

Vol. : XXXIX No. 16

ISSN 0254-7996

Fortnightly Publication of South Asian Press Clippings

Selections From Regional Press

Coverage

Dailies:

- **August 16 – 31, 2023**

INSTITUTE OF REGIONAL STUDIES, ISLAMABAD

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THE HINDU, DELHI 31-8-2023

**Cross the boulders in the
Indus Waters Treaty**

*India and Pakistan have to recognise their common
interest in the optimum development of the
Indus rivers system*

Amit Ranjan, Nabeela Siddiqui

The Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), brokered by the World Bank, which has again become a source of contention between India and Pakistan, considerably encapsulates the principle of equitable allocation rather than the principle of appreciable harm. Both India and Pakistan are granted exclusive rights to utilise the waters of the rivers allocated to them without harming others' interests. Under the IWT, India has unrestricted use of the three eastern rivers (Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej), while Pakistan enjoys similar rights over the three western rivers (Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab). India is allowed to store 3.60 million-acre feet (MAF) (0.40 MAF on the Indus, 1.50 MAF on the Jhelum and 1.70 MAF on the Chenab) of water. The sector-wise allocation is 2.85 MAF for conservation storage (divided into 1.25 MAF for "general storage" and 1.60 for "power storage") and an additional 0.75 MAF for "flood storage".

The issue is India's hydel projects

The core of the issue now between India and Pakistan involves the Kishanganga and Ratle hydroelectric power plants in India's Jammu and Kashmir.

India considers these projects crucial for energy needs and the region's development, while Pakistan has raised objections, citing violations of the treaty and potential negative effects on its water supply which goes against the provisions outlined in Annexure D of the treaty.

Pakistan first raised its concerns over the Kishanganga project in 2006 and the Ratle project on the Chenab in 2012. In 2010, the dispute on the Kishanganga project was taken to the Court of Arbitration (CoA). Pakistan contended that India's plan is not in line with Article III, Article IV (6) and Paragraph 15(iii) of Annexure D of the IWT. In 2013, the CoA delivered the final judgment, ruling that the Kishanganga hydroelectric project is a run-of-river dam, and India, under the IWT, can divert water from the river Kishanganga/Neelum for power generation.

However, the court stated that India has to maintain a minimum flow of water in the Kishanganga/Neelum river to nine cusecs (cubic metre of water per second).

After the CoA's judgment, the two countries reached an amicable resolution on only one out of four issues that were expected to be resolved. Despite several rounds of talks between the Indus Water Commissioners, Delhi and Islamabad could not resolve the other three matters relating to pondage and spillway configuration. Consequently, Pakistan went to the World Bank accusing India of violating the IWT and the court's verdict. Islamabad also raised objections to the Ratle project.

In 2016, Pakistan requested the World Bank to form a CoA. To this, India requested a neutral expert be appointed to deal with the dispute. At that time, the World Bank paused the works on the Kishanganga and Ratle projects "to allow the two countries to consider alternative ways to resolve their disagreements". Despite the pause, works on the Kishanganga continued, and, in 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the Kishanganga project. A day before Mr. Modi's visit to Jammu and Kashmir, at least nine people were killed on both sides of the border in firing by security officials from the two sides. Pakistan raised its concerns with the World Bank. In October 2022, the World Bank appointed Michel Lino as the neutral expert and Professor Sean Murphy as Chairman of the CoA.

India's stand

On July 6, 2023, the Permanent Court of Arbitration, or PCA (chaired by Prof. Murphy), unanimously rejected India's objections and confirmed its competence to consider and resolve the disputes raised by Pakistan. India has been abstaining from participating in the proceedings at the PCA and did not attend the present proceedings as well. On the question of its competence to take up such matters, the PCA, based on its interpretation of paragraph 1 of Annexure G and Article IX of, unanimously said that it is competent to "consider and determine the disputes set forth in Pakistan's Request for Arbitration".

After the PCA made its observations, India said that it cannot be "compelled to recognize or participate in illegal and parallel proceedings not envisaged by the Treaty". India has been participating in the neutral expert's proceedings whose first meeting was held at The Hague on February 27-28; the next meeting is scheduled in September.

A trust deficit

In a line of advice to address their disputes over shared waters, an Opinion article in The Hindu, "More than court action, revisit the Indus Waters Treaty" (July 20, 2023) observes that more than going to court, the need is to incorporate "equitable and reasonable utilisation" and the "no harm rule" in the IWT. Pragmatically, any such incorporation requires better ties and enduring trust between India and Pakistan. Due to a wide trust deficit between the two countries, there is a remote chance of Pakistan accepting India's request to renegotiate to modify some of the provisions in the IWT.

Second, there is a need to involve local stakeholders also in any negotiation process between India and Pakistan on shared water issues. Also, a joint group comprising technocrats, climate experts, water management professionals, and scientists from both countries can be set up to look at the core of the problem.

Why does India want to renegotiate the Indus Water Treaty with Pakistan?

Third, to make the IWT work there is a need to explore cooperation arrangements mentioned in Article VII of the IWT. The two countries have to recognise their common interest in the optimum development of the Indus Rivers System.

Finally, as the IWT was signed more than 60 years ago, an amendment or two or some may be needed due to changes in the situation in the Indus River Basin region. However, the provisions of the IWT cannot be modified unilaterally. Hence, any modification requires trust between the two riparian countries.

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THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 22-8-2023

Depsang on table, India, China hold third meet in 4 days

India has objections over PLA blocking patrols

Ajay Banerjee

New Delhi, Military officers of India and China today met for the third time within four days to resolve the border standoff, especially at the sensitive Depsang plains.

Major General-level officials met at two locations — Chushul and Daulat Beg Oldie — in eastern Ladakh on Monday. This was the third meeting since Friday.

The push to resolve the deadlock also comes just ahead of the expected bilateral between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the BRICS summit from August 22 to 24 in South Africa.

Major General-level officers have been tasked with finding a workable solution that could be implemented along the undemarcated Line of Actual Control (LAC).

There are differences over the pulling back of troops from the Depsang plains and Charding Nullah near Demchok. The two sides have been locked in a standoff since April 2020. Talks have been deadlocked over the dispute over the 972-sqkm plateau Depsang. The two sides have issues over troop positions, especially at the “bottleneck” on the eastern edge of Depsang. India has been objecting to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) deliberately blocking Indian patrols on the patrolling route that goes east of the “bottleneck” in Depsang. Prior to April 2020, Indian patrols were using the patrolling route, but since then the PLA has been craftily using a clause in the 30-year-old border agreement to block Indian patrols.

As per the border agreement, patrolling parties of one country have to return on encountering the patrol party of the other country.

One of the options being discussed now is that Indian troops would coordinate with the Chinese when patrols go east of the “bottleneck”. This would mean the

creation of a new buffer zone and not carrying out patrols independently.

The claims of both sides overlap, especially in the Depsang plains. Some of these locations hold strategic value as they overlook the Aksai Chin plateau which is under illegal control of China.

India has already suggested to China that a graded three-step process is needed to ease the standoff. The first is disengagement of troops within close proximity in grey zones along the LAC and getting back to positions as on April 2020.

The next two steps — de-escalation and de-induction — will entail pulling back troops and equipment to the pre-April 2020 levels. Till that is agreed upon and complied with, it cannot be assumed to be business as usual.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 24-8-2023

On China, India needs to show strategic patience

By Ashok K Kantha

As the India-China talks on border issues concluded without a breakthrough, India needs to exercise strategic patience to resolve the border stand-off

The 19th round of the India-China corps commander-level meeting to resolve outstanding issues along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh concluded on August 14 without a breakthrough. There have been follow-up talks between the border commanders, leading to speculation that efforts are being made to register some forward movement ahead of a possible interaction between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Brics Summit at Johannesburg. It is desirable to move towards disengagement of troops and de-escalation of tensions in border areas but that should be achieved while safeguarding our position on the ground and not driven by any artificial deadlines.

While dealing with China, strategic patience must be an essential component of our approach. We have the lesson of the Doklam imbroglio in 2017 — when an understanding on the pullback of troops was reached on the eve of the Brics summit at Xiamen in September 2017 appeared to resolve the matter but soon led to the Chinese entrenching their presence in the Doklam plateau of Bhutan.

Where do we stand today in terms of the resolution of the border stand-off, triggered by Chinese transgressions across LAC at multiple locations in eastern Ladakh, their induction of additional forces in excess of 60,000 troops (and counter-deployment by India), and their concerted efforts to alter the facts on the ground? Through protracted negotiations, there has been disengagement of troops at five friction points, though not before the deadly clash in the Galwan Valley in mid-June 2020. Reports suggest these understandings on disengagement involve the creation of buffer zones partly on our side of LAC and denial of access to our

troops to several patrolling points they were visiting earlier.

The Chinese have, so far, not agreed to disengagement in Depsang and Demchok. In Depsang, the Chinese continue to prevent our border forces from resuming patrolling beyond five patrolling points in the Y-Junction. A similar denial of access to traditional patrolling routes in Demchok persists. There has been no significant de-escalation or de-induction of additional troops deployed by both sides since 2020, even during the winter months of three consecutive years.

India has rightly maintained that there cannot be restoration of normalcy in its relations with China as long as the state of the borders remains abnormal. After all, there is a clear understanding between the two countries that the continued development of their relations is predicated on the maintenance of peace and tranquillity in border areas, an agreement that was violated by China along with several other provisions of bilateral agreements on confidence-building measures (CBMs). Yet, China continues to press India to accept de-linkage, between the border issue and bilateral relations returning to the normal track. It seeks incremental gains along LAC and maintains a coercive stance through grey zone operations to consolidate those gains to create a new normal. Where do we go from here in terms of border management?

First, while the resolution of the current impasse is needed, we must not opt for quick-fix solutions. We must safeguard our perception of the LAC while investing in border infrastructure and enhanced deterrence.

Second, we should consider no-patrolling or buffer zones as a temporary measure, rather than a new normal, and push for the restoration of the status quo ante as of April 2020, even if it involves a long wait.

Third, it is imperative that we keep pressing for the resumption of patrolling in Depsang and Demchok. We can explore formalising the concept of overlapping patrolling which was already happening in many pockets, including in some areas of Depsang and Trig Heights.

Fourth, we have to work based on the new situation in border areas. India-China borders have become live, and are likely to remain so for quite some time. We cannot be in a hurry to de-induct additional troops as we are at a disadvantage when it comes to the re-induction of troops, given the asymmetry in border infrastructure and the nature of the terrain.

However, a situation of enhanced deployment of troops of both countries in close proximity is also not desirable as it can lead to accidents. We have to, therefore, keep exploring means of achieving de-escalation and de-induction of troops through patient negotiations.

While working out any such arrangement, we should insist on forced induction time as the primary

determinant, rather than accepting numerical equivalence in troop levels. This understanding is suitably reflected in Article III (3) of the Military CBMs Agreement of 1996, which notes that, “the ceilings (on military forces and armaments to be kept by each side) shall be determined in conformity with the requirement of the principle of mutual and equal security, with due consideration being given to parameters such as the nature of the terrain, road communication and other infrastructure and time taken to induct / deinduct troops and armaments.”

Fifth, in the aftermath of the current disturbances along LAC, questions have been raised about the efficacy of the architecture of military CBMs negotiated since 1993. There are suggestions that we should jettison the current regime and work out new CBMs. As someone who was closely involved in negotiating existing protocols, I will argue that they have served us well and remain valid. Of course, they can be tweaked, but we should be wary of accepting any code of conduct proposed by China, which will hamper the development of infrastructure on our side of LAC. We have a second mover’s disadvantage when it comes to border infrastructure, which we cannot afford to freeze.

Finally, there is one key question we need to address: Do we return to the policy of constructive engagement with China as and when peace and tranquillity are restored? Frankly, there is no alternative to a broad stance of engagement with China as our largest neighbour. However, any such engagement has to be tempered with a heavy dose of realism, deterrence and balancing of China, recognising that China is our primary strategic challenge.

We will have to consciously reduce our economic dependence on China-dominated supply chains. This will be a long process, but our policy objectives should be clearly defined, along with the roadmap for realising them. It is also important to have an intensive dialogue — both internally and with China — on structural challenges in bilateral relations, which predate Galwan and will persist even if the situation along the borders eases up.

Ashok K Kantha is a former ambassador to China.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 26-8-2023

Holding the line on China

PM Modi was emphatic in saying that a stable LAC is key to normalising ties. But China may not stop using border aggression as leverage

The backdrop of the Brics summit in Johannesburg was the heightened tensions between India and China, and the fevered speculation about a possible meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping. Mr Modi used what some described as a pull aside at the Brics leaders lounge to drive home India’s contention that ties can only be normalised by maintaining peace in border areas and

respecting the Line of Actual Control (LAC). He also emphasised India's concerns over unresolved issues along LAC. The Indian side said the conversation was the outcome of a pending Chinese request for a bilateral meeting, and that the two leaders agreed that officials should step up efforts for expeditious disengagement and de-escalation in the Ladakh sector.

The Chinese side offered a markedly different take on the encounter, saying it was held at the Indian side's request and avoided any mention of steps to resolve the military standoff, which has resulted in frontline troops being deployed in large numbers close to LAC. The statement only trotted out the standard Chinese line of focusing on the "overall interests" of bilateral relations. There was no indication of Beijing's intentions regarding the resolution of friction points at Depsang and Demchok, where Indian troops continue to face hurdles in patrolling areas they had access to prior to May 2020. Despite several rounds of talks between local commanders, little progress has happened largely due to Chinese intransigence. Experts have cautioned that this is part of China's playbook and that Beijing does not intend to end the standoff, instead using buffer zones as part of a solution. This is a thread that runs through Chinese strategy in other contested geographies, where Beijing routinely uses underhand tactics. Given this, it would be realistic to exercise greater patience and not set any unrealistic expectations for the border talks. Holding the line on Chinese aggression is more important than a temporary and unsustainable detente. In fact, New Delhi has done well so far to not take Beijing at face value and wait for concrete action on de-escalation before taking reciprocal steps. The conversation also came just weeks before India hosts the G20 Leaders Summit, at a time when China – in collusion with no-limits partner Russia – has proven to be a hurdle in corraling a consensus on signature initiatives. With Russia announcing that President Vladimir Putin will not attend the G20 Summit, it remains to be seen what stance China takes. But India would do well to not hope for too much cooperation.

Mr Xi's push for an expansion of Brics — in the end, six countries were allowed entry, out of the 22 that had applied for induction — held a mirror to Beijing's strategy of turning every forum it is a part of into an anti-West grouping. On the global stage, India will have to contend with navigating these choppy waters as it secures its interests. Closer home, New Delhi has little option but to prepare for the long haul at LAC. The country has done well to ignore calls by China to normalise ties while the border remains tense. It will now need to continue ramping up border infrastructure, and manage the deployment of thousands of soldiers, while resisting any aggression or adventurism. Despite pushing for peace, this tense calm appears to be the new normal, at least in the short term.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 30-8-2023

Old habit: S Jaishankar on China including Arunachal in its map

India lodges strong diplomatic protest

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, India has dismissed a new map put out by China that claims Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin as its territory, besides huge chunks of South China Sea and Taiwan.

"Putting out a map doesn't mean anything. The territories belong to India. This government is very clear about its territories. Absurd claims won't make others' territories yours," said External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on China officially releasing the "2023 edition of China's standard map".

"India has lodged a strong protest through diplomatic channels with the Chinese side on its map that lays claim to India's territory," said MEA spokesperson Arindam Bagchi.

China occupied Arunachal and Aksai Chin in the 1962 war. Jaishankar, in an indirect reference to the "nine-dash-line that claims nearly the entire South China Sea as Beijing's territory, said "it's an old habit of theirs".

Beijing claims Taiwan its part and its integration with the mainland is part of a "vowed objective" of President Xi Jinping. The Chinese claims over the South China Sea are contested by a host of nations, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan. The 2023 map was released on Monday and its launch was highlighted on western social media platforms by the Beijing-controlled 'Global Times' which, it said, had been launched on the website of the "standard map service hosted by the Ministry of Natural Resources". In April, New Delhi had rejected China "renaming" several locations in Arunachal. This was the third attempt after two previous ones in 2018 and 2021.

Ironically, China has extended the same treatment to Russia, which it claims is one of its closest partners. The Chinese Ministry of Natural Resources in March this year renamed eight Russian cities and territories.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 31-8-2023

China defends new map saying 'routine practice', urges India not to 'over-interpret' it

India on August 29 lodged a strong protest with China over its so-called 'standard map' laying claim over Arunachal Pradesh, the Aksai Chin and asserted that such steps only complicate resolution of the boundary question

PTI, Beijing

China on Wednesday defended its move to release a new "standard map" for 2023 showing Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin as part of its territory, saying that it is a "routine practice" in accordance with its law

and urged India to "stay objective and calm" and refrain from "over-interpreting" the issue.

India on Tuesday lodged a strong protest with China over its so-called "standard map" laying claim over Arunachal Pradesh and the Aksai Chin, and asserted that such steps only complicate the resolution of the boundary question.

The External Affairs Ministry also rejected these claims as having "no basis".

"Just making absurd claims does not make other people's territories yours," External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar told NDTV while reacting to the Chinese move.

Asked for his reaction to India's diplomatic protest by a Chinese state-run outlet, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin told a media briefing in Beijing on Wednesday that "on August 23, the Ministry of National Resources of China released the 2023 edition of the standard map".

"It is a routine practice in China's exercise of sovereignty in accordance with the law. We hope relevant sides can stay objective and calm, and refrain from over-interpreting the issue," Wang said.

China on Monday officially released the 2023 edition of its "standard map" that claimed Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin as belonging to that country. The "map" also showed the entire South China Sea as part of China as it featured in the previous editions of the 'map'.

The ties between India and China came under severe strain following the eastern Ladakh border row that began in May 2020. The Indian and Chinese troops are locked in an over three-year confrontation in certain friction points in eastern Ladakh even as the two sides completed disengagement from several areas following extensive diplomatic and military talks.

India has been consistently maintaining that peace and tranquillity along the LAC were key for the normalisation of overall ties.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 17-8-2023

Strong bipartisan support must, says PM Modi after meeting US Congress team

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, A visiting Congressional delegation from the US, including co-chairs of the India Caucus in the House of Representatives, on Wednesday called on Prime Minister Narendra Modi. "Strong bipartisan support from the US Congress is instrumental in further elevating India-US Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership," wrote PM Modi on X after the meeting.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar also met the delegation and exchanged views on advancing the bilateral partnership. They also discussed the global situation and collaboration between India and US on multilateral, regional and global issues.

The delegation included Indian-American Congressman Shri Thanedar, US Congress Richard McCormick, and Indian-American Congressman Ro Khanna.

McCormick said PM Modi's June visit to the US was "special" and "now we're here in force to have a bipartisan group of congressmen to continue to develop this relationship that I think it's going to be essential in the future".

Meanwhile, Khanna was trolled on the social media for meeting an Indian right wing social media activist who has in the past been acerbic about his US Congress colleagues. Khanna clarified in a post on X that he is often criticised for speaking with people he disagrees with. "But I continue to think we shouldn't shy away from debates and opportunities to engage people who have different ideologies. My core values have never changed as a result of meeting people," he wrote.

Khanna has often spoken in favour of pluralism and stated that he had absorbed the values of secularism from his grandfather Amarnath Vidyalankar, a three-term Member of Parliament in India from Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur and Chandigarh, after having been a minister in the early governments in Punjab.

Earlier on Monday, RO Khanna and Deborah Ross had visited the Mumbai headquarters of Western Naval Command and interacted with Vice Admiral Sanjay Bhalla, Chief of Staff, Western Naval Command (WNC) and other Flag and senior officers of the Command.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 27-8-2023

India, US discuss ways to give impetus to growing partnership, investment flows

Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal holds bilateral meeting with US counterpart Katherine Tai

PTI

New Delhi, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal and US Trade Representative Katherine Tai on Saturday discussed ways to promote trade and investments between the two countries.

In a message on social media network X (formerly known as Twitter), Goyal said he held a bilateral meeting with the US counterpart Tai.

"Discussed key bilateral issues of mutual interest and explored ways to give further impetus to the growing India-US partnership through enhanced trade and investments," he said. An official has recently said that both countries are looking at ending their last trade dispute related to poultry in the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Besides they are also looking at enhancing the partnership by permitting companies in both countries to participate in each others' government procurement.

In July, India and the US mutually resolved six trade disputes pending at the WTO, in line with the

commitment made by the two countries during the US visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in June.

During Modi's US visit in June, a joint statement said that the prime minister had expressed India's interest towards being recognized as a Trade Agreements Act-designated country by the US to further enhance the integration of both economies and promote bilateral trade and investment.

In this regard, the two sides have welcomed the initiation of discussions at an official level on issues related to bilateral government procurement.

The poultry case was filed by the US against India in the WTO in 2012. India has lost the dispute both at the panel as well as the appellate body levels. It was ruled against India that New Delhi's ban on imports of poultry products from the US was inconsistent with global norms.

As India was not able to implement the decision within the stipulated time frame, the US demanded compensation. After that, both countries are discussing ways to resolve the case mutually.

The US is the largest trading partner of India. In 2022-23, the bilateral goods trade increased to USD 128.8 billion as against USD 119.5 billion in 2021-22.

Further, Goyal also held a bilateral meeting with UK Secretary of State for Business and Trade Kemi Badenoch on the proposed free trade agreement between the two countries.

"Discussed ways to add further momentum to the India-UK free trade agreement negotiations for a mutually beneficial deal," he added.

Negotiations for the agreement, which aims to boost trade and investment, have reached the last stage.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman also met Badenoch and discussed bilateral investment and FTA.

Earlier in the day, Sitharaman met European Commission Executive Vice-President V Dombrovskis and discussed bilateral economic and financial issues of mutual interests.

Goyal also co-chaired the third High Level Dialogue (HLD) along with Valdis Dombrovskis here.

During the meeting, both sides took stock of ongoing three negotiations on India-EU Free Trade Agreement; Investment Protection Agreement; and a Geographical Indications Agreement.

They also discussed the market access issue of both sides and reviewed the progress made so far under the India-EU Trade and Technology Council (TTC).

In a separate statement, Valdis Dombrovskis said that the EU is India's second-largest trading partner but there is still a lot of untapped potential.

He said that India would gain from tapping into the "world's biggest" single market.

There is a clear political willingness on both sides to make faster progress, he said adding the two sides must now use this momentum to bridge major gaps.

"We need to see good progress in terms of investment protection - important to attract further European investment to India," he added.

India and the 27-nation bloc resumed negotiations on June 17 last year after a gap of over eight years on the proposed agreements on trade, investments and Geographical Indications (GI).

India had started negotiations for a trade pact with the EU in 2007, but the talks stalled in 2013 as both sides failed to reach an agreement on key issues, including customs duties on automobiles and spirits and the movement of professionals.

India's merchandise exports to EU member countries have increased to USD 74.5 billion in 2022-23 from USD about USD 65 billion in 2021-22. Imports also rose to USD 60 billion in 2022-23 from USD 51.4 billion in 2021-22.

The EU accounts for about 17 per cent of India's total exports and about 8.5 per cent of the country's total imports.

Besides greater market access for its products like textiles, leather, gems and jewellery, the Indian industry is looking for easy access for skilled professionals in the EU markets. On the other hand, the EU side has an interest in areas like auto, digital trade, sustainability and financial services sectors like banking and insurance.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 20-8-2023

India, Iran agree to speed up development of Chabahar port

Tehran dissatisfied with the pace of work carried out by Indian companies in Chabahar's Shahid Beheshti Terminal

Sandeep Dikshit

New Delhi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Iranian President Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi agreed to quicken developing the Chabahar port as a symbol of bilateral cooperation, said Mohammad Jamshidi, Iranian President's deputy chief of staff for political affairs, after telephonic talks between the two leaders late on Friday.

"PM Modi hailed long-term cooperation with Iran and said the implementation of the joint project of Chabahar port and turning it into a connectivity hub would lead to the region's development. He said India was ready to finalise the documents pertaining to the completion of the project," said the official Iranian news agency IRNA.

"The two leaders reiterated their commitment to further strengthen bilateral cooperation, including to realise the full potential of Chabahar port as a connectivity hub," said a brief MEA reference to the port.

Iran and India have been trying to resolve differences, with Tehran dissatisfied with the pace of work carried out by Indian companies in Shahid Beheshti Terminal in Chabahar.

New Delhi blames the US sanctions imposed on Iran in 2018 for the slow pace of work at the port. But the Iranians point out that India has secured a waiver from the sanctions for its specific activity in Chabahar.

Experts say increased activity in Chabahar will facilitate trade between the Indian Ocean and Afghanistan, landlocked countries in Central Asia and with Russia.

India also wants the Chabahar port included in the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a sanctions-proof land-sea transportation corridor passing from Iran through over a dozen countries to Russia, Central Asia and Caucasus. In the conversation with PM Modi, Raisi underscored more interaction on the INSTC.

Both leaders are expected to meet in South Africa later next week.

Interestingly, the Iranian emphasis on Chabahar comes a week before PM Modi visits Greece where India is exploring the possibility of utilising its Piraeus port instead of the Chabahar port. India could send the goods to either the Dubai port or the Adani-owned Haifa port in Israel from where those can go to the Piraeus trans-shipment complex.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 20-8-2023

Delhi stands with Dhaka as ‘steadfast partner’: Says Indian envoy

Pranay Verma, UNB, Dhaka

Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Pranay Verma yesterday said India stands with Bangladesh as a “steadfast partner” and committed to supporting its aspirations for a “peaceful, prosperous, and inclusive” future.

“Today, Bangladesh is on a path of progress and development,” he said, adding that their “collaborative efforts” in areas such as trade, connectivity, security, and people-to-people ties continue to flourish, cementing our place as two nations united by common goals and shared values.

Verma was invited by Bangladesh India The high Friendship Society as a special guest in a discussion on the occasion of the 48th martyrdom anniversary of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Liberation War Affairs Minister AKM Mozammel Huq was the chief guest at the event.

The National Mourning Day holds a significant place in the history and hearts of the Bangladeshi people, said the envoy, adding that it is a day of reflection, remembrance, and recommitment to the values and ideals that Bangabandhu espoused -- democracy, human rights, and social justice.

“His indomitable spirit, visionary leadership, and unwavering dedication to the welfare of his people continue to inspire generations not just within the borders of Bangladesh, but far beyond,” said Verma.

The high commissioner also said, “Let us stand together against extremism, intolerance, and violence, and work towards a world where the ideals of justice, equality, and human dignity prevail.”

“May the memory of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman continue to guide us as we march forward on the path of progress and prosperity.”

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 24-8-2023

Invest in Bangladesh, join dev journey PM urges South African entrepreneurs

UNB, Johannesburg

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has invited South African entrepreneurs to invest in Bangladesh.

“Bangladesh is moving towards prosperity. We want you to join our journey of development. Do invest in Bangladesh. We are confident that your investment will be primed for success, and we are fully prepared for a sustainable partnership,” she said.

The PM was speaking at the Bangladesh Trade and Business Summit at the Radisson Blu Hotel in South Africa yesterday.

The event was organised by Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission and Bangladesh Investment Development Authority.

“I have a dream. The 170 million people of Bangladesh have a dream. And that is to become a trillion-dollar economy and a fully developed smart nation by 2041,” she said.

Hasina said that investment in Bangladesh is secure due to consistently high returns.

“Moreover, our government ensures a business-friendly and stable atmosphere that guarantees your investment’s success.”

Currently, Bangladesh has the most open Foreign Direct Investment policies in South Asia. The country offers a liberalised industrial policy, one-stop service, 100 percent foreign ownership, an easy exit policy, 15-year tax exemption, VAT exemption for imported machinery, streamlined services, and more, she added.

Hasina said Bangladesh and South Africa have built a strong and friendly relationship over the last five decades based on mutual respect, shared values, cultural ties, and common beliefs.

However, despite the significant potential, the Bangladesh-South Africa bilateral trade stood at only \$316.83 million last year, she said.

Unhindered Democracy Spurs Achievement

Addressing the “Bangladesh Envoys Conference” organised by Bangladesh ambassadors stationed in African countries, she emphasised the need for an unhindered democratic process in the country for the sake of non-stop development.

“Development is only possible through the democratic trend. That should be continued so no one can hinder the advancement of Bangladesh,” she said.

Bangladesh has registered unprecedented development in the last 14 years and a half due to the uninterrupted democratic system in the country.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 21-8-2023

Sri Lanka sensitive to India's Regional concerns – High Commissioner Moragoda

While noting that India's security concerns in the immediate neighborhood, as well as in and around the Indian Ocean, are Sri Lanka's security concerns as well, Sri Lanka's High Commissioner (HC) to India, Milinda Moragoda said, Sri Lanka, therefore, pays a great deal of attention to the developments taking place in the Indian Ocean.

HC Moragoda was recently addressing the students of the 63rd National Defence Course at the National Defence College (NDC) in New Delhi, on the theme 'Evolution of India-Sri Lanka Relations: Opportunities and Challenges'.

At the outset, HC Moragoda highlighted the uniqueness of India-Sri Lanka relations, drawing examples from historical ties to the present-day dynamics, which involve a wide range of critical facets that define the relations between India and her closest maritime neighbour Sri Lanka.

During his interactive session, the HC Moragoda focused on key thematic areas of cooperation in the fields of Economy, Energy, Culture, Defence and Regional Dynamics in the Indian Ocean, and explained how the India-Sri Lanka relations over the years have grown from a transactional phase to a special relationship. He also highlighted the importance of elevating the existing special relationship to a strategic level, with the gradual progression of recently inked initiatives.

While thanking the Indian Government for the timely assistance rendered during the recent economic crisis, HC Moragoda apprised the audience of the current status concerning Sri Lanka's Economy and the economic stabilization efforts that are underway. He also stated that future bilateral cooperation would heavily focus on connectivity and investment based on a reverberant economic integration road-map that was agreed upon by the leaders of the two countries.

The HC Moragoda also highlighted key pillars charted in the Integrated Country Strategy launched in 2021 for Sri Lanka Missions in India, and its achievements.

HC Moragoda, emphasising the importance of the recent official visit of the Sri Lanka's President to India, explained that the five key connectivity-focused enablers mapped in the India-Sri Lanka Economic Partnership Vision, would remain the driving force in propelling the existing relations towards a new era.

Speaking on Defence cooperation, the HC Moragoda thanked the Indian government for the assistance rendered in enhancing the capacities and capabilities of the Sri Lanka's armed forces over the years. He also stated that India's security concerns in the immediate neighbourhood as well as in and around the Indian Ocean, are Sri Lanka's security concerns as well, and therefore, Sri Lanka pays a great deal of attention, especially to the developments taking place in and around the Indian Ocean.

The 63rd NDC course comprises 120 students representing the Indian Military, Indian Civil Services, and friendly foreign countries, including two senior military officers from Sri Lanka.

The NDC is dedicated to the intellectual development and strategic enculturation of selected senior officers of the armed forces and civilian government services of India, and those from foreign countries, for higher leadership positions and responsibilities.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 18-8-2023

China will consistently stand with our special friend Sri Lanka – Communist Party Politbureau Member & Foreign Minister of China

*A friend in good times as well as difficulties –
Prime Minister*

Sugeeswara Senadhira in Yunnan, China

Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena's current visit to China has achieved fruitful results as it has, in addition to reiterating the bonding friendship between the two countries, laid a solid foundation to take the development cooperation to a higher level.

These assurances were given at bilateral talks held in Kunming on August 16 between Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena and Foreign Minister of China Wang Yi, who is also a high-ranking leader of the Communist Party of China (CPC Politbureau).

Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement that China will help Sri Lanka improve its capacity for independent development, get rid of the "poverty trap" and the "trap of non-development," and accelerate its industrialization process and agricultural modernization. "China also firmly supports Sri Lanka in safeguarding its sovereign independence and national dignity, and is willing to strengthen exchanges of experience in governance as well as cooperation in various fields with Sri Lanka."

