as a football by the pohottuwites to play their brand of racists politics. We have seen this happen in the runup to all elections in the past. The goni billas are already being paraded. On that last occasion, renegade UNP General Secretary Tissa Attanayake came out with a document of a so called agreement entered into by the Common Candidate and then Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe with the TNA to merge the North and East and grant Federalism. This was followed by a famous film actress displaying an Eelam map, at media conferences to inform the people the fate that awaits the country in the event of a victory for the Common Candidate.

One can only expect the same refrain to continue until the election period, with the Bikkhu bandwagon adding fuel to the fire. It is a matter for regret, indeed, to witness a mature

politician of the calibre of Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was twice President of this country, continuing in the same vein as in the past, adopting a policy of win at any cost by recourse to racists politics, never mind the damage done to the ethnic and social fabric of this country at a time the country is making efforts to bury the past and forge reconciliation.

Mercifully, the SLFP has so far acted with responsibility, not resorting to communalize the issue of the new constitution though diverse views are being expressed. To her eternal credit, Chandrika strove hard and succeeded to a great degree in ridding the communalist label that had been attached to the Blues from the 'Sinhala Only' days and transformed the party by divesting itself of its inward-looking isolationist outlook. Perhaps this transformation has much to do with the present attitude of the SLFP membership.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 14-1-2019 **GET READY FOR PC POLLS -** **PRESIDENT**

President Maithripala Sirisena has instructed the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) electoral organisers to prepare for a Provincial Council Election, which will probably come before a Presidential Election.

The President made these remarks yesterday while addressing SDFP Uva and Central Province Electoral Organisers. The President added that certain persons are trying to postpone the Provincial Council election, due to be held now, by hinting on a Presidential Election.

"The term of six Provincial Councils have elapsed and this situation is not suitable for a healthy democracy. It negates the objectives of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution," he said.

The President said persons who speak about a Presidential Election should get ready for a Provincial Council Election.

He said that he has already discussed this with the Election Commission Chairman.

Addressing the Electoral Organisers, the President further said measures will be taken to hold the Provincial Council Election soon aiming to strengthen the voting rights of people.

President Sirisena said that Chairmen and the Director Board members for certain state institutions have not been appointed so far ever after three weeks of appointing Ministers. Therefore certain persons are levelling allegations against the Presidential Secretariat in this regard. The President said the relevant Ministry is responsible for this situation.

"Proposals for appointments should be forwarded to the Presidential Secretariat through the Prime Minister's Office. Hence, the Presidential Secretariat cannot take responsibility in this regard since the Prime Minister's Office has not forwarded those nominations," he noted.

Appointing of Chairmen and Board members should only be done by the Committee appointed to nominate persons for these posts, the President stressed.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 1-1-2019

Who is in charge?

Nation-building has never been our national policy

Andrea Upadhya

Politics and governance should remain independent. Any administration of the government is steeped in politics, carrying with it most of the same, immediate concerns. Governments, by their very definition, strive to do that which will receive the most popular support. They remain at the mercy of public whims. Governance, however, looks forward—much further than the next election.

Good governance requires visionaries. Good governance fosters a culture of transparency, makes those at the helm of affairs accountable, and obliges everyone to uphold the rule of law. It is not a one-time thing. Practicing good governance is a continuous process. But the Nepali government's utter misinterpretation of the notions of governance continues to be an obvious problem.

Architects of history, though not exclusive, are rare enough that most are deified. Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton, being the foremost in this realm, entered the popular imagination. While the three exemplars may have had personal flaws and drawbacks, as architects of history, they remain unparalleled. Closer to home, India had Gandhi. On our part, we had Prithvi Narayan Shah. All these illustrious names are visionaries who could foresee the future and dared to do what their contemporaries did not.

The afterbirth of the American Revolutionary War, much like the aftermath of the People's War, was chaotic, with every faction seeking their own interests. While overwhelming in terms of its scope, the vanguards of American democracy did the impossible.

They wrote a constitution—an imperfect, vague set of laws that has sustained the nation into prosperity for over 200 years. Two centuries later, the American constitution has stood the test of time. Political grievances and strife aside, their constitution is perhaps one of the most compelling and powerful pieces of writing ever produced.

It is obviously unfair to compare a fledgling democracy like ours to one as established as the United States's. But to strive to surpass successful teams forms the basis for our sporting events, our business ventures, and our marketing strategies. Why should our approach to governing be any different? As a state, we have been playing at democracy. Nepal has struggled with the very basics of democracy for a decade. And yet, instead of playing the game any differently, we still prescribe to the same unsuccessful rule we have set for ourselves: settle for mediocrity.

The sad truth is that nation-building has never been our national policy. The only concerns that gain political traction are short-term concerns that are geared towards winning elections. We'd rather allow ourselves to be distracted by policies, electoral

strategies, and developments of little or no importance. Nearly a decade ago, when certain political factions began promising grandiose, impossibly extravagant visions of turning our capital into Singapore, the shrewdest skeptics among us laughed while others were transfixed by the gilded dream before us. Although our basic infrastructure is in shambles, we refuse to hold these politicians and their factions accountable.

Transitions demand leadership that does not succumb to petty toils and, instead, yields to urgent matters. After twenty odd years of instability, economic stagnation, flagrant migration, we're here attempting to serve as Nepal's vanguards of democracy. If we were to look at socio-economic factors like child mortality and education, there have been tremendous improvements. However, the idea behind the improvements remains foreign. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and now its heir, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), that provided the ultimate objectives were initiated by the United Nations (UN). While the real-world impact of the improvements should be celebrated and continued, the issue that I find with the whole ordeal is that, as a country, we excessively rely on foreign organisations to identify some of our most critical and crucial issues.

Aside from blatantly ignoring and not understanding the demands of our people—particularly our new workforce—we are also not doing enough to keep people in our country. We can no longer afford to 'play' at this system of governance. Our society seems to need a reminder that there is an entire generation of young, dynamic individuals who would rather stay in their own country to work and build something than go abroad. Right now, we are becoming a major producer of migrants for the rest of the world.

Youth in Nepal, from a startlingly young age, seem to aspire to go abroad. Our national pride seems to hinge solely on Buddha and Mount Everest. We saw these two achievements and decided to continually peddle narratives of pride around them instead of forging new ones. India has Ganga and Gandhi. They didn't stop. America has Lincoln and Mount Rushmore. Didn't stop. We cannot hang our entire notion of national pride on two symbols that don't make any difference to our daily lives.

Democracies require work. We asked for this. The very name, democracy, demands that people be invested and engaged. Not taking the time to maintaining this commitment will only lead to another overhaul of our national state apparatus in another decade. We need to focus on substance, not just on window dressings.

Upadhya is a Political Science graduate from Texas Wesleyan University

III – ECONOMIC, CULTURAL AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad

Summary

ECONOMIC, CULTURAL AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

With general elections just around the corner, economists writing in Indian media are coming up with their diverse opinions about the health of Indian economy. Some present a rosy picture of high GDP growth rates, others have said that things might not be as good as they look on the surface. While putting this situation in context, one writer commented that “GDP growth, like beauty, may lie in the eyes of the beholder”. Supporters of the ruling alliance refer to the 7.2 % GDP growth rate at present which they say is the highest in the past three years. This is also the highest growth rate among the major economies. The ones in the opposition camp, they state, look at the aforementioned growth rate in relation to the forecast which the Reserve Bank of India had made, which was 7.4 %. Therefore, they say that the government has failed to reach its target growth rate. They also believe that “from an average of 7.6 % in the first half, growth is expected to slow down to an average of just 6.8 %.” These opinions aside, the GDP growth rate for the full year is projected to be 7.2 % according to data released by the Central Statistics Office.

According to reports in Afghan print media, Afghanistan has so far exported 5400 tons of goods worth 100 million USD via the air corridors it has recently established with different countries. The goods so exported include dried and fresh fruits, saffron and animal hides. China, India, Kazakhstan, Turkey and some Arab countries were the destinations where these goods were exported.

According to reports in Pakistan’s newspapers, the PTI-led government has set for itself the target of 5.8 percent growth rate in GDP, citing from the draft of its five-year plan 2018-23. As reported in press reports, “Federal Planning Minister Makhdum Khusro Bakhtyar was informed during a meeting that consolidation period was expected to be over by the next fiscal year, and GDP growth would start picking up from the envisaged 4.2 percent in current fiscal year 2018/19 to 7 percent during the terminal year of the five-year plan in 2023”. Other news pertaining to economy include the reconstitution of the National Finance Commission, which was long overdue, steps envisaged to increase trade with other countries including with Turkey and Sri Lanka, and the synchronization of the two coal fired power plants with the national grid by China Power Hub Company.

III - ECONOMIC, CULTURAL AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

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Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 11-1-2019

There is no space for an inadvertent confluence of fiscal, regulatory, monetary easing

Policymakers have done well in the last few years to ensure macroeconomic stability. They must not now give in to the clamour for fiscal, monetary and regulatory easing.

By Sajjid Z. Chinoy

The economic narrative in India has rapidly evolved. As recently as October, the policy was focused squarely on preserving macroeconomic stability as external imbalances rose to unsustainable levels and the rupee came under relentless pressure. With global crude prices collapsing since then and domestic food prices remaining exceptionally benign, stability concerns have receded.

Instead, rising agrarian distress and the (chronic) headwinds confronting small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have taken center stage. Extrapolating from this, some are fearing a more generalised and sustained slowdown. This has inevitably led to calls for some easing — fiscal, monetary, regulatory. The agrarian distress has already resulted in 10 states announcing farm loan waivers over the last two years. Now, there is a growing clamour among commentators to introduce unconditional cash transfers to serve as income support for distressed farmers nationally, as has been attempted in Telangana and Odisha. Separately, with food inflation dramatically undershooting and pulling down headline inflation with it, markets are expecting imminent rate cuts. Finally, banks continue to argue for some regulatory easing and forbearance. In other words, 2019 could witness an inadvertent confluence of fiscal, monetary and regulatory easing.

This would be a very dangerous path to tread, in our view. First, fears of a growth slowdown are overstated. Near-term prospects have meaningfully improved, as crude prices have collapsed, monetary conditions have eased, and banks have quickly stepped in to fill any void left by non-bank financial-companies (NBFCs). Crude at \$60 in the coming months versus \$75-80 in the first half of the fiscal, will amount to a meaningful positive terms-of-trade impulse that boosts household purchasing power, increases farm margins and creates some fiscal space.

Second, bond yields have fallen by almost 70 bps from their highs and, even accounting for some increase in NBFC spreads, monetary conditions have eased to a two-year low. Third, non-food bank credit growth has picked up sharply, accelerating to a four-year high of 14 per cent, suggesting banks are quickly and increasingly stepping in to fill some of the NBFC voids. Finally, while the collapse in food prices hurts farmers' purchasing power and rural consumption, it helps urban consumption. Yes, year-on-year growth in the second half of 2018-19 will moderate sharply — but largely optically on account of adverse base effects from the sharp growth at the end of last year — and, therefore, should be looked through.

Further, we estimate "output gaps" in India have virtually closed, reflected in rising capacity utilisation and the firming of core inflation recently. Against this backdrop, the confluence easing

in 2019 — inadvertent as it may be — would simply exacerbate underlying imbalances and sow the seeds of future macroeconomic instability.

Fiscal exhaustion: Fiscal space is particularly constrained. We estimate the total public sector borrowing requirement (Centre, state, off-balance sheet, central public sector enterprises) was still a hefty 8.2 per cent of GDP in 2017-18, the same level as five years ago. To be sure, the Centre has been bringing its deficit down, but this has been completely offset by state deficits, off-balance sheet borrowing, and central public sector-enterprise borrowing rising commensurately.

Unsurprisingly, this has led to fiscal exhaustion among markets. The slope of India's government yield curve has continuously risen in recent years, as borrowing remains elevated, and policymakers remain wary of more foreign participation in the market, while correctly trying to reduce financial repression within the banking system. The upshot: For any given overnight interest rate the RBI sets, benchmark 10-year borrowing costs in the economy are higher than they used to be. The implication is clear: Any fiscal relaxation at this point will become counter-productive, pushing up borrowing costs and crowding out economic activity.

Fiscal imbalances also have their external counterparts. The current account deficit (CAD) is simply an economy's investment-savings gap. Public dis-savings remain elevated. Therefore, the main reason the CAD narrowed is because private investment slowed so sharply. If the private investment cycle picks up — as we all hope — the CAD would balloon, unless the public-sector imbalance reduces. In other words, without more fiscal consolidation, we will always be choosing between a sustainable CAD and higher private investment.

