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CONTENTS

I.	Foreign Affairs	1
II.	Economic, Cultural and Social Affairs	17

I - FOREIGN AFFAIRS

	Subject	Newspapers/Periodicals	Date	Page
	INDIA			
	India-China Relations			
1.	India, China agreed that next round of military talks should be held soon: MEA - PTI	The Tribune, Chandigarh	24-12-2020	1
2.	China versus India-I By Ashok Kapur India-South Korea-China	The Statesman, New Delhi	25-12-2020	1
3.	India, South Korea to discuss defence ties, China's SCS posturing - PNS India-Bangladesh Relations	The Pioneer, New Delhi	29-12-2020	3
4.	Calling Bangladesh! Editorial India-Vietnam Relations	The Pioneer, New Delhi	18-12-2020	3
5.	India, Vietnam draw three-year road map to upgrade ties By Sandeep Dikshit India-Nepal Relations	The Tribune, Chandigarh	21-12-2020	4
6.	Nepal on the boil Editorial India's Outreach to the World	The Pioneer, New Delhi	22-12-2020	4
7.	India to open three new embassies - Tribune News Service AFGHANISTAN	The Tribune, Chandigarh	30-12-2020	5
8.	President Ghani Meets US Acting Secretary of Defense in Kabul - Tolo News	Outlook Afghanistan, Kabul	24-12-2020	6
9.	Reaction to Baradar's Trip to Pakistan Editorial BANGLADESH	Outlook Afghanistan, Kabul	27-12-2020	6
10.	'Take Bangladesh-South Korea relationship to new heights' Say speakers at webinar By Diplomatic Correspondent	The Daily Star, Dhaka	16-12-2020	7
11.	Bangladesh and India's relations must go to the next level	The Daily Star, Dhaka	19-12-2020	7

12.	PM seeks Turkey's involvement in Rohingya repatriation By Observer Online Desk	The Daily Star, Dhaka	23-12-2020	8
13.	The Hasina–Modi December summit By Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan	The Daily Star, Dhaka	29-12-2020	8
14.	Bangladesh and China: An alliance for prosperity By Farhat Ahmed NEPAL	The Daily Star, Dhaka	31-12-2020	10
15.	Indian Foreign Secretary Visit Restoring Trust By Keshab Poudel	Spotlight, Kathmandu	16-12-2020	10
16.	Beijing is sending a senior party leader to Nepal as political crisis unfolds By Anil Giri PAKISTAN	The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu	27-12-2020	11
17.	UNGA adopts Pakistan-sponsored resolution on self-determination By Anwar Iqbal	Dawn, Islamabad	18-12-2020	12
18.	Knowing India's intent, can we name its partners too? By Aamir Ghauri	The News, Islamabad	19-12-2020	13
19.	Reappraisal of Pakistan—Iran relations By Dr Farooq Hasnat & Dr Zamurrad Awan	The Nation, Islamabad	23-12-2020	14
20.	Pakistan-Saudi ties Editorial	Dawn, Islamabad	23-12-2020	15
21.	FM discusses bilateral ties with Egyptian counterpart Staff Reporter	The Nation, Islamabad	25-12-2020	16
22.	Rising tensions Editorial	The Nation, Islamabad	25-12-2020	16

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 24-12-2020

India, China agreed that next round of military talks should be held soon: MEA PTI

Eighth and last round of military talks had taken place on November 6

India and China have agreed that the next round of military talks should be held soon for working towards an “early and complete” disengagement of troops along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh in accordance with the existing bilateral agreements and protocols, the Ministry of External Affairs said on Thursday.

External Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Anurag Srivastava said the diplomatic and military talks have helped both sides to enhance understanding of each other’s positions on the issue.

Last week, India and China held another round of diplomatic talks under the framework of Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC) on India-China border affairs.

In the virtual meeting, both sides agreed to continue work towards ensuring complete disengagement of troops in all friction points along the LAC in eastern at the “earliest”.

“India and China continue to maintain communications through diplomatic and military channels. These discussions have helped both sides to enhance understanding of each other’s positions,” Srivastava said. He was replying to questions on the over seven-month border standoff.

“As you are aware, a meeting of the WMCC on India China border affairs took place on December 18 and the two sides have agreed that the ninth round of senior commanders meeting should be held at an early date so that both sides can work towards an early and complete disengagement of troops along the LAC in accordance with the existing bilateral agreements and protocols and fully restore peace and tranquillity,” he said.

The eighth and last round of military talks had taken place on November 6 during which both sides broadly discussed disengagement of troops from specific friction points.

Nearly 50,000 Indian Army troops are currently deployed in a high state of combat readiness in various mountainous locations in eastern Ladakh in sub-zero conditions as multiple rounds of talks between the two sides have not yielded concrete outcome to resolve the standoff.

China has also deployed an equal number of troops, according to officials.

Army Chief Gen MM Naranave on Wednesday visited various high-altitude forward areas in eastern Ladakh and reviewed India’s overall military preparedness.

Asked whether India cancelled all diplomatic events planned with China to celebrate the 70th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, Srivastava said the activities have not yet been launched.

“This is the 70th year of establishment of diplomatic relations between India and China. However, the activities

that have been agreed upon have not yet been launched,” he said.

THE STATESMAN, NEW DELHI 25-12-2020

China versus India-I

ASHOK KAPUR

All along, China has been deceiving India by indefinitely delaying a border settlement, by repeating that the issue be kept on the backburner while the two countries concentrate on economic growth

It is an unequal fight. An expansionist autocracy is confronting a peace-loving democracy. The battleground, so to say, is the highest mountainous terrain in the world where “not a blade of grass grows”, in the famous, or infamous words of the late Prime Minister of India. The democracy is subjected to rude jolts from time to time by way of periodic incursions from across the ‘line of actual control’. The latest intrusion from across the border and the resultant stand-off has been provoked by the autocracy, as always, without any cause.

The current stand-off between India and China has been engineered by the latter at a time when India is fighting another battle ~ the worst pandemic in modern history, apparently exported by the Chinese. Besides, India had been facing its lowest economic growth in the last decade, where a creeping economic slow-down had blighted several sectors. From India’s standpoint, the timing could not have been worse. Adding to our woes, the neighbour to the west had been intensifying its proxy war in Kashmir. The timing of the Chinese intrusion into Indian territory and the killing of our unarmed soldiers can be fathomed from the history of independent India. The last time China attacked India and fought a brief border war was in 1962. It was entirely unprovoked, and had something to do with its internal problems. Mao tse Tung, the founder (1949) of the Chinese Communist party was in power, and his promised Utopia had turned into an indescribable tragedy. In an ancient agrarian-settled civilization, agriculture had in just a decade turned upside down under Communist rule. Between 1959 and 1961, an estimated 27 to 30 million Chinese had starved to death.

India, in contrast had nurtured and strengthened its young democracy and attained a steady though modest economic growth. It was a ‘founding father’ of the global Non-aligned Movement and came to be viewed as some kind of a role model for newly-independent nations of Asia and Africa, emerging from decades of colonial bondage. As both India and China had become full-fledged nations in the late 1940s, a comparison was inevitable.

Two giant Asian powers had appeared on the scene, but with sharply contrasting political systems ~ functioning democracy and faltering communism. It was, apparently, too demeaning for the Chinese Communists to stomach, having promised to deliver a workers’ paradise. For 2,000 years, the Chinese have viewed themselves as the Middle Kingdom in Asia, with smaller countries on the periphery ‘paying court’, literally and figuratively to ruling Chinese Emperors. Mao, who for the first time in its history knit together a modern China by eliminating traditionally

fractious warlords and potentates, fancied himself in such a role ~ ‘Chairman for life’ ~ a modern day ‘Emperor’ of sorts. In a move apparently designed to divert attention of his starving millions, he launched an unprovoked war with India over a boundary dispute. An essentially pacifist democracy and the ‘leader’ of the Non-aligned Movement was humiliated in the battlefield before the whole world. In the intervening decades, the Chinese have consistently refused to settle the boundary dispute with India. Consequently, India had to divert huge resources away from its development effort and modernize its armed forces. Today, it is maintaining one of the largest standing armies in the world. To rapidly modernize its armed forces and equip them with the latest weapons in case it has to again defend itself against the wayward Chinese communists, India has become the world’s largest importer of military hardware. After the 1960s, India could manage what has been termed as a “Hindu rate of economic growth” ~ just 3-4 per cent. China, a centrally controlled command economy meanwhile leapfrogged to a growth rate of 8-9 per cent, outpacing India, and overtaking it. It did enter into a number of ‘peace agreements’ with India to ease tensions, but deliberately kept the border pot simmering, by refusing to demarcate the boundary and sign a peace treaty. The historically unmarked border has been unilaterally defined by them as ‘line of actual control’ ~ whatever that means ~ which has the potential for dispute any time it may choose. All along, it has been deceiving India by indefinitely delaying a border settlement, by repeating that the issue be kept on the backburner while the two countries concentrate on economic growth.

In the second decade of the present century, India turned the tables on China. It outpaced it in terms of economic growth, thereby threatening its growing economic hegemony in Asia. In the recent World Economic Summit at Davos, India was lauded as the “fastest growing democracy in the world.” This surely could not have been music to China’s ears. Henry Kissinger, former US Secretary of State and an astute strategist had foreseen that smaller nations of Asia would seek a counterweight to an increasingly hegemonic China. In China’s reckoning, a counterweight had emerged on the scene.

To go back to history, the timing of the present stand-off appears to be a rewind of 1962. Coupled with their receding rate of economic growth are the multiple internal troubles being faced by the Chinese communists. Recent severe floods have affected large areas in China, Taiwan has openly repudiated the ‘one China policy’, there is widespread disaffection in Xinjiang, Hong Kong is on the boil, unrest is spreading in Inner Mongolia, Tibet is far from “pacified” and treatment of Uighur Muslims is giving it a bad name. Mao may be dead, but Maoism is alive and kicking, literally and figuratively. Xi Jinping has, in the manner of Napoleon crowned himself a veritable Emperor of China, a successor to Mao.

No one should have any doubt that China poses an existential threat to a prospering India. According to Dr Kissinger again, China fancies itself as the dominant

economic and military power in Asia. A robust counterweight like India is anathema to the Chinese way of thinking. For 2000 years, it has positioned itself as the Middle Kingdom. In this respect, it is different from the earlier Soviet communist regime which was equally expansionist and autocratic. But Russia has been a European power throughout history and was a part of Europe where a ‘balance of power’ was maintained throughout the 19th and most of the 20th century.

Kissinger says: “Theorists of the balance of power often leave the impression that it is the natural form of international relations. In fact, balance- of-power systems have existed only rarely in human history. The Western Hemisphere has never known one, nor has the territory of contemporary China for over 2000 years. Empires have no need for a balance of power.” Historically, the concept of ‘balance of power’ is alien to the Chinese way of thinking. “Before the nineteenth century, China never had a neighbour contesting its pre-eminence and never imagined that such a state could arise. The notion of sovereign equality of states did not exist in China.”

The question arises, what is to be done? Ironically, the solution comes from Sun Tzu, the sixth century BC Chinese thinker. ‘Know thyself and know thy enemy, and thou shall win a hundred battles undefeated.’ The first imperative, therefore, is to evaluate ourselves objectively, and do honest introspection about our actions and policies since 1962. Both diplomatic and military efforts are needed to ensure that 1962 is never repeated. Only then can we survive the Dragon’s fire.

Today, our military is strong but diplomacy continues to be defensive and weak. In the 1962 war, as also during the recent Galwan clash, our troops displayed such battlefield valour that it can be said that they are second to none in the world. But diplomatically, we have been shy of standing up to Chinese bullying. Take the case of Taiwan. A time has come when we must act in concert with leaders of the most friendly and like-minded democracies which openly share our concern about the growing Chinese threat to Asia, and to Asia-Pacific. Fortunately, Trump in US, Morrison in Australia, Abe in Japan and Macron in France can be brought on board to stand up together and recognize Taiwan. It is time to junk the ‘one China policy.’

New Zealand is another likeminded liberal democracy, so far outside our strategic vision where we have not reached out fully. It was earlier a part of a military alliance ~ ANZUS, with US and Australia. Formed after Second World War as a military alliance against Imperial Japan, it soon transformed into an anti-Communist alliance to meet the fresh challenge of aggressive Soviet communism. Unfortunately, the Alliance fell into disuse over a technical dispute.

We should take the initiative to revive ANZUS, this time with India as the fourth partner. QUAD-II is waiting to be born, this time in the Pacific. That China is fast expanding its footprint, or shall we say naval ‘bootprint’ in the Asia-Pacific. The Chinese could threaten the northern flank of both New Zealand and Australia, in the event of a naval confrontation.

A most glaring failure of our diplomacy is to present to the world at large the sordid facts about Chinese perfidy in annexation of East Turkestan, the historic land of Uighur Muslims. It is being widely reported today that this “minority” is being maltreated by the Chinese communists, and around one million are incarcerated. The term “minority” is a misnomer, as East Turkestan was never a part of Imperial China but conquered by them in the last century. By definition alone, a minority is a part of the whole group. It is a doubtful proposition in international law if the Turki population of an annexed country can be described by the Han Chinese as a “minority”, deceptively implying thereby that it is an “internal” issue.

India, and indeed the free world owe a debt of gratitude to eminent scholar and MP, Prafull Goradia for bringing forth the sly manner in which China gobbled up the country of Uighurs soon after Mao came to power in 1949. It was a case of classic communist perfidy, the way Stalin annexed Poland after World War II. Mao invited the leaders of Turkestan government to Beijing to ‘discuss a confederation’ between the two countries. Two communist members of the Uighur government stayed back. The other non-communist members of the Government were flying back from Beijing when the plane conveniently “crashed”. The two communist members back home promptly “voted” for “union” with Communist China!

THE PIONEER, NEW DELHI 29-12-2020

India, South Korea to discuss defence ties, China’s SCS posturing

PNS

India and South Korea will discuss the entire gamut of defence ties and security scenario including Chinese aggressive posturing in the South China Sea during Army Chief General M M Naravane’s parleys with the Korean top brass during his three-day day visit to Seoul starting Monday.

The two countries are keen to further explore possibilities to forge joint ventures in defence production in India. Korea of late has emerged as a big supplier of military platforms and weapons to India. Naravane will take stock of these ties with the senior military and civilian leadership in Seoul, officials said here on Monday.

Both nations have a convergence of outlook in the strategic and defence realm. India’s “Act East Policy” finds resonance in the present Republic of Korea administration’s “New Southern Policy”.

The major areas of concern for South Korea are increasing Chinese hegemony in the South China Sea, security of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) due to incidents of piracy and hostilities with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). Seoul considers New Delhi as a stabilising influence in the Indian Ocean region, they said while highlighting the importance of the Army chief’s visit.

Incidentally, the Army Chief’s visit to South Korea comes two weeks after concluding a six-day crucial tour of the United Arab Emirates(UAE) and Saudi Arabia that reflected India’s growing strategic ties with the two influential Gulf nations. It was the first ever visit by an Indian army chief to Saudi Arabia.

Last month, Naravane travelled to Nepal on a three-day visit that had significant diplomatic over tones. In October, the Chief of Army Staff, accompanied by Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla, travelled to Myanmar during which India decided to supply an attack submarine to the Myanmar Navy besides agreeing to further deepen military and defence ties.

Meanwhile, in Seoul, Naravane will meet the country’s minister for national defence, army chief and chairman of joint chiefs of staff. The Army chief will also meet South Korea’s minister of defence acquisition planning administration (DAPA).

THE PIONEER, NEW DELHI 18-12-2020

Calling Bangladesh!

The reopening of the Haldibari-Chilahati rail link is aimed at reducing the diplomatic distance between Delhi and Dhaka

Given the heaving presence of China in the region and its debt-trapping ways with our neighbours, it is important for India to strengthen bilateral relations and invest in mutually beneficial infrastructure than depend on a historicity of ties. While the Narendra Modi Government has been aggressively pursuing the “look East” policy, it has been aiming to make Bangladesh the arrowhead of its diplomacy. This has become all the more important considering that the Sheikh Hasina Government has been equally keen on Chinese investment and developing a transactional relationship with our eastern neighbour and counter-weighting that edge in its relationship with India. So New Delhi has been making efforts to further enhance transport and connectivity between India and Bangladesh and has revived the 55-year-old Haldibari-Chilahati rail link. The neighbours had earlier decided to resurrect the six pre-1965 rail links between the sides which the war had cut off. The other links that are set to be revived between West Bengal with Bangladesh are Petrapole (India)-Benapole (Bangladesh), Gede (India)-Darshana (Bangladesh), Singhabad (India)-Rohanpur (Bangladesh) and Radhikapur (India)-Biorol (Bangladesh). Diplomatically, this eases the trade corridor with Bangladesh, boosting bilateral trade in the region. Strategically and politically, it eases India’s mainland connectivity to the Northeastern States, particularly Assam. The new rail link between Akhaura (Bangladesh) and Agartala, which is being funded by India, is likely to be operational by 2021 end. Both are the fastest growing economies in South Asia, and Bangladesh is expected to graduate from the LDC status to a developing country by 2024. The GDP per capita is also projected to rise there. The more India strides ahead in connectivity, the more it can keep Bangladesh as a buffer against China.

Why do we need Dhaka even more now? On the face of it, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina assured India of respecting the organic nature of historic ties and soothed anxieties over the National Register of Citizens (NRC) exercise in Assam. But by foregrounding economic cooperation — one that spans connectivity, investment, power and infrastructure projects in her home country — she has also redefined the rules of bilateral engagement. The new reality has put us in a competitive slot vis-à-vis China, which has become one of the top trading partners of Bangladesh over the past couple of years. And in a multilateral world, where each nation is negotiating deals most beneficial to it and will not just pay obeisance to history, we can no longer afford to touch a raw nerve. There is a need to further woo Bangladesh, considering its deep discomfort over repeated statements from our Ministers on infiltration, minorities and the NRC. Particularly the idea that all “infiltrators” were “Bangladeshis”, repeatedly uttered in political speeches, has not gone down well among the people there. While many understand the difference between the political necessity of posturing and the diplomatic value, the overtly aggressive Hindutva messaging hasn’t quite sat easy with Bangladesh. So it is incumbent upon India to make Dhaka feel wanted at this juncture. Besides, Bangladesh is a key pillar in Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s neighbourhood diplomacy, what with it being a littoral nation and crucial to our role in the Indian Ocean. China has been quick to tap into the acute shortage of power in Bangladesh and has already taken up two mega power projects, hoping to enhance its presence in the energy market there. And while India is also a player in the power sector, it is difficult for Bangladesh to overlook China given its energy demands. For its part, India is working on joint projects on ports and roadways. If the Modi Government wants to make a success of its ‘Act East’ policy, we must invest meaningfully in our neighbouring nation.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 21-12-2020

India, Vietnam draw three-year road map to upgrade ties

Sandeep Dikshit

India and Vietnam on Monday adopted a “Joint Vision for Peace, Prosperity and People” during an hour-long virtual summit between Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Nguyen Xuan Phuc.