Minister Wang Yi expressed the belief that Sri Lanka will overcome its temporary difficulties, find a development path in line with its national conditions, and realize revitalization and prosperity.

In his speech at China-South Asia Expo, Prime Minister Gunawardena recalled that the People's Republic of

China was promulgated on the 1st of October 1949 after the long successful victorious march towards the Revolution, with a long and arduous journey led by the Great Leader Mao Tse Tung, Leader Chou En Lai, and other leaders of the Communist Party of China.

“China emerged strong in the path of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and a new era of development began with the birth of the People’s Republic of China,” he said.

President Xi Jinping said last year that China and Sri Lanka should be praised for setting an example of friendly coexistence and mutually beneficial cooperation between countries.

“China has been a Kalyana Mitra, a very special friend for Sri Lanka. Kalyana Mitra is a friend who is with you in difficulties as well as in happiness. That is why we place China as a Kalyana Mithra of Sri Lanka,” the Prime Minister said with feeling at the 7th China-South Asia Expo, where he was the Guest of Honour.

More than any other place on earth, and for the first time in the history of mankind, Today’s China has successfully eradicated the poverty of millions of human beings under its unique economic policy and set a great example to the world the way it adopted a practical economic model, he said.

“China is a true decisive global leader, especially with its leadership and assistance in Asia, Africa, & Latin America and towards the prosperity of all Nations,” he said amidst loud applause by the distinguished gathering.

Chinese leader who held discussions with the Prime Minister, assured assistance to Sri Lanka’s efforts to increase food production to ensure food security and the poverty alleviation program to ensure better living standards for the rural poor.

Minister Wang Yi said that Sri Lanka is a very special friend of China and his country would continue to assist the food security drive. Two leaders held a detailed discussion on how to enhance Sri Lanka-China bilateral pragmatic cooperation. He briefed the Prime Minister about the decisions taken by at the 20th CPC National Congress and said China will further enhance cooperation with friendly developing countries under President Xi Jinping’s policies.

The Chinese Minister recalled his visit to Sri Lanka when PM Gunawrdena was the Foreign Minister and said Sri Lanka has all the ingredients such as a strategic location in the centre of the Indian Ocean, highways, ports and also skilled youth resources needed for a leap forward in industrial and agricultural development.

The Prime Minister expressed deep appreciation to the People’s Republic of China and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who chaired the Forum for the efforts taken on behalf of the people of the world who are affected by food scarcity. Pointing out that such Forums go a long

way to enhance efforts towards food security through coordinated action, he expressed confidence that the Forum would come up with useful plans that would ensure global food security and speed up achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

The Prime Minister said that Sri Lanka seeks investments in new areas such as solar power, wind power and other alternative energy resources and assured that the top priority of the Government is to establish necessary legislations to ensure speedy clearance of investment proposals submitted by foreign partners.

Prime Minister Gunawardena recalled his virtual address to the International Conference on Hybrid Rice Varieties held in China last year and said Sri Lanka would benefit if the Hi-yielding rice technology developed by Yunnan province could be shared with Sri Lanka.

The Prime Minister said Sri Lanka looks forward to China’s support in restructuring its debt at the moment and further strengthening its economy shortly.

Sri Lanka is a great beneficiary of the five previous sessions of the Yunnan Expo as it has opened a fresh window to Sri Lankan export products. Like other South Asian nations, Sri Lanka too has succeeded in obtaining many orders for Sri Lankan products at this esteemed trade fair.

The Prime Minister recalled that Yunnan Province has a historic link with Sri Lanka through the ancient Silk Road and maritime Silk route, and Yunnan Provincial Government has consistently assisted Sri Lanka. During the current economic crisis, the Yunnan Province came to Sri Lanka’s assistance by donating food packages and Smart Boards to underprivileged families and needy schools in the Eastern Province and I take this opportunity to thank the Yunnan Provincial Government and the people of China for the assistance provided to the people of Sri Lanka.

Secretary of the Yunnan CPC Secretary Wang Ning recalled that President Xi Jinping said last year that China and Sri Lanka should be praised for setting an example of friendly coexistence and mutually beneficial cooperation between countries. He offered continuous assistance to Sri Lanka in the field of agriculture research and development as Yunnan province has recorded expertise in these sectors.

Vice Presidents of Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal and Vice Prime Minister of Vietnam and the Commerce Minister of Maldives were among the Asian top visitors to the Yunnan Expo.

State Ministers Tharaka Balasuriya, Janaka Wakkumbura, Parliamentarian Yadamini Gunawardena and Secretary to the Prime Minister Anura Dissanayake, were also present at Prime Minister’s meetings with Chinese leaders.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 31-8-2023

Neighbours snub Nepal's new map

Both India and China have refused to recognise the map that Nepal's Parliament unanimously passed in 2020.

ANIL GIRI

KATHMANDU, Nepal's new political map unveiled by the KP Oli government on May 20, 2020 and unanimously endorsed by Parliament on June 13 the same year, has now been dismissed by both India and China, the two neighbours.

After India unilaterally released a new political map in November 2019 by incorporating Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura areas, which are claimed by Nepal, and refused to entertain Nepal's concerns over the map, the Oli government, in a tit-for-tat move, unveiled the new map of Nepal in May 2020 by incorporating the three areas. This added a pointed spur on the northwest corner of the Nepal map.

And on Monday night, China released its own political map by including India's Arunachal Pradesh and the disputed Aksai Chin area in its territory. The map also shows the territories bordering China, but the pointed spur of the Nepal map is notably absent.

The disregard shown by both the neighbours to Nepal's new map has cast doubts on the map's validity.

The 2023 edition of China's standard map was officially published on the website of the China's Ministry of Natural Resources, according to Global Times, a Chinese government mouthpiece.

"This map is compiled based on the drawing method of national boundaries of China and various countries in the world," the newspaper said.

The government of India has already lodged a protest against the new Chinese map, but the Nepal government appears clueless about how to react.

"Just as we protested with India when India came up with the new map in 2019, we must now write to China and seek an explanation," said Pradeep Gyawali, the former foreign minister who is also the CPN-UML deputy general secretary.

Gyawali was the foreign minister when Nepal protested against the map released by India in 2020.

According to Gyawali, Nepal had communicated to Beijing before releasing the new Nepal map in 2020.

But Beijing's decision this week to use the old Nepal map has left many in Kathmandu surprised and also created doubts about the validity of the new map of Nepal.

"We have a boundary dispute with India, but we don't have any outstanding dispute with China," said Gyawali, adding, "if China refuses to recognise our new map, this is a serious matter and the government should seek an explanation from the northern neighbour."

In 2020, a day after Kathmandu released its new map incorporating some of the territories currently occupied by India, the spokesperson of India's Ministry of External Affairs said that Nepal had acted unilaterally.

"Such artificial enlargement of territorial claims will not be accepted by India," said Anurag Srivastava while briefing the media on May 21, 2020, in New Delhi.

Srivastava went on to say that Nepal was well aware of India's position on the matter and urged Nepal "to refrain from such unjustified cartographic assertion and respect India's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

"We hope that the Nepalese leadership will create a positive atmosphere for diplomatic dialogue to resolve the outstanding boundary issues," he said.

Former foreign minister Gyawali said that when India and China agreed to trade through the Lipulekh pass in 2015, Nepal had protested and sent separate diplomatic notes to both the neighbours, and in this case too, Nepal should tell China to recognise the 2020 map.

On Tuesday, Foreign Minister NP Saud held talks with Chinese Ambassador Cheng Song, but he did not discuss the new Chinese map, according to foreign ministry sources.

Their meeting focussed mainly on the upcoming China visit of Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, according to a foreign ministry official.

"The controversy over the new map was not part of the discussion as the ministry is also trying to find out facts about the new Chinese map," the official added. Another former foreign minister, Ramesh Nath Pandey, expressed surprise at the way the Chinese have ignored the new map of Nepal. "We are aware that India has dismissed our map, but Chinese refusal to recognise the map is a serious matter," he said. Pandey said the Nepal government, political parties, lawmakers, intelligentsia, and the civil society should collectively oppose the Chinese move, just like they did in 2019 when India issued its new map.

"The fact that the foreign minister failed to take up the map issue with the Chinese envoy suggests policy failure on our part. Why didn't he seek an explanation from China?" said Pandey.

Nepal has boundary disputes with both India and China. While Nepal's boundary disputes with India are well-known, there is also a dispute with China in the Lipulekh area at a tri-junction between Nepal, India, and China.

Nepal's northwestern boundary point begins from Lipulekh pass where pillar number one is also located, but due to a dispute between Nepal, India, and China, the two sides have yet to agree on where the pillar number one should be installed.

"Nepal and China have not carried out joint boundary work since 2011, so we don't know the actual status of the border in the north," a senior official at the Ministry of Land Management said, adding, "In July last year, we decided to activate the bilateral mechanism to clear the boundary work, but not a single meeting has been held so far."

The two countries have yet to decide whether to resume the work from where it was left in 2011 or start afresh.

According to officials and experts, Nepal and China have a dispute over border pillar number 57 in Dolakha district, which became a major bone of contention after a similar dispute over the height of Mt Everest. The dispute over the height of the world's tallest mountain was settled jointly in December 2020 after both the countries sent their own special expeditions and jointly announced the height at 8848.86 metres.

Border disputes have often surfaced in Humla, Gorkha, and Kimathanka (Sankhuwasabha district), which should be resolved through joint inspection, Buddhi Narayan Shrestha, a noted cartographer and former director general of the Department of Survey, told the Post.

Besides resolving the disputes, the two sides should regularly update the status of the boundary every 10 years as per the boundary protocol, he said.

The 1963 Joint Boundary Protocol has the provision of constituting three different mechanisms to deal with boundary issues—the Joint Inspection Team, the Joint Expert Group and the Joint Inspection Committee. The mechanisms are enshrined in the Nepal-China Boundary Protocol signed on January 20, 1963. Nepal-China border spans 1,439 kilometres. The two countries signed the third (and the latest) boundary protocol in 1988. They then constituted the three mechanisms in 2006 which worked until 2011, according to government officials. After 2011, the two sides have taken no initiative to hold the boundary consultation meeting for a joint inspection of the border.

After signing the protocol in 1963, which followed the signing of the Nepal-China Border Treaty in 1961, the two countries signed such protocols again in 1979 and 1988. When the two sides were getting ready to sign the fourth protocol in 2011 and the Nepali team was all set to visit China, the trip was cancelled at the last minute following a dispute over border pillar number 57. Since then, Nepal and China have failed to conduct a joint inspection of the border and update the boundary status, a prerequisite for signing the boundary protocol.

Shrestha, the cartographer, said that Nepal's "thin" diplomacy and China's carelessness have contributed to the recent map mishap. He doubts whether the government of Nepal sent a diplomatic note to China after releasing the new map in 2020. But former foreign minister Gyawali claims that a communication had been made to the government of China about the new map being released by the Oli government.

"In 2015, too, China disregarded Nepal's concerns and signed an agreement with India. We protested and sent diplomatic notes to both India and China. Then the spokesperson of the Chinese foreign ministry said that if Nepal backs its claim with proof, they can think about it and speak with India. Later, a Chinese state minister visited Kathmandu where he also mentioned that the boundary dispute between Nepal, India, and China can

be resolved through three-way talks. But we never raised this issue with India and China," said Shrestha.

Though the prime minister is visiting China soon, Shrestha sees little chance of him taking up this matter with the Chinese President and prime minister. "Our prime minister should raise the border issue during high-level talks in China," he said.

There is also paucity of reaction from political parties. Party leaders the Post spoke to said they are still studying the matter.

"We have seen media reports, but have yet to come to a conclusion," said Dev Gurung, general secretary of the ruling CPN (Maoist Center). "We will speak when we find out the truth."

A Nepali Congress lawmaker said that the Chinese map issue would be discussed in Parliament.

"The government should clarify its position on whether China's dismissal of the new Nepal map implies that the northern neighbour could also disown other vital decisions taken by the government of Nepal," the lawmaker said. Former minister Pandey said that to dispel the general notion that Nepal's foreign policy is one-sided [tilted towards China], political parties, leaders, parliamentarians, and others should speak up.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 20-8-2023

Riyadh launches initial step for long-term co-op deal with Iran: FM

TEHRAN- Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian has said Saudi Arabia has taken the initial steps toward developing a "long-term cooperation agreement" with Iran.

Talking to reporters on Friday on board the plane after concluding a two-day trip to the Saudi Kingdom, he noted that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman "ordered the kingdom's Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan for preliminary measures to devise the framework of the long-term cooperation document between the countries."

The document would be completed and signed by senior officials from both nations, added Amir Abdollahian.

Amir Abdollahian and bin Salman had "frank and fruitful" discussions on Friday in the city of Jeddah, the highest level of negotiations since the restoration of bilateral ties on March 10.

The talks were "explicit, frank, fruitful, and productive based on neighborhood policy," Amir Abdollahian said after his 90-minute meeting with the Saudi de-facto leader.

The visit by Amir Abdollahian, the first by an Iranian foreign minister to the kingdom in more than ten years, was a turning point in bilateral relationship.

Saudi Arabia suspended the connections in January 2016 when Iranian demonstrators stormed the Saudi embassy in Tehran following the Saudi execution of famous Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr.

But in March, following intense talks held in China, the two sides reached a reconciliation agreement, and three months later, each side named a new ambassador to the other's capital.

The foreign minister described his discussions with the Saudi crown prince during the trip, saying that they lasted "90 minutes, more than 70% of which was focused on bilateral issues."

"Because we are of the opinion that all-out and sustainable relations should take shape between Tehran and Riyadh," Amir Abdollahian averred.

According to the Iranian foreign minister, Saudi Arabia made an effort to highlight during the visit that it has adopted a "new attitude" in comparison to the past.

He pointed out that the Saudi officials made an effort to show that it was ready to turn "a new page in the countries' relations."

He predicted that "the region will enter a new stage of multilateral cooperation," crediting the possibility to the growing realization that the region can advance its development "without reliance on foreigners."

Saudi crown prince invited to visit Iran

Meanwhile, Iran's top diplomat indicated that the Iranian government has invited the Saudi crown prince to visit the Islamic Republic.

He went on to add that the Saudi crown prince approved the visit, stating he would make the necessary arrangements to come to Tehran "at the appropriate time."

Kuwait: Amir Abdollahian's fruitful visit to Riyadh can strengthen regional stability

Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber al-Sabah has said that the visit by Amir Abdollahian to Saudi Arabia will help the region achieve peace, stability, and prosperity.

In a statement issued by Kuwait's Foreign Ministry on Friday, Sabah said Iran and Saudi Arabia's connections will help nations be better equipped to deal with issues in the future.

He commended the visit of the Iranian foreign minister to the Saudi Kingdom, saying it demonstrated the two nations' desire to mend fences and maintain regional security and stability.

A "bright chapter" in the history of relations between Iran and the Persian Gulf nations "on the principles of good neighborliness ties, non-interference in other countries' internal affairs, cooperation, and dialogue" was declared by the senior Kuwaiti diplomat in the wake of the visit.

Sabah also praised Iraq and Oman's efforts to facilitate negotiations as well as China's mediation in bringing Tehran and Riyadh closer together.

"We have consensus on security and development for all in the region," the top Iranian diplomat wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter.

The negotiations between the top Saudi diplomat and his Iranian counterpart took place in the Saudi capital

Riyadh the day before the meeting with the crown prince.

In a joint news conference following the negotiations, Amir Abdollahian emphasized the importance of the discussions and said that relations between the two nations "are progressing in the right direction."

Iran's embassy in Saudi Arabia restarted operations in June, and Iranian media announced earlier this month that the kingdom's embassy in Tehran had done the same.

On August 6, Saudi Arabia reopened its embassy in Tehran. A week later, on August 13, it reopened its consulate in Mashhad, a city in northeastern Iran.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 20-8-2023

Raisi, Modi talk on how to boost ties, use Chabahar Port to its full potential

TEHRAN- Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Indian Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi have spoken about measures to improve bilateral ties, cross-border collaboration, and the achievement of Chabahar Port's full potential.

Raisi stated that Iran and India should increase their cooperation in the areas of transportation and energy security in a phone conversation on Friday.

The Iranian president emphasized the need for increased dialogue along the North-South Corridor.

"Iran seeks to strengthen regional convergence and develop economic relations with all countries across the globe, particularly those in Asia, in this regard," Raisi noted.

The president remarked that historical similarities between Iran and India provide solid justification for the development of ties at all levels.

For his part, the Indian prime minister denounced the terrorist attack on the Shah Cheragh shrine in Shiraz, Iran, and expressed condolences to the Iranian government, people, and the bereaved.

He also said that the region would prosper as a result of the implementation of the joint initiative to transform Chabahar Port into a connectivity center.

He praised long-term collaboration with Iran. India, he asserted, was prepared to complete the necessary paperwork for the project's completion.

Regarding the discussions between Raisi and Modi, Mohammad Jamshidi, the Iranian president's deputy chief of staff for political affairs, stated that "they agreed to hasten the development of Chabahar Port as a symbol of bilateral cooperation."

Raisi and Modi also spoke on issues of bilateral and regional significance, according to a news release from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs.

The Indian prime minister is quoted by the ministry as saying that the relationship between Tehran and New Delhi is "underpinned by close historical and civilizational connections, including strong people-to-people contacts."

The two sides also discussed multilateral cooperation, especially the growth of the BRICS grouping of developing economies ahead of its meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa, on August 22-24.

Iran wants to be a part of the important BRICS group of developing economies, which includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 28-8-2023
Abdollahian talks to Taliban FM,
demands Iran's right from Helmand
water

TEHRAN- Iran's request to protect its water rights in the Helmand River and its sources in neighboring Afghanistan has been reiterated by Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian.

Amir Abdollahian made the statement in a phone call on Saturday with Amir Khan Mottaqi, the Foreign Minister of the Taliban-run government.

For the first time by a group of Iranian experts recently visited the Helmand River.

According to the Iranian minister, the visits were made in conformity with the 1973 water-sharing agreement and would help to increase transparency in the water dispute.

The Hindu Kush Mountains, west of Kabul, are the source of the Helmand River, the longest river in Afghanistan.

The Helmand River flows in an arc southwest until it empties into the Hamoun wetlands, which are in Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan Province.

Iran and Afghanistan signed a contract in 1973 to develop a way of controlling each country's usage of the river after more than a century of conflict over Helmand's water supply.

Based on the agreement, Iran should get an annual share of 820 million cubic meters from Helmand.

However, Afghanistan has flagrantly broken both the words and the spirit of the agreement, risking the lives of numerous Iranians who depend on the Hamoun wetlands for drinking water, farming, and fishing.

The river in Afghanistan has also been dammed, which limits the flow of water into Iran.

Iranian politicians and government representatives have often protested that Iran does not get its fair share of water from the river.

Taliban ministers attribute Iran's recent water shortage on drought and technological difficulties.

Mottaqi was also informed by Amir Abdollahian that Iran has always sought prosperity and welfare for Afghan citizens, stressing that the Islamic Republic has accepted a sizable number of Afghan refugees.

Iran's chief diplomat also renewed Tehran's call for an inclusive government in Afghanistan.

"Tehran emphasizes the importance of cooperation among all parties inside Afghanistan with the purpose of

promoting stability, security and welfare of the Afghan people," the Iranian foreign minister said.

For his part, Mottaqi said that the brotherly ties between Tehran and Kabul are built on good neighborliness.

He also stated that attempts are being made to resolve the current issues between the two parties and extended an invitation to the Iranian foreign minister to travel to Kabul.

Back in June, Taliban agreed to let Iranian specialists assess the quantity of water behind the Kajaki dam in Afghanistan's Helmand Province, according to Iran's special envoy for Afghanistan Hassan Kazemi Qomi.

Kazemi Qomi stated during a televised interview that Iran is making significant efforts to defend its rights to a portion of water from the Helmand River.

President Ebrahim Raisi issued a warning to the Taliban leaders in May that they would be held accountable if they failed to deliver Iran with its fair share of water from the river.

"There would be no discussion if Iranian specialists certify that the dam in Afghanistan is dry, but if there is water, Iran will not tolerate any violation of its citizens' rights," the president said.

Iran FM speaks with Qatari and Omani counterparts

In phone calls on Saturday, Amir Abdollahian also addressed the extension of bilateral ties as well as regional and global events with his Qatari and Omani counterparts.

Iran's top diplomat emphasized the cordial relations between Tehran and Doha with Qatar's Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani, calling for the growth of bilateral ties.

Amir Abdollahian also praised the government of Qatar for its beneficial contribution to the process of freeing Iran's frozen assets and for its senior officials' positive contributions to regional and global developments.

On August 10, Iran said that it had been successful in securing the release of more than \$10 billion of funds that had been unjustly frozen in South Korea and Iraq for a number of years due to U.S. sanctions.

The Qatari foreign minister, who also serves as prime minister, praised the friendly relations between the governments of Iran and Qatar, emphasizing the need to expand Tehran-Doha relations.

Amir Abdollahian and his Omani counterpart Sayyid Badr Albusaidi also discussed bilateral, regional, and international topics of mutual concern.

The Iranian foreign minister stated that Tehran is ready to conclude the terms of the two nations' comprehensive cooperation deal.

He also complimented the Sultan of Oman, Haitham bin Tariq Al Said, for his positive efforts, and discussed the latest developments in Iran's sanctions relief discussions with his Omani counterpart.

Albusaidi, for his part, made it clear that Oman is willing to enhance bilateral relations and regional collaboration with Iran.

He went on to say that Oman is eager to continue playing a constructive role in matters of mutual concern.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 22-8-2023

One life lost in AJK as India violates ceasefire

Tariq Naqash

MUZAFFARABAD: In yet another “unprovoked” ceasefire violation within two months, Indian troops martyred a villager in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) on Monday morning while he was working in his field along the Line of Control (LoC).

“At about 8am today, Ghayas Deen, son of Saif Ali, aged 62 years, who was cutting grass near the LoC, was shot and martyred by the Indian army,” said Riaz Mughal, a police official in Kotli district. The victim was a resident of Oli village, in Nakyal sector. The region is an administrative unit of Kotli district and has seen a large number of casualties in shelling by the Indian forces before a ceasefire understanding was reached in Feb 2021.

“The Indian troops opened a burst of fire upon him without any provocation, leaving him dead on the spot,” SP Riaz Mughal said.

Tariq Mahmood, an official at Nakyal police station, told Dawn that Oli village is less than one kilometre from the LoC and the spot where Mr Deen was shot lies just a few metres from the LoC.

“Many villagers have fertile lands along the LoC and cultivate them during days of peace,” he said. Ghayas Deen had gone there to collect fodder, a normal practice for villagers living along the LoC. Three other persons were on their way to work when the boom of gunfire resounded across the village.

“When they approached the area from where the sound came, they saw Mr Deen lying dead,” Tariq Mehmood, the police official at Nakyal, said.

“He had received five to six bullets in the upper part of his body.”

In a statement, Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said the attack was “blatant Indian aggression” and in clear violation of the existing ceasefire understandings.

“Pakistan desires peace and tranquillity at its borders, however, all necessary measures will be taken to protect the life and property of our citizens,” the military’s media wing added.

“Any misadventure against the people of Pakistan will be befittingly responded at the time and place of our choosing.”

The latest ceasefire violation by the Indian army was condemned in the strongest terms by political leaders in Azad Kashmir.

“As another innocent Kashmiri has lost his life at the hands of trigger-happy Indian soldiers on our side of the

LoC today, I call upon the UN to take stock of the situation and do its stuff to establish lasting peace in our motherland by granting Kashmiris their inalienable right to self-determination through a free, fair and impartial plebiscite,” wrote former AJK prime minister Sardar Tanveer Ilyas in a post on X (formerly Twitter).

On June 24, two villagers were martyred and one was injured in shelling by Indian troops in Tetrinote area of Poonch district. The incident was the first major ceasefire violation in over two years.

Landmark decision

The 740-kilometre-long LoC was the scene of regular skirmishes and artillery duels between Pakistani and Indian troops until, in a landmark decision in Nov 2003, the two countries agreed to silence their guns across the disputed territory.

Barring isolated incidents, the agreement held for over a decade.

But ceasefire violations became frequent in 2016, causing deaths and injuries to civilians and losses to their properties in Azad Kashmir.

In a surprise announcement in Feb 2021, the two sides recommitted themselves to reviving the spirit of the Nov 2003 understanding and address the “core issues” that undermine peace and stability.

The LoC had been largely quiet since then, until the calm was broken by the Indian side on Monday.

THE EXPRESS TRIBUNE, ISLAMABAD 24-8-2023

Kotli misadventure

LoC peace disrupted by Indian aggression

An uneasy peace prevailing on the Line of Control has been shattered. Indian forces’ trigger-happiness is responsible for this unprovoked showdown, which killed a villager inside Pakistan. Security forces from across the LoC in Occupied Kashmir fired upon civilian areas in Kotli’s Nikial sector. The exact magnitude of loss and damages are yet to be ascertained. This comes as the first serious violation since a ceasefire came into being in February 2021, under the aegis of the UAE. Pakistan’s Foreign Office was prompt in condemning the incident, and summoned the Indian charge d’affaires to register a protest. The incident has come after a series of provocative statements from the ruling BJP leadership, apparently aimed at raising its stakes on the eve of elections. But what is unfortunate is the fact that New Delhi is not realising the gravity of the situation and seems to be hell bent upon staging false-flag operations to appease its home constituents.

This Kotli incident must be studied in its proper backdrop, as it has disturbed the semblance. Maintaining peace is an uphill task, especially in a region where the people are fed up with oppressive tactics, and where their due constitutional rights had been abrogated by the junta in Delhi. Kashmiris are in a

crisscross of their existence, and in such a scenario the tactics to bully Azad Kashmir is nothing but a strategic fallout. This brinkmanship is in need of being condemned and the world community must take notice of it. The fact that Pakistan is holding the fire and is desirous of a negotiated outcome of any of the misgivings on the border must not be read as weakness. The sooner India comes to exhibit a responsible attitude, the better.

Pakistan and India must take to the table, and make sure that a sustained comprehensive dialogue is kick-started. In an era when cooperation and dependence is the order of the day, keeping swords crossed is a Stone Age approach. India must tell its boys to desist from pulling the trigger for the sake of point-scoring.

THE EXPRESS TRIBUNE, ISLAMABAD 17-8-2023

Pakistan's Afghanistan policy

Ashraf Jehangir Qazi

AFGHANISTAN'S internal developments are of importance to its neighbours, especially Pakistan. But far more important is Pakistan's Afghanistan policy mess which is a direct consequence of Pakistan's political situation.

Let us take a brief look at Pakistan's external relations. Its relations with India are hostile largely due to India. Its relations with Afghanistan are strained because of strategic short-sightedness. Its relations with Iran are dubious because of US diplomatic and economic leverage over Pakistan. Its relations with China are stable but static because of its structural inability to avail of transformation opportunities. Its relations with Russia remain undeveloped due to Pakistan's elite deference to the US and India's continuing influence in Moscow. Its relations with the US, despite its elite deference, have declined because of its diminished strategic relevance as well as India's rising strategic profile in Washington.

In this bleak situation, Pak-Afghan relations are crucial. The Taliban government, long considered a protégé of Pakistan, is no longer friendly. It sees Pakistan's policy towards it as wavering between furtive support and kowtowing to American demands. Its enemy at home is the Khorasan branch of the Islamic State. It cannot and will not treat the TTP as an enemy even though Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada has openly declared that attacks in Pakistan are not jihad.

Mullah Akhundzada also asks pertinent questions. Why out of Afghanistan's six neighbours only Pakistan, which has fenced almost its entire border, complains of terrorism from Afghanistan? Is it because Pakistan cannot contain the TTP which actually operates from inside Pakistan with on and off support from certain quarters? Or is it because the other neighbours of Afghanistan are more committed to stopping TTP terrorism? The Taliban government of Afghanistan

denies it allows TTP terrorism against Pakistan from its territory. However, it concedes it has not been able to stop it altogether.

The rest of Afghanistan blames Pakistan for having imposed the Taliban on them and for the vicious regime that oppresses them — especially women — in the name of Islam. They prefer India to Pakistan — and not just because of India's economic assistance. Pakistan's assistance to Afghanistan on a per capita basis has actually been more than India's but it has not brought any political goodwill. This is the measure of the failure of Pakistan's Afghanistan policy. It has allowed India to potentially develop a strategic pincer or two-front situation against Pakistan.

There is, however, a larger regional context that has to be considered. India seeks regional hegemony in South Asia. As long as Pakistan was perceived as a viable state its relations with China presented an impossible obstacle to India's regional ambitions. This posed a strategic dilemma for it. The closer it got to the US against China, including a quantum jump in critically important military technology cooperation, the more the US would demand as quid pro quo that India move away from military cooperation with Russia, neutrality on Ukraine, and economic cooperation with China.

Why would India object given the importance of being a de facto non-Nato military ally of the US which would significantly advance its regional hegemonic aspirations? One, because India prizes its own status as an emerging great power which chooses its own strategic options; and two, because ironically a closer strategic alliance with the US actually reduces India's options for regional hegemony in South Asia despite the dwindling strategic significance of Pakistan.

This is because China would be compelled by the US-India military alliance to dramatically raise its own strategic profile in the Indian Ocean and among all the neighbours of India, including Afghanistan which does not actually border India. Even with US assistance, India does not have the capacity to overcome such a Chinese challenge. India's strategic planners know this and unlike their counterparts in Pakistan do not fool themselves.

Accordingly, they know India's 'efficient path' towards hegemony in South Asia is a détente with China rather than an option-limiting strategic alliance with the US against China. Such a détente would incline China to view Indian hegemony in South Asia with less alarm and allow it to concentrate on countering US hegemony in East Asia.

Once a détente develops between India and China its momentum could carry it forward towards a possible entente cordiale and Pakistan would be strategically isolated. To think the US would or could prop up Pakistan against such a development would be foolish. It would still seek a close if less strategic relationship

with India. It will not consider 'balancing' its relations with India and Pakistan, leave alone tilting towards Pakistan against India.

Accordingly, whenever Pakistan recovers from its current domestic predicament it should prioritise investing diplomatically and economically in Afghanistan's stability and prosperity. This would progressively build goodwill among the Afghan people, eliminate the danger of a two-front pincer situation, and restore China's confidence in its preferred option of Pakistan being able to counter India's hegemonic aspirations in South Asia.

This could incentivise China to financially and diplomatically support Pakistan's much more welcome influence in Afghanistan and transform the bilateral CPEC into a multilateral CAICAP (China, Afghanistan, Iran, Central Asia and Pakistan) that would be book-ended by China and Pakistan. This would eventually enable Pakistan to negotiate with India on more equitable terms, and enable the CASA region (Central and South/Southwest Asia) to become a major force for peace, security and development in Asia.

Meanwhile, Pakistan needs to boost its own credibility by dissuading the Taliban government in Afghanistan — through incentives and disincentives — from becoming a global pariah, even in the Muslim world. It would need to make the Taliban aware that its pretence of being more Muslim than the rest of the Muslim world, and especially its human rights policies, could eventually lead to its isolation within the OIC.

Finally, an Afghan public opinion that regards Pakistan much more favourably will be far less disposed to accept Indian policies aimed at undermining Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan. Accordingly, instead of relying on installing a 'friendly government' in Afghanistan, Pakistan should concentrate on cultivating a friendly people in Afghanistan.

The writer is a former ambassador to the US, India and China and head of UN missions in Iraq and Sudan.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 22-8-2023

Chinese premier says China-US ties face 'difficulties,' calls for sincerity

China to open up further, in contrast to Washington's decoupling push

By GT Staff Reporters

Chinese Premier Li Qiang on Monday told a US business delegation that China-US relations and economic and trade cooperation currently face some difficulties, which require both sides to show sincerity and meet each other halfway, but the two countries can "absolutely achieve common development."

