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# Selections From Regional Press

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**THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 4-3-2021**

## **Indo-US partnership holds the key to checking China**

**Alexander Slater , Juzar Ghadyali**

Enhanced cooperation on bilateral and multilateral issues, including trade, investment, global vaccine distribution and climate change, would strengthen the strategic logic underpinning this partnership.

The most important contribution to this international backing came from the US.

The Indian military's courage, audacity and resolve appears to have delivered a major push towards stability on India's northern borders. After Indian and Chinese soldiers engaged in a skirmish in the Galwan Valley in June, disengagement was completed and verified in Pangong Tso without any additional loss of life. This may look to some as snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. The drawback of troops and tanks marks a milestone and provides an example to the rest of the world on how to check China's revisionist actions.

So how did India do it? Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh called out these aggressive actions and declared India's determination to hold its ground. Even with domestic resources under pandemic-related pressure, the military rallied significant assets to points of confrontation. This show of resolve included surprise actions in the Kailash Range, which delivered a strategic advantage and sent a strong signal given the position's challenging environment. Under the leadership of Foreign Minister S Jaishankar, India embarked on a multi-pronged diplomatic response, including de facto economic sanctions, public rhetoric that gave its opponent the possibility of a face-saving exit, and a demonstration of significant global support for India's position.

The most important contribution to this international backing came from the US. Both the Donald Trump and Joe Biden administrations, as well as key members of the US Congress, spoke with one voice about the unacceptability of China's actions and committed to closer defence cooperation with India. Most recently, statements from President Biden, Secretary of State Tony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan doubled down on the US-India strategic partnership as a way to support stability in South Asia and have endorsed the Quad as a guarantor of a free and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.

Critically, India and America backed up these words with actions. In October, at the 2+2 meeting of defence and foreign ministers in New Delhi, they announced the signing of the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA). The last of the three foundational defence agreements that add heft to India's status as a major defence partner of the US, BECA gives India access to technology that enhances its ability to monitor border areas and execute military manoeuvres. A month later, India disclosed the lease of two unarmed MQ-9B Sea Guardian drones that immediately improved its surveillance capacity on the LAC. In December, the US government approved India's purchase of \$90 million in hardware and services for its fleet of C130-J Super Hercules Military Transport aircraft.

The countries also expanded their military cooperation so they could project power across multiple fronts. In November, India, the US and Japan welcomed Australia to the Malabar naval exercises, for the first time uniting all Quad members in combat drills to support their shared vision for the Indo-Pacific. These simulations enhanced their militaries' ability to act jointly against adversaries at sea, building on the Indian government's clearance of a \$2.6 billion purchase of 24 MH-60 Romeo helicopters from the US a year ago.

For China, the message was clear: A bipartisan consensus in the US supported strengthening India's ability to defend its borders and safeguard the Indo-Pacific, and India — a sometimes reluctant partner — embraced American efforts to enhance its power projection across multiple geographies. The cost of confrontation in Ladakh and elsewhere would be higher than China originally estimated.

While India deserves credit for delivering an acceptable and peaceful resolution to this round of conflict, all is not well along the LAC. Since Independence, one of the main obstacles to India's rapid economic and social development has been its borders' unsettled and unstable state. Too often this has been deemed a Pakistan problem when recent events from Doklam to Galwan have shown that China, too, poses a challenge. One misstep in the next stages of disengagement could see the two countries again eyeball-to-eyeball.

India's strategy for ending the current confrontation shows the way forward. By working with the US to enhance its military capabilities, it deters expansionist activity and enables its armed forces to nip problems in the bud. Revisiting the purchase of the armed MQ-9 Reaper drones would show that future border clashes could have higher costs. Closer coordination with America and other Quad countries creates a united front across. Matching capabilities by adding F/A-18s to the Indian Navy would send a strong signal. And enhanced cooperation on bilateral and multilateral issues — stronger US-India partnerships in trade, investment, supply chains and strategic technologies, as well as Quad-based strategies for global vaccine distribution and climate change — would strengthen the strategic logic that underpins these relationships.

This month, the Modi government sent signals that it's moving in this direction. Singh announced an increase in defence capital expenditure — the largest rise in 15 years. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman touted measures to make India a more attractive destination for foreign investment. And Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal expressed his desire for a comprehensive trade agreement with the US. To top it, India's official comment after the meeting of Quad foreign ministers stated their shared commitment to "respect for territorial integrity" and disclosed discussions on deeper cooperation to combat the pandemic, promote supply chain resilience, and respond to climate change. Moving from these words to actions will be a win-win for India, bringing greater stability to its borders and creating new opportunities to enhance its security and prosperity in the face of global challenges.

**THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 8-3-2021**

**Days before Quad, Beijing to Delhi: Not rivals...don't undercut each other**

**Written by Shubhajt Roy**

Wang was speaking on the sidelines of the annual session of the National People's Congress, China's Parliament.

As New Delhi prepares to participate in the first ever meeting of the leaders of the Quadrilateral grouping likely on March 12, Beijing Sunday said that China and India should stop "undercutting" each other, shed mutual "suspicion" and create "enabling conditions" by expanding bilateral cooperation to resolve the border issue.

Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi made these remarks at his annual press conference in Beijing — seen as a signal to New Delhi as it plans to join the Quad meeting this week between Prime Minister Narendra Modi, US President Joe Biden, Japan PM Yoshihide Suga and Australian PM Scott Morrison.

Wang was speaking on the sidelines of the annual session of the National People's Congress, China's Parliament.

Beijing views the Quad with suspicion. Three years ago, Wang had dismissed its revival as a "headline-grabbing" idea that, like "foam on the sea", would get attention but "soon dissipate". He called for the "the Dragon and Elephant to not fight but dance".

Since then, quite some water has flowed under the bilateral bridge – the protracted standoff along the LAC, a clash in Galwan and the first de-escalation last month. Sunday's remarks also come after Wang and External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar had a 75-minute phone conversation February 26, when they agreed to establish a hotline — "for timely communication and exchange of views".

Wang Sunday said the boundary dispute was "an issue left from history," and "not the whole story of the China-India relationship" and that both countries were friends and partners who should shed mutual suspicion. This is a reiteration of Beijing's approach in the wake of the ongoing border standoff.

After the Wang-Jaishankar call, the statement from China had underlined that the boundary situation should not be placed at the front and centre of the relationship but at a "proper place" in overall ties — the indication was that the two sides should return to business as usual even as they deal with the border issue.

India has maintained there must be an incremental approach toward a resolution and disengagement, followed by de-escalation, will lead to peace along the LAC and, eventually, normalisation of ties.

Answering a question on how Beijing viewed the relationship with India, Wang said:

"It is important the two sides manage disputes properly and at the same time expand and enhance cooperation to create enabling conditions for the settlement of the issue."

Wang, also a State Councillor, did not refer to the disengagement. His statements were tweeted by Chinese Ambassador to India Sun Weidong.

Wang said the world expects both China and India to safeguard the common interests of developing countries and

advance multipolarity in the world. The similar national conditions of the two countries, he said, mean that they share the same or similar positions on many major issues.

"Therefore," Wang stressed, "China and India are each other's friends and partners, not threats or rivals... The two sides need to help each other to succeed instead of undercutting each other. We should intensify cooperation instead of harbouring suspicion at each other."

Without directly mentioning the Ladakh standoff, Wang said, "the right and wrongs at what happened at the border area last year are clear, so are the stakes involved."

"We are committed to settling the boundary dispute through dialogue and consultation. At the same time we are resolved to safeguarding our sovereign rights," he said.

Wang added that the onus was on both sides to solidify the existing consensus, strengthen dialogue and communication and improve the various management mechanisms to jointly safeguard peace in the border areas.

On Friday, India's Ambassador to China Vikram Misri met Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui and called for completing the disengagement from all areas in eastern Ladakh.

**THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI 11-3-2021**

**Quad summit: Delhi must drop its hesitations about platforms that push back against Beijing**

**Editorial**

Times of India's Edit Page team comprises senior journalists with wide-ranging interests who debate and opine on the news and issues of the day.

Today's first summit meeting of the Quad countries – India, Japan, the US and Australia – elevates this format and cements its role as a key pillar of the free and open Indo-Pacific architecture. Coming so soon in the Biden presidency, the summit signals his administration's intent to pick up where the Trump administration left off in terms of balancing China's aggressive behaviour. The Trump dispensation, however, went by its gut instincts and lacked a larger strategic vision. While it largely sought to push the Quad in a military direction, Biden is seeking to expand its scope and adopt a holistic approach to push back against Beijing.

This is smart strategy as military coordination without an economic and technological anchor is insufficient to meet the China challenge. It's welcome, therefore, that the Quad which was earlier defined as a security dialogue is now being touted as a framework. The new accent is on resilient supply chains, emerging and critical technologies, maritime security and climate change. Hence, the idea is to draw red lines for China and insulate other countries from becoming dependent on Beijing's economic and technological patronage. In fact, the US has already begun putting together a set of coalitions aimed at countering China's dominance in key technologies like semiconductors, AI, quantum computing, surveillance technology etc.

These will set standards, establish best practices and eventually offer members market access and technology

transfers as an alternative to Chinese products. India should fully capitalise on these coalitions to obtain cutting edge technology, boost domestic R&D and kick-start its own industrial reforms. After all, in order to counter Beijing, Delhi needs to increase its comprehensive national power by adopting an all-of-government approach. It's on the right track in seeking to firewall critical sectors from Chinese equipment and cyberattacks – such as the recent intrusions into India's power infrastructure. With telecom forming the backbone of a modern, digital economy, this sector must be shielded from predatory Chinese activities.

