



Selections from Regional Press

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About the Publication

Since 1982, the "Selections from Regional Press," a fortnightly publication of the Institute of Regional Studies, has been providing exclusive coverage of key developments in South Asia. The publication focuses on areas such as foreign and internal affairs, economics, culture, social issues, defense, nuclear development, scientific research, and space technology. It is a compilation of newspaper articles published daily in the respective countries' press, with sources properly acknowledged and cited.

Articles selected for publication undergo multiple rounds of review to ensure they are unbiased and cover significant events that impact the region's traditional and non-traditional security. For this reason, "Selections from Regional Press" has been a valuable resource for academics, students, researchers, practitioners, and anyone interested in regional affairs for decades. The selection team is dedicated to maintaining its longstanding tradition of providing reliable information on issues of great importance at the time.

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Selections from Regional Press

Foreign Affairs

India

India – Pakistan Relations

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 19, 2025

S Jaishankar on Pakistan: 'Cancer of terrorism now consuming its body politic'

HT News Desk

S Jaishankar noted strained ties with Pakistan due to terrorism. He outlined India's supportive role for smaller neighbours.

External affairs minister S Jaishankar, during the 19th Nani A Palkhivala Memorial Lecture, discussed India's relationships with its neighbouring countries, emphasising that ties with Pakistan remain strained due to its support for cross-border terrorism. Jaishankar said this "cancer" of terrorism is now consuming Pakistan's political landscape, news agency ANI reported. "India's challenge has been to rebuild a neighbourhood in the aftermath of the partition. It is now doing so through a generous and non-reciprocal approach, funding and supporting energy, rail and road connectivity, expanding trade and investment and intensifying exchanges and contacts," ANI quoted Jaishankar as saying as he spoke about the challenges faced in India's neighbourhood. Speaking about Pakistan, Jaishankar said, "Pakistan remains the exception in our neighbourhood in view of its support for cross-border terrorism, and that cancer is now consuming its own body politic." Citing examples from recent history, the EAM said, "In times of crisis, be it the pandemic or the economic meltdown, India has actually served as an insurance for its smaller neighbours. Sri Lanka discovered that in 2023, when India put together a package of more than USD 4 billion even while the rest of the world didn't. It is also a reality that political developments may throw up complex situations as we are currently witnessing in Bangladesh. The very purpose of closer cooperation and contacts is actually to address such contingencies at the end of the day. It is the mutuality of interest that

should be counted upon to prevail." Speaking about India's other two neighbours, Myanmar and Afghanistan, Jaishankar said, "We in India have long-standing people-to-people ties with both societies and we must be mindful that those more proximate have stakes which are quite different from others far away."

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 23, 2025

'We didn't stop trading...': EAM Jaishankar on trade with Pakistan

HT News Desk

S Jaishankar reiterated India's concern over the most favoured nation (MFN) status, granted to Pakistan, which Pakistan did not reciprocate.

External affairs minister S Jaishankar clarified India's position on trade with Pakistan, saying that it was not New Delhi but the Islamabad administration that chose to suspend trade in 2019.

"We did not stop trading. It was their administration that made the decision in 2019 to stop trading with us," Jaishankar said during a press conference in Washington, D.C. on Wednesday.

He also reiterated India's ongoing concern over the most favoured nation (MFN) status, which India had granted to Pakistan, but Pakistan did not reciprocate.

"Our concern about this issue was from the beginning that we should get MFN status. We used to give this status to Pakistan but they did not give it to us," said the external affairs minister.

In his remarks, he pointed out the absence of recent discussions or initiatives on trade from either side, saying, "So, neither such talks have taken place with Pakistan regarding trade from our side, nor did they take any initiative from their side."

Speaking on India-US ties, Jaishankar said that both nations share a "strong degree" of trust and convergence.

"We have a very strong degree of trust today between India and the United States, a very high level of convergence of our interests," he said. He also mentioned that the two nations

share a common sense of global responsibility and are dedicated to advancing their national interests while strengthening their bilateral partnership. "A sense that while we serve our national interest, while we build our bilateral partnership, definitely on regional issues and global issues, there is a lot of good that we can do. So that sense of global good was also very evident conceptually in what we discussed," said Jaishankar. "In terms of the bilateral ties, this was the first day of the administration, so we had sort of essentially a broad brush conversation, didn't get too deep into details, but there was an agreement, a consensus between us that we need to be bolder, bigger and more ambitious," the minister added.

With ANI inputs

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 23, 2025

Stop stonewalling talks on Indus treaty

HT Editorial

The neutral expert's ruling this week that he is competent to adjudicate on the issue is a vindication of India's position

India has for long contended that disputes with Pakistan over hydropower projects on shared trans-border rivers should be handled through a graded approach as provided under the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960. Pakistan, however, resorted to the unprecedented step of both seeking a World Bank-appointed neutral expert and approaching the Permanent Court of Arbitration at the Hague to deal with disputes over the Kishenganga and Ratle hydropower projects in Jammu and Kashmir. The neutral expert's ruling this week that he is competent to adjudicate on the issue is a vindication of India's position. India has not participated in the proceedings at the Court of Arbitration and has taken a consistent position that the neutral expert's decision should be awaited before taking recourse to other approaches included in the graded mechanism under the Indus Waters Treaty for handling disputes.

India also gave notice to Pakistan last year about its intention to review and modify the 62-year-old treaty because of the

neighbouring country's intransigence in handling disputes related to the sharing of waters of cross-border rivers. This process and the disputes over the two hydropower projects are continuing at a time when relations between the two countries are at possibly their lowest point. At a time when the climate crisis is wreaking havoc on glaciers and river flows, countries should be doubling down on joint efforts to handle ecological issues, including the management of cross-border rivers. The Indus Waters Treaty is undoubtedly the most durable agreement between the South Asian rivals, though it has become vulnerable to subcontinental tensions. Grandstanding on such a sensitive matter will not advance Pakistan's interests.

India – China Relations

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 25, 2025

Resetting ties with Beijing

HT Editorial

New Delhi needs to balance its relations with China and the growing partnership with the US so that Indian interests are best served

Foreign secretary Vikram Misri's visit to Beijing next week is significant for two reasons — it is expected to build on the momentum created by the October 23 understanding between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping to take forward the process of addressing the border issue and overall relations through various mechanisms, and the trip is taking place against the backdrop of US President Donald Trump's return to the White House. It is noteworthy that Misri's visit will come days after the Trump administration signalled its commitment to the Indo-Pacific region by hosting a Quad foreign ministers' meeting as its first foreign policy engagement.

India has adopted a cautious and nuanced position towards the process of rebuilding ties with China, while Beijing has sought to project a picture of normalcy already being restored, with its persistent calls for the border dispute to be de-hyphenated from

other aspects of the relationship. Besides the obvious issue of the next steps for resolving the standoff on the Line of Actual Control (LAC), travel, trade, investment and resumption of people-to-people contacts through the Kailash-Mansarovar pilgrimage are expected to come up when Misri meets Chinese vice foreign minister Sun Weidong in Beijing. These talks will build on recent negotiations between the foreign ministers and special representatives on the border issue.

There has been speculation that Trump's return in the US may have spurred efforts by India and China to find a way out of the more than four-year-long face-off on the LAC in Ladakh, and the mercurial American leader has declared his intention to weaponise tariffs to further his MAGA project while simultaneously reaching out to Xi. China, which is showing signs of a deepening economic slowdown, is in Trump's crosshairs. Beijing needs new markets and more business to shield itself from an economic knockout if Washington were to push in that direction. There is a clear attempt on the part of Beijing to regain greater access to the Indian market. The corollary is that India too needs China for low-cost imports and technology, at least until domestic manufacturing, research and development with other partners and the derisking of crucial supply chains are on a sounder footing.

The key issue now is how India can balance relations with China and the growing partnership with the US so that Indian interests are best served. From all indications given by Chinese leaders, Beijing wants to put Galwan and Doklam firmly in the rear-view mirror, separate the border dispute and focus on trade, visas and other exchanges. This is easier said than done, especially given the public sentiment in India because of the prolonged standoff on the LAC and the difficulty that the Indian government will face in selling such an approach to the people.

A reset of India-China ties will need hard work by both sides, including a concerted approach on addressing the border dispute,

which continues to have the potential to flare up again. India needs to negotiate hard so that China is impressed about the centrality of peace on the LAC to any furthering of the overall relationship. At the same time, India will need to make it a win-win project without raising hackles in Washington, especially among China hawks such as secretary of state, Marco Rubio. Engagement with mechanisms such as Quad could both reassure India's western partners and help nudge China towards accommodating Indian concerns about the border and fair trade.

[The Telegraph, Kolkata, January 28, 2025](#)

Many parleys: Editorial on recent high-level meetings between Indian and Chinese officials

If Delhi and Beijing can each benefit from the other's growing economy, collaborate on shared concerns like climate change, and maintain peace on the border, that would be a win for both

The visit to Beijing by the foreign secretary, Vikram Misri, over the past two days marks the latest chapter in a rapid series of high-level meetings between Indian and Chinese officials as the Asian giants try to bring some normalcy back to their ties after years of heightened tensions. Mr Misri met not only his counterpart, the Chinese vice-foreign minister, but also China's top diplomat, Wang Yi, and senior officials of the Chinese Communist Party. Aside from the rhetoric that emerged from the Chinese side following these meetings, calling for the two nations to meet halfway and focus on substantive collaboration, the meetings themselves point to the importance that both sides appear to be attaching to their attempted *détente*. Ending more than four years of a military standoff along their *de facto* Himalayan border, India and China agreed last October to withdraw troops from friction points along the Line of Actual Control. Right after that, Prime Minister Narendra Modi met the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, on the margins of the BRICS summit in Russia. Since then, Mr Wang has met — in separate interactions — the national security advisor, Ajit Doval, and the external affairs minister, S. Jaishankar.

The defence minister, Rajnath Singh, also met his Chinese counterpart, Dong Jun, in November.

While these hectic parleys demonstrate intent on both sides to try to build on the momentum from the border pullback, the recent crises in their relationship have deepened mutual distrust that will not go away with a few meetings. The past few months have seen India raise concerns about a new Chinese plan to build the world's largest dam in Tibet on the upstream part of what India calls the Brahmaputra. New Delhi fears that the dam could allow Beijing to weaponise water, either by denying India adequate water or by unleashing floods. Meanwhile, Mr Jaishankar met his counterparts from the United States of America, Japan and Australia in Washington on the margins of the swearing-in ceremony of the US president, Donald Trump. The Quad grouping issued a statement that was more overtly critical of China and its territorial ambitions in the Indo-Pacific than has been the norm. No one expects New Delhi and Beijing to be best friends. But they do not need to be enemies either. If they can each benefit from the other's growing economy, collaborate on shared concerns like climate change, and maintain peace on the border, that would be a win for both.

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 30, 2025

India and China need each other. But will the detente last?

Kanti Bajpai

India and China are finally talking to each other again rather than past each other. Are we, then, headed back to their pre-Galwan "normal" relationship, or is the present thaw likely to turn cold and conflictual again? Nothing in India-China relations is ever simple and linear, but the signs are that the two countries are moving towards the normal diplomacy of the past 35 years, ever since Rajiv Gandhi's breakthrough trip to Beijing in 1988.

From 1988 onwards, India-China relations came to rest on four pillars that undergirded a fair degree of military and diplomatic

stability: Summitry, border negotiations, confidence building measures (CBMs), and people-to-people (P2P) ties including trade. Until Galwan, the top leadership of India and China would meet regularly, bilaterally and multilaterally, often more than once a year. Running parallel to summitry were the border negotiations. In one form or another, talks on a final territorial settlement have run for over 30 years, with few interruptions (a remarkable fact).

Since the two militaries could clash at the border, they had worked out a series of CBMs to reduce the risk of serious escalation — Galwan was the exception that proved the rule (fatalities were low). Beyond these state-to-state measures, Delhi and Beijing encouraged P2P — tourism, cultural and academic links, and trade — to anchor ties at the societal level as well. As a result, thousands of Indian students are in China getting relatively low-priced and high-quality education and are also getting to know their host country beyond the inflammatory headlines.

At least three factors are driving India and China back to this normal diplomacy. In a piece I wrote for the Asia Peace Programme at the National University of Singapore before Donald Trump won the US presidential election, I suggested that the three drivers of détente are economic, military, and political. These will likely be even stronger drivers of India-China diplomacy now that Trump is at the helm in Washington.

Economically, India and China need each other. India's economy is stubbornly stuck on a 30-year growth path of 7 per cent per annum. China's economy is languishing at 5 per cent per annum and could further slow down. To grow, Indian businesses desperately need Chinese products including in many key areas like pharmaceuticals, electronics, and also infrastructure. As for Chinese businesses, they need to diversify in a world where Western protectionism against them is growing. Looking ahead, India is a potentially huge market for China.

Militarily, the two countries are in a stalemate. It is clear after Galwan that both

sides are prepared to maintain huge military deployments in physically horrible environments to defend every inch of territory. But these take a huge toll on men, materiel, and money. More importantly, given the terrain and climate, neither side can likely ever win an outright victory on the border. Plus, both confront other military challenges. India must always reckon with the possibility of conflict with Pakistan over cross-border terrorism, and worse still, a two-front war with China and Pakistan. For China, the main military concerns are in East Asia — war with Taiwan, with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and with the Philippines over the South China Sea. In each case, the US could become involved against China. Trump's presidency could heighten President Xi Jinping's concerns over the US' presence and role in the region.

Politically, both Delhi and Beijing must constantly worry about Washington. Despite all the bonhomie between India and the US, differences abound: Over immigration, trade, relations with Pakistan and Bangladesh, US commentary on India's democratic record, American accusations over a putative Indian assassination plot, and Indian accusations of unchecked Sikh militant activity on US soil. Some of these worries may reduce with Trump in the White House, others such as immigration and trade could get worse. For China, the US' weaponisation of trade and technology are likely to continue under Trump.

China must also worry about America's "naming and shaming" of Beijing's policies in Tibet and Xinjiang. In short, India and China face a common challenge — how to enhance their bargaining power with the US. One way is to signal to Washington that they have other strategic choices and partners if pushed too hard.

Will this détente last? India and China have squared off in a series of confrontations since 2010 — in 2013 (Depsang), 2014 (Chumar), 2015 (Burtse), 2017 (Doklam), 2020 (Galwan), and 2022 (Yangtse), with casualties in 2020 and 2022. It would be foolish to say that the present détente and normalisation is

assured and that the two sides will avoid future clashes. Territorial quarrels are hard to manage and even harder to resolve because land (and water) is connected to sovereignty.

National identity and memories of colonialism and imperialism in both India and China make both societies very touchy about any challenges to sovereignty. As Manjari Chatterjee Miller of the University of Toronto suggested years ago, both sides have an enduring sense of victimhood. Resolution of the quarrel is possible, but it will take a huge bargain. A bargain is not beyond Modi and Xi, but neither leadership looks in a hurry.

The drivers of the current thaw in relations are structural. Economic need, military realities, and political worries over the US are long-term factors that won't easily go away. India-China relations should, therefore, continue to soften and normalise even if a long-term border and strategic agreement appears difficult to achieve.

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The Hindu, Delhi, January 16, 2025

The red flag as China's expansionist strategy rolls on

India, as the dominant regional power in South Asia, should take the lead in shaping a collective response to China's aggressive actions

Rahul M. Lad

In recent days, India has witnessed two significant incidents of Chinese aggression along the China-India border, highlighting vulnerabilities that not only threaten India's territorial integrity but also undermine its sovereignty. The Chinese government's announcement of the construction of a dam on the Yarlung Zangbo river (which is the Brahmaputra river), and the creation of two new counties in north-eastern Ladakh, have set alarm bells ringing.

India has strongly condemned these Chinese actions, asserting that they are illegal and a direct challenge to India's sovereignty. In

response to China's ambitious hydropower project, India has expressed concern, noting that it is monitoring the situation and will take necessary measures to safeguard its national interests. These developments are particularly disturbing given the recent consensus on troop disengagement along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). These new moves further underscore the unpredictability of China's approach in the region.

The transboundary water issue

India is not alone in facing the brunt of China's expansionist policies. Other South Asian countries such as Nepal and Bhutan have been subjected in a similar manner to Chinese territorial encroachments. Disputes over land boundaries persist between China and several of its South Asian neighbours, and China's unilateral actions with respect to transboundary rivers, particularly the Brahmaputra and Indus river systems, have the potential to jeopardise water security in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Pakistan. Despite these challenges, each country has opted to engage with China on a bilateral basis.

The proposed Chinese dam, with an annual capacity to generate 300 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity a year, is located on the lower reaches of the Yarlung Zangbo near the China-India border. This massive infrastructure project presents significant challenges for downstream countries, particularly India and Bangladesh.

The construction of the dam is likely to reduce the amount of water and silt reaching downstream, which could have severe long-term consequences for agriculture, fisheries, and biodiversity in India and Bangladesh. Further, during the monsoon season or in times of geopolitical tensions, the uncontrolled release of water could result in devastating floods along the Indian border, which will be an issue of strategic vulnerability for India. In anticipation, India has accelerated plans to build its own hydropower projects and reservoirs, including an investment of \$1 billion to

expedite the construction of 12 hydropower stations in Arunachal Pradesh.

Border disputes, cartographic aggression
China's recent actions, including the creation of the two new counties, are a part of its ongoing strategy of cartographic aggression aimed at asserting control over disputed territories. This kind of tactic is intended to gain strategic leverage over its regional adversaries.

China's territorial disputes with India are multifaceted, with the most recent aggression occurring along the western front, specifically in Ladakh. Additionally, China continues to lay claim to Arunachal Pradesh, a State that is an inalienable part of India. Beyond India, China also asserts overlapping claims on territories in countries such as Nepal and Bhutan.

China's tactics in asserting territorial claims — such as renaming locations within Indian-controlled territories, establishing settlements in disputed areas, and incorporating contested regions into official maps — are becoming increasingly visible. For instance, in 2023, the Chinese government standardised 11 locations in Arunachal Pradesh to assert its ownership, following similar actions in 2021 and 2017.

However, international law does not recognise territorial claims based solely on cartographic assertions. In various landmark cases, which include the ruling by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the *Minquiers and Ecrehos* dispute between the United Kingdom and France, maps were deemed insufficient evidence of sovereignty. The ICJ ruled that effective administrative control and sovereignty are crucial for determining ownership of contested territories. Therefore, China's use of cartographic aggression, while provocative, lacks legal validity under international law. Nevertheless, China's efforts to establish a physical presence in disputed territories, such as by building settlements, could complicate matters for India in the future.

The South Asian response

While China has sought economic engagement with all South Asian nations, its

territorial and water-related disputes with these countries continue to strain regional relations. Unlike the Southeast Asian nations, which have employed collective responsive measures through multilateral organisations such as the Mekong River Commission (MRC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), South Asian countries, including India, have chosen to address their concerns with China on a bilateral basis. This approach has largely been shaped by the power asymmetry between China and its smaller neighbours.

India, as the dominant regional power in South Asia, should take the lead in fostering a collective response to China's actions. A unified approach, including regional forums, multilateral institutions, or enhanced diplomatic coordination would strengthen South Asia's position in addressing China's increasing influence and territorial ambitions. A comprehensive strategy involving diplomatic engagement and regional cooperation is crucial for India's sovereignty and regional security in the face of China's growing assertiveness.

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Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 28, 2025

India, China agree to resume Mansarovar Yatra, give in-principle nod to flights

Rezaul H Laskar

NEW DELHI: India and China decided on Monday to resume the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra and agreed in principle to resume direct flights as foreign secretary Vikram Misri met Chinese vice foreign minister Sun Weidong in Beijing to discuss the next steps in normalising bilateral ties after a border standoff of more than four years.

The meeting between Misri and Sun marked the revival of the foreign secretary-vice foreign minister mechanism, the latest in a series of engagements since the two sides reached an understanding last October aimed

at reducing tensions on the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

Misri and Sun reviewed bilateral relations and "agreed to take certain people-centric steps to stabilise and rebuild ties", the external affairs ministry said in a statement. The two sides decided to resume the Kailash Mansarovar pilgrimage in the summer of 2025, and further discussions will be held on the modalities in line with existing agreements.

The two sides also "agreed in principle to resume direct air services" and the relevant technical authorities in India and China will "negotiate an updated framework" for this at an early date, the statement said.

They further agreed to take appropriate steps to promote and facilitate people-to-people exchanges, including media and think tank interactions. The two sides will also hold an early meeting of the India-China Expert Level Mechanism to discuss the resumption of provision of hydrological data and other cooperation related to transborder rivers, the statement said.

The resumption of the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, which was suspended in 2020, was a key ask of the Indian side, while the Chinese side had focused on the easing of visa regulations and resumption of direct flights, also suspended in 2020, people familiar with the matter said on condition of anonymity. The people add that further discussions will be required to address the issue of visas.

During the meeting between Misri and Sun, the two sides took stock of extant mechanisms for functional exchanges, and "agreed to resume these dialogues step by step and to utilise them to address each other's priority areas of interest and concern", the statement said.

"Specific concerns in the economic and trade areas were discussed with a view to resolving these issues and promoting long-term policy transparency and predictability," it added.

For long, India has had concerns about market access and non-tariff barriers that have resulted in trade being skewed in China's favour. In the fiscal year 2024, two-way trade touched \$118.4 billion, with India's

imports from China worth \$101.7 billion, and exports were valued at \$16.67 billion.

The statement said the two sides will use the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2025 to “redouble public diplomacy efforts to create better awareness about each other and restore mutual trust and confidence among the public”. In this context, the two sides will conduct commemorative activities to mark the anniversary.

The face-off that began in the Ladakh sector of the LAC in early 2020, and a brutal clash in Galwan Valley in June of that year which killed 20 Indian soldiers and an unspecified number of Chinese troops, took bilateral ties to their lowest point since the 1962 border war.

Since India and China reached an understanding on disengagement of forces at the two remaining “friction points” of Demchok and Depsang on October 21 and Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping met two days later in Russia, the two sides have revived several mechanisms to address their long-standing border dispute and to normalise relations.

In recent weeks, the foreign and defence ministers of the two countries have met on the margins of multilateral meetings and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval travelled to Beijing in December for a meeting of the Special Representatives on the border issue. Wang is also the Special Representative for the Chinese side, and this was their second meeting in less than five months.

Before his talks with the Chinese vice foreign minister, Misri met foreign minister Wang Yi, who said India and China should “meet each other halfway” and “commit to mutual understanding [and] mutual support”, and avoid “mutual suspicion [and] mutual alienation”, according to a readout in Mandarin from China’s foreign ministry.

Wang also said the “improvement and development of China-India relations is fully in line with the fundamental interests of the two countries” and is “conducive to safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of the Global South”.

Misri also met the minister of the international department of the Communist Party of China, Liu Jianchao.

India has adopted a more cautious and nuanced approach to these meetings, while China has called for putting the border issue in its “appropriate place” in the overall relationship, a signal that the two sides should take forward trade and investment ties.

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 29, 2025

Express View: Breaking the ice with China Editorial

The talks in Beijing between Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and senior Chinese officials including Foreign Minister Wang Yi are a welcome step in the ongoing normalisation of India-China relations, especially as both countries mark 75 years of diplomatic ties this year.

The broader context of Misri’s Beijing visit, however, lies in the four-year-long disengagement process which concluded in November last year with the patrolling agreement for Demchok and Depsang — two friction points following China’s incursions into eastern Ladakh along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in 2020. The Chinese military’s actions were a direct violation of the confidence-building measures in place at the time, with the crisis escalating into the Galwan Valley clashes which led to the first fatalities on the India-China border since 1975. For the past four years, discussions between the two sides have largely been limited to military issues at the border. This time, however, the talks centred around “people-centric steps”.

Direct flights between India and China had been suspended in the early stages of the Covid pandemic and remained halted after Galwan. Both countries have now agreed to resume direct flights and facilitate the issuance of visas. The Kailash-Mansarovar Yatra is also set to resume. Both sides are expected to engage in dialogue over trans-border rivers and share hydrological data. The talks underlined the importance of restoring mutual trust.

Despite these encouraging developments, the prospects for genuine mutual understanding remain uncertain, given the continued large-scale troop deployment by both countries for the fifth consecutive year. India has maintained that “disengagement” should be followed by “de-escalation” and, ultimately, the “de-induction” of the additional forces in eastern Ladakh. The latest disengagement agreements notwithstanding, the “de-escalation” process is yet to commence.

Ultimately, India seeks the withdrawal of Chinese troops to their peacetime positions. Another key issue is trade. India continues to face a significant trade deficit with China, which has now surpassed \$100 billion, despite efforts to restrict Chinese imports. There are reports of Chinese authorities clamping down on exports of crucial manufacturing equipment, seemingly to impede the growth of global companies in India. Delhi, therefore, should not be complacent on the China question after the latest round of talks. It is a step forward, but many more steps remain.

India – US Relations

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 16, 2025

Nuclear deal in mind, US removes curbs on BARC and two others

Shubhajit Roy

Just over a week after US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said Washington was finalising steps to remove “long-standing regulations that have prevented civil nuclear cooperation between India’s leading nuclear entities and US companies”, the US Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) removed three Indian nuclear entities — Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC), Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research (IGCAR) and the Indian Rare Earths Limited (IREL) — from its ‘Entity List’. The US Entity List is a list of foreign individuals, businesses and organisations that are subject to export restrictions and licensing requirements for certain goods and technologies. The list — compiled by the BIS of the US Department of Commerce — is ostensibly used to prevent unauthorised trade in items that could be

diverted to terrorism, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programmes, or other activities that are perceived by the US as going against its foreign policy or national security interests.

“The removal of Indian entities Indian Rare Earths, Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research (IGCAR), and Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) will support US foreign policy objectives by reducing barriers to advanced energy cooperation, including joint research and development and science and technology cooperation, towards shared energy security needs and goals,” the BIS said in a statement. “The US and India share a commitment to advancing peaceful nuclear cooperation and associated research and development activities, with strengthened science and technology cooperation over the past several years that has benefitted both countries and their partner countries around the world,” it said.

“The removal of the three Indian entities will enable closer cooperation between the US and India to secure more resilient critical minerals and clean energy supply chains... This action aligns with and supports the overall ambition and strategic direction of the [US-India partnership](#),” said Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Export Administration Matthew Borman. The decision came on a day when the US Department of Commerce added 11 Chinese entities to its ‘Entity List’ “for activities contrary to US national security and foreign policy interests”. Speaking at IIT-Delhi on January 6, Sullivan, who met PM Narendra Modi, NSA Ajit Doval and External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar during his visit, had signalled the removal of restrictions. The Indian Express had reported that BARC, IGCAR and IREL — all government-run institutions — may be removed from the US ‘Entity List’.

“Although former (US) President (George W) Bush and former Prime Minister (Manmohan) Singh laid out a vision of civil nuclear cooperation nearly 20 years ago, we have yet to fully realise it... the Biden administration has determined that it is past time to take the

next major step in cementing this partnership,” Sullivan had said.

“So today, I can announce that the US is now finalising the necessary steps to remove longstanding regulations that have prevented civil nuclear cooperation between India’s leading nuclear entities and US companies. The formal paperwork will be done soon, but this will be an opportunity to turn the page on some of the frictions of the past and create opportunities for entities that have been on restricted lists in the US to come off those lists and enter into deep collaboration with the US, with our private sector, with our scientists and technologists, to move civil nuclear cooperation forward together,” he had said.

That the announcement, and its implementation, comes just days before US President-elect Donald Trump assumes office is significant, as the 2008 Indo-US civilian nuclear deal has not been operationalised in more than a decade-and-a-half. This move allows the Trump administration to move forward in operationalising the nuclear deal.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 18, 2025

India-US ties to be based on tech in future, says Jaishankar

Tribune News Service

India-US relationship in the future will be heavily based on technology, with space and defence sector being two crucial components, said External Affairs Minister (EAM) S Jaishankar at the opening of the US Consulate in Bengaluru on Friday.

The Minister said the domain of space was just beginning to open up and there were many more possibilities. He further noted that defence too was a crucial area.

“In the technology, space and defence sectors, there is a case for stronger US presence and leveraging the capabilities of Bengaluru and Karnataka,” he stated.

The EAM said two decades ago, there were virtually no American weapons in the Indian inventory and little defence collaboration. Today, India flies the US-origin special operation planes such as the C-17, C-130J,

Boeing P8I; and the Chinook and Apache helicopters.

He further said education and research would be the driver of India-US relations. “As the new education policy opens vistas, I hope to see collaborative campuses, exchange of students and a stronger American presence in the education sector in this region,” he added. “Besides, trusted supply chains will become key to strategic partnerships amid transformation in the industry. I see a great future for India and the US in this area as well,” Jaishankar added.

Jaishankar said absence of an American consulate in Bengaluru was a gap in the relationship between two nations. In 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi asserted the need for a consulate in Bengaluru.

The EAM said, “Its formal opening is another sign that we are overcoming the historic hesitations that marked the India-US ties.” Although the Minister did not point it out, the reference stems from the cold war era from 1945-91.

He went on to state that India would open a consulate in Los Angeles soon.

US Ambassador to India Eric Garcetti and Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar also attended the event.

Garcetti said India was now America’s second largest mission in the world.

The US Embassy said the initiative to expand US presence in Bengaluru would broaden and deepen long-standing ties, diplomatic engagement and strategic partnership in Karnataka. Home to nearly 700 US companies and tens of thousands of US citizens, the state is creating jobs for people in both the United States and India.

It is also the centre for rapidly expanding collaboration in space. This was highlighted by the planned launch of jointly developed NASA-ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar satellite and a US mission to bring NASA-trained Indian astronauts to the International Space Station.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 18, 2025

'India-US ties based on technology': EAM Jaishankar at the opening of US Consulate in Bangalore

Tribune News Service

External Affairs Minister (EAM) S Jaishankar joined US Ambassador to India, Eric Garcetti, for the opening of the US Consulate in Bangalore. Speaking about the expanse of the India-US ties, Jaishankar said, "Our relationship will be heavily based on technology. It will have a much bigger space component because the space domain is just beginning to open up. Defence is a crucial area."

The event was also attended by Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar.

Jaishankar added, "Defence is an absolutely crucial area. I look at technology, space and defence, and I think there is a case for stronger US presence and leveraging the capabilities of Bengaluru and Karnataka."

The minister also cited how two decades ago, there were virtually no American weapons in the Indian inventory, and very little defence collaboration. "Today, we fly the C-17s, the C-130Js; the Chinooks, the Apaches."

He also highlighted the importance of the education and research sector between the two countries. "I hope to see collaborative campuses, exchange of students and a stronger American education presence in this region," Jaishankar said.

The Minister cited how supply chains are undergoing a transformation. "Trusted supply chains will really become key to strategic partnerships and there I see a great future for India and the US," Jaishankar added.

He said that an American consulate was not there in Bengaluru was a gap in the relationship. It was Prime Minister Narendra Modi who, in 2023, said that this consulate was needed. "The formal opening of this consulate is one more sign that we are overcoming the hesitations of history," Jaishankar said. He did not say it but the reference stemmed from the cold war era (1945-91).

"We will be opening our consulate in Los Angeles also," the EAM said.

US Ambassador Garcetti said, "The US mission is the second largest mission anywhere in the world. Presently, visa services are not being offered from Bengaluru, but will happen soon. US-India relations will be indispensable for peace, prosperity and for the planet."

The Telegraph, Kolkata, January 18, 2025
US-India partnership key to tackling global health challenges, says top White House official

PTI

The US-India partnership is critical for addressing global challenges, particularly in public health and pharmaceutical innovation, a top Indian-American White House official has said.

Dr Rahul Gupta, Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), said it is important for the safety security and health of the world that the two nations maintain and accelerate their partnership in all areas.

"Because when we have a United States and an India that are looking forward together to solve the world's problems, it is the only way we're going to be able to solve the world's problem because this is really where East meets the West," said Dr Gupta, who is one of the highest-ranking Indian Americans in the outgoing Biden Administration.

"This relationship allows the two countries, but also the continents in the world, to come closer together, to understand each other, and at the end of the world solve the most pressing world's problems together as one unit so we can inspire the next generation of countries coming up to work democratically in a way that will help this planet," he told PTI in an interview.

In his capacity as the Drug Czar of the Biden Administration, Dr Gupta played an important role in successfully fighting the opioid crisis in the US.

He played a key role in the US arriving at an agreement with China on this issue, wherein Beijing agreed to take action against those responsible for illegally pushing synthetic drugs into the US.

Dr Gupta said with India, the US wants to create some of the most forward-leading drug

policy frameworks ever established between our two countries. That cooperation has three pillars, he noted.

The first pillar is counter-narcotics cooperation.

Public health is the second priority to ensure that the advancements made in both countries are supported and shared with one another.

"We have more engagement from academia to academia, treatment providers to treatment providers, and the workforce. For example, the United States has a very shortage of public health workforce in terms of psychiatrists, medical doctors, nurses, counsellors and others," he said.

The third pillar is developing a supply chain for pharmaceutical productions of the future, he said.

"So going at these 21st-century challenges together as two countries, two democracies that lead the world so many other things, also advancing technology and drug discovery at the same time while having integrity with integrity in the global supply chain," he added.

Gupta said the time has come for the next phase of cooperation between India and the US.

"For instance, using artificial intelligence to conduct drug discovery, not only will it save time, and make new products much cheaper, but we'll have more access to the global world. This is an important part, both for the United States and for India," he said.

"India has been able to distribute its vaccine across so many countries when it comes to COVID. It's going to be important that we follow that model when it comes to medications like not only addiction, but high blood pressure, diabetes, and so many others," he said.

The Telegraph, Kolkata, January 18, 2025

India is well placed under Trump administration, says expert; tariffs and immigration may pose challenges

PTI

India, in relative terms, is quite well placed under the Trump Administration, an eminent India-expert has said, observing that the

incoming president does not see India as a problem, but there might be bumps on the road on the issue of tariffs and legal immigration.

"I always say that India is, in relative terms, quite well placed under the Trump administration," Dhruva Jaishankar, executive director of ORF America told PTI in an interview, days ahead of the presidential inauguration. Donald Trump, 78, will be sworn-in as the 47th president of the United States on January 20.

"If you look at what Trump's demands are: he says American allies are free riders, that they should be doing more: Nato allies, Japan. He doesn't like foreign aid. So, on many issues, India is not really going to be directly affected because he doesn't see India as a problem," said Jaishankar, whose latest book "Vishwa Shastra" recently hit the bookstores.

"I think there are two issues where there will be some bumps. One, again, is on some trade issues where India enjoys quite a large trade surplus with the US. And again, some around Trump see that India is engaging in unfettered trade practices. India says, no, it's not, and points to the fact that India is in fact a net importer for much of the rest of the world. It's a consumer-based economy," he said.

"So, I think that negotiation will be difficult in the first few months but hopefully lands soon in a good spot. Within six months or a year, we have some kind of broad agreement where both sides understand the terms of economic engagement," he observed.

"The second issue that could be difficult is on immigration. Obviously, it's very clear on undocumented migrants, but I think even the question of legal migration has already become an issue in the US. Those are two areas I would look out for. So this is not a relationship that won't be without some difficulties. But overall, I don't see why the relationship won't remain on a positive trajectory, unlike some adversaries of the US and some allies of the US," Jaishankar said.

Responding to a question on China, he said this remains one of the big uncertainties of

the Trump Administration as they have three or four different worldviews within itself.

"The dominant one, at least based on the appointments that have been announced so far, is one that sees China as a systemic competitor of the US. I think that would be the default position," he said.

But there are others, who believe that China remains a competitor, but the US should actually withdraw or downsize its presence in other regions, Europe and the Middle East.

"There are others who believe that the US should not try to compete with China and be a bit more, for lack of a better word, isolationist. And then finally, there are some, particularly in the economic side, and this includes many influential political donors of Trump, who believe that the US and China need to go back to some sort of a normal economic relationship where you have a two-way investment and downplay some of the strategic and military differences between the two," Jaishankar observed.

"But I think so far, at least what has been indicated, even I saw an interview from the incoming nominee for the Treasury Secretary, again, somebody who comes from Wall Street, who said that China presents a major challenge, military and economic challenge to the US. That is really where the starting consensus is. A lot is much more uncertain than you believe. Some of this is playing out in the discussion on TikTok, for example," he said.

The invitation extended to world leaders to attend the Trump inauguration, the first of its kind, is a welcome sign, he noted, in response to a question. "In some ways, it's perhaps a welcome sign that this Trump administration is not going to be, as some of the critics say, overly isolationist or that they are willing to look at cooperation with partners," he said.

"It's also a good sign, it seems, based on news reports that there will be a Foreign Minister's QUAD meeting, which again shows some continuity. The Quad restarted under Trump in his first term. That seems to be a positive sign, but perhaps it's also showing that this is a US that knows that it is in a much more competitive landscape. And this idea that we

had in the 1990s and early 2000s that they could take the rest of the world for granted, is no longer there," Jaishankar said. PTI LKJ MNK MNK

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 18, 2025

India, US must have 'honest conversation' on nuclear cooperation, tariffs: Eric Garcetti

Rezaul H Laskar

The Indian government should address the country's nuclear liability law to drive civil nuclear cooperation with the US following Washington's removal of restrictions on key Indian atomic entities, outgoing US ambassador Eric Garcetti said on Thursday.

Garcetti, who is set to step down this week, appeared to be in agreement with US president-elect Donald Trump's call for changes in India's tariff regime, saying in an interview that there is a need for an "honest conversation" between the two countries on this issue.

The US Bureau of Industry and Security on Wednesday removed Indian Rare Earths, Indira Gandhi Atomic Research Center (IGCAR) and Bhabha Atomic Research Center (BARC) from an 'Entity List' to reduce barriers to advanced energy cooperation. The move came in the wake of an announcement by US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, during a visit to India on January 6, that Washington would remove regulations preventing cooperation between key Indian nuclear entities and American companies under the 2005 civil nuclear deal.

Garcetti said the actions by the US underlined the depth of cooperation with India in areas such as civil nuclear technology and critical technologies which is making the relationship "indispensable". Other countries such as China will dominate in nuclear technology in the absence of closer cooperation between the US and India, he indicated.

"Other countries will compete and dominate nuclear technology, whether it's China or others, if we don't get this together. But imagine the US and India doing this together, meeting India's energy needs without climate change being affected, propelling future ships

and transportation. Really, the sky is the limit,” he said, adding that he had “no doubt that the Trump administration will carry that ball forward” in civil nuclear cooperation.

“But liability...for civil nuclear activity is still an issue that we engage with, Prime Minister [Narendra Modi] and President [Joe Biden] spoke about it and we still have some steps to take,” Garcetti said.

Addressing issues related to nuclear liability “is a sign that you will see India-US technology shared, liability shared and that we can move beyond the rhetoric of the Cold War and really acknowledge just what dear and close friends we are right now”, he said.

Asked specifically if India needs to do more to address the nuclear liability clause, Garcetti indicated that both the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the opposition think there is a “responsible way” to handle the issue.

He replied: “Absolutely. I mean that was the promise of India... In fairness, Prime Minister Modi told the president we absolutely want to find a way to move forward and my conversations privately with both the opposition and BJP here is that they both think there’s a responsible way forward, where there’s some shared liability but also not such a high bar, that no progress moves forward and other countries dominate this space.”

The Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act of 2010, enacted to provide compensation to victims of a nuclear incident, includes the concept of supplier liability over and above the liability of the operator of a nuclear plant. This provision whereby suppliers can be asked to pay damages has held up nuclear projects involving foreign suppliers.

Responding to another question about Trump’s threat to impose reciprocal tariffs on India and the impact of the incoming administration on the growth of bilateral relations, Garcetti appeared to back the president-elect’s stance on tariffs.

Garcetti had created a flutter by saying at an event organised by the US-India Business Council (USIBC) in December that India remains the world’s “highest tariff major

economy” and the two sides should work together to reduce tariffs and make trade more fair.

“I hope that President Trump’s words help us elevate a more honest conversation, as I’ve called for. Now that we’ve resolved all the trade disputes that we had, that were outstanding, we’ve set the table for a feast,” he said.

“But it cannot be that we let our bureaucracies take baby steps. If we’re going to replace our overdependence on China for critical supply chains, if we are to be able to reap the benefits from pharmaceuticals to artificial intelligence, we’ve got to be bigger, bolder and ambitious. And I think what president-elect Trump is saying [is that] there’s consequences if we don’t, but there’s also opportunities if we do,” he said.

Garcetti also addressed criticism from some quarters that the India-US Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) has not moved fast enough by noting that it didn’t exist two years ago. He said he believed it will be a “permanent part” of the bilateral relationship and has resulted in “record semiconductor investments from American companies” in India and the creation of telecommunication systems “without Chinese equipment”.

He added, “I know the new administration already, in the briefings I’ve had, Michael Waltz, who’s our incoming NSA, wants to carry that work on critical and emerging technologies forward.”

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 18, 2025

Trump’s tariff talk will target the farm sector

Biswajit Dhar

Washington is likely to ask Delhi to reduce tariffs on US farm products. India needs to protect its farm sector to ensure food security and protect livelihoods

During the two months since Donald Trump’s decisive victory at the hustings, the incoming administration has repeatedly hinted at the disruptions the global economy will have to face due to recalibration of the United States (US)’s policies vis-à-vis its major partners.

Within weeks of being assured of a second term as the US president, Trump announced his decision to increase tariffs on imports from Canada, China, and Mexico immediately after his inauguration. India escaped being among the targeted countries even though the President-elect had consistently railed against India's relatively higher tariffs, labelling India as the "tariff king". However, not too long after this, Trump announced that his administration would impose "reciprocal tariffs" on India arguing, "[I]f they tax us, we tax them the same amount. They tax us. We tax them. And they tax us. Almost in all cases, they're taxing us, and we haven't been taxing them". He elaborated in typical Trump fashion, "If they want to charge us, that's fine, but we're going to charge them the same thing". Trump's commerce secretary pick, Howard Lutnick, emphasised that "reciprocity" is something that is going to be a key topic for the Trump administration. This intent of the incoming administration was hardly surprising as the President-elect had underlined on his campaign trail that "the most important element of [his] plan to make America extraordinarily wealthy again is reciprocity".

How will the Trump administration's penchant for "reciprocity", a policy that was practised by the mercantilists in the Middle Ages, affect the future of India-US trade relations? The imposition of higher tariffs could significantly impact India's exports to its largest trading partner, which, for the first time, is accounting for ~19% of India's total exports in the current fiscal.

Facing the highest risk of being targeted by the new American administration's policy of "reciprocity" is India's agriculture. There are two reasons for this. One, the US is the world's largest exporter of agricultural commodities, valued at \$179 billion in 2023. And two, the share of agricultural products in India's imports from the US has been just 3-4% in recent years. Successive administrations have repeatedly highlighted India's low share in the US's agricultural exports and have urged the Indian government to improve market-access

opportunities through a slew of measures, including the reduction of tariffs.

The US department of agriculture (USDA) has identified cotton, dairy products, ethanol, fresh fruit, forest products, processed food and beverages, pulses, and tree nuts as the top agricultural products having substantial prospects for US exporters in India. The department argues that India impedes agricultural trade with high tariffs and non-tariff barriers. India applies tariffs ranging between 30-40% on most agricultural and consumer-ready food products and retains the flexibility of raising agricultural tariffs to as high as 150% without violating its commitments to the World Trade Organization (WTO). The USDA also contends that the Indian government regularly enacts sanitary and phytosanitary measures and other non-tariff barriers, particularly in the biotechnology space, that are not based on science- or risk-based approaches.

India has routinely defended its relatively high tariffs in agriculture stating that it needs to provide adequate levels of protection to its farming communities from the highly subsidised products dumped by producers in advanced countries, including the US. In this context, it must be pointed out that most agricultural producers in the US do not need tariff protection as high doses of subsidies allow them to sell their products below international prices. Thus, the US can always boast of not imposing tariffs on agricultural products while it facilitates the dumping of agricultural products by its producers in the global market.

Moreover, India has argued that its agriculture is largely aimed at meeting the food security needs of the country's population, which was diametrically opposite to the objectives of a market-oriented US agriculture. Lowering tariffs and exposing India's small and marginal farmer-dominated agriculture to US farm products would put at risk not only the hard-earned domestic food security but also a significant share of livelihoods dependent on agriculture. Trump's first term in office was marked by the beginning of sustained pressure on India's

agricultural subsidies. Along with several agricultural exporting countries, the US has been arguing since 2018 that the level of subsidies India provides to its major staples, rice, and wheat, far exceed the level it is permitted to under WTO rules. Questioning India's agricultural subsidies continued during the Biden presidency as Congressmen joined the fray. Early last year, Senator Ron Wyden, chairman of the Senate Committee on Finance, insisted that India's wheat subsidies were distorting prices and directly hurting American farmers who were unable to compete in the Asian market. Under these testing circumstances, the Indian government would have to maintain its resolve to protect the interests of the country's farmers, especially after the second Trump administration takes charge in Washington. Much like his antipathy for tariffs, Trump has been deeply resentful of foreign workers entering the US with H-1B visas. In 2017, as president, he signed an executive order, the Buy American and Hire American Executive Order seeking to create higher wages and employment rates for US workers, ostensibly to protect their economic interests by rigorously enforcing and administering the immigration laws. This resulted in increased scrutiny of H-1B visa applications with rejection rates reaching an all-time high of 24% in 2018. As a presidential candidate last year, Trump sounded equally hawkish on the immigration issue, receiving considerable support from his conservative base. However, after Trump chose tech entrepreneurs Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy to join his cabinet, the President-elect's views on the presence of foreign workers in the US seem to have changed significantly. "We need smart people in our country", he opined, "we need a lot of people coming in". Though Trump's change of heart has split the Republicans, this augury will please India as around 72% of H-1B visas were issued to its nationals during 2022-23. Such a change of heart or even a slight relaxing of his tariff-reciprocity stance, however, looks doubtful.

Biswajit Dhar is distinguished professor, Council for Social Development. The views expressed are personal

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 18, 2025

N-deal: India hails lifting of US curbs on 3 entities

Express News Service

India Friday welcomed the US move to lift restrictions on three Indian nuclear entities, saying the move will open new avenues for collaboration in the civil nuclear field. The US had Wednesday **removed restrictions on Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC), Indira Gandhi Atomic Research Centre (IGCAR) and Indian Rare Earths (IRE).**

The decision came over a week after NSA Jake Sullivan announced that Washington was finalising steps to "remove" hurdles for civil nuclear partnership between Indian and American firms.

"It is a welcome step," said External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal at a media briefing.

"These (BARC, IGCAR and IRE) were in the entity list of the US for several years now. With this action by the US government, it will lead to greater collaboration between India and the US in the field of nuclear energy and also in the field of critical minerals," he said.

Jaiswal indicated that efforts will be put in to address issues relating to nuclear liability.

Certain clauses in India's nuclear liability norms have emerged as hurdles in moving forward in implementation of the historic India-US civil nuclear deal that was firmed up around 16 years back. "These are steps which will now be discussed. It will open up new avenues of collaboration in the civil-nuclear field and hopefully questions about liability etc will also be discussed and taken forward," Jaiswal said.

The removal of restrictions on the three key Indian entities is being seen as an attempt by the outgoing Biden administration to facilitate the implementation of the landmark India-US civil nuclear pact.

India and the US unveiled an ambitious plan to co-operate in civil nuclear energy in July 2005 following then Prime Minister

Manmohan Singh's meeting with American President George W Bush.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 19, 2025

India-US sign MoU on cybercrime investigations

Tribune News Service

India and the US have agreed to enhance cooperation and information sharing on cyber threat intelligence and digital forensics in criminal investigations, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) official spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal announced on Saturday.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on cybercrime investigations was signed by India's Ambassador to US, Vinay Kwatra and Acting US Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security Kristie Canegallo in Washington, DC, on Friday.

Cybercrime has intricate linkages with the common security challenges faced by India and the US, such as terrorism and violent extremism, terror financing, drug trafficking, organised crime, human trafficking, illegal migration, money laundering and transportation security.

The MEA said, "The MoU allows the respective agencies of the two countries to step up the level of cooperation and training with respect to the use of cyber threat intelligence and digital forensics in criminal investigations."

According to sources, cybercrime cooperation between India and the US is a key component of their strategic partnership. It is driven by shared interests in combating cyber threats, protecting critical infrastructure, and promoting a secure and open cyberspace. The two countries have established a range of mechanisms to facilitate cooperation.

Both countries already share information on cyber threats, attacks, and activities on a real-time or near real-time basis, when practical and consistent with existing bilateral arrangements.

In the past, the US has provided training and technical assistance to India to enhance its cybersecurity capabilities. The two countries already collaborate on cybersecurity research

and development to address emerging threats.

From India, the Indian Cybercrime Coordination Centre established by Ministry of Home Affairs is responsible for execution of the MoU. From the US side, the Department of Homeland Security, and its constituent agencies, including the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Homeland Security Investigations Cyber Crimes Center, are responsible for its execution.

The Telegraph, Kolkata, January 20, 2025

Biden administration signs pact with India to enhance cooperation in cybercrime investigations

PTI

The US on January 15 removed restrictions on three Indian nuclear entities, Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC), Indira Gandhi Atomic Research Centre (IGCAR) and the Indian Rare Earths (IRE)

Days before it hands over power to President-elect Donald Trump, the Biden administration signed a pact with New Delhi that provides for boosting cooperation in combating cybercrime and related challenges such as terror financing and violent extremism.

The agreement on cybercrime investigations, signed in Washington on Friday, allows the agencies concerned of the two countries to step up the level of cooperation with respect to cyber threat intelligence and digital forensics, according to an Indian readout.

It is the second such move in the last few days by the outgoing Biden administration that reflected the overall upward trajectory of relations between the two nations.

The US on Wednesday removed restrictions on three Indian nuclear entities -- Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC), Indira Gandhi Atomic Research Centre (IGCAR) and the Indian Rare Earths (IRE).

The lifting of the restrictions is aimed at implementation of the historic India-US civil nuclear deal sealed around 16 years ago.

The Memorandum of Understanding or MoU on cybercrime investigations was signed by Indian Ambassador Vinay Kwatra and Acting US Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security Kristie Canegallo.

"Cybercrime has intricate linkages with the common security challenges faced by India and the US such as terrorism and violent extremism, terror financing, drug trafficking, organised crime, human trafficking, illegal migration, money laundering and transportation security," the MEA said in the readout.

"The MoU on cybercrime investigations will enable further strengthening of India-US security cooperation, as part of our comprehensive and global strategic partnership," it said.

From New Delhi, the Indian Cybercrime Coordination Centre (I4C) of the Union Home Ministry will be responsible for execution of the MoU, the MEA said.

From the US side, it will be the Department of Homeland Security, and its constituent agencies -- the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Homeland Security Investigations Cyber Crimes Center (C3) which are tasked to execute the pact.

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 21, 2025

Trump and India-US ties: What will work, what needs work

Prashant Jha

Ties will also go through its share of challenges, due to the larger global climate, developments in the US, and the specifics of bilateral ties

Under Donald Trump, just like the past five American presidencies including his own, America's strategic relationship with India will deepen.

Shared anxiety about China will continue to be the glue that brings Delhi and Washington DC together. Quad will become stronger. India will have many friends across departments in the administration on day-to-day functional issues. There will be a broader political and ideological climate with which Indian political dispensation feels comfortable and aligned. In terms of defence, intelligence and security, and at times of national security crises, there will be a degree of trust. The potential for tech cooperation will remain deep. And there will continue to be deeper convergence in West Asia as Israel-Saudi Arabia

normalisation happens and doors open for the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor.

But just like the past five presidencies, ties will also go through its share of challenges, due to the larger global climate, developments in the US, and the specifics of bilateral ties.

There will be greater strategic uncertainty driven by Trump's somewhat chaotic management of US foreign policy. There will be a lot of second-guessing about Trump's larger strategic commitment to Indo-Pacific, yet, paradoxically, there will be greater strategic asks from India in the name of burden sharing. The scale and depth of bilateral defence and tech ties will hinge on India's ability to offer a robust case of what it brings to the table and Delhi's utility for Washington. India-US economic ties will go through stresses on both the trade and investment pillars and will need imagination, flexibility and political will to be re-engineered. India will have to explain why make in India and made in America don't clash. And there will be secondary consequences of decisions that Trump takes for domestic reasons — on energy, climate, artificial intelligence, crypto, immigration, ties with Europe — for both better and worse.

What will work: Politics, strategy, personnel

Three things will work for India.

The first is the broader political vibe between the ruling dispensations. There are enough reliable first person accounts to suggest that Narendra Modi and Donald Trump get along, they have the ability to communicate, they have engaged in difficult conversations and they have sustained a cordial working relationship. As Robert O'Brien, Trump's last NSA told HT in a recent interview, the US president sees a bit of himself in Modi, his nationalism and his appeal with crowds. There is the memory in both dispensations about how the US and India worked together at three crucial junctures in Trump's first term — Doklam, Balakot and Galwan — with DC on Delhi's side all three times. There is a sense in Delhi of what factors motivate Trump and how to play on that. There is a

strong ideological solidarity between nationalist conservatives, for they see a common adversary in Islamism, China and the liberal and Left public sphere. In politics and international system, these are not decisive factors but a degree of shared history, personal warmth between principals, and alignment in the worldview of ideological movements propelling the dominant party helps and opens up informal channels of communication.

Two, the shared anxiety about China really matters as a binding force in the relationship. A lot of the strategic, defence, supply chain, and economic convergence is a derivative of that anxiety. The key driver of ties today — technology — is almost entirely a derivative of the China challenge. And a concrete manifestation of that is Quad. Trump takes pride in reviving the grouping and is sending a strong signal to China by holding a meeting of Quad foreign ministers in Washington DC on Tuesday, marking it one of the administration's first diplomatic engagements. But the story can take three directions. One possibility is Trump maintains a strong but careful posture on China on lines that Joe Biden did; this is good news for Delhi because a lot of what is a derivative of that posture benefits India. The second is Trump intensifies the strategic competition and the possibility of conflict increases; this may result in stronger asks from Delhi and require India to be prepared to make some hard decisions, especially given its public reticence on China despite its immense private lobbying against Beijing. The third scenario — based on Trump's ties with Elon Musk and Musk's business interests in China, Trump's position on TikTok even at the cost of going against a national security consensus, and his penchant for short term dealmaking — is the possibility of a US-China deal of sorts. The contours of any such arrangement will have to be studied but a grand bargain is unlikely. And with anything less, the US national security state will continue to see Beijing as an adversary and US economic planners will continue to do

what they can to reduce dependence on China, both of which open doors for India.

And finally, India has got lucky with Trump's national security personnel picks. National security advisor Michael Waltz, principal deputy NSA Alex Wong, senior director for India in NSC Ricky Gill, secretary of State Marco Rubio, FBI director Kash Patel, head of national intelligence Tulsi Gabbard, Undersecretary of defense for policy Elbridge Colby, and some other appointees at the senior to middle levels in key departments are understood to have a positive view of India, or at least don't harbour deep hostility. Trump hasn't made his picks for assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, assistant secretary of defense for Indo-Pacific security affairs, and the US ambassador to India, three other key positions, but the names doing the rounds are largely people India will be comfortable with. This matters because on a day to day basis, having strong functional relationships helps smooth over issues especially when the level of political attention from the top is limited. Sustaining these relationships will be the task of Indian diplomacy in DC.

And so it is this trinity — the personal bonhomie at the top, the political alignment and ideological convergence; the shared China challenge, which gives rise of convergence in many other domains; and the institutional and personnel relationships — that will continue to give ties momentum. The people-to-people ties are a bonus. And the strong business lobbies in the two countries provide an additional layer of comfort.

What will need work: Trade, investment and the unknowns

But the relationship is not on auto pilot and will continue to need work. Two areas in particular will merit attention in Delhi.

The first is the broader economic relationship.

One axis is trade, where Trump is very obviously peeved about India's trade surplus of over \$40 billion with US which he does not attribute to Indian competitiveness but Indian tariffs that, in his worldview, make American exports uncompetitive but leave

India to leverage American market. It is not clear if Trump will impose across the board tariffs on all countries with a higher tariff for China (a scenario that's most manageable for India since terms of trade are likely to even out with the rest while China loses the most); or whether he will impose across the board tariffs on India along with select other countries with which US shares a higher deficit (a worrying scenario for both Indian dispensation and Indian exporters), or whether he will target only specific Indian sectors for higher tariffs (which is not positive but leaves room open for negotiations, contingent on which sectors are hit and to what degree). It is also not clear given the composition of the Indian export and import basket what Trump will target.

But the broader motivation underpinning Trump's possible actions remains a deeply held belief that India has exploited American markets without giving a fair share of its market to American producers. If India can find a way to reframe this understanding embedded in the Trump ecosystem imaginatively, through astute messaging, through concessions in terms of domestic access where possible, through greater purchases of American goods where feasible, it will help bridge the deficit and make Trump feel he scored a political win.

The second economic dimension is American investment. Besides a few major successes, Apple being the most prominent, India has failed in leveraging the China+1 moment in global boardrooms, with relatively dismal foreign direct investment figures. This has been true even at a time when the US government under Joe Biden was actually pushing American industry to go to India. It is unlikely that the Trump administration is going to do the same. The absence of the expected increase in foreign investment is largely due to the domestic regulatory climate in India, which has been a constant complaint of American businesses and they may well have a more a willing audience in White House. The Indian market is a tempting proposition but it not a sufficient condition, especially at a time where onshoring and

nearshoring will rank higher than friendshoring. So despite talk of supply chain resilience, in concrete terms, expect less American effort in sending industry to India, but more American state backing for American industry that may be unhappy with Indian policy framework in key sectors.

And the third related economic dimension is investment in America. Trump sees other countries as having stolen American investment without making investments in America. Indian companies have invested billions in America — the last CII report from 2023 suggests 160 Indian companies have invested \$40 billion and created 425,000 jobs, which is two-thirds of the American investment in India. And while this is a talking point in select policy gatherings, this story largely remains untold because of almost invisible Indian public diplomacy in America and its failure to communicate with the larger American political and public sphere.

India needs to make a better economic case in Washington, a case that encompasses the trade, outbound and inbound investment and technology. Showing to Trump's orbit where India actually adds value and is not just a notional partner that extracts benefits, while doing the work back in Delhi to revise policies without hurting domestic economy or national interest to balance economic ties, is key to winning over skeptics.

The second broader issue is Trump's global posture. It isn't what the US does or does not do with India that is the sole determinant of ties. It is what the US does in the rest of the world.

If America's ties with Europe fracture, or the US reliability in Europe comes into serious question, then the slow task of persuading Europe to move away from China will suddenly become more difficult. If America decides to stop supporting public health and civil society initiatives in Africa, it only aids the other big power in the region, China. If America is seen to be cutting a deal with China, its own allies in the Indo-Pacific will try to strike a similar bargain before Washington does so to secure their interests.

If America pursues policies that only aid climate crisis and steps back from even the tokenistic commitment it makes to climate finance and helping the world adapt, the global south will look to China for help. If America steps back from multilateral organisations, it leaves a large swathe of the international community disgruntled and allows China to play the responsible cop. If Trump creates a permissive structure for crypto, it will have implications for financial policymakers everywhere. If AI gives way to artificial generative intelligence during a Trump presidency, a possibility that Sam Altman has predicted, Trump will have ways of influencing AI policy and winners and losers of the tech revolution in dramatic ways with global consequences.

India can do little to influence these policies, but will have to keep a close watch on Trump's externally and internally disruptive actions, for those will have profound consequences and not always in happy ways. Despite all the challenges of the past quarter of a century, the India-US story has been defined by growth, optimism, energy and new ideas. The fact that Bill Clinton, George W Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden didn't agree on much but agreed on the importance of India and the fact that it was in American interest to invest in the relationship and draw India into a broad policy alignment incrementally speaks of what is now an enduring bipartisan consensus in Washington. This consensus is born out of global circumstances and geopolitics. But India has shaped this consensus and benefited from it. It has been hard work and sustaining that story over the next four years will require the same degree of work and imagination that has brought ties this far.

The Hindu, Delhi, January 21, 2025

Prioritising IMEC is in America's best interest

The U.S. and India must ensure the completion of this project, which represents a fundamental reimagining of regional economic cooperation

Sanjeev Josphipura, Kapil Sharma

The United States-India relationship has evolved into an increasingly vital strategic partnership ever since the Clinton administration laid the foundation for a new direction in the 1990s. Today, broad bipartisan consensus supports building upon these ties even further, driven by converging interests in economic growth, regional security, and democratic values. As global dynamics shift, the importance of this relationship for the Trump administration becomes even more pronounced.

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) agreement presents a tremendous opportunity for President Donald Trump to solidify this multilateral partnership while advancing both the strategic interests of the U.S. and India. By leading the effort to secure cooperation among the participating nations, the U.S. can help create a robust economic corridor to ensure free and open trade routes, with enhanced energy security and technological innovation, which, in turn, will also benefit American companies.

More conceptual now

Announced in 2023, IMEC represents an ambitious vision to forge an integrated network spanning three vital regions through advanced physical and digital infrastructure. The corridor must develop efficient transportation routes, including railways, shipping networks, and maritime connections, while also establishing cross-border electricity and hydrogen pipelines and digital communication cables. The end goals should be to enhance trade connectivity and reduce transportation costs, while diversifying global supply chains and promoting deeper economic integration among participating countries (India, the U.S., the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Italy, France, Germany, and the European Commission).

At the moment, it is reasonable to suggest that IMEC is more conceptual than concrete. Meeting its lofty goals requires extensive planning and cooperation. The Trump administration's leadership on this matter could enhance his legacy on the international

stage. By supporting IMEC, the U.S. and India can establish a compelling alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), creating a more balanced global economic architecture that aligns with western democratic values and market principles.

IMEC was never destined to be a straightforward endeavour. Each participating nation faces a complex calculus of investment, political will and economic strategy. The corridor demands substantial infrastructure investments that directly compete with other national priorities. Moreover, private sector engagement introduces another layer of complexity. Corporate investors require clear pathways to return on investment; and without active engagement from the private sector, it is unlikely that the project could succeed.

Several countries, such as Greece and Italy, have shown substantial initiative on IMEC. France has distinguished itself by appointing a special envoy in Gérard Mestrallet, who is not a traditional diplomat. France's President Emmanuel Macron has chosen a proven business leader from France to head this geopolitical and economic initiative, as he recognises its economic potential for France. The UAE and Saudi Arabia appreciate the role IMEC can play in advancing relationships with the West, and have spearheaded efforts for its implementation. Without regular, strategic engagement, there is a significant risk of creating an uneven economic landscape that could breed tension and political friction among participating nations. The corridor offers transformative economic opportunities not just for coastal regions and primary ports but also for inland areas that could become crucial nodes in this expansive trade network. Even within the region, we have already seen countries such as Iraq and Türkiye initiate trade agreements to compliment IMEC.

As an alternative to China's BRI

IMEC promises substantial economic advantages for India by dramatically reducing trade costs and transforming maritime logistics. This strategic network reduces vulnerability to potential disruptions such as

those that might occur in the Suez Canal, but also creates compelling opportunities for increased foreign direct investment. By positioning itself as an alternative to the BRI, the corridor allows India to strengthen diplomatic ties with West Asian and European countries.

Better for the environment

There are implications to this deal that could impact the earth's climate health. India has emerged as a significant player in green hydrogen development, positioning itself as a potential global leader in this emerging clean energy technology. The country has launched ambitious initiatives to develop green hydrogen as a strategic component of its energy transition and decarbonisation efforts. India is collaborating with international partners such as Germany and Japan, and developing infrastructure for green hydrogen production, storage, and transportation. This will help reduce carbon emissions, decrease dependence on fossil fuel imports and create new job opportunities in emerging green technology sectors.

The Trump administration's role in facilitating the Abraham Accords proved instrumental in creating the diplomatic conditions that made IMEC possible. Former U.S. President Joe Biden has been a strong proponent of IMEC. Looking ahead, questions remain about IMEC's future under potential new U.S. leadership. One intriguing factor is Mr. Trump's warm personal relationship with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This rapport could prove significant to ongoing relations. Now that there is a peace agreement between Israel and Hamas, both leaders could facilitate the much needed (and required) meeting of IMEC participants to discuss the next steps.

This endeavour transcends traditional infrastructure development; it represents a fundamental reimagining of regional economic cooperation that requires unprecedented levels of coordination among diverse stakeholders. The U.S. and India, as key architects of the corridor, must work closely to shepherd this project to completion, recognising both its economic

significance and environmental implications for all participating countries.

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Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 22, 2025

For America, why India is not China

Ashish Dhawan, Piyush Doshi

As Trump starts his second term, experts advise excluding India from tariffs, citing strong, mutually beneficial trade ties unlike those with China.

As Donald Trump begins his second term as United States (US) President, speculation is growing about the direction of his trade policy. He has consistently voiced concerns about America's growing trade deficit and has called out the unfair trade practices of some of its trading partners. While the primary target of President Trump's tariff moves has been China, he has made occasional noises about Indian trade practices.

If one looks closely at India-US trade data and the broader direction of the strategic relationship, it becomes clear that President Trump would do well to exclude India from tariff hikes because India-US trade relations are based on complementary strengths on fair terms and have been progressing well with substantial benefit to both countries. Relations between the two countries extend well beyond trade, as India has emerged as a long-term economic and geopolitical ally of the US. Here are the top 10 reasons why India is not China as far as trade with the US is concerned.

One, India's merchandise trade surplus with the US is insignificant compared to China's or those of other lower-cost economies like Vietnam and Mexico. India accounts for just around 4% of the US trade deficit of over \$1 trillion, while China accounts for almost 25% of the deficit. In fact, India does not even figure among the top 10 US trading partners with whom the latter runs a high trade deficit. Two, since India's economic liberalisation, its trade relationship with the US has been progressing well, benefiting both countries.

Goods trade between India and the US has grown over 20 times since 1991 to over \$120 billion. US exports to India have grown at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of ~12% between 1992 and 2018 while US imports from India grew at a CAGR of ~11% in the same period. Services trade between India and the US has also been fair and synergistic with both countries increasing exports by similar amounts and the US deficit remaining constant at about \$7 billion over the last decade. India's robust services sector has driven operational efficiencies for US companies by exporting lower-value services, freeing up local talent to focus on high-innovation areas.

Three, while the US has understandable concerns around high Indian tariffs in some sectors like agricultural products and automotive, India has been on a consistent glide path to tariff reduction since 1991, a commitment that was reinforced by the new government in June last year. Moreover, India has begun focusing on products for which the US is a key supplier — such as aircraft, defence products, drones and critical technologies — and a supportive relationship would significantly grow such imports. Any outstanding issues on trade can easily be resolved through a well-established negotiation mechanism.

Four, the trade basket of India and the US is highly complementary and major Indian exports to the US — like textiles, gems, jewellery, and pharma ingredients — do not pose a strategic technology risk to the US, unlike exports from China. A large part of this production basket is not attractive for domestic US manufacturing due to high labour intensity or regulations around environmental protection for the production of certain chemicals.

Five, India, unlike China, has not used subsidies to artificially make its products more attractive for export markets. While China spends almost 1.75% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on direct industrial subsidies (over \$300 billion), India's spending is insignificant at less than 0.25% of GDP on similar incentives (about \$6 billion, a

large proportion of which is targeted at small and medium enterprises with insignificant export contribution).

Six, unlike some other countries, India is not being used by China to circumvent US tariffs. There are strict controls on Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) into India. As a result, China stood at 22nd position amongst all nations with only a 0.37% share (\$2.5 billion) in total FDI equity inflows reported in India since April 2000.

Seven, India has avoided large-scale systemic challenges posed to the US economy with intellectual property infringement. Reports by the US Trade Representative have historically accused China of being responsible for the vast majority of counterfeit goods coming into the US. Data from OECD and EUIPO — based on analysis of seized counterfeit goods — found that 85% of such goods originated in China.

Eight, unlike China, which has imposed sanctions on American companies, the politico-economic environment in India does not discriminate against American companies. This divergence is visible in the market leadership of American companies in India — Google (vs Baidu in China), Uber (vs Didi in China), and Meta (vs WeChat in China).

Nine, India, in fact, shares the predicament of the US vis-à-vis China, incurring a goods trade deficit with China of \$85 billion in FY24 (amounting to 2% of its GDP). Indian industry has been investing in capacity expansion and has the potential to be a partner for the US in case of increasing adversarial relationships with China.

Ten, the India-US relationship runs deep at the human capital level as well. The Indian diaspora in the US has been a visible and long-term partner in America's growth journey — its tax contribution share (5-6%) is disproportionately higher than its population share (~1.5%). Through corporate leadership and entrepreneurship, members of the Indian diaspora have been job creators in the US.

Overall, India is a reliable strategic partner for the US with strong and mutually beneficial

ties across trade, business and human capital. The two countries have shared concerns about trade and other practices of China. America will benefit greatly by not placing India in the same trade bracket as China.

Ashish Dhawan is founder-CEO and Piyush Doshi is operating partner, The Convergence Foundation. The views expressed are personal
Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 22, 2025

Time to seize the promise of the U.S.-India nuclear deal

There are major challenges that limit the full fruition of the deal, but the Trump administration can iron them out

Raymond E. Vickery, Jr.

Sixteen years ago, this writer and other organisers of the Coalition for Partnership with India rejoiced at the final approval of the United States-India civil nuclear deal through the U.S. Congress. The long struggle for passage of the necessary U.S. legislation began in 2005, and it was only in late 2008 that the Coalition succeeded in working with the George W. Bush administration and U.S. Congressional leaders to make the deal legal under U.S. law.

The Coalition for Partnership with India was a loose association of businesses, Indian-Americans, and academics that supported U.S. approval of the deal in the face of fierce opposition that stipulated that the deal would promote the proliferation of nuclear weapons. As a consultant to the U.S.-India Business Council, this writer was privileged to recruit and act as a liaison among Coalition components, plan strategy, and advocate before the Congress.

A game-changing deal

The U.S.-India civil nuclear deal was a watershed moment and opened a whole new era in defence and strategic cooperation for the two democracies that had become estranged during the Cold War. Without the trust engendered by the willingness to cooperate in dealing with the most powerful and potentially most destructive technology ever seen, the present level of U.S.-India interaction on defence purchases and manufacturing, military exercises, technology

transfer, intelligence sharing, and crisis management would never have occurred.

And yet, the energy and commercial promises of the U.S.-India deal have never been fulfilled. Those of us who supported and advocated for the deal envisaged the augmentation of the Indian civil nuclear sector with many plants being built using U.S. equipment, technology, and allied services. Employment would be created both in the U.S. and India. More electricity would be generated by plants to fuel Indian industry and benefit the average Indian. This energy would not generate greenhouse gases and help wean India away from an over-reliance on climate changing, and often toxic, fossil fuels. Even though U.S. President Barack Obama announced in 2016 that Westinghouse would build six new nuclear plants in India, this has not happened yet.

Jake Sullivan, in his last trip to India as U.S. President Joe Biden's National Security Adviser, announced, "... the United States is now finalizing the necessary steps to remove long-standing regulations that have prevented civil nuclear cooperation between India's leading nuclear entities and U.S. companies." Will this development be the mechanism that breaks the logjam that has prevented the U.S.-India deal from fulfilling its true potential? If only it were so simple.

At the conclusion of the civil nuclear deal in 2008, there were approximately 200 Indian entities on the so-called "Entity List" kept by the U.S. Department of Commerce. In general terms, U.S. companies are prohibited from doing business with companies on this list unless a special licence is granted. In practice, such licences are seldom granted. After the U.S.-India civil nuclear deal, all but a handful of Indian companies dealing with nuclear matters were removed from the list. This was one of the benefits of the deal. Among those remaining, were those that were mainly involved in research and development and thought to involve the risk of nuclear technology leakage into military uses and other security issues, including leakage to Russia and other adversaries of the U.S. Mr. Sullivan, in his speech in New Delhi, made

oblique reference to this concern when he said, "As we see more and more new technologies diverted to unfriendly actors, the United States and India will also need to ensure that valuable dual-use technologies don't fall into the wrong hands. This means aligning our export control systems...."

Apparently, the Biden Administration decided that the few remaining Indian nuclear entities on the U.S. Entity list no longer present the kind of security concerns that landed them on that list in the first place. This is all well and good and can be considered progress, although it remains to be seen whether the security and foreign policy agencies under Mr. Trump will agree with that assessment. However, this is not the heart of the problem preventing the U.S.-India civil nuclear deal from reaching its full potential.

The liability risk issue

In 2010, India enacted the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act. This Act was fuelled in Parliament by those who had lost the attempt to block the deal and their anti-foreigner rhetoric, including invocation of the infamous Bhopal/Union Carbide tragedy. The result was India departing from international civil nuclear liability norms and placing major liability obligations not on the operators of a civil nuclear facility but on the suppliers. Neither of the major U.S. suppliers — GE and Westinghouse — was willing to assume these liability risks, and neither the U.S. nor India was willing at that time to step in to ameliorate these liability concerns.

The Indian Government did attempt later to provide some relief from liability risks in conjunction with the resumption of Russian participation in the Indian civil nuclear expansion. Through India's public sector General Insurance Corporation, and four other government companies, a 20-year insurance premium would be charged to cover the supplier's liability for an accident. The Russians accepted this risk amelioration in large part because their overseas civil nuclear entities are government owned, will have a defence of sovereign immunity, and in any case will be protected by the Russian government from liability that might

otherwise put them out of business. And the Russians saw their increased participation in Indian civil nuclear development as bearing significant geopolitical dividends. The Russians are now moving forward with India on civil nuclear expansion. The U.S. companies have been unwilling so far to accept this insurance amelioration. Thus, the Trump administration will have to find means to cut the Gordian knot of liability before there will be significant U.S. company involvement in Indian civil nuclear expansion. Hurdles such as technology, consumer costs

There are other significant barriers to the full involvement of U.S. companies in Indian civil nuclear expansion that have arisen since the 2008 conclusion of the U.S.-India civil nuclear deal. Civil nuclear technology has evolved rapidly. For U.S. companies to be fully involved, they must show that they can offer the latest technology. Most importantly, this technology and its implementing equipment must be offered at a reasonable price that will not increase electricity costs to the Indian consumer. Indian civil nuclear officials are acutely aware of the disastrous cost overruns that have doomed the latest civil nuclear facilities in the U.S. and left ratepayers to shoulder unwelcome costs without improvements in either quantity or quality of services.

All these challenges limit the full fruition of the U.S.-India civil nuclear deal. But they cannot be met by U.S. companies acting alone. The Trump administration can work with Indian and U.S. nuclear companies not just on regulatory issues but also those involving liability, technology, and cost as well. The hour is late, but the benefits to seizing the full promise of the U.S.-India civil nuclear deal will be tremendous.

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The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 22, 2025

Express View on India and Trump 2.0: Delhi's challenges

Given India's past trade policy issues with Trump, it must prepare for increased pressure from the US for greater access to its markets and other related matters.

As India processes Donald Trump's inaugural speech and subsequent executive orders, it must acknowledge that its relationship with the United States cannot continue as before. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi enjoyed a positive rapport with Trump during his first term (2017-2021), and considerable progress was made in bilateral relations, navigating Trump's return to the White House will not be straightforward. This does not imply any inherent hostility from Trump towards India; however, Delhi now faces challenges stemming from Trump's clear intent to fundamentally reshape America's internal and external policies. The developments witnessed in Washington signal a historic shift in three crucial areas for India: Open markets, open borders, and America's great power relations.

It is premature for India to breathe a sigh of relief that Trump refrained from announcing major tariffs against trading partners, including India. His administration seems poised to adopt a more deliberate and systematic approach to addressing US trade challenges, avoiding immediate punitive measures. Nevertheless, Trump has indicated that tariffs are inevitable in the near future. Given India's past trade policy issues with Trump, it must prepare for increased pressure from the US for greater access to its markets and other related matters. The Indian commerce bureaucracy is infamous for its lack of creativity and flexibility, making it less than successful in building trade and investment partnerships around the world. It is essential for PM Modi to demand a new strategic approach to trade negotiations with the US. Modi must also temper the ideological bravado in his own party and government

that routinely disses ties with the US, romanticises engagement with Russia and China, and promotes loose talk on “dedollarisation”.

Immigration will also pose significant challenges, as Trump has placed it at the forefront of US political priorities. India cannot directly influence the American discourse surrounding legal migration, particularly regarding H-1B visas, amid concerns from US tech companies and labour activists about the exploitation of Indian tech workers. While India is open to repatriating undocumented migrants, facilitating a smooth process requires considerable effort. Given the political weight of this issue in Washington, Delhi must proactively address the efficient identification and deportation of Indian nationals in the US. Lastly, the uncertainty surrounding US relations with Russia and China significantly impacts India’s security. While Delhi welcomes Trump’s normalisation of ties with Moscow, it is wary of any potential agreements with Beijing. India should recognise that the triangular dynamic between the US, China and Russia has fluctuated since its independence. Delhi must accept that as the world’s two foremost economies and military powers, Washington and Beijing will always be open to mutual engagement and understanding. Trump has always been interested in negotiating a grand bargain with China. Losing sleep over US-China ties highlights India’s insecurity and masks the deep structural contradictions between Washington and Beijing. Therefore, it is crucial for India to decisively capitalise on existing opportunities to strengthen its strategic partnership with the US. Traditionally, Delhi has sought to slow down the engagement with Washington when the US steps up its outreach to Beijing. This approach has been self-defeating. A proactive approach to building the partnership with the US will serve as the best safeguard against any changes in US-China ties.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 23, 2025

India always open to legitimate return of undocumented Indians: Jaishankar

PTI

India has always been open to legitimate return of undocumented Indians to their country, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said on Wednesday, noting that New Delhi is still in the process of verifying those from the US who can be deported to India and the number of such individuals cannot be determined yet.

“As a government, we are obviously very much supportive of legal mobility because we do believe in a global workplace. We want Indian talent and Indian skills to have the maximum opportunity at the global level. At the same time, we are also very firmly opposed to illegal mobility and illegal migration,” Jaishankar told a group of Indian reporters here.

“Because you also know that when something illegal happens, many other illegal activities get joined onto it, which is not desirable. It is certainly not good reputationally. So, with every country, and the US is no exception, we have always maintained that if any of our citizens are there illegally, and if we are sure that they are our citizens, we have always been open to their legitimate return to India,” Jaishankar said.

The minister was responding to a query on news reports that India is working with the Trump administration for the deportation of some 1,80,000 Indians in the US who are either undocumented, or have overstayed their visas.

“This position is not unique to the United States. I do understand that right now there is a certain debate going on, and a resulting sensitivity which is there, but we have been consistent, we have been very principled about it and that remains our position. I conveyed that clearly to Secretary (of State, Marco) Rubio,” he said.

“At the same time, I also told him that, while we understand all of this, and I also accept that these are autonomous processes, it is in our mutual interest to facilitate legal and mutually beneficial mobility.

“If it takes 400-odd days of waiting period to get a visa, I don't think the relationship is well

served by this. He (Rubio) also noted that point," he said.

"But while I've seen some numbers... I caution you about them because for us, a number is operative when we can actually validate the fact that the individual concerned is of Indian origin," Jaishankar added.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 23, 2025

US wants to advance economic ties with India, address irregular migration: Rubio to Jaishankar

Tribune News Service

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, at a meeting with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, has expressed the desire of the Donald Trump administration to "work with India to advance economic ties" and address concerns related to irregular migration.

Rubio and Jaishankar met at Washington DC on Tuesday evening. Jaishankar also had a separate meeting with US National Security Advisor Michael Waltz.

The meetings happened a day after Trump took over as President. Rubio and Waltz are part of the new Trump team. Rubio had his first bilateral engagement with Jaishankar.

Tammy Bruce, a spokesperson of the US state Department, said, "Secretary Rubio emphasised the Trump administration's desire to work with India to advance economic ties and address concerns related to irregular migration."

Bruce said, "Rubio affirmed a shared commitment to continuing to strengthen the partnership between the United States and India."

Rubio and Jaishankar discussed a wide range of topics, including regional issues and opportunities to further deepen the US-India relationship, in particular on critical and emerging technologies, defence cooperation, energy, and on advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific region. In a post on X, Jaishankar said, "Reviewed our extensive bilateral partnership, of which Secretary Rubio has been a strong advocate. Look forward to closely working with him to advance our strategic cooperation."

Jaishankar after a meeting with US NSA Waltz posted on X, saying, "Discussed strengthening our friendship to ensure mutual benefit and enhance global stability and prosperity. Looking forward to working together on an active and outcome-oriented agenda."

Rubio, a long time votary of stronger US-India ties, had last year introduced the 'United States-India Defence Cooperation Act' of 2024', which aims to enhance the military relationship between the two nations. Rubio advocates treating India akin to a NATO ally in specific defence deals. His leadership could push forward technology-sharing in the military domain.

Waltz was the co-chair of the bipartisan Congressional Caucus on India and Indian-Americans.

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 23, 2025

In US, S Jaishankar speaks on 2023 Indian consulate attack in San Francisco: 'We expect accountability'

HT News Desk

External affairs minister S Jaishankar's statement comes hours after his meeting with newly appointed US Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

External affairs minister S Jaishankar, hours after meeting with newly appointed US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, on Wednesday called the attack on the Indian consulate in San Francisco in 2023 a "very serious matter". He added that India expects accountability for the incident and those responsible to be held accountable.

S Jaishankar was in the US to attend Donald Trump's inauguration as the 47th President.

Responding to a question at a press conference in Washington DC on Wednesday, Jaishankar said, "The arson attack on our consulate in San Francisco is a very, very serious matter, and it is something for which we expect accountability. We would like to see that people who did it are held responsible."

The Consulate General of India in San Francisco was attacked by a group of assailants in March 2023. The intruders had committed criminal trespass, damaged public

property and attacked officials of the Consulate.

Some attackers had also tried to set the Consulate building on fire on the same day with the use of some inflammable substances. Protesters were seen breaking through the makeshift security barriers while raising pro-Khalistan slogans and even installing two Khalistani flags inside the Consulate premises.

Around three months later, again in July, violent Khalistani activists attacked and sought to burn down the Indian consulate in San Francisco.

The incident, though, did not cause any damage inside the premises of the diplomatic building, but it was the second time that Khalistanis made the SF consulate a target.

At the time, the attack was brought to the attention of the highest rung of American national security and diplomatic apparatus in Washington DC, which instructed agencies to immediately investigate the incident and heighten security.

India had made it clear that it wanted to see action in the matter, and not just sympathy. It wanted arrests of those involved in these incidents and preemptive measures by the US authorities to stop any such attacks in the future.

Jaishankar in US

Jaishankar held a bilateral meeting with Marco Rubio after the swearing-in ceremony of Donald Trump. The two leaders also, according to Jaishankar, held a brief discussion on Bangladesh. However, the EAM did not get into further details on the same and said that "I don't think it's appropriate".

Jaishankar had also attended the first Quad ministerial meeting of the new Donald Trump administration on Tuesday and held the first bilateral meeting with Rubio shortly after.

In addition, Jaishankar also raised India's concerns over prolonged visa delays with Rubio, saying that these delays impact business, tourism, and the overall relationship. He had said that the relationship is not "well-served" if it takes that many days for people to get a visa.

(With inputs from agencies)

The Hindu, New Delhi, January 23, 2025

Changed dynamics: On India and the Trump administration

India must chart a new transactional course with the Trump administration

The first 48 hours of U.S. President Donald Trump's second term have been proof of the radical shifts he plans over four years, with the overarching theme of putting "America First". While the strengthening of India-U.S. ties during his first term should give those in New Delhi attempting to strategise for this term some comfort, his moves now make it clear that it will be necessary to expect the unexpected as well. The slew of Executive Orders changes U.S. policy on energy, the environment and climate change, trade and global taxes, citizenship routes, health, border control and immigration. But the new administration has shown it is keen to engage India: External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, who was invited along with other Quad Foreign Ministers at the inaugural ceremony, was the first Foreign Minister to hold a one-on-one bilateral meeting with new U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio. The readout of their meeting and the Quad Foreign Ministers' joint statement make it clear that the two sides are on the same page on the Indo-Pacific partnership, concerns over Chinese actions, critical and emerging technology cooperation, strategic and defence ties. Yet, some Trump-Rubio pronouncements have set alarm bells ringing, notably on trade, immigration and the cancellation of citizenship by birth. On trade, India has escaped being named in the first round of tariff announcements, but Mr. Trump's comments on a "100% tariff" against all members of the BRICS emerging economies grouping raised the suspense and a possible market reaction. In his first term, he had withdrawn India's GSP status affecting Indian exporters. On immigration, he has announced a "border emergency", authorised a crackdown on illegal and undocumented migrants, and plans to crush the hopes of H-1B visa holders and other Indians working there, by cancelling the automatic path to citizenship for any children born to them in

the U.S. With 7,25,000 undocumented Indians, any action to deport them in large numbers, beginning with about 18,000-20,000 on the Immigration “final list for removal”, will be a major crisis for India.

In this context, Mr. Rubio’s statement in talks with Mr. Jaishankar that they must address the “irregular migration” should be taken seriously. So too should Mr. Trump’s pronouncements insisting on investments in the U.S., hiring in the U.S., and the buying of U.S. energy. The new administration’s geopolitical outlook appears to be set on devaluing the multilateral world order, withdrawing from U.S. commitments of support to WHO, the WTO, and the UN, and putting NATO allies on notice. Given the signs, New Delhi must be prepared for a U.S. administration that will not be particularly sensitive to India’s concerns or be a willing partner in India’s growth unless it sees a benefit for itself, and instead chart a more transactional course, while moving to limit the damage from any adverse actions of the Trump era.

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 23, 2025

In first bilateral talks with Trump admin, US brings up irregular immigration, India says always open to return

Shubhajit Roy

Newly appointed US Secretary of State Marco Rubio raised the issue of “irregular immigration” in his very first meeting with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar in Washington DC Wednesday.

While there was no word on the discussion on tariffs, Rubio underlined the new administration’s desire to “advance economic ties”.

The two sides are also discussing the possibility of a meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Donald Trump on the sidelines of the AI summit in Paris on February 11-12, sources said.

Jaishankar told reporters that “levels of trust are very high” and “the trust is a more systemic sentiment”.

“There’s a very visible chemistry between Prime Minister Modi and President Trump, and that also, in a sense, percolates through the system and reinforces that comfort and trust... So, there was a very visible appetite to get this relationship moving to do more, to set bigger goals. So that was a sort of feeling in the room,” he said.

Rubio “emphasised the Trump administration’s desire to work with India to advance economic ties and address concerns related to irregular migration”, State Department spokesperson Tammy Bruce said in a readout after the meeting.

Jaishankar framed the conversation about mobility of people. “We have a position on mobility, which is a principled position, applies to all countries as a government. We obviously are very much supportive of legal mobility, because we do believe in a global workplace. We want Indian talent and Indian skills to have the maximum opportunity at the global level. So at the same time, we are also very firmly opposed to illegal mobility and illegal migration, because you also know that when something illegal happens, many other illegal activities get joined on to it. And it is not desirable. It is certainly not reputationally good. So we have with every country and the US is no exception. We have always taken the view that if there are any of our citizens who are not here legally, if we are sure that they are our citizens, we have always been, you know, open to legitimate return to India.”

“And I conveyed that very clearly to Secretary Rubio... At the same time, I also told him that, look, while we understand all of this, and I also accept that these are autonomous processes, it is in our mutual interest to facilitate legal and mutually beneficial mobility. If it takes a 400-odd days waiting period to get a visa, I don’t think the relationship is well served by this. So I think he also noted that part. So, let us say how we take that forward,” he said, bringing up the high visa wait times at the US embassy and consulates in India.

On economic cooperation, he said “the overall sense is there are a lot of opportunities here...”

in an era of more technology-centric progress, the message I got was we appreciate the value of India as a partner. There are domains we want to work on. There are systemic things we need to do to sort of optimize collaboration.”

“There will be the economic interests of the two countries... We will sit down and talk about it and discuss that when the moment is opportune... the deeper sentiment is — you have your interest. We have ours. We have to harmonize it.”

The twin themes of illegal immigration and tariffs are expected to dominate the conversation between Delhi and Washington DC in the Trump 2.0 administration.

If the Trump administration moves on deportations, among the first affected could be the 20,407 “undocumented” Indians, as of November 2024, who are either facing “final removal orders” or are, currently, in detention centres of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Of these, 17,940 “paperless” Indians are not in detention but are under “final removal orders,” and another 2,467 are in detention under ICE’s Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO). Jaishankar, however, cautioned about these numbers: “I have seen some numbers. I caution you about them, because for us, a number is operative when we can actually validate the fact that the individual concerned is of Indian origin,” he said.