To implement this Vision, a Plan of Action for the period 2021-2023 was also signed between the two Foreign Ministers, which identifies concrete follow up actions, Secretary (East) Riva Ganguly Das said at a media conference after the event.

India and Vietnam also signed seven new agreements in areas, including scientific research, nuclear & renewable energy, petrochemicals, defence and cancer treatment.

In defence cooperation, a key pillar of bilateral ties, both PMs identified defence industry cooperation as a priority with India symbolically handing over a high-speed guard

boat and launching two other vessels manufactured in India.

On Indo-Pacific, they affirmed that a peaceful, stable, secure, free, open, inclusive and rules-based region is in the common interest of all countries, said Das.

They also discussed the keel-laying of seven vessels being manufactured in Vietnam, under the \$ 100 million Indian defence Line of Credit. The two sides signed the “Implementing Arrangement on Defence Industry Cooperation” to build on the pact to ensure confidentiality of defence exchanges inked in 2013 to further defence manufacturing collaboration.

India will extend a grant of \$ 5 million to establish an IT infrastructure at the Army Software Park in Telecommunications University at Nha Trang.

Vietnam has moved closer to the western block during Covid with its Foreign Secretary participating in weekly conversations with his counterparts from the US, India, Japan, Australia, South Korea, Vietnam and New Zealand. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has said the US forces will be reconfigured to counter the Chinese threat to India and Vietnam besides other countries. Vietnam has supported India on Kashmir and its envoy was in the first batch of ambassadors who visited the Valley in January this year.

As both countries will also be together on the UNSC in 2021, the two PMs agreed to actively promote “reformed multilateralism” to make international organisations, including the UN Security Council, more representative and contemporary.

The two leaders also discussed new technology and innovation to deliver good governance, and agreed to work together in peaceful uses of nuclear and space technologies, new developments in ICT, as well as cooperation in start-ups and smart cities.

Vietnam has been the prime beneficiary of some supply chains moving away from China with soaring land rents at industrial parks. It plans to make cryptocurrency and blockchain among its top five priorities and is partnering with advanced countries to participate in the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

As part of their discussion on security cooperation, both PMs also discussed closer engagement in dealing with traditional and non-traditional threats in cyber and maritime domain, terrorism, natural disasters, health security, water security, and transnational crimes.

THE PIONEER, NEW DELHI 22-12-2020

Nepal on the boil

As Oli dissolves House, losing the majority to challengers, it’s time for India to manoeuvre the crisis to its advantage

For some time now, Nepalese Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli has been co-opted by China which has turned the Himalayan frontier State against India, challenging us on redrawing borders and questioning our shared civilisational heritage. And now that he is facing a rebellion in his Nepal Communist Party (NCP), with rival

contenders Pushp Kamal Dahal ‘Prachanda’ and Madhav Nepal now claiming majority support — both nurtured by India for a while — he has done the unthinkable. Cornered and desperate, Oli has dissolved the 275-member House of Representatives — the Lower House of the country’s Parliament. Not only that, he got the President to issue a communiqué on elections in April-May with his Government holding forth in the interim. The move is unconstitutional as the Pratinidhi Sabha has a five-year term and cannot be dissolved earlier. There is no provision that allows the Prime Minister to dissolve it unilaterally. Logically, he would have to face a trust vote by his own party, which would suggest the contender, in this case Prachanda, as Prime Minister for the remaining term. Of course, the matter is pending before Nepal’s Supreme Court. An adverse verdict would mean he will have to resign. If not, he would continue until the summer elections. The dissension in the NCP is not new, with India trying to neutralise a hostile Oli by propping up the other two. But every time China has stepped in to broker a deal and keep Oli in the chair, simply because it wants to step up its offensive against India and keep the borders hot. In fact, China couldn’t have asked for a more servile leader than Oli, who got into a map war with us at its behest to further its expansionist agenda. Beijing has been investing heavily in the infrastructure of the Himalayan nation, making it impossible for even the rival faction to ignore its geo-strategic heft. India has been trying to keep Oli in check and rework bilateral ties on more equitable terms with the Army chief, Gen MM Naravane, visiting in November, followed by Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla. Oli thought that by grandstanding against India, he would have inspired a nationalist tide that would make him an indispensable leader of his party. But not all in his party or the Opposition want to burn bridges with India. Besides, the rival faction is looking for its own political legitimacy. When the NCP was formed in May 2018 by merging the Oli-led Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) and the Prachanda-led Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre), both leaders had agreed to a power-sharing deal under which both would be Prime Minister for two-and-a-half years. But the deal never got ratified and Oli avoided taking it up with the combined general council, relegating it to a no-priority list and heightening anti-India rhetoric. But Prachanda is restless to realise his political ambition than sacrifice it to a manipulated threat perception from India. This could be an opportunity like no other for India to play upon Prachanda’s anxieties and rebuild its relevance in the ensuing power play. Besides, there has also been a resurgence of pro-royalists, who want a return to monarchy, an aspiration that India could smartly play into, using the sentiment for a Hindu kingdom to strengthen ties with the Narendra Modi Government. Not that Nepal’s monarchy was anti-China but at the moment a swell of opinion in its favour could give India a certain comfort level and help it bargain with both Oli and Prachanda.

Having been a Hindu kingdom and given its contiguity to India, Nepal has had a commonality of interests, which has been one of the reasons for the open borders between both countries. But Oli has been putting up cultural barriers, and is determined to delink any interdependent association with India. He is decidedly hawkish about China, willing to be its vassal State. In fact, China has upped its cultural diplomacy, too, in Nepal, helping it rebuild old temple complexes and shrines that were damaged in the earthquake of 2015. Oli’s latest tirade against India questions Indian claims around the Lipulekh Pass based on varied interpretations of the British-era maps. Though there is a long history of both nations making claims and counterclaims over this area, according to a 1954 treaty signed between them and China, Lipulekh Pass is very much an Indian gateway. Although the new road near it, built by New Delhi to facilitate pilgrim traffic to Kailash Mansarovar, is now one of the quickest links between Delhi and the Tibetan plateau, China, too, has not objected to it. In fact, it recognised India’s sovereignty by agreeing to expand trade through the Pass. India’s over-dependence on historical, spiritual and geographical connect as a leitmotif of diplomacy is being tested severely. And though we are investing in bilateral relations on more favourable terms and pushing COVID-19 aid, we can’t beat the Chinese, who make up 90 per cent of Nepal’s Foreign Direct Investment.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 30-12-2020

India to open three new embassies

Tribune News Service

Cabinet approves missions in Estonia, Paraguay and Dominican Republic; to open in 2021

The Union Cabinet on Wednesday approved the opening of three missions in Estonia, Paraguay and Dominican Republic in 2021.

The opening of the Indian Missions in these countries will help expand India’s diplomatic footprint, deepen political relations, enable growth of bilateral trade, investment and economic engagements, facilitate stronger people-to-people contacts, bolster political outreach in multilateral fora and help garner support for India’s foreign policy objectives, said an official press release

Indian missions in these countries will also better assist the Indian community and protect their interests, it added.

"The decision to open these new Indian Missions is a forward-looking step in pursuit of our national priority of growth and development or ‘Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas’."

"Enhancement of India’s diplomatic presence will provide market access for Indian companies and bolster Indian exports of goods and services. This would have a direct impact in augmenting domestic production and employment in line with our goal of a self-reliant India or ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat’," added the release.

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 24-12-2020

President Ghani Meets US Acting Secretary of Defense in Kabul

(TOLO NEWS)

KABUL - President Ashraf Ghani met with US acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller at the Presidential Palace in Kabul on Tuesday afternoon, the Palace said.

In the meeting, President Ghani said the Afghan govt has taken practical steps for peace and that the other side should also show its clear intentions in this respect, the Presidential Palace said.

The Presidential Palace's spokesman Sediq Sediqqi in a tweet said that President Ghani and Miller discussed the Afghan peace process, the security situation in Afghanistan and in the region, and the continued support for Afghan forces.

Miller's trip comes as American troops are withdrawing from Afghanistan after US President Donald Trump last month ordered the number of US forces to be approximately halved to 2,500 by January 15, five days before he leaves office.

The US and Taliban have signed an agreement in Doha, Qatar, in February this year that would see the withdrawal of all US forces from Afghanistan by May 2021 if the Taliban met certain conditions including a reduction in violence leading to a ceasefire and peace talks with the Afghan government.

Last week, Mark Milley, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, held unannounced talks with the Taliban peace negotiators in Doha, capital of Qatar, to urge a reduction in violence across Afghanistan, the AP reported.

Gen. Milley met for about two hours with the Taliban negotiators before he flew to Kabul to discuss the peace process with President Ghani, the report said.

"The most important part of the discussions that I had with both the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan was the need for an immediate reduction in violence," Milley told three reporters, including one from the AP, who accompanied him to Qatar and Afghanistan. "Everything else hinges on that."

Under ground rules set by Milley for security reasons, the journalists traveling with him agreed not to report on either set of talks until he had departed the region, according to the report.

It was Milley's second unannounced meeting with the Taliban's negotiating team; the first, in June, also in Doha, had not been reported until now, said the AP.

In Kabul, Milley met President Ghani and "Both sides expressed their concerns over the escalation of violence in Afghanistan and discussed the Afghan peace process and the immediate need for a ceasefire," Presidential Palace said.

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 27-12-2020

Reaction to Baradar's Trip to Pakistan

With Mullah Baradar's presence among a group of his supporters in Karachi, Pakistan – where according to him all decisions about the peace process were being finalized

in consultation with the Taliban leadership and cleric council – Afghan officials showed reaction. On a video released on social media, Baradar said the Taliban leadership existed in Pakistan.

Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs said the presence of the Taliban leaders and their fighters in Pakistan was a "clear violation of Afghanistan's national sovereignty."

Afghanistan and Pakistan had high-level exchanges and Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan traveled to Kabul last month vowing to put his weight behind the Afghan peace process. Moreover, when the Taliban delegation led by Baradar visited earlier, Khan made a phone call to President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani and reiterated his support to the talks. On both occasions, Kabul appreciated the support of the Khan administration and the bonhomie between the two sides grew stronger.

Nonetheless, Baradar's latest trip to Pakistan for meeting the Taliban leaders and fighters and confessing the existence of their councils there, Afghan officials doubted Pakistan's goodwill. As a result, Ministry of Foreign Affairs said the presence of the Taliban leaders and rank and file in Pakistan would continue the ongoing crisis and instability in the region and would challenge the efforts to ensure sustainable peace in the country. It called on Islamabad to prevent insurgents from using its territory against Afghanistan adding that closing their safe havens was significant for a peaceful end to the crisis in the country.

Likewise, first vice president Amrullah Saleh said on a tweet, "Mullah Baradar did three things in Karachi. He visited the wounded Talib terrorists at a government hospital who are there without any visa, went to a training facility to inspire the terror cadets and thanked the government of Pakistan for generous support to the Talibs to this point."

Afghan officials and global stakeholders have no doubt about Islamabad's strong leverage on the Taliban leadership and, therefore, believe that Pakistan could play a critical role in the Afghan peace process. Kabul had constantly urged Pakistan to engage constructively in the process and pressure the Taliban leadership to declare ceasefire.

Revealing Taliban's sanctuaries in Pakistan in the current critical time is likely to harm the emerging trust between Kabul and Islamabad. If Pakistan seek to support the intra-Afghan dialogue, as it has reiterated so, it has to push the Taliban leadership to reach a peace deal with the Ghani administration and decrease the level of their violence. Islamabad had better close Taliban's council on its soil and do not harbor their fighters.

The existence of the Taliban leadership and councils in Pakistan, based on the released video and Baradar's confession, will trigger public distrust in Pakistan. For instance, Afghan social media actors also showed reaction to the released video showing Baradar's presence among his supporters and called Pakistan their "home".

As a result of Afghan-Pak high-level exchanges and Islamabad's reiteration of its support to the Afghan peace process, a sense of hope emerged among the public and

Afghan officials. With this in mind, Pakistan should support the talks. In other words, if Taliban's councils and leadership exist in Pakistan, they will be effective tools for pressuring the Taliban. Islamabad should use this leverage to nudge the Taliban to reduce violence and reach peace agreement with the Afghan republic negotiating team.

It is important to note that both peace process and the Afghan-Pak relations are fragile and at critical points. Pakistan is a heavyweight stakeholder in the Afghan peace process and has strong leverage on the Taliban. With this in mind, Islamabad has to use its leverage constructively so that it could prove its goodwill not only to Afghanistan but to the world.

Afghan officials seek not to reveal their reservations or have their say against Islamabad turning a blind eye to some facts so that the mutual relations do not be soured and Pakistan support the talks. On its part, Pakistan should play a constructive role and cement the mutual trust.

Considering the fragility of peace process, Pakistan in particular and regional and global stakeholders in general have to give their all-out support to the intra-Afghan dialogue so that sustainable peace and stability come to Afghanistan, which will be crucial to regional peace. On the contrary, a troubled political situation in Afghanistan is likely to threaten regional peace and stability.

Meanwhile, since the Taliban leadership is negotiating with the Ghani administration to reach a peaceful settlement, it must not capitalize on its sanctuaries outside the country. So it has to decrease the level of their violence against Afghan state and nation so that talks do not be derailed.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 16-12-2020

‘Take Bangladesh-South Korea relationship to new heights’ Say speakers at webinar

Diplomatic Correspondent

Since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1973, Korea and Bangladesh have strengthened cooperation in various areas. Photo: Collected

Bangladesh and South Korea want to take their bilateral relationship to new heights – going beyond textile to ICT, energy, blue economy, climate change and infrastructure development, said diplomats and academicians, as the two countries celebrate 47th year of diplomatic relationship on December 18.

They suggested going for free trade agreement (FTA) quickly, as Bangladesh is on track to graduate from least developed country (LDC) category by 2024, when duty-free facilities could be withdrawn.

Emphasising the cordial relationship between Bangladesh and Korea, Korean Ambassador to Bangladesh Lee Jang-Keun, at a webinar, said the relationship needs to be elevated to new heights.

The event "Bangladesh-Republic of Korea: The 47th Anniversary of Diplomatic Ties" was jointly organised by the South Korean Embassy in Dhaka and the South Asian

Institute of Policy and Governance (SIPG) of North South University (NSU) yesterday.

Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen said Bangladesh is rapidly growing and becoming a lucrative investment destination.

Khondker Talha, director general of Bangladesh Foreign Ministry's East-Asia wing, proposed establishment of a human resources development centre, where Bangladeshis can receive advanced technical skills for placement in Korea or Bangladesh.

Shin Dong Woo, director at South Korea's foreign ministry (Asia and Pacific Division 2), said Korean companies have interests but they sometimes question about red tape, unknown risks and business environment before considering investment in Bangladesh.

Youngone Corporation Chairperson Ki-hak Sung said Youngone is the first Korean company that set up business in Bangladesh about four decades back, and had an excellent experience throughout the period.

Prof Choe Wongi, head of Center for ASEAN-Indian Studies in Korea, said Korea has been too focused in East-Asian countries, but gradually it is moving to ASEAN and South Asia. Over the years, about 1,000 Korean companies relocated to Vietnam from China. In South Asia, Bangladesh is a priority country after India.

NSU Vice Chancellor Prof Atiqul Islam said his university is eager to exchange students with Korean universities and train graduates to be employable in Korea.

Shahidul Haque, former foreign secretary and senior fellow at SIPG, moderated the discussion, also addressed by Bangladesh Ambassador to Korea Abida Islam, Prof Delwar Hossain of Dhaka University, and Prof Abdul Hannan Chowdhury and Prof Tawfique M Haque of NSU.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 19-12-2020

Bangladesh and India's relations must go to the next level

Stumbling blocks in the friendship have to be removed

As Bangladesh approaches its 50th year and observes the birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and Bangladesh-India celebrate 50 years of their friendship, the virtual summit between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Prime Minister Narendra Modi bears special significance. Many of the commitments made anticipate further strengthening of this close friendship. This includes India's promise to promptly deliver to Bangladesh the Covid-19 vaccines it is producing and the commitment to strengthen bilateral and regional cooperation on trade and connectivity, especially by removing non-tariff barriers. Thus relations between the two countries, especially at the political level, are very amicable and positive. There are, however, certain issues that stand in the way of taking this friendship, which has great strategic significance to both countries, to a deeper level of trust, mutual understanding and cooperation.

Bangladesh is anxiously waiting for certain crucial issues to be resolved. PM Sheikh Hasina has sought early signing of the interim agreement on Teesta water sharing that had

been agreed upon a long nine years ago. Although PM Modi has expressed India's sincere commitment to address this, the people of Bangladesh would like to see a concrete resolving of this issue as quickly as possible.

There are also some trade-related thorns in the economic relationship of the two countries that need to be removed. We would, for instance, like to see the anti-dumping tax on jute products removed. The implementation of the Indian Line of Credit to Bangladesh aimed at boosting infrastructural development, among other things, has been delayed due to bureaucratic hurdles that need to be addressed. The condition of around 85 percent of materials to be sourced from India for infrastructural projects (which has been relaxed in special cases) needs to be revised as it may hurt Bangladeshi industries, such as those producing cement and rods. What is the logic of sourcing materials from India when they are abundantly produced in Bangladesh?

We are also less than happy with India's role, or lack thereof, in the Rohingya refugee repatriation that Bangladesh has been burdened with. A more active role is sought from India, one that will be prioritised over its economic interests in Myanmar. The continuous border killings of Bangladeshi nationals by BSF despite India repeatedly promising to address this issue, has been cause of great disappointment for Bangladesh. A more sincere effort is needed from the Indian side to put a stop to these killings.