The Biden administration's strategic approach is a good one, and Delhi can ill-afford to procrastinate about siding with the West and like-minded countries seeking to uphold international rules and freedoms, due to fear of what Beijing might think or its own ideological hobby horses. Delhi has a knack of missing international opportunities whenever they arise due to its lack of flexibility, which allows nimbler rivals to outmanoeuvre it. It must not miss the bus again, hoping to shine in splendid isolation.

**THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 2-3-2021**

**India, Pak, China must build on de-escalation, resist hubris that exults in unilateral triumphalism**

**Pratap Bhanu Mehta**

*If all three powers, China, Pakistan and India, can draw the appropriate lessons in humility, there is hope for regional politics to turn over a new leaf*

The announcement by India and Pakistan of "strict observance of all agreements, understandings and cease firing" along the Line of Control is a welcome step. Combined with the de-escalation on the LAC with China, it provides a sense of relief. In the case of India and Pakistan, the protracted history of the conflict, punctuated by fleeting moments of hope that are frittered away, always imposes a caution on reading too much into developments. With China, there is still a tense standoff.

It is also the case in international relations that intentions, doctrines and capabilities can be subverted by a conjunction of events. So it is premature to conclude what all this will amount to in the long term. But if all three powers, China, Pakistan and India, can draw the appropriate lessons in humility, there is hope for regional politics to turn over a new leaf.

In the case of India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has immense political capital to make bold foreign policy moves. Many of these, including the strike on Balakot, were milked for domestic political use. They were also an attempt to signal a change in status quo. But two years later, a few things have become palpably clear to India. First, the belligerent use of foreign policy in domestic politics has unintended effects on your international standing. In 2019, the official rhetoric was promising India retaking PoK and putting more military pressure on Pakistan. In contrast, the discourse on foreign policy since the Chinese pressure on the LAC has been one of marked sobriety scaling back all expectations of a flippant militarism.

Second, the standoff with China has brought home some stark realities. We can speculate on Chinese motives. It is unlikely that our moves with Pakistan are a result of some package deal with China. But there is no denying that the LAC standoff considerably released the pressure on Pakistan. It cut out all of India's loose talk on cross-border adventurism. China may have not particularly cared about Article 370; it did care about casual signalling that India might want to alter the status quo on borders with Pakistan. We were reminded that the LAC and LoC can be linked; that the zone around Kashmir was a trilateral and not a bilateral contest, and that India will need significant resources to deal with China. The fact of the matter is that status quo ante has not been restored on the LAC with China, and costs can be imposed on India.

And there is a seemingly unrelated matter of the CAA. Again, no one is against granting citizenship to minority refugees from neighbouring states. But the belligerent rhetoric of evicting Bangladeshis has been starkly checkmated by the need to placate Bangladesh, which is vital to our strategic interests. The chest-thumping bravado of 2019 has been replaced by the sober realities of international power politics.

But equally, there are humbling lessons for Pakistan as well. India now has enough weight in the international system that any attempts to internationalise Kashmir are a non-starter. Second, even Modi's critics will have to acknowledge that the revocation of Article 370 did not unleash the kinds of fissures and cycle of violence within the Valley that Pakistan might have been hoping to exploit. There are important questions about Indian democracy, and the rights of Kashmiris. But Pakistan can hardly show a candle on these issues. Pakistan's infrastructure of terrorism has been a net liability to Pakistan itself, and its vulnerability in FATF is a constant reminder of that fact.

But we are at a moment in international politics where so long as India's moves are within international understandings, it will have free rein to work out whatever political arrangements it wishes. And there is the perennial question of whether Pakistan can realise its full economic potential if it remains so thoroughly dependent on the coat tails of one or the other super power. In fact, the pandemic is a great opportunity for Pakistan to recognise that opening up to the South Asian region at large buys it more room for manoeuvre in the long term than acting on the coattails of China.

It might seem that China is the victor in all this. It signalled how it can ratchet up the pressure on India. But while India may not have, in a literal sense, restored the status quo ante on the LAC, the fact of the matter is that it has stood up with enough firmness to send the signal that it will not be a pushover. India's economic measures may have been nothing but a pin prick to China for the moment. But India signalled a resolve that Chinese military and economic hegemony can be resisted. China cannot wish away considerable Indian power. In fact, by concentrating India's mind on the China challenge, it may have unwittingly done India a favour.

So this moment can be a constructive one if everyone understands the one lesson of this conjuncture in world politics: There are diminishing returns to belligerence. Three things can derail this moment of de-escalation. The first question is: How much does the Pakistani deep state buy into this de-escalation? The second is that there is always the risk that some fringe group will try to test the waters by precipitating an incident. Are the diplomatic channels now robust enough to withstand such a possible test? Third, Chinese intentions still remain relatively opaque and the deep currents of distrust that authoritarian regimes like Xi Jinping's generate will not be easy to overcome.

With Pakistan, India should seize the moment and build on the de-escalation. The pandemic offers an opportunity for greater economic cooperation. For the long term momentum to be sustained, political establishments of both countries will have to think of what is a win-win political narrative they can legitimately offer their citizens. The challenge has always been that the one plausible candidate — making the de facto realities the de jure settlement — has always been seen as a loss in Pakistan. Nationalism is a perennial derailing ideological force in all three countries. But the one thing we have also learnt is nationalism is protean in character: The ability of regimes to spin nationalism to convert even defeats into victories should never be underestimated. It requires some creative organised hypocrisy.

The truth of this moment is that the world will not run according to a Modi doctrine, a Bajwa doctrine or a Xi doctrine. The region will be better off with a humility that tries to align them, rather than a hubris that exults in unilateral triumphalism.

## **OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 3-3-2021**

### **US-Taliban Peace Agreement Had no Positive Impact on Afghanistan**

#### **Editorial**

One year has passed from the US-Taliban peace agreement, signed in Qatari capital of Doha, militancy continues unabated, though. Afghan soldiers and civilians have sustained heavy casualties as a result of the Taliban's intensified attacks. Heavy death toll, unmitigated insurgency, Taliban's refusal to reduce violence or declare ceasefire, and stalemate in the intra-Afghan dialogue, which has been broken recently, filled the air with disappointment. Afghans are likely to have lost their trust in the peace process, especially as the Taliban are gearing up for spring offensive.

The United States and NATO say that the Taliban have not honored their 2020 peace accord. That is, the Taliban maintain their ties with al-Qaeda and Haqqani network, refuse to reduce violence, and did not have meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government. On the other hand, the Taliban insist on the US troop withdrawal. Worst, Sirajuddin Haqqani has warned of an unprecedented conflict if foreign troops do not exit Afghanistan by May. This is an obvious remark in support of the Taliban by a recognized

terrorist group. The Taliban never publically condemned Haqqani network or al-Qaeda.

US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad has resumed his shuttle trip in the region aimed at pushing the intra-Afghan dialogue forward through gaining regional consensus. However, Afghans have lost their trust in Khalilzad, who signed a peace agreement with the Taliban without achieving any gains for Afghanistan. In other words, the US-Taliban peace agreement, to which Afghanistan was not a signatory, could not mitigate insurgency or bring in peace and stability. With this in mind, Khalilzad does not carry much weight by now as his trips to regional and global states could not even lead to the persuasion of the Taliban in reduction of violence and declaration of ceasefire. Meanwhile, Pakistan was also not persuaded to use its leverage on the Taliban leadership.

It is believed that if the Taliban do not honor the Doha peace agreement, the peace talks will be deadlocked. Meanwhile, violation of the deal is most likely to strip the Taliban group of international recognition as a legitimate party to peace. If the Taliban seek the US troop pullout, they have to honor their deal, reduce violence and enter in meaningful peace talks with the Afghan government. That is to say, if the Taliban honored the Doha agreement, the US forces could exit Afghanistan by May. But the US and NATO troops are unlikely to withdraw from the country since the Taliban violated the deal and are engaged in escalated insurgency. Threatening remarks will not work out. In response to Haqqani's remarks, Mullah Manan Niazi, the leader of the Taliban's splinter group, called Haqqani "stooge" of Panjab, a province of Pakistan.

He added that Jalaluddin Haqqani, father of Sirajuddin Haqqani, offered the tanks, weapons and helicopters of Khost province of Afghanistan to Pakistan as gift. Concerning to Haqqani's statements – as he said, "Today... we have the technology to use drones, we have our own missiles" – Niazi said that Panjab had designed new weapons so that the Haqqani network kill the people of Afghanistan.

The US-Taliban Doha agreement simply gave concessions to the Taliban as the Pentagon reduced the number of US troops in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, more than 5,000 Taliban fighters, including their dangerous figures, were released from Afghan prisons and the names of the Taliban leaders were removed from the UN blacklist. Nonetheless, scores of Afghan soldiers and civilians have been killed so far. The Taliban are again preparing for spring offensive, which indicates that they are not genuine in the negotiations and may not accept declaration of ceasefire. In short, the Trump-Taliban peace accord did not have a positive impact on the security situation in Afghanistan.

After all, the Taliban declared the deal as "victory" of the "jihad" against "the infidels" and Taliban's political spokesperson called it a "withdrawal agreement", in his earlier interview with national TV outlet, rather than peace agreement.

Overall, the people of Afghanistan believe that the Taliban do not have genuine intention in the peace talks and some



neighboring countries are not willing to use their leverage on the Taliban leadership and do not practice upon the principle of good neighborliness.

If neighboring countries seek their own interests in the talks, the peace process will be highly complicated and the negotiations will not bear the desired result.