That said, deportation of illegal immigrants from India in special flights will be bad optics. Even with the Biden administration, about 1,100 illegal immigrants from India were deported in the last year itself. So, there has been a steady trickle of deportations, but they have been kept low-key and under-the-radar. With Trump at the helm, and advised by Stephen Miller, these deportations are expected to be high-visibility events.

Asked if the court cases about the alleged assassination plot against pro-Khalistan separatist figure Guruprant Singh Pannun came up for discussion, Jaishankar said it did not figure in the discussions.

Picking up the threads

Rubio and he discussed deepening the US-India relationship, in particular on critical and emerging technologies, defence cooperation, energy, and on advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

This means that the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET), which was started during the Biden administration between the National Security Advisors, is expected to continue in the new administration as well.

The two ministers affirmed a shared commitment to continuing to strengthen the India-US partnership, State Department spokesperson Bruce said.

“They discussed a wide range of topics, including regional issues and opportunities to further deepen the US-India relationship, in particular on critical and emerging technologies, defence cooperation, energy, and on advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific region,” she said.

Jaishankar said that the focus was on iCET, semiconductors and supply chain.

Besides iCET, the emphasis on defence cooperation is more than welcome from the Indian side — it was under the Trump administration that the foundational agreements including BECA, COMCASA were signed. Also, the Trump 1.0 administration had backed India during the crises with its neighbours — Doklam, Pulwama, Balakot and Galwan.

In the advancement of the free and open Indo-Pacific region, the Trump 1.0 administration had revived the Quad grouping in November 2017, on the sidelines of the ASEAN and East Asia summits in Manila.

Jaishankar said the issue of Bangladesh came up for discussion briefly.

He had attended the inaugural celebrations after the swearing-in ceremony of Trump. “It was the first time I was myself at an inauguration. It was something which was very impressive. What I saw was really a very confident, upbeat, incoming administration, I mean that feeling... look, we need to get things done. And where India is concerned,

that you are a partner with whom we can get things done,” he said.

During the event, he met the 56th Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Mike Johnson, and Senate Majority Leader John Thune. He also interacted with Kash Patel, the nominee for the Director of the FBI.

On the US walking out of the WHO and the Paris climate pact, he said it was the US administration’s decision and he will leave it at that.

Asked about the new US administration’s China policy, he said he would not like to comment publicly about it, but there was “positive sentiment towards India”.

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 23, 2025

How India can do business with Trump’s America

Sachin Chaturvedi

The “golden age of America” has begun under the leadership of President Donald Trump with an aggressive America first trade policy. China will continue to be the target country. However, along with Mexico and Canada, it must have heaved a sigh of relief with his initial announcement on tariffs. In the first few memos, Trump has identified countries that would be approached for possible deals. But, while giving a clear message of trade reciprocity, Trump’s initial statements also provide space for dialogue and course correction to partner countries. This is contrary to the fears that were voiced before he assumed office.

The biggest challenge for the Trump administration will be to contain the continuously expanding trade deficit. In 2023, the US trade deficit was at \$1.05 trillion, of which four countries accounted for almost 80 per cent — China (30 per cent), Mexico (19 per cent), EU (16 per cent) and Canada (15 per cent). With a 3.2 per cent share and a surplus of only \$33 billion, India comes in at the ninth position. It is also important to note that among the top four contributors to the US trade deficit, each one accounts for more than \$150 billion, with China’s share being double of this at \$318 billion.

On decoding the US trade deficit further, one finds that India’s trade surplus varies across product categories. For instance, imports of primary goods from the US stand at \$13 billion, while exports are at less than a billion. The pattern is completely opposite in the case of consumption goods where India’s imports stand at \$2 billion while exports are at \$27 billion. This makes it clear that a nuanced approach is required to analyse India-US trade. In some categories, distinctions are not so pronounced. For example, the US exports capital goods worth \$6 billion while its imports from India stand at \$8 billion.

Trade partnerships, if not viewed with a balanced perspective and in the right context, may lead to actions that cause a contraction rather than expansion. With the political push at the highest level and collective commitment for addressing global supply chain disruptions, the efforts of leadership should be to guide business enterprises and facilitate investment and financial linkages for strengthening trade relations. Given the fact that in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), India has already agreed at three verticals out of the four — supply chains, clean energy, decarbonisation and infrastructure, and tax and anti-corruption — the possibility of a calibrated free trade agreement seems bright. It is interesting to note that on day one, Trump has already identified stable supply chains as his top priority.

It is also pertinent to see what the internal discussions in the US are. The US has come out with a comprehensive Quadrennial Supply Chain Review 2023. This talks about strategies that it should come up with to respond to the non-market policies and practices (NMPP), as increasingly leveraged by China. This report shows how a third party — China using other countries — targets the US economy. Bringing in greater traceability in trade is something which this report focuses on. Traceability is also an issue for several countries like India. The solutions advocated by the quadrennial supply chain review are in terms of proposed amendments to Article 301 and Article 201 — it calls on

the US administration to bring in greater circumvention procedures. President Trump has also suggested that Treasury, Commerce and Homeland Security pool their resources to implement the External Revenue Service, instead of leaving the task to Customs and Border Protection.

A China-US trade war could pose challenges for India. China may target new markets and destinations in view of the production churn taking place in the country. Apart from the danger of dumping in the Indian market, India's exports to developing countries, especially those in Africa could also be affected.

Further, India is well entrenched in the services sector in the US, but there is an inordinately high reliance on the H-1B visa as a tool for service delivery. It has to be realised that traditional service delivery business models have become outdated and modalities like BPOs stationed in India may not benefit as much from the time-zone advantage any longer. India may like to increase its focus on professional services and maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) services, and similar other service sub-sectors.

There are two things that the Indian government has been consistently pursuing. One is to push for simplifying the H-1B process. Currently, it has a very complicated process and this has been time and again brought to the attention of the US administration. In addition, efforts are also being made to enhance the quota for Indian students. Almost 72 per cent of the total H-1B visas are being granted to Indians. China's share stands at 12 per cent. The arguments for and against this expansion have already taken a political turn. China is also being blocked in AI-related areas while Indian students have prevailed in many more areas, though some discussions now are on to block everyone from entering new and upcoming areas in synthetic biology. Greater linkages and continuous dialogue between India and the US may help us elevate the partnership above these narrow concerns.

The India-US partnership should be viewed in a comprehensive manner, bringing in the

cross-sectoral and cross-modality connections across trade, investment, technology and finance. This may require new institutional mechanisms at the highest level for effective and timely delivery. This would provide the space for launching necessary measures for ensuring convergence across above mentioned segments. As trends in trade are emerging, this institutional mechanism will help prepare India to look at trade relations beyond the US.

The writer is director general, RIS. Views are personal

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 24, 2025

Express View on India's trade relationship with Trump 2.0: India must leave no stone unturned

Editorial

In the weeks leading up to Donald Trump's inauguration, there was considerable anxiety across the world over what the US president-elect would do on tariffs. Trump has repeatedly spoken about imposing tariffs on countries such as Mexico, Canada and China. He has attacked India's tariff structure, pointing specifically at the 100 per cent rate levied on some products. However, so far, days after the inauguration, there has been no policy action. While Trump is now reported to have said that tariffs on some countries will be imposed on February 1, there is uncertainty over how this will play out.

For India, the US is an important trade partner — in 2023-24, bilateral trade between the two countries was around \$120 billion. Despite the current rhetoric in Washington, there is a clear consensus on maintaining and strengthening India-US relations. Only in October, the US and India signed an MoU to expand and diversify the critical minerals supply chain. The threat of levying tariffs may well only be a negotiating tool but the Indian government is mindful of possible changes in the contours of US policy. As per a report in this paper, the commerce ministry has begun holding inter-ministerial talks to prepare for likely changes in US trade policy that could involve tariffs. The Trump administration will, however, also offer

opportunities. The America First trade policy memorandum talks about bilateral trade agreements. It says that the US trade representative “shall identify countries with which the US can negotiate agreements on a bilateral or sector-specific basis to obtain market access”. As per reports, during Trump’s first term as president, India and the US had discussed a trade deal.

India’s approach to trade agreements has been mixed. In recent years, while it has entered into pacts with countries like the UAE and Australia, it has also shied away from agreements such as the RCEP, and has not joined the trade pillar of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. While a bilateral agreement with the US should be explored, there are areas of concern. Trade deals may be linked to labour mobility, which is a complex issue and requires deft handling. There may also be concerns around intellectual property, labour markets, government procurement and data localisation, among others. Any such deal will necessarily involve reducing tariffs. India should take the lead here. It must undertake a broader and more comprehensive examination of its tariff structure and resist protectionism. Alongside, it must push through the EU and UK trade agreements, negotiations over which have been going on for some time now. It must also push through much-needed reforms to take advantage of the opportunities that a rapidly changing global environment may offer. The upcoming Union budget is an opportune moment for the government to take the first steps towards this end.

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 25, 2025

Willing to work with US on trade, immigration, want bigger relationship, says India

Rezaul H Laskar

NEW DELHI: India on Friday signalled its willingness to work with the Donald Trump administration in the US to address all matters related to trade and illegal immigration, saying that both sides are keen

to forge a “bolder, bigger and more ambitious” relationship.

Since his inauguration, Trump has spoken of imposing “100% tariffs” on the Brics bloc, which includes India, and issued executive orders and proclamations to launch a sweeping crackdown on illegal immigrants. These moves have triggered worries about the potential fallout on India, though the fundamentals of the bilateral relationship remain strong and trade in goods and services soared to \$190 billion in 2023.

External affairs ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal responded to several questions on these issues at a regular media briefing by noting that India and the US have ongoing dialogue on matters related to both trade and immigration that can deal with all eventualities. Using the words of external affairs minister S Jaishankar at a media briefing after his meeting with US secretary of state Marco Rubio, Jaiswal said India is focused on building “bolder, bigger and more ambitious” relations with the US.

Trade occupies a special place within the strong and multi-faceted India-US relationship, and the two sides reached a “record level of trade in goods and services worth \$190 billion” in 2023, Jaiswal said. The two sides are also in continuous dialogue on trade-related matters through established mechanisms. “Our approach has always been to address issues in a constructive manner which is in keeping with the interests of both countries and we remain in close communication with the US administration and would like to continue to work towards strengthening our economic partnership further,” he said.

“The new US government has come in recently, whatever trade issues are there, we will talk it out. We want to enhance the record levels of trade, and further expand it,” Jaiswal added.

Even before his election victory, Trump had spoken about the possibility of imposing retaliatory tariffs on China and India, which he labelled as the “tariff king” in the past. He has also railed against efforts by Brics members, primarily China and Russia, to push

for greater trade settlement in domestic currencies as part of a shift away from the US dollar.

Jaishankar has responded to Trump's threats on this count in the past by saying that India "has never been for de-dollarisation" and that all Brics members don't have an identical position on this issue.

The US was India's largest trading partner in 2023-24, accounting for more than 18% of the country's exports. India also has a favorable trade balance with the US, and any tariffs by the Trump administration could hit exports.

Jaiswal also said India is opposed to illegal immigration because of its links to several forms of organised crime, and that New Delhi will take back all Indians who have either over-stayed in the US or any other country or are there without proper documentation.

"We will take them back provided documents are shared with us so that we can verify their nationality, that they are indeed Indians," he said.

Jaiswal said it would be "premature" to talk about the number of illegal Indian immigrants in the US, but said New Delhi "will take things forward" and facilitate the return of all such migrants.

People familiar with the matter said on condition of anonymity that figures from the US department of homeland security suggested there are close to 18,000 illegal immigrants from India in the US, and that the American side had sent back close to 1,000 illegal migrants towards the end of last year. They said the verification of nationality will be done in each case before any migrant can be sent back.

Authorities on the two sides are in regular touch on this issue, and the verification of nationality is a process that can take several weeks, the people said.

Jaiswal emphasised New Delhi's constructive approach on issues related to trade and immigration and said: "Both sides want to make the relationship stronger, the two sides are keen to build a bolder, bigger and more ambitious relationship."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Trump share a "warm personal relationship", and Jaishankar's visit to Washington for the inauguration ceremony and subsequent participation in a Quad foreign ministers' meeting had bolstered ties, he said.

Jaiswal responded to a question about Khalistani separatist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun's reported presence at the inauguration ceremony by saying: "Whenever there is an anti-India activity, we take up such matters with the US government. We will continue to raise such issues with the US government which have a bearing on our security, which have an anti-India agenda."

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 26, 2025

In Republic Day greeting, US says ties with India to be 'defining relationship of 21st century'

HT News Desk

The US Secretary of State Marco Rubio on Sunday sent his message of greetings to the people of India on Republic Day.

The US Secretary of State Marco Rubio on Sunday sent his message of greetings to the people of India on Republic Day, saying his country recognises the significance of the Indian constitution as the foundation of the world's largest democracy.

He congratulated India on occasion of Republic Day and hailed the significance of the country's constitution.

"On behalf of the United States of America, I congratulate the people of India as they celebrate their nation's Republic Day. As they commemorate the adoption of the Constitution of India, we join them in recognizing its enduring significance as the foundation of the world's largest democracy," Rubio said in a statement issued by the State Department.

He said the partnership between the United States and India continues to reach new heights and will be a defining relationship of the 21st century.

"The enduring friendship between our two peoples is the bedrock of our cooperation and propels us forward as we realise the

tremendous potential of our economic relationship," Rubio said.

Rubio also added that he looks forward to deepening the cooperation between both the countries in the year ahead, including by advancing joint efforts in space research and coordination within the Quad to promote a free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.

India will showcase its military might and vibrant cultural heritage at an annual parade on the Kartavya Path in New Delhi on Sunday as the country completes 75 years as a Republic.

India, the US, Australia and Japan came together 20 years ago to extend assistance in response to the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. The coalition is now known as Quad.

The first Quad meeting of the new Donald Trump regime

The first meeting of the Quad group in the new Donald Trump regime was held hours after his inauguration as the 47th President of the United States on January 20.

The meeting was attended by his secretary of state Marco Rubio, along with external affairs minister S Jaishankar. The foreign ministers of Australia and Japan were also present.

"Attended a productive Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting today in Washington DC. Thank @secrubio for hosting us and FMs @SenatorWong and Takeshi Iwaya for their participation," Jaishankar posted on X after the meeting.

According to Jaishankar, the timing of the meeting underlined the priority the group has in the foreign policy of its member states. He also said the group's wide-ranging discussions addressed different dimensions of ensuring a free, open, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

The EAM also held an hour-long bilateral meeting with Rubio, becoming the first foreign minister in the world to do so since his US counterpart took office.

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 27, 2025

Express View on S Jaishankar's US visit: India should reap benefits with Trump 2.0 by embracing trade reform

Editorial

amid the announcements of sweeping policy changes during the first week of President Donald Trump's second term, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's visit to the United States — his second within the span of a month — signals continuity in India-US relations. Jaishankar met with senior members of the outgoing Biden administration in late December in Washington, while outgoing National Security Advisor (NSA) Jake Sullivan visited India in January. Jaishankar's two trips to Washington reflect India's recognition of the importance of its relationship with the US and the necessity of managing it prudently amid global turbulence. After he attended Trump's inauguration, Jaishankar held bilateral talks with NSA Michael Waltz and Secretary of State Marco Rubio on the sidelines of the QUAD Foreign Ministers' meeting. While all this points towards a resilient engagement, some matters merit close attention.

The elephant in the room is the H-1B visa issue, within the larger and ongoing debate over immigration in the US. Speaking to reporters in Washington, Jaishankar emphasised that India is willing to take back illegal Indian immigrants, provided that their Indian origin is verified. With respect to legal migration, both India and the US have expressed their willingness to work towards reciprocal gains. While Trump has expressed the need for "competent people" in the US, in an attempt perhaps to assuage concerns raised by his executive order on birthright citizenship, Jaishankar has underscored that "Indian talent and Indian skills" deserve "maximum opportunity at the global level". The question of whether foreign talent depresses wages and causes job displacement for the American people is an issue that the US is likely to continue to wrestle with internally. Delhi can only hope that the outcome ultimately aligns with India's interests.

With Trump, India's primary challenge in the past has been trade. The Modi government, in anticipation of potentially raised tariffs, is reportedly considering measures such as recalibrating its own duties and increasing imports from the US. However, tinkering with the import-export balance may provide only a short-term fix. In the long term, India must focus on reforming its trade policies and deepening its economic ties with the US. Despite Trump's threats, the US remains one of the world's most open economies, second only to China. India must embrace trade reform rather than resisting it. Furthermore, America is arguably on the cusp of a technological revolution, driven by Artificial Intelligence and other sectors. India must act swiftly to implement its own technological reforms, modernise outdated laws, and position itself competitively within the global ecosystem. The Biden Administration strengthened bilateral relations, and India should reap the benefits with Trump 2.0, by ensuring that it remains aligned with the challenges of the changing global economic and technological landscape.

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 29, 2025

Trump-Modi summit will straddle key space between geopolitics, real impact

Prashant Jha

Trump announces Modi's visit to DC in February, highlighting India's importance amid US political shifts and the need for strategic dialogue on key issues.

Washington President Donald Trump has said that Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit Washington DC in February. In symbolic terms, the timing of the visit is the message. It speaks to India's importance that the transition from a stable Democratic administration to a disruptive Republican administration has been relatively smooth so far for New Delhi.

In tangible terms, the visit should be judged on five parameters of how it meets the current moment in global geopolitics. In terms of the real political impact, it should be judged on a sixth parameter -- whether it

addresses a fundamental deficit in the world view of a Trumpist ecosystem.

The five-fold testOne, does the visit send early signals of positivity about the future of the India-US strategic relationship with convergence both in Indo-Pacific and West Asia? This is likely. Both Delhi and DC remain anxious about China. Both Delhi and DC want to see a Saudi-Israel deal and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). There is also greater alignment on Ukraine, where both want an end to the war as soon as possible.

Two, are both sides able to have difficult conversations privately on trade, immigration, defence and investments and arrive at a clear road map to resolve differences, without Trump possibly blurting out embarrassing details? This is unlikely for now. A trade pact is eventually possible but will require battling domestic political lobbies. Defence acquisitions and defence co-production can be reconciled but will need give and take. The in-principle agreement on taking illegal immigrants back is fine but the scale of the problem is still unclear. There is a tension between Trump's desire for onshoring and India's hopes for friendshoring though there is meeting ground too. To top it, Trump doesn't understand discretion, which will make the Indian system, acutely conscious of optics, uncertain of what's in store. But just an early signal that divergences can be managed will be a good start.

Three, can the visit prevent public damage from issues that are integral to Trump's agenda but have the potential of hurting Modi's political base — the diaspora and urban middle class in case of legal migration, Gujaratis in case of illegal immigration, and key business lobbies in case of trade? This is possible, but only as long as India is able to offer Trump what he considers real political wins.

Four, do both sides trust each on China? This is to be determined. The US has sent mixed signals about its China policy — with Trump's defence of TikTok, the absence of Day 1 tariffs on China, invitation to Xi Jinping for the inauguration, statements suggesting that US

and China can make the world safer, and US seeking China's help to end the Ukraine war. India has embarked on its own version of normal diplomacy in abnormal times with China. Clear, transparent communication can help while ambiguity and opaqueness can erode trust.

Five, do both sides send reassuring signals to critical tech and business investor constituencies about being trusted partners? In the wake of DeepSeek's disruption of the entire artificial intelligence race, do they find new ways to collaborate to ensure national security for both, dominance and competitiveness in the case of America and growth of an ecosystem and innovation in the case of India?

Expect mixed results on the fifth test. Both sides are invested in continuing the initiative on critical and emerging technologies (iCET) or elements of it. On AI, there will have to be a reset with a careful examination of the entire gamut of issues — the impact of chip restrictions, how India can add value with its twin assets (data and tech talent), India's ambitions to grow an ecosystem and become an AI power in its own right, and the US's goal to sustain its dominance in the face of a China making up the gap in much quicker time than anyone anticipated. On semiconductors, it remains to be seen if US encourages American majors to continue investing in India. Secretary of State Marco Rubio's Republic Day message to India mentioned space research in particular; this will continue. There is convergence on need for supply chain diversification beyond China but expect discord on details. On defence, as Trump made it clear on his call with Modi, he expects India to buy more equipment — this means that co-production initiatives involving tech transfer are unlikely to be green-lit in a hurry. All these five areas merit close scrutiny. But in addition, in the run-up to the visit, a key aim should also be to begin a process of addressing a fundamental deficit that exists in Trump's world, and in the wider US public sphere, about India. And this is about what India brings to the American table.

Sixth test to address mistrust Ask an American about what Indian students contribute to US, and few are likely to be able to tangibly quantify their financial contribution.

Here is a clue. According to a November 2024 report published by NAFSA: Association of International Educators, there were 1.1 million foreign students in the US in the 2023-2024 academic year. They contributed \$43.8 billion to the US economy and helped create 378,000 jobs. Out of this total number, according to OpenDoors which tracks foreign students in the US, there were 331,602 students from India, higher than any country, including China. A rough back of the envelope calculation suggests that as one-third of the total number of foreign students in US, Indian students may well have contributed over \$10 billion and helped create over 100,000 jobs in the US in just a single academic year.

Ask an American about what Indian companies contribute to the US, and few are likely to be able to point to the actual tangible Indian investments in the US.

Here is a clue. In a report titled "Indian Roots, American Soil", published in May 2023, the last time any credible data on the issue was available, a Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) survey found that 163 Indian companies had invested \$40 billion and created 425,000 jobs in the US. And it may only have grown since. Indian companies are present in all 50 states. The investment by value is highest in Texas and Georgia (incidentally both are Republican states) while job-creation is also highest in Texas, with 29% of Indian investments in the life sciences, pharmaceutical and health care sector, 21% companies in the information technology and telecommunications sector, and 18% in manufacturing, among other sectors. And the figures don't reveal the hidden stories. Take the example of an HCL plant in North Carolina. In one facility, 87% employees were local Americans and 13% were on H-1B, a complete inversion of the ratio when the Indian tech company first started its operations in the state.

These are two simple barometers, merely indicative of all the other ways India contributes to the US. Of course, India needs the US too, even more so. But precisely for that reason, the diplomatic task at the moment is persuading a large part of America, which is sceptical of international partnerships and sees the world as exploiting America, about India's value.

To address this deficit, India needs to refocus its diplomatic communication from catering to the home audience and diaspora to catering to the American public sphere. It has to meet American audiences where they are, including podcasts and YouTube videos and social media, and on themes that are outside the bilateral box but pertain to American economy and competitiveness. And it has to refine its messaging, weaving in the shared coded convergence on China but also showing India's value to the American Main Street.

Modi's success in this visit will lie in not just setting the tone for positive bilateral ties. It would help to kick off a process where Indian diplomacy is tasked with persuading the US political leadership and the wider US public sphere that India is both a partner of value and that it values the US. It is time for Delhi to own the relationship.

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 29, 2025

Trump names India, China as high-tariff nations, vows tariffs on those that 'harm' US

HT News Desk

Donald Trump said that US will create a "fair system" where funds will flow into the nation's coffers, ensuring that America becomes "very rich again."

President Donald Trump has said that the United States will impose tariffs on countries that "harm" America, naming China, India, and Brazil as those with high tariffs.

"We're going to put tariffs on outside countries and outside people that really mean harm to us. Well, they mean us harm, but they basically want to make their country good," Trump told House Republicans at a Florida retreat on Monday, his first after beginning his second term as president last week.

"Look at what others do. China is a tremendous tariff maker, and India and Brazil and so many other countries. So we're not going to let that happen any longer because we're going to put America first," he added.

He said that the US will create a "fair system" where funds will flow into the nation's coffers, ensuring that America becomes "very rich again" in a "very short time."

Trump stressed that the US must return to the system that had once made it "richer and more powerful than ever."

Reflecting on his inaugural speech, Trump said, "Instead of taxing our citizens to benefit foreign countries, we should impose tariffs and taxes on foreign nations to benefit our citizens."

"Under the American first economic model, as tariffs on other countries go up, taxes on American workers and businesses will come down and massive numbers of jobs and factories will come home," he said.

Earlier, Trump has already talked about slapping "100 per cent tariffs" on the BRICS grouping, a bloc that includes India as well.

In his speech, Trump urged companies to establish manufacturing operations in the US if they wanted to avoid tariffs.

"If you want to stop paying the taxes or the tariffs, you have to build your plant right here in America. That's what's going to happen at record levels. We're going to have more plants built in the next short period of time than anybody ever envisioned before because the incentive is going to be there because they have no tariff whatsoever," he said.

The president stated that the US will back companies setting up plants in America, especially in sectors such as pharmaceuticals, semiconductors, and steel.

Trump added that his administration would also be placing tariffs on steel, aluminum, copper and other materials required by the US military. "We have to bring production back to our country. There was a time when we made one ship a day, and now we can't build a ship. We don't know what the hell we're doing. It's all gone to other locations and other lands," he said.

“To further return production to the United States, we're going to environmentally free up our rare earth minerals. We have some of the best rare earth anywhere in the world, but we're not allowed to use it because the environmentalists got there first,” said the president in his address.

With AP inputs

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 31, 2025

Jaishankar calls Trump ‘American nationalist’, highlights strong India-US ties
PTI

Emphasising strong India-US bilateral ties, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Thursday described US President Donald Trump as an “American nationalist”.

Speaking at an interactive session at Delhi University’s Hansraj College, Jaishankar highlighted the evolving nature of global diplomacy and India’s approach to it.

“I recently attended his (Trump’s) oath-taking ceremony and we received good treatment. I believe he is an American nationalist,” Jaishankar said in response to a question about whether Trump is India’s friend or enemy.

He acknowledged that Trump’s policies could bring significant changes to global affairs but asserted that India’s foreign policy would continue to be guided by national interest.

“Yes, he (Trump) will change a lot of things, maybe some things will be out of syllabus, but we have to conduct foreign policies out of syllabus in the interest of the country,” he said, adding, “There may be some issues where we differ, but there will be many areas where things will be in our shed.” Jaishankar also stressed the strong personal ties between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Trump, saying, “Our relationship with the US is strong and Modi has a good personal relationship with Trump.” During the session, Jaishankar spoke about India’s growing global influence and changing perceptions about the country.

“Even non-Indians now say they are Indians, they think it will help them get a seat on a plane somewhere,” he said.

Reflecting on his career, Jaishankar shared insights into his transition from academia and diplomacy to politics.

“I never thought I would become a bureaucrat. My entry into politics happened by accident, or call it fortune, or call it Modi. He (PM Modi) pursued me in a manner that nobody could say no,” he said.

He highlighted that Indians living abroad still rely on their homeland for support and said, “Jo bhi desh ke baahar jate hain, woh hamaare paas hee aate hain. Baahar hum hee rakhwale hain (Those who leave the country turn to us only. We are their caretakers outside).”

This article went live on January thirty-first, twenty twenty-five, at fifteen minutes past eight in the morning.

India – Bangladesh Relations

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 24, 2025

India-Bangladesh security chiefs discuss steps to curb illegal activities, counter ‘exaggerated’ reports on border disputes

Express News Service

The Border Security Force (BSF) Wednesday held a coordination meeting with the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) to discuss key issues, including the prevention of the movement of people other than farmers near the international border, strengthening bilateral cooperation, and control of illegal activities.

The meeting was held between Tarun Kumar Gautam, DIG (Malda Sector), BSF, and Colonel Mohammad Imran Ibne Rouf, Sector Commander (Rajshahi Sector), BGB, at Sonamasjid Border Outpost in Bangladesh.

“Important issues of mutual interest in border areas related to border management were discussed in the meeting. Among other issues: strengthening bilateral cooperation, control of illegal activities in the border area, prevention of movement of people other than farmers near the international border, were discussed and consensus was reached,” said a BSF officer.

The Indian side of the border touches West Bengal (2216.7 km), Assam (263 km), Meghalaya (443 km), Tripura (856 km) and

Mizoram (318 km). The entire stretch consists of plains, riverine belts, hills and jungles. The area is heavily populated and is cultivated right up to the border.

During the three-hour meeting, both sides also focused on ensuring effective border management. "Recent concerns were also discussed in the meeting, including the incident at Sukdevpur border in the Malda district [in West Bengal] on January 18. BSF reiterated its commitment to work closely with BGB to maintain peace and security along the India-Bangladesh border. The meeting concluded on a positive note, with both forces expressing their continued commitment to bilateral cooperation and border security," the BSF officer said.

Both sides also emphasised on finding solutions to border related problems through mutual dialogue and consensus. "Both sides expressed concern over exaggeration of border related disputes and rumours in some sections of the media and agreed to prevent the same," the officer said.

N K Pandey, South Bengal Frontier, BSF, said, "These high level meetings symbolise the strong partnership between India and Bangladesh. Both the forces reiterated their commitment towards maintaining security of the international border and resolve common issues through mutual dialogue and cooperation. BSF is fully dedicated to its objective of ensuring peace and security of its borders, and having cordial relationships with its neighbouring countries is high on its priority."

"In order to prevent infiltration, smuggling, and other anti-national activities from across the India-Bangladesh border, the Centre had sanctioned the construction of border fencing with floodlights, in phases. The total length of India-Bangladesh border is 4096.7 km, out of which, 3196.705 km has been covered by physical fencing. The non-physical barrier will be in the form of technological solutions. Old design fences are being replaced with a new design fence," an official of the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) said.

"There have been some problems in the construction of fencing in certain stretches on

this border due to riverine/low lying areas, habitations close to the border, pending land acquisition cases and protests by the border population, which have slowed down the completion of the project," the official added.

The Telegraph, Kolkata, January 27, 2025 **'Cold war' between BSF and Bengal police hits bunker probe in Nadia**

Subhasish Chaudhuri

Investigations have made little headway since Friday's discovery of three underground bunkers stockpiled with the cough syrup Phensedyl close to the Bangladesh border in Nadia, with the BSF blaming local villagers' silence and state police's alleged failure to cooperate.

Neither has the smuggling network involved been identified, nor have the ownership details of the plot in Naghata village on which the bunkers had been built been unearthed.

Some 62,200 bottles of Phensedyl — a codeine-based cough syrup that has a market in Bangladesh as a recreational narcotic drug — had been found in the three bunkers, installed 2km from an unfenced portion of the international border. The haul is said to be worth 1.4 crore.

The BSF on Sunday handed the case over to the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) for further investigation "considering the gravity of the incident", DIG Nilotpal Kumar Pandey, spokesperson for the BSF's South Bengal Frontier, said.

An NCB team visited Naghata and inspected the bunkers and the cache of Phensedyl bottles. BSF officials said the bottles are likely to be submitted before a court in Krishnanagar on Monday.

A battle of attrition seemed to be taking shape between the BSF and the Bengal police, with the central force alleging a lack of cooperation from the district cops, who swatted away the charge.

Sources said the BSF-NCB investigation was facing challenges as the villagers were keeping their mouths shut — apparently for fear of the smuggling mafia — claiming ignorance about the ownership of the plot.

A local politician told this newspaper the plot where the bunkers were found belonged to

“at least two individuals” but did not name anyone.

BSF officials said their investigations were also constrained by the need to avoid any political backlash from the local community, given that some people were ready to accuse the border force of overreach and highhandedness at the drop of a hat.

“So, we have restricted ourselves from venturing further to ensure nobody accuses us of encroaching on civic areas,” a senior BSF official in Calcutta said.

An official of the central force in Nadia expressed frustration at the lack of local police involvement.

“It’s surprising that the police have little knowledge about the landowners or the individuals behind the storage tanks (bunkers), although the area is under their surveillance. Everyone here seems to know, but they remain silent out of fear of the kingpins of this smuggling racket,” he said.

Another BSF official said: “What’s shocking is the police’s mysterious ignorance about the case — from the stockpiling of the Phensedyl to the building of the bunker-like storage tanks — despite their civic volunteers monitoring the area.”

By Sunday evening, the police had not questioned anyone in the village or attempted to locate the welder who fabricated the bunkers, made of corrugated metal sheets and bricks and fitted out with locking mechanisms.

The police said they had not registered a case or begun investigations because the BSF had not yet lodged a formal complaint with them. Asked whether the BSF was deliberately sidelining the police from the investigation, DIG Pandey said: “The police can suo motu (on their own) take cognisance of the incident. But I shall refrain from commenting on why they have not done so.”

Police sources claimed they had unofficially carried out some preliminary investigations, which suggest the Phensedyl bottles may belong to an old batch that could not be sold in Bangladesh because of a declining demand.

“We suspect the consignment owner paid someone to hide the unsold items under the

ground,” said the Krishnanagar superintendent of police, Amarnath K, dismissing the allegations of a police surveillance failure.

“It’s a success story of coordinated intelligence,” he said, alluding to the joint operation by teams from the BSF’s Tungi border outpost and Krishnaganj police that discovered the bunkers.

“If someone digs a pit behind their house, invisible to others, how can a civic police officer notice it? This is not a failure of intelligence but a success, as the operation was executed. The civic police do not have a sixth sense.”

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 29, 2025

Bengal Cabinet approves land acquisition for India-Bangladesh border fencing

HT Correspondent

The move comes amid tensions between the two countries over the construction of barbed wire fencing along some stretches of the frontier and cross-border clashes between farmers

The West Bengal Cabinet has given the go-ahead for acquiring land for the Border Security Force (BSF) to fence the India-Bangladesh border at Karimpur in the Nadia district amid tensions between the two countries over the construction of barbed wire fencing along some stretches of the frontier and cross-border clashes between farmers.

“The Cabinet gave in-principle approval on Monday. The land procurement through the district-level committee will start soon. We will soon inform the Union home ministry to place the fund with the committee,” said an official.

West Bengal shares a 2,216 km border with Bangladesh. Some stretches of the porous border remain unfenced and vulnerable to infiltration and smuggling.

A BSF officer said fencing has helped bring down criminal activities along the border. “The fence would have helped both nations to check cross-border crimes.”

The BSF on Friday said it unearthed three underground chambers, within less than two

km of the border in Nadia district, and seized phensedyl cough syrup to be smuggled to Bangladesh.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has accused West Bengal's ruling Trinamool Congress of not acquiring land for border fencing and jeopardising national security. "The issue of national security is paramount and transcends everything. So, it is not that the state government has done something noble by giving a nod for acquiring land for fencing. In no other state, we have seen such a thing between the government and the BSF over land. The state has to come forward," said BJP spokesperson Samik Bhattacharya.

TMC spokesperson Jay Prakash Majumdar said the BJP can never come to power in West Bengal and had it been possible the party would have handed over the entire state to the BSF. "Border security is the responsibility of the BSF. If the BSF cannot secure the border without getting some small stretches of land, they should tell us. We will manage."

West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee has accused BSF of intimidating villagers along the border. Ahead of the 2021 assembly elections, the TMC complained to the Election Commission of India that the BSF threatened villagers. The BSF denied the charges.

The TMC opposed the Union government's move to increase the BSF's jurisdiction from 15 km to 50 km. Banerjee raised the issue with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in October 2021.

India – Afghanistan Relations

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 16, 2025

India-Afghan relations beyond Pakistan's shadow

Jayant Prasad

The upscaling of India's relations with Afghanistan is not sudden and Pakistan-centric. The 90-minute warm exchanges between Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and Afghan Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi last week in Dubai in the aftermath of the deteriorating Afghanistan-Pakistan relations were a coincidence.

The Afghan Foreign Office stated that the meeting conformed to its determination to

strengthen political and economic ties with India "as a significant regional and economic partner." India is equally determined to continue to connect with Afghans and prevent the hiatus that existed from the mid-1990s to 2001 (during the factional warfare within the Mujahideen government and the rule of the Taliban) when the Indian embassy and consulates remained shut.

The Indian decision to step up India-Afghanistan relations is in line with India's progressive engagement with the Taliban. JP Singh, Indian government's point person for Afghanistan, pursued this periodically through contacts with the relevant Afghan authorities. Over time, both sides felt the need to expand their relations beyond humanitarian assistance from India in foodgrains, pesticides, vaccines, medicines and de-addiction and relief materials. Although the Taliban regime is non-inclusive and mistreats minorities and women, the law-and-order situation has improved and opium cultivation has almost gone. Isolating the Taliban is unlikely to moderate them.

The conspiracy-obsessed Pakistani social media is viewing the Dubai meeting as a plot hatched against it. Its commentators invariably see any growing closeness between India and Afghanistan as two sides of a nutcracker trying to crush Pakistan. They disregard India's stake in Afghanistan's stability, the traditional connection between Indians and Afghans and the Indian security consideration (to assure itself that Afghan territory is not used by terrorist groups against India). India meets its strategic objective if Afghanistan can stand on its feet and make its own decisions.

The establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan led to triumphalism in Pakistan. The Taliban bristles at the suggestion that it is a Pakistani puppet. The Pakistani euphoria has since turned to disquiet because of the refusal of the Taliban leadership to accept its tutelage. To pressure the Taliban, Pakistan has pushed back Afghan refugees at a time when the authorities in Kabul cannot handle the numbers. Pakistani actions have resulted

in unfriendly relations with three of its five neighbours — Afghanistan, India and Iran.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif described the recent Pakistani cross-border military strikes as a "teeth-breaking response" to the Taliban's perceived non-cooperation in curbing the activities of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan. Besides, Pakistan has a grudge against the Afghan refusal to acknowledge the Durand Line as the frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Following border skirmishes between the two, Pakistani aerial bombardment of 83 locations in Afghanistan led to many civilian deaths, including women and children. The Pakistani punitive strikes have been "unequivocally" condemned by the Indian External Affairs Ministry spokesperson.

The former army chief of Pakistan, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, altered the erstwhile Pakistani idea of establishing 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan — propounded by one of his distant predecessors, General Mirza Aslam Beg — by qualifying that Pakistan should do so without control over Afghanistan.

The Pakistani establishment has done the opposite — not just eschewing the quest for control but also engaging in aggression against Afghanistan. No wonder, the Afghan reaction is fierce. Acting Deputy Foreign Minister Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai reminded Pakistan that though Pakistan had named its missiles Ghaznavi, Abdali and Babur, it should remember that Afghanistan had many Ghaznavis, Abdalis and Baburs equal to atomic bombs.

Afghanistan seeks recognition and increased economic interaction with the rest of the world. No country has recognised the Islamic Emirate, though 40 countries engage with it in various ways. Unlike China, which has accepted an ambassador sent by the Islamic Emirate and sent its ambassador to Kabul, India continues with the arrangement of maintaining a technical unit in its Kabul Embassy and interacting with the Afghan mission in New Delhi, headed currently by a chargé d'affaires who was an appointee of former President Ashraf Ghani. Most other

Afghan diplomats in India have since taken asylum in western countries.

The absence of adequate staff hampered work in the Afghan diplomatic offices in India. The Ministry of External Affairs facilitated the selection of an official in the Afghan consulate in Mumbai. The person appointed has studied in India for eight years under the scholarship scheme of the Indian Council of Cultural Relations and obtained a PhD degree. The tricolour of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan still flies atop the Afghan diplomatic representation in India. After all, Afghan officials, including ministers, travel abroad on the Republic passports and the Afghan cricket team plays with the Republic colours.

A distinguishing feature of the erstwhile Indian development partnership with Afghanistan was that India sought Afghan priorities and proceeded with those it could practically accomplish. The Indian readout of the Dubai meeting highlighted four areas of cooperation: material support for the health sector and the rehabilitation of refugees, strengthening sports (cricketing) links and the increased use of the Chabahar Port for trade and commercial activities.

Besides, India is ready to resume development activities. It could begin by restarting the unfinished projects and maintaining and upgrading the executed projects. At the Afghan request, India recently sent a technical team to inspect the Hari Rud Friendship dam in Herat.

India has restarted scholarships and technical training activities remotely. Of the 1,000 scholarships offered to Afghan students for online courses in Indian universities, 30 per cent have gone to girls. If possible, this could go up to 50 per cent. The Taliban is seeking a more liberal grant of Indian visas for Afghans. There has been an incremental increase in medical and business visas. These need boosting to keep up active people-to-people exchanges.

When Indian visa officials in the past tried to dissuade Afghan medical visa seekers from going to Delhi and proceed to Peshawar instead to save cost, the invariable response

was that they had no aithbar (trust) in Pakistan. India must liberalise its visa regime to refresh the Afghan trust in India.

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 18, 2025

India wants to engage with 'government of people of Afghanistan': MEA

ANI

India has also agreed to promote trade and commerce, including through Chabahar port. India wants to engage more with the "government of the people of Afghanistan" on development cooperation and do more in terms of offering humanitarian assistance, the Ministry of External Affairs said on Friday.

"We have a technical mission in Kabul. We have had engagements at the Joint Secretary's level, several of them, in the past year or so...This was the highest level of engagement that we have had, and we have clearly spelt out that we want to do more to offer humanitarian assistance and also to engage with the government of the people of Afghanistan on development cooperation," Jaiswal said in a press briefing today.

Jaiswal further elaborated that India seeks to continue its long-standing relationship with Afghanistan by strengthening humanitarian and developmental support.

"Both these counts we want to continue to build on what we are doing there to strengthen our longstanding relationship with the people of Afghanistan. We also want to do more in sports. You would have seen there are several cricket players from Afghanistan who play here in the Indian Premier League (IPL), Greater Noida also happens to be the homeground. So these - all these are the areas where we want to build our relations so that we can bring more benefit of our approach, of our humanitarian assistance, of our engagement on developmental cooperation front."

India-Afghanistan relations

During the meeting, FS Misri reiterated India's commitment to provide further humanitarian and development assistance to the Afghan people.

India has also agreed to promote trade and commerce, including through Chabahar port.

It will also extend its support to the health sector and rehabilitation of refugees in the country.

India, in its bid to support the Afghan people, has so far dispatched several shipments consisting of 50,000 MTs of wheat, 300 tons of medicines, 27 tons of earthquake relief aid, 40,000 litres of pesticides, 100 million polio doses, 1.5 million doses of COVID Vaccine, 11,000 units of hygiene kits for the drug de-addiction programme, 500 units of winter clothing and 1.2 tons of stationery kits, etc, according to the MEA.

Further being asked about the political developments in Canada in the wake of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau declaring his intent to resign as the Canadian PM, the MEA spokesperson said India is keeping a "close eye" on the developments.

"A lot of political developments are going on in Canada. We are keeping a close eye on them. India and Canada enjoy a very deep relationship with each other...We hope that the relationship will remain strong and India will be ready to take any step in this direction," Jaiswal further said.

Earlier this month, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that he would resign as leader of the Liberal Party and as Prime Minister as soon as a new candidate is found for the post. He said that the Canadian Parliament would be prorogued or suspended until March 24.

India - Singapore Relations

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 17, 2025

India, Singapore strengthen ties: President Tharman, PM Modi review bilateral partnership

India and Singapore are celebrating 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' in line with strengthening India's 'Act East Policy'

Tribune News Service

Singapore President Tharman Shanmugaratnam met Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi as both leaders reviewed the bilateral partnership.

Tharman is currently on a five-day visit to India.

India and Singapore are celebrating 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' in line with strengthening India's 'Act East Policy'. Continuing their discussions from their recent meeting in Singapore in September 2024, the leaders extensively reviewed the bilateral partnership. They also exchanged views on regional and global issues of mutual interest.

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 17, 2025

India-Singapore ties on new trajectory, says visiting President Tharman Shanmugaratnam

HT Correspondent

Singaporean President Tharman and President Droupadi Murmu unveiled a joint logo to commemorate the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations

NEW DELHI: Singapore is eyeing new opportunities in India in sectors such as logistics, connectivity, petro-chemicals and maintenance, repair and operations (MRO) for aerospace, Singaporean President Tharman Shanmugaratnam said on Thursday. Bilateral ties are on a "new trajectory" following the upgrading of relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership last year and the two sides are cooperating in key areas such as advanced manufacturing and semiconductors, with Singapore helping build up India's semiconductor eco-system, Tharman told the media during a ceremonial reception at Rashtrapati Bhawan.

Besides looking at opportunities in logistics, connectivity, petro-chemicals, skilling, and MRO for aerospace, the two sides are working on net zero industrial parks and exploring new initiatives in the digital space and sustainability, he said.

"In the digital space, we are exploring the possibility of a data corridor between GIFT City and Singapore so that our financial institutions can exchange data on a safe and trusted basis," Tharman said. In sustainability, the two sides are "working actively to look at whether a corridor for renewable energy between India and Singapore can be achieved".

With Singapore already playing a role in the skilling of Indian workers in diverse fields, Tharman said the two sides are looking at skilling for new industries.

"Our business relationships are thriving. In fact, Singapore is the largest investor in India for many years now. Our defence relationship is strong," he said. "I'm optimistic about our relations with India...because our leaders see eye to eye. We are natural partners. Singapore is invested in India's ambition to be a developed country by 2047."

Tharman's four-day visit marks the beginning of celebrations to mark the 60th anniversary of diplomatic ties between India and Singapore. He recalled India's role as one of the first few countries to recognise Singapore's independence in 1965, and said a "natural partnership" has grown since because the two countries "found ways to cooperate in ways that are in our mutual interests in a whole range of areas".

Later in the day, Tharman held separate meetings with President Droupadi Murmu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Tharman and Murmu unveiled a joint logo to commemorate the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations. The logo incorporates colours from the Indian and Singaporean national flags, the lotus (India's national flower) and the orchid (Singapore's national flower), and the number 60 highlighting the 60th anniversary. These elements symbolise the enduring friendship, mutual trust and shared values of the two countries, the external affairs ministry said.

Bilateral ties are characterised by strengthening political, defence, economic, cultural, educational and people-to-people contacts, and Singapore is a "key pillar of India's Act East policy and our vision of the Indo-Pacific", the ministry said.

The talks between Murmu and Tharman focused on ways to further strengthen the bilateral comprehensive strategic partnership, external affairs ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said on X. Minister of state for skill development Jayant Singh met Tharman on Thursday and said on X that he had discussed education, skill-

related interventions and potential areas of cooperation. "I am certain together we can strengthen capabilities, deepen our partnerships, and drive progress that resonates globally," he said.

On Wednesday, external affairs minister S Jaishankar met Tharman and discussed cooperation in semiconductors, industrial parks, skilling, digitalisation and trade development. "As we celebrate 60 years of bilateral relations, confident that his state visit will add new momentum to our comprehensive strategic partnership," Jaishankar said on X.

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 17, 2025

Singapore President says ties with India on 'new trajectory'

Express News Service

India and Singapore are cooperating in critical sectors like advanced manufacturing and semiconductors as the relations are on a "new trajectory" of growth, Singapore President Tharman Shanmugaratnam said Thursday.

Shanmugaratnam, on a five-day visit to India, held separate talks with President Droupadi Murmu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi with a broad focus on expansion of bilateral ties. He is travelling to Odisha Friday where he will meet the state government's leadership.

The Singapore President told reporters that a data corridor between the GIFT City in Gujarat and his country is being explored so that the financial institutions of the two sides can safely exchange data.

He said the possibility of a "corridor for renewable energy" between India and Singapore is also being looked at.

Talking about Singapore-India ties in the last few decades, he said the two countries are now on a new trajectory after ties were upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership during Modi's visit to the city state in September last year.

"We are exploring new initiatives going beyond the existing active relationship that we have. We are cooperating in advanced manufacturing and semiconductors," he said.

Shanmugaratnam said both sides are also working on new "generation and net zero" industrial parks besides focusing on skilling for new industries.

"In the digital space, we are exploring the possibility of a data corridor between GIFT City and Singapore so that our financial institutions can exchange data on a safe and trusted basis," he said.

The Singapore president also referred to how India was among the first to recognise his country around six decades ago.

"We will never forget that India was one of the first few countries to recognize Singapore's independence in 1965. And since then our relationship has grown by bounds," he said.

The year 2025 marks the celebrations of the 60th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Singapore.

To commemorate this occasion, Murmu and Shanmugaratnam unveiled a joint logo.

The joint logo incorporates elements: colours from the Indian and Singaporean National flags, the Lotus (national flower of India) and Orchid (national flower of Singapore), and the number 60 highlighting the significant milestone of the 60th anniversary.

The placement of these elements symbolises the enduring friendship, mutual trust and shared values between the two countries, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 18, 2025

Singapore President Shanmugaratnam embarks on two-day visit to Odisha

PTI

Singapore President Tharman Shanmugaratnam arrived in the Odisha capital on Friday on a two-day visit to the state, during which several memorandums of understanding (MoUs) will be signed between the island country and the coastal state.

Odisha Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi, Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, Chief Secretary Manoj Ahuja and other senior officials welcomed Shanmugaratnam and his delegation at the

Biju Patnaik International Airport in Bhubaneswar.

"His Excellency Mr@Tharman_S, President, Republic of Singapore receives a warm welcome from Hon'ble CM Shri @MohanMODisha at Bhubaneswar Airport. A moment of pride as #Odisha hosts the esteemed leader, strengthening bonds of friendship and collaboration," the CMO posted on X.

The president, who is accompanying a high-level delegation, including ministers, MPs and officials, went to a reputed hotel where he is scheduled to hold discussions with Majhi and other officials later in the day to boost trade, business and tourism in the state, sources said. Security has been tightened in Bhubaneswar, with 40 platoons of police deployed and traffic restrictions in place until Saturday.

Shanmugaratnam's visit comes days before the business conference, 'Utkarsh Odisha: Make-in-Odisha conclave', slated for January 28 and 29.

During his visit, at least eight MoUs will be signed between Singapore and Odisha, focusing on key areas such as skill development, industrial infrastructure and sustainable energy.

One of the significant agreements involves enhancing Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), with a focus on the semiconductor industry to bolster Odisha's skill development ecosystem.

Another pact will be signed between the Odisha Industrial Infrastructure Development Corporation (IDCO) and Singapore's Sembcorp for industrial infrastructure projects. Additionally, the Bhubaneswar Development Authority (BDA) will collaborate with Surbana Jurong, Singapore, to develop a new city.

Pacts will also be signed for a green hydrogen corridor and developing a petro chemical and petroleum investment region (PCPIR).

Shanmugaratnam is also scheduled to visit the World Skill Centre, which was set up here by Singapore's Institute of Technical Education and Education Services (ITEES)

with funding from the Asian Development Bank.

On Saturday, he would visit the Sun Temple in Konark and the vaccine manufacturing plant of Bharat Biotech on the outskirts of the state capital, the statement said.

Speaking to mediapersons, Majhi said the talks would focus on strengthening ties in urban planning, port management, green energy, skill development and logistics.

"Many MoUs will be signed with Singapore. Investment in Odisha and cooperation with Singapore will pave the way for a new and prosperous Odisha. The state is taking a historic step in the field of investment," Majhi said at the airport.

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 18, 2025

India, Singapore working on green energy corridor, data corridor

Rezaul H Laskar

India and Singapore focus on a green energy corridor and data corridor during President Tharman's visit, with MoUs expected on green hydrogen and more.

New Delhi: India and Singapore's work on creating a green energy corridor and a data corridor have been in focus during Singaporean President Tharman Shanmugaratnam's ongoing visit to the country, a senior Indian official said on Friday.

There is already work going on for setting up a green hydrogen corridor between the eastern part of India and Singapore and the two sides are expected to sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in this regard, secretary (East) Jaideep Mazumdar in the external affairs ministry said.

This green corridor includes a link from Tuticorin and another from Paradip in Odisha, Mazumdar told a media briefing. An MoU is expected to be signed during Tharman's trip to Odisha state.

The data corridor is an important venture between Gujarat's GIFT City and Singapore that is being discussed though no MoUs are expected to be finalised during the current visit, he said.

Tharman, who is accompanied by several ministers and a large business delegation, said on Thursday that the proposed data corridor will allow the “safe and trusted” exchange of data between financial institutions, while the renewable energy corridor will facilitate sustainable development.

People familiar with the matter said on condition of anonymity that seven MoUs are expected to be signed during Tharman’s visit to Odisha, including five pacts between businesses and two between the Singapore and Odisha governments for skill development.

Mazumdar said the two sides are eyeing MoUs in areas such as green hydrogen, green shipping, an industrial park, petrochemical complexes, and skill development, especially for semiconductor manufacturing.

Cooperation with Singapore in the field of maintenance, repair and operations (MRO) for aerospace too has gained importance, especially since Indian airlines now have 1,500 aircraft on order, he said. This area has significant potential for generating employment and creating value addition, thus making India an MRO hub for others.

While Singapore is a strong MRO centre, it has certain limitations in terms of land, manpower and resources, Mazumdar said. “They are looking to work with us and we are looking to work with them,” he said, noting that two of the world’s foremost MRO players – ST Engineering and SIA Engineering – are based in Singapore and would like to partner with India to develop the sector.

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 18, 2025

Odisha, Singapore sign 8 MoUs in semiconductors, green hydrogen and fintech

Debabrata Mohanty

The MoUs were signed ahead of the Odisha Investor Summit, scheduled to be held in Bhubaneswar later this month, where Singapore will be the first country to partner

Bhubaneswar: Odisha signed eight memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with the Singapore government on Friday in key

sectors such as green hydrogen, petrochemicals, the fintech ecosystem, semiconductors, and skill development.

The MoUs were signed ahead of the Odisha Investor Summit, scheduled to be held in Bhubaneswar later this month, where Singapore will be the first country partner.

Singapore President Tharman Shanmugaratnam, who arrived in Bhubaneswar this afternoon for a two-day visit, visited the World Skill Center in Bhubaneswar and the Vertical Transportation Lab and Travelator Lab where he lauded Odisha’s efforts in advancing skill development and fostering innovation.

One MoU was signed between the Odisha Industrial Infrastructure Development Corporation (IDCO) and Sembcorp, Singapore for establishment of industrial parks in the State while the second MoU was signed between the IDCO and Sembcorp, Singapore for setting up of a Green Hydrogen Corridor. A third MoU was inked between IDCO and Surbana Jurong, Singapore in the Petrochemical and Petroleum Investment Region (PCPIR) sector. The Bhubaneswar Development Authority (BDA) signed an MoU with Surbana Jurong, Singapore for development of a new city in Odisha. The fourth MoU was signed between the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), GRIDCO, and IIT Bhubaneswar in the New Energy sector. The 5th MoU was signed between the Electronics & IT Department of Odisha with the Global Finance & Technology Network (GFTN), Singapore for strengthening FinTech Ecosystem in the State. The sixth MoU was signed between the Skill Development & Technical Education Department, Odisha, and the ITE Education Services (ITEES), Singapore, focusing on advanced skilling. Another MoU was signed between the Skill Development & Technical Education Department, Odisha, and the ITE Education Services (ITEES), Singapore, focusing on skill development in semiconductor sector.

Also Read: India, Singapore working on green energy corridor, data corridor

Officials said the InsureTech Hub will support India’s goal of “Insurance for All” by 2047 so

that all citizens have access to appropriate insurance, contributing to financial security and economic empowerment.

The partnership will establish training programmes in FinTech and InsureTech, upskilling professionals and students. This will equip the workforce with the skills needed to drive innovation in the digital economy. The initiative aims to establish venture capital funds and angel networks to attract investment in Odisha's FinTech ecosystem. Increased investment can fuel the growth of startups and drive technological advancements.

Similarly, the MOU between skill development department and ITEES of Singapore would ensure expansion of World Skill Center, Bhubaneswar through introduction of new courses in various areas such as food and beverage operations, hotel operations, logistics, digital animation, healthcare assistant training, visual merchandising, artificial intelligence application, aerospace technology, aerospace avionics, marine engineering, retail, electronics, semiconductor, renewable energy. A World Centre for Information Technology and Information Technology enabled Services in areas such as cybersecurity, cloud computing, blockchain, Internet of Things, data science would also be set up in Bhubaneswar.

The MoU on semiconductor related skilling in Odisha would conduct assessment to assess the requirement of skilled human resources in the Semiconductor sector in India and the jobs available. The MoU would enable Singapore to design the curriculum based on its extensive knowledge and experience in the areas for course such as semiconductor fundamentals, semiconductor processes, semiconductor metrology, semiconductor devices and integrated circuits, industrial automation, ic packaging and electrical testing, wafer fabrication technology, cleanroom and vacuum technology, design engineering, design verification engineering or any other courses identified by SD&TE.

Odisha chief minister Mohan Charan Majhi, who was present on the occasion, said, "There

is tremendous potential for collaboration between Singapore and Odisha."

The Telegraph, Kolkata, January 19, 2025
Odisha and Singapore-based firms sign MoUs to strengthen collaboration in key sectors

Subhashish Mohanty

These MoUs were signed in the presence of Singapore President Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Odisha chief minister Mohan Charan Majhi and Union minister Dharmendra Pradhan

Odisha and Singapore-based organisations on Friday signed a series of MoUs to strengthen the collaboration in key sectors such as semiconductors, new energy, advancing skill landscape, setting up industrial parks, green hydrogen corridor and a new city in Bhubaneswar.

These MoUs were signed in the presence of Singapore President Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Odisha chief minister Mohan Charan Majhi and Union minister Dharmendra Pradhan.

President Tharman Shanmugaratnam arrived on a two-day visit here to explore business opportunities in various fields. Singapore is the official partner of the upcoming Utkarsh Odisha (Make in Odisha Conclave-2025) the state's biennial investment summit. It is scheduled to be held on January 28th and 29th.

President Tharman Shanmugaratnam was welcomed warmly by chief minister Mohan Charan Majhi and Union minister Dharmendra Pradhan at the Biju Patnaik Airport and later at the World Skill Centre in Bhubaneswar.

Chief Minister Majhi said: "To attract investments to the state and to be a part of the Utkarsh Odisha Conclave 2025, we interacted with various investors in Delhi and Mumbai and also organised road shows. We asked them to come and invest in Odisha. We have assured them to provide all support and infrastructure."

Majhi said, "As a part of this process, we went to Singapore to explore business opportunities in various fields such as petrochemicals, semi-conductors and IT

sector; we had a business summit in Singapore and invited the Singapore President to come to our state.”

Majhi said: “Keeping our request, the President came on a visit to the state, We had signed MOUs in eight sectors business. We are quite happy. The investments will come to the state in future and Odisha would be immensely benefited, We have been able to do all these things within seven months coming to power.”

The chief minister said the President will visit Raghurajpur village in Puri district and Sun Temple at Konark on Saturday.

“There is tremendous potential for collaboration between Singapore and Odisha,” said Majhi.

Chief Secretary Manoj Ahuja gave a presentation covering key themes such as skill development, industrial parks, master planning, ports and Paradip, renewable energy, semiconductors, information technology, data centres, culture, and connectivity. The presentation highlighted Odisha’s initiatives and opportunities for collaboration with Singapore in these crucial sectors.

The President visited the Vertical Transportation Lab and Travelator Lab at the World Skill Center and interacted with students and instructors, showcasing Odisha’s commitment to fostering technical education and innovation.

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 19, 2025

Singapore mulls interest in Telangana’s Musi project

Srinivasa Rao Apparasu

An official delegation led by chief minister A Revanth Reddy met Singapore minister for sustainability and environment Grace Fu Hai Yien on the second day of its tour to Singapore

The Singapore government on Saturday evinced its interest in being partner to the ambitious Musi river rejuvenation project of the Telangana government, besides other water management and sustainability plans of state, an official statement said.

An official delegation led by chief minister A Revanth Reddy met Singapore minister for sustainability and environment Grace Fu Hai Yien on the second day of its tour to Singapore during which both held wide-ranging discussions for partnership in several areas.

“Hai Yien assured the chief minister that Singapore would consider his invitation to partner with the Telangana government in making the goals of ‘Telangana Rising’ vision a reality and success. She was particularly keen on Net Zero Future City, River Musi rejuvenation project, water management and the sustainability plans of Telangana,” the official statement said.

It further stated that the Telangana delegation, including IT and industries minister D Sridhar Babu, and officials, showcased the investment opportunities in Telangana in several areas, including urban planning and infrastructure, water management, skills development, sports, semiconductors, manufacturing, environment and sustainability sciences and technology.

“Both sides agreed to work together closely, including identifying special teams to explore joint projects, systemic sharing of learning from Singapore for India’s youngest state, and making rapid progress and impact on the ground in joint projects,” it added.

Later, Sridhar Babu held a separate roundtable interaction with the Singapore Semiconductor Industry Association (SSIA).

The SSIA shared learnings, best practices, and lessons from Singapore’s meteoric rise and global consolidation in the semiconductor sector.

“Sridhar Babu, while expounding on the salient features of ‘Telangana Rising’, showcased the opportunities for global investors, and invited the Singapore industry to invest heavily in the state,” the official release said, adding that a team of Singapore semiconductor industry leaders would visit Hyderabad later this year to explore opportunities on the ground.

On the first day of the Telangana delegation to Singapore on Friday, the chief minister and his team visited the Singapore Institute of

Technical Education (ITE) campus and enquired about the skill development courses offered by the institute and the facilities provided in the campus.

Later, the team held discussions with the top officials of ITE and requested them to support the Young India Skill University that has been established in the Fourth City in Hyderabad.

In the meeting, Sridhar Babu briefed the ITE management about the skill development courses offered by the Skill university to meet the growing market demand for skilled workforce and provide employment to the youth in different various sectors.

"The minister also proposed to exchange skills development training modules with mutual cooperation. The ITE delegation responded positively and came forward to work together with the Young India Skill University," the statement added.

India – Canada Relations

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 29, 2025

India rejects Canadian inquiry report: 'In fact, Canada meddling in our affairs'

Express News Service

The Ministry of External Affairs rejected the probe report on Tuesday by Foreign Interference Commission Tuesday identifying India as the "second most active country" (after China) engaging in electoral foreign interference in Canada, and said that in fact, it was Canada which has been consistently interfering in India's internal affairs.

"We have seen a report about alleged activities on purported interference. It is in fact Canada which has been consistently interfering in India's internal affairs. This has also created an environment for illegal migration and organised criminal activities. We reject the report's insinuations on India and expect that the support system enabling illegal migration will not be further countenanced," the MEA said in an official statement.

While the initial report in May last year had pointed to China as the "most persistent and sophisticated foreign interference threat to Canada," the final report lays out the ways in which India has become the "second most

active country engaging in electoral foreign interference in Canada."

Commissioner Marie-Josée Hogue, who led the inquiry, wrote, "Like the PRC (People's Republic of China), India conducts foreign interference through diplomatic officials in Canada and through proxies".

"A body of intelligence indicates that proxy agents may have, and may continue to be, clandestinely providing illicit financial support to various Canadian politicians in an attempt to secure the election of pro-India candidates or gain influence over candidates who take office."

"The intelligence does not necessarily indicate that the elected officials or candidates involved were aware of the interference attempts, or that the attempts necessarily succeeded," she added.

The report names Russia, Pakistan, and Iran as other countries considered foreign interference threats to Canada.

Ties between India and Canada have been severely hit after then Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stood up in Parliament in September 2023 to state there were "credible allegations" that agents of the Indian government were involved in the killing of pro-Khalistan separatist figure Hardeep Singh Nijjar in June 2023. India has rejected the allegations calling them "absurd" and "politically motivated". It has led to serious downgrading of the relations, as diplomats including High Commissioners have been expelled by both countries.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 30, 2025

'No definitive connection' between Nijjar killing and India, reveals Canadian report

Tribune News Service

A Canadian commission report has said there was "no definitive link" with a "foreign state" in the killing of Sikh activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar.

In September 2023, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau had claimed that they had credible evidence that agents of the Indian Government were involved in the murder of Nijjar in British Columbia.

The report titled “Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions” was released on Tuesday.

In the report, commissioner Marie-Josée Hogue said, “Disinformation is used as a retaliatory tactic to punish decisions that run contrary to a state’s interests.”

The report has suggested India spread disinformation on Nijjar’s killing.

“This may have been the case with a disinformation campaign that followed the Trudeau’s announcement regarding suspected Indian involvement in the killing of Nijjar (though again no definitive link to a foreign state could be proven),” the report said.

Nijjar was gunned down in Surrey, British Columbia, in June 2023. The 123-page report also talked of expelling six Indian diplomats.

On Tuesday, India strongly rejected “insinuations” made against it in the report, which also accused New Delhi of interfering in Canada’s internal affairs. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has said that it is in fact Canada that has been “consistently interfering in India’s internal affairs”.

New Delhi has also alleged that Canada is aiding “illegal migration and organised criminal activities”.

Regarding the Indian diaspora, the Canadian report claims that “India’s activities primarily target 8,00,000 members of the Sikh diaspora in Canada and aim to promote a pro-India and anti-Khalistan narrative”.

The report alleges that India “may have attempted to clandestinely provide financial aid to candidates during the 2021 poll” and describes India as “the second most active country, after China, engaging in electoral foreign interference in Canada”. (With PTI inputs)

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 30, 2025

India dismisses Canadian commission’s ‘insinuations’ of election interference

HT News Desk

The ministry of external affairs (MEA) said that Canada has, in fact, been “consistently interfering” in India’s internal affairs.

India has firmly rejected the “insinuations” made against it in a Canadian commission’s report, which investigated allegations of foreign interference in Canada’s elections.

The ministry of external affairs (MEA) strongly responded, dismissing the report’s claims and saying that Canada has, in fact, been “consistently interfering” in India’s internal affairs.

“We have seen a report about alleged activities on purported interference. It is in fact Canada which has been consistently interfering in India’s internal affairs,” the MEA said.

“This has also created an environment for illegal migration and organised criminal activities. We reject the report’s insinuations on India and expect that the support system enabling illegal migration will not be further countenanced,” MEA said in a statement.

The Globe and Mail reported that India was suspected of using proxy agents to secretly fund candidates from three political parties in a federal election.

In September 2023, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau appointed Justice Marie-Josée Hogue to lead an inquiry into allegations of foreign interference in elections.

According to Canadian media reports, the commission investigated election interference allegations involving China, Russia, and other nations.

In June last year, Canada’s National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians released a report saying that some lawmakers were knowingly or partially involved in foreign interference.

“India is the second most active country engaging in electoral foreign interference in Canada. Like the PRC, India is a critical actor on the world stage. Canada and India have worked together for decades, but there are challenges in the relationship. Many of these are long standing and inform India’s foreign interference activities,” the report said.

The report also accused India of spreading disinformation about the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar. However, it contradicted itself by stating that Canada found no foreign state involvement in his death. India strongly

rejected this claim in November last year, calling for such allegations to be dismissed with the “contempt they deserve.”

With PTI inputs

Other Important Developments

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 22, 2025

India, France agree to enhance partnership in high technology

HT Correspondent

France is India’s closest strategic partner in Europe and a supplier of defence hardware ranging from Rafale combat jets to advanced submarines

New Delhi: India and France have agreed to enhance their partnership in high-end technology ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Paris next month to attend a summit on artificial intelligence.

The two countries reviewed progress in bilateral cooperation under the India-France Horizon 2047 Roadmap at a meeting between foreign secretary Vikram Misri and Anne-Marie Descôtes, the secretary-general of the French foreign ministry, in Paris on Monday.

The discussions covered key areas of bilateral cooperation, including defence, civil nuclear energy, space, cyber and digital, AI, institutional dialogue mechanisms, and initiatives fostering people-to-people exchanges, the external affairs ministry said in a statement. “Both sides agreed to expand bilateral partnership in the areas of high-end technology sectors,” it said.

Modi is expected to visit France for the AI Summit to be held during February 11-12. The Horizon 2047 Roadmap was unveiled during a meeting between Modi and French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris in July 2023 with the aim of boosting bilateral ties in areas ranging from trade and investment to strategic cooperation.

The talks between Misri and Descôtes also focused on the situation in West Asia and the Ukraine conflict, the external affairs ministry said.

“In addition, the dialogue extended to global and regional issues such as cooperation in environment, climate change and health, cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, trilateral

dialogues, joint development projects in third countries and ongoing international issues and crises such as those concerning the situation in the Middle East and Russia-Ukraine conflict,” it said.

France is India’s closest strategic partner in Europe and a supplier of defence hardware ranging from Rafale combat jets to advanced submarines. The two countries also cooperate on defence and security issues and counter-terrorism.

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 27, 2025

India, Indonesia agree to hold early dialogue on defence, maritime, cyber security

Shubhajit Roy

Underlining the importance of “freedom of navigation and overflight” in the Indo-Pacific region, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the visiting President of Indonesia Prabowo Subianto “agreed to an early establishment of bilateral maritime dialogue and cyber security dialogue”, according to a joint statement issued Sunday.

Subianto, the **Chief Guest at the Republic Day parade**, was hosted by President Droupadi Murmu later in the day for the At Home function at Rashtrapati Bhawan.

As the two countries had adopted the “Shared Vision of India-Indonesia on Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific” in 2018, they agreed to hold the next Defence Ministers’ Dialogue at an early date.

According to the joint statement issued at the end of the three-day visit of the Indonesian President, the two leaders reaffirmed that India and Indonesia are “maritime neighbours and strategic partners” and emphasised the importance of regularly convening bilateral dialogue mechanisms at the leaders level, ministerial level, and senior officials level. These include the India-Indonesia Security Dialogue, Consular Dialogue and Policy Planning Dialogue, which are the key platforms for advancing mutual understanding and cooperation.

The two leaders welcomed the **ratification of the Defence Agreement Cooperation (DCA)** and expressed confidence that this would

lead to further deepening of defence ties. They underscored the importance of regular engagements between Defence Ministers of both countries to effectively implement the DCA.

Modi and Subianto discussed the “strategic and operational interaction between the defence forces” of both countries, comprising more than two decades of continuous biannual India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol, conduct of periodic bilateral Army (Garuda Shakti) and Naval (Samudra Shakti) exercises. They welcomed the interest to have “cadet exchanges between the Naval Academies and the National Defence University/ Academy”, the joint statement said.

Recognising the importance of building “domestic defence manufacturing capabilities”, President Subianto appreciated India’s advancements and expressed interest in strengthening cooperation in this sector.

“India agreed to support the ongoing defence modernization programmes of Indonesia through experience and expertise sharing. Both countries affirmed their commitment to deepen collaboration in the defence industry by utilizing the Joint Defence Cooperation Committee,” the joint statement said.

The Indonesian President “welcomed India’s interest in enhancing cooperation on maritime security, including its engagement with regional mechanisms to ensure the safety and security of sea lanes of communication. Both leaders also acknowledged the significance of collaborative efforts to achieve safe and secure sea lanes in the region. In this regard, they agreed that there needs to be constant communication to discuss enhancement of maritime safety”, the statement said.

It said that both also welcomed the ongoing discussions on the White Shipping Information Exchange agreement. They agreed to position an International Liaison Officer from Indonesia at Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) Gurugram. They agreed to continue discussions to identify mutually beneficial areas of cooperation in maritime security.

The statement said the leaders welcomed the “renewal of the MoU on Maritime Safety and Security Cooperation which signifies commitment to continue cooperating in preventing and responding to acts of crime at sea, coordinating search and rescue operation upon request, and capacity building activities”.

On South China Sea, the joint statement said, “Both leaders reaffirmed the importance of maintaining and promoting peace, stability, maritime safety and security, freedom of navigation and overflight in the region, and other lawful uses of the seas, including unimpeded lawful maritime commerce and to promote peaceful resolutions of disputes, in accordance with universally recognised principles of international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS, and the relevant standards and recommended practices by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO).”

“In this regard, they supported the full and effective implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea in its entirety and look forward to the early conclusion of an effective and substantive Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC) that is in accordance with international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS.”

On counter-terrorism, the joint statement said both leaders “strongly condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and reaffirmed their commitment to enhancing cooperation in combating this threat through bilateral and multilateral initiatives”.

“They underscored the importance of strengthening global efforts to combat terrorism, including eliminating terror financing and preventing the recruitment of terrorists, without any double standards. Both leaders emphasized the need for all countries to work collectively to deny safe havens and support networks to terrorist groups, in accordance with international obligations and commitments,” the statement said.

It said that they “called upon all countries to take concerted action against UN-proscribed terrorist organizations and their affiliates. Recognizing the evolving nature of security challenges, the two leaders agreed to work together in preventing the spread of online radicalization and strengthening mechanisms to counter extremist ideologies”.

On food security, President Subianto expressed appreciation for “India’s support in Indonesia’s new mid-day meal scheme through the sharing of knowledge and experience, as well as facilitating the visits of Indonesian officials to various relevant Indian institutions”.

Prime Minister Modi reaffirmed India’s commitment to supporting the initiative and invited more Indonesian officials to benefit from the expertise of the Food Corporation of India in managing the Public Distribution System, it said.

Both leaders also welcomed the “establishment of a Track 1.5 dialogue mechanism between think-tanks of the two countries”.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 21, 2025

Jaishankar holds talks with Japanese, Australian counterparts ahead of Quad ministers’ meet

Tribune News Service

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar held separate meetings with the Foreign Ministers of Japan and Australia in Washington, DC, ahead of the swearing-in of US President-elect Donald Trump. The Foreign Ministers of the Quad nations — India, Australia, Japan and the United States — are expected to meet during the visit.

Jaishankar met Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya and later posted on X, “Reviewed the progress in our bilateral cooperation. Also discussed developments pertaining to Quad.” Japan’s Foreign Ministry added that the meeting marked the 40th anniversary of the Japan-India agreement on science and technology cooperation. The ministers agreed to designate April 2025 to March 2026 as the “Japan-India Science Technology and Innovation Exchange Year”

(STIY25) to boost collaboration in these areas.

In his meeting with Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong, Jaishankar described their discussion as engaging, posting, “Delighted to meet FM Wong, a Quad colleague, in Washington DC today. As always, enjoyed our discussion on the state of the world.”

During his visit, Jaishankar is set to meet members of the incoming Trump administration, including Secretary of State-elect Marco Rubio and National Security Adviser-elect Michael Waltz.

Rubio, a vocal supporter of US-India relations, introduced the ‘United States-India Defence Cooperation Act of 2024’, which aims to enhance the military relationship between the two nations. Rubio also seeks to treat India as a NATO-equivalent partner for specific defence deals.

Waltz, upon assuming the NSA role, will co-chair the US-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET) with Indian NSA Ajit Doval. The iCET framework focuses on cooperation in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, semiconductors, advanced telecommunications and other cutting-edge technologies.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 29, 2025

India, Oman hold Joint Commission meeting, leaders discuss enhancing trade, investment

ANI

New Delhi [India], January 29 (ANI): Union Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal visited Oman on January 27-28 and co-chaired the 11th Session of the India-Oman Joint Commission Meeting (JCM).

The meeting was co-chaired by Qais bin Mohammed Al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry, and Investment Promotion of the Sultanate of Oman.

JCM saw productive discussions on enhancing bilateral cooperation in trade, investment, technology, food security, renewable energy and other key areas. The Minister held a productive bilateral meeting with Minister Qais during which he undertook a detailed

review of the bilateral trade and economic relations between India and Oman and identified concrete steps to further strengthen the mutually beneficial business ties, an official release said.

The two Ministers also exchanged views on a bilateral India-Oman Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which is under advanced stages of negotiations. Both Ministers agreed to expedite the discussions for an early signing of the CEPA which will be a new milestone in bilateral trade relations and has the potential to significantly scale-up two-way trade and investments.

On the sidelines of the visit, both sides signed the Protocol to amend the India-Oman Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA), aligning it with international standards on cross-border taxation, simplifying tax procedures, and promoting greater cooperation in tax matters.

Goyal also held bilateral meetings with Sultan bin Salem Al Habsi, Minister of Finance, and Ali bin Masoud Al Sunaidy, Chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), to deepen economic ties.

The Minister participated in the India-Oman Joint Business Council (JBC) meeting which was hosted by the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), with support and participation of a delegation from FICCI. The JBC, which is traditionally held on the sidelines of the India-Oman JCM, provided an excellent platform for wide ranging discussions among the two business communities and provided exposure to investment opportunities and incentives of both India and Oman. Goyal met with a select group of CEOs and business leaders of Oman at a Business Roundtable hosted by the Ambassador of India at the Indian Embassy premises. This interaction provided an opportunity for the Minister to directly engage with key business leaders of Oman to apprise them of the India opportunity and seek their suggestions for bilateral cooperation.

The minister also addressed the Future Leaders Programme at the Royal Academy of Management, Oman, highlighting India's growth story and sharing insights on leadership and its role in shaping a better world.

The Commerce Minister visited the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque in Muscat which is an icon of cultural and architectural heritage of Oman. He will also offer prayers at the historic Shiva Temple in old Muscat, later this evening, underscoring the deep-rooted cultural and people-to-people ties between India and Oman.

The successful visit of the Union Commerce Minister reinforced the strong foundations of India-Oman relations, paving the way for enhanced collaboration in trade and investment, the release said. (ANI)

Bangladesh

Bangladesh - Pakistan Relations

Daily Observer, Dhaka, January 21, 2025

6-member BD military delegation visits Pakistan: ISPRA

A six-member military delegation, led by Principal Staff Officer of the Armed Forces Division Lt Gen SM Kamrul Hasan, visited Pakistan from January 13 to 18. During the visit, the delegation paid courtesy calls and exchanged views with the chiefs of the three armed forces of Pakistan as well as other high-ranking military officials, according to an Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) press release on Monday. In the meetings, the delegates discussed issues related to the professional and training aspects of the armed forces of both countries and expressed the hope for continuing mutual friendly relations, the release added. —UNB

Daily Observer, Dhaka, January 23, 2025

BD, Pak traders demand to remove of barriers to boost bilateral trade

Business Correspondent

Bangladesh and Pakistani business leaders in a meeting held at Gulshan, Dhaka on Wednesday, called for the removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers between to boost bilateral trade between the two countries. These issues came up for discussion at a meeting held between a delegation of the

Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) and a business delegation at the meeting. The Bangladeshi importers and businessmen said that they see big opportunities and potentials in importing dates, oranges, other fruits and agricultural products from Pakistan to meet the demand throughout the year, including during the Holy Month of Ramadan. They also believe that there are huge potentials for exporting various Bangladeshi products to Pakistan. For this, businessmen from both countries have called for the removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers between the two countries. The meeting was presided over by FBCCI Administrator Md. Hafizur Rahman. In his welcome speech, he said that there is a huge demand for dates in Bangladesh during the Holy Month of Ramadan. Along with this, the demand for other fruits also increases during that time, says a press release issued by FBCCI.

Besides, there is a lot of demand for domestic and foreign fruits in the local market throughout the year. "Pakistan can be an affordable and easily accessible source of fruits and agricultural products for Bangladesh," said the FBCCI Administrator.

Stressing on boosting bilateral trade between Bangladesh and Pakistan, Md. Hafizur Rahman said that there is an opportunity to expand trade between the two countries through joint initiatives and mutual cooperation in the private sector. He also emphasized on the importance of completing a Bangladesh-Pakistan trade agreement. Businessmen from both countries emphasized on the development of logistics, supply chain, cold storage, packaging and goods transportation systems to facilitate and expand trade between Bangladesh and Pakistan.

The meeting was attended among others by Zain Aziz, Trade and Investment Attaché of the Pakistan High Commission in Dhaka, Md. Zafar Iqbal, Head of the International Affairs Department of FBCCI, FBCCI leaders, members of the Pakistani business

delegation, leaders of the Bangladesh Fresh Fruits Importers Association and others.

Bangladesh – India Relations

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 27, 2025

Verma stresses interdependence, mutual benefit for Dhaka-Delhi ties

UNB, Dhaka

Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Pranay Verma has said they strongly believe that their partnership with Bangladesh must benefit the common people on both sides, stressing that their relations have always been people-centric.

"We remain confident that the reality of our cultural and societal connections and the logic of our interdependence and mutual benefit will keep guiding our relationship forward," he said.

Speaking at a reception celebrating the 76th Republic Day of India at a city hotel yesterday evening, Verma said they have and will continue to support a "democratic, stable, peaceful, progressive and inclusive" Bangladesh.

India will continue to seek a "stable, positive, constructive, forward-looking and mutually beneficial relationship" with Bangladesh, in which people are the main stakeholders.

Planning and Education Adviser Dr Wahiduddin Mahmud spoke at the event as the chief guest.

The adviser said over the years, the two countries collaborated in a wide range of areas, and Bangladesh is committed towards strengthening the relationship based on mutual respect and understanding of each other's perspectives, concerns and priorities. Political leaders including, emeritus president of the Gono Forum Dr Kamal Hossain, Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury, Jatiya Party leaders including its Chairman GM Quader, Advisers including Dr Asif Nazrul, Foreign Secretary Md Jashim Uddin, senior dignitaries from the government and Armed Forces of Bangladesh, Ambassadors and High Commissioners, businesses leaders, editors, civil society members, think-tanks and celebrities were present.

Daily Observer, Dhaka, January 21, 2025

Securing our border crucial to safeguard territorial integrity

While speaking at a certificate distribution and closing ceremony for officers from various sectors on Sunday, Home Affairs Adviser Lt Gen (retd) Jahangir Alam Chowdhury said that the country's borders are fully secure and measures are being implemented to increase border security, adding that while there are issues at the border, the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) is consistently on high alert. We are in full agreement with the advisor's comment on securing our border, since it is directly linked to safeguarding our territorial integrity. On that note - Territorial integrity is the principle under international law where sovereign states have a right to defend their borders and all territory in them from another state.

It is clearly mentioned in Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, and has been recognized as customary international law. Under this principle, forcible imposition of a border change is an act of aggression. The home affairs advisor's statement comes against the backdrop of a number of tensed incidents occurring along our shared border with India during the past week. The last occurrence was particularly disturbing because of Indian citizens infiltrating through our Chapainawabganj border.

Aided by the BSF, the infiltrators damaged farmland and cut crops and trees of our countrymen. BSF members had also clearly violated international border rules by throwing tear shells and sound grenades inside our territory - equivalent to exercising acts of aggression. However, though the situation has de-escalated following a number of BGB-BSF flag meetings, but some areas along our shared border with India yet remains quietly tensed and under strict vigilance. Diplomats concern in both countries had been summoned. The point, however, our territorial integrity had reportedly been compromised many times in the last 16 years, and we want no more. That said - we profoundly thank our BGB members, for being bold and ensuring

strict vigilance along our shared four thousand plus kilometer porous border with India. So far our BGB members have displayed marked commitment, tolerance and patriotism in defending our border. Given decades old persisting border disputes, violence, killings and skirmishes along our shared border with India - we believe, it also is time to expand and modernize BGB's border defense mechanism. The para-military force's annual budget must also be increased. Apart from structural and man-power expansion, we expect to see BGB to emerge as a well-trained, well-equipped and technologically advanced force. Despite having whatever disputes and issues with our next-door neighbors, we want our borders secure at any cost.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 26, 2025

Bangladeshi farmer hurt as BSF shoots him in C'nawabganj

UNB, Chapainawabganj

A 30-year-old Bangladeshi man sustained bullet injuries in firing by Indian Border Security Force (BSF) at the Telkupi border in Chapainawabganj's Shibganj upazila on Friday.

The injured, Habil, 30, of Mollatola village in Shahbazpur union, is currently undergoing treatment at Rajshahi Medical College Hospital.

BGB-59 Battalion Commander Lt Col Golam Kibria said BSF personnel opened fire around 3:30am when a group of six to seven suspected smugglers tried to cross the border, leaving Habil injured.

Habil's associates managed to rescue him and bring him back to Bangladesh.

He was taken to the 250 Bed District Hospital, Chapainawabganj for primary treatment and later moved to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital for advanced treatment.

Dr Kausar Hasan, doctor of the emergency department at Chapainawabganj hospital, said Habil was admitted to the hospital around 7:00am today where he was treated for a gunshot wound in the chest.

Bangladesh - China Relations

Daily Observer, Dhaka, January 21, 2025

Touhid visits China to build new era of Dhaka-Beijing ties

Bilateral talks with Chinese FM today

Diplomatic Correspondent

Foreign Affairs Adviser of the interim government Md Touhid Hossain left Dhaka for China for a three-day trip on the invitation of his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi on Monday.

The Foreign Adviser is set to hold bilateral talks with his Chinese counterpart in Beijing today (Tuesday) to build a new dimension of Dhaka-Beijing relations.

Chinese Ambassador in Dhaka Yao Wen has hinted that Beijing is ready to sign an implementation plan on hydrological information exchange, fulfilling a previous request from Dhaka. Discussions on China's potential role in Bangladesh's crucial Teesta River project are also expected to feature prominently during the visit. "The official visit will focus on lowering interest rates on loans, exchanging hydrological information, advancing medical treatment cooperation, and encouraging greater Chinese involvement in resolving the Myanmar situation," Touhid told the media on Sunday at the Foreign Ministry. Beyond official talks with the Chinese foreign minister, the adviser is scheduled to meet with Chinese Communist Party leaders and deliver speeches at the China Institute of International Studies and the Shanghai Institute of International Studies, apart from engaging with business representatives in Shanghai to attract Chinese investments in Bangladesh, Foreign Ministry officials said. On Sunday, Chinese Ambassador Yao, reaffirmed China's respect for Bangladesh's sovereignty and territorial integrity, reiterating support for the country's stability, reforms, democratic transition, and development initiatives.

Meanwhile, foreign ministry officials said the key priorities for the visit include renegotiating loan terms, such as reducing interest rates from the current 2-3 per cent to 1 per cent waiving commitment fees, and extending grace periods from 15 years to 30 years.

Duty-free access for Bangladeshi products following its graduation from the least-developed country (LDC) bracket in 2026, as well as increased Chinese investment and higher exports to China will also be pursued. "Economic issues will dominate the discussions. Bangladesh's trade and economic relations with China are vital," Touhid said at a pre-departure briefing last week. A formal request will also be made to fully waive commitment fees, Touhid said. The visit coincides with the 50th anniversary of Dhaka-Beijing diplomatic ties, as China recognized Bangladesh on August 31, 1975. Both countries have planned year-long celebratory events to commemorate this milestone.

During the visit, announcements regarding these 50th-anniversary programs are anticipated.

The foreign adviser said the trip would enhance mutual understanding, friendship, and a vibrant partnership between the two nations, advancing strategic and technical cooperation.

China has long been playing a mediating role in the Rohingya crisis between Bangladesh and Myanmar, although no resolution has been achieved. The Rohingya issue is expected to be a major topic of discussion during this visit. Touhid informed the Chinese envoy on Sunday that Dhaka anticipates a "very strong" and "proactive" role from China in facilitating the repatriation of Rohingyas to Myanmar, where they were forced to flee persecution. The foreign adviser is expected to request that China designate at least three to four top-tier hospitals in Kunming, close to Bangladesh, for improved medical treatment of Bangladeshi citizens. Hossain also indicated that Bangladesh is prepared to provide land and logistical support for establishing a full-fledged tertiary-level Chinese hospital in Purbachal, on the outskirts of Dhaka. China remains Bangladesh's largest trading partner, with imports from China amounting to \$24 billion annually, compared to exports of only \$670 million.

Despite 100 per cent duty-free access to the Chinese market, Bangladesh's exports remain low, resulting in a significant trade imbalance. Addressing this disparity will be a key agenda item during the adviser's discussions in Beijing, said the officials familiar with the visit.

He will return to the country on January 24.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 22, 2025

China for advancing bilateral ties with Bangladesh: Wang Yi

Star Digital Report

Beijing is willing to work with Bangladesh to deepen friendship, strengthen strategic communication and advance comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership, said China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi today.

China is also willing to promote high-quality Belt and Road cooperation to further advance bilateral ties, he told Foreign Adviser Touhid Hossain during a meeting in Beijing.

"China has always prioritised Bangladesh in its neighbourhood diplomacy and adheres to a good-neighbour policy toward all Bangladeshi people," reports China Daily quoting Wang.

Touhid Hossain arrived in Beijing Monday night for a four-day visit. This is his first visit to China at the invitation of the Chinese foreign minister.

The fact that Hossain made China the destination of his first trip overseas after assuming office reflects the great importance that the interim government of Bangladesh attaches to China-Bangladesh relations, Wang said.

He said the modernisation and reform drives in China will offer new opportunities for countries worldwide.

Bangladesh was the first South Asian country to sign a memorandum of understanding on Belt and Road cooperation with China.

Wang called on the two countries to coordinate efforts to implement major landmark projects and "small but beautiful" livelihood programmes. He also urged for consolidating traditional cooperation while exploring new emerging areas.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between

China and Bangladesh, as well as the China-Bangladesh Year of Cultural Exchange.

Hossain said there is a cross-party consensus on the friendship with China. It has been supported by successive governments and the people of the country also want to strengthen the ties.

He thanked China for supporting Bangladesh in safeguarding its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity while pledging the country's firm adherence to the one-China principle.

Hossain also expressed gratitude for China's long-term selfless support for Bangladesh's development, bringing about tangible benefits to its people.