The Chinese premier reiterated that China will continue to open up its market, optimize the business environment and improve the protection and treatment

of foreign businesses. The remarks further underscored China's determination to promote win-win cooperation, even as the US government continues to recklessly push for a decoupling, analysts noted.

Li met with the US business delegation led by Marc Casper, chair of the US-China Business Council (USCBC), in Beijing, during which he congratulated the council on its 50th anniversary and commended its role in helping promote bilateral cooperation, according to the Xinhua News Agency.

"China-US relations and economic and trade cooperation are facing some difficulties, which require both sides to show sincerity, meet each other halfway, and work together. China and the US absolutely can achieve common development and work together to make greater contributions to the bright future of all mankind," Li said.

For his part, Casper and other US business leaders said that the USCBC supports the development of healthy and stable bilateral relations and economic and trade cooperation between the two countries. The Chinese market is critical to enhancing the competitiveness of US businesses, they said.

The remarks highlighted both China's commitment to further opening its market for foreign businesses, including those from the US, and US businesses' great interest in investing in the Chinese market, despite the US' government's arbitrary decoupling moves, analysts noted.

"The US public and the business community still attach great importance to the Chinese market and are inclined to further deepen and expand China-US cooperation," Dong Shaopeng, a senior research fellow at the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at the Renmin University of China, told the Global Times on Monday.

However, Dong pointed out that US politicians' anti-China rhetoric and actions are also having a great impact on various fields, including the business community, as they face increasing difficulties in pursuing development and cooperation in the Chinese market.

Over the past several years, under the guise of various manufactured excuses such as "national security concerns," the US government has constantly intensified its decoupling campaign against China, in an attempt to contain China.

In one of the most recent moves, US President Joe Biden signed an executive order aimed at banning some new US investment in China in advanced technologies like computer chips and requiring government notification in other tech sectors. Chinese officials called the move "economic coercion" and vowed to take "necessary countermeasures" after a comprehensive assessment.

In stark contrast to the US' sweeping ban, China's door to opening-up will not be closed, but will only open

wider and wider, and the vast Chinese market has huge growth potential and opportunities. China will continue to expand market access and optimize the business environment for foreign businesses, Li said.

Highlighting China's great market potential, Li on Monday also presided over a special study session focused on developing the digital economy, stressing that China has multiple advantages such as a super-large-scale market, massive data resources, and rich application scenarios, and the development of the digital economy has broad space. To further optimize business environment and ease the burden on businesses, Li has also signed a document to amend certain administrative rules, including lowering administrative fines in certain minor violations, starting on Monday when it was published.

Casper and other US personnel said that the USCBC welcomes signals of deepening reform and opening-up from the Chinese government, according to Xinhua.

It is important to "separate the US government from the US business community," as the former pushes for restrictions and confrontation, while the latter pursues commercial interests, He Weiwen, a senior fellow at the Center for China and Globalization, told the Global Times on Monday.

He said that China's responses should also be compartmentalized - opposing and countering US restrictions that violate WTO rules, while working to stabilize bilateral ties and further developing economic and trade cooperation.

"For economic and trade ties to continue to develop, the business community is a great basic force," he said, noting that it's crucial for all departments and localities to implement various policies and take concrete steps to address concerns from foreign businesses and improve the business environment.

Chinese officials, both at the central and local levels, have announced measures to stabilize foreign investment and have been actively meeting representatives from foreign businesses, including those from the US.

Also on Monday, Jin Zhuanglong, minister of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), had a meeting with a delegation led by Casper, during which he said that the MIIT attaches great importance to communication and cooperation with foreign-funded businesses and strives for a world-class business environment, according to an official statement.

Jin said that Chinese modernization will create more opportunities and greater development room for foreign businesses in China. "It is hoped that the USCBC will continue to help member companies take root in China, deepen investment cooperation in advanced manufacturing, green and low-carbon and other fields,

and achieve mutually beneficial and win-win development," Jin said.

For his part, Casper praised the Chinese government's policy of further opening-up to the outside world and said that the USCBC, together with the US business community, will continue to play an active role in promoting the healthy and stable development of US-China economic and trade relations, according to the MIIT statement.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 23-8-2023

UK urged not act as US 'pawn' amid reported consideration of curbs on Chinese investment

By GT Staff Reporters

Chinese experts on Tuesday urged the UK to make strategic moves wisely and not to act as a US "pawn" to suppress China, responding to reports that the UK is considering curbs on investment in key Chinese technology sectors due to national security.

British firms were reportedly quizzed by the UK government through a survey in late July asking if they had invested in 17 areas from advanced materials and robotics to transport, energy and more sectors, Politico reported, adding that the survey also sought to learn about investment in other countries and regions in addition to China and was designed to understand the investment flows in "sensitive sectors."

The move comes hard on the heels of a promise to "more closely align" with the US on policies to prevent the transfer to China of so-called "dual-use technology," which has both civilian and military applications, according to the report, adding that the still-embryonic national security move has sparked fears that the government could cast the net too widely with jitters about the impact on the local microchips sector.

The UK has been lacking strategic autonomy in handling major foreign affairs and interactions with China, while acting as a "strategic pawn" of the US, Zhao Junjie, a research fellow at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of European Studies, told the Global Times on Tuesday.

Zhao urged the UK to view cooperation with China through a pragmatic perspective rather than playing the "two-faced" game. Zhao stressed that such a practice is not conducive to the healthy and sustainable development of bilateral relations.

The release of the reported survey came as British Foreign Secretary James Cleverly is due to visit China at the end of this month, Reuters reported on Monday, describing the "long-awaited trip seeking to stabilize a turbulent relationship that has sunk to its lowest point in decades."

UK investment in China in the first seven months of 2023 grew by 159.9 percent, according to data from China's Ministry of Commerce.

Politico's report noted that officials from the UK's Department for Business and Trade have told companies that the UK will curb investment into China's semiconductor, artificial intelligence and quantum computing technology like the US.

However, the rules may hurt companies that license chip design to Chinese manufacturers and force them to make hard choices, read the report.

The reported restrictions would hinder the development of relevant UK enterprises as they may face obstacles in their overall development and further expansion in China, Xiang Ligang, director-general of the Beijing-based Information Consumption Alliance, told the Global Times on Tuesday.

Xiang said that the US curbs have had a negative impact on its companies that previously gained in China through investment.

The British Chamber of Commerce in China said in May that a majority of UK-based businesses had greater optimism about the Chinese market. In a survey conducted by the chamber in April, 76 percent of businesses reported feeling more optimistic about the coming year following China's reopening.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 16-8-2023

Frequency of China-Russia exchanges proportional to level of regional tensions

By Wang Zixuan

Chinese State Councilor and Minister of National Defense Li Shangfu's two trips to Russia within a span of four months confirm the desire of security and stability in Eurasia.

Li kicks off his visit to Russia on Monday, during which he attends the 11th Moscow Conference on International Security. This is Li's second trip to Russia this year, following his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin on April 16 in Moscow.

Wang Xianju, deputy director of the Center for Russian Studies at Renmin University of China-St. Petersburg State University, told the Global Times that the main purpose of the meeting this time is to promote peace and boost cooperation. "When discussing the issue of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, China may continue to propose to resolve the conflict through peaceful negotiations," he said.

Unsurprisingly, the visit was again maliciously interpreted by the Western media. Their political malice revealed during Li's first Russia trip has continued and even intensified. For example, the Associated Press reported that Li's trip is "a show of support for those

nations which the West has sought to isolate" over Russia's military operations against Ukraine, and Li's attendance at the 11th Moscow Conference on International Security "further underscores the drive by China and Russia to align their foreign policies in a bid to undermine the Western-led liberal-democratic world order, despite their economic and reputational costs."

It should be clarified, however, that Li's presence is not because of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, nor is it an act by China to "undermine the Western-led liberal-democratic world order." In fact, it has been the norm for the Chinese defense minister to participate in the Moscow Conference on International Security over the years as part of bilateral military cooperation between Russia and China, which is sort of a routine for the two countries.

The visit of Li is a continuation and deepening of the general Russia-China cooperation. The comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era between China and Russia has been stable, and the bilateral military cooperation has been held normally so far this year. Hence, there is no need to exaggerate or over-interpret the visit this time. The Western media's hype is nothing more than a conspiracy on their part and a false attack on China.

Noticeably, the frequency of China-Russia exchanges is proportional to the level of tensions in the region as well as to the urgency of enhancing strategic mutual trust and cooperation. The more volatile the region becomes, the more steadily China-Russia relations should move forward. As the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, as well as key players of G20, APEC and other regional and global organizations, China and Russia have played a crucial role in continuously promoting multilateral cooperation, jointly speaking out on major international and regional issues, vigorously enhancing the representation of the emerging countries and developing countries in global affairs. Based on this, the two countries have become a constructive and indispensable force for improving the international order, promoting global and regional development and safeguarding the security and stability of member states.

Against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, it is understandable that the West is highly concerned about interactions between China and Russia. Nevertheless, putting labels maliciously with tinted glasses at every sight of China-Russia exchanges is indeed an attempt at disrupting the relations between the two countries. The deepening of China-Russia relations is in the interest of the Eurasian continent to pursue tranquility and stability, which is also precisely where Li's Russia trip lies.

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THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 25-8-2023

Can BJP's 3-pronged attack win in 2024?

Rajdeep Sardesai

PM Modi hinted dynastic politics, corruption and appeasement will be his 3 weapons for 2024. But after nine years, will they work as well as they did in 2014?

With an astute political communicator such as Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi, the message often lies in deliberate wordplay. Which is why the use of the word *parivarjan* (family members) as many as 48 times in his Independence Day address this year is strategic. Moving away from *mitron* (friends) and *bhaiyo aur behno* (brothers and sisters) to *parivarjan*, the PM is setting himself up as a lead member of a family of 1.4 billion Indians. The contrast with his political rivals whom he accuses of *parivarwaad* or dynastic politics is sharpened. But does the PM's *trishul* of *parivarwaad*, *bhrashtachar* (corruption) and appeasement resonate as effectively as it did nine years ago?

Let's start with the original *brahmastra* of *parivarwaad*. In 2014, Modi was the archetypal outsider, a Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh *pracharak* turned chief minister who was a *chaiwallah's* son and not part of the privileged Lutyens' elite. His principal rival, Rahul Gandhi, was typecast as a fifth generation dynast, a *shehzada* (prince) of the so-called Delhi Sultanate. The *kaamdar* (worker) versus *naamdar* (dynast) binary narrative worked perfectly, especially as Gandhi did little to repudiate the popular view that he had the Congress's reins only because he was Sonia and Rajiv Gandhi's son.

In the last year though, the roles of the two principal players in the political fight may have imperceptibly reversed. Modi may still cast himself as a rooted Other Backward Classes (OBC) leader who is promising to build a new India based on merit and not lineage, but he is also now a two-time PM with the trappings of power. When a cricket stadium in Ahmedabad is named after him or he is seen feeding peacocks in a well-manicured garden, when he looms large on G20 hoardings or is photographed in front of the grand new Parliament, the transformation into an imperious figure is unmistakable. In contrast, Gandhi spent the last year criss-crossing the country on the Bharat Jodo Yatra, rushed to Manipur to embrace grieving families in a relief camp, and was seen in the company of truck drivers, mechanics, farmers and vegetable vendors. The well-packaged videos of Gandhi with the *aam aadmi* (common man) are clever optics, designed to project the Congress leader as someone who listens to the voices of ordinary Indians. The dynastic sense of entitlement may still haunt him, but it is no longer his sole badge of identity. Moreover, while the Opposition Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) is dominated by family-centric parties, can the Bharatiya

Janata Party (BJP) still claim to be entirely above nepotism in public life? Around 40 BJP members in both Houses of Parliament have dynastic links. In the recent Karnataka elections, at least two dozen BJP tickets went to candidates from just 10 political families. And what of the BJP allies, old and new, from the Akalis in Punjab and Dushyant Chautala in Haryana to Chirag Paswan in Bihar and Ajit Pawar in Maharashtra? Aren't they also part of the *parivarwaad* syndrome?

Interestingly, in a speech delivered in the central hall of Parliament on Constitution Day two years ago, the PM drew a distinction between dynastic parties and dynasts. The former, he said, were against the spirit of democracy but the latter could be acceptable if they had talent and public support. In effect, Modi was greenlighting the kin of politicians, if they could prove their electability.

Let's turn to corruption as a campaign plank. In 2014, Modi was the prime beneficiary of the India Against Corruption movement that hobbled Manmohan Singh. Nine years later, there are serious question marks over the manner in which federal agencies have been used to single out Opposition politicians. When the Enforcement Directorate is hyperactive in non-BJP-ruled states but missing in BJP-governed states, can the Modi government claim to be even-handed in its *na khaoonga na khane doonga* (will not be bribed or allow bribes) stance? And what of numerous political defectors who seem to mysteriously escape the scrutiny of the investigative agencies the moment they switch sides? Greatly enriched by opaque electoral bonds, the BJP's claim of being a party with a difference is now blighted by charges of cronyism.

The PM's other trope of appeasement also needs a relook. If the Congress is accused of pandering to minorities, the BJP can't escape the serious allegation of persecuting minority groups. When interfaith marriages are demonised as love jihad, when food and dress habits lead to social discrimination, when there is little political representation for some minorities, and when hate speech isn't called out, questions will be raised about the threat of majoritarian politics. The recent targeted killing of Muslims in a train by a Railway Protection Force constable hardly evoked any public outrage within the ruling establishment.

The BJP, though, is convinced that its three-pronged attack on opponents will ensure a Modi hat-trick. With the Opposition still struggling to get its act together, Modi remains in pole position to return to power in 2024. But after almost a decade in office, the Modi government's strategy can't revolve around exposing Opposition frailties alone. The new BJP must define what it stands for, and not just against what the Opposition is seen to represent. The *parivarjan* deserve better.

Post-script: On the sidelines of an INDIA meeting, one senior politician offered an intriguing prospect in private conversation: "What if Rahul Gandhi is not our PM face? Don't forget we have Mallikarjun Kharge, Nitish Kumar, Mamata Banerjee, and Arvind Kejriwal in our lineup: A Dalit, an OBC, a woman, an IITian. Can anyone call them beneficiaries of *parivarwaad*?" he asked pointedly.

Rajdeep Sardesai is senior journalist and author.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 22-8-2023

Congress gets battle ready

Balance. That appears to be at the core of the significant reshuffle in the Congress Working Committee (CWC) over the weekend, months after party president Mallikarjun Kharge took charge. Mr Kharge decided to expand the party's top body, with an eye not only on fulfilling some of the long-pending resolutions passed in Udaipur last year, but also on a clutch of crucial polls that will determine the contours of the Opposition arrangement in taking on the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). As a result, the main CWC now has 39 members, up from 25 in the previous avatar. It also has 32 permanent invitees and 13 special invitees. The first balancing act is between the old guard and the new faces. Mr Kharge inducted at least 20 new faces, aiming to fulfil the Udaipur resolve of mandating 50% members under 50. The new members included Gaurav Gogoi, Kanhaiya Kumar and Alka Lamba. But the main CWC has only three members below the age cut-off. Among the old guard, AK Antony, Digvijaya Singh and P Chidambaram were the prominent names retained.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 20-8-2023

Chhattisgarh polls: Kejriwal announces ten guarantees, promises free electricity, allowance for women, unemployed

The tenth guarantee is about farmers and tribals but he will reveal it during his next visit, said

AAP national convenor

PTI, Raipur

Seeking to make inroads in Chhattisgarh, Aam Aadmi Party leader Arvind Kejriwal on Saturday announced ten "guarantees" for the upcoming assembly polls in the Congress-ruled state including free electricity, monthly 'samman rashi' for women and Rs 3,000 monthly allowance for the unemployed.

Addressing an AAP workers' convention here, the Delhi chief minister said his party's governments in Delhi and Punjab have fulfilled the guarantees given to people, and if it comes to power in Chhattisgarh, it would do the same thing.

"Today I am giving you ten guarantees which are not like a fake manifesto or 'sankalp patra'. Kejriwal will die (if it comes to it) but fulfill these promises," he said.

The guarantees included 24-hour uninterrupted power supply -- free upto 300 units -- to every household, waiver of pending electricity bills till November 2023, Rs 1,000 monthly 'samman rashi' (honorarium) to all women aged above 18 years and free quality education to school children, he said.

As in Delhi, an AAP government will also provide free and better health treatment to every citizen of Chhattisgarh, mohalla clinics in every village and ward in cities, employment and allowance of Rs 3,000 per month to those unemployed, free pilgrimage for senior citizens, corruption-free Chhattisgarh, Rs 1 crore to the kin of personnel of state police and army jawans (who belong to Chhattisgarh) martyred in the line of duty as 'samman rashi' and regularize contractual employees, Kejriwal said.

The tenth guarantee is about farmers and tribals but he will reveal it during his next visit, he said.

Kejriwal was accompanied by AAP leader and Punjab chief minister Bhagwant Mann.

Kejriwal had addressed a public rally in Bilaspur last month. In March, he had attended an AAP workers' convention in Raipur.

The AAP tried its luck for the first time in the assembly elections in Chhattisgarh in 2018 and fielded candidates in 85 of 90 seats but failed to achieve success.

THE FINANCIAL EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 31-8-2023

Chhattisgarh Election 2023: Opinion poll predicts second term for Congress, BJP staring at another defeat

Chhattisgarh Assembly Election 2023: The Congress registered an emphatic win over the BJP in the 2018 polls, displacing the party from power after three consecutive terms. The party holds 68 seats in the 90-member Assembly.

Written by India News Desk

Chhattisgarh Elections 2023 prediction: The Bharatiya Janata Party will need a miracle to return to power in Chhattisgarh with the Congress comfortably placed to retain power in the state, a new survey has found.

According to the ABP-Cvoter opinion poll for Chhattisgarh, the Congress is projected to win 48-54 seats with a vote share of 45.6 per cent while the BJP may finish short of a majority with 35 to 41 seats with a 41.1 per cent vote share. In the elections held in 2018, the Congress bagged a staggering 68 seats, bringing to an end the 15-year rule of the BJP.

In the 2018 polls, the Congress had secured 43.1 per cent vote share while the BJP's vote share stood at 33 per cent. The vote share projected for the Congress and BJP in the survey suggest an uptick of 2.5 per cent and 8.1 per cent for the Congress and BJP, respectively.

In terms of seats, the Congress may finish on the top but with a heavily reduced margin. The BJP, on the other hand, is looking at big gains from its tally of 15 seats in

the 2018 elections, but still falling short of the magic figure of 46

The survey's findings also suggest a second straight term as Chief Minister for incumbent Bhupesh Baghel who appears to be far ahead in the race against former Chief Minister Raman Singh. Baghel emerged as the most favored candidate for the top post, securing a significant lead of more than 25 percentage points over his BJP counterpart.

While 48 per cent of the participants saw Baghel as the best choice as CM, only 25 per cent backed Singh, the former three-time chief minister. Deputy CM TS Singh Deo, who was led in an intense power struggle with Baghel over the post of Chief Minister, came in third with the support of just 19 per cent of the respondents.

In terms of performance, as many as 46 per cent of the respondents said they were "very much satisfied" with his work, 31 per cent said that they were "satisfied to some extent" while 19 per cent said they were "not at all satisfied" with CM Baghel's performance.

The Bharatiya Janata Party has already released its first list of candidates for the elections. Polls to the Chhattisgarh Assembly are scheduled to be held around November-December. The Election Commission of India is yet to announce the schedule for polls to the five states where elections are due this year. Besides Chhattisgarh, the states going to polls this year include Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Telangana and Mizoram.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 22-8-2023

BJP confident of clear majority in Madhya Pradesh assembly polls, says Jyotiraditya Scindia

Scindia, joined the Bharatiya Janata Party after quitting the Congress in March 2020

PTI, Gwalior

Union civil aviation minister Jyotiraditya Scindia on Monday asserted his party BJP will secure a clear majority in the upcoming assembly polls in Madhya Pradesh and form the next government.

Scindia, who joined the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) after quitting the Congress in March 2020, however, refrained from predicting the number of seats the saffron outfit will win in the year-end polls to the 230-member assembly.

"I am not an astrologer to tell the number of seats (that BJP will win). But we will form a full majority government in the state," he told reporters here during his visit to the Gwalior-Chambal division which accounts for 34 assembly segments.

The Rajya Sabha member said party workers feel energized after the visit of Union Home Minister and BJP strategist Amit Shah to Gwalior on Sunday and they will now work for the polls with a renewed vigour. Reacting to Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal projecting himself as 'chacha' (uncle) to voters during

his visit to the BJP-ruled state, Scindia said everybody knows how he has treated Delhi, where the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) is in power.

AAP convenor Kejriwal on Sunday addressed a campaign rally in Satna and assured various "guarantees", including free power, medical treatment and construction of quality schools besides a monthly allowance of Rs 3,000 to unemployed youths in Madhya Pradesh.

He also projected himself as 'chacha' (paternal uncle) to state voters while taking a veiled dig at Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, who is popularly known as 'mama' (maternal uncle).

The ruling BJP has already declared its first list 39 candidates for the assembly polls whose schedule is yet to be announced.

Union Home Minister Shah has set the target of winning more than 150 seats out of the total 230 in the state. In the 2018 polls, the saffron party had won 109 seats, short of the simple majority mark of 116.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 28-8-2023

Samajwadi Party releases names of two more candidates for Madhya Pradesh assembly polls

PTI

The Samajwadi Party (SP) has declared names of two more candidates for the Madhya Pradesh assembly polls due this year-end, taking the number of its candidates to six.

Asked if the Samajwadi Party will contest the MP polls in alliance with the Congress as a constituent of the Opposition Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), SP state president Ramayan Singh Patel ruled out such a possibility.

"The decision about the alliance in any state is taken by the party's national leadership, but as of now we don't see any possibility of such an alliance in Madhya Pradesh for the upcoming assembly polls. But, our national president will take a decision in this regard," Patel told PTI on Sunday.

The Opposition bloc INDIA is an alliance of 26 political parties, including the Congress and the SP.

In Madhya Pradesh, the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have been the main political opponents with a marginal role of other parties.

Notably, the SP is the third party after the BJP and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) to declare candidates even though the assembly polls schedule is yet to be announced by the Election Commission.

The BJP had released a list of 39 candidates and the BSP of seven nominees.

The SP, led by former UP chief minister Akhilesh Yadav, managed to secure one seat in the 2018 polls to the 230-member MP assembly.

On August 23, the SP released a list of four candidates from seats in Bundelkhand and Gwalior-Chambal belt, located near the Uttar Pradesh border.

The party has also released names of candidates for two more seats, both from Vindhya region.

It has fielded Vishwanath Singh Gaud Markam from Dhauhani and Shravan Kumar Singh Gaud from Chitrangi. Both the seats are under Sidhi district, which is located near the UP border.

Patel said so far, the SP has declared candidates in six seats.

He said at present, his party leadership has directed the state unit to contest elections in all seats.

The party will make an announcement whenever it finds suitable candidates for different seats, he said, adding that preparations are underway for the upcoming polls.

Asked about issues the SP intends to raise in the MP polls, Patel said his party leadership has already announced a caste-based census.

Besides, unemployment allowance of more than Rs 3,000 per month for youth, government guarantee for business loans for youth and loan waiver for farmers will be among the issues which the party will take to the people, he said.

In 2018, SP candidate Rajesh Shukla won from Bijawar seat in Chhatarpur district, but he was later expelled for anti-party activities. Shukla later joined the BJP.

While no party won a clear majority in the 2018 assembly polls in MP, the Congress won a maximum of 114 seats in the 230-member House. The BJP won 109 seats. The Congress formed a coalition government under Kamal Nath with the support of SP, BSP and independent candidates.

However, the Nath government collapsed after 15 months when a section of Congress MLAs, most of them loyal to Union minister Jyotiraditya Scindia, quit and joined the BJP.

The saffron party returned to power in March 2020 with Shivraj Singh Chouhan as chief minister once again.

THE TELEGRAPH, KOLKATA 16-8-2023

A new erosion

There is a given and standard liberal narrative, which tells us that the State has become completely communal and Muslims are being targeted systematically to sustain and nurture aggressive Hindutva

Hilal Ahmed

The recent violence in Nuh (formerly Mewat), Haryana, which was followed by the demolition of houses and shops in and around Gurugram, has wider political significance. It not only underlines a set pattern of targeted violence but also points towards a much deeper crisis in our political life.

The incident was officially recognised as communal violence — a form of collective action that is perpetrated across religious/ethnic lines. By the same

official logic, the use of bulldozers was legitimised for clearing illegal encroachments. It is almost impossible to find out any discriminatory angle in these overtly technical administrative moves.

Yet, most of the victims of this violence were Muslims; most of the houses/shops demolished by the authorities were owned by Muslims; most of the people who had to flee the area after the violence were Muslims; and those who were socially and economically boycotted by a few village *panchayats* were also Muslims. It is a typical case where a particular community is systematically punished for being *habitual troublemakers*. The division bench of Justices G.S. Sandhawalia and Harpreet Kaur Jeewan of the Haryana and Punjab High Court also made a pertinent observation. They noted: "... the issue... arises whether the buildings belonging to a particular community are being brought down under the guise of law and order problem and an exercise of ethnic cleansing is being conducted by the State." (<https://www.livelaw.in/top-stories/punjab-haryana-high-court-asks-on-nuh-demolition-drive-whether-buildings-belonging-to-particular-community-brought-down-as-exercise-of-ethnic-cleansing-234623>)

There is a given and standard liberal narrative, which tells us that the State has become completely communal and Muslims are being targeted systematically to sustain and nurture aggressive *Hindutva*. This explanation goes well with another powerful claim: democratic and administrative backsliding. It is argued that Indian democracy is declining under the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance and anti-Muslim violence is an outcome of this political deterioration. This line of reasoning is convincing. It might help us trace the crucial links between emerging authoritarian tendencies and the multifaceted violence against Muslims.

This explanation, however, has two limitations. First, it overemphasises the 2014 election and the rise of the Narendra Modi led-BJP as a single, decisive, and determining factor responsible for the communalisation of the State and the administration of the country. This is not true. Communal and caste divisions have always been an important aspect of our social life. The political class — political parties and groups associated with them directly or indirectly — uses these sociological fault lines to create a legitimacy for itself in a variety of ways.

For a long period of time, communalism and casteism were seen as challenges to the nation. The rise of Dalit and OBC politics reconfigured this political consensus in the 1990s in a significant way. Caste eventually came to be recognised as a legitimate category for achieving social justice. This crucial development went well with the basic philosophy of the Indian Constitution. At the same time, it did not pose any challenge to the Congress-dominated narrative of secularism and social inclusion.

The *Hindutva* groups worked hard to appropriate the idea of social justice. They evoked the historical and the social marginalisation of Dalit and Hindu OBC communities to create a new narrative of Hindu victimhood. The claim that caste-based reservation is only meant for reforming Hinduism is a good example of this political trajectory. The success of the BJP post-2014 forced other parties to accept this narrative as an ultimate reference point for political negotiations. Instead of proposing any alternative idea of nationalism, they began to celebrate their Hindu pride. That has been one of the reasons why non-BJP parties are hesitant to use the term, secularism, to counter the BJP's politics of *Hindutva*. The communalisation of the State, in this sense, is inextricably linked to this new 'political consensus', which has been accepted more or less by the entire political class after 2014.

There is another problem with this explanation. The term, democratic backsliding, is often used freely to describe a number of different, and sometimes contradictory, political trajectories. The decline of institutional autonomy, political centralisation, and the authoritarian attitude of the ruling elite are seen as symbols of democratic backsliding in a strictly comparative sense. It is assumed that there is an empirically observable benchmark for measuring the level of democratic performances of a regime. This assumption is factually problematic. Democracy in the Indian context cannot be restricted to free and fair elections. Instead, it is deeply associated with the constitutional commitments to create a humane, rights-based, egalitarian social order. Hence, measuring the multifaceted idea of Indian democracy on the basis of an imagined checklist is analytically unhelpful. Communal violence against Muslims, for instance, is not a new phenomenon. There were serious riots in the past decades as well, particularly when the Indian political system was not seen as a declining democracy. This simply means that the democratic backsliding framework does not offer any satisfactory explanation to make sense of the present form of anti-Muslim violence.

There is a need to go beyond this standard liberal explanation. The idea of religion is an important vantage point in this regard. A few recent survey-based studies have shown that meanings of religion and religiosity have changed considerably in the last ten years. The Pew report, *Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation*, for instance, found that contemporary religiosity is determined by a strange obsession with ritualism (<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/06/29/religion-in-india-tolerance-and-segregation/>). A majority of Indians (that includes respondents belonging to all major religions) claim that it is very important to have public ceremonies for the birth of a child, public observance of death rituals, and

religious processions to mark important festivals to assert their faith.

This fascination for publicly-displayed religiosity has two important implications. First, it reminds us that the crucial distinction between *religion as a spiritual-moral force* and *religion as an expression of identity* is gradually disappearing. Religions are primarily being observed as *competing ideologies*. Public assertion of religiosity is treated as an end in itself while there is no space for any discussion on moral-religious values and, for that matter, on *sarva dharma sama bhava*.

Secondly, the public display of this competing religiosity corresponds directly to the dominant political consensus of our time — *Hindutva*-driven nationalism. The demand to have *shova yatras*, *mahapanchayats*, and celebrations of *kanwar yatras* by the State underlines the belief that religion can only be meaningfully observed if it is celebrated in public. The competitive dimension of this religiosity is equally crucial. The presence of the green minarets of mosques and shrines, the public display of *namaz* on roads, the recitation of *azaan* five times a day and a visibly Muslim figure either in a skull cap or *hijab* contribute significantly to the given narrative of Hindu subjugation. This is precisely what has happened in the Nuh region. We must remember that Hindu communities are not mobilised for direct violence against Muslims. Instead, the public presence of Islam is used as a resource to create a fear psychosis among them.

The failure of our political class is evident. It does not have the moral courage to question the emerging dogmatic nature of religion. It fears that such a moral intervention may disturb electoral equations. This is perhaps one of the most serious challenges for our democratic sensibilities.

Hilal Ahmed is Associate Professor, CSDS, New Delhi

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 28-8-2023

Fresh violence, loot of arms rock Manipur before assembly session

Utpal Parashar

Fresh violence in Imphal, Manipur, has seen three houses burned down and assault rifles stolen from security personnel, creating tension in the state ahead of an assembly session. The violence comes in the wake of clashes between the Meitei and Kuki communities that have resulted in 155 deaths and 50,000 displaced people. The violence first broke out after tribal groups protested against a proposed change to the state's reservation matrix, granting Scheduled Tribe status to the Meitei community.

Guwahati: Fresh violence rocked Imphal on Sunday as three houses were burned down and assault rifles were stolen from security personnel, two days ahead of an

assembly session in strife-torn Manipur, officers aware of the matter said.

The flare-up heightened tension in the northeastern state and strained the fragile peace that was established against the backdrop of clashes between the dominant Meitei community and the tribal Kuki community that have left at least 155 people dead and displaced at least another 50,000.

“Unidentified miscreants set three abandoned houses on fire in the New Lambulane area of Imphal West district on Sunday afternoon,” a senior district police officer said on condition of anonymity. The officer added that security personnel fired several rounds of tear gas shells to disperse a mob that was trying to enter New Lambulane, one of the few Kuki-dominated localities in the Meitei-majority Imphal Valley.

Clashes in Manipur first broke out on May 3 in Churachandpur town after tribal groups called for protests against a proposed tweak to the state’s reservation matrix, granting Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to the Meitei community. The violence quickly engulfed the state, where ethnic fault lines run deep.