Washington has to put pressure on the neighboring countries to play constructive role in the peace process and persuade the Taliban to reduce their violence.

## **OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 13-3-2021**

### **The Reaction of Afghan people to the Blinken's Letter**

**Mohammad Zahir Akbari**

Recently, the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, has sent a letter to Afghan politicians, specifically to the president of Afghanistan and to the Chairman of high peace council urging on acceleration of peace talks and urging on more comprehensive roadmap for the peace process in Afghanistan.

The letter had stressed on urgency of peace process warning of worsening security situation in case the US forces completely withdraw from Afghanistan. The US Secretary of State had explained in the letter that their decisions were not finalized about Afghanistan but reached in a conclusion that the peace talks should accelerate through high level diplomatic efforts. The letter also stressed on efforts by Khalilzad to accelerate the peace process and to reach a quick ceasefire in Afghanistan. In general, the new approach seems more comprehensive because all the regional stakeholders such as Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, and India are supposed to be engaged with mediation of the UN and host of Turkey as an impartial country in the region.

The Antony Blinken's letter has faced different reactions in Afghanistan. The ordinary and non-political people think that it is not important how or who will bring the peace but it is important to put an end to the war as it imposes high expenses on the people of Afghanistan. The US Secretary of State Antony Blinken had also stressed on the same issue stressing that the ongoing war imposing unacceptable expenses on the people of Afghanistan.

He talked about a short term plan which would pave the way for 90 day violence reduction plant to prevent from Taliban attacks in the spring season. So, the position of ordinary and non-political people seems conformist to the new US approach. This plan seems more enchanting to the ordinary people when we imagine the successive failure of the security forces against the everyday attacks on the heart of large and small city of the country.

The second part of people seems more skeptics about this and other plan in the country. This group of people while extremely is unhappy from the current disorders; they prefer the minimum security than no security. They stress that word and action should go ahead together in the peace process.

They are afraid of repetition of bitter experiences which happened after the former president of Afghanistan Dr.

Najib which eventually led to destruction of everything in the country.

Based on this view, we can find many good points in the new US plan but there is no guarantee for preservation of the past achievement which hardly attained in last two decades. The concerns of this group of people are more realizable when we look at the frequent breaches of commitment by the Taliban and their supporters.

They had pledged to reduce violence after the release of 5000 prisoners but the outcome were vice versa. They had pledged to disconnect from the international terrorism such as Daesh and Al-Qaeda but the national and international evidences show that they have not acted upon their commitment.

Therefore, the stance of this group of people seems more rational as there is no guarantee once the current minimum order collapses down.

The next group of people has showed more sentimental reactions to the Blinken's letter.

In fact, the Blinken's letter faced with angry reaction of politicians saying this letter was sent on contrary to the international customs and practices. Others said the US has never had a transparent policy in Afghanistan.

Although the people of Afghanistan had welcomed their presence in the country expecting to bring peace and stability, no outcome has gained yet. If we follow the local media, especially social media network, it can make a long list of issues and criticism outlined from the letter. Firstly, revelation of this letter from sources close to the United States indicates that the country has violated the international protocol and has blatantly violated the principles of friendship between the two countries. Secondly, the diplomatic custom was not observed in this letter and even political literature was not used correctly in this letter. Thirdly, the US Secretary of State's letter looked at the issue of peace as a project that had to be done on time. Fourthly, the letter ignores the objective realities of Afghanistan emphasizing on domination of certain ethnic and religious group in the country.

Fifthly, the letter does not respect the values that the US government considers itself responsible for its implementation in the world. And last but not last, the tone of this letter, however, is offensive, threatening and on contrary to diplomatic principles.

In general, the position of Afghan politicians falls into the last category.

It is said that the recent calls between the US secretary of state, the US national security adviser and Afghan NSA Hamdullah Mohib could not change the Afghan government's stance on peace and therefore Mr. Blinken produced this blunt letter. Amongst the political reactors, the first vice President Amrullah Saleh had a direct and harsh reaction to the letter, saying that it will not change the Afghan government's position on the peace process.

He also stressed that as long as the "legitimate demands of the Afghan people" are at stake, the government will stand by the basic principle of elections.

On the whole, most of the people seem unhappy because the new US administrations have adopted similar to the Trump's

approach when he marginalized the Afghan government and people in the peace process.

**THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 5-3-2021**

**Connectivity can change the region**

*Visiting Indian FM stresses stronger connectivity between India, Bangladesh*

**Diplomatic Correspondent**

Bangladesh and India are looking forward to stronger connectivity between the two countries and with South Asia and beyond in the next 20 years.

As the two neighbouring countries celebrate their 50th year of diplomatic relations, Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said, "Connectivity is productivity."

Emerging out of a meeting with Bangladesh Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen at the state guesthouse Padma yesterday, he said, "If we can get connectivity right between India and Bangladesh, I can tell you the entire geo-economy of the region will change. The Bay of Bengal will look very different."

At a joint press conference after the meeting, Jaishankar said they spoke about involving a third country, preferably Japan, which is a very good friend of Bangladesh and India, in terms of connectivity. Japan is already involved in a number of major connectivity projects in the Bay of Bengal under the Bengal Industrial Growth Belt.

"Our relations transcend orthodox partnerships, and I believe our bonding is central to the realisation of the dream of a peaceful, prosperous and progressive South Asia," he said.

The purpose of Jaishankar's visit is to prepare the groundwork for Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh on March 26-27. It will be the Indian premier's first travel outside India since the coronavirus pandemic as well as his second as PM to Bangladesh. Modi virtually held a meeting with his Bangladesh counterpart on December 17 last year.

Jaishankar, who arrived in Dhaka around 10:00am yesterday, also called on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and inaugurated a branch of India's Cultural Centre in Gulshan before flying back to Delhi last night.

**PROJECTS TO BE INAUGURATED MAR 26-27**

Modi and Hasina are likely to inaugurate Shwadhinata Sarak that connects India from Mujibnagar; Feni Bridge, Dhaka-New Jalpaiguri passenger train service, and Bapu-Bangabandhu Digital Museum, a memorial for the Indians who were martyred in 1971, officials concerned told this correspondent.

Modi is also likely to visit the memorial of Bangabandhu in Tungipara, Gopalganj, and Orakanda, a place of worship of the Matua community, in the district.

Dhaka and Delhi are scheduled to sign some MoUs that were discussed in yesterday's nearly two-hour Momen-Jaishankar meeting. The MoUs are on connectivity, trade, water sharing, security, border killing, energy, and post-Covid cooperation.

The Indian minister stressed on connectivity -- rail, road, and waterways.

There are a number of connectivity projects under Indian Line of Credit worth \$7.86 billion. Five rail lines out of total eight that were suspended since 1965 are already operational.

Under MoUs signed between the two countries, India can use Chattogram and Mongla ports to transport goods to its northeastern states. It will allow the landlocked Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura states to access open sea trade routes. India is constructing the roads and rail lines to Sabroom as part of its massive development work in the northeast, according to Indian media.

Bangladesh sought to join the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral highway to improve connectivity with the Southeast Asian countries.

"India welcomed our proposal and said it will talk to the countries concerned," a foreign ministry source said.

Bangladesh also seeks materialisation of the Bangladesh-India-Nepal Motor Vehicle Agreement. Indian officials say a protocol needs to be signed for this. A Bangladesh official said the government has already submitted a draft protocol to Nepal and was awaiting response.

"The significance of our ties with Bangladesh lies in its centrality for our 'Neighbourhood First' and its growing relevance for our 'Act East' Policy. We see Bangladesh as a key neighbour and a valued partner not only in South Asia but also in the broader Indo-Pacific region," Jaishankar said. He said after connectivity, India also gives high priority to people-to-people connectivity, health, education, and culture.

**BORDER KILLING**

Bangladesh has been raising the issue of border killings before India, urging it to bring the number down to "zero". At a home-secretary-level meeting on February 27, Bangladesh asked India to use non-lethal weapons.

According to Ain O Salish Kendra, at least 49 Bangladeshi citizens were killed along the India-Bangladesh border by Indian Border Security Force last year. The figure was 15 in 2018 and 43 in 2019.

According to the Indian government, in 10 years until December 10 last year, a total of 132 Bangladeshis and 95 Indians were killed in BSF firing on the Indian side. During the period, 17 BSF personnel died and 1,110 BSF members were injured in confrontations with smugglers.

Jaishankar said many of the border killings happen deep inside India and the issue was discussed in yesterday's meeting. One needs to ask why the problem is there, he said. "Every death is regrettable ... so, our shared objective should be no crime no death at the border. I am sure if we can get it right, no crime no death, we can together address this problem effectively."

**WATER SHARING**

Sharing of water of the Teesta has been a long-pending issue as the Teesta deal could not be signed due to West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's last-minute opposition in 2011. India says as it is a federal system, and as per their constitution, approval of the states is a must for striking any deal on common rivers.

The two countries are now working on six other rivers -- Manu, Muhuri, Khowai, Gumti, Dharla and Dudhkumar – and are sharing water flow data.

"We discussed it. Our water secretaries will discuss it very soon. You know India's position. That has not changed," Jaishankar said.

Foreign Minister Momen said, "We focused on possible ways to materialise our commitments and how to prioritise and accommodate each other's priorities in a mutually beneficial manner.

"This is a landmark year for our two countries. We discussed some of the important activities that we plan to undertake jointly to celebrate these historic occasions."

He thanked India for presenting vaccine doses.