Bangladesh is willing to engage in mutual support with China in international forums, strengthen coordination in regional affairs, act as partners in promoting connectivity and regional economic integration, and jointly safeguard international fairness and justice, he said.

Daily Observer, Dhaka, January 24, 2025

Dhaka, Beijing cooperation needed to resolve Rohingya crisis: Adviser Touhid

Diplomatic Correspondent

Foreign Affairs Adviser Md Touhid Hossain on Thursday outlined a forward-looking vision for global peace, emphasising the significant role of economic cooperation as a cornerstone for sustainable development and stability.

Hossain made the remarks while delivering a keynote address at a seminar in the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS), China.

Hossain underscored the transformative role of China's development assistance and investments in Bangladesh's various sectors which have significantly contributed to the country's socio-economic development. The seminar titled "Our Shared Vision for Peace, Stability, and Prosperity" reflected on the common vision of Bangladesh and China for a secure and better world. The programme began with a welcome address by Dr Chen Dongxiao, president of SIIS, who highlighted the historic and evolving partnership between Bangladesh and China, according to

the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In his speech, Touhid highlighted the deep historical ties between Bangladesh and China, which dates back to ancient times and the evolution of relationship into a dynamic partnership through different mechanisms including the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI). Reflecting on global challenges, Foreign Affairs Adviser focuses on peace and security are collective responsibilities that demand inclusive economic frameworks and greater emphasis on empowering underrepresented groups, particularly the youth and women. Referring to the Rohingya crisis, Adviser Hossain stressed on creating a congenial atmosphere in Rakhine State for return of the Rohingyas.

"Both Bangladesh and China have vital interests in resolution of the conflict, and we must cooperate wholeheartedly in bringing about the resolution," he said. He also drew attention to the importance of narrowing trade gaps and fostering regional connectivity to promote equitable growth. Hossain highlighted Bangladesh's successful social initiatives, such as microcredit programmes, pioneered by Nobel Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus, chief adviser of Bangladesh Government, which have empowered rural women and fostered social harmony, and called for similar transformative efforts to uplift the youth. In order to realize the shared vision, Hossain underscored the need for working towards strengthening multilateral institutions, expanding investments, deepening people to people exchange and championing the global trade system.

The event brought together a distinguished group of participants, including scholars, diplomats, government officials, young researchers, media representatives, senior leadership and experts of SIIS, and officials from the Shanghai Foreign Affairs Office. The programme featured speeches from key participants, including remarks by Dr. Yang Jiemian, Director of the Academic Advisory Board at SIIS, and presentations by six renowned experts. These experts shared insights on topics

ranging from economic globalisation to regional stability, triggering rich discussions during the interactive session that followed. The event concluded with closing remarks by Bangladesh Ambassador to China Md. Nazmul Islam and the President of SIIS. Adviser Hossain also visited a high-tech electric vehicle manufacturing plant in the outskirts of Shanghai where he witnessed the production line of electric vehicles. The plant produces around 500 EV units a day. He urged the Chinese company to consider establishing such a plant in Bangladesh.

The Acting Mayor of Shanghai also met the foreign adviser. During the meeting, both of them underscored the need for enhanced business-to-business and people-to-people engagements between Dhaka and Shanghai. The acting mayor extended an invitation to Bangladesh to participate at the "Shanghai Tourism Festival" to be held this year.

Other Important Developments

Daily Observer, Dhaka, January 17, 2025

German support for achieving our development goals encouraging

In a significant step toward advancing sustainable development, Germany has pledged 14.45 million euros to support Bangladesh's efforts in transforming its textile sector, improving climate resilience, and fostering electric mobility. This financial backing, formalized through three new technical cooperation agreements signed between Bangladesh and Germany on Wednesday, reflects a shared commitment to sustainable growth, which is essential as both nations navigate the challenges of an increasingly interconnected world. Among the key agreements, the 'Programme for Sustainability in the Textile Sector II (STILE-II)' stands out as a major initiative. With a fund of 7.3 million euros, the program will focus on modernizing Bangladesh's textile and Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industries to meet European Union sustainability standards.

This move is crucial, as the textile sector is a cornerstone of Bangladesh's economy,

contributing significantly to both employment and exports. Aligning with global sustainability norms will not only ensure the sector's continued competitiveness but also mitigate its environmental impact-an essential step in a world where eco-conscious production is rapidly becoming the standard. Additionally, STILE-II promotes gender equality and the strengthening of sectoral policies, setting the stage for a more inclusive and forward-thinking industry. Parallel to this, the LOCAT (Localisation of National Climate Adaptation Targets) project, with an allocation of 3 million euros, is designed to support urban climate action planning. Under the Ministry of Local Government, the project will enhance the capacity of local governments to integrate climate adaptation strategies within the framework of Bangladesh's National Adaptation Plan. By focusing on gender-responsive tools and frameworks, LOCAT ensures that climate resilience efforts are inclusive, empowering communities, especially women, to take part in shaping their future. Germany's support is particularly timely, as climate change increasingly threatens developing nations like Bangladesh. By bolstering local institutions and focusing on urban resilience, Bangladesh will be better equipped to face the growing challenges posed by extreme weather patterns and rising sea levels. Moreover, the agreement on advancing sustainable electric mobility underscores the importance of green transportation in reducing emissions and fostering a low-carbon economy. As part of its broader environmental goals, Bangladesh aims to increase its use of electric vehicles, with the potential to reduce its dependency on fossil fuels and lower air pollution levels. This partnership with Germany will provide the technical expertise and funding necessary to develop the country's electric mobility infrastructure, contributing to both environmental protection and the diversification of Bangladesh's energy sources.

In the larger context, these initiatives reflect the depth of Bangladesh's commitment to sustainable growth. The country's strategic collaboration with Germany, a global leader in green technologies, presents a unique opportunity to combine innovation, technical expertise, and financial resources. The road ahead remains challenging, but with strategic partnerships like these, Bangladesh is well on its way to building a more resilient, sustainable, and equitable future. Germany's investment in these critical sectors is an affirmation of the power of international cooperation and the shared responsibility of nations to combat climate change and promote inclusive growth.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 24, 2025

Singapore's role in recovering stolen assets is crucial

Prof Syed Munir Khasru

Impressive global rankings and statistics are a testament to Singapore's accomplishments as the world's fifth least corrupt country and the only Asian nation in the top 10. The country is also a leader in the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index, ranking 16th out of 142 countries globally and fourth regionally in 2024, indicating its strong legal and regulatory framework.

Bangladesh and Singapore share a friendly and dynamic relationship, with Bangladeshi workers being a significant part of Singapore's 1.5 million migrant workers and a substantial addition to the country's economy. Over 160,000 Bangladeshi nationals are contributing to essential sectors such as construction and marine industries in Singapore. In 2022 alone, 64,383 Bangladeshi workers were hired in Singapore, setting a record, and their remittances contribute substantially to Bangladesh's economy.

Construction contracts worth \$32 billion to \$38 billion are anticipated to be awarded in Singapore in 2024, with a substantial portion benefiting from Bangladeshi labour. Meanwhile, Bangladesh trains around 5,000 workers annually at specialised centres certified by the Singapore authorities to meet the country's workforce demands. These collaborations underscore interdependence

of their economies and a relationship based on mutual growth.

Bangladesh at a crossroads

The ousting of Sheikh Hasina on August 5, 2024 has unleashed a wave of uncertainty as well as opportunities in Bangladesh. The interim administration, led by Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus, has vowed to root out corruption and restore good governance. The government has also formally requested the United Nations' investigation into the mass killings and human rights violations during Hasina's final months in power.

Yet, the remnant of embedded systemic corruption looms large in Bangladesh against the backdrop of social, political, and economic reforms. Allegations against the Awami League government, including mismanagement of megaproject funds and money laundering, underline the overwhelming challenges that are to follow while restructuring the nation. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has launched extensive investigations into key figures of the former administration for alleged embezzlement and laundering of billions of dollars. Specific projects under scrutiny include the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant (RNPP) suspected of financial irregularities amounting to around \$5 billion. Hence, these probes, though wearisome, represent a crucial effort to address years of unrestrained corruption, involving not only former politicians but also prominent business tycoons who have managed to evade justice by fleeing the country or stashing cash in convenient overseas destinations.

A case in systemic corruption testing Singapore's institutional integrity

At the heart of the arising corruption allegations lies the S Alam Group, led by Mohammed Saiful Alam, who has been accused of laundering over \$1 billion through entities in Singapore and other countries. Alam's case has become a glaring indicator of financial systems being exploited for illicit purposes. In fact, latest investigations have revealed that Alam funnelled significant sums through shell companies, leveraging his influence to secure questionable loans worth

thousands of crores from Bangladeshi banks like Islami Bank, often coupled with collateral compensating for only a fraction of the loan value.

Building on S Alam's case, Singapore's role as a destination for the said laundered funds has raised concerns about its advanced financial infrastructure being exploited to channel and shelter illicit wealth. Reports indicate that funds from Bangladesh were routed to Singapore via offshore mechanisms, raising concerns about regulatory loopholes that might have facilitated such transactions. In this regard, the ACC has requested Singapore's cooperation in tracking these funds and ensuring accountability. Addressing these allegations can help Singapore set a precedent for combating transnational financial crimes, consistent with the country's standing in global finance. There are also other controversial Bangladeshi industrial conglomerates who have built a base in Singapore.

A moral and strategic imperative for Singapore

By taking just, fair, and decisive action and ensuring its financial systems are not exploited, Singapore has an opportunity to solidify its role as a leader in upholding justice and transparency. This is no less a moral test for the country as it is of legal consequences for a nation that is globally applauded for its rule of law. Singapore cannot afford to be perceived as a safe harbour for illicit wealth, especially embezzlement of public funds that exacerbate poverty and foment political instability elsewhere. At this critical juncture of the country, it is natural for Bangladesh to expect Singapore to address these allegations by freezing suspect assets and cooperating with Bangladeshi authorities.

By tackling these challenges head-on, Singapore will not only uphold the integrity of its own systems but will also support the global fight against corruption, defending rights of the less privileged, bringing to justice those who have plundered a nation's resources and drained the banking sector. As at least 10 Bangladeshi banks are on the

verge of collapse and depositors scratch their heads for the money looted from their coffers, Singapore has a responsibility to help Bangladesh retrieve the ill-gotten money that has found its way into the Singaporean shore.

Daily Observer, Dhaka, January 16, 2025

BD's relations with the USA remain steady amidst political changes

Diplomatic Correspondent

Foreign Affairs Adviser Md Touhid Hossain on Wednesday stated that the relations between the USA and Bangladesh are not based on any particular party, but on the two states.

"We have nothing to speculate," he said while talking to reporters at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, expressing optimism that things will move on smoothly in terms of relations with the United States. When the new administration in the US assumes office, Touhid said there might be some remarks, "which we will look into accordingly." He said they will observe for the first two to three months, adding that Bangladesh is not to be dissatisfied with any country.

The Biden Administration has been providing full-fledged support for the current interim government of Bangladesh and the reform process. Foreign Affairs Adviser said, "Our relations with India, China, and the US are very important. We will surely maintain balanced relations with these three countries, protecting our own interests." He said Bangladesh will maintain good relations with these three countries, protecting Dhaka's interests. President-elect Donald Trump is preparing more than 100 executive orders starting Day One of the new White House, in what amounts to a shock-and-awe campaign on border security, deportations, and a rush of other policy priorities, according to an AP report.

Trump told Republican senators about the onslaught ahead during a private meeting on Capitol Hill. Many of the actions are expected to launch on Inauguration Day, January 20, when he takes office. Trump's top adviser Stephen Miller outlined for the GOP senators

the border security and immigration enforcement measures that are likely to launch soonest. In November last year, Foreign Affairs Adviser Touhid Hossain said the interim government does not foresee any major change in its relations with the United States.

"It wouldn't be right to think that there will be any big change in our relationship with the Trump Administration," he told the journalists while responding to a question on the specific issue of Trump's return to the White House.

"Then we will see what steps the Trump Administration takes. Based on that, we'll work with the US," he said in November. Congratulating US President-elect Donald Trump, interim government chief adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus said he looks forward to working together with the new US administration to further strengthen the Dhaka-Washington partnership and foster sustainable development.

"I firmly believe that the possibilities are endless as our two friendly nations work towards exploring newer avenues of partnership," said the Nobel Peace Laureate in his message conveying his heartfelt felicitations to Trump on behalf of his government and the people of Bangladesh on his victory in the US Presidential Election 2024.

Sri Lanka

Daily News, Colombo, January 24, 2025

Pakistan ready to tie-up with SL to explore fisheries sector – Envoy

Pakistan is ready to collaborate with Sri Lanka's new administration, emphasising the potential for joint venture projects in the fisheries industry, Pakistan's High Commissioner to Sri Lanka Major General (R) Faheem Ul Aziz said.

The High Commissioner stated this when he called on Fisheries, Aquatic and Ocean Resources Minister Ramalingam Chandrasekar recently. This meeting marked an important step in fostering bilateral relations and exploring collaborative

opportunities between the two nations, particularly in the fisheries sector. The High Commissioner presented a special gift from Pakistan's Prime Minister to the Minister as a gesture of goodwill and friendship.

Discussions highlighted the underutilisation of the Sri Lanka-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement, with the High Commissioner pointing out the untapped opportunities for exporting Tilapia Fish to Pakistan. He noted that Pakistan faces a growing demand for this particular fish, which Sri Lanka has the potential to supply, creating a mutually beneficial trade relationship.

The conversation also touched on Pakistan's advanced expertise in biotechnology and the scope for sharing this knowledge with Sri Lanka to support innovation and sustainability in the fisheries sector. Trade and Investment Attache Mahwash Sami, Pakistan High Commission Second Secretary Iftikhar Hussain and Fisheries Ministry Private Secretary Dr. B. K. Kolitha Kamal Jinadasa also participated at the discussion.

Daily News, Colombo, January 30, 2025

Editorial

Bring poaching to a halt

South Indian fishermen poaching in Sri Lanka's territorial waters is continuing unchecked now for over a period of time heightening tensions between Sri Lanka and the Tamil Nadu (TN) State.

Sri Lanka has on several occasions registered its protest with the TN Government and also the Indian Central Government in this regard, but to no avail. Poaching continues on a regular basis and all that this country can do is to grin and bear.

Yet another instance of poaching was reported on January 27 where the Northern Naval Command observed a cluster of fishing boats enter Sri Lankan waters off Velvetithurai (VVT), Jaffna. Subsequently, the Navy mounted a special operation to drive away these fishing boats from Sri Lankan waters deploying Naval craft. During this operation, the Navy seized an Indian fishing boat that continued to remain in Sri Lankan waters, while continuing with illegal fishing activities and collecting the fishing harvest.

The operation also led to the arrest of 13 Indian fishermen aboard the fishing boat. The Navy claimed that the TN fishers acted aggressively when confronted by the Navy, maneuvering the fishing boat in a hostile manner and behaving confrontationally with the Navy.

The fishermen who were an organized group attempted to assault the Navy personnel and made an attempt to snatch the rifle from a Navy officer endangering the lives of the Navy personnel on board. This has been the all too familiar story right along, but no solution to this issue has been forthcoming until now. How long our Northern fishermen can be made to suffer in this manner when the TN fishermen use sophisticated (and possibly illegal) fishing methods including bottom trawling to virtually empty the seas in the North of their rich fishing harvests is a pertinent question.

Previously there had been numerous instances where TN fishermen had intruded into Sri Lankan waters and the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) for poaching. On all such occasions the Navy had apprehended the fishermen and handed them over to the authorities for legal action.

However, this has by no means stopped the poaching which affects not only the Northern fishermen but fishermen living in all parts of the South when vast harvests of fish are taken away from our waters illegally. The new Government under President Anura Kumara Dissanayake should take a firm stand on poaching by Indian fishermen in the Northern seas. After all, he was given a thumping mandate by the people of the North which no doubt, included the vast fishing community there.

Failure to tackle the problem in an effective manner is going to threaten the livelihoods of all the fisher folk in the North. In fact, fishing happens to be the main livelihood of the people in the North, and, as such, every endeavour should be made to protect their chief means of eking out an existence.

Regrettably, the TN State Government always takes the side of the poaching fishermen. The Central Government also does not want to

antagonize Tamil Nadu due to its election fortunes being irrevocably tied to TN. This was the case from the days of MGR and Jayalalithaa who always stood by the TN fishermen.

However, this cannot go on indefinitely. Some concrete measures should be taken to halt the poaching by TN fishermen in our Northern waters. Besides, this is an illegal act. Things have gone so far that there was once talk too of the State Government of TN wanting to take back the Kachchathivu Island which was ceded to Sri Lanka by the late Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1974. If this were to happen, it could also impede the annual pilgrimage of Catholics to the famous Shrine on the Island. Hence, steps should be taken soon to deal with the underlying problems by effectively tackling the poaching issue.

One recalls that during the time of the LTTE, arms continued to be smuggled via TN fishing boats. The terrorists stationed in South India used these fishing boats as a convenient mode of navigation to the North. It is no secret that these fishing boats are presently being used to smuggle in Kerala Cannabis (KG) and other types of drugs into the country.

This is another reason why poaching should be stopped. It has also been a famous smugglers route even before the time of the LTTE, where all kinds of contraband entered the country.

Presently, though there is little hope of bringing poaching to halt. This is because of the reluctance of the authorities to deal with a firm hand against the TN fishermen engaged in poaching, primarily due to the influence exerted by the Indian authorities vis-à-vis TN. Hence, we are in all probability going to see poaching into Sri Lankan waters by Tamil Nadu fisher folk continue as before, unless the authorities thrash this matter out with the TN Government. The Northern fishermen cannot be left at the mercy of the TN fishermen. We must also remember that it is also a question of infringement of Sri Lanka's sovereignty.

Daily News, Colombo, January 16, 2025

Editorial

A landmark visit

President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's current visit to the People's Republic of China is bound to further strengthen bilateral ties between the two countries. China has been a friend of Sri Lanka both in fair and foul weather from the very inception. It has never shied away from coming to our assistance even amidst the most demanding situations.

China's unwavering support to defeat terrorism and restore peace no doubt will be recalled with gratitude by the leaders and the people of this country. It not only provided financial aid towards this end but is also one of the few countries that provided direct arms, including heavy weapons to defeat the LTTE. If China's help was not readily forthcoming it would have taken that much longer to end the terrorist war with many more lives lost. In that respect too we should be grateful to China which stamped its friendship with this country in more ways than one.

Close ties between the two countries even go beyond the signing of the Rubber-Rice pact during the time of Premier Sirimavo Bandaranaike. China was also one of our main donors and has come to our assistance whenever the need arose. This steady unbroken friendship always stood the test of time whichever Government was in power in this country or the policies they adopted. Sino-Lanka ties, indeed, became stronger under the regime of Sirimavo Bandaranaike, perhaps due to the similar policies that were in place in both countries at the time.

China is also one of the most prominent investors in this country – the Hambantota Port and Colombo Port City among the standouts. It is also among our chief importers and main buyers of Sri Lanka Tea. Tourist arrivals from China to Sri Lanka continue to surge. China granted Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status to Sri Lanka many decades ago with regard to Tourism. Chinese presence in Sri Lanka has a long history from the days of explorer monk Fa Hien and there is evidence that our ancient Kings traded with China.

At one time, areas such as Maradana in Central Colombo were teeming with Chinese nationals, engaged in all forms of businesses and trade. A few of their descendants still live here. China has also taken steps to teach the Chinese (Mandarin) language to Sri Lankans and many centres are already in existence for the purpose.

Sri Lanka has always taken measures to balance the interests between its ties with China and India. Following this step there has been no strained relations with India or China. This status quo is being maintained to the present day. This augurs well for Sri Lanka because China is today a major superpower in the global scene and this country stands to benefit immensely as a result if the same level of friendship is continued. In fact, we should do everything possible to enhance and build on this relationship. President Dissanayake, no doubt, is aware of the importance of maintaining and taking this strong relationship into the future as well. As already mentioned, this country will be the ultimate beneficiary as a result of such a move. This is seen by the standards of all such countries closely tied up with China.

During the visit, the President will hold bilateral discussions with Chinese President Xi Jinping on a range of areas of mutual interest and will also have talks with Chinese Premier Li Qiang and Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China, Zhao Leji. He will also engage in talks with the Communist Party of China (CPC) Secretary of the Sichuan Provincial Committee. Speaking at a press conference the Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Gao Feng said China stands ready to work with Sri Lanka through the upcoming visit to carry forward their time honoured friendship, deepen political mutual trust and expand high-quality Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cooperation in various fields for continuous new progress in advancing the China-Sri Lanka strategic cooperative partnership featuring sincerity, mutual support and everlasting friendship as well as more benefits for the two peoples.

The statement is a clear indicator that China is keen in maintaining its continuing ties with this country and also assists it in every way possible. For its part, Sri Lanka too should go all out to cement these ties which will only be to its monumental benefit. It should cultivate the friendship of both China and India on an equal level. This is exactly what Premier Sirimavo Bandaranaike did, thus winning the trust and confidence of both countries.

Close relationship with China should be built at all levels. This can be done with regular visits made by ministers and officials in order to closely interact with their Chinese counterparts. Steps should also be taken to draw in more Chinese visitors to Sri Lanka.

We should also strive to bring in more Chinese investors and also professionals so that the country can benefit from their expertise. The tourism industry should take additional interest in drawing more Chinese visitors which is bound to enhance the existing close people-to-people contacts. The sky's the limit for the Sino-Lanka friendship.

Daily News, Colombo, January 17, 2025

President extends invitation to Chinese investors to explore opportunities in SL

President Anura Kumara Disanayake extended an invitation to Chinese investors to explore investment opportunities in Sri Lanka, emphasizing the nation's stable governance and transparent economy.

He made these observations as the keynote speaker at the 'Investment Forum' held yesterday jointly organized by Chinese State and private enterprises. The forum was a significant event during President Disanayake's third day of his four-day state visit to China, undertaken at the invitation of Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Prominent Chinese corporations, including China Tianying Inc. (CNTY), China Harbour Engineering Company Ltd., China Communications Construction Company Ltd., China Petrochemical Corporation (SINOPEC Group), Metallurgical Corporation of China Ltd., China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC), China Energy International Group Company Ltd.,

Guangzhou Public Transport Group and Huawei BYD Auto participated in the event.

President Dissanayake also engaged in cordial discussions with the leadership of these corporations.

The forum was attended by Minister of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment, and Tourism Vijitha Herath, Minister of Transport, Highways, Ports, and Civil Aviation, Bimal Rathnayake, Chinese Ambassador to Sri Lanka Qi Zhenhong, and Sri Lankan Ambassador to China Majintha Jayasinghe, among others.

Nepal

The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu, January 30, 2025

Nepal seeks to resume border talks as a top Indian official comes calling

Foreign Minister Deuba asks Additional Secretary Mahawar to allow more air routes and direct flights to new airports.

Anil Giri

Foreign Minister Arzu Rana Deuba has called for an early convening of the Boundary Working Group (BWG) between Nepal and India. The bilateral mechanism is mandated to carry out field work along the Nepal-India border, including the construction, restoration and repair of boundary pillars, clearing the no-man's land, and other technical tasks, excluding the disputed Susta and Kalapani areas.

The issue was raised during a meeting between Deuba and Munu Mahawar, an additional secretary who is in-charge of the Nepal and Bhutan desk at India's Ministry of External Affairs, also known as the north desk in South Block.

According to Nepali officials, both sides agreed to resume and continue meetings of all bilateral mechanisms, including the BWG, through both formal and informal discussions.

During his first visit to Nepal since taking charge of the Nepal-Bhutan desk, Mahawar paid a courtesy call on Foreign Minister Deuba on Wednesday and discussed issues of mutual interest, including early resumption of

the BWG meeting, which has been postponed for over five years.

Deuba emphasised the importance of BWG in resolving border-related issues and called for an immediate meeting, said a statement issued by Deuba's private secretariat.

Though no specific date was proposed, both sides agreed to resume the meeting soon, said a senior foreign ministry official. "Several important bilateral meetings have already been held and some are in the pipeline. There is a shared understanding to gradually resume and conclude all such meetings," said the official.

The BWG was established during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to Nepal in 2014 to address boundary matters, excluding Susta and Kalapani, at the director general-level of the Department of Survey.

In the last BWG meeting held in August 2019 in Kathmandu, both sides had agreed to complete the remaining task in the border areas by the end of 2022. But due to the Covid pandemic, no meetings were held for a couple of years.

"After the pandemic was over, we insisted on resuming the meeting, but the Indian side was reluctant to do so," said the foreign ministry official, requesting anonymity.

The BWG was mandated to complete boundary works, including installing and repairing boundary pillars.

According to data from the Department of Survey, the two countries have installed 8,554 pillars along the border. Of these, 1,325 are missing, and 1,956 are partially or fully damaged. Below the BWG, there are two mechanisms—the Survey Officials' Committee and Joint Field Survey Teams—that mobilise on the field and provide technical inputs to the BWG.

Joint teams have already been mobilised for tasks such as constructing, repairing and restoring boundary pillars, preparing an inventory of encroachments on no-man's land and cross border occupations, and conducting GPS observations of boundary pillars.

Currently, some of these tasks are being handled by the Armed Police Force and India's Sashastra Seema Bal, which, according

to the foreign ministry official, is not the right mechanism to take up boundary-related issues. "To resume the meeting, we have sent several diplomatic notes to India but there is no response yet," a foreign ministry official told the Post, requesting anonymity.

Indian reluctance to hold BWG meetings on a regular basis may have stemmed from the map dispute between Nepal and India, which started in November 2019.

During Wednesday's meeting, Foreign Minister Rana recalled the discussions and agreements of the last joint commission meeting at the foreign ministerial level, held in Kathmandu, in January 2024.

The January 2024 meeting had directed the BWG to convene and take necessary action, said the statement issued by Deuba's private secretariat, adding that both sides underscored the need for such meetings to improve bilateral relations and facilitate cooperation.

Besides pushing for the resumption of BWG meetings, the two sides discussed other bilateral engagements, noting the successful recent meetings of the India-Nepal Intergovernmental Committee and the Nepal-India Energy Meeting, both held in Kathmandu this month.

Some notable understandings were reached in both the meetings.

Foreign Minister Rana also urged the Indian government to prioritise Nepal's request for additional air routes and direct flights between India's various cities and newly-built Gautam Buddha and Pokhara International Airports, said the statement.

Nepal has long sought additional air routes, but India has been reluctant to allow more routes for Nepal-bound planes.

Additionally, she requested India's facilitation in the transport of equipment and construction materials through their territory for ongoing road construction from Darchula to Tinkar on the eastern side of the Mahakali River, an area facing logistical difficulties due to geographical difficulties, said the statement.

Nepal has already formally urged the Indian government for the same.

In the meeting, Rana had reiterated Nepal's strong commitment to strengthening bilateral relations and promoting cooperation for the mutual benefit of the citizens of both the countries, said the statement.

Mahawar, who arrived in Kathmandu on a familiarisation visit after taking charge of the Nepal-Bhutan desk, also led the Indian delegation at 5th meeting of Joint Project Monitoring Committee on post-reconstruction projects, on Monday. Padma Kuamar Mainalee, joint secretary at the Ministry of Urban Development, led the Nepali delegation in the meeting.

After the 2015 earthquakes, the Indian government had committed a \$250 million grant for post-earthquake reconstruction in Nepal. The grant was allocated across four different sectors—Housing (\$100m), Education (\$50m), Health (\$50m), and Cultural Heritage (50m). A Joint Project Monitoring Committee (JPMC) was set up in August 2017 to monitor the progress of these projects.

The latest meeting conducted a comprehensive review of progress of the Indian-assisted post-earthquake reconstruction projects in housing, education, health and cultural heritage sectors, according to an Indian embassy statement. The meeting also acknowledged successful completion of the projects agreed under the housing sector in 2021 and the education sector in 2024, the statement said.

The Rising Nepal, Kathmandu, January 30, 2025

Trade and investment linkages between Nepal and Bangladesh discussed

Kathmandu, Jan 30: The Embassy of Nepal in Dhaka has organized a programme on "Trade and Investment Linkages between Nepal and Bangladesh" in the Bangladeshi capital on Wednesday.

In his welcome remarks, Ambassador Ghanshyam Bhandari highlighted the growing economic engagements between Nepal and Bangladesh and shed light on the progress achieved in sectors such as trade, connectivity, energy, and tourism, among

others, the Embassy stated in a press release.

On the occasion, the Ambassador referred to the first-ever flow of 40 MW hydroelectricity from Nepal to Bangladesh and underscored that energy cooperation provides mutual benefits not only to the two countries but also to the entire South Asia region. He also urged Bangladeshi business leaders to build synergetic partnerships with Nepal's business community and utilize investment opportunities available in Nepal.

Speaking as the Special Guest, Chief Executive Officer of Investment Board Nepal Sushil Gyewali, made a comprehensive presentation on Nepal's investment climate, opportunities, and priority sectors.

He outlined Nepal's strategic initiatives to create a conducive environment to attract foreign direct investment and elaborated investment opportunities in priority sectors such as energy, tourism, agriculture, information and communication technology, urban infrastructure, health, manufacturing, and mines and minerals.

Executive Member of Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA) Dr Khandoker Azizul Islam discussed Bangladesh's investment priorities and expressed commitment to work together with Nepal to strengthen investment ties in mutually beneficial areas.

Chairman of the National Bank Ltd. and former president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) Abdul Awal Mintoo shared his perspectives on doing business in Nepal and underlined the need to consolidate economic ties between the two countries.

During an interactive session, CEO Gyewali and Ambassador Bhandari responded to the concerns and queries of the participants.

The event brought together eminent business leaders of Bangladesh including representatives of FBCCI and Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI). (RSS)

Iran's top general in Pakistan for military and security talks

TEHRAN – Major General Mohammad Bagheri, Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, has emphasized the strengthening of military and security ties between Iran and Pakistan during his trip to the neighboring country.

In remarks to reporters, Bagheri highlighted the growing cooperation and coordination between the two nations on various regional and international issues.

Upon his arrival in Islamabad on Sunday night, General Bagheri remarked, "We have witnessed significant events in the region over the past year, where Iran and Pakistan, as two Islamic countries, are located in the sensitive area of West and South Asia."

He underscored the extensive relations between Tehran and Islamabad, stating that both countries share similar positions on many matters.

Bagheri noted the positive development in military relations between the two countries in recent years. "Relations between the Iranian and Pakistani armed forces have been developing, and we have reached good agreements," he stated.

The general pointed out that the two countries are working to resolve security issues while expanding friendship and economic ties along their shared border.

"The main topics of our visit include border issues and the development of military relations," Bagheri elaborated.

The top general's visit to Islamabad follows an official invitation from the Commander of the Pakistan Army, General Asim Munir.

The two-day trip is scheduled to include meetings with top Pakistani political, military, and security officials, including President Asif Ali Zardari, Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif, and Defense Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif.

Discussions are expected to cover not only military and defense cooperation but also regional developments and the latest issues in the Muslim world.

Iran

Tehran Times, Iran, January 20, 2025

This visit marks General Bagheri's third trip to Pakistan, following his visits in July 2018 and October 2021.

Last year, General Munir made an official visit to Tehran, meeting with General Bagheri and other Iranian military and civilian officials.

Growing Iran-Pakistan military ties

Tehran and Islamabad have intensified their military cooperation in recent years, particularly in response to shared security concerns along their 909-kilometer border.

Specifically, in 2023, Iran and Pakistan conducted a joint border security exercise. This exercise aimed to enhance operational coordination against terrorism, drug trafficking, and other illegal activities.

Furthermore, the two countries signed a security cooperation agreement in April 2024. The agreement includes the deployment of colonel-rank officers in border areas for better coordination in counterterrorism efforts.

Tehran Times, Iran, January 30, 2025

No message exchange with U.S. on sanctions talks so far: Iran FM

TEHRAN – Iran's Foreign Minister, Abbas Araghchi, has dismissed speculation that the new U.S. administration has reached out regarding possible negotiations on lifting sanctions.

Speaking on the sidelines of cabinet meeting on Wednesday, Araghchi made it clear that Tehran has received no direct messages from Washington and remains cautious about any engagement.

"So far, no clear communication has been exchanged between the two governments," he stated. "What is being discussed is only in the media."

His comments come amid growing speculation that the U.S. may have secretly sent messages to Iran regarding a potential return to the 2015 nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). However, Araghchi stressed that any decision to enter negotiations would depend on meaningful confidence-building measures by the U.S..

Araghchi emphasized that Iran is already engaged in discussions with European

signatories to the JCPOA and is waiting for Washington to clarify its stance before making any decisions. He also reiterated Tehran's longstanding position that it was the U.S., not Iran, that broke the agreement.

"We had a deal. Iran honored its commitments, but it was the U.S. that unilaterally withdrew," he said, referencing former President Donald Trump's 2018 decision to abandon the JCPOA and reinstate economic sanctions under the "maximum pressure" campaign.

In response to Washington's withdrawal and its failure to uphold the agreement, Iran gradually scaled back its own compliance with the nuclear deal starting in 2019, arguing that it could not remain bound by an agreement that the other parties were not fully implementing.

Despite Trump's repeated remarks during his campaign and presidency about seeking a new agreement with Iran, Araghchi underscored that trust between the two countries has been severely damaged. "Overcoming this distrust is not a simple task," he said. "It cannot be achieved with mere words—it requires concrete action."

He further noted that if Iran ever considers returning to negotiations, it will only do so under conditions of equality and mutual respect. "Any potential talks must be based on a fair and balanced approach, not dictated by one side."

'Afghanistan a vital strategic partner to Iran'

In addition to addressing nuclear negotiations, Araghchi touched on Iran's evolving relationship with Afghanistan, particularly in light of recent regional developments. He reaffirmed Iran's commitment to engaging with Afghanistan's interim government, describing the neighboring country as a vital strategic partner with shared national interests.

One key issue in Iran-Afghanistan relations is Iran's water rights from the Helmand (Hirmand) River. Araghchi noted that the Afghan government acknowledges Iran's legal claims and has expressed its willingness to honor existing treaties as well as religious

and humanitarian obligations regarding water access.

He also addressed the ongoing issue of Afghan refugees in Iran, stating that while Afghanistan's interim government has agreed in principle to repatriate illegal migrants, they insist that the process must be carried out in an organized and coordinated manner.

Tehran Times, Iran, January 30, 2025

Trump's foreign fund freeze and fallout for Iran's opposition

U.S. President orders 90-day pause in foreign aid

By Soheila Zarfam

TEHRAN – On January 20, 2025, Donald Trump signed an executive order suspending U.S. foreign development assistance for 90 days, citing the need to reassess the efficiency and alignment of U.S. aid programs with his "America First" agenda.

The State Department quickly implemented the directive, freezing most ongoing foreign aid initiatives and pausing new funding efforts.

While this move has been framed as a routine review, it has triggered an immediate wave of concern among Iranian opposition figures and exile groups. Publicly, they argue that the aid freeze will intensify human rights abuses in Iran by cutting off support for independent media and civil society organizations.

However, a closer look suggests that these concerns are merely a cover—the real issue is that the decision threatens long-standing efforts to engineer regime change in Iran through U.S. financial and strategic backing.

In September 2024, leaked internal emails and documents obtained by The Grayzone revealed the extent to which U.S. policymakers had been orchestrating efforts to reshape Iran's opposition movement. The leaks point to a covert initiative, spearheaded by Carl Gershman, the former director of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), to construct an "Iran Freedom Coalition"—a network of pro-Western activists and neoconservative operatives with the ultimate goal of destabilizing the Islamic Republic system.

The documents also provided an accompanying list of "individuals involved or to be involved" in the IFC. Among the names listed as key figures in this coalition were Reza Pahlavi, the exiled son of Iran's last monarch and pretender to the country's now non-existent throne; Masih Alinejad, a U.S.-based journalist, and Mariam Memarsadeghi, a regime-change advocate who has openly called for direct U.S. intervention in Iran.

The NED, originally established during the Reagan administration as a tool for U.S. intelligence operations, has a long history of funding groups aimed at toppling foreign governments. From backing anti-government factions in Nicaragua and Venezuela to funding opposition movements in Hong Kong, the organization has played a key role in advancing Washington's geopolitical interests under the guise of promoting democracy.

The leaked documents suggest that similar tactics were being deployed in Iran, with U.S. government funds channeled into opposition networks to sustain pressure on the Iranian establishment. This revelation casts doubt on the claim that U.S. assistance was primarily about protecting human rights. It appears that, in reality, the funding was an extension of Washington's broader strategy for regime change.

The impact of Trump's decision is perhaps best reflected in the reaction of Dana Stroul, a U.S. official who used to be Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (DASD) for the Middle East. In a recent post on X, Stroul lamented the aid suspension, writing:

"-Last year \$65M for human rights, free flow of information, and civil society organizing. Want to enable "maximum support" policy for Iranian people as part of "maximum pressure" against Iranian regime? Hard to do with 0 resources."

While she frames the funding in terms of human rights and democracy promotion, she explicitly ties it to the broader "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran. Her use of the term "maximum support" directly aligns with the rhetoric of Reza Pahlavi who has repeatedly called for greater U.S. assistance in bringing about regime change.

For years, Pahlavi and his allies have insisted that international backing is necessary to weaken Iran's ruling system. Stroul's post indicates that U.S. officials were actively considering this approach, treating financial aid as a tool for advancing Washington's strategic objectives rather than simply supporting civil society. Now, with Trump's aid freeze in place, those who depended on U.S. resources to push for regime change are suddenly left scrambling.

The opposition's frantic response: a crisis of dependence

The abrupt halt in U.S. funding has triggered a wave of anxiety among Iranian opposition figures, particularly those in exile.

Within days of Trump's executive order, opposition activists and media outlets rushed to warn that the aid freeze would worsen human rights conditions in Iran. Yet, their response suggests a far deeper concern—the sudden loss of a crucial financial lifeline.

Iranian exile groups have long claimed to be independent, grassroots movements representing the will of the Iranian people. However, the overwhelming distress following Trump's order suggests otherwise. As Trump's review of foreign aid continues, the future of these U.S.-sponsored efforts remains uncertain. However, one thing is clear: the temporary withdrawal of U.S. assistance has forced a moment of reckoning for Iran's opposition.

Tehran Times, Iran, January 27, 2025

Kabul visit yielded tangible progress on critical bilateral issues: Iran FM

TEHRAN – Abbas Araghchi, the Iranian Foreign Minister, has called his visit to Kabul “productive, with tangible steps taken toward resolving key concerns.”

Araghchi arrived in Kabul on Sunday, leading a high-level political and economic delegation.

The visit aimed to discuss a range of issues affecting both Iran and Afghanistan, with a particular focus on regional security, water rights, migration, and economic cooperation.

‘Water rights: a shared responsibility’

Araghchi's first meeting was with Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund, the Prime Minister of Afghanistan.

During the meeting, Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund welcomed Araghchi and emphasized the importance of the longstanding brotherly and friendly relations between Iran and Afghanistan. He highlighted the many common interests the two nations share, including cultural, religious, and geographical ties. Akhund called for utilizing all available resources and capacities to further deepen the relationship across all sectors.

Akhund expressed Afghanistan's deep gratitude towards Iran for its role in hosting Afghan refugees and migrants over the last five decades. He praised Iran for facilitating the return of undocumented Afghan nationals with dignity, underlining that Afghanistan sees this as an ongoing priority.

The conversation then shifted to the critical issue of water resources. Akhund reiterated Afghanistan's firm commitment to providing Iran with its rightful share of water from the Helmand River, emphasizing that the Afghan interim government considers this a religious, ethical, and humanitarian obligation. Even in the absence of a formal treaty, Akhund stressed that Afghanistan has no intention of withholding Iran's share of water, and there are no obstacles preventing its delivery.

Security along their shared borders was another focal point of the discussions. Akhund acknowledged that the two countries must collaborate more closely to enhance border security, particularly in light of the persistent threats posed by terrorist groups. He offered Afghanistan's readiness to exchange intelligence and increase cooperation in combating these security challenges, underscoring the importance of stability for both nations.

In response, Foreign Minister Araghchi highlighted the Iranian government's continued commitment to strengthening relations with Afghanistan. He noted that Iran views its relationship with Afghanistan as a critical element of its neighborhood policy,

which seeks to foster good neighborliness and mutual benefit. Araghchi reaffirmed Iran's willingness to enhance cooperation in various fields, including trade, economic development, and cultural exchange.

Araghchi emphasized that security is a shared concern for both nations and called for greater collaboration to combat terrorism and ensure the safety of all ethnic groups in Afghanistan, particularly the Shiite and Persian-speaking communities. He also discussed the ongoing issue of Afghan migrants in Iran, advocating for a more structured approach to facilitate the repatriation of undocumented Afghan nationals. Araghchi stressed the importance of international support to manage migration issues and ensure the wellbeing of Afghan returnees.

'Shared historical, cultural bonds must be capitalized to benefit both sides'

Later in the day, Araghchi met with Mullah Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Acting Foreign Minister of Afghanistan. This meeting focused on expanding economic cooperation and addressing regional developments that affect both countries.

Araghchi noted the deep cultural and historical bonds between the two nations, emphasizing the need to capitalize on these shared foundations to benefit both sides. He reiterated Iran's readiness to work closely with Afghanistan to address mutual concerns, including water rights, migration, and border security. Both sides agreed on the importance of improving economic, commercial, and cultural ties.

Muttaqi expressed his appreciation for Iran's continued support in hosting Afghan refugees, a relationship that spans over four decades. He affirmed that the Taliban is prioritizing the return of these migrants as security and economic conditions improve. Muttaqi also discussed the ongoing challenge of drought, which affects both Afghanistan and Iran, and committed to ensuring that water distribution remains fair and benefits both nations, despite the regional climate challenges.

The issue of border security also featured prominently in the talks. Muttaqi outlined the Taliban's efforts to strengthen security along its border with Iran. He stressed the need for enhanced coordination and increased border control to prevent terrorism and criminal activities from destabilizing both countries.

'Diplomatic cooperation needed to tackle security concerns, terrorism'

In another crucial part of his visit, Araghchi met with Mullah Mohammad Yaqoub Mujahid, Afghanistan's Acting Minister of National Defense. This meeting delved deeper into the defense and security aspects of the bilateral relationship.

Araghchi highlighted the interlinked security challenges faced by both Iran and Afghanistan, particularly in dealing with terrorism, drug trafficking, and cross-border crimes. He called for more robust cooperation between both countries' defense authorities to address these issues effectively.

Mujahid expressed gratitude for Iran's warm hospitality toward Afghan refugees and reiterated the Afghan interim government's commitment to improving national security. He emphasized the importance of joint efforts in securing the border and combating terrorism, including better communication and information sharing between the two nations.

Mujahid also discussed Afghanistan's ongoing initiatives to modernize its defense capabilities, particularly in the realm of border security. He assured Araghchi that Afghanistan was committed to strengthening cooperation with Iran to ensure a stable and secure border region.

At the end of his visit, Foreign Minister Araghchi reflected on the progress made during his meetings in Kabul. In talks with reporters, Araghchi expressed optimism about the future of Iran-Afghanistan relations. He noted that despite the political changes in Afghanistan over the past several years, the shared history, culture, and geography of the two nations continue to bind them.

Araghchi acknowledged that Afghanistan has undergone significant changes in recent

decades, particularly following the civil war and the rise of various extremist groups. He emphasized that these developments have had a direct impact on Iran, particularly in relation to migration, terrorism, and regional security concerns.

While discussing these issues, Araghchi stressed that diplomacy and dialogue are essential for managing the challenges both nations face. He reiterated that Iran's foreign policy aims to secure the interests of both countries, regardless of the political system in place in Afghanistan.

Looking forward, Araghchi expressed confidence that the discussions held during his trip would pave the way for continued cooperation. He noted the importance of addressing critical issues such as water rights, border security, and migration in a constructive manner to reduce tensions and build a stronger, more stable partnership.

Tehran Times, Iran, January 18, 2025

Iran-Russia comprehensive agreement: outcomes and implications

By Ebrahim Fallahi

TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian arrived in Russia's capital Moscow on Friday, January 17, to strengthen ties between the two regional powers. His visit marks the beginning of an official strategic partnership with President Vladimir Putin, focusing on boosting bilateral cooperation in energy, economy, and technology sectors.

Notably, they are expected to sign a comprehensive agreement that will encompass various fields, including finance, energy, and trade, with a strong emphasis on circumventing Western sanctions. The discussions aim to enhance economic connectivity and foster long-term collaboration between the two nations.

The comprehensive Iran-Russia cooperation agreement represents a significant milestone in bilateral economic relations. The agreement emphasizes collaboration in key areas such as trade, energy, and infrastructure development. It modernizes a 2001 treaty to reflect the evolving geopolitical and economic environment.

Key economic initiatives include the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which will connect Iran, Russia, and other regions, reducing costs and trade routes significantly. The agreement also envisions increased bilateral trade and investments, supported by measures to integrate financial systems and bypass Western sanctions through alternative payment mechanisms.

Trade expansion and regional impact

Iran-Russia annual trade grew by 15 percent last year, with this agreement aiming to accelerate the trend. Russia sees Iran as a critical partner in countering Western hegemony and promoting a multipolar world order. For Iran, the partnership provides access to advanced technologies in sectors like nanotechnology, aerospace, and AI.

Implications for the region and beyond

The agreement's emphasis on energy cooperation aligns with Iran's position as a significant gas producer and Russia's status as a global energy powerhouse. Joint projects, such as the transfer of Russian gas through Iran, will enhance energy security for both nations and neighboring regions. Additionally, this partnership challenges U.S. sanctions and could influence global energy markets.

By strengthening ties within frameworks like BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Eurasian Economic Union, the agreement bolsters regional integration. It sets a precedent for partnerships among emerging powers seeking to challenge the unipolar dominance of the West.

In summary, the Iran-Russia agreement deepens economic ties, supports mutual interests in countering sanctions, and enhances their influence in shaping a multipolar global order. It also promises economic benefits for both nations and broader regional stability.

EF/

Tehran Times, Iran, January 19, 2025

Landmark Iran-Russia treaty paves way for enhanced bilateral ties: Araghchi

TEHRAN – Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi has highlighted the 20-year

Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty between Iran and Russia and described its wide-ranging scope, which includes trade, investment, energy, transportation, and tourism.

He expressed hope that with such a foundation in the relations between the two countries, the economic, cultural, and political relations between Iran and Russia will proceed more easily and in a better framework from now on.

Araghchi noted that the treaty also incorporates cultural exchange, judicial cooperation, and strengthened parliamentary ties, setting the stage for improved bilateral relations.

The landmark agreement was signed by Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian and Russian President Vladimir Putin during a summit in Moscow on Friday.

President Putin hailed the treaty as a "breakthrough" and expressed optimism about the ambitious tasks outlined within it.

Russia-Iran pact an example of relations between equal states: Lavrov

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in comments to Mayak radio, highlighted the treaty's broader implications. "It sets an example of how nations can constructively build relations based on equality and sovereignty," he said. Lavrov reiterated the importance of mutual respect in fostering partnerships that withstand external pressures.

President Putin described President Pezeshkian's visit to Moscow as a significant opportunity to explore comprehensive cooperation. He emphasized the ambitious nature of the agreement, predicting that it would give new momentum to the partnership in all directions.

"This agreement provides a solid foundation for cooperation across all areas and will significantly enhance our partnership," he stated. Russian Foreign Minister added that the treaty serves as a model for relations between sovereign, equal states, praising its emphasis on mutual respect and shared goals.

A pivotal step in the evolving global order: Dugin

The significance of the treaty was further emphasized by Russian political thinker Alexander Dugin, who described it as a pivotal step in the evolving global order. Dugin praised the formalization of the alliance, stating that it marks a decade of progress in Iran-Russia relations. He outlined three key areas of focus: economic collaboration, regional engagement, and international cooperation.

According to Dugin, the treaty aims to establish a unique security framework that promotes mutual trust while maximizing opportunities. Proposals include potential Russian military bases in southern Iran and Iranian economic activities in the Arctic.

"The North-South Corridor, a trade route linking Russia to international waters through Iran, is a cornerstone of this agreement," Dugin said, highlighting its potential to reshape Eurasian connectivity and counter Western sanctions.

Dugin also noted the cultural and geopolitical alignment between the two nations, describing their shared rejection of global hegemony as a foundation for deeper cooperation. "This partnership is a step toward building a multipolar world order," he concluded.

The treaty's signing was lauded by both nations as a historic milestone. Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova called it an "unprecedented agreement," underscoring its depth and scope.

Afghanistan

The Kabul Times, Kabul, January 20, 2025

Editorial

Afghan-Chinese relations unceasing

Today (Monday) January 20, 2025, marks the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Afghanistan and China. As history suggests, diplomatic relations between the two nations, date back to the 18th century when Afghanistan was ruled by King Ahmad Shah Durrani and China by Qianlong. However, trade relations between the nations date back to at least the Han dynasty with the

profitable Silk Road a long-lasting relationship involving centuries. The trade and diplomatic relations symbolize the long-standing friendship, trust, partnership, and cooperation between the two countries as the people of Afghanistan regard China as a sincere and reliable friend that has stood alongside their country, under all circumstances even tough conditions. The key reason behind firm, uninterrupted, and continued relations between the two countries, particularly, after the fall of the former Soviet Union-backed Afghan regime in 1992 is that China has consistently tried to support peace and stability in Afghanistan even at a time when intense proxy wars engulfed the country for nearly twenty years. Moreover, China has proved that it has never tended to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries with Afghanistan particularly to deal with friendly, close, and transparently. In line with the foreign policy of non-interference of the Islamic Emirate, China has tried to remain committed to Afghanistan's national interests, while certain world and regional countries want to decide our present and future and to reach their personal goals through interference in the country's internal affairs. This is while the relations between Afghanistan and China are rooted in mutual respect, and economic development of the impoverished nation at the national and international levels. In addition to China's exemplary friendliness and its policy of noninterference in Afghanistan's internal affairs, the two countries have long been strengthening bilateral diplomatic relations through practical measures of the physical establishment of diplomatic missions and introducing ambassadors to both countries. Expansion of cultural and humanitarian areas should also be considered beyond diplomatic ties. After the withdrawal of U.S.-led foreign forces from Afghanistan, unlike other countries, China maintained its firm economic and diplomatic engagement with the war-torn nation during the challenging time and is continuing its good interaction with the Islamic Emirate, while other countries of the world and the region closed their embassies

in Kabul and even diminished their relations with Afghanistan, under the challenging time. China's remarkable cooperation with Afghanistan in different areas of reconstruction, trade, education, and economics is unforgettable. Beyond the Afghanistan and China diplomatic and economic relations, the wise leadership in China even plans to expand worldwide, through the Belt and Road (B&R) extra-large project, an initiative certain powers oppose as a move that the second economy [China] wants to expand its supremacy worldwide.

The Kabul Times, Kabul, January 22, 2025

Editorial

Better to try alternatives other than death penalties for Afghan prisoners

The situation of Afghan migrants in the neighboring countries of Iran and Pakistan is heartbreaking. They face torture, insult, and arrest by police officials in Iran and Pakistan. Hundreds of Afghan migrants are arrested and taken to prisons by policemen in Iran, and Pakistan under inaccurate suspicion. Afghans residing in the neighboring countries are only seeking work. Most of them have been jailed innocently or their faults are proven. Some of them have been sentenced to years in jail or received the death penalty. Reports quoting the Iranian human rights organization said that up to 90 Afghan prisoners have been executed in the Islamic Republic of Iran over the past three years. Recently, the Deputy Chief of the Islamic Emirate's Supreme Court, in a meeting with the Iranian Justice Minister, said that the country is fully prepared to accept Afghan prisoners from Iran. The Iranian deputy foreign minister said that Iran is committed to transferring 1,500 Afghan prisoners to Afghanistan in the near future. Enhancement and strengthening of judicial cooperation between the countries, most importantly the consideration of the death penalty for Afghan prisoners, as well as banking issues for migrants in some cities of the neighboring countries, were among the issues, the two sides discussed in their latest meeting. The discussion between the two countries' justice and judicial officials about the fate of the

Afghan prisoners is highly welcomed by the people of Afghanistan. The two countries should establish a joint committee for the implementation of a constructive program to facilitate the Afghan prisoners' transfer to the country. The process of transferring Afghan prisoners should be expedited and the two sides should do their best to confirm their identities and accelerate their transfer to the country. On the other hand, the Iranian courts, considering good neighborliness, should seek alternative measures to the death penalty for Afghan migrants who committed crimes deserving death sentences in that country. Also, the Islamic Republic of Iran should treat Afghan migrants in line with international migration laws and neighborhood principles. Their children should be provided with educational opportunities, the workers should be helped find employment under the host country's foreign nationals' rules, and the police should refrain from harassing and detaining Afghan migrants illegally. The Afghans residing and working in the neighboring Iran or Pakistan, also advised that while living there, they should obey the migration rules of the host countries and make efforts to get busy in working to support their families. They should avoid violating the host countries' rules, which are mostly focused on legal migration documents.

The Kabul Times, Kabul, January 27, 2025
Refugees among issues discussed in Prime Minister, Iranian FM meeting in Kabul

KABUL: The Prime Minister of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund, during a meeting on Sunday with Sayed Abbas Araghchi, the Iranian Foreign Minister, discussed strengthening bilateral relations, an official said. Welcoming the Iranian Foreign Minister, Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund said that such diplomatic visits should be increased to strengthen and develop diplomatic, political, and economic relations between the two Muslim and brother countries, the deputy spokesman of the IEA Mullah Hamdullah Fitrat said. The Prime Minister said that the Islamic Emirate wants to solve some

misunderstandings with Iran through dialogues and diplomatic channels. "Living in an atmosphere of understanding and brotherhood and fostering relations will strengthen the relations between the two countries and lead to the well-being of the two nations," Mullah Hassan said as quoted by Hamdullah Fitrat. The Prime Minister also asked the Iranian government to deal with Afghan migrants in line with Islamic principles and provide them with necessary services and facilities. Meanwhile, Araghchi said that Iran's security and stability depend on Afghanistan's security and stability, and his country is seeking to expand cooperation with the Islamic Emirate in various fields. Referring to Iran's historical, religious, and economic relations with Afghanistan, he said: "We are happy that after four decades of conflict and instability, sure security has been ensured in Afghanistan." Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi arrived in Kabul Sunday morning for talks with Afghan authorities on various issues of mutual interest. The Kabul Times

The Kabul Times, Kabul, January 27, 2025
Afghanistan enjoys friendly relations with Qatar in various sectors, Shaheen

KABUL: Mohammad Su- official hail Shaheen, the Islamic Emirate's ambassador to Qatar, said that Afghanistan currently enjoys friendly relations with Qatar in various sectors. "Our relations with Qatar are friendly and brotherly, and we collaborate in various fields. We welcome Qatari investments in Afghanistan. The Islamic Emirate's embassy in Qatar remains active, enabling the IEA to establish connections with various countries worldwide," he said as quoted by TOLONews. Highlighting Doha's crucial role in expanding the relations between the Islamic Emirate and with world, Shaheen said Qatar has served as the primary host for peace negotiations between the Islamic Emirate and the former Afghan government, as well as in talks between the Islamic Emirate, the United States, and other Western countries. Qatar has always maintained good relations and played a key role in cooperation with Afghanistan. Even now, it continues to make efforts to

foster positive interactions between Afghanistan and other countries and has consistently acted as a good mediator, he concluded. The Kabul Times

The Kabul Times, Kabul, January 29, 2025
First trilateral meeting on TAP-500 power project held in Kabul

KABUL: The first trilateral meeting on the TAP-500 power project, following the establishment of the Islamic Emirate, was held in Kabul between Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and the Turkish Çalık Holding group, the Ministry of Energy and Water said in a statement the other day. The meeting focused on plans to initiate the practical work on the TAP-500 electricity project, the roadmap, and the responsibilities of the involved countries. The TAP-500 project aims to transmit electricity from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan passing via Herat, Farah, Helmand, and Kandahar before reaching Pakistan. During the meeting, officials from Turkmenistan and Çalık Holding praised Afghanistan's current security environment and expressed their enthusiasm for implementing the project under favorable conditions. All sides agreed to form technical committees and hold regular meetings to finalize agreements and implementation plans for the TAP-500 project. Based on its economic-centric policy, Afghanistan reaffirmed its commitment to regional connectivity by highlighting progress on the CASA-1000 electricity transmission and TAPI gas pipeline projects. After years of delays, the TAP-500 project is now set to commence, marking a significant step forward for Afghanistan's energy sector and regional integration. Afghanistan, as the host of this project, will not only gain access to electricity but is also expected to earn approximately \$100 million annually. The Kabul Times

The Kabul Times, Kabul, January 29, 2025
Editorial

Dialogue the best way to resolve differences

The U.S. Secretary of State has recently said more American citizens may have been taken hostages by the Islamic Emirate forces than previously reported. He quoted a report

saying: Just hearing the Taliban [the Islamic Emirate] is holding more American hostages than has been reported. If this is true, we will have to immediately place a VERY BIG bounty on their top leaders, maybe even bigger than the one we had on Bin Laden." In response to the remarks by the U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Suhail Shaheen, the acting ambassador of the Islamic Emirate in Qatar, said that the Islamic Emirate seeks to resolve disputes through dialogue but will not accept pressure. The country's ambassador warned that those supporting the policy of pressure should learn a lesson from the recent Jihad of the people of Afghanistan. "The policy of the Islamic Emirate is to resolve issues peacefully through dialogue; however, in the face of pressure and aggression, the recent struggles of the Afghan nation are a sufficient lesson for everyone to learn from," he said. Though the exact number of American citizens is not still clear in Afghanistan, the two sides can use every opportunity to deal with any problems via diplomatic channels. Actually, Afghanistan, with a new chapter of relations with the world, wants to maintain a soft, national interests-based, and Islamic Sharia-based policy with the whole world countries, including the U.S. and support any step taken towards resolving challenges peacefully. Both Afghanistan, under the Islamic Emirate and the U.S. have to work through understanding, policy, and coordination to address any bilateral issue and overcome any tensions between the two sides through peaceful means and the exchange of information. The Islamic Emirate has frequently called for the world countries, particularly the West, to reopen their embassies in Kabul and normalize their relations with the Islamic Emirate. Since its power resumption more than three years ago, the Islamic Emirate has been seeking the establishment of positive relations with all countries based on mutual interests with the U.S. in particular, as it has long been the key stakeholder in Afghanistan and one of the sides of the Doha agreement. So, under this principle, the United States can also resume normal diplomatic relations with Afghanistan and any arising challenges can be

resolved through mutual understanding. So, any option of pressure should be negated and the U.S.'s new administration should address any challenges with the ruling Islamic system through dialogue.

Pakistan

Pakistan – India Relations

The Nation

January 24, 2025

Thief Posing as Judge

Malik Muhammad Ashraf

India under Modi has become a majoritarian state where minorities are being suppressed under a deliberate policy inspired by 'Hindutva' philosophy.

It has become visceral with the Indian leaders and security Czars to blame Pakistan for cross-border terrorism. The Indian Army Chief called Pakistan Epicenter of Terrorism' last week. The statement is quintessential of the proverb 'Thief posing as Judge'. India itself is practicing state terrorism. Perhaps corroborative evidence from international media and other irrefutable sources would be pertinent to unravel the truth.

The Washington Post reported a few days ago that India's intelligence agency Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) has carried out at least six target killings in Pakistan using hired criminals and Afghan shooters. The report claimed that the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi having positioned himself as the most assertive Indian leader since independence is the driving force behind the nation's actions beyond its borders.

It is pertinent to mention that a similar report was also published by The Guardian in first week of April saying that Indian government had killed about 20 people in Pakistan since 2020. The paper published this report on the basis of interviews with officials of Indian intelligence and the documents shared by Pakistan which shows the involvement of Indian RAW in these attacks.

The report vindicated our former foreign secretary Syrus Sajjad Qazi who in a press briefing on January 24, 2024 in which he claimed that India was involved in committing extra-territorial and extra-

judicial killings of 20 Pakistanis on their own soil. He asserted that credible evidence of links between Indian agents and assassination of two Pakistanis on our soil was available. He further said that these were killings-for-hire cases involving a sophisticated international setup spread over multiple jurisdictions. Indian agents used technology and safe havens on foreign soil to commit assassinations in Pakistan. They recruited, financed and supported criminals, terrorists and unsuspecting civilians to play defined roles in these assassinations. India under Modi has become a majoritarian state where minorities are being suppressed under a deliberate policy inspired by 'Hindutva' philosophy. It has also adopted terrorism as a state policy under which the detractors of the regime living in other countries are murdered besides fomenting and abetting terrorism in the neighbouring countries, particularly Pakistan. The killings of Pakistani nationals in their own country are not only a blatant violation of sovereignty of Pakistan but also the principles enshrined in the UN Charter. India had also targeted an Indian dissenter and Sikh leader in Canada and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau blamed it directly on India claiming that they had irrefutable evidence in this regard. Later it was reported that India tried a similar assassination attempt in the US but failed. US protested but mildly. Nevertheless these incidents in Canada and US did throw sufficient light on Indian acts of terrorism.

Perhaps it would be appropriate to recall Indian attempts to support insurgency in Balochistan and acts of terrorism on its soil. Kalbhushan Sudhir Jhadav a serving commander in the Indian Navy was arrested on March 3, 2016 in Balochistan while crossing over from Iran in a counter-intelligence operation. He was found in possession of a valid Indian passport with a fake name of Hussain Mubarak. During the investigations Jhadav confessed that Indian intelligence agency RAW was involved in destabilizing Pakistan and he was a serving officer of the Indian Navy working in Pakistan at its behest. He also acknowledged that he

launched a covert operation against Pakistan from the Iranian port of Chahbahar for which he used to get instructions from Joint Secretary of RAW Anil Gupta. According to him RAW had been funding the Baloch separatists for carrying out their insurgency operations. Kalbhushan also admitted that he had been directing various activities in Karachi and Balochistan on directions from RAW since 2013 and had a role in the deteriorating law and order situation in Karachi. He was tried in a military court and awarded death sentence which has not been carried out as yet.

The reign of terror unleashed by the Indian security forces in Illegally occupied Jammu and Kashmir since 5 August 2019 when it scraped special status of the state, divided it into two territories and made it part of the India, also sends shudder through the nerves. The killing spree continues but the global community does not seem bothered about the state terrorism being perpetrated on Kashmiris. International media and human rights organizations including Amnesty International have been continuously reporting blatant violations of human rights in the state which are properly documented. A report prepared by UN Human Rights Commission also provides corroborative evidence in this regard.

India blamed Pakistan of having orchestrated Pulwama incident and sent its planes across the border to target an alleged terrorist camp at Balakot. The later reports revealed that India itself had staged that tragedy to stir up anti-Pakistan sentiments to win the upcoming elections. India claimed that its planes had killed 350 terrorists. The falsehood of the Indian propaganda was immediately exposed by the local and international media. Pakistan justifiably retaliated and hit targets within India and also downed two Indian planes besides capturing an Indian pilot Abj Nandan. This brought the two countries almost on the brink of war but the intervention of friendly countries prevented this from happening. These happenings were a ranting testimony to which extent the Indian government under Modi can go to achieve its political objectives.

Pakistan has been drawing the attention of the international community to Indian-sponsored acts of terrorism within its territory and in this regard, a dossier was also presented to the UN and other big powers which unfortunately did not invoke an appropriate response. The enactment of state terrorism by India and its ruthless continuation is an affront to the conscience of the global community as well as the United Nations.

Will the global community and UN take notice of it and stop India in its tracks to commit these heinous crimes against other states remains a million-dollar question. Regrettably, the principles enshrined in the UN Charter and international conventions are selectively employed. Global politics and management of international affairs is conducted through the prism of strategic, geo-political and commercial interests. The reason why India gets away with such indiscretions and violation of UN charter is that the big powers including US, UK and France are Indian allies and they look at things from the perspective of their strategic and commercial interests linked to that country. India is also their partner in achieving the objectives of 'Contain China' policy.

Malik Muhammad Ashraf
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The Nation
January 24, 2025

IWT Success

Pakistan must remain steadfast in its commitment to the Indus Waters Treaty, a landmark agreement with India that governs the equitable sharing of water resources. This treaty, vital for both nations, is particularly significant for Pakistan's water security and agricultural lifeline. However, India's construction of the 330 MW Kishanganga project on the Jhelum River and the 850 MW Ratle project on the Chenab River in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) has raised serious concerns, as these projects violate the treaty's provisions.

In October 2022, the World Bank, acting under its obligations as a guarantor of the treaty, initiated two parallel processes to address the disputes over these hydroelectric projects. While Pakistan sought the establishment of a Court of Arbitration to review the projects' architectural compliance, India called for the appointment of a Neutral Expert to evaluate similar concerns. This divergence in approach reflected the deep-seated mistrust and differing interpretations of the treaty's provisions by both nations.

The World Bank's appointments to these processes marked a critical step in resolving the disputes. Professor Sean Murphy was named Chairman of the Court of Arbitration, and Michel Lino, President of the International Commission on Large Dams (ICOLD), was designated as the Neutral Expert. On Monday, Michel Lino asserted his capacity to adjudicate the disputes, affirming that both parties would be heard before a final decision is rendered.

The Neutral Expert's ruling, endorsed by the World Bank, is a significant validation of Pakistan's legal stance. It affirms the binding nature of the Kishanganga Awards, despite India's longstanding objections, and bolsters Pakistan's broader case strategy while confining the Neutral Expert's scope to project-specific issues. Furthermore, key admissions by India have strengthened Pakistan's position in the ongoing legal proceedings.

This development is a testament to the efficacy of the treaty's dispute resolution mechanism and highlights Pakistan's diplomatic and legal acumen. It represents a significant victory for justice, diplomacy, and Pakistan's water rights. As the proceedings advance, Pakistan's success in this matter sets a precedent for the future. It reinforces the principle of equitable resource sharing, strengthens the treaty's mechanisms, and reaffirms Pakistan's resolve to defend its rights on the international stage.

Pakistan – China Relations

Dawn

January 28, 2025

One-China Policy remains unchanged: Foreign Office

Baqir Sajjad Syed

ISLAMABAD: The Foreign Office on Monday affirmed that its policy of supporting One-China Policy remains unchanged, dismissing media speculations as baseless attempts to undermine Pakistan-China relations.

In a statement, the Foreign Office described the One-China Policy as a consistent cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy, emphasising that the country's stance remains the same.

The statement came in response to growing criticism of Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi's participation in an event sponsored by the New Federal State of China (NFSC), an anti-China group.

But the FO did not specify the media speculations it was addressing, but reiterated Pakistan's commitment to its strategic partnership with China, calling such allegations baseless and unfounded.

Mr Naqvi, who faced backlash over his participation in the event, had earlier issued his own clarification, denying that the event was anti-China but stopping short of addressing claims that it was hosted by NFSC. In contrast, the Foreign Office avoided direct comment on the controversy surrounding NFSC's sponsorship of the event.

A diplomatic source, speaking on condition of anonymity, told *Dawn* that the event in question was organised by Gunster Strategies, a lobbying firm that boasts its connections with US President Donald Trump's allies and family members. NFSC was reportedly one of the sponsors.

Gunster Strategies held the event to celebrate Trump's inauguration, though Mr Naqvi claimed that the event he attended was a youth event.

The source revealed that Mr Naqvi's office had coordinated his participation directly, bypassing Pakistan's embassy in Washington. The embassy's involvement was limited to providing transportation for the minister to the event, the source added.

The source claimed that Mr Naqvi had a personal liaison in Washington who handled his connections.

The Chinese embassy in Washington reportedly has since raised the issue with its Pakistani counterpart, expressing concern about the incident.

China is Pakistan's strategic partner, the FO reiterated. This relationship is characterised by mutual trust, shared values, support on issues of core concern, and a commitment to regional and global stability, it further asserted.

Mr Naqvi was contacted for comments, but he did not respond to the request.

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The Express Tribune

January 19, 2025

Wakhan corridor and Indian propaganda

India's ambition of acting as a counterweight to China is a cornerstone of its foreign policy.

Omay Aimen

The Wakhan Corridor, a strategic region in Badakhshan province of Afghanistan, connects the country to China's Xinjiang region. It lies between Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region to the North and Pakistan's Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan regions to the South. The high-altitude valley, rising to 4,923 meters, has long been a focal point of regional geopolitics, intertwining the interests of these three nations with those of Central Asia. Spanning approximately 350 kilometers, this narrow strip of land serves as a lifeline to its sparse population, in stark contrast to its crucial role in trade, security and diplomacy. Historically crafted during the 19th century 'Great Game' as a buffer zone between the British and Russian empires, the Wakhan Corridor continues to exert influence in modern geopolitics. Recently, the Corridor has drawn a substantial media hype after a reported visit of Pakistan's spy master to Tajikistan. The visit, which might have been a routine occurrence, was misconstrued by Indian media and termed as an overture aimed at Pakistan annexing the Wakhan area. India exploited this event and hurled a propaganda campaign, alleging ulterior

motives behind this interaction. Indian media twisted the context of Pakistan's engagement with Central Asian states and falsely filled a narrative of Pakistani aggression in the Corridor. The purpose behind these baseless assertions is to undermine Pakistan's regional cooperation initiatives and create tension between Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

There is no denying the fact that Wakhan Border offers multi-faceted geo-strategic and economic incentives to Pakistan. These incentives, by no means, can stir belligerent intentions by a country which has never been observed violating the sovereignty and integrity of its neighbours. While Pakistan realises the benefits attached to an access to this strategic passage to resource-rich Central Asian states in addressing its energy shortages for revival of its economic growth, it cannot violate its international obligations as a responsible member of global community. Pakistan's advantageous location at the confluence of South and Central Asia makes it a connectivity hub. Pakistan is already accruing desired benefits inhibiting any further temptation at the cost of tarnishing its image as a responsible state. Triggering a well-crafted propaganda against Pakistan is favourite distraction of its Eastern neighbour India. Indian perpetual efforts in discrediting Pakistan have always been an established norm - something that was exposed by credible global forums like EU Disinfo Lab in 2019. Indian assertion of Pakistan's intentions of occupying the Wakhan Corridor encompass multiple nefarious objectives having negative implications for Pakistan in the region. It is crucial to evaluate India's inimical propaganda with regards to the Wakhan Corridor.

The Wakhan Corridor is a critical strategic asset that provides Afghanistan with political and economic leverage - a fact that India wishes to manipulate playing on this sensitivity of Afghanistan. India is making concerted efforts in escalating tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Owing to perilous security situation in its restive

provinces of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, Pakistan remains wary of Afghanistan's patronage to terrorist groups operating in these regions. Pakistan's grievances on use of Afghan soil by terrorist groups, expulsion of Afghans illegally residing in Pakistan, lack of efficient border management by Afghanistan and a host of other issues have caused a substantial commotion between both countries. India, which had a significant clout in Afghanistan in the pre-Taliban regime days, is once again endeavouring to manage congenial relations with Afghan Interim Government (AIG). The accomplishment of this aspiration is only possible by creating mistrust between AIG and Pakistan. Pakistan has consistently reaffirmed its commitment to regional peace and sovereignty. This commitment is frequently emphasised by the country's military leadership - a fact vindicated by the Chief of Army Staff in a statement during his visit to Peshawar on 13 January 2025. The ISPR Director General also explicitly affirmed Pakistan's commitment to respecting Afghanistan's sovereignty, in his presser in December 2024. Pakistan's efforts to host millions of Afghan refugees and its active support for Afghanistan's reconstruction further demonstrate its unwavering focus on promoting stability in the region.

India's ambition of acting as a counterweight to China is a cornerstone of its foreign policy. The Wakhan Corridor offers China a potential opening to enhance its economic and strategic influence in the region. By controlling the Wakhjir and Tegermansu passes, China can leverage its position to gain both economic and strategic benefits in the region. Furthermore, the Corridor can serve as an auxiliary route when other connections, such as those through Jalalabad and Chitral, are inaccessible due to seasonal closures. China's Xinjiang province shares borders with 14 countries, including Pakistan, making it a critical hub for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). India's propaganda frequently emphasises this connectivity, aiming to weaken the BRI as well as CPEC's sustainability and its role in connecting

Xinjiang to Gwadar Port. India sees the strengthening of ties between Pakistan, Tajikistan and China as a direct threat to its own geopolitical standing. Moreover, India is trying to isolate Pakistan diplomatically and disrupt its collaboration with China by presenting a flawed narrative on Gilgit-Baltistan's integration with Pakistan. India's rhetoric regarding the Wakhan Corridor reflects this broader agenda, framing Pakistan's legitimate economic and security interests as expansionist. India's opposition to any Pak-China collaboration is also part of a broader plan to distract attention from its own unfavourable domestic situation.

Indian anxiety is attributed to any potential collaboration between Pakistan, China, Afghanistan and Central Asian States which not only diminishes India's influence in Afghanistan but also threatens its broader regional strategy. India has long sought to counter Pakistan's influence in the region by promoting alternative routes, such as the Afghanistan-Iran-India corridor, which bypasses Pakistan entirely. It is, thus, imperative for all stakeholders to comprehend the real intent behind the malicious Indian propaganda.

Pakistan - Bangladesh Relations

The Nation

January 26, 2025

Relations between Bangladesh, Pakistan to grow stronger with each passing day

NEWS WIRE

PESHAWAR - High Commissioner of Bangladesh to Pakistan, Iqbal Hussain Khan Saturday said that his country is moving towards democracy after current changes and relations with Pakistan would further strengthen with each passing day. He was addressing media persons in Peshawar Press Club here. Bangladesh Press Attaché, Muhammad Tayyab, President Peshawar Press Club, M Riaz and senior journalists were also present on the occasion. Iqbal Hussain Khan said that Bangladesh people firmly believe in democracy adding that country is fast moving towards democracy after current changes. He said that change of the setup in Bangladesh would lead country

towards better future, development and freedom of press. He said that speed for democracy is very strong in Bangladesh where people love freedom of press and expression. He said that elections would be held in Bangladesh in December 2025 or start of 2026. Highlighting old cultural and traditional similarities between Pakistan and Bangladesh, he said that there are many vistas of future cooperation between two countries in sectors of trade, commerce, tourism, health, education and gemstone sector.

The Nation

January 29, 2025

Pakistan, Bangladesh to launch direct flights: BD envoy

NEWS WIRE

ISLAMABAD - The High Commissioner of Bangladesh to Pakistan, Muhammad Iqbal Hussain Khan on Tuesday announced that direct flights between Pakistan and Bangladesh were expected to begin within the next few months. This significant development is set to enhance connectivity and foster stronger economic and cultural ties between the two countries, he said.

During a meeting with Islamabad Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ICCI) President Nasir Mansoor Qureshi and his team, the High Commissioner also revealed that cargo flights between Dhaka, Karachi, and Lahore would also commence soon, further facilitating trade and business exchanges. He highlighted Bangladesh's commitment to strengthening business partnerships with Pakistan, emphasizing the ease of obtaining Bangladeshi visas online for Pakistani citizens. He also encouraged both countries to explore joint ventures and industrial collaborations to maximize bilateral benefits. He pointed out that there are ample opportunities for the businessmen of both countries to ink joint ventures for mutual prosperity, underscoring the vast potential for trade and investment.

On trade, the high commissioner mentioned the opportunities in various sectors with Pakistan exporting goods such as sugar, steel, surgical instruments cement, dry fruits, pink

salt, milk products, marble, and coal to Bangladesh. In turn Pakistan can import items like tea and jute from Bangladesh, creating a complementary trade dynamic between the two countries. The ICCI President stressed that the business, industry and trade communities of both countries could achieve significant milestones through economic diplomacy. He expressed his intention to visit Bangladesh with a delegation of potential investors at the earliest opportunity, with the goal of inking memoranda of understanding with the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry and other relevant bodies.

President Qureshi also highlighted the facilitation desks at ICCI, which assist the business community in overcoming challenges to ease of doing business. He also mentioned the Chamber's other initiatives to boost economic and commercial activities in the region by holding exhibitions and expos. Former ICCI Presidents Zubair Ahmed Shaikh, Mian Akram Farid and Mian Shaukat Masood emphasized that Bangladesh presents a unique opportunity for quickly enhancing bilateral trade, given the complementary nature of the two countries' economies.

They noted that sectors such as industrial collaborations, joint ventures, technology transfers, B2B engagements, and chamber-to-chamber cooperation are key areas for growth.

The meeting was attended by ICCI members, including Senior Vice President Abdul Rehman Siddiqui, Vice President Nasir Mehmood Chaudhry, former Presidents Mohammad Ejaz Abbasi, Shaikh Aamir Waheed and executive members Ishaq Sial, Chaudhry Mohammad Irfan, Imran Minhas, Malik Mohsin Khalid, Rohail Anwar Butt, Mohammad Waseem Chaudhry, and Shumaila Siddiqui.

The participants expressed strong optimism about the future of Pakistan-Bangladesh trade and said that the direct flights would play role in advancing this partnership. This development marks a pivotal step towards enhancing economic relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh, with both nations

eager to seize the opportunities presented by improved connectivity and closer business ties, they said.

Other Important Developments

The News

January 20, 2025

Action in Zhob: Five terrorists killed while sneaking into Pakistan thru border with Afghanistan

Security forces remain committed to securing borders and eliminating terrorism

By Our Correspondent

RAWALPINDI: The security forces have killed five Khwarij while trying to sneak into Pakistan through the Pak-Afghan border in the Zhob district of Balochistan.

On the night of January 18 and 19, the security forces effectively engaged a group of Khwarij in the general area Sambaza, Zhob District, killing five Khwarij.

Pakistan has been consistently asking the interim Afghan government to ensure effective border management on their side, fulfill their obligations and deny the use of their soil by Khwarij for perpetuating acts of terrorism, the ISPR said.

The security forces remain committed to securing the borders and eliminating terrorism, it added.

APP reports: Meanwhile, President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif Sunday lauded the security forces for stopping intrusion at the Pak-Afghan border in Zhob district.

In a message, the president appreciated the security forces for their timely action against the Fitna al-Khwarij terrorists. He said the brave security forces were always ready to protect the country's borders and reiterated the government's determination to completely eradicate terrorism and defend the borders.

In a message, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif highly appreciated the security forces for carrying out a successful action against the Fitna-al-Khwarij terrorists in the Zhob district and said the entire nation stood with the security forces in the war against terrorism. "We are fully determined to root

out all types of terrorism from the country," he said.

The News

January 21, 2025

'Pakistan committed to address issues with Afghanistan'

By Our Correspondent

Islamabad: It will take political commitment and sincerity on both sides to steer Pakistan and Afghanistan out of the current tensions and find the way for a better future.

This was the conclusion drawn from a day-long civil society dialogue between representatives from Pakistan and Afghanistan organised here by Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS). They also underscored the need for easing restrictions on visas for Afghan citizens, which they claimed, are breeding animosity and negativity among Afghans.

The participants of the dialogue pointed out the losses worth millions of dollars that farmers and traders endured due to border closures and political tensions in the aftermath of violence and terrorist actions in Pakistan. These disruptions, coupled with the alleged corruption of officials, hit traders and farmers of both countries, they observed. "Robust mechanisms and consistent policies" can help minimise such disruptions and the ensuing losses, the participants suggested.

Intensive discussions centred on girls' education, terrorism, obstructions in the way of transit and bilateral trade and visas for Afghan nationals. They also called on both governments to keep politics and trade separate and engage in meaningful dialogue on issues that are of primary concern to both countries. The civil society dialogue took place to the context of a spike in TTP-led terrorist violence and the consequent bombing of the terrorist outfit's camps in eastern Afghanistan in December.

Special representative for Afghanistan Mohammad Sadiq attending the session promised to look into the visa-related complaints and issues encountered by common Afghans and also informed the audience of the multiple steps the government is taking to smoothen visa

processes and facilitate traders on both sides of the border. Only through mutual consultations can we overcome problems that are hindering peoples' and goods movement between the two countries, the delegates proposed.

The participants said one way of rubbing off bilateral acrimonies would be to involve a third party like China or Qatar adding that such a trilateral dialogue was helpful in various other instances too.

Dawn

January 31, 2025

Govt to engage Pak-Afghan tribesmen for peace in KP

Bureau Report

PESHAWAR: The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government will engage tribesmen living on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border to end militancy and ensure peace in the region.

Adviser to the KP chief minister on information Barrister Muhammad Ali Saif said the objective for talks with tribesmen on the other side of the border was to maintain peace in the province since Pakhtuns lived on both sides of the 2,650-kilometre-long border.

The provincial government was preparing terms of reference for holding talks with tribesmen, Mr Saif said on Thursday. The draft would be sent to the federal government for approval due to the "complex" nature of bilateral relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

"After the approval of TORs, a delegation comprising tribal, religious and political leader will be sent to Afghanistan to hold talks with the tribesmen living across the border," Mr Saif said in a statement issued by his office. "The delegations will be sent to Afghanistan after approval from the federal government and talks will only be held with other tribesmen, he added.

"There will never be any talks with militants." He said the negotiations between tribesmen would "provide a strong base" for ending the decades-long violence.

Mr Saif said maintaining law and order situation in the merged tribal districts was

the provincial government's responsibility. On January 13, the country's political leadership had asked the military's top brass to engage with Afghanistan to resolve internal security problems.

During the meeting with the chief of army staff, representatives of several political parties expressed concerns over the prevailing law and order situation in the province.

Sources said that political leadership asked the military top brass to engage with Afghanistan, but the army chief said Kabul did not listen to Islamabad. "They don't listen to us," sources quoted the army chief as telling those calling for formal or informal talks with the interim Afghan government. The political leaders then suggested "other ways" for engagement with the Afghan interim government to resolve contentious issues.

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Dawn

January 21, 2025

Iranian military official meets army chief, president

APP

ISLAMABAD: Major General Mohammad Bagheri, the chief of general staff (CGS) of the Iranian Armed Forces called on President Asif Ali Zardari and Chief of Army Staff General Syed Asim Munir, on Monday.

During the meeting with the president, both men highlighted the longstanding and fraternal relations between Pakistan and Iran, and emphasised the need to promote trade and economic relations for the mutual benefit of the two countries.

Terrorism was highlighted as a shared challenge, one that both countries needed to take effective and coordinated measures to address.

The Iranian armed forces chief also appreciated Pakistan's stance on Gaza and Lebanon, the Presidency said in a statement.

Visit to GHQ

Meanwhile, according to Inter-Services Public Relations Maj Gen Bagheri visited the General Headquarters (GHQ) in Rawalpindi where he met Chief of Army Staff General Syed Asim Munir.

During the meeting, both sides discussed matters related to the prevailing regional security environment and bilateral defence cooperation.

Upon his arrival at GHQ, Major General Mohammad Bagheri laid a floral wreath at the Yadgar-i-Shuhada to pay homage to Pakistan's martyrs.

He was warmly received, and a guard of honour was presented by a smartly turned-out contingent of the Pakistan Army.

Published in Dawn, January 21st, 2025

The News

January 23, 2025

Turkiye agrees to boost tech education

By Jamila Achakzai

Islamabad: Religious affairs and interfaith harmony minister Chaudhry Salik Hussain met with Ambassador of Turkiye Irfan Nazir Oglu here on Wednesday.

The two discussed proposals regarding religious harmony, respect for humanity, and providing more job opportunities for Pakistani workers in Turkiye. Minister Chaudhry Salik Hussain said that Pakistan and Turkiye were like one soul in two bodies, bound by the eternal ties of religion, history, and culture.

Turkish Ambassador Irfan Nazir Oglu expressed sorrow over the deaths of Pakistanis in the recent Morocco boat incident and reaffirmed his country's commitment to providing more job opportunities for skilled Pakistani workers. He also said that his country was working on increasing the supply of machinery to Pakistani industries and expanding technical training and educational projects in Pakistan, while several Turkish companies were successfully operating in the country.

Dawn

January 16, 2025

US sees Pakistan as 'partner', not ally

Anwar Iqbal

- White House official John Kirby stresses anti-terror partnership, says no formal treaty exists between two nations
- Trump's attorney general nominee says global cooperation key to counter Afghan-based terrorist groups

WASHINGTON: Pakistan has played a pivotal role in US counterterrorism efforts over the years, but it has never been a formal ally bound by treaty obligations, senior White House official John Kirby said.

This nuanced positioning underscores the delicate and complex nature of US-Pakistan relations, shaped by shared security concerns and divergent strategic priorities.

Meanwhile, Pam Bondi, President-elect Donald J. Trump's nominee for attorney general, emphasised during her confirmation hearing on Wednesday that global cooperation would be essential to counter the growing threat posed by Afghanistan-based terrorist groups like ISIS-K.

Her comments mirrored broader concerns in Washington about the evolving regional security dynamics and their implications for US-Pakistan relations.

At a Washington briefing, White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby candidly addressed the nature of the US-Pakistan relationship, highlighting the absence of any formal defence pact.

"Pakistan was never a technical ally of the United States. I mean, there was no treaty of alliance with Pakistan," he stated in response to a question.

Despite this, Kirby emphasised the long history of cooperation between the two countries, particularly in combating terrorism in the volatile Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. "Certainly, over many, many years in the last couple of decades, we partnered with Pakistan as appropriate to deal with the terrorist threat that still exists on that spine between Afghanistan and Pakistan," he explained.

In August last year, State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel reaffirmed the US's commitment to preventing groups like the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) from using Afghanistan as a base for launching terrorist attacks against neighbouring countries.

The next month, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller asserted that the US would continue to stand "shoulder to

shoulder with Pakistan in its fight against terrorism”.

A US State Department report released in December noted that Pakistan has made substantial progress in countering terrorist financing and addressing regional extremist networks.

At the same time, Kirby also acknowledged the human cost of terrorism in Pakistan, recognising that its citizens continue to suffer from cross-border violence.

“We recognise that Pakistan is still — still the Pakistani people fall victim to terrorist violence coming from across that border.

“And we have, and for as long as we’ll be in office here, remain committed to working with Pakistan to address those common threats and challenges. And that’s not — that hasn’t changed. It’s not going to change,” Kirby said during the briefing.

Separately, Bondi assured lawmakers that the Trump administration would remain committed to combating groups like ISIS-K, a stance consistent with prior administrations. When questioned by Senator Lindsey Graham about the United States’ position on ISIS, Bondi unequivocally stated, “Of course, we are at war with ISIS.” She further agreed with Graham’s assertion that ISIS is similarly at war with the US.

The senator also shifted the discussion towards ISIS-K, citing statements from US generals with experience in Afghanistan. These generals warned that ISIS-K has both the capability and intent to target the US and Western interests, noting its increased strength in Afghanistan following the US withdrawal in 2021. Bondi concurred, stating, “From everything I have heard and read, ISIS is one of the greatest threats.”

Bondi’s call for enhanced coordination among US agencies and global partners to combat ISIS-K underscores the complexity of maintaining effective counterterrorism efforts in a region marked by volatile geopolitics. Her remarks also reflect the intricate nature of US-Pakistan relations, shaped by mutual security concerns yet tempered by strategic divergences.

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January 29, 2025

Ex-diplomat Maleeha Lodhi calls for sweeping review of country’s foreign policy

Baqir Sajjad Syed

ISLAMABAD: Former diplomat Dr Maleeha Lodhi on Tuesday called for a sweeping review of the country’s foreign policy, emphasising the need for economic self-sufficiency, strategic partnerships and a focus on national priorities to break free from outdated approaches and dependency.

Dr Lodhi, who has served as ambassador to the United States, the United Kingdom and the United Nations, was speaking at the inaugural session of the Dialogue on Economy hosted by Pakistan Business Council.

A broad foreign policy review is essential and overdue given the geopolitical changes sweeping the world. The last such review was over 20 years ago, she said while also underscoring the importance of improving economy, extending diplomatic efforts beyond seeking financial assistance, and casting aside outdated approaches to elevate the country’s standing.

“All foreign policy begins at home. Weak economy dependent on external financial resources and internal political turmoil weigh heavily on the conduct of Pakistan’s diplomacy and stymies its ability to emerge as a Middle Power,” she maintained.

Expounding on the global landscape, Dr Lodhi said that Pakistan has to navigate its foreign policy challenges in a global geopolitical environment that is marked by five important features: “growing multipolarity but weakening multilateralism, US-China competition, rising East-West tensions, increasing importance of Middle Powers and with advance technology being of prime importance”.

This shifting global order, she stressed, demands a recalibration of Pakistan’s foreign policy priorities to better address emerging challenges and opportunities.

