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CONTENTS

I.	Foreign Affairs	1
II.	Politics and Economics	15
III.	Social and Cultural Affairs	29
IV.	Defense and Security	41

I - FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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	Subject	Newspapers/Periodicals	Date	Page
	INDIA Regional Relations			
1.	Sri Lankan envoy meets NSA Ajit Doval; holds discussion on bilateral relations By HT Correspondent	The Hindustan Times, New Delhi	17-1-2023	1
2.	Jaishankar's visit reset bilateral relations, says Sri Lankan envoy By Rezaul H Laskar Relations with MEA Region	The Hindustan Times, New Delhi	29-1-2023	1
3.	MEA: Sisi visit will deepen 'time-tested' India-Egypt relations - Express News Service Relations with Global Powers	The Indian Express, New Delhi	22-1-2023	2
4.	Sort out granular issues to bolster India-US ties By Manjari Chatterjee Miller BANGLADESH Regional Relations	The Hindustan Times, New Delhi	30-1-2023	3
5.	Bangladesh, India ties see significant achievements - UNB SRI LANKA Bilateral Relations	The Daily Star, Dhaka	27-1-2023	4
6.	SL, Turkey Ombudsmen sign bilateral cooperation MoU	Daily News, Colombo	16-1-2023	4
7.	Foreign Minister Sabry has successful bilateral discussions with Saudi Arabia PAKISTAN Relations with MENA Region	Daily News, Colombo	31-1-2023	5
8.	Pak-UAE Rising Ties By Muhammad Asif Noor	The Daily Times, Islamabad	17-1-2023	6

	Pak-US Relations			
9.	Pak-US 'rollercoaster' ties By Ali Imran Atta CHINA China-Arab Relations	The Daily Times, Islamabad	27-1-2023	7
10.	Chinese FM calls for speedy implementation of China-Arab summit's outcomes - Xinhua China-Africa Relations	People's Daily, China	17-1-2023	9
11.	China, Africa working with each other along path of win-win cooperation, common development By He Yin Resetting US-China Ties	People's Daily, China	19-1-2023	9
12.	Commentary: World needs China-U.S. ties back on track in 2023 - Xinhua IRAN Regional Relations	People's Daily, China	19-1-2023	11
13.	Iran, Turkey hold joint consular meeting World Order	Tehran Times, Tehran	17-1-2023	12
14.	Iran, Russia looking for a new world order By Soheila Zarfam Bilateral Relations	Tehran Times, Tehran	24-1-2023	13
15.	Iran, Venezuela explore ways to deepen ties	Tehran Times, Tehran	24-1-2023	14

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 17-1-2023

Sri Lankan envoy meets NSA Ajit Doval; holds discussion on bilateral relations

The visit is being seen as an opportunity to reset bilateral ties after they were hit by the visit of the Chinese surveillance vessel Yuan Wang 5 to Sri Lanka's Hambantota port last August

By HT Correspondent

Sri Lankan high commissioner Milinda Moragoda met National Security Advisor Ajit Doval on Monday to discuss priority areas for cooperation ahead of a planned visit to Colombo by external affairs minister S Jaishankar.

Moragoda and Doval discussed issues pertaining to bilateral relations.

“The discussion focused on mutual strategic interests of the two countries and priority areas for cooperation,” the Sri Lankan high commission said in a brief statement.

The meeting was part of regular and ongoing dialogue between the Sri Lankan envoy and the NSA, the statement said without giving details.

The meeting also came ahead of a planned visit to Sri Lanka later this week, though both sides are yet to make an official announcement regarding it.

The visit is being seen as an opportunity to reset bilateral ties after they were hit by the visit of the Chinese surveillance vessel Yuan Wang 5 to Sri Lanka's Hambantota port last August.

It will also help take forward discussions on restructuring Sri Lanka's debt amid an unprecedented economic crisis.

India and the US had opposed the Yuan Wang 5's visit.

The Sri Lankan government initially asked the Chinese side to defer the ship's visit but later made a U-turn and allowed the vessel to call at Hambantota for replenishment.

The Sri Lankan side is also keen on India's help for debt restructuring negotiations.

India provided aid worth nearly \$4 billion last year to help Sri Lanka cope with the economic crisis, which resulted in the country defaulting on its dollar debt to preserve foreign currency to pay for food and fuel.

The concurrence of China and India, which are not members of the Paris Club, for debt restructuring is essential for Sri Lanka to meet conditions for a \$2.9-billion bailout package from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 29-1-2023

Jaishankar's visit reset bilateral relations, says Sri Lankan envoy

Milinda Moragoda said India and Sri Lanka have sort of overcome the fallout of a Chinese surveillance vessel's visit to Hambantota port last year.

By Rezaul H Laskar

India and Sri Lanka have been able to address the impact of a Chinese surveillance vessel's visit to Hambantota port last year and Colombo is looking to New Delhi to help drive economic recovery through investments in key sectors such as energy, Sri Lankan envoy Milinda Moragoda said on Friday.

External affairs minister S Jaishankar's recent visit to Sri Lanka helped “reset” bilateral relations and both sides have made a fresh start, he said. Defence cooperation, including military-to-military exchanges, too has picked up pace and the two sides are in discussions regarding the supply of another Dornier surveillance aircraft to Sri Lanka, he said in an interview.

“I think this is a fresh start and it's a new chapter. [Jaishankar's visit was] a reset and I think we have lessons to learn. But the biggest success for us was that we kept communication lines open,” he said in response to a question on whether the two sides had overcome the fallout of the visit of China's Yuan Wang 5 tracking vessel to Hambantota in 2022.

“We have sort of been able to get over it, but we have to always be vigilant,” he added.

Also Read | Sri Lankan diplomat translates Jairam Ramesh's book into Sinhala

Expressing appreciation for the economic aid of nearly \$4 billion extended by New Delhi “without any conditions” for Colombo amid last year's economic crisis, Moragoda said India had also taken the lead in providing guarantees to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to help Sri Lanka access a \$2.9-billion bailout package.

“In every way, India led the stabilisation and was the bridge to the IMF,” he said. “The reality is that our social explosion would have been much worse and would have been clearly violent if India had not stepped in.”

Sri Lanka is keen on Indian investments in key areas, including renewable energy, especially wind and solar energy in the island's northwest, development of the Trincomalee oil tank farm as a regional energy hub, and the Sri Lankan government's planned divestments in telecommunications, insurance and hotels, he said.

The framework is being set up for a power grid between the two countries, he added.

A subsidiary of Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) signed a deal with Sri Lanka last year to develop the 850-acre oil storage facility at Trincomalee with a capacity of nearly one million tonnes. Moragoda said storage of fuel at the facility will help Sri Lanka's energy security and there is also scope for building a refinery with the possible involvement of a third country.

"The tourism sector is low-hanging fruit. We need tourism to get the economy moving quickly. India was the main source of tourists before the pandemic," he said.

The two sides are also looking at expanding trade through Indian rupee settlements. "India has allowed Sri Lankan banks to open Indian rupee accounts with Indian banks. RuPay would be another possibility for tourism," he said, adding there was agreement at the policy level on RuPay and technical discussions were on to finalise arrangements.

Moragoda, who recently met National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and Chief of Defence Staff Gen Anil Chauhan for discussions on security issues, said defence cooperation between the two sides has picked up pace. Sri Lanka currently has about 400 military personnel being trained in India, the highest for any country, and work is underway on a floating dock being built at Goa shipyard for the Sri Lankan Navy.

Following the supply of a Dornier reconnaissance aircraft to Sri Lanka last year, the two sides are in negotiations for a second aircraft. India and Sri Lanka are set to hold their annual bilateral defence dialogue during February 23-25 and there is significant cooperation through the Colombo Security Conclave that brings together India, the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Mauritius, he said.

"We should build towards a strategic dialogue. At the moment, the strategic dialogue happens at the political level, but over time it could be more structured," he said.

Noting that the Yuan Wang 5 episode occurred when there was "an element of dysfunctionality" in Sri Lanka, Moragoda said the continuing dialogue with India helped build trust. "I think we should develop ways of predicting some of these things. There may be other unknowns, may not be a ship. It may be something else, but what is important is an open line of communication, especially in what is essentially an asymmetrical relationship of India and Sri Lanka," he said.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 22-1-2023

MEA: Sisi visit will deepen 'time-tested' India-Egypt relations

Express News Service

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's three-day visit to India next week is expected to deepen the "time-tested" partnership between the two countries, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said on Saturday.

The 68-year-old influential Arab leader is scheduled to visit India from January 24 to 26, during which he will hold wide-ranging talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, grace the Republic Day celebrations and hold an interaction with the business community.

India and Egypt are expected to ink around half-a-dozen agreements to expand cooperation in the areas of agriculture, cyberspace and information technology (IT) following the talks between Modi and Sisi on January 25.

Further ramping up of defence and security cooperation is expected to be a major focus area in the discussions.

The MEA said Sisi will be accompanied by a high-level delegation that will include five ministers and senior officials.

The Egyptian president previously visited India in October 2015 to participate in the third India-Africa Forum Summit, which was followed by his State visit in September 2016.

This is for the first time that the president of Egypt has been invited as the chief guest to India's Republic Day celebrations. A military contingent from the Egyptian Army will also participate in the Republic Day parade.

The MEA said Sisi will be accorded a ceremonial welcome at the Rashtrapati Bhavan on January 25 and President Droupadi Murmu will host a state banquet in his honour the same evening.

"President Sisi will have a bilateral meeting and delegation-level talks with the Prime Minister on bilateral, regional and global issues of mutual interest," the MEA said in a statement.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar will also call on Sisi.

"The forthcoming visit of President Sisi is expected to further strengthen and deepen the time-tested partnership between India and Egypt," the MEA said.

India is keen on further expanding its ties with Egypt, a key player in the politics of both the Arab world as

well as Africa. It is also seen as a major gateway to markets in Africa and Europe.

The MEA said the multifaceted relationship between the two countries is based on shared cultural values, commitment to foster economic growth, collaboration in the fields of defence and security and convergence on regional and global issues.

It said the two countries work closely at multilateral and international platforms. The bilateral trade has also been on an upswing in the last few years.

The trade between India and Egypt achieved a “record high” of USD 7.26 billion in 2021-22, according to the MEA. “The trade was fairly balanced, with USD 3.74 billion Indian exports to Egypt and USD 3.52 billion imports from Egypt to India,” it said.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 30-1-2023

Sort out granular issues to bolster India-US ties

For several decades, experts have been talking about the US-India relationship deepening without having much concrete evidence to show this to be the case.

However, that tide seems to finally be turning

By Manjari Chatterjee Miller

As we begin 2023, it is evident that the current United States (US)-India bilateral relationship is not the relationship that existed between the two countries a decade ago, nor is it even the relationship from five years ago. Instead, this strategic partnership is on a trajectory few would have expected at the beginning of the 2000s, with cooperation expanding across sectors and many trust-building measures in place. However, this does not mean the two are on the same page on all strategic priorities. So, what are the issues affecting the relationship that are of interest to the US this year? Here are some of the most important.

First, the Ukraine war is playing a huge role in the US’s strategic calculations. The Biden administration’s National Security Strategy states that the US’s most-pressing challenge is posed by countries that “layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy”. There is little doubt that Russia, one of the US’s two major power rivals, is a “most-pressing challenge”. The prolonged war has depleted Russia’s conventional military strength, but it is still a nuclear power with unconventional capabilities. While the amount and type of aid to Ukraine have been up for debate in Washington DC, it

would be hard to overstate the depth of bipartisan American mistrust of Russia and President Vladimir Putin.

Given this backdrop, the US worries about the India-Russia relationship, especially that India’s reliance on Russian military imports will continue. The US hopes that as its own defence cooperation with India expands, New Delhi will see it as a reliable partner. Last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s seeming rebuke of President Putin on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was taken as a welcome sign that the India-Russia relationship was changing. This year, the Biden administration may look for other more tangible indications, particularly as India’s oil imports from Russia have displaced Iraq as its top supplier.

China — another hugely pressing challenge for the US — is also an important factor in the US-India bilateral ties. Last week, the US State Department’s East Asia consultations revealed much common ground on China. This is unsurprising. The US-China relationship is perhaps at its lowest point in two decades. Meanwhile, the December 2022 border clashes between China and India, and Beijing’s tone-deafness about New Delhi’s concerns, means that the China-India relationship continues to be plagued by mistrust, with little sign of resolution.

Consequently, the US and India share an interest in New Delhi strengthening its deterrence capacity towards Beijing on the border and in the Indian Ocean. The US is aware that India wants to avoid being drawn closer into the US-China strategic competition but remains worried about Taiwan and the lessons it believes China is drawing from the Ukraine war. Therefore, the question of India’s position should an escalation occur in the Taiwan Strait, and whether Indian officials have planned for such a scenario, remains pertinent.

The US also pays close attention to India’s leadership in multilateral forums, such as the G20 and the SCO. India can use its leadership positions in both this year to act as a bridge between the West and developing nations. The US would like to support India in this endeavour and draw it into more multilateral agreements. But it is also watching how India manages its relationships within these institutions, especially its dealings with Russia. India played a constructive role in the G20 Bali summit in 2022, including crafting the statement. The US hopes India’s

management of Russia in the G20 will not be akin to business as usual.

There are also more granular issues, for example, in the trade and technology relationships. On the one hand, US-India trade is at an all-time high. In 2022, trade stood at almost \$120 billion, and the US was India's largest trading partner. On the other hand, the US is concerned about India's turn towards protectionism. As trade specialist Inu Manak and I argued in a previous column, there are problems in the trade relationship that have been obscured by US-India cooperation on security. India, for example, makes up only 2% of the US's merchandise trade due to policies that protect domestic industry from foreign competition.

Technology cooperation between the two countries has also rapidly expanded as both increasingly prioritise it. Many US semiconductor industries, a crucial part of both countries' strategic agendas, have begun investing in India. Such industries require India to pay attention to, for example, the domestic electricity and water supply infrastructure, which is crucial for production, as well as the reform of customs procedures, which can hamper the movement of products and disrupt supply chains.

Finally, despite being aware of India's sensitivity to matters of domestic politics, the US is concerned about the state of Indian democracy. Many members of Congress and officials in the Biden administration are following reports on civil liberties and minority rights in India. Furthermore, questions are being raised surrounding data protection in India and what the implications are vis-à-vis surveillance and censorship. While the Biden administration is unlikely to raise any public questions or criticisms, members of Congress may not have any such inhibitions.

Washington is hugely optimistic about the relationship, and sees India as one of its most valuable partners. For several decades, experts have been talking about the US-India relationship deepening without having much concrete evidence to show this to be the case. However, that tide seems to finally be turning.

Manjari Chatterjee Miller is senior fellow, Council of Foreign Relations, and associate professor, International Relations, Boston University The views expressed are personal

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 27-1-2023

Bangladesh, India ties see significant achievements

Momen tells event marking 74th Republic Day of India

UNB, Dhaka

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen yesterday said the Bangladesh-India relationship has seen "transformative changes", reaching a new height with significant achievements through cooperation and collaboration.

"Bangladesh attaches the highest importance to its relations with India," he said while speaking at a reception on the 74th Republic Day of India.

Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Pranay Verma hosted the reception.

Momen said the relationship between the two countries, led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Indian counterpart Narendra Modi, created opportunities for robust cooperation to achieve more together.

The foreign minister said there are huge untapped opportunities on the trade front for both countries.

Momen emphasised the possible partnership for addressing global challenges, including the impacts of Covid, the crisis in Europe and the imminent global economic recession.

He thanked India for inviting Bangladesh as a "guest country" at the G20 Summit to be held in September 2023 under the presidency of India.

He also hoped that the two countries would continue to work together for the betterment of the people and shared peace and prosperity in the region.

Several cabinet ministers, ambassadors and dignitaries attended the event.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 16-1-2023

SL, Turkey Ombudsmen sign bilateral cooperation MoU

On the sidelines of the International Ombudsman Conference 2023, the Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration (Ombudsman) of Sri Lanka and Ombudsman Institution of Turkey entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on January 11 in Ankara.

The MoU between the Office of the Ombudsman of Sri Lanka and Ombudsman Institution of Turkey was signed in the presence of the Speaker of the

Parliament of Turkey, Mustafa Sentop, Sri Lankan Ambassador to Turkey, Hasanthi Urugodawatte Dissanayake, Ombudsman of Sri Lanka Justice (Retd.) K.T. Chitrasiri, and Chief Ombudsman of Turkey Seref Malkoc. Ombudsman of Sri Lanka Parliament and Chief Ombudsman of Turkey signed the MoU.

The main objective of the MoU is to focus on the role of the two institutions in Sri Lanka and Turkey in the field of protection of human rights and remedies for injustices while protecting citizens from injustice and discrimination. It further creates organizational conditions for cooperation between the two parties in the field of protection of citizens' rights, complaints and other activities related to the tasks and purposes of the work of each party and thus contribute to the protection of citizens' rights and freedoms within the powers vested by legislations.

The International Ombudsman Conference 2023 under the theme 'The future of Human Rights in the 21st Century' is funded by the European Union. More than 70 Ombudsmen participated from different regions Asia, Europe, Africa and the Middle East and shared the legal framework of Ombudsman in their own countries and their insights on the protection of human rights.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 31-1-2023

Foreign Minister Sabry has successful bilateral discussions with Saudi Arabia

On the invitation extended by Minister of Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia, Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, Foreign Minister Ali Sabry, PC, undertook an official visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from January 22 to 27.

During the visit, Minister Sabry had an extensive bilateral discussion with his Saudi counterpart on a wide range of issues.

In the meeting with his counterpart, Minister Sabry underlined the excellent bilateral relations between the two countries and thanked Saudi Arabia for the support extended to Sri Lanka in the international fora, especially during its membership at the UNHRC in 2009, 2012 and 2014.

The Minister also acknowledged the contribution of nearly SAR 1.5 billion by the Saudi Development Fund in infrastructure and other developments in Sri Lanka and the solidarity shown in the IMF supported debt restructuring programme.

Minister Sabry thanked his counterpart for hosting nearly 185,000 Sri Lankans and expressed his willingness to enhance the employment opportunities for Sri Lankans in skilled, semi-skilled and professional categories in the Kingdom. He invited Saudi investors to invest in Sri Lanka, especially in the Colombo Port City and the Renewable Energy sector.

The Saudi Foreign Minister stated that Saudi Arabia and Sri Lanka are true friends and share similar views on a number of international issues. He expressed his appreciation to Sri Lanka for being one of the first countries to support Saudi Arabia's bid to host EXPO 2030 in Riyadh. He also said that Saudi Arabia always encourages business entities to look at Sri Lanka as a possible destination for investment. Responding to the update given by his Sri Lankan counterpart on the current economic situation in Sri Lanka, the Saudi Minister said that he is "glad that Sri Lanka is getting positive attention from her friends around the world".

The Ministers also agreed to the resumption of air connectivity between the two countries to the level of the pre-Covid period.

During his meeting with Chief Executive Officer of the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD) Sultan A. Al-Marsad, the Sri Lankan Minister thanked the SFD for the continuation of the funding despite the economic situation in the country and the flexibility shown on debt repayment.

Foreign Minister Ali Sabry also engaged with heads of intergovernmental organizations during this visit.

During his meeting with the Secretary General of Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC)

Hissein Brahmin Taha, the Minister and the Secretary General agreed to enhance engagements and continue to cooperate in the international fora. During the meeting, the Minister also urged the member states of the OIC for the "visible humanitarian and economic support" to Sri Lanka.

At a meeting with the Vice President of the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) Dr. Zamir Iqbal, the organization offered to coordinate with the Government of Sri Lanka to organize an investment conference to unlock alternative finance with a view to helping Sri Lanka's economy.

During the meeting with the Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Dr. Nayef Falah M Al Hajraf, the Minister noted that the total trade volume between Sri Lanka and GCC countries is in

the region of US\$ 2.5 billion a year, a significant trade bloc, following India, China, Europe and the USA.

He also noted that, in terms of foreign employment, the region is the number one destination for Sri Lanka. The Foreign Minister also noted that of the 300,000 jobs generated during 2022, 257,000 were employed in the region.

Minister Sabry and the Secretary General acknowledged the necessity of exploring untapped investment opportunities available in Sri Lanka for GCC countries. In this context, it was agreed to expedite the process of entering into a framework agreement between Sri Lanka and the GCC.

During the visit Minister Ali Sabry and Governor (Minister Rank) of Zakat, Tax and Customs Authority Eng. Suhail bin Mohammed Abanmi signed the Agreement on Avoidance of Double Taxation on behalf of their respective governments at the headquarters of Zakat, Tax, and Customs Authority of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Foreign Minister Ali Sabry also called on the Governor of Madinah province, during which more employment opportunities for Sri Lankans in Madinah and the increase in arrivals of Saudi tourists from the western region were discussed.

Minister Sabry also interacted with the Sri Lankan communities in Riyadh and Jeddah at the gatherings organized by the Sri Lanka Embassy in Riyadh and the Consulate General in Jeddah respectively.

The Minister also addressed the students of the Sri Lanka International School in Jeddah which was established during his stint as Consul General Jeddah.

DAILY TIMES, ISLAMABAD 17-1-2023

Pak-UAE Rising Ties

Muhammad Asif Noor

As Pakistan struggles with a financial crisis, the country's leadership looks to the UAE for support. The civil and military leaders of Pakistan have traveled to the UAE to secure new loans and negotiate the terms and conditions of these loans. The leaders of both countries also exchanged their perspectives on various regional and global issues of mutual concern. High-level visits to the UAE occurred amidst a financial crisis and devastating floods. The Foreign Minister of Pakistan and other cabinet members accompanied the Prime Minister, who had just returned from Switzerland, where they were joined by the Chief of Army Staff.

This visit by the Pakistani leadership to the UAE, coming at the start of the New Year, underscores the importance of maintaining a steady growth in mutual understanding and cooperation. It highlights the need for regular dialogue at various levels in areas such as diplomacy and security. This engagement will allow both partners to maintain the momentum of their brotherly relationship. Sheikh Mohamad received Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff at Qasr al-Shati Palace to discuss security cooperation with high-level Emirati officials, including the National Security Advisor, Deputy Prime Minister, and Minister of the Presidential court, also in attendance. This meeting shows a commitment to addressing security concerns and highlights the strategic importance of the relationship between the two countries, not only in terms of trade and investment but also in terms of national security.

This was Prime Minister Sharif's third visit to UAE after assuming office in April last year. He met the ruler of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to discuss the avenues of cooperation. Pakistan and the UAE agree to strengthen their cooperation in mutual investments, enable the integration of capital, and boost bilateral cooperation in other areas. Currently, the UAE is Pakistan's largest trading partner in the Middle East and North Africa region, with a trading volume worth \$8 billion. Furthermore, the UAE is the largest foreign investor in Pakistan.

Given the shared interests of both countries, there is significant potential for future cooperation. The operationalization of the Gwadar port in Pakistan will incentivize trade with the UAE by reducing logistics costs. The UAE can use this route to reach Central Asia and Afghanistan through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, promoting development and integration in the entire region.

In addition to meeting with the rulers of the UAE, Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif also met with investment companies and representatives of Sovereign Funds to explore opportunities for foreign direct investment in Pakistan. These discussions on investment and business between the two countries are crucial as around 1.7 million Pakistanis are working in the UAE, contributing to its economy, and sending remittances back to Pakistan.

During the visit, The UAE deferred the payment of a \$2 billion loan and agreed to provide an additional \$1 billion, which will assist Pakistan in servicing its \$13 billion debt by June of this year. The situation in

Pakistan is dire, with foreign exchange reserves at a low not seen since 2014 and the International Monetary Fund imposing harsh loan conditions. The government of Pakistan is trying to secure more loans to help the country's economy and its citizens. Still, as the world watches, one must question whether this is enough to solve the underlying problems or if it is just a temporary fix.

For over five decades, Pakistani workers, both white-collar and labourers, have been a vital part of the UAE's economy, working in major sectors such as construction, transportation, and services. This longstanding relationship between the two countries provides unique leverage for the Pakistani leadership as they engage with the business and political sectors of the UAE. Additionally, the people of UAE and Pakistan share a common religion, Muslim identity, and bond of brotherhood.

The partners of Pakistan in UAE acknowledged the challenges faced by Pakistan with its economy, particularly the devastating floods in 2022, which caused damages worth \$30 billion to the economy, including 37 million displacements and the destruction of 2 million housing units. Despite this, Pakistan received a significant response from international partners at the Climate Resilience Pakistan conference in Geneva, where pledges of up to \$10 billion were made.

However, these donations cannot be used to service debt, which puts added strain on Pakistan's economy. This is particularly concerning as Pakistan has over 220 million people and cannot be overlooked. The positive intervention and timely assistance of UAE authorities to Pakistan, in the form of \$3 billion, is seen as a significant step towards stability. This amount represents one-quarter of the loan repayment, \$13 billion, and is a vital lifeline for Pakistan's economy and people.

Given the shared interests of both countries, there is significant potential for future cooperation. The operationalization of the Gwadar port in Pakistan will incentivize trade with the UAE by reducing logistics costs. The UAE can use this route to reach Central Asia and Afghanistan through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, promoting development and integration in the entire region.

Furthermore, the ruling family in the UAE has a history of investing in socio-economic projects in Pakistan, including the announcement of further investments in August of last year. Pakistan requires heavy investments in its energy infrastructure,

including gas and renewables, as well as in healthcare, agriculture, biotechnology, logistics, and financial services. By exploring these opportunities for cooperation and investment, both the UAE and Pakistan stand to benefit in the long term.

The writer is the director of the Institute of Peace and Diplomatic Studies.

DAILY TIMES, ISLAMABAD 27-1-2023

Pak-US 'rollercoaster' ties

Ali Imran Atta

The United States of America emerged as the first country to develop formal relations with Pakistan on August 15, 1947, one day after Pakistan gained independence through the partition of British India. These relations are a critical component of the US state's overarching framework in Central and South Asia, as well as in Eastern Europe. However, the relationship between the two sovereign states has been termed a "roller coaster," with highs marked by productive collaboration and depths marked by profound bilateral estrangement between 1948 and 2013.