### **THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 12-3-2021**

## **‘Bangladesh and India at the Peak of Engagement’**

### **Orissa Diary**

NEW DELHI, March 11: Dr. Pramyesh Basall mentioned that 2021 is a special year for India and Bangladesh as its 50 years of liberation of Bangladesh and 50 years establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Bangladesh.

He discussed that among south Asia, India and Bangladesh are one of the largest trade partners, the connection at the level of senior dignitaries is optimistic.

India and Bangladesh are at the peak of engagement and we are working on improving the connectivity between the nations which will help to increase the bilateral trade mentioned Dr. Pramyesh Basall, Commercial Representative, High Commission of India, Bangladesh, said in the inaugural session of Bangladesh PrintPack International Expo 2021 organized by PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry, in New Delhi on Wednesday.

Dr. Basall emphasized that companies from India and Bangladesh should come together and work towards collaboration with each other. "We can trade with each other as well as we can trade with third countries also."

Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) CEO Mohammad Mahfuzul, discussed the present and prospects of packaging in India and Bangladesh, mentioned that collaboration in the printing and packaging sector between both the countries will be beneficial for industries in both the nations.

Futurex Trade Fair & Events Pvt. Ltd Managing Director Prem Anveshi, mentioned that India and Bangladesh have been sharing a deep-rooted history, mature relationship with each other. He further mentioned that with the new leadership of India we have realized that there an important role India can play for its neighbors for their progress and development.

PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry International Affairs Committee for South Asia Chair Naveen Sardana, discussed the close historical, civilization, and cultural ties shared between India and Bangladesh mentioned that it is a major pillar of India's neighborhood first policy.

He also mentioned Bangladesh is India's biggest trade partner in South Asia, bilateral trade between India and Bangladesh has grown steadily over the decade.

Cooperating in power sectors has become one of the hallmarks of India and Bangladesh relations. Bangladesh is India's biggest development partner.

Talking about the packaging industry, he deliberated that packaging is a high growth industry in India and is developing at a fast rate making India a preferred hub for the packaging industry. It's a pivotal sector, driving technology and innovation growth in the country adding value to the various manufacturing sectors including agriculture, FMCG, and many more.

The session was moderated by PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry Secretary Rakesh Kumar Sangrai and was attended by many industry stalwarts around the world.

### **THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 2-3-2021**

## **What’s next for Pakistan-India?**

### **Mosharraf Zaidi**

A renewal of the 2003 ceasefire at the Line of Control (LOC) between Pakistan and India is unequivocally good news. Neither country’s strategic or tactical goals are served by the constant violence along the LOC, but dozens of families and hundreds of individuals are in the line of fire every time there is an escalation in exchanges between the respective armed forces of the two countries. Given that there is still a relatively heavy civilian population on the Azad Jammu and Kashmir side, there is all the more reason for Pakistan to be proactive in seeking an end to the LOC exchanges.

The more intriguing part of the DGMOs meeting, and the high-level conversations, whether directly or through mutually trusted third parties, is what happens next. Pakistan and India have both made political commitments since 2019 that will be difficult to walk back – but need to be revisited in order for serious conversations to take place between the two countries.

Pakistan has repeatedly sought Indian assurance that New Delhi will revisit and reverse the draconian annexation of the Occupied Kashmir region that was enacted on August 5, 2019. Without any action by India that signals its openness to this reversal, it will be incredibly difficult for the Pakistani leadership to engage in a politically robust dialogue process, no matter the intended outcome – whether it is full normalization, better people-to-people exchanges, or even marginal improvement in ease of doing business and trade. Despite unprecedented alignment on issues of national security between civilian and military leaders, including those in the opposition, we have already witnessed how an appetite for domestic point scoring can motivate leaders like Ayaz Sadiq to misrepresent events related to India.

India has created a domestic political environment for itself in which making peace with Pakistan is even more complicated for leaders in New Delhi than it is for Pakistani leaders in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Hatred and distrust for Pakistan are qualifications for any Indian leader to engage in the public discourse. Voices for reasonable engagement

with Pakistan have been tarred and feathered, and thoughtful voices in the Indian mainstream are forced to adopt incredibly harsh postures on Pakistan, in order to be deemed acceptable for nationwide consumption.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi may be the only Indian leader alive that can flip a switch and try to walk back the rhetoric he has invested in, but he would risk alienating both the rank and file of the RSS, the extremists that he owes his political life to, as well as alienating the anti-Pakistan hawks that run his foreign policy. From spymaster (and anti-Pakistan terror champion) Ajit Doval, to Look East (and away from Pakistan) architect S Jaishankar, it is Pakistan that is at the beating heart of the Indian deep state's national security logic.

Despite these constraints, as recently as December 2017, Pakistan and India have engaged face to face, in bilateral talks at the National Security Adviser level. Even after August 5, 2019, Pakistan has engaged with India at multilateral fora that India is able to dominate (such as the recent Saarc meetings on Covid-19). Softening the blow of engagement for hawks on either side of the border through increased engagement in multilateral fora is an easy and likely very quick way of escalating conversation, exposure and engagement between the two countries.

Among the most ardent champions for this approach will be Russia, China and the United States. A better bilateral relationship between Pakistan and India is thus one of the very few things on which these three powerful countries (and allies of both countries) agree on. Saarc, SCO (in Dushanbe in September), UNGA (New York in September), or even COP26 (Glasgow in November) all represent potential venues for interaction between key Pakistani and Indian leaders.

To imagine how a dialogue could be structured is also important. Traditional Pakistani diplomats have sought to remain steadfast to the conventions that were visible in the 'composite dialogue' or the most recent permutation of the same, known as the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue. The Indian motivation is to focus solely on what is of interest to India in the dialogue. Pakistan should respond not with a compromised version of a framework that leans into India's hegemonic strategic culture, but instead propose a framework that addresses Pakistan's concerns.

Any serious conversation between Pakistan and India needs to address and tackle the conventional core concerns of the two countries: Kashmir for Pakistan, and UNSC listed terrorist groups for India. But a serious conversation in 2021 also needs to include four additional issues between the two countries that have traditionally not been central enough to the bilateral framework.

The first is Pakistan's concerns about India's sponsorship of terrorism targeting Pakistan and Afghanistan through violent extremists using both religion (such as the TTP) and ethnicity (such as the BRA). The second is the impact of climate change, and climate-altering behaviours on either side of the border. The third is an approach to water,

especially ground water usage, and water conservation. The fourth, and perhaps the most controversial, is the treatment of Muslims under a right-wing extremist regime in India. Without these four conversations, a dialogue between Pakistan and India is essentially an exercise in public relations, with almost zero strategic or tactical value for Pakistan – but potentially major rents for India.

Consider the fact that during the week that Pakistan's DGMO was being briefed to take the bold step of renewing the ceasefire for India, and as the Pakistani civil and military leadership was making its umpteenth attempt to de-escalate with India, the friends-and-family India package was ringing in full bloom at the FATF. Despite having among the world's most robust set of on-paper measures to counter terrorist financing and taking up massive anti money laundering regulations and rules, Pakistan was once again denied an exit from the FATF grey-list. What signal should Pakistani strategists and tacticians derive from the extension of Pakistan's grey-listing to June 2021?

The most important is that Pakistan is not going to be rewarded for anything that it does that may be seen as a positive or constructive step. Pakistan took measures to de-escalate on the LOC in early 2018. This generated no positive reviews from any international partner. Pakistani behaviour in the aftermath of India's Balakot attack was designed to end, not sustain conflict. This too, did not garner any recognition or appreciation.

Pakistan has helped forge a Doha Peace Process, reducing the robustness of its intimacy with the Taliban, gaining hardly any new friends for its efforts in Afghanistan, nor any political goodwill at home, and only marginal international acknowledgment. The consistently positive messaging since the August 2019 annexation of Occupied Kashmir by India has focused on politics and symbolism, rather than the war mongering that is the bread and butter of the Indian mainstream. This too has earned Pakistan virtually nothing.

All this while, the Western embrace of New Delhi has tightened. Its dangerous information warfare, through the India Chronicles is ignored. Its support for terrorist groups targeting Pakistan is neglected. India is afforded a special understanding for consuming Russian military hardware. It is given waivers to trade with Iran. It is celebrated for engaging in dangerous cross-border militarism with China, and it is rewarded for annexing Kashmir.

In this global geopolitical environment, Pakistan needs to invest in a serious examination of the domestic political appetite for a strategic pivot to geoeconomics. Pakistan's treatment at international fora is principally informed by the massive gap in the absolute numbers between itself and its key international interlocutors. Whether it is military spending versus India, unskilled labour exports to the Gulf, foreign direct investments from China, or the pure political power differential with Western powers – in each of these dynamics, Pakistan has less power than it needs to negotiate better outcomes that serve its strategic goals.

When the Senate elections take place this week, Pakistan's grand strategists need to step back and ask themselves whether the conversation leading to the Senate elections is of a country that has forged the necessary consensus needed to undertake the kind of strategic pivot that Pakistani time and space requires. Is it?

### **DAWN, ISLAMABAD 13-3-2021**

## **Re-engaging America**

**Touqir Hussain**

*The writer, a former ambassador, is Adjunct Professor Georgetown University and Visiting Senior Research Fellow National University of Singapore.*

PAKISTAN-US relations in recent years have derived largely from Washington's China and India policies, the Afghanistan war and US national security concerns related to international terrorism. And they have not performed well, leaving both sides unhappy. The Biden administration has given no hint of what comes next.