Dr Lodhi identified several priority areas for Pakistan’s foreign policy in the near future, which included managing relations with

China and the US, navigating an increasingly testy relationship with Afghanistan, addressing adversarial ties with India, balancing relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and maintaining positive engagement with the European Union.

China remains Pakistan's top foreign policy priority. While relations remain strong, a number of problems need to be resolved, she emphasised and listed Beijing's concerns vis-a-vis Pakistan as absence of political stability, security threats to its personnel working here, and Islamabad publicly asking for loan rollovers and debt relief from China. The durability of this partnership, she insisted, hinged on Pakistan's ability to address these pressing concerns.

Turning to Pakistan's ties with the United States, Dr Lodhi said: "With the US relations are at an inflection point since the American military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the big unknown is how relations with Trump's America will shape up especially as Pakistan's geopolitical importance has diminished for Washington after its Afghan exit."

She pointed out that a reset proved elusive during President Biden's tenure, as he showed little interest in Pakistan.

Islamabad seeks re-engagement with Washington to build a relationship based on Pakistan's intrinsic importance and not as a function of a third country. But this won't be easy as Pakistan cannot be part of any anti-China coalition, and Washington's strategic alignment with India presents another significant hurdle.

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China

China - Pakistan Relations

Global Times, China, January 16, 2025

Exclusive: Submarines from China-Pakistan cooperation project to join Pakistan Navy fleet soon, says Pakistani naval chief

Brotherly cooperation

By Liu Xuanzun and Guo Yuandan

In recent years, China and Pakistan have been enjoying high level, pragmatic naval

cooperation. In addition to joint exercises and training operations such as the Sea Guardian series bilateral exercises and AMAN series multinational exercises, the two countries have also carried out cooperation in military equipment such projects involving Type 054A/P guided missile frigates and Hangor-class submarines.

The Pakistan Navy is planning to host the AMAN-25 multinational exercise in early February in Pakistan's southern port city of Karachi. Ahead of the exercise, Admiral Naveed Ashraf, Chief of the Naval Staff of the Pakistan Navy, said in an exclusive interview with the Global Times that the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy has participated in all previous editions of AMAN exercises, and he expects that PLA Navy will participate in AMAN-25 and is looking forward to hosting PLA Navy leadership during the AMAN dialogue.

AMAN exercises deepen collaboration

Ashraf told the Global Times that the main objective of AMAN is to foster regional cooperation for the maintenance of good order at sea, improving interoperability, share experiences, understand each other, and exhibit united resolve against terrorism and organized crimes in the maritime domain.

He said that the Pakistan Navy is fully prepared and geared up to conduct AMAN-25 with enhanced participation of friendly countries in a professional and befitting manner.

It is worth noting that the previous edition of the exercise held in February 2023, which witnessed the participation from 50 countries across the globe. "Keeping the same spirit, we are hopeful that this edition will also mark a distinctive chapter in history of AMAN exercises with enhanced participation of friendly countries," Ashraf said. Ashraf revealed that the maiden AMAN Dialogue will be held in tandem with AMAN-25. "The AMAN Dialogue aims to promote understanding in maritime security issues, finding ways to enhance cooperation at sea, and discussing security linked to the blue economy."

"We have been honored by the regular participation of PLA Navy in all previous editions of AMAN exercises," Ashraf said, noting that this has added highlights to the exercise and is a reflection of the two countries' common resolve to come together for peace and security in the region. "Similarly, we expect that the PLA Navy will actively participate in AMAN-25 also with suitable representation. As I have mentioned earlier as well, the maiden AMAN Dialogue will also be conducted concurrently with Exercise AMAN. So, we are also looking forward to hosting PLA Navy leadership during the dialogue," he said. Official Chinese media releases previously reported that the PLA Navy flotilla's participation in the AMAN exercises further promoted the PLA Navy's maritime exchanges and cooperation with other participating navies, showing the determination to jointly safeguard maritime security, and boosted the capability in jointly dealing with maritime security threats.

Fruitful naval cooperation

Aside from the AMAN series exercises hosted by the Pakistan Navy, China and Pakistan also regularly hold the Sea Guardian bilateral naval drills. The China-Pakistan Sea Guardian-3 maritime joint exercise was held in the waters and airspace of the northern Arabian Sea from November 11 to 17, 2023. In 2020 and 2022, the two countries held the Sea Guardian 2020 and Sea Guardian-2 joint exercises in northern Arabian Sea waters and waters and airspace near Shanghai respectively. The Sea Guardian joint exercises aim to enhance security cooperation between the two sides, consolidate all-weather strategic cooperative partnership, and boost the level of combat-oriented training of the two militaries.

Speaking about the achievements the two sides have made from the Sea Guardian series drills, Ashraf said that Pakistan Navy-PLA Navy relations are a reflection of Pakistan-China strategic ties, which includes participation in bilateral and multilateral exercises. In this regard, the Sea Guardian series of exercises amply fulfil the objectives

of fostering interoperability and sharing professional experiences to deal with contemporary traditional and non-traditional threats in the Indian Ocean region. Ashraf introduced the Sea Guardian-3 exercise in detail. He said that the Pakistan Navy units along with PLA Navy frigates, submarine, and aviation units participated in the exercise. The evolution at sea included joint maneuvers, anti-surface, anti-air, and anti-submarine drills. They "provided a useful opportunity to strengthen bilateral naval cooperation and enhance interoperability between two navies. Moreover, we expect that scope of the exercise will gradually increase in coming editions." In addition, as an important part of the China-Pakistan naval cooperation, all four Type 054A/P frigates built by China have been delivered to the Pakistan Navy. In May 2023, two Type 054A/P frigates built by China for the Pakistan Navy were delivered, marking that all four Type 054A/Ps ordered by the Pakistan Navy have been commissioned. The Type 054A/P is one of the latest multi-role frigates of Chinese origin, equipped with the state-of-the-art weapons and sensors that include CM-302 surface-to-surface missiles and LY-80 surface-to-air missiles, as well as an Advanced Anti-Submarine Warfare suite and Combat Management System, enabling ships of this class to operate under multi-threat scenarios.

Ashraf spoke highly of these four ships. He said that the acquisition of Type 054 A/P is a symbol of enduring friendship and historical affinity between Pakistan and China. Type 054 A/P ships are equipped to operate under multi-threat scenarios and have been fully integrated into Pakistan Navy operations. "The induction of Type 054 A/P frigates in the Pakistan Navy Fleet has bolstered our war fighting capabilities, enhanced operational flexibility, and these ships will remain the mainstay of Pakistan Navy Fleet in coming years."

Moreover, according to a photo provided by the Pakistan Navy, the PNS *Zulfiquar*, an F-22P guided missile frigate China built for the Pakistan Navy, conducted Operation

Himalayan Spirit in the North Arabian Sea in October 2024. The Pakistan Navy seized 1.3 tons of narcotics during the operation. Other than cooperation in terms of surface vessels, another key project in the China-Pakistan naval cooperation is the joint construction of eight Hangor-class submarines. This type of submarine is equipped with the latest weapons and sensors. With air independent propulsion (AIP) system onboard, the submarine has significantly enhanced submerged endurance capabilities.

According to open reports, Pakistan signed a contract with China to procure eight Hangor-class conventional submarines in 2015, with the first four to be constructed by China and the other four to be assembled by Pakistan, so as to improve Pakistan's technical capabilities. The plan is that Pakistan will obtain the eight advanced submarines between 2022 and 2028. In December 2021, the fifth Hangor-class conventional submarine, also the first one built in Pakistan, officially received a steel cutting ceremony. It marked Pakistan's gaining of the building technology of the world's top-class modern submarine.

Open reports also showed that the first Hangor-class conventional submarine was launched in China in April 2024. In response to the questions "When is the first boat scheduled to enter service, and how is the progress for the four boats being built in Pakistan," Ashraf said that the Hangor-class submarines will significantly enhance Pakistan's naval capabilities. These submarines will provide improved stealth, maneuverability and firepower, allowing our Navy to execute a wide range of operations effectively. "The project is proceeding as per the timeline. We expect that these submarines will join the Pakistan Navy fleet very soon," Ashraf said.

New fields to be explored

Talking about the future of Pakistan-China naval cooperation, Ashraf said that the Pakistan Navy and the PLA Navy enjoys a historically strong deep-rooted bilateral relationship. Close collaboration between the

two navies exists across multiple domains including acquisition of platforms, equipment, bilateral exercises, technical cooperation, Navy-to-Navy (N2N) Expert Level Staff Talks, training collaboration, exchange visits, and port calls.

According to the admiral, the prospects for future cooperation between the Pakistani and Chinese navies are very broad. "I believe that there is no shortage of avenues for the broadening of our mutual engagements and we are looking forward to establishing long term collaboration in the domains of artificial intelligence, robotics, cyber, and space." According to a photo provided by the Pakistan Navy, Ashraf visited a shipyard in Wuhan, Central China's Hubei Province in April 2024 and met with the shipyard's representatives during the launching ceremony of the first Hangor-class submarine of the Pakistan Navy. When asked about his visit to China in April 2024, Ashraf said that he interacted with the PLA Navy leadership, and has found PLA Navy leadership to be highly professional and cordial. "I have no doubt that the PLA Navy is on the way to becoming one of the finest and leading navies in days to come. Moreover, I also believe that with the focused approach of the leadership on both sides, our relations will continue to expand further in times to come."

India is continuously expanding and modernizing its naval fleet and also commissioned its first domestically built aircraft carrier in 2022. In response to the questions, "How has the naval build up might affect regional maritime balance of power, and does the Pakistan Navy plan to eventually operate an aircraft carrier as well," Ashraf said that the Pakistan Navy is a balanced force, which is capable of responding to a full spectrum of conflicts and is optimized to the evolving character of warfare, rehearsed to perform in time-sensitive situations and remains combat ready. Manned by competent human resources, integrated through network-centric warfare, and with a right balance between manned and unmanned assets, our fleet is capable of dealing with

diverse maritime challenges. "While India continues to build its navy, we are not in an arms race. However, we maintain an adequate capacity to accomplish assigned tasks effectively," Ashraf stressed.

People's Daily, China, January 24, 2025

CPEC symbolizes Pakistan-China friendship, shared vision: minister

ISLAMABAD, Jan. 23 (Xinhua) -- Pakistan's Minister for Planning, Development and Special Initiatives Ahsan Iqbal said that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a testament to the enduring friendship and shared vision nurtured by Pakistan and China over decades.

Speaking at a ceremony here on Wednesday to celebrate the forthcoming Chinese New Year and to recognize the contributions of 30 outstanding Chinese staff working on CPEC projects in Pakistan, Iqbal said that CPEC represents a roadmap for sustainable development, mutual growth, and prosperity, not only for the two nations but for the entire region.

Highlighting the contributions of the Chinese staff, Iqbal praised their dedication, technical expertise, and relentless hard work, which have been instrumental in transforming ambitious projects into tangible realities.

"From energy generation and infrastructure development to logistics and technology, your efforts have been crucial in overcoming challenges and ensuring the successful completion of numerous landmark initiatives," he said.

Launched in 2013, CPEC, a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative, connects Gwadar Port in Pakistan with Kashgar in northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. While the first phase focused on energy, transport, and industrial cooperation, the second phase expands into areas such as agriculture and livelihoods.

Discussing the second phase, Iqbal noted that it will unlock immense opportunities, modernize agriculture, digitize industries, drive economic diversification, create millions of jobs, and enhance Pakistan's global competitiveness.

Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan Jiang Zaidong also addressed the gathering, expressing confidence in Pakistan's economic growth under the government's leadership and with the collective efforts of its people.

"The cooperation and partnership between China and Pakistan will continue to progress steadily, fostering lasting development," he added.

The event featured vibrant traditional dances by both Chinese and Pakistani performers, showcasing the rich cultural heritage of the two nations. The audience showed keen interest in the performances and expressed gratitude to China for its pivotal role in strengthening Pakistan-China relations. A special recognition segment was held during the ceremony to honor the best-performing Chinese companies involved in CPEC projects. Certificates of excellence and souvenirs were presented to acknowledge their outstanding contributions.

China – India Relations

People's Daily, China, January 28, 2025

Chinese FM calls on China, India to foster cooperation, not division

BEIJING, Jan. 27 (Xinhua) -- China and India should strive for mutual understanding, support and collaboration, rather than fostering suspicion, alienation and consuming each other, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said Monday.

Wang, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, made the remarks during a meeting with India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri in Beijing.

Noting that since the leaders of the two countries met in Kazan last year, the two sides have earnestly implemented the important consensus reached by the leaders, carried out active interactions at all levels, and accelerated the process of improving China-India relations, Wang said both sides should seize the opportunity to meet each other halfway and explore more substantive measures.

The improvement and development of China-Indian relations are fully in line with the fundamental interests of the two countries

and peoples, and are conducive to safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of the Global South countries and contributing to the peace, stability, development and prosperity of Asia and the world, Wang added.

Misri said that India and China have carried out a series of useful dialogues and communications in accordance with the consensus reached by the leaders of the two countries in Kazan, properly managed and resolved differences, and promoted the resumption of pragmatic cooperation in various fields.

India is willing to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with China, and will fully support China's work as the presidency of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Misri added.

Global Times, China, January 28, 2025

China, India agree to strengthen strategic communication, enhance mutual political trust, resume direct flights: FM

By Yang Sheng

China and India have recently reached multiple consensus, including India expressing full support for China's rotating presidency of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and both sides agreeing to resume direct flights between the Chinese mainland and India, and facilitating personnel exchange, according to the Chinese Foreign Ministry on Tuesday. Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong and Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri held the China-India Vice Foreign Minister-Foreign Secretary Dialogue in Beijing on Monday. The meeting focused on pushing forward the implementation of the important consensus reached by the leaders of the two countries during the meeting in Kazan and discussing the measures for the improvement and development of China-India relations, according to a release by the Chinese Foreign Ministry on Tuesday. The two sides reached consensus on multiple issues. Among these consensus, the Indian side will extend full support for Chinese presidency of the Shanghai Cooperation

Organization, and will actively participate in the meetings under the SCO umbrella. The two sides agreed to carry out active interactions at all levels on bilateral and multilateral occasions, strengthen strategic communication, and enhance mutual political trust, according to the release. The two sides agreed to jointly commemorate the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and India in 2025, and carry out media and think tank exchanges, Track II dialogues and other people-to-people exchanges, it read. Hu Zhiyong, a professor from Zhejiang International Studies University and also research fellow at the Institute of International Relations at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, told the Global Times that the consensus reached by both sides showed that, at this moment, both sides have common interests to stabilize bilateral ties and remove obstacles for further cooperation, as there will be uncertainties and challenges in 2025 that will require both sides to work together. "Although the two countries had frictions and tensions in different fields in the past few years and New Delhi has imposed many sanctions or strict measures to target some Chinese firms that are operating in India, the data about trade between the two countries prove that decouple from China is unfeasible, and Indian decision-makers have realized that the confrontation approach against China is wrong and unsustainable," Hu noted. The Indian media Economic Times reported on January 15 that "India is heavily reliant on Chinese imports, with the country's trade deficit surging to \$85.1 billion in fiscal year 2024. China was India's top import source with \$65.89 billion, a 9.8 per cent year-on-year increase between April-October, 2024." However, India's exports to China "dipped by 9.37 per cent to \$8 billion in the same period last fiscal," according to India's Commerce Ministry data. According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, at the meeting on Monday, the two sides agreed to resume direct flights between Chinese mainland and India, support the competent

authorities of the two countries to coordinate and push it forward, and take measures to facilitate personnel flows and exchanges of resident journalists. The two sides agreed to resume the Indian pilgrims' visit to Kailash Mansarovar in Xizang Autonomous Region, China in 2025, and will discuss relevant arrangements as soon as possible. The two sides also agreed to advance trans-border river cooperation, and maintain communication on holding a new round of meeting of the China-India Expert Level Mechanism on Trans-border Rivers at an early date, according to the release. Hu said the obstacles of people-to-people exchange were unilaterally not set by China, and now it's the right decision for India to remove them and correct this mistake. Li Zishuo, a Chinese student who is studying in Jawaharlal Nehru University of India, told the Global Times that since late 2024, after the meeting between top leaders of the two countries on the sidelines of the 16th BRICS Summit in last October, the bilateral ties and people-to-people exchange have recovered gradually.

"Chinese students in India or those who plan to come to India find that it's easier for them to get Indian visa now. In the past, they were troubled by groundless reasons such as 'national security concern' of the Indian side," Li said. Indian universities who welcome Chinese students are also becoming more confident on the visa issue, Li said. "The number of new exchange students from China has also increased, and the application for student visa is also easier to get passed. But more efforts are needed, and we are being cautious to observe what will happen in 2025." Lin Minwang, a professor at the Institute of International Studies at Fudan University, told the Global Times on Tuesday given the geopolitical landscape and other global uncertainties, India has realized that it has to expedite efforts to improve relations with China. Thus, barring unexpected circumstances, the broader trend of stabilizing China-India relations by 2025 is

likely to be stabilized and proceed smoothly. During the dialogue, the Chinese side stressed that both sides should view and handle China-India relations on the basis of the fundamental interests of the two countries and two peoples and from a strategic height and long-term perspective, actively advance exchanges and practical cooperation with a candid and constructive attitude, guide the public opinion in a positive way, enhance mutual trust, and properly handle differences, so as to promote the development of China-India relations along the sound and stable track.

The two sides also had a candid and in-depth exchange of views on issues of respective concern, according to the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

Other Important Developments

China Daily, China, January 23, 2025

Nepal-China ties rooted in history

By Bharat Khanal

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Nepal and China, although civilizational links between the two sides can be traced to early 5th Century AD. Since establishing diplomatic ties on Aug 1, 1955, Nepal and China have enjoyed cordial, cooperative and win-win relations, not least because the two countries are linked by history, geography and mutual interest.

The current state of bilateral relations, based on mutual understanding, shared interests, mutual support and appreciation of each other's concerns and sensitivities, is amiable and economically beneficial, facilitating the further deepening of ties.

Since the Nepal-China relationship has been guided by the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (Panchsheel), and amity and good neighborliness, the two countries' peoples harbor nothing but goodwill and love toward each other.

Influenced by the teachings of the Buddha, the artworks of Araniko, the translations of monk Buddhahadra, and the cultural contributions of Nepalese Princess Bhrikuti (Khrirdzun) who brought the Sutra of the White Lotus to Tibet, bilateral relations have

helped strengthen the two countries' cultural and spiritual connection. And since opening its embassy in Kathmandu in July 1960 (with Nepal opening its embassy in Beijing in September 1961), China has remained a strong development partner of Nepal, supporting the latter's overall development endeavor.

The two countries share a 1,414-kilometer-long border, with the majestic and mighty Himalayas connecting them. People-to-people relations between the two countries are strong, close and deep-rooted. The people of Nepal will always remember China's support during the global public health crisis and in the aftermath of the April 15, 2015, earthquake China helped the country carry out rescue and relief operations.

China has always respected Nepal's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence. Similarly, Nepal remains committed to the one-China principle.

Regular exchange of high-level visits between the two countries has produced positive results, significantly contributing to the consolidation of friendly bilateral relations.

From Dec 2 to 5, 2024, Nepalese Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli paid an official visit to China, during which Nepal joined the "Group of Friends" of China's Global Development Initiative and signed the "Framework for Belt and Road Cooperation", identifying key projects. The two sides, however, need to expedite the implementation of projects.

Also, Nepalese President Bidya Devi Bhandari paid a state visit to China in 2019, during which the two heads of state witnessed the signing of seven different agreements, including the "Protocol on Implementing Agreement on Transit and Transport".

The transport cooperation, trade facilitation, establishment of cross-border economic zones, and cooperation on trade infrastructure development will greatly benefit the people of both countries.

China's remarkable economic development is astonishing and inspiring. As a close neighbor and trusted partner, Nepal wants to deepen its economic cooperation with China, particularly in the trade, investment,

technology transfer and tourism fields, in order to benefit from China's remarkable development.

Nepal hopes to get a higher level of financial and technical support from China in priority development areas such as connectivity, infrastructure development, healthcare, hydropower and agriculture. In this regard, developing the trans-Himalayan multi-dimensional connectivity network, as agreed by both sides, will benefit not just Nepal but China as well. The immediate and urgent need of Nepal is to "materialize" cross-border connectivity through improved roads on both sides of the border. Later, this multi-dimensional connectivity network can be expanded to include railways, transmission lines and information channels.

Nepal also needs increased air connectivity between the major cities of the two countries, including direct and regular flights to and from the Pokhara International Airport and Gautam Buddha International Airport in Siddharthanagar to boost its tourism sector and enhance connectivity.

Moreover, Nepal hopes to get China's support in transforming its agricultural sector through the increased use of modern technology; and hopefully, the modernization of Nepal's agricultural sector will stem the flow of Nepalese migrants to other countries. Considering the huge trade gap between the two sides, Nepal needs Chinese knowledge, experience and technology to increase its productive capacity so that it can boost its exports. It also wants to deepen cooperation with China on information technology, artificial intelligence and cybersecurity.

In fact, Nepal also requires huge amounts of investment to transform its economy, achieve its development goals, and meet its requirements, for which Nepal has been encouraging Chinese people and businesses to invest in Nepal.

The two neighbors also have the potential to promote different types of tourism, including sports tourism and adventure tourism. That Nepal and China jointly announced the new height of Mount Qomolangma (8,848.86 meters) at a special ceremony in Kathmandu

in December 2020, shows they have enough room to expand cooperation in adventure sports.

Nepal will graduate from the group of least-developed countries by 2026, and China's support will be of great help to make the "graduation" process smooth. Similarly, Chinese expertise in urban infrastructure, urban transportation and healthcare development can greatly benefit Nepal. The two sides can also collaborate on environmental protection and climate change mitigation.

Nepal is a staunch advocate of a just, equitable, inclusive and rules-based world order, and commends China's strong and important role in defending and supporting the cause and interests of developing, and less- and least-developed countries at multilateral forums.

To take Nepal-China relations to newer heights and ensure the fruits of closer ties benefit the two peoples, both countries have to make extra efforts.

The author is consul general of Nepal in Guangzhou.

People's Daily, China, January 16, 2025

Xi calls for fostering new highlights in China-Sri Lanka cooperation

BEIJING, Jan. 15 (Xinhua) -- China will actively support Sri Lanka in focusing on economic development and the two countries should jointly foster new highlights in high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, as well as cooperation in modern agriculture, digital economy and marine economy, Chinese President Xi Jinping said here Wednesday.

China's efforts in further deepening reform comprehensively to advance Chinese modernization will bring new opportunities for Sri Lanka's development, Xi said when holding talks with Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Disanayake, who is in China for a state visit.

Noting that China and Sri Lanka enjoy a traditional friendship, Xi said bilateral relations have maintained healthy and stable development over the past 68 years, setting an example of friendly coexistence and

mutually beneficial cooperation between different countries.

With joint efforts, China and Sri Lanka have continuously promoted strategic cooperative partnership featuring mutual assistance and ever-lasting friendship. High-quality Belt and Road cooperation and cooperation in various fields have achieved fruitful results, bringing tangible benefits to the two peoples, Xi said.

The two countries should have a keen grasp of bilateral relations from a strategic perspective and jointly build a China-Sri Lanka community with a shared future, he said.

Noting that China takes Sri Lanka as a priority in its neighborhood diplomacy, Xi said that the country will continue to support Sri Lanka in maintaining its national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

China supports Sri Lanka in exploring a development path suitable for its national conditions, and is willing to deepen political mutual trust, exchange governance experience, and enhance dialogue and communication between various departments of the two countries, Xi said.

China is willing to strengthen coordination and cooperation with Sri Lanka within multilateral mechanisms such as the United Nations to jointly address major issues concerning the whole of mankind, including climate change, Xi said.

He called for pooling the joint efforts of the Global South for solidarity and development, contributing to regional peace, stability and prosperity.

Noting that Sri Lanka admires China's great development achievements in economy, science and technology, and infrastructure, Disanayake said China has always been a reliable friend and partner of Sri Lanka, and Sri Lanka attaches great importance to its relations with China.

Sri Lanka firmly abides by the one-China principle, and appreciates China's invaluable support in safeguarding Sri Lanka's independence, sovereignty and legitimate rights and interests, Disanayake said.

Sri Lanka is committed to enhancing regional connectivity through the Belt and Road

cooperation, and welcomes more Chinese enterprises to invest and do business in the country, Dissanayake said, adding that Sri Lanka is willing to strengthen cooperation with China in infrastructure, energy, agriculture, finance, poverty reduction, digital transformation, tourism, marine industry and personnel training.

China plays a significant leading role in the Global South, as well as a constructive role in international affairs, he added. The Sri Lankan side is willing to continue strengthening coordination and mutual support with China on multilateral occasions to safeguard common interests, said the president.

Following the talks, the two heads of state jointly witnessed the signing of several bilateral cooperation documents, in such areas as Belt and Road cooperation, agricultural products, social welfare, and news and broadcasting.

Global Times, China, January 24, 2025

China shocked about killing of Chinese mine worker, urges Afghanistan to bring perpetrators to justice: FM spokesperson

By Global Times

China is deeply shocked at the attack and strongly condemns the killing of a Chinese mine worker who had been murdered in Afghanistan's northern Takhar province, spokesperson of China's Foreign Ministry Mao Ning said on Thursday. China has lodged serious protests to Afghanistan right after the attack, and asked the country to conduct thorough investigations into the attack, and bring the perpetrators to justice, she said. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning made the remarks while answering a question about the Chinese mine worker who had reportedly been killed in Afghanistan, and that the Islamic State's regional chapter reportedly had claimed responsibility for the attack, according to a monitoring group called "SITE." In response, Mao said at the Thursday press brief that China is deeply shocked at the attack and strongly condemns it. We mourn the death of the victim, she said. China firmly opposes all forms of terrorism

and calls for resolute and strong efforts in cracking down on ISIS, the ETIM and other terrorist organizations designated by the UN Security Council with zero tolerance. China will closely follow the security situation in Afghanistan and continue supporting Afghanistan in combating all forms of terrorism and violence, and upholding national security and stability, said Mao. We urge the Afghan interim government to take resolute and effective measures to ensure the safety and security of Chinese citizens, institutions and projects in Afghanistan, the spokesperson said.

People's Daily, China, January 16, 2025

Strengthening China-U.S. people-to-people exchanges enjoys public support: FM spokesperson

BEIJING, Jan. 15 (Xinhua) -- Strengthening people-to-people and cultural exchanges between China and the United States enjoys public support and conforms to popular will, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun said Wednesday.

Guo made the remarks at a daily news briefing when asked to comment on a video of the One Voice Children's Choir from the United States singing a Chinese song in Beijing that went viral on social media. In November 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced in San Francisco an initiative to invite 50,000 young Americans to China for exchange and study programs over a five-year period. Guo said that under the initiative, more than 16,000 young people from the United States came to China for exchange and study in 2024, making new friends, learning the Chinese language, experiencing Chinese culture and exploring modern China.

Noting that amity between people holds the key to sound relations between countries, Guo said it is hoped that more envoys of the new generation will promote friendship between the two countries and write a new chapter in the stable, healthy and sustainable development of China-U.S. relations.

Internal Affairs

Selections from Regional Press

India

Kashmir Affairs

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 20, 2025

Shifting Yasin Maliks terror trial from Jammu to Delhi: SC to take up CBIs plea on Jan 20

Tribune News ServiceThe Supreme Court will on Monday take up the CBI's petition challenging a Jammu court's order for the physical production of Kashmiri separatist leader and JKLF chief Yasin Malik to face trial in a case related to the murder of 4 Indian Air Force (IAF) personnel in 1989.

The matter is listed before a Bench led by Justice Abhay S Oka which had on December 18 asked six co-accused to respond to the CBI's plea.

"All the accused have to be heard if the trial is to be transferred," the Bench had said after it was told that one of the 10 accused has died while others have not filed their replies.

The CBI has challenged a Jammu court's order for the physical production of Malik to face trial in the case. Currently lodged in Tihar Jail in Delhi, Malik insisted on being physically present in Jammu to cross-examine witnesses.

The Jammu Special Court has sought Malik's appearance for cross-examination of witnesses in two cases - the killing of four IAF personnel and abduction of Rubaiya Sayeed, daughter of late Mufti Muhammad Sayeed -- a former Chief Minister of erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir -- in 1989.

The top court had issued notice on the CBI's petition in April 2023 and stayed the Jammu court's order.

Noting that even 26/11 Mumbai terror attack case accused Ajmal Kasab was given fair trial in India, the Bench had on November 21 suggested setting up a court in jail to cross-examine Malik.

Describing him as "just not another terrorist", Solicitor General Tushar Mehta had last month said, "We do not want to take him to Jammu and Kashmir because of the offence in which he has been convicted...The

Government cannot go by the book in such cases."

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 21, 2025

SC asks J-K HC to arrange video conferencing facility for Yasin Malik trial

Satya Prakash

The Supreme Court on Monday directed the Jammu and Kashmir High Court Registrar General to ensure proper video conferencing facilities at a Jammu court for the trial of separatist leader Yasin Malik and others in the 1989 Rubaiya Sayeed kidnapping and the murder of four Indian Air Force personnel in the same year.

"We direct the Registrar General of the High Court of Jammu and Kashmir to look into what is stated and take immediate steps for installing a proper system through which hearings can be conducted by using video medium or video conference. The system should be such that there can be effective cross-examination by using the system," a Bench led by Justice AS Oka said.

The Bench also directed the Delhi High Court Registrar General to ensure proper video conferencing facilities at Tihar Jail where Malik is currently lodged in a terror financing case. Seeking status reports from both the high courts by February 18, the Bench posted the matter for further hearing on February 21.

As other accused objected to the transfer of the trial to Tihar, saying that it was difficult for them to travel to Delhi, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta said they were "acting in tandem" with Yasin Malik.

While Malik was insisting on going to Jammu and the other accused were refusing to come to Delhi, Mehta pointed out.

Contending that a functional court exists within Tihar Jail, equipped with video-conferencing facilities, the CBI said it was unnecessary to physically transport Malik to Jammu for the trial.

The CBI has moved the top court against a Jammu court's order for the physical production of Malik to face trial in the case.

Currently lodged in Tihar Jail in Delhi, Malik insisted on being physically present in Jammu to cross-examine witnesses.

The Jammu Special Court has sought Malik's appearance for cross-examination of witnesses in two cases—the killing of four IAF personnel and the abduction of Rubaiya Sayeed, daughter of former CM Mufti Muhammad Sayeed.

The top court had issued notice on the CBI's petition dated April 2023 and stayed the Jammu court's order.

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Describing him as “just not another terrorist,” Solicitor General Tushar Mehta had last month said, “We do not want to take him to Jammu and Kashmir because of the offence in which he has been convicted... The government cannot go by the book in such cases.”

On December 18, the top court had asked six co-accused in the case to respond to the CBI's plea. “All the accused have to be heard if the trial is to be transferred,” the Bench had said after it was told that one of the 10 accused has died while others have not filed their replies.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 21, 2025

Soldier killed in Sopore gunfight, search op on

Adil Akhzer

A soldier was killed in an overnight encounter in north Kashmir's Sopore, officials said on Monday. The soldier, identified as Pangala Kartheek, was injured in the exchange of fire with terrorists in the Zaloora Gujjarpati area of Sopore and died as he was being evacuated, they said.

Following a tip-off, the security forces busted a hideout of terrorists in the area. A cordon and search operation was launched by a joint team of the police and Army personnel.

Srinagar-based 15 Corps said a suspicious activity was observed by the troops. “On being challenged, terrorists opened

indiscriminate fire. Our troops effectively retaliated. The operation is still in progress,” the Army said.

Police sources told The Tribune that one jawan was killed after he suffered injuries in a grenade attack during the encounter. Paying tributes to the slain soldier, the Army, in a post on X, said, “All ranks of the Chinara Corps salute the supreme sacrifice of braveheart Pangala Kartheek, who laid down his life in the line of duty.”

The sources said it was believed that two militants were trapped in the area.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 26, 2025

Terrorists fire at Army camp in J&K's Kathua district; search operation on IANS

A massive search operation was started on Saturday after terrorists fired at an Army camp in Jammu and Kashmir's Kathua district.

Defence Ministry sources said that suspicious movement was noticed in Bhatodi area of Kathua late on Friday evening.

“A gunfight took place after the Army fired in Bhatodi area of Kathua district following suspicious movement in the area.

“A massive search operation has been launched in the area now”, sources said.

Reports received from the area said that the security forces have launched an extensive search operation in Kathua district after the Army camp was fired upon by terrorists late on Friday night.

“Terrorists opened fire at the Army camp located in Bhatodi village of Billawar tehsil in Kathua district after which soldiers fired in retaliation and the ultras fled. The area has been cordoned off and an intense search operation has been launched to hunt for the terrorists”, reports reaching here from the area said.

The incident has occurred a day before the country's Republic Day celebrations for which heightened security has been put in place across J&K.

The main Republic Day function will take place at the Maulana Azad Memorial Stadium in Jammu.

Lieutenant Governor, Manoj Sinha will hoist the national flag and take salute at the parade tomorrow while Chief Minister, Omar Abdullah will be the chief guest.

In the Valley, the divisional level function and parade will be held at the Bakshi Stadium in Srinagar where Deputy Chief Minister, Surinder Choudhary will preside.

Extraordinary security has been put in place in Jammu and Srinagar cities to secure the venues of the main Republic Day flag hoisting and parades.

All high-rise buildings adjacent to Maulana Azad Stadium in Jammu and Bakshi Stadium in Srinagar have been taken over by sharpshooters of the security forces.

Human surveillance multiplied with electronic and drone surveillance is in place to ensure that the anti-nationals are prevented from disrupting the Republic Day celebrations.

Political Developments

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 23, 2025

Atishi responds to claims that Arvind Kejriwal can't become Delhi CM | HT interview

HT News Desk

Delhi CM Atishi, in an exclusive interview with Hindustan Times, said the legality of the matter "is absolutely clear".

Delhi chief minister Atishi has dismissed claims suggesting that Aam Aadmi Party boss Arvind Kejriwal cannot become CM after the February 5 assembly election.

In an exclusive interview with Hindustan Times, Atishi, AAP candidate from Kalkaji, said the legality of the matter "is absolutely clear".

"Legally, it's very clear that anyone who can contest elections is eligible to become the CM. So, the legality of this is absolutely clear," Atishi said in the interview.

Arvind Kejriwal resigned as Delhi chief minister in September last year, two days after he was released on bail in the alleged liquor scam case. He had vowed to return to the post only after the assembly election when the people of Delhi gave him "certificate of honesty".

While the AAP has already declared Arvind Kejriwal as their CM candidate if they return to power next month, both the BJP and Congress are yet to make any such announcement.

Atishi says AAP has always worked under conditions imposed by Centre

Speaking on the possibility of Arvind Kejriwal not becoming the CM due to any conditions imposed in his bail from the Supreme Court, Atishi said her party has always worked under 'imposed conditions.' "The AAP has always run its government in the last 10 years under some condition or the other imposed on it. We came to power in Delhi in February 2015. In May 2015, MHA issued a notification illegally taking away all powers of the Delhi government. We fought that for eight years in court and were proved right. Within eight days, they got an ordinance that again took away all our powers," the Delhi CM told HT.

Atishi said the AAP and Kejriwal have run a successful pro-people government despite all the 'conditions'. So, according to her, having conditions imposed upon them wasn't anything new.

The Delhi assembly poll is scheduled for February 5 in a single phase, while the counting of the votes will be done on February 8.

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 30, 2025

Delhi polls: Cong pledges permanent govt jobs, 33% women quota, caste census

Snehil Sinha

The Congress on Wednesday promised 33% job reservation for women, 700 free public libraries, 10 new hospitals, 24-hour dispensaries in every ward, a caste census and end contractual government jobs as it released its manifesto ahead of the February 5 Delhi assembly elections.

It reiterated five poll guarantees including 300 free units of power, LPG cylinders for ₹500 each to domestic consumers along with ration kits, ₹2,500 to women under Pyari Didi Yojna, ₹25 lakh health insurance for every resident, and ₹8,500 monthly to educated unemployed youths.

The manifesto has 22 subheads related to different groups and issues including youth, women, urban poor, minorities, urban villages, working professionals, ex-servicemen, and LGBTQIA+ along with health, education, transport, industries, right to housing, and pollution.

Congress leader Jairam Ramesh, who was among those present at the manifesto launch, said every party has started using the word “guarantee”. He said that Congress used the term first when the Manmohan Singh government introduced the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. “We delivered every time we promised or guaranteed something.”

Ramesh said they discussed the implementation of 7,000 new CNG buses, the Yamuna Action Plan, and the Delhi Metro at the first meeting when Sheila Dikshit became the chief minister in 1998. “...There is no dearth of money for those who want to work for the people... If the intentions are good, there are many sources of revenue,” said Ramesh. He added that Delhi needs ease of breathing and not ease of doing business or ease of hollow promises.

Delhi Congress chief Devender Yadav said Congress would focus on employment by reinstating 15,000 civil defence volunteers and making jobs of sanitation workers permanent. “We will ensure that after 2025, all contractual positions are ended and made permanent. Once we come to power, we will also check all the vacant positions in all departments and get them filled, whether of teachers, doctors, engineers...”

The manifesto promised a “shagan” of ₹1.1 lakh for the weddings of disadvantaged widows, their daughters, and orphaned women. It pledged widowed women with disabilities, transgender people, and destitute ₹5,000 monthly pension. The Congress promised 100 Indira canteens for nutritious food for ₹5. The street vendor policy the party introduced earlier will also be revived.

The Congress promised 15% reservation in government contracts for the Scheduled Castes and other marginalised communities and the establishment of a Jain Welfare

Board. It pledged to free Char Dham Yatra for Dalits.

Yadav questioned the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) claims about its education model. He said the enrollment in government schools has reduced and children are failing in the name of good results. “We feel Delhi needs a new education policy to improve the pass percentage of students. We have planned 700 free public libraries, 10 in every assembly constituency where students can go and study late evening as at many homes, it is difficult to get the space and environment to focus,” Yadav said. He added Congress would build 10 new super specialty hospitals in the next five years and add 1,500 new dispensaries.

Yadav called water supply a huge problem in Delhi. “...about 56% [of water] is wasted due to leakage and other issues. We will ensure that all residents have 24x7 piped clean drinking water, which will need a large infrastructure change. It is possible if we reduce wastage and ensure all leaks and pilferage by the water tanker mafia is ended,” said Yadav.

The Congress manifesto promised to reinstate the Yamuna Welfare Board, establish smart villages, increase circle rates, ensure the handover of the 55,000 in-situ rehabilitation flats to slum dwellers, ownership in unauthorised colonies, improve public transport with a special focus on last-mile connectivity and revival of monorail project, ensure relaxation in land pooling norms among others.

The Congress earlier promised a separate ministry for the Purvanchalis with dedicated funds and a sub-plan. The manifesto reiterated the promise with a separate sub-section for the Purvanchalis for the first time. Chaudhari Anil Kumar, the Congress’s Patparganj candidate who headed the manifesto committee, said that 22 sub-committees were formed before drafting the promises. He added about 10-12 members each spoke to different groups of people and engaged with experts. “We got multiple suggestions from that campaign directly from the people. Experts gave feedback on how

promises will be financially feasible and can be implemented,” said Kumar.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 31, 2025

For once, AAP on the defensive in Delhi

Manisha Priyam

The Delhi Assembly elections continue to pivot around Arvind Kejriwal and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), thanks to its two full terms (and a little more) in power since 2013. Although Atishi is currently the Chief Minister, leading the House with an overwhelming majority of AAP legislators, she has made it abundantly clear that she only sits there in the interregnum, and it is Kejriwal who holds the reins of power. To further buttress Kejriwal's pre-eminence, the electoral promises made this time are being referred to as “Kejriwal ki guarantee”.

As for the ruling party, it is defending its record of governance — what it calls the ‘Delhi model’ centred around vastly improved government schools and mohalla clinics, topped up with dollops of free electricity and water supply for those at the bottom of the economic pyramid. The broader canvas of pro-poor governance is somewhat invisible to the more affluent citizenry of Delhi, portrayed popularly as “*dilwaali dilli*”, happy and feisty in its spirit.

So, how is AAP defending its long tenure in power — and countering the general setting in of anti-incumbency and the corruption charges that landed then CM Kejriwal and his deputy Manisha Sisodia in jail? Has the BJP been able to launch a counter-offensive sharp enough to dislodge the incumbents? And finally, what role does the Congress play in this frayed pitch where it must oppose AAP in Delhi, but is ideologically committed to not let the BJP come to power? The dilemma for the Congress deepens further as it is the leader of the INDIA bloc, whereas its alliance partners Mamata Banerjee, Hemant Soren and Akhilesh Yadav are open in their support for Kejriwal.

The current AAP is dramatically different from what it was in 2013, when it was a new party emerging from a people's movement against corruption, appropriately named

‘India Against Corruption’. The target of the attack then was the Congress, led by Manmohan Singh at the Centre and Sheila Dikshit in the state. The allocation of the telecom spectrum, the coal scam, then CAG Vinod Rai's report, the mismanagement of the Commonwealth Games and finally the Nirbhaya tragedy created a popular storm against the Congress. Having grabbed power from the Congress in the national capital, Kejriwal became the face of its pro-poor governance. AAP developed national ambitions and even challenged the BJP. The party's runaway success in Punjab was its crowning glory.

By 2024, however, it had become a far more weakened AAP, with the BJP leading an assault on the party, levying corruption charges in the ‘liquor scam’; the excise policy did not see the light of day but is presumed to have accorded partisan benefits to AAP. Even more scandalous were the social media revelations of Kejriwal's ‘*Sheesh Mahal*’ — the CM's official residence that he got renovated at a considerable cost to the exchequer. The CAG audit put the cost at Rs 33 crore, while BJP leaders claimed that it was above Rs 70 crore. Social media circulated photographs of this palatial bungalow, bringing considerable disrepute to him and his party.

The now-forgotten case of his own Rajya Sabha MP and trusted party colleague Swati Maliwal entering Kejriwal's residence and levying charges of misconduct by his personal assistant did further damage. Kejriwal was quick to make a turnaround — he resigned from the CM's post soon after his release from jail and vacated the bungalow. Since then, he has returned to the people's court and his party cadres. The resignation also reduced the likelihood of Kejriwal's confrontation with the Lieutenant Governor (L-G), since it is now a milder and younger Atishi dealing with the L-G.

The BJP's offensive has largely been a personal attack on Kejriwal — over corruption charges and for pretending to be an “*aam aadmi*” whereas he lived the life of royalty. The BJP also believes that there is a definite anti-incumbency against Kejriwal,

especially as the party had a steady base of over 38 per cent vote back even in 2020, when it won only eight seats. Besides, nearly 17 seats were won or lost by very narrow margins at the time, despite an AAP wave. Given the BJP's extraordinary performance in Delhi in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the party and its cadres have been in a buoyant mood — although the party has lost some of its sheen among *poorvanchalis* and the upper castes with unbecoming comments from Shehzad Poonawalla.

Launching Parvesh Verma to confine Kejriwal to his own seat has been key to the BJP's strategy. Its offer of Rs 2,500 to women — Rs 400 more than what AAP currently gives to them — is another significant element. For the woman voter, it is not just about which party gives more money; rather, it is about whom she trusts more.

Kejriwal's government has given women free bus passes and posted women marshals for security. Besides, women consider good schools an investment in their children's future, a rare opportunity for social mobility for the underclass in the city. The "Kejriwal guarantee" now talks about jobs for the youth.

Lastly, the Congress seems weak on many counts — it is not seen as the party that can dislodge AAP. Rahul Gandhi has not been personal in his attack on Kejriwal. Many of its leaders such as Arvinder Singh Lovely or the *poorvanchali* Mahabal Mishra have made their home in other political parties. A sombre Sandeep Dikshit has been criticising AAP, but is largely seen as the third candidate in the New Delhi constituency. Yet, it's a city that elects different parties for the Centre and the state and will have to contend with pitched battles in at least 17 of the 70 seats.

The Telegraph, Kolkata, January 31, 2025
Bread and butter over 'sheesh mahal' : Voters focus on AAP's tangible policies
Pheroze L. Vincent

The BJP is drawing voters' attention to the Delhi chief minister's newly renovated residence to drive home its allegation of the incongruence between AAP leader Arvind Kejriwal's "*aam aadmi*" image and the lavish

lifestyle he appears to have led while at the helm of the government.

With memes, videos and campaigns targeting Kejriwal's alleged extravagance, the BJP has made it the central theme of its narrative against the AAP for the upcoming Assembly polls.

Despite anti-incumbency and the AAP government's allegedly erratic delivery of civic services, the BJP and the Congress's campaign overdrive surrounding the "*sheesh mahal*" allegations don't seem to have cut ice with voters, especially those who back Kejriwal.

In Bihar Camp, a low-income settlement of those who work at the Delhi Race Club opposite the Prime Minister's residence in Kejriwal's New Delhi seat, elderly resident Radha dismisses the allegations of corruption against the former chief minister.

"People can say lies too; who verifies allegations? I haven't seen the residences of Kejriwal or the PM. What should matter is inflation. Has any party offered a solution for it? I am satisfied with Kejriwal because he has worked well and given some relief from inflation," she said.

The residence at 6 Flagstaff Road became the centre of scrutiny after Kejriwal vacated it following his release from jail and resignation as chief minister last year. The BJP and the Congress have used it to accuse Kejriwal of corruption and hypocrisy, especially considering his image as a "man of the common people".

However, voters like Radha are focused more on the tangible benefits they feel from AAP's policies, such as addressing inflation, rather than the optics of a government official's home.

"Which CM doesn't have a good bungalow? Have you seen videos of the PM's house?" asked Rajesh Kumar, a resident of south Delhi's Sangam Vihar slum, which has more than 12 lakh residents spread over 9sqkm in two Assembly constituencies.

Kumar has seen a spoof on AAP's YouTube channel on a "*raj mahal*" — the derisive term used by the AAP and the Congress to describe the Prime Minister's residence on Lok Kalyan

Marg. He believes it is true, and says that if it is false, the Prime Minister should open his house to the press.

Kumar is a voter in Deoli who migrated from Uttar Pradesh's Rae Bareilly. "I am from a Congress stronghold. We got piped water there before Sangam Vihar did. During the 15 years of Sheila Dikshit's rule, she got our votes for gradually regularising the slums. But we only got water supply after Kejriwal came.

"Today, anyone who gives education, healthcare and jobs will win. The BJP should focus on these instead of playing Hindus against Muslims and going after Kejriwal's house."

In Okhla, another slum on the banks of the Yamuna, M. Khalil is equally unperturbed by the "*sheesh mahal*" controversy.

"Who doesn't join politics to make money?" he asks, acknowledging that while politicians may have personal illegal gains, they should still focus on serving the people. He lauds Kejriwal for his work, considering the challenges he has faced, such as his arrest and political harassment. "Kejriwal is working well for the poor. The BJP should focus on the states they rule before asking for our votes."

While the AAP still enjoys strong support in some quarters, other political dynamics are also at play. In Okhla, Khalil says there is local sympathy for Shifa-ur-Rehman Khan, a candidate from the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) who has been incarcerated along with JNU scholar Umar Khalid since 2020 in connection with the Delhi riots conspiracy case. Despite this, Khalil remains loyal to the AAP, believing that Kejriwal has made real progress for the slum residents.

"The BJP is also strong as our municipal councillor (AAP's Praveen Kumar) defected to the party. I feel sad for Shifa-ur-Rehman but I am for the AAP. Kejriwal must be rewarded for working for the poor because no one bothers about slum-dwellers," Khalil says.

Sajjan Singh, an old Sikh resident of the bustling retail hub of Lajpat Nagar, has seen the best and worst of Delhi politics. The worst time, he says, was the period during the 1984

riots, and the best has been during the tenures of both Dikshit and Kejriwal.

"The BJP is contesting more aggressively now, but this *sheesh mahal* issue makes no sense. As if the BJP leaders live like *fakirs*, as Modiji says he does. There is a saying, '*Khai bhali ka mai* (food is more love than one's mother)'. With Kejriwal giving affordable electricity and water, I prefer him in power," Singh says.

The Telegraph, Kolkata, January 31, 2025
Congress failed Dalits, backwards in 1990s but aims to restore 'original base': Rahul Gandhi

PTI

During Indira Gandhi's tenure, the Congress had full confidence of Dalits, minorities, backwards, but later in the 1990s "there were shortcomings," says Gandhi

The Congress did not protect the interests of the Dalits and backwards the way it should have in the 1990s, Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi said on Thursday.

Addressing a programme organised by Dalit influencers here, Gandhi said merely getting political representation for Dalits and backwards would not help solve their problems unless they got "bhaagidaari" in institutions and wealth.

He also said that once the "original base" of the Congress party is back, the BJP and the RSS would have to run away. It will happen soon, he added.

Gandhi said during Indira Gandhi's tenure, the Congress had full confidence of Dalits, minorities, backwards, but later in the 1990s "there were shortcomings," and the fact is not lost on the party.

"We would not talk just about representation. You talk about political representation and Kanshi Ram fought for political representation. But they have made political representation irrelevant. Lok Sabha BJP MPs say they have made them a statue as they can't even speak. The institutions, be it education or corporate India, judiciary, we have to get the share of power," he said at the 'Vanchit Samaj: Dasha aur Disha' programme. The former Congress president said there is a "huge difference" between representation and share of power. "Like I said in the budget,

backwards have 50 per cent population but the share of power is just 5 per cent. Dalits have 15 per cent population but have only one per cent share of power. The next question is the share of power and the share of wealth," he said.

Gandhi asserted that unless the Dalits and the backwards got a just share in power, the problem would not be solved.

Hindustna Times, New Delhi, January 31, 2025

BJP will lose Delhi polls: Akhilesh at Kejriwal roadshow

HT Correspondent

Speaking to the media after landing in Delhi, the SP chief said, "BJP will lose the Delhi assembly elections as it is a hindrance in the development of Delhi. Stopping its interference will help Delhi develop even more."

Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav who participated in a roadshow with Aam Aadmi Party convenor Arvind Kejriwal in Delhi on Thursday, said that the Bharatiya Janata Party will lose the Delhi assembly elections while accusing the BJP of hampering the development of Delhi.

Speaking to the media after landing in Delhi, the SP chief said, "BJP will lose the Delhi assembly elections as it is a hindrance in the development of Delhi. Stopping its interference will help Delhi develop even more."

The SP chief further termed the stampede incident in Prayagraj Mahakumbh as very sad and said that both the state and the Central governments were responsible for this. "Devotees have lost their lives and people have lost their loved ones. The responsibility lies with the government and the BJP government cannot escape from this responsibility."

"The BJP government did not make as much arrangements as it promoted for Mahakumbh. If the arrangements were good, this incident would not have happened. The compensation amount of ₹25 lakh for the families of the deceased is less and it should be increased. Along with this, the list of all the devotees who have died and those who are

missing should be released because there is a lot of apprehension, there is confusion among the people, and it will be removed only when the complete list is released," added Akhilesh Yadav.

"The government is claiming that a budget of ₹10 thousand crore was sanctioned for the event. They also claimed of better security arrangements. If there is no lack in the arrangements, then how did so many people lost their lives," he said.

"The government itself was distributing invitations for Mahakumbh, whereas till now no such practice was ever followed. Whatever the mythological and historical records are, no one was ever given a card as the devotees themselves come to Kumbh driven by their faith. The devotees who lost their lives in the stampede did not come to Kumbh because of the government, they came here due to their faith," he added.

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 31, 2025

Delhi polls: On campaign trail with AAP's Sisodia at Jangpura, an ally from UP

Ankita Upadhyay

On Thursday, walking alongside AAP leader Manish Sisodia as he campaigned in the Muslim-majority Nizamuddin Basti ahead of the Delhi Assembly polls was an ally from the neighbouring state — the Samajwadi Party's Kairana MP from Uttar Pradesh, Iqra Hassan. Sisodia, who is the party's Jangpura candidate, and Hassan first visited the Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah and later went door to door meeting residents. Canvassing for votes on behalf of the AAP, Hassan told them that it was SP chief Akhilesh Yadav's decision to support AAP.

"I've come from far away...," she said. "I request those who talk about development that it's our responsibility to support the Aam Aadmi Party. Manish Sisodia has revolutionised education in Delhi... AAP has done a lot of development in the last 10 years and has heard the voice of the poor... education has improved. We need to think about our children and their future."

Earlier this week, the Samajwadi Party, a key member of the Opposition INDIA bloc, along

with Trinamool Congress, Shiv Sena (UBT) and NCP (SP), backed AAP over the Congress in the polls.

Local residents, who stepped out of their houses to meet the two leaders during their padyatra, flagged two primary issues — bad roads and overflowing sewers.

They, however, remained divided over supporting AAP or Congress. Many said they are Congress supporters but will choose AAP this time. Others praised the AAP and said it has worked in the last 10 years but there are issues that still need to be resolved.

Nizamuddin is part of the Jangpura Assembly constituency and has 49,332 voters and 66 polling stations. While the BJP has fielded Sardar Tarvinder Singh Marwah, the Congress has picked ex-councillor and former Mayor Farhad Suri.

In the narrow lanes of Nizamuddin Basti, Sisodia met general store owner Mohammed Tahir Siddique (62) and told him that “voting for Congress means making BJP win and reducing our votes”.

Nodding in agreement, Siddique, who has run the general store since 1989, said he was a Congress voter for a long time and supported Suri but switched to AAP after the grand old party disappointed Nizamuddin Basti. “They (Congress) worked in Nizamuddin West, which is a posh area but did not work for the poor.”

Siddique said when he met Sisodia, he complained about roads being in a bad state in the area and the sealing of several community areas in the area.

He also admitted that Sisodia’s image has taken a beating due to the liquor scam accusations but he did a lot of work in the education sector and improved the conditions of schools. “Look at the hospitals... they have become so better,” he added.

Kashif Nizami (59), Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah Committee General Secretary and Congress block president, admitted that Congress votes from the area have gone to AAP in the last 10 years but the party is reemerging again.

In Jangpura, he said it is a tough fight between the three parties. “In Lajpat Nagar,

residents are inclined towards BJP due to work done by the RSS members there... in Bhogal too, there are a number of AAP and BJP supporters... here in Nizamuddin people will vote for Congress,” he added.

Nizami alleged that AAP has not done any work in the area: “The baraat ghar (wedding hall) where poor people would get married has been closed, sewer lines have not been changed for 10 years and the Monday market was shut by MCD councillor Sarika Chaudhary.”

Nizami said even the Congress is planning to bring in a big leader to campaign. “I know Iqra Hassan ji personally but we will invite Rahul ji to the area,” he added.

Shahrukh Khan (30), a trader living in Nizamuddin Basti, said, “We want an AAP government in Delhi but we do not want the MLA from the party because they have not done any work.”

“Jo kaam Sheila ji kar gayi wo abhi tak kisi ne nahi kiya (former CM Sheila Dikshit did all the work; after her, not much work has been done in the area),” he added.

Azam Khan, a butcher shop owner, maintained that while AAP leaders have been visiting the area, it is Congress that will win. “Earlier, my shop’s electricity bill did not exceed Rs 8,000... now, it is 20,000. Despite repeated requests, nobody looked into my concerns,” he said.

He also said the AAP had no local volunteers from the area till recently, when it recruited some young boys for the task. “It is Suri and his men who have been listening to our concerns so far. He has recruited people from our localities and has active workers.”

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 31, 2025

Delhi Model 2.0: How AAP govt has prioritised subsidies over infrastructure

Nirbhay Thakur

Since it came to power in Delhi with full majority in 2015, the AAP government has maintained a revenue surplus economy, earning more revenue than it spends.

This is despite increased expenditure on healthcare, education and subsidies.

The AAP dedicates nearly 40% of its Budget to health and education and nearly 15% to subsidies such as free electricity, free water and free bus rides for women.

Data compiled by The *Indian Express* shows that capital expenditure as a percentage of total expenditure during the AAP rule (from 2015) has fallen sharply, while revenue expenditure has risen drastically.

While revenue expenditure is the estimated cost on salaries, allowances, subsidies and other expenses required for the normal running of government departments, capital expenditure is the cost of constructing or acquiring an asset of a lasting nature, which yields revenue – such as constructing buildings or buying machinery.

Under the AAP government, capital expenditure as a percentage of total expenditure peaked at 25% in 2022-23. During the Congress rule that preceded AAP's, capital expenditure crossed 40% each year between 2005-06 and 2010-11. Between 2011-12 and 2013-14, it was between 20% and 30% of the total Budget.

While the Budget outlay grew on average by Rs 5,000 crore every year (Rs 37,750 crore in 2015-16 to Rs 76,000 crore in the latest Budget), Delhi's inflation-adjusted Gross domestic product (GDP) rose from Rs 4.28 lakh crore in 2014-15 to Rs 6.26 lakh crore in 2022-2023 – a rise of 150%.

Despite all the expenditure on subsidies, Delhi's debt to GDP ratio was 3.9% as compared to an all-India average of 27.5%. While revenue expenditure (including subsidies) has grown rapidly along with the Budget, capital outlay (money spent on acquiring, maintaining, or improving fixed assets, such as land, buildings, equipment, or vehicles) has not kept up.

In the first four years of AAP rule, capital outlay as a percentage of total net expenditure nearly halved from 14% to 7.68%. During this time, revenue expenditure shot up from 78% to 86.7% of the net expenditure.

In the next four years, the capital outlay bounced back to 13.5% of net expenditure, and revenue expenditure still remained high

(from 80% to 82%). Capital outlay is a component of capital expenditure. Other components include – repayment of loans to the Centre and loans and advances by the state government.

Capital outlay – which is essentially the productive component of capital expenditure – ranged from 35% in 2018-19 to 54% in 2021-22.

Why is this important?

While revenue expenditure is important to raise the living standards of people and has more immediate impact as compared to capital expenditure, the latter has a higher multiplier.

For instance, a 2019 Reserve Bank of India report found that the Central Capex has a multiplier of 3.25 – a Re 1 rise in Capex increases output by Rs 3.25 and by states increases output by Rs 2. The corresponding multiplier figures for revenue expenditure were 0.45 and 0.82, respectively.

A 3.25 multiplier essentially means that if the government spends a rupee on capital expenditure, it will lead to an overall increase (over time) in the income by Rs 3.25. When the government spends, it can lead to a boost in private investment and household consumption, increasing the income of the population by an amount greater than what it spent in the first place.

Debt to GDP ratio

While Capex as a percentage of total expenditure has fallen during the AAP's rule, the debt to GDP has also fallen indicating good fiscal health. In the 10 years preceding AAP rule, the outstanding liabilities as a percentage of GSDP (Gross State Domestic Product) fell from 16.3% to 7.3% – a drop of 9 percentage points. During this period, the state GDP grew by a factor of 5.12. From 2015 to 2023 (till which actual data is available), the outstanding liabilities as a percentage of GSDP fell from 6.6% to 1.6% – a 5-percentage point drop. The GSDP during this time doubled. This indicates that while fiscal health was maintained and even improved, and the state's GDP grew under the AAP's rule, a clear priority for the government became revenue expenditure in place of capital expenditure.

The Hindu, Delhi, January 28, 2025

Time for Congress to walk the talk

The Congress government continues to follow the 2021 order restricting protests

Rajendran Narayanan, Vinay Sreenivasa

The Congress recently announced the launch of 'Jai Bapu, Jai Bhim, Jai Samvidhan', a campaign to commemorate the 75th year of the Constitution. Hindutva ideologues have denigrated M.K. Gandhi while their antipathy towards Dr. B.R. Ambedkar became evident through the disparaging remarks made by Home Minister Amit Shah in Parliament. In this light, this campaign appears to hold promise.

Since coming to power in Karnataka in 2023, the Congress government has signalled its commitment to the Constitution. It hosted an international conference titled 'Constitution and National Unity' in February 2024 and held massive celebrations in September 2024 to mark the International Day of Democracy and the Chief Minister urged people to abide by constitutional values.

Notwithstanding these, a genuine commitment to democracy must minimally ensure that everyone feels like an active participant in a consultative process. Therefore, spaces for peaceful dissent should not be curtailed. In 2021, the BJP government in Karnataka passed the Licensing and Regulation of Protests, Demonstrations and Protest Marches (Bengaluru City) Order, making public protests outside a designated area illegal. The grounds for these were that the "unauthorised manner adversely affect traffic movement, which cause huge vehicular congestion." After the order, protests in Bengaluru have been limited to a small park ambushed by a parking lot; it is ironically called Freedom Park. Protests attempted to be held anywhere else have met with police crackdowns and FIRs.

The right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly is a fundamental right (Article 19). Indeed, the very idea of satyagraha or peaceful civil disobedience is one of the biggest contributions of India to the rest of the world. When tenant farmers in Bihar's Champaran district were forced by

the British to cultivate indigo and were heavily penalised for any crop failures, Gandhi initiated the historic Champaran Satyagraha in 1917. He defied government orders to leave Champaran; this resistance led to the Champaran Agrarian Law providing relief to farmers. In 1923, the Bombay Legislative Council permitted people across castes to use places built and run by the government. However, Dalits were prevented by caste Hindus from drinking water from public tanks. In defiance, in 1927, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar led thousands of Dalits to walk to Chavdar tank in Maharashtra's Mahad and drank water from the tank in protest. These, among many others, have given the world a grammar of dissent.

The Congress government in Karnataka has continued the undemocratic order passed in 2021. On August 15, 2022, 72 farmers protesting against government acquisition of their land in Devanahalli were arrested and FIRs were registered against them. Numerous pro-Palestine protesters have been detained. The police slapped FIRs against several people who gathered at the steps of Town Hall in Bengaluru to protest against the assault of two Manipuri women. The Karnataka High Court quashed those FIRs, but the process of fighting itself became a punishment. In 2023, on Gandhi's birth anniversary, hundreds of citizens walked from the Gandhi statue to Vidhana Soudha as a satyagraha to reclaim the rights to peaceful assembly. They were detained by the police and an FIR was filed against several people.

Although election rallies and religious processions cause traffic, only protest rallies are banned. Controlling traffic is a civic matter. The government's rationale that protests held at a particular spot cause traffic is unfounded. For instance, protesting at the steps of Town Hall does not cause traffic. The real reason for traffic snarls are the exponential rise of private vehicles without a commensurate increase in affordable and quality public transportation. Peaceful protests are usually the last resort for people when all appeals to the government fail.

Therefore, using traffic as a reason to curb constitutional freedoms is undemocratic.

If the Congress wants to walk the talk, it must revoke the 2021 order. Peaceful protests are sites where the theatre of democracy is performed and its pedagogy is put to practice. So long as this is not done, the 'Jai Bapu, Jai Bhim, Jai Samvidhan' campaign and other events would appear to be mere platitudes.

Rajendran Narayanan teaches at Azim Premji University and is affiliated with LibTech India; Vinay Sreenivasa is an advocate. Views are personal

The Hindu, Delhi, January 31, 2025

Has the INDIA bloc lost its vitality after the Lok Sabha polls?

Sobhana K. Nairwk in New Delhi

The INDIA bloc managed to prevent the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) from reaching the majority mark in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. However, it went on to lose the Haryana and Maharashtra Assembly elections. In the ongoing campaign to the Delhi Assembly elections, the INDIA bloc appears fragmented as certain constituents of the coalition, such as the Samajwadi Party and the Trinamool Congress, are supporting the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), leaving the Congress to fight on its own. Has the INDIA bloc lost its vitality after the Lok Sabha polls?

K.K. Kailash and **Hilal Ahmed** discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Sobhana K. Nair**. Edited excerpts:

Are pre-poll alliances inherently weak?

Hilal Ahmed: It depends on the nature of the alliance. Let's compare the two major alliances in the country: the NDA (National Democratic Alliance) and the INDIA bloc. There is a distinct difference in the structure of the two. In the NDA, the BJP is the anchor; it brought together the other constituents. It had a concrete plan of action for the time before the election as well as after. On the other hand, the INDIA bloc came together to oppose the BJP. This alliance is based on the logic that no party will occupy the anchoring position. The stability of an alliance depends on the structure on which it has been built. It hardly matters whether it was stitched before or after the polls.

K.K. Kailash: We will be limiting ourselves if we look at a coalition only from the perspective of when it was formed. The stability of a coalition is decided by how the political parties relate to each other, how they come together, and how they conduct their business. Let's take the example of the Congress-led UPA (United Progressive Alliance) government and the United Front governments led by Prime Ministers H.D. Deve Gowda and I.K. Gujral. They were fairly stable because they had mechanisms which constantly allowed political parties in the alliance to consult each other. In the INDIA bloc, we have the Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) on one end of the spectrum and the Left parties on the other. Is the premise on which the INDIA bloc came together (the pooling of the anti-BJP vote) too narrow a meeting ground for parties with disparate ideologies?

Hilal Ahmed: I won't say that Indian politics is now completely governed by the logic of ideology. Rather, I would call it professionalism in politics. As (political scientist) Suhas Palshikar rightly identified, Hindutva hegemony is the dominant narrative in politics today. (Congress leader) Rahul Gandhi's two Bharat Jodo Yatras tried to construct a different narrative based on social justice politics, which centred both caste and economic disparity. Before the 2024 general elections, the regional parties in the INDIA bloc too contributed to this narrative, but it was limited. One of the outcomes of the 2024 elections was that for the first time, the BJP's Hindutva agenda was significantly challenged by the narrative of social justice. It even forced Prime Minister Narendra Modi to interpret social justice through the prism of Hindutva. The Congress manifesto was the most significant political document in the last 10 years, but it wasn't accepted by the other INDIA bloc partners. In the (Assembly) elections that have happened since the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, this narrative of social justice has been compromised. The failure of the INDIA bloc to come up with an alternate narrative in these elections is one of the reasons for this.

K.K. Kailash: Coalitions with far more disparate allies have stuck together and continued for a term as part of a ruling coalition. The NDA government under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1999-2004) is a good example of this. Despite the 2002 riots in Gujarat and the discomfort that it caused to some of the allies, the coalition stuck together until the BJP decided to call for early elections.

Comparative studies show that there is no coalition in opposition. The willingness of the Opposition to form a pre-electoral coalition increases only when constituents think that the incumbent regime is weak and will likely be defeated. The 2024 general elections gave the Opposition such a moment. But once the BJP came back to power, the moment passed. Now, we are back to business as usual.

A source of tension within the INDIA bloc is the constituents' relation to the Congress. There has been enduring criticism that the Congress is the weakest link in the bloc. Do you agree with the criticism?

Hilal Ahmed: The Congress is the only pan-India party in the Opposition coalition. When we say the Congress is weak, I think that weakness could have two meanings. A coalition requires an anchor. This anchoring can come intellectually as well as by making strategic alliances at a time when there is no election. The Congress, with its Bharat Jodo Yatra, successfully consolidated the idea of India that was politically different from the BJP's imagination. But the problem is that within the party, this idea has not been sustained. There was divergence between the central leadership and the regional players in the Congress on the question of extending reservation in the private sector in Karnataka. The Karnataka government is also dithering on publishing the caste census. If the Congress was strong in terms of ideas as well as organisation, it would be in a position to provide a leadership role to the other players of the India bloc.

K.K. Kailash: In a coalition, political parties do not give up their individual identities. Each of them has their own brand, which they want to protect. The Congress as a national party

believes that it is more representative of India's diversity and therefore encompassing of society's interests, whereas the State-based political parties have lower stakes; they are more concerned about a smaller pool of supporters and a subset of policy decisions. To put the entire onus on the Congress would not be fair.

Does the Indian Opposition really need to work under a common umbrella?

Hilal Ahmed: I think it is important to look at what we call an Opposition. Is it simply an electoral vehicle? In a liberal democracy, the Opposition's role goes beyond just contesting elections. The INDIA bloc came into existence on the premise that the BJP got only 37% of the votes in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections and yet came to power because of a fragmented Opposition. But it did not have a common minimum programme. There is no clarity on what the alliance stands for and why. The only clear goal it has is that it wants to defeat the BJP. The Delhi Assembly election, for instance, is being fought entirely on Delhi issues (by the AAP and Congress); their campaigns do not reflect their national agenda. In contrast, the BJP's campaign is a regional interpretation of its national agenda. Opposition unity will become meaningful only when there is a national agenda which can be interpreted regionally. Just professionally opposing the BJP to form the government would be a narrow meaning of the term Opposition.

K.K. Kailash: We need to make a distinction between the Opposition as a normative idea and an empirical manifestation. During elections, we see the empirical manifestation. Between elections, the normative idea comes out much more clearly. Remember that the Opposition is a very integral element of any liberal democracy. This means that there is a right to publicly oppose and criticise the actions and policies of the government of the day. This automatically means that there is space for a plurality of ideas. Between elections, the Opposition needs to focus on this normative aspect and this could happen in a variety of ways. For example, it could actually do what we could call 'legitimacy

infirmer' actions. Basically, these activities might not remove the ruling regime, but will discredit it and raise doubts about it. Take the issue of the politics of welfare. I think we have reached saturation point with every political party promising the same thing. The Opposition should push for accountability and ask whether the welfare schemes are actually reaching the people it is meant for. The Opposition for long has been focusing on issues such as high-level corruption, cronyism, etc., which are far removed from the everyday lives of individuals. They may galvanise the core supporter, but do not necessarily make a difference to the classes. There is no need for the Opposition to work under one umbrella; each individual party could do this on their own. During a non-election time, a disjointed Opposition is useful because it creates multiple battlegrounds for the ruling party. This gives the Opposition more chances compared to having just one agenda and constantly pushing it.

K.K. Kailash, Professor, Department of Political Sciences, Hyderabad University; Hilal Ahmed, Associate Professor, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 28, 2025

ONOE crucial for India's democratic process: PM

HT Correspondent

Modi highlighted the flip side of frequent elections in the country, saying it creates problems in governance, works are hindered, and the country has had to suffer because of it.

NEW DELHI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday said the government's ambitious plan of One Nation, One Election, or simultaneous polls, was directly linked to the future of India's youth, urging them to come forward in large numbers to steer the ongoing debate around it so that the country can move in the right direction.

Modi highlighted the flip side of frequent elections in the country, saying it creates problems in governance, works are hindered, and the country has had to suffer because of it.

"A key issue linked to the future of India's youth is the country's electoral system," he said on Monday, addressing the customary National Cadet Corps (NCC) rally at the Cariappa parade ground in Delhi Cantt. The rally is held every year after the Republic Day parade.

Those present included defence minister Rajnath Singh, chief of defence staff General Anil Chauhan, army chief General Upendra Dwivedi, navy chief Admiral Dinesh Kumar Tripathi, chief of the air staff Air Chief Marshal AP Singh and defence secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh.

For a long time after Independence, Lok Sabha and Assembly elections were conducted simultaneously in the country, he said.

"But then this pattern was broken, and the country had to suffer due to this. In every election, the voters' list must be updated and there are many other things that need to be done. Teachers are also assigned duties relating to the elections. This affects studies and preparations for examinations. There are problems in governance too because of frequent elections," he said, making a strong case for One Nation, One Election.

His comments came two days after President Droupadi Murmu hailed the government's plan to conduct simultaneous polls in her speech on the eve of Republic Day, stressing that it "promises to redefine the terms of good governance" among other benefits.

The President's support for the Constitution (amendment) bill came at a crucial time when the legislation, which was introduced in the Lok Sabha on December 17, 2024, along with a similar bill for UTs, faces an in-depth review in the joint committee with the entire Opposition group not in favour of the law.

An important debate on One Nation, One Election is taking place in the country, and everyone is presenting their views, the PM said, adding that "brainstorming is necessary" in a democracy.

"The world's biggest elections are conducted in India, but this has another side --- elections keep taking place every few months. If Lok Sabha and Assembly polls take place together

every five years, new works will not be impeded. I specifically urge the youth of India, including the NCC cadets and volunteers...wherever you are...take this debate forward, steer it and take part in it in big numbers. This issue is directly linked to the future of youth," Modi said.

The Constitution (amendment) bill will also test the National Democratic Alliance's ability to push key reforms as it doesn't have the requisite numbers in both Houses to push such amendments.

Modi said even in the United States, elections are held once in four years and the date of formation of the new government is predetermined.

"In your own college or school, the student council elections are concluded in one go. Imagine if elections are held every month, then are studies possible? That's why you must steer the debate and there must be discussion across the country so that the country can decide to go in the right direction."

The 21st century world is changing rapidly and it's the need of the hour that India too moves forward at a swift pace, he said. "Youth has a big role to play in this."

In his speech, he also said whether it is a person or a country, their potential increases after they can tide over unnecessary hurdles. "In the last 10 years, we have worked towards removing those hurdles. This has increased the potential of the youth and the country," he said.

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 22, 2025

UCC: Congress alleges Modi govt showing cavalier attitude towards Law Commission
Abhishek Angad

Congress leader Jairam Ramesh alleged that a respected body like the Law Commission, which had once opposed the implementation of UCC, is not being allowed to function properly

The Congress on Tuesday accused the Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government of showing a "cavalier" attitude towards the Law Commission of India, particularly on a

sensitive issue like the Uniform Civil Code (UCC).

Congress general secretary in-charge of communication and Rajya Sabha MP Jairam Ramesh alleged on X that a "respected body" like the Law Commission, which had once opposed the implementation of UCC, is not being allowed to function properly.

His comments come a day after Uttarakhand chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami's cabinet cleared the UCC rules for its implementation in the state — the first in the country — likely by the end of this month.

Ramesh said that the 21st Law Commission, appointed by the Modi Government, had submitted its 182-page 'Consultation Paper on 'Reform of Family Law' in 2018 where it noted that the UCC was "neither necessary nor desirable" at that stage.

"Then in a press note published on June 14, 2023, the 22nd Law Commission of India notified its intention to once again examine the UCC. This was being done, the press note clarified, on a reference sent by the Ministry of Law and Justice. However, the 22nd Law Commission was finally wound up on August 31st 2024, without submitting its report on the UCC," he said.

Ramesh added that the 23rd Law Commission was announced on September 3rd, 2024, but its actual composition has not yet been announced showing the Modi government's lack of concern towards the Commission.

In November last year, Union home minister Amit Shah had termed the UCC in Uttarakhand as a "model UCC" during a poll campaign in Jharkhand and had said that UCC would be implemented in Jharkhand as well. He, however, said that tribal communities will be kept out of its ambit.

Last month, during the Constitution debate in Parliament, Shah criticised the first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru for bringing Muslim Personal Law and slammed the Congress for not bringing one law for all communities.

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 16, 2025

Express view on Mohan Bhagwat's 'ghar wapati' comment

Editorial

Adivasis have long been a contested constituency in India's polity. The comments by RSS Sarsanghchalak Mohan Bhagwat — he claimed that Pranab Mukherjee, while he was president, said that had it not been for the Sangh's work on "ghar wapsi" or reconversion, the Adivasis could have become "anti-national" — adds to an already fraught discussion and politics. Evoking Mukherjee's name, a week after the BJP-led Centre decided to earmark a designated site in the Rashtriya Smriti complex for his memorial — Bhagwat's comments underline the BJP attempt to twist the knife into Congress by appropriating Mukherjee. Bhagwat's comments could also be read as a bid to put Congress in a spot on the question of "ghar wapsi", given that its ally, JMM, stands against the Sangh Parivar's efforts to integrate Adivasis into the broader Hindu fold.

Since Independence, the RSS has made concerted attempts to make inroads into Adivasi-dominated regions. In 1952, it founded the first Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram at Jashpur in Chhattisgarh; by the 1970s, there were branches across Chhota Nagpur and Chhattisgarh. Besides providing medical and educational support to the Adivasis, whom it calls "Vanavasi" (forest dwellers), the Ashram has reportedly worked against their conversion to Christianity. In the last few years, the BJP has further strengthened its tribal outreach. In 2021, it marked November 15, the birthday of Birsa Munda, as the Janjatiya Gaurav Divas. In 2023, Narendra Modi became the first PM to visit Munda's village Ulihatu. He announced projects worth Rs 24,000 crore for the development of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups. Despite these overtures, the BJP couldn't win a single ST-reserved seat from Jharkhand in the 2024 Lok Sabha election; in the assembly election, it lost all but one. Notably, the party didn't fight the Jharkhand election banking on the allegations of "conversion to Christianity" — it used, instead, "infiltration" as the centrepiece of its political discourse. In this context, the question now is: Does Bhagwat's statement signal a return to the Sangh

Parivar's discourse on integration and assimilation of Adivasis? The troubling use of the "anti-national" tag in the context of Adivasis also has a history — its roots lie in a colonial vocabulary. In 1871, the British brought in the Criminal Tribes Act and marked around 200 communities as "criminal" tribes. In the early 1870s, a member of the Viceroy's Council, J F Stephen, while defining the criminal tribes, said, "We are dealing here with a tribe whose ancestors have been criminals since the very dawn of time, whose members are sworn by the laws of their caste to commit crime". The term "anti-national" reinforces such vicious colonial understandings and threatens to undermine the BJP's attempts to woo the tribal constituency.

Bangladesh

Political Developments

Daily Observer, Dhaka, January 21, 2025

Why our politicians fall short of their election promises

Md Nurul Momen

The interim government has established several reform commissions currently gathering stakeholder opinions and organizing consultative and public meetings to provide recommendations on important national issues. The white paper on the state of the Bangladesh economy has already presented its findings to the chief advisor. Current debates, along with the recently submitted white paper report, have examined persistent issues such as the 16 years of authoritarian rule, unemployment, poverty, and inequality in the country. Before the election, all participating political parties pledged to strengthen democracy and promote sustainable economic development if they were to be elected. However, despite these promises, the country has seen little change even after fifty-five years of independence. In contrast, many other countries that gained independence during the same period have successfully strengthened their democratic values and achieved balanced economic development. The publication of the White Paper on Bangladesh's economy, which exposes

widespread corruption under the Awami League government, is an important opportunity for promoting accountability and inspiring future economic reforms. The White Paper shows a dismal picture of Bangladesh's economy while simultaneously providing a recovery plan. With the adoption of accountability, transparency, and institutional reforms, Bangladesh now has the potential to redefine its economic paradigm. It is now expected that the interim government led by Dr. Muhammad Yunus will pursue the White Paper's suggestions; it has the potential to transform Bangladesh from a country stricken by economic mismanagement to one characterized by equitable growth and democratic accountability for future generations. The chief advisor's recent address to the public indicated that elections are scheduled for late 2025 or early 2026. While all major political parties are likely to make numerous promises, the key question will be their actual performance once the winning political party assumes office. The election commission is preparing to announce the electoral roadmap, and political parties are increasingly demanding information on how they plan to address the country's current political, social, and economic challenges, as identified by the White Paper on Bangladesh's economy. However, many election promises are often blatant falsehoods and populist rhetoric aimed deliberately at dissatisfied and vulnerable citizens. With each election cycle, the scope of promises becomes unrealistic, filled with false pledges and unfulfilled commitments. The gap between unrealistic promises to eliminate unemployment and poverty, combat corruption, and the actual outcomes leaves citizens feeling disillusioned and disappointed. What recourse or capacity exists when a political party, in an attempt to attract voters, makes pre-election promises it fails to fulfill once in office? False promises throughout the electoral campaign: In addition to the civil service job quota issue that arose during the civil unrest in July and August, various factors have led citizens to protest against authoritarianism,

unemployment, excessive executive power, and income inequality, among others. Currently, political parties in Bangladesh are focused on making election pledges to the electorate. An electoral manifesto is a document in which a political party outlines its objectives and commitments to voters if they come to power. It serves as a framework and guideline for governance, as well as a pledge to address significant national issues. It is recommended that all political parties develop five-year work plans based on their electoral promises. Additionally, they should establish clear annual milestones for implementing their election programs, allowing voters to evaluate their performance while in office. Political parties must clearly articulate their positions on national issues in their manifestos. However, the failure of election manifestos to deliver on their stated promises is a persistent issue in Bangladesh. Political parties often make extravagant promises to attract voters, yet these pledges frequently lack a pragmatic basis and genuine commitment to execution. Promises to reduce unemployment, lessen economic inequality, or promote pluralism may be hindered by budget constraints and the influence of the ruling party. Consequently, the question remains as to why political parties are not held accountable for the false promises made to deceive voters. Independent entity for the oversight of electoral manifesto: Once the election concludes, voters can no longer hold political parties accountable for their campaign promises. Many voters become disillusioned by these parties' failure to fulfill their commitments or their clear deviations from what was promised during the campaign. During election campaigns, influential politicians often deceive voters to secure victory in parliamentary elections. However, the electorate tends to respond positively to political parties that guarantee specific pledges. Therefore, it is essential for voters to demand accountability and regularly monitor the progress of these manifesto promises. The interim government could consider establishing an independent entity to oversee

and report on the implementation of these commitments. Having an impartial body review election manifestos can significantly enhance the fulfillment of electoral promises. Additionally, this independent body should evaluate how political parties that do not secure a majority in the election contribute to and promote their electoral agendas. Role of an independent entity in voter education: Political parties must take responsibility for formulating and executing their pledges, while voters play an essential role in demanding accountability. The prevalence of false electoral manifestos is a significant concern in the country, threatening democracy and development and negatively impacting citizens' trust in political parties. To address the underlying causes of this non-execution, an independent entity could transform election manifestos into meaningful tools for promoting democracy and development. This entity would serve as a catalyst, educating voters on the importance of manifestos and holding political parties accountable. In doing so, it would empower citizens to advocate for improved governance in the future. The issue of unrealistic election manifestos is critical and requires a comprehensive approach to establish a new political settlement in Bangladesh. By understanding the extent of political commitment and the structural and institutional factors contributing to this failure, the independent entity can assist political parties in collaboration with various stakeholders. This effort would involve disseminating information to bridge the gap between electoral promises and their actual outcomes, thereby strengthening the foundations of democratic governance and development in Bangladesh.

Election manifesto - a legally enforceable document: In our country, there is a concerning trend of deliberately deceiving voters, the majority of whom are uneducated and lack awareness. Presenting false, unrealistic, and unattainable campaign promises constitutes a form of political deception, violating ethical standards and

integrity. The manifestos of major political parties have become ineffective documents in their current state, highlighting the need for reforms to hold political parties accountable for the pledges made in their election manifestos.

To address this issue, it is essential to incorporate election manifestos into the Representation of the People Order, 1972. Amendments should be made to ensure political parties are held accountable for their electoral commitments. Manifestos must be officially documented, and if a party purposefully fails to fulfill its promises or makes no effort toward execution by the end of a five-year term, it should be brought before an independent body. There should be no alternative. Otherwise, each election cycle will lead to promises of new bridges, improved roads, job creation, and better governance, but without any tangible outcomes.

A significant penalty, such as a heavy fine or a declaration of ineligibility for the incumbent politicians or party, should be enforced for failing to meet these electoral pledges in future elections in Bangladesh. However, challenges may arise in a coalition government. All parties involved in the coalition must endorse the collectively agreed-upon election promises before joining the government. When political parties make promises, they take on a burden and have a legal and moral obligation to fulfill them. This requires taking legal action in the best interests of the constituency and the country as a whole. Consequently, political parties must exercise caution when formulating election manifestos. They should be based on comprehensive research and realistic evaluations of available resources and pressing issues to eliminate the possibility of deceiving voters during election campaigns. *The writer is a Professor and Chair of the Department of Public Administration at the University of Rajshahi*

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 31, 2025

Reforms vs election: A distracting debate

Mahfuz Anam

Recently, a debate in our political arena has been clouding our thinking. "No election before reforms" vs "No reforms if it delays the election" has our political players' attention engaged, distracting them from urgent actions. Exchanges between the respective proponents are now getting shriller and acrimonious. The truth is, we need both and can have both within the time frame of December 2025 or January 2026. People are firm and clear about not missing this unique opportunity to institute vital reforms, but they are also conscious about the complexity of the current situation and would prefer a more stable political and legal scenario.

Those who place the election above reforms undervalue the vital need for the latter. They tend to forget that the introduction of BAKSAL, two military interventions, the binary nature of our politics since the restoration of democracy in 1991, and the authoritarian rule for more than 15 years not only prevented reforms in areas like the judiciary, administration, police, etc, but reversed the process of making governance a public service and not a weapon in the ruler's hand. All our vital institutions need fundamental reforms—and urgently so. Let there be no doubt about it.

Contrarily, those who place reforms above the election do not truly understand the significance of a free and fair election and the absolute necessity of holding it as soon as possible as voters have been cheated of their right in the last three. It is also vital to put the country back on the track of having an elected government and parliament. The national election will restore people's right to choose who should and who should not rule them. It is a citizen's inalienable right to select which party and/or individual will be given the power to lead the country, govern it, spend our tax money, and introduce new policies and plans. Only a free and fair election can ensure it. How can we forget that, from the mountain of misgovernance by Sheikh Hasina, what triggered public anger the most was her fraudulent elections. Now, due to the students' popularity and Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus's wide acceptance, people

have decided to wait to exercise their right to elect. But that wait is time-bound.

What elections also do is bring about the accountability of those who are placed in power and positions of decision-making. "Accountability" is perhaps the most ignored and undervalued word in our country's governance. Our government officials, who get all their perks and facilities and, most importantly, salary from our tax money, face no accountability. Our police, intelligence agencies and security apparatus have all the power to oppress the public, but the public has no right to ask if they are even remotely performing their tasks honestly and in line with the law. In every profession and sector, there are honourable exceptions whom we praise for being honest in spite of the system. But the overall system is rotten to the core.

Free and fair elections are the only effective mechanism to make our political leaders accountable. It can be said that it did not work effectively in the past. With the proposed reforms instituted, it will be different in the future.

The interim government deserves kudos for setting up reform commissions in the most vital areas well in time. Four of them have already delivered their recommendations, while two others are expected soon. Some important committees have also shared their findings. What awaits us is the dialogue with political parties that the chief adviser has already planned. Recommendations on vital issues like the constitution, Election Commission, police and Anti-Corruption Commission are already in the public domain. All of them now await widespread discussion, which we think should start immediately.

However, when a national dialogue should be starting in earnest, the "reforms vs election" controversy has reemerged, and this time, unfortunately, in a tone that we should and need to avoid. The BNP's latest decision to launch a movement may lead to counter-movements, which may bring many factions to the streets. When things seem to be falling into place, such actions seem unnecessary.

The recent remark by BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakrul Islam Alamgir about the interim

government—that if it loses its neutrality, we must have a new one to conduct the election—took us all by surprise. The reasons he cited need to be examined, but we think the conclusion he made was a bit premature. Mirza Fakrul's comments took a dramatic turn when Adviser Nahid Islam speculated as to whether or not BNP was making an indirect call for bringing back an army-backed government to hold the election, modelled after 1/11.

This comment, we think, took the discussion towards a confrontational direction. Instead of a greater understanding, attributing motives to the BNP, which was neither fair nor justified, has now led to a distance between the students and the BNP, which is, as Adviser Dr Asif Nazrul observed, "undesirable." If anybody, it was the BNP that suffered the most during 1/11. Given its experience, BNP would be the last political party to want the return of an army-backed caretaker government.

Vital and urgently necessary reform proposals are now in place. We urge all to begin serious discussions on them. Let's start with the one that has a built-in consensus: police reform. We want the police to be permanently changed from being an extension of the ruling party's oppressive mechanism to an institution that upholds law and order for the benefit of the people. As a public institution, the police must represent justice, not oppression. Many of the reform suggestions are timely, useful, and urgently needed. The reform process can easily start with the police and can be seen as an example for the other reforms to follow.

As for the judiciary (what we have been able to learn from media reports; the formal presentation of its report is yet to come) the idea of decentralising the High Court benches is a most timely one. The dictum "Justice delayed is justice denied" is a painful reality for most citizens who live outside Dhaka. Travel, stay, food and the high cost of lawyers put the higher judiciary literally out of reach for most people. Even when they make the effort, the procedural maze and the avoidable but casually imposed delays make our

ordinary citizens puppets in the hands of the law, which is well exemplified by the 5.77 lakh cases pending at the court. Reported suggestions about appointments, work accountability, financial transparency of the judges and separate administration, supervision, etc will make the proposals most relevant. If there is a place where anti-discrimination needs implementation, it is here.

Public administration reforms are also an urgent need for us. Our administration never served the people but the ruling party of the day, and of course themselves. There are honest officials, but they are a small minority. Most are corrupt, inefficient and totally without accountability and monitoring. Reforms here would be most resisted, and hence must be pursued with determination. Election reforms are of immediate concern and must be implemented fastest, compared to others.

The above examples—only a small part of the whole process—show how important the reform proposals are and how seriously and diligently we must pursue them.