The policy challenge: There is, therefore, absolutely no space for new unfunded liabilities. The pace at which farm loan waivers have been proliferating is worrying, even though budgetary allocations have been much lower than announcements. As is well known, loan waivers are a particularly blunt instrument suffering from the familiar pitfalls of vitiating credit culture, addressing the symptom, not the underlying cause, and disproportionately favouring larger farmers who rely on institutional credit.

Consequently, a slew of commentators have proposed direct, unconditional, cash transfers as income support for farmers. A variety of proposals have been mooted from paying farmers the difference between market prices and minimum support prices (MSPs) in cash, to a broader quasi-universal basic income that covers 25-50 per cent of the population, costing anywhere from 1-5 per cent of GDP based on their expansiveness.

The question is how will this be paid for, given that India's fiscal cup runneth over? The policy challenge, therefore, is to either find the fiscal space for cash transfers by reducing existing subsidies and welfare programmes, or to offer either existing product subsidies or equivalent cash transfers, but not both. In the current environment, both options look politically daunting.

Could the RBI's excess capital pay for income support? Even without going into the merits of this, it's important to understand the economic impact. For starters, any RBI special dividend will either be one-off or staggered over a few years, whereas any new

farm-income-support creates a perpetual liability. Second, from an accounting perspective, the fiscal deficit will not widen because the additional expenditure will be paid for by the transfer of capital from the RBI. But we should not conflate the accounting with the economics. If the transfer, for example, is spent on cash transfers — instead of retiring public debt — the “effective fiscal impulse” will increase by the full quantum of that spending tantamount to a fiscal stimulus, with the attendant implications on pressurising macroeconomic imbalances.

Monetary and regulatory easing : Will the pressure on the fiscal be accompanied by monetary and regulatory easing? The collapse in food inflation has meant that headline CPI has been undershooting market and RBI expectations and prospects of some monetary easing have risen in the first half of 2019.

Separately, there is growing market/bank clamour for some regulatory easing towards banks. Policymakers must eschew this. NPAs appear to have peaked, the IBC has changed the debtor-lending balance of power, the government has injected more capital, and credit growth has increased smartly in recent months. The tough medicine of the recent years has finally begun to bear fruit. Lowering lending standards through any regulatory easing at this stage, risks undoing accruing gains and triggering a fresh wave of NPAs down the line.

Don't draw the wrong lessons: 2019 has begun with benign crude prices, providing much-needed breathing space to India. But India cannot get complacent in this environment and inadvertently indulge in any excesses. India's growth prospects have improved, and there is no case, or space, for an inadvertent confluence of fiscal/regulatory/monetary easing.

More fundamentally, it's important we don't draw the wrong lessons from the last five years. Policymakers must be complimented for pursuing some tough — but necessary — medicine in recent years: Inflation targeting, asset resolution in the banking system, and a reduction at least of the central fiscal deficit. This progress should not be mistakenly held responsible for the collapse of food inflation or the continued unviability of the SME sector. Resolving the stress in agriculture and SMEs is imperative but requires well-known supply-side reforms to improve scale, productivity and viability.

Instead, if the political consensus for keeping inflation down weakens on account of the collapse in food prices, or the political consensus to resolve the twin-balance sheet problem softens, so as to hasten credit-flow to certain sectors, or the political consensus to stick to a path of fiscal consolidation back-slides, the hard-earned gains of recent years risk being eroded. We think that would be a travesty. Let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater.

THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI 10-1-2019

Economists in Wonderland: GDP growth, like beauty, may lie in the eyes of the beholder

Mythili Bhusnurmath

“Leaving bumps behind, GDP in fast lane ahead of polls” declared a business daily headline, the morning after the Central

Statistical Organisation (CSO) published its First Advance Estimates for the 2018-19 gross domestic product (GDP) last Monday. Time to uncork the bubbly?

Wait a minute. “Worry for government as growth seen slowing sharply,” says the headline in another business daily. But aren't both dailies commenting on the same data? So how come one sees GDP in the ‘fast lane’ while the other sees the same growth (7.2%) as indicative of ‘growth slowing sharply’?

Aha! You haven't reckoned with macroeconomics! “When I use a word,” said Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, “it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.” To which Alice replies, “The question is whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

Alas, that is the problem with macroeconomics too. Substitute GDP growth for ‘word’ and you have Alice's dilemma in a nutshell. As with Humpty Dumpty, the GDP growth rate can mean whatever you want it to mean.

Whether one sees GDP growth as good or bad depends to a large extent on how one wants to see it. And different people see it differently.

BJP supporters would like to focus on the fact that the GDP growth estimate for the current financial year (7.2%) is the fastest in the past three years. It is also the fastest amongst the major economies. Two sectors, manufacturing and construction, which hold the key to faster job creation, are projected to grow at 8.3% and 8.9% respectively, up from 5.7% in the previous year.

Meanwhile public administration spending, which shored up growth last year, is expected to decline from 10% last year to 8.9%, signalling a welcome shift away from unproductive to more productive sectors of the economy. Further, growth in gross fixed capital formation, a measure of investment in the economy, is projected to increase – from 7.6% last year to 12.2% this fiscal year (at constant prices). As a percentage of GDP it is expected to touch 33%, again the highest in the past three years.

All suggestive of GDP in the ‘fast lane’, as one headline put it? Not quite!

For opposition parties and all those not overly fond of BJP, the CSO's GDP growth estimate is slower than the Reserve Bank of India's projection of 7.4%, suggesting a slowdown in the second half of the year. From an average of 7.6% in the first half, growth is expected to slow down to an average of just 6.8%. Surely, that's nothing to cheer about?

Add to that government's stretched finances, and hence its inability to spend in order to boost growth, domestic political uncertainty with general election looming ahead and rising global tensions. And suddenly, the prospect of growth losing momentum over the coming months and slipping into the slow lane is a distinct possibility.

So what is the ordinary citizen supposed to make of the state of the economy after reading such contradictory headlines? She could give up in despair, like former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill who may have spoken for all of us lesser mortals when he exclaimed, “If you put two economists in a room, you get two opinions, unless one of them is Lord Keynes, in which case you get three opinions.”

Better still, she could take both points of view with a pinch of salt and refrain from making sweeping judgments either way.

How growth finally pans out for the year will depend on a host of things for which we don't have complete data as yet. Remember, first advance estimates are projections based on data for the first half of the year. And as we saw with demonetisation and the global financial crisis, a single black swan event can demolish the best projections.

Take my advice (this comes from a dyed-in-the-wool journalist): Never get swayed by newspaper headlines!

THE HINDU, DELHI 10-1-2019

Caution ahead: on economic growth and election spending

Election-season temptations for populist spending pose a challenge to the economy

The first advance estimate of gross domestic product (GDP) growth for 2018-19 released by the Central Statistics Office on Monday paints a mixed picture of the economy. The GDP growth rate for the full year is projected to be at 7.2%, which is significantly higher than the growth rate of 6.7% achieved last year. Many sectors of the economy are projected to do better than they did last year in the aftermath of the twin shocks of demonetisation and the rollout of the Goods and Services Tax. Sectors such as manufacturing and construction, for instance, are projected to grow at a healthy pace of 8.3% and 8.9%, respectively, both of which are higher than the growth rate of below 6% that each sector witnessed last year. Interestingly, the CSO's growth estimate for 2018-19 appears conservative and is lower than the estimates made by institutions such as the Reserve Bank of India and the World Bank. A worrying trend in the economic data is the recent sequential deceleration in growth over consecutive quarters. According to the CSO, growth is likely to slow down considerably from the average of 7.6% recorded during the first half of the current fiscal year to around 6.8% in the second half. This sequential slowdown is expected to get reflected in the sectoral level data as well with sectors like manufacturing expected to slow down sharply in the second half of the year compared to the first half. On the brighter side, investment spending, which has ailed the economy for long, is expected to pick up finally. Gross fixed capital formation as a percentage of GDP is expected to reach 33%, the highest in three years.

One of the significant near-term risks to the economy is the general election that is expected to be held in May. Regime uncertainty associated with the election may put a halt to the nascent pick-up witnessed in investments as corporations might decide to hold back on big ticket investments until things clear up. A major risk in the medium to long term is the absence of meaningful structural reforms that are necessary to increase economic productivity combined with populist policies that eventually damage the economy. Another perennial risk is the over-dependence on imported oil, which makes growth heavily dependent on external events often beyond the control of the government. The projected slowdown in the second half of the fiscal despite the fall in global oil prices is a worrying sign. Ahead of the general election, the government may wish to help

growth by boosting spending, but any such move would be ill-advised. With the fiscal deficit exceeding the Budget estimate by 15% in just the first eight months of the fiscal year, the government cannot crank up spending without severely affecting its finances, along with investor confidence in the economy.

THE ASIAN AGE, NEW DELHI 8-1-2019

Agri, manufacturing to push GDP growth to 7.2 pc in 2018-19: CSO

Financial Chronicle

New Delhi: Indian economy is expected to grow at 7.2 per cent in 2018-19, a tad higher from 6.7 per cent in the previous fiscal, mainly due to improvement in the performance of agriculture and manufacturing sectors, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) said on Monday.

The CSO estimate is, however, a bit lower than 7.4 per cent growth projected by the Reserve Bank for the current fiscal.

Releasing the first advance estimates of National Income for 2018-19, the CSO said, "The growth in GDP during 2018-19 is estimated at 7.2 per cent as compared to the growth rate of 6.7 per cent in 2017-18."

The gross domestic product (GDP) had expanded by 7.1 per cent in 2016-17 and 8.2 per cent in 2015-16. "Real GVA (Gross Value Added) is anticipated to grow at 7 per cent in the current fiscal as against 6.5 per cent in 2017-18," it said.

According to the CSO data, the expansion in activities in 'agriculture, forestry and fishing' is likely to increase to 3.8 per cent in the current fiscal from 3.4 per cent in the preceding year.

The growth of the manufacturing sector is expected to accelerate to 8.3 per cent this fiscal, up from 5.7 per cent in 2017-18.

However, the mining and quarrying sector growth rate is estimated to decline from 2.9 per cent in 2017-18 to 0.8 per cent in current fiscal. Trade, hotels, transport, communication and services related to broadcasting will too witness deceleration to 6.9 per cent from 8 per cent in the previous fiscal.

The growth rate of public administration, defence and other services will also dip to 8.9 per cent from 10 per cent last fiscal.

Electricity, gas, water supply & other utility services growth is estimated at 9.4 per cent in 2018-19, up from 7.2 per cent in the last fiscal. Similarly, the construction sector is expected to grow at 8.9 per cent from 5.7 per cent previous fiscal. Financial, real estate & professional services' growth will be a tad higher at 6.8 per cent this fiscal against 6.6 per cent in 2017-18.

According to the CSO estimates, the per capita net national income during 2018-19 will be Rs 1,25,397, showing a rise of 11.1 per cent as compared to Rs 1,12,835 during 2017-18 with the growth rate of 8.6 per cent.

Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF), a barometer of investment, at current prices is estimated at Rs 55.58 lakh crore in 2018-19 against Rs 47.79 lakh crore in 2017-18.

At Constant (2011-12) Prices, the GFCF is estimated at Rs 45.86 lakh crore in 2018-19 as against Rs 40.88 lakh crore in 2017-18. In terms of GDP, the rates of the GFCF at Current and Constant (2011-12) prices during 2018-19 are estimated at 29.5 per cent and 32.9 per cent, respectively, as against the corresponding rates of 28.5 per cent and 31.4 per cent, respectively in 2017-18. The

discrepancies in the GDP estimates for current fiscal has been pegged at Rs 1,49,331 crore as against Rs 2,23,504 crore in 2017-18.

The Government Final Consumption Expenditure (GFCE) at Current Prices is estimated at Rs 21.70 lakh crore in 2018-19 as against Rs 19.08 lakh crore in 2017-18. At Constant (2011-12) Prices, the GFCE is estimated at Rs 15.28 lakh crore in 2018-19 as against Rs 14.0 lakh crore in 2017-18.

In terms of GDP, the rates of GFCE at current and constant (2011-12) prices during 2018-19 are estimated at 11.5 per cent and 11.0 per cent, respectively, as against the corresponding rates of 11.4 per cent and 10.8 per cent, respectively in 2017-18.

THE HINDU, DELHI 3-1-2019 **Hope with concerns in 2019**

C. Rangarajan

Five issues need to be addressed comprehensively if India is to achieve sustained high growth

The New Year is always looked forward to with hope, whatever the conditions might have been the previous year; 2018 has been a mixed bag, both globally and domestically.