Pakistan for its part, going by official statements and think tanks reports, is hoping for a reset where relations find their own rationale yet reflect a balance in America's ties with India and Pakistan, and its consent to Islamabad's strategic links with Beijing. But Pakistan has given no indication how the competing objectives in its wish list can be reconciled, and hasn't provided any clues about its own policies to induce the desired change in US policies. All we hear is talk that Pakistan is moving away from geopolitics to geo-economics.

In fact, there's no such thing as stand-alone geo-economics especially when Pakistan's value as an economic partner is anything but obvious. Here a little history is relevant. Pakistan's close relations with the US have historically been a function of geopolitics (1954 to 1965 and 1979 to 1990) or issues relating to US and global security (2001 to 2011). That is where the relations found their logic.

Pakistan seems to be hoping for a reset in ties.

Geopolitics still remains the guiding principle of Pakistan-US relations except that now it provokes conflict. Cooperation is still possible in areas such as stabilisation of Afghanistan and counterterrorism. The US feels that continued Afghan conflict will keep insurgency and terrorism alive, and would not only threaten its own security but by fuelling extremism in Pakistan would also hold the stability of the nuclear-capable country hostage. Jihadists also threaten India, undermining Washington's China policy. As it is these areas of cooperation between the two sides are also marked by a conflict of perception, policy and interests,

How Washington resolves these dilemmas will depend not only on its China and Afghanistan policies currently under review but also on how compatible Pakistan's policies will be with US objectives. America does not want to start a new

Afghan war. Nor does it want to scuttle the February 2020 agreement entirely. Washington may have lost the war but has not lost the capacity to prevent instability in Afghanistan. However, it will need Pakistan's help. But there appears to be no clarity in Pakistan's Afghanistan policy except in rhetoric.

There is also a continued lack of trust in Washington's policies. Those sceptical of America's value as a partner need to revisit Pakistan's own history. To its credit, the US did help Pakistan meet its economic and security challenges earlier. Problems arose in the 1980s and after 9/11 in liaisons between Washington and the Zia and Musharraf regimes struggling to gain legitimacy, economic support and political backing. They made a bad bargain with the US in their own interest rather than Pakistan's. Sadly, more than suffering at the hands of others Pakistan was a victim of its own poor policy choices and their advancement through an unqualified partnership with the US.

Pakistan's policies must enjoy domestic support before others respect it. And if Pakistan wants to move from geopolitics to geo-economics it has to reach some understanding with Washington on strategic and security issues, otherwise these will keep colliding with prospects of economic cooperation. And finally, Pakistan has to enhance its value as an economic partner for which it needs to strengthen its economy, free itself from entrenchment in a security-dominated national purpose, and pursue policies that make its excellent geopolitical location a true asset, not a liability. Its real value as an economic partner will not show until Afghanistan stabilises and Pakistan becomes a hub for pipelines and trade with Central Asia.

Pakistan should not seek across-the-board change in its ties with the US. Washington is not interested in broadening the relationship. Pakistan should start modestly with Afghanistan and counterterrorism and build mutual confidence, and then expand the dialogue and agree to cooperate on points of convergence while trying to manage areas of divergence. In the long run, Washington cannot leave Islamabad entirely dependent on China and useful only to Beijing's strategic purposes. And that is where there is some strategic convergence.

Pakistan should revisit Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's great idea of 'bilateralism'. Instead of being concerned over losing China in pursuit of America, Islamabad should worry about gaining internal strength to enhance its appeal to both sides so neither can afford to lose Pakistan. A weak Pakistan would need both China and the US. However, it would have no option but to choose one.

### **THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 15-3-2021**

## **Ties with Sri Lanka**

**Malik Muhammad Ashraf**

In the backdrop of persistent efforts by India to isolate Pakistan in the region and beyond, the two-day visit to Sri

Lanka by Prime Minister Imran Khan in the last week of February was of great significance.

The visit has surely produced positive outcomes with regard to further strengthening the historically cordial ties between the two countries which have agreed to enhance bilateral relations in diverse areas, including defence, trade and tourism through greater connectivity. PM Imran Khan also offered a \$50 million line of credit to Sri Lanka for defence purchases.

The visit was also aimed at building a strategic relationship with Sri Lanka, as Prime Minister Imran Khan invited the Sri Lankan leadership to join CPEC for regional connectivity. The move was part of a well-conceived and proactive strategy to engage South Asian countries in view of the worsening ties with India. Sri Lanka is an important member of Saarc and the South Asian region. Taking relations with Sri Lanka to a higher level would surely scuttle Indian efforts to isolate Pakistan in the region.

India has strained relations with the government of Sri Lanka, particularly with the present leadership of the country, for the support India had extended to the Tamil Tigers during the insurgency. India along with the US also played a role in the defeat of Rajapaksa in the 2015 elections to install a pro-India and Pro-US government there. Rajapaksa served as president of Sri Lanka from 2005 to 2015, during which he was able to end the three decades old insurgency in the country and establish peace.

It was during the regime of Rajapaksa that relations between Pakistan and Sri Lanka became very strong. Sri Lanka started buying arms and ammunition from Pakistan in a big way from 1999 to quell insurgency in the country. The total purchases until December 2007 were worth \$50 million while there was a sudden jump in the quantity of merchandise ordered in 2009. Much opinion in Sri Lanka in fact favoured and promoted the idea of the Sri Lankan government finalizing a defence cooperation agreement with Islamabad.

In May 2000, Pakistan supplied millions of dollars of much-needed weapons to the Sri Lankan government, when Tamil Tiger rebels were about to recapture their former capital of Jaffna.

In April 2009, Sri Lanka requested \$25 million worth of 81 mm, 120 mm and 130 mm mortar ammunition to be delivered within a month. Sri Lanka also evinced interest in the purchase of Pakistani al-Khalid Main Battle Tanks, light weapons and ammunition, and the Sino-Pak joint venture product JF-17 Thunder aircraft. Till the recent past, the relationship between the two countries predominantly focused on defence cooperation because of Sri Lanka's war against the Tamil Tigers.

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa visited Pakistan in February 2012 which gave a new dimension to bilateral relations between the two countries. They agreed to enhance bilateral trade from \$375 million to \$2 billion within three years, besides expanding cooperation in the field of economy, defence, media and technical education. Pakistan

and Sri Lanka agreed to strengthen multi-sectoral cooperation and consequently, one MOU and three agreements were signed during the visit to formalize the cooperation in different fields.

One agreement pertained to waiving off visas for officials and diplomats to facilitate an increased level of interaction between the two countries. Under the second agreement on customs, both the countries agreed to cooperate with each other in the prevention, investigation, prosecution, transfer of illicit substances and illicit trafficking in narcotics.

The third agreement for cultural cooperation expressed commitment in the fields of arts, culture, creative studies, archaeology, sports, education, information and media; to achieve this objective, it was agreed to enhance exchange of cultural delegations, besides the holding of exhibitions for promoting and highlighting cultural heritage of both the countries. The MOU on agriculture focused on cooperation for mutual benefits. Pakistan also offered Sri Lanka a \$200 million buyer's credit loan, giving it the option to make the payment either on barter or in local currency that was much appreciated by the Sri Lankan government.

The two countries also decided to reinvigorate the Joint Economic Commission, and task it to work out modalities for a new and unconventional phase of economic cooperation marked by barter trade, currency exchanges and banking interchanges. Sri Lanka was the first country that signed a free trade agreement with Pakistan, which became effective in June 2005 under which 4,000 items could be imported.

The process of the expansion and diversification of bilateral relations between the two countries set rolling during Rajapaksa's regime has continued to be on the higher trajectory. The relationship is characterized by the realization between the two sides that their cultural heritage provides a sound basis for building a multifaceted partnership to their mutual advantage. Their shared values and concerns about regional security justify an increased synergy of their economies and reinforcing of the institutional framework for cooperation.

More so, Sri Lanka, like Pakistan, rejects India's hegemony in the region. The commonality of views on this issue is yet another strong pillar of the Pak-Sri Lanka relationship. Further, Sri Lanka has always stood by Pakistan like a true friend. For instance, when all the cricket playing nations of the world showed reluctance to send their teams to Pakistan on the pretext of terrorism, it was the Sri Lankan administration that showed solidarity with us and sent its team to Lahore. It was, however, most unfortunate that the terrorists were able to make things worse by attacking it. Pakistan's government and people appreciate that gesture and hold the Sri Lankans in the highest esteem.

The return of Rajapaksa and his party to power in Sri Lanka augurs well for bilateral relations between Pakistan and Sri Lanka as well as with respect to the development of strategic relations for regional connectivity and stability.