At this important juncture of their relations, the most important element is trust and sincerity. India must show greater understanding towards Bangladesh by letting go of its unnecessary prickliness regarding Bangladesh's relations with China. Bangladesh, in its endeavour to develop and progress, will continue to reach out to other countries as it has to Japan, the US, China and the European countries. It will do so for its own interests. This in no way affects its close ties with India with which it shares a most important and emotional history—our Liberation War. Therefore, India must be rest assured that Bangladesh will not do anything that will in any way compromise India's security concerns.

We hope that this auspicious milestone of relations between the two countries will usher in a significantly more meaningful height of mutual cooperation by removing all the stumbling blocks that keep coming in the way. Most decidedly, the ball is in India's court.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 23-12-2020
**PM seeks Turkey's involvement in
 Rohingya repatriation**

Observer Online Desk

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Wednesday sought Turkey's involvement in ensuring the return of forcibly-displaced Myanmar citizens from Bangladesh to their homeland.

Sheikh Hasina made the request when visiting Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu met her at her official residence Ganobhaban, reports UNB.

Deputy Press Secretary to the Prime Minister Hasan Jahid Tusher briefed reporters after the meeting.

The Prime Minister also sought more Turkish investment in Bangladesh's special economic zones and referred to the vast regional market due to its geopolitical position and the local market.

She said Bangladesh offers a huge market as the country is situated at the centre of the South Asia and South-East Asia. "Both the countries will be benefited from this investment."

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu expressed his country's keen interest to strengthen bilateral relations with Bangladesh saying that Turkey gives value to the bilateral relations with Bangladesh.

He also said his country will do whatever is needed to strengthen the bilateral trade.

The Turkish Foreign Minister informed that his country is investing in Bangladesh in all sectors from energy to tourism.

Sheikh Hasina thanked Turkey for repairing Bangladesh's Naval warship 'Bijoy', which was damaged in a devastating blast in Beirut, the capital of Lebanon.

She reiterated the invitation to the Turkish President.

Mevlut Cavusoglu said the Turkish President might visit Bangladesh in March, the golden jubilee month of Bangladesh's Independence, if the coronavirus situation improves.

He thanked the Prime Minister for inviting his President to visit Bangladesh.

The Turkish Foreign Minister highly appreciated the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the development of Bangladesh.

He also praised the steps taken by the government to face the Covid-19 pandemic.

Principal secretary Dr Ahmad Kaikaus and Turkish Ambassador to Bangladesh Mustafa Osman Turan were also present.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 29-12-2020
The Hasina–Modi December summit
Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan ndc, psc (Retd)

We are on the cusp of our 50th anniversary. Come March 26, 2021, it will be 50 years since Bangladesh had declared its Independence. We restate our gratefulness to our martyrs and the freedom fighters for their sacrifices. It is also fitting to recognise the contribution of India for its assistance, without whose help it might have taken longer than nine months to throw the Pakistan Army off our soil. Over the last 50 years, Bangladesh's primary preoccupation in the diplomatic sphere has been to chart a course for a harmonious coexistence with India, which for the greater part of our independent existence has been our "only neighbour" since Bangladesh had hardly bothered to look towards its east, at Myanmar, till the Rohingya problem became a very serious security issue for Bangladesh. If foreign relationships are predicated on three concentric rings, each defining the sphere of our interests, the first two of those have been dominated, and to some extent dictated, by India.

It has been 49 years since India recognised Bangladesh on December 6, 1971, the second country do so after Bhutan, ten days before the surrender of the Pakistanis to the joint Bangladesh-India command. And it is worth taking a look at how the bilateral relationship has panned out in these years. Perhaps a look at the recent virtual summit between the two prime ministers on December 17, and at the compact reached between the two countries, would be a good starting point to examine the real state of Bangladesh-India relations. And one should mention that official and public perceptions of Bangladesh-India relations are different.

The Bangladesh-India relationship has seen many peaks and troughs in the last five decades. The peaks and troughs were directly related to whether it was the Awami League or BNP that was in power. It must be mentioned that the course of the foreign policy of the nascent state, both in terms of regional and international relationships, was defined by Bangabandhu himself. He made no secret of his intention to acquire for Bangladesh as much diplomatic space for manoeuvre as necessary by a sovereign and self-respecting nation. He asserted firmly the multiple identities of Bangladesh, which couldn't have been lost on those at home and abroad who wanted Bangladesh to be seen as only a singular construct of nationhood. He was cut out in the mould of an idealist—principles rather than realism dominated his foreign policy outlook.

Those who have followed the course of the Bangladesh-India relationship closely must not have failed to notice in recent times the oft reiteration of the excellent state of the relationship between the two countries. Constant restating of the "extraordinary" relationship, which is supposed to be on a very even keel, may convey a different impression to the more keen observers.

Indeed, in spite of the official pronouncements, our relationship had come under a degree of strain in recent times. And that was induced by both the internal and external policies of India. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), followed immediately by the National Register of Citizenship or NRC 2019, was a major source of concern for Bangladesh. Although our official position is that these are internal matters of India, it nonetheless created flutters in the official circles. The statement of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on the CAA that, "We do not understand why they [the Indian government] did it, it was not necessary," does indeed express the country's concerns about the likely deleterious consequences of the CAA on Bangladesh. The scurrilous and snide comments about Bangladeshis by very senior BJP leaders did not help either.

Strain was also induced by Bangladesh's position on the Belt and Road Initiative and the strategic implication of China's enlarged footprint on South Asia, and indeed on a large swathe of the globe. Bangladesh's disinclination to join the US led Indo-Pacific bandwagon to counter China's influence demonstrated its resolve to not get involved in an arrangement that may well take the character of a security organisation eventually.

But nothing of these was reflected, understandably, in the 39-point joint statement released after the Hasina-Modi virtual summit, which contained platitudes and reiterations of intent and the excellent state of the mutual relationship thriving in multitude areas of cooperation. There were many substantive issues of permanent interest to both countries that have been mentioned in the document, such as Border Management and Security Cooperation (one is not sure whether the issue of terrorism really merits inclusion under this issue), and Trade Partnership for Growth (but restrictions remain on import of certain essential items from India—on December 22, Bangladesh demanded the withdrawal of a ban on seed imports from India to boost bilateral cooperation in the agricultural sector). Then there is the most strategically important issue for India, which has been more than adequately met by Bangladesh—Connectivity for Prosperity. In this regard, it appears that while there have been ample extensions of connectivity between the Indian mainland and its North-East through the Bangladesh-India connectivity programme, sub-regional connectivity is yet to come to full fruition, and the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) initiative is still waiting to be operationalised. And one would hope that Bangladesh would get the appropriate dividends it deserves by allowing the use of its facilities for transit. Bangladesh happens to be India's biggest trade partner in South Asia and we believe that not only should Bangladesh expand its export basket, but India should also liberalise its import policy vis a vis Bangladesh to offset the huge balance of trade deficit.

As far as Cooperation in Water Resources, Power and Energy is concerned, while the two leaders underscored the need for an early conclusion of the Framework of Interim Agreement on sharing of waters of six joint rivers, namely, Manu, Muhuri, Khowai, Gumti, Dharla and Dudhkumar, sharing of the Teesta waters was predictably absent. This is what the Bangladesh foreign minister had to say to The Daily Star on the question of Teesta—"You know what the barriers to signing the Teesta water-sharing agreement are. The Indian government, multiple times, has promised that they would sign the agreement after solving their internal disputes over the issue. So, there is no reason to create an embarrassing situation by raising this question repeatedly. Rather, you should pose this question to the government and media of West Bengal." So the Teesta remains on the list of promises. And the centre in India has found a good excuse in Mamata Banerjee's intransigence to shelve the Teesta water issue for the time being.

There was a single paragraph in the joint statement on forcibly displaced persons from the Rakhine state of Myanmar, but India's expressed position on the issue is in contrast to their demonstrated position on it. What other impression shall we form when India consistently abstains from voting on the Rohingya issue at the UN?

Since the time Awami League returned to power in 2009, every one of India's security and strategic concerns has been answered by Bangladesh promptly and positively. India's Bangladesh locked North-East is no longer so. Mutual cooperation in dealing with extremism and

terrorism has paid dividends. But two of Bangladesh's most pressing concerns remain to be adequately addressed—Teesta water sharing and border killings (which merits a separate article). Thus, the question we are compelled to ask is, will these issues be satisfactorily addressed, and soon?

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 31-12-2020
Bangladesh and China: An alliance for prosperity
Farhat Ahmed

The relationship between China and Bangladesh is very amiable when it comes to joint ventures to construct mammoth infrastructures. The Chinese government and many leading construction companies in China have shown genuine interest in cooperating with Bangladesh to attain better social developments by establishing significant infrastructures. Over the past decade, numerous mega projects, bridges, and elevated roadways have been constructed with the help of the advanced construction strategies and skills of Chinese firms. Bangladesh has largely appreciated the bilateral unity and never stepped back from planning similar steps ahead for the future.

The almost 50 years of diplomatic relations between the two states have resulted in countless trades and investments, which remain memorable in the history for both. The transportation, energy, electricity, technology, and many more sectors in Bangladesh have been boosted through its fruitful partnership with China. As the social development gained pace, the overall economic growth also took off for the population of Bangladesh. Among the core concepts for such development in Bangladesh are the Digital Bangladesh - Vision 2021 and Vision 2040, two wide-scale national projects that require extensive fueling in technology and engineering. Hence, Bangladesh sincerely expects its allies to be consistent by its side. And China is one of Bangladesh's major allies in this journey.

The Bangabandhu International Conference Center, Payra 2x660 MW Coal-fired Power Plant, the IV tier National Data Center and many more projects have been made successful under partnerships between China and Bangladesh. The recent addition to this has been the Padma Multipurpose Bridge and Padma Bridge Rail Link Project (PBRLP), which carries a special emotion to all the Bangladeshi citizens. The China Railway Group Ltd (known as CREC) has been one substantial partner to Bangladesh's large railway projects for a long time. CREC is highly reputed in the global industry because of its efficiency, capability, and commitment. CREC is constructing the gigantic Padma Bridge rail-road, the near 170 km long line, which was envisioned to be Bangladesh's pathway to the next level as a state. Estimated to be over USD 3 billion, the project has seen tremendous progress so far, credited to CREC's flawless design and work-strategies. Recently they have also constructed a sleeper factory at Bhanga to supply sleepers for the PBRLP.

Another exceptional project that is currently underway in Bangladesh is the Multi-lane Road Tunnel Project under the Karnaphuli River in Chattogram. This intricate project has also been trusted in the hands of a reputed Chinese construction firm. Already ahead of schedule, once the construction of the tunnel project is complete, it is projected to become integral for the BCIM Economic Corridor and the BRI. This very first underwater tunnel of South Asia will boost the productivity of the Chattogram port.

CREC has an over 120-years' legacy of brilliance in infrastructure construction, industrial manufacturing, research, and development. The government of Bangladesh trusted this company based on their previous records, and CREC kept their end every time. Currently, the organization is active in more than 90 countries across the world. Chinese organizations like CREC have mostly been appraised worldwide for their service quality excellence and timeliness.

Bangladesh values such partners on its way to attaining the prime prestige of a developed country. The rise to the top for any nation is a gradual process, which involves friends and allies beyond financial interests. And China has been a perfect ally in this regard for Bangladesh.

SPOTLIGHT, KATHMANDU 16-12-2020
Indian Foreign Secretary Visit Restoring Trust

Keshab Poudel

After completing his visit to Nepal, Harsh Vardhan Shringla, Indian Foreign Secretary, has succeeded to restore the trust between the people of two countries

From his first statement delivered at Tribhuvan International Airport VIP lounge to his last statement delivered at a talk program and his remarks in Gorkha, Indian foreign secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla, a highly qualified and capable professional cadre of Indian Foreign Service, did not spare any time while winning the heart and mind of the people.

With a remark in Nepali at Tribhuvan International Airport's VIP Lounge saying that he feels like coming home, secretary Shringla started his first official visit winning the heart and mind of people. Native Nepali made a psychological edge over the mind of people.

His praiseworthy remarks on the role of Prithivi Narayan Shah at his birthplace Gorkha was another gesture of respecting Nepal's unification. He paid respect to Prithvi Narayan Shah, founder of modern Nepal who launched the unification motion to make Nepal original Hindustan, for his contribution to expanding the bravery of Gorkha all over the world including India. This was another soft point that touched the sentiments of Nepalis.

Foreign Secretary Shringla traveled to Gorkha and inaugurated three schools constructed with Indian reconstruction assistance. Those include Shree Mahalaxmi, Shree Ratnalaxmi and Shree Tara Secondary Schools. During the inaugural statement, foreign secretary

Shringla expressed his regards to the founder of modern Nepal.

Frustrated by the role of mainstream political leaders, who denounced and destroyed the statue of Shaha, the Indian foreign secretary's statement revitalized the minds of the common people.

Not seen in the last few years, Indian foreign secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla's approach was different although policy remained the same. He reached to the common people showing the proximity of language. He has made efforts to revive and restore people's traditional faith in India. Although one visit cannot make many differences, this visit has opened up to find out common interest and common civilization and culture.

Handled by the professional hands of Nepal's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and secretary Bharat Raj Paudyal, the visit of the foreign secretary of India set a new tone in the relations between the two countries.

Even political leaders including prime minister K.P. Sharma Oli and main opposition leader Sher Bahadur Deuba, who passed the new map in haste last time, came with different tones stressing the need to have a dialogue to settle all the bilateral problems.

As they have already passed the map including a disputed portion of territory, their recent tone for dialogue has no meaning. Bypassing the map unilaterally and issuing officially, Nepal has closed the door. The question now is will they amend the map again in case of the settlement?

In 2015, Nepal promulgated the new constitution in haste discarding the request of India. This created distrust between the two neighbors.

Although the visit of Indian Army Chief General Manoj Mukund Naravane, had helped to ease some misunderstanding between the two countries, foreign secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla has further opened a new link to Nepal.

Issued following the bilateral secretary-level meeting led by foreign secretary of Nepal Paudyal, Indian foreign secretary's official statement mentioned Nepal's foreign ministry for arranging a successful visit.

People To People Relations

Foreign Secretary of India Shringla said that people to people linkages between India and Nepal are so powerful that people in the government only complement these.

Delivering a distinguished lecture at a program organized by the Asian Institute of Diplomacy and International Affairs (AIDA) in Kathmandu, Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla laid out the foundational multi-dimensional strength of the ties between the two countries and the vision for taking it forward.

"The people-to-people linkages are so strong and so powerful that quite frankly we in government only complement these," he said while addressing a limited gathering of leading civil society members on India-Nepal relations at an event hosted by AIDA

According to him, the relations between the two neighbors rest on four pillars - development cooperation, stronger connectivity, expanded infrastructure and economic

projects, and easier and enhanced access to educational opportunities in India for the young people of Nepal.

Dr. Madan K Bhattarai, Former foreign Secretary, delivered opening remarks. Similarly, the chairperson of AIDA Sunil KC delivered opening remarks thanking foreign secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla addressing the lecture program.

Religious Link

In his official visit, the Indian Army Chief visited Pashupatinath Temple and Kumari Temple, two important Hindu temples of Nepal showing common connections. Inaugurating the monastery, Indian foreign secretary Shringla has touched on other areas of commonality.

Thriving in a common civilization, Nepal and India share common religion and culture. "Given our genetic profiles, what works for India is likely to work for Nepal as well. Together we will recover from the pandemic and together we will protect our people," he said.

In his last engagement before leaving Nepal that also signifies the diverse bilateral development and cultural cooperation, Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla virtually inaugurated the Tashop (Tare) Gompa monastery constructed at Shree Kharka village in Manang district.

Visiting the places like Gorkha, the Kingdom of the founder of Nepal Prithvi Narayan Shaha and inaugurating the monastery in Manang and speaking in the Nepali language in all the places, the foreign secretary has made efforts to revive India's deep connection with Nepal. However, given the present set of rulers without any conviction on Nepal's civilization, culture and history, there is the need for a long march.

Indian Foreign secretary conveyed enough of a message to Nepal with his sober and soft tone. However, it remains to be seen how Nepal's current political leadership including the ruling NCP and Opposition Nepali Congress who have been exploiting civilization-based Nepal-India relations for individual gain and loss handle the new scenario

THE KATHMANDU POST, KATHMANDU 27-12-2020

Beijing is sending a senior party leader to Nepal as political crisis unfolds

Anil Giri

Guo Yenzhou, a vice-minister in the Chinese Communist Party, is arriving today, days after the Nepal Communist Party split following the House dissolution by Prime Minister Oli.

Guo Yezhou, Vice-minister of the International Department of the Communist Party of China. Reuters In May this year, when the wrangling within the Nepal Communist Party was at its peak, Chinese Ambassador Hou Yanqi visited the ruling party's top brass and President Bidya Devi Bhandari.

There was a temporary truce in the party.

Again in July, Hou had to do the rounds as the bitter infighting within the party erupted once again.

Subsequently, matters settled down once again.

But Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's decision to dissolve the House of Representatives on Sunday, knowing well

enough that it could lead to a split in the party, seems to have caught Hou and her political masters in Beijing by surprise.

Beijing is now sending a senior Chinese Communist Party leader to Kathmandu.

Guo Yezhou, a vice-minister of the International Department of the Chinese Communist Party, is arriving in Kathmandu on Sunday, according to at least two Nepal Communist Party leaders. He is leading a four-member team to Nepal for a four-day visit, according to sources in both factions of the Nepal Communist Party.

Bishnu Rijal, deputy head of the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Nepal Communist Party (Dahal-Nepal faction), confirmed to the Post that the Chinese had communicated about Gou's visit to Kathmandu.

"I don't have much detail to share with you at this point of time," said Rijal.

The Chinese leadership, observers say, made a lot of efforts to bring the then CPN-UML and Maoist Centre together so as to form the Nepal Communist Party, and their interest to keep their unity intact continues.

"They have invested hugely in Nepal and are competing with India so their interest is growing," said Dinesh Bhattarai, a former ambassador who served as foreign relations adviser to prime ministers Sher Bahadur Deuba and Sushil Koirala. "Now, with the sudden political changes in Kathmandu, they must be concerned."

After a gap of almost a year, Delhi, with which Oli's relations had soured over border issues, in October suddenly began to show its renewed interest in Nepal.