This month, the United States has not attempted to conceal the fact that it is actively watching progress in Pakistan, both on the political and economic fronts, in recent weeks and months. Over the last four months, almost a dozen remarks have primarily or in passing mentioned Pakistan, and in every case, the timbre and intention reflect a level of apprehension rarely seen in the past. The most recent US State Department statement expressed hope for financial stability in the country, emphasizing that America was not only aware of Pakistan's financial problems, but also supported efforts to revive the national economy. When asked if Washington shared the country's concern that Islamabad is on the verge of economic crisis, a US State Department spokesperson said that the nation needed to collaborate with international financial institutions to enhance its economy.

"We incentivize Pakistan to keep on working with the World Monetary Fund (IMF) on implementing programs, particularly those that will improve Pakistan's business environment," the US official said. "Doing so will increase the competitiveness of Pakistani businesses and help Pakistan attract high-quality foreign investment." When Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari was asked a similar question, he replied, "As long as we remain willing to help ourselves," others would continue to help Pakistan.

“We must assist them by taking the necessary steps at home.” The young minister noted that the rest of the world had vowed to provide roughly half of the financing Pakistan needed for regeneration following the 2022 floods at the latest conference in Geneva.

The economic collapse in Pakistan has the potential to be extremely damaging for everyone concerned with international stability and the preservation of the current international order. As a significant international power, the United States is worried. Secondly, the US does not want Pakistan’s economy to collapse while it is led by a democratic system that is working hard to stabilize relations with the US.

“Now Pakistan must contribute the remaining 50%.” The foreign minister also emphasized the importance of reaching a “conclusion with the IMF” and following up on the offer to renegotiate our debt made by French President Emmanuel Macron and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. To put things in context, a State Department official stated, “Pakistan’s economic stability is a subject of discussion between the Pakistani and US government agencies, including the United States State Department and our counterparts, the Department of Treasury, and the White House.” But why is Washington so concerned about Pakistan’s economic and political stability? According to conventional wisdom, the determinant is our nuclear program, and the world cannot perhaps afford to view a nation with a nuclear arsenal on the verge of annihilation. However, conventional wisdom only exposes the tip of the iceberg. Pakistan is the fifth largest country in the world, and the second largest Muslim country, with a large army and extensive nuclear infrastructure.

The economic collapse in Pakistan has the potential to be extremely damaging for everyone concerned with international stability and the preservation of the current international order. As a significant international power, the United States is worried. Secondly, the US does not want Pakistan’s economy to collapse while it is led by a democratic system that is working hard to stabilize relations with the US. The South Asian great power rivalry phenomenon is such that it would be in the US’s interest to articulate to Pakistan that it intends to remain involved and work cooperatively where applicable so that Pakistan does not lean too heavily in the direction of China. This viewpoint is shared by John Ciorciari, a professor at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan. He observes that while funders such as China and Saudi Arabia may well not

include any explicit conditions in their aid, there are always implicit strings attached.

“China will look to Pakistan for favourable incentives, such as the power generation passageway moving from the Arabian Gulf to China’s western region and the strategically located port of Gwadar. China will indeed seek Pakistan’s assistance on geostrategic issues ranging from Taiwan to Afghanistan and Ukraine.” Michael Kugelman, director of the Woodrow Wilson Centre’s South Asia Institute, concurs. “The risk of such a struggling economy is a serious risk to [Pakistan’s] overall stability. As a result, it’s comprehensible that Washington would want Islamabad to pull away from the edge and get the economy growing. I’m not sure if the US is concerned about the Pakistani economy collapsing, but I believe it is eager to help avoid that outcome, which values compressive strength efforts to either get things moving again with the IMF, he says. Since the 1950s, the Pakistan-US relationship has been linked to various stages of US defense interests in the region in the 1950s and 1960s, it must have been strongly linked to Regional Politics; in the 1980s, the Iranian revolution and the Communist invasion of Afghanistan took the spotlight. After the events of September 11, 2001, this relationship was reawakened in the early 2000s. Throughout these phases, the US government was the closest to Pakistan’s defence department (and related civilian elite)... It also accepted and backed military governments in Pakistan, which received military and non-military assistance.

With the transformation in Afghanistan throughout 2021 and the switch within the US to a China containment policy, it has shifted its regional preference to India. People must recognize, for the sake of the country, that Pakistan has had severe problems with governance, social change, democratization, and development, for which we are primarily responsible. The United States did not create these conditions but rather took advantage of them. However, he contends that economic uncertainty may imply a less sustainable Pakistan government, which may have an impact on Washington’s often long-term companion in the nation, the military. One could argue that Pakistan’s economy would benefit from a consistent representative democracy with checks and balances.

As a result, an unstable political environment combined with an economic crisis could result in a chaotic situation in which Pakistan could once again

become a breeding ground for extremism. The diplomatic process respectively Pakistan and the United States must become natural if it is to progress, and it should. Both parties benefit from a strong relationship. However, this normalcy cannot be achieved unless Pakistan becomes a normal country and Washington shifts its fixate of interest away from the political elite and toward the people.

The writer is a freelance columnist.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 17-1-2023

Chinese FM calls for speedy implementation of China-Arab summit's outcomes

CAIRO, Jan. 16 (Xinhua) -- China is ready to strengthen communication and coordination with Arab countries to implement the outcomes of the first China-Arab States Summit, Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang said here Sunday.

The summit was held successfully with fruitful results, Qin said while meeting the press with Arab League (AL) Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit.

Three significant outcome documents were issued, namely the Riyadh Declaration of the First China-Arab States Summit, the Outline of the Comprehensive Cooperation Plan Between China and Arab States and a document on deepening the Sino-Arab strategic partnership for peace and development, Qin said, adding both sides also agree to make all-out efforts to build a China-Arab community with a shared future in the new era.

Going forward, China is ready to strengthen communication and coordination with Arab countries to implement the outcomes of the summit, Qin said.

Firstly, China and Arab countries should jointly carry forward the spirit of bilateral friendship featuring "solidarity and mutual assistance, equality and mutual benefit, and inclusiveness and mutual learning." Both sides should uphold independence, focus on economic development, maintain regional peace and strengthen inter-civilizational exchanges, so as to make solid progress in building a China-Arab community with a shared future and contribute to the building of a community with a shared future for mankind, said the Chinese foreign minister.

Secondly, both sides should jointly implement the spirit of the Riyadh Declaration. The Declaration emphasizes maintaining international order and multilateralism based on international law, promoting

the common values of peace, development, fairness, justice, democracy and freedom of all mankind, opposing politicizing and instrumenting human rights issues and interfering in other countries' internal affairs, upholding the concept of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security, strengthening counter-terrorism efforts, and opposing "double standards" on fighting terrorism, strengthening dialogue among civilizations, safeguarding the diversity of civilizations, and opposing the "clash of civilizations" theory, he said.

Qin added that the two sides should jointly uphold the above spirit, safeguard international fairness and justice, and safeguard the common interests of developing countries.

Thirdly, both sides need to work together for more outcomes of practical cooperation. The Outline of China-Arab Comprehensive Cooperation Plan covers 182 cooperation measures in 18 fields, including politics, trade and economy, investment and finance. The eight major cooperation initiatives for China-Arab practical cooperation proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping cover 56 cooperation measures in eight areas, including development support, food security, public health, green innovation, energy security, inter-civilizational dialogue, youth development and security and stability, which meet the development needs and concerns of the Arab side, said Qin.

China will establish an effective working mechanism with Arab countries to implement the above-mentioned cooperation measures one by one, accelerate cooperation projects that are ripe for development and strive for more early harvests, Qin said.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 19-1-2023

China, Africa working with each other along path of win-win cooperation, common development

By He Yin

The first phase of the China-aided Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) headquarters project was recently completed, becoming a new landmark symbolizing the friendship and solidarity between China and Africa.

The Africa CDC headquarters was a flagship project of China-Africa cooperation announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Beijing Summit of the

Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2018.

The timely delivery of the reliable building mirrors the high standard and level of China-Africa cooperation and explains the demeanor of China, a country that always values its promises.

This year is the 10th year since Xi put forth, in 2013, the principles of sincerity, real results, amity and good faith, and of pursuing the greater good and shared interests for China's relations with Africa.

Over the past decade, with the joint guidance and commitment of Chinese and African leaders, China-Africa relations have made historic achievements that impressed the whole world, and entered a new era of building a high-level China-Africa community with a shared future.

The two sides always follow the spirit of sincere friendship and equality, win-win for mutual benefit and common development, fairness and justice, and progress with the times and openness and inclusiveness. China and African countries have always been good friends who stand together through prosperity and adversity, good partners who share weal and woe, and good comrades who fully trust each other in a shifting international landscape.

China and Africa offer mutual assistance on their way to achieve economic progress and national rejuvenation, and are constantly expanding the areas of cooperation.

China-Africa cooperation has progressed with the times and deepened its connotation, from the 10 major cooperation plans adopted at the 2015 FOCAC Johannesburg Summit to the eight major initiatives proposed at the 2018 FOCAC Beijing Summit, and to the nine programs for cooperation announced at the Eighth Ministerial Conference of the FOCAC.

China has maintained the largest trading partner of Africa for the past 13 years. The two sides' bilateral trade in 2022 is expected to exceed \$260 billion. Fifty-two African countries and the African Union (AU) Commission have signed Belt and Road cooperation documents with China. Landmark projects like the AU Conference Center, the Africa CDC headquarters, the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), and the Ethiopia-Djibouti Railway keep emerging.

These cooperation outcomes are tangible and play an important role in promoting the economic and social development of Africa and improving people's livelihoods on the continent. They fully demonstrate

the vision of China-Africa relations and the defining feature of China-Africa friendship.

China is the largest developing country in the world, and Africa is the continent with the largest number of developing countries. As changes of the world, of the times, and of history are unfolding today in ways like never before, the importance of strengthening China-Africa solidarity and cooperation is self-evident.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said Ethiopia's cooperation with China in such areas as infrastructure, green economy, agriculture, and industrial park construction has been exemplary and produced remarkable results, helping Ethiopia rank among the fastest-growing economies in Africa.

Angolan President Joao Lourenco said that the airports, hydropower stations, roads, ports, and many other landmark projects built with China's support have progressed smoothly in Angola and played an indispensable role in the country's post-war reconstruction and socio-economic development.

China is the first country to support the AU in joining the G20. It supports boosting the representation and voice of African countries in the UN Security Council and other international organizations. This helps safeguard the common interests of developing countries and will make the global governance system more just and equitable.

Chairperson of the AU Commission Moussa Faki Mahamat noted that Africa values China's strong support for African integration, connectivity, and the development of a free trade area, and looks forward to working with China to jointly advance the building of a China-Africa community with a shared future in the new era.

For some time, a few countries have intentionally provoked bloc confrontation in Africa, forcing African countries to take sides, which is against the will of African countries and the trend of the times.

Africa should be a stage for international cooperation, not an arena for major-force rivalry. Only the countries that sincerely help Africa achieve peace and development and strive for bigger representation and stronger voice of the continent in global governance can receive the support from African countries.

South Africa's think tank, Institute for Global Dialogue, said in a recent report that a few countries have never adopted practical measures to help Africa cope with development challenges, and they only want to make African countries a tool that contains the influence of other countries.

Compared with such hegemonic diplomacy, China's diplomacy, which never interferes in other countries' domestic affairs and always pursues win-win cooperation, is welcomed by African countries.

China has always prioritized Africa in its diplomacy, and inheriting and carrying forward the China-Africa friendship has become a glorious tradition and defining feature of China's diplomacy.

Upholding the principles of sincerity, real results, amity and good faith, and of pursuing the greater good and shared interests, China and African countries will stay committed to strengthening unity and cooperation and working with each other along the path of win-win cooperation and common development. The two sides will join hands to build a high-level China-Africa community with a shared future.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 19-1-2023

Commentary: World needs China-U.S. ties back on track in 2023

BEIJING, Jan. 20 (Xinhua) -- China's Foreign Ministry said this week that China welcomes U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's upcoming visit and is in communication with the U.S. side on specific arrangements.

The China-U.S. relationship, as one of the world's most important bilateral relations, influences the welfare of both countries and the whole world. Across the globe, there is a growing call against containing or decoupling from China, and for stable U.S.-China ties.

The world is now at a crossroads. When viewing and handling China-U.S. relations, both sides should see the bigger picture, and not just a zero-sum game. China's advancement or American's progress presents opportunities, rather than poses challenges, for each other.

Regrettably, such common sense has been abandoned in recent years by certain Washington politicians, who have been tirelessly making trouble or threatening to decouple from China, casting a cloud over bilateral ties.

In a report published last November, the Brookings Institution said the United States must forge a "durable, productive relationship" with China, adding that both sides share common interests in both bilateral and multilateral areas and that cooperation is needed.

Economic and trade cooperation is the bedrock of China-U.S. relations. Bilateral economic and trade ties

are built on mutual benefit, not zero-sum games. Decoupling from or breaking economic links with China, a major trading partner of America, will hurt others and America itself.

Decoupling isn't yet happening in any significant way, not by a long shot, and isn't likely to, Foreign Policy magazine said in an analysis. It quoted U.S. business insiders as saying that the U.S.-China economic relationship remains profound and is growing deeper in many sectors, and that a decoupling will undercut U.S. global competitiveness.

Despite a lingering pandemic and an uncooperative Washington, China-U.S. trade surged 20.2 percent year on year to 4.88 trillion yuan (719 billion U.S. dollars) in 2021. In the first 11 months of 2022, bilateral trade value stood at 4.62 trillion yuan (681 billion dollars), up 4.8 percent year on year.

China boasts an irreplaceable industrial chain edge. The Chinese mainland remains U.S. tech giant Apple's primary production base, where 150 out of its 190 disclosed suppliers have factories, according to its supplier list for fiscal year 2021 released last October.

Meanwhile, China remains a top market for U.S. businesses, with 83 percent of member companies reporting that they are not considering relocating manufacturing or sourcing outside of China, according to the 2022 American Business in China White Paper, released by AmCham China last year. Chamber members believe that a "decoupling" is not in the economic interest of either side.

Over the past decades, economic globalization has led to the continuous expansion of industrial, value and supply chains, and the global flow of production factors, injecting strong impetus into the world economy as an irresistible trend.

The value of global trade hit a record high of 28.5 trillion dollars in 2021, an increase of 25 percent on 2020, and was projected to reach 32 trillion dollars in 2022, showed data from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

However, the United States has been pushing unilaterally for cutting supplies and decoupling, which is doomed and will backfire.

It is wrong to presume that global welfare is a zero-sum game, and that China's ascent implies America's decline, Pinelopi Koujianou Goldberg, a former World Bank chief economist and professor at Yale University, wrote in a recent opinion piece, warning that an economic war on China is in no one's interest.

The United States and China are the world's two largest economies, whose sheer economic sizes determine that sound China-U.S. economic and trade ties are of paramount significance to both themselves and the world.

In recent years, however, the United States has coerced its allies into containing and "decoupling" from China. Such an attempt to maintain global economic dominance at the expense of allies has proved unpopular.

During his official visit to China in November 2022, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said that China is an important trading partner for Germany and for Europe as a whole, and that Germany firmly opposes decoupling and stands ready for closer trade and economic cooperation with China.

Likewise, Europe as a whole would not want to choose between the United States and China, as an opinion piece in The Diplomat magazine said recently. "The U.S. coercive diplomacy comes at a cost: It threatens to inject friction and erode trust in the transatlantic relationship," it said.

In an opinion piece published in the Financial Times earlier this month, British foreign affairs columnist Gideon Rachman advised the West to ditch its goal of curbing China's growth. "China is a huge part of the world economy. If you will China to go into recession, you are quite close to wanting the world to also slide into recession," he wrote.

Simply siding with the United States is not a viable alternative, if only because the lavish U.S. subsidies will attract investment and capital from Europe, German-language news daily Neues Deutschland said in a recent analysis, referring to the Inflation Reduction Act package as another product of "America First," which tramples on European interests and the rules of the World Trade Organization.

Japanese businesses trading with China are also concerned that Tokyo may be drawn deeper into the growing economic rivalry between Washington and Beijing, urging the government to "understand that we do not want to be exposed to country risk in China." Experts believed that Japan and China should improve bilateral communication on a range of issues such as supply chain resilience, and non-traditional threats to security and climate change.

Some emerging economies and developing countries also detest the U.S. practice of engaging in a great power competition and forcing others to take sides.

A recent article by the South China Morning Post said that "the fate of ASEAN members is largely tethered to the trajectory of U.S.-China relations in the 21st century," and that economically, Southeast Asian states prefer Washington and Beijing "to cooperate, rather than engage in zero-sum rivalry."

The United States and China stand to gain from cooperation and lose from confrontation. The world is big enough for the two countries to develop individually and collectively.

The world shares the common aspiration for a sound China-U.S. relationship and a means for getting along that is conducive to lasting global peace and prosperity.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 17-1-2023

Iran, Turkey hold joint consular meeting

TEHRAN – Iran and Turkey held on Sunday their 19th joint consular meeting in which they discussed a variety of consular issues.

Deputy Foreign Minister for Consular, Parliamentary, and Iranian Expatriates Affairs Alireza Bigdeli and Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister for Consular and Administrative Affairs Yasin Akram presided over the meeting which was also attended by the representatives of the justice ministries and international police departments of the two countries as well as relevant organizations, according to the Iranian foreign ministry.

In an amicable atmosphere, the participants in the session discussed the consular issues of Iran and Turkey including the issues of students, tourists, transit drivers, detainees, borders and police as well as extradition of convicts, facilitation of services on borders, resolution of the problems of expatriates of both Iran and Turkey, recognition of documents issued by the two governments and other issues of Iranian and Turkish nationals.

The two sides underlined the importance of the role of popular ties in relations between Tehran and Ankara. They also agreed that such issues must be monitored and resolved through regular consultations between the two countries.

The consular meeting is held days before Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian pays a visit to Turkey for a joint meeting on Syria. Last week, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu announced that his Iranian counterpart Amir Abdollahian will pay a visit to Turkey to attend a ministerial meeting about Syria.

The Turkish foreign minister said he would meet Amir Abdollahian next Tuesday and “the Iranian President can also visit Turkey in the upcoming days,” according to Al-Monitor.

Iran has stepped up diplomatic efforts regarding Syria. On Wednesday, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed Syria, among other things, over the phone.

In the conversation, President Raisi emphasized that regional issues can be resolved only through cooperation and coordination, citing the Caucasus region and Syria as examples. “The Islamic Republic of Iran always emphasizes strengthening regional integration and the harmfulness of foreign interference.”

Regarding the efforts to solve the Syrian issues, Raisi emphasized the centrality of the Astana Framework and announced the readiness of Iran to play an active and constructive role in ending the conflicts and establishing peace in Ukraine, according to a readout by the official website of the Iranian presidency.

Putin, for his part, welcomed Iran's initiative to establish peace in Ukraine and emphasized coordination to solve the problems of Syria within the Astana Framework.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 24-1-2023

Iran, Russia looking for a new world order

By Soheila Zarfam

TEHRAN – Chairman of the Russian State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin has arrived in Tehran and met with Iranian Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf. In Tehran, talks of a 25-year partnership between Iran and Russia featured high.

With Volodin visiting Tehran at a critical world juncture, Iran and Russia appear to be moving in the direction of upgrading their ties to a strategic level within the framework of the 25-year partnership agreement that is under consideration in both countries.

While this partnership is conspicuously bilateral, it comes against a backdrop of a delicate moment in the world, with Russia and Iran both facing severe sanctions imposed by the West.

The sanctions seem to be creating a common ground between the two countries to boost their ties and lay the groundwork for a new, multipolar world order in the process.

Commenting on the visit, Iranian Ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali has underlined the need for close consultations between Tehran and Moscow amid a Western drive to protect Western-centric world order.

Jalali referred to the visit by Volodin to Iran. “The visit of the head of the Russian State Duma to Tehran amid the rapid international developments confirms the necessity of continuing close consultations between the two countries,” the ambassador said on Twitter.

He added, “Now that the West has exerted all its power for the continuation of the Western-oriented world order, the interaction between Iran and Russia in the forefront of the new international order strengthens the axis of the emerging powers.”

Volodin was accorded an official reception in Tehran on Monday morning led by Iranian Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf.

After the welcoming ceremony, Qalibaf and Volodin held the third Joint High Commission of Parliamentary Cooperation between Iran and Russia.

“The Joint High Commission is being held when both sides have reached a common understanding of sensitivities and cooperation. We hope that in 2023, relations between the parliaments will find their way with more momentum in the political and economic arena, as well as other strategic cooperation,” Qalibaf said.

He added, “After entering into any phenomenon and incident, opportunities and threats arise, and it is true that the officials of the two countries, parliaments, governments and nations can act in a way that maximizes the use of opportunities and turns threats into opportunities. Otherwise, we will lose opportunities and also opportunities will become threats.”

Qalibaf stated, “Our officials in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation know that we are at an important point in bilateral and multilateral relations and national and regional issues, and time is the most important element in this decision.”

He said, “We must look to the future and the strategic agreement between Iran and Russia must be taken into consideration. We must implement the 25-year agreement as soon as possible.”

Volodin, for his part, praised the relations between Iran and Russia, according to ICANA. “The relations between Iran and Russia have found a positive development path and the relations between the leaders of the two countries also show good bilateral

relations. At the level of the Russian Parliament, we will use all our efforts to implement the decisions made in the Joint High Commission.”

He said, “We hope to achieve results in this joint commission that will secure the interests of the two countries. Various economic and commercial issues will be raised in this joint commission.”

Volodin said, “Considering the development of parliamentary relations between Iran and Russia, we are looking for new structures for the development and deepening of relations.”

This high-ranking Russian official pointed to the 25-year agreement between Iran and Russia and said, “This agreement does not only include new relations, but will create a foundation for the development of relations.”

The head of the Russian Duma mentioned the role of Qalibaf in signing the 25-year contract and presenting its draft to the Russian authorities during his visit to Moscow.

He said, “I hope that in the near future this contract will be reviewed by the heads of government of the two countries. This agreement is not only a strategic agreement, but it is a building block for the development of cooperation in all fields, and it will also be a new building block for greater cooperation between the two countries.”

Volodin added, “We are well aware that we must use all our efforts to create a new architecture for the world, and this depends on the will of the two countries. Iran and Russia definitely support the concept of global multipolar architecture.”

He continued, “Iran and Russia have been facing sanctions and challenges for a long time, and these threats do not hinder the development of our relations. In fact, the main purpose of sanctions is to maintain the hegemony of the United States in the world, but we defend our national sovereignty and determine our own destiny. We support our traditions, literature and language and support the independent politics of countries.”

He noted, “They are used to interfering in other countries and want to use all the resources of the world to increase their wealth. Of course, the United States is already damaged, but the European Union follows the policies of the United States. The leaders of Europe must get the energy and gas they need from non-Russian markets and at higher prices than before, which is very difficult for them.”

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 24-1-2023

Iran, Venezuela explore ways to deepen ties

TEHRAN- Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian and Vice Foreign Minister Capaya Rodriguez of Venezuela met on Monday to discuss progress in bilateral ties.

Amir Abdollahian emphasized the necessity to bolster ties, particularly in areas of high-tech, technology, and the energy sector.

The vice minister from Venezuela, for her part, underscored the value of women's roles in all societies. She pointed to women's congress in Tehran, saying it demonstrated the prominent and admirable status of women in Iran.

Iran hosted the first international congress of women of influence on Thursday and Friday.

Women from 96 different countries attended the congress.

First ladies from Burkina Faso, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Serbia, Guinea, Niger and Sri Lanka, as well as top female officials from Syria and Turkmenistan were present at the conference.

The conference was attended by 300 international visitors, including vice presidents and members of parliament.

Iranian FM meets Nicaraguan “women of influence”

Also, Amir Abdollahian visited on Monday the Nicaraguan female officials who had participated in the congress on women. They included ministers of interior, family, education, youth, health, and higher education.

At the meeting, Amir Abdollahian stressed the need of strengthening connections between Iran and countries in Latin America, particularly Nicaragua.

Ramona Rodriguez, President of the Autonomous University of Nicaragua and minister of higher education, headed the delegation.

Rodriguez advocated the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the Autonomous University of Nicaragua and the University of Tehran as well as the plan to promote academic, scientific, and cultural interactions between her country and Iran.

Other Nicaraguan cabinet ministers also shared their perspectives on the various areas where Iran and Nicaragua can collaborate.