As we pointed out earlier, we have almost a year in hand. If we use this time with efficiency, dedication, and seriousness, and refrain from getting embroiled in unnecessary issues, we can have both reforms and the election within the desired time frame, about which there is a widespread agreement.

We are aware that some sections will gain with an early election and others will not. It cannot be counted out that arguments of both the sides could also be based on these perceived benefits. But we have to put public interest above everything else. We cannot lose this opportunity and the momentum to reshape our future on the basis of democracy, equality, tolerance, and general prosperity.

We strongly urge all concerned not to further dig into this debate and concentrate fully on achieving both the reforms and the election, which will serve our national interest most effectively. We should set aside our differences and assist the interim government

to move forward with speed and clarity to implement this dual agenda.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 26, 2025

AL won't be allowed to run in nat'l polls

Our Correspondent, Chandpur

Calling the party fascist and anti-state, Mahfuj Alam, adviser to the interim government, yesterday said the Awami League would not be allowed to take part in the general election.

"The elections will be contested among pro-Bangladesh groups only. All political parties, whether BNP-Jamaat or others, along with student organisations, workers, women, and scholars who are pro-Bangladesh, will establish future governance through a fair electoral process."

He made these remarks while exchanging greetings with students and locals at Hajiganj Bazar in Chandpur, reports a correspondent in Chandpur.

"We're working to establish a stable democratic Bangladesh, free from Awami fascism. If the Awami League returns, fascism will return with it," said Mahfuj.

He claimed that the people of the country do not want to see the era of Sheikh Mujib or Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh anymore.

"The new Bangladesh rejects the fascist system. We want Bangladesh to remain in the hands of true patriots. There will be no place for pro-Delhi elements in Bangladesh," added Mahfuj.

The adviser further said they would soon start talks with political parties and stakeholders and hold elections to facilitate democratic transformation, after carrying out minimum reforms based on the report of reform commissions.

"It is our commitment to ensure justice to the killings during the July uprising and to carry out reform of the institutions that were destroyed by fascist Hasina. We are also committed to holding free and fair elections for the sake of democratic transition."

Mahfuj, however, said that if the election is held without minimum reforms to the institutions that Hasina used to perpetrate genocide and oppress people, those same institutions will remain in place.

Hajiganj Upazila Nirbahi Officer Tapas Shil, Officer-in-Charge (OC) of Hajiganj Police Station Mohiuddin Farooq, leaders of Students Against Discrimination and Jatiya Nagorik Committee were present.

Later in the day in Ramganj Government College in Lakshmipur, Mahfuj said there is no probability of military rule in Bangladesh, reports our Noakhali correspondent.

"We did not overthrow Hasina with the support of any state this time. We overthrew Hasina with the blood of the students and the people. We no longer need to obey anyone. We have brought independence in exchange for our own blood ... We will not bow to anyone again."

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 26, 2025

Awami League's melodramatic redemption arc

H. M. Nazmul Alam

The ongoing political narrative surrounding the Awami League (AL) seems to be an attempt at rewriting its history—a curious exercise in portraying itself as a victim after years of wielding unbridled power. While some might view this as a natural turn of events in the cycle of politics, others find it to be an astonishing display of hypocrisy and irony.

If politics were a theatre, Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal and his ilk would be worthy of Oscars for their tragicomic renditions of "Victims of Circumstance" and "The Forgotten Heroes." Only this time, the audience isn't clapping; they're rolling their eyes.

In a recent interview with the Indian Express, the former home minister delivered a soliloquy so riddled with irony that even the most skilled satirists would struggle to script it. Kamal admitted to an intelligence failure during the July uprising of 2024, lamenting how 460 police stations were torched, thousands of weapons looted, and chaos reigned supreme. To top it off, he boldly blamed a "joint coup of Islamic extremism and the army" for the government's fall.

But let's rewind the reel to his own tenure. Remember the years when police stations didn't need to burn because dissent was already smothered in the flames of crossfires

and enforced disappearances? During his party's reign, anyone daring to speak out against the regime was silenced, often permanently. Yet here he stands, bemoaning the inefficacy of the same police force he once weaponised. It's akin to a firefighter who moonlights as an arsonist lamenting the spread of flames. Kamal's lament is like a chef blaming his burnt soufflé on the oven—completely ignoring his own recipe for disaster.

Mohammad A Arafat, another AL luminary, recently took to Facebook to demand elections under a caretaker government. Yes, you heard that right—the very system they demonised, abolished, and declared unconstitutional is now their chosen sanctuary. It's as if someone who insisted on drinking seawater for years suddenly complains about dehydration.

For those who've forgotten, AL spent three consecutive elections—2014, 2018 and 2024—under their own political regime, systematically dismantling the caretaker system to cement their autocracy. Their justification? Caretaker governments, they claimed, were a breeding ground for instability and conspiracies. Fast forward to 2025, and here they are, weeping for its resurrection. The hypocrisy could power an entire season of *House of Cards*.

Let's talk about the crimes that AL leaders conveniently overlook in their newfound role as victims. Under their watch, the nation witnessed extrajudicial killings euphemistically dubbed "crossfires." Innocent citizens, political opponents, and journalists were subjected to a reign of terror. The streets of Dhaka were painted red, not with the colours of revolution, but with the blood of innocents. The frightening reports of people disappearing overnight were treated as just another day in the AL's kingdom.

One could argue that the AL's rule was a masterclass in dystopian governance. If Orwell's *1984* were ever to be adapted into a Bangladeshi context, their regime would serve as the perfect blueprint. Surveillance? Check. Thought control? Double check. Fear as a tool of governance? Triple check. Their

tenure redefined the term "big brother" and not in the reality-TV sense.

Kamal's lament about the "morale" of AL workers being high is as believable as claiming that Walter White cooked meth for charity. He wistfully spoke of Sheikh Hasina's transformative leadership, citing her economic achievements. But where were these accolades when the economy spiralled into inflation, and essential goods became luxuries? The price of onions soared so high that they became a symbol of wealth, and the middle class found themselves nostalgic for days when a simple fish curry didn't break the bank.

And let's not forget the AL's media stranglehold. During their tenure, newspapers were muzzled, journalists were imprisoned, and social media became a hunting ground for dissenters. Yet today, they whine about media bias under the interim government. It's like a monopolist complaining about competition.

If the AL's current predicament were a Bollywood film, it would be titled *Ghar Ghar Mein Hypocrisy*. Picture Kamal as a tragic hero, spouting lines like, "*Main woh insaan hoon jo apne hi banaye huye system se haar gaya*" (I am the man defeated by my own system). Meanwhile, Arafat's Facebook status could be the perfect script for a villain's monologue, demanding justice while ignoring the skeletons in his own closet. Their melodramatic shift from authoritarian overlords to misunderstood victims deserves its own soundtrack.

Kamal's claim that "everything has turned 360 degrees" is unintentionally accurate. A full circle indeed, as the AL now finds itself in the very position it worked so hard to eliminate—pleading for fairness, justice, and democracy. The irony is almost poetic, like a snake biting its own tail. Except this snake spent years assuring everyone it was a dove. From *Game of Thrones* to *Breaking Bad*, pop culture is rife with cautionary tales about power and its corrupting influence. The AL's saga is no different. Their fall from grace serves as a stark reminder that unchecked power inevitably leads to ruin. It's like Walter

White lamenting the moral decay of the meth industry or Cersei Lannister criticising unethical leadership practices.

The AL often boasted about their electoral victories as proof of public support. But in a country where elections were marred by allegations of ballot-box stuffing, intimidation, and outright fraud, these claims hold as much water as a sieve. The phrase "public mandate" was weaponised to justify their grip on power, ignoring the disillusionment simmering among ordinary citizens.

Ironically, the same party that dismissed peaceful protests as "foreign conspiracies" now attempts to portray itself as the defender of democracy. Their narrative is as believable as a thief crying foul when caught red-handed. They demand an impartial system, conveniently forgetting their systematic efforts to erode democratic norms for over a decade.

Under AL's rule, silence became a survival strategy. Academics, activists, and ordinary citizens were forced to self-censor, lest they invite the wrath of the regime. The state apparatus functioned as an omnipresent spectre, watching and punishing dissent. The culture of fear they cultivated is a scar on the nation's psyche—one that will take years to heal.

Now, in an ironic twist, AL leaders lament the lack of "freedom of expression" under the interim government. Their cries would be laughable if they weren't so infuriating. It's like an authoritarian mourning the loss of their own dictatorship.

The people of Bangladesh have spoken, and their message is clear: enough is enough. No amount of crocodile tears or revisionist narratives can erase the AL's legacy of oppression. Their cries for justice and democracy ring hollow, echoing the hypocrisy of a regime that trampled those very ideals. The public is now the discerning critic, refusing to buy tickets to a show they've seen too many times before.

So, as Kamal dreams of a "short time" for recovery and Arafat rallies for a caretaker government, one can't help but chuckle at the

absurdity. The AL's redemption arc is less a phoenix rising from the ashes and more a circus act fumbling its way through a dark comedy. The curtain has fallen on their melodrama, and the only applause they're receiving is the sound of people turning their backs.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 20, 2025

Reforms without consensus unacceptable

Staff Correspondent

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir yesterday said none of the reform proposals will be acceptable without the consensus of the political parties.

When asked about the submitted reports of the four reform commissions, he said, "We are yet to make any initial remarks as we have not received the full report. The government has said it will hold discussions with political parties after receiving the reports and make a decision on the reform proposals afterwards. Without consensus, none of it will be acceptable."

The BNP leader made the remarks while speaking to reporters after paying tribute to Ziaur Rahman on the occasion of his 89th birth anniversary at his grave in the capital's Sher-e-Bangla Nagar area.

"We hope, within a short time, we can return to democracy through elections and that such a system can be established," Fakhrul said.

Asked about BNP's demand for elections by July-August, which some have called unrealistic due to the challenges of reforms and justice, Fakhrul said, "We have always said there is no conflict between reforms and elections."

He said the party that wins the election and forms the government will carry forward the reforms.

"We can say it clearly, on behalf of our party, that we will take forward every reform if we form the government," he said.

To mark the birth anniversary of BNP founder, Fakhrul, alongside other party activists and leaders, paid homage by placing floral wreaths at the mausoleum of Ziaur Rahman.

After paying tributes, Fakhrul said, "When Ziaur Rahman assumed state leadership in

1975, he undertook numerous reforms in a short time to build a modern and prosperous Bangladesh."

"He [Ziaur Rahman] was also the first to liberate the economy from the restrictive socialist framework and introduce a free-market economic plan. It was during his tenure that a revolution occurred in agriculture," added Fakhrul.

Zia became a statesman after a lot of political changes post-Liberation War. He established the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) on September 1 in 1978.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 21, 2025

Must reorganise BNP for rebuilding nation: Tarique

UNB, Dhaka

BNP Acting Chairman Tarique Rahman yesterday emphasised reorganising the party with talented, diligent, honest, and productive people to rebuild the country as it has been battered by autocratic rule.

"We strongly believe that we will get the people's support (to form a government). After that, we must rebuild our country. If we do not reorganise the party properly, we will not be able to rebuild the country," he said.

He made the remarks while virtually addressing the BNP's primary membership renewal programme.

Tarique formally launched the programme by submitting his party membership renewal form online during an event at the BNP Chairperson's Gulshan office.

The BNP leader said their party has already presented a 31-point proposal for overhauling and rebuilding the state.

"To implement it, we must unite and reorganise our party by bringing talented individuals to the forefront. We need to unite those who are hard-working, have integrity and ideals, and involve them in the party," he said.

Tarique called upon party leaders to organise and unite all party workers across the country. He also urged the BNP rank and file to put their best efforts into overhauling the party.

Addressing the programme, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir said

training for BNP activists is essential, as it appears they are drifting away from politics.

"Yesterday (Sunday) we marked the birth anniversary of our founder Ziaur Rahman. Our workers there shouted slogans in the name of different leaders from Dhaka south and north. This is not politics. It cannot be politics," he said.

Fakhrul said, "We must now make political training compulsory in every upazila and district. This must be done with urgency."

He also said the party must take steps to transform itself into an ideal political organisation.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 23, 2025

Draft cyber ordinance gets a scrubbing

Staff Correspondent

When the new cyber protection law comes into effect, a majority of the cases filed under its predecessors -- Digital Security Act and Cyber Security Act -- will automatically be dismissed.

Defamation, cyberbullying, and hurting of religious sentiments, among others, will be decriminalised, said the ICT Division secretary and the division's policy adviser at a press conference held at the ICT Tower yesterday while unveiling the amended version of the draft Cyber Protection Ordinance.

On December 26, 2024, the cabinet had approved the draft, but the draft drew flak from different quarters as it retained much of the controversial provisions of its predecessors.

At the press conference, Secretary Shish Haider Chowdhury said the government has scrapped nine provisions in the draft Cyber Protection Ordinance that were remnants of the DSA and the CSA.

These provisions criminalised, among others, defamation, cyberbullying, "hurting of religious sentiments", and allowed for search and arrests without warrants.

Even though vague wording like "hurting of religious sentiments" was removed from the new draft, it, however, includes a provision criminalising the dissemination of content that incites hatred among religious and ethnic communities.

"Hate speech will be defined as per the Penal Code," said Faiz Ahmad Taiyeb, the policy adviser (ICT Coordination & Reform) of the ICT Division.

The Daily Star obtained data from Centre for Governance Studies' DSA Tracker and found that 44 percent of the cases filed under the DSA for "hurting religious sentiment" were against the religious minorities, particularly the Hindus.

"We wanted to ensure that no political government can abuse this law to target anyone. However, no matter how foolproof a law is, if the political equilibrium and political system do not amend itself, all laws can be abused," said Taiyeb.

The new draft mandates that the government discloses any content it blocks.

"We ensure full transparency. We can only request the tech giants to block content. We cannot take down content ourselves. If the tech giants block or remove any content, the government must disclose what content was blocked," said Taiyeb.

According to the new draft, once a case is filed and it goes to court, the judge can dispose of the case even before the investigation stage.

The new draft has narrowed the scope for arrests without a warrant only to cases in which critical information infrastructure of the country is under threat.

The latest draft also criminalises sexual harassment online, and specifically mentions blackmail, revenge porn, and targeting of minors. The fines for committing those crimes go up to Tk 20 lakhs, and carries a three-year jail term.

The new law also criminalises online gambling with a jail term of two years and a Tk 20 lakh fine.

The law guarantees access to the internet as a right for every citizen.

The ICT Division secretary said they started drafting the ordinance to prevent a vacuum arising from the repeal of the CSA.

Taiyeb said the ordinance would be turned into an act by the political parties and that they would have the full power to amend and improve the law.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 16, 2025

Constitution reform: Sweeping changes in constitution

Staff Correspondent

Expanding the fundamental rights to include food, clothing, shelter, education, internet, and vote, the Constitution Reform Commission proposes replacing nationalism, socialism, and secularism with equality, human dignity, social justice and pluralism as fundamental principles of state policy.

The only core principle retained from the 1972 constitution is democracy.

The commission also recommends an interim government to conduct elections, a bicameral parliament, two-term limits for the president and prime minister, lowering age limit of MPs to 21 from 25 and a national constitutional council to oversee appointments of constitutional bodies like the Election Commission as well as the chief adviser of the interim government.

The commission said in its recommendations that the five core principles reflect the ideals of the Liberation War of 1971 as well as the aspirations that emerged from the mass uprising of 2024. The commission recommended deletion of articles 8, 9, 10, and 12, which expanded on the key principles.

Led by Prof Ali Riaz, the commission also proposed to strike out articles 7A and 7B that barred constitutional amendments, which now have to be carried with two-thirds majority in both houses followed by a referendum.

The commission recommends calling the nation "Bangladeshis" instead of the previous "Bengalees" and further proposes recognition of mother tongues of all Bangladeshis as common or traditional languages. Bangla will remain the state language as before.

The commission advocates expanding the scope of fundamental rights and ensuring their constitutional protection through a comprehensive charter merging the second and third sections of the constitution to form a new charter on "fundamental rights and liberty". Thus, the right to food, education,

healthcare or the right to vote will become enforceable in a court of law.

The commission recommends a bicameral legislature with a 400-seat lower house, or the National Assembly, and a 105-seat upper house or the Senate. The tenure of both houses are set at four years. Of the 400 assembly members elected directly, 100 will be reserved for women.

Political parties will be required to nominate at least 10 percent candidates in the lower house from among the youth. The minimum age to run in the elections will be reduced to 21 years from the existing 25.

There will be two deputy speakers with one coming from the opposition.

The recommendations stipulate that a member of parliament can only hold the post of prime minister or the leader of the house or the party chief at the same time.

Modifying, the much discussed article 70, the commission recommends that parliamentarians be allowed to vote against party line except finance bills.

To strengthen parliamentary watchdogs, the commission proposes that the standing committees be always led by members of the opposition.

The Senate will consist of 105 members, of whom 100 will be determined by the proportion of votes in the national election.

Political parties will nominate up to 100 Senate candidates of whom at least 5 will have to include representatives of marginalised communities.

The remaining 5 seats will be filled by presidential nominees who are not members of either house or affiliated with any political party.

A political party must secure at least 1 percent of the total votes in the national election to be eligible for representation in the Senate.

The Senate speaker will be elected by a simple majority from among its members.

There will be one deputy speaker elected from the opposition.

The commission recommends a National Constitutional Council (NCC) to ensure transparency and accountability in state

functions and establish balance among the branches and institutions of the state.

This council will include representatives from all the three branches of the state. Council members will be the president, the prime minister, the leader of the opposition, the speakers of both houses, the chief justice, one deputy speaker of the National Assembly from the opposition, and the Senate deputy speaker, and one member elected by members of both houses, who do not belong to either the ruling party or the main opposition.

This council will remain in office even after dissolution of the parliament until the chief adviser of the interim government (charged to conduct national election) takes the oath. During the absence of the legislature, the NCC will consist of the following members: the president, the chief adviser, the chief justice, and two members of the advisory council nominated by the chief adviser.

The commission recommends the appointment of an interim government to conduct elections and remain in office until the next elected government takes oath.

The interim government's head, the chief adviser, will have to be appointed either 15 days before the expiry of the assembly or within 15 days of dissolution of the assembly.

The reform proposals lay down elaborate provisions for the appointment of a chief adviser for the interim government.

There are seven options for the appointment that the constitutional council will prioritise sequentially as laid out. The first option, requiring seven of the commission's nine votes, is to appoint any individual who is not in the commission. If that is not possible, the commission may resort to the second option, requiring six votes out of nine, to appoint any former chief justice or any former judge of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court. If that is not possible then, the commission may, with unanimous agreement, appoint the president as the chief adviser. Failing that, the commission may then appoint the last retired chief justice as the head of interim government.

However, if the former top judge who retired last, declines, then the commission will have to approach the one who retired immediately before and work backwards. If none of the former chief justices are available or if all of them decline the appointment, then the commission will consider the last retired Appellate Division judge and failing that work backwards till they find one willing to shoulder the responsibility.

The chief adviser will carry out functions through an advisory council not exceeding 15 members.

The president will be elected by a majority vote of the electoral college, comprising each member of both houses, 64 district coordination councils and every city corporation coordination council.

The president's term will also be limited to four years with a two-term limit.

The commission also proposes the same term limit for the prime minister whether they are consecutive or not.

The commission has recommended decentralising the judiciary in an attempt to make justice more accessible. Proposals include a unitary structure of the Supreme Court while establishing permanent High Court benches in all divisional centres.

The commission emphasised the importance of a strong local government system and recommended a Local Government Commission. It also suggested coordination councils in the districts and metropolitan centres.

The commission recommends dedicating sections of the constitution elaborating on five constitutional commissions, namely the Human Rights Commission, Election Commission, Public Service Commission, Local Government Commission, and Anti-Corruption Commission.

The commission further recommends that the structure, appointment, tenure, and removal processes for all these commissions be identical. The tenure of each commission is set at four years.

The constitution commission recommends deletion of the constitutional provision that stipulates inclusion of Bangabandhu Sheikh

Mujibur Rahman's speech of March 7, 1971, his declaration of independence and the proclamation of independence, which are included in the 5th, 6th and 7th schedules respectively.

The recommendations empower the president to declare a state of emergency only upon the decision of the NCC. The commission believes that during a state of emergency, no citizens' rights should be revoked or suspended, and the right to access the courts should not be suspended either.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 17, 2025

Reform proposals: Major parties taking time to react

Md Abbas

Two leftist political parties have voiced strong criticism of the proposed changes to the fundamental principles in the preamble to the constitution.

Some of the proposals, however, have been received positively by these parties.

Meanwhile, the BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, Jatiya Nagorik Committee, and Ganosamhati Andolan have refrained from commenting on the proposals, saying that they would first deliberate on the recommendations within their respective party forums before making any public statements.

Ruhin Hossain Prince, general secretary of the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), said anyone could present their recommendations for amending the constitution. "But the question is, who will be eligible to amend the constitution? Only an elected government can amend it. With deep anger and grief, we have seen that the Constitution Reform Commission has proposed some recommendations that are not acceptable," he said.

Additionally, he said, removing the three fundamental principles -- nationalism, socialism, and secularism -- achieved through the Liberation War, would be an offence.

"During the drafting of the constitution in 1972, our party informed the committee about some inconsistencies, which were retained while amending the constitution at different times. We will engage in discussions

on these matters, but only if the fundamental principles remain untouched," he said.

Regarding the other proposals, he said the CPB believes the government is wasting time on such matters.

"The primary responsibility of this government is to prepare for the national election and transfer power to an elected government. People are not interested in discussing these proposals right now. Instead, they are demanding security for their lives and property, as well as control over the prices of daily essentials. These are the issues that need to be addressed at this moment," Ruhin added.

Saiful Huq, general secretary of the Biplobi Workers Party, said they supported some proposals that align with their 31-point agenda.

However, his party disagrees with the proposal to remove the three fundamental principles, and it believes secularism should be retained.

Regarding the proposed change to Bangladesh's official name, he said further discussion is needed.

Saiful also said his party views positively the Constitution Reform Commission's proposal to expand fundamental rights and liberties, emphasising that no civilised country should enact laws that curtail citizens' rights.

The politician expressed concerns about the proposal to lower the minimum age for becoming an MP from 25 to 21, describing it as "suicidal".

He said many believe this provision is intended to give benefits to students involved in the Anti-discrimination Student Movement and youths currently forming political parties.

His party believes 21-year-olds may lack the knowledge and experience necessary for such responsibilities, as many would still be completing their education at that age.

Saiful, however, welcomed the proposal for the National Constitutional Council and called for a clear definition of the interim government's powers as proposed by the commission.

His party also advocated for a provision in the constitution to ensure the interim government is held accountable during its tenure and after transferring power to the elected government.

Saiful criticised the recommendation to exclude Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's March 7, 1971 speech, his declaration of independence, and the proclamation of independence, which were included in the 5th, 6th, and 7th schedules, respectively.

He said these must remain parts of the constitution.

Zonayed Saki, chief coordinator of Ganosamhati Andolan, said the government would discuss the recommendations with political parties to reach a consensus.

"After thoroughly analysing the proposals, we will provide our opinions to the government," he said, declining to comment further.

When contacted, three standing committee members of the BNP declined to comment before discussing the proposals within their party forum.

"We will clarify our position on the proposals of the Constitution Reform Commission after holding discussions in our party forum," Iqbal Hasan Mahmood Tuku, one of the three, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Jamaat-e-Islami Secretary General Mia Golam Parwar also told this newspaper they would not comment on the proposals before discussing these within their party forum.

He said the Jamaat had requested the government to hold discussions on the proposals with political parties and stakeholders, and they would provide their opinions during the talks.

Nasiruddin Patwary, convener of the Jatiya Nagarik Committee, said that his organisation would refrain from commenting until the full proposals of the commission were released.

"We will provide our formal opinions through a press release once the commission submits its complete report," he told the newspaper.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 18, 2025

Reform commission reports: Proposals seek to bring youths into JS

Mohiuddin Alamgir

Reform commissions on the constitution and election process have both recommended measures that increase opportunities for the youth to run for parliament and become more involved in politics, sparking both hope and criticism.

While the constitution commission suggested lowering the minimum age for aspiring lawmakers from the existing 25 years to 21, both commissions have recommended that political parties reserve a tenth of their nominations for youth and other disadvantaged groups.

"Political parties shall nominate candidates from among the youth for a minimum of 10 percent of the total seats in the lower house," said the constitution commission.

The electoral commission suggested reserving 10 percent nominations for youths, religious and ethnic minorities, and people with physical disabilities.

Meanwhile, the Police Reform Commission proposed creating job opportunities for injured protesters from the July uprising in various government agencies, including the police. The Anti-Corruption Commission recommended involving the youth in anti-corruption awareness programmes.

However, several political parties, including the BNP, expressed concerns over the recommendation to lower the minimum age for MP candidates. They claimed it could "favour" a potential political party to be formed by the Students Against Discrimination, which spearheaded the July uprising, and its platform for citizens the Jatiya Nagorik Committee.

On the other hand, leaders of the Nagorik Committee welcomed the proposal, emphasising the need to acknowledge the youth's contributions, particularly during the mass uprising that created an opportunity to reshape political culture.

"The reform commissions made these proposals to ensure greater participation of the youth and other marginalised groups in politics. The youth played a vital role in freeing the country from an autocratic rule," said the head of the Electoral Reform Commission, Badiul Alam Majumdar.

Professor Ali Riaz, head of the Constitution Reform Commission, said the recommendations were made considering the demographics of the country, where a significant portion of the population is young. He said the youth of Bangladesh have immense contributions and the recent student-led mass uprising was a prime example.

"Youths shape the future of the country, so we must expand opportunities for their participation in politics. Their involvement will bring new ideas and perspectives," he added.

The interim government formed 15 reform commissions to strengthen weakened democratic institutions, establish a state system rooted in public ownership, accountability and welfare, and lead the country toward genuine democracy.

Four commissions--on constitution, electoral system, police and anti-corruption--submitted their reports to Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus on Wednesday.

The constitution commission also proposed a bicameral legislature--"National Assembly" as lower house with 400 members and "Senate" as upper house with 105 seats.

Of the senators, 100 will be elected through a proportional representation of the national election for the assembly. The remaining five will be nominated by the president from among people without any political affiliations.

The constitution commission suggested a lowering age floor for the lower house but did not mention anything about the upper house. The electoral commission, however, recommended a minimum age of 35 to be eligible for the upper house. It further stipulated that all senators have a bachelor's degree.

The electoral commission proposes to prohibit associate organisations of the main parties that only act as their extensions. In other words, none of the parties would be allowed to have separate student wings or youth fronts under any guise.

Another criteria to be eligible for an MP nomination is a minimum three years' membership in the party.

Currently, The Representation of the People Order clearly states that political parties are now allowed to have affiliated student, teacher and labour organisations. But most of the political parties bypass the provisions as they termed their student and labour bodies as "friendly" organisations.

BNP Standing Committee Member Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain said the party would make detailed comments after reviewing the proposals.

"But what I can say right now is that people are criticising the move to lower the age for lawmakers and reserving 10 percent nominations for youths," he said.

He said that the current minimum age is widely accepted. "So many are suspicious why this move is being taken now."

"The interim government is party neutral and if this government goes ahead with such proposals, it will seem to be supporting a specific group, and people will not accept it," he said.

He pointed out that there is contradiction between the proposals of the constitution commission and the electoral commission.

Typically, 21-year-olds are still university students, but then the electoral reform commission prohibits parties to have student wings, he said.

Communist Party of Bangladesh General Secretary Ruhin Hossain Prince said that the party will come out with its official reaction soon, after reviewing the recommendations. But lowering the age to 21 is "unnecessary".

"They can urge political parties to have 10 percent candidates from youth groups. Many political parties always try to have new and young faces but you cannot make it mandatory. And also, who will define youth?"

He said that such a sudden proposal to reduce the age for candidacy without properly evaluating the society or reality has given rise to "many questions among the countrymen".

"Many believe that this move was to serve the purposes of vested quarters, who are making questionable comments regarding the

Liberation War and its spirit after the mass uprising," Prince said.

Saiful Huq, general secretary of the Biplobi Workers Party, expressed concerns about the proposal to lower the minimum age for becoming an MP, describing it as "suicidal".

He said many believe this provision is intended to benefit students involved with the Students Against Discrimination and the Jatiya Nagorik Committee.

His party believes 21-year-olds may lack the knowledge and experience necessary for such responsibilities, as many would still be completing their education at that age.

Samanta Sharmeen, spokesperson for the Jatiya Nagorik Committee, said youths have struggled for long, and made sacrifices and played pivotal roles in all kinds of turmoil and crisis.

"But their contribution was never acknowledged sufficiently. Different political parties turned youths into political cadres and instituted politics of mafia. We stood against this culture. The recent mass upsurge has shown that youths have developed themselves as matured in politics," she said.

"We congratulate them [reform commissions] as they have made such recommendations and acknowledge that youths should be involved in mainstream politics."

Political culture should be changed, so that youths get priority in the political process rather than be used as muscle.

The Nagorik Committee in their proposals to the constitution commission said 18-year-olds should become eligible to run for MP as soon as they become eligible to vote.

Typically, the age floors are higher for the upper house of the parliament across the world.

Both India and Nepal have the same age requirements for their lower and upper houses, which is 25 for the lower house and 35 for the upper house. In Pakistan, it is 25 and 30 years. In the US, the minimum age for the lower house is 25, and for the upper house, it is 30.

However, in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Cuba, France, Canada, the UK and Sweden it is 18 for the parliament or their lower house. In

Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam, MPs must be 21.

As for the upper houses, it is 21 for UK, 24 for France, and 30 years for Malaysia and Canada.

Asked about the definition of youth, Ali Riaz said there is an international standard and the age for youth will be defined through a law. Again, political parties can also fix their definition.

The United Nations defines those aged between 15 and 24 as "youth".

According to the National Youth Policy of Bangladesh, any citizen between 18 and 35 is considered youth.

Asked whether their proposals were made to favour the political party to be formed by the student platforms, Ali Riaz said, "I want to say clearly, giving benefit to a political party or possible political parties, was never our consideration."

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 18, 2025

An analysis of the constitutional reform proposal

Dr Shamsad Mortuza

"Politics is too serious a matter to be left to the politicians"—Charles de Gaulle, a French military officer-turned-statesman who led the resistance against the Nazis during World War II, famously said what has now become a truism. Earlier, another Frenchman, a physician-turned-journalist-turned politician named Georges Clemenceau, quipped, "War is too important to be left to the generals." Clemenceau, who later became the prime minister of France, was referring to the successive defeats of the military during World War I and asserted the influence of the national assembly for the eventual formation of the Third Republic. The French connection between the two statesmen implies a rejection of the professionals or experts dedicated in the field. Instead of assigning the tasks of war and politics, two important facets of national life, to the so-called experts, both Clemenceau and de Gaulle wanted various stakeholders in formulating strategies for national life.

The nine-member Constitutional Reform Commission, headed by Prof Ali Riaz, has

recommended significant changes to our current constitution. There are academics, activists, lawyers, and writers in the team. Notable exclusions are the politicians who birthed the constitution and brought 17 different changes over the last five decades. The interim government formed the commission to reflect the wind of change through which the former government was ousted. It felt that the different provisions within the constitution compromised its democratic spirit and allowed the premier to turn into an autocrat. Whether the recommended changes can be implemented by the incumbent administration before the parliamentary election or by the incoming government after the election is a legal debate that needs to be sorted. But more importantly, the commission's report has brought many of the inherent contradictions and inconsistencies within the constitution to the surface. Some of them were due to the Cold War realpolitik that conditioned our independence; socialism is a case in point. Many others were due to the self-serving interests and agendas of various governments.

The country's four guiding principles for state governance—nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism—have been replaced by democracy, equality, human dignity, social justice, and pluralism. The essence of socialism can easily be subsumed under equality and social justice. The omission is thereby understandable. The contention lies in the removal of two categories: nationalism and secularism. The commission evidently tried to include them in their broad categorisation of citizenship and pluralism.

They redefined the term citizenship, replacing the existing Article 6 (2), "The people of Bangladesh are a nation of Bengalis," with "The citizens of Bangladesh will be known as 'Bangladeshis.'" This allows the commission to avoid Bangalee nationalism that worked as a mantra during our Liberation War. The proposed category of citizenship does not necessitate distinguishing citizens in terms of their ethnic

groups. But the brute force with which some citizens from the hill tracts were beaten up for demanding their "Indigenous" status just recently shows that equality is a far cry if we don't truly practise pluralism.

Yet, countries from where the bicameral parliamentary model has been suggested recognise their Indigenous population as "First Nations." The special status is a way to integrate the marginal groups into the mainstream. Even from a geostrategic perspective, it is important for us to restore calm and peace in our hinterland that has been targeted by major stakeholders and neighbours with separatist agendas.

The committee head mentioned that they worked day and night for months under the image of Abu Sayeed and remained mindful of the sacrifices made by the students and members of the general public during the July uprising. The Proclamation of Independence on April 10, 1971 embodied their guiding spirit of anti-discrimination. I think the committee cherry-picked the three terms—equality, human dignity, and social justice—to create a counternarrative that cursorily mentions the Liberation War and equates it with the July uprising.

It concluded by observing, "We, the people of Bangladesh, who, in the continuity of the historical struggle for the liberation of this land, achieved independence through people's war and united against autocratic and fascist rule for the establishment of democracy, solemnly pledge, in utmost respect for the martyrs who sacrificed their lives, that the ideals of equality, human dignity, and social justice that inspired the people of Bangladesh in the Liberation War of 1971, and the ideals of democracy and anti-discrimination that united us against fascist rule in 2024, will be established in the state and society."

The whimsical interpretation of the term "*projatontro*" echoes the sweeping statement. The commission head has mentioned his reservation against the Bangla term for "Republic" in various forums. He did not pay heed to many observers who reminded that there was nothing wrong with the term,

despite its shadowy connotation of being subject to a sovereign monarch. The commission head uses a royal "we" to say that they would like to see "Republic" and "People's Republic of Bangladesh" replaced with "Citizenship" and "People's Democratic Bangladesh" in all relevant sections of the constitution. In Bangla, they used the coinage "*jono-gono nagorikontro*."

I don't see any reason as to why "*projatontro*," a widely understood term that conveys the idea of people's rule or governance by the people, needs to be changed. The Latin root of the word implies "public affairs," and in Chinese it means "shared harmony." The commission has unnecessarily rooted itself in semantics. May I also remind the commission of the financial, administrative, and logistical costs involved in changing the name of the country? Delivering democratic governance and reforms that benefit the people should be the priority at this point in time. The symbolic or semantic debates will hardly do us any good.

The seven key proposals made by the commission include: adoption of the new guiding principles for the constitution and the state; establishment of institutional balance of power; reduction of the absolute power of the office of the prime minister; clear proposals for the structure of the interim government; decentralisation of the judiciary; ensuring a robust local government system; and expansion of fundamental rights, with constitutional protection and enforceability. They all deserve serious attention.

Then again, we have hit the walls of legitimacy as we have yet to determine whether it is within the mandate of the interim government to bring such changes. A referendum is required before the foundational terms of the state or the structure of governance are altered. This could lead to legal challenges, public discontent, and long-term instability. Indeed, the commission might believe that drastic changes are too crucial to leave to the politicians. Then another republic may soon arise with an alternative dictum to dismiss the one that has been proposed. Such

knowledge is too dangerous to be left with the academics.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 21, 2025

Current dynamics of the economy, reform and elections

Dr Fahmida Khatun

The student-led mass movement in July-August 2024 marked a significant turning point in Bangladesh's sociopolitical and economic history. This movement emerged in response to widespread grievances among people from all walks of life. Unemployment reached alarming levels, leaving millions of youth disenchanted and directionless. Under the false narrative of a growth miracle, economic discrimination further deepened societal divides, with wealth concentrated in the hands of a few while the majority struggled to make ends meet. The absence of democracy was palpable, with limited opportunities for citizens to express their choices through free and fair elections. Fundamental rights, including freedom of speech, were systematically curtailed, fostering an environment of fear and suppression. Corruption was pervasive across all levels of governance, eroding public trust and stifling economic, social, and political progress.

In the wake of the movement, an interim government was formed amid high expectations from all quarters. It was entrusted with the dual responsibilities of steering the nation towards economic stability and implementing political and institutional reforms. However, that journey has been fraught with challenges.

Political parties wholeheartedly supported the interim government and displayed prudence by appreciating its efforts to address the country's accumulated problems over decades. However, as time progresses, some have called for the national election as soon as possible as the reform process continues simultaneously. The students— aspiring to form their political entity and participate in the upcoming national election—favour delaying elections until substantial reforms are implemented. It is widely believed that students desperately

need time to organise their parties, which has so far proven to be tough for them. Many citizens, who have had enough of the defective and dysfunctional political system that gave rise to autocracy and rampant corruption undermining all rights, also want the election after substantive reforms.

Several reform commissions were established to chart a path towards a democratic and just society. Their recommendations addressed critical issues, including constitutional, electoral, anti-corruption, and police reforms. Other commissions are also set to place their recommendations to the chief adviser. However, implementing these recommendations requires political consensus and commitment—a daunting task given the divergence of positions on reforms and the interests of political parties.

The proposals of some commissions, particularly those regarding the constitutional reform, have given rise to many discussions as to which proposal recommendations should be included and which should not. Removing secularism as a pillar of the constitution, reducing the minimum age of election candidates to 21 years, and introducing a two-tier parliament with a national assembly and senate are some of the issues that sparked debates, reflecting the diverse perspectives within the nation. Such debates are healthy and can contribute to refining the proposals. Moreover, as reform is a continuous process, there should always be opportunities for improvement.

A close observation of the current discussions of reforms and elections in Bangladesh reveals that some are trying to sequence these two crucial tasks: reforms first, then the election. But in reality, the interplay between reforms and elections cannot be phased. Reform and elections are not mutually exclusive—both can be pursued in parallel. Reform is a prolonged and iterative process. It is also an ongoing endeavour that spans years, even decades. Elections, on the other hand, provide a mechanism for citizens to express their choices and hold leaders accountable. Hence, discussions that implicitly suggest that reforms should only be

done after the national election don't hold water. This reminds us of the futile debate by Awami League politicians and some intellectuals about development and democracy, aimed at promoting their corrupt development model and undermining the importance of democracy.

Amid the political complexities, economic challenges have persisted. Inflation remained high at 10.89 percent in December 2024, eroding the ordinary citizens' purchasing power. Private and foreign investment stagnated due to an unfavourable business environment. Investor uncertainty about the political situation remains high. The tax-GDP ratio, a critical indicator of fiscal health, remained dismally low at less than eight percent, while the implementation of the Annual Development Programme (ADP) lagged behind targets. Meanwhile, the World Bank has projected that economic growth during the ongoing FY2024-25 will be 4.1 percent. Even without the World Bank's prediction, economists can say that such low growth is not unexpected during a turbulent year when investment and production were low, and severe floods hampered economic activities.

Although an increase in exports and remittances halted the freefall of foreign exchange reserves, the overall volume of forex reserves remained insufficient to support robust import growth. Depreciation of the taka further compounded economic difficulties, raising the cost of imports and hindering investments and production. Meanwhile, the National Board of Revenue (NBR) struggles to meet its revenue collection targets, exacerbating fiscal constraints. Missing the NBR target has persisted for about a decade due to high tax evasions, a narrow tax net, illicit financial flows, and several undue tax exemptions to specific business groups, organisations, and individuals over several years. The perceived fear among the public of complexities and harassment by the tax department, and the lack of adequate services in return for tax contributions, further discourage compliance. The government's limited fiscal space also

curtailed its ability to expand social safety nets for the poor and low-income households, which are most vulnerable to inflationary pressures.

The interim government expanded its responsibilities to encompass a wide array of issues within a limited period. Though, initially, the interim government's tenure was unclear, many felt that an unelected and non-political government consisting of well-meaning but inexperienced people—some of whom ran non-government organisations (NGOs) while others were senior retired bureaucrats—cannot govern the country for long unless backed by the military. Along with political uncertainty and economic challenges, the law and order situation weakened and must be improved to ensure people's safety. Rent-seeking, corruption, bribes, and administrative hassles have not disappeared either.

Although public expectations for the interim government have been initially high, it is evident that patience is waning due to the slow pace of progress on these pressing issues.

Uncertainty about the fate of reform proposals is also a critical issue. A national consensus commission, led by the chief adviser, plans to engage with political parties and stakeholders to identify areas of consensus and recommend actions. This is critical since the reform agenda will have to be implemented by the elected government. However, concerns over the implementation of reform proposals remain. Will the elected government accept reform recommendations fully or partially? What if the elected government sets aside the reform proposals altogether and designs its reform agenda conveniently? What will be the oversight and accountability mechanism for implementing reforms?

While the interim government's intention to tackle political and economic challenges is commendable, the task appears daunting. Striking a balance between the demands of reform, the organisation of a free and fair election, and economic recovery has thus far proven to be a formidable challenge for it.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 21, 2025
90-day interim govt proposed to oversee polls

Md Abbas

The Constitution Reform Commission has proposed an interim government system to oversee elections and outlined a comprehensive framework for the selection of this government's chief.

The interim government, commonly known as a caretaker government, will take over after parliament is dissolved, and ensure a smooth transition to a newly elected government. It will remain in office until the next elected government takes oath, according to the commission's proposal.

The head of the election-time government will be referred to as chief adviser. The appointment of the chief adviser will have to be finalised either 15 days before the expiry of the current assembly or within 15 days of its dissolution, recommended the reform commission, which submitted its report to Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus on January 15.

The tenure of this government would be 90 days. However, if the national election is held before the time frame (90 days), the tenure would expire soon after the prime minister of the newly elected government is sworn in.

The commission made another suggestion of forming a National Constitutional Council (NCC) to handle appointments of constitutional bodies like the Anti-Corruption Commission and Election Commission, and the three chiefs of army, navy, and air force.

The NCC will also appoint the chief adviser of the interim government for which the reform commission outlined a detailed procedure.

The first option is to select a suitable citizen of Bangladesh, provided that seven out of nine members of the NCC vote in favour. However, none of the NCC members will be eligible for the post of chief adviser.

If the first option is not feasible, the council may opt to appoint a former chief justice or a former judge of the Supreme Court's Appellate Division. This decision requires the support of six of the council's nine members.

If the council fails to agree on either of the two options, the president may be appointed as the chief adviser, but only if the council reaches a unanimous agreement.

If these options are not materialised, the last retired chief justice will be considered for the role of the chief adviser.

If the last retired chief justice declines, the council will sequentially approach previously retired chief justices in reverse order of their retirement until a willing candidate is identified.

If none of the former chief justices accepts the appointment, the council will then consider the most recently retired judge from the Supreme Court's Appellate Division. The council will continue to work backwards until it finds a suitable and willing candidate.

The chief adviser will be supported by an advisory council that must not exceed 15 members. This advisory council will work collectively to ensure that the interim government fulfils its primary mandate of conducting free, fair, and impartial polls.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Prof Ali Riaz, head of the Constitution Reform Commission, said, "The recommendation for the formation of the caretaker government aims to appoint a chief of the interim government who is acceptable to all."

He added that the proposal also aims to ensure the participation of all stakeholders so that the government alone cannot unilaterally impose decisions regarding the interim government's formation.

Additionally, the process would ensure that the opposition's stake is recognised and upheld during the formation, he said.

The reform commission emphasised that the selection of advisers for the interim government should not rest solely with any individual or single institution. Instead, this critical responsibility should be entrusted to the NCC, as proposed by the commission, Prof Riaz opined.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 25, 2025
What should we expect from a national constitutional council?

Barrister Khan Khalid Adnan

The Constitutional Reform Commission submitted its report to Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus on January 15, proposing a number of recommendations to bring significant changes to the constitution of Bangladesh. Among the most notable recommendations is the creation of a constitutional body called the National Constitutional Council (NCC). The goal of forming this body is to establish checks and balances among constitutional organs, preventing the concentration of power in any single individual or institution. The recommendation is rooted in Bangladesh's recent experience with 15-plus years of authoritarian rule, during which the constitution was repeatedly misused to suppress dissent. The proposed NCC is expected to curtail the prime minister's extensive powers, restore institutional balance, and oversee the formation of interim governments.

The concept of NCC appears to draw inspiration from constitutional councils in other jurisdictions, which serve as guardians of constitutional principles. Originating in France, the idea of a constitutional council has parallels with, but differs from, the constitutional court model found in countries like South Africa and Colombia. A few nations have adopted the constitutional council framework. For instance, it is viewed as a quasi-political entity in Cameroon, a fully political body in France, and a body composed of senior public officials in Cambodia. Within South Asia, Sri Lanka and Nepal have implemented similar models. In Nepal, the constitutional council primarily focuses on recommending appointments to constitutional positions, promoting gender and inclusive representation, and formulating guidelines for nominations. However, the council in Nepal has faced criticism for partisan decision-making and difficulties in achieving consensus. The requirement for majority approval in a politically fragmented environment often leads to delays in appointments. While recent amendments have aimed to enhance procedural transparency, they have also sparked

allegations of increasing executive dominance.

Given that Bangladesh's constitution, under Article 102, already vests extensive judicial review powers in the High Court Division, which includes the authority to interpret the constitution and review executive actions, adopting the NCC model instead of a constitutional court seems prudent. The NCC would not have judicial functions, but would complement the judiciary's robust review powers, making it a sensible and promising approach.

The proposed composition of the NCC is noteworthy, bringing together representatives from various constitutional organs. It includes the president, the prime minister, the leader of the opposition, speakers of both houses of parliament, the chief justice, deputy speakers from both houses nominated by the opposition, and one member elected by a majority vote of all legislators, excluding the prime minister, the opposition leader and their party members. In coalition governments, this additional member would be elected by members of coalition parties, excluding the prime minister's party. If parliament is dissolved, the NCC would continue functioning, consisting of the president, the chief adviser, the chief justice, and two advisory council members chosen by the chief adviser. This representative structure mirrors aspects of constitutional councils in Nepal (Article 284) and Sri Lanka (Article 41A). The Sri Lankan model highlights the inclusion of civil society members to minimise political influence in the appointment process. In contrast, the composition of the proposed NCC does not incorporate this feature, setting it apart from the Sri Lankan model in this regard.

Additionally, the NCC would remain operational during interim governments and periods when the parliament is dissolved. This continuous operation is designed to address extraordinary constitutional crises, such as the one triggered by the abrupt departure of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on August 5, 2024 amid widespread protests. The NCC's ongoing presence would

enable it to manage unforeseen constitutional challenges effectively.

The NCC would play a pivotal role in appointing individuals to significant constitutional positions. It would advise the president on appointments to key roles, including the chief election commissioner and other election commissioners, the attorney general and additional attorney generals, the chairpersons and members of the Public Service Commission, Anti-Corruption Commission, and National Human Rights Commission, as well as the chiefs of the defence forces and other positions prescribed by law. This advisory role would limit the scope of Article 48 (3), which currently requires the president to act on the prime minister's advice in these appointments. By reducing the prime minister's unilateral authority, the NCC would introduce greater transparency and promote democratic practices. This mechanism is similar to the appointment roles of constitutional councils in Nepal and Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the NCC would be responsible for selecting advisers for interim governments formed after the dissolution of parliament.

For Bangladesh, establishing the NCC has the potential to strengthen democratic institutions and address systemic governance challenges. Functioning as a quasi-political entity rather than a judicial body, the NCC could serve as a constitutional guardian, similar to the role of constitutional councils in other nations. Entrusted with upholding and preserving constitutional principles, the NCC has the potential to enhance governance and reinforce democracy in the country.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 25, 2025

'72 constitution an obstacle to multi-party democracy

Staff Correspondent

It is not possible to have a multi-party democracy under the 1972 constitution, said Nasir Uddin Patwary, convener of the Jatiya Nagorik Committee, yesterday.

"We want a constitution, formed through a constituent assembly, that will ensure fascism can never return to this country," Nasir said

at a rally titled "March for Unity and Justice" in the capital.

The rally, organised by the private university unit of Anti-Discrimination Student Movement, took place in front of the National Museum. Participants called for the recognition of the July mass uprising and justice for those killed during the movement.

"In order to resolve the country's crisis, we must unite and move towards elections for a constituent assembly. The constitution that emerges from the assembly must honour the sacrifices of the workers who were martyred during the 2024 mass uprising, as well as the voices of mothers and women," Nasir added.

He said that anyone attempting to obstruct the reform process or the trial of those responsible for the July massacre would face a fate similar to that of Sheikh Hasina.

"Our co-fighters from private universities, the hills, and the plains -- let us unite. Let us move away from the one-party constitution of Mujibism and march towards a constitution that accommodates multiple parties," Nasir said.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 19, 2025

65pc people want local polls before nat'l election

Staff Correspondent

Sixty-five percent of the people favour local government elections before the next national polls under the interim government, a Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics study has found.

The study also found 70 percent of the people support non-partisan local gov

ernment elections, compared to 28 percent who prefer local elections to be partisan.

The state statistics agency conducted the National Public Opinion Survey on Electoral Reforms at the request of the Electoral Reform Commission.

Conducted from December 20–22, the survey on 46,080 households picked one adult (18 or older) respondent per household. Published on Friday, the study is available on the reform commission's website.

Badiul Alam Majumdar, chief of the commission, said the survey was meant to

gauge people's opinions about elections and related issues.

He said the commission made its recommendations for the Election Commission based on these opinions, besides the members' experience.

The report has come when major political parties, including the BNP and its allies, have said they are against holding local government polls before the national election. BNP Standing Committee member Iqbal Hasan Mahmud Tuku said the interim government was supposed to hold a national election, but it was making "noise" about local polls.

As far as he knows, Tuku said, local government elections have never been held under an interim government except during the Ayub Khan regime before independence. Questioning the intention behind bringing up the local election issue at this time, Tuku accused the government of focusing on reforms instead of election, law and order, and rising prices of daily necessities, which he said was worsening public sufferings.

On January 8, Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus said the interim government is simultaneously preparing for national and local body elections.

The Jatiya Nagorik Committee, however, is in favour of holding the local government elections before the parliamentary polls, its central executive member Alauddin Mohammad said at a press briefing on January 11.

STUDY AT A GLANCE

In the study, about 74 percent of the respondents said they believe there is a risk of autocracy's resurgence if politics continues to be driven by business interests instead of public welfare.

Regarding the so-called nomination business, 48 percent of the respondents believe that the political parties and their candidates should stop this practice, while 44 percent think the responsibility of nominating candidates should lie with the public.

The survey showed that 68 percent of the citizens prefer a non-partisan president, while around 29 percent were in favour.

About 83 percent of the people favour direct voting to elect the president while 13 percent believe MPs should elect the president.

About 47 percent of the respondents favour appointing the Election Commission's own officials as returning officers, while 44 percent said deputy commissioners can hold the posts.

Nearly four out of every five people or 78 percent of the people surveyed during the study said re-election should be held if voter turnout is less than half the constituents.

The same number of respondents favour a new election with a new set of candidates, if the "No" vote option wins.

About 74 percent are in favour of increasing the number of seats for women in parliament and prefer a direct election for these seats.

About 91 percent support punishment of election commissioners if they fail to perform constitutional duties properly. And 79 percent of the people believe executive should take the EC's permission before taking any action that can influence elections.

Around 89 percent favour scrutiny of candidates' affidavits.

More than 63 percent are against political parties having separate student wings.

Also, 50 percent are opposed to political parties having branches abroad while 42 percent are in favour. There is also overwhelming support, 87 percent, for introducing electronic voting on a trial basis for expatriates.

Human Rights

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 18, 2025

Bangladesh needs lasting reforms to stop abuses: HRW

Staff Correspondent

Lasting reforms will be needed in Bangladesh to stop abuses, with the interim government led by Nobel Laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus pledging accountability and credible elections, Human Rights Watch (HRW) said in its "World Report 2025".

"Bangladesh's interim government has taken significant strides toward a democratic and rights-respecting future, but its progress could evaporate without deep institutional reform and international support," said

Meenakshi Ganguly, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

"The interim government needs to protect Rohingya refugees, support credible investigations and reparations for enforced disappearances, and provide for civilian oversight over security forces," she said in a media release on the HRW website.

For the 546-page World Report, in its 35th edition, released on Thursday, HRW reviewed human rights practices in more than 100 countries.

In the report, HRW said Bangladesh's interim government has set up a commission to investigate enforced disappearances and pledged reforms and accountability for rights abuses under former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian rule.

During the crackdowns on student-led protests over three weeks in July and August, over 1,000 people were killed and many thousands injured due to excessive and indiscriminate use of ammunition by security forces, the report said.

However, activists have raised concerns that security forces have continued to carry out abuses, including arbitrary arrests of opposition supporters and journalists and denying them due process and proper access to legal counsel.

HRW said while the interim government acceded to the United Nations Convention on Enforced Disappearances, security forces have failed to release those unlawfully detained or provide answers to their families about what happened to them.

The HRW report pointed to hundreds of thousands of Rohingya who fled Myanmar and are living in refugee camps are at risk of violence at hands of armed groups and gangs, adding that unregistered refugees risk hunger and do not seek health care out of fear that they will be returned to Myanmar.

HRW said the interim government should reform institutions in line with international human rights standards with the help of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Also, it should disband the "notorious" Rapid Action Battalion, reform security forces to

ensure independent oversight and accountability, and pursue justice for the victims of enforced disappearances and their families, it added.

Moreover, it should also ensure unfettered access for human rights monitors to the Chattogram Hill Tracts and work with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to register Rohingya refugees so that they can access protection, medical care, and food rations.

In the World Report, HRW Executive Director Tirana Hassan writes in her introductory essay that in much of the world last year, governments cracked down and wrongfully arrested and imprisoned political opponents, activists, and journalists.

Armed groups and government forces unlawfully killed civilians, drove many from their homes, and blocked access to humanitarian aid.

In many of the more than 70 national elections in 2024, authoritarian leaders gained ground with their discriminatory rhetoric and policies.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 18, 2025

HRW report: Govt must ensure past abuses are not repeated

Hasan Meer

The publication of Human Rights Watch's World Report 2025 shines a stark light on Bangladesh's human rights landscape. The report outlines the interim government's pledges for accountability and credible elections, while underscoring the need for sweeping reforms to ensure lasting progress. With the international community closely watching, Bangladesh finds itself at a critical juncture in its democratic journey.

The interim government, led by Nobel Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus, has taken steps that signal a break from the authoritarian practices of the previous administration. Notable among these is the establishment of a commission to investigate enforced disappearances and the decision to accede to the UN Convention on Enforced Disappearances. These measures indicate a willingness to address the systemic abuses that marred the country's past.

However, promises alone are insufficient.

Human Rights Watch, in its report (published in this newspaper on January 17), rightly highlights the challenges ahead, particularly the persistent abuses by security forces, arbitrary arrests of opposition supporters, and the absence of meaningful civilian oversight.

These issues remain an albatross around Bangladesh's neck. Without dismantling repressive apparatuses like the Rapid Action Battalion and reforming the security forces to ensure accountability, the nation's progress will remain superficial.

Reforms must go beyond short-term fixes. Building resilient institutions aligned with international human rights standards is essential for a sustainable democratic transition. Transparency and inclusive governance should be the cornerstones of this transformation.

Bangladesh's history of student protests and public resistance demonstrates the resilience of its people. However, the violence during the crackdowns in 2024 serves as a sombre reminder of the cost of unchecked power. The interim government must seize this opportunity to redefine governance in Bangladesh, ensuring that past abuses are not repeated.

Hasan Meer is a journalist at The Daily Star

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 29, 2025

HRW hands over report to CA Yunus

Special Correspondent

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has handed a report on the July Uprising to Chief Adviser Professor Dr Muhammad Yunus, stating that officers had informed them that the ousted Bangladesh dictator, Sheikh Hasina, "directly ordered enforced disappearances and killings."

A HRW delegation led by Elaine Pearson, Asia Director of the world's most respected human rights group, called on Professor Muhammad Yunus and praised the Interim Government for its reform initiatives and efforts to improve the rights situation in the country. "We commend the progress you have made so far," the HRW Asia chief said. Highlighting that establishing rights was the core principle during the July-August

Monsoon Revolution, she said Bangladesh's "ordinary people now realise the importance of human rights" in every sphere of life. HRW recommended the disbanding of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), stating that its officers responsible for killings and enforced disappearances should be held accountable for their crimes. "There needs to be some accountability," she said.

Chief Adviser Professor Yunus lauded the efforts of HRW during Sheikh Hasina's dictatorship, saying its reports over the past 16 years unveiled the widespread crimes committed by the regime. He said the RAB has publicly apologised for its crimes, but the individual officers responsible for extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances should "face trials and be punished." Pearson said the security forces were "politicised" during Sheikh Hasina's 2009-2024 rule, and they acted like ruling "party cadres."

Minorities

Daily Observer, Dhaka, January 17, 2025

Govt condemns attack on ethnic minority students

Observer Online Report

The interim government has strongly condemned Wednesday's attack on a peaceful gathering by a group of ethnic minority students in front of NTCB at Motijheel in the capital.

The government has also ordered an investigation into the attack, and two persons have already been arrested in this connection, Chief Adviser's Deputy Press Secretary Abul Kalam Azad Majumder said on Thursday.

Other perpetrators are being identified and will soon be arrested, he said.

All miscreants will be brought to justice, according to a statement of the interim government.

Imbued in the true spirits of the July mass uprising, the government reiterated in unequivocal terms that there is no place for mob violence, racial hatred, and bigotry in Bangladesh.

The government warns that anyone involved in activities that harm harmony, peace, and law and order shall face stern actions without discrimination, the statement reads.

TF

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 31, 2025

Doing away with 'secularism' to hurt minority rights

Staff Correspondent

Platform for minorities says about proposed removal of 'secularism' from constitution
Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Oikya Parishad yesterday said the proposal to remove secularism from the constitution was unacceptable.

"Excluding secularism is tantamount to opposing religious freedom and denying that discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities exists in the state and society," said Monindro Kumar Nath, acting general secretary of the association.

It means endorsing all forms of communalism and the misuse of religion for political gains and absolving the state of the responsibility to protect the freedom of all religious communities, he said at a press conference at Jatiya Press Club.

According to newspaper reports from August 20, 2024, to December 31, 2024, there were 174 incidents of communal violence, mostly in rural areas. In some of the incidents, multiple families were attacked and affected, he said, reading a written statement

In the 174 incidents, 23 were killed, nine woman were raped, gang-raped or abused, it said.

In 64 of the incidents, places of worship were either vandalised, looted or set on fire.

During the period, 15 people were arrested or assaulted after they were accused of disrespecting religion; in 38 incidents, homes and businesses were either vandalised, looted or set on fire; in 25 incidents, homes, land and businesses were taken over.

The government, instead of taking incidents of communal violence seriously, has adopted a strategy of dismissing them as false, exaggerated, and fabricated reports.

"Regardless of how these ongoing violence are interpreted, the association believes that

since August 4, religious and ethnic minority communities have been targeted in a series of violent attacks. Homes, places of worship, and businesses belonging to minorities have been attacked, vandalised, looted, and set on fire. Crimes such as rape and murder have also been committed," Manindra added.

Minority communities across Bangladesh are living with trauma, he said.

"The government is denying that the violence [happened] by labelling it as politically motivated and failing to arrest the actual perpetrators. As a result, miscreants are getting away with impunity, further endangering the minority communities."

The association then accused the interim government of using state institutions to carry out discriminatory practices against minorities, saying 804 sub-inspectors were dismissed in four phases. On October 21, 2024, of the 321 officers dismissed, 103 were from minority communities. Additionally, of the 55 female officers dismissed, 16 were from minority groups.

The Oikya Parishad termed these actions a violation of country laws and human rights.

On December 15, 25 out of 66 trainee assistant police superintendents were issued show-cause notices, and 21 were later dismissed, including 9 from minority communities. In the 43rd BCS, 227 individuals were dismissed, 82 of whom were from minority communities.

The Oikya Parishad in the statement also criticised the government for prioritising quotas over merit, which goes against the anti-discrimination student movement's slogan.

The association's Organisational Secretary Dipankar Ghosh, President Professor Neem Chandra Bhowmik, Ushatan Talukdar, Nirmal Rozario, and Presidium Member Bhikkhu Sunanda Priyo also spoke.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 19, 2025

40 shrines attacked in over 5 months

Staff Correspondent

At least 40 shrines (mazar, sufi graveyards, dargahs) in the country have been targeted in 44 incidents of attack since August 4 last year,

the government has said, citing police reports.

The incidents included vandalism and attacks on shrines and the devotees, looting of shrine properties, and arson, the Chief Adviser's Press Wing said in a media statement yesterday.

According to the police, the highest number of 17 attacks on shrines was reported in the Dhaka division. Chattogram and Mymensingh divisions saw 10 and seven attacks respectively. Four attacks were carried out on a single shrine in Sherpur under the Mymensingh division.

Legal actions have been taken in all the incidents since the interim government has taken a zero-tolerance policy towards any attacks on shrines, according to the statement.

These actions included the filing of 15 regular cases and 29 general diaries (GDs) with different police stations on receiving complaints from the aggrieved persons or the police's own volition.

A total of 23 suspects have been arrested in those criminal cases. Charge sheets have already been submitted to the court in two regular cases. Investigations in 13 other regular cases and 29 GDs are currently ongoing.

The statement said all police units were ordered to investigate the cases stringently and arrest all those involved in the attacks.

The government has attached the highest importance to the safety and security of the shrines, reads the statement. Police have taken all appropriate measures to ensure the safety and security of the shrines. All the aggrieved persons have been requested to file complaints with the police.

The statement said steps were taken to solve the issues locally by arranging peace meetings with the confronting parties. Programmes were also organised with the participation of the people and Islamic leaders through community policing efforts.

Sri Lanka

Political Developments

Sunday Observer, Colombo, January 26, 2025

Every possible relief given to the people

Govt has ended corrupt political culture –
Tilvin Silva

By Uditha Kumarasinghe

Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) General Secretary Tilvin Silva in an interview with the Sunday Observer shared his perspectives on the current political developments in the country and the Government's way forward. He said during its short tenure in office, the Government has put an end to the corrupt political culture which swindled public funds, creating an administration which is free from fraud and corruption. The people have realised that the Government has fulfilled an enormous task to get the country out of the crisis, giving every possible relief to the people.

Excerpts of the interview

Q: Around five months have passed since President Anura Kumara Dissanayake was elected and around two months since the National People's Power (NPP) Government was set up with a two-thirds majority. In retrospect, what is your assessment of the progress made so far?

A: Our political opponents level criticisms thinking that the NPP Government was formed three to four years ago. This Government was set up two months ago. The people have realised that the Government has fulfilled an enormous task within its short tenure in office. We have worked hard to get the country out of the crisis. On the other hand, some relief measures have been given to the people. The biggest task we made was to end the corrupt political culture which swindled public funds creating an administration which is free from fraud and corruption. We have minimised waste of public funds. We have stopped the practice of politicians being above the people. At present, people don't see any politicians going along with so many security personnel and backup vehicles, and this is a big change.

Our political opponents said that if an NPP Government comes to power, we won't get any foreign assistance or aid and we will lack

international connections. We have practically proven during the past two to three months that the NPP Government has received the highest number of foreign aid and investments. Countries worldwide have accepted that we are a democratic Government, free from fraud and corruption. Therefore, countries such as China, India and many other countries have decided to help us. We have already given much relief to the people and steps were also taken to reduce electricity tariffs. If there are few shortcomings, the Government has done a lot during this short tenure in office.

Q: What are the benefits that the country will gain by the President's recent visits to India and China? How does the Government intend to balance these two giant regional powers without taking anyone's side?

A: We have a good political understanding on their strengths and contradictions between two countries. When the President went to India, he categorically said that we would not allow anything to happen in Sri Lankan territorial waters which would pose any threat to India's national security but we didn't bow down before India. However, we strengthened our bilateral ties with India. India has pledged to extend its support to our digitisation project and poverty eradication drive. In addition, we have obtained nearly a US\$ 400 million loan from India to upgrade our railway signalling system. They have agreed to write it off and turn it into a donation. The President's Chinese visit was also a very fruitful in that 15 MoUs were signed. The biggest was the US\$ 3.7 billion investment in an oil refinery project in Sri Lanka. China has also donated 500 million Yuan which can be used in our projects. Recently, we met a large number of foreign Ambassadors including those from Australia, US and UK and they pledged support to us. They have seriously taken into consideration that the Government has checked violence, racism and created an administration free from fraud and corruption.

Q: Nabbing corrupt persons associated with past regimes was one of the main promises of the NPP Government. Yet, critics say that

apart from a few illegal vehicle assembly cases, no substantial charges have been brought against any politician. What is the reason for the delay?

A: Whoever has committed any wrongdoing, the law will be implemented against them regardless of their positions. Those who made a big hue and cry saying that the culprits are not brought to book, now say that the Government takes revenge against its political opponents. A former Minister of the Kurunegala district was arrested in a case of alleged misappropriation of public funds which had occurred over ten years ago. When that arrest was made, his friends and close associates went before the media and said that the Government has resorted to taking revenge from its opponents. We have given full freedom to the law enforcement authorities to conduct their investigations.

Q: Likewise, there are accusations that this Government also is not making much headway regarding the Easter Sunday attacks' probe and also the killings of journalists such as Lasantha Wickrematunge and the disappearance of journalist Prageeth Eknaligoda under past regimes. What is the reason for this delay?

A: Steps should be taken regarding these incidents. As we all are aware, these are very complex issues because the Governments in power at that time were connected to these incidents. If ordinary citizens had committed such offences, we should have implemented the law against them. The investigations into the Easter Sunday carnage had revealed that some former intelligence and Army officers had also got involved in those incidents and some of that information had been distorted and concealed. However, the investigations are continuing and I hope we will be able to reveal the truth soon.

As for Lasantha Wickrematunge's assassination, the information on those investigations has been distorted. His assassination took place before 2015 and a new Government came to power in 2015 and it didn't take any action in that regard. Then Gotabaya Rajapaksa Government came to power in 2019 and they took every possible

measure to distort and conceal that evidence. Amid these hardships, we will continue investigations and hope we could bring all those culprits who were connected to those crimes to book.

Q: Reducing the Cost of Living was a main campaign plank of the NPP and indeed, the Government has managed to bring down power tariffs. However, it has not substantially reduced fuel prices. What is the reason for this?

A: The Government has given a 20 percent reduction in electricity tariffs to consumers and 30 percent to industries. Accordingly, the rates of all services and industries should come down and we will monitor that closely. We have given a series of relief measures to the poorer segment of the society. The amount of money given under the Aswesuma program and its beneficiaries has been increased. In addition, nearly 1.3 million children have been given an allowance of Rs.6,000 each to purchase school stationery while Rs.60 provided for a preschool student on meal has been increased up to Rs.100. A fuel price formula was introduced earlier and the state monopoly of distributing fuel was given up in the recent past.

The distribution of fuel was also given to Sinopec and IOC. At present, fuel is imported and distributed by CPC, Sinopec and IOC. Therefore, the price is decided based on the cost incurred by these three companies to import fuel. However, a situation has been created where the Government is not in a position to decide on the fuel prices. The fuel price is decided on based on the price formula and if the fuel is sold by the CPC below that price, Sinopec and IOC will also follow suit. Then the Government will have to provide the loss they incur due to selling fuel at lower prices. At present, there is an issue as the Government is not in a position to do that. We think we could further reduce the fuel prices when the new oil refinery is set up and use oil tanks in Trincomalee to refine crude oil.

Q: Judging by the market conditions, the Government has not been able to end the shortage of certain varieties of rice and also bring down rice prices in general. Again,

critics say that the NPP Government is also being held hostage by the big mill mafia. What is your comment?

A: Actually, this is not an issue created by us and it was there when we came to power as well. All those paddy fields had been cultivated during the tenure of the former Government. The issue was that the Government institutions didn't have accurate data. When the decisions were taken based on that wrong information, it paved the way to create a rice shortage in the local market. However, we imported nearly 170,000 metric tons of rice and controlled the shortage. When Ranil Wickremesinghe was the President, 20 kilograms of rice packs were distributed among people countrywide with the intervention of then Agriculture Minister Mahinda Amaraweera. Red rice stocks in the Southern province rice mills which were distributed among the people. It is a known fact that red rice is not consumed everywhere in the country. Most people in Anuradhapura consume Nadu rice. Red rice stock in the South was over as a result of distributing red rice countrywide.

There is no possibility of importing red rice and then a kilogram of red rice would be at over Rs.300. There is a small issue until the paddy harvest is reaped during this harvesting season.

Q: There are fears that the economy could be adversely affected if there are uncontrolled imports of private vehicles. What is the Government's plan to protect the economy whilst allowing vehicle imports?

A: There are several reasons for us to import vehicles. Our vehicle market has become inactive due to the non-import of vehicles for a long time. There are a large number of people who depend on this industry and they have lost their jobs. Therefore, a certain number of vehicles has to be imported to activate the vehicle market. According to the agreement the former Government signed with the IMF, there is a particular percentage that the Government should maintain its revenue. Then the taxes should be imposed to achieve this target. However, we cannot impose more taxes on the masses.

If a tax is imposed on imported vehicles, then the Government's tax revenue will go up. That is why a decision was taken to import vehicles. Initially, we would allocate nearly US\$ one billion to import these vehicles. We believe these vehicle imports will not have any adverse impact on the economy. We have been able to successfully exceed the targets given by the IMF and increase our foreign reserves.

Q: The Opposition as well as media critics also charge that the political inexperience of most NPP Ministers and MPs could be a major disadvantage in governance. What is your comment on this?

A: Today we have to suffer because of certain actions taken by some of those well experienced politicians. They committed the Central Bank daylight robbery based on their experience and still we are suffering due to that. Many frauds and corruption took place under the former Governments. So many development projects were suspended and cancelled due to the attempts of those well experienced Ministers. Some politicians of former Governments used their experience to swindle public funds, get commissions and solicit bribes. We believe this lack of political experience is in a way good for the country. New Ministers and MPs are catching up their duties so quickly.

None of them are new to politics or work alone and they all work as a team. They have already delivered so many positive things which the well experienced politicians couldn't do in the past.

Q: Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) politicians and various sections have raised concerns on the Government's decision to reclaim the official residence of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. Would you comment?

A: Those who try to survive with the help of public funds even after they get defeated have panicked. We have received a mandate to change the country's political culture and curtail the perks and privileges enjoyed by politicians. We first commenced to curtail that on our own and not from Mahinda Rajapaksa. We didn't appoint our relatives to

Government institutions or offer them top positions. We stopped using luxury vehicles and started using normal vehicles. We didn't give official residences to Ministers and asked them to stay at the Madiwela Housing Complex. We didn't give police security to Ministers. So, we have already curtailed many perks and privileges enjoyed by former Ministers and MPs. While doing so, we also asked former Presidents to minimise their wasteful expenditure.

This is not an issue just confined to Mahinda Rajapaksa. If some particular individual has retired from the Presidency, if he or she attempts to survive on public funds, it's a shameful act. When there are over 2.5 to three million people who are not in a position to even have their three meals a day, how can one particular individual live in a huge State-owned house along with hundreds of security personnel merely because he held the Presidency. It was Mahinda Rajapaksa's supporters who said that the LTTE has been wiped out and there is a threat. Then what is the purpose of having such a huge security for him? There is a culture that they have maintained to live above the people such as VVIPs spending public funds as they please. When their movement is disturbed, they start crying but that is not relevant to us.

If Mahinda Rajapaksa doesn't have a house, we are ready to give him a house. However, that won't be a huge official residence that he has occupied so far. Therefore, he should either pay the rent of the house or should vacate it and we are ready to provide him a suitable house. We believe there is no stable economy in Sri Lanka where we can treat Mahinda Rajapaksa like a king. He has three sons so they should be ashamed of keeping him in an official residence. They have a responsibility to look after their father.

Q: The Opposition and various sections have raised concern on the Clean Sri Lanka program launched by the Government. Can you explain?

A: Clean Sri Lanka is the massive socio, economic and political movement commenced in recent times to change the country. This is not a mere garbage disposal

project. The prime objective of the program is to ensure cleanliness in the country and create an awareness to change the attitude of the people. Therefore, it will take a few years to effect these changes. When this project was started, some institutions jumped the gun and even a small issue came up when the police attempted to remove the modifications in buses. However, there is a law which prevails in the country and the police attempted to remove those modifications of buses but we have controlled it now. We have to implement the Clean Sri Lanka project step by step. This is a difficult task but this will bring a lot of benefits to the society.

Q: The Opposition alleges that the Government has failed to fulfill its pledges given to the people. Your views?

A: This Opposition has failed. Earlier, they were in the Government. But the people ousted them from Government and confined them to a limited number of MPs in the Opposition. I think they have not gained any experience from the people's mandate given to them. All what they said during the election campaign on the NPP have proved to be completely false. Even today, if they want to rectify their mistakes, they should submit constructive criticism to the Government. A constructive dialogue should begin in Parliament without levelling baseless allegations.

However, the Opposition doesn't have that ability and ideologically they are very poor. We like the manner in which the current Opposition conducts itself and they would never be able to win public confidence.

Q: The Opposition alleges that the NPP vote base has declined and it suffered a setback in the recent Cooperative Society Elections which were held in a few areas. Would you elaborate?

A: When they formed Governments, did they win all 160 electorates in the country? They were also defeated in over 50 electorates. At the last election, the NPP won 21 electoral districts but was defeated in the Batticaloa district. In politics, you can't win all districts. Recently, the NPP won nearly 25 to 30

cooperative society elections and were defeated in only two.

Q: Some say that you are actually running the Government behind the scenes. Is this a true description of the work you do?

A: That is not so. The President and the Ministers do a great deal of effort. Actually, I don't work as hard as them and I only look after the party activities. However, the Government cannot be run without Ministers, its parliamentary group and officers. Similarly, the support of the JVP and NPP is also needed to run the Government. Therefore, we work collectively sharing our responsibilities. I fulfill the task entrusted on me. So, it is difficult to judge whose work is more important. The duty done by our office assistants is also vital to continue the Government.

Daily News, Colombo, January 28, 2025

LG polls likely in April - Bimal

Varuna Dayaratne

Transport, Highways, Ports and Civil Aviation Minister Bimal Rathnayake said that it is expected that the Election Commission will take steps to hold the Local Government (LG) polls in the second or fourth week of April.

The Minister made this statement during a press conference that was held in Jaffna on Sunday (26) and said that all political parties have jointly submitted to Parliament the draft Bill for the amendment of the Local Authorities Elections Act to conduct the LG Polls.

Minister Rathnayake said that with the agreement of the leaders of all parties, the Government has submitted a Bill to Parliament regarding the conducting of the LG polls stating that currently, there are a number of petitions that have been submitted in the courts by several parties. He said that however, these petitions will not be an obstacle for holding the LG elections and mentioned that the court will deliver its verdict at a time when it decides, but the court has a limited number of days to deliver the verdict.

Minister Rathnayake said that therefore, they are hoping that the Election Commission will take necessary steps to hold the LG polls in

the second or fourth week of April, as the Government hopes to hold these LG elections in the country without postponing the elections any longer.

Daily News, Colombo, January 28, 2025

LG Polls

UNP won't join forces with SJB as long as Ranil is its leader – Dilum

Asela Kuruluwansa

Sarvajana Balaya National Organiser Dilum Amunugama expressed scepticism about the success of discussions between the United National Party (UNP) and the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) to contest the upcoming Local Government elections together. He stated that Ranil Wickremesinghe would never consider aligning under another leader's guidance.

Speaking at a media briefing following an event at Sahas Uyana in Kandy, Amunugama said, "If there is a thought of the UNP and SJB coming together, it cannot happen without a change in leadership. Ranil will not give up his leadership to join forces. Besides, Sajith Premadasa's leadership has led to multiple electoral defeats for the SJB, highlighting the weakness of the opposition. For the first time in history, a group other than the opposition formed the government due to the opposition's ineffectiveness. Traditionally, when the ruling party is defeated, the opposition takes power. This time, the opposition remained stagnant."

The Sarvajana Balaya party aims to not only contest the Local Government elections, but also focus on economic rejuvenation, Amunugama said, emphasising that the party is drawing inspiration from successful models in countries like Dubai, Singapore, and South Korea, aligning with concepts once envisioned by Upali Wijewardene.

"Under the leadership of Dilith Jayaweera, the party is undergoing reorganisation and expanding its grassroots network. We are gathering individuals loved by the people. Our party does not welcome those with allegations against them. We are even discussing forming an alliance with the People's Alliance for the upcoming elections,

although no agreement has been reached yet," he added.

Amunugama criticised the country's political culture of imprisoning opposition members when promises to the public go unfulfilled. "This has been a recurring issue in the country's history. Sarath Fonseka was imprisoned during the time of our government, and that too was wrong. The current government, which came to power on false promises and propaganda akin to Goebbels' theory, is failing to deliver on those promises. To cover up their failures, they are taking measures such as seizing vehicles and arresting individuals. This is not what the people expected. They cannot even implement Ranil's strategies effectively," Amunugama said.

The Island, Colombo, January 28, 2025

LG polls in April

The government is ready to hold the Local Government Elections in April this year, Minister Bimal Rathnayake has announced.

He said that the Election Commission was expected to take necessary steps to conduct the polls in either the second or fourth week of April.

Speaking at an event in Jaffna on Sunday, Minister Rathnayake revealed that all political parties had jointly submitted a Draft Bill to Parliament to amend the Local Authorities Elections Act, paving the way for the Local Government elections.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court has concluded hearings on a petition challenging the Local Government Elections (Amendment) Bill. The Court has decided to communicate its ruling directly to the Speaker of Parliament.

Local Government elections have not been held since 2018. They were postponed to 2023. Further delays were caused by legal challenges and court rulings.

President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, following recent victories in the Presidential and Parliamentary elections, has assured that the Local Government polls will be held before April this year.

Daily News, Colombo, January 29, 2025

LG polls likely in April: Cabinet Spokesman

Ishara Mudugamuwa

Cabinet Spokesperson Health and Media Minister Dr. Nalinda Jayatissa stated yesterday (28) that the Local Government elections will be held in April.

He made this announcement during the Cabinet media briefing held at the Government Information Department. The Minister said the Supreme Court decision related to the Local Government Elections has already been delivered.

Accordingly, the Speaker is expected to inform that decision to Parliament, after which the relevant laws will be brought forward to facilitate the election. The Election Commission will announce the appropriate date for the elections, the Minister added.

Dr. Jayatissa also said that after the Local Government Elections are concluded, a decision will be made regarding the Provincial Council elections, potentially with amendments to the electoral system.

The Island, Colombo, January 29, 2025

Editorial

Remarketing rejects

The SLPP is girding up its loins for the upcoming local government (LG) polls. Its National Organiser Namal Rajapaksa yesterday launched the SLPP LG Councillors' Forum, in Colombo, and among those present on the occasion were those who made an immense contribution to the SLPP's downfall. The fact that the Opposition has prevailed over the ruling NPP in cooperative society elections during the past several weeks, signalling a shift in public sentiments, seems to have boosted the morale of the SLPP. The SJB and the UNP are also upbeat about their performance in the cooperative society elections, the results of which are popularly believed to indicate which way political winds blow at the grassroots level. The NPP has sought to put a bold face on the situation, but it is holding rallies with President Anura Kumara Disanayake in attendance, in the areas where it has suffered setbacks in the cooperative society elections, according to the Opposition.

Psephologists may be wary of extrapolating the cooperative society election results to

other polls, but the NPP's poor performance in the grassroots-level contests indicates growing public disillusionment with the incumbent government. The NPP leaders are doing more of what they did during their opposition days in a bid to retain popular support, instead of exercising state power they are wielding to deliver on their promises. They are bellowing rhetoric and making more promises.

Paddy farmers are up in arms, unable to sell their produce at reasonable prices. People have to wait in long queues to obtain passports and some varieties of rice. The Opposition is in overdrive to capitalise on public resentment towards the government and recover lost ground.

However, the mere sight of a bunch of unpopular, if not notorious, characters in the garb of ex-local council members has the potential to put off voters. Therefore, the biggest challenge before the SLPP is to repackage and remarket such unsavoury individuals in the upcoming LG polls. Namal himself opted out of the last general election and returned to Parliament via the National List, and it will be a Herculean task for him to enable the SLPP to improve its electoral performance in the foreseeable future.

One may recall that the former LG members of the SLPP were also responsible for the downfall of the Gotabaya Rajapaksa government. They assaulted a group of peaceful anti-government protesters at Galle Face Green in May 2022. Their savage attack on the protesters who were insulting and trying to oust President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa was akin to the fatal blow the proverbial pet monkey delivered to his royal master in his sleep with his own sword, in an attempt to kill a mosquito.

Aragalaya had run out of steam, and protesters were fatigued when the SLPP goons went on the rampage, triggering a spate of retaliatory attacks, which left scores of houses belonging to SLPP politicians gutted and led to the resignation of Prime Minister Rajapaksa immediately afterwards. The Galle

Face attack paved the way for the JVP-led NPP's meteoric rise in national politics.

Accusing President Dissanayake of having had Mahinda Rajapaksa's official residence overvalued for political reasons, a former SLPP MP said yesterday that their houses burnt down in 2022 should have been estimated in a similar manner. They are lucky that they were not asked to disclose how funds had been raised for the construction of those palatial houses when compensation was paid.

It is only wishful thinking that the SLPP will be able to turn itself around by nominating its former local councillors who were involved in the Galle Face attack and other such activities, to contest the upcoming LG polls. People cannot be expected to re-elect those characters simply because they are resentful and have given a knock to the NPP in the co-operative society elections, sending a warning about their dissatisfaction.

Sri Lanka PD

The Island, Colombo, January 17, 2025

Editorial

Lies and mandates

The Opposition has been able to put the government on the defensive on the propaganda front. The JVP/NPP carried out a propaganda onslaught against its political rivals, and rallied enough popular support to win last year's elections. The boot is now on the other foot.

On Wednesday, claiming that despite last year's regime change, some big companies continued to import coconut oil fraudulently, causing huge losses to the state coffers, SJB MP S. M. Marikkar, said NPP's much-flaunted mandate had a foundation of lies. The ruling alliance had lied its way to power, making a host of promises that it did not intend to fulfil, he said. The SJB is now saying about the incumbent dispensation what the NPP said about previous governments.

The NPP launched a successful campaign to delegitimise the SLPP's popular mandate after the onset of the current economic crisis in 2022. The Opposition is now all out to assail the NPP government's credibility and challenge its authority in a similar manner.

Legitimate mandates founded on honest campaigning, truthfulness and sincere promises are rarer than hen's teeth in Sri Lanka. It is doubtful whether during the past several decades any government has obtained an unsullied mandate in this country, where election campaigns are characterised by half-truths, outright lies and false promises.

One may recall that in the run-up to the 1970 general election, the SLFP-led United Front (UF) promised to make rice freely available even if it had to be brought from the moon. The country experienced a protracted shortage of rice under the UF government.

The UNP came to power in 1977, promising to bring about a 'Righteous Society', but what the country witnessed was the very antithesis thereof. Democratic dissent was violently suppressed; elections were rigged and state terror claimed tens of thousands of young lives under that regime.

The SLFP returned to power in 1994, promising to eliminate state terror and corruption, as a national priority, but both evils flourished under that government. The UNP obtained a mandate to rule the country again in 2001, promising to end the war through negotiations, but it only jeopardised national security.

The SLFP-led UPFA administration promised a 'Prosperous Future', but only its leaders and their kith and kin prospered during that government. The UNP formed a government in 2015 with the much-advertised goal of ushering in good governance, but its rule became a metaphor for corruption.

The SLPP obtained a mandate in 2019 by pledging to carry out its manifesto, 'Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour', but it bankrupted the country in 2022. The NPP promised 'A thriving nation and a beautiful life', but the people are struggling to keep the wolf from the door. Rice is in short supply and the prices of essentials have gone through the roof. Overall, the NPP stands accused of doing the opposite of what it obtained a mandate for.

Most of all, the NPP government is on the reverse gear just like its immediate predecessor; it keeps making about-turns on

its key promises. It has chosen to remain silent on its pledge to scrap the executive presidency although it has a two-thirds majority in Parliament to introduce constitutional reforms.

The SJB's assertion that the NPP's mandate has a foundation of lies may resonate with the irate people who are demanding pay hikes and tax and tariff reductions. However, the fact remains that even the SJB, which has taken the moral high ground, and is condemning the NPP for reneging on promises, would not have been able to deliver what it sought a mandate for if it had won the presidential and parliamentary elections last year. It pledged to amend the debt structuring agreement, but the IMF bailout conditions leave no room for such measures. Most of its election promises were also Machiavellian.

Daily News, Colombo, January 21, 2025

UNP will support Govt's initiatives, will collaborate with SJB – Ruwan

Sisila Gunathilaka Gampaha District Spl. Corr.

The United National Party (UNP) will support positive initiatives undertaken by the Government, including the 'Clean Sri Lanka' programme, UNP Deputy Leader Ruwan Wijewardene said. Wijewardene made this statement during a gathering held on Sunday (19) evening at the UNP Gampaha District office to brief party members. He further noted, "In the past, opposition parties focused on pulling down the Government. However, we are committed to supporting the good work of the current administration."

Wijewardene also revealed that discussions are underway for the UNP and the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) to collaborate in the future. He stated that the leaders of both parties have already approved the idea.

Speaking at the event, the newly appointed UNP General Secretary Talatha Athukorala remarked that it is still too early to criticise the Government, as it has been elected for a five-year term. She added, "The SJB is essentially a part of the UNP. I have always believed in unity, and that remains my position."

The event was attended by several notable figures, including former Gampaha Pradeshiya Sabha Opposition Leader and Imbulgoda UNP Electoral Organiser Sameera Randeniyah, Western Province Administrator Jayaraj Chandrasekara, Divisional Manager Dhammika Edirisinghe, former Gampaha Municipal Councillor Anoma Nugapitiya, Gamini Paranayapa, and Lakshman Samarathunga.

Nepal

Political Development

The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu, January 17, 2025

Coalition is not in crisis, work with PM Oli, Deuba tells Congress ministers

Ministers from the largest party in government claim that the prime minister is intervening in their jobs.

Post Report

Nepali Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba has instructed his ministers to work closely with Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, claiming that the coalition of the largest party with the CPN-UML was going smoothly.

Passing the instructions to the party's ministers on Thursday, Deuba told them to work as per the spirit of the seven-point agreement signed between the Congress and the UML at the time of government formation in July last year. He asked them to work closely with other ministers in the government and particularly with the prime minister and UML ministers.

In order to take updates on the work and performance of the Congress ministers in the midst of rumours that the government could change any time, Deuba called Congress ministers at his residence and issued a seven-point instruction as well. Ten Cabinet ministers and two ministers of state represent the party in the Oli government.

"There is no crisis of confidence between us," Deuba told his ministers, referring to the two coalition partners. "In the same spirit of the mid-July agreement with the UML to form the government, we should work together."

The meeting reached a conclusion that the government formed by the two largest parties faced no hurdles, according to Home Minister

Ramesh Lekhak. At a time when some Congress leaders within the Deuba camp and the rival faction led by Shekhar Koirala were voicing dissatisfaction with the government's performance, Deuba held the meeting of his ministers with the party's parliamentary committee. Congress leaders were of the view that the government was running smoothly as per the agreement between the two partners.

"We discussed how to improve the government's performance," Lekhak said. Some Congress ministers, however, had complained that Prime Minister Oli often intervenes in their work and in their ministries, denying them free rein.

Deuba, speaking at the start of the meeting, told his ministers to work with the spirit of the coalition and asked them to focus on delivery, according to Minister for Youths and Sports Teju Lal Chaudhary. Some ministers had complained that they could not perform well due to some obstacles. He, however, denied that there was no cooperation at all from the UML.

Party leaders including Deuba asked the ministers to work closely with the prime minister and discuss their problems with him too. "We have a task force between the Nepali Congress and the UML and the grievances of ministers will be discussed there," said party general secretary Gagan Thapa.

At the meeting, Thapa explained the reasons behind the government introducing the five ordinances, which have been approved by the President.

The objective is to give momentum to the government and make its work more effective, Thapa reportedly said. These ordinances were issued in coordination with the UML.

"No one is opposing the ordinances," Thapa claimed. "The government's intention is good."

Another Congress General Secretary Bishwa Prakash Sharma raised issues with the content of the ordinance related to non-resident Nepalis.

"If a non-resident Nepali has obtained the non-resident citizenship, then why are we issuing a free visa for ten years to them and

their family members?" Sharma wondered, citing the ordinance's provisions. He also pointed to the constitutional measure to provide non-resident citizenship to the Nepali people living outside SAARC countries.