The absence of official exchanges between Nepal and India ended after Delhi sent the chief of the Research & Analysis Wing, Samant Goel, to Kathmandu. The visit was followed by visits by Manoj Mukund Naravane, the chief of the Indian Army, and Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla in November.

Delhi broke the ice with Kathmandu days before it hosted US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Pompeo and US Defence Chief Mark Esper's visit was aimed at strengthening strategic ties in the face of growing Chinese influence in the region.

Concerns grew in China.

Beijing decided to rush its Defence Minister Wei Fenghe to Nepal on November 29, two days after Indian foreign secretary concluded his visit. But an advance team from China had already done the rounds among the Nepal Communist Party leadership.

A Nepal Communist Party leader admits that the larger Chinese interest in Nepal is also in the context of India's influence in the country.

"The Chinese were concerned about a series of visits from India in the past few months," a Standing Committee member who is aware of the Chinese position on Nepal told the Post. "But [Oli's] decision to dissolve the House seems to have caught the Chinese unawares."

Even though the Chinese concerns were there about the infighting in the Nepal Communist Party, by dissolving the House on Sunday, Oli dropped a bombshell.

The House dissolution had an immediate impact on the party.

On Tuesday evening, hours after the party virtually split, Chinese Ambassador Hou called on President Bhandari.

On Thursday, Hou met with Dahal and then on Friday, she held talks with Madhav Nepal. She also held meetings with Krishna Bahadur Mahara, the former Speaker of the House of Representatives and a confidant of Dahal, and Barsha Man Pun, another Dahal ally and energy minister until he resigned in protest against the House dissolution on Sunday.

"Besides other matters, she inquired about recent developments in our party and wanted to know whether there was any chance of reconciliation [in our party]," Pun told the Post. "She was also interested to know if Chinese investment in Nepal would suffer in the changed scenario."

Chinese investments include the construction of an international airport in Pokhara, which is on track, and the second phase of Ring Road expansion in Kathmandu is also moving ahead, according to Finance Ministry officials.

"Due to the Covid pandemic, some China-funded projects with investment by the Chinese private sector were hit hard but overall progress is not bad," said a Finance Ministry official on condition of anonymity.

China has its own security concerns and it wanted to see political stability and a stable government in Nepal, according to observers.

"The Chinese are concerned about the Nepal Communist Party, chances of party unity in the future," Sundar Nath Bhattarai, chairman of China Study Center, told the Post. "Any changes or political turmoil can easily be cause for concern for Being as it has its own security interests."

Despite having relations with Kathmandu for the last six decades, Beijing has never been as visible as of late, especially since the Nepal Communist Party government was installed nearly three years ago.

The Nepal Communist Party and the Chinese Communist Party had increased engagements. In September last year, a month ahead of Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Kathmandu, the Nepal Communist Party had even organised a two-day symposium on Xi Jinping Thought. Ambassador Hou too had suddenly increased her meetings with Nepali communist leaders.

"By their very nature, the Chinese were not involved in micro-management of Nepali politics like the Indians," said former ambassador Bhattarai. "They were against this split. They thought there would be some give and take between the Nepal Communist Party leadership but that did not happen. So they must be unhappy."

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 18-12-2020

UNGA adopts Pakistan-sponsored resolution on self-determination

Anwar Iqbal

UNITED NATIONS: The United Nations General Assembly has approved a Pakistan-sponsored resolution

that reaffirms the right to self-determination for peoples subjected to colonial, foreign and alien occupation.

The 193-member body adopted the resolution by consensus on Wednesday afternoon when it also considered other human rights issues.

The resolution — “Universal realisation of the right of peoples to self-determination” — clearly stating that self-determination is a fundamental right of all peoples — including those under colonial, foreign and alien domination.

The resolution, which was co-sponsored by 71 countries, observed that “self-determination is a fundamental condition for the guarantee and observance of human rights”.

Akram says the world body reaffirmed Islamabad’s legal, political and moral case in support of Kashmiris

Declaring its firm opposition to foreign military intervention, aggression and occupation, the Assembly called on “those States responsible to cease immediately their military intervention in and occupation of foreign countries and territories”.

The world body also “deplored the plight of millions of refugees and displaced persons who have been uprooted as a result of such acts and reaffirmed their right to return”.

Pakistan’s UN Ambassador Munir Akram said that by adopting Pakistan’s resolution, the General Assembly had “reaffirmed our legal, political and moral case in support of all peoples, including the Kashmiri people, to struggle for self-determination against foreign occupation by all means available to them”.

The text of the resolution was recommended last month by the General Assembly’s Third Committee, which deals with social, humanitarian and cultural issues. While taking up a report on “Social development”, the assembly also “stressed the importance of removing obstacles to realizing the right to self-determination”.

By a recorded vote of 168 in favour to five against with 10 abstentions, the Assembly then adopted draft resolution II — “The right of the Palestinian people to self-determination.” The resolution reaffirms the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, including to their independent State of Palestine.

It urged all states and specialised UN agencies to continue to assist Palestinians in the early realisation of this right.

The United States, Israel, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia and Nauru voted against the resolution.

Ambassador Akram said the resolution on self-determination had empowered legitimate freedom movements and had also renewed international commitment to help those living under occupation and subjugation. Pakistan, he said, would continue to speak up for all peoples who were suffering under foreign occupation. “This has been a cornerstone of our foreign policy and we are proud to be a voice of the voiceless,” he added.

The General Assembly also proclaimed Aug 31 as the International Day for People of African Descent to “promote greater recognition and respect for the diverse

heritage, culture and contribution of people of African descent to the development of societies”.

The Assembly deferred action on two draft resolutions: “Situation of human rights of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar”, and “a global call for concrete action for the elimination of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance”. The resolutions would be reviewed after budgetary considerations.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 19-12-2020

Knowing India’s intent, can we name its partners too?

By Aamir Ghauri

Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi flew into Dubai on Thursday reportedly carrying a message from Prime Minister Imran Khan. And as the world goes about diplomacy these days, a few tweets followed après his meetings with the Emirati leaders stating furthering of bilateral relations and welfare of Pakistani diaspora in the sheikhdom were the main agenda items.

Mentioning of good ‘brotherly or historic’ relations have been often-parroted shibboleths employed by the custodians of the erstwhile Hotel Shahrzad in Islamabad. Why abandoning the jargon of the bygone decades remains too difficult for the Pakistani practitioners of modern day diplomacy beats an ordinary observer. But lets believe our Cambridge-educated chief diplomat for now as he expects a rethink by UAE on the visas issue and hopes the Emirates would reverse its decision about including Pakistan into the list of countries whose citizens were disallowed travel to UAE for work or pleasure.

Why Pakistan was added to the list of 13 countries mostly Muslim by the cornucopious Gulf state remains troubling nonetheless. One can understand or argue why Afghanistan, Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Kenya, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey or Yemen made the list. But Pakistan? Is Islamabad being tested for attempting a half-independent foreign policy? Is Pakistan being arm-twisted into a situation where it must take an unpalatable diplomatic decision regarding the emerging geopolitical scenario in the Middle East? Whatever the case may be, Pakistan should telling its people half-truths – that the UAE action was necessitated because of Covid-19 pandemic. Word coming out of Abu Dhabi put forward ‘security reason’ for the downing the visa facility.

Stopping Pakistanis from visiting or applying for work in the former Trucial state would have seriously negative implications for Pakistan. The 1.5 million Pakistanis living and working in UAE remit a sizeable chunk of Pakistan’s total remittances. Only last month, they sent home \$519.5 million – nearly 22 per cent of all remittance received.

Information shared by international real estate operators reveal that Pakistanis are among top 10 investors in Dubai real estate including industries in free zone as well as the mainland. Though most Pakistanis working in the UAE can be described as labourers, there are a large number of professionals in many other sectors including accounting and finance.

As per recent Dubai Land Department (DLD) records, Pakistani investments exceeded \$15.5 billion (Dh57 billion) through 46,058 real estate investments made by 32,083 investors in the past 10 years, claims a London-based real estate company. In fact, 7,000 Pakistani expats around the world including those living in Britain, UAE, Europe, and USA own Rs1,100 billion worth properties in Dubai. Pakistani expatriates are one of the largest buyers of properties in Dubai and the second largest among the non-GCC investors, it said.

Sizeable numbers but they represent private investments for private benefit. Compare it with the Indian influence in the UAE. Starting from around \$180 million bilateral trade in the 1970s when the UAE became independent, the bilateral trade between the UAE and India has risen to \$59 billion a year in 2019-2020 making India UAE's third largest trading partner after the US and China. It is also the second largest export destination for Indian products – worth \$29 billion in 2019-2020. Indian expats living and working in the UAE are approximately 3.42 million. That is a sizeable number in a country of around 9.8 million.

Pakistani foreign minister cannot be oblivious to facts stated above. Then why has he chosen Dubai to tell the world that India is planning to attack Pakistan with the unspoken permission from its global partners? According to Foreign Minister Qureshi, New Delhi is “trying to seek tacit approval” to carry out surgical strikes inside Azad Kashmir and Pakistan from “important players who they [Indians] want to be their partners”.

His and his ministry officials stress India would do so to divert international attention from its internal issues and chaos like the Kashmir imbroglio, the ongoing farmers protest, communal violence, recent revelations by the Brussels-based DisinfoLab etc. detailing Indian cheating exercise spanned over 15 years aiming at international institutions in order to defame Pakistan.

Trouble with the present regime and its various ministers and spokespeople remain their vocality. Devoid of diplomatic nuances, they blurt out whatever attracts the illiterate masses. But that is not expected of an experienced hand like Shah Mehmood Qureshi. It requires a national debate, even if the culture of debate has evaporated from our discussion chambers, to discuss what necessitated him to say what he has said while sitting in a foreign country.

Hardly a day goes by when we do not incessantly talk about our geographic focality, telling the world they need us more than we need them. We have been running to the courts of those running the world, offering services in return for peanuts for the privileged elite. We feel aggrieved that our “friends and partners” of the past have abandoned us for our eternal enemy. We feel pained that the “friends and partners” have rebranded the international waters touching our shores from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific without consulting us. But that's the way international politics works. Friends come and go interests remain paramount.

During Pervez Musharraf's reign, a former home secretary had said that “intelligence agencies of some friendly countries are playing dirty games in Balochistan”. I remember asking Pervez Musharraf in a presser held in London's Dorchester Hotel if he would confirm or deny what his home secretary had said. The erstwhile dictator shied away from giving a straight answer but added, “all intelligence agencies play dirty games”.

Hence the billion-dollar question that what good is the knowledge of knowing your enemy's “intent” or its machinations of winning “tacit approval” from its “partners” to surgically strike Pakistan if we do not have the muscle or the wherewithal to name those partners? Is it because we have been friends with those partners all along?

Those in charge of our foreign policy should not forget that states behave like human being because human beings run them. You cannot go on naming or mentioning countries for not being cozy with you and then expect them to behave according to your wishes.

THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 23-12-2020

Reappraisal of Pakistan—Iran relations

Dr Farooq Hasnat & Dr Zamurrad Awan

In the second week of November, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif visited Pakistan on a two-day visit. His delegation included political, strategic, and economic experts. During this brief but busy stay, he had detailed meetings with the Pakistani civil as well as military leadership and discussed issues relating to the security and peace in the region, including enhancement of trade and economic partnership. This is Javad Zarif's tenth visit to Pakistan as Foreign Minister, while his fourth contact with Prime Minister Imran Khan's government in the last two and a half years. It conveys a strong message that in the rapidly changing regional context, it becomes imperative for two brotherly neighbours to assess the fast-changing regional, political, and economic alignments, which seriously affects both the countries to readjust their strategic placement.

Before going further in assessing the significance of this visit, it is relevant to comprehend the historic, religious, cultural, and geographic relevance of Iran and Pakistan for each other. After 1947, Iran, along with Turkey became a focus of attention for the founding fathers and the subsequent leadership paid special attention to forging an alliance based on trust and respect, embedded in cultural and historic similarities and interdependence. It was realised that for its strategic needs, Pakistan could trust these two vital non-Arab Muslim nations of the Middle East. It is no coincidence that Quaid's close companion Raja Ghazanfar Ali Khan was carefully chosen and appointed as Pakistan's first Ambassador to Iran (1948-1952) and subsequently to Turkey (1952-1953). His

assignment was to lay a solid foundation of close ties with these two natural allies of Pakistan.

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran received widespread blessings from the people of Pakistan, and during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), Pakistan tilted towards Iran and understood that Saddam Hussein was the aggressor. Even in the subsequent difficult circumstances, both the countries felt comfortable enough to resolve any glitches that came their way.

In recent days, Pakistan firmly condemned the assassination of Iranian scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. In a strong-worded statement Pakistan extended “sincere condolences to the family members of Mr Fakhrizadeh and to the Iranian people.” The statement further warned that “such acts not only run contrary to all norms of interstate relations and International Law but also threaten the peace and stability of an already fragile region”.

Similarly, taking religious and cultural connections into consideration, around 0.3 million pilgrims from Pakistan visit Iran every year, on a regular basis. Secondly, a considerable number of Urdu words are derived from the Persian language. The historic parallels between the two languages can also be gauged by the fact that 60 percent of Allama Iqbal’s poetry is in Persian, and nearly all of Pakistan’s national anthem is in the same language. This deep connection between the religion and culture of both countries has played an important role in keeping them connected. Despite these deep ties, the volume of trade between the two countries has remained low. It is expected that the recent visit of the Iranian Foreign Minister would lay a foundation for the enhancement of trade and investment collaborations. According to the joint statement, the most important steps to boost mutual trade include plans to open new markets on the Pak-Iran border and an agreement to open border markets and various border crossings. It will not only boost trade but also facilitate people-to-people contact. In this regard, Pakistan has announced the opening of Rimdan- Gabad and Pishin-Mand crossings, while Iran is to open Rimdan crossing point, located about 130 km from Chabahar port in Sistan and Baluchistan province. Both countries have decided to name the common border, “Border of Peace, Friendship, and Love”.

It is hoped that all these measures will increase the volume of trade between the two countries, which currently stands at USD 392.08 million, of which Pakistan’s exports are only 22.86 million. However, one cannot deny the fact that this trade volume can only increase if trade routes are best protected.

Apart from the prospects of economic and political improvements, the visit of the Iranian Foreign Minister has significance due to change in the American administration. During the Trump administration, the US unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran in 2018 and cruel economic sanctions not only ruined the peace of the region but also severely damaged Iran’s economic interests. Many countries, including Pakistan, postponed

trade and economic agreements due to the threat of US sanctions. Thus, a gigantic gas pipeline Iran-Pakistan was deferred.

It is to be hoped that Joe Biden’s policies towards the Middle East would not be lopsided, and “hateful” US attitude towards Iran would be managed, in a fair manner. Moreover, Iran will be able to play a more active role for peace in Afghanistan. It is also likely that Pakistan and Iran can work together to overcome a difficult situation in Afghanistan as these countries strongly believe that peace arrangements must be by mutual consent of the domestic political forces.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 23-12-2020

Pakistan-Saudi ties

THE relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia is indeed a strong one that goes back decades. While Pakistanis have a special regard for the kingdom due to its position as the custodian of Islam’s holiest cities, political, economic and military ties are also robust. However, the relationship has experienced turbulence over the past few years, mainly because of changing geopolitical realities in the region, and the varying responses Islamabad and Riyadh have given to meeting these challenges.

The most recent manifestation of unease in ties was the Saudi demand for timely repayment of part of a loan Pakistan had taken from the kingdom. Though the money was returned to the Saudis with China’s help, in the past such demands were unthinkable from Riyadh. But in an apparent effort to smoothen ties after this episode, the Saudi ambassador in Islamabad on Monday called upon the prime minister. Though officially it was stated that “bilateral cooperation and the Covid-19 situation” were discussed, it is safe to assume that attempts were made to prevent the situation from deteriorating further. This assumption is substantiated by the fact that the Saudi foreign minister is due to visit Pakistan next month.

In the modern era, perhaps the height of Pakistan-Saudi cooperation came when both states were on the same side helping the US give the Soviets a tough time in the Afghan ‘jihad’. Of course, the cooperation has continued thereafter, especially on the military and economic fronts, with the kingdom currently hosting over a million Pakistani workers, who in turn have over the decades played a major role in transforming Saudi Arabia into a modern state.

However, the relationship was jolted in 2015 when — against presumed Saudi wishes — parliament voted against entering the Yemen war. While the move had earned Riyadh’s ire, the collective wisdom of parliament has proved correct, keeping Pakistan away from a conflict that is an unmitigated humanitarian disaster. Yet last year it appears the Saudis were more successful in pressuring Pakistan, as this country stayed away from a summit in Malaysia that Riyadh saw as an alternative to the OIC.

The Saudis are wary of seeing the formation of a bloc including Pakistan, Malaysia, Iran and Turkey lest it challenge Arab ‘leadership’ of the Muslim world. Also, Prime Minister Imran Khan has said he has been facing demands to recognise Israel, with speculation that our Arab friends may be nudging us to establish ties with Tel Aviv.

Going forward, Pakistan should by all means work towards improving and strengthening the bilateral relationship with Saudi Arabia. However, this should not come at the cost of sovereignty; this country must remain free to take decisions regarding foreign policy that are in its best interest. Moreover, Pakistan must work hard to stabilise its internal economic and political situation so that both friends and foes are unable to exploit its weaknesses.

THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 25-12-2020

FM discusses bilateral ties with Egyptian counterpart

Staff Reporter

ISLAMABAD - Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi yesterday held a telephonic conversation with his Egyptian counterpart Sameh Hassan Shoukry, and discussed a wide range of issues pertaining to bilateral relations and the regional security. During the talks, they dwelt at length on ways and means to further enhance the Pakistan-Egypt bilateral cooperation in various fields, said a foreign ministry statement.

They also took stock of the overall security situation in the region, and other regional and global issues of mutual interest, the statement added.

Commenting on his telephonic conversation with the Egyptian foreign minister, Qureshi said on Twitter said that “Great speaking with FM Sameh Hassan Shoukry on further strengthening & diversifying our bilateral relations with enhanced collaboration at multilateral organizations.”

The FM said that he conveyed to his Egyptian Counterpart Pakistan’s appreciation for Egypt’s cooperation at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation’s Council of Foreign Ministers.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 25-12-2020

Rising tensions

A HEIGHTENED state of tension persists in the subcontinent, with relations between Pakistan and India at a particularly low point. While relations have never been ideal, with mostly downs and very few ups, ever since Narendra Modi took the reins of government in New Delhi in 2014, ties have been especially testy.