In Imphal district’s Sagolband Bijoy Govinda area, unidentified men snatched two AK-series assault rifles and a carbine from the security guards of former state health director K Rajo, a second police officer said on condition of anonymity.

The arson and looting of weapons cast a shadow on the one-day monsoon session of the state assembly scheduled for Tuesday. Ten Kuki MLAs, cutting across party lines, earlier in the month said that they were unlikely to attend the assembly session due to concerns over their safety in Meitei-dominated Imphal.

“It will be nearly four months since clashes started, but violence hasn’t stopped. Just two days prior to the assembly session, two incidents were reported in the capital, Imphal itself. It shows how the government machinery has completely failed,” said Manipur Congress chief K Meghachandra.

The Congress chief said that they wanted a longer assembly session in order to hold discussions on the ground situation in Manipur, but the state government ignored their demand.

“We wanted a proper discussion on the present situation in the assembly, which is the best platform to find a solution. But it is unfortunate that the state government is bent on murdering democracy and doesn’t want the opposition to have any say inside the House,” Meghachandra said.

On Sunday, the Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum (ITLF), a conglomerate of Kuki groups in Churachandpur district, and the Committee on Tribal Unity (COTU), a Kuki group based in Kangpokpi district, issued a joint statement denouncing the assembly session and cited concerns over the safety of Kuki-Zo MLAs.

“Considering the complete breakdown of law and order and the failure of the state in protecting the lives of common people and top officials alike, convening the assembly session at the moment is devoid of logic and rationality,” the statement said.

HT reached out to Manipur health minister and government spokesperson Sapam Ranjan Singh for a response but did not get one immediately.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 31-8-2023

Manipur violence: CBI takes over 27 FIRs, including 19 related to crime against women

Teams from federal agency have started questioning the suspects and victims after visiting the crime sites, say sources

PTI

New Delhi, The CBI has taken over the investigation in 27 FIRs lodged in connection with ethnic clashes in Manipur that have claimed more than 160 lives in nearly four months, officials said.

According to the latest data, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has so far registered 27 cases handed over to it by the state police -- 19 cases of crime against women, three related to an armoury loot by a mob, two of murder and one each of rioting and murder, kidnapping and general criminal conspiracy, sources aware of the developments said.

The agency has re-registered these cases but has not made the details public because of the sensitive nature of the situation prevailing in the northeastern state, they said.

CBI teams have started questioning the suspects and victims after visiting the crime sites, the sources added.

The investigation gained momentum after the CBI top brass mobilised a team of 53 officers, including 29 women, drawn from various units of the federal agency across the country to probe the cases, they said.

With the society in Manipur divided on ethnic lines, the CBI is facing the critical task of avoiding allegations of bias during the operation as any involvement of people from one community will result in fingers pointed from the other side, the sources said.

They said several of these cases being probed by the CBI may attract provisions of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, which can be probed by an officer of the rank of deputy superintendent of police.

Since the deputy SPs cannot be supervisory officers in such cases, the agency has mobilised one of its SP-ranked officers to supervise and monitor the investigation, they said.

The team that also includes three DIGs—Lovely Katiyar, Nirmala Devi and Mohit Gupta—and Superintendent of Police Rajveer will report to a joint

director who is supervising the overall probe, the sources said.

It is understood to be a first-of-its-kind mobilisation where such a large number of women officers have been simultaneously pressed into service, they added.

Two additional superintendents of police and six deputy superintendents of police—all women—are also part of the 53-member force, they said.

Besides, 16 inspectors and 10 sub-inspectors will also be part of the team, the sources said.

More than 160 people have been killed and several hundreds injured since ethnic violence broke out in Manipur on May 3, when a “Tribal Solidarity March” was organised in the hill districts to protest against the majority Meitei community’s demand for Scheduled Tribe status.

Meiteis account for about 53 per cent of Manipur’s population and live mostly in the Imphal valley, while tribals, including Nagas and Kukis, constitute 40 per cent and reside mostly in the hill districts.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 16-8-2023

Is the Awami League worried?

Muhammad Al-Masum Molla

The debate over which party is more popular or which leader is the most popular in Bangladesh is as eternal as that regarding who the best footballer of our time is: Messi or Ronaldo. It will perhaps never be settled. But come election time, some organisations run their own surveys to ascertain the likely outcome of the polls. Of course, this is not unique to Bangladesh. If anything, our country sees very few surveys of this kind compared to other parts of the world, where groups are continuously polled on how different parties are doing in terms of specific issues.

However, the reaction to these surveys is similar to people’s reaction to election results. No matter how authentic or robust, the camp that comes out in a negative light in the survey seeks to discredit it at every turn. The other camp, meanwhile, considers it as one more feather in its electoral cap. But people’s acceptance or rejection of these survey results come from a habitual mistrust for data. When there is a serious scarcity of data in every field, it is only natural that people will have little confidence in the ones made available, especially since there are always claims that the survey findings are manufactured, if not doctored. That the agency behind the survey is trying to serve the interest of certain quarters – the one which comes out better in the survey findings, naturally.

It is perhaps keeping this context in mind that one should consider the IRI’s survey findings and the reaction of our political parties to it. The US-based International Republican Institute (IRI) – an agency of the Republican Party of the US – has found that 53 percent of Bangladeshis believe the country is headed in

the wrong direction, while 44 percent think it is headed in the right direction. But then, 70 percent Bangladeshis, the survey found, approve of Sheikh Hasina’s performance as prime minister. The approval for the opposition has gone up from 36 percent in September 2019 to 63 percent in the latest survey. A combined 69 percent Bangladeshis want an election either under a caretaker government or a national unity government.

In other news, an Awami League delegation has returned from India after a tour at the invitation of BJP. At a press conference (meant to brief the media regarding this visit), Awami League presidium member and Agriculture Minister Abdur Razzaque said they did not discuss anything specific about the election. However, as a Prothom Alo report said, the AL delegation has returned with a notion that India would stand by the ruling party in the upcoming election, as they have done in the past. This is significant because India has so far not issued any statement regarding Bangladesh’s election, except one by Arindam Bagchi, a spokesman for the Indian foreign ministry, hoping the election would be held peacefully and as per schedule. Given that this did not clarify India’s stance convincingly, the Prothom Alo report is rather significant.

Meanwhile, US Ambassador to Bangladesh Peter Haas recently visited Awami League’s office on Bangabandhu Avenue. There, he met and spoke with AL General Secretary Obaidul Quader who welcomed the envoy with a bouquet. This was most likely the first time that a US ambassador to Bangladesh visited the office of a political party. It was also unusual that Haas spoke to the press by himself after the visit. Perhaps this was done deliberately and the US envoy did not want to be seen addressing the press while flanked by AL spokespeople or other leaders at the party office.

But what would have been the scenario if it was the BNP party office that Haas had visited, while that of AL had been left out? Would he have had to face the ruling party’s wrath? Would the US envoy have been taken to school about the propriety of diplomatic behaviour? And would this act have been seen as meddling in local politics, where foreigners are not welcome? At the press conference, with an AL logo looming over his head in the background, Haas made it a point to say that the visit was part of his interaction with all spheres of Bangladeshi society, including law enforcers, news outlets, and other political parties. Whatever the case may be, the sight of the US envoy visiting the AL office and addressing the press from AL’s conference room made the ruling party look quite good.

Prior to the ruling party delegation’s visit to India, top leaders of leftist parties, which are part of the all-encompassing 14-party alliance led by the Awami League, visited China. Before the visit, Workers’ Party of Bangladesh President Rashed Khan Menon said at

parliament that the newest US visa policy was a bid to change the ruling regime in Bangladesh. It appears that the ruling party is courting all the powers that matter in Bangladeshi politics. That the party is close to India was never doubted, and that this crucial neighbour has historically favoured the Awami League has never been a secret, either. The recent visit of the AL delegation to India was perhaps to strengthen that relationship. On the face of it, the ruling party is using all its forces to reach a favourable position. Interestingly, the Election Commission has finally approved the application of two parties, with names surprisingly similar to BNP: the BSP and the BNM. Although this has raised many eyebrows, the EC did not seem to pay heed to the reactions or speculations. Despite so many factors being in its favour, it is curious that Awami League still seems to be worried about something.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 23-8-2023

AL govt using militant issue to stay in power: Says Fakhrul

Staff Correspondent

Innocent people were picked up from a neighbourhood in a forest and labelled as militants, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir said yesterday.

“Because they [government] want to show that there are militants in Bangladesh ... and they are needed to suppress the militants. This is their main goal, and this is what they want to show the western countries and India,” said Fakhrul.

He made the remarks at an event commemorating the eighth death anniversary of Kazi Zafar Ahmed, former chairman of a faction of Jatiya Party. The event was held at Diploma Engineers Institute in the capital’s Kakrail.

“We know that they are the militants ... The Awami League is militant, the government is militant. Inflicting terrorism and militancy on people, they are killing and destroying common people, and taking away all their rights,” he asserted.

Fakhrul also denounced the government’s treatment of the six Chhatra Dal leaders arrested on Saturday, asserting that they were framed in a fabricated case.

The BNP earlier alleged that they had been picked up by plainclothes men on Friday.

He accused the government of attempting to deceive the public and of spreading false information. “The people of the country are now well aware of their [the government’s] actions. They can no longer deceive the people to remain in power.”

He also criticised Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for referring to the Zia family as “a family of killers”.

Later in the day, attending another programme, Fakhrul protested the convictions of acting editor of now-defunct Amar Desh Mahmudur Rahman and senior

journalist Shafiq Rehman. Terming the AL government “fascist”, he said they cannot tolerate the truth and that’s why they have convicted the two journalists.

He made the remarks at a programme at the Abdus Salam Hall of Jatiya Press Club in Dhaka, organised by the Bangladesh Sammilito Peshajibi Parishad to protest the verdict against Mahmudur and Shafiq.

Rejecting the verdict, Fakhrul said, “Most fascist governments’ first target is the media, as the media advocates for the people.”

Mahmudur and Shafiq were targeted because they were capable of raising awareness among the people through their creative writing. Due to the torture he endured in jail, Mahmudur was forced to leave the country, and Shafiq was forced to do the same, Fakhrul alleged.

He urged professionals from different sectors to take to the streets to protest the misrule of the government and protect of the country’s existence.

Meanwhile, the BNP has announced fresh programmes to push forward its one-point movement.

BNP’s Dhaka North and South units will hold mass processions wearing black flags in the capital city on August 25 while all city units of BNP across the country will bring out mass processions wearing black flags on August 26, according to the BNP media cell.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 24-8-2023

FOREIGN OBSERVERS, JOURNOS

EC to finalise changes to guidelines in September

Staff Correspondent

The Election Commission will finalise the changes to the guidelines for foreign election observers and journalists by the first week of September.

At an inter-ministerial meeting at the EC office yesterday, the commission urged relevant ministries to place their proposals at the meeting next week.

Officials from the ministries of foreign affairs, home and information, and the National Board of Revenue were present.

Briefing journalists after the meeting, Ashok Kumar Debnath, additional secretary to the EC Secretariat, said they will finalise the draft incorporating the changes by the first week of September.

“We reviewed the current foreign election observer policy. No final decision has been made yet on the nature of changes to the policy ... We will sit again next week.”

The move came after Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Habibul Awal and Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen met on August 10 and discussed updating the guidelines, EC officials said.

They held the discussion as some foreign observers, especially of the European Union, want to bring in vehicle trackers, cameras, Broadband The

Global Area Network facilities and other equipment with a tax waiver when they come to visit during the upcoming election.

The current guidelines offer no such waiver.

The issue of visa duration for foreign journalists and observers was also discussed at the inter-ministerial meeting yesterday.

According to the existing guidelines, polls observers are granted tourist visa.

The validity of visas for long term observers is two months while for short term observers, it is three weeks.

“A foreign observation mission said they want to stay for a longer period when they come to observe the polls. We held a discussion on it and if someone wants to stay longer, they can extend their visa validity while they are here,” an official from the meeting said.

The official added they also discussed the past issue regarding the monitoring experience of foreign observers.

“We are also considering adding a provision stating that foreign observers should have prior monitoring experience.”

The guidelines are being reviewed at a time when foreign diplomats are showing increased interest in the upcoming national election, which is likely to be held in January next year.

Earlier this month, the US said it would send a monitoring team early October to assess the pre-polls situation.

On the other hand, the EU’s Election Exploratory Mission visited Bangladesh from July 9 to 23 and will prepare a report, based on which the EU will decide whether or not to send an observer team.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 24-8-2023

Political Parties Navigate Internal Issues Ahead of 2024 Elections

Lakdev Liyanagama

There doesn't appear to be any elections on the horizon- almost certainly not this year- but that hasn't restrained major political parties from getting ready for 2024 which in all probability will be the year when both presidential and general elections are held, leading to many behind the scenes moves.

The common thread that seems to run through these parties as they prepare for a showdown next year – with the exception of the United National Party (UNP) which President Ranil Wickremesinghe leads – is that they are scrambling to prevent internal divisions from fragmenting their popular vote base.

UNP's convention and constitutional shifts

As for the UNP, it is preparing the ground for its Annual Convention on September 10. It is to be held on a grand scale at D.R. Wijewardene Mawatha in Colombo, the venue being changed from the ‘Nelum Pokuna’ theatre. The meeting is likely to see the adoption of a new Constitution for the UNP.

While strengthening the authority of President Wickremesinghe, the new Constitution will pave the way for a second-tier leadership for the party. The President has advised that he needs to ensure that succession plans for the leadership should be in place. This will be in the form of a leadership council.

If the UNP was aspiring for stability through these changes, it was more a case of damage control in three of the other parties, namely, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna which dominates Parliament, the main Opposition party the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

13th Amendment Debate

In the SLPP, divisions are emerging within its ranks over the issue of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution which was incorporated into legislation under the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987. President Wickremesinghe has been recently calling for the full implementation of this amendment.

Parliamentarians such as Nimal Lanza who have been working closely with President Wickremesinghe have stated publicly that they supported this point of view. Lanza points out that former President Mahinda Rajapaksa was also agreeable to the concept of maximum devolution.

This is reference to the former President discussing a proposed ‘13 plus’ strategy that envisaged granting even more autonomy than what was set out in the 13th Amendment. This was soon after the end of the Eelam war in 2009 in response to calls from India for a settlement to the ethnic conflict.

However, others in the SLPP have vehemently disagreed with this view. This was articulated by two party stalwarts, General Secretary Sagara Kariyawasam and former Minister Gamini Lokuge. They were both of the view that the matter needs further discussion and a broader consensus of opinion.

Factional speculations

Kariyawasam, in a recent discussion with the President, was to point out that none of the previous seven Presidents who held office prior to President Wickremesinghe were in a position to implement the 13th Amendment in full and that the reasons for this should be given serious consideration.

What was interesting is that the obvious difference of opinion on an important national policy issue is being aired publicly by both groups within the SLPP. This

may be a sign of healthy freedom of expression but other SLPP members are also concerned that this could lead to serious divisions.

So far, the higher echelons of the SLPP have not publicly expressed their views on enacting the 13th Amendment in full. If this were the only issue that was causing concern in the SLPP, it can be settled at a leadership level through discussion where the party's stance can be formally announced.

Raising even more eyebrows are the potential difficulties in the SJB. For many months now, there has been speculation that when national elections are announced a faction of the party would pledge their support to President Wickremesinghe and join his team. So far, this has not eventuated.

Shifting alliances and intrigues

Several MPs elected on the SJB ticket have however left the party. They include Harin Fernando, Manusha Nanayakkara and Diana Gamage who joined the Government when former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa was in office and 'independents' Kumar Welgama and Champika Ranawaka.

There was also speculation about former Health Minister Rajitha Senarathne who stated publicly that if he were handed over the troubled health portfolio, he would accept it. This is despite the SJB handing over a motion of no confidence against Health Minister Keheliya Rambukwella in Parliament.

Also causing waves within the SJB is former Army Commander and Presidential candidate at the 2010 Presidential Election, Field Marshal Sarath Fonseka. He holds the titular position of SJB Chairman but has recently been quite liberal in his public criticism of party leader Sajith Premadasa.

SJB-UNP reconciliation speculation

The latest round of concern within the SJB arise from comments attributed to Parliamentarian Rohini Wijerathne. One of a handful of female members in the legislature, Wijerathne has earned a reputation of maintaining a dignified presence in Parliament while being and able and assertive debater.

Wijerathne hails from a political family in the Matale district with close connections to the UNP. She is the daughter of former Minister Wijeratne Banda and the widow of Sanjeewa Kaviratne. In the aftermath of political events of last year she vied unsuccessfully for the post of Deputy Speaker.

Asked at a public function in Kandy last week whether she supported the President or Opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa, Wijerathne was to say that they were they like "her pair of eyes" and added that they should be working together towards the betterment of the country in this time of crisis.

This has been interpreted in numerous quarters to mean that moves were afoot to reconcile the SJB and the UNP, the latter being the parent party from which the former broke away from. There certainly have been some discussions in this regard and opinion within the SJB is divided.

It is understood that the UNP will offer an olive branch to the SJB to return to its ranks. There is also every possibility that if this approach fails, SJB Parliamentarians would be invited on an individual basis to join the Government. Informal discussions in this regard are already taking place and there have been positive responses from some MPs, those familiar with the process have said.

Leader of the Opposition and SJB leader Sajith Premadasa faces a challenging task. On the one hand, he has to push through a political programme that is in contrast to that of the Government to offer an alternative to the voters. On the other hand, he has to keep his Parliamentary group intact.

Nevertheless, Premadasa is also in talks of his own. That is to woo the Nidahasa Jathika Sabhawa. This group of thirteen parliamentarians with Dullas Alahapperuma and G.L. Peiris as their leaders have held discussions with the SJB leadership on a possible alliance before major elections.

It will be recalled that Premadasa and Alahapperuma have a good working relationship. In the lead up to the selection of a President by Parliament in July last year, Premadasa who first announced his candidacy later withdrew from the contest to support Alahapperuma who however did not succeed.

SLFP's Political Alignment Dilemma

Another party that is sorting out its internal issues is the SLFP. Once a major party which governed the country for decades, it is now a depleted outfit. Several party seniors are Government Ministers but the party hierarchy is undecided as to what position it should adopt at the next election.

With virtually no prospect of securing victory on its own steam, the SLFP has come to face the reality that it would have to align with a major player in the political arena by next year. At present the party officially opposes the Government despite some seniors being Cabinet and State Ministers.

These Ministers successfully challenged in Court moves by the SLFP to expel them from the party. After this, there appears to be a change of heart from the party leadership which is amenable to the possibility of contesting the next elections with the Government. However, some oppose this move.

At the centre of this controversy is SLFP General Secretary Dayasiri Jayasekera who is reportedly resisting this concept. His public statements have been

critical of the Government. Despite this, the SLFP will be compelled to take a stance on supporting or opposing the Government in the near future.

Therefore, personalities and the political positions of all the major parties except the UNP are currently in a state of flux at this time, attempting to forge alliances with the aim of securing the best possible outcomes for the next major national elections which are due to be held next year.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 25-8-2023

Ravi calls all who left to rejoin UNP for country's sake

UNP Colombo district leader Ravi Karunanayake yesterday requested everyone including the leaders who left the UNP to forget their old conflicts and come to the UNP Headquarters to support the new journey of building a new country.

He mentioned this while speaking to the media yesterday (24). Karunanayake also said that the country is facing a very severe national level crisis. "It has economic political and social problems. To get out of this national crisis, everyone should come together and go for a new programme with a common national policy. In comparison to the past few years, President Ranil Wickremesinghe has changed the economy and political environment which had deteriorated very severely.

He is creating an environment where people can breathe and live comfortably. Even though the country has reached a better level than it was, the people are still living very difficulty. In the programme to create a new developed country by 2048, new measures should be introduced to build the economy of the people in the next few years.

In order to build a new, developed country, Parties should unite regardless of political differences. I invite everyone to follow the path taken by Harin, Manusha and Harrison. There was a false opinion that Ranil could not become the President. But today he is the President. The United National Party was split by a conspirator by a former President. Today everyone has understood what happened. Therefore, we should forget the old conflicts and work for the country.

The United National Party has always saved the country's economy from crises and built the country. UNP is a party that treats all religions and ethnic groups equally. Only the UNP can unite the urban as well as the rural communities regardless of race, religion and caste in this country.

Peace and reconciliation are essential factors for the development of this country today. It is necessary to build a new force to bring everyone together to build

this country. The current president is the most suitable leader to create that new force and give a novel leadership. Restructuring is essential for the development of a country. That is the best solution to be given to loss-making government institutions that have burdened the public. Otherwise, the innocent people will have to pay taxes to maintain them every day.

"We do not need to restructure in the same way the IMF says. Our economic plans should be implemented in a way that suits Sri Lanka. Therefore, we should go for more formal plans. As the Finance Minister in 2016, I implemented a programme to strengthen the country's economy through the 100-day programme, so I know how to do it practically. We increased the salaries of government employees by ten thousand rupees by earning the revenue. Other concessions were given in the same way. We should go for such a programme in the coming year. The current President has the power to do that. So we all should support him.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 21-8-2023

Parties fail to end parliamentary deadlock

An all-party meeting on Sunday ended with an understanding to find a solution today, leaders said.

Tika R Pradhan

KATHMANDU, The all-party meeting called by the prime minister on Sunday failed to make any headway towards ending the main opposition party CPN-UML's obstruction of Parliament.

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal had convened a meeting of parties represented in Parliament to discuss the obstruction that has paralysed the proceedings of both the chambers for nearly a month.

Santosh Pariyar, chief whip of the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), said Sunday's meeting concluded on a "positive note" with an understanding to find a solution on Monday as the UML chair KP Sharma Oli could not attend it "due to an illness." "Most probably, things will be settled at the next meeting, by Monday, allowing the House to resume on Tuesday," Pariyar said.

UML's deputy leader of the parliamentary party Subas Nembang and chief whip Padam Giri represented the main opposition at the meeting held at the prime minister's office in Singha Durbar.

Speaker Devraj Ghimire has postponed the meeting of the House of Representatives to Tuesday. Earlier, following the obstruction on August 14, Speaker Ghimire had postponed the House meeting until Sunday.

During Sunday's all-party meeting, Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister Narayan Kaji Shrestha briefed leaders about the ongoing investigation into the

gold smuggling case and asked the leaders to wait for 15 days until the Central Investigation Bureau of Nepal Police completes its investigation into the case.

On Saturday, Prime Minister Dahal had pledged to resume House business from Sunday, saying he has been making efforts to convince the main opposition.

The all-party meeting was attended by Rabi Lamichhane besides Pariyar from the Swatantra Party, chair of Rastriya Prajatantra Party Rajendra Lingden, Anita Devi Sah of the Janamat Party and Rajkishor Yadav from the Janata Samajbadi Party.

Nepali Congress chief and parliamentary party leader Sher Bahadur Deuba, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Purna Bahadur Khadka, and the Maoist Centre's chief whip Hitaraj Pande were also present at the meeting.

According to leaders, Home Minister Shrestha said a high-level probe panel could be formed if parties don't agree with the report of the CIB.

"Both the main opposition and the ruling parties seemed somewhat flexible during today's meeting," Pariyar told the Post. "I'm hopeful we will find a way out in the next meeting."

The leaders of the parties represented in Parliament had agreed that they must resume House business at the earliest.

This is the third time the meeting of the political parties has failed to come to any conclusion to ensure the resumption of the House meetings. But leaders say the major political parties have felt the heat as all the parties and people have started to create pressure on both the main opposition and the ruling parties to find a solution.

According to leaders present at the meeting, Prime Minister Dahal said the government was ready to form a high-level probe panel to investigate all the corruption cases and not only the gold smuggling right from their roots.

On Saturday, UML's whip Mahesh Bartaula told the Post that his party faced extreme pressure from lawmakers "who have been denied their right to raise issues of public suffering caused by natural disasters and the deaths of cattle from lumpy skin disease." He added that his party was considering allowing lawmakers to speak while continuing to obstruct the House from doing other businesses.

Meanwhile, President Ramchandra Paudel has called an all-party meeting for Tuesday to discuss the same issue. He had earlier this month held meetings with Prime Minister Dahal, Speaker Ghimire, upper house chair Ganesh Timilsina and the main opposition leader Oli with the aim to end the deadlock.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 28-8-2023

Missions impossible

Nepali politics is so volatile that it is hard to predict what will happen in six months, much less four years.

BISWAS BARAL

Four years is a long time in politics. In Nepal, where post-1990 governments have lasted an average of nine months, it is an eternity.

Big or small, most of Nepal's political parties are embarking on their own version of "Mission 84", the next set of elections four years (and two months) down the road. Why the rush, you wonder?

For established parties, this jump-start to their electoral campaigns betrays a deep sense of insecurity, even an existential crisis. The recent success of the Rabi Lamichhane-led Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) and the popularity of Balendra Shah and Harka Sampang as mayors of Kathmandu and Dharan, respectively, have shaken them to the core. If they don't hit the ground running now, they expect the newbies to trounce them in the next elections.

More understandable are the party expansion campaigns of the RSP and CK Raut's Janamat Party, the two new stars of the November 2022 elections. They, too, have an eye on the 2027 (2084 BS) elections.

Nepali politics is so volatile that it is hard to predict what will happen in six months, much less four years. The Pushpa Kamal Dahal-led government has barely survived nine months in office, with KP Sharma Oli constantly tugging at the rug under the prime minister. Multiple sources of instability lurk all around, not least the never-ending drama in Koshi Province that might push it into early elections—and throw national politics into turmoil.

So, planning the nitty-gritty of elections so far off is an exercise in futility. What the political parties represented in Parliament should be doing right now is getting down to the business of governing and legislating in the public interest. By not doing so, they are dishonouring the mandate of 2022.

The established parties are steadily losing ground. There have been two full elections since the 2015 promulgation of the new constitution. The CPN-UML got 26.9 percent of all votes cast in the 2022 general elections, with the Nepali Congress hot on the heels at 25.7 percent, followed by the Maoist Centre at 11.1 percent. Five years before that, the vote shares were: 31.1 percent for the UML, 36.6 percent for the Congress and 15.3 percent for the Maoist Centre.

Then, in the 2023 byelections, in the Chitwan-2 constituency, the UML candidate won 14.49 percent of the votes while the Congress candidate got 14.14 percent. The winner, RSP's Rabi Lamichhane, secured 70.03 percent. Likewise, in the Tanahun-2 byelections,

in the heart of the Congress land, RSP's Swarnim Wagle got 54.57 percent votes against 31.45 percent for the Congress candidate and 13.27 percent for the UML candidate.

The traditional parties say they want to strengthen their organisation and cadre base. Yet many cadres, especially the young ones, are uninterested in renewing their party affiliation and fast decamping to the newer outfits.

Without a change in leadership, the likes of the Congress and the UML will struggle to be competitive again. People are in no mood right now to vote for the parties led by Deuba, Oli or Dahal; the calls for party and national renewal coming from these repeatedly tried-and-tested faces just do not ring true.

At least in the Congress, Sher Bahadur Deuba cannot run for party president again and so a new face will lead the party into the next elections. Whether the new leader is an old establishment face or someone the public trusts more will make all the difference in its electoral fortunes.

The UML and the Maoist Centre are at a disadvantage on this front. In the UML, Oli is again likely to lead the party into the next round of elections. But Oli's reputation as a leader has been tarred by his repeated dissolution of Parliament in his previous term as prime minister. Oli's post-blockade nationalist credentials are also much diminished. If, by some fluke, Bidya Devi Bhandari takes up UML leadership, the party's chances won't improve much either. Bhandari's public standing is arguably worse than Oli's, following her two highly controversial terms as the country's president.

Currently, the UML's target of expanding its cadre base and winning 51 percent of all votes cast in the next election looks implausible. If anything, the party is going backwards.

It has been able to renew the memberships of only around 50 percent of its cadres: It has done the best in Gandaki and Lumbini provinces, with a 60-65 percent renewal rate, while in Madhesh, it could retain only 30 percent of its members.

No such figures are available for the Maoist Centre. But with the leadership scrambling for resources to run arguably the most expensive party machinery in Nepal, Dahal and his once revolutionary party are now fighting for their very existence. Perhaps no other figure in Nepali politics is trusted as little as the Janus-faced Dahal.

But what about the RSP and, as many now dare to whisper, a new party of Balendra Shah? While there is considerable youth support for these new rockstars of Nepali politics, their fans, unbound by any ideology, are fickle. If, say, Gagan Thapa is tomorrow elected the Congress leader, he could, at the head of a party with

solid pro-democratic and liberal history, capture the public imagination again.

The RSP's recent struggle to come up with a political document is also suggestive of the challenges that lie ahead. So far, it has been able to sell, to borrow from Yuval Noah Harari, "simple and compelling" stories to the masses—and Lamichhane is a consummate raconteur. (And so is a rapping Shah, for that matter.) But the reality of governing the country is far messier. The task is made harder still from a place of an ideological void that the RSP occupies.

The grandees of the big parties are betting on the RSP's split. It is not uncommon to hear top Congress and UML leaders discuss possible ways of pitting Lamichhane against Shah come 2027 so that they cancel each other out.

The problem again is that these calculations are premature. Nepal's political course is filled with bumpy roads and hairpin bends. Moreover, if the national parties cannot fulfil the mandate they already have, how do people trust them to deliver four years later?

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 16-8-2023

Shah Cheragh terrorist attack elicits global outrage

TEHRAN - The world community as well as high-ranking officials have strongly condemned the Sunday terrorist attack at the Shah Cheragh shrine in Shiraz, Iran's southern metropolis.

Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary general of the Lebanese Hezbollah resistance movement, denounced the terrorist act in a televised speech on Monday.

Nasrallah said it appeared that the United States has decided to send terrorists out into numerous areas once more.

Antonio Guterres, the secretary general of the UN, strongly condemned the terrorist act, his spokesperson told reporters.

"Acts targeting religious sites, and places of worship are abhorrent," Stephane Dujarric said.

The UN chief stressed the need to bring to justice those responsible for the heinous crime committed against civilians who were expressing their freedom of religion.

In another move on Monday, the European Union's senior spokesperson for foreign affairs, Peter Stano, strongly denounced the terrorist attack.

"The attack, claimed by #Daesh, is yet another example of terrorists targeting innocent civilians," Stano said in a post on X social media platform, formerly known as Twitter.

He also conveyed the sympathies of the EU to the victims' families.

The terrorist attack was condemned in an online statement made in English by the French Foreign Ministry on the X social media platform.

Syria condemned the terrorist attack on unarmed civilians as well.

According to an unidentified source from Syria's Foreign and Expatriates Ministry, the incident was carried out by terrorists backed by foreign parties in order to destabilize security in Iran.

The ministry went on to say that the unlawful conduct was both inhumane and ethically repugnant, urging "all parties involved to stop their support for such deeds."

The Iraqi Foreign Ministry, for its part, denounced the heinous attack.

The ministry released a statement in which it reiterated Iraq's condemnation of terrorism in all of its manifestations and stated that the government joins the international community in its efforts to combat terrorism.

Iraq also supports any workable initiatives aimed at eradicating extremism and bloodshed.

"We share the government and people of the Islamic Republic of Iran's grief in these times, and we offer our heartfelt condolences and sincere sympathy," the ministry stated.

The Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a strong condemnation and denunciation of the terrorist attack, saying Doha's resolute position is based on opposing violence and terrorism regardless of the motivations and justifications.

The ministry conveyed Qatar's sympathies to the victims' relatives, as well as the Iranian government and people, and wished the injured a swift recovery.

Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry also condemned the terror assault in a post on X.

"Azerbaijan suffered from terrorism and condemns its all forms and manifestations," the ministry wrote while extending its condolences to families of the victims and the Iranian government and people.

Simon Shercliff, the British ambassador to Iran, has come under fire on social media for neglecting to label the armed assault as a "terrorist attack."