**II - ECONOMIC, CULTURAL AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS**

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	<b>INDIA</b>			
1.	India for inclusion of Chabahar port in INSTC route, says Jaishankar Express News Service <b>AFGHANISTAN</b>	The Indian Express, New Delhi	5-3-2021	11
2.	APTTA Trade pact extended for three months Tolo News <b>BANGLADESH</b>	Outlook Afghanistan, Kabul	7-3-2021	11
3.	Bangladesh becoming South Asia's "economic bull case": WSJ Observer Online Desk	The Daily Star, Dhaka	4-3-2021	11
4.	India, Japan JV achieves financial closure for BD power plant Business Correspondent	The Daily Star, Dhaka	7-3-2021	12
5.	BD, Australia to focus more on trade, investment - UNB <b>NEPAL</b>	The Daily Star, Dhaka	12-3-2021	12
6.	Japan provides assistance to implement drinking water, livelihood improvement and new born child project in various districts New Spotlight Online	Spotlight, Kathmandu	9-3-2021	13
7.	Nepal-Bangladesh trade pact stuck over other duties or charges By Krishana Prasain <b>SRI LANKA</b>	The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu	10-3-2021	14
8.	Pakistani PM pledged to facilitate more betel imports from Sri Lanka By Kelum Bandara	Daily Mirror, Colombo	1-3-2021	15
9.	Lanka's foreign policy to be aligned to economic recovery - Prof. Jayanath By Dinesh Perera <b>PAKISTAN</b>	Daily News, Colombo	11-3-2021	15
10.	Pakistan, IMF agree to lower tax collection target By Mehtab Haider	The News, Islamabad	6-3-2021	16
11.	Pakistan to facilitate Uzbekistan's access to seaports: PM Staff Reporter	The Nation, Islamabad	11-3-2021	16

12.	Pakistan, Iran committed to promote bilateral trade By Staff Correspondent	The News, Islamabad	13-3-2021	17
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**THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 5-3-2021****India for inclusion of Chabahar port in INSTC route, says Jaishankar****Express News Service**

In his address on 'Chabahar Day' at Maritime India Summit, he said the shift in fulcrum of global economic growth towards Asia is creating unprecedented opportunities for connectivity in the region.

India has proposed inclusion of Chabahar port in the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) route, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said on Thursday, and expressed hope that member-states involved with INSTC will agree on expanding membership of this project.

In his address on 'Chabahar Day' at the Maritime India Summit, Jaishankar said the shift in the fulcrum of global economic growth towards Asia is creating unprecedented opportunities for connectivity in the region.

He asserted that the marking of Chabahar Day by India reflects its strong commitment to enhancing regional connectivity.

Jaishankar said India has also proposed the inclusion of Chabahar in the INSTC route.

The INSTC is a key trade corridor project, wherein India is partnering with 12 countries to establish an economic corridor, he said.

The Corridor is a 7,200-km multi-mode transport project to move freight among India, Iran, Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, Central Asia and Europe.

"We also welcome the interest of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan to join the multilateral corridor project. Establishing an eastern corridor through Afghanistan would maximize its potential," Jaishankar said. "I am hopeful that during the INSTC Coordination Council meeting, member-states would agree to the expansion of the INSTC route to include the Chabahar Port and also agree on expanding the membership of this project."

The virtual event also saw participation of ministers from Afghanistan, Armenia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia and Uzbekistan.

Jaishankar highlighted that the Chabahar port has not only emerged as a commercial transit hub for the region but also facilitated delivery of humanitarian assistance, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The location of the Chabahar port has strategic advantage and high potential to provide connectivity among India, Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and other Commonwealth of Independent States countries, and boost trade.

**OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 7-3-2021****APTTA Trade Pact Extended for Three Months****(TOLO NEWS)**

KABUL - The Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) was extended for three months, allowing the two neighboring countries to further discuss proposed amendments in the document and sign its revised version, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce said.

The agreement that was signed in 2010 was expired in February.

The decision to extend the agreement is aimed at preventing any disruption in trade and transit affairs between the two countries, said Fawad Ahmadi, spokesman for the Ministry of Industry and Commerce.

He said this will buy time for the two countries to further discuss the proposed amendments in the agreement.

"Work on technical issues of the agreement is underway by representatives of the two countries and it will be signed in compliance with World Trade Organization's principles," Ahmadi said.

Afghanistan's free trade to India via Pakistan and Pakistan's cargo transit to Central Asia through Afghanistan is one of the five major issues that need to be revised in the APTTA. But the countries have not come up with an agreement on the amended issues after months of discussions.

Naqibullah Safi, the CEO of Afghanistan-Pakistan Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industry said the agreement should be signed within the next three months.

Afghanistan Chambers Federation said the agreement has not proved effective for Afghanistan and instead it has reduced Afghanistan's exports.

"Overwhelming challenges will remain if basic changes are not applied in the APTTA agreement and if the last decade's problems in the trade affairs are not addressed," said Khan Jan Alokozai, the deputy head of Afghanistan Chambers Federation.

The APTTA agreement was signed in 2010 between Afghanistan and Pakistan governments by the United States mediation. However, Afghanistan's private sector continues to raise its concerns about the closure of trade and transit routes by Pakistan more than a dozen times in the last 10 years.

**THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 4-3-2021****Bangladesh becoming South Asia's "economic bull case": WSJ****Observer Online Desk**

Bangladesh is becoming South Asia's "economic bull case" as its exports have boomed over the past decade, reported Wall Street Journal (WSJ) yesterday.

WSJ's Hong Kong-based reporter Mike Bird has claimed that Bangladesh is notable in South Asia for being the

“closest proxy” for the successful development models seen at various stages in South Korea, China, and Vietnam. Bangladesh provides the world with another example that export-led development has the best modern-day track record of moving countries from very low-income levels into middle-income status, the report said.

It said the country’s exports have boomed over the past decade, while those of India and Pakistan have lagged behind.

Bangladesh achieved a landmark economic status last week when the United Nations’ Committee for Development Policy (CDP) recommended that the country graduate from the least developed country (LDC) categorisation it has held for most parts since its independence 50 years ago.

The report also stated that Bangladesh’s exports have risen by around 80 percent in US dollar terms in the past decade through the country’s booming garment industry, while India and Pakistan’s exports have declined marginally.

In 2011, Bangladesh’s GDP per capita in US dollar terms was 40 percent below India’s. Bangladesh’s GDP per capita caught up last year due to India’s pandemic-related slump, but the IMF expects the gap will not widen any time soon.

The report also suggested that Bangladesh’s meteoric economic rise should be accompanied by greater cooperation in Southeast Asia.

Bangladesh finds itself outside of multilateral Asian economic cooperation like ASEAN, RCEP, or the CPTPP. For starters, diversifying the country’s manufacturing exports through greater participation in intra-Asian supply chains and closer economic relationship with neighbours in the east can provide better results.

Citing Vietnam and Cambodia, the author suggested Bangladesh’s next step should be transition towards higher-value forms of manufacturing and exporting.

#### **THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 7-3-2021**

### **India, Japan JV achieves financial closure for BD power plant**

**Business Correspondent**

A joint venture project between India's Reliance Power (RPower) and Japanese JERA said on Thursday it has achieved the financial closure for phase-1 of 745 MW gas based combined cycle power project in Meghnaghat, Bangladesh with group of lenders -Japan Bank of International Cooperation (JBIC), and Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Reliance Power Limited, formerly Reliance Energy Generation Limited is a part of the Reliance Anil Dhirubhai Ambani Group of India. It was established to

develop, construct, operate and maintain power projects in the Indian and international markets.

JERA is 50-50 joint venture between TEPCO Fuel & Power, a wholly owned subsidiary of Tokyo Electric Power Company, and Chubu Electric Power, founded in April 2015.

Chubu Electric Power Co., Inc., abbreviated as Chuden in Japanese, is a Japanese electric utilities provider for the middle Chubu region of the Honshu island of Japan. "All requisite conditions for availing the drawdown under the loan agreements have been satisfied," RPower said in a statement.

India's financial newspaper Financial Express said: "Subsequently, RPower's wholly owned subsidiary Samalkot Power has received the approval from the US Export Import Bank to sell one module of equipment (Module 1) to Samsung C&T Corporation of South Korea, who is the EPC contractor for the project, for around Rs 1,540 crore.

"Notice to proceed has been issued by the project company to Samsung C&T, who in turn has issued the notice to proceed to Samalkot Power for supply of equipment," RPower said.

RPower decided to relocate the equipment from Samalkot to Bangladesh owing to non availability of natural gas for the project. The equipment was procured from internationally reputed OEMs. RPower had earlier synchronised two units of the Rs 10,000 crore or 2400 MW project in Samalkot.

RPower had in July 2019 restructured the Rs 2,430 crore Samalkot loan from US Exim Bank by amortising repayment schedule into bullet repayments and extended the final loan maturity to June 2022 at an ultra-low interest rate of only 2.65% per annum.

Reliance Power has a networth of Rs 12,063 crore and debt to equity of 2.24 times as of December 31, 2020. The company expects to reduce the total debt of over Rs 20,000 crore by upto Rs 3,000 crore by March 2021.

#### **THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 12-3-2021**

### **BD, Australia to focus more on trade, investment**

**UNB**

Bangladesh and Australia want to expand bilateral relations with more trade, investment and cooperation in human resource development.

Australian Foreign Minister Senator Marise Payne called his Bangladesh counterpart Dr AK Abdul Momen recently and discussed bilateral, regional and global issues of mutual interest, including the Rohingya issue, climate change and Commonwealth.

"Their discussion also focused on recalibrating the bilateral relations more towards trade, investment and human resource development," said the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Thursday.

Foreign Minister Momen sought intensified Australian support for early resolution of the Rohingya crisis.

Meanwhile, talks were held on Thursday between the two foreign offices on a virtual platform as part of the regular Foreign Office Consultations.

Australian side congratulated Bangladesh on the occasion of the birth centenary of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the golden jubilee of independence.

Bangladesh side recalled with gratitude the bipartisan support of Australian lawmakers and the people during her War of Liberation.

Both sides highlighted the excellent bilateral relations based on historical ties, the important contribution of diaspora and shared values and common aspirations for peace, progress and prosperity.

Bangladesh and Australia expressed their desire to deepen and widen their economic cooperation.

As Bangladesh graduates from the Least Developed Country group, both sides acknowledged the importance of greater engagement, particularly in the areas of agriculture; water resource management; power, energy and mineral resources; trade; investment; human resource development; ICT; defense and blue economy.

They hoped for closer collaboration to address common challenges and opportunities in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean regions.