Indian adventurism along the Line of Control has added to the tension, while Pakistan has proved that it is ready to defend itself on numerous occasions. Last year’s episode following the Balakot incident, in which an Indian fighter jet was shot down, clearly showed that any aggression against Pakistan will be countered. But irresponsible and aggressive statements from Indian generals and politicians show that New Delhi is not in the mood for peace.

In this regard army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa, while touring forward positions in AJK recently, said any Indian “misadventure” would get a befitting response. Moreover, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi said in Multan that dialogue with India was not possible “in the prevailing situation”, while making particular reference to atrocities in occupied Kashmir.

While peace is a worthy goal and war must be avoided, the question arises: can Pakistan succeed by making overtures to India, when the latter continues to rebuff such gestures? The answer seems obvious. While decades of tension in South Asia have hampered socioeconomic growth and prevented the region from realising its potential, there appears to be no appetite for peace in New Delhi at the moment. The Hindu chauvinist BJP that rules India is hell-bent on excluding Indian Muslims from the national mainstream, while at the same time demonising Pakistan.

Further, the BJP’s ham-headed tactics in India-held Kashmir have failed to subdue the disputed region. The latest proof of this came in local elections in J&K, in which parties opposed to the BJP won the majority of seats. The fact is that even some of New Delhi’s staunchest loyalists in the region have cried foul over the Modi government’s tactics to scrap occupied Kashmir’s autonomy.

Indeed, at the moment it is difficult to make attempts at peace in such a stifling atmosphere. However, the people of South Asia must ask themselves if living in the constant shadow of war, poverty and disease is the region’s fate. It does not have to be this way, even though certain lobbies on both sides — hawkish elements in Pakistan and the Hindutva brigade in India — thrive on confrontation.

Saner minds on both sides, particularly in India, must realise that South Asia’s nearly two billion people deserve a better future, one that can be achieved by allowing talks, trade and travel. Of course, visionary steps are required, such as a just solution to the Kashmir dispute, while there must be an acceptance of Pakistan as a reality by the Indian establishment.

II - ECONOMIC, CULTURAL AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

	Subject	Newspapers/Periodicals	Date	Page
	INDIA			
	Economy/Planning/Reform			
1.	Reset economic models By Moin Qazi	The Pioneer, New Delhi	28-12-2020	17
	International Trade and Cooperation			
2.	Our investment plans in India on track: Saudi Arabia - PTI	The Pioneer, New Delhi	21-12-2020	18
3.	Centre, World Bank ink \$500 million project for safe and green NHs - PNS	The Pioneer, New Delhi	23-12-2020	19
4.	Indian economy on strong wicket: UN - PTI	The Tribune, Chandigarh	29-12-2020	19
	AFGHANISTAN			
5.	Aid could and should produce better results By Wasil Ahmad Akhtar	Afghanistan Times, Kabul	23-12-2020	20
6.	Pakistan hold discussions on a new trade agreement with Afghanistan - ATN	Outlook Afghanistan, Kabul	24-12-2020	20
7.	Kabul, Tashkent to Set Up Joint Economic Zone - Pajhwok	Outlook Afghanistan, Kabul	26-12-2020	21
	BANGLADESH			
8.	US firms keen to participate in Ctg port expansion By Staff Correspondent	The Daily Star, Dhaka	17-12-2020	21
9.	Padma Bridge: Economic sustainability of Bangladesh By Asm Anam Ullah	The Daily Observer, Dhaka	17-12-2020	22
10.	Nearly half the state-run entities running at a loss By Ahsan Habib	The Daily Observer, Dhaka	20-12-2020	23
11.	Govt to ship 50,000 tonnes of urea to Nepal By Rezaul Karim Byron and Dwaipayan Barua	The Daily Star, Dhaka	24-12-2020	24
	SRI LANKA			
12.	China ready to invest in many projects - Chinese Ambassador	Daily News, Colombo	17-12-2020	24

13.	Indian govt to provide INR 300 mn for Palali airport expansion By Menaka Indrakumar	Daily News, Colombo	24-12-2020	24
14.	BOI attracts over USD 800 mn FDI in 2020 By Shirajiv Sirimane	Daily News, Colombo	24-12-2020	25
15.	India, Lanka working on USD 100 mn credit line solar power NEPAL	Daily News, Colombo	25-12-2020	25
16.	Nepal and U.S. pledged their commitment to deepen their engagement By New Spotlight Online	Spotlight, Kathmandu	17-12-2020	25
17.	World bank provides \$80 million to Nepal to implement rural enterprise and economic development project By New Spotlight Online	Spotlight, Kathmandu	21-12-2020	26
18.	For deeper engagement Nepal and U.S. commit to deepening their engagement By Staff Correspondent PAKISTAN	Spotlight, Kathmandu	13-12-2020	27
19.	Pakistan returns \$1 billion of Saudi Arabia's soft loan, officials say - Reuters	Dawn, Islamabad	17-12-2020	28
20.	Foreign loans surge by 45pc in five months of fiscal By Khaleeq Kiani	Dawn, Islamabad	18-12-2020	28
21.	Gwadar port provides huge trade opportunity to CARs, Afghanistan: Razak Dawood - APP	The Nation, Islamabad	20-12-2020	29
22.	Fiscal deficit rises by Rs189bn in July-Oct period By Khaleeq Kiani	Dawn, Islamabad	25-12-2020	29
23.	Pakistan's trade with Africa reaches \$4.18 billion in 2019-20: Razak Dawood - APP	The Nation, Islamabad	28-12-2020	30
24.	Pakistan, Russia to establish North-South gas pipeline project By Fawad Yousafzai	The Nation, Islamabad	30-12-2020	31
25.	'Improved Pak-Afghan trade means regional integration' - APP	The News, Islamabad	29-12-2020	32

THE PIONEER, NEW DELHI 28-12-2020**Reset economic models****Moin Qazi**

What we essentially need is a community-based, businesslike approach encompassing grassroots action, policy advocacy and everything in between

The covid-19 pandemic is a human tragedy of Biblical proportions which has caused an explosion of infections and massive destruction of livelihoods. Tragically, the outbreak has also revealed that our societies and economies have been operating on a very thin margin. The edifice seemed so shiny; with jets stitching together gleaming cities, a world of soaring markets and industrial empires. But a couple of months into the contagion and it all began tottering. The jets were grounded, the cities went silent and one industry after another headed for bankruptcy. However successful our world may have seemed, it wasn't very sturdy. Our systems and society seem to be very fragile, exploding the myths of a robust and resilient order.

The greatest learning is that our current economic models do not benefit everyone equally. This is particularly true for rural societies. To combat this we will have to contend with the almost universal suspicion of our grand political schemes. While we do need plans and systems, we also need mutual accountability. Before we have the entire apparatus in place — the economic plumbing — we must understand more concretely what such a strategy means to the people it is meant to serve, who know best their own problems and also have relevant and sustainable solutions for them.

Tackling the problems of the disprivileged requires a fundamentally-different approach: One that starts with the people themselves and encourages initiative, creativity and drive from below. This principle must be at the core of any strategy that hopes to transform their lives; only then it can be lasting and meaningful.

Approaches to rural development that respect the inherent capabilities of the people who live in rural areas and systematically build on their experience, have a reasonable chance of improving their lives. This can include enhancing their capacities to mobilise and manage resources effectively. If people can be given the support they need to build their own democracies in their own ways, they can do the rest themselves. In doing so, they will not only move their own communities, they will also take the world with them.

This is because local leadership is critical to driving ownership of social programmes. We need to hire individuals with the entrepreneurialism and drive to create change on the ground. You can't solve the problems of the "last mile" from the headquarters. It takes local entrepreneurs, empowered to adapt easily to the nuances of local cultures to succeed. This approach has to be guided by local wisdom and must show a deep appreciation of ground realities.

We need to develop more inclusive policies to ensure that rural development is made socially, economically and environmentally sustainable. Inclusive rural

transformation can be promoted through people-centered development in which beneficiaries become agents of their own development, participating in designing, decision-making and execution of the processes. Moreover, the strategies for inclusive transformation have to be context-specific, building on local solutions which best address local challenges.

Such solutions may require adaptation over time. People will not actively and emotionally participate in an intervention unless it has relevance to their lives and their strengths. When communities take charge of projects, they also contribute through their labour and commitment and engage actively with the system to ensure that projects are completed on time.

We need to invest in developing local leaders who are typically under-acknowledged and under-supported so we are able to effectively engage with popular movements, community-based organisations and grassroots activist groups that are close to locals. We have to constantly navigate existing unjust, broken systems while at the same time reimagining them

Since local entrepreneurs know the community dynamics and power relationships, they are well-attuned to handling the actors in the local ecosystem. Their potential to drive change is tremendous, but they often lack opportunities for training and education and are unable to access networks and finance. Yet they are an essential part of society and often don't receive the credit they deserve as policy drivers and implementers in India's challenging developmental space.

There has also been a failure of agricultural strategy which needs reappraisal. Food crops have gradually been abandoned in favour of cash crops which are more profitable but are also highly water intensive. The high yielding variety (HYV) seeds which entered Indian fields during the Green Revolution were less resistant to droughts and floods and needed delicate management of water, insecticides, pesticides and chemical fertilisers.

These crops also attract more pests, forcing farmers to apply chemical pesticides to save them. So, every year the farmer had to spend more to grow such crops. Typically the commercial seeds had to be purchased year after year, and farmers could not reuse seeds from their crop, with seed manufacturing giants filing lawsuits against small farmers who did so. It became a perpetual treadmill. Families faced crippling healthcare costs, crop failures, loss of income and debt, all directly related to pesticides. The overuse of chemical fertilisers for augmenting yields in the short term led to physical and chemical degradation of the soil by altering the natural microflora and increasing soil salinity and alkalinity. Higher yields and profits in the short-term have come at a huge socio-ecological cost such as biodiversity loss, environmental pollution, land degradation, increased damage from climate change, infusion of toxic elements into the food chain from chemical residue applied in the crop field leading to decline in human health and livelihood and the erosion of agricultural expertise.

Formerly, societies might have depend upon 200 to 300 crops for food and health security but gradually we have come to the stage of four or five important crops: wheat, corn, rice and soybean. This homogenisation increases profitability for a handful of owners, to the detriment of everyone else.

The cultivation of indigenous and heritage crops has the potential to make agriculture genetically diverse, sustainable and resilient to climate variability. Indigenous landraces have evolved in the region over thousands of years of agrarian practice and have relied on fungicides, organic fertilisers and pesticides prepared from locally available materials. The Green Revolution introduced newer methods of cultivation; brought in new strains of seeds generated through modern methods of plant breeding which gave high yields; intensified the use of fossil fuel fertilisers; increased acreage through double cropping; used pesticides and mechanical equipment extensively and massively; and drilled into groundwater reserves through deep borewells.

Native heirloom seeds adapted to local diets and conditions were replaced by expensive corporate-produced hybrids, often dumped in India after having failed elsewhere. Although the new high-performance varieties guaranteed high yields, they degraded soil quality, harmed biodiversity, polluted the environment and irreversibly damaged human health.

The pandemic will hopefully help farmers to take conscious decisions and shift gradually to sustainable practices, rather than changing things hurriedly by following the instruction given by seed or pesticide companies through extension workers, dealers, or the labels on the packaging of crop inputs. They will use their own experience or knowledge acquired through experimentation rather than relying on hearsay or advertising, when buying inputs (for example seeds and fertiliseers).

The pandemic has already underlined the need for them to come up with context-specific solutions for ecologically sustainable agriculture. We hope farmers will apply their own knowledge of ecology, soil fertility management, seed preservation and pest management which they used to rely on before the advent of conventional agriculture.

There are many lessons to be brought to the table from field experience. We need to understand the existing human conditions rather than hastily proposing templates that serve the interests of the owners. Experts need to combine their knowledge with grassroots action and a wider community of practice. The incredibly evolving and complicated ecosystem requires better collaboration and partnerships for understanding, analysing, designing solutions and for undertaking impact studies to contribute to the wider knowledge pool within. We have to usher a culture where farmers can apply their own knowledge and skills rather than being expected to follow what the external agencies are prescribing.

There is need for integration of an entire gamut of resources, ranging from financial and human to markets and entitlements. When we address these issues

empathetically, we can move ahead with a more self-assured, robust and proactive engagement towards inclusive growth and livelihood development. What we essentially need is a community-based, businesslike approach encompassing grassroots action, policy advocacy and everything in between.

THE PIONEER, NEW DELHI 21-12-2020

Our investment plans in India on track: Saudi Arabia

PTI

Saudi Arabia, the world's largest oil exporter, on Sunday said its investment plans in India are on track, noting that the Indian economy has the strength to recover from the adverse impact of the coronavirus crisis.

In February last year, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced that Saudi Arabia would invest over USD 100 billion in India in petrochemicals, refining, infrastructure, mining and manufacturing, agriculture and several other sectors.

"Our plans to invest in India are on track and we are in discussion to prioritise investment opportunities in several sectors in both countries," Saudi Ambassador Dr Saud bin Mohammed Al Sati told PTI in an interview.

Stating that Saudi Arabia values India as a strategic partner and a close friend, Al Sati identified ongoing cooperation in areas of training, knowledge sharing and combating terrorism as key elements of the partnership in defence and security sphere.

Al Sati complimented India's measures to revive its economy in view of the impact of the pandemic and said the economic recovery of both countries will help elevate other economies in the region as well.

"The economic relief package provided by India for its most prominent sectors is commendable. As the fifth-largest global economy and the largest economy in South Asia, the Indian economy has the impetus to recover from the impact of the ongoing pandemic," he said.

Without commenting on Army Chief Gen MM Naravane's visit to Saudi Arabia last week, the Ambassador said the setting up of the Strategic Partnership Council by the two countries opened new avenues of cooperation in several sectors including defence and security and counter-terrorism. "The Strategic (Partnership) Council set up by the two countries in 2019 has opened new avenues on partnership in strategic areas like defence, security counter-terrorism, energy security and renewable energy," he said.

Gen Naravane on Sunday held extensive talks with Commander of Royal Saudi land forces Gen Fahd Bin Abdullah Mohammed Al-Mutir as he began a two-day rare visit to the Gulf country to lay the ground for deeper military ties.

In the first-ever visit by a head of the Indian Army, Gen Naravane travelled to Saudi capital city Riyadh last week where he held talks with top military brass.

The two sides set up the Strategic Partnership Council during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Riyadh in

October last year. The council is mandated to monitor the progress of strategic relationships in a whole range of key areas.

“The current decade has witnessed a remarkable stride in the relations between Saudi Arabia and India. What was once viewed as ties between two friendly countries is now a strong strategic partnership between two formidable economies,” Al Sati said.

“From energy cooperation, security and defense, burgeoning trade relations to health cooperation, the nature of this relationship has diversified immensely allowing for expanded growth. The leadership on both sides have heralded this transformation for Saudi – India ties,” he said. On trade partnership, the envoy referred to the decision by Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) to invest approximately USD 1.3 billion in Reliance Retail and USD 1.5 billion in Reliance’s Jio platforms” Saudi Aramco is committed to investing in India’s energy sector. Aramco’s decision to buy a stake in Reliance Industries Oil to Chemical business and Aramco’s commitment to invest in the West Coast refinery petrochemical project signifies the interest Saudi Arabia places in the development of India’s energy sector,” he said.

Apart from this, Al Sati said Saudi Arabia is continuing to explore new investment opportunities in India. The envoy also highlighted Saudi Arabia’s recent Labor Reform Initiative (LRI), saying they will further help Saudi Arabia and India to cement their economic relationship.

“It will enhance the contractual relationship between workers and employers, and will support the Kingdom’s vision of establishing an attractive job market, empowering and developing labour competencies and developing the work environment,” he said.

THE PIONEER, NEW DELHI 23-12-2020

Centre, World Bank ink \$500 million project for safe and green NHs

PNS

The Central Government and the World Bank on Tuesday signed a \$500 million project to build safe and green national highway corridors in the States of Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. The project will also enhance the capacity of the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) in mainstreaming safety and green technologies.

The Green National Highways Corridors Project will support MoRTH construct 783 km of highways in various geographies by integrating safe and green technology designs such as local and marginal materials, industrial byproducts, and other bioengineering solutions. The project will help reduce GHG emissions in the construction and maintenance of highways.

Dr C S Mohapatra, Additional Secretary, Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Finance stated that the Government of India is committed to environmentally sustainable development in its infrastructure projects. This project will set new standards in the construction of safe motorable roads.

The ultimate objective of transport infrastructure is to provide seamless connectivity and reduce logistics costs, said a government statement.

The Government of India has launched many investment programs in road sector infrastructure to strengthen and improve logistics performance. This project will also support analytics to map the freight volume and movement pattern on the National Highway network, identify constraints, and provide innovative logistics solutions, it added.

A senior MoRTH official said the project will support the ministry with an in-depth analysis of gender-related issues in the transport sector along with help in creating jobs for women by training women-led micro enterprises and women collectives to implement green technologies in the highway corridors.

“Connectivity for economic growth and connectivity for sustainable development are two important aspects of a country’s development trajectory. This operation brings these two priorities together in support of India’s growth strategy,” said Junaid Ahmad, World Bank Country Director in India.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 29-12-2020

Indian economy on strong wicket: UN

PTI

India’s economy could prove to be the “most resilient” in the subregion of South and South-West Asia over the long term, according to a report by the UN. It says the country’s large market will continue to attract investments.

The report, ‘Foreign Direct Investment Trends And Outlook In Asia And The Pacific 2020/2021’, compiled by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, said the inward FDI flows to South and South-West Asia slightly decreased by 2 per cent in 2019, from \$67 billion in 2018 to \$66 billion in 2019.

Driving force in S Asia

The growth in South Asia is mainly driven by India, says report

A majority of the investment inflow destined for the information and communications technology (ICT) sector Fast-growing telecom and digital space to see a faster rebound

The growth, however, was mainly driven by India, which accounted for 77 per cent of the total inflows to the subregion and received \$51 billion in 2019, up 20 per cent from the previous year.

The report said the majority of these flows were destined for the information and communications technology (ICT).

Regarding the ICT sector, the report said the investment to India had evolved from information technology services for multinational enterprises to the thriving local digital ecosystem where many domestic players had attracted international investment.