II – POLITICS AND ECONOMICS

	<u>II – POLITICS AND ECONOMICS</u>			
	Subject	Newspapers/Periodicals	Date	Page
	INDIA Inflation			
1.	A fortuitous trend: On wholesale inflation data Trade	The Hindu, Delhi	18-1-2023	15
2.	Exports set to decline due to global slowdown - Tribune News Service Economic Stability	The Tribune, Chandigarh	20-1-2023	15
3.	With inflation under check, the government must now focus on fiscal consolidation to further macroeconomic stability Editorial Elections	The Indian Express, New Delhi	23-1-2023	15
4.	Tripura elections: ‘No breaking point... parties did not give a concrete offer,’ says TIPRA Motha chief By Sunetra Choudhury BANGLADESH Elections Observation	The Hindustan Times, New Delhi	31-1-2023	16
5.	US to focus on polls atmosphere By Porimol Palma SRI LANKA LG Elections	The Daily Star, Dhaka	17-1-2023	18
6.	LG polls then and the present scenario By Jaliya Wijeyekoon NEPAL Presidential Elections	Sunday Observer, Colombo	22-1-2023	19
7.	Presidential election: When constitutional and legal terms clash - Tika R Pradhan	The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu	22-1-2023	21

	PAKISTAN Trade			
8.	Pakistan, Iran sign 39 MoUs to boost trade By Saleem Shahid	Dawn, Islamabad	17-1-2023	22
9.	ICCI, Moscow Chamber join hands to promote Pak-Russia trade relations By Imran Ali Kundi Foreign Investment	The Nation, Islamabad	24-1-2023	23
10.	UAE president hints at ‘huge investment’ in Pakistan By APP & Staff Correspondent	The News, Islamabad	26-1-2023	24
11.	Pakistan, Kazakhstan agree to sign Transit Trade Agreement By Imran Ali Kundi CHINA FDI	The Nation, Islamabad	27-1-2023	25
12.	China’s FDI up 8% in 2022, continuing upward trend for three consecutive years By GT Staff Reporters Trade Ties with the US	People’s Daily, China	19-1-2023	25
13.	GT Voice: Ball in Washington’s court to improve trade ties with China - Global Times IRAN Trade	Global Times, China	31-1-2023	26
14.	Iran’s exports to EU up 20% in 11 months on year - EF/MA	Tehran Times, Tehran	16-1-2023	27
15.	Commodities worth over \$950m traded at IME in a week - MA/MA	Tehran Times, Tehran	17-1-2023	28

THE HINDU, DELHI 18-1-2023**A fortuitous trend:****On wholesale inflation data**

The cooling in inflation must become more broad-based for it to sustain

The last month of 2022 capped a year dominated by high inflation headlines on a seemingly amiable note. The average price rise faced by consumers during December slipped to its lowest since November 2021 at 5.7%. Data released on Monday show that wholesale inflation also fell to a 22-month-nadir of 4.95% from 5.88% in November. That December 2021 had registered a steep 14.2% wholesale price rise, exaggerated the cooling effect. Yet, this marked the seventh successive month of moderation in wholesale inflation since it hit an all-time high of 16.6% in May 2022, and the fourth straight month that retail inflation has eased from 7.4% in September 2022. Over November and December, retail inflation has stayed below the central bank's 6% threshold and wholesale price rise has been slower than consumer prices, signalling that pressures on producers to pass on higher input costs may be easing. The Government, gearing up for a pre-election Budget, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), which has projected inflation to average 5.9% in the current quarter from 6.1% in October-December 2022, and consumers too, would be hoping this is a harbinger of lower prices this year. However, these two months of milder inflation do not offer compelling comfort on this front simply because they have been disproportionately influenced by what some economists have termed an 'idiosyncratic' element — 'vegetable prices'. From about 8% inflation in October, prices for vegetables dropped 8% and 15% in November and December, respectively, as onions, tomatoes and potatoes turned cheaper. This pulled down food inflation but may not have lowered overall household expenses on food much. Inflation accelerated for the sixth straight month in the largest item of the food basket — cereals (at 13.8%, with wheat prices rising 22%). An uptick was also seen for pulses, milk, eggs, meat and fish, and spices, even as non-food items and services show stubborn price rise trends, be it clothing, footwear, personal care, household goods or health and education. Keeping volatile vegetable prices out, retail inflation in November was 7% and raced to 7.2% in December, belying the headline trend. Core inflation, which measures price rise minus food and energy, also inched up and needs attention, as reiterated by RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das amid a growing clamour

for pausing interest rate hikes. With the Chinese economy rebooting from a strict zero COVID policy, global commodity and oil prices may well harden again. It is too early to take the eye off the inflation problem, which continues to hurt rural demand in particular, deterring much-awaited private investment plans.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 20-1-2023**Exports set to decline due to global slowdown****Tribune News Service****New Delhi, January 19**

India's exports are likely to fall by 2.9% in 2022-23 and further by 4.1% in 2023-24 to \$416.6 billion. The exports had grown by 45.1% in 2021-22 mainly due to a sharp rise in commodity prices.

"Fears of an impending recession in the US and other developed economies led to a correction in commodity prices in the September 2022 quarter in addition to slowing demand. According to the World Economic Outlook (WEO), increase in commodity prices is likely to have decelerated to 7.3% during 2022. Slowing economic growth in China also hit demand for India's exports," said an analysis by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy.

International prices of metals including steel, copper, aluminium, zinc, lead and tin dropped to a 2-year low by November 2022. Yet, they remain above the pre-Covid levels. Cotton prices have also seen a similar trend. Petroleum product prices have also eased to six-month low in November, driven by a sustained easing of crude oil prices, said the report written by Janaki Samant.

Government policy has also hit exports. In May 2022, the government imposed export duty on pig iron, steel and iron pellets and sharply hiked tax on export of iron ores and concentrates in order to increase domestic availability. Consequently, exports of these commodities dropped sharply.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 23-1-2023**With inflation under check, the government must now focus on fiscal consolidation to further macroeconomic stability**

Is the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) inclined towards lesser quantum of interest rate hikes or even taking a pause, in line with the stance of one of its own monetary policy committee members? The central

bank's just-released "State of the Economy" report would seem to suggest that. While inflation was the dominant concern of 2022, this could be displaced in 2023 by recession — a debate over whether it may turn out "short and shallow" or "long and deep". The report is also encouraged by "macroeconomic stability getting further entrenched" and the "first milestone of monetary policy" — consumer price inflation in the last two months falling within the RBI's six per cent upper tolerance limit — being passed. It is even hopeful of fiscal consolidation "underway at central and sub-national levels" and the external current account deficit "on course to narrow through the rest of 2022 and 2023".

The above prognosis, probably somewhat over-optimistic, is significant, coming less than two weeks before the Union Budget for 2023-24. Either way, it is sensible for the RBI to slow down the pace of monetary tightening, if not pause. Since early-May, the bank's benchmark repo lending rate has gone up by 225 basis points, from 4 per cent to 6.25 per cent. That's a fairly steep rise within a short period. It is well established that monetary policy acts with a lag. In this case, the transmission of the front-loaded interest rate increases to the real economy may take at least a few quarters. The RBI can, therefore, afford to adopt a wait-and-watch approach and allow the impact of its past monetary policy actions to be fully felt. This does not mean taking its foot off the pedal; bringing down inflation to the target ("second milestone") of four per cent is no less important. But the balance of risks is today clearly tilted towards growth rather than inflation, both globally and domestically.

If the RBI is seen to have done enough of tightening for now, it is appropriate that the onus for macroeconomic stabilisation also shift more to North Block than Mint Street. The coming budget should prioritise fiscal consolidation. It implies no new populist schemes in the name of putting money in people's hands or sharp tax cuts to supposedly incentivise investors. The world is, no doubt, viewing India favourably as an investment destination, both for its large domestic market and the need to de-risk from China in the current geopolitical environment. The Narendra Modi government's focus on improving the country's physical as well as digital infrastructure, plus schemes such as production-linked incentive for attracting investments in specific manufacturing sectors, has probably added to that perception. Demonstrating macroeconomic stability and policy

credibility can be the icing on the cake to bring the world to India.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 31-1-2023

Tripura elections: 'No breaking point... parties did not give a concrete offer,' says TIPRA Motha chief

In the upcoming assembly elections in Tripura, the TIPRA Motha party, led by former Congress leader Pradyot Bikram Manikya Deb Barma, is being wooed by all national parties for an alliance.

By Sunetra Choudhury, New Delhi

In the upcoming assembly elections in Tripura, the Tipraha Indigenous Progressive Regional Alliance (TIPRA) Motha party, led by former Congress leader Pradyot Bikram Manikya Deb Barma, is being wooed by all national parties for an alliance. After days of talks, the party announced that it will fight alone because all parties failed to give a written assurance on their demand for a separate state of Greater Tipraland. After announcing 30 candidates for the 60 assembly seats, Deb Barma told Sunetra Choudhury that his party is confident of winning even in non-tribal seats. His party won the largest chunk of 18 out of 28 seats in 2021's election to the tribal council. Edited excerpts from an interview:

What was the breaking point for the talks?

There was no breaking point. All I wanted was in writing, and oral assurances have never worked in the past, so I said if you wanted to have a dialogue, it should be in writing, as not many people trust politicians these days.

The Left had said they were wooing you and the Bharatiya Janata Party held talks with you. Out of all the parties, who made the most serious offer?

The BJP never gave me a serious offer. I had spoken to the home ministry and never spoke to the BJP. The closest would have been the Left front. At least publicly or in press conferences, the Left has been at loggerheads with me and my family for a very long time, and they have definitely softened their stance. They have definitely also seen some logic to the condition of what the tribals are going through and they did realize that. I spoke to Sitaram Yechury too. They were concessional, but they did not want to give it in writing.

Is there still room for a change of heart on your part about going it alone? You have not announced candidates for all seats.

We have announced 42 till last night, and there is no change of heart as the heart should always have a

singular approach and not wander around here and there. It is very important to have a written understanding or contract so that you can go back and tell your supporters that you did not have any other motive other than stitching up an alliance. We were always prepared.

Congress also approached us during the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) elections, but even that time we did not go with them because we realized that our strength lies in fighting it out on our own. The other national political parties tend to overlook the conditions of the people in the hills and I have gone through the same when I was the Congress president (of Tripura). I think there is too much of a communication gap in what Delhi wants you to do, and what the local state party does. Tripura is too small and insignificant a state for national parties to give importance to it. After all, there are just two Lok Sabha seats.

You had a meeting with the chief minister of Assam in Delhi. Can you share what happened?

I know Himanta Biswa Sarma since we were both in Congress. He had asked us about some of our problems and we had told him what the problem was. I am not part of his northeast democratic alliance and so we spoke and I put forward my views, and I clearly said unless the government of India assures us of constitutional solutions to our problems, we will not have any alliance. He understood and said will he will pass on the message.

Amit Shah didn't call you after that?

The home ministry discussed this with us. We had a discussion among our party leaders. There was some draft that was shown by the ministry, but we said we wanted it in writing because drafts have been signed earlier as well in 2018, but nothing came of it and the trust of the people was shattered. I cannot spoil the image of our party by going to Delhi and stitching up an alliance without any concrete, written proposal.

Wasn't it tricky allying with the BJP because your party has a strong stand on the Citizenship Amendment Act?

We are not against any legal citizen settling in India. Our stance on CAA is different from the rest of the country. We also have a different stance on customary laws, among other issues, with the BJP, but that does not mean that constitutional protections should not be given to the people. I was not discussing this with the BJP, but rather the government of India, and if it believes in Sabka Sath, Sabka Vikas (Together, for everyone's growth, with everyone's trust), then they cannot ignore the 14 lakh tribals residing in the hills

of Tripura. They are the original inhabitants of Tripura and need to be protected as much as the minorities from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Now you have gone ahead and announced your candidates for the seats.

Congress is fighting on 13 seats and now they may have gone to 16 and the communists are fighting in 44 and we are fighting on a similar number. This proves that we are quite competent in having candidates and I am quite sure we will do very well in the elections. We had done very well and won the council by two-thirds majority and subsequently have come very close to winning seats where tribals are not in majority. In fact, in the Surma by-polls, we lost by just 2,000 votes in a seat which is reserved for a scheduled caste candidate. People have started warming up to us and we are the first regional party that has fielded candidates from all communities extensively.

In your assessment, which is the party you have to beat?

In many seats, our direct fight is with the communists and the BJP is nowhere in the picture. In a few seats, the TIPRA will be the main contenders along with the BJP. In some seats, it's us versus the CPI(M), but the BJP and us in some seats. It's more the CPI(M) versus us, however.

Do you think the BJP's strategy of changing the chief minister will help it like it did in Gujarat and Uttarakhand?

It didn't help in Himachal Pradesh. I think the people of Tripura are very intelligent and Biplab Deb was seen as a popular face of the BJP, and removing him will have its pro and cons. I feel that without giving any reason why Biplab Deb was removed, it has damaged the 4.5 year government of the BJP, which they claim have done a great job in the past five years. The BJP thinks that public memory is short. I don't think in Tripura, where there are a lot of Bengalis, memory will be a problem, as they are very intelligent people and they have a good sense of history, and I don't think they will forget the five years since they still remember the rule of the maharajas or the role Manik Sarkar and not forget the 4.5 years rule of the BJP government. It would not be that easy. The tribals, of course, are not voting for the BJP, and I don't think that the BJP is faring very well in these elections.

Finally, what's your impression of the Bharat Jodo Yatra?

I think it is a wonderful initiative taken by Rahul Gandhi. He has been trolled and abused, but he responded by shunning hatred and accepting love.

This is the Rahul Gandhi I know. I think it's a great initiative, and we should welcome a person who starts an entire yatra and goes from Kanyakumari to Kashmir. I hope he takes a similar yatra from Kutch to Tripura also, and it will be even better if he makes it as non-political as possible. It will be very good.

Will it have an electoral dividend?

I am no one to comment on that but I think the image of Rahul Gandhi, of being a person who rushes away to a foreign country as soon as the elections are over and so and so forth, has been largely diminished. I think Rahul Gandhi is an honourable and decent gentleman. I may not be in Congress, but personal fondness always remains. But this does not mean I am going back to the Congress, but I think Bharat Jodo is a great initiative. I think all of us should take similar initiatives to bring about more love among countrymen, irrespective of caste, creed or religion.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 17-1-2023

US to focus on polls atmosphere

Lu says in interview with; there were no fresh sanctions as Rab made progress; labour rights ensured will mean GSP reinstated

There was a lot of interest in US Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia **Donald Lu's** visit to Dhaka. Before leaving early yesterday, he held a series of meetings with the top ministers, labour rights, and civil society leaders. What were the discussions and outcomes? Lu shared with **Porimol Palma** in detail.

TDS: After landing, you directly went to the foreign minister's home and met him over dinner. What did you discuss?

Lu: I was really honoured to be welcomed by the foreign minister right off of the aeroplane. It was a very frank discussion. We all agreed that we could work a little harder to prevent misperceptions on both sides, but work harder to focus on the future of our relationship. There's a lot that we're doing. Trade, investment, security, climate change. We have a lot of hard work going forward. I was very clear the US is going to continue to value democracy and human rights in this country. That it's important that when friends have concerns or questions that we're raising. But I think we can do that in a friendly environment. I certainly see on the part of the minister a desire to make this a constructive relationship.

TDS: In Washington, you had expressed concerns over the security of your ambassador over an incident

on December 14 in Dhaka. Did you raise that issue in Dhaka? Has the issue been settled?

Lu: I have to say, we take very seriously the security of your Bangladeshi diplomats in the US. We spend a lot of time making sure that they are safe and well taken care of. We expect the same from the government of Bangladesh. I was given assurances from everyone we met, including the home minister, that they are very focused on the security of our team.

TDS: There was a rumour that more sanctions were coming. Is it so?

Lu: I hope not. Normally, we impose sanctions on the anniversary [December 10]. We would have designated more individuals from the Rab to face individual sanctions. We didn't do that because we recognise the progress being made by the government and by the Rab itself to reform. We would like to see more reforms, but we mean to encourage this process going forward ... [so that] they are an effective law enforcement unit without human rights violations.

TDS: What more did you discuss on sanctions?

Lu: We have seen over the last year a dramatic reduction in the number of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. This is extraordinary and something that should be celebrated. There was a killing in November. It is Shaheen Mia. Immediately, the government appointed a magistrate to investigate the incident. This is important to show that Rab is going to be held accountable. In fact, you have structures in place to make sure that nothing inappropriate is being done. I encourage the government to report on such cases. This is a sign that Rab can function in a way that all Bangladeshi should be proud of. We want to encourage Rab to continue the progress. I have heard from the government that they're very interested in making reforms.

TDS: You have reiterated your commitment to democracy and free, fair and participatory elections. What was the feedback?

Lu: Well, let me say the main focus of my visit is to show that the US is a reliable partner and that we share the vision of Bangladeshi people for a stronger democracy, more prosperity and stability in this important country. Bangladesh is an important democracy in South Asia. Like all of us, Bangladesh has an imperfect democracy. I hope Bangladesh will be working hard to make sure that as it moves towards elections, they're focused on the ability of the government and opposition to work peacefully together, to protect freedom of assembly so people can gather peacefully, but also freedom of speech. As Americans, we'll condemn violence where we see it --

if it's on the part of opposition or the part of government and security forces. At the same time, we are going to focus on whether there's intimidation during these elections, and if either side attempts to intimidate the voters or the leaders, we will say so publicly. I think it's important as democracies that we provide that sort of feedback and really encourage each other to be better democracies. I have every confidence that Bangladesh will be able to rise to the occasion and have a good election.

TDS: What was the feedback?

Lu: Well, everyone I talked to pointed to the prime minister's commitment to free and fair elections without violence or intimidation. And so that's what we would like as well. I hope there will be that same commitment on the part of the opposition.

TDS: Bangladesh wants the GSP (Generalised System of Preferences) facility back and funding under the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) but both are tied to labour reforms. How can you help here?

Lu: The US is the number one destination for exports from Bangladesh. So, labour rights are really important for you and the US as a consumer. We could provide technical assistance in terms of labour laws including the EPZ law. We are willing to support Bangladesh in improving the process of trade unions' registration. There are some unions that have tried to register but were unable. Improving labour rights means your reputation going up. It can also open the door to new financing from the DFC and the GSP reinstated.

TDS: Recently, a Russian ship with equipment for the nuclear power plant in Bangladesh was redirected to India because the ship was sanctioned. What is the magic that it could be unloaded in India and not in Bangladesh?

Lu: Let me broaden the question. The US does not ask Bangladesh or anyone else to choose between Russia and the US, or China and the US. We want to compete and show that we are a reliable and constructive partner for Bangladesh. We want Bangladesh to see value in our relationship. This is important for us. The war in Ukraine has caused some very unfortunate consequences for Bangladeshis, Americans, and certainly for Ukrainians. We see high energy prices, and high food prices. So, the international community has imposed some sanctions on Russia. The point is to prevent Vladimir Putin and his military from gaining more money and power for them to use in the war. It is not to punish Bangladeshi people. And, we are talking to the Bangladesh

government about how to minimise the effects of these sanctions on Bangladeshi people. About the ship. I would just pray that Bangladesh can avoid secondary sanctions. The sanctions oriented at Moscow may become a bilateral issue for us or cause problems for Bangladeshi businesspeople who might take things off of ships that were under sanction. I've had long discussions with our Indian partners about these very same issues and we're working through them.

TDS: Dhaka has said that foreign diplomats speaking about Bangladesh's elections and politics violates the Vienna Convention. How do you respond?

Lu: I have been in government service for 33 years. In all the places we served, we encourage our partners to live up to their democratic values. That's just what means to be an American diplomat. It's not something specific to Bangladesh or South Asia. It is because we believe that our partnership is stronger when your democracy is stronger; when people have the right to free speech and freedom of assembly. I believe this is what Bangladesh wants as well. We, Americans, have our own problems with democracy, but I am proud that our two countries can talk about these issues openly. We will also welcome support for improving our democracy.

SUNDAY OBSERVER, COLOMBO 22-1-2023

LG polls then and the present scenario

By Jaliya Wijeyekoon

Local Government election fever is gradually spreading across the country though amidst some uncertainty due to the current economic and political situation in the country. LG polls are scheduled to be held by late March 2023 according to the LG Act and the election commission is prepared to hold it on schedule.

However, according to the sentiments expressed by some senior Government Ministers, it is rather unlikely that the Government is seriously interested in holding the election at this point of time due to the severe financial constraints.

A large number of economists, independent analysts, unbiased political enthusiasts and even some members of the Maha Sangha have requested the Government to postpone the LG Polls for some time until the economy becomes fairly stabilised.

Indeed quite contrary to all these the Opposition parties such as the SJB, JVP and the newly formed alliances are hell-bent on having the LG Polls as

scheduled absolutely with no respect for the above views.

Whatever the final outcome of the LG polls would be, there will not be a change of the central administration in the country and the motive behind their effort is to assess the popularity of their parties in the electoral districts across the country.

It is very sad to note that none of these parties are least concerned about the urgent burning issues of the ordinary masses. Other than these opportunistic politicians, the general public irrespective of any differences are not least interested in going for an election at this hour spending an enormous amount of money as the country is in a very pathetic economic situation.

History of LG polls

It is quite timely and appropriate to refer to the history of Local Government Elections in Sri Lanka. Local Government bodies had been in existence in Sri Lanka from the colonial days. They were known as Village Councils (VC), Town Councils (TC), Urban Councils (UC) and Municipal Councils (MC).

Urban Councils and Municipal Councils still operate under the same names, but with much wider powers with the introduction of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution in 1987. VCs and TCs were done away with the introduction of 13th Amendment and replaced by Pradeshiya Sabhas.

The administrative areas were re-demarcated based on the population, strength of the economy and number of Grama Niladhari divisions and every Pradeshiya Sabha is covered by an Additional Divisional Secretary.

Prior to 1987, the formation of these local bodies was quite different. All local bodies had a ward system. From Municipal Councils down to village councils, all local bodies had a set of wards which were represented by party members.

Any local body which wins the majority number of ward members from the party elect their chairman and takes over the administration of the council for a specified period of four years.

Local bodies were the breeding ground of promising politicians in the past in this country. J.R. Jayewardene, S.W.R.D. Bnadaranaika and Ranasinghe Premadasa rose to the zenith of their political career, representing their parties, having started their political career as ward members of the Colombo Municipal Council.

There were a number of senior legislators such as Dr. N.M. Perera, A.E. Goonesinghe, Peter Keuneman, Ashoka Karunaratne, M.D. Banda and P.C. Imbulana

who started their political career as local body members from their respective areas.

All of them were seasoned politicians who rendered invaluable service, not only to their areas, but also to the entire country during the latter stages of their political careers.

During the olden days, no regular payment or gratis was made to these ward members, instead, a nominal fee was paid to them for every sitting. It was considered an honourable job carried out by these members who commanded the respect of the public of the area.

Introduction of Pradeshiya Sabhas

However, with the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, Pradeshiya Sabhas were introduced replacing VCs and TCs, and the Local Authority Elections Act was also changed. It was further amended by Act No. 25 of 1990.

Elections for local bodies were held under the new system for the 1st time in 1991. The elections on March 2023 would be the 9th occasion when the elections are conducted under this system. Unlike in the early days, politics has now become a lucrative profession and all parties are equally interested in winning the election by any means, to establish their political empires.

The candidates are even more anxious to attain power and resort to any mean tactics since they are sure of enjoying the perks, power and privileges once they are elected.

The election process has also become extremely complicated, from the time of preparing nomination papers right up to the time of issuing official results by the returning officers. It had been recorded at previous Local Government elections that there had been different types of discrepancies with regard to the preparation of nomination papers by political parties, which had resulted in the rejection of their nomination lists.

There are a number of qualifications, statutory requirements and some provisions for a person to be a candidate under a registered political party. The party organiser in the area has to see the conformity of all candidates of his or her area before submitting the lists to the returning officers.

Some political parties even appoint legal experts to scrutinise the nomination lists. The candidates are chosen after they are interviewed by a panel appointed by the party hierarchy.

Despite all preparations, the nomination papers of many parties are rejected due to various lapses. There are minute details which have to be carefully

scrutinised by the party secretaries or authorised officers before submitting their lists to the returning officers.

The following are the basic requirements to be fulfilled by a candidate under a registered political party who wishes to contest the election for any of the local bodies.

1.He or she should be a person residing in the same area for a period of not less than three years and his or her name should appear in the election register.

2.He or she should be a person over 18 years of age as at June 30 of the preceding year.

3.He or she should not be a person who had been convicted for any offence and served a jail term of over three months.

4.He or she should not be a person who has been diagnosed by a physician as an insane person.

5.If the candidature aspirant is a Government servant he or she has to resign from the post held before the nomination papers are signed.

6.The registered name of the parties should be correctly indicated in the nomination papers.

With the introduction of the new Amendment to the LG Act in 2017 where the number of members became almost double, the entire process became even more cumbersome and complicated from the time of submitting the nominations papers right up to forming the councils after declaring the results.

The duty of the party secretary, group leader or the authorised officer is to scrutinise their nomination papers and see whether all requirements are met and whether the nomination list is accurate.

Even if there is a slight difference or discrepancy in name written on the nomination papers as against the birth certificate of a candidate, the returning officer has the full authority to reject their entire list of nominations. The rule equally applies to independent groups as well.

Current plight of LF polls 2023

Quite evidently there are two factions airing different views about the impending LG polls. The general opinion is that it is not a timely move to go for an election spending an enormous amount of public funds at a time like this when the national economy is at an abysmal level and finding it difficult to manage the basic and inevitable expenditures of the deserving masses of the country.

Concurrently the other faction consisting of SJB, JVP and the newly formed alliance are vehemently accusing the Government of its endeavour to postpone the election as the Government is unable to muster the support of the majority population.

But the ground reality is that only the Opposition parties and their close associates are engaged in the election campaign while the vast majority of citizenry is not least interested in wasting time on an election campaign as it will not bear any fruitful results for the common man.

However, it should be stated that holding the timely elections is a foremost responsibility of any democratic Government but our history reveals that the local elections in the past had disrupted the peaceful public environment and caused havoc in the society with grass root level members of all parties fighting each other during the run up to the election.

The mentality among some aggressive sections of the people such as aragalaya activists and their allied forces are well beyond the peaceful methods of negotiating political views of the general public.

During the past LG polls the village based political supporters of all parties had caused significant distractions and social divisions leading to chaotic situations in their areas and the Government in power had to impose even police curfew in some places to avoid political crimes.

Quite contrary to those by gone days, right now the country needs social harmony and peace mainly in order to get out of this economic mess.

In this backdrop both factions are anxiously awaiting the final verdict of the Supreme Court on the writ petition filed against conducting the LG polls and the three intervention petitions filed seeking the dismissal of the writ.

However, the Election Commission had officially informed the Supreme Court that they have made all the ground work to conduct the 2023 local elections on schedule. Still for all the general public is kept in suspense over the LG polls 2023.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 22-1-2023

Presidential election: When constitutional and legal terms clash

President and Vice President Election Act 2017 requires vote at least a month before the incumbent's tenure ends.

TIKA R PRADHAN

KATHMANDU: With the Cabinet expanded and Speaker and deputy Speaker of the House elected, political parties are now focussed on the upcoming elections of the new President and Vice President.

Ramesh Lekhak, chief whip of the Nepali Congress, on Thursday raised a question on the need to amend the law governing the presidential election.

“The constitutional provision and the existing law on election of the President contradict each other. Therefore, the law needs to be amended,” Lekhak told reporters after the Speaker election on Thursday. “We must work on it.”