In its seven-point instructions to the ministers, the party wants them to focus on the ministry's work for five days and listen to public grievances for two days every week.

The party also urged its ministers to speed up work in coordination among the Congress ministers while taking major decisions. The meeting also drew their attention to the need to pass the bills pending in Parliament, speed up development works held back for long, take initiative to conclude the projects that are in the budget but have yet to secure financial resources. The leadership also asked the party's representatives in government to heed the feedback, concerns and concerns of lawmakers and suggestions and complaints registered with the party headquarters by the party's provincial, district and local committees.

The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu, January 18, 2025

Opposition parties intensify call for PM's resignation

Allege moral failures, rising impunity for corruption, rule through ordinance, and growing public frustration.

Post Report

The opposition parties have intensified their demand for Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's resignation citing moral failures, bad governance and growing public frustration.

Addressing a joint press conference of seven opposition parties on Friday, CPN (Maoist Centre) Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal called for Prime Minister Oli to step down claiming that the latter has lost the moral authority to rule.

"This government has lost its moral ground to lead the country," he said after a joint meeting of the opposition parties. "The prime minister would thus do well to resign."

The opposition parties came together in protest against the government's delays in calling the parliament session, its reliance on ordinances, failure to revive the economy,

sluggish delivery, and mounting public frustration over bad governance.

In July last year, ahead of forming a coalition government, the ruling parties Nepali Congress and CPN-UML had decided to amend the constitution. But a statement by Prime Minister Oli has raised doubts about whether the pledge would be honoured. Prime Minister Oli recently deferred the deadline for constitution amendment to 2087 BS or 2030.

"If the prime minister himself says that the constitution amendment is not possible before 2087 BS, and the government is moving in the wrong direction, it has lost the morality to lead. So the prime minister should resign on moral grounds," said Dahal.

Besides Dahal, other opposition party leaders like DP Aryal, acting president of the Rastriya Swatantra Party; Rajendra Lingden, chairman of the Rastriya Prajatantra Party; Madhav Kumar Nepal, chairman of the CPN (Unified Socialist); Durga Poudel, vice chairman of the Rastriya Janamorchha; Tilak Thapamagar, co-chair of the Am Janata Party; and Mahindra Raya Yadav, chairman of the Nepal Samajbadi Party, were present in the opposition meeting and press conference.

"It is better for the prime minister to resign, but everyone should understand that we are not angling to join the government," said Dahal. "We are genuinely concerned about the country's situation. If the government does not summon the House session, we will take to the streets."

At the conference, Dahal also slammed the Congress-UML coalition government as 'unnatural'. "Public frustration and dissatisfaction are increasing due to the government's actions. Its legitimacy is crumbling," he said. "The way the government was formed was unnatural. It was formed in a non-transparent manner. It was formed against the spirit of the constitution."

In a press statement issued after the meeting, the opposition parties have accused the government of failing to tackle inflation and corruption, mishandling international

relations, bypassing parliament, and trying to rule through ordinances.

Earlier this week, the government amended several laws and issued five ordinances at one go, purportedly to cut the red tape and facilitate trade and investment.

The opposition parties' statement also pointed to the worsening economic situation of the country and blamed the government for failing to fix it.

They have accused the government of protecting corrupt individuals and closing high-profile corruption cases like the Giri Bandhu tea estate scam, the fake Bhutanese refugee case, the Bal Mandir land scam, and the Nepal Scout land lease scam, among others.

"People are extremely frustrated and upset due to the government's totalitarian actions, which are against the interest of the nation and the people. The government has totally blocked the campaign against corruption. The government is protecting the corrupt people, promoting corruption. And leaders of the ruling parties are being exempted from corruption cases," said Dahal.

The opposition parties have also demanded that the government summon the parliament session immediately. "If the government does not summon the House session, we will begin the process to call a special session," said Dahal.

At the same conference, Dahal accused the government of issuing a land-related ordinance to benefit land mafias.

"To protect the land mafias and corrupt people, the government has issued the ordinance," said Dahal, adding, "It shows the government's true intent."

The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu, January 23, 2025

Federalism key to progress, not a burden: Finance Minister Paudel

Leaders and experts at the 'Gantabya Gandaki' event call for strengthening federalism, addressing governance gaps, and investing in education, health, and employment.

Post Report

Federalism has progressed significantly in Nepal and must now be strengthened rather than questioned, said Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Bishnu Prasad Paudel on Wednesday. Speaking at the final session of the 'Gantabya Gandaki' programme, organised by Kantipur Media Group, Paudel emphasised federalism as an opportunity, not a burden.

"Federalism is not a liability; it is our responsibility. We have achieved significant milestones in its implementation, but much remains to be done to make it fully effective. To accomplish this, we must embrace the tasks ahead with resolve," said Paudel during the session titled 'Federalism: Burden or Opportunity?'

Paudel reiterated that federalism was introduced to distribute powers to sub-national governments and bring governance to the local level, making it indispensable.

Chief Minister of Gandaki Province Surendra Raj Pandey, highlighted the challenges of the federal system, likening it to operating on outdated infrastructure.

"While the world has advanced to 5G, Nepal's federalism is still functioning on the 2G stage. The system remains skeletal, lacking the limbs and brain required for effective functioning," said Pandey. He noted that constitutional provisions on exclusive and shared rights require clarity and proper implementation to address inefficiencies.

Pandey urged the three tiers of government to collaborate and avoid conflicts over jurisdiction, warning that such disputes would undermine federalism's potential.

Police integration crucial for federalism

Former Deputy Prime Minister and CPN (Maoist Centre) leader Narayan Kaji Shrestha underscored the need for police integration to advance federalism. Reflecting on his tenure as home minister, he shared how progress on police integration stalled due to political and procedural hurdles.

"We began the process of police integration, even forming a committee led by an undersecretary to prepare a timeline for the purpose. Unfortunately, the initiative did not progress after my tenure ended," said

Shrestha, stressing that the issue remains unresolved and hinders federalism's full implementation.

Rapid progress in federalism implementation

Khagaraj Adhikari, former chief minister of Gandaki Province, praised Nepal's progress in federalism compared to other nations.

"South Africa took 30 years to adapt to federalism under Nelson Mandela's leadership. Nepal, however, has identified its path within just five or six years," Adhikari stated during the session 'Core Concerns: Education, Health, and Employment.'

Adhikari called for a clear division of powers and enhanced coordination among local, provincial, and federal governments. He emphasised the need for meritocracy and transparency in sensitive sectors like health and education to ensure sustainable development.

Collaborative governance essential

Laxmi Pandey, chair of the National Federation of Rural Municipalities, urged all three levels of government to adhere to constitutional mandates and work collaboratively.

"Instead of clashing over jurisdiction, governments must coordinate and support one another. Effective financial federalism is crucial to driving national development," Pandey said.

Highlighting local achievements, Pandey noted that federalism has brought tangible improvements to infrastructure, education, and healthcare at the grassroots level. However, she cautioned against overshadowing these gains with undue criticism.

The discussions concluded with a consensus that federalism is vital to Nepal's progress. Participants stressed the need for focused efforts to address existing challenges, ensure effective governance, and leverage federalism's potential for sustainable development.

The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu, January 31, 2025

Editorial

Silencing the critics

The social media bill must be revised through the broadest possible consultations.

Social media has brought people closer, made communication easier and become a platform for the exercise of free speech. However, it has also become a hotbed for hate speech and false and malicious content. With time, many online outlets began disseminating more fake news and mis/disinformation than genuine news. Thus successive governments have tried to regulate these mediums to 'safeguard the society'. Now, Minister for Communication and Information Technology Prithvi Subba Gurung is at it. Arguing that it is already too late to regulate online media in Nepal, he had been pushing Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli to enact the controversial Social Media Bill-2025 through an ordinance. Following the premier's go-ahead, Gurung registered the bill in the National Assembly on Tuesday.

Yet this bill has sparked intense debate among social media users, stakeholders, journalists and experts as, in the name of regulation, it infringes on the fundamental right of free speech. The ruling party leaders appear minded to weaponise laws to suppress criticism of any kind against the government. The bill was introduced without consulting experts and other stakeholders.

The most problematic provision of the bill is Clause 18, which states that "any individual who posts or shares content on social media that disturbs the sovereignty, geographical integrity, national unity and security of Nepal will be imprisoned for up to five years or fined up to Rs500,000, or both". If passed as a law, the government could use this provision not only to control anti-government views but also to target media outlets that expose corruption and misgovernance. Moreover, people will self-censor out of fear of being persecuted.

Digital rights activists point out the many ambiguities in the bill. For example, while it mentions terms like 'false propaganda' and 'misleading content', these are vaguely defined. Concomitantly, the definition of social media is also so vague and open-ended that authorities could exploit such

ambiguities for their own benefit. Further, the bill also authorises the Department of Information Technology to oversee social media registration, user compliance and content removal, providing plenty of room for its abuse.

Nepal is thus moving towards 'controlling' social media more than regulating it. This imperils the country's image in South Asia as the 'freest' in terms of providing a voice to its citizens regardless of their political and social background. Our lawmakers should take a cue from experts and media watchdogs before following in Bangladesh's footsteps, where the draconian digital laws introduced in 2018 suppressed press freedom and free speech. The pent up anger eventually exploded, resulting in the ouster of Sheikh Hasina late last year.

Criticism of government leaders through online posts, cartoons, or opinion is a fundamental democratic right—not a criminal offence. Democracy cannot thrive without check and balance on government actions and policies. The ruling parties should also realise that much of the criticism expressed online is justified and, as such, look to improve their own performance rather than trying to gag the critics.

There can be no ifs and buts about this: The ruling coalition must revise the bill in line with international human rights principles and through the broadest possible consultations—in and outside the Parliament. Only a law arrived through this democratic route can be justified, especially when it comes to playing with people's most fundamental right.

The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu, January 16, 2025

Oli backs ordinances as opposition alleges executive power abuse

Six opposition parties led by the Maoist Centre blast 'arbitrary' rule, demand Parliament session pronto.

Purushottam Poudel

While opposition parties are voicing strong dissatisfaction over the ordinances brought by the government, Prime Minister and CPN-

UML Chairman KP Sharma Oli has staunchly defended the decision.

Addressing a press conference at Singha Durbar on Wednesday, Prime Minister Oli also clarified that there are no disagreements within the ruling coalition on the ordinances. The Cabinet on January 10 had decided to forward five different ordinances to President Ramchandra Paudel for his approval.

On January 13, the President approved four ordinances including the Ordinance to Amend Some Nepal Acts related to Promoting Good Governance and Public Service Delivery (2025); the Economic Procedure and Financial Accountability (First Amendment) Ordinance (2025); the Privatisation (First Amendment) Ordinance (2025); and the Ordinance to Amend Some Nepal Acts Related to Improving the Economic and Business Environment and Enhancing Investment (2025). But he withheld the Ordinance to Amend the Land Act 1964, the Forest Act 2019 and the National Park Act 1973 claiming its sensitive nature.

Oli on Wednesday indicated that the President should not issue ordinances forwarded by the government without studying them, and that he would sign the remaining one after studying it.

"The President will have his associates study the ordinance before approving it," said Oli. Soon after the prime minister's statement, the President's Office approved the previously stalled ordinance.

"After Prime Minister Oli assured to address the President's concerns related to the stalled ordinance through a replacement bill, the President agreed to issue the Ordinance to Amend the Land Act-1964, the Forest Act-2019 and the National Park Act-1973," a source close to the President told the Post.

Prime Minister Oli also explained that the delay in convening Parliament was because several bills are stuck in various parliamentary committees.

The budget session of Parliament ended on September 16. Currently many bills which are to be presented before Parliament are being discussed in various parliamentary committees.

"We will present the ordinances in Parliament on the first day of the House sitting. We will then bring replacement bills within 60 days and pass them," Oli claimed. However, he did not specify when the winter session of Parliament would commence.

Prime Minister Oli also explained the rationale for the ordinances.

"After extensive discussions with top leaders of major coalition partners, experts, and stakeholders, the government brought the ordinances because they were essential for good governance and development," Oli said. He further claimed that the ordinances were brought in agreement with the main coalition partner, Nepali Congress, as well as the business community.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Oli also reiterated that his government has no plans to introduce any ordinance to split political parties.

Earlier, on December 25, the government had forwarded the Ordinance to Amend Cooperative Act to the President, which he approved on December 29.

However, opposition parties have accused the government of trying to rule through ordinances instead of convening a winter session of Parliament.

Six opposition parties, including the main opposition CPN (Maoist Centre), have strongly criticised the government's reliance on ordinances.

In a meeting of opposition parties held at the Maoist Centre's parliamentary party office on Wednesday morning, opposition leaders criticised the government's conduct as arbitrary.

The government has disrespected Parliament and its members by issuing ordinances when Parliament is not in session, said Shakti Basnet, deputy general secretary of the Maoist Centre, who also was present in the meeting.

"Issuing ordinances instead of convening the winter session of Parliament sends a message of discord in the ruling coalition," Basnet said while calling the move 'regressive.'

The opposition meeting also urged the government to call the winter session without

delay while accusing it of bypassing democratic norms.

Besides the Maoist Centre, representatives of the Rastriya Swatantra Party, Rastriya Prajatantra Party, CPN (Unified Socialist), Nepal Samajbadi Party, and Am Janata Party took part in the meet.

The opposition plans to issue a joint statement on Thursday urging the government to convene Parliament. A taskforce led by the Maoist Centre Deputy General Secretary Barshaman Pun and Unified Socialist vice-chair Beduram Bhusal as the members, has been assigned to draft the statement.

The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu, January 23, 2025

A case for proportional representation

The reason UML appears to be antagonistic to PR is because of its inclusive provisions.

Deepak Thapa

There used to be a running joke some years ago in development circles that the MLD, i.e., the-then Ministry of Local Development (now, the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration, MoFAGA), should actually be known as the UMLD. That was because many of the mandarins running the MLD appeared to take their cue from the UML, the common moniker for Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's party, the CPN-UML.

When the secretary at MoFAGA, Dinesh Thapaliya, was hand-picked back in 2019 to become the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) by Oli during his earlier stint as prime minister, the MLD-UML nexus was the first thing that came to mind. Perhaps such a characterisation is not fair on CEC Thapaliya, but there had to be some underlying reason for appointing a serving secretary to such a powerful position just one day after the previous incumbent's tenure had ended. Particularly considering that many other constitutional bodies had remained headless for years with Oli showing no inclination to make them functional.

Given this background, a recent piece of news struck me as quite unexpected. Speaking at a function dealing with what can be translated as 'Electoral Reforms in Nepal: Aspects,

Rationale and Relevance', Thapaliya came out guns blazing at the notion that the current mixed electoral system was responsible for the political instability plaguing the country. That he should oppose the conventional wisdom that has permeated the UML was interesting, to say the least.

Let it be

Let's consider some of CEC Thapaliya's strongly expressed views, as reported.

Thapaliya declared that neither the constitution nor any laws had prevented any political party from reaching a 50 percent majority during elections. "Can you tell us which article in the constitution and section of the law prohibits that?" he asked rhetorically. "Is there anything to prevent any party from getting 10 million votes from the 11 million voters?"

Taking aim at the politicians, Thapaliya said it was they who had not been able to satisfy the voters and instead were trying to incite the people by making nonsensical arguments that the fault lay in the electoral system.

He went on to make the astute observation that of the eight multiparty elections the country has undergone so far, there were four—in 1959, 1991, 1999 and 2017—which had seen one party win the majority. In none of these cases, however, had the majority party been able to complete a full term in office. The other four elections had resulted in coalition politics but in no case had the parliament been dissolved midway.

Thapaliya also pointed out that political parties have been arguing that constitutional amendments to the electoral system are needed for the sake of a stable government and proper implementation of inclusive provisions. He said that the issue of political stability can be addressed by raising the threshold entitling parties to a presence in legislative bodies while ensuring candidacies from women, minorities, Janajatis, Dalits and Madheshis during elections was the proper way to ensure greater inclusivity.

If the first-past-the-post part of the election were to be made inclusive, he said, there could be modifications in the ratios of the directly elected and the proportional parts of

the election. There is no way we can get rid of the proportional representation (PR) system, he continued. Proportionality is one of our great achievements. Our democracy is an inclusive democracy. There can be no law without inclusive provisions.

The CEC accused the government of being little interested in electoral reforms. He pointed out that it had taken 22 months for the file on the proposed Election Management Act to move from the Home Ministry to the cabinet office next door. He asked how much longer it would take to reach the parliament and in its eventual implementation across the country.

Thapaliya said that he was not aware of any study that had identified the various weaknesses of the current electoral system or showed how another system would ameliorate those weaknesses. And, in a seemingly apparent dig at Oli, given that is how our PM functions, Thapaliya stated that just because someone had a dream one night about changing the electoral system and then declared the next morning it was a national necessity, there is no obligation for everyone to go along.

Green, green grass

If Oli and his ilk had their way, they would have gotten rid of the PR part of the election in a jiffy. I perhaps would not be alone in believing that the only reason the UML is antagonistic towards PR appears to be because of its inclusive provisions. Otherwise, one fails to understand what else would have been its beef with what is universally accepted as a more democratic alternative than the winner-take-all system. The PR saved it from near-oblivion in 2008, and it could have benefitted enormously from such an arrangement in both the 1991 and 1999 elections.

In fact, it had once been quite vehement in asserting that PR is a much fairer system. At the November 8, 2006 meeting of the top leaders of the Seven-Party Alliance and the Maoists, which laid the blueprint for the Comprehensive Peace Accord later in the month, the agreement had been to adopt the current mixed electoral system in the election

to the constituent assembly. All the parties agreed with the sole exception of the UML, which insisted disagreeing with its partners for the record: "The CPN (UML) holds a dissenting view that the most democratic method to elect the Constituent Assembly is the proportional system of election."

It is certainly human nature not to be satisfied with what we have. That was what I was reminded of when reading a recent op-ed in *The New York Times*. Written just days before Donald Trump re-took office, it argued for exactly the opposite of what our parties have been saying. Boldly titled, 'How to Fix America's Two-Party Problem', it said: "As a new Congress sputters into gear, this rusty binary split—a product of our antiquated winner-take-all electoral mechanisms—is key to understanding why our national legislature has become the divisive, dysfunctional place it is today. It is why more than 200 leading political scientists and historians...signed an open letter in 2022 calling on the House of Representatives to adopt proportional representation—an intuitive and widely used electoral system that ensures parties earn seats in proportion to how many people vote for them. The result is increased electoral competition and, ultimately, a broader range of political parties for voters to choose from."

And here we are on the other side of the world, arguing that that the "broader range of political parties" is what we must avoid at all costs. The old folks certainly got it right when they said the grass is always greener elsewhere.

Iran

Political Developments

Tehran Times, Iran, January 30, 2025

From exile to victory

By Faramarz Kouhpayeh

Imam Khomeini's return to Iran after 14 years in exile and start of the ten-day Fajr
TEHRAN – Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Iran's Islamic Revolution, returned to his country on Thursday, February 1, 1979, after 14 years in exile. His

arrival was a pivotal moment in the revolution, marking the beginning of the Ten-Day Fajr (Dawn).

Imam Khomeini was invited back to Iran by a multitude of anti-Shah revolutionaries who had been courageously protesting in cities and towns across the country despite months of brutal repression and violent crackdowns by the Shah's regime.

The return of the immensely popular revolutionary leader came just two weeks after the last Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, fled the country on January 16, 1979.

Imam Khomeini's arrival ultimately led to the collapse of Shapour Bakhtiar's provisional government and the final overthrow of the Pahlavi regime 10 days later, on February 11, 1979—the victory of the Islamic Revolution.

The Bakhtiar government's attempt to block Imam Khomeini's return

Before fleeing, the Shah had handed over power to Shapour Bakhtiar, his last prime minister. However, Bakhtiar's authority was weak, and his government struggled to maintain control.

Imam Khomeini was initially scheduled to return to Iran on January 26, but Bakhtiar's interim government announced the closure of all airports in an attempt to prevent his arrival.

Shortly after the Shah's departure, Imam Khomeini, who was in exile in Paris, declared that he would return as soon as the airports reopened to continue the struggle against the Pahlavi regime alongside the Iranian people. Meanwhile, revolutionaries and the public, eager to welcome their leader, formed a special "welcoming committee" to organize his safe return.

The Bakhtiar government's decision to shut down the airports triggered widespread protests and strikes. Seminary students and clerics staged sit-ins at religious schools across the country, while massive demonstrations erupted in major cities. In Tehran alone, 28 people were killed in clashes. Protesters chanted slogans such as, "Bakhtiar, a servant of the Shah with no authority."

Officials of the Pahlavi regime were well aware that once Imam Khomeini returned, their chances of survival would be slim, and the regime's collapse would be imminent.

On January 29, the airports were reopened. Finally, at 9:30 a.m. on February 1, 1979, Imam Khomeini triumphantly returned to Iran, marking the beginning of the Ten-Day Fajr—the final countdown to the victory of the Islamic Revolution.

Upon arrival, he addressed reporters at Mehrabad International Airport, saying: "I thank you all for your love. The Iranian people's affection is a great responsibility on my shoulders, and I cannot repay it. Unity is the key to victory."

A historic welcome: millions gather for Imam Khomeini's homecoming

Imam Khomeini's arrival sparked one of the largest public gatherings in Iranian history. Conservative estimates place the number of people flooding the streets of Tehran at over three million.

From the airport, he proceeded to Behesht-e Zahra cemetery, where many revolutionaries who had died in the struggle were buried. Along the way, millions lined the streets, chanting his name, waving banners, and celebrating his long-awaited return. At the cemetery, hundreds of thousands gathered to hear him speak.

Addressing the massive crowd, he acknowledged the sacrifices of the people: "We have suffered many tragedies. Women lost their husbands; men lost their children. When I see those who have given their lives for this movement, I feel sorrow and a great responsibility. I cannot thank a nation that has sacrificed so much for the sake of God."

In a direct challenge to Bakhtiar's provisional government, Imam Khomeini declared his opposition, famously vowing: "I shall punch their teeth in."

He also reaffirmed his vision for an Islamic government, based on the will of the people and determined by popular vote.

Imam Khomeini's return intensified the revolutionary momentum. On February 8, 1979, a pivotal moment unfolded when a group of **Iranian Air Force commanders,

pilots, and personnel (Homafaran) visited Imam Khomeini's residence to pledge allegiance to the revolution. Their defection marked the collapse of military loyalty to the Shah, signaling the regime's imminent downfall.

Meanwhile, the army refused to enforce martial law, declaring neutrality.

On February 4, 1979, Imam Khomeini appointed Mehdi Bazargan as the prime minister of the provisional government, further solidifying the revolution's political transition.

With the state rapidly unraveling, the Pahlavi regime collapsed completely on February 11, 1979, marking the final victory of the Islamic Revolution.

Each year, Iranians commemorate Imam Khomeini's return and the Ten-Day Fajr celebrations, both inside Iran and around the world. Various ceremonies, cultural events, and recitations of Imam Khomeini's teachings serve as a reminder of the revolution's significance.

The Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, has repeatedly emphasized the importance of preserving the memory of Fajr as a "national treasure."

Tehran Times, Iran, January 18, 2025

IRGC announces arrest of 15 terrorists in SE Iran

TEHRAN – The Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) has apprehended 15 terror suspects in Iran's southeastern province of Sistan and Baluchistan.

The Public Relations Office of the Quds Headquarters of the IRGC Ground Forces announced on Thursday that its soldiers, along with other security forces, conducted a ground operation in the border regions between Iran and Pakistan.

The operation saw extensive support from combat helicopters and drone units, culminating in the successful capture of the suspects.

The IRGC's statement further noted that during the area's cleanup to eradicate terrorist factions, a substantial cache of

various weapons and ammunition was confiscated.

The operation was part of the ongoing "Martyrs of Security" exercises.

The intensified anti-terrorism initiative led by the IRGC has been ongoing since late October 2024.

The large-scale exercises also involve the Ministry of Intelligence and police forces, which have successfully dismantled at least three terrorist teams so far.

Among those detained are figures affiliated with the so-called Jaish al-Adl, the terrorist organization responsible for a deadly attack on a police convoy in Taftan County in October 2024.

Tehran Times, Iran, January 19, 2025

Two Iranian Supreme Court judges assassinated in Tehran terrorist attack

TEHRAN – Two Iranian Supreme Court judges were killed on Saturday in a shooting attack. They have been identified as Ali Razini, head of Branch 39 of the Supreme Court, and Mohammad Moqiseh, head of Branch 53.

The two veteran judges were dealing with offenses against national security, espionage, and terrorism.

"A person armed with a handgun entered the room of the two veteran judges before noon Saturday and martyred them," Judiciary spokesman Asghar Jahangir said, adding a bodyguard of the judges was injured in the attack.

"The gunman immediately committed suicide while running away and we cannot talk about his motives at the moment," he said.

"Martyrs Razini and Moqiseh were always the target of malice held by the enemies because of their brilliant records," Jahangir said.

"In the past year, the Judiciary has taken extensive measures to identify spies and hypocritical groups, and this has led to the anger and resentment of the enemies," Jahangir said.

According to the initial investigations, the armed assailant had neither lodged a complaint at the Supreme Court nor referred to any court branches. The identity and potential affiliation of the gunmen have not been disclosed.

Razini previously survived an assassination attempt in January 1998 when assailant motorcyclists attached a magnetic bomb to his vehicle. In that attack, he was injured.

Iran's prosecutor-general has ordered the assassination of the two judges to be investigated as a "priority case".

Judiciary head, president address attack

Judiciary Chief Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei released a statement hours after the attack, in which he attributed the assassination to the two judges' dedication to law and justice. "The tragic loss of two prominent, revolutionary judges, [Hojjat al-Islam Ali Razini](#) and [Mohammad Moqiseh](#), in a terrorist attack on Saturday, has deeply saddened and grieved everyone serving in the judiciary of the Islamic Republic," the Judiciary head wrote.

"Over many years of dedicated service, these two martyrs were always at the forefront of justice, fighting tirelessly to uphold the rights of the oppressed against oppressors, criminals, and wrongdoers. They remained steadfast in prosecuting and punishing terrorists, spies, murderers, and those threatening citizens' security. Their courage, decisiveness, and frankness in their judicial duties often angered traitors and hypocrites," he added.

Ejei explained that Razini and Moqiseh were true believers in the Islamic Revolution and followers of its leaders, genuinely serving the people. Their uncompromising stance against terrorists, whose hands were stained with the pure blood of Iranians, made them targets of the enemies' hatred, he said.

"I extend my heartfelt congratulations and condolences to the esteemed families, friends, and colleagues of these two revolutionary and sincere judges, as well as to the entire nation of Iran."

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian also offered his condolences in a separate message. He ordered Iran's security forces to launch a thorough investigation on the matter and noted that the two judges' martyrdom would not obstruct the process of justice. "Their path will continue," the president wrote.

Tehran Times, Iran, January 23, 2025

Three arrested in connection with assassination Supreme Court judges in Tehran

TEHRAN – Authorities in Iran have arrested three suspects in connection with the recent armed attack in Tehran, which claimed the lives of two judiciary judges Ali Razini and Mohammad Moqiseh.

"Following this heinous act, extensive investigations were immediately launched by security agencies under the Tehran prosecutor's supervision," the judiciary spokesperson Asghar Jahangir stated in a briefing on Wednesday.

The spokesperson revealed that significant progress has been made, with several individuals connected to the attack identified. "Among those arrested, at least three individuals have confirmed ties to specific groups. Investigations into their roles, their connections to the perpetrator, and the support they provided are ongoing. Once investigations are complete, the findings will be shared with the public," he added.

On the weapon recovered from the assailant, the spokesperson noted that it was a non-standard firearm, and investigations into its origin continue. He also mentioned that a suspect was arrested in one of the provinces and is being transferred to Tehran for further questioning.

The judges worked on cases fighting crimes against national security, espionage, and terrorism.

'Execution process underway for Azerbaijan embassy attacker'

The judiciary also provided an update on the case involving the attack on the Embassy of Azerbaijan. The attacker, who has been sentenced to execution, had his case referred to the Supreme Court before being forwarded to Tehran's Criminal Enforcement Division for execution.

"The enforcement process requires the victim's family to formally request execution. Once this request is submitted, the case is sent to the relevant authority for final approval of execution. The case is currently in the enforcement stage, and further steps will

proceed as soon as the family submits their request," the spokesperson explained.

'Swiss national that committed suicide in jail photographed military sites'

The judiciary also addressed the controversial death of a Swiss national in Semnan prison, which has drawn international attention.

The spokesperson revealed that the individual entered Iran in October through the Dogharoun border crossing as a tourist in a personal vehicle. He traveled through several provinces before being arrested in a restricted military zone in Semnan. "The detainee, born in Namibia and holding Swiss citizenship, was apprehended for photographing sensitive military sites and alleged collaboration with a hostile state. The Swiss embassy in Tehran was informed immediately after his arrest," he stated.

While in custody, the individual's needs, including a vegetarian diet, were reportedly met. However, the spokesperson recounted the details of the detainee's suicide: "On the day of the incident, after breakfast, he turned off the cell's electricity, and in a spot not covered by cameras, he used a curtain in the restroom to hang himself. Prison staff responded immediately, but despite their efforts, he passed away."

Switzerland has demanded a full investigation into the case. Iranian authorities confirmed that a Swiss embassy delegation and a trusted physician inspected the scene and confirmed the cause of death. The body was transferred to Tehran's Forensic Medicine Organization before being handed over to Swiss representatives. The judiciary spokesperson assured that the findings of these investigations would be made public as they develop.

Pakistan

Political Developments

The News

January 16, 2025

Key backchannel event: Gohar, Gandapur met 3 very important persons

However, neither has there been any official confirmation of this backchannel meeting nor has PTI confirmed it

By Ansar Abbasi

ISLAMABAD: Backchannel talks between the 'government' and the PTI, which paused a few weeks back amid focus on the formal dialogue process between the two sides, have revived and entered an important stage.

An informed source has said that two PTI leaders Barrister Gohar Ali Khan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur had an exclusive meeting with three very important persons. The meeting, the venue of which was neither Islamabad nor Rawalpindi, was reportedly held last Monday.

However, neither has there been any official confirmation of this backchannel meeting nor has the PTI confirmed it. In fact, when contacted, Barrister Gohar said no such meeting had been held.

The source, however, insists that a meeting of great importance has been held, and that these backchannel meetings will continue. In the next meeting, a federal minister and two important persons will apparently meet the PTI side. However, the result of these meetings depends on the PTI's future policies and its style of politics. It has to accept the system and distance itself from politics of agitation and confrontation.

Before this latest backchannel meeting, a key PTI leader had met a federal minister and an important official in the third week of December.

It was reported by this newspaper while quoting a source that the message for the PTI was that if it continued with its policy of agitation, and violence, attacking the army and its top leadership and hurting the economy, these backchannel contacts would not amount to much. If the party opts for reconciliation, it would require a clear change of policy and departure from its past few years of politics.

According to the source, primarily Imran Khan will have to decide: If the PTI wants political space and intends to return to normal politics, it will have to stop its

confrontation with the army and its top leadership and in no manner do any politics which may hurt the economy of the country.

It was also reported then that the future of these backchannel talks and their success depends on required confidence-building measures from the PTI side. Clear signs of departure from the past two and half years of policy will help the PTI get much-needed political space.

In case of required CBMs, the PTI will also see a change for the better which, the source insists, may not be immediate but will be incremental and sustainable. In case of a continuation of politics of agitation and attacks on the army and economy, the source says the PTI will get nothing but more difficulties. Backchannel contacts were also active during the SCO Summit and during the PTI's Nov 24 protest march to Islamabad. The PTI had originally announced a protest on D-Chowk on the occasion of the SCO Summit. However, after backchannel contacts between the two sides, doctors from PIMS hospital were allowed to visit Imran Khan. The PTI wanted Imran's personal physician from Shaukat Khanum Hospital but it was agreed during the backchannel talks that the PTI would call off the D-Chowk protest during the SCO Summit even if PIMS doctors were allowed to visit Imran Khan. Later, these backchannel contacts became active when the PTI announced its 'Final Call' for the Nov 24, 2023 march to Islamabad. Through backchannel negotiations, some PTI leaders including Ali Amin Gandapur, Barrister Gohar Ali Khan and Barrister Saif were facilitated to meet Imran Khan but the PTI founder insisted on his immediate release from jail. Khan had also agreed to the government's suggestion to stop the protest at Sangjani (in the outskirts of Islamabad). However, Bushra Bibi led the march to D-Chowk and it all ended on the Nov 26 episode. The Nov 26 events were a serious jolt for these backchannel interactions, which were paused amid the initiation of a formal dialogue between the government and the PTI.

The News

January 17, 2025

Buoyant PTI confirms Gohar, Gandapur met army chief

Gohar, speaking to journalists in Adiala jail courtroom, confirms that he met with military chief after he had kept denying meeting

By Muhammad Anis & Mumtaz Alvi & News Desk & Shabbir Dar & Zarmeen Zehra

ISLAMABAD: Taking a U-turn, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Chairman Barrister Gohar said on Thursday that he had called on Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Asim Munir along with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur.

PTI Chairman Gohar, speaking to journalists in the Adiala jail courtroom, confirmed that he had met with the military chief after he kept on denying the meeting.

Explaining what had transpired during their rare talks with the COAS, the PTI chairman said that all matters and demands of the party were presented directly to General Asim Munir.

He termed direct negotiations with the establishment as a positive step towards resolving the ongoing issues. Barrister Gohar further said: "Ali Amin Gandapur and I held a meeting with COAS Munir, during which we outlined all of PTI's concerns and priorities." PTI founder Imran Khan also confirmed to reporters that Gohar had met the army chief in Peshawar. Khan mentioned that his party had long been trying to get the other side on the negotiation table.

Sources, meanwhile, also mentioned that the PTI chairman was transported to Peshawar via a helicopter to meet the military's chief.

The meeting reportedly occurred during COAS Munir's visit to Peshawar, where he met top provincial political leaders and emphasised: "If there is a state, there is politics. God forbid, without a state, there is nothing."

Elaborating on the reported meeting while speaking to Geo News, Gohar remarked: "What Imran Khan has said about my meeting with the COAS is correct".

Meanwhile, KP Chief Minister Gandapur said that he and Barrister Gohar met the army chief along with other parties on the security situation.

At the Parliament House, before the meeting with government committee, when a journalist asked, Gandapur confirmed the meeting between the army chief and Barrister Gohar and said that his meeting with the army chief was related to security.

The confirmation comes after The News reported that backchannel talks between the government and the PTI, which paused a few weeks back amid focus on the formal dialogue process between the two sides, have revived and entered an important stage.

An informed source told the publication that two PTI leaders — Barrister Gohar and KP CM Gandapur — had an exclusive meeting with three very important persons. The meeting, the venue of which was neither Islamabad nor Rawalpindi, was held last Monday.

In the next meeting, a federal minister and two important persons will apparently meet the PTI side. However, the result of these meetings depends on the PTI's future policies and its style of politics. It has to accept the system and distance itself from politics of agitation and confrontation.

Meanwhile, an explanation regarding the meeting between the army chief and PTI leaders came out. Geo News sources said that the discussion with Barrister Gohar and Ali Amin Gandapur in Peshawar was about the security situation, adding that the discussion with both leaders was held in the context of counter-terrorism issues.

According to sources, in the meeting Barrister Gohar tried to discuss political matters, but he was told: "You should discuss political matters with politicians."

Sources say that the discussion was presented out of context and an attempt was made to politicise the discussion on security matters.

Meanwhile, the government and the opposition negotiation committees held the third round of talks here in Islamabad.

Talking to the media after chairing the third round meeting, National Assembly Speaker Sardar Ayaz Sadiq said that negotiations between the government and the opposition were moving in the right direction and there was no need to worry.

The PTI team handed over written demands of their party to the Speaker. The government would respond to the demands within seven working days.

The Speaker told the media that he also shared his two demands with both the committees. He said that he wanted both the government and opposition to agree on Charter of Economy and joint stance against terrorism. He said these two demands would also be discussed during the course of talks.

Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN) Senator Irfan Siddiqui read the communique that said: "Omar Ayub Khan handed documents containing demands of the PTI to the Speaker at outset of the meeting. Omar Ayub also read out PTI's demand while participants from both sides presented their views. Both the sides decided that the government would give its response to the PTI demands within seven working days."

Meanwhile, the members of seven coalition parties of the government, after consulting their leadership, would apprise the opposition committee of their views. The PTI demands pertain to the release of Imran Khan, party's leaders and workers, and formation of judicial commissions on May 09 and November 26 events.

The Speaker would give the date of next meeting after consulting both the committees. The communique said that the two committees appreciated efforts of the Speaker and expressed complete confidence in him. Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Omar Ayub Khan who heads opposition committee, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur, Sunni Ittehad Council chief Sahibzada Hamid Raza, former NA Speaker Asad Qaisar, Majlis-e-Wahdatul Muslimeen head Senator Allama Nasir Abbas and PTI Secretary General Salman Akram Raja attended the meeting.

The government team was represented by Deputy Prime Minister Senator Ishaq Dar, Senator Irfan Siddiqui, Adviser to PM Rana Sanaullah Khan, former prime minister Raja Parvaiz Ashraf, PPP MNA Syed Naveed Qamar, Ejazul Haque, Khalid Magsi and Abdul Aleem Khan.

The PTI's three-page charter of demands presented for the government committee, a copy available with The News, reads:

"The charter of demands is a prerequisite to wider negotiations with respect to the restoration of the Constitution, the rule of law, and respect for the people's mandate, free and fair elections."

The charter called upon the federal government to set up two commissions of inquiry in terms of the Commission of Inquiry Act 2017. The two commissions are to comprise the Chief Justice of Pakistan or three serving judges of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, mutually nominated by the PTI and the government within seven days. The conduct of the proceedings of the two commissions must be open to the general public as well as the media.

"The first commission be tasked to conduct an in-depth inquiry into the legality of the events that led to the arrest of PTI founding chairman Imran Khan on May 9, 2023, the legality of the manner of the arrest and those responsible for the break-in into the premises of the Islamabad High Court by the Rangers and the police;

"The events across the country after the arrest of Imran Khan; in particular the circumstances in which groups of individuals were able to reach various high security locations at which damage to property is said to have been caused; examination of the CCTV recordings at each location where damage is said to have been caused by protesters; if CCTV footage is not available the causes of this lack of availability;

"The manner in which those arrested in connection with the events of May 9 were apprehended and then kept in custody as well as the circumstances of their release; were the human rights of these individuals violated, including through torture? How

were the lists of those to be arrested compiled?

"Were multiple FIRs registered against the same individual with respect to May 9, 2023 and sequential arrests carried out in abuse of the process of law?

"Review instances of media censorship and restrictions on reporting related to the incident, including harassment of journalists.

"Examine the vires and legality of government's imposition of internet shutdowns and its impact before, during and after the unrest and fix responsibility."

According to the charter, the second commission be tasked to carry out an in-depth inquiry into the following: The events of 24 to 27 November, 2024 in Islamabad. The following issues, in particular, be examined and inquired into:

"Was there firing of live ammunition and other forms of physical assault on the protesters in Islamabad? If so, who ordered the use of live ammunition and other violent actions against the protesters? To what extent was the use of force excessive? If so, who was responsible for the excessive use of force?

"The number of the martyrs and injured and of persons who went missing after 24 to 27 November, 2024?

"Examine and ascertain the state of CCTV recordings at various hospitals and medical facilities in Islamabad with respect to the period 24 to 27 November, 2024?

"Were the records of hospitals and other medical facilities tampered with? If so, under whose directions and command was this done? Were the hospitals prevented from releasing information about the fatalities and the injuries?

"Examine and ascertain the state of CCTV footage recorded at various premises from China Chowk to D Chowk on the Blue Area, Islamabad.

"What difficulties were faced by those seeking to register FIRs and initiate other legal action with respect to the events of 24 to 27 November?

"Review instances of media censorship and restrictions on reporting related to the

incident, including the harassment of journalists.

“Examine the vires and legality of government’s imposition of internet shutdowns and its impact before, during and after the unrest and fix responsibility.

“The PTI, hereby, also calls upon the federal government, as well as the governments of Punjab, Sindh and Balochistan to support, in accordance with the law, the grant of bails or orders suspending the conviction and sentence of all political prisoners, to be identified by the PTI, who have been arrested pursuant to one or more FIRs registered with respect to any event on May 9, 2023 or any event on 24 to 27 November, 2024 or any other political event anywhere or who have been convicted and whose appeals or revisions are presently pending before a court of law.

“The establishment of the two commissions identified in this charter is a necessary indication of seriousness of intent. We shall not be able to continue with the negotiations if the two commissions sought by us are not agreed to in principle and constituted forthwith,” the charter concluded. The document carried signatures of the six members of the opposition committee.

Meanwhile, talking to the media at the Parliament House, following the meeting, Omar Ayub said he presented the charter to the NA Speaker and then read it out before the meeting.

Replying to a question, he said that they looked forward for a meeting with the party founding chairman in an unmonitored environment. When his attention was drawn to the jail manual, he replied, “This meeting will not be about the security of Pakistan. It is our right to meet our leader, who is not convicted but under trial, facing political cases.”

About the appointment of new chief election commissioner and two ECP members, he said that the government had not contacted them but they had taken the first step by writing to the NA Speaker, while Leader of the Opposition in the Senate Shibli Faraz wrote to

the Senate chairman on the constitution of parliamentary committee in this context.

Meanwhile, Rana Sanaullah said that Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has formed a committee comprising members from all ruling parties to review the demands submitted by the opposition committee.

Flanked by the government’s negotiation committee head Senator Irfan Siddiqui, Sanaullah addressed a press conference in Islamabad to brief the media on a meeting between the PTI and the government’s negotiation committees.

“For now, I am presenting the initial opinion on the demands,” said Sanaullah, adding that the PTI demanded the release of its “political prisoners” and party founder Imran Khan.

Speaking about the PTI demands to form the chief justice-led probe commission on May 9, 2023, violent protests and the November 26, 2024 crackdown on the party workers, he said both matters had already been investigated. “An inquiry cannot be opened again on their demands while it is already in the courts,” he said.

The PM’s aide also rubbished the PTI’s claims that “hundreds of its workers were killed and went missing” following the November 26 crackdown on the demonstrators in Islamabad’s D-Chowk area last year.

“They could not even figure out as to how many of their workers were missing or injured in two and a half months. If hundreds of their workers had gone missing, their families would have staged a sit-in at D-Chowk,” he added.

Moreover, Sanaullah said the PTI did not even provide any details of its “political prisoners” or missing or killed workers. “It is hoped that the decision of £190 million case against the PTI founder and his wife will be announced tomorrow,” he said.

Irfan Siddiqui compared the PTI charter of demands to a charge sheet against the current government, calling it a “pack of accusations” largely based on unfounded allegations.

He stated that the government negotiation committee, after consulting with its coalition partners, would issue a formal written

response to PTI's demands within seven working days.

The government believes that negotiations should proceed without the pressure of deadlines. However, to maintain a constructive dialogue, "we have agreed a response deadline for January 26 or 27."

Siddiqui stressed that the focus should remain on achieving tangible outcomes rather than adhering strictly to timelines. He underscored that certain issues, particularly sub judice cases, cannot be discussed during the negotiations due to legal constraints. "As per the Constitution, cases under judicial consideration cannot be part of these discussions," he explained.

One of the key points of contention is PTI's demand for the formation of a commission to investigate the May 9 and November 27 incidents, Siddiqui stated, adding that the government would consider the proposal carefully and evaluate all aspects before making a decision.

PTI has proposed 15 terms of reference (TORs) for the creation of two commissions.

Siddiqui indicated that if a commission is formed, the government would also include its own conditions in the TORs. In a bid to foster a positive atmosphere, Siddiqui indicated that the government did not view the recent media statements from PTI as a hindrance, despite their contentious nature.

He revealed that a meeting with the PTI's founder chairman had been agreed upon and would take place in the coming days, in a conducive environment.

Responding to questions about PTI's recent narrative, Siddiqui accused the opposition party of spreading falsehoods.

He claimed the PTI had failed to substantiate its claims regarding fatalities, injuries and missing persons, particularly related to the Nov 26 incidents.

"They have exaggerated the number of missing persons to hundreds without providing any evidence or names. How can we trace people without any concrete information?" he asked.

Siddiqui also strongly rejected PTI Chairman Barrister Gohar Ali Khan's statement about

the politicisation of the security-related meeting in Peshawar, which took place a few days ago.

He expressed disappointment over the statement, arguing that the PTI leader had undermined his own negotiating team. "No direct talks are being held between PTI and other parties, except with the government's negotiating team," Siddiqui pointed out.

Meanwhile, reiterating the party's demands for justice, accountability, electoral transparency and meaningful dialogue, PTI Central Information Secretary Sheikh Waqas Akram accused the government of misleading the public and suppressing dissent.

Addressing a press conference in Peshawar, he said that PTI's calls for judicial inquiries and meaningful dialogue reflected its commitment to constitutional rights and democratic principles.

Sheikh Waqas criticised the government's narrative about Imran Khan's arrest, pointing to an alleged letter from Islamabad High Court judges claiming they were pressured and their families intimidated. "Demanding an inquiry by the chief justice is our right, and there is nothing wrong with it," he asserted, calling for judicial independence.

He rejected the claims that PTI had abandoned its stance on the stolen mandate, accusing former federal minister Rana Sanaullah of misrepresenting the party's position. "We are not stepping back. Our struggle for electoral justice continues, as the people's vote does not belong to the government. Dialogue does not mean we will stop seeking justice for the stolen mandate," Sheikh Waqas said.

He said that PTI's dialogue agenda covered the issues of those who died during protests, the incident of May 9 and broader political crisis.

Sheikh Waqas also accused the government of denying the deaths of 13 PTI workers during protests, despite evidence shown by national and international media. He alleged that hospitals were closed to injured protesters, post-mortem examinations were obstructed, and medical staff were unavailable. "You have seen the funerals of our workers. Even your

deputy prime minister, senators, and Rana Sanaullah himself admitted on the floor of the assembly that firing took place during the protests," he stated.

The PTI leader dismissed allegations surrounding Imran Khan's use of Toshakhana gifts, challenging the government to first disclose records of their own leaders.

"You accuse us of wrongdoing, yet your leader, supposedly in London for treatment, was doing something entirely different. These baseless accusations and fake cases against Imran Khan and his wife reflect the government's fear of PTI's growing momentum," he said.

About the dialogue with the government, Sheikh Waqas clarified that Imran Khan approved the talks to address rising hostility between the people and state institutions. He stressed that PTI seeks "meaningful dialogue," adding, "If the government thinks we will forget the stolen mandate, they are mistaken. We will demand justice at every forum."

Responding to reports of backdoor discussions with the establishment, he confirmed the recent meetings between PTI leaders and the Chief of Army Staff related to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's security concerns. He dismissed speculation of secret agreements, stating, "There is nothing unusual about these meetings. Security concerns required them to be conducted in confidence."

Responding to a question about the separate meeting between Barrister Gohar and Ali Amin Gandapur with the COAS, he stated, "During a meeting, there was governor and people from other political parties, so that's why they couldn't discuss something clearly because of political differences. So they had a separate meeting with COAS about security concerns of KP."

Sheikh Waqas also criticised the government's economic policies, highlighting declining industrial growth and mass emigration. "The federal information minister claims economic progress, but the reality is millions are leaving Pakistan because of the economic crisis," he added.

Dawn

January 17, 2025

After third round of talks, PTI & govt still poles apart

Syed Irfan Raza

- PTI formally lays demands before govt; seeks judicial commissions, acquittal of 'political prisoners'
- Govt team will 'take its time' to review demands; rules out relief for those already being tried in court
- Tarar says no to concessions in garb of talks

ISLAMABAD: The PTI on Thursday formally asked the government to release its political prisoners and constitute separate judicial commissions to probe the crackdown in the wake of the events of May 9, 2023, while the government ruled out any extraordinary relief in the garb of negotiations, while agreeing to respond to the demands.

In a three-page document signed by committee members, the PTI sought the "support" of the federal and provincial governments in bail, sentence suspensions, and acquittals of "political prisoners" identified by the party. Besides its demand for the formation of commissions, the opposition party also suggested terms of reference (ToR).

According to the PTI, the commission should comprise the chief justice of Pakistan, or three serving Supreme Court judges, mutually nominated by the PTI and the government within seven days.

Though it agreed to respond in seven working days, the government appeared uncertain about the formation of a commission under the Commissions of Inquiry Act, 2017, saying that cases involving opposition leaders and party workers were already in court.

"The conduct of the proceedings of the two commissions must be open to the general public as well as the media," it said, calling the formation of these commissions "a necessary indication of seriousness of intent".

"We shall not be able to continue with the negotiations if the two commissions sought

by us are not agreed to in principle and constituted forthwith,” PTI’s letter added.

According to the PTI, the commissions needed to conduct an in-depth inquiry into various aspects, including the “legality of the events that led” to Imran’s arrest on May 9, 2023, and the subsequent violence.

It also sought CCTV footage of the attacks on sensitive installations and if it was “not available, the causes of this lack of availability” should be investigated. It also sought a review of “instances of media censorship and restrictions on reporting related to the incident, including harassment of journalists”.

Bringing recurring internet disruptions into the discussion, the PTI demanded that the “vires and legality of government’s imposition of internet shutdowns and its impact before, during and after the unrest” be examined, with responsibility fixed for it.

It also sought a probe into the November 26 crackdown in which live ammunition was allegedly used against PTI supporters. It also asked for the “number of the martyrs and the injured and of the persons who went missing after 24 to 27 November, 2024” as well as hospital records.

Besides the commissions, the PTI also called upon the federal government, as well as the governments of Punjab, Sindh and Balochistan, to “support, in accordance with the law, the grant of bails or orders suspending the conviction and sentence of all political prisoners” arrested pursuant to “one or more FIRs registered with respect to any event on May 9, 2023 or any event on November 24 to 27, 2024 or any other political event anywhere”.

It stated that the prisoners, to be identified by the party, would include those “convicted and whose appeals or revisions are presently pending before a court of law”.

‘No relief for those on trial’

But Rana Sanaullah, the PM’s aide on political affairs, maintained that there was no room in the inquiry commission act to hold a probe into cases that are already being tried in the courts. “However, it is not the final decision.

We will come up with our response after consultation with ruling allies,” he said.

Addressing a news conference flanked by Senator Irfan Siddiqui — the spokesperson for the government’s negotiating team — he claimed that the PTI had backtracked from its previous demand of a probe into alleged election rigging.

He said PTI had presented a second demand claiming that all cases against their workers and supporters were political in nature, but failed to give the name of any worker or an FIR number. He asked why PTI had not furnished the list of its “arrested, missing and deceased workers”.

Senator Siddiqui termed PTI’s demands “a charge sheet” against the government. “The PTI has taken 42 days to present its demands and the government will definitely take some time to respond, but before Jan 31.”

Information Minister Attaullah Tarar, in a separate press conference, said that those accused in corruption cases would have to face trials, adding that nobody would get any concession in the name of negotiations.

Meanwhile, KP Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur said he believed the government would form judicial commissions on the PTI’s demand, warning that talks would not move forward otherwise.

Meanwhile, National Assembly Speaker Ayaz Sadiq said the talks were heading in the “right direction” and shared his two demands for the talks committee.

He said, “I requested them that the entire country should also be united on a charter of economy and [the issue of] terrorism, and that some committees should also be formed on these,” he added. The NA speaker said the opposition had requested another meeting with the incarcerated PTI founder, and the government had assuring them they would try to arrange one.

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The News

January 19, 2025

Imran’s tweet again threatens talks including backchannel ones

Imran Khan is advised by his leaders to stop PTI's overseas chapter from running any anti-army campaign

By Ansar Abbasi

ISLAMABAD: Imran Khan's latest post on X (formerly Twitter), targeting top military command, has again risked both the formal dialogue and backchannel talks between PTI and the government/establishment.

Imran Khan is unstoppable despite having been advised even after the latest meeting of army chief with PTI leaders that he should not target the army and its command to help talks succeed.

But Imran Khan again posted an aggressive post in his social media account. "This (unstoppable Imran Khan's social media statements) is the biggest hurdle in moving forward," a senior PTI leader lamented while talking to this correspondent on condition of not being named.

A source close to KP Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur disclosed that the CM during his last meeting with Imran Khan requested PTI founder chairman to avoid attacking the army and its command in view of the recent breakthrough in the backchannel dialogue process.

The source said that Barrister Gohar also made a similar request to Khan but again a hard-hitting statement was issued on jailed PTI leader's social media account.

Imran Khan was also advised by his leaders to stop the PTI overseas chapter from running any anti-army campaign.

Similar requests were made to Imran Khan even before but all such requests fell on deaf ears.

Gandapur and Gohar had recently met Army Chief General Asim Munir in Peshawar. Imran Khan himself confirmed this development while talking to reporters and termed it a welcoming development.

Most of the PTI leaders were also excited about this development amid hopes that backchannel talks with the establishment would continue and bring some relief for the PTI.

But Imran Khan's tweet on his X account on Friday disappointed quite a few within the

PTI. There has been even discussion between some leaders how to stop Khan's social media account from spoiling what the PTI has achieved after so long.

While the PTI was expecting follow-up backchannel meetings after the recent breakthrough, now they are not sure how the establishment would respond after Khan's latest tweet.

On Friday, Imran Khan's message following his conviction in £190 million case was posted on his X account. His message urged the nation to read the Hamoodur Rahman Commission report. "The history of 1971 is being repeated in Pakistan. Yahya Khan destroyed the country, and today, the dictator is doing the same to protect his dictatorship and personal gains, pushing the country to the brink of destruction."

There is a realisation among PTI's second tier leadership that if Khan continues his aggressive posture towards the establishment, it will hurt the dialogue process -- both public and backchannel.

An earlier aggressive tweet of Imran Khan had already jolted the dialogue process once. It was not expected after PTI leaders meeting with the army chief but Khan did it again.

Owing to the aggressive use of Khan's social media account in the past, PTI leaders have urged him to bring the control of Khan's as well as PTI's official social media accounts back to Pakistan from abroad to ensure that they are not used to fuel the fire.

According to a PTI leader those controlling these accounts from abroad even exaggerate Imran Khan's view and as a result create more problems for the party and its leadership. He, however, agreed that Khan never snubbed such elements.

Dawn

January 21, 2025

Govt swings into action after PTI threatens boycott

Syed Irfan Raza | Ikram Junaidi

- PM briefed on meetings; Irfan Siddiqui promises 'serious response' within seven days
- Gohar says negotiations meaningless sans

judicial commissions on May 9, Nov 26 events
• PTI likely to move IHC against Al Qadir Trust case verdict today

ISLAMABAD: The government on Monday assured the PTI of a response to the opposition's charter of demands within seven working days, after the party warned it would boycott the next round of talks if judicial commissions were not formed to probe the May 9 and Nov 26 incidents.

"We have shared PTI's demands with all our allies in the ruling coalition and sought their suggestions on how to fulfil them," said Senator Irfan Siddiqui, a member of the government's negotiation team, while talking to *Dawn*.

"We will give a serious, sympathetic response to the PTI within seven working days," he said, adding that Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif had formed a committee of all ruling allies to finalise the government's response, with its first meeting scheduled to be held shortly.

"We have also included some legal experts in the committee, including Law Minister Azam Nazir Tarar, and asked our allies to obtain legal opinions from their respective legal teams on the PTI demands and present their viewpoints in the committee's first meeting," he said.

"Once we gather suggestions from our partners, a unanimous reply will be prepared and presented to the prime minister."

As agreed by the two sides, he said, the government will respond to the opposition within seven working days (by Jan 27 or 28), after which the reply will be presented before National Assembly Speaker Sardar Ayaz Sadiq during the next meeting.

Senator Siddiqui denied media reports suggesting that the government had refused to form a judicial commission, urging the media to avoid spreading baseless news that could undermine the dialogue process.

"Such news causes worries and uncertainty on the other side and can hamper the dialogue process," he cautioned.

Later, three members of the government's negotiation team — Ishaq Dar, Irfan Siddiqui,

and Rana Sanaullah — called on PM Shehbaz to brief him on their meetings with the PTI.

A source said the prime minister urged them to maintain close liaison with other members of the government's team and finalise the responses to PTI's charter of demands.

PTI's threat

The government's response followed a warning from PTI Chairman Barrister Gohar, who said the party would not participate in the fourth meeting if the government failed to commit within seven days to forming judicial commissions on May 9 and Nov 26 incidents. Barrister Gohar, who met PTI founder Imran Khan in jail, told reporters that the ex-PM had categorically directed him that there would be no talks if the government did not form the judicial commissions.

Talks will be meaningless if the government filed to do so, he said, adding that the government should make the talks result-oriented through sincerity and politeness.

Separately, PTI Secretary General Salman Akram Raja said that the party would abandon talks with the government by January 28 unless they were allowed unfettered access to their incarcerated party founder.

Speaking to the *DawnNewsTV*, Mr Raja said: "In the last meeting, we asked to meet him alone, without the tools or officers of the state present. But it does not seem to be happening now".

When asked if the PTI would negotiate with the establishment, Mr Raja said the party was open to talking with all actors and it will engage with the establishment as well.

Separately, PTI legal expert Faisal Chaudhry, speaking to *Dawn*, said the party was committed to the negotiations for the country's benefit, not for gaining any advantage for the party itself.

"Imran Khan has said that imprisonment does not make any difference to him and it will not affect the negotiations with the government and others. He has stated that he only wants the establishment of a judicial commission to investigate the May 9 and November 26 incidents. He also clarified that the negotiations have nothing to do with his

release,” Mr Chaudhry said, sharing the former prime minister’s message.

In reply to a question, he warned that if the government did not show seriousness regarding the establishment of the judicial commission, PTI would be left with no option but to stop negotiations with the government. He also criticised Senator Siddiqui for his statement and accused the “Form 47 government” of showing mistrust towards security agencies. He said the government was also showing mistrust towards the press release issued by the security agencies. “It seems the government is afraid and puzzled because of the contacts between PTI and other powers.”

So far, three meetings between the government and PTI have taken place, chaired by NA Speaker Ayaz Sadiq. During the last meeting on Jan 16, the PTI presented its charter of demands, including the formation of judicial commissions to investigate the events of May 9, 2023, and Nov 26, 2024, as well as the release of all PTI prisoners.

Challenge to £190m case verdict

Meanwhile, speaking outside Parliament House, Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly Omar Ayub Khan said the party would approach the high court against the decision in the £190 million Al Qadir Trust case.

He said it should be asked from Hasan Nawaz, son of ex-PM Nawaz Sharif, how he transferred Rs40 billion from Pakistan to the UK.

Barrister Gohar claimed that the £190m case was not related to corruption but was a case concerning a trust, asserting that Imran Khan was not involved in corruption.

In response to a question about the judicial commission, he said that the commission could be established at any time and over any issue. He confirmed that Imran Khan had set a seven-day deadline for the commission’s formation.

PTI leaders Asad Qaiser announced that the party would approach the Islamabad High Court on Tuesday (today) to challenge the Al Qadir Trust case. He said Imran Khan remained the most popular leader and hinted

that the PTI would soon form an alliance with opposition parties.

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The News

January 23, 2025

No commission, no talks: Omar

PTI leader Sher Afzal Marwat says those who voted for 26th Amendment should see condition of Supreme Court

By Asim Yasin & Mumtaz Alvi

ISLAMABAD: Opposition Leader in the National Assembly Omar Ayub Khan Wednesday warned that there would be no negotiations if the commissions on May 9 and November 26 incidents were not formed.

Speaking to the media outside the Parliament House along with the PTI Chairman Barrister Gohar Ali Khan and other lawmakers, he said, “The plot they have created on Al-Qadir University is a stupid drama due to which the PTI founder and Bushra Bibi were imprisoned. At present, there is pressure on the judiciary.”

He claimed that the ‘Form-47 regime’ did not have the courage to compete with the opposition in the House. Omar said the opposition launched such a vigorous protest in the NA that Shehbaz Sharif could not pluck up the courage to speak.

“Several days have passed when the third round of talks was held but this Form-47 regime could not arrange our meeting with our leader Imran Khan in an unmonitored environment despite making a promise,” he regretted. He alleged that the PPP and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari shed crocodile tears over the information technology saying the PPP’s duplicity came to light when they voted with PMLN and MQM on the Digital Nation Pakistan Bill.

Speaking on the occasion, Barrister Gohar posed a question: “How many hours and days has the National Assembly actually been in session? This is the shortest time in the year that it took to complete the session. Today, 89 days have passed. During this period, only 37 legislations were made of which 29 are

government bills, while the rest are private member bills.”

Meanwhile, PTI Information Secretary Sheikh Waqas Akram denounced what he called the smear and relentless campaign against Imran Khan’s wife Bushra Bibi. He vowed that notorious elements were bent on hurting Khan and his mission but they would not succeed in their nefarious designs.

In a statement, Akram lashed out at the wicked elements for their continued attacks on the PTI founding chairman’s family, categorically stating that ‘enough is enough’ since their nonsensical social media activities and venomous propaganda against Khan’s family had deeply hurt the sentiments of Pakistanis. He termed attack on Bushra Bibi reprehensible and condemnable, adding that such baseless and hurtful accusations would not be tolerated under any circumstances. Separately, PTI leader Sher Afzal Marwat said those who voted for the 26th Amendment should see the condition of the Supreme Court. Talking to the media outside the Parliament House, Marwat said one bench files a case and the next day it becomes contempt of court. “Our first demand should be the release of political prisoners and the second should be judicial commission; their time to appeal to the president will come soon,” he noted.

Marwat said the law minister should save this opportunity for the “Mian Sahibaan” when the justice system would be restored and cases against them would be revived. “If the talks fail, we will be on the streets. They have come to power through a fake way so that they can loot,” he claimed. Meanwhile, the spokesperson for the government negotiating committee, Senator Irfan Siddiqui, said a written response would be given to the PTI on January 28.

“No decision on formation of a judicial commission on PTI’s demand has yet been made,” he said while talking to The News after the sub-committee meeting held in the Speaker’s Chamber at the Parliament House. The meeting was attended by Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Senator Ishaq Dar, Law Minister Azam Nazir Tarar, Syed

Naveed Qamar, Minister for Privatization Abdul Aleem Khan, Adviser to PM on Political Affairs Rana Sanaullah, Dr Farooq Sattar, Ijazul Haq, Khalid Magsi and Minister for Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resources Chaudhry Salik. Talking to The News, Siddiqui said they had to convey to the speaker that the government response would be ready by January 27 and the Speaker may convene the fourth round of talks with the PTI on January 28. He was hopeful that the PTI will attend the fourth round and will not have any excuse. Talking to the media, committee member Ijazul Haq said the PTI’s demands were discussed in detail and legal matters were also looked into but the response on these had not been prepared yet.

Dawn

January 23, 2025

Govt wants to give talks a chance after PTI threat to disengage

Ikram Junaidi | Syed Irfan Raza

- Irfan Siddiqui promises response to party’s demands in Jan 28 meeting, terms move to call off talks ‘illogical’
- PTI leader says not possible to continue talks without formation of commissions to probe May 9, Nov 26 events

ISLAMABAD: As the PTI decided to walk away from the talks with the government till the formation of judicial commissions, the government urged the opposition to remain part of the dialogue, promising to respond to their demands in the fourth round of talks on Jan 28.

The announcement by the PTI to call off negotiations came shortly after the confirmation of the fourth round of talks scheduled to be held on Jan 28. So far, three rounds of talks have been held between the two sides, and the PTI submitted its written demands in the last meeting. The government asked for seven working days to respond.

“No commissions, no negotiations,” PTI leader Omar Ayub stated in a post on the social media site X. In a presser earlier in the day, Mr Ayub said the PTI would not participate in the negotiations till commissions were formed by the government to probe the May 9 and Nov 26 events.

The government, however, struck a conciliatory tone and asked the PTI to remain part of the talks. Senator Irfan Siddiqui, spokesperson for the government's negotiation committee, said that they would present a written response to the opposition party's charter of demands on Jan 28.

"We (government) have promised the PTI that we will present our response to the dialogue committee within seven working days and thus we will definitely submit our replies on Jan 28," the PML-N senator told *Dawn* following a meeting of ruling allies regarding the PTI's demands.

In response to a question about the PTI's refusal to attend the next meeting until the commissions were formed, the senator appeared confident about the opposition party's prospects to remain part of the dialogue.

"They (PTI) will definitely join the next meeting, and they should because the dialogue was started by them, as they first formed their negotiation committee," said the senator about the dialogue to defuse political tensions.

He said the talks were being held on PTI's demands for the formation of the commissions, adding that the government had not taken any decision regarding these. He also said that skipping the next meeting of the committee would be an "illogical" move by the PTI.

"We want they should ... not leave the dialogue process incomplete and sit (with the government) without any condition," he added.

"We will give a proper answer to the PTI's demands (and) in the same manner in which the opposition party had submitted its demands," the senator said.

He said the government had also asked National Assembly Speaker Ayaz Sadiq, who is head of the negotiation committee, to call the fourth meeting of the committee on Jan 28 or on any other date with the consent of the PTI.

Senator Siddiqui said the ruling allies met on Wednesday for the second day to deliberate on the PTI's charter of demands and would

continue to hold their meetings daily till the fourth round of talks.

He said that on Wednesday, some legal experts and lawyers were invited by the meeting who presented their point of view in light of the Constitution and some decisions of the courts.

"Some of the legal experts will come to tomorrow's (Thursday) meeting, and they will also give their input in this regard," he added.

The PTI had demanded the formation of judicial commissions on its May 9, 2023 and Nov 26, 2024 violent protests across the country and the release of all PTI prisoners.

Meanwhile, another PML-N leader, Khurram Dastagir Khan, said in a private TV programme that the government would not compromise on the May 9 riots.

It may be noted that after a long standoff, a dialogue between the government and the opposition started in December last year.

Initially, the PTI was not willing to share demands in writing, but after getting a go-ahead from Imran Khan, it shared the written demands seeking the formation of judicial commissions and the release of its prisoners.

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The News

January 24, 2025

Imran ends talks 'over govt failure to form judicial commission'

Talks had to be called those off "due to non-cooperation from the government," says Barrister Gohar

By Asim Yasin & Khalid Iqbal & Mumtaz Alvi & Shakeel Anjum

RAWALPINDI: Former prime minister and PTI founder chairman Imran Khan has called off negotiations with the government, citing its failure to form a judicial commission within the agreed seven-day period.

The PTI and the government were engaged in talks to bring down the political temperatures. After two rounds of meetings, the third round was held seven days ago (Jan 16), in which the PTI formally presented its demands in writing. Despite the negotiations, the dialogue process has hardly moved forward on major issues, including the

formation of judicial commissions to probe the May 9 and November 26 incidents and the release of PTI prisoners. On Monday, after PTI warned of a boycott of the next round of talks, the government had assured them of a response to their 'charter of demands' within seven working days.

Speaking to reporters outside the Adiala jail on Thursday after meeting Imran Khan, Barrister Gohar said the government had promised to form the judicial commissions within seven days, but it failed to do so.

The PTI founder asked for calling off the talks over the government's failure to form the judicial commissions, he said. He added that the PTI was hopeful of continuing talks, but they had to be called those off "due to non-cooperation from the government". Negotiations could not move forward if the commission was not announced today (Thursday), he said. He noted, however, that negotiations could resume if a three-judge commission was formed. Quoting the PTI founder, Gohar said the party would continue its struggle under the law and Constitution. "On the instructions of Imran, we will join various opposition parties and struggle together," he added. To another question, Gohar quoted the PTI founder as saying "we are not waiting for help from any foreign country".

Earlier, talking to his lawyers, Imran strongly condemned the 'illegal raid' on Hamid Raza's house and seminary and said, "The 'orderly' (Ardali) government is pretending to hold talks on one hand and continuing to violate human rights on the other. We are immediately stopping the talks after this raid".

He described the raid as "an attack" on their negotiation committee, saying no good could come out of the duplicitous and malicious negotiation process. "I have instructed my party to take all political parties into confidence for the rule of law, survival of democracy and respect for human rights in Pakistan. We are working on a grand national agenda against this fake government," he added.

Terrorism, he regretted, is flourishing in Balochistan and no political solution was being found for the problem there. The issue of Baloch missing persons is very serious, for which Mahrang Baloch is raising her voice. "Many workers of PTI are also missing. We stand with them on this issue and will raise this issue before international human rights organisations. Until a government with public trust is brought in the whole country, including Balochistan, stability is not possible."

Imran said he did not ask anything from the establishment for his own sake and that if he talks to them, it will be only for the betterment of the country and the nation. The real control is in their hands. Everyone else is their puppet, who awaits their signals. "We demand that a commission consisting of the three most senior judges of the Supreme Court or the Islamabad High Court be formed so that the real culprits involved in the incidents of May 9 and November 26 can be identified. Without this, no commission is acceptable to us."

The PTI supremo alleged that the judicial commission would find out that the government and the establishment were involved in the false flag incident of May 9 and the massacre on November 26. "On May 9, they removed the army and police from the checkpoints, set fire to them and also removed the CCTV footage, blaming it on innocent political workers. On November 26 too, our people were martyred and injured and we were declared terrorists. At least 14 of our people were martyred, many people are injured and missing, thousands of innocent people were put in jails. Those who are outside the jails are sometimes going to one court, sometimes another for bail," he added.

Regarding, Malik Riaz's recent statement if he discloses the secrets many people will have to bite the dust, he said: "I request Malik Riaz to tell me which judges, generals and politicians received money and other financial benefits from him in the last 30 years so that the nation can know who is behind this mess." In his message to overseas Pakistanis, Imran

once again said that sending remittances to 'this' government is tantamount to "staining your hands with blood". "Since this government is involved in the massacre of its own citizens, so boycott sending remittances to them," he said.

The PTI also shared a message from Imran Khan on his social media account, 'X,' about his conversation with lawyers and the media at Adiala jail on January 22, 2025. "To cover up the events of May 9 (2023), Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa did not hear our petitions regarding the May 9 false flag operation and the election rigging of February 8 (2024). The worst human rights violations in history were committed against PTI," he wrote. He continued that "from Zille Shah to Sami Wazir, there is a long tale of oppression and tyranny against us. We have not been able to get justice from any court. The courts are paralysed, but even today, the illegitimate government fears that if a judge hears our petitions on human rights violations on merit, they might actually deliver justice. But no matter what they do, it is a divine law that a reign of tyranny and oppression cannot last long".

He added: "I am deeply grateful to Saudi Crown Prince HRH Mohammed bin Salman for responding to my appeal and releasing nearly 7,200 poor and deserving Pakistani citizens from Saudi prisons. I have always tried to use my position and influence to improve the lives of ordinary Pakistanis. This was one of the reasons I entered politics, and I will continue to strive for it for as long as I live."

He reiterated that neither Bushra Bibi nor he financially benefited from the Al-Qadir Trust in any way. "Malik Riaz will testify that I was the only prime minister who never sought anything from him for personal or financial gain. Unlike Zardari, I did not have a Bilawal House built for me, nor did I sell One Hyde Park at double its value, like the Sharif family did. The future of Pakistan's youth is important for me, and it was for this reason that Al-Qadir University was established," he said. "They have used every tactic to cause me agony. I strongly condemn the social media

campaign against Bushra Bibi. The opposition has been slinging mud at her for six years to malign my character. Those who claim to be our well-wishers but have become part of their propaganda are playing into the enemy's hands by carrying out their mission," he added.

Reacting to the PTI leadership calling off the talks, the spokesperson for the government negotiating committee, Senator Irfan Siddiqui, said the PTI's announcement on ending the talks is regrettable, as the negotiation process was initiated on their wishes. "They should have listened to our answer and then refused. In our opinion, seven working days end on January 28, and we gave the date of January 28 to the speaker. Why can't they wait for just five more days," he said while talking to the media at the Parliament House.

The senator said it was decided in the first meeting that the demands would be brought in writing, and it took them 42 days to do so. "But they want us to form a commission within seven days. They were eager to come and they were also in a hurry to leave. What has prompted them to call off the talks now," he questioned.

The spokesperson said, "We took the demands seriously and the committee of seven parties discussed them. We were ready for the deadline of Jan 28 so that something could be achieved. We wanted things to improve; they should revisit the decision." He said despite their call for civil disobedience and using foul language against the prime minister, "we did not say anything about it either, we have been walking on our path with determination."

Meanwhile, no meetings were held with the PTI founder in Adiala jail, despite it being the scheduled day for party leaders to meet the former prime minister. The jail authorities confirmed that no PTI leaders arrived for the meeting. According to jail officials, PTI leader Salman Akram Raja contacted them by phone, to express his wish to meet Imran Khan, but his request was denied. Similarly, Imran Khan's lawyer, Faisal Chaudhry, submitted a formal request to the jail superintendent for

an immediate meeting with the PTI founder. The sources in the jail revealed that Imran Khan was currently not in the custody of jail authorities but under physical remand with the Rawalpindi police. As a result, any requests for meetings must be directed to the New Town Police Station, which now holds the authority to approve or deny such visits. On the other hand, independent Senator Faisal Vawda said both the government and PTI want to keep the PTI's founder in jail. Reacting to Imran Khan's announcement to end the ongoing negotiations, he said he had already told them that the negotiations would not continue, that they would let the government run as it had been running since the day one and that the PTI people were happy with Imran Khan being in jail. "The frontline party people are enjoying power, none of them endured any hardships or suffered in the jails; they are doing everything under compromise, they voted for all the amendments, went to the gallery under compromise and played their role according to the script," he claimed. Vawda said there would be no sit-in or protest but they would surely write some letters abroad to defame the country. "When President Trump's mood changes, they will be forced to negotiate, the government will continue to function as PTI is the guarantor of PMLN government," he added.

Dawn
January 24, 2025

Negotiations come to a halt after PTI storms off

Dawn Report

- **Imran says dialogue abandoned due to raid on SIC chairman's house, reiterates demand for commissions to probe May 9, Nov 26 events**
- **Govt asks opposition party to reconsider decision, says response to party's demands 'almost ready'**

ISLAMABAD: The nearly month-long dialogue process between the government and the opposition came to a standstill on Thursday after the PTI called off talks due to the "non-cooperation" of the government, while the

latter urged the party to reconsider its decision, for the sake of political stability.

The decision to abandon talks came a day after the PTI threatened to walk away from the process due to non-compliance with its demand to form judicial commissions to probe the violence on May 9 and November 26 — a key component of its written charter of demands submitted to the government earlier this month. According to a statement posted on the X account of party founder Imran Khan, the talks were scuttled due to a raid on the residence of Sunni Ittehad Council chief Sahibzada Hamid Raza, an ally of the PTI and its spokesperson for the talks committee. "We have decided to stop the process of negotiations because of the attack on the negotiating committee's spokesperson's house, who is also our ally. It is an attack on the negotiating committee. The negotiations based on ill intention cannot succeed," Imran Khan stated. On the one hand, the government was holding negotiations but on the other, it had been violating basic rights, said the PTI leader.

The party founder, however, remained willing to talk to the establishment in the country's best interests, claiming that the establishment has control over all issues and all others are "puppets".

He also reiterated the demand for the formation of judicial commissions, comprising senior judges of the Supreme Court, to investigate the incidents of May 9 and November 26.

Imran Khan also claimed that he had directed his party to take other opposition parties into confidence. "We have been working on a grand national agenda against the fake government. There is instability in the country," he added. The PTI leader also alluded to terrorism in Balochistan, saying no one was trying to solve it politically.

"Mahrang Baloch has been raising her voice and the whole country is facing a situation similar to Balochistan," he said, adding that a number of PTI workers were also missing.

Earlier in the day, PTI interim chairman Barrister Gohar Ali Khan told reporters outside Adiala jail that Mr Khan had asked

them to call the talks off over the government's failure to form the judicial commissions. He added that the PTI was hopeful of continuing the talks but they have to be called off "due to non-cooperation from the government." "Negotiations cannot move forward if the commission is not announced today," Barrister Gohar said, per Dawn.com. Meanwhile, PTI spokesperson Sheikh Waqqas Akram said the talks were called off after the non-constitution of judicial commissions and a police raid on the seminary of one of its negotiators. Addressing a press conference at the KP information department in Peshawar, Mr Sheikh said that the negotiations were over. He added that they had made it clear that the fourth round of talks would take place after the notification of judicial commissions.

Govt asks PTI to reconsider

On the other hand, the government urged the PTI to reconsider its decision to abandon the dialogue process. Addressing a press conference outside Parliament House, Senator Irfan Siddiqui urged the PTI to not forsake dialogue, for the sake of political stability.

"I cannot understand the reason for the PTI's threat to abandon talks," he added. He said the two sides had already agreed to give the government time to furnish its formal written response to the PTI's demands, adding that the deadline was not yet up.

"I don't have the words except that they were in a hurry to arrive and are in a hurry to depart. The impatience with which they came is the same with which they are going back. We ask them to stay some days and not go back; let the weather become pleasant."

Senator Siddiqui said the coalition parties had "almost" formed an opinion on the PTI's demands. "They should reconsider if it is in their power and if they can form an opinion apart from their founder's opinion," he added. The senator pointed out that the government side had exhibited restraint on many points during the talks and ignored many actions by the PTI since it wanted to advance talks in the "spirit of negotiations, democracy and give and take". He called on the PTI to reconsider

its course of action or submit its complaints in written form.

Syed Irfan Raza and Ikram Junaidi in Islamabad, and Manzoor Ali in Peshawar contributed to this report

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The Express Tribune

January 24, 2025

Talks to nowhere

Editorial

The snail-paced and synergy-less talks between the government and the PTI have come to naught. Incarcerated former PM Imran Khan has pulled out of 'talks', complaining the ruling dispensation's lack of interest and refusal to do the needful. Such an outcome was a fait accompli, as the government seemed non-serious and perhaps wanted to buy time by engaging the PTI in a directionless dialogue. The PTI which had squeezed down its demands to a two-point agenda - forming judicial commissions to investigate the May 9, 2023 and the November 26, 2024 upheavals, as well as release of political prisoners - ran out of patience and called it a day. The PTI had already made acceptance of, at least, the first demand as the way to go so that the government's sincerity is reflected. But the fact that the coalition could not walk the talk by positively responding had blown the lid, and now political volatility is once again set to rise.

The government, for the first time, seems to be in a tight corner and its inability to strike a working deal with the PTI will have repercussions. That is so because internal and external pressure is mounting, and there is a persistent demand from business, stakeholders and foreign lenders to put the house in order by bringing an end to political uncertainty. But the ruling strata, perhaps, has some flimsy considerations on its mind. It thinks of the opposition as a spent force, and believes that it could get along with marginally improving economic indicators. The slapping of new cases on opposition stalwarts and obstructing the path to justice are other cases in point.

The government would do well to get back to the opposition with an olive branch. Scaling down of political temperature is a must, and accepting the two pivotal demands of the opposition can make a good start. The government itself had canvassed for bringing culprits and hooligans to book, and there could be no better way to appoint independent judicial commissions to look into the issue and release political prisoners who have been wronged. The buck stops at the government.

The News

January 25, 2025

Govt-opposition talks: NA speaker calls 4th meeting on 28th, PTI says won't attend

Opposition leader says members of government committee should call meeting, and take tea themselves

By our correspondents

ISLAMABAD: National Assembly (NA) Speaker Sardar Ayaz Sadiq Friday summoned the 4th session of the negotiating committees of the government and the opposition for Tuesday, January 28.

According to a news release, issued by the National Assembly Secretariat, the meeting would be held at 11:45am in Committee Room 5 of the Parliament House. The in-camera session would be chaired by NA Speaker Ayaz Sadiq.

However, PTI Chairman Barrister Gohar Ali Khan, while talking to the media at the Parliament House, said on Friday they would not attend any other meeting of the negotiating committee, as per the instructions of party founder Imran Khan. He said they wanted to take the progress of the talks beyond a photo session, but the government did not respond positively.

Opposition leader in the National Assembly Omar Ayub Khan said members of the government committee should call a meeting, and take tea themselves.

Later, while holding a press conference at the Parliament House, Barrister Gohar said, "There is a long charge-sheet against us; despite this, the PTI founder asked for talks and had made two demands".

"The government asked for written demands; and we did so. The [seven-day] deadline has passed, but the government has not announced a judicial commission," he pointed out.

Meanwhile, talking to the media in the Press Gallery here, along with Omar Ayub, Shibli Faraz and Ali Muhammad Khan, Barrister Gohar said it was necessary to form two commissions. Hamid Raza's house was attacked; he was not allowed to meet the PTI founder; the party founder said there should be a neutral umpire.

He said if the government would have announced formation of both commissions, there would have been no problem in another meeting for talks. He said the PTI founder might consider resuming talks if the government announced formation of judicial commissions.

Addressing a protest, organised by the media fraternity against the PECA Act, outside Gate No. 1 of the Parliament House, Omar Ayub called it a black law and a plot to silence tongues. He claimed all the journalistic organisations agree that the PECA Act should not be approved, urging them to forge unity and move forward, the opposition would support them.

Opposition leader in the Senate Shibli Faraz also spoke, saying "at the time of the 26th Amendment, we had said that they would move towards strangling freedom of expression and today we see that strangulation of freedom of the press has started."

Today, he noted, the custom has started that no one would move forward with their heads held high and the process had started and journalists would not even be able to close their eyes now.

The PTI chairman said that under the guise of information and disinformation, freedom of expression was being stifled.

Commenting on the situation, Senator Irfan Siddiqui, spokesperson for the government's negotiation committee, said the PTI had been invited to the negotiation committee meeting. "The PTI hasn't informed [us] in writing about calling off the talks," he added.

Speaking to the media outside Parliament House earlier, Senator Siddiqui censured the former ruling party for Thursday's announcement of calling off the parleys. "We have not called off the negotiations, but when one side abruptly ends the talks, whom are we supposed to negotiate with? Should we sit in a room and talk to the walls?" he said.

He criticised the unpredictability of the opposing side, saying: "The issue is that the prison gates open, and someone suddenly makes an announcement without the negotiation committee even being informed."

"This is not child's play; they need to move beyond these 'ifs and buts'," he said. Reiterating the agreed-upon timeline, he added that as per the agreement, the meeting was to be held on January 28.

Earlier in the day, Prime Minister's Adviser on Public and Political Affairs Rana Sanaullah said the government could not be held responsible for ending negotiations.

"We entered into the dialogue and still want to continue, but there is a way of holding talks. It has always been that one of the parties gives their charter of demands and the other responds to it. The issues are then framed and discussed," Sanaullah said while speaking on Geo News' programme 'Geo Pakistan'.

"Those they [PTI] are looking up to won't have any discussion on any political agenda, as it has been clarified earlier. If they [PTI] still have any kind of confusion, it will be cleared in the coming days," the former federal minister added.

Separately, PTI Central Information Secretary Sheikh Waqas Akram announced on Friday the party had given the government until midnight to come to the negotiating table. However, he added, "Talks are on hold until further notice".

He said the fourth round of negotiations with the government would only resume if a decision was made regarding formation of a judicial commission.

Addressing a news conference at the Information Cell in the Peshawar Secretariat, Waqas Akram slammed the amendments to the PECA Act as a 'black law' that undermines

the Constitution of Pakistan. He warned that the PTI would resist the attempt to control the party through social media restrictions. The PTI leader criticised the MQM and the PPP for their hypocrisy on media freedom and revolution.

He said the decision on future of the protest would be made by the PTI founder chairman Imran Khan, and added that the PTI had clarified that it was not engaged with anyone except the government.

Sheikh Waqas announced that PTI's MNA Adil Bazai had been reinstated, following a Supreme Court decision. He also expressed concern over the difficult circumstances faced by Bazai's family in Balochistan.

He regretted that a systematic propaganda campaign had been launched against Bushra Bibi, wife of PTI Imran Khan, and a response would be given. He said efforts were underway to unite political parties with a coherent vision, which would play a significant role in the country's assembly.

Sheikh Waqas said the attack on Sahibzada Hamid home had harmed the negotiation process with the government, adding that the PTI would not hold negotiations with the government if their leadership were given no respect and their democratic rights were violated.

The News

January 25, 2025

Deadlock again

Government points out that PTI has not formally called off talks, leaving room for ambiguity

By Editorial

The talks between the government and the PTI may just become a myth. Scheduled for January 28, they appear to be doomed before they begin. National Assembly Speaker Ayaz Sadiq, tasked with facilitating these negotiations, has summoned the session but the PTI has refused to attend, creating yet another impasse in a political climate that thrives on stalemates. The government has pointed out that the PTI has not formally called off the talks, leaving room for ambiguity. On the other hand, PTI Chairman Barrister Gohar Ali Khan's conflicting

statements – first declaring the talks cancelled, then saying they were ‘on hold’ – add to the confusion. This lack of clarity, coupled with Prime Minister’s Adviser Rana Sanaullah’s accusation that the PTI is responsible for the breakdown in dialogue, shows yet again the sheer lack of coherence that characterises Pakistan’s political discourse.

From the outset, the PTI has been an unwilling participant in these negotiations. Their reluctance to engage in meaningful dialogue – evident not just in this instance but throughout their political history – suggests a troubling aversion to democratic norms of negotiation and compromise. The PTI’s preference for ultimatums over discussions shows a party that seeks immediate fixes rather than long-term solutions. Their written demands – the release of political prisoners and the formation of a judicial commission to investigate the events of May 9, 2023, and November 26, 2024 – were accompanied by an ultimatum to end the talks if these conditions were not met. This pretty much undermines the very essence of dialogue, which requires patience, flexibility and a willingness to find common ground. The government, for its part, cannot entirely absolve itself of responsibility. While it claims to have been ready to continue the talks, it must reflect on whether it has done enough to address the PTI’s concerns or build an environment conducive to dialogue. The perception that the government has been dragging its feet, possibly to buy time has only fueled the PTI’s scepticism. However, now this decision to abandon the talks preemptively weakens its position. By walking away, it forfeits the opportunity to expose any insincerity on the government’s part.

Let’s face it: the PTI’s disdain for dialogue is not new. Whether in opposition, in power or now back in opposition, the party has consistently preferred to engage with the establishment rather than its political contemporaries. This strategy, while perhaps effective in the short term, is unsustainable in a democratic system where political

consensus is essential for governance. The party’s willingness to sit down for talks, probably prompted by the fallout from the November 26 protest and the Al-Qadir Trust verdict, appeared to be a pragmatic shift. The way forward for both sides lies in recognising that dialogue is not a sign of weakness but a cornerstone of democracy. Both sides must move beyond their entrenched positions and engage with sincerity. For the PTI, this means abandoning its preference for ultimatums and unilateral decisions. For the government, it requires addressing the PTI’s concerns in good faith. Political observers are right to caution the PTI against expecting immediate results. Temperatures will not cool overnight. If Pakistan is to navigate its current crises, it must do so through dialogue.

Dawn

January 25, 2025

Stalled talks

Editorial

ONE step forward, two steps back. That had been the progress so far in long-awaited negotiations between the opposition PTI and the ruling coalition, but all talks have now been called off by the PTI’s incarcerated founder after a ‘raid’ on an allied lawmaker’s residence.

Following the raid, former prime minister Imran Khan decided on Thursday that the government was being ‘non-cooperative’ and, therefore, there was little to be gained from continuing negotiations with it. One wonders if he was a tad impatient in making that call.

After all, his party had previously announced that talks would be given a chance at least till the end of January, after which it would take decisions regarding its next steps forward. The government, too, had promised to respond to the PTI’s written demands by Jan 28 and had repeatedly asked the party not to abandon the committee set up for parleys between the two political camps.

It was, no doubt, a poor play by the authorities to sanction a raid on the residence of Sunni Ittehad Council Chairman Hamid Raza, who also serves as the PTI’s spokesperson for the talks committee. The PTI chief saw it as an attack on the

negotiating committee, noting that “negotiations based on ill intentions cannot succeed.”

However, Mr Khan should not have let the incident distract him from the bigger picture. Any negotiation with the government was never going to be easy, given the chasm between the two camps. His party has also been aware that there are spoilers who were unhappy with the process from the start. It would have been wiser, therefore, not to react to the provocation. However bitter their differences, both parties need something from each other if they hope to keep their share in the country’s political future. They should have remained committed to the process.

Perhaps there is an opportunity yet to salvage the talks. Though he has ended negotiations, the PTI founder still wants judicial commissions to probe the events of May 9 and Nov 26. Given the government’s confidence and conviction regarding its position, it does not make sense for it to delay the matter any further. It should let independent arbitrators investigate the facts so that these chapters may be closed and the country can move on.