The report added that FDI outflows from South and South-West Asia increased for the fourth consecutive year, modestly growing from \$14.8 billion in 2018 to \$15.1 billion in 2019. The report noted that in the short term,

both inflows and outflows from and to the subregion were expected to decline.

“India’s economy, however, can prove the most resilient in the subregion over the long term. FDI inflows have been rising, albeit lower, growth after the pandemic and India’s large market will continue to attract investment,” it said.

AFGHANISTAN TIMES, KABUL 23-12-2020

Aid Could And Should Produce Better Results

By Wasil Ahmad Akhtar

For the last two decades Afghanistan has been dependent on aid from other countries. The country needs considerable resources to overcome on issues facing in the last five decades.

In past two decades, many conferences were held for the renewal of commitments for reconstruction funds and securing a better future of Afghanistan. The Government of Afghanistan and its International Partners agreed on Afghanistan Partnership Framework (APF) as a result of 2020 Afghanistan Conference, 23-24 November, held in Geneva. Both, the Government of Afghanistan and the International Partners renewed their commitment to continued efforts towards a peaceful, prosperous and self-reliant Afghanistan. The APF is intended for four years starting from 2021, until 2024.

As reported by Daily Finland, the donors pledged at least US\$ 3.3 billion for the first year of the upcoming quadrennial, with annual commitments expected to stay at the same level each year. More than 70 countries and 39 organizations and representatives of the civil society participated in 2020 Afghanistan Conference. It is agreed by both the Government of Afghanistan and the International partners that all development assistance will be subject to annual joint review processes to decide upon the level and modality of annual financial support.

Autonomy of action, and transparency and predictability of aid flow is the legitimate interest of international partners. The international partners/donor community have the legitimate concerns regarding effective management and the impact of their financial support. The effective management, joint oversight and annual review process can ensure that the foreign aid is used for its intended purposes and helps promote reforms.

There are several factors experienced that affect the effectiveness of the foreign funding management.

- Ownership of fund flow especially the off-budget assistances and low level of consultations between Government, implementing organizations and donor community;
- Capacity constraints, language, donor and government guideline, in depth understanding of country context and culture;
- Bureaucracy, staff demotivation when coupled with weak oversight has the potential to lead corruption;
- Favored personal gain instead of national interest;

- Un-necessary competition about distribution of resources and improper consideration of vulnerability factors; and
- Lacking consultations especially with citizens as a key beneficiary in general.

Most of the Afghans are living below poverty line and feeling unsecure from all aspects of life. They are either not aware of their rights, do not want to change their lifestyle or feeling unsafe to raise their voice. A country wide public outreach is needed to enhance citizens understanding on their rights, democracy and rules of law in order to advocate citizens and make the government more accountable. The voice of reform concept should come from the people residing in corners for country map. The resources can be effectively utilized and managed if the citizens were engaged fully in especially at the stage of designing reform activities, during and post implementation. The key planning and budgeting should not be made in Kabul but decentralized and extended to the districts and village level where the actual gaps should be tackled.

The Afghanistan Partnership Framework is presented very well that is why the international partners were convinced and renewed their commitments in Geneva Conference but it requires serious attention from the government key figures when it comes to its implementation. Aid could and should produce better results; this was the agreement recognized at the Paris Declaration in 2005, which brought together donor and recipient countries, development institutions, and civil society.

The Government of Afghanistan and International Partners measures should be more transparent and accountable. These measures should be explicitly open to civil society and independent body review, to enhance mutual trust and increase public accountability. Afghanistan should use to the idea that they will receive less or no financial aid after 2024. The aid money will need to be more effective if Afghanistan is to maintain its development path.

In last, if corruption is not meaningfully addressed, donor countries do not support the Afghan government, designing strategies without citizens input, and if not properly utilized then the aid resources spent will not be much effective at all, no matter how well intentioned.

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 24-12-2020

Pakistan Hold Discussions on a New Trade Agreement with Afghanistan

(ATN)

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan has started consultations with various stakeholders in order to negotiate a preferential trade agreement (PTA) with Afghanistan, the Express Tribune reported on Tuesday.

According to the report, advisor to Pakistan’s prime minister on commerce and investment Abdul Razak Dawood has already started discussions and on Monday briefed the Ministry of Commerce on issues related to

Pakistan's trade with Afghanistan and with Central Asian Republics (CARs).

Dawood also reported briefed delegates at the meeting on discussions he held with leaders of Afghanistan during his visit to the country last month – shortly before Imran Khan visited Kabul.

The Express Tribune reported that according to Dawood, a lot of work had been done since these two visits and discussions with stakeholders around the PTA are ongoing.

He was stated that a revision of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) was in its final stages. The Tribune reported that a delegation of stakeholders from Afghanistan will visit Pakistan from December 28 to 30 to hold talks on the PTA, APTTA and the establishment of joint border markets.

OUTLOOK AFGHANISTAN, KABUL 26-12-2020

Kabul, Tashkent to Set Up Joint Economic Zone

(Pajhwok)

MAZAR-I-SHARIF - Afghan and Uzbekistan have agreed on creating a joint economic zone on their common border to boost bilateral trade.

The proposed economic zone, to be set up in the Sarkhandarya province of Uzbekistan, will facilitate Afghan traders and investors.

Balkh and Sarkhandarya governors made statements to the effect at the second conference on strengthening Uzbek-Afghan cooperation in areas of trade and culture in Mazar-i-Sharif.

The Sarkhandarya governor said his country was willing to expand economic and trade ties with Afghanistan.

He added the two sides discussed an agreement on creating an economic zone in Sarkhandarya and initial work of the project had begun.

The visiting official hoped the economic zone, when established, would encourage Afghan traders to invest in Uzbekistan and vice versa.

Based on the agreement, Afghan traders will be able to stay in Sarkhandarya for 15 days without visa and they will get necessary facilities.

"The Afghan-Uzbekistan development committee for cooperation has been established and is doing its job,"

For his part, Balkh Governor Mohammad Farhad Azimi told the conference that with the establishment of the economic zone, Afghan products could be easily exported to global markets.

He voiced optimism about the further development of Afghan-Uzbekistan ties in the spheres of trade and culture. Azimi added Uzbekistan was looking forward to increasing investment by Afghans in that country to expand economic links.

The Balkh governor said the working committee had been tasked with facilitating travel between Afghan and Uzbekistan for traders.

Azimi urged Uzbek businessmen to invest in exporting Afghanistan's agricultural products, fresh and dried fruits, stones and other products.

Meanwhile, Afghan traders expressed optimism about the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan trade and economic cooperation. Amruddin Kakar, a businessman from Balkh, told Pajhwok Afghan News that greater economic cooperation would benefit both sides.

He believed real cooperation from Uzbekistan would enable Afghan traders to easily reach Asian and European markets.

Balkh business people asked the government to convince Uzbekistani entrepreneurs into investing in Afghanistan.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 17-12-2020

US firms keen to participate in Ctg port expansion

Staff Correspondent, Chattogram

Says Joanne Wagner, deputy chief of mission at the US embassy in Dhaka Joanne Wagner

Companies from the US are keen to participate in the ongoing development of the Chattogram port and improve the efficiency of its activities, said Joanne Wagner, deputy chief of mission at the US embassy in Dhaka.

The expansion of the Chattogram port has created a number of exciting opportunities for firms from the US to share their technology, expertise and ideas and help the country's most active port achieve the status it aims to reach, she said.

Wagner made these comments while leading a team of US representatives on a two-day visit to Chattogram, where they met the port's officials on Sunday afternoon.

"We are looking for opportunities that can benefit both the US and Bangladesh, ways that we can make something out of even these challenging times before us," she told The Daily Star.

There are a number of areas with potential for US investment in Bangladesh, particularly the tourism industry of Chattogram as well as the pharmaceutical, IT, light engineering and energy sectors.

Energy is a very promising sector and the US companies are very much involved in the planning for such projects.

With regard to Bangladesh's blue economy, which relates to the exploitation and preservation of the marine environment, Wagner said business agreements would soon be reached on how the US companies could support local aquaculture.

Around 10 years ago, a project called the Megaport Initiative was implemented at the Chattogram port with financing from the US to prevent the possible movement of dangerous cargo through the port.

But the Megaport Initiative was not just about Bangladesh since it was something that the US was very much concerned about and eager to implement.

This is because having dangerous goods in any port is a risk for the people who live and work there and also for the people where the goods are destined for, she added.

Wagner went on to say that a US company that provides container logistics support is keen to implement an overhead cargo movement project in the Chattogram port. When such a project is implemented, the time it takes to shift goods from one place to another drops significantly and this benefits the buyers.

It is also cleaner for the environment for a reduction in carbon emission from vehicles transporting goods.

"We hope to learn more about it while we are here in Chattogram so that we can convey what we have learnt to our companies and see what they can bring to the table as the US does have a lot of experience in the expansion of ports," Wagner said.

"The more we can find out about those opportunities, the better, since I am quite certain that US companies will be very much interested in the expansion of the port itself, whether it is performing actual infrastructural works or supplying the equipment or energy," she added.

The deputy chief of mission went on to say that given the dynamism that exists between the two countries, it is always advantageous to bring the two together.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 17-12-2020

Padma Bridge: Economic sustainability of Bangladesh

Asm Anam Ullah

The Padma Bridge is the most expensive and expanded project in Bangladesh since independence. The project had many financial, technical, and other logistical difficulties. Initially, the World Bank rejected the project on suspicion of possible corruption involved in the project. However, the Bangladesh government decided to run the entire project with the country's internal resources, which was the most crucial decision for the Bangladesh government. Many of us believe that Padma Bridge is a dream project of Bangladesh. The Padma Bridge will significantly transform the country's trade and communication system and connect other countries in South-East Asia. Nevertheless, experts say, to see the ultimate benefits of the Padma Bridge, the Bangladesh government needs to adopt a proper strategy, which is the most comprehensive and costly mega project being completed with the people's taxes.

Eight thousand or more transports will traverse the Padma Bridge from the day of its openings, by the tentative date of 2022. However, it is assumed that between the years 2041-2050, the total number of transports will cross the Padma Bridge, will be almost 18 thousand, which will carry nearly \$18.5 billion. Besides the income from the transpositions, experts say that another \$2.1 billion would have been earned from other economic projects from surrounding stations of the Padma Bridge.

However, the vast financial transactions based on the Padma Bridge will indirectly contribute about 6 billion to the national economy. National GDP will grow by 1.26 percent. The goal of the Bangladesh government is to recover its entire investment within a maximum of five years of its opening date. However, experts assume that

the toll of the transports for using the Padma Bridge is exceptionally high. Therefore, it is urged that the Bangladesh Government would reconsider or readjust the toll in due course to let people enjoy the ultimate benefit of the bridge.

The Government of Bangladesh needs to reunite to see the best possible outcome of the project through the adoption and implementation of some more strategic plans that will also accelerate the national economy. It is essential to understand that the Padma Bridge must be sustainable to contribute to the national economy, without focusing on petty issues, or on claiming political victory.

To attract proper attention, the Government of Bangladesh must select the right target market for their investment in the Padma Bridge area. It is important to remember that only the Padma Bridge area and the stations around it can be a role model for a beautiful and green city. In this case, the Bangladesh government can follow the neighbouring countries like Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, or Vietnam. The Government of Bangladesh must adopt some long-term strategic policy that can bring about the most favourable outcome for the Padma Bridge in the next twenty years. Suppose the government of Bangladesh has adopted a mega plan to invest \$5-10 billion dollars in the next twenty years. The construction of new airports, new universities, hospitals, hotels, industrial zones, and even amusement parks are just a few examples of mega-projects. Thus, a large number of job opportunities will be opened for the locals and other people of the country. In that case, the Padma Bridge will be more sustainable, and Bangladesh will become the most economically sustainable country in South-East Asia.

Another essential issue is due to the Padma Bridge; for example, more mobile passengers will come to Dhaka city. Dhaka is already a dense and populous city for hunting and maintaining a good livelihood. If more passengers come to Dhaka every day, it will be a more chaotic situation for those who mainly live in Dhaka.

Moreover, there will be environmental pollution. Traffic will vary greatly. So, it is essential to realize and decide how you can save Dhaka city without bringing a lot of people here, instead, to update the policies with the opinion of economic policy experts. The Bangladesh government needs to think about the proper decentralization now.

It is more important to consider the fact that with potential investments in the future, the local population near the Padma Bridge area will be affected due to infrastructural development. Thus, the Government of Bangladesh and other stakeholders will have the primary responsibility for rehabilitating the affected local citizens adequately.

In a nutshell, the Padma Bridge will be a unique experience for all Bangladeshis. It is truly a matter of pride for the entire nation. We have been able to make our history after almost 50 years of independence. However, maybe we could have achieved this much earlier if we could have controlled corruption.

More importantly, our political instability has destroyed our bright prospects of becoming at least the number one

nation in Southeast Asia. However, nothing was too late. We should all remember that Bangladesh is our country which we have to build ourselves. Let us make the country more prosperous by eliminating corruption and inequality from society so that we can build a Padma Bridge every five years in Bangladesh.

THE DAILY OBSERVER, DHAKA 20-12-2020

Nearly half the state-run entities running at a loss

Ahsan Habib

A lack of competitiveness brought them to their knees affecting stock investors

Nearly half of the listed state-run companies have been incurring losses for many years due to a lack of competitiveness, in turn affecting stock investors.

Of the total 18, seven are incurring losses while the rest booked profits in 2019-20, according to the data of the Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE).

State-run companies, which enjoy natural monopoly and do business in strictly regulated markets, are booking profits. However, those running in a competitive atmosphere are mostly incurring losses, according to the companies' business analysis.

The seven loss-incurring companies deal with producing sugar, motorcycles, hotel services, cables and glass sheets. A big number of government run companies are not giving any dividends for many years so the stocks are providing nothing to their investors, said stock investor Abdul Alim. Renwick Jajneswar and Usmania Glass did not provide any dividend for the last two years.

Moreover, Shyampur Sugar and Zeal Bangla Sugar have not paid any dividends in at least for the past two decades, the DSE data shows.

The state-run sugar mills are 60 years old but their economic lifespan ended at least 30 years ago, said Sanat Kumar Saha, chairman of the Bangladesh Sugar and Food Industries Corporation (BSFIC).

So they are incurring losses for many years, he said.

The listed three state-run companies named Shyampur Sugar, Zeal Bangla and Renwick Jajneswar are under the BSFIC.

Now, modernisation is needed to ensure their commercial viability, Saha added.

Atlas Bangladesh was once a profit-making state-run motorcycle producer and distributor but now it has been incurring losses for the past five years.

The situation became so bad that its auditor expressed uncertainty about future continuation of business.

A lack of competitiveness is the main reason of the state-run companies' fallouts, Alim said, adding that most of the companies did not take to modernisation and product diversification over the years.

The drive to attain profitability is rare in the companies, the stock investor added.

A top official of an asset management company said they refrain from buying state-run companies' stocks because their performance may get hampered by the government

decisions at any time, something that was witnessed in case of Titas Gas.

In 2015, the energy regulator decided to reduce its service charge so its earnings fell suddenly. Thus the stock price of the gas distribution company dropped.

Some state-run companies have huge potential because many of them work in an uncompetitive but prospective fields, he said.

About the loss-making state-run companies, he said inefficiency and a lack of competitiveness and accountability were the main reasons behind the state-run companies' fall.

So most of them are profitable only in regulated markets but not in the competitive arena, the asset manager added.

Eleven listed state-run companies are making profits. Of the 11, seven are doing business in strictly regulated areas where the private sector was not allowed to do business.

The companies are Meghna Petroleum, Jamuna Oil, Padma Oil, Titas Gas, Powergrid, DESCO, and Bangladesh Submarine Cable.

Only four state-run listed companies are making profits competing with the private sector. The companies are National Tubes, Eastern Lubricants, Bangladesh Shipping Corporation and Rupali Bank.

The government should bring companies with good performance records to the market rather than companies with bad records, said a top official of a leading merchant bank.

Otherwise, the main objective of bringing them would be spoiled, he said.

The government has taken steps to bring some state-run companies to the stock market in order to boost stock investors' confidence.

Already, three state-owned commercial banks announced their commitment to get listed and Rupali wished to offload more shares within the current year although it has been delayed due to the pandemic.

Some banks are not in a good shape due to higher non-performing loans so the government should reconsider such decisions so that their listing does not increase woes of the stock investors, said the merchant banker.

Once the listed state-run companies were profitable, but they became loss-making entities due to a lack of efficiency and monitoring, said Prof Abu Ahmed, a stock market analyst.

The government should have offloaded their shares and controlling power so that efficient people came to the boards. But the government holds a majority share for unknown reason, he said, adding that bureaucrats do not want to give up power to the private sector.

"What the majority power is giving to the government is yearly losses," he said.

If the government sold the shares, it could get a huge amount of money back, on the other hand, efficient directors could bring in profits for the companies that would pay them tax at the year's end, Ahmed said.

The companies have huge idle resources that could be used for making the companies profitable, he added.

THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA 24-12-2020
Govt to ship 50,000 tonnes of urea to Nepal

Rezaul Karim Byron and Dwaipayan Barua

Bangladesh is set to send 50,000 tonnes of its imported urea fertiliser to Nepal at the import price to help the landlocked country, which failed to purchase the organic compound on time due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

To materialise the plan, the cabinet committee on purchase yesterday in its 36th meeting approved the purchase of Tk 109.74 crore worth of granular urea fertiliser.

Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation (BCIC) would purchase the fertiliser from international joint venture entity Karnaphuli Fertiliser Company Ltd (Kafco). It would buy 40,000 tonnes in bulk at \$257.35 a tonne and the rest 10,000 tonnes of bagged urea fertiliser at \$262 a tonne, Abu Saleh Mostafa Kamal, additional secretary of the cabinet division, told journalists after the meeting.

"Nepal would get the fertiliser at the import price. However, an additional \$1.82 a tonne will be collected from them as banking charge," Industry Secretary KM Ali Azam told The Daily Star.

Nepal would pay the bill through banking channel within three months, he added.

During a telephone conversation on September 1, Nepalese Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli sought the fertiliser from his Bangladeshi counterpart Sheikh Hasina. "Nepal requested Bangladesh to provide urea fertiliser and the government agreed to assist," said Azam, adding that Bangladesh imports around 15 lakh tonnes of urea annually.