Lekhakh said that the provisions in the constitution and the law have created confusion about the commencement of the newly-elected President’s tenure.

Article 63(1) of the constitution states that the term of office of the President shall be five years from the date on which he or she is elected.

But Section 4 of the President and Vice President Election Act 2017 says the Election Commission should elect the President at least a month ahead of the expiry of the incumbent’s term.

If the new President and the Vice President are elected a month before the terms of the incumbents expire, they should assume office as soon as possible, as per the constitution, in the process shortening the term of the sitting President and Vice President by a month. If the same provision is continued, this one month reduction in the terms will be applicable to all those elected to the two offices.

Leaders of other major parties have also pointed to the contradiction in the constitutional and legal provisions.

Subas Nembang, who chaired the Constituent Assembly that drafted the constitution, said the issue was a serious one.

“The issue raised by Ramesh Lekhak regarding the term of the incumbent President and the election of the new one is serious,” UML vice-chair Nembang told the Post. “Parties should resolve it through discussions.”

CPN (Maoist Centre) leaders have also said the issue needs immediate attention from the government so that the applicable law can be amended at the earliest. General Secretary of ruling Maoist Centre Dev Gurung said a constitutional problem could arise if the law governing the presidential election is not amended.

“If we can amend the law, the election can be held in mid-March. If not, the presidential election should be held before mid-February,” Gurung said. “As the constitution says the new President should assume office soon after election, a problem could arise.”

The issue comes to the surface at a time when major political forces are engaged in a tug of war to get the coveted post.

The Nepali Congress has been urging Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal to elect the new President

through consensus among political parties. Dahal has responded to the proposal of the largest party positively, at least in public.

But CPN-UML chair KP Sharma Oli, who is Dahal’s key coalition partner, has rejected the idea outright saying that there has already been an agreement on giving the top position to his party.

Prime Minister Dahal also convened an all-party meeting on Tuesday to seek national consensus on the presidential election. But UML leaders believe the consensus proposal was brought with the ill intent of breaking the ruling coalition.

Some coalition leaders also claimed that the issue of contradiction in constitutional and legal provisions was raised with an intent to delay the election. They argued that Congress leaders were trying to buy time as they are on a ‘mission’ to break the coalition led by the UML and the Maoist Centre.

Constitutional experts say the constitutional provision prevails if any law contradicts it. Hence it would be desirable for Parliament to ensure uniformity in the constitutional and legal provisions.

“Parliament should ensure uniformity in compliance with the constitutional provision,” said Bhimarjun Acharya, an advocate and expert on constitutional law.

But not all constitutional experts find a problem with the legal requirement to elect the President and the Vice President a month in advance as that could prevent a constitutional hurdle arising in the event of the election not happening on time.

“The election to such a high-profile office should be held a month before so that the president-elect and the outgoing official have ample time to prepare,” said Bipin Adhikari, a professor and former dean at the Kathmandu University School of Law.

“The existing law on the presidential election was well thought out and there won’t be any problem. The new President can take the oath the day the outgoing one feels comfortable.”

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 17-1-2023

Pakistan, Iran sign 39 MoUs to boost trade **Saleem Shahid**

QUETTA: Pakistan and Iran have signed 39 memorandums of understanding to enhance bilateral trade, improve economic relations and ensure cooperation in various fields such as transportation, tourism, fisheries, mines and minerals.

The MoUs were signed at the conclusion of a two-day meeting of the joint border trade committee on

Sunday night. The meeting discussed various issues relating to the implementation of agreements signed between the two countries in 2010 and 2006 for increasing trade volume and providing facilities for import and export at the Pak-Iran borders.

Both sides agreed that the Zahidan Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture and Quetta Chamber of Commerce and Industry will make joint investment for provision of the required infrastructures in customs, trade, transportation and airline sectors.

It was agreed that the authorities concerned would be approached to increase the number of items included in the Preferential Trade Agreement signed between Pakistan and Iran and reduce tariff.

It was decided that both countries would take measures to increase bilateral trade to \$5 billion annually and also try to achieve balance of trade.

Both sides agreed that an additional border crossing point shall be opened at Kohak-Panjgur in order to increase bilateral trade.

It was also agreed that recommendations should be sent to higher authorities for establishment of new joint border markets at Mir Javeh-Taftan (first priority), Jalgh-Mashkel (second priority) and Shamsar (third priority) after approval by the relevant authorities and identification of exact locations by a joint technical team.

The two sides agreed that relevant ministries and authorities would be approached to sign a free trade agreement between Iran and Pakistan. It was agreed that efforts shall be made by both sides to reduce import tariff on fresh fruits through negotiations with the relevant authorities.

Both sides agreed to set up maritime clearance stations at Pasabandar in Iran and Jiwani in Pakistan for bilateral trade.

The Iranian side agreed to declare Gabd-Ramdan as designated TIR border at the earliest for conducting international transit trade from Pakistan towards Turkiye, Azerbaijan, Russia and other regional countries via Iranian territory. They proposed to declare Pishin/Mand as designated TIR station.

Both sides agreed that vehicles loaded with cargo shall be allowed without carnet/visa up to customs area at Mir Javeh and Mir Javeh Special Economic Zone on Iranian side, while on the principle of reciprocity, the same facility is being extended to Iranian cargo vehicles up to NLC terminal and railway station at Taftan.

Iranian authorities agreed to provide shelters to Pakistani rice at Zahidan customs. They also proposed

that LPG in cylinders may be allowed to be imported via all land border stations from Iran to Pakistan.

The meeting was informed that a ferry service with Iran is being finalised and the same will be shared with the Iranian side after completion of codal formalities.

The Pakistani side said the number of railway wagons for freight transportation would be increased up to 500 on the completion of a bridge at Hirak by the end of June 2023, considering the increased demand of the traders.

THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 24-1-2023

ICCI, Moscow Chamber join hands to promote Pak-Russia trade relations

Imran Ali Kundi

ISLAMABAD - The Islamabad Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ICCI) has signed a Protocol of Intentions with Moscow Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI) to work jointly for promoting business linkages between the private sectors of both countries and enhancing bilateral trade between Pakistan and Russia. Ahsan Zafar Bakhtawari, President ICCI, and Stanislav Korolev, Chairman, Commission on Foreign Economic Relations with Partners in Pakistan of MCCI, signed the document during a ceremony held at ICCI. Dr. Zahid A. Khan, President, Pakistan Trade House in Russia was also present in the signing ceremony. Speaking at the occasion, Ahsan Zafar Bakhtawari, President ICCI, said that Pakistan and Russia have great potential to enhance trade relations as their current bilateral trade is far less than their actual potential.

He said that both countries should make efforts to take bilateral trade to at least \$5 billion within the next few years. He said that Pakistan can export many products to Russia including agricultural products, textiles, clothing, pharmaceuticals, rice, leather, sporting goods, surgical equipment and others. He said that Pakistan and Russia should sign a free trade agreement to boost trade volume. He said that Pakistan is a huge market and Russian investors should invest in energy, oil & gas, infrastructure development, railways and other sectors in Pakistan. He said that ICCI would consider taking a delegation to MCCI in May or June this year for B2B meetings to explore new areas of bilateral trade promotion.

Faad Waheed, Senior Vice President ICCI, said that Russia had helped Pakistan in establishing Pakistan Steel Mills and we would like to revive similar flagship Russian projects in Pakistan in cooperation

with Moscow Chamber of Commerce & Industry. Engr.

Muhammad Azhar ul Islam Zafar, Vice President ICCI, said that Pakistan and Russia should encourage frequent exchange of trade delegations to explore all untapped areas of mutual cooperation. Speaking at the occasion, Stanislav Korolev, Chairman, Commission on Foreign Economic Relations with Partners in Pakistan of Moscow Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said that Russia wants to expand trade ties with Pakistan. He said that ICCI should lead efforts for promoting business relations with Russia. He said that he has been working since 2015 for an Islamic Bank in Russia to promote trade relations with Muslim countries including Pakistan.

He said that Russia is quite advanced in the pharmaceutical sector and can cooperate with Pakistan in this field. He said that the Energy Ministers of Russia and Pakistan have signed protocols for boosting cooperation in the energy sector as the three-day Pakistan-Russian Intergovernmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation has examined the prospects for boosting cooperation in the energy field. He hoped that the signing of protocol between ICCI and MCCI would contribute to improving trade ties between the two countries. Ameer Hamza, Humayun Kabir, Maqsood Tabish, Sheikh Ejaz, Ch. Muhammad Ali, Khalid Chaudhry and others also spoke at the occasion and gave useful proposals for improving bilateral trade and economic ties between Pakistan and Russia.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 26-1-2023

UAE president hints at ‘huge investment’ in Pakistan

UAE President Sheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan dropped clues that his country was planning to broaden its investment footprint in Pakistan, which needs foreign inflows to prop up its economy

By APP & Staff Correspondent

BAHAWALPUR/ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif warmly received the UAE President, Sheikh Muhammad Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, at the Chandna Airport in Cholistan desert on Wednesday afternoon.

Earlier, Sheikh Muhammad Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan reached the Cholistan desert, Rahim Yar Khan, on his annual unofficial (private) visit and later Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and the UAE president met each other at the airport lounge and discussed the

bilateral relations as well as the regional, political and economic situation.

Shehbaz Sharif was accompanied by the Federal Minister for Information Marriyum Aurangzeb, Punjab Caretaker Chief Minister Mohsin Raza Naqvi and others, who received the UAE president and entourage at the Chandna Airport in the centre of the Cholistan Desert.

After meeting the UAE president, Shehbaz Sharif returned to Islamabad.

UAE President Sheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan Wednesday dropped clues that his country was planning to broaden its investment footprint in Pakistan, which needs foreign inflows to prop up its economy.

“Be prepared, the UAE will make a huge investment in Pakistan,” the sources quoted the UAE president as saying during a cordial meeting with Prime Minister Shehbaz at the airport.

The prime minister recalled his recent visit to the UAE and emphasised that both countries would work on the understanding reached between the two leaders in various fields, during his visit to the UAE.

The UAE president said that the brotherly relations between the two countries went back many decades and his father, who had immense love for Pakistan and its people, laid the foundation of their bilateral ties. The president also assured the prime minister that the UAE would always stand by Pakistan.

Taking to Twitter, the premier wrote: “Extremely delighted to receive my brother His Highness Sheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed on his arrival in Pakistan, which is his second home. Building on our last meeting, we discussed ways [and] means to further strengthen our brotherly relations.”

The president expressed warm affection towards the prime minister on his arrival in Pakistan and took the premier to his personal jet, sources told Geo News. The premier also met with the family members of the president and held conversations with his children in English and Arabic, the sources said.

The UAE, on January 12, agreed to lend \$1 billion to Pakistan and roll over an existing \$2 billion loan, the country’s information minister had said, as the country’s central bank foreign reserves fell to just three weeks’ worth of imports.

The UAE’s financial support offered some respite to the country that is still reeling from devastating nationwide floods that have caused more than \$30 billion of damage. The loan announcements came as Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif kicked off a two-day visit to the United Arab Emirates. “This support will

help us tide over economic difficulties,” Shehbaz said in a statement.

He met UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan and was due to discuss business and economic opportunities with other officials and business leaders, Information Minister Marriyum Aurangzeb said.

THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 27-1-2023

Pakistan, Kazakhstan agree to sign Transit Trade Agreement

Imran Ali Kundi

ISLAMABAD- Pakistan and Kazakhstan have agreed in principle to sign Kazakhstan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement.

Ambassador of Kazakhstan Yerzhan Kistafin met with Federal Minister for Commerce Syed Naveed Qamar here on Thursday and agreed in principle to sign Kazakhstan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement. The two discussed potential opportunities for trade and cooperation between Kazakhstan and Pakistan, including the conclusion of several transit trade agreements. The minister remarked that the government is keen to further establish strong economic and trade ties between the two countries, and expressed confidence that the two sides would expedite the process of concluding the agreements.

Syed Naveed Qamar observed that Pakistan will host the next session of the Joint Working Group on Trade in the coming months to discuss issues in bilateral trade and undertake measures for enhancing economic integration. The minister remarked that the MoU between KAZAKH INVEST & QazTrade from Kazakhstan and TDAP & BOI from Pakistan signed on 23rd December, 2022 will further enhance trade and investment activities between the two sides. Kistafin expressed his appreciation to the minister for his support and expressed optimism that the agreements would be finalized soon.

Besides this agreement, the ambassador also showed keen interest in Pakistani sports goods, furniture, and tourism. Subsequently, Syed Naveed Qamar invited the ambassador as “Guest of Honor” on the 18th Trade Fair of the OIC member states that is scheduled to be held from 16-18th June, 2023 in Lahore with the theme of women entrepreneurship. He also invited Kazakh government to establish a “Special Pavilion” at the OIC’s Trade Fair.

Ambassador of Saudi Arabia calls on Naveed Qamar
Meanwhile, Nawaf Saeed A. Almalkiy, Ambassador and Commercial Attache of Saudi Arabia to Pakistan,

called on Federal Minister for Commerce Syed Naveed Qamar here on Thursday. During the meeting, the two sides discussed matters of mutual interests and agreed to enhance trade volume between the two countries. Syed Naveed Qamar highlighted the need to enhance cooperation in the field of trade and investment between the countries and emphasized the need for closer economic ties.

He said that the Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Islamabad is making its utmost efforts to promote the economic relationship between the two countries and thanked Nawaf Saeed A. Almalkiy for his efforts in this regard. The ambassador and commercial attache expressed his satisfaction over the existing level of economic cooperation between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and expressed the desire to further expand economic cooperation in all areas. The two sides agreed to continue their cooperation in order to further strengthen the economic relationship between the two countries and to explore new areas of cooperation.

PEOPLE’S DAILY, CHINA 19-1-2023

China’s FDI up 8% in 2022, continuing upward trend for three consecutive years

Market size, improving business climate attract global funds: experts

By GT Staff Reporters

China's inbound foreign direct investment (FDI) grew for a third consecutive year in 2022, official data showed on Wednesday, indicating the country remains a magnet for foreign investment despite the pandemic. The attraction of China, backed up with a mass consumption market, a strong manufacturing base and an improving business environment, was not dampened by COVID, Chinese observers said, and many foreign-funded firms will remain in the market for the long run.

FDI in 2022 hit \$189.13 billion, rising 8 percent in US dollar terms and maintaining stable growth, data from the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) showed on Wednesday. FDI totaled \$173.48 billion in 2021 and \$144.37 billion in 2020.

FDI in the manufacturing sector was 323.7 billion yuan, up 46.1 percent year-on-year. This segment accounted for 26.3 percent of the total FDI, an increase of 7.8 percentage points from 2021.

FDI in the high-tech sector was up 28.3 percent, accounting for 36.1 percent of the total -- an increase of 7.1 percentage points from 2021, the data showed.

Large projects each with contracted FDI of more than \$100 million received 653.47 billion yuan, up 15.3 percent. Those projects accounted for 53 percent of China's actual use of foreign capital, providing important support for stabilizing foreign investment, the MOFCOM said.

The growth of FDI shows that foreign investors have always had confidence in the growth and stability of the Chinese market, experts said.

"The attraction of China's long-term advantages, including an improving business environment and market conditions, played an important role," Li Yong, deputy chairman of the Expert Committee of the China Association of International Trade, told the Global Times on Wednesday.

China has promoted high-standard opening-up. For example, the authorities canceled registration requirements for businesses engaged in foreign trade on December 30, 2022, following a revision of the Foreign Trade Law, the MOFCOM said on January 3. The MOFCOM and the Ministry of Science and Technology on Wednesday pledged to encourage foreign investors to set up research and development (R&D) centers and continue to support cross-border flows of R&D data in accordance with the law.

It will be impossible for multinational companies to give up the Chinese market due to its vast potential, which could be the largest in the world, Cong Yi, a professor at the Tianjin University of Finance and Economics, told the Global Times on Wednesday.

The France-based airplane manufacturer Airbus said in its earnings report on January 11 that in 2022, Airbus delivered a total of 112 aircraft to the Chinese market, including 96 single-aisle A320 series aircraft and 16 A350 aircraft, accounting for about 17 percent of Airbus' total deliveries.

The company said that it works with domestic partners, expanding the scope of cooperation to the entire industry chain covering procurement, component production and installation, aircraft final assembly, delivery, aircraft operation support, and aviation services cooperation.

MOFCOM data showed that South Korea, Germany and the UK are the top three investors, of which the FDI increased by 64.2 percent for South Korea, 52.9 percent for Germany and 40.7 percent for UK.

Bosch, the German engineering giant, said on January 12 that it plans to build a facility in Suzhou, East China's Jiangsu province to develop, test and manufacture new-energy vehicle parts and

autonomous driving technology, mainly for local automakers.

It plans to invest up to \$1 billion over the coming years to propel development and production of components for electro-mobility and autonomous driving in China.

Schneider Electric is unswervingly confident in the Chinese market. Operating in China for 36 years, China has become its second-largest market, and one of its four largest R&D bases in the world, the company told the Global Times on Wednesday.

China's business climate during the fourth quarter of 2022 won high praise from most foreign enterprises, said the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade on Tuesday, as it vowed to initiate promotions for foreign enterprises in China to enhance global competitiveness.

Chinese Vice Premier Liu He on Tuesday reiterated at the World Economic Forum's annual meeting at the Davos World Economic Forum that China is determined to promote all-round opening-up and multilateral cooperation.

"Foreign investments are welcome in China, and the door to China will only open up wider," he said.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 31-1-2023

GT Voice: Ball in Washington's court to improve trade ties with China

By Global Times

Given the huge scale of US-China trade, views are still divided as to the "decoupling" prospects of bilateral trade. Yet, it is undeniable that US-China trade trajectory is showing increasing signs of a deviation from normal trend, which is discouraging and requires attention.

According to media reports on Sunday, China may have lost the position as the top supplier of US goods imports in 2022 due to impacts from US-China geopolitical tension, COVID-19 pandemic, and other factors.

The US release of November trade numbers showed US imports of goods from China collapsed further in November, continuing the fall that began in September. Thus, during the first 11 months of last year, the US already imported more from the EU than from China in value terms, according to media reports.

At the superficial level, the development seems to be exactly what the US attempted to pursue a "decoupling" push and to crack down on China's supply chains has achieved. The political will may

have affected the trend of US-China trade to some extent, driving it toward a "lose-lose" situation for both sides.

Despite geopolitical tensions, China and the US are important trading partners, and 2022 still marked a record year for China-US trade volume, but there is an obvious deviation of their trade from their overall trade trend. Statistics from China's General Administration of Customs showed that in 2022, China's exports to the US rose 1.2 percent year-on-year, with imports from the US down by 1.1 percent. This is in comparison to China's 2022 export gain of 7 percent, with imports up 1.1 percent.

If anything, it represents an abnormal state of bilateral trade. The pandemic may play a role during the process, but with China's optimization of COVID-19 response, the impact from this factor has abated. That leaves the US policies in main play in the current abnormal trend. Over the years, the US government has launched trade war against China, imposed tariffs on \$300 billion worth of Chinese goods, and issued a series of bans on exports of high-tech products to China. All these have contributed to continuing trade tensions that have left their mark on bilateral trade.

In spite of the pressure from the US across global supply chains, China's trade with other major trading partners continued to gain momentum. In 2022, China's trade with ASEAN surged 17.7 percent year-on-year, while trade with the EU increased 8.6 percent, an apparent manifestation of the resilience and diversification of Chinese trade with the rest of the world.

Moreover, past years saw some low-end manufacturing transfer to China's neighboring countries under the US trade policies and other factors. This is an inevitable process of China's industrial upgrading manifested in the extension of industrial chains.

Of course, the trade diversification doesn't mean that we don't value trade with the US any more. China's willingness to see bilateral trade get back to the normal track remains unchanged, but the ball is actually in the US' court when it comes to improving bilateral trade ties.

Through any lens, strengthening the coordination of economic and financial policies and promoting cooperation in the economic and trade fields between the two largest economies in the world are in the interests of both sides and in line with the law of the market economy. Distorting trade ties based on political reasons is against the laws of the market

economy, and to go down on such a wrong path will have serious consequences.

Indeed, except for some anti-China forces and politicians keen on zero-sum political thinking, many businesses in the US are looking forward to easing tensions of bilateral trade, which is the foundation or "ballast" of China-US relations. The US is still facing the risk of recession, with its inflation remaining at high levels, while China is trying its best to fuel a full-fledged economic recovery from the pandemic. The status quo presents the room for expanding mutually beneficial cooperation, if political headwinds are not involved. Washington needs to make adjustment to its China trade policy before opportunities slip away.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 16-1-2023

Iran's exports to EU up 20% in 11 months on year

TEHRAN – The value of Iran's export to the European Union (EU)'s member states rose 20 percent in the first 11 months of 2022, as compared to the same period in 2021, according to the data released by the European Union's statistics office Eurostat.

The Eurostat's data show that Iran exported commodities worth €976 million to the union in the 11-month period of this year, while the figure was €812 million in the same time span of the previous year, IRNA reported.

The EU's export to Iran has also risen 22 percent to €3.739 billion from €3.048 billion.

According to the Eurostat, the total value of trade between Iran and the European Union reached €4.715 billion in January-November 2022, while the figure was €3.86 billion in the same period of 2021.

Among European countries, Germany was Iran's top trading partner in the first 11 months of 2022, accounting for about 39 percent of Iran's trade with the European Union. Germany exported €1.465 billion worth of goods to Iran while importing €260 million worth of commodities from the Islamic Republic. The country's total trade with Iran was 1.725 billion euros.

As previously reported by Eurostat, the value of trade between Iran and the European Union reached €4.863 billion in 2021, registering a nine-percent growth compared to the previous year.

The trade between Iran and the European Union in 2020 stood at €4.458 billion.

Iran exported €922 million worth of commodities to the union during January-December 2021 to register a 29-percent rise year on year.

Based on the mentioned data, the exports from Europe to the Islamic Republic in the said year also increased by five percent, standing at €3.941 billion.

Iran imported €3.745 billion worth of commodities from the European Union states in 2020, while exporting €713 million to the region.

Iran mainly exports foodstuff and livestock, beverages and tobacco, raw materials, mineral fuels, and vegetable oils to European countries, while foodstuff, beverages and tobacco, mineral fuels, vegetable oils, and chemicals are also the main products imported from the union.

EF/MA

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 17-1-2023

Commodities worth over \$950m traded at IME in a week

TEHRAN- During the past Iranian calendar week (ended on Friday), Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) witnessed the trade of 2,165,000 tons of commodities with a total trading value of more than \$950 million on its physical market.

As reported by the IME's Public Relations and International Affairs Department, the exchange traded on its metals and minerals trading floor 1,679,139 tons of commodities valued at more than \$705 million.

On this floor the IME sold 1,006,174 tons of cement, 604,600 tons of steel, 83,000 tons of iron ore, 10,025 tons of aluminum, 8,035 tons of copper, 900 tons of zinc, 500 tons of lead, 200 tons of molybdenum concentrate, 24 kg of gold bars and 10,792 vehicles.

Furthermore, the IME witnessed on both domestic and export rings of its oil and petrochemical trading floor 407,876 tons of commodities worth more than \$223 million.

Commodities traded on this floor included 134,857 tons of bitumen, 98,000 tons of vacuum bottom, 96,649 tons of polymeric products, 39,390 tons of chemicals, 31,000 tons of lube cut, 6,075 tons of base oil, 1,800 tons of petroleum products and 955 tons of sulfur.

The IME also traded within the same week 78,279 tons of commodities on its side market.

As previously reported, 10,931,107 tons of commodities worth over \$3 billion were traded at Iran Mercantile Exchange during the past Iranian calendar month Azar (ended on December 21, 2022).

The exchange traded on both domestic and export rings of its oil and petrochemical trading floor 1,791,743 tons of commodities valued at nearly \$991 million.

The IME's customers purchased on this floor 526,000 tons of vacuum bottom, 491,023 tons of bitumen, 419,853 tons of polymeric products, 157,696 tons of chemicals, 120,500 tons of lube cut, 41,000 tons of sulfur, 23,788 tons of oil, 9,632 tons of petroleum products, 1,200 tons of insulation and 1,050 tons of feedstocks.

Furthermore, the exchange saw trade of 9,133,701 tons of commodities worth more than \$2 billion on its metals and minerals trading floor.

Items traded on this floor included 4,592,219 tons of cement, 2,199,000 tons of iron ore, 1,784,395 tons of steel, 340,000 tons of sponge iron, 131,650 tons of zinc, 31,175 tons of aluminum, 24,731 tons of copper, 2,000 tons of cast iron, 750 tons of molybdenum concentrate, 100 tons of lead, 36 tons of precious metals concentrate and 272 kg of gold bars.

It's worth noting that the IME also traded 13,686 vehicles on its automobile trading floor.

Last was the IME's side market on which the exchange traded 5,649 tons of commodities

The value of trades at Iran Mercantile Exchange rose 102 percent, and the volume of trades at the exchange increased 128 percent in the past Iranian calendar year 1400 (ended on March 20, 2022), which was the highest level of growth in the history of the exchange since its establishment.

Statistical data show that in the past year, in addition to new records in the volume and value of trades of different products, 10 major records in total value and physical market trades were registered. In a way that besides the total value of trades, the volume and value of physical market trades, the volume, and value of industrial products and petrochemicals trades, the value of oil products trades and the volume and value of side market trades all hit records.

IME is one of the four major stock markets of Iran, the other three markets are Tehran Stock Exchange (TSE), Iran's over-the-counter (OTC) market known also as Iran Fara Bourse (IFB), and Iran Energy Exchange (IRENEX).