There is a dire need for all national leaders to act sensibly if they wish the best for the country’s future. Much damage has been done by their inability to resolve their differences through political channels, and yet it seems that the temptation to keep looking to the ‘third umpire’ has not yet gone. A mutually acceptable solution must be found to return executive power back to the people, where it rightfully belongs. The status quo is not sustainable.

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The Nation
January 25, 2025

Stalled Talks

The PTI’s decision to suspend negotiations over the forthcoming general elections following the caretaker government’s refusal to agree to its demands is both regrettable and ill-advised. As per reports, PTI has conditioned further talks on a written assurance from the ruling authorities,

effectively stalling a dialogue process that had shown promising progress.

This is not the moment to play brinkmanship. Talks of such national importance cannot and should not be held hostage to inflexible preconditions. Negotiations are inherently about compromise and finding a middle ground. While both sides undoubtedly harbour concerns regarding their respective positions, refusing to engage is counterproductive. Pakistan’s political and economic stability hangs in the balance, and interruptions like this do nothing but exacerbate the uncertainty. A great deal of progress has already been made in these talks, and derailing them now serves no one. The PTI must realise that its hardline approach might alienate it from the public and the broader political process. Simultaneously, the caretaker government and allied forces must approach these discussions with a spirit of inclusivity, recognising that dialogue is the only path to long-term stability.

Irrespective of disagreements on specific demands, the criticality of these negotiations transcends party lines. Both sides must demonstrate a willingness to compromise for the greater good. History has shown that unyielding attitudes on either side have only worsened national crises, leaving the people of Pakistan to suffer the consequences.

Dialogue must continue unabated. Neither PTI nor the ruling alliance can afford to dig their heels in at this critical juncture. What is at stake is far greater than political wins or losses—it is the future of Pakistan. It is high time both sides prioritised the nation’s welfare over party agendas.

Daily Times
January 25, 2025

Editorial

Political Musical Chairs

It is quite evident that the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) has been forced to boycott or pull out of the talks due to the government’s lack of seriousness. Both sides went into three rounds of negotiations, and every time, the PTI came out pressing for their most basic demand: the formation of judicial

commissions to investigate the May 9 and November 26 incidents. First, the government created the impression that the PTI wanted to have talks only for concessions. It asked for every demand in writing as if the talks were meant for discussion on demand literature.

PTI presented its demands in writing on January 16 and seven working days to the government to provide a formal response. The deadline, however, passed without any meaningful progress. The party's leadership, including Chairman Barrister Gohar Ali Khan, expressed frustration over the government's attitude, labelling it as insincere and dismissive.

The PTI chairman criticised the government for wasting time and failing to address even simple demands like announcing the formation of the judicial commissions. He remarked that the government's refusal to engage constructively showed a clear disregard for the spirit of dialogue.

What added to the tensions is that the government passed eight laws within 11 minutes during a parliamentary session, bypassing any substantive debate or consideration of the president's objections. PTI leaders termed this move a blatant mockery of legislative processes, further straining the prospects of meaningful negotiations.

Senator Irfan Siddiqui, representing the government, urged PTI to reconsider its decision and continue the dialogue process. He assured that the coalition parties were close to reaching a consensus on PTI's demands. However, PTI leaders viewed these statements as hollow and insufficient to address their grievances.

The PTI's withdrawal speaks volumes about the government's inability to create a conducive environment for dialogue. Negotiations cannot succeed if one side consistently delays responses and avoids taking responsibility. The collapse of talks highlights the pressing need for genuine efforts from the government to restore trust.

If the government is serious about lowering political tensions, it must take immediate steps to revive the dialogue process. Meeting

PTI's core demands, particularly the formation of judicial commissions could pave the way for renewed discussions and political stability.

Dawn

January 26, 2025

PTI flip-flops on dialogue with govt

Ikram Junaidi

- Imran seeks meeting with party negotiators before 28th, sticks to demand for judicial commissions on May 9, Nov 26 incidents
- Junaid Akbar replaces Gandapur as head of KP chapter after PTI founder's order

ISLAMABAD: Within days after its decision to bid adieu to the talks with the government, the PTI on Saturday expressed its interest in coming back to the table, with its incarcerated chief Imran Khan seeking a meeting with his negotiators before the fourth round of talks scheduled for Jan 28.

In another development, the PTI founder removed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur from his position as the provincial head of PTI and appointed party lawmaker Junaid Akbar as the new chief of the party's KP chapter.

The desire to remain part of the talks with the government, however, is still contingent on the formation of judicial commissions to probe the May 9 and Nov 26 events — a key point of the PTI's written charter of demands submitted to the dialogue committee.

The government is expected to share its response during the fourth meeting on Jan 28. Speaking to reporters outside the Adiala jail after meeting Imran Khan and later at the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa House, PTI Secretary General Salman Akram Raja said he had a detailed meeting with the party chief. According to Mr Raja, the PTI founder said that he was doing negotiations in the best interest of the country.

"He [Imran Khan] said that efforts were made to weaken the PTI so that it would not take part in the elections or hold its campaigns. People voted for the PTI on February 8, 2024; however, our victory was converted into a defeat and we could not get justice from courts either," he claimed.

Mr Raja said Imran Khan had reiterated that they would not join negotiations as long as judicial commissions were not established to probe the May 9 and Nov 26 incidents. "However, he has shown interest in meeting the (PTI) negotiation committee," he added. Senator Shibli Faraz while talking to the media said PTI was the largest party in Pakistan despite the fact that some sections of the party had split. "We believe that negotiations have to be done if we want Pakistan to prosper. We faced atrocities but Imran Khan suggested we talk to the government. We gave our written demands as per the desire of the government, but it seems they have ill intentions," he alleged, adding that the government was not willing to tell the truth to the nation and wanted to cling to power at the expense of Pakistan. "They still have time to think for the country," he added. Mr Faraz said PTI had no objections to continuing the talks if the government formed the commissions.

A day earlier, PTI interim chairman Barrister Gohar Ali Khan made similar remarks, saying PTI could reconsider its decision to call off the negotiations if the government established judicial commissions.

Party's legal expert Faisal Chaudhry, while talking to *Dawn*, said PTI believed that the government was not serious about the formation of judicial commissions.

"The PTI will be interested in negotiations if the judicial commission, comprising three most senior judges of the Supreme Court or the Islamabad High Court, is established," he said.

Insiders told *Dawn* that PTI may rejoin the talks if the government assured it that the terms of reference for the commissions would have its input even if there was a delay in the formation.

PTI KP president

A day after he clinched the slot of the Public Accounts Committee's chairman, PTI lawmaker Junaid Akbar was appointed by the party's KP chapter head.

Mr Raja said the appointment was made on the directions of Imran Khan, adding that CM

Gandapur was removed from this position because he had "many responsibilities".

He added that CM Gandapur volunteered to step down from the role.

Mr Raja confirmed that Advocate Mashal Yousafzai had been appointed spokesperson for former first lady Bushra Bibi.

It may be noted that Ms Yousafzai had received a show-cause notice for attempting to represent Imran Khan in a May 9 case despite the suspension of her practice licence.

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The News

January 29, 2025

PTI not stopped from backchannel talks by Imran

"Backchannel talks have not been closed by other side as well," says party source

By Ansar Abbasi

ISLAMABAD: Imran Khan has though called off the formal dialogue process but has not given any such direction to his party leadership regarding backchannel talks.

Publicly all the stakeholders, including establishment, government and even PTI, deny backchannel contacts and discussions. But there have been different rounds of behind-the-scene interaction during the recent few months.

An important PTI source in his background discussions with *The News* said the backchannel talks have not been closed by Imran Khan, who has called off formal talks with government. "The backchannel talks have not been closed by the other side as well," the PTI leader said on condition of not being named.

Chairman PTI Barrister Gohar, when contacted, denied the backchannel talks. He said neither such talks were held before nor were being held now. He said formal dialogue with government has been closed because of government's failure to respond to the demands of PTI. He said if the government wanted to set up a parliamentary committee instead of a judicial commission to probe May 9 and Nov 26 incidents, it should have made such an offer for consideration of PTI.

Of late, two PTI leaders' — Barrister Gohar and Ali Amin Gandapur — meeting with Army Chief Gen Asim Munir made headlines while jailed PTI leader Imran Khan, while talking to media persons, confirmed the meeting, held recently in Peshawar. Imran was reported as saying Barrister Gohar presented all matters and demands of the party directly to Gen Asim Munir. Gohar, however, later said security issues were discussed in the meeting without explaining what his relevance was to sit with the army chief along with chief minister in a meeting discussing security issues.

Imran Khan had termed direct negotiations with the establishment a positive step towards resolving ongoing issues. There has been no formal response from the ISPR on Imran's claim, but the government denied any political matter was discussed in the interaction. According to the government, there was no schedule for any meeting of PTI leaders with army chief. It was claimed after the law and order meeting of army chief with different political leaders, Gen Asim Munir was approached by KP Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur for an exclusive meeting with him and his party chairman Gohar Ali Khan. Government's view is that when the PTI leaders talked about party issues, they were told by the army chief to take up political matters with government and political parties. The army chief, it is said, told them he would not get into such matters.

After this all-important meeting, PTI source confirms no follow-up meeting has so far been held between the PTI and any military official. The PTI is still hopeful the follow-up backchannel meeting will be held. The party source, however, is not sure when it will happen. The ISPR had said several months back the army will not talk to any political party and insisted politics and political matters should be discussed between the political parties.

The Nation
January 31, 2025
Negotiated Impasse

It seems that talks between the government and the opposition have finally broken down. Both sides are once again at an impasse, with the Prime Minister himself stepping in to state that while the government is willing to form a parliamentary committee to continue negotiations with the PTI, it is the PTI that refuses to budge from its demands, treating the process more like a hostage negotiation than a dialogue. The fourth round of talks was boycotted by the PTI over delays in forming a judicial commission to investigate incidents of concern. The government, while maintaining that a politically motivated judicial inquiry is out of the question, has offered a parliamentary committee as an alternative. This has now become the primary sticking point, with both sides resorting to social media and other platforms to assert their positions.

The Prime Minister is right in pointing out that it takes two to negotiate. Dialogue must continue so that the country can move forward instead of suffering further harm from violent protests. The PTI cannot expect to hold firm on its demands without compromise—negotiation is not about issuing ultimatums but about finding common ground. A parliamentary committee, even if not the PTI's preferred option, would provide the same level of scrutiny and inquiry into the incidents in question while offering some relief to the embattled opposition. At the same time, if the PTI were willing to ease some of its demands regarding the commission, it might secure a more lenient approach from state prosecutors in the cases faced by its protesters. This underscores the need for both sides to show flexibility rather than remain rigid to the bitter end.

For the PTI, compromise is the only viable option. With its senior leadership entangled in legal troubles and its primary mode of political expression limited to protests that have caused social and political unrest—resulting in injuries and even deaths—it must recognise that a negotiated settlement is the only path forward.

Dawn

January 19, 2025

Kurram conundrum

Editorial

THE validity of the claim by state functionaries that the violence in KP's Kurram district stems from a 'tribal dispute' has been severely put to the test by recent events.

After an attack on a convoy in the Bagan area on Thursday led to the loss of security personnel, a counterterrorism operation seems imminent, and the state has prepared plans to shift civilians to safer areas. While tribal disputes over land and water have played a key role in exacerbating tensions in Kurram, the fact is that sectarian groups and terrorist outfits have exploited these differences to establish footholds in the district, as the state has fumbled for responses.

At least two security men were martyred in the convoy attack, which is the second of its kind; an earlier attack had targeted the then Kurram DC, who survived the ambush. In the latest outrage, militants looted the trucks carrying goods to Parachinar, while four drivers have been found dead, with their hands tied and their bodies bearing signs of torture.

Unfortunately, if the state — all institutions, including the centre, the KP government, and the security establishment — had moved with alacrity when violence initially flared up last year, such bloodshed could have been avoided. But it seems that the administration was in denial, letting the Kurram cauldron boil until it was ready to explode, which it certainly has. Now, thousands of people will be displaced as the security forces go after militants. Besides, matters will be complicated by the fact that the local militants — including those fighters allied with the banned TTP and IS-K — have ideological comrades just across the border in Afghanistan.

Sadly, the state took a slothful approach to addressing the underlying land and water disputes which have fuelled conflict. Moreover, the government displayed great callousness by allowing Parachinar to be

blocked off from the rest of the country for months following the deadly targeting of a convoy in Lower Kurram in November. This resulted in a grave humanitarian crisis in Kurram's main town, with children and newborns particularly affected due to lack of food and medicine.

But the state took its time to address the 'tribal dispute'. Even the peace pact hammered out by a jirga on Jan 1 has failed to stem the violence, as the recent convoy attacks show, and now a CT operation is being seen as the last resort. If terrorists and sectarian groups — regardless of their confessional affiliations — had been neutralised earlier, we would not be at this juncture today.

Furthermore, the blockade of any region even for a single day should not have been tolerated by the state. The days ahead will tell whether the government succeeds in bringing peace to this forsaken area.

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The News

January 29, 2025

Terrorist attack foiled: Five terrorists killed, two soldiers martyred in Qila Abdullah

Terrorists' attempt to enter post effectively thwarted by troops, which forced Khwarij to ram explosive laden vehicle into perimeter wall

By Our Correspondent

RAWALPINDI: Five Khwarij (terrorists), including two suicide bombers, were killed as security forces foiled their attempt to enter a post in Balochistan's Qila Abdullah district. However, two soldiers were martyred during the exchange of fire with the terrorists.

On the night of Jan 27-28, terrorists attempted to attack a security forces' post in Qila Abdullah's general area Gulistan. The attempt to enter the post was effectively thwarted by troops, which forced the Khwarij to ram an explosive laden vehicle into the perimeter wall of the post.

Troops fought bravely and in ensuing exchange of fire, all five Khwarij, including two suicide bombers, were sent to hell.

However, during the intense exchange of fire, two brave sons of soil, Naik Tahir Khan (Age 39 years; resident of Tank district) and Lance Naik Tahir Iqbal (Age 26 years; resident of Karak district), having fought gallantly, paid the ultimate sacrifice and embraced Shahadat.

Separately, three Khwarij were killed and nine injured in an intelligence-based

operation (IBO) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Bannu district. On January 27, security forces conducted an intelligence based operation in general area Jani Khel, Bannu district, on reported presence of Khwarij. During the conduct of operation, troops effectively engaged the Khwarij location, as a result of which, three Khwarij were sent to hell, while nine khwarij got injured.

Selections from Regional Press

Economic, Cultural and Social Affairs

India

Economy/Planning/Reforms

The Hindu, Delhi, January 18, 2025

India's real growth rate and the forecast

Over the next five years, the best that India may hope for is a steady real GDP growth rate of 6.5%

C. Rangarajan, D.K. Srivastava

The First Advance Estimates (FAE) of National Accounts for 2024-25 show a real GDP growth of 6.4% and a nominal GDP growth of 9.7%. These numbers have fallen short of the Reserve Bank of India's revised growth estimate of 6.6% for real GDP, as in its December 2024 monetary policy statement and 10.5% for nominal GDP growth as in the 2024-25 Union Budget presented in July 2024.

The annual growth of 6.4% can be seen as consisting of 6% growth in the first half and 6.7% growth in the second half. There is, thus, a clear improvement expected over the Q2 growth of 5.4%. The sharp fall in 2024-25 annual GDP growth from that of the previous year at 8.2% is seen only in the case of GDP. With respect to Gross Value Added (GVA), this difference, between 7.2% and 6.4%, is much less. On the GVA side, it was the manufacturing sector which suffered a sharp fall in sectoral growth from 9.9% in 2023-24 to 5.3% in 2024-25.

Growth prospects for 2025-26

The Gross Fixed Capital Formation rate at constant prices has ranged between 33.3% and 33.5% during 2021-22 to 2024-25. Thus, it appears to have stabilised around 33.4%. It is expected to continue at this level in 2025-26. The average Incremental Capital Output Ratio (ICOR) has been marginally higher than 5 in recent years. Assuming ICOR to be 5.1 in 2025-26, we may consider a 6.5% real GDP growth to be realistic.

There may not be much change in the global economy even though Donald Trump's assumption of office may create more uncertainty. India will have to largely depend on domestic demand.

In particular, the Government of India has to ensure that there is no relaxation in its investment expenditure. In fact, the slightly lower growth in 2024-25 is largely linked to the slowdown in the Government of India's investment growth which has remained negative at (-)12.3% even after eight months into the fiscal year.

With a lower nominal GDP growth in 2024-25 of 9.7% as compared to the budgeted nominal GDP growth of 10.5%, the budgeted Gross Tax Revenue (GTR) of 38.4 lakh crore may not be realised if the budgeted buoyancy of 1.03 is maintained. As per Controller General of Accounts (CGA) data, GTR growth for the first eight months was 10.7%. If this growth is maintained for the remaining months also, the realised buoyancy would be about 1.1, which is higher than the budgeted buoyancy. In such a case, tax revenue shortfall will be minimal. In other words, any revenue constraint or likely pressure on fiscal deficit would not constrain the government's ability to achieve its capital expenditure target of 11.1 lakh crore.

Reason for the dip

However, after the first eight months, the level of the Government of India's capital expenditure has remained limited to 5.14 lakh crore, that is 46.2% of the Budget target. In the remaining four months, the Government of India's capital expenditure may be accelerated. It may still fall well short of the target. This has been the main reason for the dip in overall real GDP growth in 2024-25.

Going forward in 2025-26, the Government of India will have to continue to rely on an accelerated capital expenditure growth which can be kept at least at 20% on the revised estimates for 2024-25. Sustained government capital expenditures can have a favourable effect on private investment. The size and the pattern of investment expenditure of the government should be designed to accelerate private investment as well.

Medium- to long-term growth prospects

Over a period of next five years, the best that India may hope for is a steady real GDP growth rate of 6.5%. This is in line with the International Monetary Fund's real GDP growth projection for the Indian economy, as in its October 2024 release, which is at 6.5% over the period 2025-26 to 2029-30. This real GDP growth may be accompanied by an implicit price deflator (IPD)-based inflation of about 4% which can give a nominal GDP growth in the range of 10.5%-11%. In years in which global conditions improve and the contribution of net exports to GDP growth becomes significant, real GDP growth may touch even 7%. If a real growth of around 6.5% and a nominal growth in the range of 10.5%-11% are maintained over the long run with an average exchange rate depreciation of 2.5% per annum, India should be able to reach a per capita GDP level consistent with a developed country status in the next two and half decades. But the task is not going to be easy. It will be hard to grow at 6.5% as the base keeps on increasing. In fact, in the earlier years, the growth rate will have to be higher. But, at present, the potential rate of growth appears to be 6.5%. However, it can change. In the light of a potential growth rate of 6.5%, the achievement of 6.4% in 2024-25 should not be considered as disappointing. In fact, the achievement of 8.2% in 2023-24 should be considered as a flash in the pan. The current year's growth rate of 6.4% as in the first advance estimates should be seen in the context of India's potential growth rate.

C. Rangarajan is former Chairman, Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council, and former Governor, Reserve Bank of India. D.K. Srivastava is Honorary Professor, Madras School of Economics, and Member, Advisory Council to the Sixteenth Finance Commission. The views expressed are personal

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 24, 2025

Terms of Trade | India's economic worldview will have to change from China+1 to US+1

Roshan Kishore

A second Trump presidency will not cripple the Indian economy but cause enough policy pain, which will only get worse if objectivity is lacking

Donald Trump is back in the Oval Office. And he has not imposed 60% or 100% tariffs on any country. At least so far. What will four years of his presidency entail for the global economic order? This is a question which will occupy the minds of businesses and governments, including in India in the days to come.

A little bit of digression is useful here. India, as far as its place in the global economy is concerned, has become the equivalent of a sun in perpetual dawn, which is, one day it is expected to outshine all other stars but hasn't so far. There was a time when India and China were thought of as competitors. That era is long over. Chinese and Indian economies are worth more than \$18 trillion and about \$4 trillion today, a gap unlikely to be bridged in our lifetimes.

Sure, India will become the third-largest economy in a couple of years. But the only question, as far as India's medium-term economic prospects are concerned, is how much can India boost its per capita GDP in the days to come? It is this metric which will lead to a large part of India's population moving from subsistence levels to a mass of consumers with at least some purchasing power.

What will it take for this to happen? The short answer is moving people from agriculture to non-agricultural jobs, which pay them discernibly better than what they get on farms or construction sites. The long answer is slightly more complicated and also bitter. A large part of our workforce (and workforce in the making) does not have the skills to qualify for even relatively low-skill white-collar service sector jobs. To be sure, the absolute number of those who get these jobs will still be pretty large compared to other countries in the world. So, any services-led economic transformation argument is downright delusional.

This brings into play the unrealised promise of manufacturing jobs. No country in the

world has had a manufacturing boom without exports. Because China pretty much conquered global export markets in the last three decades, the possibility of riding an export wave to the manufacturing boom has been shrinking for India. In fact, India is more worried about Chinese exports and excess capacity hurting its domestic manufacturing than out-competing China in global markets. This made for a pretty bleak outlook on India's manufacturing prospects.

All this seemed to change in the last decade or so, especially after the pandemic. US's increasing strategic competition with China and the pandemic's disruption of global value chains triggered what is now referred to as the China+1 sentiment in global manufacturing. It essentially represented an urge on the part of companies to diversify, if not completely relocate, their manufacturing production from China to prepare for bitter decoupling between the world's largest and second-largest economy.

India with its (relatively) large market, cheap labour, expanding infrastructure and willingness to undertake more business-friendly reforms was seen as a strong contender for China+1 play in the world. Some of these benefits have materialised too. However, they are still not big enough when put in the perspective of India's overall economy. Manufacturing's share in the Indian economy is largely unchanged. The bottom line is things have not gone south.

Will the status quo remain unchanged under Trump 2.0? it is early days to hazard a guess. However, one can try and identify the broad contours of what to expect going by the experience of his first term, his campaign in these elections and his initial announcements. Let us take tariffs first. Instead of throwing the kitchen sink of tariffs at China, which is what the Trump campaign promised, the new President is using tariffs as a bargaining chip to force China to sell TikTok to an American (of Trump's choice). We are probably going to see similar trade-offs on other things as well. Trump is the classic case of a politician in power who thinks of the macroeconomy as an aggregate of the businesses he is friends with.

Their interest is what defines national interest for him. The US is long past its economic prime and it is unlikely to pick up a significantly higher growth momentum than what it has right now.

Trump taking the US away from its responsibilities as the global capitalist leader will have consequences for the global economy and perhaps the US economy as well. But macroeconomists or policies endorsed by them do not necessarily determine political outcomes. For all the nuisance Trump's America will cause in the next four years, the world will have little choice but to deal with it or rather placate such demands.

What does all this mean for the global economic order, and for India? It might appear to be a crude formulation, but expect the world to pivot from a China+1 setting to a US+1 mode where everybody will be busy trying to strike deals with Trump to, first and foremost, preserve what they already have in the US markets and then maybe, make some gains.

The bargaining power of companies and countries will be decided by how much they have to offer to the US. The Chinese can divest TikTok or maybe allow X (formerly Twitter) in China to prevent tariffs. India will try to negotiate more US investments and uninterrupted service exports including policies such as the H-1B visa programme. But what will it have to offer in return? Buying American oil instead of Russian? Opening up agricultural markets or bringing down subsidies on US demands as has been pointed out in these pages by Biswajit Dhar? Buying more expensive US weaponry could put a further squeeze on what is already a strained defence budget. Will European companies be forced to invest more in the US instead of emerging markets such as India? What about global tech giants holding off on data localisation demands by India?

None of these trade-offs are going to cripple the Indian economy. But they will cause enough short-term pain or irritation to make them anything but insignificant. What will it take to engage with Trump's US for India?

The US, under Trump, is a discernibly more aggressive and transactional strategic partner for India, which is also the world's largest superpower. Nothing short of a hard-headed strategic prioritisation of policies will do. This is something which is easier said than done given the diversity in the Indian political economy. To even begin this process, the regime will have to do a very objective self-appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of our economic standing in the world. Delusion should be avoided like the plague.

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 31, 2025

Government needs to spend – for India to grow

Mehul Pandya

As India looks to achieve its target of a \$ 5-trillion economy over the next few years, what remains crucial will be maintaining a sustainable growth path without losing our focus on critical issues like fiscal discipline and economic inequality. The Union Budget 2025 carries the potential to impact the economy significantly. It arrives at a crucial time, with the economy facing challenges such as weak GDP growth and low consumer spending. Key expectations include tax reforms to provide relief to individuals and boost consumption, increased capital outlay for infrastructure development, and support for sustainable initiatives in various sectors.

Capital expenditure has become critical in determining India's growth. The government should continue focusing on productive capex, which has a higher multiplier effect on growth, especially when consumer spending shows weakness. This will support India's ambition of achieving the \$ 5-trillion target.

Recent data highlights an increase in India's gross fixed capital formation (GFCF), which climbed to 30.8 per cent of GDP during FY24, surpassing the pre-pandemic average of 28.9 percent, observed during the fiscal years 2015 to 2019. However, a chunk of this growth has been supported by the government's capex push and an upswing in household investments in residential dwellings.

Even though the government has been prioritising infrastructure development, the first half of FY25 (H1FY25) has seen disruptions in momentum due to multiple elections. Data reveals that capital expenditure by central and state governments fell by 15.4 per cent and 10.5 per cent year on year, respectively. Moreover, major central public sector enterprises reported a 10.8 per cent decline in capital expenditure during H1FY25, reaching only 43.6 per cent of their annual target, reflecting cautious spending amid economic challenges. To bolster capex by states, the Centre has raised the allocation for the 50-year interest-free loans in the Union Budget for FY25 to Rs 1.5 trillion. Of this, Rs 550 billion is an unconditional loan, while the rest is tied to conditions such as industrial growth, land reforms, and state capex growth. It is essential to monitor states' utilisation of this loan — in the previous fiscal year, they used only Rs 1.1 trillion of the budgeted Rs 1.3 trillion. However, the slowdown in the public capex seems to be temporary, with a likely pickup in the second half.

The overall private sector capex has yet to witness a strong pickup. Headwinds primarily emerge from global policy uncertainties, geopolitical risks, oversupply from China, increased borrowing costs, and muted domestic demand. With the expected monetary policy rate cut and policy support from the Union Budget, we remain hopeful about a likely pick-up in private capex going forward.

Gross FDI inflows have performed well as of FY25 year-to-date; gross FDI inflows stand at \$48.6 billion, higher than \$42.1 billion in the comparable period of last year. However, higher repatriation of profit has resulted in muted FDI inflows on a net basis. This and the recent outflow of FPIs increase depreciation pressure on the rupee. Given the volatility in the investment landscape arising from global uncertainties and slowing domestic growth, fiscal support remains crucial at this juncture. The Centre's budget allocations for capex have more than doubled, from 1.6 per cent of GDP in FY19 to a projected 3.4 per cent in

FY25. Meanwhile, state capex is also expected to grow modestly to 2.6 per cent of GDP in FY25, exceeding pre-pandemic levels. Closer scrutiny is warranted regarding the actual deployment of these budgets, as states have often struggled to realise their plans fully.

That said, an upward trend in order books for the capital goods sector, combined with a recovering infrastructure sector, provides a glimmer of hope for increased capital spending across various industries. Order books in the capital goods sector grew 23.6 per cent in FY24, against the CAGR of 4.5 per cent in the preceding four years. Moreover, in H1FY25, there was 10.3 per cent growth compared to the end of FY24, implying healthy momentum.

Infrastructure companies, particularly those involved in road development, saw a decline in their aggregate order book by around 15 per cent in FY24. However, in FY25, the situation has improved, with substantial new orders already secured, showing 20.5 per cent growth in just the first half of the year. Most new orders are coming from the public sector, particularly state governments, indicating a possible pickup in public capex going forward.

In conclusion, while the government has set ambitious capex targets, the slowdown in allocations in recent months has impacted India's growth momentum. Even though we expect overall public capex to improve following the election period, the current economic environment necessitates vigilant monitoring of capex trajectory. The vital interplay between public investment and growth will need careful navigation to harness the potential of India's burgeoning economy.

The writer is MD and Group CEO, CareEdge

The Hindu, Delhi, January 18, 2025

Inflation matrix: On the numbers and trends

December's price rise numbers do not ring in enough relief

In the final inflation print before the Union Budget for 2025-26 is presented, followed by the first review of the monetary policy led by

the new Governor of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in early February, the price rise faced by Indian consumers eased to 5.22% in December. Although a four-month low, this still marked only a mild decline from November's 5.5% uptick in the Consumer Price Index (CPI), and was largely driven by a sequential easing in food prices. Food inflation moderated from over 9% in the previous month to 8.4% last month, and though inflation in vegetables cooled from 29.3% to 26.6%, it still remained generally high. Households still forked out a lot more for their meals than they did a year ago — it must be recalled that overall inflation was 5.7% and food price rise, over 9.5% in December 2023. While prices of some food items, including vegetables, are seen cooling further this month, those of a few critical ingredients have started spiking, including of edible oils, that rose at a 33-month high pace of 14.6% in December. Eggs, meat and fruits also saw inflation accelerating last month along with the relatively humble potato (up 68.2%). Moreover, inflation in wholesale prices has gained pace, signalling that there is room for higher costs to be passed on to consumers for food items as well as manufactured products.

The government and industry want the RBI to cut interest rates to reinvigorate consumption and fading growth impulses by looking through 'volatile' food inflation. But even industry captains admit that just keeping food prices out of the interest rates and growth-inflation balancing act will not suffice. Moreover, even if the weightage for food in the CPI is reduced in line with the recent household consumption spending survey results, food price trends have a material impact on the spending propensity of households and their inflation expectations. Inflation may yet average 4.5% through January to March, as the RBI expects, but the central bank that has committed to await a durable alignment to its 4% goal before slashing rates, has a difficult call to make in February. Tangible measures, if any, to ease price pressures in the Budget, along with some visibility on the Centre's fiscal

glide path, could help tip the scales for a rate cut cycle to begin soon, if not next month. There are a few new imponderables that have compounded the trade-off matrix for policymakers in North Block as well as Mint Street — the swift unravelling of the rupee vis-à-vis the dollar in recent weeks which raises the risk of importing inflation, among other collateral effects, especially as global oil prices have resurged to multi-month highs. A very nuanced approach is imperative to avoid fresh missteps.

Trade

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 16, 2025

Trade deficit narrows to \$22 billion in December as gold imports ease to \$4.7 billion

Data showed that the exports contracted for the second month in a row by about 1 per cent year-on-year to \$38.01 billion due to global uncertainties, while imports rose by about 5 per cent to \$59.95 billion.

Written by Ravi Dutta Mishra

India's trade deficit narrowed to \$21.94 billion in December after a sharp surge to a lifetime high on the back of miscalculations in gold import and as gold imports in last month came in at \$4.7 billion compared to \$9.84 billion in the previous month, government data showed on Wednesday.

Data showed that the exports contracted for the second month in a row by about 1 per cent year-on-year to \$38.01 billion due to global uncertainties, while imports rose by about 5 per cent to \$59.95 billion.

Amid weak demand in the West, petroleum product shipments declined by 28.62 per cent to \$4.91 billion last month. During the first nine months of this fiscal also, these exports contracted by 20.84 per cent year-on-year to \$49 billion. "This shows the resiliency of our exports. In all the three quarters of this fiscal also, we have done better. We are doing much better in non-petroleum exports," Commerce Secretary Sunil Barthwal said, adding that Indian exports of services and goods would cross \$800 billion during the ongoing fiscal. On the revision of gold and silver import data for November 2024, the Secretary said a

committee has been set up to create a robust mechanism for publishing consistent data.

The government revised gold import data for November 2024, bringing down numbers by \$5 billion to \$9.84 billion. As per the revised data, exports in November 2024 were down by 5.06 per cent to \$32.03 billion, while imports rose by 16 per cent to \$63.86 billion. The trade deficit stood at \$31.83 billion. Gold imports during the month under review rose by 55.4 per cent to \$4.7 billion against \$3 billion in December 2023. On the other hand, silver imports jumped by 211 per cent to \$421.91 million. In December, India's shipment rose positively to the US, Saudi Arabia, France, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. During the month, the top five import sources were China, Switzerland, Thailand, Germany and the US. Federation of Indian Export Organisations (FIEO) president Ashwani Kumar said that the slight decline in goods exports is due to the volatility in commodity and metal prices, along with ongoing international trade disruptions and currency fluctuations.

"Geopolitical tensions in the Gulf region further exacerbated logistical challenges, affecting export flows to key markets like Europe, Africa, and the CIS," Kumar said.

Kumar stressed the importance of a focused export strategy targeting key markets, particularly the US, as the tariff war presents new opportunities.

On engineering goods exports, Engineering Export Promotion Council of India (EEPC) chairman Pankaj Chadha said that despite challenges and uncertainties on the external front, India's engineering exports sector has shown remarkable resilience. Continuing the growth momentum for the last eight months, engineering exports grew 8.35 per cent year-on-year to \$10.84 billion in December 2024. "There is growing apprehension that once the Trump 2.0 administration assumes charge, some countries with which the US has a sizable trade deficit could face higher tariffs. This is likely to disrupt global trade and also affect India. As the US remains the top market for Indian engineering goods, we remain

cautious of the possible fallout of tariff hikes by the Trump government,” he said.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 26, 2025

India's exports to US up 5.57% to \$60 billion in April-December FY25

The bilateral trade during April-December 2024-25 stood at USD 93.4 billion, as against USD 94.6 billion between India and China

PTI

The country's exports rose by 5.57 per cent to USD 59.93 billion during April-December this fiscal on account of healthy demand in the American market for domestic goods, according to government data.

During December, the shipments increased by 8.49 per cent to USD 7 billion, the data showed.

On the other hand, imports during the first nine months of 2024-25 grew by 1.91 per cent to USD 33.4 billion, while in December it was up by 9.88 per cent to USD 3.77 billion.

According to experts, going by the trend, the total trade between the two countries will continue to grow in the coming months also.

The bilateral trade during April-December 2024-25 stood at USD 93.4 billion, as against USD 94.6 billion between India and China.

The experts added that the possible trade war between the US and China will give huge export potential for Indian exporters.

The US is the largest trading partner of India from 2021-22. The US accounts for about 18 per cent of India's total goods exports and over 6 per cent in imports and about 11 per cent in bilateral trade.

Some experts raised concerns that if the US would impose additional duties on certain Indian goods, as threatened by US President Donald Trump, it can impact trade.

In December last year, Trump had said India charges “a lot” of tariffs, reiterating his intention to impose reciprocal tariffs in retaliation for what New Delhi will impose on the import of certain American products.

“India should respond firmly and in equal measure,” economic think tank Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) Founder Ajay Srivastava said.

In 2018, when the US taxed Indian steel and aluminium, India retaliated by raising tariffs on 29 US products, recovering equivalent revenue.

Corruption

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 18, 2025

Shun corruption

Editorial

SO entrenched is corruption in the Indian social and political reality that any resolve to counter it instantly runs into thick clouds of pessimism. A sense of resignation with regard to the status quo runs deep. Yet, for hope to filter through, the significance of terse plainspeak at the highest echelons cannot be overstated. Chief Justice of India (CJI) Sanjiv Khanna's call to reinforce systems of accountability and fairness is a reminder of how the citizen continues to be let down. Corruption as a hydra-headed monster that undermines public trust and hinders the ideals of democracy is an apt description. Equally crucial is the CJI's emphasis that the success of the anti-corruption ombudsman, the Lokpal, hinges on public trust and citizen engagement. It's the ability of the little man or woman to hold the big and powerful accountable, as he put it.

It's indisputable that corruption can be rooted out only with the help of an educated and engaged citizenry. What's essentially missing — and that's the hydra on the ground — is institutional support. The social contract between the government and citizens to safeguard against corruption remains breached, and the gap is only widening. The referee agencies have been found wanting. Public trust is the sum total of the efficacy of the systemic reaction and action on complaints and grievances at every level. Nothing less will suffice.

What the citizen has come to recognise is the futility of standing up against corrupt practices, small or big. Nothing weakens the national character more than a social sanction to graft and an official stamp, as it were, to the right to cheat. All organs of democracy are to blame. If you truly desire change, revitalise the institutions. Else, expect

a more shrivelled moral and ethical fibre in an average Indian.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 20, 2025

Middlemen & bribes

The exposure of corruption in Haryana's Revenue Department has laid bare a systemic rot. A government report implicates 370 patwaris and 170 middlemen in widespread bribery, with demands ranging from Rs 200 to Rs 10,000 for essential services like land partition and property mutation. Kaithal, Sonapat and Mahendragarh districts lead in the number of corrupt officials, while Gurugram is home to the highest number of unauthorised middlemen who exploit citizens for profit. The September 2022 findings in Panipat exemplify the extent of the problem. Over 1,500 applications were found pending during a surprise inspection, unauthorised individuals were managing official work and infrastructure deficiencies were glaring. Similarly, a patwari in Kurukshetra was discovered with disproportionate assets, a reflection of unchecked graft in the system.

The Supreme Court's December 2022 judgment in Neeraj Dutta vs State (NCT of Delhi) offers a glimmer of hope. By lowering the bar for evidence in corruption cases, it empowers agencies to secure convictions even when witnesses turn hostile. This landmark ruling should embolden the Haryana authorities to take decisive action against those involved in the revenue scandal. Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini's reiteration of a zero-tolerance policy must be matched by concrete action. Reforms like digitising land records, introducing biometric attendance systems, installing CCTV cameras in offices and conducting regular audits are critical. Moreover, swift punitive measures, coupled with citizen awareness campaigns and effective grievance redress systems, are essential to curb exploitation and build accountability.

India's 93rd rank in the 2023 Global Corruption Index underscores the urgency for reforms. Corruption in public offices erodes trust and tarnishes governance. Haryana must seize this opportunity to revamp its

revenue administration, inspired by the Supreme Court's robust stance. Restoring public trust is not just a goal but a necessity for ensuring a fair and transparent system.

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 21, 2025

Former IAS officer Sharma gets 5 yrs in jail in 2004 graft case

PTI

A sessions court on Monday sentenced former **IAS officer Pradeep Sharma** to five years in jail and fined him Rs 75,000 in a corruption case dating back to 2004 when he was the collector of Kutch district in Gujarat.

The court of principal district and sessions judge KM Sojitra convicted him in a case registered by Anti Corruption Bureau (ACB) pertaining to the allotment of a piece of land to Welspun Group at a price that allegedly caused a loss of Rs 1.2 crore to the government exchequer.

The court found Sharma guilty section 13 (2) (criminal misconduct by a public servant) and section 11 (public servants obtaining an undue advantage without consideration) of the Prevention of Corruption Act. He was sentenced to five years in jail and fined Rs 50,000 fine under section 13(2), and given a three year sentence and fine of Rs 25,000 under section 11, public prosecutor Kalpesh Goswami said, adding both the sentences will run concurrently.

Sharma is currently lodged in a jail in Bhuj in another corruption case. The court conducted a joint trial for three corruption cases related to the allotment of land to the Welspun Group, Goswami said. As per the case detail, Sharma had allotted land to the company at a price which was 25 percent of the prevailing rate, causing a loss to the government exchequer.

In return, the Welspun Group allegedly made Sharma's wife a 30 per cent partner in Value Packaging, one of its subsidiaries, and extended her a benefit of Rs 29.5 lakh.

Sharma was arrested by ACB on September 30, 2014 for allegedly accepting Rs 29 lakh bribe from the private company when he was the collector of Kutch in 2004.

The Hindu, Delhi, January 24, 2025

Is poverty being underestimated in India?

Samreen Wani

Last month, the government released a factsheet on the 2023-24 Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES), which recorded a decline in poverty in urban and rural areas. Over the last few years, policymakers and academics have debated the issues of incomparable data sets, the unavailability of data, and the definition of an adequate consumption basket to determine a poverty line. Is poverty being underestimated in India? P.C. Mohanan and N.R. Bhanumurthy discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Samreen Wani**. Edited excerpts:

How do you define poverty? Is poverty being underestimated in India?

P.C. Mohanan: We had a stable definition of poverty from the late 1970s to 2005. We started with the expenditure required for sustaining a minimum calorie diet and that used to be updated every five years using the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) data. When the NSSO started the whole exercise, its estimates of private expenditure and those of the National Accounts were very similar, so there was no controversy. But over the years, their estimates diverged so much that questions came up about the accuracy of the NSS data.

Then, the government appointed the Tendulkar Committee. At the same time, the NSSO also started experimenting with different methodologies to improve the collection of consumption expenditure and that meant using different recall periods. (A recall period is when a respondent is asked to recall their consumption expenditure over a specific time period.) After 2011-12, the government neither had official poverty estimates nor conducted a survey. People started using alternative estimates of expenditure and later, the multidimensional poverty index was used. So, using certain data sets, there have been claims that poverty has drastically come down. But that is questionable because it depends on the poverty line and the data.

N.R. Bhanumurthy: In the last two decades, the number of people below the poverty line has drastically come down, whatever line you take. But the delta between the two decades (the change in poverty estimation over a period of time) is very large for many reasons such as high GDP growth, increase in public expenditures through a number of flagship programmes introduced by the Union and State governments, and an improved public delivery system. In addition, we still have the National Food Security Act, which covers nearly 80 crore people. So, saying that people still live in extreme poverty would be counter-intuitive, if that is happening.

Initially, while defining poverty, we were talking about calorie consumption alone. Now, the definition has been broadened. And that is the way to go. If you use the Tendulkar line or the Rangarajan line, you might get different numbers, but the change between two rounds in both the methods would be more or less the same and close to 17% or 18%. Dr. Rangarajan himself estimated that poverty was close to 10% based on the 2022-23 survey. With the recent factsheet, I wouldn't be surprised if poverty would have come down further to single digits.

What are your concerns with the HCES data?

PCM: Over the years, there has been a divergence between the NSSO per capita household consumption expenditure data and those from the National Accounts. Some of the issues were because of the recall period. The NSSO started experimenting with different recall periods. While it set a seven-day recall period for certain items, it set a 30-day period for others. But these estimates then could not be compared with previous consumption estimates, which had different recall periods. We had the uniform reference period (URP), where we had 30 days of recall for all items, and the mixed reference period (MRP) using 30 days (food) and 365 days (for other goods). Tendulkar estimated poverty based on MRP. Then we had the modified mixed reference period (MMRP) — seven days for food items along with 30 days and 365 days for other items. This gives you a higher estimate of expenditure because your

recall is better. If you use the higher expenditure distribution on a lower poverty line, which is what many researchers have done, naturally your poverty goes down. Rangarajan had suggested a different methodology in his committee report, but the government did not accept that. In the last two years, the NSSO has made a further modification by visiting households in three sittings instead of one. This way, data reporting is better because respondents get more time and can recall better. The current methodology will still give us higher expenditure. But if you use this data on the older poverty line, your estimate will come down. Very few people have tried to create a new poverty line for the NSSO's new methodology. This is a major gap.

NRB: We need to improve the methodology. We cannot go with a URP because some expenditures would not have been made in the last seven days or the last month. Right now we are looking at a slightly broader aspect of consumption. If you look at the factsheet, food articles constitute less than 50% of the total consumption basket. So, it shows that we are not spending on food items alone and are looking at other services required for the household. In that sense, there is a need for us to re-examine the old methodology. The present criticism is with the estimate that suggests a decline in poverty by over 17% between two rounds. I would say that whatever poverty line we use, the decline in the number of poor between 2011-12 and 2023-24 would be closer to 17% or more.

What do we know about poverty in rural and urban regions?

PCM: The data show that the rural-urban differential in consumption is actually coming down. Rural areas are doing better. But the idea of a rural area that we have is based on the 2011 Census, so a significant portion of the rural areas is basically urban or peri-urban in character. Earlier, food expenditure used to be the major component of rural consumption patterns. But the 2022-23 data show that a substantial number of items are the same in urban and rural areas now, which

means rural consumption has actually changed in terms of diversity. We need to put a statistical base in place, including a Census, so we know what is rural and urban.

NRB: There should be clear-cut separation of what is rural and urban. If we decide to shift peri-urban to urban areas, I think urban poverty would have declined much faster than the preliminary estimates we have now. In any case, at the aggregate, we see a sharp fall in the number of poor, but in terms of consumption, we have to look at public policy interventions.

Where do you stand on an upward revision of the poverty line in India?

PCM: A research paper by the Foundation for Agrarian Studies used the Rangarajan methodology on the 2022-23 HCES data. They estimated around 25% poverty. I'm not clear that by just updating a poverty line in that fashion, we would have a definite estimation. But we need to have some agreement on a methodology and the government needs to stand behind that. That is unlikely to happen.

NRB: With the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) laying down \$2.15/day as a poverty line, even their estimates suggest poverty was just about 12.9% in 2019. So, I don't agree with the 25% figure that Dr. Mohanan is quoting. NITI Aayog's estimates also don't really support that number. However, I agree with him that we need to have a clear-cut methodology for a poverty line estimation, but at the same time we need to stick to a single poverty line.

There have been some criticisms against Niti Aayog's multidimensional poverty index. UNDP's index has 10 indicators and India's index has 12. Is this criticism valid?

NRB: The UNDP has one methodology for all countries. It is only a framework that suggests what needs to be part of your consumption basket. But it is left to the countries to customise that methodology. Broadening that basket is the right way to do it. We have rightly added bank accounts and maternal health to the 10 indicators that the UNDP includes in its index.

PCM: I am not sure about that because multidimensional poverty tells you whether

you are deprived of that particular indicator or not. Now there are many indicators which may not be applicable to a household. When you don't have a child, all those indicators related to a child are not relevant, so that household is not deprived of those things. Many of the indicators actually don't go down. Once you have access to electricity, a bank account, etc., you don't get deprived of those indicators in future. This index will never go up. Poverty estimates will continue to stay low because of the way the indicators have been selected. There is no scope for getting deprived in future. We don't measure income vulnerability and we need to do that.

Listen to the conversation in The Hindu Parley podcast

P.C. Mohanan is the former member of the National Statistical Commission. N.R. Bhanumurthy is the Director of the Madras School of Economics

Social Issues

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 17, 2025

Nagpur police says more minors may have been sexually abused by psychologist

HT News Desk, hindustantimes.com

Nagpur: The allegations surfaced when one of his former students approached the police. The accused, arrested in November, is currently in judicial custody.

The Nagpur police in Maharashtra said on Thursday that the number of minor girls sexually abused by a 47-year-old psychologist is expected to rise. The career counsellor was recently arrested for sexually exploiting at least 50 minor girls and women.

The man allegedly lured girls by offering counselling services. The allegations surfaced when one of his former students approached the police. The accused, arrested in November, is currently in judicial custody.

It is alleged that he abused victims during camps and trips he organised, and also took explicit photos for potential blackmail.

Three cases have been filed against the accused under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, Nagpur Police

Commissioner Ravinder Singal stated, adding that the man's wife was also allegedly involved in these crimes.

His wife was involved too

According to Hudkeshwar police, the accused, who ran a private clinic, conducted residential programs in east Nagpur where he targeted young girls under the guise of counselling and personal development training. Three cases have been filed against him under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

Police Commissioner Singal stated, "His wife was also involved, and charges will be applied based on her level of involvement... Initially, only one case was registered, but later two more were added, and the number of victims is expected to rise."

The case came to light when a 27-year-old woman, a former student of the accused, now married, approached the Hudkeshwar police on Sunday. She reported that the psychologist had been blackmailing her with explicit photographs from her time at his institution. With the support of her husband, she filed the complaint, uncovering a long history of abuse. The commissioner also hinted that many victims might not have come forward yet. A committee has been established to further investigate and ensure that juvenile victims can provide statements as per the law. Evidence was found at a residence where the counsellor had sheltered some children.

Singal added, "I have personally formed a committee to explore other aspects and ensure that juveniles provide their statements before the CwC as per the law."

The committee comprises a senior IPS officer, an API from the Cyber Crime Unit of Nagpur Police, and members from the child welfare board, among others.

"It took considerable effort to encourage the minor girls to come forward," Singal mentioned. He also revealed that the accused had been working in and around Nagpur for "many" years.

Singal further disclosed that the accused had sheltered some children at a residence, where

evidence was found. "Based on this, we will continue our investigation," he said.

The case has sparked widespread outrage, leading to renewed calls for stronger measures to protect children and young adults from exploitation by those in positions of power.

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 17, 2025

Minor abducted, gang raped by three while going to school; one detained

Senjuti Sengupta

Jaipur: A 21-year-old man was detained for allegedly abducting and gang raping a 13-year-old girl, along with two others, on Wednesday in Rajasthan's Phalodi. The minor's father, who was returning after filing a missing complaint at the police station, allegedly discovered her lying unconscious by the roadside, a police officer said on Thursday.

The accused, who was arrested from Balotra, is known to the girl's father. Two others remain absconding, the officer added.

Around 10 am on Wednesday, the girl was on her way to school, located within a kilometre of her residence, deputy superintendent of police (DSP) of the Lohawat circle, Sangram Singh, said. "The three accused, who were waiting in a car for the minor near the school, abducted her and took her to an isolated area, five to six kilometres away from the locality, where they raped her," Singh said.

Singh added that around 11.30 am, the school informed the girl's father that she had not come to the school that day. "After unsuccessfully searching for his daughter, he filed a complaint at the Lohawat police station. On his way back home from the police station, he found his daughter lying in a distressed state by the roadside," Singh said.

The girl was immediately taken to a nearby hospital. "She told the police that the three men raped her in turns for more than an hour while one of them kept watch in the vicinity. Someone allegedly informed the accused that her father had lodged a missing person report, after which they left her by the roadside and fled the area," Singh said.

A case was registered against three individuals under sections 63 (rape), 70 (gang rape), and 138 (abduction) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), and relevant sections of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act.

Investigations revealed that two of the accused had previously worked with the girl's father, a local farmer, for a month.

"The accused had switched off their phones to avoid police action. A police team detained one of the accused at a checkpoint in Balotra when he was trying to flee to another district," Singh said, adding that the search is ongoing for the other two suspects.

A medical examination was conducted on the girl, and the police are awaiting the report. She was discharged from the hospital, and on Thursday morning, the police recorded her statement.

"Prima facie, there was a significant amount of sexual violence against the victim. We are reviewing CCTV footage in the area to verify the abduction. Further investigation is underway," Singh said.

Meanwhile, Congress party state chief Govind Singh Dotasra attacked the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, saying, "The result of the BJP's ineffective government and weak law and order is that today our daughters are not safe even in their villages, homes, and schools. The BJP came to power promising women's safety, but in the last year, there have been record incidents of crime and cruelty against minor girls."

"In 2024, at least 1,610 minor girls were raped, which is 3.34% more than in 2023 and 10.2% more than in 2022 during the previous Congress government. The daily incidents of rape of innocent daughters and these figures are exposing the real face of the BJP government. The picture is also exposing the reality of BJP's 'Nahi Sahega Rajasthan' slogan," Dotasra wrote on X.

Congress leader Tikaram Jully, said, "One after another, incidents of cruelty against minor girls are putting the state to shame, but the Chief Minister is sitting with his eyes closed. I demand answers from the government on this issue and am committed

to providing security to the daughters of Rajasthan. I demand that the government take immediate action and concrete steps for women's safety."

BJP spokesperson, Laxmikant Bhardwaj, hit back saying, "The BJP government never spares a criminal and necessary action will be taken against the accused in this case as well. Our government is cautious and is putting all their effort to maintain the law and order in the state, which had been in a complete disarray during the Congress rule. The Congress might not have also missed that there was a significant decline in the overall crime rate in Rajasthan last year."

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 18, 2025

Why we need to talk to boys about rape

Namita Bhandare

The malaise of violence, including sexual violence against women and girls, cuts across geographic borders, age of victim, educational level, and income

In Kerala, India's most developed and literate state, an 18-year-old Dalit athlete has revealed to social workers that she has been sexually abused since she was 13 by 64 men. Gang-raped five times in as many years, she says.

Let that sink in. At the time of writing, police in Pathanamthitta district have detained 42 people and 30-odd cases have registered. The girl is now in a shelter home, and I can only hope she is receiving the counselling and care she undoubtedly needs.

Who are these men? Their ages range between 17 and 47. Their names are Amal, Adarsh, Joji Mathew, Sivakumar, Aji, Aswin and others. They are the girl's neighbours, her father's friends and her sport coaches, according to BBC. The scale of the crime brings memories of another horror in southern France where Dominique Pelicot spent a decade drugging his wife of 40 years and inviting 70-odd men to rape her while she was comatose. Only three reportedly turned down the invitation. Not one reported to the police.

The malaise of violence, including sexual violence against women and girls, cuts across

geographic borders, age of victim, educational level, and income. It is by far one of the worst epidemics of our times with one in three women globally subjected to some form of violence. In India, 86 rapes reported every day.

When a crime is horrific enough to jolt the "nation's conscience", legislators rush to come up with band-aid solutions. Last week, Tamil Nadu chief minister MK Stalin, under pressure from the Opposition following the sexual assault of a 19-year-old student at Anna engineering university, introduced two bills to increase the punishment for sexual offences. In West Bengal, where judgment on the R.G. Kar rape and murder of a doctor is expected this month, the Mamata Banerjee government cleared a bill by unanimous vote making the death sentence mandatory in heinous rape cases.

Yet, invoking the death penalty as our lawmakers did in response to the Delhi 2012 gang-rape has not stopped the crime. If anything, numbers are up, from 24,923 rapes reported in 2012 to 31,516 in 2022.

If tough laws aren't working, we need a better solution.

We need to talk to the men. The guys we run into every day – the neighbour, the athletic coach, the tuition teacher, the social worker. More crucially we need to speak to the boys. It works. A pilot programme by non-profit Breakthrough with adolescent boys in Uttar Pradesh found that talking to them resulted in measurable attitude change. Not only did they start treating girls with greater respect, they also began helping mothers and sisters with housework.

It is imperative to reconsider ideas of toxic masculinity. We have far too many boys growing up in India with noxious ideas of what it is to be a man. These ideas include what not to do (show vulnerability) and what to (hanging out in packs, leering or doing worse to girls).

Unless we begin to start talking to the boys, nothing will change. School curriculums, non-profits and governments need to step in. The challenge is formidable. On social media, ideas of toxic masculinity are all pervasive.

This week Pete Hegseth, Donald Trump's defense chief pick, faced Congressional hearings about his attitude to women and accusations of assault. Trump himself has been found liable for sexual abuse. And influential figures like Meta chief Mark Zuckerberg has urged companies to reclaim "masculine energy".

Men are not born violent, says Amrita Dasgupta, director, Swayam. "It's society and our socialization process that make many of them this way." For a world free of violence, "You have to work with men and boys to break stereotypes." As new year resolutions go, it's a good place to start.

Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 20, 2025

Teenage girl abducted from outside house, raped in car in UP's Moradabad

At the time of incident, girl's father was away from home while her mother was working in a field

PTI

A 16-year-old Dalit girl was allegedly abducted and raped in a car by a man here, police said on Sunday.

The accused, nabbed through an identity card placed on the car's dashboard, also recorded the act on his phone, they said.

The man, Rashid, abducted the girl in his car from outside her house and raped her.

The incident took place around 10 am when the girl was out to throw garbage.

Rashid also allegedly hurled casteist abuses at her while he committed the crime, police said. After raping the girl, he threw her on a road outside her village near a cremation ground, they said.

At the time of the incident, the girl's father, a labourer, was away from home while her mother was working in a field.

The girl saw the name of the assailant on an identity card in his car.

He was identified as a native of a village under Thakurdwara Police Station.

Rashid was arrested on Friday and booked under sections of rape, SC/ST Atrocities (Prevention) Act and POCSO Act, police said.

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 20, 2025

16-year-old gang raped by three, consumes poison a day after accused arrested

By Senjuti Sengupta

Jaipur: A 16-year-old girl, who was gang raped by three men in Deeg's Kaman on December 22, consumed poison on Friday night, a day after the arrest of three accused, a police officer said on Saturday

Jaipur: A 16-year-old girl, who was gang raped by three men in Deeg's Kaman on December 22, consumed poison on Friday night, a day after the arrest of three accused, a police officer said on Saturday.

She is receiving treatment in hospital and is in a critical condition, the police officer added.

"The minor was gang raped by three men last month at knifepoint. The police arrested all the accused on Thursday. Meanwhile, she consumed poison on Friday night. She was immediately taken to a local hospital from where she was also referred to a hospital in Bharatpur. Doctors said that her condition is critical," said deputy superintendent of police (DSP) of Kaman circle, Dharmraj Chaudhary.

Police said that the accused lived in the same neighbourhood as the minor. "She is familiar to the prime accused. On the afternoon of December 22, the main accused arrived at her house along with his brother and uncle when she was alone. They asked her to come with them at a nearby place where they raped her in turns at a knifepoint," said the DSP.

The girl's father lodged an FIR against three of them at Kaman police station on the same day under section 63 (rape), 70 (gang-rape) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), and the necessary sections of the Prevention of Children from Sexual Violences (POCSO) Act.

"However, three of them were on the run. On Thursday, the police arrested them from a nearby village after tracking their phones and based on some tip-offs," added the DSP.

The accused were taken to the crime scene on Friday morning to gather more details for the investigation.

"However, the girl's family had suddenly arrived at the spot and confronted them. The

two groups had a scuffle during which the accused threatened to kill them. The police had intervened and took the accused back to the police station,” said the DSP.

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 21, 2025

From Crime To Punishment: RG Kar rape and murder case timeline

Express News Service

August 9: Body of trainee doctor found in seminar hall on third floor of RG Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata.

August 10: Kolkata Police arrests civic volunteer Sanjoy Roy; describes him as the only accused in the case. Meanwhile, junior doctors protest, accuse police of cover-up.

August 12: CM Mamata Banerjee visits residence of the deceased 31-year-old doctor; tells Kolkata Police that they have to crack the case in a week or otherwise she will hand the investigation to CBI. Amid protests by junior doctors, Sandip Ghosh, principal of RG Kar Medical College and Hospital, resigned. Hours later, the government moved him to Calcutta National Medical College and Hospital.

August 13: Calcutta High Court hands the investigation to CBI, asks Sandip Ghosh to go on a long leave CBI takes Sanjoy Roy into custody.

August 14: People take to the streets across West Bengal as part of ‘Reclaim the Night’ protest, seeking security for women. Amid protests, mob vandalises parts of RG Kar Medical College and Hospital in Tala.

August 17: IMA calls for nationwide suspension of health services in protest for 24 hours.

August 18: Supreme Court takes suo motu cognisance of the case.

August 20: Supreme Court pulls up West Bengal government over delay in filing FIR and allowing thousands of miscreants to vandalise the hospital. It constitutes 10-member National Task Force (NTF) to formulate protocol for ensuring safety and security of doctors and other healthcare professionals. It also orders deployment of CISF at the hospital to enable doctors to resume work.

August 21: CISF takes over security of RG Kar Medical College and Hospital. Kolkata Police suspends three police officers in connection with the vandalism at the hospital on August 14.

August 27: Students’ outfit ‘Chhatra Samaj’ marches to state secretariat Nabanna, demanding CM Mamata Banerjee’s resignation. After being stopped midway, activists clash with police, resulting in injury to several people.

September 2: CBI arrests Sandip Ghosh in connection with allegations of financial fraud at RG Kar Medical College and Hospital.

September 10: Junior doctors begin sit-in outside Swasthya Bhavan, the headquarters of the state Health Department in Salt Lake, even as their cease work continues.

September 14: CBI charges Sandip Ghosh with delay in lodging FIR in rape and murder of the doctor, and tampering of evidence. The agency also arrests Tala police station’s officer-in-charge Abhijit Mondal in same case.

September 16: Agitating junior doctors meet Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee as the protests cripple healthcare services across West Bengal.

September 17: Kolkata Police Commissioner Vineet Goyal removed after CM’s meeting with protesting medics; IPS officer Manoj Kumar Verma appointed in his place. Director of Health Services (DHS) Debashis Halder, Director of Medical Education (DME) Kaustav Nayak and Deputy Commissioner of Kolkata Police’s North Division Abhishek Gupta also removed.

September 19: Junior doctors announce withdrawal of stir.

October 6: West Bengal Junior Doctors’ Front launches fast unto death at Esplanade, urging government to meet rest of their demand and also ensure justice for their deceased colleague.

October 7: CBI files charge sheet against Sanjoy Roy in Sealdah court.

October 21: Junior doctors end their 17-day fast after meeting with CM Mamata Banerjee at state secretariat Nabanna.

November 12: In-camera trial begins at Sealdah court.

November 29: CBI files 125-page charge sheet in financial irregularities case, Sandip Ghosh named as accused.

December 13: Sandip Ghosh and Abhijit Mondal get bail in case related to evidence tampering, delay in filing FIR as CBI fails to file chargesheet within the mandatory 90-day period.

2025

January 9: Trial of rape and murder case concludes at Sealdah court.

January 18: Court holds Sanjoy Roy guilty for rape and murder

January 20: Sealdah court sentences Sanjoy Roy to life imprisonment till death, directs state to pay compensation of Rs 17 lakh to family of deceased doctor.

[**The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 22, 2025**](#)

Police: Woman gangraped in Bengaluru, 2 held

Express News Service

Two persons were arrested for alleged abduction and gangrape of a 37-year-old woman in Bengaluru while she was waiting for a bus on Sunday, the police said Tuesday. Bengaluru city Police Commissioner B Dayananda confirmed the arrests Tuesday. "The complaint pertains to extortion and sexual assault," he said.

A senior police officer said the woman has been shifted to a shelter home. Around 11.30 pm on Sunday, the woman, who is from Tamil Nadu, was waiting for a Yelahanka bus near the busy Godown street in KR Market area, said police. The woman asked the accused about the availability of buses and was told they stop somewhere else and was taken to the Godown Street. She was allegedly gangraped and robbed of her mobile phone, jewellery and cash, the police said. Though the identities of the accused are yet to be released, the police said they were labourers in the KR Market.

[**The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 22, 2025**](#)

R G Kar verdict is welcome, but questions remain

Pinky Anand

While the ghost of the murder and rape victim of December 12, 2012, was hanging over our heads, another young woman suffered a similar fate – in Kolkata. There was immense media coverage of the December 12, 2012 incident in Delhi. Candlelight marches were held and laws were changed. For a while, we had started to believe that perhaps we had become more conscious as a society. This was till we were faced with a gruesome incident on August 9, 2024 — a severely scarred body of a resident doctor was found at the R G Kar Medical College and Hospital in West Bengal.

What followed seemed like a déjà vu – the same protests, the same calls for justice and the same cry for women's safety. The incident has brought to the fore the same questions: "Are women really safe in the streets?" "Are even doctors going about their work safe?"

On January 18, the court of Additional District and Sessions Judge Anirban Das in Sealdah declared Sanjay Roy, a former civic police volunteer, guilty of the rape and murder of the postgraduate trainee. The charges under which he has been convicted entail a minimum sentence of life imprisonment, while the maximum sentence can be capital punishment. His mother said she has no problem if the court hangs him for the crime. Several questions, however, remain unanswered. They lead one to wonder whether he was the only one involved in this gruesome crime. Roy claims he is innocent. He has reportedly said that an IPS officer was involved in the incident.

The events that followed the discovery of the crime are at the very least suspect. The West Bengal Government transferred the hospital's superintendent. R G Kar's Principal Sandip Ghosh stepped down on August 12. There were nationwide protests, which brought medical services to a halt.

As the nation watched, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) intervened. It noted visible signs of struggle on the victim's body. On August 14, the Kolkata Police formally handed Roy over to the CBI. On August 15, the protest turned violent and a mob vandalised the crime scene. The National

Commission for Women accused the authorities of lapses and raised alarms that the crime site was renovated prematurely, leading to the possibility of tampering.

The Supreme Court had to take action and it was only by mid-September that Roy was arrested. He was accused of tampering with evidence. The FIR seemed to have been delayed. The Supreme Court constituted a 10-member task force to address the safety of healthcare professionals. By the end of the month, the protests had spiralled into political movements. The CBI, under intense pressure, raided the homes of Sandip Ghosh and several others connected to the hospital.

In the second week of December, a Kolkata court granted bail to Ghosh and Abhijit Mondal, the then officer-in-charge of the Tala police station, after the CBI failed to file chargesheets within the statutory 90-day period. It was alleged that Ghosh knew about the crime before he took action. Another doctor at the R G Kar College and Hospital reportedly said that “the CCTV footage captured the movements of 68 people, yet only Roy could be identified. There were multiple DNA samples, and it’s impossible the crime scene was the seminar room — no biological evidence or signs of struggle were found”.

The court has sentenced Sanjay Roy to life imprisonment. It has been held that Roy’s DNA was found on the deceased.

The verdict is welcome, it has come in quick time. However, I believe that the investigation has not answered all the questions.

The writer is a former Additional Solicitor General of India

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 23, 2025

5 men sentenced to death for rape-murder of Chhattisgarh girl

PTI

A fast-track court in Korba district of Chhattisgarh has sentenced five men to death for gang-raping and killing a 16-year-old girl and murdering her two family members in 2021.

The Fast Track Special Court (FTSC) sentenced another accused to life imprisonment.

Additional sessions judge Mamta Bhojwani convicted Santram Majhwar (49), Abdul Jabbar (34), Anil Sarthi (24), Pardeshi Ram (39) and Anand Panika (29) under Sections 302 (murder), 376 (2) G (gang-rape) and other sections of the IPC, the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act and Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act and sentenced them to death, said special public prosecutor Sunil Mishra on Wednesday.

The court sentenced another accused, Umashanakar Yadav (26), to life imprisonment, he said.

While delivering the judgement on January 15, the court said this inhuman and cruel act of the accused is extremely perverted, heinous, brutal and cowardly, he said.

The copy of the order was made available on Monday.

On January 29, 2021, the teenage girl was allegedly raped and bludgeoned with stones before she was dumped in a forest leading to her death near Gadhpura village under Lemru police station area of Korba district.

The accused also killed the girl’s father, aged around 60, and his four-year-old granddaughter who were with her.

The incident came to light a few days later when the deceased man’s son lodged a missing person report at Lemru police station, following which the cops swung into action and rounded up six accused following their interrogation.

Mishra said that the police found in their investigation that the main accused, Manjhwar, who had employed the victim’s family as his cattle grazer, was pressing the girl to become his second wife. When she and her family opposed this, Manjhwar and his five associates raped and killed her and also murdered her two family members.

The victims belonged to the Pahadi Korwa tribal community, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG).

The court has said in its judgment that this inhuman and cruel act of the accused is

extremely perverted, heinous, brutal and cowardly, because they have killed three innocent and weak people to satisfy their lust. This has shocked the collective conscience of the entire society, the lawyer said.

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 24, 2025

56 held for rape of Kerala Dalit athlete, Vijayan tells assembly

Vishnu Varma

The chief minister revealed the details and progress of the police probe in response to starred questions filed by Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) legislators.

Kochi: The special investigation team (SIT) of the Kerala Police has arrested 56 of the total 59 accused in the case of alleged rape of an 18-year-old Dalit athlete in the Pathanamthitta district, Kerala chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan told the assembly on Thursday.

The chief minister revealed the details and progress of the police probe in response to starred questions filed by Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) legislators, including NA Nellikunnu and Najeeb Kanthapuram, during the Question Hour of the ongoing budget session of the assembly.

The CM confirmed that 30 first information reports (FIRs) have been lodged in various police stations in Pathanamthitta district and one FIR within the Thiruvananthapuram rural limits in connection with the allegations of sexual assault and gangrape of the Dalit athlete.

The district-level athlete has told police that she was blackmailed and sexually abused by at least 62 people over the last five years. A male friend began the chain of sexual assault when she was 13, and allegedly recorded explicit photos and videos with which he and his accomplices blackmailed her over the years, she alleged.

The CM told the assembly, "Of the remaining three accused who are yet to be arrested, two are slated to be abroad and one is absconding. Of the 56 arrested so far, seven are minors."

"The SIT is continuing the investigation in the case under the leadership of three deputy superintendents (SPs) in Pathanamthitta and

one deputy SP in Thiruvananthapuram. The Thiruvananthapuram Range DIG has been tasked with ensuring a probe and prosecution proceedings without any loopholes," he added.

The SIT has filed most of the cases under sections 376 (rape), 376 D (gangrape), 376 (2)(n) (repeatedly raping the same person) etc of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), 137(2) (kidnapping) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) along with relevant provisions of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (Pocso) Act, IT Act, and Prevention of Atrocities against SC/STs Act, the CM added.

To a question on what the government has done so far in ensuring security of women, the CM said that mobile applications like POL APP and Nirbhaya can be used to quickly contact police personnel in case of threats or dangerous situations. Additionally, police in collaboration with NGOs such as Bachpan Bachao Andolan has devised a comprehensive legal awareness campaign to make children aware of cyber crimes.

The SIT probe has found that the Dalit woman was gang-raped multiple times, including in public locations such as the Pathanamthitta general hospital and inside cars near rubber estates and abandoned buildings within the town.

The survivor had first recounted the details of the abuse to volunteers of the "Snehitha" help desk of the Kudumbashree unit at her school. After hearing of the revelations, the child welfare committee (CWC) transferred the woman to a shelter home and gave her psychological counselling. The survivor then went on to give detailed statements to police.

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 24, 2025

Five in India sentenced to death for gang rape and murder

AFP

A court in India has sentenced five men to death for the gruesome gang rape and murder of a teenager as well as the killing of her father and toddler-aged niece.

The crime was committed in January 2021 when the men offered the girl and her family all members of a disadvantaged tribal

community in the central state of Chhattisgarh lifts on their motorbikes while they were waiting for public transport.

They later clubbed the teenager's father to death as he attempted to stop the rape and killed her three-year-old niece, public prosecutor Sunil Kumar Mishra told AFP.

The last victim was found unconscious by villagers several days later and died on her way to hospital.

Five men were found guilty of the rape and triple murder "and condemned to death", Mishra said on Thursday, the day after the sentence was published by the court.

A sixth man "was found guilty of association in crimes, but his involvement in rape was not proved, so he was sentenced to imprisonment for the remainder of his life for killings", he added.

India imposes the death penalty, although it is rarely carried out in practice.

An average of nearly 90 rapes a day were reported in 2022 in the country of 1.4 billion people, but activists say many more go unreported.

A court in the eastern city of Kolkata sentenced a man to life in prison this week after he was found guilty of raping and murdering a 31-year-old doctor last year.

The discovery of her bloodied body at a state-run hospital in August stoked nationwide anger and protests at the chronic issue of violence against women.

The gruesome nature of the attack drew comparisons with the 2012 gang rape and murder of a young woman on a Delhi bus, which also sparked weeks of nationwide protests.

Four men convicted of the bus attack were executed in March 2020.

Last week more than four dozen men were arrested for the repeated sexual abuse of a teenager, who said around 60 men targeted her in the southern state of Kerala over several years.

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 25, 2025

5 men rape mentally ill woman in Goa, arrested

Pavneet Singh Chadha

Five people were arrested on Friday for allegedly raping a mentally ill woman in Goa, police said.

The incident took place on the intervening night of January 22 and 23 between 8 pm and 3.30 am.

Police filed a case after a complaint by the woman's mother, who alleged that one of the accused persons "befriended her mentally unsound daughter" and abducted her from a bus stand in South Goa.

The complainant said he travelled with her in a bus to another location, and subsequently took her to a third location on a scooter, where four other men joined them.

"The five accused persons then took her to a flat in South Goa in a car, where they all sexually assaulted her," said a police officer.

The complaint stated that the accused persons exploited the woman's condition and raped her. Police charged the five with gang rape and other relevant sections of the BNS.

Goa Police said they solved the case within hours of the crime. The accused persons are Adil (18), Mohammed Ali Mulla (22), Shahzad (18), Viresh (18) and Mohammed Yasir (18).

"Multiple raids were conducted by several teams. The vehicle used for the offence and five mobile phones have been attached. The investigation is ongoing. All the accused have been remanded in seven days' police custody," the police statement said.

A police officer, requesting anonymity, said: "The victim is in her 20s. She has undergone treatment for a mental health condition in the past and had been taking medication for some time. After the incident, she was disoriented and stressed and confided in her mother, who then reported the matter to the police. Her medical examination was conducted as per protocol and her statement is being recorded."

This article went live on January twenty-fourth, twenty twenty-five, at forty-seven minutes past nine at night.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 26, 2025

Woman gang-raped by brother-in-law, others during 31-hour ordeal; two held

PTI

An 18-year-old woman was allegedly gang-raped by her brother-in-law and two others in Nashik city of Maharashtra on the pretext of arranging a guarantor to secure bail for her jailed husband, police said.

The incident took place in the Panchavati area of the city between 10 am on January 22 and 5 pm on January 23, they said, adding that during her 31-hour ordeal, she was also thrashed by the accused, causing her to become unconscious a few times, but she managed to escape from their clutches.

While two of the accused have been arrested, her brother-in-law, who is elder to her husband, is absconding. Two more persons are suspected to be involved in the incident, they said.

As per the complaint lodged by the woman, she got married a few months back and since she was still a minor at that time, a complaint was lodged by her family members against her husband at the MIDC police station in Mumbai's Andheri. A case was then registered against him and he is currently in a jail in Mumbai.

Recently, her brother-in-law called her to Nashik, where he resides, on the pretext of arranging a guarantor for her husband's bail and release from the prison. Accordingly, she reached Nashik around 8.30 am on Wednesday, a police official said.

Her brother-in-law and other accused then took her to an open ground in the Panchavati area under the pretext of meeting her husband's guarantor. They also offered her food, but after she refused to accept it, they tied her to a tree. Around 1.30 pm, they beat her up and one of them raped her, due to which she fell unconscious, the complaint said.

When she regained consciousness around 7.30 am on Thursday, she found it difficult to talk and walk. She tried to escape, but the accused thrashed her again, due to which she fell unconscious once again. This continued till 5 pm that day, it added.

In her complaint, she also said that when the trio was consuming liquor, the woman told them that she wanted to answer nature's call. They allowed her to go, but asked one of the

accused to go with her so that she does not escape. However, she pushed him aside and ran away. She reached the Nashik Road suburb of the city and lodged a complaint with the police late Thursday night.

According to police, two accused, Amit Vijay Damle and Gopal Rajendra Nagolkar, both aged 25, have been arrested, while a search is on for her brother-in-law.

Two more persons, one named Gopya, aged around 30 years, and another unidentified, are suspected to be involved in the crime, they said.

The Nashik Road police registered a case and transferred it to the Panchavati police station. A case under Sections 70 (1) (gang-rape), 64 (rape), 69 (sexual intercourse by employing deceitful means), 74 (assault or use of criminal force against woman), 115 (2) (voluntarily causing hurt) and 3 (5) (common intention) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) was registered on Friday, they said.

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 26, 2025

Minor allegedly raped in Assam hospital, cleaning staff and woman helper held

HT Correspondent

The cleaning staff allegedly sexually assaulted the girl who was undergoing treatment at GMCH with the help of a female assistant on January 19

Silchar: A cleaning staff and woman helper of Assam's Gauhati Medical College & Hospital (GMCH) were arrested for allegedly raping a 13-year-old female patient at the hospital, said police.

The cleaning staff allegedly sexually assaulted the girl who was undergoing treatment at GMCH with the help of a female assistant on January 19, said the deputy commissioner of police (DCP) of Guwahati East Parthasarathi Mahanta.

Based on the complaint lodged at the Bhangagarh Police Station on January 21, police registered a case under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) and Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (Pocso) Act against the cleaning staff and the woman who helped him commit the crime.

Police have identified the accused as Abdul Rashid and Karabi Roy, both residents of Kamrup Metro district. A police officer said the minor was medically examined as per the Pocso Act and her statement was judicially recorded.

The superintendent of GMCH, Abhijit Sarma, said that the minor first visited the GMCH in October last year and there after used to visit the hospital frequently for treatment.

"It is suspected that she knew the accused. The matter is being investigated by the police and we are cooperating with them. The accused was not directly employed by us," Sarma said, adding the hospital authorities have submitted the CCTV footage of that area to the police.

The minor's family alleged that she was dragged to a washroom and raped by the cleaning staff.

"The case is under investigation and a chargesheet will be submitted very soon," said the officer.

Climate Change

The Express Tribune

January 21, 2025

Green skills revolution: are we ready?

Mirza Mujtaba Baig

Those who fully grasp the severity of the climate crisis understand that the next few decades will be crucial for climate mitigation and adaptation. While such individuals may not be the majority, many hold positions of authority and are bound to acknowledge this reality as signatories to various global climate protocols, most notably the Paris Agreement. This is a unique global crisis, unlike any other, dividing the world into two groups: the perpetrators of climate change and its victims. No country exists entirely within one group; all must choose a side, as each group carries mandatory obligations that its members must fulfil to remain part of the global community.

As signatories of the Paris Agreement, all countries are obligated to adhere to its provisions. These include quantified targets, such as halving GHG emissions by 2030 and achieving net-zero emissions by 2050.

Whether these targets are deemed ambitious or conservative, they must ultimately be met in full. Mere rhetoric will not suffice; all nations must demonstrate tangible progress at the annual COPs.

Failure to take serious steps towards meeting these targets may result in penalties, such as the withdrawal of support for both mitigation and adaptation efforts. While this may not be immediate, the increasing intensity and frequency of climate disasters, along with other devastating impacts like food and water crises, will necessitate such measures against non-compliant nations. This enforcement is crucial to ensure the effective implementation of the Paris Agreement.

Both Global North and South nations must transition their fossil fuel-dependent economies to green economies. This necessitates either retraining their existing workforce or hiring climate professionals across various sectors. While the phasing of this transition will vary, immediate action is crucial. The Global North has been undertaking this shift for the past decade, yet progress has been insufficient. Conversely, most Global South countries, with the exception of a few rapidly developing nations, are primarily in the planning stages for hiring climate professionals to adapt to the new climate reality.

A recent report reveals a significant disparity between the global demand and supply of green talent. Between 2023 and 2024, demand for green skills surged twice as fast as the available workforce, with an 11.6% increase in demand compared to a 5.6% increase in supply. This trend is alarming, as projections suggest that by 2030 - halfway to the deadline for achieving nationally determined climate goals - one in five jobs will lack suitably qualified green professionals. Furthermore, by 2050, this gap is expected to widen dramatically, affecting half of all jobs.

Individuals possessing green skills or relevant job titles enjoy a substantial advantage in the job market. Their hiring rate is 54.6% higher than the average across all sectors. This advantage is even more

pronounced in certain countries, such as the US (80.3% higher) and Ireland (79.8% higher). Globally, the fastest-growing green skill is Sustainable Procurement. In 2024, 15% more individuals added this skill to their LinkedIn profiles compared to the previous year, highlighting its increasing importance in the green economy.

In stark contrast to the global landscape, Pakistan presents a disappointing picture regarding the recognition of green skills and climate action competencies. Beyond a handful of leading universities, education in these areas falls significantly short of the qualifications required for sustainable procurement. The primary focus of these institutions remains on environmental management, primarily to cater to the health, safety and environmental sector. However, the global trajectory is shifting towards Environment, Sustainability and Governance (ESG) systems, with a focus on climate-smart practices across production and distribution. Consequently, most of our green skills are rooted in outdated environmental management syllabi, lacking comprehensive coverage of sustainability and climate change. To date, no private or public university offers a fully-fledged degree programme that comprehensively addresses all facets of climate change.

It is widely acknowledged that climate change is an interdisciplinary subject that encompasses numerous areas of natural, physical, managerial and social sciences. For instance, a climate scientist is not expected to possess in-depth knowledge of transition economics or carbon trading, as these fall under management sciences. Similarly, climate policy belongs to the realm of public administration, and an energy transition expert may not be qualified to contribute significantly to policy-related tasks.

This presents a dilemma. We must either cultivate a vast pool of experts specialising in various subfields of climate change or develop higher education programmes that integrate key subjects across disciplines. This ensures that even if individuals don't become masters of every field, they possess a

foundational understanding of all relevant subjects to effectively contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation goals. The challenges do not end here. We already have a significant workforce employed in both the public and private sectors. This workforce primarily consists of individuals over 30 years old, who may not possess the same level of agility to readily adapt to the demands of new learning. Special efforts will be necessary to assist them in aligning with the requirements of green jobs. This necessitates a two-pronged government approach:

Cultivating a climate-ready workforce: This involves fostering a climate workforce within the higher education sector.

Upskilling the existing workforce: This requires the development and implementation of specialised training programmes for currently employed individuals. These programmes must be meticulously designed and executed, unlike the haphazard efforts currently undertaken by some organisations. To ensure the consistent delivery of climate training, a permanent framework should be established at both federal and provincial levels. Priority should be given to training individuals who are still a considerable distance from retirement, followed by training for senior-level employees in a subsequent phase. It is not essential for these initiatives to be located on-site or solely managed by the government. This task could be outsourced to various organisations already working to cultivate climate action skills. Alternatively, a robust virtual setup might also be feasible, considering the limited resources and the relatively low priority currently assigned to this issue.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 22, 2025

Scientists link climate change to dengue outbreaks, develop early warning system

PTI

Dengue infections and deaths increase when temperatures go above 27 degrees Celsius and rainfall is moderate and spread out over a period, according to a new study.

The study also reveals very heavy rainfall (more than 150 mm in a week) can wash away mosquito eggs and larvae, lowering the risk of dengue.

Researchers Sophia Yacob and Roxy Mathew Koll from the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM), Pune, examined how temperature, rainfall, and humidity affect dengue in Pune, a major hotspot of the disease.

They found that dengue infections and deaths increase when temperatures go above 27 degrees Celsius, rainfall is moderate and spread out over time and humidity is between 60 and 78 per cent during monsoon (June–September).

The scientists created a model using artificial intelligence and machine learning that can predict dengue outbreaks more than two months in advance. This allows local authorities and health departments to prepare in time and reduce the impact of the disease.

In Pune, the average temperature ranges from 27–35 degrees Celsius during monsoon. This range is conducive for dengue transmission because it affects how long mosquitoes live, how many eggs they produce, and how quickly the virus develops inside them. It also influences how long it takes for people to show symptoms after being infected.

The researchers noted this temperature range is specific to Pune and will differ in other places because various factors—like rainfall and humidity—vary. Therefore, it's important to study the climate-dengue link for each region separately.

The study shows moderate rains (up to 150 mm in a week) increase dengue deaths because they cause stagnant water that mosquitoes use to breed. Heavy rains (more than 150 mm in a week), however, reduce dengue by washing away eggs and larvae.

Monsoon rainfall in India has active (wet) and break (dry) phases. Years with fewer active and break phases (meaning rainfall is more evenly spread out) see higher dengue cases and deaths. Years with more of these phases (meaning more rain in short bursts) see

fewer dengue cases and deaths, the scientists found.

So, it is not just the total amount of rain that matters, but also how the rain is spread out over time. Currently, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) issues forecasts for these active-break cycles 10–30 days in advance for the whole country. Using these forecasts can give extra time to predict dengue outbreaks.

In the future, scientists say temperatures and humidity in India will continue to go up, and monsoon rains will become more erratic, with more heavy rainfall. While these heavy rains might wash away some mosquito eggs and larvae, overall warmer days will likely boost dengue transmission.

Under scenarios with both low and high fossil fuel emissions, Pune could see its average temperature rise by 1.2–3.5 degrees Celsius by the end of the century.

“We were able to conduct this study and prepare an early warning system using health data shared by Pune’s Health Department... We approached Kerala and other states where dengue cases are high, but health departments there did not cooperate,” said Koll.

“We have meteorological data readily available from the IMD. If health data is shared, we can prepare customised early warning systems for climate-sensitive diseases like dengue, malaria, and chikungunya for each city or district in India. Cooperation from health departments is key to saving lives,” Koll said.

Several states with a high dengue burden—such as Kerala, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Punjab, Haryana, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh—could benefit from an advanced early warning system. This would improve their readiness and reduce the disease’s effects, the scientists said.

Sujata Saunik, the Chief Secretary of Maharashtra, said this collaboration highlights the importance of bringing together expertise from diverse fields to address complex climate-health challenges.

“It is a perfect example of how scientists, the health department, and the government can

work together to improve our health warning system."

Bangladesh

Economy/Planning/Reform

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 18, 2025

Economy to grow 4.1% in FY25: WB

Staff Correspondent

The World Bank has kept its forecast for Bangladesh's economic growth almost unchanged for the current fiscal year (FY) 2024-25, citing subdued investment and industrial activity amid heightened political uncertainty.

Bangladesh's economy may grow 4.1 percent in FY25, the WB said in its latest Global Economic Prospects released Thursday.

The growth projection is slightly higher than its October forecast of 4 percent for FY25.

Growth is projected to pick up to 5.4 percent in FY26, assuming broad political stability, successful reforms in the financial sector, an improved business climate, and increased trade, the WB report said.

"Easing inflation is expected to boost private consumption," said the multilateral lender.

The WB's latest forecast is also higher than the 3.8 percent growth projection made by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in December last year, which cited output losses caused by the July uprising, floods, and tighter policies.

As per the predictions of the two multilateral agencies, Bangladesh's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth in FY25 would be the lowest since FY20, when the Covid-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on the globe.

Earlier this month, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) said GDP growth was 1.81 percent in the July-September quarter of FY25.

The first-quarter growth was the lowest since the second quarter of FY21, when the pandemic continued to cripple the economy. In the first quarter of FY24, GDP grew 6.04 percent.

The WB said inflation in Bangladesh has remained persistently high, and monetary policy has been tightened further.

The 12-month average inflation in Bangladesh rose to 10.34 percent in 2024, up from 9.48 percent a year earlier.

In 2022, the annual average inflation was 7.7 percent, according to the BBS.

In December, the IMF kept its projection of inflation in Bangladesh elevated for the current fiscal year, ending on June 30, 2025.

The WB said political turmoil in mid-2024 dampened economic activity and worsened investor confidence.

It said growth in FY24 is estimated to have slowed to 5 percent, a downward revision of 0.6 percentage points from previous projections.

"Supply constraints, including energy shortages and import restrictions, weakened industrial activity and led to increased price pressures."

"High inflation reduced the purchasing power of households, slowing services growth."

The WB also cautioned about the risk of social unrest in countries, including Bangladesh, where youth unemployment has risen since the pre-pandemic decade.

It said elevated social unrest could weigh on productivity and investor confidence in South Asia.

"In addition, the incidence of political violence has increased in some countries in the region," it added.

More frequent or more severe weather events could reduce food production, drive up food price inflation, and raise living costs, the WB report added.

The Washington-based multilateral agency said slower-than-projected growth in major trading partners and the resulting weaker demand could dampen activity, particularly in countries with strong economic ties to Europe and the USA, including Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

"For example, countries in Europe account for about half of total goods exports in Bangladesh."

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 23, 2025

We must break free from our economic captivity

Bobby Hajjaj

Once, long ago, the poet Nazrul sang of revolution, of freedom from oppression, but were he alive today, he might lament a nation enthralled—not to foreign invaders, but to a domestic oligarchy.

Bangladesh, a country of immense potential, now finds itself shackled by the iron grip of family-owned conglomerates. These corporate behemoths, shadowy leviathans cloaked in cronyism, have seized the state, becoming the financial sinew of Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian regime. Their stranglehold threatens not only our economy but also our democracy, suffocating the very ideals for which this nation was born.

In Japan's pre-war years, the zaibatsu—vast industrial and financial conglomerates—dominated the economy, leveraging their might to entrench authoritarianism. A striking parallel can be drawn with the past Awami regime in Bangladesh, where conglomerates like S Alam, Beximco and Bashundhara entrenched themselves across critical sectors, including energy, finance, real estate and media.

These conglomerates have become the faceless architects of a regime sustained by repression and corruption, extracting billions from an impoverished populace to line their pockets and bankroll autocracy. The modus operandi is insidious: monopolistic practices that stifle competition, inflate prices and hollow out public coffers.

Banks have been looted with impunity, state contracts distributed like party favours and regulatory bodies rendered impotent. Foreign investors, sensing the rot, flee; the economy's lifeblood haemorrhages. Yet the perpetrators remain untouchable, shielded by their proximity to power.

History offers a clarion call: economic monopolies and democratic governance cannot coexist.

The Allied dismantling of Japan's zaibatsu after World War II stands as a model. By decentralising economic power, breaking conglomerates into smaller entities, and instituting strict anti-trust laws, Japan laid the groundwork for a competitive, transparent economy. Similarly, South Korea's chaebol

reforms curbed the dominance of family-owned conglomerates, injecting accountability into the veins of its economic system.