Globally, the growth rate in 2018 was high, particularly in the United States. But strong signs of a trade war emerged, dimming hopes of faster international trade. Britain is passing through the pangs of separation from the European Union. Domestically, the first quarter growth rate was high. But signs are not good for the balance of the year. The rupee underwent a severe shock as crude oil prices rose, and abated after a fall in oil prices. While prices fell, agrarian distress accentuated.

India's growth rate in 2018-19 is forecast at 7.4% by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). But it looks to be a touch-and-go situation. More likely, it will be slightly lower. Looking ahead, 2019 may not show any substantial rise in the growth rate. Even though the Goods and Services Tax (GST) has stabilised, much will depend on the pickup in the investment rate.

The international environment is not that conducive for growth in our foreign trade; this will have an impact on our exports and, therefore, growth. Perhaps the growth rate will be between 7.2% and 7.5%. Though this may be the highest growth rate of any country, it falls short of our requirements.

Going ahead, what are our major concerns?

Investment ratio

In the final analysis, the growth rate depends on the investment rate and the productivity of capital or its inverse incremental capital-output ratio.

The incremental capital output ratio is a catch-all expression. It depends upon a multiple number of factors such as quality of labour, which again depends on education and skill development levels, and technology, which is constantly changing. For ensuring a sustained high growth, we need to raise the investment ratio and keep the incremental capital-output ratio at 4. The Gross Fixed Capital Formation ratio has fallen from 35.8% in 2007-08 to 28.5% in 2017-18. The journey to raise the investment ratio is not going to be easy. 'Animal spirits' must be revived. A tranquil political and economic environment needs to be nurtured.

Banking system

An important factor affecting economic growth is the condition of our banking system. Non-performing assets (NPAs), including stressed assets, as a proportion of loans of public sector banks stood at 16.7% as of March 2018. As many as 11 public sector banks are under Prompt Corrective Action (PCA). This restricts the lending abilities of these banks. Added to this, the non banking financial company (NBFC) system is also under stress. This is partly a reflection of the stress in the banking system since most NBFCs borrow from banks. Recapitalisation of public sector banks will partly solve the problem. It is not clear at this point how much it will help in adding to lending capacity. Some have advocated providing more capital to banks outside the PCA framework as that will increase their lending capacity immediately.

Today, banks are responsible both for short-term and long-term lending. Their inability to lend affects the availability of working capital as well as capital expenditures.

The decision to pump in more capital to public sector banks must be completed soon. The growth rate in the industrial sector will depend on how quickly the banking system comes back to normalcy.

Employment growth

There is a great concern about the inadequate growth of employment. Honestly, we do not have satisfactory employment numbers. The employment data in the organised sector are reliable. But the employment in the informal sector is much larger. One question that is asked is that if growth is around 7%, why is there no corresponding growth in employment? We need to keep two factors in mind. Growth can occur either as a result of increase in investment or because of better utilisation of existing capacity. It is growth which is led by new investment that leads to a significant increase in employment. But growth caused by improved efficiency of utilisation of existing capital can lead only to a marginal increase in employment. Much of the growth seen in the last few years is of the latter variety.

Second, the increase in employment seen in the period between 2004-05 and 2009-10 was because of the rapid growth of the information technology (IT) and financial sectors. The IT sector has slowed down. The financial sector is under stress. Employment in these sectors was visible and educated entrants into the labour market found ample opportunities. The IT sector growth rate is not likely to pick up significantly as this industry is undergoing many structural changes. The revival of the banking system depends on a number of factors. Thus, even from the point of view of employment, the key factor is the pickup in investment.

India's external sector has grown and is well integrated with the rest of the world. India's trade in goods and services as a percentage of GDP has grown to 42% of GDP. Therefore, what happens in the rest of the world affects India's growth very much. India's balance of payment situation has been comfortable since liberalisation. However, there are vulnerabilities as seen in September-October 2018, when the value of the rupee suddenly plummeted when crude oil prices rose and there were simultaneously capital outflows. RBI intervention and the subsequent fall in crude prices have restored the value of the

rupee. In April-November 2018, India's exports of goods grew by 11.6%. However, we need to note that exports growth was 5.2% (2016-17) and 9.8% (2017-18). Strong growth in exports is a must if we have to keep the current account deficit (CAD) at a manageable level.

The forecast for world trade and output is not encouraging. There are too many uncertainties which include an intensification in the trade war. Along with export promotion, we also need to contain some of our large imports. A watch on India's CAD is critically important if we have to achieve growth with stability.

Agrarian distress

The future growth also depends on the performance of agriculture. Agrarian distress is widespread. Strangely, the fall in prices of agricultural products is in one sense a reflection of our success in raising output. Some years ago, the concern was a rise in the price of pulses to abnormally high levels. But today the picture is reversed. Thanks to increase in production, prices have fallen. Similar is the case with respect to vegetables, particularly onion. The need of agriculturists is income in current prices. The solution to the fall in prices lies in government intervening in the market and buying off the surplus over normal levels. The market will then automatically take prices to the normal level. The important requirement in this context is not only the financial capacity of the government to procure but also adequate physical arrangements to procure and store. The procured agricultural products can be sold by the government in later years when output is low or utilised in any safety net programme.

Loan waivers are at best short-term solutions. The fundamental problem is one of increasing productivity and enabling farmers to achieve increased output and better prices. There is also a basic weakness that we have to address. The average size of landholding is so small that any amount of increase in productivity will not give adequate income. Farmers have to think in terms of consolidation of landholdings so that they can get the benefits of larger size. Small farmers will also have to think in terms of higher value-added products like vegetables. A combined attack to increase productivity, consolidate landholdings and improve marketing is needed to assure farmers of better income.

Thus there are five concerns, as we stand at the beginning of 2019. These are: raising the investment ratio; putting the banking system back on the rails; employment generation through better growth; enhancing export growth to contain the CAD; and removing agrarian distress by increasing productivity and consolidation of small landholdings. These issues need to be addressed comprehensively, if we have to achieve sustained high growth.

THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI 10-1-2019

Confront the harsh reality: The only way we can really help farmers is to take most of them out of farming

Arvind Panagariya

Today, we give farmers 2.2 trillion rupees in subsidies on fertiliser, power, crop insurance, seeds, credit, irrigation and a

myriad other items. We have a massive programme of procurement of grains at above market prices; we give highly subsidised food grains to 75% of rural population; and we offer guaranteed employment for 100 days to one adult in each rural household.

We run schemes that provide houses and LPG connections to rural poor and free primary education and free primary health care to rural households. Finally, substantial resources have been invested in bringing roads, digital connectivity and electricity to rural areas.

Yet, after seven decades of development effort, stories of widespread farmer distress remain a daily feature of our television programmes. Why?

It is tempting to hypothesise that since stories of distress capture viewer attention more readily than those emphasising positive achievements, media has a vested interest in focussing on them disproportionately. Given the vastness of India, there is always farmer distress in one or another of its corners, providing fodder for primetime television on a regular basis.

Given the human tendency to generalise from anecdotes, especially when they are presented in visual form, isolated incidents of suffering then get translated into generalised distress across the length and breadth of the nation. In contrast, hard data is costly to collect, difficult to digest and often loses to vivid images offered by specific stories even if they represent an exception rather than the rule.

While there is some truth in this hypothesis, in all likelihood, there is enough evidence to suggest that the stories of distress are real. Because India lost nearly four decades following the independence to poorly conceived policies, it remains a relatively low per capita income country. Within this broad scenario, agriculture has seen far slower progress than industry and services.

Over the 65 year period spanning 1951-52 to 2016-17, industry has grown at the annual average rate of 6.1%, services 6.2% and agriculture only 2.9%. The result of this asymmetry in growth rates has been that the share of agriculture in GDP has fallen from a hefty 53.1% in 1950-51 to just 15.2% in 2016-17.

By itself, this decline in share is neither unusual nor a reason for despair. It is an established stylised fact of growth that industry and services grow faster than agriculture with the result that the share of the latter sector in the GDP dwindles as the country grows rich in per capita terms. Today, the share of agriculture in the GDP is tiny in every country that has achieved high per capita income: 2% in South Korea, 1.6% in Taiwan, 1.5% in France, 1% in Japan and the United States, and 0.5% in the United Kingdom.

India's tragedy is that, unlike these countries, it has not achieved a commensurate decline in the share of agriculture in employment. Today, employment share of agriculture stands at 5% in South Korea and Taiwan, 3.5% in Japan, 3% in France, 2% in the United States, and 1% in the United Kingdom. In contrast, the share of agriculture in employment in India remains stubbornly high at around 45%.

As a result, per worker output in agriculture today is just one-third that of the nationwide GDP per worker, which is itself low. On top, a gigantic 68.5% of operational holdings are smaller than

one hectare. Per worker output on these tiny holdings is lower than per worker output within agriculture, itself one-third of the GDP per worker.

These facts imply that while the government can make improvements on the margin, it can do almost nothing within agriculture to create even a semblance of prosperity among farmers. Marketing reform, even if successfully implemented – and this is a big if – cannot go far. With the low per worker output, the scope for redistribution from a few rich traders to the vast numbers of farmers is quite small.

Increases in productivity cannot go very far either. India is already self-sufficient in food grains. Therefore, any increase in food grain output would pose a marketing challenge. Selling the extra output at home would depress prices while exporting it would attract countervailing duties due to WTO illegal subsidies via the MSP.

Diversification is seen as an option. But with fruits and vegetables accounting for just 5% of cultivated area and animal husbandry for just 5% of workforce, even doubling the output of these commodities within a short period would bring benefit to only a small proportion of the farmers while harming many others by sending prices into a tailspin. Processing and exporting the produce may help but only a small fraction of the associated benefit would accrue to farmers.

It is delusional to think that the next farm loan waiver or yet another clever government scheme aimed at farmer welfare would magically turn the situation around. The harsh reality is that with too little output and too many to share it, no solution within agriculture would drastically improve the situation.

We need to systematically remove obstacles – many of them erected by past policies – to the exit of the large number of marginal farmers from agriculture. Simultaneously, we must unshackle labour intensive sectors in industry and services to create good jobs for them.

THE STATESMAN, NEW DELHI 4-1-2019

A few steps on a long journey

Challenges of infrastructure and corruption as experienced in case of RSBY may also confine the success of Ayushman Bharat but it is imperative to look at the positives too

Naveen Manchanda & Vaishali Jain

The Prime Minister's Independence Day speech of 2018 marked the announcement of yet another scheme, this time pertaining to the ailing healthcare situation of India. Ayushman Bharat – National Health Protection Scheme (AB-NHPS), tagged as Modicare is deemed to be one of the largest health insurance schemes in terms of extent and expense. The scheme can be seen as an extension of the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana launched by the UPA government in 2008.

Like RSBY, AB is targeted at poor, deprived rural families and identified occupational category of urban workers' families. Specifically, according to the Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) 2011 data, 8.03 crore families in rural and 2.33 crore in urban areas will be entitled to the benefits of scheme, i.e., it will cover nearly 10 crore people. AB-NHPS offers to provide an insurance cover of Rs 5 lakh per family (on a family-floater

basis) per year for secondary and tertiary care hospitalisation marking an overarching increase of 1500 percent in the coverage amount compared to RSBY.

Indeed, as elections approached, addressing the needs of people will be the BJP's mandate and launching Ayushman Bharat has been labelled as one move in this direction. It cannot be debunked that the scheme may sound impressive but sustaining it financially, with the proposed premium rates, seems almost impossible.

Tracing the inpatient care expenditure from the recent health survey provided by National Sample Survey shows that the nearly Rs 18,500 crore is spent by the bottom two expenditure quintiles in India – the target populace for the scheme – while the premium proposed hovers around Rs 1,032 per household which translates to Rs 10,820 crore implying huge losses for the insurance companies. In fact, given that such a health insurance scheme will reach many marginalised households for the first time, pent-up need and demand for healthcare will in all probability imply high burn-out ratios for the insurance companies making the scheme economically unviable.

AB-NHPS like RSBY is focussed on in-patient care while in India ambulatory or OPD care poses a bigger economic challenge. Such care is frequently needed. A study by Laveesh Bhandari, Peter Barman and Rajeev Ahuja (2010) based on the 2004 health round of the National Sample Survey found that outpatient care has a greater 'impoverishing effect' than inpatient care in both urban and rural areas.

The analysis of nationally representative data from India also shows that high out-of-pocket (OOP) payments have pushed 3.5 per cent of the population below the poverty line. However, if OOP payments on either medicines or outpatient care are excluded then only 0.5 per cent falls into poverty due to spending on health. This suggests that insurance schemes that only cover hospitalisation charges would not be very helpful in protecting the poor from impoverishment due to OOP. This requires health schemes to have broader coverage that would include outpatient care as well as drugs.