MA/MA

III - SOCIAL AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS

	<u>III – SOCIAL AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS</u>			
	Subject	Newspapers/Periodicals	Date	Page
	INDIA Educational Finances			
1.	Costly course By Furqan Qamar Educational Reforms	The Telegraph, Kolkata	16-1-2023	29
2.	Implementing NEP: Govt forms panel to restructure school education By Pallavi Smart Communal Clashes	The Indian Express, New Delhi	17-1-2023	29
3.	Gurugram: Thrashed by four men over Rs 3,000, Dalit man dies in hospital - PTI BANGLADESH Educational Course	The Telegraph, Kolkata	27-1-2023	30
4.	The Ideological Elephant in the NCTB Textbooks By Dr Shamsad Mortuza SRI LANKA Tourism	The Daily Star, Dhaka	28-1-2023	30
5.	‘Seethawaka Odyssey’ on track to boost tourism By Avissawella, Special Correspondent Kalpani Padmaperuma Educational Reforms	Daily News, Colombo	16-1-2023	32
6.	Educational transformation catering to modern requirements By Dharma Sri Abeyratne NEPAL Disease	Daily News, Colombo	18-1-2023	33
7.	Nepal struggling to control measles By Arjun Poudel	The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu	18-1-2023	34

	PAKISTAN Education			
8.	The essence of education By M Zeb Khan	The Daily Times, Islamabad	16-1-2023	35
9.	Chancellor's vision about higher education in K-P By Dr Syed Akhtar Ali Shah Tourism	The Daily Times, Islamabad	18-1-2023	36
10.	KP to become hub of tourism investment after completion of ITZs - APP CHINA Tourism	The Nation, Islamabad	20-1-2023	38
11.	Nation sees strong rebound in tourism sector during the Chinese Spring Festival holidays By GT Staff Reporters IRAN Tourism	Global Times, China	25-1-2023	39
12.	Maku to host winter tourism festival - ABU/AM	Tehran Times, Tehran	16-1-2023	40

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 16-1-2023**Costly course**

Higher education institutions are vulnerable and easily manipulated into resorting to cost recovery

Furqan Qamar

The National Education Policy, 2020 strives to raise the gross enrolment ratio in higher education from 27.1% in 2019-20 to 50% by 2035. This would amount to doubling the higher education enrolment within the next 15 years. This would require the enrolment to grow by 4.7% annually. During 2014-15 to 2019-20, the growth rate was no more than 1.99% a year. The required growth in enrolment could come from enhancing the intake capacity of existing institutions or by establishing new ones. The NEP hopes to achieve these twin objectives mainly through an increased participation of the private sector in higher education.

The private sector does create capacity but is not necessarily helpful in increasing enrolment. The engineering and management institutions are glaring examples — half of their sanctioned intakes remains unfilled, while the Indian Institutes of Technology and Management have a very high seat-to-application ratio for these very programmes. Students are clearly attracted if institutions can offer quality higher education at affordable prices.

In India, undergraduate programmes account for four fifths of the total enrolment and within this a third of the students are enrolled in humanities, social sciences, arts and languages. Science, commerce and engineering/ technology account for 16, 14.9 and 12.6%, respectively. Agriculture, law, medicine, paramedical, nursing, physiotherapy and other programmes account for a minuscule fraction of the total enrolment. These in no way reflect the demand and preferences of students. Nor are they in sync with the current needs of the industry. The economy and society need graduates with professional and technical knowhow and skills, and students want to pursue such programmes. They are unable to do so for capacity constraints of institutions which could provide quality higher education at a reasonable cost.

India suffers from a shortage of doctors, but not due to a lack of interest. In 2021, about 16 lakh students appeared for the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test, out of which about eight lakh were eligible to pursue a medical degree. But the capacity of government and private medical colleges is just one lakh. Fees for a bachelor's degree in the IITs is said to have seen a three-fold rise over the past six years. A BTech degree from these institutions now costs 8-10

lakh for the general and other backward caste categories. Scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and persons with disabilities and those belonging to the general and OBC category with a family income of one lakh rupees or less are eligible for a full tuition waiver. It still costs them Rs 2 to 3 lakh. An MBBS degree in some government colleges may be available, for the most meritorious, for a nominal fee. The rest may have to shell anywhere between Rs 20 to 24 lakh a year.

Tuition fee is often determined by demand and supply. Some institutions charge exorbitant fees as a strategy for brand building, in business and management institutions, for instance. An MBA from some of the newly established ones may cost about Rs 11 lakh, but the old and established ones charge Rs 23 - 25 lakh. They target consumers who prefer higher-priced goods over low-priced ones, even though the two are quite similar. The private sector abhors and resists pricing regulation. The public sector, on the other hand, used to despise raising their fees, for they held the belief that higher education is at least a public responsibility. Most have, however, succumbed to circumstances. Public-funded Central and state universities held the fort most stubbornly. Deprived of funds, they face an existential threat and have no option but to raise their fees.

Higher education institutions are vulnerable and easily manipulated into resorting to cost recovery. The rising cost of higher education does not augur well either for students or for the nation. It would affect equity and inclusion.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 17-1-2023**Implementing NEP: Govt forms panel to restructure school education**

Pallavi Smart

Maharashtra government has formed an inter-departmental committee for implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP), which will draw up the roadmap for converting the existing structure of school education from 10+2 to 5+3+3+4 under which for the first time, three years of pre-primary will be brought under the formal education system.

Representatives from different departments such as school education, women and child development, social welfare, tribal development and skill development, among others, will work together in the inter-departmental committee. The school education department issued a Government Resolution (GR) in this regard on Monday.

In the new structure, as per the GR, the first five years will include three years of pre-primary, Class I and II. While the focus will be to enable children of these classes to read and write, an innovative 'Happiness Curriculum' will be developed for these classes with the help of local games and languages. Thereafter, for Class III to V, activity-based interactive curriculum will be developed for students' intellectual growth. The three years after that, Class VI to VIII, will focus on application-based practical knowledge, including skill-oriented courses.

In Class IX to XII, the final four years of school education, students will get a chance to learn subjects of their choice from a pool of 40 subjects. While the importance of board exams will be diluted, the practice of asking students to choose a stream for Class XI and XII will be removed by offering a multidisciplinary approach.

As the curriculum will be designed to focus more on holistic development than on marks, the evaluation practice too will evolve with a multidimensional approach, which will include self as well as peer assessment. An overall assessment will include cognitive, functional, emotional and social development of a student along with academic evaluation.

Talking about the need for an inter-department committee, an official from the school education department said, "The women and child development department is currently looking after 'Anganwadi' and 'Balwadi', which are pre-school classes for government schools, currently starting from Class I. The social justice and special assistance department and tribal development department run 'Ashramshalas' as well as government hostels for students. In order to implement the NEP effectively, integration is required in all these departments, which calls for the inter-departmental committee..."

The committee, which will be headed by the principal secretary of the school education department, will comprise commissioners from all other departments along with a few directors from the school education department.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 27-1-2023

Gurugram: Thrashed by four men over Rs 3,000, Dalit man dies in hospital

The accused beat the victim with sticks on Tuesday night and left him outside his house

PTI | Gurugram

Four men allegedly thrashed a 33-year-old Dalit in Ghoshgarh village in Bilaspur area so severely over

Rs 3,000 that he died the next day, police said on Thursday.

The accused beat the victim with sticks on Tuesday night and left him outside his house. He died Wednesday night during treatment.

According to the police, the victim, Inder Kumar ran a grocery shop from his house in Ghoshgarh.

Around four days ago, one Sagar Yadav, a man from his village, had lent him Rs 19,000 to pay the electricity bill.

Police said that Inder spent Rs 3,000 out of Rs 19,000 and failed to pay the bill.

According to the complaint filed by Deepchand, the father of the victim, on Monday, Sagar came to their home and took the remaining Rs 16,000 and gave Inder an ultimatum to return the rest as soon as possible.

"On Tuesday evening, Sagar called my son near the village temple. At around 7.30 pm Sagar called me on phone and said that Inder has promised to return the money by tomorrow, and if he does not give it by then, I will have to give him the money," Deepchand, according to the police, said in his complaint.

"I agreed, but an hour later, Sagar and three others with him, left my son outside my house moaning in pain. My son told me that Sagar, Azad, Mukesh, and Hitesh of the village beat him with sticks.

"We took him to a hospital in Pataudi for treatment from where he was referred to civil hospital, Gurugram, where he succumbed late Wednesday night," he added.

Following the complaint, an FIR was registered Thursday morning against Sagar, Azad, Mukesh, and Hitesh under sections 302 (murder) of the ICP and SC/ST Act at Bilaspur Police Station.

"We handed over the body to kin after the post mortem. The accused are absconding but our team is conducting raids to nab them and they will be arrested soon," said Inspector Rahul Dev, SHO, Bilaspur Police Station.

Except for the headline, this story has not been edited by The Telegraph Online staff and has been published from a syndicated feed.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 28-1-2023

The Ideological Elephant in the NCTB Textbooks

Dr Shamsad Mortuza

The newly introduced textbooks for Grades 1, 6 and 7, prepared by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), have created quite a stir. The issues are more than the presence of some glaring oversights

that allowed typos to creep into the texts. Instances of plagiarism in science textbooks have been traced, and the editors have already apologised for their scholarly negligence. The use of Google Translate to change a source text into Bangla for writing sections of textbooks is an event of scandalous proportions, to say the least. The involvement of some high-profile writers in such a shoddy job of academic thievery has stigmatised the entire process.

Some of the controversies are also ideological in nature.

I scanned through the Science, and History and Social Sciences textbooks to understand the nature of the “ideological” controversy. The education minister has already told a press conference that these books are pilot versions, and after receiving feedback from stakeholders and correcting factual and typographic errors, the final versions would be made available.

Questions may be asked about why these pilot versions were printed then. It would have been much easier and less expensive to make such amendments in soft copies. I guess the answers to such queries would have exposed the myth of internet penetration in our country, and the shortage of digital devices.

Before I address the elephant in the room: the embedded ideological issues in texts meant for an adolescent audience in their formative years, let me commend the writers and NCTB for adopting a learner-centric narrative tone. In science textbooks, the applied section (exercise book) complements the investigative study quite nicely. The books are rich in content and cover extensive areas, including some contemporary issues of climate change and sustainability.

However, the extent of the topics covered in these books makes me worry whether students who are 11 to 13 years old will be able to grasp so many ideas in one academic year. Since this is a pilot version, I would suggest that the lessons are tried out with detailed lesson plans with sample groups before being finalised. Whether a 140-page plus book packed with information can be covered in 10 months is something that needs to be tested and validated.

Critics have found fault with the way archaeological history has been presented. They think that the books have given more focus on pre-history, and the lack of attention on the Muslim and British eras, thereby, does not reflect the identity formation of the majority in a predominantly Muslim country.

The Class 7 book randomly starts with images of friends of our Liberation War, and ends with an image of Bangladeshi refugees taking shelter in India. Yet,

the first chapter deals with the early period of South Asian urbanism, while locating Indus cities in their larger regional landscape. The picture of Indira Gandhi has been enlarged, deservedly so. But the out-of-context placement and highlighting of the photo make the issue unnecessarily problematic for a textbook prepared by our national curriculum board. The distribution of the topic seems lopsided, as the book cursorily refers to some architectures and mosques to come to an abrupt end about the fusion of cultures in the region.

The NCTB earlier tried to bring changes to the textbooks in 2012, but was forced to omit some major sections as they were objected to by certain Islamic groups. The internet barometer suggests that a similar backlash is brewing. Already, there have been objections raised to the supposed inclusion of the theory of evolution. Critics are claiming that the NCTB textbook has suggested humanity evolved from apes, which contradicts the origin of man found in organised religion.

In a press release, the NCTB clarified its position against various propaganda. For instance, one of the narrators in the text says, “Many claim that man has come from monkeys. It’s wrong.” The text then goes on to exclaim the branching out of species, and includes an interesting side story on Lucy, a fossil of one human ancestor that dates back to 3.2 million years.

Already, claims are being made that the Darwinian theory of evolution should be dropped from the syllabi. There are many Islamic scholars today who have given ample logic to show that scientific views of origin can only solidify religious views. Holding on to a traditional view, without being aware of evolution, which literally means change over time, will fossilise our education. Hamza Yusuf is one such scholar, who uses the lens of al-Ghazālī to reach an alignment between Islam and Neo-Darwinian evolution. In a lecture, Hamza Yusuf says that it is important for Muslims to acquire the symbolic logic of the West to engage with their ideas.

I think the NCTB has been strategic in instilling inquisitiveness and openness in the minds of young readers. The objective of making a textbook for the 21st century is commendable. The book is designed to make the students critical and creative. Without creativity and a critical outlook, our young generations will fail to become global citizens.

However, the noble purpose of the textbook has been diluted by some fringe agendas. These could be products of some over-enthusiastic scholars,

politicians or bureaucrats. The books will serve a greater purpose if it assumes a more neutral and objective tone. Many of the images and additional information can be made available online for further reading.

Overall, I think these textbooks are in the right direction of making students lifelong learners by equipping them with the tools to ask questions. Stylistically, the printing needs to be error-free. And the method needs tweaking, precisely because of the controversies it has espoused already.

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DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 16-1-2023

‘Seethawaka Odyssey’ on track to boost tourism

**Avissawella Special Correspondent
Kalpani Padmaperuma**

Minister of Transport, Highways and Mass Media Dr. Bandula Gunawardena said that the economy will receive an enormous boost through the development of the tourism industry.

The Minister added that it is essential to develop the country’s tourism industry and the Government’s attention is focused on identifying and developing new tourist zones.

Minister Dr. Gunawardena expressed these views attending the launch of the “Seethawaka Odyssey” luxury train service yesterday (15), which promotes Seethawaka/Avissawella as a new tourist destination, anticipating the rapid growth of the tourism industry in this country.

The official launch of the “Seethawaka Odyssey” promotional programme was organised by the Western Province Tourism Board and the Ministry of Transport, Highways and Mass Media under the patronage of the Minister of Transport, Highways and Mass Media, Dr. Bandula Gunawardena.

This train journey was launched after performing religious observances with the participation of foreign tourists and a large number of people.

The train then travelled from Colombo Fort along the Kelani Valley Railway Line to the Waga Railway Station and the guests were taken from there to the Labugama and Kalatuwa reservoirs by bus.

A cultural pageant was held at the Seethawaka Wetland Park. This service has been introduced to promote Seethawaka/Avissawella as a tourist destination as another milestone under the tourist programme implemented by the Western Provincial Tourism Board to revive the tourism industry that collapsed due to the pandemic and economic instability as result of the global economic crisis.

The Western Provincial Tourism Board has planned to utilize the tourism potential of the Seethawaka/Avissawella tourism region to promote the area as a sustainable tourist destination.

Promotional programmes have been implemented jointly with the Railway Department as a preliminary step to attract local and foreign tourists.

A special weekend tourist train service will operate to boost the tourist industry in the Seethawaka/Avissawella areas and online bookings will be available from January 29.

Speaking to the media, Minister Dr. Bandula Gunawardena said, “Visitors will travel to the Waga Railway Station by train and then visit the Kalatuwawa, Labugama Reservoir and Seethawaka Wetland Parks using a shuttle bus service. We must educate local and foreign tourists about such tourist areas and promote such tours among foreigners who visit Colombo for a one-day or two-day stay. They plan to promote new tourist destinations in the Colombo District.

“The Government is focusing on bringing more foreign tourists to Sri Lanka and attention is focused on bringing tourists from Bandaranaike International Airport, Katunayake to the Seethawaka Tourist Zone under a special package. Both local and foreign tourists are taken to this tourist area from Colombo Fort.”

Western Province Tourism Board Chairman Sugath Hewapathirana said the “Seethawaka Valley near the Kelani River has the most beautiful ecosystem in the Colombo District.

“The ancient Seethawaka Kingdom has great historical importance and has been a home to many tourist attractions such as traditional arts, cultural and archaeological sites. People of Colombo and other areas are aware of this importance and now they can have more enjoyment by visiting this area. New avenues of investment are opened through the existing tourism industry in the area.”

“We are working to start a new project focusing on the Kelani Valley Railway to develop the tourist industry in a more systematic manner. Tourist trains such as Ella Odyssey and Kandy Odyssey, operated by the Railways Department are in great demand and have become very popular among travellers. The Seethawaka Odyssey is another weekend tourist train service that has been launched. Passengers coming from Colombo to Waga by train will be provided with travel facilities from there by a combined Sri Lanka Transport Board and private transport service,” he said.

Members of Parliament Yadamini Gunawardena, Madhura Withanage, Pradeep Undugoda, Western Province Chief Secretary Pradeep Yasaratne, Tourism Ministry Secretary Chulananda Perera, Western Province Tourist Board Chairman Sugath Hewapathirana, representatives of the Railway Department, Ceylon Transport Board and many other institutions related to the project together with representatives from Local Government bodies were present for the inaugural tour.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 18-1-2023

Educational transformation catering to modern requirements Dharma Sri Abeyratne

Educational transformation is systemic changes in the prevailing educational model. It is a worldwide accepted fact that educational transformation is a must to fine-tune or streamline the prevailing education system in any country from time to time. Distinguishing itself from the theories that defend reforms or renovations of some elements of the model, maintaining the substance of the traditional teaching and learning process, and its organisation and structure can simply be defined as educational reforms.

Aiming to arm the younger generation with quality education to face the ever advancing requirements in present-day society, the Education Ministry has taken measures to implement educational reforms promptly. Moreover, it is a timely need to introduce educational reforms to our education system focussing on producing a valuable citizen to society with multi-talents.

When concerning fruitful education methods available in the world, the education system of Finland, Japan and a few other countries are widely concerned and appreciated. It is believed that the education system in Finland is rather worth emulating by other countries

since the Finnish education system caters to the requirements of modern day society.

The Finnish education system greatly helps to create a balanced person both mentally and physically. Therefore, the Sri Lankan education authorities have taken measures to seek the support of educationists in Finland for educational reforms in Sri Lanka.

Accordingly, Sri Lankan education system is going to have a radical change by implementing educational reforms with the assistance of Finnish education specialists, Education and Higher Education Minister Dr. Susil Premajayantha said, speaking on the new educational reforms which are going to be implemented.

Under the initiative co-ordinated by the National Institute of Education (NIE), a group of Finnish educationists have already visited Sri Lanka to provide technical assistance to local educators in Sri Lanka on the new educational reforms.

The Finnish team, lead by Prof. Leena Krokfors, is a Professor at the Centre for Continuing Education (CCE) at the University of Helsinki, Finland, is in a process of evaluating the country's present education system and looking at implementing the necessary changes.

It is significant that Finland was named as the country which had the best education system in the world in 2017.

The move to introduce new educational reforms is sponsored jointly by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Japan Fund for Poverty Alleviation. Accordingly, the new educational reforms carried out in Sri Lanka with the assistance of Finnish educators to meet the educational needs of the 21st Century, will mark a new leap in the field of education, the Minister said.

“In the history, we Sri Lankans had remarkable irrigation technology, medicine, engineering technology and much more. The education system introduced to us by the British is still in operation in the country. Having slight changes from time to time, the education system is still in use. What we need now is educational reforms which suit the 21st Century. The knowledge of the child produced by this education system is excellent. Attitudes are good. But skills are the problem,” he noted.

As he highlighted, even though the subject knowledge of our students is unique and it is second to none of any student in any given country.

Schools are administered by the local authorities in Finland, which had the best education system in the world in 2017. But we have to think whether such a

thing is possible in our country and therefore the Finnish education system needs to be fine-tuned so as to suit our country,” he added.

“A teacher in Finland is trained for five years. Colleges of Education are being transformed into universities to improve the quality of education. Things like teacher training and selection are done very well in that country. He added that many more job categories in the world will be lost for years to come. New job categories are being created. Unprecedented jobs are being created. Our children need to be prepared for that. We need an education that moves forward with technology,” he said.

Director General of the NIE Dr. Sunil Jayantha Navaratne said that new educational reforms are carried out under the theme ‘Education for Sustainable Development and Sustainable Peace’. It has nine themes such as pre-school education, educational administration, curriculum reform, etc.

For the first time, we hope to develop general education through six objectives aiming to create a citizen who can actively contribute to national development. The new system will create an efficient and productive employee or a skilled self-employed person, a person with a good entrepreneurial mindset, a patriotic citizen, a happy family member and so on.

“In developing an active person, who can contribute to the development of the country, we are working to shape education so that each child can contribute to the national economy according to their talents, abilities and skills. Similarly, we know of instances in the country today, where a mason or a carpenter fails to perform his duties properly. That is why education should focus on creating the most efficient and effective person, who can provide the service, which the client wants. We hope that under these new educational reforms, we will be able to inculcate an entrepreneurial mindset in children within school education”, Dr. Nawarathne added.

Accordingly, in order to create a good entrepreneur, that tendency should be given through education. That mentality needs to be inculcated in children. Similarly, a child born with a good educational background will be a patriot who loves the country.

“Through new reforms, we look forward to contribute to education to produce more patriotic Sri Lankans. The Education System should produce a good human being. Even if the citizen is a doctor or an engineer, if he or she is not a good human being, such an education system will not benefit the country,” he noted.

The next step is to create a happy family member through education. Many children today are a little or less tolerant. The less patience there is, the harder it is to live happily in the family unit. It is needed to redefine this education system concerning the needs of the 21st Century, as we are now in the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

The change in the existing education system, which has become the wish of the majority of the people, should be done through the process of revolutionary education transformation. In the midst of other global problems and challenges, the necessity of making the transformational change in education was explained. The transformation should not be limited to personnel transfer but should be a practical one starting from the administrative structure with changes at the level we can afford and it should be carried out continuously during other educational activities such as holding ordinary level, advanced level etc. exams.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 18-1-2023

Nepal struggling to control measles

Experts say outbreak in Nepalgunj could be a proxy, suggesting inadequate vaccination.

Arjun Poudel

KATHMANDU, The outbreak of measles virus started from Ward-5 of the Nepalgunj Sub-metropolitan City and has by now spread to 17 wards and the nearby Khajura Rural Municipality. Health Officials at the Sub-metropolis said 190 cases of infection have been confirmed until Tuesday afternoon. They also conceded that hundreds of other cases could be in communities as all cases of infections generally do not get reported.

What concerns child health experts and immunisation specialists in Nepal is the outbreak of measles virus in Nepalgunj Sub-metropolitan City could be an indication of the low coverage rate of the overall vaccination programme. “Forget about the elimination of the measles virus from the country,” said Dr Shyam Raj Uprety, former director general of the Department of Health Services.

“We are even struggling to control the outbreak spreading uncontrollably in communities in Nepalgunj.”

Measles is a contagious disease transmitted through fluids from the nose, mouth or throat of infected persons and through air. The virus infects the respiratory tract, then spreads throughout the body.

It remains a big cause of death among young children globally, despite the availability of a safe and effective vaccine, according to the World Health Organisation. Nepal had committed to eliminating measles by 2023. To declare measles as eliminated, the number of cases should be less than five in every one million people throughout the year.

Experts say the massive outbreak of the deadly disease at the start of the new year shows that the country is nowhere near its elimination target.

“Outbreaks of measles virus in big cities and accessible areas indicate that we have to revamp and intensify our vaccination programme,” said Upreti. “Now it has been clear that there are loopholes and gaps in Nepal’s vaccination programme, which must be addressed at the earliest.”

Health officials serving in Nepalgunj Sub-metropolis concede low coverage rate of the measles vaccine, as most of the infected children are either unvaccinated or have not taken their full dose of the vaccine.

“We have started administering measles vaccines to all children between six months to 15 years in all 23 Wards of the sub-metropolis,” said Rajan Shahi, an official at the sub-metropolis.

“After the outbreak of the measles virus, people seeking vaccination have also increased in areas where the vaccination coverage rate was low.”

More than 22,000 children of the said age group have already been administered with the measles vaccine after the outbreak.

Low vaccination coverage, internal migration, lack of public awareness on the importance of vaccines and government’s apathy are the reasons ascribed to regular outbreaks of measles in the districts, according to health experts. Officials say most measles outbreaks have been reported among the marginalised and religious communities—Muslims and Catholics—as well as other backward groups where the level of awareness of regular immunisation is low.

“Coverage of other health programmes is also low in our areas and for that, several factors are responsible,” said Ram Bahadur Chand, chief of Health Division at the sub-metropolis. “We are preparing to launch mass drug administration to control lymphatic filariasis or elephantiasis and it will be the 13th consecutive year.” Most of the districts throughout the country controlled lymphatic filariasis from five years’ mass drug administration programme, but the mosquito-borne parasitic disease has not come under control in Banke and a few others districts.

Experts say the problems in vaccination might include quality of vaccine, cold chain management,

transportation, administration of vaccine and lack of awareness.

“The time has come to review the loopholes in vaccinations,” said Dr Senendra Raj Upreti, former health secretary. “Officials of all three tiers of governments—federal, provincial and local—must come together to find the cause of the massive outbreak of measles and make a uniform decision about what to do next in the coming days.”

Experts suggest micro-planning to ensure that no child misses the vaccine, improvement of preparedness to respond to the outbreaks and better coordination among the concerned agencies under all three tiers of governments, as well as with the international partners, including UN bodies such as the WHO and UNICEF.

Measles was endemic in Nepal. In the past, hundreds of children died every year in the country from the potentially fatal contagion.

Routine measles vaccination in Nepal began in 1979, starting with three districts. The campaign was extended nationwide after 10 years. Despite measles vaccines being included in the regular immunisation list, an average of 90,000 cases were recorded every year from 1994 to 2004.

DAILY TIMES, ISLAMABAD 16-1-2023

The essence of education

Educational institutions should provide students the opportunity to challenge existing ideas and ideologies

M Zeb Khan

Until my Masters I had this idea that education was all about passing exams with good grades by reproducing ideas/facts in writing and orally as exactly as possible. It was my first PhD course in “philosophy of social sciences” that forced me to think differently! By studying different philosophers, I came to realise that the essence of education is to turn mirrors into windows (SJ Harris) by cultivating critical attitude.

At times it may be risky and even heretical to raise questions about widely held beliefs and established traditions but it is the only tested way to open up the mind and enter an amazing new world of ideas. Developments and discoveries in any field of life owe a great deal to this critical attitude.

Ideally, educational institutions should provide a platform and a marketplace to students for challenging existing ideas and ideologies so that they could come up with something different and unique without turning anything into a cult. Education, in essence, is a learning-unlearning-relearning process.