Australia reaffirmed its commitment to support Bangladesh's recovery from COVID-19 and to extend assistance to its priority areas through the Australian development programme.

The two sides also expressed satisfaction in the progress made in creating a platform for discussing trade and investment related matters and also resumption of direct air cargo transportation from Bangladesh.

The talks involved productive exchange of views on the challenges in the Indian Ocean region, Myanmar, a durable solution to the Rohingya crisis, the importance of human rights, and on other current global issues including climate change.

Officials acknowledged the shared security interests, including cooperation in cyber security, fighting transnational crime, countering terrorism and human trafficking; and the importance both sides place on defence cooperation.

Australia appreciated that Bangladesh was bearing a significant burden in hosting the Rohingyas and also provided an update on Australia's humanitarian assistance for them.

Both sides stressed the need for early, voluntary, safe, and sustainable return of the Rohingyas and reintegration of the returnees into the Myanmar society, with international support.

They also agreed that the solution to the crisis remained within Myanmar and creation of a conducive environment there was necessary for the repatriation of the Rohingyas to their ancestral homes in the northern Rakhine province.

Bangladesh also stressed that if the Rohingyas could not be repatriated within a short span of time, it would have ramifications for the entire region and beyond.

In Bangladesh's Golden Jubilee year, Australia and Bangladesh looked forward to building on the existing strong foundations to ensure that Asia-Pacific region remained secure, open and prosperous.

The two sides also agreed to commemorate the 50th year of establishment of diplomatic relations in a befitting manner in 2022 and hold the next Foreign Office Consultations the same year.

Bangladesh side was led by Khondker M Talha, Director General for East Asia and Pacific of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs while Gary Cowan, First Assistant Secretary, North and South Asia Division, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade headed the Australian side.

Bangladesh High Commissioner in Canberra Md Sufiur Rahman and Australian High Commissioner in Dhaka Jeremy Brewer also participated in the talks.

### **SPOTLIGHT, KATHMANDU 9-3-2021**

## **Japan Provides Assistance To Implement Drinking Water, Livelihood Improvement And New Born Child Project In Various Districts**

### **NEW SPOTLIGHT ONLINE**

Japanese Assistance for Water and Sanitation Facilities Construction and Hygiene Education Intervention Project for Primary and Secondary Schools in Mugu District, Nepal

The Government of Japan has extended US dollars 865,034 (about NRs. 101.13 million), to Good Neighbors Japan under the Grant Assistance for Japanese NGO Projects Schemes.

Good Neighbors Japan will work with Good Neighbors Nepal, Shree Karnali Poverty Abatement & Development Forum, and Village Development Committees in Mugu District, and aims at improving the water hygiene environment at public elementary and junior high schools in Mugu District. A grant contract for this project was signed and exchanged on 9th March 2021 by Mr. Yoshioka Yuzo, Charge d'Affaires ad Interim of Japan to Nepal and Ms. SATO Makiko, Good Neighbors Japan.

This project aims to provide water and sanitation facilities and hygiene education which promotes proper hygiene practice to 31 primary and secondary schools in Mugu District. The main activities of this project are to construct and repair drinking water supply facilities, construct gender-friendly toilets, establish and strengthen school WASH management committees, and provide menstrual hygiene management education.

Combining all these activities, this project improves access to safe water and gender equality in education. The Embassy of Japan in Nepal expects that this project will contribute to achieve access to safe water and to increase the number of girl students' educational attainment in Mugu. It is also confident that the project will strengthen the cordial friendship between the peoples of Japan and Nepal.

### **Japanese Assistance for Livelihood Improvement through Agriculture in Sindhupalchowk District**

(Kathmandu: March 9): The Charge d'Affaires a.i. of Japan to Nepal, Mr. YOSHIOKA Yuzo, signed a grant contract for US\$ 453,368 (about NRs. 53 million) with Ms. Nakajima Ayaka, Country Representative of the Japan Asian Association and Asian Friendship Society (JAFS) to implement a project to support earthquake-affected communities in Sindhupalchowk District to enhance livelihoods through agriculture.

The support was made under Japan's Grant Assistance for Japanese NGO Projects Scheme for FY 2020 and will be implemented by JAFS, an international NGO based in Osaka, Japan, in collaboration with its local partner NGO, AFS-Nepal. The project focuses on building irrigation and life water systems and training local farmers on using the systems.

JAFS will also support the establishment of agricultural cooperatives to help farmers to collaborate with each other to add value to their products. It will also provide opportunities farmers for to learn how to grow varieties of fruits and vegetables, such as pineapples, lemons and mangos, etc.

The Embassy of Japan in Nepal hopes that the project will help towards improving the livelihoods of farmers in earthquake-affected areas, and believes that it will also enhance the friendly relations existing between the peoples of Japan and Nepal.

### **Japanese Assistance for Improvement of New Born and Child Health Project in Banke District**

(Kathmandu: March 9): The Charge d'Affaires a.i. of Japan to Nepal, Mr. YOSHIOKA Yuzo signed a grant contract for US\$ 448,618 (about NRs 52 million) with Ms. Onishi Yuka, Project Manager of ADRA Japan, for implementing a project to improve newborn and child health in Banke District.

The support was provided under Japan's Grant Assistance for Japanese NGO Projects Scheme for FY 2020 and will be implemented by ADRA Japan, an international NGO

based in Tokyo, and its implementing partner, ADRA Nepal, and its local NGO partner, ENRUDEC.

The grant has been used to repair and upgrade five Health Posts and one Primary Health Care Center in the district, and for installing medical equipment at 48 health facilities, including at the Bheri Federal Hospital. The project also organized training and seminars for health service providers in coordination with Lumbini Province, the Health Office, Banke, and local government units.

The project focuses on enhancing the capacity of health service providers and it will raise awareness for local communities. ADRA believes that understanding the importance of care is the first step to save the lives of mothers, newborn babies, and children. The Embassy of Japan in Nepal hopes that the project will enhance child health care services and the understanding of people about basic health care. It also believes that the project will further strengthen the friendly relations between the peoples of Japan and Nepal.

### **THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 10-3-2021**

## **Nepal-Bangladesh trade pact stuck over other duties or charges**

### **Krishana Prasain**

Nepali officials said a deal between the two neighbours was unlikely until the ODC is dropped to zero.

Bangladesh said it was open to negotiations on the issue of other duties or charges (ODC) on listed goods while repeatedly deferring signing the first preferential trade agreement with Nepal.

Nepali officials said a deal between the two neighbours was unlikely until the ODC is dropped to zero. The ODC is normally added as an indirect cost.

The proposed preferential trade agreement gives preferential access to certain products by reducing tariffs, but due to the ODC, it does not abolish them completely. Providing duty-free quota-free access to Bangladeshi products without removing the ODC on Nepali products will not benefit Nepal, according to officials.

As Bangladesh is an initial member of the World Trade Organisation, it is permitted to levy ODC. After adding ODC on top of the tariffs on goods exported from Nepal, total charges could come up to 130-132 percent, the official said.

The plan to sign a preferential trade agreement at the end of December last year did not materialize as the issue of ODC remained unsolved.

The sixth Nepal-Bangladesh commerce secretary-level virtual meeting on trade and economic cooperation held last October had agreed to sign a bilateral preferential trade arrangement by 2020-end.

“The chances of concluding a preferential trade agreement are slim,” said an official at the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supplies, who wished not to be named.

As per the technical committee formed by the Industry Ministry to finalize the list of goods,

Among the 42 goods proposed to be listed by Bangladesh, 30 are included in the South Asian Free Trade Area's (SAFTA) sensitive goods list. Another five goods are medicine related products while the Nepal government has a policy to protect domestic medicinal industry.

As a least developed country, Nepal can levy tariff on certain goods and cannot waive duty on them. The Industry Ministry has written to Bangladesh proposing to list 20 goods taking this provision into consideration.

“The Bangladeshi side has said that it is flexible regarding other duties or charges, and is ready to discuss the subject. But we are for eliminating the charges completely,” said Prakash Dahal, joint secretary of the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supplies.

“There will be no deal even if the ODC is fixed at 5 percent,” he added.

Officials said that Bangladesh planned to invite President Bidya Devi Bhandari to its Independence Day celebration on March 26, and there is talk that the preferential trade agreement could be signed at that time.

“But Bangladesh has not sent its final list of goods,” Dahal said.

There is talk that a trade meeting has been scheduled for next week or March 22 to discuss the issue, sources privy to the matter said.

Earlier, the Bangladeshi commerce minister had said that they were positive regarding the ODC issue which the Nepali side has put forward as a major condition before signing the pact.

According to Dhakal, the commerce minister said that their thoughts were progressive regarding the ODC.

“But we are not clear what that means. Will Bangladesh remove the ODC completely or only by some percentage? They need to be clear on that,” said Dahal.

According to an Industry Ministry official, the agreement is more beneficial to them. “Offhand, I would say that we will lose the revenue we are currently collecting if we sign the agreement without eliminating the ODC.”

Dahal said, “Concluding the pact without any benefit is pointless. Nepal’s exports to Bangladesh are small, and we have fewer exportable products too.”

According to the Department of Customs, Nepal imported goods worth Rs3.07 billion in the first seven months of the current fiscal year from Bangladesh. Shipments to that country during the same period were valued at Rs367.69 million.

In fiscal 2019-20, Nepal shipped goods worth Rs954 million to Bangladesh while it bought more than five times that amount from there. That year, imports from Bangladesh were valued at Rs5.29 billion.