Ayushman Bharat fails to address this issue. Challenges of infrastructure and corruption as experienced in case of RSBY may also confine the success of AB but it is imperative to look at the positives too.

The chart published with this report presents the coverage and utilisation of RSBY since inception and it has improved over the years. Another study by Manchanda and Chaudhary (2016) finds that RSBY, if placed in the larger perspective of providing social security to poor, did fail to cover some of the most backward districts of the country where the proportion of the poor was higher.

Also, they opined that introduction of an insurance programme without proper infrastructure in place like health centres, roads and electricity is redundant for the poor classes even if it reaches such underdeveloped districts as the scheme in such cases merely ensures "availability" without really ensuring accessibility of the health care service.

Despite highlighting the loopholes in the functioning of the RSBY, the authors highlighted the larger picture of poverty and associated insecurity for the majority of the population in India

for whom RSBY served as an important policy measure, providing access to inpatient care – to many for the first time! “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step,” said Lao Tzu.

Hence, it is imperative to have a comprehensive health policy in place and then work towards its efficient implementation than denouncing it altogether at its infancy.

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 9-1-2019 **Afghanistan Exported 5,400 Tons of Goods Via Air Corridors**

KABUL - Afghanistan has so far exported 5,400 tons of goods worth USD 100 million through the air corridors that it has recently established with various countries.

So far 320 flights have taken place through the air corridors, exporting 5400 tons of goods including dried and fresh fruits, saffron and animal skins to Arab countries, India, China, Kazakhstan, Turkey and France.

Afghanistan's first air corridor was with India that was inaugurated in June of 2017. The first Delhi-bound cargo plane left Kabul, carrying 60 tons of medicinal plants left Kabul.

Consequently, Afghanistan established the air corridor with Kazakhstan. Its third air corridor was Kandahar-Delhi, followed by Kabul-Turkey, and United Arab Emirate, Kabul-China, Kabul-Jeddah and EU countries.

The next air corridor will be the Mazar-London which will be inaugurated on Wednesday. a Turkish Airline flight will take five tons of dried fruits to London.

Sameer Rasa, head of the Public Relations Office of the Senior Advisor to the President in Banking and Financial affairs, said the number of flights through the air corridors will increase from six per week to ten in the coming future.

He added that agreement was reached with Kam Air Airlines on one flight a week to export pine nuts to China. **(Wadsam)**

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 13-1-2019 **Capital Flight Continues as Situation Remains ‘Unchanged’**

KABUL - Afghanistan Chamber of Industries and Mines says Afghan investors are moving their investment to Central Asian countries as the situation in the country remains “unchanged” for them.

Head of the Chamber of Industries and Mines, Rahimullah Samandar, said Afghan investors are provided with more further facilities outside the country.

Dozens of investors have moved their investment from Afghanistan to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan over the past two years, he said.

Lack of investment facilities and insecurity are main challenges often raised by local investors.

“When government cannot provide three or five megawatts of electricity to a steel factory, how can investment be attracted in the country and how our investors stop going outside the country?” asked Samandar.

Investors meanwhile called on government should overcome their problems in order to attract new investment in the country and prevent capital flight from Afghanistan.

“Government has to fulfill its promises to create facilities and provide privileges to investors and should work in this area to provide more investment opportunities,” said Farid Hashimi, an investor.

Officials say that investors are paying only AFs100 instead of paying at least AFs30,000 to obtain an investment license and buy one square meter of land in industrial parks for AFs50.

(Tolo news)

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 10-1-2019 **Ghani Stresses Urgent Efforts for Better Water Management**

KABUL - President Ashraf Ghani has emphasized on more and urgent efforts to properly manage the country's water resources which he called a natural asset, saying work so far done in this regard is inadequate.

The president said this while chairing a meeting of the High Council on Land, Water and Environment at the Presidential Palace, a statement from the palace said.

The meeting discussed matters relating to the management of water resources, the overall situation of water distribution and irrigation system, the statement said.

At the beginning, deputy water and energy minister Eng. Khan Mohammad Takal discussed four phases of reaching the national target of better water management, analysis of the country's water situation and challenges and presented his proposals in this regard.

Second Vice President Sarwar Danish, Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah, Finance Minister Mohammad Humayon Qayyumi, Rural Development Minister Mujiburrahman Karimi Presidential Advisor Amin Karim also presented their views regarding proper and more accurate management of water resources.

The president said efforts undertaken for management of water showed coordination between authorities concerned had increased, but said it was still insufficient and more work and efforts should be made in this regard.

“The information on the state of water in the country is indicative of the abandonment of the sector,” the president said.

He said they should work on a national plan to make their activities more coherent and achieve tangible results in a short time.

He also said the public perception remained that the water situation was constant, but it has changed due to climate change.

“We need to have a clear vision at the national level and there is a need for a basic roadmap to make clear progress on water management,” Ghani said.

The president said 90 percent the country's irrigation remained traditional and with the advent of climate change, the sector was in danger. **(Pajhwok)**

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 8-1-2019 **PTI targets average GDP growth of 5.8pc in Five Year Plan**

Mehtab Haider

ISLAMABAD: The PTI-led government has prepared a draft of 12th Five Year Plan by envisaging average GDP growth rate of 5.8 percent in the next five years from 2018 to 2023, a minister said on Monday.

Federal Planning Minister Makhdum Khusro Bakhtyar was informed during a meeting that consolidation period was expected to be over by the next fiscal year, and GDP growth would start picking up from the envisaged 4.2 percent in current fiscal year 2018/19 to 7 percent during the terminal year of the five year plan in 2023.

Bakhtyar, who chaired the meeting, underlined that the 12th Five Year Plan should contribute to real economic growth covering all aspects of sustainability. Secretary Planning Zafar Hasan, Joint Chief Economist Rai Nasir Ali Khan, Chief Macroeconomics Muhammad Zafar and review committee members attended the meeting.

The minister appreciated the macroeconomic framework prepared by the Planning Commission of Pakistan. The framework was based on consultations involving all stakeholders including civil society, media, private sector, and above all the provinces.

The minister was apprised that the plan aimed at achieving 5.8 percent GDP growth on average during 2018-23.

This has been projected on the basis of 3.6 percent growth in agriculture, 6.1 percent in industry, and 6.8 percent in the services sector on average.

In line with the government's vision, emphasis would remain on social sectors, poverty alleviation, job creation and improvement of governance for ensuring transparency and overcoming corruption. The meeting was apprised that draft of the plan was ready, which would be launched after the approval from the competent forum.

In a separate meeting, Khusro Bakhtyar directed the Statistics Division to collect data of essential food items every Monday rather than Thursday to have a clear picture of prices of key items in the beginning of the week.

Noting that poor market information leads to profiteering and hoarding, the minister called for close collaboration between all the stakeholders, including market committees and district administrations across the country to curb profiteering.

The minister said that the government was committed to providing relief to the marginalised sections of the society by checking profiteering and hoarding, and effectively monitoring and implementing price control of essential food items. It is pertinent to mention that the prime minister had assigned the additional portfolio of Ministry of Statistics to Khusro Bakhtyar on December 12, 2018.

The minister was informed that inflation for essential kitchen items has been less than one percent since August 2018. The minister directed that the mechanism should be devised to educate the public on economic statistics especially the trends in consumer price index (CPI) and inflation.

He underscored the need to disseminate the information to the general public through media so consumers could stay vigilant and informed about prices of essential kitchen items. He said he would soon have a meeting with federal minister for information in this regard.

Statistics Division Secretary Shaista Sohail gave the presentation to the minister, in which she informed that Pakistan Bureau of statistics was following international standards while collecting data.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 3-1-2019 **Inflation eases to 6.2pc in December**

Mubarak Zeb Khan

ISLAMABAD: The country's inflation clocked in at 6.2 per cent in Dec 2018, according to data released by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) on Wednesday.

The consumer price index (CPI) based inflation in Nov 2018 had already slowed to 6.5pc after touching record four-year high at 6.78pc in Oct 2018.

The marginal decline in inflation was due to incremental increase in average prices of essential food items coupled with a sharp decline in fresh vegetables and higher-than-expected drop in fresh fruits at major urban centres.

Central bank's tightening monetary policy has come on the back of rising inflation amidst depreciating rupee and high global crude prices during the last two years.

Policy rates are already at their six-year highs, after the State Bank of Pakistan raised the key rate by 150 basis points to 10pc in the last monetary policy announcement made on Nov 30, 2018. The central bank has raised interest rates by 4.25pc since Jan 2018.

In Dec 2018, food inflation was up 0.9pc on an annual basis but dipped 1.4pc month-wise. Prices of non-perishable food items were up 0.33pc while those of perishable products fell by 13.78pc.

Food items whose prices increased the most in Dec 2018 include honey 5.6pc, pulse moong 4.06pc, pulse gram 2.96pc, beans 2.7pc, pulse mash 2.55pc, pulse masoor 2.29pc, cooking oil 1.92pc and dry fruits 1.74pc.

In the same category, however, fresh vegetables dipped 21.78pc, tomatoes 21.14pc, potatoes 20.23pc, onions 13.23pc, chicken 6.8pc, fresh fruits 1.83pc and eggs 1.31pc.

On the other hand, non-food inflation went up 9.8pc and 0.2pc on yearly and monthly basis respectively.

In the non-food items, price of personal equipment increased 2.69pc, motor vehicles accessories 2.4pc, woollen readymade garments 2.07pc, washing soap and detergents 1.44pc, plastic products 1.41pc, household servant 1.18pc and mechanical services 1.17pc.

In the same category, transport services price dropped 1.57pc, kerosene oil 1.01pc and motor fuel 0.67pc. The non-food prices also remained under pressure on account of 10.37pc rise in education index, followed by 7.73pc increase in clothing and footwear and 9.08pc in housing, water, electricity, gas and other fuel during the period under review.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 2-1-2019**NFC reconstitution**

THE move towards the reconstitution of the National Finance Commission is an important step forward, though the real test will be in getting the provinces to agree to a new revenue-sharing formula. The seventh NFC award from 2009 is the last consensual award, and stands out as a rare moment when the federal and provincial governments were able to agree on a new revenue-sharing formula. The commission set up under Pervez Musharraf failed to reach a consensus, as did the one installed during the rule of the PML-N. Successfully navigating the politics of the finance commission is a test of political maturity, and the ninth commission, for which the government has sent a reference to the president, comes at a time when political maturity is needed more than ever.

Beyond the politics, the economics of the National Finance Commission will also present a unique challenge. The revenue-sharing formula that has held the field since 2009 awards 57.5pc of the federal divisible pool to the provinces, and since 2011 Balochistan has received further assurance that its share will be disbursed on the basis of revenue projections, not actual collections. The spirit of the 2009 NFC award was a belated acknowledgement of the federal structure of the state, and the important role of the provinces in the overall governance framework. The latest commission that is about to be constituted must not roll back these gains made by the provinces, nor should it seek a disingenuous path to cut provincial shares through other means. The Constitution prohibits rolling back provincial shares in national resources, and its letter and spirit must be respected as the commission prepares to meet. It is true that the devolution of these resources to the provinces has sharply narrowed the fiscal space available to the centre, but it would be better to address that issue through tax reform and strong efforts at documentation of the economy. One matter that the commission can discuss is how to incentivise the provincial governments to strengthen their own revenue-collection efforts, and particularly to do more in generating agriculture income tax, which lies squarely in the provincial domain. At the moment, the provincial government revenues have grown on the back of low-hanging fruit such as taxes on services. The finance commission would have the opportunity to craft a consensus around revenue mobilisation and sharing, and the opportunity must not go to waste.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 4-1-2019**Pak-Turkey trade be taken to high level:
Imran****APP**

ANKARA: Prime Minister Imran Khan Thursday said it was high time that Pakistan and Turkey should take their bilateral trade to a high level, citing Pakistan's ideal geo-strategic location

and its huge potential for investment in infrastructure and tourism.

Addressing the Turkish businessmen at a business forum organised by the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB) here, the prime minister said that Pakistan was a virgin territory as a lot of trade areas had not yet been exploited and hardly five percent of total mineral reserves could yet be explored. TOBB is the highest legal entity in Turkey representing the private sector with 365 member associations from local chambers of commerce and industry. The prime minister is in Turkey on two-day official visit, at the invitation of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Prior to landing in Turkish capital, he visited Turkish city of Konya where he visited the tomb of renowned jurists and Islamic scholar Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi and laid a wreath at the grave.