This process can either be active or passive. Learning is active when it is acquired by direct experience, by observation and experiment, or by logical reasoning. Our relations are mostly based on direct experience, scientific knowledge is developed through observation and experimentation, and philosophy owes its existence and growth to logical reasoning. We achieve knowledge passively by being told something by someone else. Most of the learning that takes place in classroom and what comes to us by watching TV or reading newspapers is passive.

The kind of education system we have in Pakistan is, sadly, suffocating and predominantly passive in character! From the very beginning, students are exposed to an environment of fear of failure. They are ridiculed and most often punished for making mistakes. In order to avoid punishment, students always look to teachers for specific instructions to perform a particular task and never dare to deviate from the stated guidelines. Over the course of time, students develop robotic attitude and mechanical skills. They would solve mathematical problems given at the end of every chapter by performing step-by-step operations but confusion would engulf their mind when a small twist is added to the problem. It is because the emphasis is on mechanical rather than logical learning. The same is true for almost all subjects!

Another hindrance to true learning relates to curriculum design. I have seen class five and six students struggle to learn highly abstract/metaphysical concepts. Regardless of how one tries to teach such concepts, the students would simply not grasp them. For example, the science book of class six begins with an introduction to scientific method which is riddled with so many abstract notions that students can hardly know what it is all about. Similarly, students of age five through twelve years, who have not yet understood their physical environment, are expected to understand metaphysical religious beliefs! Unable to understand conceptually, they have no choice but to resort to cramming the stuff from start to end. Logically, curriculum design should follow the principle of moving students from easy to complex and from concrete to abstract phenomenon.

What is more intriguing is the authoritarian style of teaching at all levels of education. Instead of encouraging students to question authority and conventional wisdom, teachers in general pose themselves as all-knowing (omniscient) and infallible authority on the subject. Having been trained in an

environment of conformity for so long, students develop trained incapacity. Later in life, they would follow every advice and suggestion without recourse to independent thinking and rational analysis.

Previously, family and teachers were thought to be the dominant, and sometime the only, influence on children. Today, however, the influence exerted by mass media is greater. Modern advertising typically bombards the public with slogans by celebrities. Advertisements are designed to appeal to emotions and instant pleasure. They often portray play as more fulfilling than work, self-gratification as more desirable than self-control, and materialism as more desirable than spirituality and idealism. In such a situation, teachers should develop rather than envelop students' abilities to think beyond the apparent, to read between the lines, and to hear what is not said. Filling the empty mind of students with more and more information is not education. It is the "how to think" part which matters more than "what to think" in our time and should be the focus of education.

DAILY TIMES, ISLAMABAD 18-1-2023

Chancellor's vision about higher education in K-P

Other issues most of the newly established universities are suffering from include ad hocism

Dr Syed Akhtar Ali Shah

Realising the precarious conditions of the universities in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Governor Haji Ghulam Ali, who is the ex-officio chancellor, held a marathon conference of the Vice Chancellors spanning two days. I also had the privilege of attending the conference which provided an opportunity to the VCs to highlight the issues facing the universities in the province. The Chancellor vowed to resolve the problems by involving standing committees of the National Assembly, Senate and K-P Assembly as well as Higher Education Commission and Federal Education Ministry. The formation of a committee to monitor implementation on the decisions was the final outcome of the conference.

Unveiling his vision, the Chancellor stated that he would work to bring the local universities on a par with international standards, with a focus on learning, research, innovation and invention. He decided that market-orientated disciplines would be developed further, with linkages created with chambers of

commerce and industry. Also, the gap between the farmer and the manufacture would be bridge to share the fruits of research.

In this backdrop, comparative analysis of universities in the private and public sector revealed that while the former met their expenditures from their own sources and were making profits, the latter were heavily dependent on grants from federal and provincial governments, but were still suffering from lack of funds.

Other issues in the context ranged from lifting of ban on recruitment of teachers and administrative staff, composition of the Senate and Syndicate, amendments to the University Act and standardisation of the statutes, distant learning and online examinations, BS Programmes, community colleges, undue interference, cut in expenditure, focus on research and co-curricular activities.

The intent and purpose of the Chancellor was to reconstitute and reorganise the universities, to further improve their governance and management, by ensuring transparency and giving due representation to all stakeholders in decision-making so as to enhance the quality of education.

For this to achieve, the VC, being the Chief Executives, and Principal Accounting officers are responsible for administrative, academic and financial functions of the universities and for ensuring that the provisions of the University Act 2012, statutes, regulation and rules are faithfully observed in order to promote the general efficiency and good order of the university.

While analysing the aforementioned context, questions arise: where do we stand? Why and where do we want to go? And how? Unfortunately, our planning in this regard within the universities and government is elite (political) driven and not in accordance with the guidelines of planning and development as well as financial space of federal and provincial governments.

The mushroom growth of new public-sector universities, while the old face financial crunch, cannot be described as a sound planning. In view of the shrinking federal and provincial government revenues, there is all the likelihood of suspension of official grants. Therefore, the universities have to find their own means to sustain.

In order to achieve global standards, the universities are required to approve annual plan and strategic plan;

ensure appointments of pro-VCs, deans, professors and other teaching staff as well as registrar, treasurer and controller of examination; and set key performance indicators (KPI) for all including VCs.

In this connection, the Chancellor believes that mere lectures and provision of notes to students are not enough for universities to rank among the best, and that there is also the need for effective research papers and co-curricular activities. And research and inventions cannot be carried out without funds.

The conference also agreed that since both federal and provincial governments lack funds and resources, establishing separate universities for different disciplines such as medical, engineering, agriculture, law, etc, should be avoided, as it is against the principle of optimum utilisation of resources.

Other issues most of the newly established universities are suffering from include ad hocism. Since most of these universities are without regular faculty, thus they do not earn accreditation from relevant authorities, thus putting the students' future in jeopardy.

Under the Universities Act 2012, the university as a corporate body enjoys autonomy with the Senate and Syndicate as their supervising bodies. However, a majority of the Senate and Syndicate members are not independent, which is adversely affecting governance.

In view of the poor quality of higher education, the government must not establish any new university before reforming the existing ones. General universities should be allowed to open schools of medicine and engineering. New universities should be allowed to recruit regular faculties. Besides visiting and adjunct faculty, all other professors should be hired on a regular basis. Adequate resources should be provided to improve research and innovation. Pending court cases should be adjudicated. The new discoveries and inventions should be patented and registered under a trademark to ensure source of earning and benefit to society. Last but not least, performance indicators should be set for both the teaching and the administrative staff either by the Syndicate or Senate.

The crux of the whole discussion is that quality of education can be ensured by adherence to rule of law, transparency and accountability and research, innovation and invention. The autonomy of a university can only be ensured if it is self-sustaining. It should be ensured that no new universities are

opened and universities operating within a certain radius are merged. Distant learning education and examination should also be adopted. Grants must also be linked with research and/or other achievements. KPI must also be set for all.

THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 20-1-2023

KP to become hub of tourism investment after completion of ITZs

APP

ISLAMABAD- The speakers at the tourism conference on Thursday said that after the completion of Integrated Tourism Zones (ITZs), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) will become a hub for tourism investment.

They said that the all three KP government's ITZs including Ganool, Mankiyal and Madaklasht were important projects of the provincial government, which would bring revolutionary changes in the provincial tourism. An Investment Readiness Conference for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Integrated Tourism Zones (ITZs) was held at a local hotel here in Islamabad to mobilize private sector investments and to promote responsible tourism. The event was attended by a huge number of national level investors. Presidents of Islamabad Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ICCI), Rawalpindi Chamber of Commerce and Industry (RCCI), representatives of PTDC, KP-BOIT and other trade associations were present on the occasion.

The speakers said that after the completion of three ITZs, there was possibility of adding \$10 billion to the provincial economy. Director General KP Culture and Tourism Authority (KP CTA) Muhammad Bakhtiar Khan in his keynote address, stated, "Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is well positioned as a preferred tourism destination in Pakistan. It has a considerable competitive advantage due to natural endowments and a culture of hospitality. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government is not only focusing on creating employment opportunities by promoting tourism activities but also making efforts to conserve the natural and cultural assets by promoting responsible tourism in the province."

He said that Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Tourism Department was committed to its objective of making the province a preferred tourist destination. Efforts are being made to not only develop new tourist sites but

also better manage the existing tourist areas, he added and said that it is important for us to prepare the sites for handling the tourist influx during peak season and to harness this opportunity to create economic opportunities for the communities, he expressed.

Chief guest Sardar Yasir Ilyas, former President ICCI appreciated the government of KP efforts in promoting sustainable tourism and urged the local investors to make investments in the tourism sector. He also explained steps taken by the Chamber and the government in facilitating investments in this sector. It is important to note that Upper Swat and Mansehra were impacted by the recent floods and there is thus a compelling case for disaster mitigation in order to conserve nature, and protect tourism assets and livelihoods of communities that rely on tourism receipts. Ali Asghar, Chief Economist KP, in his welcome address, briefed on sustainable tourism initiatives undertaken by the government, "The use of innovative approaches including, development planning for new and existing destinations, public-private partnerships, reduced carbon footprint and heritage preservation are at the center of project implementation."

The government is contributing extensively towards tourist facilitation, building the sector's resilience against climate change and geophysical hazards and local economic development, he said. Ms. Kiran Afzal, Senior Private Sector Specialist, World Bank in her remarks congratulated the Department of Tourism and project team of the KITE project on achieving this milestone and mentioned that ITZs can especially help the tourism sector of KP in attracting investments which will lead to economic and social uplift of local communities. An exclusive discussion on the title 'Real-estate and Tourism, A Public Private Partnership approach' was part of the conference. The panel shed light on various aspects of sustainable tourism and opportunities for the local economy. The panelists appreciated the efforts of DoT, CTA and KITE project and recommended practical ways for the immediate implementation of these plans. The ITZs is a maiden concept in Pakistan which aims to open new destinations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to promote responsible tourism by suggesting diversity and quality in the tourism offering of these destinations and provide guidance for tourist planning and destination management activities.

The ITZ feasibility and master plans were prepared by the KP's Department of Tourism (DoT) through the

World Bank sponsored Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Integrated Tourism Development (KITE) project with the support of international experts over a period of one year. The provincial authorities and other speakers shared the opportunities for private sector investments with the participants. As part of this exercise, customized plans for each destination have been prepared and will be used to invite investments from the private sector. It is expected that this approach of destination management will lead to improved visitor experience, better regulation of sites and mobilization of resources from the private sector for the identified investments.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 25-1-2023

Nation sees strong rebound in tourism sector during the Chinese Spring Festival holidays

By GT Staff Reporters

China's tourism industry sees a strong rebound in both domestic and overseas market, with numbers of visitors to some major tourist sites reaching a peak since the epidemic, as the country celebrates the Chinese Spring Festival holidays lasting from January 21 to 27, the first long holiday since the optimized epidemic control and the reopening for traveling.

Popular tourist destinations of the season, ranging from Harbin in Northeast China's Heilongjiang Province to Sanya, South China's Hainan Province, are all thronging with visitors, which experts said it shows China's consumption capacity in the tourism industry and paves the way for a solid recovery in a wider range of industries for the rest of this year.

In the first three days of the Spring Festival holidays, bookings for domestic hotel and scenic spots increased by 56 percent and 79 percent year-on-year while domestic air ticket bookings rose by 30 percent, according to the data that online travel agency Tongcheng Travel sent to the Global Times on Tuesday.

China's passenger trips via railway, road, waterway and plane amounted 23.53 million on Monday, a year-on-year growth of 67.7 percent, data from China's

Ministry of Transport showed on Tuesday, partially mirroring the strong momentum for domestic tourism market.

The number of tourists received by the tourist attractions in Sanya increased by 62.44 percent year-on-year on Monday, while the average occupancy rate of hotels in local well-known resort bay areas such as Haitang Bay and Yalong Bay exceeded 90 percent, according to local tourism authorities.

Local air traffic control department predicts that the flight volume in Sanya will remain high throughout the Spring Festival holidays. Zhangjiajie, a popular tourist destination in Central China's Hunan Province, serves as an important microcosm of the tourism industry changes.

On Tuesday, core scenic spots such as Wulingyuan received 40,018 tourists, a year-on-year increase of 10 times, followed by 34,853 tourists or 477.99 percent growth at Tianmen Mountain, and 13,476 tourists or 502.95 percent rise at Zhangjiajie Grand Canyon, according to the data that local travel bureau sent to the Global Times on Tuesday.

The travelers and ticket income of the 743 A-level tourist attractions in Southwest China's Sichuan Province on Monday increased by 37.65 percent and 93.74 percent than previous day, data from Sichuan Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism showed.

Metropolitan cities such as Shanghai also witnessed booming tourism and the city's authorities reported 4.412 million tourists in the first three days of the holidays.

Among the nationwide destinations, southwestern provinces such as Yunnan have gained the popularity due to the pleasant weather.

Data from online travel agency Tongcheng Travel showed that the hotel reservations in the four most popular cities in the province - Xishuangbanna, Kunming, Lijiang, and Dali's have increased by more than five times year-on-year. In the wake of the explosive growth of traffic flow, many tourist attractions have issued temporarily restrictions to curb explosive flows for the safety of tourists.

For example, Xi'an Datang Furong Garden, Northwest China's Shaanxi Province, said on Monday that it will take temporary measures to limit the flow of tourists when their number reaches 20,000.

Local scenic spot of Emei Mountain in Sichuan Province said on Tuesday morning that it has suspended selling tickets for Tuesday after hitting the booking ceiling. People must book tickets at least one day in advance at a real-time ticket booking platform.

While domestic tourism embraced a warm-up, overseas travel experienced a whooping increase. Tongcheng Travel's data shows that searches for overseas travel on the platform have increased by 224 percent month-on-month since the Ministry of Culture and Tourism issued a notice on January 20, launching a pilot resumption of group travel.

The most popular destinations for outbound air tickets include China's Hong Kong and Macao, and some cities of the neighboring countries such as Phnom Penh, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur.

For example, Macao welcomed 71,678 inbound passengers on Monday, of which more than half are from the Chinese mainland, the highest single-day entry number recorded since the pandemic, per data from the Macao Government Tourism Office.

"The booming tourism in the Chinese Spring Festival holidays set a good start for the full recovery of the industry to pre-epidemic level, especially for domestic tourism, after the lifting of the epidemic restrictions," Yang Jinsong, a senior expert with the China Tourism Academy, told the Global Times on Tuesday.

China's consumption capacity for tourism remains huge and now the conditions for distant travel are met, driven by local governments' supportive measures in optimizing epidemic control and boosting travel, they will contribute to the fast rebound of the industry, the expert said, predicting a full recovery for domestic tourism in the first half of this year.

tourism festival, a local tourism official has announced.

A winter tourism festival is planned to be held in the border city during the eleventh Iranian calendar month of Bahman (January 21-February 19), Behnam Amirian explained on Sunday.

Tourism development and prosperity in the Maku Free Zone are greatly enhanced by holding various festivals, the official added.

The opportunity to hold the winter tourism festival serves as a great way to introduce the tourism potential of Maku, he noted.

Maku is located northwestern province of West Azarbaijan and enjoys a unique geographical and natural location.

In a valley that passes through which the Zangmar River divides Maku into two parts, the city is located 1294 meters above sea level.

The city is surrounded by the Qarasu River and Turkey from the north, the Aras River (the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic and Armenia) from the east, Khoy from the south, and Turkey from the west.

Due to the surrounding stony mountains, this city has a moderate climate in winter and a hotter climate in summer.

Mountainous landscapes, flourishing pastures, hot water springs, waterfalls, protected areas, and hunting grounds are some of the tourist attractions of this area.

Maku is located on the main Tabriz-Bazargan road and has an excellent strategic location.

Among the city's most significant features is its role as the country's only land border business and a link to Europe. As part of Maku's economy, there is an industrial complex on the Maku-Bazargan road.

Maku people rely on cross-border trade, agriculture, and animal husbandry for their livelihood.

ABU/AM

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 16-1-2023

Maku to host winter tourism festival

TEHRAN – The northwestern Iranian city of Maku in West Azarbaijan province will be hosting a winter

IV – DEFENSE AND SECURITY

	<u>IV – DEFENSE AND SECURITY</u>			
	Subject	Newspapers/Periodicals	Date	Page
	INDIA Defense Cooperation			
1.	Defence cooperation important pillar in India-Egypt ties: Egyptian envoy By HT Correspondent	The Hindustan Times, New Delhi	17-1-2023	41
2.	Indo-Russian JV produces first batch of AK-203 assault rifles in Amethi, deliveries to Army soon - Express News Service Defense Indigenization	The Indian Express, New Delhi	18-1-2023	41
3.	Address fighter shortage with indigenisation By Abhijit Bhattacharyya	The Tribune, Chandigarh	18-1-2023	42
4.	Indian 105-mm field guns replace vintage 25-pounders for 21-gun salute during 74th R-Day parade - PTI Space Technology	The Tribune, Chandigarh	27-1-2023	43
5.	Clear the space By Sushant Khalkho Defense Budget	The Telegraph, Kolkata	18-1-2023	44
6.	Defence budget must be capability-driven By Lt Gen Pradeep Bali (retd) Border Clashes	The Tribune, Chandigarh	20-1-2023	45
7.	More Indian-Chinese troops clashes expected in Ladakh as Beijing...: Report By Aniruddha Dhar BANGLADESH Bangladesh amongst Global Powers	The Hindustan Times, New Delhi	28-1-2023	47
8.	Cold War redux in Dhaka By HA Shovon and Md Himel Rahman Militancy	The Daily Star, Dhaka	17-1-2023	47
9.	‘Biggest militant threat’ country has ever faced By Shariful Islam	The Daily Star, Dhaka	31-1-2023	48

	NEPAL Peacemaking			
10.	New batch of Nepali peacekeepers in Lebanon By Jagdishor Panday PAKISTAN Peace Negotiations with India	The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu	19-1-2023	49
11.	Talks with India Editorial Militancy	The News, Islamabad	18-1-2023	50
12.	Understanding the TTP By Aliya Anjum	The Daily Times, Islamabad	19-1-2023	51
13.	Pakistan wants Iran to punish killers of its security personnel By Mariana Baabar CHINA Military Exercises	The News, Islamabad	20-1-2023	54
14.	PLA Air Force's Wang Hai Air Group fully equipped with J-20 fighter jets, expels foreign aircraft by giving full play to stealth capability By Liu Xuanzun Defense Indigenization	Global Times, China	18-1-2023	54
15.	PLA Navy's 7th Type 055 large destroyer Zunyi makes public debut after commissioning By Liu Xuanzun IRAN Defense Purchases	Global Times, China	21-1-2023	55
16.	Iran to get Sukhoi Su-35 aircraft in spring: MP Military Relations	Tehran Times, Tehran	16-1-2023	55
17.	EU realized that putting IRGC on terrorist list is 'play with fire': Iran FM	Tehran Times, Tehran	30-1-2023	56

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 17-1-2023

Defence cooperation important pillar in India-Egypt ties: Egyptian envoy

Egyptian ambassador Wael Mohamed Awad Hamed said the visit is an opportunity to forge a strategic relationship based on the similar priorities and national interests of Sisi and PM Modi

By HT Correspondent

Defence and security cooperation has become an important pillar in India-Egypt relations and both countries are linked through their efforts to ensure peace and stability in the Indian Ocean, Egyptian ambassador Wael Mohamed Awad Hamed said on Monday.

Speaking at an event ahead of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's visit to India to be chief guest at the Republic Day celebrations, Hamed said the trip is an opportunity to forge a strategic partnership and to drive trade and investment.

He hoped India will lift a ban on wheat exports in the aftermath of Egypt approving the country as a certified supplier of the commodity.

The issue of Palestine is expected to figure during Sisi's visit, Hamed said, adding that Egypt and India can both leverage their good relations with Israel to bridge differences.

Though India and Egypt have enjoyed close ties in past decades, especially as founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961, Sisi will be the first Egyptian leader to be hosted for the Republic Day celebrations.

Hamed said the visit is an opportunity to forge a strategic relationship based on the similar priorities and national interests of Sisi and Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Hamed referred to the centrality of the Indian Ocean in growing defence and security ties.

"India is the major country in the Indian Ocean. The security of the Indian Ocean starts from the security of the Red Sea in the west, and for Egypt, the security of the Suez Canal starts with the security of the Red Sea. We are both linked together in this respect," he said.

"The Indian Ocean, Suez Canal and Red Sea – this is one continuum that flows from one into the other and both of them depend on each other for security," he said, adding the militaries of both countries are "forces of peace in their respective regions".

He noted that Egypt's Special Forces are currently conducting exercises with their Indian counterparts in Jodhpur.

Shortly after Egypt approved India as a wheat supplier in April 2022, the Indian side banned exports of the commodity to cope with domestic demand.

While expressing understanding for India's decision, Hamed said, "We hope that this ban will be lifted sometime soon if the weather conditions allow for this. Wheat from India and fertilisers from Egypt can help address food security on both sides."

There is scope to boost trade and investment through cooperation in areas such as pharmaceuticals, education and climate transition and the two sides have set a target for boosting bilateral trade from the current level of \$7.2 billion a year to \$12 over the next five years. Besides, Hamed said, Egypt provides India with the opportunity to access huge markets in Europe, Middle East and Africa thanks to the country's free trade agreements in these regions.

Acknowledging that the issue Palestine will figure during Sisi's visit, Hamed said, "Palestine is and remains very close to our heart. Palestine is and remains the number one international issue that we always stand for. Of course, this is going to be one of the issues that we are going to discuss with the Indian side."

The envoy said there isn't "much difference" between the two countries on this issue.

The two sides also have good relations with Israel and they "both can talk to the Israelis, to influence [them] and bridge the differences", he said.

Hamed also acknowledged the heyday of relations in the 1950s and 1960s under Gamal Abdel Nasser and Jawaharlal Nehru but said this was no longer the era of NAM since the world is facing polarisation arising from the Ukraine crisis and food and energy security.

Egypt, which is a guest country in the G20 process, and India can both join hands to take up the interests of the Global South, he said.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 18-1-2023

Indo-Russian JV produces first batch of AK-203 assault rifles in Amethi, deliveries to Army soon

Army Chief General Manoj Pande said the first batch of 5,000 AK-203 rifles will be delivered to the force by March.

Express News Service

Indo-Russian Rifles Private Limited, a joint venture of Russia and India, has started producing AK-203 Kalashnikov assault rifles at Korwa ordnance factory in Uttar Pradesh's Amethi.

“Korwa ordnance factory in Amethi has produced the first batch of 7.62 mm Kalashnikov AK-203 assault rifles,” Alexander Mikheev, Director General of Rosoboronexport, said in a statement issued on Tuesday, adding that the deliveries to the Indian Army are expected to begin soon.

“The factory’s capacity makes it possible to fully equip the personnel of other law enforcement agencies in India with AK-203 assault rifles. In addition, the joint venture will enable export of its products to other countries,” Mikheev said.

Sergey Chemezov, General Director of Rostec, said Russia and India are linked by strong partnership relations.

Rostec State Corporation is Russia’s largest defence manufacturing company. Rosoboronexport is part of Rostec.

“With the launch of production of Kalashnikov AK-203 assault rifles, high-quality, convenient and modern small arms will begin to enter service with India’s defence and law enforcement agencies,” Chemezov said, adding that the model combines excellent ergonomics, adaptability and high-performance characteristics and it is one of the best assault rifles in the world.

The joint venture targets 100 per cent production of AK-203 rifles in India. The Rosoboronexport statement said that in future, the company may also increase the output and upgrade its production facilities to manufacture advanced rifles based on the Kalashnikov assault rifle platform.

Last week, Army Chief General Manoj Pande said the first batch of 5,000 AK-203 rifles will be delivered to the force by March. He said 70,000 rifles will be delivered to the Army in 32 months where the indigenous content will be in the range of five to 70 percent. After that, the completely indigenous AK 203 will be made available to the Army, he had said.

Over 6.1 lakh AK-203 assault rifles will be made in India with technology transfer from Russia under a deal worth over Rs 5,000 crore signed between both the countries in December 2021.

As per the statement, the AK-200 assault rifles have retained all advantages of the traditional AK scheme: reliability, durability and ease of maintenance.

Rosoboronexport said that Russia and India continue to implement military-technical cooperation projects and their current and future programmes are focused on technological cooperation, including joint ventures in the form of licensed production and joint R&D projects.

“Rosoboronexport aims to cooperate on terms of transfer of technology put forward by the Indian side and in accordance with the Make-in-India initiative,” it said.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 18-1-2023

Address fighter shortage with indigenisation

India must modernise its fighter fleet, for which it needs to curb mounting import expenditure and cultivate doubling up her indigenous combat craft enterprise. Like what China achieved after Mao’s death in October 1976. Today, the Beijing air force inventory contains 2,500 combat-capable aircraft because China went all out with indigenisation and went slow on imported craft.

Abhijit Bhattacharyya

Author and Columnist

THE Military Balance 2001-02, published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, reported that when the Indian Air Force (IAF) operated 40 fighter squadrons in 2001, Pakistan had 19 squadrons. At that time, the Chinese air force’s numbers were three times that of India and Pakistan taken together. Hence, whatever the quality of the two South Asian countries’ fighter aircraft, the sheer squadron volume of the China-Pakistan duo make it a daunting task for the IAF to deal with in a multi-front conflict.

The glib talk about confronting two hostile neighbours makes little sense because of the rapidly dwindling squadrons of IAF fighters. Successive Indian Air Force chiefs have wailed, failed and faded away, yet the establishment has remained unmoved.

Does anyone remember the then IAF Chief, NAK Browne’s words of October 2013? “Of 42 squadrons it should have, IAF now has 34.” And now, incumbent IAF Chief Air Chief Marshal VR Chaudhari stated on December 22, 2022, that the “squadron strength is down to 31” and that “fighter shortage is now critical.”

Isn’t India proving herself to be an amazing compound of contradictions, chaos and confusion? Do time and tide wait for anyone in the combat zone or, for that matter, on the nation’s enemy lines?