Shercliff expressed sorrow at "yesterday's incidents in Shiraz" in a social media message on Monday afternoon, and he offered his condolences to the victims' families.

"Violence against people, in any form, has no justification," he said via his account on X without acknowledging that the assault was a terrorist attack.

Seyed Abbas Mousavi, the Iranian ambassador to Baku, responded to Shercliff by saying that it is usual for Western officials to "divide terrorism into good and bad" by reducing it to "violence" or "incident".

In a statement released on Monday, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that Abu Dhabi vehemently denounced the terrorist act.

"The UAE expresses its strong condemnation of these criminal acts, and its permanent rejection of all forms of violence and terrorism aimed at undermining security and stability in contravention of human values and principles," it said.

The Shah Cheragh shrine terror attack was condemned by the Omani Foreign Ministry as well. In addition to expressing sorrow and condolences to Iran and the relatives of the victims, the ministry also wished the injured a swift recovery.

The Bahraini Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for its part, condemned the terrorist assault emphatically. Additionally, it reaffirmed its utter condemnation of any and all acts of terrorism, extremism, and violence that try to undermine security and stability and go against fundamental moral and ethical standards.

The Kuwaiti Foreign Ministry also expressed Kuwait's categorical opposition to all kinds of violence and terrorism in a statement on Monday.

It emphasized the significance of multinational efforts to combat the scourge of terrorism and its effects.

The ministry also expressed Kuwait's condolences to the Iranian government and the relatives of the victims, as well as its wishes for the injured to recover quickly.

China, Tajikistan, Japan, and Jordan have also condemned the terrorist attack and offered condolences to the Iranian nation and government.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin condemned the crime and expressed his country's opposition to any form of terrorism. Wang emphasized that Beijing firmly supports the Iranian people and government in the fight against terrorists, as well as maintaining peace and stability in the country.

Tajik Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhriddin, condemning the terrorist attack, sympathized with the bereaved families and wished a speedy recovery for the injured.

Stating that Tajikistan is ready to cooperate with the relevant entities of the friendly and brotherly country of Iran, the top Tajik diplomat stressed that this terrorist act will not affect the relations between Tajikistan and Iran.

The attackers on the shrine in Shiraz were two foreign nationals that one of them was arrested by the shrine's servants. The chief of Fars Province's Justice Department said the terrorist's name is Rahmatollah Noorozov from Tajikistan.

On Tuesday, Jordan's Foreign Ministry also expressed its strong condemnation and denunciation of the terrorist attack. Issuing a statement, the Jordanian

Foreign Ministry emphasized Jordan's firm stance in rejecting violence and terrorism.

The Japanese embassy in Tehran also reacted to the terrorist attack in a post on X social media.

"We are deeply saddened by the loss of life in Shah Cheragh Shrine in #Shiraz City on August 13. We condemn in the strongest terms the terrorist attack. The attack against innocent civilians is unacceptable for any reason. We express our heartfelt condolences to the victims and the bereaved families and pray for the swift recovery of those who were injured," the embassy wrote.

Late on Sunday, an armed terrorist attack on the Shah Cheragh shrine resulted in at least two fatalities and eight injuries.

The Daesh Takfiri terrorist group has claimed responsibility for the deadly assault.

Last year, armed militants carried out a similar attack on the Shah Cheragh shrine.

An armed terrorist stormed the site on October 26, 2022, murdering 15 pilgrims, including women and children, and wounded scores more before being shot and killed by security forces.

The assailants of the October attack were also foreign nationals.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 16-8-2023

Multiple spy services behind Shah Cheragh terrorist attack: IRGC

TEHRAN – Spokesman for Islamic Revolution Guard Corps Ramazan Sharif has told Iranian media that multiple spy services were behind the terrorist act that happened in the southcentral city of Shiraz on Sunday.

Sharif said the terrorist who carried out the attack is a citizen of one of Iran's neighboring countries but not from Afghanistan. "We will announce the nationality of the terrorist when the right time comes but apparently the man is not an Afghan citizen. It is obvious why certain media outlets are trying to introduce him as an Afghan person. When they started announcing his alleged nationality, there was still not much information on the incident".

He asserted that foreign media tried their best to use the terror act to its benefit but could not succeed

The IRGC spokesman also announced that several individuals have so far been arrested in connection to the attack. The terrorist who conducted the attack was arrested on the spot.

"The enemy tried to reach different goals through the Shah Cheragh terrorist operation. Creating religious and ethnic divisions and causing a rift between neighboring countries are one of them," said the IRGC spokesman.

Sharif added that terrorists who have been active against Iran have been largely vanished and this is their last attempt at trying to exist.

He underlined that the terrorist was fully armed and had a significant number of munitions on him and was ready to cause a disastrous tragedy but the guards of the shrine were able to stop him due to their alertness and great braveness.

He reassured the people that the Iranian armed forces will give a decisive response to any mischievous act. "Iranian soldiers are ready to give up their lives to assure the country's security," the general declared.

Sunday's terrorist attack targeting the Shah Cheragh shrine has left two people dead and 7 others injured. It is the second time the site has come under attack. A terrorist opened fire on people in October killing 15 people and injuring more than a dozen others. Daesh took responsibility for the October 2022 attack which was carried out by a man from the Republic of Azerbaijan. Daesh claimed it wanted to take revenge on Iran through the barbaric assault.

With the help of the Iranian government, the terror group was largely vanquished in Syria and Iraq in the 2010s.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 19-8-2023

Delayed polls

WITH the ECP saying on Thursday that the delimitation process will be wrapped up by mid-December, polls within the constitutional window of 90 days appear to be an impossibility.

This paper has consistently argued that the law of the land must be respected, and polls should not be delayed.

Yet the movers and shakers — both in Islamabad and Rawalpindi — have other ideas; it appears that a deliberate situation of legal and constitutional confusion was created to make timely polls difficult.

The PML-N-led dispensation bears primary responsibility for the delay. The newly notified census and fresh delimitation of constituencies thereafter are being cited as reasons behind the delayed polls. But provisional numbers for the 2023 census were ready in May.

Had the PDM government so desired, it could have discussed the issue with all parties and called a CCI meeting to notify the results several months ago, paving the way for timely polls.

Instead, consensus was reached in the Aug 5 CCI meeting over fresh census data, after the PPP, for example, was 'magically' convinced to approve the 2023 headcount.

The appointment of a rather large caretaker cabinet is also cause for concern. A caretaker set-up should be a

bare-bones operation tasked with running day-to-day affairs — primarily law and order and keeping the economy on track — and ensuring timely and fair polls.

Therefore, a 24-member cabinet, which includes portfolios for departments such as national heritage and tourism, is unnecessary and fuels rumours that the caretakers are in for the long run.

In this regard, the interim prime minister, during his maiden cabinet meeting on Friday, made a ‘reassuring’ statement that he and his team do not have a “perpetual mandate”. The interim information minister also remarked that the caretakers do not intend to prolong their stay.

Some observers say that the Constitution is vague on delimitations — the reason behind the electoral delay — but clear on the period available to caretakers, therefore the 90-day limit is sacrosanct.

Ideally, the caretakers should go home in 90 days, and a new elected government should then emerge. Realistically though, polls are unlikely before February, as several political leaders have pointed out.

Yet any delays beyond this date will throw up a fresh constitutional crisis, as Senate elections are due in March, and the provincial assemblies, along with the National Assembly, form the electoral college of the Upper House.

Without elected assemblies, there will be no Senate polls. Ignoring constitutional imperatives — it has already been done in the case of the KP and Punjab caretaker administrations — is abhorrent, but if delays are inevitable, they must be kept to a minimum, and the ECP should clear the air by announcing a definitive date for general elections.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 29-8-2023

Independents win 40 out of 72 seats in KP LG by-polls

By Javed Aziz Khan

PESHAWAR: Independent candidates won 40 of the 72 different seats in by-election for village councils (VCs) and neighborhood councils (NCs) in 21 districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa which were held amid tight security on Sunday.

As per the provisional results released on Monday, the independent candidates remained successful on 40 slots while all the political parties together could win only 32 seats.

Among the political parties, candidates of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf won 14 slots in different parts of the province, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazal contenders got six seats, Jamaat-e-Islami grabbed five, Awami National Party won four, Pakistan People’s Party got two and Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan won one seat.

Some analysts termed it an anger expressed by the voters against the political parties for their failure to address the basic issues of the country during their respective rules.

However, in many constituencies the options were limited as mostly independents were in the run. Also, there is a trend that a large number of people normally vote the LG polls for community and individuals close to them instead of parties in.

The Sunday contest was for the smallest units of the Local Government system that had fallen vacant in the last almost two years.

Apart from general seats, votes were also polled for the categories of Youth, Women and Peasant councillor seats in the VCs and NCs.

As many as 256 polling stations had been set up for over 385,000 voters in different districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for the election.

Out of these 159 polling stations were declared the most sensitive and 84 were declared sensitive. The polling was held in 65 NCs and VCs in 21 districts. These included six in Peshawar, seven in Dera Ismail Khan, nine in Mardan and five each in Bannu and Charsadda and other districts.

In some VCs and NCs, the by-polls were held for more than one slot. As per the provisional results in Peshawar, Inayatullah of JUIF received 1004 votes while Khan Wali of Pakistan PTI bagged 658 votes for the general councillor seat in VC Regi, Yousafkhel Peshawar. In Nodeh Bala NC-125 Peshawar, Kashifur Rehman of the PTI got 810 votes while an independent, Muhammad Ismail, was runner-up with 709 votes for the general seat.

In Maroofzai, Badaber, Asad Ahmad of ANP secured 936 votes while Rafiullah of the PTI got 552. In Garhi Fazl Khaliq, Badaber, Niaz Muhammad of the PTI won the general seat with 352 votes against his namesake from ANP who got 246 votes. In Garhi Banat IV, Badaber, an independent, Zeeshan, won the seat for the youth councilor. Amjad Khan of PTI won the youth councilor slot in Garhi Banat-1 Badaber against Saqib of ANP.

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THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 19-8-2023

The issue is not about India's GDP, but its JDP

Political leaders need to question whether headline grabbing GDP numbers actually ensure true economic prosperity to all

Praveen Chakravarty

Participating in the debate on the motion of no-confidence in Parliament last week, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman waxed eloquent about India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growing in double digits, the Indian economy being the world's fastest, and also highlighted glowing reports by foreign institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Morgan Stanley. Former Union Finance Minister P. Chidambaram countered Ms. Sitharaman by pointing out that annual GDP growth under the United Progressive Alliance was higher. Economist-politician Subramanian Swamy too has weighed in about India's abysmal economic performance by giving suggestions, largely outlandish, to improve GDP growth. The whole debate among India's leading economic policymakers has revolved around whose GDP growth was higher (i.e. the National Democratic Alliance or the UPA), or what must be done to achieve higher growth. But no one has really asked the question, whose GDP growth is it in the first place?

The issue is job potential

If India's economy is growing so rapidly, then why is the demand for minimum wage work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme also growing so fast? After all, only those who have absolutely no alternative sources of income will ask to toil in the sun the whole day for bare minimum wages. Ever since the Narendra Modi government took office, India's real GDP has grown 5.3% (annualised), but demand for MGNREGA work also grew at 5.4% every year. That is, when India was apparently the fastest growing economy in the world, more and more people were also clamouring for MGNREGA work. If the economy is doing well, it should be creating many jobs, which should then lower the demand for minimum wage MGNREGA work. MGNREGA demand should be inversely proportional to economic growth.

Clearly, there is a big dissonance between GDP growth and its translation into actual jobs and incomes for people.

Further, even the jobs that are being created tend to exacerbate India's social fissures. People from higher castes constitute nearly three quarters of the formal service sector jobs that GDP growth produces while 80% of workers under the MGNREGA programme are

from the oppressed castes of Dalits, tribals and backward castes.

Analysis of data from the Reserve Bank of India shows that in the decade 1980 to 1990, every percentage point of GDP growth produced two lakh formal jobs. This halved to just one lakh jobs for every percentage of GDP growth in the 1990s, and halved further in every subsequent decade. There is an alarming decline in the number of jobs that are being created with every percentage growth in GDP. This is a function of the poor quality of GDP growth, rapid increase in productivity and extreme automation. To be clear, this phenomenon is not unique to India or the Narendra Modi government, but a global economic problem.

Thus, it is important to focus on the job intensity of economic initiatives rather than merely chase headline GDP growth. For example, there has been much hullabaloo recently about India's foray into semiconductor manufacturing, with a lot of taxpayer money being spent to lure foreign companies to set up factories to make electronic chips. While there may be sound strategic reasons for defence and diplomacy in this initiative, the economic rationale is weak. Semiconductor manufacturing is highly automated and does not produce many jobs, especially for low-skilled workers. The world's largest (contract) electronics manufacturer, Foxconn, nearly doubled its revenues between 2010 and 2020 but its total number of workers remained roughly the same. Traditional manufacturing such as automobile, steel, cement and semiconductors have lost their ability to create as many low-skilled jobs as they did earlier, primarily due to automation. While these economic activities may contribute meaningfully to headline GDP numbers, it matters very little to the millions of Indians who are looking for jobs and incomes.

The Mines and Minerals Bill, India's future

In this context, the Narendra Modi government's new Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2023, or the MMA Bill, can be a potential booster shot in India's economic arm, if administered properly. The world is in the midst of an inevitable transition to electric mobility. While electronic chips and equipment are key to this transition, the fountainhead for this change are minerals such as lithium, cobalt, graphite and other 'rare earths'. These minerals are the foundation for the whole electric mobility supply chain which countries such as China are pursuing aggressively. China dominates this supply chain through a belligerent geo-economic policy of sourcing, extracting and refining these minerals from various parts of the world. The Washington Post reported recently that nearly a trillion dollars worth of a vast wealth of lithium and other minerals have been found in the Hindu Kush mountain range in Nurestan. It

is little wonder that China is working closely with the Taliban regime to gain access to this strategic asset.

Various studies have shown that India's topography is very conducive to finding similar mineral deposits as found in Afghanistan and Western Australia. But India has not explored even 10% of its potential mineral deposits below the earth and has mined even less. With a coastline that is over 7,000 kilometres long, India's potential in finding rich strategic minerals can be even greater through deep sea mining. However, lack of access to latest mining technologies, environmental concerns and previous incidents of labour exploitation in mines have prevented India thus far from exploring this opportunity. The new MMA Bill promises to change that through private sector participation in exploration of strategic minerals including lithium.

More importantly, mining, unlike semiconductor manufacturing, can create large numbers of jobs that are both local and low skilled. It can also be socially more inclusive by absorbing large numbers of people from the oppressed castes (Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) in the workforce. In the global transition to electric mobility, by exploring India's vast untapped mining potential, there is an opportunity for India to achieve true inclusive economic development and also become a strategic powerhouse in the world through control of critical minerals.

But it is still too early to tell. While the new MMA Bill promises to unlock India's mining potential through the private sector, it lacks details and as always, the devil is in the details. There needs to be strong guardrails against labour exploitation and environmental hazards. But rather than being doe-eyed about initiatives such as 'SemiconIndia' or 'Make in India', the government should be more discerning and critical in its evaluation of where to spend India's limited resources to extract maximum social returns.

Change the discourse It is very important for political leaders to change the nation's economic discourse and abandon this blind quest for headline GDP growth. Economists, technocrats and the IMF peddle GDP growth, since it is a convenient measure to compare what they can forecast through excel models on their computers. For political leaders who are entrusted with people's real welfare, it is critical not to fall prey and question whether such headline GDP delivers true economic prosperity to all its people. The Finance Minister has convened a 'chintan shivir' (thought workshop) of all top economic policy officials, apparently to discuss ideas for a high GDP growth rate. Perhaps, more importantly, this chintan shivir should ask not what our nation's GDP growth should be, but instead ask what our JDP should be — i.e., Jobs Data Product.

Praveen Chakravarty is a senior office-bearer of the Congress party

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 18-8-2023

Govt seeks to free up 1 trillion to curb inflation before 2024 polls: Report

Bloomberg

Indian officials are considering a plan to reallocate as much as 1 trillion rupees (\$12 billion) from the budgets of various ministries to contain a surge in food and fuel costs without imperiling the federal deficit target, according to people familiar with the matter.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will take a decision in the coming weeks, which could include lowering taxes on local gasoline sales and easing import tariffs on cooking oil and wheat, the people said, asking not to be identified as the discussions are private.

It would be the second straight year of similar adjustments to contain costs for consumers after the government unveiled a \$26-billion plan last year. The proposals follow the central bank's last week rate decision where it left borrowing costs unchanged — one of the highest in Asia — flagging risks from soaring prices.

Urgency is building for bureaucrats after Modi in a speech to the nation this week vowed to fight inflation that has surged to a 15-month high. India is a country where the cost of onions and tomatoes has toppled governments. While Modi has just months to rein in prices for voters, he also cannot afford to blow out the budget deficit that is being closely watched by global investors.

Budgetary re-allocations aren't unusual in India, but higher dividend payments from the central bank and steady tax collections as the economy grows at one of the fastest paces in the world allow for legroom of about a trillion rupees, equivalent to 2% of the budget for the year through March 2024, the people said.

The fiscal space could also be used to provide cheaper loans and homes for the poor, while sticking to the budget deficit target of 5.9% of the gross domestic product for the year that started April 1, they said.

A Finance Ministry spokesperson didn't respond to requests seeking comments.

One of the people said a crackdown on food hoarders will continue to lower the prices.

Uneven rains and floods in several parts of the country have led to the surge in prices of several household items, including key ingredients of an Indian meal such as tomatoes and onion. After a ban on wheat exports in 2022, the government curbed shipments of some rice varieties last month. It also imposed curbs on stockpiling some food staples.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 25-8-2023

Significant progress made in FTA negotiations with four countries

Rajeev Jayaswal

India has achieved significant milestones in the ongoing free trade negotiations with at least four countries or groupings, the UK , the EFTA, the European Union, and Canada, with prospects bright for the conclusion of talks for the first two very soon.

India has achieved significant milestones in the ongoing free trade negotiations with at least four countries or groupings, the UK , the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), the European Union, and Canada, with prospects bright for the conclusion of talks for the first two very soon, three officials aware of the development said.

Bilateral negotiations with several countries and groupings, including the four are being held on the sidelines of the G20 Trade and Investment Ministers Meeting (TIMM) in Jaipur, they added requesting anonymity. The visiting UK trade minister Kemi Badenoch on Thursday evening confirmed that the FTA negotiations *is part of the agenda for her India visit.

She declined to put a definite timeline for conclusion of the FTA negotiations saying that the hardest bits tend to come at the end. She said the two parties have closed many chapters, “perhaps the more simpler tasks”.

The minister hinted that India’s demand of easier mobility for its professionals in the UK may not face any major roadblock. According to her, while mobility for business and trade could be part of a trade framework, general visa regulations are subject matters of the home ministry.

One of the three officials mentioned above said India and the UK have narrowed the gap on contentious issues such as mobility and liquor in their free trade negotiations though more work needs to be done to resolve differences on rules of origin and investments. Both sides are making efforts to arrive at some tangible outcomes that can be forwarded to the political leadership ahead of the G20 Leaders Summit in September, he said. HT reported this on August 17.

The other negotiation in terms of fast progress and possibility of early closure is the one with EFTA, a second official said. EFTA is a grouping of four countries -- Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland. Commerce minister Piyush Goyal has already met with key officials of some of these countries, including Swiss State Secretary for Economic Affairs Helene Budliger Artieda, he added.

India and EFTA are currently negotiating a Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA). This aims to

enhance trade and economic cooperation between India and the EFTA member countries, fostering an environment conducive to increased investments, reduced trade barriers, and greater market access.

TEPA negotiations are centred around “outstanding chapters” such as trade in goods, trade in services, intellectual property rights (IPRs), rules of origin and trade and sustainability. Goyal, during his UK visit on July 11-12, met a EFTA delegation led by Artieda, who was accompanied by industry representatives from the pharmaceutical, machinery and electronics industry. “The industry of both sides are eager to conclude the FTA for mutual benefit at the earliest,” the official said.

“An deal with Canada is also a possibility as the negotiations are centred around an early harvest , followed by a comprehensive FTA,” a third official said. India is negotiating an interim Indo-Canada Early Progress Trade Agreement (EPTA), which may finally culminate in a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA).

After the relaunch of FTA negotiations between India and Canada in March, 2022, nine rounds of negotiations had been held till July this year. The ninth round was held from July 12-21, 2023, in a virtual format. The two partners have so far discussed trade matters related to goods, trade remedies, rules of origin, origin procedures, services, institutional and core provisions.

The previous and the sixth ministerial dialogue on trade and investment (MDTI) was held on May 8, 2023 in Canada. “On the basis of ministerial guidance, work on various tracks are on-going to complete negotiations as soon as possible to achieve mutually beneficial outcome,” the official added.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 28-8-2023

73 farmers commit suicide in Maharashtra's Chandrapur district from Jan to July 2023

From 2001 to 2023, 1,148 farmers have ended their lives in the district, including 446 in last five years, according to data

PTI

Chandrapur, As many as 73 farmers have committed suicide in Maharashtra’s Chandrapur district from January to July this year, including 13 last month, as per the district administration data.

From 2001 to 2023, 1,148 farmers have ended their lives in the district, including 446 in the last five years, according to the data.

A committee comprising the district collector, zilla parishad chief executive officer and superintendent of

police had declared 745 farmers, who committed suicide between 2001 and 2022, as eligible for government compensation and 329 deceased cultivators as ineligible, as per the district administration.

The district administration had sent a proposal to the government for providing compensation to the kin of the deceased farmers and 48 cases are pending from December 2022, the data said.

“We are following guidelines updated in 2006 for providing the compensation amount of Rs 1 lakh to the kin of farmers who commit suicide,” a senior official from the collectorate said.

In case of suicide by farmers, the government provides compensation based on a fixed criteria.

For reasons like crop loss, inability to repay loan from nationalised banks/co-operative banks or recognised moneylender, and failure to repay the loan, the kin of farmers will be eligible for a compensation of Rs 1 lakh, out of which Rs 30,000 will be handed over to them, while the remaining amount of Rs 70,000 will be deposited for five years into their accounts, as per the government resolution issued in 2006.

A total of 54,514.65 hectares of crops belonging to 64,379 farmers in the district were damaged recently due to the flood in June-July this year, a senior official from the agriculture department said.

He said a total of 852 villages were affected due to the flood in the district.

Gondpipri tehsil recorded the highest crop damage on 12,571 hectares of land, he said.

The department has already sent a proposal of Rs 44.63 crore of compensation for crop damages in the district, the official said.

A total of 3,51,091 farmers have taken Re 1 (premium) crop insurance under the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) in the district, including 50,890 farmers who have taken loans and 3,00,201 non-loanee cultivators, according to the agriculture department.

A total of 3,28,155.26 hectares of crop have been insured under the PMFBY in the district, it said.

The state government will pay the premium of Rs 98,59,30,865.33 while the central government will pay the premium of Rs 45,05,15,938.23 to the insurance company on behalf of farmers for crop insurance, the official said.

Loans worth Rs 87489.25 crore were given to 98,177 farmers from district cooperative bank, public sector banks (nationalised) and gramin bank during the kharif and rabi seasons in 2022-23, against the target of Rs 129100 crore given to the banks by the government, a senior official from the district administration said.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 19-8-2023

In Kota deaths, a wake-up call

Only a mix of policy incentives and punitive action can spur the necessary change

Can Kota change? This question is swirling after the untimely death of yet another young person in the Rajasthan town that has come to represent both the hope and the despair inherent in the India story. Since the mid-1980s, the dusty town has become the focal point for thousands of families from the hinterland, looking for a ladder that could help their sons – and yes, it’s still mostly sons – pull their families out of poverty. The airless cubby holes that cram hundreds of students from sunrise to sunset, and sometimes even beyond, preparing them for India’s highly competitive exams for engineering and medical colleges, are seen as the only viable shot at prosperity.

By now, it is clear that many students are cracking under the pressure. On Wednesday, an 18-year-old student died by suicide. His unfortunate death marked a grim landmark, pushing the toll of students this year to 21, the highest in eight years. Many of them came from underprivileged families in the countryside. The problems are known, and have been catalogued diligently. Studies show some young people find it difficult to adjust to the gruelling routine of what can barely be called pedagogy, wither away from their homes for the first time, and their depression, illness and anxiety are brushed under the carpet of competitive spirit. Oversight mechanisms are rare, and often crude and ill-informed – limited to perfunctory steps such as putting steel cages around ceiling fans. The suicides of scores of young people has sparked a peculiar kind of governance paralysis, evoking dull condemnation but little corrective.

This cannot stand. No modern society treats the deaths of young people as collateral damage. The problems are many – the government needs to enact a robust oversight mechanism that makes institutes fall in line, the centres need to be, or be made to become, more cognisant of deaths, and the authorities should invest in creating some support structures to lessen anxiety among struggling students instead of castigating them. But the change will remain piecemeal unless the disproportionate importance of these examinations, and of coaching centres in the preparation for these tests, are addressed. Examinations for our premier institutions will need to become more insightful and ensure equality of opportunity, while our policymakers will need to level the playing field more aggressively. Ultimately, whether the situation improves will depend on a mix of policy incentives and punitive action.

Can Kota change? It must.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 16-8-2023

Economy growing but trade-GDP ratio falling gradually

Star Business Report

Bangladesh's exports and imports as percentage of its gross domestic product (GDP) has been falling gradually, although the economy has continued growing by 6.5 percent annually in the last one decade.

The ratio of import to GDP, which was 21.2 percent in 2013-14 fiscal year, halved to 10.69 percent in 10 years.

The ratio of export to GDP even experienced a sharper fall, from 17.2 percent a decade ago to 7.66 percent in FY23, according to data by Bangladesh Economic Review 2023.

As a result, share of Bangladesh's international trade to its growing economy has halved in the past one decade, raising questions about the credibility of national income estimates.

At the same time, the falling ratio of exports and import also shows Bangladeshi entrepreneurs' lack of appetite to try their products in the international market through exports, two analysts said last week.

"Behind the drop, one reason could be that our industrialisation strategy is inward looking. There is high tariff protection for domestic market-oriented industries that prevent entry of foreign products. This makes profits from business from domestic market protected," said Zahid Hussain, former lead economist at the World Bank Dhaka.

So, naturally entrepreneurs will be interested to invest for domestic market in lieu of competing for selling their products in the international market, he said.

"Return on capital is much higher in doing business locally than exporting."

The maiden national tariff policy published this week showed that the customs authority has cut Bangladesh's average tariff protection rate from over 70 percent two decades ago.

During the FY23, average tariff protection rate was 30.58 percent.

"When you provide high tariff protection, incentive to become efficient does not exist," he said, "Export to GDP would have risen had we focused on export diversification."

The economist said local industries have been getting tariff protection year after year. Now even an efficient firm loves protection, he said adding that the government provided incentive to Bangladesh's main export earner garment industry in the 1980s after it showed potential.

"The incentive has helped the sector scale up," he said.

Hussain said the fall in trade to GDP ratio also raises questions about the credibility of GDP estimate by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. "Our estimated GDP has grown so fast that it could not keep pace with growth of exports and import," he said.

The former WB economist said Bangladesh has inadequate natural resources and raw materials.

The estimate of economic growth shows it is manufacturing driven and the question is why will imports fall if the economic growth is manufacturing driven, he questioned.

"Input has not increased even though output has grown. This raises question about GDP," Hussain said.

Mustafizur Rahman, distinguished fellow of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), said in general the proportion of export and import grows with the expansion of overall output of the economy.

The fall in export to GDP ratio is a very bad sign because payment of import bills, building of foreign exchange reserves and servicing debt is related with imports, he said. In general, exports and imports grow when the economy grows.

But the decline in overall trade as percentage of GDP is not a good sign at all, he said.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 16-8-2023

While some buy citizenship, others can't even afford eggs

Anupam Desbathis Roy

Have you been to the kitchen markets lately? If so, and if you are a middle-class or a lower-middle-class citizen of this country, you must have noticed the astounding prices of necessary commodities. The price of everything is going up by so much that ordinary people can no longer afford them. The much-discussed recent International Republican Institute (IRI) poll has shown that, above many concerns, Bangladeshis are mostly worried about the alarming rise in the prices of daily necessities. And this is a large chunk of Bangladesh. On the other side, though, are the looters and money launderers, one of whom was recently exposed in an investigative report of this daily. These people are syphoning millions of taka abroad with impunity, and buying lavish real estate properties and even citizenships in foreign countries.

This is not a singular incident by a lone actor, but is representative of a number of businesspeople who are using their proximity to those in power to amass huge amounts of wealth, and then laundering that abroad. This practice is not an exception to the rule; it seems to

be the rule. In short, if you want to amass a lot of money, it is not ingenuity or innovation that will help you to the top, but joining the unholy nexus between the state and unscrupulous businesses.

But we must also view this from the perspective of the average daily shopper. They are aware of what is happening. They follow the news and are on social media. Many leave a frustrated comment or share a relatable post. Others silently observe the situation, not expressing their opinion for fear of repercussions. But that, of course, does not stop them from forming an opinion. They witness their deprivation and find themselves trapped within the constraints of the “system.” Are these citizens really so pessimistic to think that nothing will ever change as they wish for it to?

The aforementioned IRI poll also revealed that the acceptability of the opposition in Bangladesh has increased recently. It is true that many do not believe that the opposition has anything new to offer. Nevertheless, the political pendulum swings and it may be that an aversion for the incumbent is in effect. At least, as far as the market prices are concerned, people want a respite. And as far as the looters are concerned, people want to see them be brought to book. If the opposition can strongly vow to deliver on that, it is possible that their acceptability would rise even higher than what the IRI poll has shown.

Then again, let’s try to understand the issue of price hikes at a personal level. How can this not anger the average citizen? Have we, as a population, become so jaded that manipulation of this level does not move us into action? What lies behind the apparent inaction of the middle class and the lower income groups in the face of this massive jump in prices? Social movement theory suggests that when there is such a level of strain and deprivation in a society, the people would be compelled to act. However, the strain and deprivation have to be “perceived.” If it is treated as being part of business as usual, and the people start to believe that no other alternative is available, then their inaction is understandable. Is that what is happening in Bangladesh?

One may interject that the lower classes are acting by joining the protests and demonstrations of the opposition party. If this is true, then the fuel for a social movement – demanding a curbing of corruption and the lowering of the prices of necessities – is being exhausted for the political activism of the opposition. The opposition, however, has largely failed to make the two major causes of people’s concern the centrepiece of their activism. Leaders of the opposition have sparingly commented on this, but their activism remains focused on the instalment of a caretaker government that may increase their chances of getting to power. If the opposition does not pivot to a more people-centric

approach, the zeal of their movement may be lost as the people will not be able to connect with them.

The questions that are difficult to ask must be raised. We must ask how it is that regular people are not able to buy chicken or a dozen eggs while the super-rich are allowed to practically loot the country. We must demand answers from the administration about its inability to prevent these – the inflation and the money laundering – from taking place. The share market manipulation, the looting of the banks, and the manipulation of the private sector must all be accounted for. When we hit a financial crisis, the super-rich will flee to the countries in which they have investments or in which they have bought citizenship. But it will be the general people who will have to keep suffering. This must change.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 19-8-2023

A silent crisis in Bangladesh

Madhuri Kibria

Gossip travelled at light speed through the Class 4 girls’ bathroom: a girl from a higher class had experienced her first period. As whispers rippled through the room, I stood there, grappling with an unexpected wave of confusion. Period, a word until now entirely absent from my dictionary, had taken centre stage.

My confusion persisted, but soon became shrouded by feelings of shame as my own menstruation started. Having to hide my sanitary pads from men in my family and boys in class, I worried whether a blood stain was showing on my clothes, stuttering anytime someone asked me why I could not pray or why I was feeling unwell. And these experiences are not uniquely mine, but shared by about 39 million menstruating women and girls aged between 15 and 49 in Bangladesh.