He is accompanied by a high level delegation including Foreign Minister Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Finance Minister Asad Umar, Planning Minister Makhdoom Khusró Bakhtiar, Advisor on Trade Abdul Razak Dawood and Special Assistant to PM Zulfikar Bukhari.

The prime minister said huge reserves of oil, gas, copper and coal were yet unexplored. He said as Pakistan was undertaking huge connectivity projects under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the issue of huge distance impeding Pak-Turkish trade would be resolved. He said both the countries should start working from now to benefit from the huge opportunities coming out of BRI as it would connect those parts of the world which had been no or less connectivity.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 8-1-2019**Sri Lanka for removal of trade barriers****The Newspaper's Staff Reporter**

LAHORE: Sri Lanka has sought removal of non-tariff barriers (NTBs) and other issues to improve trade with Pakistan.

Addressing the Lahore Chamber of Commerce and Industry on Monday, High Commissioner of Sri Lanka to Pakistan Noordeen Mohamed Shaheid said that though the two countries signed Free Trade Agreement (FTA), certain issues including NTBs need to be resolved to improve trade between the two countries.

The envoy said Pakistan and Sri Lanka had signed the FTA in June 2005 under which the private sectors of both the countries were provided with greater opportunities to take trade and economic relations to next level. From 2005 onwards, there was significant increase in bilateral trade, he said. "But it is also a fact that the two countries could not succeed in fully exploiting the trade potential," he added.

The Sri Lankan high commissioner said there was a vast scope for the expansion of bilateral between Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

He urged that both countries should introduce new products for trade and make business-to-business contacts stronger. "Sri Lanka offers huge opportunities in various sectors of economy," he added. He said though terrorism remained a big challenge for Sri Lanka, but today it a peaceful country. "We have defeated terrorism due to immense support of Pakistan," he said.

Speaking on the occasion, LCCI President Almas Hyder said Sri Lanka was at the take-off stage and Pakistani business community should avail this great opportunity. "Both Pakistan and Sri Lanka are members of Saarc and enjoy friendly relations based on historical linkages.

Cooperation between two countries especially in defence sector has played major role in further strengthening the mutual ties," he added.

Earlier, National Assembly Deputy Speaker Qasim Khan Suri also visited the LCCI and said the government was making all-out efforts to overcome the inherited economic crisis. "The business community has a key role in economy and economic challenges will be tackled with their cooperation," he said.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 1-1-2019

660MW CPHGC power plant connected to national grid

The Newspaper's Staff Reporter

KARACHI: The China Power Hub Generation Company (CPHGC) has successfully synchronised one of its two 660MW coal-fired power plants with the national grid, the company announced on Monday.

The synchronisation of the first unit was achieved ahead of schedule and was realised within the agreed technical parameters, said the company release. After the commencement of commercial operations at CPHGC, the project will add 9 billion kWh of electricity of the national grid every year meeting electricity needs of 4 million households in the country.

The project will run on imported coal and will operate with super-critical technology at a total installed capacity of 1,320MW. The company also announced that it plans to complete the second 660MW unit within the stipulated time and synchronisation would be completed by Aug 2019.

While announcing the completion of project, CPHGC Chief Executive Zhao Yonggang appreciated the team work and efforts by Pakistani and Chinese employees to complete the project before time.

Mr Yonggang said that the 2x660MW plant is a priority project under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the first overseas thermal power project developed by State Power Investment Corporation under the China's Belt and Road Initiative.

The CPHGC project, located in Hub, Balochistan, is a joint venture between China-Pakistan International Holding — a state owned entity — and the Hub Power Company Ltd (Hubco) with 74 per cent and 26pc ownership respectively.

Recently, Hubco announced that it plans to increase its shareholding the project from 26pc to 47.5pc through its wholly owned subsidiary, Hubco Power Holdings. However, the transaction will be consummated after regulatory and corporate approvals from China and Pakistan.

The letter of support for the project was issued in 2016 which includes a power plant and a dedicated coal jetty.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 14-1-2019

\$200m ADB loans to improve rural roads

Star Business Report

Asian Development Bank (ADB) is going to give Bangladesh \$200 million in loans to help improve the country's rural road network.

Monowar Ahmed, secretary to the Economic Relations Division (ERD), and ADB Country Director Manmohan Parkash yesterday signed the loan agreement at a ceremony in Dhaka.

"The assistance supports the government's priority of delivering urban services in rural areas by increasing connectivity, providing greater access to social services and markets, and promoting the agriculture sector, benefitting over 51.5 million people," said Parkash.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 12-1-2019

Cruising to Kolkata thru' river route

Bangladesh-India passenger, cruise vessel service may start in March

Sohel Parvez

Good news for cross-border cruise lovers.

Your dream of travelling between Bangladesh and India, while also enjoying the beauty of the mystic Sundarbans and the lush green dots of riverine Bangladesh, is about to come true.

In October last year, the shipping ministries of the two countries finalised the Standard Operating Procedure (SoP) for movement of passenger and cruise vessels on the coastal and designated inland routes between the two neighbours.

Cruise service operators are already queuing up for permission, for what stakeholders say would be a boost for tourism business.

Two such operators -- RV Bengal Ganga and Assam Bengal Navigation -- applied to the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) to operate between Kolkata-Dhaka and Guwahati, said BIWTA Joint Director Saiful Islam.

"Recently, we received a letter from the Inland Waterways Authority of India that RV Bengal Ganga wants to start cruise service from Kolkata in March," he said, adding that the request was forwarded to the shipping ministry.

Relevant ministries will soon sit to discuss preparations of agencies such as customs and immigration, which manage cross-border movement of people and goods, the official said.

Journey Plus, a local tour operator, submitted the application on behalf of Assam Bengal Navigation.

The move brings to mind the memory of the British era in the Indian subcontinent when people from the East and West Bengal as well as Northeastern India could travel by steamers.

Captain Showkat Sarder, general manager (marine) of Bangladesh Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC), said there was a steamer service on Assam-Goaland-Narayanganj-Kolkata-Elahabad route during the British rule.

“It was a 10-day trip. And as far as I know, it came to a halt after the partition in 1947,” said Showkat, who studies the routes of steamer service in the subcontinent.

Officials said passenger and cruise services could be operated through all the eight coastal and eight inland routes between the two countries.

For now, cruise operators have shown interest to use Kolkata-Haldia-Raimongal-Chalna-Khulna-Mongla-Kawkhali-Barishal-Hizla-Chandpur-Narayanganj-Aricha-Sirajganj-Bahadurabad-Chilmari-Dhubri-Pandu-Shilghat (Assam) route, stretching 1,535km, according to BIWTC officials.

Tour operators said the cruise service will considerably increase cross-border movement. It will also attract tourists from other parts of the world.

At the moment, the two countries register movement of more than 15 lakh of their citizens a year, according to the Indian High Commission in Dhaka and immigration office.

Taufiq Rahman, chief executive of Journey Plus, said they planned to sail from Northeastern city of Guwahati and enter Bangladesh through Chilmari river port. On the way, tourists can visit some historical places, including the Jamindar Bari of Rangpur and the Baudha Bihar in Paharpur, a world heritage site, before anchoring in Dhaka.

The vessel will then resume its journey towards the Southern region. On its way, it will pass all three big rivers -- Padma, Meghna and Jamuna -- and touch Chandpur, Barishal and port town Mongla, before entering the Sundarbans on its way to Kolkata.

“It's likely to be a 17-day package,” he said, adding that they planned to operate a cruise in April-May for an experiment.

“The prospects are very bright, given Bangladesh is a riverine country. We also hope to attract a large number of European tourists,” he said.

“Because of the cruise service, tourists will get to go to Kolkata through the Sundarbans.”

Rahman, also a director of the Tour Operators Association of Bangladesh, urged the government to build the required infrastructures for customs, navigation, immigration and other facilities to facilitate their operations.

SK Mahfuz Hamid, chairman of Coastal Ship Owners Association of Bangladesh, said opening of passenger and cruise services will create a big opportunity for the private sector of both countries.

“Thousands of people of Bangladesh and India will take the cruise to see the Sundarbans instead of travelling by air or other means,” he said.

Commodore Syed Ariful Islam, director general of the shipping department, said his office was ready to allow cruise vessels on the coastal waters.

“We are yet to receive any formal proposal from private cruise service operators,” he said, adding that an Indian enterprise showed interests initially. But nothing is official yet.”

Two BIWTC vessels -- MV Bangali and MV Madhumoti -- have the potential to operate as cruise vessels in the coastal and inland waters between the two countries, he said.

“These vessels can operate if they [the BIWTC] take an initiative,” he said.

“It will also improve transport efficiency, generate 3.13 million person-days employment, introduce high-level technology to enhance road master planning, and create road safety awareness among rural population.”

The assistance will support the government's Rural Connectivity Improvement Project (RCIP), upgrading about 1,700 kilometres of rural roads in 34 districts of five divisions to all-weather standards, according to an ADB statement.

The ADB said the project would also improve the capacity of the rural infrastructure agency for rural road development and enhance rural road master planning.

The GIS technology will help identify agricultural value chains, road conditions and mechanisms for allocating priorities, optimising the use of available resources for effective rural road network planning and improvement.

The roads will be designed with safety features, including signage, guard posts and speed breakers.

They will also adopt climate resilient designs incorporating features such as elevated paving, drainage, road foundations and earthworks to significantly reduce maintenance.

The roads will be covered under contractual maintenance for five years after the date of construction on a pilot basis. The project also prioritises repair of roads damaged by flashfloods in 2017.

The project will provide training to Local Government Engineering Department on road and financial management, road safety, climate resilient design and construction, improving road users' awareness and enhancing women's skills on road construction and maintenance.

An ADB technical assistance grant of \$1 million will support these activities.

Over 2,400 women were consulted in the project area during project design and they appreciated that it will give them more access to economic opportunities and services, according to the ADB statement.

The ADB said only about 40 percent of the rural population in Bangladesh has access to all-weather roads and these roads make up only 28 percent of the total length of rural roads in the country.

The total cost of the project, which is due for completion in November 2023, is \$285.31 million. The ADB will provide a concessional loan of \$100 million and a regular loan of \$100 million. The government will provide the remaining \$85.31 million.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 8-1-2019

Bangladesh 2nd largest economy in South Asia

To become 24th largest economy in world by 2033: UK think tank

Staff Correspondent

Bangladesh has been ranked 41st among the world's largest economies in 2019, moving up two notches from last year's. The country has become the second biggest economy in South Asia, according to an analysis by a London-based think-tank.

Among the other South Asian countries, India is ranked 5th, Pakistan 44th, Sri Lanka 66th, Nepal 101st, Afghanistan 115th, the Maldives 156th, and Bhutan 166th, in the World Economic League Table, published annually by the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR).

With the United States at the top of the table, China, Japan, Germany and India take the lead as the top five economies.

The report which forecasts the fortunes of 193 countries to 2033 says China is likely to overtake the US as the world's number one economy in 2032, two years later than previously expected, due to a more lax monetary policy and lower exchange rate.

In the long run, many Asian economies will rise through the ranks of the table as these countries cash in on their demographic dividends.

The two most prominent examples are Bangladesh, which will enter the top 25 largest economies in 24th place in 2033, and Pakistan, which will rise to 27th in 2033, said the report.

"We expect annual rates of GDP growth [in Bangladesh] to average 7 percent between 2018 and 2033. This will see the country climb 19 places in the World Economic League Table to become the world's 24th largest economy by 2033," said the report, which was released on December 26.

Bangladesh will rank 36th in 2023 and 27th in 2028.

World Economic League Tabl... by on Scribd

According to the report, Bangladesh has benefitted from garments exports, strong increase in remittances, duty free access to the Indian market, domestic consumption expenditure and government spending.

Bangladesh's economy is expected to have grown by 7.3 percent in 2018, just shy of the 7.4 percent in the previous year. The country has benefitted from a strong increase in remittances in the financial year ending 2018, after declines in the previous two years. Moreover, the export sector benefitted from the duty free access to the Indian market, pushing exports to \$375 million in the three months to September.

Indian clothing retailers, as well as global retailers opening Indian outlets, increasingly import from Bangladesh due to the competitive prices of their products.

"Bangladesh's competitiveness relative to India was further boosted by the introduction of a general sales tax in India, a step that is still outstanding in Bangladesh," said the 10th edition of the CEBR report.

It, however, warned the country runs the risk of negating gains from its successful export sector through its growing appetite for imports. The current account tipped into a deficit in 2017, and this is expected to widen in 2018, it added.

"The government will also need to explore options on how to increase revenues in order to finance upgrades for infrastructure while maintaining the social safety net."