An agreement between the companies of the two countries was signed on December 17 at the initiative of Nepalese Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development.

Mohammad Amin Ul Ahsan, BCIC chairman, and Netra Bahadur Bhandari, managing director of Krishi Samagri Company of Nepal, signed the agreement.

This is the first ever trade of fertiliser for Bangladesh with a neighbouring country, Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal, who chaired the meeting through a virtual platform from Singapore, informed journalist after the meeting.

When questions were raised on the export when the country is dependent on import, the minister said: "The export will brighten the country's image."

There are instances of exporting goods after importing those by countries like Singapore and others, he said.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 17-12-2020

China ready to invest in many projects - Chinese Ambassador

Ambassador of the People's Republic of China Qi Zhenhong paid a courtesy call on Speaker Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena at the Speaker's official residence.

Ambassador of the People's Republic of China Qi Zhenhong said that the Government of China will invest more towards the development of Sri Lanka.

He said so during bilateral discussions held with Speaker Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena. Accordingly, the

Government of China is planning to formulate an international legal framework which would make the Port City of Colombo under construction a suitable platform for foreign investment.

The Ambassador further stated that it is intended to attract investors to invest in the Port City. The meeting was held at the Speaker's official residence yesterday (15).

The Ambassador of the People's Republic of China also stated that the Government of China hopes to build another tyre factory in Matugama with an investment of US\$ 600 million, similar to the tyre factory in Hambantota.

Furthermore, he stated that the Government of China also plans to build an automobile assembling plant in Sri Lanka next year. This will result in a major impetus towards the development of the Sri Lankan economy.

The Chinese Ambassador also extended an invitation to Speaker Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena to pay an official visit to the Chinese Parliament.

The monetary assistance by the Government of China towards the development of the Ruhuna University was presented to Vice Chancellor Prof. Sujeewa Amarasena. The Secretary General of Parliament Dammika Dasanayake was also present at the occasion.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 24-12-2020

Indian govt to provide INR 300 mn for Palali airport expansion

Menaka Indrakumar

The Indian government under the Narendra Modi administration will fund Indian Rs 300 million to uplift the Jaffna airport in Palali to international standards within the next two years.

"INR 300 million will be funded by the Indian government and the runway will be extended further to 3 km. This will allow larger flights to operate and set the trend for international airport standards," former Governor of the Northern Province and parliamentarian Dr. Suren Raghavan said.

By 2022, the airport will meet international standard approvals as well to receive flights from Europe and the Middle East as well.

"When this airport is completed it will give a good competition to other international airports, BIA in Colombo and MRJA in Mattala making Sri Lanka a South Asian aviation hub."

Dr. Raghavan said, this is a great post-war development project, that will strengthen ties and create a harmonized social structure among communities and create high paying employment opportunities for youth. The completion of the airport in two years will also result in more FDI to the Northern Province.

"I have discussed the current development with the Indian high commissioner and we both agreed to expedite this project as a priority. The Jaffna International Airport has huge potential to be a gateway to the region. The airport can also be promoted to the Indian market especially during the Jaffna festival seasons."

Air India operated international direct flights from Chennai along with several domestic airlines but they were halted during the pandemic.

DAILY NEWS, COLOMBO 24-12-2020

BOI attracts over USD 800 mn FDI in 2020

Shirajiv Sirimane

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Sri Lanka secured over USD 800 million Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) for 2020, said the new Director-General of the Board of Investments, Sanjaya Mohottala.

In an interview with the 'Daily News Business,' he said that in addition there were commitments to another USD 200 million for the year.

Mohottala said that the 2021 outlook looks impressive with several mega development projects in the pipeline. "One area that will bring in around USD 150 million would be in the cement manufacturing and bagging sector with plans for Kankesanthurai and Hambantota."

In addition, there will be two large wind power parks planned for Punarin where international tenders will be called next year to generate over 200 megawatts of power. In addition, Sri Lanka will also tender to set up solar parks. There will also be international companies that will be investing to set up two sugar refiners in the North East.

"We need to convert projects that are signed and in the pipeline to actual projects and sadly the conversion ratio has been low," Mohottala said that once approval is granted for projects by the BOI, the execution of projects will not get delayed unlike in the previous years.

The main reason for this is that President Gotabaya Rajapaksa is heading the steering committee set up in this regard and the President will take action to iron out bottlenecks that were a major hindrance earlier when executing projects."

He opined that long term plans are underway to improve on the Ease of Doing Business index which is not very impressive. "We plan to make it around 60 in two years."

He also said that the Foreign Service too has now been streamlined and people with integrity have been appointed as ambassadors. "This will be a major plus point to woo FDI and we have already conducted several webinars with them involving top investors of those countries."

Investors wanted a stable government and consistent politics and both these objects to have been met.

He said that Sri Lanka lacks country branding and these new ambassadors will help to reposition Sri Lanka in a better way to investors.

DAILY MIRROR, COLOMBO 25-12-2020

India, Lanka working on USD 100 mn credit line solar power

The multi-pronged project envisages enhancement of solar power usage in government buildings and low-income households through the installation of rooftop units and commissioning of floating solar power plants in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka and India are currently working on a US \$ 100 million credit line by India in the solar power sector a statement from the Indian High Commission said.

"This multi-pronged project envisages enhancement of solar power usage in government buildings and low-income households through the installation of rooftop units and commissioning of floating solar power plants in Sri Lanka," it said.

Sri Lanka is a founding member of the International Solar Alliance which was anchored by India. Recently inaugurated 100 MW wind power project in Mannar involved the participation of technical experts from India. Geographies of the two countries offer bright prospects for a deeper partnership in the fields of solar and wind energy. The statement said:

The statement said Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the world's largest and first of its kind renewable energy park comprising both wind and solar energy with a total capacity of 30 GW at Kutch in Gujarat on December 15, 2020.

Around 72,600 hectares of wasteland was transformed and put to use in building the hybrid energy park. Upon completion, the energy park will contribute towards the reduction of CO2 emissions up to 50 million tons per year. This is equivalent to the planting of 90 million trees.

"India has set ambitious goals to effectively combat climate change and increase the proportion of renewable energy in India's energy mix.

The hybrid plant takes India closer to its target of 175 GW of renewable energy by 2022. Adopting a low-carbon and climate-resilient development approach, India endeavours to generate 450 GW of renewable energy by 2030. Collaboration in renewable and sustainable energy is a focus area for Governments of India and Sri Lanka.

Following these shared priorities, both sides are currently working on a USD 100 million credit line by India in the solar power sector. This multi-pronged project envisages enhancement of solar power usage in government buildings and low-income households through the installation of rooftop units and commissioning of floating solar power plant(s) in Sri Lanka, "the statement said.

SPOTLIGHT, KATHMANDU 17-12-2020

Nepal And U.S. Pledged Their Commitment To Deepen Their Engagement

By New Spotlight Online

The United States-Nepal Council on Trade and Investment, under the United States-Nepal Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA), held its fifth meeting virtually on December 15, 2020 to promote expanded bilateral trade and investment in both goods and services. The meeting was co-chaired by Mr. Christopher Wilson, Assistant United States Trade Representative for South and Central Asia, and Mr. Baikuntha Aryal, Secretary of Commerce and Supplies, Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Supplies, Government of Nepal.

Both delegations included officials from trade, finance, labor, and other regulatory agencies. For detail

According to a press release issued by US Embassy in Nepal, during the meeting, representatives discussed a range of bilateral trade and investment-related issues covered under the TIFA, including, among others, customs and trade facilitation, intellectual property, digital trade and e-commerce, labor, financial services, investment promotion, trade in agriculture products, and utilization of the Nepal Trade Preference Program.

The United States affirmed its engagement with Nepal on its efforts to foster innovation and investment through improvements in intellectual property protection and enforcement. Nepal provided an update on its initiatives to increase intellectual property protection through legislative changes. The United States welcomes the opportunity for further updates and engagement on these changes. Recognizing the important role of digital trade in fostering economic growth, Nepal and the United States agreed to explore ways to deepen engagement on policy developments affecting the digital economy.

The United States welcomed Nepal's efforts to promote internationally recognized worker rights and the implementation of Nepal's labor laws. Nepal affirmed the importance it attaches to worker rights and both countries agreed to engage in constructive discussions on these issues. The United States also welcomed confirmation that there is no restriction on the import of US pork and poultry in Nepali market, and Nepal's Department of Food Technology and Quality Control (DFTQC) Nepal recognizes the food certificates of the National Competent Authority of USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). Both countries agreed to remain engaged on market access issues of mutual interest.

Nepal and the United States discussed the importance of fully utilizing U.S. preferential trade benefits for select products from Nepal, available through December 31, 2025 as a result of the Trade Facilitation and Trade Enforcement Act of 2015. Taking note of Nepal's interest in expanding utilization of the trade preference program and reviewing Nepal's concept note, the United States expressed willingness to provide further technical assistance to Nepal to increase trade and investment.

Nepal provided an update on recent investment policy reform initiatives taken to improve its investment climate, and emphasized its interest in attracting additional foreign investment from the United States. The United States took note of this interest and suggested ways in which Nepal could further enhance the business climate to attract investment.

Both governments pledged their commitment to deepen their engagement in these issue areas over the coming months in intersessional meetings and to hold the 6th TIFA Council Meeting in Kathmandu, Nepal as soon as travel conditions permit.

Background:

The Trade and Investment Framework Agreement Between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of Nepal (TIFA) entered into force on

April 15, 2011. Objectives of the agreement include the expansion of trade, investment and technical cooperation, and strengthening economic relations between the two countries.

Following the 2015 earthquakes in Nepal, the Trade Facilitation and Trade Enforcement Act of 2015 established a new country-specific preference program to grant duty-free treatment to Nepal for products covered by 77 Harmonized Tariff Schedule lines (including handicrafts, shawls, and travel goods).

Nepal and the United States had \$213.4 million in total (two-way) goods trade during 2019, a 38 percent increase compared to 2018.

SPOTLIGHT, KATHMANDU 21-12-2020

World Bank Provides \$80 Million To Nepal To Implement Rural Enterprise and Economic Development Project

By NEW SPOTLIGHT ONLINE

Government of Nepal and World Bank sign \$80 Million Rural Enterprise and Economic Development Project to strengthen Nepal's agriculture sector and boost post-pandemic recovery

According to a press release issued by the World Bank, the Government of Nepal and the World Bank signed a \$80 million (around NPR 9.3 billion) million project today to bolster Nepal's agriculture sector by strengthening rural market linkages and promoting entrepreneurship while creating jobs to support post-COVID-19 recovery.

The Rural Enterprise and Economic Development Project (REED) project was signed by Finance Secretary Sishir Kumar Dhungana on behalf of the Government of Nepal, and the World Bank Country Director for Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, Faris Hadad-Zervos.

"We thank the World Bank Group for providing crucial support with this project which will enhance the access of rural enterprises and small-hold producers to markets and institutional buyers," stated Sishir Kumar Dhungana, Secretary, Ministry of Finance. "Promoting agribusiness competitiveness with sustainable market linkages will be critical to boost Nepal's post-COVID recovery."

The project aims to facilitate productive partnerships between rural producer organizations and private-sector buyers to add value, create jobs and foster sustainable inclusion into, and development of, higher-value domestic and foreign value chains.

The project focuses on five economic corridors covering Provinces 1, 2, Bagmati, Gandaki, Lumbini and Sudurpashchim that offer opportunities for successful linkage activities of the rural entrepreneurs to be supported by the project. REED will work with provincial and local governments, intermediary organizations and small and medium enterprises to build capacity in the agriculture sector and strengthen the entrepreneurship ecosystem.

The project will also finance investments in municipal agriculture centers and value chain infrastructures to ensure the availability of inputs for farming as recovery actions from COVID-19. The project will use labor-

intensive Cash for Work mechanism, to the extent possible, in short-term public works.

“The project brings a unique opportunity to transform Nepal’s agriculture sector and spur economic recovery from the pandemic’s fallout by bolstering rural enterprises and creating local jobs and opportunities,” said Faris Hadad-Zervos, World Bank Country Director for Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka. “By fostering meaningful collaboration among various actors, the project can promote Nepali agriculture products globally by stimulating many niche sectors such as coffee, tea, fruit and medicinal products, among others.”

The project supports the Government of Nepal’s Agriculture Development Strategy 2015–2035 that aims to create a sustainable, competitive, inclusive and resilient agricultural sector that drives economic growth with private sector participation.

SPOTLIGHT, KATHMANDU 30-12-2020 **NEPAL-U.S TRADE TALK**

For Deeper Engagement Nepal And U.S. Commit To Deepening Their Engagement **By A Correspondent**

Nepal and the United States are far away geographically. However, U.S is Nepal’s fourth largest trade partner, after two neighbors India and China. Most important part is that trade between the two countries is in Nepal’s favor.

Although COVID-19 has badly affected Nepal’s tourism sector, U.S is the third highest country to send the tourists in Nepal. Given such an important role as a trade partner, trade talks between Nepal and U.S are highly important.

Last week, Nepal and U.S. concluded their trade talks expressing commitment to deepen their engagement. Led by Dr. Baikuntha Aryal, secretary at Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supply, Nepal has expressed the hope that U.S will continue to provide duty free access to U.S Market.

The United States affirmed its engagement with Nepal on its efforts to foster innovation and investment through improvements in intellectual property protection and enforcement. Nepal provided an update on its initiatives to increase intellectual property protection through legislative changes. The United States welcomes the opportunity for further updates and engagement on these changes. Recognizing the important role of digital trade in fostering economic growth, Nepal and the United States agreed to explore ways to deepen engagement on policy developments affecting the digital economy.

The United States welcomed Nepal’s efforts to promote internationally recognized worker rights and the implementation of Nepal’s labor laws. Nepal affirmed the importance it attaches to worker rights and both countries agreed to engage in constructive discussions on these issues. The United States also welcomed confirmation that there is no restriction on the import of US pork and poultry in Nepali market, and Nepal’s Department of Food Technology and Quality Control (DFTQC) Nepal recognizes the food certificates of the National Competent

Authority of USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). Both countries agreed to remain engaged on market access issues of mutual interest.

The United States-Nepal Council on Trade and Investment, under the United States-Nepal Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA), held its fifth meeting virtually on December 15, 2020 to promote expanded bilateral trade and investment in both goods and services.

The meeting was co-chaired by Christopher Wilson, Assistant United States Trade Representative for South and Central Asia, and Baikuntha Aryal, Secretary of Commerce and Supplies, Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Supplies, Government of Nepal. Both delegations included officials from trade, finance, labor, and other regulatory agencies.

According to a press release issued by US Embassy in Nepal, during the meeting, representatives discussed a range of bilateral trade and investment-related issues covered under the TIFA, including, among others, customs and trade facilitation, intellectual property, digital trade and e-commerce, labor, financial services, investment promotion, trade in agriculture products, and utilization of the Nepal Trade Preference Program.

Nepal and the United States discussed the importance of fully utilizing U.S. preferential trade benefits for select products from Nepal, available through December 31, 2025 as a result of the Trade Facilitation and Trade Enforcement Act of 2015. Taking note of Nepal’s interest in expanding utilization of the trade preference program and reviewing Nepal’s concept note, the United States expressed willingness to provide further technical assistance to Nepal to increase trade and investment.

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Nepal and the United States had \$213.4 million in total (two-way) goods trade during 2019, a 38 percent increase compared to 2018.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 17-12-2020

Pakistan returns \$1 billion of Saudi Arabia's soft loan, officials say

Reuters

Pakistan has returned \$1 billion to Saudi Arabia as the second instalment of a \$3 billion soft loan, as Islamabad reaches out to Beijing for a commercial loan to help it offset pressure to repay another \$1 billion to Riyadh next month, officials said on Wednesday.

Analysts say it is unusual for Riyadh to press for the return of money. Relations between historically close friends Pakistan and Saudi Arabia suffered a strain earlier this year when Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, in an unusually sharp warning, asked Saudi Arabia-led Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to stop dilly-dallying on the convening of a meeting of its Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) on Kashmir.

Army Chief Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa subsequently visited Riyadh in August to ease the tensions. Gen Bajwa also met the Saudi ambassador in Islamabad on Tuesday.

With the \$1 billion flowing out, Pakistan — which has \$13.3 billion in State Bank foreign reserves — could face a balance of payments issue after clearing the next Saudi instalment.

“China has come to our rescue,” a foreign ministry official told Reuters.

A finance ministry official said the SBP was already in talks with Chinese commercial banks.

“We've sent \$1 billion to Saudi Arabia,” he said. Another \$1 billion will be repaid to Riyadh next month, he said. Islamabad had returned \$1 billion in July.

Although a \$1.2 billion surplus in the current account balance and a record \$11.77 billion in remittances in the past five months have helped support the economy, having to return the Saudi money is still a setback.

Saudi Arabia gave Pakistan a \$3 billion loan and a \$3.2 billion oil credit facility in late 2018. After Islamabad sought Riyadh's support over human rights violations by India in occupied Kashmir, Saudi Arabia has pushed Pakistan to repay the loan.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 18-12-2020

Foreign loans surge by 45pc in five months of fiscal

Khaleeq Kiani

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's foreign loan inflows have jumped by almost 45 per cent to about \$4.5 billion in first five months (July-November) of the current fiscal year as compared to the corresponding period in the last fiscal.

With the loans taken in the five months, the country has received a total of about \$23.6bn in foreign loans during tenure of the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf government (since July 1, 2018), according to data on Foreign Economic Assistance compiled by the Ministry of Economic Affairs.

The ministry said on Thursday “the government has received \$4.499bn total external inflows from multiple financing sources” during July-November of fiscal year 2020-21. This amounted to 37pc of the annual budget estimates of \$12.233bn for the entire FY2020-21, it added.

In the corresponding period of fiscal year 2019-20, the external inflows stood at \$3.108bn, which was around 24pc of the annual budgeted amount of \$12.958bn.

Govt has received a total of about \$23.6bn in foreign loans since July 1, 2018

Last week, the ministry reported that Pakistan had received a total of \$10.7bn during FY2019-20 and \$8.4bn during FY2018-19.

Since the outbreak of Covid-19 the disbursements for project financing from development partners had slowed down, the ministry said, adding that the pandemic had resulted in most economic activities, including work on development projects, coming to a halt.