While the IAF plays the tragic tune of the depleted and fast-depleting strength of its fighter squadrons, a small bunch of self-serving optimists, including some NRIs, is misleadingly telling the world as to how great the economy of India will become if the rupee depreciates vis-a-vis the dollar every hour, foreign

exchange reserves deplete every week, and the current account deficit mounts every month to an astronomical figure, and that what a boon it would be for Delhi if it allows Beijing to spread its wings in industry, investment, commerce, trade, banking etc.

No country of India's shape, size and demography can ever prosper with a mounting debt, an unbridgeable deficit trade, skyrocketing negative current account, depreciating currency and unbridled entry of an enemy nation just for a few investment projects covered with a systemically entrenched espionage in the Indian hinterland.

The harsh reality is that India's imports are several times higher than her exports, thereby making the imported foreign-made goods much more expensive, which inflicts a mounting deficit on India's economy. Thus, whereas importing a fighter aircraft in 2001 would have been an outflow of Rs 45 a dollar, the same import will now be Rs 83 a dollar. Hence, even assuming that the unit production and sale price of the imported machine is constant at \$40 million, one can very well calculate the price difference (owing to the mounting rupee-dollar exchange rate differential) between 2001 and 2023.

The reference to the fluctuating rupee-dollar exchange rate was made to make a point to modernise the fighter fleet, for which India needs to curb mounting import expenditure and cultivate doubling up her indigenous combat craft enterprise. Like what China achieved after Mao's death in October 1976. Today, the Beijing air force inventory contains 2,500 combat-capable aircraft because China went all out with indigenisation and went slow on imported craft. Thus, it's now an open secret that it will take several years for the IAF to operate to its sanctioned 42 squadron-fleet level.

So, how did China lure the West and endure her worst to develop indigenous fighters to stump all? Chinese indigenisation began in the early 1980s with lightning speed copying of Soviet fighters and inviting UK's Rolls Royce and Canadian Pratt and Whitney engines, followed by American Bell and French Dauphin helicopter. The Chinese strategy was clear. Cultivate the West through the charm offensive. Follow Deng Xiaoping's dictum: "Hide and bide" (hide intent and bide time) — show the smiling teeth and bite when you get the time.

Thus, when the Soviets were neck-deep in the Afghanistan quagmire, the Chinese silently cut a deal with US aviation giant McDonnell Douglas to co-produce MD-82 twin engine passenger jet in January 1984. During the course of the next three decades,

Communist China-backed companies lured gullible western corporations to strike deal after deal to shift their production line and latest technology to Beijing's special industrial zones. So much so that the West is now bogged down in the yellow terrain just as the way Hitler's tanks got stuck in the slushy soil of Russia during the harsh winter of the early 1940s.

By the late 1980s, it was western aviation on eastern soil. From capitalist America's Grumman Corporation, McDonnell Douglas to British Aerospace to French Aerospatiale, all are collaborating with the communist China in building air power. And today, the situation has reached a point of no return for the West. The West groans in agony in vain because engine makers of all variety and shade have entered China: the likes of Pratt and Whitney, General Electric, Honeywell, French Snecma, and even Germany's MTU, thereby making the Chinese air force 'atmanirbhar'.

The desperate callout of successive IAF chiefs needs to be understood and acted upon in this grim perspective. India must accelerate indigenisation through any means; fair or foul. Morality and ethics have no place when it comes to national self-interest, especially if there is an existential threat to national security in the form of the perennially active, two-front, unholy Sino-Pak alliance.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 27-1-2023

Indian 105-mm field guns replace vintage 25-pounders for 21-gun salute during 74th R-Day parade

Reflects upon the growing 'Aatmanirbharta' (self-reliance) in defence

PTI

New Delhi, January 26

The ceremonial 21-gun salute during the 74th Republic Day celebrations at Kartavya Path was fired by 105-mm Indian field guns as they replaced the vintage artillery with 25-pounder guns that traditionally did the thundering salute.

Associated with the 2281 Field Regiment, seven 1940-era cannons formed the part of the artillery that had been firing the ceremonial salute during the Republic Day celebrations on Rajpath (now Kartavya Path).

Made in the United Kingdom, these vintage guns had participated in the World War II, according to sources. India's military prowess and cultural heritage was displayed during the parade that started around 10:30 AM and ended close to noon time after a fly past.

As per tradition, the national flag was unfurled followed by the National Anthem with a booming 21-gun salute. The ceremonial salute was given with 105-mm Indian field guns.

"The iconic 21 Gun Salute. For the first time ever, the Gunners of 8711 Field Battery (Ceremonial) presented the traditional 21 #GunSalute by the indigenously made 105 mm Indian Field Guns #IFG on the occasion of #RepublicDay23. #IndianArmy #OnPathToTransformation," the Army tweeted.

It also shared a few pictures of the indigenously-made IFGs on Twitter.

The duration of the ceremonial 21-Gun Salute coincides with the length of the National Anthem.

Chief of Staff Delhi Area Maj Gen Bhavnish Kumar at a press interaction on January 23 had said that this year the 21-Gun Salute will be fired by the 105 mm Indian field guns replacing the 25-pounders.

The defence ministry on Wednesday had said the IFGs will replace the vintage 25-pounder guns, reflecting upon the growing 'Aatmanirbharta' (self-reliance) in defence.

During a press interaction here on Monday, Chief of Staff Delhi Area Maj Gen Bhavnish Kumar said, "We are transitioning towards indigenisation" and the "time is not far when all are equipment will be 'swadeshi'".

All equipment from the Army that will be showcased during the 74th Republic Day celebrations are made-in-India, he had said.

"This year the 21-Gun Salute will be fired by the 105 mm Indian field guns replacing the 25-pounders," he had said.

During the 2017 R-day ceremony, a senior Army official had told PTI that each 25-pounder gun is handled by a team of three personnel, "and ideally all seven fire in a cyclical fashion until the 21st round is fired when hay of ...jay jay hay is being sung or played".

Asked about the reason behind the move of replacing the 25-pounders, Maj Gen Kumar said, "Since the 105-mm Indian Field Gun is an indigenised gun, so we want to use this to replace the 25-pounder guns used earlier for the 21-Gun Salute. And, it is a matter of pride that we are showcasing our indigenous gun for this too".

The 105 IFG (Indian Field Gun) was designed in 1972. The Gun Carriage factory, Jabalpur and Field Gun Factory, Kanpur, manufacture it. They are in service since 1984, he said.

These field guns are compact light and they can also be airdropped. It is a very good Indian gun, Maj Gen Kumar said.

Army sources said these guns (25-pounders) are "obsolete and phased out of the Army now. And, presently being used as warm trophies in various army establishments like the Artillery Centre, etc".

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 18-1-2023

Clear the space

One of the most pressing problems plaguing the international comity of spacefaring nations is that of 'space debris' proliferation

Sushant Khalkho

A Chennai-based startup inaugurated India's first private space pad at Sriharikota. This development came close on the heels of the launch of Vikram-S, India's first privately developed rocket. These occasions are significant milestones in India's storied space odyssey. They also present us with an opportunity to ponder the implications of continued private sector involvement in space activities.

One of the most pressing problems plaguing the international comity of spacefaring nations is that of 'space debris' proliferation. The Inter-Agency Space Debris Coordination Committee defines space debris or space junk as any human-made space object or its constituent part(s) that have become non-functional after serving its intended purpose in the space activity. At present, there are around 70 national and regional space agencies, with over 13 spacefaring nations having independent launch capacity. With the increasing commercialisation of space for weather forecasting, surveillance, telecommunications and so on, traffic congestion in outer space will lead to a commensurate increment in the risk of damage to person or property as a result thereof. In August 2022, space debris purportedly from SpaceX crashed in an Australian farmland. This was preceded by reports of Chinese space debris falling into the sea in the Philippines.

Currently, as per Nasa, there are upwards of 27,000 pieces of trackable space junk in near-Earth space. The precise concern is that if left unregulated, continued contamination of outer space may pose a challenge to the very idea of outer space as a global 'commons'. To stem the degradation of outer space environs, space has been considered to be the Common Heritage of Mankind in international law.

Taken holistically, CHM encompasses the principles of 'no harm', 'polluter pays', and 'sustainability', among others. The utility of these principles lies in strengthening the ingredients of inter-generational equity and long-term sustainability into international governance of space.

Eventually, through legal osmosis, these principles found their way into the fabric of Indian space law. India is a signatory to the UN Liability Convention, 1971, as a result of which India bears international responsibility for any space object it launches from its territory or for any space object which uses its facility. Such responsibility was sought to be concretised in the draft space activities bill 2017, which was touted to be the foremost national legislation for commercialisation of space and the opening up of the sector for private players. The same has been gathering dust; yet, it must be noted that Section 8(2) of the 2017 bill imposed a 'no harm' obligation on all license holders. It did so by mandating that all commercial space activity license holders carry out their space activities in a manner so as to avoid contaminating outer space or polluting earth's environment.

The push towards incorporating the principles of 'polluter pays' and 'sustainable use' was further buttressed by Section 16 of the 2017 bill, which sought to impose a maximum penalty of three years imprisonment, or an uncapped monetary fine starting at one crore (or a combination of both imprisonment and fine), for causing damage or pollution by space activity. Such legislative drafting was consistent with the Indian position of sustainable use of outer space.

To continue its leadership as a space-faring nation, the management, mitigation, and remediation of space debris should form a larger, more vocal, part of India's space vision in the 21st century. In this regard, India can ensure sustainability through a few practical ways such as advocating for fixing debris quotas, levies, or timelines for debris clearance as well as exploring new methods to extend the operational lifetime of functional space objects. The need of the hour is for erring nation-states to adopt the aforementioned principles and translate them into State practice as a means of governance of outer space. This will serve as a bulwark against continued contamination of outer space commons.

Sushant Khalkho is a lawyer

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 20-1-2023

Defence budget must be capability-driven

Having had this long experience of underfunding and underutilisation, maybe it is time for a fixed amount to be transferred every year to a defence modernisation fund that can be managed by the RBI or a designated bank. This fund should be drawn upon to make acquisitions in a time-bound manner. A necessary concomitant would be transparent acquisition processes, whether it's from domestic or foreign sources. The defence budget should not be viewed as a drain on the national economy.

Lt Gen Pradeep Bali (retd)

THE annual budgetary process is well underway and the expected allocation for the nation's security under the defence head is a matter of great interest and greater concern. India has an inimical neighbourhood, both on the western and northern fronts. While the western adversary has been a constant irritant, it does not pose a major threat by itself. The main issue of concern is and will remain China, with whom the unsettled land borders stretch across the Himalayas. The security situation in the neighbourhood, as well as globally, remains unpredictable and volatile.

In the past, we have been mostly reactive in dealing with any crisis situation, not only militarily but even the monetary requirements were met in an emergency mode. While there has been a regular annual increase in global defence outlays, especially of the USA and China, the sudden jump in the case of a country like Japan is a stark pointer to the fragile security environment, which majorly factors in our northern adversary.

A clear perception of desired capabilities linked to timelines is essential for meeting the security challenges that confront the nation, in at least a medium time frame of seven to 10 years.

It is a well-known truism that building capacities and developing capabilities need time, while intentions can change rapidly. The bottom line for capability development is the fiscal outlay. Infusion of high-end technology in military systems and equipment, which in the present day includes cyber, space and unmanned platforms, is cost-intensive.

However, every year we see only a marginal increase in the defence budget, which is not even adequate to overcome inflation. In fact, it has been decreasing as a proportion of total government expenditure. During the last 10 years, the annual defence budget as a

percentage of the GDP has shown a decline, with the ratio for the last year being the lowest since the 1960s. This has been well below the desired levels. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence had recommended that defence expenditure should be 3 per cent of the GDP to ensure adequate preparedness of the armed forces, based on threat perceptions, and developing long-term deterrence capabilities against hostile neighbours.

The allocation for the Ministry of Defence has shown a much lower annual growth as compared to the average growth in overall Central government expenditure of 14 per cent. Since 2011-12, the capital outlay for defence grew at an annual average rate of 7 per cent, while the overall capital expenditure of the Central government grew at 13 per cent. The share of capital outlay for defence in total government capital expenditure decreased from 41 per cent to 23 per cent in this period. The increase in capital outlay for defence over the last two years, which includes expenditure on big-ticket platforms such as tanks, naval vessels and aircraft, as well as a large and varied inventory of smaller systems, equipment and infrastructure, has been around 10 to 12 per cent, while capital expenditure of the Central government has gone up by around 25 to 29 per cent.

It may well be argued that the competing fiscal requirements for national development, which includes a multitude of projects and government initiatives, civilian infrastructure, healthcare and education, among others, may preclude any substantial increase in the defence outlay. While this needs to be appreciated in a developing nation like ours with a burgeoning population living at subsistence levels, it is ironic and distressing that even the reduced allocations for defence are not fully utilised.

Budgetary constraints and labyrinthine processes have undoubtedly been a dampener in acquisition of military weapons and equipment. Repeatedly, we see the lapsing of allocated funds at the end of the financial year. The solutions to all this have been highlighted often enough, not only by the armed forces but also by the Parliamentary Standing Committee for Defence.

First and foremost, the defence budget must be capability-driven and not intention-driven! The total annual outlay is always falling short of the projected requirements. To safeguard against slippages due to procedural tardiness in procurements, it is imperative to make the Capital Budget 'non-lapsable' and 'roll-

on' in nature, with a three-to-five-year time span. During the recent winter session of Parliament, the Standing Committee on Defence has once again stressed that a 'non-lapsing fund' for military modernisation must be created so that the mid-year need for additional grants and budgetary allocation is avoided.

At present, there is no separate allocation of funds for committed liabilities and new schemes, as both are covered under capital acquisitions, contrary to recommendations made by this committee. Under the present rules of business, allotted funds lapse at the end of the financial year on March 31, hence the pressing need for an amendment in making the capital head of the defence budget 'non-lapsable' and 'roll-on'. This would also enable meeting urgent defence needs during critical situations. The draft Cabinet note for a non-lapsable defence modernisation fund has been under consideration by the government for quite some time now and its approval needs to be accorded expeditiously. The situation demands solutions, not shuffling of papers.

Having had this long experience of underfunding and underutilisation, maybe it is time for a fixed amount to be transferred every year to a defence modernisation fund that can be managed by the RBI or a designated bank. This fund should be drawn upon to make acquisitions in a time-bound manner. A necessary concomitant would be transparent acquisition processes, whether from domestic or foreign sources. Lapsing of capital funds, convoluted procurement processes and red tape, with no accountability, have no place in modern-day governance, least of all in the area of national security. It is time to make a bold move in this Budget.

On February 1, the Finance Minister will present the Union Budget, which will be the last full-year annual financial statement by the present government. It is fervently hoped that due importance will be given to the monetary cost of ensuring national security, not only in terms of enhanced outlay but also by making provisions to obviate non-utilisation of funds.

Most importantly, the defence budget should not be viewed as a drain on the national economy. With emphasis on high-quality indigenous defence production, both by private players and efficiently managed defence public sector undertakings and the large dual-use ecosystem that this creates, a major portion of the defence expenditure can well be seen as an engine of economic growth.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 28-1-2023

More Indian-Chinese troops clashes expected in Ladakh as Beijing...: Report

The Reuters report claimed that the assessment is part of a new, confidential research paper by the Ladakh Police that was submitted at a conference of top police officers held from January 20 to 22.

Written by Aniruddha Dhar, New Delhi

There could be more skirmishes between Indian and Chinese soldiers along their contested frontier in Ladakh as Beijing ramped up military infrastructure in the region, news agency Reuters reported citing a security assessment by the police.

The report claimed that the assessment is part of a new, confidential research paper by the Ladakh Police that was submitted at a conference of top police officers held from January 20 to 22.

The relations between India and China nosedived significantly following the fierce clash in the Galwan Valley Ladakh in June 2020 that marked the most serious military conflict between the two sides in decades. As a result of a series of military and diplomatic talks, the two sides completed the disengagement process on the north and south banks of the Pangong Lso and in the Gogra area.

In September last, the Indian and Chinese militaries carried out disengagement from the Patrolling Point 15 in the Gogra-Hotsprings area. A fresh clash erupted between the two sides in Arunachal Pradesh's Tawang in December but there were no deaths.

The Reuters report added that the assessment was based on intelligence gathered by local police in the border areas and the pattern of India-China military tensions over the years.

It claimed that the Indian Army did not respond to a request for comment but the assessment assumes significance as it was submitted at a conference attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It said the Chinese foreign ministry also did not respond to a request for comment.

"Given the domestic compulsions ... in China and their economic interests in the region, the PLA would continue to build up its military infrastructure and skirmishes would also get frequent which may or may not follow a pattern," the report stated, referring to China's People's Liberation Army (PLA).

"If we analyse the pattern of skirmishes and tensions, the intensity has increased since 2013-2014 with an interval of every 2-3 years... With the massive infrastructure build up by PLA on Chinese side both

the armies are testing each other's reaction, strength of artillery and infantry mobilization time," it added.

India and China share a 3,500 km border that has been disputed since the 1950s. The two sides went to war over it in 1962.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 17-1-2023

Cold War redux in Dhaka

HA Shovon and Md Himel Rahman

The dynamics of the US-Bangladesh and Russia-Bangladesh relations cannot be viewed outside the context of Bangladesh's increasing geopolitical, geostrategic, and geo-economic salience.

Bangladesh, with the second largest economy in South Asia and eighth largest population base, is currently the 35th largest economy in the world. Bangladesh's rapid socioeconomic development, its huge domestic market, its military-strategic significance for India and China, its role as a gateway between South and Southeast Asia, and its strategic location on the Bay of Bengal have all incentivised great powers, including the US and Russia, to seek expanded influence in the country. The US, motivated by the urge to retain its global hegemony through stalling the meteoric military economic rise of China, and guided by its Indo-Pacific Strategy, is currently bent on expanding its foothold in the Asia-Pacific region.

On the other hand, Russia, compelled by its growing estrangement from the West and its own geo-economic necessities, is seeking to engineer a pivot to Asia in general and the Asia-Pacific region in particular. Accordingly, Bangladesh has attracted both US and Russian attention.

The position is awkward and unenviable for Bangladesh because getting entangled in the Russia-US rivalry is contrary to Bangladesh's national interests. Moreover, the US is Bangladesh's third largest trading partner, the single largest market for exported RMG products, the topmost source of foreign direct investment, historically one of the largest providers of foreign aid, and the largest provider of aid for the Rohingya refugees. The US-Bangladesh relationship is therefore multifaceted, ranging from trade and investment to security and counter-terrorism.

Meanwhile, although the volume of Bangladesh's bilateral trade with Russia is relatively modest – worth USD 1.1 billion annually – Russia is currently the principal financier of some important projects in Bangladesh, including the 2,400 MW Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant, and is the fourth largest provider

of foreign aid to Bangladesh, amounting USD 1.22 billion in 2022. Taking into account recent energy shortages in Bangladesh, Dhaka's energy cooperation with Moscow is critical to ensuring the former's energy security. More importantly, after China, Russia remains the second largest source of military equipment for the Bangladesh Armed Forces.

Needless to say, Dhaka has its own share of problems with both Washington and Moscow. A number of US activities – including the refusal to reinstate GSP facilities, the imposition of sanctions on Rab and its officials, the continued criticism of labour rights conditions, and the expression of dissatisfaction with internal politics – have irked Dhaka. Conversely, Washington is unhappy with Dhaka on account of a number of issues, including Bangladesh's close ties with China and Russia, and its internal political dynamics. However, Dhaka is less than satisfied with Russia's role in the Rohingya refugee crisis, as Russia has persistently supported Myanmar at the UN.

Taking into consideration the points of convergence and divergence between Dhaka and Washington as well as Dhaka and Moscow, it is in Dhaka's best interests to maintain friendly and cooperative relations with both of them. So far, Dhaka has aptly managed to strike a balance between the great powers, but the advent of the Ukraine crisis and consequent intensification of geopolitical rivalry has made the task far more challenging for Dhaka than ever before. The war has adversely affected Bangladesh's economy. Moreover, Bangladesh has been compelled to walk on a politico-diplomatic tightrope since the start of the war. Bangladesh has so far refused to condemn Russia in clear terms for its invasion of Ukraine and abstained from voting on anti-Russian resolutions before the UN on a number of occasions.

On the other hand, Bangladesh has voted against Russia at the UNGA on a few occasions and has prevented the US-sanctioned Russian ship *Ursa Major/Sparta III* from docking at the Mongla seaport on December 24. However, Dhaka has sought to placate Moscow by receiving the goods from the ship via India, too. Moreover, the Russian Ambassador to Bangladesh, Aleksandr Mantytsky, has accused Bangladeshi media outlets of anti-Russian bias in their coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war.

However, both Washington and Moscow have responded to Dhaka's careful balancing act by increasing their diplomatic, economic, and military engagement with Bangladesh. For instance, the Exercise Tiger Lightning-3 between the armies was held in March 2022, the eighth US-Bangladesh

Partnership Dialogue was held in Dhaka on March 20, 2022, the eighth US-Bangladesh Security Dialogue was held in Washington on April 4, 2022, and the second Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) between Bangladesh and the US naval special forces was held in October-November 2022.

More recently, the visits of US assistant secretary of state for population, refugees and migration, Julieta Valls Noyes, that of the US National Security Council official, Rear Admiral Eileen Laubacher, and the recent visit of US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Donald Lu, manifest renewed diplomatic engagement and the growing importance of US-Bangladesh ties. Meanwhile, Russian engineers and specialists continue work on the construction of the Rooppur NPP. Russia has also offered to sell oil to Bangladesh at discounted prices, although the offer was not accepted.

In a nutshell, Washington's controversial interference in domestic politics and Moscow's equally controversial criticism are both unwelcome developments for Dhaka.

The recent activities of Washington and Moscow are indicative of the fact that Bangladesh, against its will, is being turned into a potential battleground for influence between the two top nuclear powers. Thus, Bangladesh must navigate carefully amid these murky geopolitical waters.

Taking into consideration the points of convergence and divergence between Dhaka and Washington as well as Dhaka and Moscow, it is in Dhaka's best interests to maintain friendly and cooperative relations with both of them.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 31-1-2023

‘Biggest militant threat’ country has ever faced

*Rab claims about Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal
Sharqiya*

SHARIFUL ISLAM

Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya posed a bigger security threat than any militant outfit ever did, law enforcers said.

Commenting on Jama'atul Ansar's combat training, operational tactics and activities, officers said members of the newly emerged militant outfit were highly motivated.

Several officers who seized documents during raids on Bandarban hills said the militants followed the code of conduct of global terror organisations Al Qaeda and Islamic State.

Their plan was to establish a caliphate in Bangladesh through armed struggle and, if necessary, carry out attacks on key installations and important personalities, Rab officers said, adding that the militants' aim was to fight non-muslim people in India, Pakistan and Myanmar, the officials added.

To reach their goals, the group recruited young men, took them to the hills, and made them go through rigorous combat training provided by the Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF), an armed group of the Hill Tracts, they added.

Jama'atul Ansar has 55 members trained in the use of firearms that include assault rifles, officers said.

The militant leaders wanted to have 313 trained members, and money was not much of a problem for them because funds came from foreign and local sources. The organisation also owned businesses.

Rab officers learnt these by interrogating the arrested militants, including their two top leaders, seized documents, and analysing the video made by the suspects on their training.

"With motivation, determination and combat training, Jama'atul Ansar is the biggest militant threat Bangladesh has ever faced from militants," said a Rab officer, wishing anonymity.

Lt Col Moshir Rahman Jewel, Rab director (intelligence), said, "By analysing the video, one clearly understands that those militants are highly capable in terms of firearms and physical training. It would have been a catastrophe if they managed to come to the plain lands and carried out attacks."

Its members are trained in using assault rifles, and five or six of them have the expertise in making powerful Improvised Explosive Device (IED) with gelatin sticks, he added.

The eight-minute video shows the militants being trained in modern fighting techniques. They know about trigger safety and how to properly hold a weapon. The video also shows the commander assigning jobs to the armed members through hand gestures during an operation and informing them about enemy locations by drawing a map on the ground.

Three officers, who were members of the team that raided the camps in the hills, said Jama'atul Ansar has a camouflage uniform and its members are trained to ambush. For self-defence, the militants dug bunkers and trenches around their camps at an altitude of 3,000 feet.

"No other militant organisation has such training," said one of the officers who has been involved in tracking down militants for the last nine years and

participated in several operations, including the one during the Holey Artisan Bakery attack.

The militants used to guard the camps along with KNF members and often engaged in gunfights with other insurgent groups of the hill tracts. One of their members, Abdur Rahman who went by the alias Jahir, got killed during one such fight around seven months ago.

Another man died there due to starvation and sickness. As many of the KNF members are converted Christians, Jama'atul Ansar took their help, said an officer.

The KNF provided arms training and shelter under a three-year deal, they added. The KNF, which has around 200 armed members, would get the trained militants to fight against other insurgent groups in the hills.

Jama'atul Ansar was formed by some leaders of Ansar Al Islam, Neo JMB and Huji-B. Its leaders used to keep an eye on mosque goers and selected potential recruits. The leaders then motivated the potential recruits for one to three years.

The highly radicalised individual was then asked to leave home to become a militant.

The recruits were asked to go through physical training and acquire the skills of electricians, carpenters, masons, mobile phone mechanics, drivers and tailors. They also preferred to recruit physicians, especially the surgeons, according to the seized document of the militant outfit.

Many of the 55 militants trained in the hills have MBBS and business degrees while others have madrasa education.

Eight of them, including two key leaders, have been arrested.

The militant outfit owned farm animals in Munshiganj, Cumilla and the hill tracts, officials said, adding that it also owned a perfume and panjabi shop in the capital's Gulistan and a mobile accessories shop in Maghbazar.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 19-1-2023

New batch of Nepali peacekeepers in Lebanon

Brigadier General Melchor Marin Elvira of Spain welcomed the Nepali delegation to the mission on Monday.

JAGDISHOR PANDAY

Beirut (Lebanon), In Lebanon this past year, Nepali soldiers worked day in and day out to establish peace along the sensitive 'Blue Line', the border between

Lebanon and Israel that stretches 120km. A contingent of Nepal Army peacekeepers has been playing an important role in controlling the conflict there for a year. The area is located to the south-east of Beirut, the capital of Lebanon.