The country is further grappling with the Rohingya refugee crisis, the report added.

The CEBR predicts that three of the top five global economies by 2033 will be Asian, with China at the top, India third and Japan fourth position. The US will be second and Germany fifth.

In a statement, CEBR Deputy Chairman Douglas McWilliams said: "The World Economic League Table shows that despite global uncertainty and the tightening in US monetary policy which has pushed down some of the emerging market currencies, the 21st century is still likely to be the Asian century."

The table gives a ranking of the world's developed and emerging economies by gross domestic product measured in US dollars at market prices to 2033.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 12-1-2019

SL- Pakistan trade: High Commissioner calls for removal of barriers

Sri Lankan High Commissioner to Pakistan Noordeen Mohamed Shaheed said although the two countries signed the Free Trade Agreement (FTA), certain issues including non-tariff barriers (NTBs) need to be resolved to improve trade between the two countries.

He was addressing the Lahore Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI), recently.

He said Pakistan and Sri Lanka had signed the FTA in June 2005 under which the private sectors of both countries were provided with greater opportunities to take trade and economic relations to the next level. From 2005, there was significant increase in bilateral trade, he said. "But it is also a fact that the two countries could not succeed in fully exploiting the trade potential," he added.

The Sri Lankan High Commissioner said there was vast scope for the expansion of bilateral trade between Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

He urged both countries to introduce new products for trade and make business-to-business contacts stronger.

"Sri Lanka offers huge opportunities in various sectors of economy," he added. He said although terrorism remained a big challenge for Sri Lanka, today the country is peaceful. "We have defeated terrorism due to immense support of Pakistan," he said.

LCCI President Almas Hyder said Sri Lanka was at the take-off stage and Pakistani business community should avail this great opportunity.

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

Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad

**IV – DEFENCE, NUCLEAR DEVELOPMENT, SCIENTIFIC
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Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad

THE HINDU, DELHI 8-1-2019

Navy to set up new air base in Port Blair

Dinakar Peri

Later this month, the Indian Navy will commission a new airbase 100 miles north of Port Blair in the strategically located Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

“The base, INS Kohassa, will be commissioned by Navy Chief Admiral Sunil Lanba on January 24,” spokesperson Capt D.K. Sharma said.

This will be India’s fourth air base and the third naval air facility in the archipelago, which are closer to Southeast Asia than to the Indian mainland, overlooking key sea lanes of communication and strategic choke points.

The base will initially operate choppers and Dornier short-range surveillance aircraft, Capt. Sharma said.

It will initially have a runway of about 3000 metres which will in phases be extended to 9000 metres to support all kinds of aircraft including fighter jets.

As part of the upgrade, the base will feature staging facilities, fuel dump and maintenance and repair facilities and a complement of personnel would be positioned there.

THE HINDU, DELHI 4-1-2019

Improved Light Combat Aircraft gets green light for production

Madhumathi D.S.

FOC tag signals that the indigenous fighter is fully equipped and fit for battle; delivery of first aircraft expected in Oct, Nov 2019

On December 31, Light Combat Aircraft ‘Tejas’ quietly progressed towards manufacture in an enhanced, battle standard format.

A new ‘limited’ clearance from military airworthiness certifier CEMILAC for the Indian fighter green-lights its production in a superior lethal version, multiple sources associated with the LCA programme confirmed.

Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), which is mandated to produce the LCAs for the Indian Air Force (IAF), aims to get the first aircraft out in late 2019 in the just-cleared standard, its Chairman and Managing Director R. Madhavan said.

“We have received drawings and documents related to this standard. We can now start activities such as planning, procurement of parts from vendors. We aim to deliver the first aircraft [in the cleared standard] in October or November 2019,” he said.

‘Tight lead time’

“The lead time has become tight for us. As for the remaining aircraft, we must see how many of the 16 we can deliver by the middle of 2020,” Mr. Madhavan said.

The LCA is being designed and developed by the Aeronautical Development Agency (ADA) in Bengaluru. The IAF has asked

HAL to make 40 LCA aircraft. Of this, 20 will be in the advanced ‘FOC’ (final operational clearance) format. Another 20 are in the earlier IOC (initial operational clearance) version.

The FOC tag signals that the novice LCA is fully equipped and fit for battle. It adds many features over the IOC version, which Tejas achieved in December 2013. The IOC enabled the IAF to start flying it and in getting acquainted with its competences. Until then, only test pilots and ADA handled Tejas.

“The latest clearance is a good development for HAL. My jigs were getting empty and we didn’t have anything to do after making the IOC-standard LCAs. We start now,” Mr. Madhavan said.

Tejas was expected to be FOC-compliant much earlier, the last two deadlines being June-end and December-end of 2018.

More than one source said what was given on December 31 is an interim or limited FOC; Tejas is still some distance away from being FOC standard. And that this was done to speed up production and keep HAL’s idling facilities engaged. Further improvements would follow in the ‘FOC-2’ phase.

A higher-up in the defence set-up also confirmed the move: “It is ‘almost-full’ FOC. Very few additions [are there that] can be added later,” the person said.

To get the final of FOC certification, the plane must have battle-time requirements — such as mid-air refuelling, AESA radar, electronic warfare suites, a variety of bombs and weapons, among others. It has passed mid-air refuelling and armament testing, while the full picture was not immediately available.

The IAF has modified and upgraded its trainer requirement in its old package order of 40 LCA aircraft.

It has opted to have all eight trainers in the FOC mode, instead of four each in IOC and FOC standards.

Of the 16 fighters in the IOC version, 11 have been delivered, one is being flight tested and four are being assembled, he said.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 2-1-2019

Mixing up reforms & management

Pravin Sawhney

Army’s reorganisation should be a tri-service endeavour

THE Army Chief, Gen Bipin Rawat, is under pressure from the government to cut his Army to size. Reason: with the bulk of annual defence allocations being spent on the pay and allowances of the 13-lakh Army, there is little money for modernisation of the three defence services.

We now have the third report from the single-member Lt Gen DS Hooda (ret’d) committee, in addition to the four study groups set up by the Army Chief, and the Shekatkar committee which submitted its report in December 2016. The committee had recommended the cutting of 57,000 troops over three years; the saved finances were proposed to be utilised for new verticals like electronic and cyber warfare and so on.

The Army Chief's study groups have promised to slash one lakh troops over two to three years to meet the challenges of modern war. According to General Rawat, the Army needs three things for modern war: technology infusion; restructuring of the Army from the present bloated formations to agile integrated brigade groups; and most importantly, to be the lead service in war (with the IAF in support role).

The Lt Gen Hooda committee has reportedly made three key recommendations: reduce the standing Army and create a reserve force that can be called upon in war; make Special Forces (SF) a strategic force; and create a three-star post to recommend new technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) and robotics and so on for military use. This committee has proposed reducing 20 per cent of the Army strength.

Of the three committees, only the Shekatkar recommendations make sense because of its modest aim of simply reducing the Army strength. This committee, unlike the other two committees, did not propose preparing the Army for modern war; it restricts itself to internal management rather than reforms.

The Army Chief groups and Lt Gen Hooda's recommendations have issues in their implementation for six reasons. One, modern war requires military reforms (involving the three services). Talking of Army reforms alone negates the basis of modern war — joint-ness — the prerequisite for swift, intense and result-oriented warfare. Two, given the infusion of cutting-edge military technology like precision standoff weapons with China and its increased interoperability (ability to fight together on common mission) with the Pakistan military, the IAF, and not the Army, should be the lead in modern war. Three, the Army cannot give primacy to hybrid warfare (with focus on counter-terror and psychological operations) and yet hope to be the lead in a modern war. The two — hybrid and modern war — are as different as chalk and cheese.

Four, the Lt Gen Hooda recommendation of raising an SF brigade under the Army Headquarters for strategic tasks without credible counter-offensive capabilities to meet enemy's retaliation serves little purpose. The Army has not had these capabilities since 1990, when counter-insurgency (CI) assumed priority. For this reason, during the so-called 2016 surgical strikes, the then Director-General Military Operations, Lt Gen Ranbir Singh, had informed Pakistan within hours that the mission was over and no further strikes were planned. This was done to ensure that Pakistan did not retaliate. India was simply not prepared for an escalation. Given this, how can the Army have SF for strategic task (like demolition of Marala headquarters) when fearing escalation, it could not use it for tactical task of CI operations along the Line of Control? Moreover, the government has already cleared the raising of a tri-service SF division (which might be upgraded to command), which is in addition to the SF with all three services.

Five, when the committee says that the reserve units should be optimised for capabilities for desired outcome, it makes little sense. For one, the lessons of Rashtriya Rifles (RR) raisings should be recalled. The RR concept with 50 per cent retired soldiers was mooted in 1990 by Gen K Sundarji. Since few

retired soldiers were willing to come back to combat in J&K, the then Army Chief, Gen BC Joshi, was compelled to alter the concept by having all serving troops serve in RR; which remains a regular Army by another name. Given this, where would reserve soldiers, who would come voluntarily and get paid for three months in a year to fight CI operations come from? Seeking human fodder to fight faceless terrorists would be impossible. Besides, how would the Army ensure desired capabilities (equipment and training) for reserve units, when the regular units are woefully short of war-withal?

And six, why does the committee need the post of a DG for identifying new-age technologies for the military when two high-powered discussions on this subject are already under way? Since these technologies comprising AI, partially autonomous systems, robotics and human-machine interface are more in the commercial than in the military domain, NITI Aayog had last year released a discussion paper on 'National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence'. The committee should read this paper to know how the government proposes to set up centres of excellence by private-public partnerships. Simply put, India has not even begun this defining journey that would revolutionise warfare. Moreover, the Defence Ministry had also set up a task force in 2017 to identify AI technologies for military purposes.

Given all this, the Army should stop confusing its internal management with military reforms. Once this is done, it would not be difficult for it to reduce its manpower. If it starts to look at progressively reducing the five divisions and three brigades it raised since 2009, when it started the two-front war capability building plan, a beginning could be made.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 8-1-2019

Policy a must to reform defence entities

Bhartendu Kumar Singh

Many defence PSUs have become victims of incompetent management, as evident from the falling standards of production, exports and project management. The business process is bureaucratised and politicised. There is a tendency to take the nomination route in securing procurement orders rather than competing in the open market.

IN the recent SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) list of top-100 arms-producing companies, four Indian firms found a place. India's annual arms production in 2017 grew by 6.1 per cent against the global figure of 2.2 per cent. However, Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) registered a negative growth of 0.9 per cent over the previous year's figure. Also, the surge in India's defence production is due to domestic demand. Media optimism about Indian defence companies going global is, therefore, misplaced. Indeed, a major public policy issue challenging India's rise as a military power is the absence of arms production companies with global sales outreach.

HAL's regressive performance is not a new phenomenon. In the past five years, its sales figures have almost stagnated. During this period, Lockheed Martin Corporation (US), the No. 1 arms

company in the world, increased its sales figures by 25 per cent. HAL's highly publicised claim of inbuilt capability of assembling state-of-the-art fighter jets (such as Rafale) notwithstanding, its own performance has been dissatisfactory with regard to Tejas and other aircraft and helicopters. Its export figures are laughable. A large section of its manpower is staring at potential joblessness due to reduced procurement and repair orders. It does not have sufficient cash in hand to pay January salaries to employees. The chain of ordnance factories, hitherto departmental undertakings, have done no better and continue to show a pathetic performance in SIPRI rankings.

Together, HAL and ordnance factories represent the larger problem: inability of Indian defence companies under government control to create global standards and outreach despite a basketful of policy supports, secured orders and favourable monopolistic treatment vis-a-vis private sector companies. All these days, they have been competing with themselves since the public policy preferences for public sector enterprises in the fifties and sixties gradually perpetuated monopolisation of production activities through the reserve list that still exists, albeit on a reduced scale. They often act as an extended bureaucracy having little interest in corporate governance. Further, many defence PSUs have become victims of incompetent management, as evident from the falling standards of production, exports and project management. The entire business process is bureaucratized and politicised. They can only boast of huge estates leased to them at throwaway prices, posh amenities for their top management and an inbuilt tendency towards the nomination route in securing procurement orders rather than competing in the open market.

Globally, few public sector entities have done well on a recurrent basis. Most have been glaring examples of what has often been called the 'theory of public incompetence'. Additionally, in the Indian context, at least three sets of systemic obstacles prevent defence PSUs from performing better. First, there still is public policy preference for PSUs and departmental undertakings, though these 'white elephants' have been sitting on huge public resources and produce peanuts as deliverables. Perhaps the basketful of control mechanisms leaves very little functional autonomy for these entities. One example would suffice. In any ordnance factory set-up, the General Manager is supposed to deliver. However, he can't even suspend a Group B employee without clearance from the Ordnance Factory Board (OFB) in Kolkata. He has several categories of small offices working alongside him, but not under his chain of command, such as audit, accounts, security and inspection. He does not have operational freedom to fix the prices of items; rather, this is done by the OFB that also dictates on supply chain and annual targets. He has to contend with inflated man-hours that eat into profits. Other than an 'Ayudh medal', he does not get any incentive for good performance.