However, after easing of pandemic-related restrictions by the government the economic activities are being revived, which may lead to an increase in project financing in the current fiscal year (2020-21).

Giving a breakdown of the \$4.499bn foreign loans, the ministry said about \$1.3bn, or 29pc, pertained to programme loans/budgetary support, mostly from multilateral lenders, to help restructure Pakistan's economy. About \$1.621bn, or 36pc, was foreign commercial borrowing to repay maturing foreign commercial loans, it said.

In addition, \$518 million, or 12pc, was received as project financing for development activities, presumably for improving the socio-economic development of the country and asset creation. Another \$60m, or 1pc, was short-term credit while \$1bn, or 22pc, was received in terms of time safe deposits during the current fiscal year.

The bilateral and multilateral development partners disbursed \$1.878bn of foreign economic assistance during July-November of the ongoing fiscal year against the budgetary allocation of \$5.811bn for fiscal year 2020-21 on concessional terms with longer maturity.

Among the multilateral development partners, the Asian Development Bank provided \$712m and the World Bank disbursed \$694m against the budgetary allocation of \$2.257bn. From bilateral sources, France, the US and China provided \$33.4m, \$63.8m and \$21.8m, respectively. During July-October of 2020 total servicing of external public debt was \$2.45bn against the annual repayment estimates of \$10.363bn for the entire fiscal year. Of this, \$2.035bn (83pc of total external public debt servicing) was repaid as principal and \$415m (18pc) as interest on the outstanding stock of external public debt.

During July-October of 2020-21, the government settled \$1.295bn worth of foreign commercial loans. Similarly, the government also repaid \$695m to multilateral and \$102m to bilateral development partners.

Considering the foreign exchange constraints, financing of development projects and repayments of these huge external public debts compelled the incumbent

government to further borrow from multiple sources, the ministry said.

For the period July-October of 2020-21, net transfers to the government were \$144m, as external loan inflows stood at \$2.179bn against total outflows of \$2.035bn in the same period. Positive net transfers came mainly due to higher inflows from multilateral lending agencies. Interestingly, the stock of external loans which were obtained on market rates decreased by \$618m and the share of concessional external loans with longer maturity increased by \$761m. As of June 30 this year, Pakistan's total external public debt amounted to \$77.9bn, compared to \$73.4bn in the same period last year, showing a growth rate of 6pc. The total external public debt came from three key sources — 51pc from multilateral debt, followed by 31pc in bilateral debt, including China's safe deposits, and remaining 18pc from foreign commercial banks and institutions, including Eurobonds and Sukuk.

THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 20-12-2020

Gwadar port provides huge trade opportunity to CARs, Afghanistan: Razak Dawood

APP

ISLAMABAD - Adviser to Prime Minister on Commerce and Investment Abdul Razak Dawood has said that Gwadar port would provide huge opportunities to the energy rich Central Asian Countries and Afghanistan for regional trade connectivity.

Talking to APP in an exclusive interview here, adviser Abdul Razak Dawood said that government was prioritizing the economic integration to promote regional trade and connect the regional important trade players with the deep sea port Gwadar.

Replying to question, he said that Central Asian Republic (CARs) are demanding to providing them trade facilitation in Gwadar and Bin Qasim sea port for international and regional trade and providing them the facility of the warehouse. Adviser said Deep Sea Port of Gwadar has its own geo-strategic and economic importance which was located at the centre of regional connectivity and a possible railway link from Gwadar to Kandhar and other parts of Afghanistan.

He said Central Asia via Afghanistan can become a key trade and transportation route for the entire region.

Razak Dawood said that Pakistan was actively participating in regional forums of Central Asia Economic Cooperation (CAREC) and Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement (QTTA) so that maximum benefits could be taken when the Gwadar Port operates at full capacity in near future. Government of Afghanistan has requested Pakistan to provide Cross-Staffing Facility at Gwadar Port, he said. He informed that when modalities are finalized by the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR), ample employment opportunities will be generated for the locals. He said development of Gwadar Port under China-Pakistan Economic Corridors (CPEC) would provide more opportunities to establish new industries as huge

investment has been pouring in under CPEC and it will also provide the shortest possible route to the goods in transit.

Iran, Pakistan open new border gateway to ease trade

He said that with the improvement in Trans-shipment facilities at Gwadar, the whole dynamics of the regional connectivity would be changed.

The Adviser said that Gwadar was at strategic location giving China and Central Asia an access to the Gulf Region and the Middle East. He said that in future, it would be a main Sea-gate for the Central Asia. It would also become easy to send products from Xinxiang and Central Asian countries to other regions, he said. Replying to another question, he said that this port was likely to reduce transport time for goods from Gwadar to Western China and the Central Asian Republics by 60% to 70%.

Razak Dawood said that all possible steps are being taken by the Ministry of Commerce, in coordination with other stakeholders, to provide modern facilities at Gwadar Port so that goods clearance time may be reduced as per the set international standards.

Moreover, in the forthcoming Strategic Trade Policy Framework (STPF 2020-25) special focus has been accorded to Trade facilitation, Economic Infrastructure Development, Transshipment and Development of Economic Corridors (CPEC and CAREC) so that overall policy environment could be improved in general and regional connectivity should be increased in particular, he informed.

Responding to a question on Pak- Afghanistan, Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA), he said that in 2015, Pakistan shared a draft Pak-Afghan Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) with Afghanistan.

Subsequently, Afghanistan has shared its comments on draft PTA and its request list and offer lists in November, 2019 and June 2020, he added.

Razak Dawood said the work on Afghanistan's Request List has been undertaken by Ministry of Commerce, in consultation with government sector stakeholders including Ministry of Industries, Ministry of National Food Security and Research and FBR, as well as private sector.

He said that during his recent visit to Kabul in November, the two sides decided to form a Technical Negotiation Committee (TNC) to start negotiations on PTA.

The ministry of Commerce has notified its TNC and requested the Afghan side to follow suit, so that first meeting of TNC may be held.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 25-12-2020

Fiscal deficit rises by Rs189bn in July-Oct period

Khaleeq Kiani

ISLAMABAD: Putting country's fiscal deficit at 1.7 per cent of GDP (Rs753 billion) in first four months of current fiscal year, the government on Thursday said continued economic recovery in recent months could be affected by the resurgence of new Covid-19 cases.

“With the resurgence of new cases of coronavirus, still there is a risk of slower economic performance mainly due to halted activities in services,” the Economic Adviser’s Wing of the Ministry of Finance said in its Monthly Economic Update & Outlook (MEUO) released on Thursday.

The report said the overall fiscal deficit during July-October, FY2021 stood at 1.7pc of GDP (Rs753bn) against 1.4pc of GDP (Rs564bn) in the comparable period of last year, showing an increase of Rs189bn or 33.5pc. On the other hand, the primary balance posted a surplus of Rs178bn (0.4pc) during July-October, FY2021 against the surplus of Rs130bn (0.3pc of GDP) in the same period of FY2020, showing an increase of about 37pc, the outlook added.

The MEUO noted that economic recovery — which started at the beginning of the second quarter of the current fiscal year — was keeping its momentum. However, the main risk factor to the situation was the recently observed resurgence of new waves of infections world-wide and also in Pakistan, necessitating imposition of new restrictions on social contacting that may impact on the economic expansion.

Surplus in primary balance up by Rs48bn

“The effects on the economic outlook will depend on the intensity of pandemic and duration of restrictions” the report noted.

It said the economy was currently recovering from two consecutive crises. The first one that continued in most of 2018 and 2019, which compelled necessary macroeconomic adjustments needed to correct the accumulation of unsustainable external balance of payment deficits. The second was associated with Covid-19 global lockdowns — including in Pakistan during February-August — to contain the pandemic. “The recovery from both of these shocks is underway and promises strong growth in the current fiscal year,” the outlook said.

It said the agriculture sector during FY2021 is expected to surpass the growth target of 2.8pc on the back of improved production of sugarcane and rice compared to FY2020 due to timely measures adopted by the government. “Also, on the basis of input availability and better weather forecast, the prospects for growth in agriculture are very encouraging”.

This is supported by recent Suparco’s estimates about better performance of crops in kharif season. For rabi season 2020-21, wheat crop sowing is in progress and is expected to be in time as compared to previous year mainly due to timely termination of cotton and rice crops. In November 2020, current account remained in surplus (\$447 million) for fifth consecutive month. Thus, current account posted a surplus of \$1.6bn (1.4pc of GDP) during July-November FY2021 against a deficit of \$1.7bn last year (-1.6pc of GDP). Contractions in import payments for both goods and services were the primary factors, coupled with healthy growth in workers’ remittances resulted in surplus of current account.

The report said that industrial activity, measured by the Large Scale Manufacturing (LSM) index was the sector most exposed to external conditions. In every month since July 2020, the year-on-year growth rate of LSM has been positive. Industrial activity has now again fully recovered from the downfall following the preceding balance of payment crises, the report said.

THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 28-12-2020

Pakistan’s trade with Africa reaches \$4.18 billion in 2019-20: Razak Dawood

Six new Commercial Sections opened in Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Senegal, Sudan and Tanzania

APP

ISLAMABAD - Adviser to Prime Minister on Commerce and Investment Abdul Razak Dawood on Sunday said Pakistan’s trade with African countries touched \$4.18 billion in 2019-20, which increased by seven percent as compared to the previous year (2018-19).

As a result of Pakistan’s new engagement with African countries through “Look Africa Campaign” started by government of Pakistan, despite Covid-19 pandemic, exports to Africa increased by seven percent in 2019-20 from \$1.38 billion in 2018-19 to \$1.48 billion in 2019-20, the advisor told APP.

The advisor said total trade with Africa has increased from \$3.19 billion in 2016-17 to \$4.18 billion in 2019-20. Replying to a query on the surge in trade with African countries, he said Pakistan’s trade with Africa remained stagnant at US \$ three billion per year for last few years but because of government’s trade policies with Africa, now multilateral trade with African region crossed the mark of US\$ four billion.

Japan to develop world’s first wooden satellites by 2023 to reduce ‘space junk’

He added that main reason of the low trade volume was low level of engagement of Pakistan with Africa. Razak Dawood said traditionally, rice has been our top export to Kenya and other African countries.

However, “We are planning to enhance exports of pharmaceuticals, surgical goods and light engineering and electronic products including tractors and agricultural implements, two and three wheelers, commercial and domestic fans, water pumps and electrical machinery and equipment etc”. He said there was a lot of potential of these products to connect with the untapped African Market.

Replying to a question, he said under the “Look Africa Policy” of Ministry of Commerce, “We are taking different initiatives. Six new Commercial Sections have been opened in Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Senegal, Sudan and Tanzania, in addition to four existing Commercial Sections in Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria and South Africa, to cover top ten economies of Africa”. He informed that ‘Look Africa Trade Forums’ have been organized in all major cities of Pakistan to create awareness among business community of Pakistan about potential of African markets.

He added that establishment of bilateral linkages with major African countries was underway.

Razak Dawood said Joint Working Group with Egypt and Joint Trade Committee with Kenya have been established while MoUs have been shared with multiple African countries.

He said that the government also prioritized to increase more participation in trade exhibitions in Africa in future to enhance the economic and trade integration with these countries.

He informed that for the first time, Pakistan was expected to participate in International Khartoum Fair in January 2021.

He said Ministry of Commerce has also organized Pakistan Africa Trade Development Conference in Nairobi, Kenya on 30th and 31st January 2020.

President of Kenya inaugurated the Conference; in which 246 African delegates from 26 African countries participated.

The advisor said 115 delegates including 85 companies from Pakistan also participated in the Conference and 1883 B2B meetings were held during the Conference between Pakistani and African business people.

He said exports to Kenya increased from \$265.1 million in 2018-19 to \$289.3 million in 2019-20, recording an increase of nine percent despite Covid-19 pandemic. He said our decision to organize Look Africa Trade Development Conference in Kenya and the inauguration of the Conference by the president of Kenya signifies the strength of bilateral trade relations between the two countries.

He informed that Pakistan's total trade with Tanzania has reached \$194.58 million in 2019-20, as compared to \$136.52 million in 2018-19, which made Tanzania an important trade partner.

Razak Dawood said a month ago in November, a four-member business delegation from Tanzania visited Pakistan after decades. The delegation was led by the President Tanzania Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture. These bilateral exchanges were expected to enhance trade between the two countries.

THE NATION, ISLAMABAD 30-12-2020

Pakistan, Russia to establish North-South gas pipeline project

Fawad Yousafzai

Islamabad - Pakistan and Russian Federation have agreed to establish a special purpose company, namely Pakistan Stream Pipeline (Pvt.) Ltd for the execution of North-South gas pipeline project, it is learnt reliably here.

The matters pertaining the new company and the start of execution work was discussed on December 23, 2020, during the second meeting of the Joint Russian-Pakistani Technical Committee for the implementation of the North-South gas pipeline project held in via video conference.

The Russian side of was headed by the Director of the Department of International Cooperation of the Ministry of Energy of the Russian Federation A.N. Gospodariev and it also included representatives of the Ministry of Energy of the Russian Federation, the Federal State Unitary Enterprise Center for Operational Services (FSUE TsEU) of the Ministry of Energy of Russia, OOO Eurasian Pipeline Consortium (OOO ETK) and PAO TMK. The Pakistani side was headed by the Director of the International Cooperation Department of the Ministry of Energy of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Saira Najib, and it also included representatives of the Ministry of Energy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the NSGP Technical Committee

The parties considered the draft JCC Regulations proposed by the Pakistani side and agreed to exclude from clause 2. Functions and submit the following sub-clauses to ISGS and the nominated Russian company for consideration which includes Technical parameters and related issues; Shareholders Agreement between ISGS and the nominated Russian company; Memorandum and Articles of Association of a special purpose company; Draft Implementation Plan; Sources of supplies of equipment and material support.

The Russian side informed the Pakistani side about the consideration by the relevant federal executive bodies of the Russian Federation of the Protocol on Amendments to the Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan on cooperation in the implementation of the North-South gas pipeline project dated October 16, 2015 and reported that will send an adjusted, but not final version of the specified document to the Pakistani side by January 15, 2020.

The parties discussed the creation of a special purpose company, namely Pakistan Stream Pipeline (Pvt.) Ltd. The Pakistani side presented to the Russian side a presentation of the draft Shareholders Agreement, Memorandum and Articles of Association of the special purpose company.

The parties agreed that FSUE "TsEU", LLC "ETK" and PJSC "TMK" will comprehensively study the submitted projects of the Shareholders Agreement, Memorandum and Articles of Association of the special-purpose company and prepare comments, suggestions and additions to these documents.

The parties agreed that FSUE "TsEU" On January 20, 2021, will send to the Ministry of Energy (Petroleum Division) the indicated list of materials to the Shareholders Agreement, Memorandum and Articles of Association of the special purpose company. The Pakistani side noted the need for an early approval of these documents in view of the need to start construction no later than mid-2021. The parties agreed, prior to signing the Shareholders Agreement, to create a separate working group to discuss and make joint decisions on the technical parameters of the North-South gas pipeline construction project and hiring design contractors.

The Russian side proposed to take into account in the project the costs incurred by PJSC "TMK" related to the implementation of PreFEED. The Pakistani side expressed its readiness to discuss this issue and asked for the results of PreFEED. It is worth to mention here that earlier it was planned that the entire project will be executed with Russian funding, but after Supreme Court decision on the GIDC, the government of Pakistan has decided to provide maximum funding to the project.

Now it has been decided that Pakistan's share in the equity will increase to 76 per cent while the Russian share will be 24 percent, said the source.

Similarly, initially it was proposed that the pipeline of 1,100 kilometres was to be laid with a diameter of 42 inches with capacity to transport 1.2 billion cubic feet RLNG per day, however now Pakistan wants to increase of the pipeline to 1.6 bcf/d with a diameter of either 52 inches or 56 inches. In November Pakistan and Russia had agreed to rename the project from North South Gas Pipeline Project to Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline (PSGP) Project.

THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD 29-12-2020

'Improved Pak-Afghan trade means regional integration'

APP

ISLAMABAD: Adviser to Prime Minister on Commerce on Investment Razak Dawood on Monday said improving trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan will maximise chances of regional economic integration and enhance the connectivity among neighbouring countries.

In recent trade dialogue, Pakistan and Afghanistan were mainly focusing on transit, bilateral and informal trade issues through the agenda of shared prosperity and peace, the adviser said while addressing the opening session of 8th round of three-day Afghanistan Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA). Minister for Commerce and Industry Nisar Ahmad was also present in the meeting.

"We have already allowed Afghanistan to use Gwadar for their transit trade as the same was demanded by the Central Asian States to connect them with Gwadar port in near future," he said. Pakistan has agreed to provide opportunities to Afghanistan trade items through Gwadar and Bin Qasim ports in a good gesture to enhance the economic ties. Preferential trade agreement (PTA) between Pakistan and Afghanistan would be finalized by the end of January next.

The adviser hoped that the review agreement of APTTA would also be signed in coming months of 2021 and investment-related matters would be resolved in the recent bilateral dialogue between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The adviser said due to corona and other internal issues Pak-Afghan trade was on halt but now after the normalisation, bilateral and transit trade is expected to achieve previous gains. Both sides would discuss to establish economic zones to enhance the bilateral investment and the trade opportunities.

The adviser said in previous seven rounds of negotiation, actions were agreed in a comprehensive document to support peace and stability. Dawood told media through the recent rounds of dialogue, both sides would resolve all the transit and bilateral trade issues along with issues of other informal trade. In coming month, he would lead delegation to negotiate on the 9th round of APTTA with Afghanistan and all the issues would be resolved through the common agenda of peace and prosperity.

Ahmad said the government of Afghanistan under the leadership of President Ashraf Ghani is committed to providing all facilities to Pakistan for increasing the trade and investment opportunities in both sides.

There is huge potential to enhance the bilateral and transit trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan and in recent years both sides are negotiating the common agenda of peace prosperity and regional harmony.

The minister said through World Trade Organization Afghanistan wants to export to the South Asian market via Pakistan for connecting the regional economy and trade.

He said Afghanistan is ready to connect the regional countries with Central Asian States and that Pakistan and Afghanistan could play a major role through their geographical location.

Federal Secretary for Commerce Sualeh Ahmad Faruqi and Ambassador of Afghanistan to Pakistan Omar Zakhilwal also highlighted the different issues of trade and mutual cooperation between both sides and also gave proposals to resolve these issues.