### **DAILY MIRROR, COLOMBO 1-3-2021**

## **Pakistani PM pledged to facilitate more betel imports from Sri Lanka**

**By Kelum Bandara**

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan agreed to further facilitate betel imports among others, from Sri Lanka by eliminating the present bottlenecks raised by the Sri Lankan side, Trade Minister Bandula Gunawardane said yesterday.

The Pakistani leader concluded his two day bilateral visit to Sri Lanka last week. Minister Gunawardane who participated in bilateral negotiations with him told Daily Mirror the trade balance was heavily in favour of Pakistan, and Prime Minister Khan pledged to take measures to reduce it by entertaining more imports from Sri Lanka. The bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) which is in force will be examined further to remove barriers for trading.

“Our exports to Pakistan stand at around US \$ 100 million whereas we import items valued US \$ 400 million. We brought this to the notice of Prime Minister Khan who was concerned about it. Of our exports, betel leaves account for 20 percent. We are planning to develop betel export villages in the country. Our revenue from betel exports has dwindled due to tariff barriers in Pakistan,” the Minister said. The Pakistani Prime Minister mooted the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor for Sri Lanka to connect with the Central Asian countries. Mr. Gunawardane said the Pakistani leader offered to help Sri Lanka to arrange for Sri Lankan exporters to warehouse their products in Pakistan to be exported to the countries such as Uzbekistan. “I was invited to visit Pakistan with a trade delegation soon,” he said.

### **DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 11-3-2021**

## **Lanka’s foreign policy to be aligned to economic recovery - Prof. Jayanath**

**Dinesh Perera**

Secretary of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Prof. Jayanath Colombage noted that Sri Lanka’s foreign policy would be aligned to an economic recovery following the fallout caused by COVID-19.

Prof. Colombage was defending Sri Lanka and the government’s track record on the Al Jazeera network. Prof. Colombage showed that military involvement in domestic affairs in Sri Lanka was on par with other countries. Colombage called on the international

community to realize the lack of popularity of the politicians that co-sponsored the UN resolution against the country.

Prof. Colombage said, “we are going through a very difficult time due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It has slowed down the world economy and it has impacted quite harshly on a small economy like Sri Lanka. We have a huge task to overcome the economic situation in the country. We have to give the injection to everyone and revive the economy. To do that we need foreign direct investment.” Prof. Colombage pointed to how Colin Powell with a military background was made Secretary of State in the US.

On his own appointment, Prof. Colombage said, “Just because someone serves in the military I do not think they should be limited from serving his country.”

Prof. Colombage noted that many developed countries used the military when things got critical during COVID-19. Colombage was speaking to Al Jazeera on March 6.

The appointment of military members in Sri Lanka was done to effectively combat COVID-19. Military officers in certain geographies were best placed to take control of the situation.

Prof. Colombage cited the Easter Sunday attacks as one of the worst failings of national security. He said, “The crux of the report is that the then government did not take any issue on national security. The religious extremists were able to carry out their dastardly act.”

Prof. Colombage pointed to a lack of domestic legitimacy to the co-sponsored resolution at the UN. He said of the former ministers that brought the resolution, “Look at what happened to them? Not one of them is in politics today. They were all wiped out by the people.”

He added on the resolution, “It was the greatest betrayal of the sovereignty of the country.”

Prof. Colombage noted that a domestic mechanism for reconciliation existed and that Sri Lanka’s statistics on the war remained impressive.

#### **THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 6-3-2021**

### **Pakistan, IMF agree to lower tax collection target**

**Mehtab Haider**

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have agreed to revise downward the annual tax collection target of the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) in order to revive the stalled extended fund facility (EFF) programme.

The tax collection target would be lowered by Rs246 billion, from Rs4,963 billion to Rs4,717 billion, for the current fiscal year, 2020-21.

The two sides agreed for revival of the programme, but it required stamped approval of the Fund’s executive board, which is expected to be held by end of the ongoing month.

The IMF and Pakistan also agreed to fix the next budget’s FBR target at Rs6,000 billion, a gigantic task, in which the government would be given the task to collect additional Rs1,300 billion with the help of normal growth plus different stringent taxation measures.

The FBR has so far collected Rs2,916 billion during the first eight months (July-Feb) period of the current fiscal year, and the Board would have to collect Rs1,801 billion during the next four months (March-June) period to materialise its downward revised target of Rs4,717 billion on its board on June 30, 2021.

On an average, the FBR would have to collect over Rs450 billion every month in the next four months for achieving the desired target. Independent economists argued that the FBR could collect Rs4,300 to Rs4,400 billion during the current fiscal year and with adoption of stringent measures through taking advances, it could go up to Rs4,500 billion. But achieving the revised downward target of Rs4,717 billion seems a bit difficult, they added.

Now the FBR official circles say that the Board would be able to achieve its desired tax collection target for the current fiscal year. The FBR was taking all required measures and database would be utilised to bring potential income earners into tax net.

When contacted, FBR Member Inland Revenue (Operations) Dr Mohammad Ashfaque Ahmed said on Friday that the tax machinery took different measures without creating hue and cry for the purpose of streamlining the tax collection. He said that the tax machinery generated tax demand of Rs1.4 trillion, highest in the last six years, which would be materialised into taxability after completing all procedures. He said the FBR showed zero tolerance for corruption and wrongdoings and took a number of other steps that would be converted into taxability with certain time lag. He said the FBR streamlined its collection despite COVID-19 pandemic difficulties.

#### **THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 11-3-2021**

### **Pakistan to facilitate Uzbekistan’s access to seaports: PM**

**Staff Reporter**

ISLAMABAD - Prime Minister Imran Khan on Wednesday said that Pakistan would facilitate Uzbekistan to get access to its seaports of Gwadar and Karachi in a bid to enhance regional connectivity and trade.

The Prime Minister made these remarks while talking to visiting Uzbek Foreign Minister Dr Abdulaziz Kamilov, who called on him here.

The Prime Minister while expressing appreciation for the proposed Trans-Afghan railway project between Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, he underscored Pakistan's commitment to support all efforts for the earliest realization of the important connectivity project.

He underlined Pakistan's resolve to forge closer ties with Central Asian Republics in diverse fields including trade, investments and energy. He said Pakistan will facilitate Uzbekistan to get access to its seaports of Gwadar and Karachi in a bid to enhance regional connectivity and trade.

Imran Khan emphasized that enhanced trade and regional connectivity are the cornerstones of economic growth and development.

The Prime Minister reaffirmed Pakistan's steadfast support to the Afghan peace process, stressing the imperative of negotiated political solution.

In the context of South Asia, the Prime Minister underscored that durable peace and economic development in the region hinges on peaceful resolution of long-standing unresolved disputes.

The Uzbek Foreign Minister Kamilov conveyed cordial greetings of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and reiterated Uzbekistan's commitment to expand bilateral cooperation with Pakistan in diverse fields.

He also handed over a letter from President Mirziyoyev addressed to Prime Minister Imran Khan, inviting him to participate in a Central Asia-South Asia Connectivity Conference in Tashkent in July this year.

The visit of Uzbek Foreign Minister is a result of the ongoing discussions between the two countries on enhancing bilateral cooperation in commerce and trade and other areas.

Both the countries have been closely collaborating at regional and international fora, especially at the United Nations, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, Economic Cooperation Organisation and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

The two countries are also closely cooperating to enhance regional connectivity, especially by early construction of the Trans-Afghan Railway Project between Pakistan, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan.

### **THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 13-3-2021**

## **Pakistan, Iran committed to promote bilateral trade**

### **Staff Correspondent**

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan and Iran on Friday reiterated a resolve to promote economic and trade linkages between the two countries by building on geographical proximity and economic commonalities.

Iran's Deputy Minister of Economic and Finance Affairs Hassan Abghari and Managing Director Iran Foreign Investment Company called on the Minister for Finance and Revenue Hafeez Shaikh, at the finance division.

The finance minister underscored needs to find ways for furthering trade relations. The Pakistan-Iran Investment Company can play a pivotal role in strengthening trade and investment between the two countries, he said.

The minister said the government is pursuing a broad-based economic reform agenda to achieve export led growth and sustainable economic development. He apprised him about the economic challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and outlined socioeconomic measures taken by the Pakistan to lessen the adverse impact of the pandemic on marginalized sections of the society.

The government announced largest ever fiscal stimulus package and introduced the strategy of a smart lockdown to protect the vulnerable segments of the society which has been acknowledged worldwide, he said.

"The current government is firmly committed to correct fundamentals of the economy through effective policy making and targeted reforms with an aim to achieving sustainable and inclusive growth strategy," he added.

The government is resuming cargo train operation with Iran and Turkey. The train will cover a distance of 6,566 kilometres in three countries.

The first such train service was launched in August 2009. The operation was shut down after eight rides due to security reasons.

Currently, there is an insignificant bilateral trade with Pakistan and Iran despite immense potential. Currently, the bilateral trade stands at \$359 million including exports to Iran amounting to \$36 million against its imports at \$323 million.

Tariff and non-tariff barriers are major obstacles in the way of trade enhancement. All the four traditional transportation modes are available for bilateral trade, but unfortunately none of these modes of transportation are efficiently and economically utilised at present.

Iran is ready to export petrochemical, steel and liquefied petroleum products to Pakistan in return of rice, meat and other agriculture products in a barter trade arrangement, its top official said.

Iran is willing to start barter trade with Pakistan with energy and agriculture sectors having potential to increase exports and imports, Iranian Consul General Reza Nazeri said during a meeting with businessmen. Iranian government is ready to facilitate Pakistan's private sector to promote bilateral trade and investment, he said in a statement.