Second, despite proven underperformance of defence PSUs and ordnance factories, a graduated, implementable and acceptable reform package is yet to be evolved. This is partly because these defence entities have managed to portray a collective image as 'protector general' of defence production activities in India,

grabbing a major portion of domestic procurements among them. Together, they have encouraged the perpetuation of 'licence raj' and oligopoly, leaving very little space for the private sector to compete. Every now and then, newspapers are flooded with sponsored advertisements singing paeans to their production milestones. Such artificial constructs may lead to opinion in their favour, but deprive the nation of a competitive military industrial complex (MIC).

Third, despite an early start, our defence PSUs and ordnance factories have fossilised research and development (R&D) arrangements and have shown little interest in front-end military innovation over the years. A significant budget of R&D goes to inspection tours and logistics arrangements. There is little to show in terms of patents and designs despite a basketful of incentives. Little wonder they have not been able to move beyond 'screw driver or assembly garage' economy and have become laggards in revolution in military affairs (RMA). These entities also suffer from high levels of institutional isomorphism and refuse to learn from best global practices and advances in weapons production.

Reforming these defence entities and making them perform is a key policy challenge, more so since huge public financial investment is at stake. Learning from leading defence companies in the US, Russia, China and Israel is one way. Reducing government and bureaucratic control could be another step. Equal space for domestic private sector in defence production and procurement is also necessitated for competition and cost efficacy. Preference to domestic procurements vis-a-vis foreign ones is also desirable to shore up the performance of Indian firms. The armed forces, on their part, need to overcome their institutional preferences for foreign weapons and make long-term commitments to domestic MIC.

These steps could become a reality by redrafting the defence production policy that is still at the draft stage. The SIPRI report shows that small nations such as Turkey have done well in defence production through right policy choices and we can learn from them. Probably, there lies some hope for having world-class defence companies.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 2-1-2019

On Rafale, facts a casualty

Supreme Court judgment has not settled the issue. In fact, it has raised more questions than it has answered.

By Kapil Sibal

Within the limited contours of its jurisdiction under Article 32 of the Constitution, the Supreme Court chose not to question the purchase of 36 Rafale fighter aircraft. Defence procurements, according to the Court, impacting India's security interests, unlike other contracts, require a somewhat different standard of scrutiny. Within the contours of that standard, the Supreme Court was broadly satisfied with the government's position.

There are several undisputed facts in the public domain, which make the Rafale purchases highly suspect. Let me state some of

them. On March 13, 2015, Dassault and Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. (HAL) finalised the work-share contract thereby signalling that the deal was through. On March 25, 2015, Dassault CEO, Eric Trappier was in Bengaluru with the chairman, HAL and Chief of Air Staff ready to take the contract forward. In a press conference in France wherein our ambassador was present, Trappier stated that 95 per cent of the deal had been finalised and the balance 5 per cent would follow soon.

These facts militate against the Court's opinion that problems between Dassault and HAL led to the prime minister's decision on April 10, 2015 when he announced the purchase of 36 Rafale off the shelf. The chairman of HAL has publicly stated that there was no impediment in the deal between Dassault and HAL, and that the notings on the file, if made public, would clarify all issues. It is also a matter of public record that the sub-stratum of the contract had been modified from a private arrangement to an Inter-Governmental Agreement (IGA). Under the guidelines, before entering into an IGA, its terms and conditions would have to be negotiated through a Contract Negotiating Committee and the Price Negotiating Committee, after which it required clearance from the Defence Advisory Council. Thereafter, it had to be approved by the Cabinet Committee on Security. None of this happened on April 10, 2015 when the prime minister made the public announcement.

Supreme Court judgment has not settled the issue. In fact, it has raised more questions than it has answered minister's announcement. The Court erroneously came to the conclusion that Reliance was in negotiation since 2012 not realising that at that time Reliance Industries wished to diversify its operations from gas exploration to manufacturing the wings of the Falcon aircraft — a project which was given up, and had nothing to do with RDL. Another matter in the public domain is that Reliance Aerostructure Ltd. (RAL), the joint venture partner of Dassault was incorporated on April 24, 2015. Trappier publicly stated that this joint venture was entered into in April, 2015. Obviously, the venture must have been put in place between April 25 and April 30. RAL, upon incorporation, had no assets, no capital, no experience and no land. Why would Dassault, within five days of incorporation of RAL, agree to a joint venture unless it was pre-meditated and concluded under instructions?

Trappier justified the joint venture on the basis that Reliance had land near the airport, making the operation easier. HAL, said Trappier, had no such facilities near the airport in Bengaluru. Both the statements are false. Reliance applied for land only on June 16, 2015, whereas HAL already had huge tracts of land near the airport, much prior to April, 2015.

The files would, in fact, tell a story of their own. They might show that key stakeholders including the defence minister, insisted on a Letter of Guarantee. They might also reflect opposition to the PMO's attempts to interfere in the process. In any event, the truth would have emerged had the Supreme Court summoned the files and taken note of the proceedings reflected in their movement. Once the prime minister had already committed himself to the purchase of 36 Rafale fighter aircraft, the process that followed could not have overridden his unilateral

decision. How can this process ever be deemed to be consistent with any guidelines?

Another serious issue that needs attention is why the Supreme Court opined that former French President François Hollande's statement has been denied by President Emmanuel Macron, who, on the contrary, when asked, could not comment on it since he was not present at the meeting. Surprisingly, Hollande's statement has not been denied by the prime minister. I am sure, minutes of this bilateral meeting, which are normally recorded, will reflect what happened. Trappier, who also was not present in the meeting, cannot possibly be privy to any such statement. Therefore, for the Supreme Court to say that President Hollande's statement is denied is not borne out by any record.

The fact that the prime minister made this announcement without the knowledge of the defence minister, the foreign minister or the Indian ambassador in France or, for that matter, Dassault, suggests that the prime minister took this decision unilaterally without taking into confidence key stakeholders. Once the nature of the contract was changed to an IGA, then willy-nilly there had to be a government guarantee for the execution of the contract instead of a letter of comfort.

Without doubt, the waters are muddied and the truth is yet to be told — how and when, only time will tell. The Supreme Court judgment has, in no way, settled the issue. In fact, it has raised more questions than it has answered. The Court has always upheld principles of transparency and maintained that every decision must be informed, otherwise it cannot pass the test of reasonableness.

In the past, Article 32 has not constrained the Supreme Court to direct investigations after en-masse cancellation of telecom licenses and coal allocations. I guess, both public perception and the perception of judges change from time to time. Consistency in decision-making may not be a virtue but inconsistency, sometimes, may also not be a sign of judicial wisdom. Judicial wisdom, in changed circumstances, must not be at the cost of the Court's credibility.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 2-1-2019

Defence spend up in absolute terms, down percentage-wise

Tribune News Service

Giving numbers in Parliament on budgetary spending, the Ministry of Defence has admitted that the defence expenditure, as per percentage of the central government expenditure, has fallen, although it has gone up in absolute terms.

The defence expenditure, including pension, is budgeted at Rs 3,80,690 crore for the current fiscal. This is 17.16 per cent of the Central Government expenditure for the year. There has been a drop over the last year's figure when defence consumed 19.11 per cent of all expenses and was budgeted at Rs 3,77,542 crore. In other words, the government added in rupee-terms for this year's budget, but the ratio vis-à-vis total expenditure is down by 2 per cent.

In a written reply in the Rajya Sabha yesterday, Minister of State for Defence Subhash Bhambre said “projections made by the Services are forwarded to the Ministry of Finance. Based on the overall resource position, funds are allocated”.

The MoD also informed that Capital Expenditure—meant for new projects—had gone up in absolute terms over the past few years.

Defence Capital expenditure is maintained around 34 per cent of the total allocations under the Defence Services estimates, which are Rs 2,79,305 crore (this figure is minus the pensions) for the current fiscal.

The allocated Capital budget has been fully utilised since 2016-17, reversing the previous trend, Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said in a written reply to a question in the Rajya Sabha.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 8-1-2019

India to lose out in new-era wars

Manoj Joshi

China's Xi exhorting PLA to expedite reforms, Indian political leadership unenthused

WE need to take a balanced view of Chinese President Xi Jinping's 'order' to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to continue strengthening its combat capabilities and be always ready for battle. This is the kind of message that leaders all over the world are expected to give to their militaries, so it should not be taken to mean that the PLA is about to embark on a new wave of aggressive behaviour.

In his speech, Xi did emphasise that China faced unprecedented risks and challenges and so China's armed forces needed deeper “preparation for war and combat” to ensure an effective and efficient response “in times of emergency”.

Though probably aimed elsewhere, there is a message there for the Indian military, which confronts China across a 4,000-km disputed border and is learning to cope with the PLA Navy movements across the Indian Ocean. Since the Doklam episode in 2017, the land border has been more active than ever; in the past year, there have been reports of the PLA upgrading its posture across its length.

Xi's remarks came two days after he raised the temperature on Taiwan by calling for 'peaceful reunification', while asserting that his government made “no promise to renounce the use of force” in relation to the issue. The 'Taiwan contingency' remains the premier focus of the PLA's deployments, followed by the South China Sea. On both accounts, it must contend with the fact that its premier adversary is the US, by far the much stronger power in the western Pacific.

Overall, the message seems to be that the PLA needs to double down on reform and restructuring that began in 2013. This is more so when Beijing is confronting an unprecedented political challenge from the US, which has now categorically designated China as a strategic challenger. Technology has emerged as a

major area of this rivalry and the US is convinced that China has been systematically working to acquire western technology through acquisitions, forced transfers and thefts to gain strategic advantage.

The threat of an all-out war between, say, the US and China, or India and China is remote. But what is real is the jockeying for advantage in which both sides worry that emerging technologies could provide the other with some as yet unknown battle-winning edge. However, as of now, the PLA is still in the midst of its restructuring and reform process that has led to considerable disruption through its reduction of numbers, as well as reorganisation into theatre commands.

For obvious reasons, the PLA is emphasising the reform of military education and training to accompany the acquisition of new equipment. The PLA's joint operations research and experimentation has revealed weakness in its military training institutes, joint proficiency of its officer cadre, joint training, doctrine and tactics and logistics, and command structures, all of which are being addressed in the current reform.

The key thrust of the reform process has been jointness. Over the years, the PLA has been moving from 'coordinated joint operations' to 'integrated joint operations'. It took a major step under the 2013 reforms, with the creation of theatre commands and the establishment of joint headquarters to create optimal joint operational capability.

The foundation of integrated joint operations lies in developing an effective system of systems capability. This, in essence, is the fusing of various components—weapons, equipment, units beyond their individual capacity to provide synergy. At the heart of this lies the development of integrated command, control, communications, computer intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) structure which will not just link the systems and forces, but also enhance their joint operational capacity.

The PLA's Strategic Support Force (PLASSF), set up on December 31, 2015, has sought to integrate capabilities in space, cyberspace and the electro-magnetic spectrum into the PLA's combat arms. Its goal is to meet the PLA's military strategic guidelines of being ready to fight and win 'informationised' wars.

The SSF has been involved since 2016 in the PLA's key annual Stride exercises. But, say observers, it is still some way from developing its fifth generation of operational regulations (the previous set was issued in 1999) that will guide its operations in space and the cyber domains.

The shift of the PLA from being a continental force to one capable of integrated joint operations within China's borders and without could easily span a generation. Clearly, at present their capabilities remain far behind those of advanced countries like the US and Japan. In that sense, Xi's injunctions and those of the PLA Daily are by way of being exhortations to do better. Under Xi, the deadlines have been advanced. In the 19th Party Congress, Xi announced that modernisation of the PLA would be complete by 2035. Earlier, the third stage of the plan was for it to be completed by 2049. However as Xi himself noted, the PLA is

not likely to become a world-class military till the mid-century. The US will remain the dominant global military power for the foreseeable future and can look after itself.