Such confusion, shame, embarrassment, and ostracism are by-products of a society that evades and suppresses conversations and education on menstrual health management (MHM). Only six percent of schools in Bangladesh provide MHM education, and according to the 2018 National Hygiene Survey, only 53 percent of adolescent girls had heard about menstruation before their first period. Lack of accessible and accurate information on MHM is a core aspect of menstrual or period poverty – which means poor access to affordable menstrual hygiene products, safe and private toilets or sanitation facilities, clean water, and waste disposal bins.

The silencing of dialogue on menstruation breeds myths, misinformation and stigma, perpetuating a vicious cycle of period poverty. As appropriate knowledge, resources and services remain scarce, families and peers fail to change their mindsets, and

women and girls continue to avoid seeking help. All of these factors act as significant barriers to ensuring menstruating women and girls' education, health literacy, employment, opportunity to partake in sports, and safe water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), with 41 percent of Bangladeshi girls taking absence from school during their period and 86 percent being unable to change or dispose menstrual products due to a lack of safe and private WASH facilities.

What we must recognise is that MHM and adequate access to basic sanitation are inextricably tied to women's socioeconomic well-being, and the realisation of their human rights, sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), dignity, and gender equality. These two factors alone have been attributed to low educational attainment among girls, particularly in low-income and rural communities, as well as poor menstrual hygiene practices, leaving women and girls vulnerable to negative health outcomes such as skin irritation, urinary tract infections, pregnancy complications, and fistulae, to name a few.

Based on pilot studies done in Bangladeshi schools in 2014 and 2022, incorporating MHM education in school curricula has proven to be a powerful and effective pathway for transforming behaviours, values and norms related to menstruation and puberty among adolescents and women. Although WASH projects are regularly implemented, they rarely include MHM advocacy and education. Organisations such as UNFPA, UNDP, Brac, Foundation 21, WaterAid, and Wreetu, among others, have delivered MHM education programmes to limited numbers of beneficiaries, but having such programmes across all schools, with contextually tailored information for rural, disadvantaged or low-income communities, could ensure greater consistency, increased coverage, and widespread shifts in mindsets and behaviour.

Recommendations have emerged highlighting the need to combat period poverty through the widespread introduction of MHM programmes across all English and Bangla medium schools, as well as madrasas. These proposed actions are primarily focused on dismantling the barriers of misinformation and stigma surrounding menstruation. The suggestion is to launch these programmes as after-school activities, integrate them during or between classes, conduct seminars, or use any other format tailored to the community's needs. It is essential that these initiatives be age-specific, yet comprehensive, addressing topics such as basic sexual and reproductive health, dispelling social misconceptions, building self-esteem, promoting hygiene practices, ensuring safe disposal methods, and offering guidance on accessing affordable menstrual products and services.

These recommendations are in line with the National Menstrual Hygiene Management Strategy, introduced in

2021 by the government. This strategy envisions funding comprehensive behavioural-change training modules and making MHM education mandatory from Class 5 onwards. An integral part of the strategy emphasises involving mothers and guardians in MHM programmes. Research has underscored that mothers play a pivotal role in imparting menstrual knowledge to their daughters, sometimes imposing restrictions on movement, diet, and social activities based on misconceptions.

Engaging men and boys is also fundamental to creating an MHM-friendly environment, free from culturally reinforced patriarchal norms that undermine menstruating women's dignity and deprive them of the physical and emotional support they need. Moreover, for the successful rollout of gender-sensitive MHM education initiatives, capacity development of teachers, especially religious teachers, is paramount, and the urgency and importance given to MHM should not be compromised.

A lack of publicly available information raises questions on successful implementation of any strategy, making it critical to establish structured monitoring and evaluation frameworks, particularly for MHM programmes in remote and rural areas, low-income settlements, marginalised communities, and madrasas. In line with the national strategy, this limitation can be rectified through rigorous development of methodological and monitoring standards, and by having designated experts conduct technical programme evaluations to track progress, analyse results, identify barriers, and allow for improved design and strategic planning.

The combination of cultural stigma surrounding menstruation and puberty, low rates of literacy, and low decision-making power among women contribute to the continuing neglect of MHM education and awareness in households, schools, policymaking, and public institutions. I acknowledge that changing deeply entrenched unequal gender norms is not easy, as well as the challenges posed by disparities in socioeconomic status and geographical access to creating an MHM-friendly future. However, cultivating a social and political landscape that empowers and dignifies women, addresses MHM as a key public health issue, and stimulates tangible policy action, are steps in the right direction.

This article, along with its policy recommendations, draws from a policy brief co-authored by this writer. The brief was published by BacharLorai, a Canadian youth-driven social impact organisation run by Bangladeshi expats.

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THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 30-8-2023

NEW UK TRADE BENEFIT

Bangladesh can save £315m a year: experts

Star Business Report

Bangladesh will benefit the most from the UK's Developing Countries Trading Scheme (DCTS) as it will potentially save £315 million in tariffs annually on its exports to the European nation, according to experts.

The UK introduced its new Generalised System of Preferences (GSP), namely the DCTS, with effect from last January under which developing nations will enjoy duty-free benefits to the UK markets, except for arms.

"The scheme will support Bangladesh's smooth transition from LDC status and take the UK-Bangladesh trading relationship to greater heights," said British High Commissioner to Bangladesh Sarah Cooke yesterday.

It is more generous than GSP because it maximises benefits for developing nations and British buyers, she said.

The DCTS will mostly support Bangladesh because the UK formed the scheme especially keeping the country in mind, she said in an event at her Dhaka residence.

Cooke hoped that it would support the economic resilience of the country, although export diversification was still a challenge for Bangladesh.

In an online presentation, Sabiha Ahmed, trade preferences policy adviser at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office of the UK, said Bangladesh would benefit from more generous rules of origin compared to the previous GSP.

The threshold for imported non-originating content increased from 70 percent to 75 percent for a large number of products, she said.

Bangladesh can source inputs from up to 95 countries without losing duty-free status by treating the inputs as originating in Bangladesh, she said.

The south Asian country will get the highest benefits of £315 million annually, she said.

Under the DCTS, Bangladesh will automatically move to an "Enhanced Preferences" tier in 2029, which will provide duty-free access to 98 percent of Bangladesh's exports to the UK, including garments, said Ahmed.

The DCTS is about boosting trade and prosperity and retention of the scheme is based on respect for human and labour rights though compliance with international conventions, she said.

This includes those focused on civil and political rights, anti-corruption, climate change and the environment, she said, adding that the UK would closely monitor these aspects.

Bangladesh has huge potential to grab the UK market as it accounts for only 0.7 percent of its \$688 billion imports, said Mohammad Abdur Razzaque, chairman of the Research and Policy Integration for Development (RAPID).

The research firm identified more than 100 non-apparel items with high export potential, from leather goods and footwear, agro-food and processing, fish and shrimp, to light engineering products.

Apparel accounts for more than 90 percent of Bangladesh's exports to the UK. However, the UK's imports are highly diversified with the share of apparel products being just 3.4 percent, he clarified.

"It shows how big of a potential the UK market is for Bangladesh!" he said.

The main challenges to grabbing the market is a lack of knowledge and information about it and absence of established relationships with big brands and retailers of non-apparel products, said Razzaque while presenting a paper.

Moreover, exporters often find it difficult to meet the UK's standard and certification requirements, he said. He recommended increasing incentives on identifying potential export sectors and launching globally recognised certification and necessary testing facilities.

In the pharmaceuticals sector, Bangladesh needs collaboration with the brains of the drug innovators of the UK, said Syed S Kaiser Kabir, CEO & managing director of Renata Ltd.

Because research and development are key to expanding and grabbing a bigger market in this sector, he added.

Faruque Hassan, president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, MA Jabbar, managing director of DBL Group, Simeen Rahman, managing director & CEO of Eskayef Pharmaceuticals, Md Abdur Rahim Khan, additional secretary to the Ministry of Commerce, and Md Sameer Sattar, president of the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce & Industry, were present at the event.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 30-8-2023

Bilateral trade to rise if EPA is signed with Korea: Korean envoy says

Star Business Report

Bangladesh's bilateral trade and investment with Korea will increase if an economic partnership agreement (EPA) is signed, Korean Ambassador to Bangladesh Park Young-sik said yesterday.

The envoy spoke at a discussion on "Korea-Bangladesh Economic Cooperation" at Pan Pacific Sonargaon in Dhaka to celebrate the 50th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations between the two nations.

Korean embassy in Dhaka, Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) and Korea Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KBCCI) jointly organised the event.

Bangladesh has been negotiating with its major trading partners, including Korea, to sign trade pacts to retain the preferential trade benefits after the country's graduation to a developing nation in 2026.

The ambassador said Korea is the fifth largest investor in Bangladesh and recently the world's 10th largest economy has turned up as a major trading partner for Bangladesh in terms of export, import and investment.

Korea's RMG sector entered Bangladesh in late 1970s and the most recent Korean investments were made in the manufacturing industries such as automobile, mobile phones and electronics in joint ventures with the local partners, Young-sik said.

On export front, Korea is becoming a major export destination for Bangladeshi products, especially for the apparels because of competitive prices.

The merchandise export to Korea grew by 122.71 percent in eight years to \$623.79 million in 2022-23 fiscal year, up from \$280.09 million in 2015-16 fiscal year, according to data from the Export Promotion Bureau.

The partnership between Bangladesh's Desh Garment and Korea's Daewoo Corporation in 1979 planted the seed of Bangladesh's garment industry, the Korean envoy said.

Since then, bilateral economic relations have flourished in many ways, benefiting both the economies and the two-way trade surpassed \$3 billion-dollar mark last year for the first time, he said.

Before the LDC graduation in 2026, Bangladesh government needs to pay attention to increase productivity of the manufacturing sector, he said.

Young-sik also urged Bangladesh to form policies to stop smuggling of mobile phones as illegally imported handsets meet 50 percent of its demand in the country.

The manufacturing sector of Bangladesh should produce more cars locally, as 85 percent of the cars sold here are reconditioned, the ambassador said.

State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam said currently Bangladesh enjoys duty-benefit on export to Korea for 95 percent or over 4,000 of its products under the Asia Pacific Trade Agreement.

Alam urged the Korean government for further expansion of the product coverage under the duty benefit, especially beyond 2026.

He said Japan will also review its generalised system of preferences by June 2024 so that the duty benefit to Bangladesh can be extended for 10 more years up to 2034.

Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute, said a massive investment is needed in the education sector for building a smart nation.

Bangladesh should utilise its demographic dividend to increase industrial productivity, he said.

He also suggested for building smart, updated, green and sustainable industries to build a smart Bangladesh, Mansur also said.

Some 68 Korean companies have so far registered with the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (Bida), said Shah Mohammad Mahboob, director general for international investment promotion of the Bida.

Over 70 percent of the foreign investments Bangladesh received last year were actually reinvestments made by the foreign companies, which highlights Bangladesh's popularity as a secured place for investment, he said.

Hyeok JEONG, a professor of the Graduate School of International Studies of the Seoul National University, presented the keynote paper at the event, where Zunaid Ahmed Palak, state minister for ICT, also spoke.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 18-8-2023

Accelerate initiative to attract five million tourists annually – President

Strategic plan upto 2025 almost complete

Focus on enhancing visitor amenities

President Ranil Wickremesinghe urged officials to accelerate efforts towards the goal of attracting five million tourists annually to Sri Lanka.

These directives were issued during a meeting at the Presidential Secretariat on Wednesday (16), where he engaged with a committee responsible for assessing the progress of Sri Lanka's tourism industry enhancement programme and proposing measures to establish the country as a prominent tourist destination.

During the discussion, comprehensive plans spanning short, medium, and long-terms were thoroughly deliberated upon to enhance Sri Lanka's appeal and comfort for tourists. President Wickremesinghe inquired about ongoing plans and the role of the private sector in promoting the nation's tourism industry. Officials briefed the President on current initiatives and emerging trends.

According to the recommendations set forth by the committee tasked with establishing Sri Lanka as a leading tourist destination, the Tourism Ministry and its affiliated bodies are formulating a strategic plan for up to 2025. Remarkably, 95% of this plan has already been completed.

President Wickremesinghe also directed officials to identify a suitable location, in collaboration with the private sector, for the establishment of a high-class hotel school in Sri Lanka. To enhance lodging options for tourists visiting Sri Lanka, the President issued additional directives. Officials have been tasked with investigating and compiling a report on currently unused buildings and historic bungalows. Additionally, they are to explore a program to unearth unexplored destinations and conceive new projects in tourist-centric areas.

With the aim of fostering a favourable investment climate, the President's plan involves the establishment of an Investment Infrastructure Corporation, alongside the formation of a decision-making council. Emphasizing the significance of Provincial Tourism Boards across all nine provinces, the President advocated for the creation of regional committees under each board.

Tourism and Lands Minister Harin Fernando said that several tourism promotion initiatives have been devised in anticipation of the forthcoming Cricket Asia Cup.

He highlighted the unexplored potential in Central and Uva provinces, particularly in the Central Province where air quality remains pristine. Minister Fernando proposed developing this province as a sustainable tourism hub.

Addressing congestion issues at airports and parks, Minister Harin Fernando underscored the focus on enhancing visitor amenities. Attending the event were key figures including Presidential Senior Adviser on National Security and Chief of Presidential Staff Sagala Ratnayaka, Presidential Secretary Saman Ekanayake, Tourism and Lands Ministry Secretary H.M.B.P. Herath and heads of various agencies.

Committee Chairman Kavan Ratnayaka and other officials appointed to guide the transformation of Sri Lanka into a premier tourist destination were present.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 25-8-2023

Trade Minister chairs bilateral meeting with the Yunnan Department of Commerce

Minister of Trade, Commerce and Food Security Nalin Fernando, who was in China, chaired the Sri Lanka side of the bilateral meeting with the Department of Commerce of Yunnan province and expressed the close collaboration to establish Sri Lanka particularly with Yunnan province.

Officials of the Department of Commerce of Sri Lanka, the Officials of the Department Commerce of the Yunnan province and the Commercial Counsellor of the Embassy of Sri Lanka in Beijing represented at the bilateral talks. The Department of Commerce under the Ministry of Trade, Commerce and Food Security successfully organized the participation of 58 Sri Lankan companies at the China-South Asia Exposition held for 5 days in Kunming. This was an ideal opportunity for Sri Lankan companies to showcase their products to the Chinese market and find new buyers.

Nalin Fernando, Minister of Trade, Commerce and Food Security visited the Kunming Expo and encouraged Sri Lankan companies to promote Sri Lankan products in the lucrative consumer market in China. Furthermore, it was an opportunity to understand the dynamic E-commerce and Social media marketing strategies used in the Chinese market.

Kunming Expo has been a major trade expo over the years and could be a great platform for strengthening bilateral trade collaboration. Further the opportunity was used to discuss the areas of market expansion of Sri Lankan products, market access for new products and capacity building that required entry to the Chinese market.

The companies promoted a range of products such as gems & jewellery, Ceylon Tea, confectionery, processed food, cashew, spices, coconut kernel products, batiks and handicraft.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 28-8-2023

Nepalis hit by rising prices every which way

As if costlier food was not enough, the government has been finding new ways to tax its inflation-stricken citizens.

Krishana Prasain

KATHMANDU, While a series of measures by India to tighten food exports has pushed up local prices, the government is making life harder for Nepalis by increasing taxes on food, say analysts.

After India ordered a ban on exports of non-basmati rice on July 20, the price of rice shot up by Rs200 to Rs400 per 20-kg bag. Coming just ahead of the autumn festival season, it is a big blow to Nepali consumers.

India issued the embargo in response to rising food prices, high inflation and fear of rice shortages due to El Nino disruptions as the country heads into the festive season and elections.

Nepalis had barely recovered from the shock when India slapped a 40 percent export duty on onion on August 19. The spicy bulb suddenly became scarce in domestic markets.

Onion is indispensable to South Asian cooking, and India is the world's largest exporter. According to insiders, the customs duty is intended to stem exports to neighbouring countries and cool inflation in vegetable products.

India's neighbours will have to live with higher prices of onions because of the steep export duty till December 31. And on Friday, India imposed a 20 percent export duty on parboiled rice with immediate effect. Experts say the move could further reduce shipments by the world's largest exporter and lift global rice prices, which are already close to 12-year highs.

India extended a ban on wheat exports after curbing rice shipments in September 2022. The southern neighbour has also capped sugar exports this year as cane yields dropped.

As if costlier food from India was not enough, the Nepal government has been finding new ways to tax its inflation-stricken citizens.

No value-added tax can be levied on potatoes, onions and other daily consumable farm products as per the Value Added Tax Act of 1996. But that was a minor hurdle for the government which promptly amended the law through the Financial Bill 2023, and removed 170 goods from the tax-free list.

So the new fiscal year began with 13 percent VAT on vegetables and other food items on top of the 9 percent agriculture service charge and 1.5 percent advance tax for a total of 23.5 percent in taxes. The Financial Bill has imposed 13 percent VAT on imported onions, potatoes, garlic, peas, frozen green leafy vegetables, collard greens, beans, spinach, sweet corn and other green vegetables.

"The government's tax policy shows that Nepal is not a welfare state," said Nara Bahadur Thapa, former executive director of Nepal Rastra Bank.

"If consumer interests were a top priority, no taxes would be imposed on food items. This is a totally wrong strategy."

Thapa said that inflation was already high in Nepal, and the new taxes would cause an inflationary burst this year.

The central bank's statistics show that the annual average consumer price inflation stood at 7.74 percent in the last fiscal year 2022-23 ended mid-July, compared to 6.32 percent in the previous fiscal year.

Under the food and beverage category, the annual average consumer price index of the restaurant and hotel sub-category increased by 14.42 percent, spices by 12.50 percent, cereal grains and their products by 10.70 percent and milk products and eggs by 9.23 percent.

The figures show that food inflation is already above the double-digit figure, and a further rise may impact millions of Nepalis who spend more than 80 percent of their income on consumption, mostly food.

Even as food prices are soaring out of control, the government has announced its aim to keep inflation within 6.5 percent this fiscal year.

"It has been two to three years since the price of goods has been increasing continuously. This has made it difficult for us to survive," said Siddhi Gorkhali, who works in a corporate office.

"My salary has not increased in the last several years, but the price of a 25-kg bag of rice has jumped by more than Rs500 within a year."

Gorkhali said that since his monthly income was not enough for his growing expenses, he has had to dip into his savings which he has deposited for future use.

In the markets, the prices are rising fast, and they are unstoppable.

Pearl brand rice, which used to cost Rs2,150 per 25-kg bag in July, rose to Rs2,451 after India's ban on rice exports. Lentils (mushuro) now cost Rs170 per kg, up from Rs150 last month.

The price of jeera has reached Rs1,400 to Rs1,500 from Rs450-500 per kg five months ago. The wholesale price of tomato increased by 36.31 percent to Rs54 per kg in the last three months, according to the Kalimati Fruit and Vegetable Market.

The wholesale price of onion dry has surged by 115.45 percent to Rs74.33 per kg. The wholesale price of potato rose by 13.97 percent to Rs35.33 per kg after the government imposed 13 percent VAT through the budget statement.

"As the list of measures used to calculate inflation is long, the price index does not necessarily reflect the actual inflation that a consumer feels," said economist Gobinda Nepal.

The government said in its budget statement presented on May 29 that inflation was gradually moderating, but it remains above the desired limit. Price rises in food,

dairy products, household consumer goods, imported goods and the depreciation of the Nepali currency against the United States dollar have put pressure on consumer prices.

“Our challenge is to contain inflation and maintain macroeconomic stability,” the budget statement said.

According to economists, no proper studies have been done to examine how inflation has spiralled, particularly after the budget added taxes to food items and India started imposing export taxes one after another to protect its food reserves and control inflation.

A high export duty allows India to curb exports which means surplus availability of food at home.

“While India has adopted a protectionist market policy, in Nepal, the market is open,” said economist Nepal. “The Nepal government has no clue about what prices should be charged on which items. The market has been given a free hand.”

For example, while the price of tomato reached a record IRs300 per kg in India, the Indian government decided to import tomatoes from Nepal to bring down prices. It also relaxed quarantine provisions to allow tomatoes to flood into the Indian market.

In Nepal, prices soared by 200 percent after traders started exporting tomatoes in large quantities to India.

“Vegetables have started being exported to India, and this will also increase inflation due to short supply in the domestic market leading to higher prices,” said Nepal. “Traders will sell where they get better profits.”

India is largely concerned about rising inflation, given the steps it has been taking for the last couple of years, but the Nepal government is least bothered about the people’s well-being.

“The government needs to be clear about its objective. It should be clear about its economic and market policies,” Thapa said.

Inflation hits the lowest-income families harder because items such as food make up a much larger portion of their budgets, leaving less for spending on health and education.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 29-8-2023

Nepal continues to be net importer of electricity

Rs19.44 billion was spent on buying electricity from India while exports stood at Rs10.10 billion in 2022-23.

Prithvi Man Shrestha

Nepal continues to spend more in buying electricity from India than earning through its export, even as the country aims to become a net exporter.

As domestic production declines sharply in the dry season requiring power supply from the southern neighbour, the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) has been forced to spend big on buying power.

According to the NEA, it spent as much Rs19.44 billion to buy power from India while its export to the southern neighbour stood at Rs10.10 billion in the last fiscal year 2022-23, suggesting the country still has a long way to go to be self-reliant in clean energy.

Nepal exported power equivalent to 1,333 gigawatt hours in the last fiscal while it imported 1,833 gigawatt hours.

Prolonged drought in the last fiscal year badly affected domestic power generation and the country had to import more, said Kul Man Ghising, managing director of the NEA. “As a result, Nepal continues to become a net importer.”

Stating that the country faced an unprecedented fall in power generation, the NEA decided to procure power through bids from Indian generators and traders with the hope that competition would significantly lower the purchase price of electricity.

“However, since the lowest bid prices exceeded the average price trends in India’s day-ahead power exchange market, the NEA was bound to annul the bidding process and cling to a bilateral agreement with the Indian power traders for the months of March, April and May,” the power utility said in its Annual Report 2022-23.

Since fiscal year 2019-20, Nepal’s power import has been on a downward trend amid increasing domestic power generation in the period.

Ghising said that he believes power imports will continue to decline even though the country had to import more due to prolonged drought. “Still, net import decreased even in the last fiscal year, even though total imports increased,” he said.

The NEA aims to be self-reliant on electricity by 2026. Ghising said it was possible to meet this target considering the planned generation of the electricity in the country.

By the end of the current fiscal year 2022-23, Nepal’s power generation capacity is expected to reach 2,853MW, 4,507 MW by mid-July 2024 and 5,251MW in mid-July 2025, according to the power utility. But domestic consumption is expected to be half the potential generation by 2025, forcing Nepal to sell electricity abroad, it said.

“If all the planned projects are completed by 2026, Nepal has every chance of becoming self-reliant on electricity,” said Sher Singh Bhat, former deputy managing director of the NEA. “Provided Nepal achieves generation capacity of around 5,500MW, there

can be base load demand for around 2,000MW in the dry season which Nepal can meet with its own generation.”

According to him, the country can also fulfil the peak power demands, of around 3,000MW, through peaking power projects.

But the bigger worry is whether the country can increase its power export given the transmission constraints and uncertainty about India consistently buying Nepal’s electricity.

When Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal visited India in May and June, New Delhi had announced that it would buy 10,000MW in the next 10 years. But the southern neighbour is yet to grant Nepal additional export permission after earlier approving 452.6MW.

“There is a question of whether India will be a reliable trading partner of electricity as it has come to treat power as a strategic product,” Bhat said. “It is thus important to sustainably increase domestic demands as we will continue to rely on ourselves for the consumption of electricity we produce.”

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 22-8-2023

Degree of Dalitness

In a recent television interview, an “upper caste” lawyer, Bhagwati Pandey, stated that the Tamang and the Magar marry their own sisters. This statement was factually incorrect; some ethnic groups do marry their cross cousins, but not sisters. And it was interpreted by the concerned ethnic groups as a form of ethnic/caste discrimination.

Humiliated and offended, members of the Tamang and Magar communities took to the streets in Kathmandu. The protests became much bigger following the alleged torture and sexual abuse of some protestors in police custody. So much so that the government was forced to form a probe body to look into the whole affair. Nonetheless, the anger is simmering and could spread to other ethnic groups if it isn’t handled properly.

The Pandey incident reminded me of a worse case in the far eastern town of Taplejung about two years ago. When I visited the town, the local Limbus were grieving the grisly murder of a young woman from their community. Her boyfriend had raped her in a nearby jungle, smashed her head with a piece of rock and hurled the body down a precipice.

At the time, the police were still investigating, but everyone suspected caste playing a significant part in the crime. Caste barriers seriously jeopardised their relationship as the man’s “upper caste” (Karki) family opposed the proposed marriage. The parents wouldn’t under any circumstances accept a Limbu woman as their

daughter-in-law because they claimed the Limbu were “lower” than the Chhetri.

Before the tragic incident, the couple had been under tremendous pressure to give up their forbidden inter-caste love affair. The murderer might well have become severely distressed and depressed as a result. The poor man was caught in a serious caste trap: He risked losing his parents, parental property, wider family—and, above all, social status as a “second-tier” caste, Chhetri—if he didn’t give up his love.

Discrimination non-exclusive

The Limbu community did feel humiliated and angry at the hands of the Karki family, of course. They also suspected the police of not investigating the murder properly due to their own casteist attitude. But somehow, they refrained from calling the murder a case of caste violence. Nor did the media identify it as such. Yet it essentially exemplifies the unspoken suffering of non-Dalits at the hands of casteist individuals and families.

As apex castes, the Bahuns enjoy the greatest degree of purity and prestige and power in society. No wonder almost all political parties and their various organisations are firmly under the grip of Bahun men. Brahmins exert similar pressure amongst the people of the Tarai, where there’s a separate caste hierarchy similar to the one in northern India. The same is true of yet another caste hierarchy, established by the Malla rulers in the 12th century, among the Newar of Kathmandu Valley.

Even among the Bahuns, there are differentiations. The Upadhyaya Bahuns consider themselves the purest of the pure and look down upon other Bahun subcastes like Jaishi and Kumai. Marriage is still restricted between them.

Likewise, the Bahuns wouldn’t accept rice cooked by the Chhetris due to the ritual pollution associated with the latter. There are few marriages between the two categories. Again, there’s no question of the Bahuns and Chhetris eating food prepared by ethnic and/or tribal groups. Their Shudra or untouchable identity is marked by the denial of the sacred thread. Like Dalits, these ethnic groups have been incorporated into the Hindu fold, albeit as “lower” ranks.

Caste hierarchy is also endemic among the ethnic/tribal groups themselves. It may not be part of their culture, but the Hindu state has Hinduised them enough to practise caste strictly. The Gurung, for example, consider the Tamang “untouchable”, even though their physical traits and languages are largely similar.

I recall a nasty incident of intercaste marriage among the Gurkha community in England around 2013. A Limbu man had fled with his Gurung lover, which angered the girl’s family and kin. The father of the

Gurung girl was so offended by his daughter's marriage to a "lower-caste" Limbu that he tried to find the man and kill him. The pair went into hiding for several months.

Caste is a barrier among the Gurungs themselves. The Gurungs from the prominent four clans consider themselves superior to the other 16 clans. There's limited intermarriage between the two categories. When a man from a "superior" Gurung clan falls in love with and marries a woman from an "inferior" Gurung clan, she's usually not allowed to touch sacred objects and spaces inside the house.

My point is, then, let's stop pretending that caste discrimination is exclusive to the Dalits. No, it isn't. They suffer far greater humiliation and domination overall, of course, but most Nepalis are prone to humiliation based on caste in one way or another. This reality should be reflected in our policy and public debates.

What "degree" Dalit?

It's time we created a new narrative on caste discrimination. The simple binary between Dalit and non-Dalit in discussions of the caste system is problematic. Most of those considering themselves "clean castes" are polluted in the eyes of one group or another. So, caste discrimination and untouchability should be understood as a pan-Nepali problem—a national issue.

If Dalit means "ritually polluted", as is commonly understood in our society, then nearly all of us are de facto Dalits. Maybe 2.5 percent of the population of the Upadhyaya subcaste of the Bahun doesn't find itself Dalitised; the rest do! The difference is only in the degree of ritual pollution and consequent separation and domination.

To help people understand the concept better, I use the term "Dalit degree". Just as the degree of the body temperature is measured by a thermometer, the degree of Dalitness, as it were, is mentally measured using a "tharmeter". One's *thar* (surname) is used enough to calculate who is placed where on the caste ladder.

We could use an imaginary scale on the *tharmeter* to identify the level of ritual pollution and the expected social distance. Say the Upadhyays are 0-degree Dalit. In that fashion, Jaishi Bahuns are around 10 degrees; Chhetris 30 degrees; Gurungs 40 degrees; Magars 45 degrees; and Tamangs 50 degrees. Among the Dalits—themselves internally divided—perhaps Kamis are 70 degrees Dalit; Damais 75 degrees; and Gandarvas 80 degrees.

Let us then review the discourses on and narrative of caste discrimination and untouchability and widen its meaning to include all castes, subcastes, ethnic groups and clans of the county. This way, everyone may realise

its damage to the broader society and perhaps become motivated to treat the problem—instead of pretending that somehow they are exempt from caste domination.

TEHRAN TIMES, TEHRAN 16-8-2023

Iran exports non-oil goods worth over \$4.6b to China in 4 months

TEHRAN- Iran exported non-oil commodities valued at \$4.644 billion to China during the first four months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21-July 22), the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA) announced.

As reported, China was the top export destination of Iranian non-oil goods in the mentioned four-month period.

The IRICA also announced that exporting non-oil goods worth \$5.558 billion to Iran, China was Iran's second source of import in the first four months of this year.

According to the data released by China's customs administration, the Islamic Republic and China traded \$15.795 billion worth of commodities in 2022, \$1.035 billion more than the figure for 2021.

As reported, China's exports to Iran grew by 14 percent in the period under review compared to the preceding year to reach \$9.44 billion. The Asian country exported \$8.258 billion worth of goods to Iran in 2021.

The value of Iran's non-oil exports to China, however, registered a two-percent decrease in 2022, reaching \$6.355 billion. Iran exported \$6.502 billion worth of goods to China in 2021.

Iran's share of China's total global trade last year was only 0.25 percent. China's trade with the world reached \$6.308 trillion in 2022, of which \$3.593 trillion was the share of the country's exports and \$2.715 trillion was related to imports. China's global trade grew by 4.4 percent last year.

China is one of Iran's main trade partners that has maintained strong trade ties with the Islamic Republic despite the strict U.S. sanctions.

Iran and China officially signed the document for 25-year comprehensive cooperation in March 2021. The document was signed between Iran's former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Iranian Foreign Ministry.

Back in December 2022, Iran and China finalized 16 memorandums of understanding (MOU) under the framework of the two countries' strategic 25-year agreement.

The MOUs were signed in an Iran-China comprehensive cooperation program summit which was held in Tehran on December 13 in the presence of Iran's

First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber and China's Vice Premier Hu Chunhua.

The summit was focused on four areas explored by four committees between the two countries with the aim of paving the way for the implementation of the 25-year agreement.

Iran and China also signed 20 memoranda of understanding in the presence of the presidents of the two countries in Beijing in mid-February.

Heading a high-ranking delegation, Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi was on a three-day state visit to China starting February 14. During President Raisi's visit to China, Tehran and Beijing signed a number of bilateral cooperation documents in the fields of agriculture, trade, tourism, environmental protection, health, disaster relief, culture, and sports.

The documents include agreements in the field of transportation and industry worth \$12 billion and \$3.5 billion, respectively; the agreements cover various joint projects like the high-speed rail link between Tehran and Mashhad, and investment in the Imam Khomeini Airport City.