The 850-strong Gorakh Box Battalion, led by Chief Lieutenant Colonel Bikas KC from Nepal, has completed a year of its service. And the Purano Gorakh Battalion, which is under the command of another Lieutenant Colonel Anil Budhathoki, has come to the conflict-ridden areas to take charge for another year. As many as 872 people are working as military observers and staff officers in this mission.

“This peacekeeping mission is in a very sensitive area,” KC noted, in a conversation with the Post recently. “Here, the Nepal Army is carrying out the responsibility given by the UN. Our aim is to maintain peace in both countries.”

The main responsibility of Nepali peacekeepers is to maintain peace along the ‘Blue Line’ that was established through a UN resolution on June 7, 2000. The line was drawn along the disputed border between Israel and Lebanon in order to ease the conflict between them. The Nepal Army is working as part of the ‘United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon’ (UNIFIL).

After Nepal became a UN member in 1955, a five-member Nepali military came to Lebanon for the first time as observers.

This mission was established in 1978 according to the resolution of the UN Security Council in view of the conflict between Lebanon and Israel. The Nepal Army has been working under it since its inception. After the withdrawal of the Israeli army from Lebanon in 2002, the Nepal army withdrew from the mission in line with the UN plan to deploy only minimal forces.

But again at the call of the UN, after the war between Hezbollah (Lebanon’s armed party) and Israel in July 2006, the UN Security Council passed a resolution and in 2007, the Nepali army arrived in Lebanon, once again.

The Nepali army is deployed in the south-east of Lebanon. There are armies of 48 countries of the world in this UNIFIL.

Nepali Army is under the ‘Sector East’ area of UNIFIL. As the head of ‘Sector East’, Brigadier General Melchor Marin Elvira of Spain welcomed Nepal’s Brigadier General Jonson Khadka, who is also the head of the Nepali delegation this Monday.

“The Nepalese army is an experienced force that has been establishing peace in this area for a long time,”

the Spanish Brigadier General Elvira said at the meeting.

Brigadier General Khadka in turn said that the Nepal Army will strengthen its role in establishing peace and that it invites cooperation of all.

The Nepali Army operates in an area of responsibility of about 96 square km and works primarily in seven municipalities and one village of South-Eastern Lebanon.

During its UN peace period of over a half-century, Nepal Army has covered 44 UN missions involving 1,42,585 Nepali personnel. The first Nepali contingent, Purano Gorakh Battalion, was deployed in Egypt in 1974.

The Nepali Army has contributed to senior appointments at the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operation and Force Headquarters. The Army has also deployed military contingents, military observers and staff officers in different peacekeeping missions around the world. During this, a total of 71 Nepal Army personnel have been martyred and another 66 have been rendered disabled.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 18-1-2023

Talks with India

There can be little argument that neighbours need to try and live in harmony, use negotiation instead of violence, and look for mutual benefits rather than arbitrary attacks on the other. Encouragingly, that seems to have been the thinking behind Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif’s conditional offer to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to “sit down on the table and have serious and sincere talks to resolve our burning issues like Kashmir”. During an interview with ‘Al Arabiya’, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has said that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) could facilitate the talks, adding that the two nuclear armed states had fought three wars with each other which only brought more “misery, poverty and unemployment to the people” and that our focus should be on ending poverty than wasting our resources on bombs and ammunition.

By all accounts, this is a good message. Unfortunately, political opponents have chosen to politicize this as well, calling it a ploy to “sell Kashmir”. The government has since reiterated that any talks “can only take place after India has reversed its illegal action of August 5, 2019”. PM Shehbaz’s interview comes just a month after Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah and Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Hina Rabbani Khar had forcefully condemned

India for terrorist activities in Pakistan, including the Johar Town blast in Lahore back in 2021 near Jamaatud Dawa chief Hafiz Saeed's residence. The prime minister's interview is quite significant but it is not the first time that Pakistan has extended an olive branch to India. When PTI Chairman Imran Khan won the 2018 elections, he had said that he wanted to fix ties with India as well. Unfortunately, Pakistan's overtures were always met with either silence or more hawkish affirmations like the war-like situation after Pulawama and then the August 5, 2019, step where India revoked Occupied Kashmir's special status. That India has been violating human rights in Kashmir almost on a daily basis should be a cause of concern for the world community. Previously, Article 370 of the Indian constitution had granted limited autonomy to the people of Occupied Kashmir but New Delhi never allowed them to enjoy even that authority. The persecution of minorities in India, especially Muslims, has become a routine now and there is no sign coming from the government of India that it is ready for any meaningful talks. It is no secret that India's policy vis-a-vis Pakistan under the Modi regime has been that of a virtual standoff, and the issue of Kashmir is the main reason why any government in Pakistan is always hesitant to make the first move without an unequivocal commitment by India.

Pakistan has repeated time and again that it wants a peaceful neighbourhood where there isn't always a looming threat of war of aggression by a bigger neighbour. In a world where economy trumps many other things, where even India and China or China and the United States continue to be trade partners despite hostilities, it is important for India and Pakistan to also give peace a chance. Trade between the two countries has a lot of potential but due to India's Kashmir policy and the atrocities being committed there, no political government can take the chance of resuming dialogue. Under these difficult circumstances, PM Shehbaz's conditional offer to talks is rather important. But it all depends on how India responds. Without any guarantees regarding Kashmir's special status, it would not be possible to move ahead. A region that has already seen enough bloodshed to last it a lifetime, South Asia cannot move forward without Pakistan and India moving forward first. The entire region benefits if both countries reach an understanding on key issues and move forward with trade and open visa regimes. For that to happen, the first step has to be a resolution of the occupation of Kashmir by the Indian state.

DAILY TIMES, ISLAMABAD 19-1-2023

Understanding the TTP

Aliya Anjum

Boko Haram in Nigeria and the TTP in Pakistan are geographically, linguistically, and culturally disparate groups. However, the identical trajectory of Boko Haram and Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) establishes that they were created from the same mould.

Such Salafi-Jihadi movements claim to be subaltern resistance to the forces of globalization. Nigeria and Pakistan have their commercial capital located in their southern end. TTP's ideological base is in Northwestern Pakistan, while Boko Haram's is in northeastern Nigeria. They are not mainstream movements, and neither is an expanding juggernaut.

While Nigeria has its Christian elite residing in its northern part, Pakistan has its Punjabi elite based in the central region. Both of these powerful groups are considered the enemy within these movements of political Islam. The US establishment could never get its all-volunteer army to enlist for the 2001 and 2003 invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq by stating its true goal of seeking control of energy sources. The US had to build a narrative of defeating the forces of evil who posed a threat to world peace – namely weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and Usama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.

Boko Haram and the TTP's true goal is also the control of territory and resources in a border zone. They similarly built a narrative of Muslims being under attack to enlist jihadis for a battle of good versus evil. These movements deviously claim to oppose the western dominance of indigenous societies. Since both Boko Haram and the TTP are not fighting invaders or non-Muslims, they had to declare the state and its citizens as heretics. This turns them into the "enemy" they need to defeat. This narrative requires religious exclusivism that opposes all other value systems, including rival interpretations of Islam. The exclusivism then posits that democracy, constitutionalism, alliances with non-Muslims, and Western-style education are all anti-Islamic practices. This makes the state their target.

The politics of victimhood is oxygen for Boko Haram and the TTP. Boko Haram claims a long history of persecution against Muslims in Nigeria. TTP bases its anti-western ideology on the great game played by Great Britain, Russia and the US – with the Pakistani state being an ally of western powers. The combination of exclusivism and grievance has

provided the ideological framework for violence toward the state, its military and its citizens – including other Muslims.

Boko Haram and the TTP's true goal is also the control of territory and resources in a border zone. They similarly built a narrative of Muslims being under attack to enlist jihadis for a battle of good versus evil.

Alongside other drivers of violence – including local politics, socioeconomic factors, and military action as the government's response-the stories of Boko Haram and TTP are eerily similar. Both groups' leaders have consistently relied on religious rhetoric in an attempt to justify brutality, score-settling, and provocations.

Occupation of Palestine and Kashmir has led to the ummah believing that Muslims must close ranks against perceived enemies. However, Boko Haram and TTP's leaders have consistently used extremely narrow criteria to define who counts as a Muslim. This is why their foot soldiers are, whether for ideological, material, or personal reasons, willing to slaughter those whom the leaders have designated unbelievers. Nigeria's preacher Muhammad Marwa, known as "Mai Tatsine (The One Who Curses)," rejected Western technology, promoted a "Quran-only" doctrine, and called himself a new prophet. This ideology reverberates among the foot soldiers of both the TTP and Boko Haram.

As per this worldview, western-style education is sinful not just for its intellectual content, but for its political impact. Boko Haram first caught international attention in April 2014, when it kidnapped 276 school girls. It was part of a greater pattern of attacks on schools, where boys were often killed outright. Boko Haram's leader Abu Bakar Shekau was avenging Nigerian authorities' detentions of its sect members' female relatives. The Pakistani state did not take any such foolhardy action against TTP members' female relatives. Hence the TTP could not justify kidnapping women and only massacred boys in the Army Public School incident of 2016. However, during the attack the TTP terrorists burnt alive female teachers, exhibiting sociopathic brutality. Salafi-jihadi movements assert the right to declare Muslim leaders apostates, rebel against allegedly infidel states, use force to impose their strict interpretation of Islamic law on civilians, and unflinchingly inflict extreme brutality. Both Boko Haram and the TTP aspire to set up a pure Islamic society under Sharia law. Both view the United States, European countries, and Israel as evil powers that seek to destroy Islam. They see their home governments,

their functionaries, and their citizens as treacherous allies of the evil west.

Boko Haram's founder Mohammed Yusuf studied religion in Saudi Arabia. Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, the present chief of the TTP, studied religion in Karachi. These credentials were needed by these two malignant narcissistic leaders to establish their power base.

Contrary to their stated goal, neither has rejected western technology or systems. Their hypocrisy exposes their true agenda of being power-hungry narcissists using religion to gain power. They know how being in a position of authority, via Islam, is the perfect way to be above reproach. They know they have a free ticket to mine people for acclaim, attention, and resources.

Boko Haram's founder, Mohammad Yusuf worked in coordination with his state's governor Ali Moudi Sheriff's government. For four years he was at the peak of his career. During this time, he rose from a poor preacher to a wealthy cleric. He lived in opulence and drove SUVs around the city, where he was hailed as a hero for his criticism of the government and his call for sharia law. As a classic Munafiq, he was a beneficiary of the democratic state, while decrying it.

Mohammed Yosef, the founder of Boko Haram eagerly accepted a hefty paycheck from the state and drove SUVs when he was able to. Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud's photographs sport a western-made AK-47. He published a book using the western printing press. His TTP has a robust social media footprint, with such technology being a western instrument. Since he uses the national currency, he also partakes in the interest-based international financial system.

This is sheer hypocrisy.

During the 1990s, an American mathematics professor became opposed to western technology and industrialization. He became a terrorist, known as the Unabomber. True to his mission, he was living alone off the grid. The peaceful American Amish community, committed to a communal and pastoral way of life, also does not use electricity, automobiles, or cell phones. Kibbutz was founded in Israel as a utopian farming community, combining socialism and zionism. They were true to their cause when it came to property ownership, gender roles and social life.

There was no hypocrisy in these western movements of exclusivism. Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud is only trying to take advantage of the former FATA's underdeveloped status by creating a turbulent political

environment. He is aspiring to become their spiritual and political leader.

In May 2014, Boko Haram killed the emir of Gwoza and founded an “Islamic state” in that town. The proof of the pudding is in its eating. Boko Haram’s then leader Abu Bakar Shekau had said, “Our state is ruled by the Book of God; our state establishes the Sunnah of our Prophet, Muhammad.” However, he also said, “There is nothing between us and the despots of Nigeria except jihad.” Boko Haram-controlled territory focused all attention on militancy and prized itself on seized military equipment. For a force committed to an Islamic way of life, it showed no interest in establishing civil institutions. It did not consolidate governance. Contrary to its *raison d’être*, Boko Haram made little effort to institutionalize Islamic courts and schools, or to distribute humanitarian relief – because they had no agenda beyond violence.

In contrast, other African jihadi rulers of short-lived Shariah law states such as Al-Shabab in southern Somalia (2009-2012) and the JNIM in Northern Mali (2012-2013), made some efforts in this regard. This gained them some legitimacy in their area of control. Political exclusivism aims to spur group violence. “Seeing the devil in others” is a necessary element to cement group cohesiveness against an outgroup.

It can be witnessed: in the master race Nazi doctrine against the Jewish people causing the holocaust; the Hindutva ideology causing the Indian Muslims ongoing genocide; in the Jewish notion of being the “chosen people” leading to the Palestinian occupation and ongoing genocide; and finally in the “true believers doctrine” of the TTP leading them to burn alive women teachers and kill school children.

Exclusivism compels Boko Haram to not only oppose the Sufi groups in Nigeria but also to commit violence against rival Salafis since it perceives them as a threat. They are all dangerous competitors for audiences.

Many Nigerian Salafis hold university degrees. They contend that Boko Haram’s opposition to Western-style education would retard Northern Muslims’ economic and political development. Mohammed Yusuf and his core followers declared that they could no longer trust Salafis who defended Western-style education or government service. After Yusuf, the next Boko Haram leader Abu Bakar Shekau amplified the violence through Takfir or by declaring other Muslims unbelievers. This justified the right to kill all other Muslims if they supported democracy, constitutionalism, or Western-style education.

The TTP in Pakistan bases its ideology on Pashtoonwali, where the tribe rules over religion. They have no moral foundation for a holier-than-thou attitude. However, they are very judgmental about the rest of Pakistan which sins differently than them. They object to practices of Sufism – especially the controversial music and dance element – and the Deobandi-Barelvi North Indian-originated Islamic ideology prevalent in the rest of Pakistan, especially in the province of Punjab. The popular culture which includes cinema, the television entertainment industry and the inclusion of women in public life, further serves as ammunition for TTP propaganda against the state and mainstream society.

An African proverb states, “The boy not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel its warmth.”

Mohammad Yusuf was a poor boy in Christian-dominated northern Nigeria and Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud was a poor marginalized Pashtoon boy. They are burning down their village to feel its warmth.

Boko Haram was bent on challenging the Nigerian state for control of Northeastern Nigeria. Boko Haram waged a guerrilla campaign in the Northeast, assassinating politicians and policemen, robbing banks, raiding police stations, and breaking into prisons. The TTP is doing the same thing in the former FATA zone in Pakistan. Neither is taking inspiration or instruction from the other.

In 2015 Boko Haram announced its merger with the Islamic State after suffering territorial losses. The TTP has similarly used tribal affiliations to enlist the support of the ruling Afghan Taliban across the border.

Both the TTP and Boko Haram peddle the false but powerful narrative that the Pakistani and Nigerian states willfully harm innocent Muslims. The existence of both these terror groups is pivoted on the depiction of the Pakistani and Nigerian states as tyrannical, ungodly institutions. This strawman argument justifies their war-mongering. It is important to understand that they are in the business of violence. If there is no *casus belli*, Boko Haram and the TTP become irrelevant.

Both the Nigerian and the Pakistani states have primarily engaged with these terror groups through military operations. This strategy has proven to be very costly for Pakistan and has only resulted in a pyrrhic victory. Now that the fog has been lifted from the smokescreen created by the TTP, Pakistan should re-strategize. Knowledge is power. Pakistan must strategically uproot the TTP by making it irrelevant. If

we strike its pivot, we can snuff out the fire, which is the TTP.

The writer is an independent researcher, author and columnist.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 20-1-2023

Pakistan wants Iran to punish killers of its security personnel

By Mariana Baabar

ISLAMABAD: The Foreign Office Thursday summoned the Iranian ambassador in Pakistan to express grave concern over a terrorist attack from inside the Iranian territory in the Panjgur district of Balochistan, martyring four security personnel.

According to official sources, the ambassador was conveyed Pakistan's expectation that the Government of Iran would swiftly bring perpetrators of the terrorist attack to justice and prevent recurrence of such incidents.

"Pakistan remains committed to working with Iran in combating the common threat posed by the menace of terrorism," said the Foreign Office.

In a related development, the Iranian Embassy in Islamabad condemned the terror attack. In a statement, the embassy said terrorism was a common problem facing Iran and Pakistan, with both neighbouring countries being a victim of that "evil phenomenon." It also sympathised with the families of victims.

Meanwhile, in the weekly press conference, Foreign Office Spokeswoman Mumtaz Zahra Baloch said, "Pakistan strongly condemns the terrorist attack from across the Iranian border. "The terrorists used the territory of Iran [to conduct the attack]. We hope Iran will take action against the responsible factors," Baloch said.

This is not the first time that Pakistanis have been taken out by terrorists from inside Iran even though there is patrolling and fencing of the Pak-Iran border

"We call upon the Iranian authorities to ensure a thorough investigation into the matter and hold the perpetrators accountable. Pakistan denounces terrorism in all its forms and manifestations. We have strongly committed that our territory will not be used for cross-border attacks in Iran and expect the same from Iran," she pointed out.

According to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), militants "targeted a convoy of security forces patrolling along the border." Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif strongly condemned the incident, saying "the nation pays homage to the sacrifices of their martyred soldiers in line of duty". President Arif Alvi and

Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari denounced the attack as well.

Meanwhile, Minister for Information and Broadcasting Marriyum Aurangzeb expressed her deep grief over the deaths of four security forces personnel. In a statement, she said terrorists intend to harm the relations between Pakistan and Iran. However, "our morale is high and our security forces are determined to defeat the terrorists."

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 18-1-2023

PLA Air Force's Wang Hai Air Group fully equipped with J-20 fighter jets, expels foreign aircraft by giving full play to stealth capability

By Liu Xuanzun

The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force recently expelled foreign aircraft threatening China's territorial airspace with J-20 fighter jets, giving full play to the aircraft's stealth capability. Experts said on Tuesday that PLA forces are well-equipped and well-trained in dealing with all sorts of threats.

As the first combat unit of the PLA Air Force that is fully equipped with J-20 fighter jets, the Wang Hai Air Group under a brigade of the PLA Eastern Theater Command carried out missions that safeguard China's national sovereignty and territorial integrity, including combat alert patrols in the East China Sea and the Taiwan Straits, China Central Television (CCTV) reported on Tuesday.

In an emergency sortie mission, the leader of the air group Yang Juncheng and pilot Wei Xin took off with two J-20 fighter jets to intercept two foreign aircraft. The two closely coordinated, took advantageous positions and resolutely safeguarded China's airspace security, CCTV reported.

"The J-20's stealth capability is its biggest advantage. It means that the enemy radar can see nothing, but we can already launch attacks," Wei told CCTV.

"You can imagine how much psychological pressure the enemies would have. They can only take hasty evasive maneuvers to avoid our threats. If we push forward, they would fall back," Wei said.

With an outstanding combat history of downing and damaging 29 hostile aircraft in the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea (1950-53), the Wang Hai Air Group has recently completed key missions including the routine management of control of the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone, combat alert patrols in the South China Sea, and

patrols around the island of Taiwan, flying across the Bashi Channel, the Miyako Strait and the Tsushima Strait in the process, according to CCTV.

"When I look down on the motherland's precious island [of Taiwan] from the cockpit of my warplane, I could clearly see the island's entire coastline and mountain range," Yang was quoted by CCTV as saying.

"I told myself at the time, I will come again, as [the island of Taiwan] is our country's territory, and [the Taiwan Straits] have no line [dividing us]," Yang said. The defense authority on the island of Taiwan releases its monitoring of PLA aircraft activities around the island on a daily basis, but it had failed to report a spotting of a stealth-capable J-20 as of press time.

A brigade under the PLA Western Theater Command, which is the first unit to receive delivery of the J-16 fighter jet, also carried out combat alert patrol missions that saw foreign warplanes expelled.

In a recent nighttime patrol, pilot Li Chao was approached by two foreign fighter jets. Li had to break away from the pursuit by shutting off all active electronic devices and flying low, before closing in on one of the foreign aircraft from its tail, gaining the upper hand, CCTV reported on Saturday.

Equipped with advanced warplanes of different types and well trained, PLA units deployed across the country are ready at all times to take measures against unidentified aircraft flying into their watch, including expelling such planes when necessary, Fu Qianshao, a Chinese military aviation expert, told the Global Times on Tuesday.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 21-1-2023

PLA Navy's 7th Type 055 large destroyer Zunyi makes public debut after commissioning

By Liu Xuanzun

The Zunyi, the seventh Type 055 10,000 ton-class destroyer of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy, recently made its first public appearance after entering service, with analysts saying on Saturday the powerful warship is expected to become combat-ready within this year.

Just before the Chinese Lunar New Year, which falls on Sunday, sailors on the PLA Navy vessel Zunyi on Friday extended their greetings to the people in the city of Zunyi, Southwest China's Guizhou Province, which is the namesake of the ship, via Live Broadcast Zunyi, a local television program.

The television report shows that the Zunyi is a Type 055 guided missile destroyer with the hull number 107.

This marks the first time the Zunyi has made an appearance to the general public in an official media report, observers noted.

With the public debut, the Zunyi has likely already been commissioned into the PLA Navy, becoming the seventh active Type 055 large destroyer, a Beijing-based military expert who requested anonymity told the Global Times on Saturday.

Based on the general pattern of warship development and the PLA Navy's past experiences with other Type 055s, the Zunyi could reach initial operational capability by the end of 2023, the expert said.

The PLA Navy commissioned its first Type 055 large destroyer, the Nanchang, in January 2020. Since then, the Lhasa, the Anshan, the Wuxi, the Dalian and the Yan'an have also entered service.

Shi Hong, executive chief editor of the Shipborne Weapons magazine, told the Global Times that the Type 055 is the world's best destroyer in terms of comprehensive capabilities, and the continued commissioning of ships in this class will contribute to the PLA Navy's combat capabilities.

China reportedly launched an eighth Type 055 in August 2020. While the eighth ship's commissioning has yet to be announced, but it is expected to happen soon according to the general shipbuilding pattern, analysts said.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 16-1-2023

Iran to get Sukhoi Su-35 aircraft in spring: MP

TEHRAN- A lawmaker has anticipated that Iran will receive a number of Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets from Russia early in the upcoming Iranian year, which begins on March 21.

Speaking with Tasnim, Shahriar Heidari, a member of the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, underlined that Iran has ordered Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets from Russia, and they will arrive in the country in early 1402.

The lawmaker pointed out that Iran has additionally ordered from Russia a number of other pieces of military hardware, including air defense systems, missile systems, and helicopters, the majority of which will be delivered soon.

Based on media sources, Iran would obtain 24 of the fourth-generation twin-engine, super-maneuverable

fighter planes used largely for air superiority operations.

Tactical Air Base (TAB) 8 of the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force (IRIAF), located in the city of Isfahan in central Iran, is expected to house some of the combat aircraft.

The Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jet "combines the qualities of a modern fighter (super-maneuverability, superior active and passive acquisition aids, high supersonic speed and long range, capability of managing battle group actions, etc.) and a good tactical airplane (wide range of weapons that can be carried, modern multi-channel electronic warfare system, reduced radar signature, and high combat survivability)," according to Russia's United Aircraft Corporation (UAC).

Iran hasn't purchased any new fighter aircraft in recent years with the exception of a few Russian MiG-29 Fulcrum fighters that it bought in the 1990s.

Significant agreements between Iran and Russia have been made in recent months to expand their economic, trade, energy, and military cooperation.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 30-1-2023

EU realized that putting IRGC on terrorist list is 'play with fire': Iran FM

TEHRAN – Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian said on Sunday that the Council of European Ministers realized that placing the IRGC on the list of terrorist organization is a "play with fire".

Abdollahian made the remarks in a meeting with four parliamentarians, Esmail Kowsari, who have been sanctioned by the European Union.

The sanctions showed that the EU doesn't have a "true understanding" of the situation inside Iran and even of the Iranians outside the country, the foreign minister pointed out.

The sanctions "show that your words and moves in defending the interests of the country have been effective" and the EU took such a decision in reaction to such important positions, Abdollahian remarked.

On January 19, the European Parliament adopted a non-binding resolution designating the IRGC as a terrorist organization and asked the EU and its member states to put the IRGC on the terrorist list.

Abdollahian said after the move by the European Parliament he talked to concerned EU officials and unequivocally told them that if the EU does something against the IRGC as a sovereign body and part of Iran's official military, Tehran's response will be harsh.

He added, "They (Europeans) are aware of their situation and know their vulnerability in this regard."

After the resolution by the European Parliament, Abdollahian talked to EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell and Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billstrom whose country holds the rotating presidency of the EU.

Foreign Minister said much discussions took place among EU officials on whether take a decision on the IRGC or not and finally they realized that they cannot "play with fire" and then they put forward a second plan and put some individuals, including four lawmakers, on their sanctions list.

The foreign minister told the four MPs that "since the beginning of the victory of the Islamic Revolution some of you have not had even a working trip to Europe and also don't have any capital there, therefore these sanctions are 'just a kind of show'."

The minister added these four legislators have been sanctioned because of their influence on the society, region and the resistance front.

"The European sides have 'naively' taken such measures and its consequences will be heavy for them."

The minister expressed hope that the four MPs will appear more active in defending the country's national security and interests.

"Your inclusion on the list of sanctions will make more influential and now you are a loud tribune for the dear Iranian people, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Islamic Revolution."

On January 23, Borrell said designating the IRGC as terrorist could only happen if a court in an EU country determined that the IRGC was guilty of terrorism.

"You cannot say 'I consider you a terrorist because I don't like you'," he told reporters ahead of the talks between EU foreign ministers in Brussels.

Swedish Foreign Minister Billstrom also said on January 25 that "the Guard Corps cannot be put on the list of terrorist organization just for violating human rights in Iran, rather they should have ties with terrorism."

Otherwise, he warned, there is a "danger that a person who is sanctioned would file a complaint at the European Court of Justice and be 'delisted' and such a thing has happened in the past, therefore 'I don't think such a move will be rational'," DW reported.

In his January 19 meeting with Borrell, Abdollahian said the move by European Parliament is "shot in the foot".