The big questions are for India, which has failed to push through any significant reform and reorganisation in its defence system. The political leadership seems to be uninterested in it. Meanwhile, its component force (Army, Navy, Air Force) leaders periodically boast about capabilities they don't have and so, we are simply not ready for the new generation of warfare.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 7-1-2019

India in crosshairs of imminent missile race

Sandeep Dikshit

New Delhi needs to adopt dual-track policy to stand up to the challenge of more potent Chinese missiles in the neighbourhood as a result of the collapse of the US-Russia treaty on land-based ballistic missiles. While India's military-industrial complex recalibrates its strategy and response, there is a need to dampen machismo in the global air by examining the possibility of a fresh missile limitation initiative.

THE Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, scrapped recently by US President Donald Trump, doesn't ring a bell in India. Neither should it. The painfully-achieved Cold War-era pact was between Russia and the US and it required both to destroy their stockpiles of ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 km and 5,500 km.

By all accounts, the treaty was a success. It led to the dismantling and destruction of over 2,500 missiles of both countries, quarterbacked by a rigorous verification regime that lasted till 2001 and followed by 30 meetings of their Special Verification Commission.

The treaty was stuttering till Trump dealt a death blow against the shadow of a wide-ranging decline in bilateral ties after Russia entered Crimea and allegedly interfered in the 2016 US presidential election. But the actual reason for scrapping the treaty was China. And once the US begins a missile race with China, India will soon feel the heat. Its only possible response, given the mindset of narrow regionalism in South Block, would be to deploy more missiles of its own.

Why does China become a factor and why should India get dragged in when it was a US-Russia bilateral treaty that was scrapped? The logic is in the past. During the Cold War, China had no rocket force to boast of and so the focus of the risk de-escalators among diplomats was to shut out the possibility of US-Soviet rivalry sideswiping the world with nuclear weapon-loaded missiles. Since then, China developed a nuclear and conventional missile inventory, 95 per cent of which is in the INF Treaty-banned ranges of 500 to 5,500 km.

Trump feels the treaty cramps the US from setting up all sorts of missiles on the ground in its bases in Japan and Korea: a loophole prohibits missiles on earth, but allows sea and space-based missiles. Trump has left no scope for doubt by stating that his abandonment of the treaty was a 'threat' to "China and

whoever else wants to play that game." The hardliners in the US had been circling the wagons for months. Xi Jinping's exhortation to the People's Liberation Army to be prepared for war and his gauntlet to independence seekers in Taiwan need to be seen in this backdrop.

Once the US installs land-based missiles around China, Xi's hard line abroad will compel him to respond in the language of confrontation, putting immense pressure on India to step up research in hypersonic missiles and also respond with more missile systems. Pakistan will then respond similarly. Trump's strategy of countering China will drag India into stepping up the potency and quantity of its rocket forces.

The INF Treaty has positioned India at the interstices of a Cold War 2.0. As the recent G-20 summit showed, India was the only country that held separate trilaterals with Japan and the US and the other pairing of Russia and China. It can capitalise on its position to exploit both binaries emerging from the collapse of the treaty. The military-industrial complex can reorient to the opening up of new security threats while South Block attempts to play the extra-regional peacemaker by attempting an enlargement of the treaty to reduce nuclear missile stocks worldwide.

This need not entail a change in regional policy behaviour of being largely a subcontinental security seeker. Thirty years after the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's attempt at a security system-reforming moment with a global disarmament plan, there is another opportunity to seek a reversal of the ballistic missile race that is blighting our part of the world more than any other: of the nine states known to possess both nuclear weapons and over 1,000-km-range ballistic missiles, six are Eurasian (not counting the US). Another 22 possess non-nuclear-tipped missiles with a range that does not fall within the INF Treaty limits.

All three postulates of the India-presented 'Action Plan for a Nuclear Weapon-Free and Non-Violent World Order' remain valid: (i) ballistic missiles do not distinguish between combatants and civilians, (ii) they hold others to inhuman threats and, the most relevant (iii) India will have to divert more of its limited resources away from other pressing needs to match improved Chinese (and later, Pakistani) weapons and delivery systems. This approach will ensure India's complete involvement with the Asian system which is being attempted piecemeal.

The world at this stage needs to give a rest to the balance of power concept in which security geopolitics has been marked by escalation. A persuasion-based model of politics has become inevitable and India is bound to find allies in Europe that has been uncharacteristically taken to insular continentalism. Barring England and France, whose missile arsenals will come under scrutiny, other old powers like Germany, Spain and Italy, despairing of US-induced tensions on Russia's periphery, may welcome an attempt at checking the enthusiasm of an externally-induced missile race on their territory that has the potential to consume its citizens. The proposal to globally extend the INF will also find takers in Africa and Latin America that have no missile-dependent security calculations.

International politics can't be left to its devices and the whims of strongmen. The contradictory US reaction to the missile proliferation issue — walking out of the treaty with Russia, rewarding Pyongyang with talks and throwing the book at Tehran — needs an overdue correction. India needs to keep its flanks guarded, but the world needs a fresh breath of ethical ethos to keep its moral compass in place.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 2-1-2019

Don't tinker with time-tested combat systems

Lt Gen SR Ghosh (ret'd)

The debate on inducting women into combat has missed the woods for the trees. The central focus here is the ability of women to cope with difficulties of frontline infantry combat rather than it being a gender issue. Before the uninitiated start glamorising warfare, they must understand the harsh realities of being in actual combat, which is a far cry from soft operating environments of other jobs.

OVER 12 years after the then Vice Chief of the Army fired the first salvo, the present Army Chief carried out 'carpet-bombing' last month when he spoke his mind on the problems of inducting women into combat. In 2006, the Vice Chief had remarked that the comfort levels with women officers in the Army were low and that we could do without them. Right or wrong, he was pressured into making a public apology. Gen Bipin Rawat, in a recent interview to a news channel, reopened the debate when he stated that women in combat areas would have to be kept cocooned from prying eyes and that the Army could not have Commanding Officers of operational units getting pregnant and proceeding on long maternity leave.

The Army Chief's views may not have been couched in diplomatese, but there definitely was merit in what he implied. Unfortunately, this has reignited an avoidable debate with indignant protests from women's rights activists, IPS officers and even some military veterans. The arguments given by most of these people are based on superficial knowledge or experience of our combat arms and of warfare. Their reactions are based more on social issues of equal rights and feminism rather than on pragmatism, ranging from an absurd comparison with Jhansi ki Rani who "could even fight with her adopted son strapped to her back", to the modern era where women succeeded in becoming airline pilots, Everest summiteers and champions in boxing and wrestling. One veteran commentator even suggested that the Army should induct women into combat roles quickly before the judiciary forced it to do so.

At the outset, it must be clarified that the capability of women in any field, be it politics, banking, civil services, business or sports, to name a few, has never been doubted. In the military, women doctors and nurses have served with distinction since time immemorial. Since 1992, women have also been commissioned into other branches of the Armed Forces, even though issues of their management and logistics keep cropping

up from time to time. In 2015, the Indian Air Force inducted the first women as fighter pilots, while the Navy will probably soon allow them to be deployed on battleships.

The fresh debate has unfortunately missed the woods for the trees. The central focus here is the ability of women to cope with the difficulties of frontline infantry combat rather than it being a gender issue. Before the uninitiated start glamorising warfare, they must understand the harsh realities of being in actual combat, which is a far cry from the soft operating environments of other jobs.

Combat means violence of the extreme kind where men are required to kill others at the cost of getting killed or wounded themselves. Combat means large-scale destruction and death all around from repeated barrages of artillery rockets, missiles and shells. The horrors and violence of combat are too many and can neither be sufficiently explained to nor understood by armchair specialists.

Let alone women, even many men find it difficult to cope with the rigours that a combat soldier has to face. The physical and physiological capabilities of a woman to handle the difficulties and hazards that infantry soldiers encounter during operations and when involved in physical combat with an enemy, terrorist or insurgent have, therefore, to be understood in the correct perspective and not seen as a gender equality issue. The dangers and horrors of women officers being taken prisoner by the enemy and being violated, tortured and mutilated are too real to be brushed aside. Are we as a society prepared to see young girls, wives and mothers coming home in coffins or to live with their faces and bodies disfigured from gunshot wounds or with amputated arms and legs?

The Army would only get increasingly embroiled in conducting courts of inquiry and court martials in cases where privacy and authority of female officers were allegedly encroached upon, at the cost of carrying out critical operations against terrorists and insurgents.

In the overall context, is there really a compelling necessity to induct women into infantry or armoured units? Is the nation so short of physically and mentally fit male volunteers for combat units? The Army is in the serious business of protecting our borders and citizens from our enemies and violent terrorists. Warfare and combat are, therefore, best conducted by trained, hardy men led by tough commanders who live together, train together and fight together, at times to their last breath. This has nothing to do with gender bias or masculinity.

In case there really is such a strong demand of women wanting to be involved in some sort of physical combat, let us first use the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) such as the BSF, CRPF and ITBP as a test bed. The pan-India strength of women police personnel is just above seven per cent, whereas the share of women in the CAPF is an abysmal three per cent or less. Only a minuscule percentage of these are women officers. In fact, the BSF inducted its first direct-entry woman officer only in 2017, while the CRPF did so just a year before that. It would also be of interest to check how many IPS officers, male or female, are

manning posts in CAPF battalions located in any operational area. The answer is probably zero.

Let us use this opportunity to blood our women IPS officers as company and battalion commanders in the BSF, ITBP and CRPF, where they will be able to lead troops in hostile operational areas, including anti-terrorist and insurgency operations.

Considering that the IPS cadre is short of about 1,000 officers, the government must seriously consider lateral induction of trained and experienced short-service women Army officers into the IPS. This will not only result in huge budgetary savings on induction and training, but also go a long way in filling critical vacancies in state police cadres.

Let not the focus of our military commanders be distracted from their primary job of destroying inimical forces from across the border. Let us also not tinker with the Army's tried-and-tested combat systems or organisations at such critical times. Women officers are already posted in the Army's combat and combat support arms such as the Engineers, Army Air Defence, Corps of Signals and Intelligence Corps. Add to these the fresh opportunities in language skills and military police now being offered by the Army Chief. These will provide more than sufficient avenues for women to showcase their organisational, intellectual and analytical skills in the Army without having to get into physical contact with an unpredictable enemy.

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Chinese contractor to build warship for Pakistan: report

Monitoring Desk

KARACHI: China has started building an advanced warship that would be exported to Pakistan under a defence agreement between the two neighbouring countries, China Daily reported on Wednesday.

The newspaper, which quoted China State Shipbuilding Corp — one of the largest state-owned defence contractors — said the construction had started at the Hudong-Zhonghua shipyard in Shanghai. It is said to be a version of China's most advanced warship.

Though the Chinese corporation did not specify the type, China Daily quoted Pakistan Navy as saying the ship's class was Type 054AP, which is based on China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy's Type 054A frigate. Pakistan has ordered four such ships, the newspaper said, quoting a statement by the Pakistan Navy.

In June last year, Pakistan Navy had announced that it was purchasing two multirole Type 054A frigates from China for bolstering its war-fighting capability.

The navy had said that Pakistan's fleet of Type054A warships would grow to four by 2021. The PLA Navy has about 30 of the Type 054A ships, each of which has a loaded displacement of 4,000 tonnes and is equipped with advanced radars and missiles.

According to a researcher at the PLA Naval Military Studies Research Institute, Cao Weidong, it appeared that the equipment installed on the ships will be Chinese, which shows China's "progress in the industry and the Pakistani Navy's confidence in our technology and capability". Previously, Pakistan would always ask its Chinese contractors to install Western radars and weaponry as it believed that West's technology was superior to China's, Mr Cao said.

"I believe the reason they chose our type is that ours is one of the few that can carry out all of the air-defence, anti-ship and anti-submarine tasks," he said, adding that he believed that the ships would improve Pakistan's naval defence.

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Pakistan-China joint military exercise ends

The Newspaper's Staff Reporter

ISLAMABAD: The Pakistan-China joint military exercise codenamed 'Warrior-VI' culminated near Kharian, says an official announcement by the Inter-Services Public Relations here on Saturday.

Troops from Special Forces of Pakistan Army and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China participated in the exercise which continued for four weeks.

The joint exercise was aimed at sharing respective experiences in the field of counterterrorism operations and learning from each other's expertise.

Inspector General Training and Evaluation Lt Gen Sher Afgan was the chief guest on the occasion.

The contingent of the special forces of the PLA had reached Pakistan last month to participate in the counterterrorism drills. This was the sixth joint exercise of the series as part of bilateral military cooperation between the two countries. The exercises are held annually alternating between Pakistan and China.

Pakistan had last hosted these exercises in 2016. These drills are held as part of the bilateral military cooperation and have complemented the growth of defence relations. Pakistan had earlier hosted a contingent of Russian Special Forces in October and November last year for two-week drills.