Investment in Iran's southeastern Mokran Coast and the purchase of Iranian oil were also mentioned in the documents.

Raisi's visit served as an example of the high level of mutual trust between China and Iran, as well as a milestone for bilateral ties.

Then in mid-July, the agreements signed between Iran and China during President Raisi's trip to Beijing in mid-February were turned into specified projects during the two countries' joint cooperation committee meeting, the Iranian finance and economic affairs minister announced.

Ehsan Khandouzi left Tehran for Beijing on July 12 to attend the Iran-China Joint Cooperation Committee meeting, which was held after four and half years.

"With the constructive atmosphere of the committee, we will soon witness good events in the fields of business and investment", the official wrote on his Twitter account on July 16.

Khandouzi further announced that Iran and China are going to begin execution of some joint projects agreed upon in February by the presidents of the two countries, as of the following month.

According to the minister, the necessary follow-ups regarding the mentioned projects have been made over the last five months and the final decisions for the start of their implementations were made during a joint business event on July 13.

"President Raisi had an important trip to Beijing last winter and good agreements were made with the

president of China; in this regard, the necessary follow-ups were made by various ministries during the last five months, and on Thursday (July 13) the first joint committee between Iran and China was held after 4.5 years," Khandouzi said.

"China is Iran's largest trading partner and the most important destination for the export of Iranian goods and an important part of our imports are also from China. Last year, China's share in Iran's (non-oil) trade was 24 percent," the minister added.

Back in early April, the Chinese ambassador to Tehran said this year is a good year for Iran-China relations. Chang Hua made the remarks in a meeting with the members of the Iran-China Joint Chamber of Commerce and a number of Iranian traders and businessmen, who conduct trade with China, held at the place of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture (ICCIMA) in Tehran.

Referring to China's growing economy, the envoy said this year is a good year for Iran-China relations, adding that during the meeting between the leaders of the two countries, important agreements were made, including the implementation of the 25-year cooperation agreement between the two countries, and a number of bilateral cooperation documents were signed in the fields of agriculture, tourism, culture, relief, and rescue, etc.

Majid-Reza Hariri, the head of the Iran-China Joint Chamber, also emphasized the desire of Iran's private sector to develop business relations with China and said there are obstacles in this direction. Among other things, issuing visas for Iranian businessmen, especially for their presence at trade fairs in China, is associated with problems, and facilitating it will definitely help the development of relations between the two sides.

MA

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 21-8-2023

Economy plans?

THE caretaker government of Prime Minister Anwaarul Haq Kakar has set some very ambitious economic targets for itself. For example, it wants to raise the tax-to-GDP ratio from below 9pc to 13pc, and boost exports from \$28bn to \$80bn. In the next few days, we may hear about more such plans. These do not sound like the plans of a caretaker dispensation with the limited mandate of helping the ECP hold fair polls in a safe environment. With fears being expressed about potential poll delays beyond the mandatory period because of planned delimitations, it is only natural that many suspect the interim set-up is here to stay indefinitely. Mr Kakar's maiden address to his cabinet has deepened the confusion about the administration's shelf life. "We are

here for an allocated time and don't have a perpetual mandate," he said, adding in the same breath, "so that utmost duty — maybe it is for a month, two, three or whatever the allocated time is — we will demonstrate not through our words but through our actions."

It should not be surprising then if his ministers are setting big targets for themselves that are difficult to achieve even in years let alone a few months. That said, it is encouraging to see the PM promising to fulfil the international commitments made by previous governments, and ensure financial discipline during the interim period. Two recent developments — market-determined adjustment of the exchange rate and increase in fuel prices to meet IMF goals — indicate that the caretakers may keep their word and not allow the new loan programme to derail. Indeed, the tax and export targets of the government are crucial for the country to achieve in the shortest possible time. But the interim set-up would do itself and the people a favour by at least attempting to refrain from crossing the limits set by the Constitution and not using the economy as a ploy to prolong its tenure.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 17-8-2023

The coming inflation

Khurram Husain

I HATE to be the bearer of bad news all the time. But circumstances don't permit otherwise. In the last monetary policy statement of July 31, the State Bank said "inflation is likely to remain on downward path over the next 12 months". But it is difficult to see how this will happen.

There are a couple of reasons to believe why inflation may have peaked. First is what they call the "base effect", which basically means that inflation was so high the same time last year that the percentage increase between the price level back then and now will be small. What this means is that the rate of growth will be small, not that inflation will ease. Given how stupendous high inflation already was the same time last year, this is small solace.

Second, the State Bank also pointed to "expected lagged impact of the accumulated monetary tightening so far, budgeted fiscal consolidation, and the tepid growth outlook for FY24" as reasons why inflation may slow. This is possible, although today the drivers behind surging inflation have multiplied and how they behave in the months to come is hard to forecast. What is also hard to forecast is whether or not the "budgeted fiscal consolidation" will actually materialise, and whether the "tepid growth" will actually dampen inflation more than the factors that are actually driving it.

Here is what has happened. The month of August has seen two massive fuel price hikes. The landed cost of petrol, for example, rose by Rs30 per litre between both of these. This is almost entirely due to the rise in international prices, as well as some amount of residual price correction that was left over by the outgoing government from the month of July.

Then the month of August also saw the resurgence of exchange rate pressure, with dollars once again largely disappearing from the open market, and LCs becoming hard to open for businesses. Once the devaluation settles (it had not till the writing of this piece), the next round of fuel price adjustments at the end of August will have to reflect this too, since fuel is imported in dollars and sold in rupees.

So already we have a vicious circle forming. Devaluation drives inflation, inflation drives devaluation. This may sound puzzling and counter-intuitive to some, but these two factors are linked to each other in a very deadly way, and once this cycle gets going, breaking it becomes very hard.

What gets this cycle going? The answer is simple: excess money supply creation. This is where the story needs a little background. Total money supply (what economists call 'broad money supply') has been doubling every five years over the past 15 years. The past five years are no exception. The pace of money creation accelerated during the Covid period and gathered steam thereafter. Despite strenuous efforts by successive governments to halt this, the authorities are now unable to do so.

Here is how this vicious circle works. In the Covid years they created money through low interest rates and refinance facilities to boost growth in the economy. When the Fund programme had to be restarted, they had to not only roll this 'accommodative monetary stance' (to use the parlance of central bankers and global lenders) but surrender altogether the power to run these refinance facilities and use printed money to pay for the government's bills. This was done via the amendments to the State Bank Act that were hurriedly passed by parliament in early 2022.

But right as they turned off one tap, they turned on another. In December 2021, they started a new way of injecting printed money into the system called 'long-term Open Market Operations'. Here is how these work: the State Bank prints money, lends this to the banks at a certain percentage, the banks lend on to government at a higher percentage still. By today, the total amount of money injected into the system via these long-term outstanding OMOs is more than 20 per cent of the total broad money supply — a stupendous percentage.

These OMOs continued through 2022, and well into 2023, because otherwise the state itself would go

bankrupt, given its interest expenditures were larger than its net federal revenues (total tax collection minus transfer to the provinces).

Ironically, this was also the time when the State Bank was hiking interest rates. The years 2022 and 2023 saw the key interest rate rise to 22pc, a historic high. This is what the State Bank is referring to when it says the “expected lagged impact of the accumulated monetary tightening” is likely to serve as a drag on inflation in the months to come.

But the problem here is that high interest rates may well be draining surplus liquidity from the system, but the state’s fiscal requirements are necessitating further liquidity injections. In short, they are draining liquidity from the system with one hand, and pumping more liquidity with the other. So the monetary tightening on the one hand, and printing money on the other, are likely to cancel each other out, unless they stop the OMOs altogether.

So we have a dilemma on our hands: how to arrest the single-most important driver of growth — money supply growth. And we have an interim government, which can do some, but not all, of what is required. The increases in inflation may start to taper off (though I wouldn’t even bet on this). But a dramatically new reality on the price level lies ahead of us. The accumulated pressures from the money supply creation underway for three years now have not dissipated. By the time they do, things will not be the same for most of us.

The writer is a business and economy journalist.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 22-8-2023

China cuts key prime loan rate to bolster economy; GDP forecast to grow 6% in H2

By Ma Jingjing and Qi Xijia

The People's Bank of China, the central bank, on Monday cut the one-year loan prime rate (LPR), a market-based benchmark lending rate, by 10 basis points (bps) to 3.45 percent, while leaving the five-year LPR at 4.2 percent. The move was the latest effort to bolster steady growth amid challenges, following a tone-setting meeting in July.

Chinese experts said the country's economic post-COVID-19 recovery has shown a wave-like

development and it's been a tortuous process. However, China's sound economic fundamentals remain unchanged, and recently announced support policies will further boost a second-half rebound, with GDP growth anticipated to be around 6 percent, experts noted.

The one-year LPR cut was the second this year, following a 10 bps cut in June. It was also within expectations since the central bank has stepped up policies to stimulate financing demand in the real economy, boost investment and employment and strengthen the recovery momentum driven by domestic demand, Zhou Maohua, an economist at Everbright Bank told the Global Times on Monday.

Zhou said that the five-year LPR has been kept steady partly due to factors such as a further narrowing in some commercial banks' net interest margins and the fact that some cities' housing mortgage rates are lower than the five-year LPR.

"Holding the five-year LPR steady will help prevent potential adverse effects resulting from a wider interest rate gap between new and existing mortgage loans," he said.

Last week, the PBC cut the medium-term lending facility (MLF) by 15 bps to 2.5 percent in a bid to adjust market liquidity.

Following a meeting of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee on July 24, China has rolled out targeted and substantive measures aimed at sparking consumption, strengthening the private sector and attracting foreign investment, which have been applauded by domestic and foreign investors.

On Friday, the central bank, the National Financial Regulatory Administration and the China Securities Regulatory Commission vowed in a video meeting to make financial support for the real economy more sustainable, and ensure that the financial sector plays a positive role in boosting consumption, stabilizing investment and expanding domestic demand.

To boost Chinese stocks market, the CSRC on Friday announced a raft of support policies, including cutting transaction fees, developing equity funds and considering the creation of a "green channel" for technology companies that aim for breakthroughs in core technologies.

On Monday, more than a dozen leading Chinese public fund firms, securities firms and asset management firms

expressed confidence in the long-term development of China's capital market, saying they would increase holdings of their own financial products.

"As macroeconomic policies are producing effects, multiple aspects of the economy have shown an improvement recently. China's sound economic fundamentals remain unchanged and the economy continues on the recovery track," Cao Heping, an economist at Peking University, told the Global Times on Monday.

Consumption in sectors, including transport, tourism and catering, have shown relatively strong performances in the past months, indicating that consumer confidence hasn't been hurt as seriously as many thought, he said.

"Positive factors ranging from stable policies and consumer confidence to the country's burgeoning digital economy will support the Chinese economy to grow by around 6 percent in the second half of the year," Cao said.

Chinese regulators still have enough tools on hand and may even come up with new ones so that precise financial support can be provided to the real economy. With the LPR being lowered this month, authorities may announce a cut in the reserve requirement ratio for financial institutions, Zhou said.

Instead of a general relaxation of monetary policy, it's more important to come up with targeted measures for key groups, for example, favorable policies supporting first-home buyers and giving money to low-income groups, Chen Fengying, an economist and former director of the Institute of World Economic Studies at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, told the Global Times on Monday.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 22-8-2023

Chinese premier meets delegation of U.S.-China Business Council

BEIJING, (Xinhua) -- Chinese Premier Li Qiang on Monday said China is willing to work with the United States in undertaking their responsibilities as major countries, jointly upholding international trade rules, and ensuring the stability of global industrial and supply chains.

Li made the remarks at a meeting with a delegation of the U.S.-China Business Council (USCBC) led by Marc N. Casper, chair of USCBC.

Li said that China and the United States, respectively as the world's largest developing country and largest developed country, enjoy economic complementarity far more than competition. He added that the essence of the economic relationship between the two countries is win-win cooperation, and maintaining economic and trade cooperation and economic ties serves the interests of both sides.

The premier said the China-U.S. relations and economic and trade cooperation are facing certain difficulties at present, which requires both sides to show sincerity, meet each other halfway, and make joint efforts.

China and the United States can certainly achieve common development and work together to make greater contribution to a better future of humanity, Li said.

China will open its door even greater to the outside world. As the country is making headway in high-quality development and Chinese modernization, its massive market is blessed with huge potential and opportunities for growth, he said.

He noted that China will continue expanding its market access, optimizing its business environment, ensuring that foreign-funded enterprises receive treatment equal to domestic firms, promoting fair competition, and protecting the property rights of enterprises and the rights and interests of entrepreneurs.

While congratulating USCBC on its 50th anniversary, Li spoke highly of contributions it has made to improving China-U.S. trade cooperation, developing bilateral ties, and enhancing people's wellbeing in the two countries.

Casper and other members of the delegation said that USCBC supports the development of sound and stable bilateral relations between the two countries, as well as economic and trade cooperation, which will give huge impetus to the economic growth of both nations.

Noting that the Chinese market is crucial to enhancing the competitiveness of U.S. companies, they said USCBC welcomes the Chinese government's indication that it will deepen reform and opening-up. They also expressed the hope that bilateral relations will develop further to bring greater certainty to the business communities of the two countries.

DEFENCE, NUCLEAR DEVELOPMENT, SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND SPACE TECHNOLOGY

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THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 17-8-2023

Boeing starts production of Indian Army's Apache choppers

The Tribune India

New Delhi, American aerospace major Boeing on Wednesday said it is starting production of the Apache choppers to be delivered to the Indian Army.

The company will deliver a total of six AH-64E Apaches to the Indian Army. The AH-64 Apache is one of the world's most advanced multi-role combat helicopters and is flown by the US Army.

"Boeing is starting production of the Indian Army's Apaches in Mesa, Arizona," the company said.

Earlier this year, Tata Boeing Aerospace Limited (TBAL) delivered the Indian Army's first AH-64 Apache fuselage from its advanced facility in Hyderabad.

"We are pleased to reach yet another significant milestone, highlighting Boeing's unwavering commitment to support India's defence capabilities," said Salil Gupte, president of Boeing India.

"The advanced technology and proven performance of the AH-64 will enhance the Indian Army's operational readiness and strengthen its defense capabilities," he said.

In 2020, Boeing completed delivery of 22 E-model Apaches to the Indian Air Force and signed a contract to produce six AH-64Es for the Indian Army.

The delivery of the Indian Army's Apaches is scheduled for 2024. "The AH-64E continues to be the world's premier attack helicopter," said Christina Upah, vice president of attack helicopter programmes and senior executive at Boeing's Mesa site.

"The AH-64 provides customers with unparalleled lethality and survivability, and we are thrilled to provide those capabilities to the Indian Army," the official said.

The IAF had signed a multi-billion dollar contract with the US government and Boeing Ltd in September 2015 for 22 Apache helicopters.

Additionally, the Defence Ministry in 2017 approved the procurement of six Apache helicopters along with weapons systems from Boeing at a cost of Rs 4,168 crore for the Army.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 18-8-2023

Vindhyagiri adds to India's naval prowess

Tribune News Service

New Delhi, President Droupadi Murmu today launched 'Vindhyagiri', an advanced stealth frigate, at Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers Ltd's facility at Kolkatta.

She said the production of the advanced frigate was a symbol of Atmanirbhar Bharat and of technological advancement made by the country. This is the sixth warship of Project 17A, a follow on to the Shivalik

Class frigates but with improved stealth features, advanced weapons, sensors and platform management systems.

Warships have been designed in-house by the Directorate of Naval Design. Around 75 per cent of the equipment and systems were sourced from indigenous firms, including micro, small and medium enterprises.

P17A ships are guided missile frigates, each of which is 149 metres long, with the displacement of 6,670 tonnes and a speed of 28 knots.

Indigenous weapons include medium range surface-to-air missiles; BrahMos surface-to-surface missiles; indigenous torpedo tube launchers and anti-submarine rocket launchers; and 76mm super rapid gun mount. A total of seven ships are being made.

Stealth frigate

Length: 149 metres

Weight: 6,670 tonnes

Speed: 28 knots

6th of 7 ships built under 'Project 17 Alpha'; first five launched between 2019 & 2022

75% of orders for equipment and systems of P17A ships are from indigenous firms

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 25-8-2023

Defence ministry clears acquisition proposals worth Rs 7,800 crore

Proposals cleared by Defence Acquisition Council chaired by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh

PTI

New Delhi, The defence ministry on Thursday approved capital acquisition proposals worth approximately Rs 7,800 crore that included procurement of electronic warfare suite for Mi-17 V5 helicopters.

The proposals were cleared by the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) chaired by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh.

The defence ministry said the proposals approved by the DAC included one on procurement of 7.62x51 mm Light Machine Gun (LMG) and another on acquisition of weapons MH-60R helicopters of the Indian Navy.

"A Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) meeting, held under the chairmanship of Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, accorded Acceptance of Necessity (AoN) for capital acquisition proposals worth approximately Rs 7,800 crore," the ministry said in a statement.

"To enhance the efficiency of the Indian Air Force, the DAC has granted AoN for procurement and installation of Electronic Warfare (EW) Suite on Mi-17 V5 helicopters under Buy (Indian-IDDMM) category," it said. The EW suite will be procured from Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL).

"The DAC has also accorded AoN for procurement of ground-based autonomous system for mechanised infantry and armoured regiments which will enable various operations like unmanned surveillance, logistic delivery of ammunition, fuel and spares and casualty

evacuation in the battle field,” the ministry said in a statement.

It said proposals for procurement of 7.62x51 mm LMG and Bridge Laying Tank (BLT) have also been given go ahead by the DAC.

“While induction of LMG will enhance fighting capabilities of infantry forces, the induction of BLT will result in faster movement of mechanised forces,” it said.

“The AoN for procurement of Ruggedised Laptops and Tablets for the Indian Army under Project Shakti has also been accorded. All these procurements will be sourced from indigenous vendors only,” the ministry said.

“To enhance the operational capability of the MH-60R Helicopters of the Indian Navy, the DAC has accorded AoN for procurement of weapons for the same,” it added.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 31-8-2023

US Congress clears landmark India-US fighter engine deal

Prashant Jha, Rahul Singh

The United States (US) Congress has no objection to the Joe Biden administration’s decision to pursue the GE jet engine deal with India, paving the way for the implementation of the company’s agreement with the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) that includes unprecedented technology transfer, manufacturing of jet engines in India and licensing arrangements.

A person familiar with developments on Capitol Hill, the home of the US Congress, said, “It is all clear from the legislative end. The sale was approved before Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit itself. But, as per the process, the state department notified the House and Senate foreign relations committee on July 28.” If, for 30 days after the notification, no Congressional representative or Senator objects, it is treated as assent. “There has been no objection. The administration can go ahead with the next steps,” the person added, asking not to be named.

During President Biden’s visit to India for the G20 summit in September, both countries are expected to discuss the next steps in taking forward the deal. Without confirming the status of the Congressional process, a senior administration said: “I don’t want to steal any of the thunder of our meetings. We are working towards and expecting the necessary steps on both sides to be able to move forward on this historic agreement.”

The state department refused to comment on the matter. A spokesperson said, “We are restricted from publicly commenting on the details of commercial defence trade licensing activities.”

HT was the first to report before Modi’s visit that the US administration had sealed the jet engine deal and the notification to the US Congress was imminent.

On June 22, the day of Prime Minister Narendra’s Modi’s historic state visit to Washington DC where he was accorded a ceremonial welcome in the White House before extensive bilateral talks and a state dinner, GE Aerospace and HAL signed a memorandum of understanding to produce F-414 jet engines in India for the under-development light combat aircraft (LCA) Mk2.

The deal is significant because the US treats jet engine technology as a “crown jewel” and hasn’t shared similar tech with even its closest allies. For its part, India has lagged in jet engine technology, a gap that the agreement can bridge, helping bolster both India’s aerial power, especially in the context of the fragile situation with China at the Line of Actual Control, and its ambition of building a domestic defence industrial base. US administration officials have acknowledged that the GE deal could be a model going forward, as it helps address India’s concerns over tech transfer and co-production and fits in with American hopes of integrating the defence ecosystems and platforms of both countries more closely.

The deal will involve 80% transfer of technology (ToT) and is estimated to be worth around \$1 billion. The production of the engines will result in the new fighter jet having an indigenous content of around 75% compared to 55%-60% in LCA Mk-1A and 50% in the existing variants, Indian officials familiar with the matter said. The deal with GE Aerospace to produce 99 F-414 engines under licence is likely to be signed during the current financial year, and the first lot of engines will be made in India three years thereafter, the officials added, asking not to be named.

The ToT will cover 11 critical areas many of which were entirely off-limits more than a decade ago when GE and India’s Aeronautical Development Agency (ADA) began talks on the possible production of the engines in the country. Back then, the US agreed to only 58% technology transfer, keeping a string of key engine technologies out of India’s reach, as previously reported by HT.

The F-414 has evolved from the F-404 engine that powers the existing LCA variants, Mk1 and Mk1A. In February 2021, IAF signed a contract for 83 Mk-1A jets, taking the total number of LCA variants ordered to 123.

IAF’s 40 earlier LCA Mk-1s ordered are in the initial operational clearance (IOC) and the more advanced final operational clearance (FOC) configurations. The LCA Mk-2 will form an important element of IAF’s future combat capabilities as India is planning to build around 130 such fighter jets.

Last year, the government gave its nod for developing the LCA Mk-2, and sanctioned ₹10,000 crore for the project. The Mk-2 fighter will be the most advanced LCA variant to be designed and developed indigenously. Apart from the more powerful GE-414

engine, it will be equipped with superior radar, better avionics and electronics, and will be capable of carrying a higher weapons payload.

Under the deal, the complex engine technologies that will be transferred to India include machining and coating for single crystal turbine blades, fabrication of powder metallurgy discs, inertia friction welding for fan and afterburner, laser drilling technology for combustor, special coatings for corrosion and erosion, machining and coating of ceramic matrix composites for nozzle guide vanes, flaps and other parts, machining of thin-walled titanium casing, polymer matrix composites for bypass duct and bottle boring of shafts, the officials said.

The LCA Mk2 will have improved range, enhanced survivability, better situational awareness for pilots, network centric capabilities, and the ability to quickly switch from one role to another, the officials added.

The 17.5-tonne fighter will have a maximum speed of 1.8 Mach, compared to the 13.5-tonne LCA Mk-1A that has a top speed of 1.6 Mach. The new aircraft will come with a payload capacity of 6.5 tonne (compared to 3.5 tonne for the Mk1A) and it will carry a mix of weapons including beyond visual range air-to-air missiles, air-to-ground missiles, heavy precision guided weapons and conventional bombs.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 29-8-2023

Leveraging India's air power:

A force to reckon with

Diptendu Choudhury

India's growth trajectory and its growing international relevance have fueled the country's great power ambitions. What was once a dream seems an achievable reality shortly. India is increasingly being looked at with respect and with an expectation of a role of greater responsibility in world affairs.

For a nation that has not always understood and leveraged air power adequately despite its significant role in five wars — and years of consistent and dedicated service — there is a definite change in the air. It's a welcome one. National security is no longer hyphenated to the land and maritime domains and is slowly transitioning towards a future-focused, multi-domain security approach. The recent increase in the participation of the Indian Air Force in international exercises with key strategic players is an acceptance of the role air power plays in national interest and security. China's growing use of its air force to implement its coercive foreign policy and revisionist strategies is evident in the Taiwan Strait and the East and South China Seas. Its recognition of India's asymmetric air power advantage during the Depsang and Galwan crises has also led Beijing to deploy air power infrastructure in the Tibet Autonomous Region.

The inclusion of the IAF in the Army's regular border talks is an important development. Given the growing

capabilities of the PLA's air force, an increase in the deployment of Indian air power for political signalling and coercion in air spaces in disputed areas may not be far off. Pressing it into service in the Indian Ocean — the lifeline of India's trade, commerce and security imperatives and indispensable to the stability of the region — is also a strategic necessity. All elements of the nation's military power must be included in India's security construct to ensure a wider basket of strategic responses and options.

The approval of the deal to procure 26 maritime versions of the Rafale combat aircraft underscores two aspects — the critical role of air power in the maritime domain and the enhancement of the much-needed interoperability between land-based air power of the IAF and carrier-based air power of the Navy. The US's use of aircraft carriers — they have played a significant political role in its coercive diplomacy — seems to have had an impact on China. The two China seas and its ports are the wellsprings of Beijing's economic power. Its security outlook is determined by the strategic concerns of the US and other nations frequenting the regional waters and airspace for reconnaissance, show of force and presence by exploiting the principle of "freedom of navigation". China, therefore, seeks aircraft carriers to overcome the limits of its geography, assert its reunification strategy with Taiwan, counter maritime claims in the South and East China Seas and protect its sea lines of communication in the Pacific region.

India's Defence Acquisition Council has approved the Rafale fighter for the Navy. But it will be at least four years before deliveries begin, not counting the time to operationalise the platform in its designated roles. What till then? Can the nation afford to wait till the Navy's aircraft carriers become fully operational? Will they meet the maritime air power requirements required to position India as a global power? This is where the IAF's strategic capabilities must be leveraged, while also expanding its multi-domain capacity by swiftly rebuilding its combat bench strength.

New Delhi seems to appreciate the Air Force's vital role in India's national and regional security, as well as foreign policy. That is evident from the seven air exercises that India has participated in this year with the air forces of the US, France, Japan, UK, Greece and the UAE, as well as the 12-nation mega air exercise planned in October-November. This is not only in sync with India's bold foreign policy, but also signals international recognition of the IAF's professional capabilities and the larger role of air power in the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific regions. It's also an affirmation of the salience of land-based power.

As China continues to pursue a strategy of expansion to "regain its perceived historical territories and maritime spaces", India's border issues with it are likely to get more complex. The direct access provided by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to the Arabian Sea —

through the Gwadar port — and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor which opens into the Bay of Bengal at Yangon and Kyaukpyu are vital to Beijing. They help it tackle its Malacca dilemma. From India's perspective, both routes not only give China access to the Indian Ocean but also allow it to strategically sandwich India's eastern and western coasts. The Gulf of Aden, Malacca and Sunda Straits are similarly of equal strategic importance to both countries. However, only India has the unique strategic advantage of dominating the airspaces over these vital maritime spaces with its land-based air power capabilities. This capability will significantly bolster India's national security, its regional presence and geo-political standing. Engaging, training and exercising with the friendly regional air forces opens up several possibilities.

Leveraging air power offers several benefits — creating a unique hard power deterrence over the South China Sea, ensuring maritime and aerial freedom in the Indian Ocean region for all and enabling aerial access to strategically located air bases amongst friendly countries in the region. It also gives India the option of exercising its soft power by providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

The writer, a retired Air Marshal, is a former Commandant, National Defence College

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 31-8-2023

Express View on ISRO's Mission

Aditya: Chasing the Sun

For ISRO, another beginning will be made, towards another great journey

Having planted its feet firmly on the Moon, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) is now headed towards the Sun. The Aditya-L1 Mission, ISRO's first to study the Sun, begins its journey later this week. It is the first time that ISRO is sending out back-to-back space exploration missions. But it was not designed to be this way. Aditya-L1 mission has been in the works for more than 15 years now. The ISRO had started preparing for it around the time it was giving shape to the Chandrayaan-1 mission in 2008. Aditya-L1 would have always followed the Chandrayaan and Mangalyaan series of Orbiters whose success was essential to validate a number of technologies that could be used in future, more ambitious, space missions. The development of sub-systems and instruments, many of them very different from what can be put on a Moon mission, for example, also took time. But now that it has come, it appears there could have not been a better time for its launch. A mission to study the Sun seems like a logical follow-up to the success of the Moon landing. Unlike the rush to the Moon, there have been very few missions to the Sun. There are inherent difficulties in going anywhere near the Sun. The Aditya-L1 mission, for example, would be stationed at a place that is just one per cent of the distance of the Sun from the Earth.

That is one of the most favoured locations to study the Sun, though missions like the Solar Orbiter of the European Space Agency have ventured much closer to the Sun. As of now, studying the Sun is a purely scientific endeavour, unlike the current round of Moon missions which are focused on exploring opportunities for resource utilisation and extraction, and setting up facilities for longer term stays. Of course, a better understanding of explosive processes happening within the Sun can potentially result in early warning systems for solar eruptions that threaten space-based assets like communication or navigation systems. The study of the Sun can give insights about the processes happening inside other stars as well. By joining this kind of scientific research, the ISRO is also sending out a signal that it has the technology and maturity — and also the resources and expertise — to contribute to every aspect of planetary science.

With Aditya-L1, the ISRO would be travelling much further in space, 1.5 million kilometres, than it did with Chandrayaan-3 whose destination was barely 4 lakh km from Earth. Of course, the Mangalyaan Orbiter went much deeper, nearly 200 million km in a different direction. For ISRO, these are only the beginnings. Many more great journeys await.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 31-8-2023

Growing Indo-Bangla defence ties

Kamal Uddin Majumder

India and Bangladesh share a historical legacy of cooperation and support during the Liberation War of 1971. The active engagement on the defense side includes high-level exchanges at the level of Service Chiefs, the conduct of the inaugural annual defense dialogues by the defense secretaries, tri-services, and service-specific staff talks. Exchange visits between Bangladesh Mukti Jodhas and Indian war veterans take place every year in December to mark the Victory Day celebrations in Dhaka and Kolkata.

On August 28, 2023, India and Bangladesh conducted their fifth annual defense dialogue in Dhaka. The meeting was co-chaired by Lt. Gen. Waker-Uz-Zaman, Principal Staff Officer of the Armed Forces Division, and his Indian counterpart, Defense Secretary Giridhar Aramane. This event took place during the two-day visit of Defense Secretary Giridhar Aramane to Bangladesh from August 27 to August 28, 2023.

The Annual Defense Dialogue between India and Bangladesh is the most institutionalized interactive mechanism between the two nations. Within this dialogue, both nations emphasized its critical role in shaping the trajectory of relations between their respective armed forces.

At the meeting, the participants conducted a comprehensive review of the ongoing defense cooperation initiatives between India and Bangladesh. Both sides expressed contentment with the escalating

level of engagement in defense cooperation. The discussions encompassed the current bilateral exercises, with mutual consensus on elevating the intricacy of these drills.

Giridhar Aramane and Lt. Gen. Waker-Uz-Zaman acknowledged the productive nature of the dialogue and emphasized the prospect of ongoing engagement based on the shared consensus established during the fifth Annual Defense Dialogue. The armed forces of both nations persist in their pursuit of collaborative efforts across various domains, and the heightened level of engagement signifies a promising outlook for the future bilateral relationship.

India-Bangladesh bonhomie in the security dimension has undeniably reached new heights in the past few years, and it can easily be speculated that Indo-Bangladesh strategic relations will continue to add "more depth and momentum" in the defense and security aspect of the bilateral relationship as both countries are committed to addressing each other's concerns and working towards common solutions.

Two defense agreements were signed between Bangladesh and India during Sheikh Hasina's four-day trip to New Delhi in April 2017. These were the first such pacts inked by India with any of its neighbors. Under these agreements, the militaries of the two countries will conduct joint exercises and training. India will help Bangladesh set up manufacturing and service centers for defense platforms that both countries possess with the aim of achieving self-sufficiency in defense manufacturing in Bangladesh and will also provide the Bangladesh military with expert training and technical and logistical support. India also extended its first ever defense-related line of credit to a neighboring country by providing Bangladesh with \$500 million to purchase defense equipment from India.

Under joint training and exercises, the defense services of both countries now participate in joint exercises, medical assistance, and training programs. SAMPRITI, the joint military exercise operation to counter terrorism, completed its 10th edition at Jashore Military Station on June 16, 2022. The exercise allows the contingents from both armies to understand each other's tactical drills and operational techniques and share their experience in counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism, peacekeeping, and disaster relief operations under the United Nations mandate.

Understandably, Bangladesh is key to India's land links eastward. When Prime Minister Hasina came to power in 2009, Dhaka assured Delhi that it would never allow even "an inch of its territory" to be used by any extremist activity against India, in line with the former's zero-tolerance policy against terrorism and militancy. New Delhi's major "security concerns" in seven sisters had already been significantly addressed by Bangladesh. The latest 5th annual defense dialogue underscores the significance of India-Bangladesh bilateral relations and

defense cooperation, symbolizing the "Neighbourhood First" policy. Both countries are cooperating extensively in trade and commerce, power and energy, transport and connectivity, science and technology, defense and security, maritime affairs, climate change and sustainable development, training programs, joint exercises, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR).

The Bangladesh Chief of Army Staff visited India in April 2023 and reviewed the passing out parade at the Officers Training Academy (OTA) in Chennai. Bilateral events like joint military exercises and frequent visits by senior military officers contribute to enhancing military-to-military relations between both nations. Through a variety of initiatives, including joint training and drills and defense discussions, the two countries' armed forces have been working together more and more.

Both India and Bangladesh have welcomed the initiatives to develop a closer effort to strengthen maritime security partnerships. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) related to the establishment of a coastal surveillance radar system in Bangladesh's Chittagong and Mongla ports has also been inked between India and Bangladesh. Two Indian naval ships, INS 'Kulish' and INS 'Sumedha', made a port call at Bangladesh's Mongla Port in March 2023.

Ironically, the US has been pressuring Bangladesh, including through sanctions, without even discussing with India (the major power in South Asia) what should be the geopolitical equation in South Asia in order to check China's expansionist designs. The cacophony of the US political elites rule-based order is nothing but crap looking at the execution on the ground, which makes it rogue-based.

America's Joe Biden Administration knows full well that pressuring Bangladesh would imply pushing it towards China. The same has been the effect of US and Western sanctions on Myanmar. Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal are already debt-trapped by China. Under the circumstances, continued American pressure on Bangladesh means that the country should go the Myanmar way, and India gets surrounded from all sides, leaving India no option but to seek a formal alliance with the US to save itself and/or face death and destruction like Ukraine fighting China as the US-NATO proxy.

Both India and Bangladesh are members of SAARC, BIMSTEC, and IORA. Since the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bangladesh in 2015 and the reciprocal visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to India in 2017, notable developments that have taken place include the resolution of long-pending land and maritime boundaries asserting the issue of enclaves, the conclusion of over ninety instruments comprising hi-tech areas like electronics, cyber-security, space, information technology, and civil nuclear energy, plus an increase in bilateral trade.

In South Asia, Bangladesh is a long-time, tested, and genuine strategic friend of India. The recently held 5th annual defense dialogue might serve to cement bilateral defense ties. Regular dialogue in this area will play a significant role in consolidating the dynamism of contemporary ties and provide an opportunity to renew bonds based on a shared geographical space, heritage, and history.

The writer is a Strategic affairs analyst.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 17-8-2023

India hands over Dornier-228 surveillance aircraft to SLAF

A successor Dornier-228 maritime surveillance aircraft was handed over to Sri Lanka by India at a ceremony held at the Sri Lanka Air Force Base in Katunayake. During the bilateral security discussions that transpired between India and Sri Lanka on January 9, 2018, in New Delhi, the potential acquisition of maritime surveillance aircraft akin to the Dornier type from India was brought to attention. The aim was to bolster Sri Lanka's capabilities in maritime surveillance.

In response to Sri Lanka's request, the Indian Government took proactive measures during these deliberations. They decided to provide a Dornier-228 maritime surveillance aircraft, which was part of the Indian Navy's fleet, to Sri Lanka free of cost for a span of two years.

The formal handover of this aircraft took place at the Sri Lanka Air Force Base Katunayake, with Baglay officiating.

Upon its delivery, the Dornier-228 aircraft was instrumental in performing specialized tasks within Sri Lanka over the past year. Subsequently, it underwent mandatory annual maintenance services in India.

In lieu of the aircraft undergoing maintenance, a replacement Dornier-228 maritime surveillance aircraft was assigned to the Sri Lanka Air Force at a ceremony held (16) in Katunayake on Wednesday.

Since its initial arrival in Sri Lanka, the Dornier-228 maritime surveillance aircraft has significantly contributed to numerous operations. These encompass a spectrum of activities such as monitoring and safeguarding Sri Lanka's airspace and exclusive economic zone through maritime and coastal surveillance operations, executing search and rescue missions, and monitoring and controlling maritime pollution.

The official handover of the successor aircraft to Sri Lanka was attended by a delegation representing the Sri Lankan Government.

This delegation included Senior Advisor to the President on National Security and Presidential Chief of Staff Sagala Ratnayaka, Gopal Baglay, the High Commissioner of India to Sri Lanka, General Kamal Gunaratne (Rtd) Secretary to the Ministry of Defence and other officials.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 29-8-2023

Indian National Defence College delegation visits Navy Headquarters

An Indian National Defence College (NDC) delegation, currently in Sri Lanka as part of their study tour, called on the Commander of the Navy, Vice Admiral Priyantha Perera at the Navy Headquarters yesterday 28 August 2023.

Commodore Arvind Rawal led the delegation consisting of nine (09) student officers from NDC Course No. 63 and members of its Directing Staff.

Subsequently, the members of the delegation engaged in an informative discussion with Vice Admiral Priyantha Perera. Marking the importance of this occasion, mementoes were also exchanged between Vice Admiral Priyantha Perera and Commodore Arvind Rawal.

The visiting delegation was also provided with a comprehensive briefing on the vital role and responsibilities performed by the Sri Lanka Navy. The Defence Advisor at the Indian High Commission in Colombo, Captain Vikas Sood was also in attendance during this event.

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 18-8-2023

Nepal, China to resume joint military drills

With Vice President Yadav, foreign minister Wang renews commitment to BRI projects.

ANIL GIRI

KATHMANDU, Nepal and China are set to resume bilateral military and defence engagements that were stalled due to the Covid pandemic. This includes suspended ministry exercise between Nepali and Chinese People's Liberation Army, other military training like the national defence course in China and other engagements.

This was agreed between the two armies during the ongoing visit

to Nepal by Yue Ande, the major general of the Tibet Military Command of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, in Kathmandu.

Yue arrived in Kathmandu on Wednesday on a five-day official

visit and held talks with Chief of the Army Staff General Prabhu Ram Sharma the same day.

"The visit by the major general of the Tibet Military Command of Chinese People's Liberation Army itself shows that traditional military-to-military engagements between Nepal Army and Chinese army have resumed," said Brig Gen Krishna Prasad Bhandari, the Nepal Army spokesman.

During the meeting between Yue and Sharma, issues of mutual concern were discussed, according to the Nepal Army.

Maj Gen Yue is leading an eight-member border defence delegation to Kathmandu. The delegation has

visited the Army Command and Staff College, among other military installations.

“I don’t know if there is a hidden agenda behind the visit, but it has resumed the traditional engagements and cooperation between the two armies.

Nepal Army is soon sending some of its officials to China to pursue the National Defense Course (NDC), and both sides are also considering resuming the joint military exercise under the banner of ‘Sagarmatha Friendship’ which has been stalled since 2019,” said spokesman Bhandari.

Bhandari did not mention the date for the joint military exercise, but said that all kinds of traditional military-to-military engagements and cooperation with China will gradually resume.

But the date for the joint military drill, which is to be conducted in Nepal, has yet to be fixed. The two countries have been conducting joint military exercises since 2017 at the platoon level. This is a small-scale exercise compared to the ones Nepal conducts with India and the United States.

The platoon-level training is led by captains of the two armies. The Nepal Army says the drill is part of its regular bilateral and multilateral military exercises aimed at sharing experiences, skills and professional knowledge, a practice common with nations that have diplomatic ties with Nepal.

The joint exercise, according to the army, is aimed at fighting terrorism, disaster response and management, and high-altitude warfare, among others. In 2019, Nepal and China had decided to conduct the joint military exercise in Nuwakot district, but it was cancelled at the last hour.

The drill, which was initially touted as a joint military exercise, was then ‘downgraded’ to a ‘training to enhance the capacity of the personnel from the two countries’.

Nepal has been conducting battalion-level exercises titled ‘Surya Kiran’ with the Indian Army for the past 18 years, engaging some 300 soldiers from both sides.

Wang meets Nepal’s Vice President in Kunming

Meanwhile, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, who is also the director of the Foreign Affairs Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, called on Vice President Ramsahaya Prasad Yadav in Kunming on the sidelines of the China-South Asia Expo. At the meeting, Yadav told Wang that Nepal and China are close partners who cooperate and support each other in various fields, including strategic cooperation and building mutual trust, according to a Chinese foreign ministry statement.

“Nepal will always remember the support, help and profound friendship of the Chinese government and people to Nepal, and has full confidence that the future of Nepal-China relations will be strengthened,” the Chinese foreign ministry said quoting Yadav.

“The Nepali side always regards relations with China as a priority in its foreign policy, will continue to adhere to the one-China policy, stick to its political commitments, and will never allow any force to use Nepali territory to engage in anti-China activities”.

“We look forward to jointly implementing the important achievements of the historic exchange of visits between the leaders of Nepal and China in 2019, building the trans-Himalayan multi-dimensional connectivity network, enhancing the diversity of Nepal-China economic and trade cooperation, and accelerating post-epidemic recovery,” said Yadav.

Yadav requested China to facilitate the export of Nepali agricultural products, the statement said.

On the other hand, Wang appreciated Yadav’s reaffirmation of the one-China principle and his commitment that Nepal’s territory will not be used by any anti-China forces.

Wang said Nepal’s ruling and opposition parties have always adhered to the friendship with China and respected China’s core interests.

“China and Nepal are friendly neighbours linked by mountains and rivers. Always respect and support each other, unite and cooperate for mutual benefit and win-win cooperation,” Wang told Yadav, according to the Chinese foreign ministry.

“China cherishes the traditional friendship between China and Nepal, and will continue to firmly support Nepal in safeguarding its sovereignty, security and development interests, and take a development path that suits its own national conditions.”

“We are willing to work with the Nepali side to promote development and prosperity-oriented strategic partnership of friendship,” Wang said.

“The two sides should continue to promote the construction of the trans-Himalayan multi-dimensional connectivity network and jointly build high-quality projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, speed up the feasibility study of cross-border railways, and help the development and revitalization of Nepal.”

Nepal is the country of honour in the South China Expo. Vice President Yadav, Education Minister Ashok Rai, some senior government officials and around 100 Nepali business delegates are taking part in the expo.

PAKISTAN TODAY, ISLAMABAD 26-8-2023

The new era of Pakistan-Turkey

Defence ties

By Nazia Sheikh

Since Pakistan gained independence on 14 August 1947, the relations between Turkey and Pakistan have grown based on a strong friendship and sense of brotherhood. The relationship will continue to deepen as we look into the future of those connections. Both nations have a long history of supporting one another and working together, which is based on diplomatic, cultural, economic, military, and Islamic relations. In

international bodies like the OIC and the UN, Turkey has continuously backed Pakistan, particularly in the Kashmir conflict. Both nations denounce the cruelty and injustice experienced by Muslims worldwide, including those in Kashmir and Palestine. Additionally, Turkey backs Pakistan's participation in the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

Turkey is looking to forge a military partnership with Pakistan for the co-production of combat jets and missiles. Pakistan has formally joined Turkish Aerospace's fifth-generation Kaan fighter aircraft development, the Turkish government has declared. The participation of Pakistan in this project would be discussed between Ankara and Islamabad, the Turkish Deputy Defense Minister Celal Sami Tüfekçi announced on August 2 in Karachi. "We will soon be having discussions with our Pakistani counterparts to formally integrate Pakistan into our national fighter jet program (Kaan), within this month," according to Tüfekçi. "Almost 200 Pakistani engineers and officials were "already taking part in the development of this program," he added.

A historic development will occur when the eagerly anticipated Kaan stealth aircraft takes to the sky for the first time. The cutting-edge technology and stealth characteristics of the futuristic aircraft are the result of cooperation between Turkey, Pakistan, and Azerbaijan. This ambitious partnership seeks to improve the strategic ties between the three nations while revolutionizing the aircraft industry. On December 27, the Turkish Aerospace Industries-produced stealth plane Kaan will take off for the first time, ostensibly propelled by artificial intelligence.

Pakistan and Azerbaijan both officially joined the initiative after the project received their strong backing, ushering in a new era of aviation cooperation. The partnership between Pakistan and Turkish Aerospace Industries has been enhanced by the signing of a contract between the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex Kamra and Turkish Aerospace Industries. As part of the partnership, some Kaan subsystems will be produced in Pakistan, leading to the development of a shared production line. The new approach not only reduces the overall cost burden but also speeds up production, guaranteeing the timely completion of the aircraft.

For Pakistan to succeed in the long run, it is not only necessary but also crucial to have a foreign policy that puts economic goals first. It is crucial for adapting the nation's foreign policy agenda to recognize that economic demands are equally important as defense needs.

From the Turkish manufacturer Baykar, Pakistan has purchased Kemanke cruise missiles that can be launched from unmanned aerial vehicles. Three different Turkish UAV models are currently in operation in Pakistan. Representatives of the Pakistan's NESCOM and TAI signed a contract in August 2021 for

the production of Turkish Anka unmanned aerial vehicles within Pakistan. With Pakistan's 2021 purchase of Bayraktar TB2 drones, the new missile is intended for usage. The Pakistan Air Force is also equipped with the Akinci and Anka UAVs Bayraktar AKINCI, Bayraktar TB2, and Bayraktar TB3 UAVs, which are all capable of launching. The Kemanke cruise missile has artificial intelligence built into it, allowing it to find targets and choose them on its own even in bad weather. In Pakistan's foreign policy, Turkey has started playing a significant role, particularly in terms of security and defense cooperation. However, Turkey needs to be more than merely a defensive ally. Pakistani collaboration with Turkey in different sectors will boost Pakistan's economy, towards more stable and prosperous Pakistan. Pakistan will need to give economic aims equal weight with defense-related ones to explore that appears to be mutually beneficial. Although it would be difficult, as Pakistan is battling with its weakening economy.

For Pakistan to succeed in the long run, it is not only necessary but also crucial to have a foreign policy that puts economic goals first. It is crucial for adapting the nation's foreign policy agenda to recognize that economic demands are equally important as defense needs.

PEOPLE'S DAILY, CHINA 28-8-2023

PLA holds encirclement drills around Taiwan island following US arms sale approval

By Liu Xuanzun

The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) recently conducted another, unannounced large-scale joint exercise encircling the island of Taiwan featuring sudden actions and sophisticated buildups after the US approved a \$500 million arms sale to the island.

A total of 32 PLA aircraft and nine PLA vessels were detected around the island of Taiwan from Friday morning to Saturday morning, the defense authority on the island said in a press release on Saturday.

Some 20 of the detected aircraft, a TB-001 armed reconnaissance drone, a BZK-005 reconnaissance drone, two Su-30 fighter jets, eight J-10 fighter jets, a CH-4 armed reconnaissance drone, four JH-7 fighter bombers, a Y-8 anti-submarine warfare aircraft, a KJ-500 early warning aircraft and a Y-9 command and control aircraft, crossed the so-called median line of the Taiwan Straits or entered the island's self-proclaimed southwest, southeast and northeast air defense identification zones, it said.

According to a map illustrated to display the PLA activities, the PLA aircraft's flight paths completely encircled the island of Taiwan.

In addition, two PLA H-6J bombers flew across the Miyako Strait and entered the West Pacific waters to the east of the island of Taiwan on Friday, before returning

from the same path, Japan's Ministry of Defense Joint Staff said in a press release on that day.

Japan also detected two PLA drones when they flew from the East China Sea along the east side of the island of Taiwan into the West Pacific on Friday, and their flight paths were similar to those of the TB-001 and the BZK-005 drones reported by the defense authority on the island of Taiwan on the same day, indicating that they were likely referring to the same aircraft.

Since the Chinese Defense Ministry or the PLA Eastern Theater Command did not make any announcement, the latest large-scale exercise is likely a routine one, but it featured more forces and more complex training courses, a Chinese mainland military expert who requested anonymity told the Global Times on Sunday.

Coming only a week after the previous large-scale military exercise around the island of Taiwan in a countermeasure against the island's separatist deputy regional leader Lai Ching-te's provocative "stopovers" in the US, the latest exercise again displayed the PLA's fast reaction and swiftness in launching a sudden large-scale exercise without having the outside world noticing, the expert said.

It came after the US' announcement on Wednesday of its approval of a possible \$500 million sale of infrared search and track systems for F-16 fighter jets to the island of Taiwan.

Expressing strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition to the planned arms sale, Senior Colonel Zhang Xiaogang, a spokesperson at China's Ministry of National Defense, said in a statement on Friday that the PLA is always on high alert to resolutely defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and safeguard peace and stability in the Taiwan Straits.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 21-8-2023

PLA's sudden, swift joint drills around Taiwan island highlighted by live munitions, multi-source intelligence support

By Liu Xuanzun

The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) launched a sudden and swift joint exercise around the island of Taiwan on Saturday that was not anticipated by the island's defense authority despite the island's separatist deputy regional leader Lai Ching-te's provocative "stopovers" in the US, as the drills displayed the PLA's growing combat readiness and its capability to completely control the region, experts said on Sunday.

Marking the PLA's third major countermeasure operation against collusion between "Taiwan independence" secessionist forces and external interference forces since last August, the latest exercises shows that secessionist attempts will never succeed and will only sabotage peaceful future of the island, analysts said.

Between Saturday morning and Sunday morning, armed forces on the island of Taiwan detected 45 PLA aircraft and nine PLA vessels around the island, with 27 of the detected aircraft including Su-30, J-11 and J-10 fighter jets, a Y-9 command and control aircraft and a Z-9 anti-submarine warfare helicopter crossed the so-called median line of the Taiwan Straits or entered the island's self-proclaimed southwest air defense identification zone, the defense authority on the island said in a press release on Sunday.

The report on the sudden significant increase in PLA activities around the island came after the PLA Eastern Theater Command on Saturday announced it had launched a sea and air joint combat readiness alert patrol and joint training exercises involving naval and aviation forces on Saturday.

In a move to test the troops' actual capabilities in joint operations, the exercises focus on training subjects including vessel-aircraft integration, seizing control and anti-submarine warfare. Spokesperson of the defense authority on the island said on Tuesday, four days before the drill, that there was no sign of large-scale exercises amid Lai's scheduled return from his trip on Friday, media on the island reported at the time. Clearly such an exercise was not expected by the defense authority on the island.

It shows that the PLA is ready for missions in the Taiwan Straits at any time, as its regular training sessions and large-scale exercises have fused together, Fu Qianshao, a Chinese mainland military expert, told the Global Times on Sunday.

With command, control and communication links among different military services and branches being interconnected and all kinds of training being carried out daily, the PLA can launch large-scale exercises at anytime, leaving no time for enemies to react or prepare before an operation, Fu said.

In the exercises, mission units including multiple Navy destroyers, frigates and missile boats, formations of Air Force fighters, bombers, early warning aircraft and electronic warfare aircraft, as well as conventional missiles from the Rocket Force rapidly maneuvered and assembled toward preset regions and started combat deployment, the PLA Eastern Theater Command said in a press release on the day.

Working with support from multiple intelligence sources, these combat platforms operated as a system and coordinated with each other according to their missions, as they arrived in designated waters and air spaces around the island of Taiwan as planned, the PLA Eastern Theater Command said.

Fu said that the multiple intelligence sources likely include those from satellites, reconnaissance aircraft and early warning aircraft in dimensions including land, sea, air, space, electromagnetic space and cyberspace.

These intelligence sources are collated at the command center and distributed to combat units in real time, as

the PLA's level of grasping, analyzing and using intelligence has reached a high level in informationized warfare, Fu said.

According to media reports, J-10C, J-11B, J-16, Su-30MK2 fighter jets, H-6K bombers, KJ-500 early warning aircraft, Type 054A frigates and DF-15 ballistic missile transporter erector launchers were among the weapons and equipment involved in the drills.

Fighter jets and bombers carried live munitions, including PL-10 short-range combat missiles, PL-15 beyond-visual-range air-to-air missiles, KD-63 land attack cruise missiles and YJ-12 supersonic anti-ship missiles, media reports show.

The PLA forces carried out a close-in deterrence mission from multiple directions, in multiple dimensions and through an extended time period, forming a situation where the island of Taiwan is surrounded and approached from all directions, the PLA Eastern Theater Command said.

To the north of Taiwan island, PLA destroyers and frigates took advantageous positions through high-speed maneuvering and stealth approaching and launched mock strikes on hostile maritime targets.

To the east of Taiwan island, PLA flotillas organized beyond-visual-range strikes against naval targets and close-range counterattacks based on real time situations.

To the southwest of Taiwan island, surface vessels and anti-submarine helicopters formed a multidimensional anti-submarine network, searching for underwater targets in a wide region, quickly cross-verified suspect targets and launched mock attacks, while standing-by missile boats carried out tracking and aiming at hostile mobile targets throughout their entire courses jointly with land-based missile assault groups, electronic countermeasure units as well as observation and communications forces.

Fighters and bombers carrying live munitions flew to designated regions from multiple directions, established strike positions, coordinated with surface vessels and carried out mock attacks on hostile aircraft and vessels in a move to seize air superiority and control of the sea. Supported by a land-sea-air joint intelligence system, the warplanes formed an integrated link, carried out joint reconnaissance, target distribution and mock precision strikes, as they tested their multi-domain awareness, coordination and joint blockade and strike capabilities.

The PLA again surrounded the island of Taiwan from all directions, leaving "Taiwan independence" secessionist forces and external interference forces with no chance, Song Zhongping, a Chinese mainland military expert and TV commentator, told the Global Times on Sunday.

Such a blockade and encirclement means that the PLA can suppress all military targets in and around the island of Taiwan, including those on the island or from the US, Song said.

Stern warning

The exercises are a stern warning of collusion between "Taiwan independence" secessionist forces and external interference forces, said Senior Colonel Shi Yi, a spokesperson at the PLA Eastern Theater Command, in a press release on Saturday.

Lai, a candidate of the separatist Democratic Progressive Party for the 2024 Taiwan regional leader election, returned to the island on Friday after "stopovers" in the US before and after his trip to Paraguay.

When Taiwan regional leader Tsai Ing-wen made "transit" in the US in April, the PLA Eastern Theater Command held combat alert patrols and the "Joint Sword" exercise that encircled the island of Taiwan in waters from the east of the island. In August 2022, the PLA also held large-scale joint exercises around the island in response to then US House speaker Nancy Pelosi's provocative visit to the island.

No matter in which way "Taiwan independence" secessionist forces or external interference forces provoke and sabotage the prospect of peaceful reunification, the Chinese mainland will always take resolute countermeasures to penalize them, experts said, noting that the more separatists provoke, the dimmer a peaceful future is for the island of Taiwan.

With each exercises, the PLA gains more capabilities and experience around the island of Taiwan, as well as actual control over the region, observers said.

"We are willing to create wide space for peaceful reunification, but will never leave any room for any kind of 'Taiwan independence' secessionist activities. We will take resolute measures to penalize 'Taiwan independence' secessionist forces and their acts and firmly safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity," the Taiwan Work Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee said in a statement on Saturday.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 31-8-2023

PLA holds extensive, nonstop anti-submarine drill in South China Sea

By Liu Xuanzun

The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) recently conducted an anti-submarine exercise that stretched for more than 40 hours and featured more than a dozen groups of anti-submarine patrol aircraft in the South China Sea, which is a region experts said is infested with foreign submarine activities that potentially threaten China's national defense.

A naval aviation regiment and a submarine detachment affiliated with the PLA Southern Theater Command recently conducted a long-endurance, nonstop exercise on searching and attacking submarines in the South China Sea, the PLA Southern Theater Command said in a press release on Tuesday.

During the exercise that examined the crews' skills and tactical capabilities, Y-8 anti-submarine patrol aircraft carried out searching, identifying, attacking and tracking of submarines under single or multiple known variables, according to the press release.

The exercise presented a combat scenario in which the anti-submarine patrol aircraft and submarines confronted each other in a realistic manner.

By focusing on multiple time periods including small hours and daybreak, the crews were able to garner more experience in dealing with hydrological and geographic environments in water at different times of the day, gather combat data, and hone the force's all-weather aviation anti-submarine warfare capabilities, the PLA Southern Theater Command said.

Anti-submarine warfare is a very challenging task, and such an extensive, nonstop search is a common practice to find submarines hidden in the vast sea, Song Zhongping, a Chinese military expert and TV commentator, told the Global Times on Wednesday.

The depth of the South China Sea means that it is suitable for submarine operations, and it has already become infested with submarines from not only countries in the region like Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia, but also countries from outside of the region like the US and Japan, Song said.

An example exposing intensive submarine activities in the South China Sea is the US Navy's Seawolf-class nuclear-powered attack submarine the USS Connecticut's collision with a seamount in the South China Sea in October 2021.

The AUKUS trilateral security pact among the US, Australia and the UK is also planning to send more nuclear-powered submarines to the South China Sea and build new ones for Australia in an attempt to militarily contain China.

The PLA now has a selection of anti-submarine equipment, including surface vessels, anti-submarine patrol aircraft and anti-submarine helicopters, giving it multiple means to carry out anti-submarine missions, Song said.

China has become one of the leading countries in anti-submarine technology, and it is important for the country to put its anti-submarine forces through the most challenging training to test and enhance their capabilities, Song said.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 22-8-2023

Philippines to skip US-Japan-Australia joint drills in South China Sea

Logistical limitations could be 'an excuse for Manila to seek a balance among powers'

By Liu Xuanzun

The Philippines will reportedly not participate in a US-Japan-Australia joint exercise in the South China Sea this week, a move analysts said on Monday showed that the Philippines is trying to find a balance under US

pressure to take advantage of Manila as a foothold in the region against China.

The US, Japan and Australia are planning to hold a joint navy drill in the South China Sea off the western Philippines this week, with all three countries deploying aircraft and helicopter carriers, namely the USS *America*, the JS *Izumo* and the HMAS *Canberra*, AP reported on Monday.

Commanders of the three countries' warships are set to meet with their Filipino counterparts in Manila after the offshore drills, the report said.

Led by the US, the trilateral exercise serves to maintain US hegemony, which in their eyes is being challenged by China, Chen Xiangmiao, director of the World Navy Research Center at the National Institute for South China Sea Studies, told the Global Times on Monday.

"The US military sees the South China Sea as a region to contest with China, with the other region being the Taiwan Straits. That is why the US wants to have the Philippines as a foothold in the region," Chen said.

Under this thinking, earlier this year, the US and the Philippines held their largest-ever Balikatan combat exercise, and the Philippines opened four additional military bases for US use.

The AP report linked the upcoming trilateral exercise to the recent tensions between China and the Philippines over the Ren'ai Jiao (also Ren'ai Reef) of the Nansha Islands in the South China Sea.

China Coast Guard on August 5 drove away Philippine vessels intruding into waters near the Chinese reef in an attempt to deliver building materials to an old Philippine warship illegally grounded at the Ren'ai Jiao since 1999. The US, Japan and Australia were among countries that expressed support for the Philippines over the incident, AP reported.

However, the Philippines would not be part of the exercise due to "military logistical limitations," AP said. Using so-called military logistical limitations as an excuse could be a part of the Philippines' tactic to seek a balance between major powers, because a complete dependence on the US could make it the biggest victim, Chen said.

With many domestic problems to be solved, the Marcos Jr administration's priority should be development, Chen said. "The Philippines needs China in terms of economic development, and the US cannot provide what it needs," he said.

If the Philippines is used by the US as a forward deployment base in a potential military conflict in the South China Sea, or worse, if the Philippines is instigated by the US to challenge China militarily, it would be the Philippines that suffers from the flames of war, while the US homeland is located thousands of kilometers away, a Chinese military expert who requested anonymity told the Global Times on Monday. The US-Japan-Australia joint exercise is only a political show and has limited military significance, the expert

said, citing China's anti-ship ballistic missiles such as the DF-21D and the DF-26 that make large vessels such as helicopter carriers and amphibious assault ships vulnerable on China's doorstep, including in the South China Sea.

The upcoming exercise by the three countries from outside the region will only have a negative impact on the current tensions. Some Filipino hardliners could see the trilateral drill as a form of encouragement, putting more pressure on Manila to lean toward the US and become more stubborn to deliver so-called supplies to the warship illegally grounded at the Ren'ai Jiao, analysts said.

In recent years, the US has gone to great lengths to interfere in the South China Sea issue. It has encouraged and supported certain countries' violation of other countries' maritime rights and sowed discord between countries in the region, which makes the US a disrupter and saboteur of the regional order, said Wang Wenbin, a spokesperson at China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at a regular press conference on Monday.

The US, together with its allies, frequently conducted military exercises and close-in reconnaissance in waters around China, including the South China Sea, to flex muscles and intensify tensions in the region. The US has become the biggest threat and challenge to regional peace and stability, Wang said.

The Philippines should put its own national interests first rather than choose to be tied to the US chariot against China, making itself an expendable pawn, expert.

GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA 30-8-2023

China, Pakistan launch joint air exercise featuring Chinese warplanes

on both sides

By Liu Xuanzun

In a first since Pakistan inducted Chinese-made J-10CE fighters into its air force, the two countries kicked off a joint air exercise on Monday, with experts saying on Tuesday that the drill will further enhance exchanges and cooperation between the two militaries and contribute to regional peace and stability.

The Shaheen-X joint air exercise kicked off on Monday in Chinese territory as part of efforts to further boost training and coordination between the two militaries and deepen their exchange and cooperation on military technology, the Xinhua News Agency reported on Monday.

According to a statement released by China's Ministry of National Defense on Saturday, the exercise is scheduled to be held until mid-September, in Jiuguang,

Northwest China's Gansu Province and Yinchuan, Northwest China's Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region.

The two sides will send fighters, early warning aircraft and several other types of aircraft, as well as ground forces such as ground-to-air missiles and radar and signal troops to participate in the exercise. Chinese naval aviation units will also be involved in the training, Xinhua reported.

J-10 fighter jets from the Pakistan Air Force will participate in the exercise, Pakistani media outlet The Nation reported on Monday.

It marks the first time J-10CE fighter jets have participated in the China-Pakistan Shaheen series air exercise since the Chinese-made aircraft were inducted into the Pakistan Air Force in March 2022, as the Shaheen-IX was held in December 2020.

Independently developed by China's aviation industry, the J-10CE is an all-weather, single-engine, single-seat, multirole, fourth-plus generation fighter jet capable of striking multiple targets from beyond visual range under a complex electromagnetic environment, and can deliver precision attacks against ground targets with multiple guidance modes.

Equipped with advanced comprehensive avionics and weapon systems, the aircraft boasts outstanding mid-to-low altitude combat maneuverability, supersonic flight, short-range takeoff and landing, large combat radius and long range and mid-air refueling capabilities.

After more than a year's independent practice and use, the Pakistani pilots should have already grasped and developed skills and tactics on the J-10CEs, and their first joint exercise with China using the aircraft will benefit both countries' pilots when they exchange experiences, Fu Qianshao, a Chinese military aviation expert, told the Global Times on Tuesday.

The Pakistan Air Force uses the J-10CE as its main combat force, while the Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force also operates a large fleet of J-10C fighter jets, Fu noted.

The exercise can enhance the two countries' interoperability under informatized systems of modern warfare, Fu said.

Xinhua reported that the Shaheen-X exercise will focus on training in typical combat scenarios such as joint air defense and joint countermeasures.

The drill will allow China to learn from the Pakistan Air Force's Western-like training system, while Pakistan will strengthen its capabilities in safeguarding its sky as well as conducting anti-terrorism operations, Fu said.