Bangladesh, too, must summon the courage to confront its oligarchs. Reforms must begin with an unflinching examination of financial records, exposing the labyrinthine networks of collusion between conglomerates and state actors. Here, examples abound: Brazil's Operation Car Wash dismantled an empire of corruption, revealing the pernicious ties between politicians and business magnates. The Zondo Commission in South Africa meticulously mapped out state capture by corporate elites. These efforts were not mere exercises in forensic accounting but acts of reclamation—nations reclaiming their dignity, their future.

The task before us is Herculean but not insurmountable.

First, we must establish a powerful, independent task force, armed with the tools of forensic accounting, data analytics and legal expertise. By dissecting financial flows, tracing cross-ownership structures and auditing procurement records, this body can expose the mechanisms of economic enslavement.

In South Korea, the Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission worked in tandem with whistleblowers to unveil the rot within chaebols. Bangladesh must do the same, empowering civil society to join this battle.

Temporary nationalisation offers another pathway. Inspired by Japan's post-war reforms, key conglomerates could be placed under professional management for a limited period. This is not an invitation to chaos but an orderly transition: stabilising operations, removing corrupt actors and creating the conditions for fair re-privatisation.

The aim is not to destroy but to transform, to extract these entities from the toxic embrace of cronyism and return them to the people as competitive, transparent enterprises. Some will cry foul, invoking the spectre of economic disruption or accusing reformers of vendetta. Let them cry. The moral imperative is clear:

the wealth of a nation cannot be the preserve of a few.

The lives of 170 million citizens—their hopes, their dreams, their right to dignity—are at stake. We must remember that these conglomerates do not merely control industries; they control futures.

Every inflated price, every siphoned dollar, every monopolised sector represents a child denied an education, a farmer deprived of fair markets, a citizen silenced by poverty. The battle is not just economic; it is existential. It is a battle for the soul of Bangladesh, a battle to reclaim our sovereignty from those who would sell it piecemeal for private gain.

Imagine a Bangladesh unshackled. Imagine industries where competition thrives, where entrepreneurs dare to dream without fear of predation by monopolies. Imagine a government no longer beholden to the oligarchs but answerable to its people. This vision is not utopian; it is attainable. It requires political will, legal reform, and, above all, a collective awakening.

Let us remember that history is a relentless tide. The zaibatsu fell. The chaebols were humbled. Even the most entrenched powers can be dismantled when a nation decides that enough is enough.

Bangladesh stands at such a crossroads. The choice is stark: capitulation or courage, stagnation or progress.

In the end, this is not merely an economic question but a moral one. Will we, as a people, continue to watch as our nation's wealth is siphoned away, our democracy eroded, our dreams deferred? Or will we rise, as we did in 1971, and declare that this land, this future, belongs to us all? The time for equivocation is over. The time for action is now.

For Bangladesh, the stakes could not be higher. For the oligarchs, the message could not be clearer: your time is up.

Daily Observer, Dhaka, January 23, 2025

White Paper on our economy: Will political parties heed suggestions?

Nurul Huda Sakib

Prof. Dr. Yunus led the interim government, which was formed just four months after the

previous Awami League-led administration left behind a range of burdens for the people of Bangladesh. It became evident that corruption was rampant across nearly all public and private sectors during the Awami League regime, with their allies and associates benefiting significantly from corrupt transactions. Ironically, billions were laundered out of the country annually during this period. In response to the prevailing corruption, the interim government rightly established a 12-member committee tasked with preparing a comprehensive "white paper" to assess the current economic situation and identify remedies for improvement. This committee produced an in-depth report on the state of the Bangladeshi economy, focusing on microeconomic issues, structural challenges, social dimensions, institutional aspects, and necessary policy reforms. In this short essay, I will focus on the methodology used by the committee, its strengths, and the future role of the government in ensuring better governance.

Facts or Fabrication? The Debate Over Data Reliability: The white paper raises significant concerns about the reliability of macroeconomic and social data, including GDP growth, inflation, public investments, and social indicators. There is a widespread lack of trust in these key indicators, with allegations of political influence and manipulation undermining data integrity. The report criticizes the previous government for exaggerating GDP growth and using inflated statistics to construct a misleading development narrative. Despite claiming to adopt an evidence-based approach, the analysis seems influenced by political critiques and pre-existing narratives regarding governance failures, which may bias the interpretation of economic performance. Additionally, discrepancies between survey data and secondary sources call into question the methodological rigor employed in reconciling conflicting figures. These criticisms suggest that the report's findings should be interpreted cautiously due to potential methodological shortcomings and

external influences. Although many people criticized the validity of the data and research methods soon after the report's release, it is essential to remember that the committee produced this extensive report in just three months. The committee acknowledges that the analyses presented in the white paper are limited in depth and scope, citing time and resource constraints as key factors. *Illusions of Progress: Corruption, State Capture and Manipulated Development Narratives: The "State of the Bangladesh Economy"* report, while acknowledging its shortcomings, highlights several critical issues in various areas. It reveals how the Awami League (AL) government has publicized inflated statistics through data manipulation, thereby creating a misleading narrative of development and an 'illusion of progress' for the public. The report also identifies the reasons behind the decline in foreign exchange reserves and points to import restrictions as indicators of external sector fragility. Consequently, public debt levels are rising, raising concerns about fiscal sustainability, inefficient spending, and corruption in public projects. From a structural perspective, the white paper illustrates how systemic corruption undermines public institutions and leads to a deficit in private investment. It also highlights how crony capitalism and poor governance create barriers to private sector investment. Notably, the paper reveals that the AL government systematically caused liquidity shortages through non-performing loans by manipulating the boards of various banks and enabling regulatory failures, resulting in a banking sector crisis. From an institutional viewpoint, the report identifies several flaws. Governance failures, the growth of crony capitalism, and the rise of an authoritarian government have significantly eroded accountability and transparency, raising questions about democratic performance and electoral integrity. The public does not need extensive data to recall their experiences during this regime, where all elections were marred by rigging. Regarding mega projects, instances of overpriced and overly lengthy

projects have been reported, alongside rampant illicit financial outflows that have drained national resources. For example, the daily expenditure for the Karnaphuli River Tunnel in Chittagong is nearly 3.7 million BDT, a cost that could have been avoided. Similarly, it is evident that the previous government could have mitigated extra expenditures on projects such as the Padma Bridge, elevated expressway, and Ruppur power plant. In several cases, ministers and their associates have engaged in unplanned spending to serve their political and financial interests. A recent example involves ICT incubation centers, where an underutilized center in Natore Town coincides with plans for another IT park in Singra upazila, the home district of Zunaid Ahmed Palak, the former ICT state minister of the ousted Awami League government. The white paper ultimately demonstrates that the alliance between political elites, bureaucrats, and businessmen has fostered deep-rooted corruption and created syndicates. However, this trio occasionally makes conflicting and short-term policy decisions, particularly in monetary, fiscal, and trade domains, further exacerbating economic fragility. Overall, these corrupt practices have led to a capture of the state by power elites. *The Cost of State Capture: A Country on the Brink: The consequences of such capture are critically severe.* Even after four months of governance, the interim government struggles to stabilize the economy. Some banks are on the verge of default, inflation is rising, and many people are finding it difficult to cope. Large-scale corruption and mismanagement have led to increased inequality and vulnerability. The widening gap in income and wealth has raised concerns about social cohesion. Corruption even extends to funds meant for the poor, such as social safety net programs, which has fueled discontent among the masses. Additionally, expenditures on education and healthcare have risen significantly, creating disparities among different segments of the population. Challenges in agricultural value chains, declining profitability, and corruption

involving subsidies and mechanization threaten food security for those in need. Similarly, corruption in the climate trust fund has heightened the risk of climate vulnerability and undermined long-term environmental sustainability. Moreover, unplanned development, fiscal burdens, and state capture have fostered a culture of discrimination, leading to brain drain and frustration among a significant portion of the youth. These consequences exacerbate job opportunities for young people, resulting in an inefficient labor market. Government Reforms and Initiatives for Recovery: There is a prevalent culture of mistrust and a blame game among politicians in Bangladesh. Historically, civil society organizations such as Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) have consistently highlighted corruption within the BNP and AL governments. However, neither party acknowledged the seriousness of these corruption concerns during their time in power. Instead, both accused TIB of being politically motivated and attempted to undermine the credibility of their data and claims. Despite the gravity of the issues raised by TIB, they were not addressed as key concerns at the time. The white paper has identified serious issues that need attention for the future of Bangladesh. I propose that the interim government take significant steps to ensure accountability and transparency and prevent corruption by implementing the reform initiatives suggested by various reform committees. Strengthening institutions such as the Election Commission, the Anti-Corruption Commission, the Public Service Commission, and local governments is essential. Additionally, a social movement united against corruption is necessary. To set a strong precedent, the government must prioritize gaining public trust and acceptance to implement these reform initiatives effectively and impose punishments on corrupt individuals. Given the current economic crisis and inflation, the government should focus on developing social safety net programs and

initiating a universal basic income (UBI) project to support the poor. This initiative would help foster harmony and build trust within impoverished communities. Furthermore, the government must combat rumors, misinformation, and disinformation, especially since many former AL members are still active and obstructing the successful implementation of reform initiatives. Moreover, it is crucial for the government to create employment opportunities for the large youth population and to consider their voices in building a prosperous future for Bangladesh. All these initiatives can be facilitated by establishing a national digital database for its citizens.

The writer is a Senior Research Fellow at the Bangladesh Center for Indo-Pacific Affairs (BCIPA) and is affiliated with the Varieties of Democracy Project at the University of Gothenburg.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 30, 2025

CPD paints a bleak picture of economy

Staff Correspondent

The economic measures taken by the government are yet to deliver substantive changes to provide relief to people's lives and businesses, says the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

The private think tank came up with its assessment of the state of Bangladesh's economy for the fiscal year 2024-25 in a paper titled "Navigating Expectations in Turbulent Times".

Presenting the paper in a briefing at its office yesterday, CPD Executive Director Fahmida Khatun said the interim government formed on August 8 last year had launched reform initiatives in many sectors, including those related to the economy.

"However, no significant changes to bring relief to the general public and businesses have been observed. Six months have passed in the current 2024-25 fiscal year, yet we have not seen any significant economic vibrancy," she added.

The economist emphasised a coordinated approach to provide relief to the people, protect vulnerable low- and limited-income

households, and ensure macroeconomic stability.

Mustafizur Rahman, a distinguished fellow at the CPD, said the think tank had been consistently calling for an increase in the tax-to-GDP ratio for years. The country's development activities have become increasingly dependent on debt due to the low tax-to-GDP ratio.

However, increasing tax revenue through higher value added tax (VAT) may worsen the situation for people already struggling to cope with high inflation, he said.

"It was a great opportunity to increase direct taxes and reduce tax evasion," he said, referring to the timing of the interim government's formation after the fall of the Awami League regime.

He said the government should take appropriate measures to curb tax evasion because the government receives only a portion of what people are supposed to pay.

Answering a question regarding low investment amid political uncertainty, Mustafizur said political instability is not the sole deterrent to investment.

"If uncertainty were the main reason, then why did investment not increase over the past 10 years when the Awami League government continued without political instability?" he asked.

If a conducive environment for investment is created—such as a one-stop service and adequate infrastructure—investment could flow in, the economist said.

"If we cannot provide a one-stop service, if we cannot ensure gas supply, and if we haven't set up an ETP [effluent treatment plant] in Savar over the last 10 years, then how can we expect investments to come in?"

Political and economic reforms must go ahead in parallel, which is a medium-term process, Mustafizur said. Meanwhile, the country should transition to a democratic process within the announced timeframe, he said.

"In that case, what is necessary is political consensus to continue the reform process, which would be a significant achievement of the July uprising," he added.

While discussing the CPD's assessment, Fahmida said total revenue collection recorded an "extremely low" marginal growth of 3.7 percent during the July-October period of FY 2025.

Inflation was higher in rural areas than in urban areas for 16 out of the last 21 months (from April 2023 to December 2024), which is particularly concerning, as purchasing power in rural areas is already low, she said.

In a positive development, export performance during the first half of FY 2025 indicates not just high growth, but also an increase in domestic value retention. However, export earnings continue to be volume-driven.

Thanks to high export and remittance earnings, the balance of payments situation and overall external balance are now in a relatively better position. Diversification of export destinations and goods could provide further stability, Fahmida said.

Regarding remittance growth, she said the reduction of informal hundi transactions after the July uprising has led to more remittances coming through official channels. However, remittance earnings are still low compared to the overall export of manpower.

About the recent increase in VAT, she said it would place an additional burden on the people.

The digitisation of the tax system could help raise revenue, and efforts should focus on curbing tax evasion, Fahmida said.

"Spiralling debt has trapped the power and energy sector in a vicious cycle that will likely persist."

She also said the government must continue its efforts to cut unnecessary projects. Nearly completed should be prioritised to ensure their quick completion.

The CPD provided seven recommendations to address the economic challenges. These include prioritising the prevention of tax evasion, limiting tax avoidance, and strengthening compliance systems to create a more inclusive fiscal base and reduce revenue leakage.

It recommended limiting intermediaries by connecting farmers directly to buyers, and

regulating the hoarding and stockpiling of rice.

Given the changed global and regional trade dynamics, renewed efforts should be made to tap into the export potential of neighbouring countries in South Asia, East Asia, and South East Asia by pursuing free trade agreements and comprehensive economic partnerships. The CPD also recommended designing a subsidised credit facility with lower interest rates to support Small and Medium Enterprises.

A proper estimation of annual rice demand is crucial, the report said. Additionally, a specific two-year plan should be developed to end the rising debt cycle that has entangled the power and energy sector.

Furthermore, the think tank recommended freezing the bank accounts of wilful defaulters and their immediate family members, liquidating their assets and temporarily nationalising their businesses.

Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director of the CPD, was also present at the event.

Daily Observer, Dhaka, January 16, 2025

BD's foreign debt exceeds \$104b, most borrowed by govt sector

Bangladesh's foreign debt stock has exceeded \$104 billion, with the government and public sector loans totalling \$84.45 billion.

The remaining \$19.91 billion has been taken by the private sector, bringing the total foreign debt to \$104.36 billion. Bangladesh Bank released this data in a report on Tuesday, covering the foreign debt status up to the September quarter of 2024. According to the report, 81 percent of the total foreign loans were received by the government sector, while the private sector accounted for the rest. Of the total debt, \$91.72 billion, or 88.19 percent, is long-term, while short-term loans in the private sector amount to \$12.62 billion. At the end of the June quarter, the foreign debt stood at \$103.40 billion, indicating an increase of over \$960 million within three months.

A senior official from Bangladesh Bank told

bdnews24.com: "In the last ten years, significant foreign loans have been secured for mega projects in the country. A substantial portion of foreign debt has been used in the power sector, including the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant construction project."

He added that foreign loans have also been utilised for the Rampal Power Plant, Matarbari Power Plant, and other projects.

—bdnews24.com

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 17, 2025

Inflation biggest concern for Bangladesh: WEF

Star Business Report

Inflation has been identified as the biggest risk to Bangladesh in 2025, according to a World Economic Forum (WEF) report released on Wednesday.

In its Global Risks Report 2025, the WEF, an independent international organisation, stated that extreme weather events — such as floods and heatwaves — and pollution are two other significant risks to the economy of South Asia.

Bangladesh is one of the 10 countries where pollution has been identified as one of the top three risks, according to the report.

Particularly in densely populated countries such as Bangladesh and India, pollution has become one of the most critical challenges to tackle, the report said.

"A pollution conscious green transition is needed," it added.

The WEF's latest report also noted that unemployment and economic downturn are two remaining challenges for Bangladesh, which has been grappling with stubbornly high inflation, devaluation of its currency, falling foreign exchange reserves, and slowing investment and business growth.

The 12-month average inflation in Bangladesh rose to 10.34 percent in 2024 from 9.48 percent a year earlier.

In 2022, annual average inflation was 7.7 percent, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS).

The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), a prominent think-tank in Bangladesh, contributed to the findings of WEF's report.

The Global Risks Report 2025 highlights an increasingly fractured global landscape, where escalating geopolitical, environmental, societal, and technological challenges threaten stability and progress.

The WEF report incorporates insights from over 900 experts worldwide.

"As we enter 2025, the global outlook is increasingly fractured across geopolitical, environmental, societal, economic and technological domains," it said.

"Over the last year, we have witnessed the expansion and escalation of conflicts, a multitude of extreme weather events amplified by climate change, widespread societal and political polarisation, and continued technological advancements accelerating the spread of false or misleading information."

"Optimism is limited as the danger of miscalculation or misjudgment by political and military actors is high. We seem to be living in one of the most divided times since the Cold War," the report added.

The latest Global Risks Report stated that more than half of respondents—52 percent—anticipate an unsettled global outlook over the next two years, a proportion similar to last year.

Another 31 percent expect turbulence, and 5 percent foresee a stormy outlook.

"Combining these three categories of responses shows a four-percentage-point increase from last year, indicating a heightened pessimistic outlook for the world through 2027," it said.

Compared to this two-year outlook, the landscape deteriorates over the 10-year timeframe, with 62 percent of respondents expecting stormy or turbulent times, it added.

"This long-term outlook has remained similar to last year's survey results in its level of negativity, reflecting respondents' skepticism that current societal mechanisms and governing institutions are capable of navigating and mending the fragility generated by the risks we face today."

Trade

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 18, 2025

Snapshots of Bangladesh's major export challenges

Dr Nasim Ahmed

Bangladesh's economy is significantly dependent on its export earnings. The export sector has faced several challenges under the interim government. Business insiders opine that the recent political upheaval has created an uncertain environment for businesses. The interim government's efforts to restore stability are becoming visible, but the situation has led many international buyers in the garment sector to reconsider placing orders in Bangladesh, anticipating potential disruptions.

The garment sector accounts for over 80 percent of Bangladesh's export earnings and has experienced significant obstacles due to worker protests demanding higher wages and better working conditions. These protests have led to the closure of many medium-scale factories as well as production delays, causing concerns among international buyers about the continuity of Bangladeshi suppliers.

Rising temperatures due to climate change have increased heat stress among garment factory workers, potentially affecting productivity, lead times, and timely shipments. Global brands are legally required to address these conditions in their suppliers' factories under new EU regulations, exerting pressure on Bangladeshi exporters to improve working conditions.

In July 2024, discrepancies were identified between export figures reported by the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) and the National Board of Revenue (NBR). The EPB acknowledged a \$3.16 billion mismatch in export data for the July-September period of the previous fiscal year, causing a temporary suspension of regular export data publication. This has confused stakeholders and may affect trade decisions in the future.

The government reduced export incentives across various sectors in July 2024, aiming to encourage exporters to raise competitiveness ahead of the country's graduation from the least developed country (LDC) status in 2026. Business leaders have expressed concerns that curtailing incentives could adversely

impact industries already struggling with increased production costs and global competition.

The snowball effect of political turmoil, labour unrest, and reduced incentives has strained the economy. The interim government is seeking international assistance to rebuild the economy, but challenges persist in restoring investors' confidence and ensuring sustainable growth. To address the major export challenges, the interim government has adopted the following strategies:

- * Restoring law and order, which is crucial to regain the confidence of international buyers. The interim government has been working on industrial security and anti-corruption reforms to achieve this.

- * Improving working conditions and ensuring fair wages in the garment sector, which are vitally important. The government is reviewing the wage structure and addressing legal concerns for workers to prevent further unrest.

- * Reducing logistics costs, which can significantly boost exports. Implementing the National Logistics Policy 2024 aims to lower business costs, enhance competitiveness, and integrate Bangladesh into the global value chain.

- * Curtailing dependency on the garment sector by supporting other industries such as leather, agriculture, and electronics. Inconsistent policies have been barriers to export diversification, and addressing these can open new markets. The government is putting efforts into reducing inconsistency.

- * While the government has set an ambitious export target of \$110 billion by 2027, economists and business leaders are pessimistic about its feasibility due to persisting challenges. Setting achievable goals can help in better planning and execution. The interim government is reassessing previously set export targets to establish more realistic and achievable goals, considering recent data discrepancies and global economic trends.

- * Investing in infrastructure, such as ports and transportation networks, which can

improve efficiency and reduce costs, making Bangladeshi exports more competitive. The National Logistics Policy 2024 also emphasises infrastructure development.

- * Implementing the Export Policy 2024-27, which would help increase annual export earnings to \$110 billion by 2027, focusing on product diversification, infrastructure development, and market expansion.

- * Strengthening diplomatic and trade ties, particularly with key partners like the US and the EU. The interim government is engaging in dialogues to foster these relationships, aiming to improve market access and trade conditions.

- * Stabilising the labour market, especially in the garment sector. The government is working to resolve disputes and improve working conditions to ensure uninterrupted production and maintain buyer confidence.

- * Efforts are underway to rectify data collection processes to provide accurate export statistics, which are essential for informed policymaking and maintaining credibility.

- * Promoting the inclusion of new products in the export basket, such as handicrafts, vegetables, and light engineering, to reduce dependency on traditional export sectors and tap into unexplored markets.

- * Developing logistics, ports, and transportation networks, which is important to enhance export efficiency and reduce costs, thereby increasing competitiveness in the global market.

Lastly, a stable political environment is essential to attract foreign investment and reassure international buyers of Bangladesh's reliability as a global trading partner.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 20, 2025

ACC to send graft info on Putul to foreign ministry

Staff Correspondent

The Anti-Corruption Commission will send graft information about Saima Wazed Putul, daughter of ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina, to the foreign ministry today.

According to sources at the ACC, the graft watchdog is mulling to send the information

to the World Health Organization through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Putul serves as the regional director of the WHO. Based on the information sent by the ACC regarding the corruption case, the ministry might write to the WHO to take action against her, said sources.

In October last year, the foreign ministry had informed the WHO of its reluctance to work with Putul. Subsequently, the ACC filed a case against Putul, her mother, and other family members, alleging fraud and forgery to obtain a plot in Purbachal. Now, the ministry may request action based on the details of that case provided by the ACC.

In November 2023, Putul was elected regional director of the WHO for the South-East Asia Region.

She was appointed for a five-year term during the WHO regional conference held in New Delhi, India.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 23, 2025

Garment exports to EU rose 3% in Jan-Nov

Star Business Report

Bangladesh's garment exports to the European Union grew by 2.99 percent year-on-year to \$18.15 billion in the January-November period of 2024.

In terms of volume, apparel shipments to the EU increased by 8.22 percent.

However, the unit price of garments experienced a 4.83 percent year-on-year decline during the 11-month period, offsetting the gains and highlighting the challenges of maintaining profitability amid a downward price trend.

Overall EU imports, amounting to \$85.36 billion during this period, saw a modest 0.86 percent rise in value but a substantial 8.04 percent increase in volume, according to data from Eurostat.

In this context, Bangladesh outpaced the EU's overall import growth.

Meanwhile, Eurostat data revealed a significant 6.65 percent drop in the average unit prices of garments shipped to the EU.

This downward price pressure significantly impacted major sourcing countries, including Bangladesh.

One key competitor, Cambodia, outshone Bangladesh by posting an exceptional 20.66 percent growth in exports to the EU, although the total volume remained lower at \$3.88 billion.

In the 11 months to November last year, China's garment exports to the EU rose by 1.85 percent to \$24.04 billion, while India's exports increased by 1.05 percent to \$4.23 billion.

Pakistan's shipments rose by 11.69 percent to \$3.47 billion, and Vietnam's exports grew by 3.46 percent to \$3.94 billion, demonstrating stronger performance.

Turkey and Indonesia, on the other hand, experienced declines in export value, underscoring the intense competition in the sector.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 18, 2025

Rice imports to hit seven-year high

Baharam Khan, Sukanta Halder

The interim government is set to import seven lakh tonnes of rice, the highest in the last seven fiscal years, as it looks to shore up its depleting food grain stock and ease the cost of living crisis for the low- and fixed-income people battered by the prolonged high inflation.

"The cost of living has increased due to various reasons in the last few years, and in the meantime, due to natural disasters, the price of rice in the market is high," Food Adviser Ali Imam Majumder told The Daily Star.

Inflation averaged 10.87 percent in the first half of fiscal 2024-25, shows data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

"Therefore, this decision has been taken to relieve people from suffering to some extent," he said, adding that the rice would be imported from several countries this fiscal year.

It was initially estimated that about 10 lakh tonnes of rice would need to be imported. Later, it was revised down to seven lakh tonnes, The Daily Star has learnt from food ministry officials involved with the proceedings.

Currently, the process of importing 5.50 lakh tonnes of rice is underway. Of this, 3 lakh

tonnes will be imported through an open tender process.

The government has finalised plans to import 100,000 tonnes of rice from Myanmar on a government-to-government arrangement.

The first consignment of 27,000 tonnes has already reached the country, and another shipment will arrive later this month, Majumder said.

From Pakistan, 50,000 tonnes of rice will be imported through the G2G method.

A decision has also been made to import 1 lakh tonnes of rice from Vietnam via the G2G method, with necessary arrangements nearing completion.

The private sector businesspeople have shown interest in importing rice due to the zero tariff on rice imports for the private sector, Majumder said.

The move comes at a time when the price of fine rice has risen by 4.05 percent in the past month, medium-grain rice by 3.31 percent and coarse rice by 6.67 percent.

And in the past year, the price of fine rice has increased by 12.41 percent, medium-grain rice by 15.74 percent and coarse rice by 9.80 percent.

Fine rice is selling for Tk 70 to Tk 84 per kg, coarse rice for Tk 54-58 per kg, and medium-grain rice for Tk 60-65 per kg, according to data from the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh.

Two consecutive floods in August and October last year damaged about three lakh hectares of cropland, according to a US Department of Agriculture report published in the third week of December.

Rice production may fall in the current marketing year of 2024-25, which began in May last year, due to the reduction in the acreage of Aman season paddy, the report added.

Currently, there is a satisfactory stock of rice in the country and necessary measures have been taken to prevent any future shortages, Majumder said.

On January 12, the public stock of food grains stood at 12.25 lakh tonnes, including 8.2 lakh tonnes of rice, down 25 percent year-on-year.

The government's initiative to import rice, both at the government and private levels, is a positive step towards bringing down the rice prices and alleviating people's suffering, said Mohammad Jahangir Alam, a professor in the Department of Agribusiness and Marketing at Bangladesh Agricultural University.

However, he emphasized the need for a comprehensive analysis to determine whether the price hike is solely due to a supply shortage or if there are other factors.

"Because, the upward trend in rice prices appears to be beyond control."

Alam also highlighted the importance of considering transportation costs when importing rice.

"If rice is sourced from distant countries, transportation costs will rise, which could lead to higher prices for consumers. Therefore, priority should be given to importing from countries that minimise transportation expenses."

He cautioned that excessive imports beyond the country's demand could adversely affect local farmers, urging the government to carefully balance imports with domestic production.

"The impact on farmers should not be overlooked," he added.

Corruption

Daily Observer, Dhaka, January 16, 2025

ACC to probe corruption allegations against Putul, Tarique Siddiqui, Tulip

Ex-PM's Principal Secy Tofazzel Hossain also under scanner

Staff Correspondent

The Anti Corruption Commission (ACC) has been taken decision to investigate former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's daughter Saima Wazed Putul, her military adviser Tarique Siddique, nephew Tulip Siddiq, as well as Tarique's wife and daughter for corruption by abusing power. ACC's Director General Md Akhter Hossain confirmed the matter to journalists at the ACC office on Wednesday. He said Saima Wazed Putul was appointed as the Regional Director of the World Health Organization through various corruptions.

There are allegations that ex-PM Sheikh Hasina used her power unethically to appoint her daughter Saima Wazed Putul as the Regional Director of WHO despite her lack of qualifications to be the Regional Director for South-East Asia. On the other hand, Tarique Siddique, his wife Shahin Siddique, daughter Bushra Siddique, niece Tulip Siddique and Azmina Siddique have been accused of corruption, abuse of power, embezzlement of government land, money laundering and acquiring illegal assets in the country and abroad in anonymous names, he added. The ACC has decided to investigate the allegations after verifying the initial information, he further said. Besides that, the ACC has decided to investigate against ex-PM's Principal Secretary Md Tofazzel Hossain Miah doing various forms of corruption like amassing undeclared assets worth crores of taka, bribery, money laundering abroad abusing his power, according to the ACC.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 16, 2025

ACC Reform: Structural, legal overhaul stressed

Staff Correspondent

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) Reform Commission yesterday proposed significant changes to the ACC's structure and operations, while also recommending some constitutional amendments to stop power abuse by the government of the day.

The reform commission also wants elimination of provisions for whitening black money.

Led by Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh, the commission recommended the enactment of several laws and amendments to some existing ones.

In all, it presented a set of 47 recommendations to strengthen the ACC.

The reform commission proposed that the ACC be recognised as a constitutional institution, by upgrading its current status of a statutory body. Also, in the proposal is establishment of an ombudsman, as already mandated by the constitution, to implement a national anti-corruption strategy.

The commission submitted the report to Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus at his office yesterday.

Three other reform commissions on constitution, Election Commission, and police also submitted their reports to the chief adviser.

"After the fall of the kleptocratic government in the glorious July '24 uprising, Bangladesh is now at a critical juncture of a new journey. As part of state reform in shaping this new journey, there is no alternative to an independent, impartial, and effective Anti-Corruption Commission," reads the synopsis of the ACC reform commission's report.

The report comes amid allegations of corruption and money laundering by some people affiliated with the previous Awami League government.

Since the ouster of Sheikh Hasina on August 5, 2024, in a popular uprising, dozens of corruption cases have been filed against the four-time PM herself, some of her family members, cabinet colleagues and party leaders.

The issue of ACC's failure to prevent corruption over the years also came to the fore, prompting the interim government to form a reform commission to come up with recommendations to strengthen the ACC.

"An institution like the Anti-Corruption Commission alone cannot control corruption in any country, including Bangladesh. An appropriate state and social environment are needed to make a nation free of corruption," Iftekharuzzaman said while handing the report to the chief adviser.

Later at a press conference at the TIB office in the afternoon, he said they made the 47 recommendations in three different categories.

"For implementation, short-term (6 months), medium-term (18 months), and long-term (48 months) roadmaps have been proposed. We believe that it is possible to implement these recommendations within the given timeframe," he said.

The reform commission recommended amending article 20 (2) of the constitution to ban misuse of constitutional and legal

authority for personal interest, asking the authorities to add this sentence in the constitution: "The state will create a situation where, as a general rule, no individual can misuse constitutional and legal powers for personal interests."

It also proposed drafting a national anti-corruption strategy replacing the existing National Integrity Strategy, specifying responsibilities and duties of different government and non-government organisations in combating corruption.

Additionally, it recommended formulating a law to prevent conflicts of interest to stop the misuse of state and legal powers.

The commission also wants some changes in the electoral code to bring transparency in political activities and polls expenditure. It called for making submission of financial statements by candidates and their family members mandatory and engaging the National Board of Revenue and the ACC to check those.

On ACC formation, it recommended increasing the number of ACC commissioners to five from the existing three, with at least one female commissioner.

The term of the commissioners has been proposed four years, instead of the current five.

A seven-member permanent search and review committee has been proposed to pick the commissioners and periodically review the ACC activities.

The search committee will be formed with the senior most judge of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court (except the chief justice) and the senior most High Court judge nominated by the chief justice, Comptroller and Auditor General of Bangladesh, chairman of Bangladesh Public Service Commission, two representatives nominated by the leader of the parliament and opposition leader respectively, and civil society member having experience in anti-graft and government activities.

The existing law stipulates a five-member committee comprised of two judges of the Appellate Division and High Court Division nominated by the chief justice, CAG, PSC

chairman and the immediate past cabinet secretary.

As for the qualification of the commissioners, it said apart from the candidates from the background of law, education, administration, judiciary, law enforcement agencies, people having at least 15 years' experience in financial institution, audit, governance or anti-corruption activities will be eligible for the post. As per the existing law, candidates must have 20 years of experience.

The ACC will have to submit a report to the seven-member search and review committee every six months and the committee will hold a public hearing on the report and give their evaluation as a measure to monitor their activities, the reform commission report says. In a shift from the existing practice, the reform commission proposed filing a case first and then begin investigation if the allegations fall under its jurisdiction.

The commission also recommended amending the section 20 of the ACC act to allow police to take over the matter when appropriate.

It also wants repeal of 32(Ka) of the ACC act – a provision that bars the ACC from filing cases against judges and public servants without prior approval from relevant authorities.

It said the section 32(Ka) which was added to the law in 2013 through an amendment to the act is "discriminatory" and "goes against the independence of ACC". Besides, the High Court already declared the section unconstitutional and ordered repealing it.

The reform commission suggested establishing special judges' court in every district where the ACC has its offices for quick disposal of the cases. Currently, the ACC has offices in 36 districts.

It proposed increasing the number of director general from eight to 12 immediately.

To appoint ACC secretary, the commission recommended a competitive and open process through advertisement.

It also suggested a separate pay scale for the ACC. The salary of ACC's officers and staff would be at least twice the national pay scale.

The commission also recommended abolishing section 54(2) of ACC Karmachari

Chakuri Bidhimala, saying that the employees cannot work independently because of the section. Under the section, the ACC can terminate an employee without issuing any show cause notice.

Speaking at the press briefing, Iftekharuzzaman said, "We are hopeful that our recommendations will be implemented."

Daily Observer, Dhaka, January 17, 2025

ACC sues ex-rail minister Zillul, MP Gulandaz, their family members over graft
Staff Correspondent

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has filed separate cases against former railway minister Md Zillul Hakim, former Member of Parliament (MP) for Mymensingh-10 constituency Fahmi Gulandaz Babel and their family member over graft. The case has been lodged under the Prevention of Corruption Act and the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, ACC Director General Akhtar Hossain confirmed the matter on Thursday. He said that ex-railway minister Zillul, his wife Sayeeda Hakim, and their son Ashiq Mahmood Mitul on charges of acquiring illegal assets and conducting suspicious transactions through their bank accounts. The ACC case documents said Zillul Hakim amassed illegal wealth of Tk 24.29 crore beyond known sources of income, while his wife Sayeeda holds illegal wealth worth Tk 4.27 crore, and his son Ashiq Mahmood holds Tk 2.62 crore. Moreover, the ACC has details of irregular and suspicious deposit transactions amounting to Tk 145.44 crore across 19 bank accounts associated with Zillul Hakim and several companies under his ownership. In addition, deposits totalling Tk 12.92 crore were discovered in six bank accounts belonging to his wife, while Tk 7.76 crore was found in a single bank account owned by his son.

These transactions involved illegal transfer and conversion of funds, constituting punishable offences, said Akhtar Hossain. However, he did not specify when these transactions took place. Meanwhile, the ACC has been filed a separate

case against former MP Fahmi Gulandaz Babel, for illegally acquiring Tk 20.11 crore, along with his wife, Sharmin Gulandaz, for possessing Tk1.02 crore in unexplained assets.

The ACC has also identified Tk 37.36 crore and US\$86,079 deposited in 16 bank accounts linked to Fahmi, inconsistent with his known sources of income. Besides, Tk2.27 crore was found deposited in three bank accounts belonging to Sharmin Gulandaz.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 27, 2025

ACC looking into whether Putul can be brought back to Bangladesh

Star Digital Report

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) is assessing whether Saima Wazed Putul, daughter of ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, can be brought back to Bangladesh.

ACC Director General Akhtar Hossain disclosed the information to journalists during a press briefing today.

"The ACC investigation team is examining whether Saima Wazed Putul can be brought back to the country," he said.

Saima Wazed Putul currently serves as the Regional Director for South-East Asia at the World Health Organization (WHO).

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 27, 2025

ACC sues ex-minister Faridul, wife over acquiring illegal wealth

Star Digital Report

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) filed two separate cases against former religious affairs minister Faridul Haque Khan and his wife Afroza Haque on charges of acquiring illegal assets worth Tk 4.07 crore.

The cases were filed at the ACC's integrated district office in Dhaka-1, ACC Director General (Prevention) Md Akhtar Hossain confirmed today.

Faridul was accused of acquiring illegal wealth worth Tk 3.05 crore.

Additionally, Afroza was accused of acquiring illegal wealth worth Tk 1.02 crore.

The charges against them include violations of Section 27(1) of the ACC Act 2004, and Section 5(2) of the Prevention of Corruption Act 1947.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 27, 2025

ACC probes 'irregularities' in EVM procurement

Star Digital Report

The Anti-Corruption Commission has launched an investigation into alleged irregularities in the procurement of Electronic Voting Machines by the Election Commission.

As part of the probe, a three-member ACC investigation team conducted an operation at the EC office today, following allegations of substandard machines being purchased at inflated prices.

The ACC has requested documents from the EC to aid the inquiry.

Speaking to journalists after the operation, ACC Assistant Director Nur Alam Siddiqui said, "In 2018, the EC procured 150,000 EVMs, of which 1,500 were found to be non-functional. During today's inspection, three machines stored at the EC office were examined. One was found defective, while the others were operational."

The EC currently stores 618 EVMs at its headquarters, 86,000 at the Bangladesh Machine Tools Factory (BMTF), and 62,000 across regional offices.

The ACC team has collected records related to the procurement and requested further documentation. "We will submit our report once all records are reviewed. If necessary, we will involve IT experts to investigate the allegations thoroughly," Nur Alam added.

This operation came after the anti-graft body decided to form a five-member team to probe the roles of former prime minister Sheikh Hasina, chiefs of police and Rab, returning officers, and others in the December 30, 2018, national polls.

Opposition parties accused authorities of ballot-box stuffing the night before election day, with reports of between 30 and 60 percent of votes being cast in advance.

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) later found evidence of ballot-stamping at multiple centres during a study conducted in 33 out of 50 surveyed constituencies.

Additionally, data compiled by Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujan) revealed a 100

percent voter turnout in 213 polling stations and a turnout between 90 and 99 percent in 7,689 centres.

Daily Observer, Dhaka, January 28, 2025

Embezzling Tk 812cr

ACC filed 4 cases against Tarique Siddique among 19

Staff Correspondent

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has filed four cases against 19 people on charges of embezzling Tk 812 crores from the development projects of three airports in the country.

Allegations have been made against 19 officials, including former Prime Minister's Military Adviser Tarique Ahmed Siddique, former Senior Secretary of the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism Mohibul Haque, and former Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) Chairman M Mofidur Rahman.

ACC Director General (Prevention) Md Akhter Hossain confirmed the cases on Monday. He stated that the accused, in collusion with each other, committed an offence punishable under

Sections 120/161/163/164/409/420/109 of the Penal Code, 1860, as well as Section 5(2) of the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1947, by embezzling Tk 812 crores from four projects. He further mentioned that the project titled "Installation of RADAR with CNS-ATM (Communication, Navigation and Surveillance-Air Traffic Management)" at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport was implemented by violating the existing provisions of the procurement process and increasing the project cost. Additionally, there are allegations of embezzling about Tk 200 crores for various reasons, including not following the rules and awarding contracts to preferred contractors. Therefore, a case has been filed against 10 people, including ex-advisor Tarique Ahmed Siddique, ex-Secretary Mohibul, and ex-CAAB Chairman Mofidur, he added. Akhter Hossain said that the work order for the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport Expansion (Third Terminal) project was given to a company called Aviation Dhaka

Consortium (ADC). Information was found that the alleged contractor, Arenas International Ltd., was involved in the work as a subcontractor. During the initial investigation, it was found that the project cost, initially estimated at Tk 13,000 crores, was increased to Tk 21,000 crores, and work orders were given in violation of the prevailing rules and regulations. It is alleged that Tarique Ahmed Siddique, Mohibul, Mofidur, and other related persons embezzled and looted about Tk 250 crores from this project in collusion. A case has been filed against 10 people in this incident, he said.

On the other hand, there have been various irregularities, including corrupt practices, in the expansion of Osmani International Airport, Sylhet. It has been seen that as the local agent of a Chinese company, an advance bill of Tk 212 crores was received for the construction of a new terminal at Osmani International Airport worth about Tk 2000 crores. The work was stopped, and the money was embezzled, with the agent currently in hiding. In this incident, a case has been filed against 11 people, including Tarek Siddiqui, Mohibul, and Mofidur, said the ACC Director General.

He also mentioned that there have been irregularities and corruption worth about Tk 1500 crores in the terminal construction work and runway construction project at Cox's Bazar Airport. Tarique Ahmed Siddique, Mohibul, Mofidur, and many others related to the project helped in awarding contracts to the company. There have also been various irregularities and corruption. It is alleged that they embezzled about Tk 150 crores from the project in collusion with each other. Therefore, a case has been filed against 12 people, including the aforementioned individuals, he added. Like the heavyweight leaders of the Awami League government that was ousted in the face of the movement, Tarique Ahmed Siddique has also fled. No information has been found about his whereabouts yet. Various allegations of crimes have been made against this person in the last 15 years.

The allegations have come to light since the fall of the Awami League. Concerned individuals have commented that the allegations made earlier never received any importance from the government.

Daily Observer, Dhaka, January 28, 2025

Corruption Cases

Ex-NBR official Matiur to be quizzed at jail gate

Court Correspondent The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has been given permission to interrogate former National Board of Revenue (NBR) member Matiur Rahman for 3 days at jail gate. Dhaka Metropolitan Senior Special Judge Zakir Hossain Ghalib on Monday granted the permission upon a remand prayer filed by the ACC investigators. The court also showed Matiur arrested in another graft case. He was brought to the court from jail on the day for a hearing on the ACC's seven days remand prayer submitted on January 21, 2025. The lawyers on behalf of the ACC presented the grounds for taking him on remand. The lawyers for the accused held a hearing seeking cancellation of the remand and bail. The court passed the order after hearing both sides.

On January 6, 2025, the ACC filed 3 cases against Matiur Rahman and his family members. Matiur Rahman was made an accused in each case. Detectives arrested Matiur and his wife Laila Kaniz from the capital's Bashundhara residential area in the early hours of January 14.

On that day, the court granted him a 3-day remand in a case filed under the Arms Act. After the remand, the court ordered him to be sent to jail on January 18, 2025. On January 6, the ACC filed three separate cases against Matiur and his family members. Matiur came to limelight after his son posted on social media a photo of a sacrificial goat worth Tk 15 lakh. The photo went viral, raising questions about the sources of his wealth.

The ACC later launched an inquiry into the sources of his wealth and filed two graft cases

against him on charges of amassing wealth illegally on December 15, 2024.

Daily Observer, Dhaka, January 28, 2025
Amassing Illegal Wealth

ACC sues former religious minister, his wife
Staff Correspondent

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has filed two separate cases against former religious affairs minister Faridul Haque Khan and his wife Afroza Haque over amassing illegal wealth worth Tk 4.07 crore. ACC Director General (Prevention) Md Akhtar Hossain confirmed the matter to the reporters at its Headquarters in Dhaka's Segunbagicha on Sunday. He said that the cases were filed at the ACC's integrated district office in Dhaka-1 for the violations of Section 27(1) of the ACC Act 2004, and Section 5(2) of the Prevention of Corruption Act 1947.

According to case documents, Faridul is accused of acquiring illegal wealth worth Tk 3.05 crore and his wife Afroza is accused of acquiring illegal wealth worth Tk 1.02 crore beyond their known sources of income.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, Dhaka, January 28, 2025

Form task force to combat graft within ACC

Dipan

Nandy

The Anti-Corruption Commission Reform Commission has proposed forming an independent internal disciplinary division to address corruption within the ACC. It has also called for the creation of a high-powered task force to identify and take swift action against corrupt ACC staff.

The recommendations were outlined in the Commission's report, submitted last Wednesday by its head, Dr Iftekharuzzaman, to the chief adviser.

The report urged the ACC to urgently establish a high-powered task force with government support, comprising members from various investigative and intelligence agencies.

This task force would identify corrupt officials and employees, ensuring their dismissal through departmental action and prosecution under criminal law.

Additionally, the commission recommended dissolving the ACC's internal anti-corruption committee and replacing it with an independent internal disciplinary division. This division would include ACC personnel and staff appointed on deputation from defence, intelligence, and law enforcement agencies.

The proposed division would be tasked with ensuring compliance with the code of conduct for ACC officials and employees. It would also carry out covert inquiries into corruption, counter-intelligence measures, and investigations into violations of internal discipline. Furthermore, the division would review asset declarations under the Anti-Corruption Commission (Employees) Service Rules, 2008, and impose punitive measures as necessary.

According to ACC data, 238 officials and staff members have been penalised over the past 16 years for offences including extortion, fraud, bribery, and corruption. Disciplinary actions ranged from dismissals and forced retirements to demotions and salary reductions.

In the past year alone, nine officials were penalised, including terminations, while departmental investigations are ongoing against 13 officials. An additional 25 employees are under scrutiny by the ACC's internal anti-corruption committee.

Between 2008 and 2013, 95 employees faced disciplinary action, with 18 dismissed. In 2008 alone, 32 employees were penalised, including four dismissals. However, allegations of corruption continue to surface, though not all have been substantiated.

ACC Director General (Prevention) Akhtar Hossain said addressing internal allegations is an ongoing process.

"A three-member committee, led by the ACC chairman, verifies complaints and takes appropriate action. Depending on the severity, both departmental and criminal cases are initiated for serving employees, while criminal actions are pursued against retired staff," he said.

Hossain declined to comment on the reform commission's report.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 30, 2025
ACC seeks info on 13 Purbachal plots from Rajuk

Staff Correspondent

The ACC Commission has sent a letter to Rajuk seeking information on plots allocated to 13 individuals, including former lawmaker Sheikh Helal Uddin, and former Jubo League chairman Fazle Shams Parash, both cousins of ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina.

The list includes: former civil aviation and tourism minister Rashed Khan Menon; former lawmakers Sadek Khan (Dhaka-13), Abdur Rouf (Kushtia-4), MM Shahin (Moulvibazar-2), Aslam Hossain Soudagar (Kurigram-1), and actress Suborna Mustafa (reserved parliamentary seat for women); Supreme Court judges Naima Haider and Jafar Ahmed; former SC judge MA Shahidul Haque; and journalists Zillur Rahman (Channel i) and Shakil Ahmed (71 Television).

The letter, signed by ACC Deputy Director Md Salahuddin was sent on January 19. The letter has already been received, but senior officials have declined to comment on it, said Rajuk sources.

An ongoing investigation is examining allegations against Hasina of abusing power and engaging in irregularities and corruption, in collusion with senior Rajuk officials, to allocate six plots of 10 kathas each in the Purbachal New Town Project to herself and other family members. The ACC has filed six cases in this connection.

As part of this ongoing probe, the ACC has requested Rajuk to provide all relevant documents related to any allocation of plots or flats under any of Rajuk's completed or ongoing projects to these 13 individuals.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 30, 2025
ACC seeks info on public servants with dual citizenship

Baharam Khan

The Anti-Corruption Commission is seeking information about government officials and staffers, judges and employees of courts, and elected public representatives who have dual citizenship in violation of service rules. It sought the same information about commissioned officers in the armed forces.

The ACC in a letter on January 12 asked senior secretaries and secretaries of all ministries to provide details of officials and employees of government, autonomous, and semi-autonomous institutions, who have citizenship of another country.

The letter, signed by Md Mozammel Haque, director general (money laundering) of the ACC, also asked for information about any dependents, of officials and employees, with dual citizenship.

According to section 40 (1) of the Government Service Act, 2018, no government employee is allowed to be a citizen of another country. If a government employee violates this rule, the government may dismiss them after providing a reasonable opportunity to explain. In such cases, a departmental probe is not required.

The ACC's move comes in the wake of complaints that some government employees are involved in money laundering.

An ACC official said allegations of high-ranking officials laundering money and having dual citizenship started surfacing after the fall of the Hasina regime.

ACC probes also found evidence in this regard, said the official preferring anonymity as he was not authorised to speak to the media.

"In many cases, even lower-level employees such as drivers and office assistants have been accused of laundering money. To ensure that no sector remains exempted, letters have been sent requesting information on all government employees, public representatives, judges, and commissioned officers in the armed forces who obtained the citizenship of another country," said the official.

Asked, another official said judges of any division of the Supreme Court is covered by the letter.

In the letter, the ACC said a number of unscrupulous officials and employees are "concealing information and obtaining passports from foreign countries...".

To cover up their misdeeds and evade punishment, these officials are residing in

foreign countries using the passports of those countries, it said.

The letter said, "With multiple passports, these officials are transferring abroad wealth acquired through corruption and are enjoying the wealth there. The ACC's investigation has found such evidence."

The commission said such activities not only promote corruption in the country but also harm the economy.

After acquiring foreign citizenship, the officials appear reluctant in discharging their duties, it added.

The ACC said it issued the letter empowered by section 2 of the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1947, section 110 of the Bank Companies Act, 1991, and section 21 of the Penal Code.

It said all commissioned officers in the armed forces, court employees and judges, government employees receiving salaries from state revenue, officials and employees of autonomous, semi-autonomous, and state-owned companies, and elected public representatives at various levels are public servants.

The commission urged the authorities to be mindful of the dual citizenship issue while appointing people to jobs.

Asked whether ministry employees would voluntarily disclose their dual citizenship status, a secretary, speaking anonymously, told The Daily Star that such information is rarely provided willingly.

However, the ministry will seek information from all employees and forward the collected data to the ACC, he said.

Badiur Rahman, former chairman of the National Board of Revenue (NBR), told The Daily Star that taking strict action against government employees with dual citizenship is a good move.

"However, the approach of the government raises doubts. Corrupt officials will not admit to wrongdoings. The government should collect information and dismiss these corrupt individuals from service. Sending letters in this manner will only alert them instead," said Badiur, also a former secretary.

According to the Statistics of Government Servants-2023, the number of posts in the

revenue sector is 19,16,519. At least 14,43,518 officials and employees are currently in service.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 30, 2025

Evaly's Rassel, wife jailed for two years over embezzlement

Staff Correspondent

A Dhaka court yesterday sentenced Evaly's founding chief executive officer Mohammad Rassel, and his wife Shamima Nasrin, former chairperson of the e-commerce platform, to two years' imprisonment in a case filed over the embezzlement of Tk 14.10 lakh from a customer.

Dhaka Metropolitan Magistrate Partha Bhadra pronounced the verdict in their absence in the courtroom.

He also fined them Tk 2,000, in default of which they will have to serve two more months in jail.

The punishment will be effective from the day of their arrest or surrender, said the magistrate in his judgment.

Earlier, the prosecution sought the highest punishment mentioned in the existing law for the couple.

During the trial, the court recorded statements of two prosecution witnesses, including the complainant of the case.

On February 4 last year, Taufiq Mahmud, a customer, filed a case against the couple for misappropriating Tk 14.10 lakh from him.

According to the case statement, Evaly sold various products on different media using "eye-catching advertisements".

Responding to one of the ads, Taufiq ordered a motorbike on March 20, 2021 and paid Tk 2,45,000 for it. On April 3, he ordered two more motorbikes and paid Tk 5,90,000 for those. However, the authorities failed to deliver the three bikes within the stipulated time of 45 days.

Taufiq then contacted Evaly's Dhanmondi office and the authorities concerned issued two cheques as reimbursement. However, the bank requested not to deposit the cheques on the specified date as there was "not enough money".

As none of his money was returned, he sent a legal notice to Evaly on January 28 asking it to

return his money within 15 days. That too was not complied with.

On June 2 last year, a Chattogram court sentenced the founding CEO Rassel and former chairperson Shamima to one year in jail in a cheque bounce case.

On December 19 last year, Rassel was sentenced to two years in jail and Shamima sentenced to one in a fraud case.

On September 16, 2021, the couple was arrested from their Mohammadpur residence in the capital in a case filed over fraud and embezzlement.

Shamima was released on bail in April 2022, and Rassel on December 19, 2022.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 31, 2025

Rajuk asks ACC to review naming its officials in Purbachal plot allocation case

Star Digital Report

The Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (RAJUK) chairman has sent a letter to the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), requesting a review of the inclusion of officials from Rajuk and the Ministry of Housing and Public Works (MHPW) in the list of accused in cases related to the allocation of plots in the name of the ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina and five members of her family.

The letter, signed by Rajuk Chairman Major General Md Siddiquir Rahman Sarkar (retd), has already reached the ACC, confirmed both sides. It calls for a reconsideration of the inclusion of officials from the MHPW and Rajuk in ACC's cases filed over the alleged misuse of power by Sheikh Hasina and her family members in allocating plots under the Purbachal New Town Project.

According to the letter, based on various correspondences from the Prime Minister's Office and the MHPW, six plots—each measuring 10 kathas—were allotted to Sheikh Hasina, Sajeeb Wazed Joy, Saima Wazed Putul, Sheikh Rehana, Azmina Siddiq, and Radwan Mujib Siddiq under Rajuk's land allocation policy in the Purbachal New Town Project.

Highlighting that the plots were allocated in accordance with Rajuk's land allocation policies, where the the government has the authority to allocate plots in specific cases,

the Rajuk Chairman mentioned in the letter that the officials merely followed government directives.

Earlier, on December 26, 2024, the ACC initiated an investigation into allegations of irregularities and corruption in the allocation of six plots in the Purbachal New Town Project in the names of Hasina and five members of her family.

The ACC filed six separate cases over alleged misuse of power concerning these plots earlier this month. In addition to these six individuals, 14 officials from Rajuk and the MHPW have also been named as accused in the cases.

Climate Change

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 23, 2025

Global action key to tackle climate change

UNB, Dhaka

Environment Adviser Syeda Rizwana Hasan has called for unified global action to confront the challenges of climate change.

She spoke about the importance of minimising environmental harm while striving to meet mitigation targets during a capacity building workshop on Paris Agreement Article 6 Implementation, held at the Department of Environment in Agargaon, yesterday.

"Market-driven solutions have a role, but my humble request is to prepare ourselves for the challenges of climate change. Together, we must work to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Failure to do so will endanger the existence of vulnerable countries like ours. Let the urgency of this crisis inspire us to achieve our future aspirations," Rizwana said.

"Mitigating through trading comes with a price, but it also offers opportunities to improve governance standards and operational efficiency. For instance, Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) projects in the energy sector can address gas emissions and improve efficiency across industries," she added.

"With modest investment, we can scale up initiatives that save lives by targeting air quality improvements. The government is focusing on investments that prioritise saving

lives over creating extravagant infrastructure," she also said.

"The demand for climate justice must centre on mitigation. While countries like Bangladesh have had voluntary obligations historically, the Paris Agreement now extends this framework globally. Mechanisms like Article 6 and Article 6.4 pose challenges in ensuring fair responsibility sharing, but they also offer opportunities for carbon trading and collaboration," Rizwana said.

Environment Secretary Farhina Ahmed addressed the event as a special guest, while the DoE director general presided over the workshop.

The Daily Star, Dhaka, January 24, 2025

Climate change and fire risks: Lessons from Southern California for Bangladesh

Md Ayatullah Khan

Addressing the intricate relationship between fire incidents and climate change is increasingly crucial, particularly in vulnerable regions like Bangladesh, which faces escalating threats from climate-related events. The alarming rise in global temperatures has been directly linked to a surge in the frequency and intensity of wildfires, illustrating a clear connection between climate instability and fire risks. For instance, the devastating wildfires that swept through Southern California in 2025 serve as a stark reminder of how prolonged drought, extreme heat, and strong winds can combine to create catastrophic fire conditions. These events not only result in the significant destruction of homes and ecosystems but also highlight the urgent need for countries like Bangladesh to understand and prepare for similar outcomes.

As climate change continues to unravel, the impacts become more pronounced, particularly through altered weather patterns that exacerbate fire risks. Rising temperatures lead to prolonged dry spells, which, in turn, dry out vegetation and increase flammability, creating an environment conducive to fire outbreaks. The 2025 Southern California wildfires exemplified how erratic precipitation, coupled with extreme heat, can generate

conditions ripe for wildfires, resulting in extensive property and wildlife losses. These patterns are not unique to California; they are increasingly relevant to Bangladesh, where altered rainfall and rising temperatures threaten local ecosystems and agricultural productivity, both of which are vital for food security and economic stability. Other factors, such as rapid urbanisation, deforestation, and unsustainable agricultural practices, could exacerbate this growing threat.

The catastrophic experiences from Southern California serve as a cautionary tale; communities that lacked preparedness faced devastating losses. Similarly, many rural communities in Bangladesh are ill-equipped to handle fire outbreaks, hindered by socio-economic vulnerabilities and limited resources. Effective fire management is further complicated by numerous challenges that Bangladesh faces, including limited resources and inadequate infrastructure. The absence of comprehensive fire management policies and trained personnel severely hampers timely responses to fire outbreaks. The 2025 wildfires in Southern California underscored the importance of having well-trained firefighting teams and readily available resources for rapid response. In contrast, Bangladesh suffers from a general lack of awareness regarding fire risks and prevention strategies, leaving communities vulnerable and emphasising an urgent need for education and capacity-building initiatives.

To enhance resilience against fire risks in the context of climate change, Bangladesh must adopt integrated disaster management strategies that encompass community engagement and education programmes aimed at raising awareness about fire prevention and response. The US has successfully implemented community-based programmes that encourage local residents to become active participants in fire prevention efforts; such initiatives could serve as valuable models for Bangladesh. Additionally, promoting sustainable land-use practices, such as agroforestry and controlled burning, can mitigate fire risks while simultaneously

supporting local livelihoods. Governance plays a crucial role in addressing the intertwined challenges of climate change and fire management in Bangladesh.

The wildfires in Southern California demonstrated the necessity of having clear policies and emergency response plans that can be activated during fire outbreaks. Bangladesh must strengthen its policies related to climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction, ensuring these policies are comprehensive and responsive to local needs. Encouraging stakeholder participation at all levels of governance can lead to more effective fire management strategies. Moreover, international collaboration is pivotal in enhancing fire management strategies in Bangladesh. Engaging with global organisations and neighbouring countries can facilitate the exchange of knowledge, resources, and best practices in fire prevention and response. Several developed global countries often collaborate with their international partners for wildfire management, sharing technology and strategies that have proven effective; Bangladesh could greatly benefit from similar partnerships. These collaborations would strengthen Bangladesh's capacity to manage fire incidents effectively and contribute to a more resilient future in the face of climate change.

The urgency of addressing fire risks in the context of climate change in Bangladesh cannot be overstated. As the climate continues to evolve, proactive measures must be prioritised to build resilience within vulnerable communities. The lessons learned from the 2025 Southern California wildfire season, particularly the importance of preparedness, community engagement, and sustainable practices, are critical for Bangladesh. By fostering a culture of preparedness and adaptation, the country can safeguard its environment, protect livelihoods, and enhance the well-being of its people amidst an increasingly uncertain climate landscape.

To reiterate, the interconnected challenges posed by climate change and rising fire risks

present a complex dilemma for Bangladesh. The need for comprehensive and integrative strategies that encompass education, policy reform, community engagement, and international cooperation is paramount. As global temperatures continue to rise, and as we witness the consequences of extreme weather patterns, Bangladesh must take proactive steps to mitigate the potential fire risks by fostering resilience at all levels of society. The experiences from regions like Southern California provide valuable lessons that can aid in shaping effective fire management strategies tailored to the unique circumstances faced by Bangladesh. Through concerted efforts in education, policy enhancement, and collaborative initiatives, the country can better prepare for the challenges posed by climate change while protecting its vulnerable communities and natural resources.

Sri Lanka

Economy/Planning/Reform

Daily News, Colombo, January 20, 2025

WB forecasts Lanka's GDP to expand by 3.5% in 2025

The World Bank's 'Quarter century report card for developing economies' says that GDP in Sri Lanka is forecast to expand by 3.5% in 2025, an upward revision of 1% point since June largely reflecting stronger industrial activity than previously expected.

Growth will moderate to 3.1% in 2026 but continue to be supported by recoveries in remittances and tourism, partly offset by tightening fiscal policy (World Bank 2024x).

Fiscal adjustment efforts are also projected to continue in other countries, including Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Inflation is projected to remain below or within inflation target ranges in most countries, including India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. The reports predict that the Growth in South Asia (SAR) is expected to remain high over the forecast period, averaging 6.2% in 2025-26, with the high level driven by resilient activity in India.

India is projected to maintain the fastest growth rate among the world's largest

economies, at 6.7% in both FY 2025/26 and FY2026/27. The services sector is expected to enjoy sustained expansion, and manufacturing activity is anticipated to strengthen, supported by government initiatives to enhance logistics infrastructure. In the Maldives, growth is projected to average 4.7% per year in 2025-26, primarily driven by resilient tourism, while the planned fiscal adjustment is expected to dampen household income and government spending. In Nepal, growth is projected to strengthen to 5.1% in FY 2024/25 and 5.5% in FY 2025/26, mainly reflecting strengthening private investment alongside the expected easing of monetary policy and resilient hydropower exports to India. In Bhutan, growth is projected to increase to 7.2% in FY2024/25 upgraded by 1.5% points from the June projection primarily because of a stronger-than-expected recovery in tourism and non-hydropower industrial activity. Because of insufficient data, growth forecasts are not produced for Afghanistan but the economy is expected to experience modest expansion, partly supported by moderating inflation.

In Bangladesh, growth is projected to decline to 4.1% in FY2024/25 1.6% points lower than previous projections. In Pakistan, growth is projected to strengthen to 2.8% in FY 2024/25 and 3.2% in FY2025/26 upgraded by 0.5% point in both fiscal years since the June forecasts.

The reports say that the Global growth is expected to hold steady at 2.7% in 2025-26. However, the global economy appears to be settling at a low growth rate that will be insufficient to foster sustained economic development with the possibility of further headwinds from heightened policy uncertainty and adverse trade policy shifts, geopolitical tensions, persistent inflation, and climate-related natural disasters.

Daily News, Colombo, January 28, 2025

Expansion in PMI and GDP growth, signal of economic recovery

The Purchasing Managers Index (PMI) for December 2024 signaled expansions across the Services and Manufacturing sectors,

reaching higher levels than the previous months.

The services sector experienced the most significant expansion, reaching an index value of 71.1, paralleling the record high index of 71.1 reached in July-24 driven by the holiday season and the peak tourism season, a sustained increase in new businesses, and improvements in wholesale and retail trade. The manufacturing sector index rose to 57.2, propelled by increased production in the food and beverage sectors. The Construction sector in November 24 also experienced expansions with an index of 51.4, despite a decline from the previous month, attributable to unfavorable weather conditions. The improvements in PMI are indicative of supply side expansion and a 5.5%YoY growth in GDP in 3Q-2024, signaling robust economic recovery and expansion says First Capital Research in their "Maintaining Momentum:Balancing Growth and Stability pre-policy analysis report. "This strong growth trajectory reduces the immediate necessity for further monetary easing." Meanwhile, the report says that Inflation is expected to remain in the negative territory over the next few months. "Inflation is expected to turn positive over the medium term and align with the target level of 5.00%." With inflation well below the 5 % target, further rate cuts could create excess liquidity, resulting in an overheating of the economy and fueling inflationary pressures through increased borrowing. Additionally, private credit growth is already contributing to economic activity, indicating that the current interest rates are sufficient to sustain recovery. The completion of External Debt Restructuring (EDR) agreements in December 24 marks a milestone in Sri Lanka's economic recovery. With debt repayments starting in December 24 and foreign payments increasing, the demand for dollar purchases will rise due to the dual requirements of debt servicing and expanding vehicle imports.

The Business Confidence Index (BCI) surged by 20 points in December 24 to 174 points, its highest level since Jan-20, marking a 58-month high. This sharp improvement is

attributed to the completion of presidential and parliamentary elections and the External Debt Restructuring (EDR) agreements, which boosted investor sentiment and led to credit rating upgrades.

Fitch upgraded Sri Lanka's rating from 'RD' to 'CCC+' on 20th December-24, and Moody's followed with an upgrade from 'Ca' to 'Caa1' on 26th Dec-24. The BCI now stands 51 points above its historical median and 65 points higher than its 12-month average, gaining 74 points over the past three months. Confidence among business leaders is expected to remain high in the first half of 2025.

Sunday Observer, Colombo, January 26, 2025

Fiscal consolidation and debt sustainability alone won't suffice

Need to go beyond economic recovery to economic growth

Driving export growth, key to poverty reduction

By Lalin Fernandopulle

While IMF's focus with checks and balances on Sri Lanka's debt sustainability and fiscal consolidation is a good policy direction to go beyond economic recovery to economic growth are crucial, said a senior economist.

Emeritus Professor in Economics at the University Colombo and CEPA (Centre for Poverty Analysis)

Executive Director Sirimal Abeyratne said Sri Lanka is still half way down the road in achieving fiscal consolidation and debt sustainability which it is said to reach in 2032.

"It is a good thing that the IMF is assessing Sri Lanka's debt sustainability biannually in keeping with the framework of the agreement but it is up to the policymakers to improve or reverse it," he said stressing the dangers of not achieving debt sustainability.

Achieving a primary account surplus which is a primary concern of fiscal consolidation was possible only a couple of times since Independence, he said.

However, Prof. Abeyratne said what is important is achieving economic growth in

line with export growth which the country has not seen yet.

He said that people should not be carried away or be over-excited about the quarterly growth figures of the economy as there is nothing new in them. They are only an indication that we have returned to our normal growth level after the contraction of the economy in 2022.

Economic growth as in the past cannot be fuelled by non-tradable goods and services such as transportation services, public administration, telecommunication, roads and highways and financial services which cannot generate foreign exchange. Investments for such projects came from borrowing funds which are now reaching maturities at repayment, the Emeritus Professor said that fiscal consolidation and debt sustainability cannot be achieved without economic growth.

"We need to enlarge the denominator; the GDP to achieve debt sustainability. For this we also need to get rid of anti-export biases. Only then that foreign investors will be attracted to export sectors that will boost exports," Prof. Abeyratne said that the country achieved some level in debt sustainability and fiscal consolidation due to the enormous sacrifices people made. Their income may have dropped by around 60 percent during the past three years due to the staggering utility prices and high taxes.

People who suffered should be compensated with good salaries and jobs which the Government cannot provide. That's why economic growth is vital to ease the burden of masses, an aspect the IMF does not talk much about. What it says is Sri Lanka should unlock its growth potential and build foreign exchange which cannot be realised without export growth he said adding that CEPA's role comes in handy to change the poverty landscape of the country.

He said poverty is related to economic growth, employment, income levels and export growth. The poverty level in the country increased after the global pandemic which put one fourth of the population below the poverty line.

"Our focus has changed to a reform agenda the country needs. So we look at social protection as a temporary measure while believing in sustainable reduction in poverty which should come from economic growth through reforms. In the future CEPA will focus on agriculture, industrialisation, digitalisation, governance and exports to reduce the poverty level in the country," Abeyratne said.

Daily News, Colombo, January 22, 2025

Inflation decrease to -2% in December

The Department of Census and statistics said that the overall rate of inflation as measured by the National Consumer Price Index (NCPI) on Y-o-Y basis decreased to -2.0% in December 2024.

This is in comparison to -1.7% in November 2024. Compared to 0.0% in November 2024, Food Inflation also decreased to -1.0% in December 2024. Governor Central bank Dr. Nandalal Weerasinghe earlier said this deflation will continue until mid 2025 and will settle around the 5% mark midyear.

Trade

Daily News, Colombo, January 17, 2025

Export revenue increase by USD 1.2 Bn in 2024

Targets USD 30 Bn by 2030:

Shirajiv Sirimane

Sri Lanka Export revenue for 2024 has increased by over USD 1.2 billion as against 2023 said Mangala Wijesinghe, Chairman/CEO of Sri Lanka Export Development Board (EDB), while announcing the 26th Presidential Export Awards Ceremony which will be held on February 7, at BMICH.

Wijesinghe said that merchandise exports contributed around USD 12. 7 billion which include ICT exports of around USD 1.6 billion and apparel exports around USD 5.1 billion. Service exports accounted for around USD 3.5 billion.

The Chairman said they expect a major contribution from the Construction Industry that now has emerging opportunities in Maldives, Myanmar and Cambodia. "This industry brought to our notice that they are facing a ceiling issue of USD 1 million and

requested to increase this amount to USD 5 million."

"We have brought this to the notice of the government and are awaiting a positive response."

The Chairman also opined that heavy taxation by the previous government is also creating issues for exporters and these will be addressed soon. "After bringing amendments to tax we expect the gem and jewellery sector also to double their contribution from around USD 400 million to USD 800 million next year."

It was also opined that similarly the ICT sector and other industry issues would be ironed out to help bring increased revenue. He said that with a focused campaign assigning many export related sectors they hope to even better this to USD 18.2 billion next year. "We expect 14. 7 billion revenue from merchandise exports and a further 4.2 billion from Service exports."

"Our final target is to bring this up to around USD 35 billion by 2023." He said that they are also looking at new sectors to include in the export basket such as modern technology based exports like nano technology and value added exports.

Daily News, Colombo, January 22, 2025

Pelwatte Dairy to export powdered milk

Invests Rs. 1.8 Bn for factory in Kurunegala:

Wins 'People's Pinnacle Best Dairy Products Brand of year' award:

Shirajiv Sirimane

Reversing the milk powder import trend in Sri Lanka, one of the largest dairy processing factories, Pelwatte Dairy Industries Ltd, will be opening their first export plant in Kurunegala mainly focusing on exports.

Founder and Chairman Ariyaseela Wickramanayake said that they have invested over Rs. 1.8 billion for state of the art equipment and other infrastructure for this venture which will be opening at the end of February and will further invest Rs. 2 billion for expansion next year."

He said that this is a major milestone since their over a decade journey starting with the

opening of their first factory in Pelwatte in Monaragala.

Wickramanayake that the aim of starting exports is to bring in foreign income into the country whilst also reducing the outflow of foreign exchange from imports which has now come down from around USD 350 million per annum to around USD 100 million.

The country now has sufficient milking cows and is moving towards self-sufficiency in milk production, making imports unnecessary.

"We have played a major role towards reducing milk powder imports and our efforts were also recognized at the recently concluded Pinnacle Awards ceremony where Pelwatte Dairy Industries won the 'Peoples Pinnacle Best Dairy Products Brand of year' award."

Wickramanayake also disclosed that Pelwatte Dairy currently invests around Rs. 12 billion annually in purchasing fresh milk from farmers across the country.

"With the opening of a second factory in Kurunegala, Pelwatte Dairy plans to double its fresh milk intake to Rs. 24 billion."

He said that this will be the first time Powdered Milk would be exported in bulk form. "Our export markets will include the Middle East, Male and from 2026, Japan."

"When these exports come on line Sri Lanka will be able to get around USD 30 million annually from milk powder exports also adding a new product to Sri Lanka's export catalogue."

He also disclosed plans to export milk powder to China after the FTA is signed between China and Sri Lanka and later to Russia as well.

"We are currently exporting butter and Ice Cream to the Maldives and with the new factory in Kurunegala we will start exports to Seychelles and Mauritius as well."

Pelwatte as part of its food safety strategy has introduced the Food Safety System Certification (FSSC) framework and also adopted the ISO 45001 standard ensuring that all products meet global food safety requirements.

Pelwatte introduces 'Dairy Milk Farmer Pension scheme'

For the first time in Sri Lanka Pelwatte Dairy Industries Ltd, will initiate a 'Pelwatte Dairy Milk Farmer Pension scheme' and become the first private entity to do so.

Founder and Chairman Ariyaseela Wickramanayake said that they will be working with AIA insurance in this regard.

Explaining the model they adopt he said that they have talked with their liquid milk suppliers who have agreed to reduce 8% from a liter of milk and the company too will add 12% per liter and this saving would be deposited in a special fund. Interest would be accumulated in this fund.

"When the farmer retires we will present this as a pension to him/her making dairy farming a pensionable job for the first time." In addition to this we have also launched another CSR scheme to provide 'chicks' to dairy farmer families so that they could have their own poultry.

(SS)

Daily News, Colombo, January 24, 2025

Sri Lanka Apparel achieves 5% export growth in 2024

Sri Lanka's export earnings from apparel in 2024 reached USD 4.7 billion, recording a year-on-year growth of nearly 5%, according to the Joint Apparel Association Forum (JAAF) with the overall export value increasing to over USD 5 billion.

"If 2019 was used as a baseline, the last "normal" pre-pandemic and economic crisis year, Sri Lanka's apparel export in 2024 communicates a more circumspect account for in 2019 Sri Lanka managed to export USD 5.3 billion resulting in last year's exports reporting 10.3% shortfall."

Exports to the US, Sri Lanka's largest destination, grew by 5.23% year-on-year to USD 1.9 billion in 2024. Despite this, the figure remains 19.4% below 2019 levels, emphasising the potential to regain further ground. Growth in exports to the UK was robust at 7.65%, now nearing parity with 2019 levels, aided by sustained demand for ethically and sustainably manufactured

garments. While growth in the EU was modest at 0.81%, the sector has maintained a foothold in a highly competitive and increasingly regulated market.

Exports to other new destinations grew by 10.13%, demonstrating both new market penetration, and the trend for the industry to label, pack and ship direct to third countries on behalf of our customers. The JAAF emphasises that localised fabric production remains critical for the industry's long-term recovery and competitiveness. Located over a span of 300 acres, the zone has been designed and will provide opportunities for multiple verticals relating to the manufacture of textiles. Manufacturers can establish textile dying, washing, knitting, weaving and other associated plants in this dedicated area. This landmark project can save significant foreign exchange and reduce production lead times.

"The Eravur Textile Zone is more than just an initiative; it's a lifeline for the industry. Localizing fabric production is crucial to increasing competitiveness and meeting the demands of global markets," said Yohan Lawrence, Secretary-General of JAAF. Analysis of growth trends over the past five years indicates that while the sector has shown remarkable resilience, its trajectory reflects a gradual recovery process and the pandemic-induced dip in 2020 saw exports fall to USD 4.1 billion, a 22% drop from 2019. The 5% growth in 2024 reflects also the downward pressure on pricing that the industry is currently seeing. Key policy actions such as enhanced market access, enabling infrastructure projects like the Eravur Textile Zone, transparency and predictability with electricity pricing and the easing operational bottlenecks as those currently experienced in the Colombo Port, are paramount for long-term growth.

The recent adjustment to electricity tariffs is a welcomed step by the industry, particularly as Sri Lanka's energy costs have been higher compared to competitor countries.

Daily News, Colombo, January 27, 2025

Merchandise exports up by 4.06% in Dec. 2024, tops US\$ 1.04 Bn

Export Development Board said that as per the provisional data released by the Sri Lanka Customs, merchandise exports in December 2024 amounted to US\$ 1,042.5 million, reflecting an 4.06% increase compared to December 2023.

This was mainly due to the increase in earnings from export of Apparel & Textiles, Tea, Rubber based products, Coconut based products, Spices & Concentrates and Food & Beverages.

However, services exports for the month of December 2024 were estimated at US\$ 322.92 million, reflecting a 29.96 % increase over the corresponding period of 2023. Consequently, total exports for December 2024, including merchandise and services, were recorded at US\$ 1,365.42 million, reflecting a moderate increase of 9.21 %.

Export earnings from Apparel & Textile increased by 1.83 % y-o-y to US\$ 446.84 million in December 2024 compared to December 2023. Export earnings from tea, which made up 12% of merchandise exports, increased by 18.43 % y-o-y to US\$ 131.6 million in December 2024. Furthermore, the estimated value of ICT exports is expected to increase by 29.81 % to US\$ 141.06 Mn in December 2024 when compared to December 2023. In addition, the estimated value of logistics & transport services is expected to increase by 46.45 % to US\$ 162.28 million in December 2024.

This increase is mainly due to the positive performance in the export of Tea Packets (30.02 %) and Bulk Tea (8.85 %). Export earnings from Rubber and Rubber finished products have increased by 1.41 % y-o-y to US\$ 80.74 Mn in December 2024, with a strong performance in exports of Industrial & Surgical Gloves of Rubber (36.88 %).

On monthly analysis, export earnings of Coconut-based products increased by 33.05 % in December 2024. Moreover, export earnings of Coconut kernel products, Coconut fiber products and Coconut shell products increased by 28.54 %, 52.98 % and 26.0 % respectively in December 2024.

Earnings from Electrical and Electronics Components increased by 13.24 % y-o-y to

US\$ 39.6 million in December 2024, primarily due to an increase in export of Insulated Wires and Cables (12.48%) and Switches, Boards & Panels (53.14%).

Earnings from Food & Beverages increased by 42.07 % y-o-y to US\$ 41.5 Million in December 2024, with a positive performance in exports of Animal feed (31.42 %) and Processed Food (100.14%) Meanwhile during the year 2024, cumulative merchandise exports recorded notable growth of 6.67 % to US\$ 12,705.44 million compared to the same period in 2023. Services exports also showed promising growth, with an estimated increase of 8.51 % to US\$ 3,467.15 Mn during the year 2024, compared to the corresponding period last year.

As a result, the total export value, encompassing both merchandise and services, reached US\$ 16,172.59 Mn during this period, reflecting a 7.06 % growth.

The Island, Colombo, January 28, 2025

Exports up by 7.06 percent last year

Sri Lanka achieved a record-breaking total export revenue of 16.17 billion U.S. dollars in 2024, according to the latest data released Monday by the Sri Lanka Export Development Board (EDB). This marks a 7.06 percent increase, compared to the same period in 2023, the EDB reported. The 2024 revenue surpassed the previous highest-ever export earnings of 15.72 billion US dollars recorded in 2018, the EDB said. The 2024 total includes 12.70 billion dollars from merchandise exports and 3.46 billion dollars from services exports, according to the EDB.

Merchandise export earnings for December 2024 reached 1.04 billion dollars, a 4.06 percent increase compared to December 2023. The growth was attributed to higher earnings from apparel and textiles, tea, rubber-based products, coconut-based products, spices and concentrates, and food and beverages, the EDB said. Services exports for December 2024 were estimated at 322.92 million dollars, reflecting a significant 29.96 percent increase over the corresponding period in 2023.

The Island, Colombo, January 30, 2025

Tea exports up in volume and earnings last year

Sri Lanka earned USD 1.43 billion U.S. from tea exports in 2024, an increase from 1.31 billion dollars in 2023, according to official data. Sri Lanka earned USD 1.27 billion from exporting tea in 2022 and USD 1.32 billion in 2021. Sri Lanka exported 245.79 million kilos of tea in 2024, up from 241.91 million kilos in 2023. Sri Lanka, on average, earned USD 5.84 per kilo of tea exported in 2024. The price was USD 5.41 in 2023. Iraq was the top importer of Sri Lankan tea, followed by Russia and the U.A.E.

Nepal

Economy/Planning/Reform

The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu, January 17, 2025

Towards demand-led growth

Nepal's plans and programmes focus more on easing the supply side. This must be corrected.

Vidyadhar Mallik

On October 7 last year, the Government of Nepal formed a high-level recommendation body headed by former Finance Secretary Rameshore Khanal to seek long-term cures for ailments in the country's economy. This came after Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli expressed concerns about slackness in the economy and representations by private sector apex bodies like the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Confederation of Nepalese Industries and Nepal Chamber of Commerce for economic reforms that could bolster consumers' demand to accelerate investment and growth.

The 16th Five Year Plan has targeted 7.3 percent economic growth against a mere 2.6 percent growth in the 15th plan. However, the market has not shown any sign of confidence, be it from a consumer or an investor. Producers are not excited to produce goods and services for mere stockpiling. There are only a few positive signs, such as a huge increment in foreign currency reserves (\$16.8 billion) and a

surplus in the balance of payments of Rs225 billion. The inflation rate of 6 percent (year-on-year basis) is moderate and the inter-bank interest rate is below 3 percent, while the lending rate for commercial credit is below the single-digit threshold.

But if we read the market's mood, despite the low interest rate, there are signs of sluggishness and an unwillingness to invest and to buy non-essentials like electronics or non-food consumables. The real estate market is collapsing; the share market is devoid of any fresh growth; the construction business is slow, and, above all, people—the mass consumers—generally lack either adequate disposable funds for purchasing non-essential items in the local market or are not buying because they feel insecure about their future or believe the market is distorted. In the first five months of the current fiscal year, merchandise imports slowed to 3 percent, and both retail and wholesale trade and service sectors, except tourism, have gone down. The revenue from the construction sector has decreased compared to last year.

Why is this happening?

Aside from the 14th three-year plan, Nepal has never achieved its planned targets in the last 30 years. The government's plans and programmes focus on easing the supply side and prioritising resource allocation in the infrastructure sector. It has played the role of a provider rather than an enabler for the private sector and market socialism to thrive. The allocation of resources for the human development sector, such as education, health and rural employment, has always been low. Moreover, the selection of projects and plans is generally based on the decisions of politicians and bureaucrats rather than on the people's demands.

This has led to the oversupply of financial products (like excess liquid funds in the banking sector despite low interest rates) and non-financial products (such as housing units or oversupplied merchandise and services), while demand has stagnated or declined. Market signals of high prices, poor quality, or unmatched product choices have led to a

decline in demand. The demand has also slowed because of consumers' concerns about their social security, low employment levels and low disposable income in the hands of poor citizens. It is more the remittance that has maintained a level of consumption in the country than the wage income.

In supply-side economics, the buyer or consumer matters less than the manufacturer or the seller. Users' choices or demands matter less than building infrastructure, such as roads or airports. Procuring medical equipment is regarded as more important than the demand for quality healthcare. Students' learning achievements become less important than constructing a school building. Keeping low tax rates on investors' income, such as dividends and capital gains (which attract lower rates of 2.5 percent to 10 percent), becomes more of a priority than lowering the tax burden on wage earners (currently facing a top rate of 39 percent).

A year ago, there was huge pressure on the Governor of Nepal Rastra Bank, Maha Prasad Adhikari, to cut interest rates and make borrowing cheaper. It has now come down to less than 7 percent, but still, there is no mood to borrow from the banks and invest. So, why has the share market not been able to uplift the mood of investors? Let us not forget that the interest rates on deposits, including fixed deposits, have decreased to the current inflation rate of 6 percent, thus reducing the income of general households and retirees. This factor has lowered the disposable income of consumers. There are many others, such as increased expenses for essentials like medical spending post-Covid and general unemployment or low-wage employment prevailing in the country.

In a market, all production factors need to be paid in a fair way so that the markets can thrive and the sellers can have buyers with cash who can purchase their products, including non-essential merchandise. Both profit and wage levels must be protected. The government should provide citizens with adequate social security to feel secure about their future and not shy away from present consumption.

Demand-led economic growth

Nepal needs plans, policies and a governance lens to correct supply-side economics and work on demand creation by putting cash into the consumer's hands and furnishing adequate consumer credits at easy instalments and cheaper interest rates. Further, health insurance and old-age care should be strengthened for the economic security of consumers in the future. Domestic demand can't be enhanced unless consumption is induced, so domestic consumption must be balanced with moderate domestic savings. Unless demand for consumables increases, production and investment can't be enhanced.

The government must work towards citizen-centric governance, inclusive economic growth and job creation through self-employed or home-based jobs, especially in the IT sector. Resource allocation patterns should be restructured to focus on human development through quality education and health.

Another focus solicited here is community-led growth in rural and agricultural sectors. Community and demand-driven development are vital to alleviate poverty and mobilise social capital for economic growth. Market socialism and cooperatives can be helpful in both regulating the market and making it pro-poor.

The government should not interfere in the private sector's resource allocation decisions through various tax incentive schemes or other sectoral investment promotion schemes. The tax policy should be reformed to support consumption by the poor and wage earners. Last but not least, the government should be turned into a minimalist government that does not interfere in household or community-level decisions related to their choices of business or social transactions.

Trade

The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu, January 19, 2025

FDI commitments rise 5.88 percent in first half

Nepal received investment pledges worth Rs23.39 billion for 200 projects in the period.

Post Report

Nepal's foreign direct investment commitments increased 5.88 percent in the first six months of the current fiscal year ended mid-January. Officials said the increase, in both pledges and actual FDI, was not as expected.

According to the Department of Customs, Nepal received investment pledges worth Rs23.39 billion for 200 projects during the review period. These FDI commitments promise to generate employment for 9,890 people.

Prashant Bohara, director of the Foreign Investment and Technology Transfer Division at the Department of Industry, said that FDI pledges fluctuate monthly. However, introducing the automatic route for FDI has recently contributed to an increase in pledges.

The automatic route, launched during the third Nepal Investment Summit held on April 28-29, allows foreign investors to invest in certain sectors without requiring prior approval from government authorities. Officials highlighted that this process saves investors' time.

In the fiscal year's first half, investment commitments were primarily for small-scale industries. The department reported commitments of Rs14.81 billion for 193 small-scale projects, Rs7.80 billion for four large-scale projects, and Rs775 million for three medium-scale projects.

The highest FDI commitments were in the tourism sector, amounting to Rs16.26 billion for 141 projects.

Similarly, Rs4.55 billion was pledged for 29 service sector projects, Rs1.64 billion for 18 manufacturing sector projects, Rs721 million for agro- and forestry-based projects, and Rs241.20 million for information and communication technology (ICT) projects.

During the review period, the industry department recommended business visas for 1,244 investors, 186 representatives, and 422 dependents. Non-tourist visa recommendations were made for 40

advertisements and 10 technology transfer agreements.

According to the Nepal Development Update of October last year by the World Bank, FDI inflows are projected to remain low despite efforts to attract more investment.

The report highlighted that low FDI remains a significant weakness. Remittances continue to surpass both FDI and official development assistance as a critical source of foreign exchange.

The report revealed that the contribution of net FDI to GDP has been consistently declining in recent years. With less than 1 percent of GDP, Nepal's FDI levels are among the lowest compared to similar countries.

Restrictive FDI policies, a lengthy process for hiring foreign workers, and difficulties in profit repatriation are key barriers.

In the first three months of the current fiscal year, FDI accounted for only 0.1 percent of GDP.

The central bank's macroeconomic report showed that FDI inflows declined to Rs3.93 billion in the first five months of the fiscal year, compared to Rs6.03 billion in the same period the previous year.

Over the past decade, Nepal received FDI commitments totalling Rs395.92 billion, but only Rs126.29 billion, or 37.89 percent of the pledged amount, has materialised, according to a central bank report. In the last fiscal year, only 13.57 percent of the committed Rs61.90 billion was realised, amounting to Rs8.4 billion in actual investment.

In November last year, Fitch Ratings assigned Nepal a long-term foreign-currency Issuer Default Rating (IDR) of 'BB-' with a stable outlook. The rating reflects Nepal's low and highly concessional government and external debt burdens, strong external liquidity, and growth prospects driven by the hydropower sector.

However, experts said the BB- rating indicates Nepal is not considered investment-friendly, with no significant improvement in its business climate.

The World Investment Report 2024, published by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, stated that FDI

inflows to least developed countries declined to 31 percent in 2023 from 27 percent in 2022.

In South Asia, FDI inflows decreased to 36 percent from 58 percent during the same period.

The Rising Nepal, Kathmandu, January 22, 2025

**Export trade up in half year of current FY
By A Staff Reporter**

Kathmandu, Jan. 22: The export trade of Nepal witnessed significant growth in the first six months of the current fiscal year 2024/25.

According to the trade statistics made public by the Department of Customs on Monday, goods worth Rs. 98.78 billion were exported during the first six months (from mid-July 2024 to mid-January 2025) of the current fiscal year.

This is 31.78 per cent higher as compared to the exports of the corresponding period last fiscal year.

Goods worth Rs. 74.96 billion were exported during the first six months of the last fiscal year 2023/24.

Along with exports, imports have also increased by 7.06 per cent to Rs. 822.37 billion during the review period.

In the same period of the last fiscal year, the country imported goods worth Rs. 768.166 billion.

According to the statistics, the trade deficit increased by 4.38 per cent to Rs. 723.58 billion during the review period.

The country had faced a trade deficit of Rs. 693.19 billion during the first six months of the last fiscal year.

Similarly, the country's foreign trade volume has reached Rs. 921.15 billion during the review period which is 9.25 per cent more than the previous year.

Due to significant growth in export, the ratio of export to import has decreased by 18.76 per cent during the review period. The ratio of export to import is still 1:8.32. The ratio of export to import was 1:10.25 in the same period last fiscal year.

The share of export in the total foreign trade is only 10.72 per cent while that of import is at 89.28 per cent.

The increment in the export of soybean oil, sunflower, cardamom, carpet, garment and tea and coffee has contributed to an increase in export trade during the review period.

The country has exported soybean oil worth Rs. 18.91 billion during the first six months of the current fiscal year while it had exported soybean oil worth Rs. 4.15 billion during the same period last fiscal year.

The country exported soybean oil worth Rs. 10.50 billion in a single month from mid-December 2024 to mid-January 2025 of the current fiscal year.

It exported soybean oil worth Rs. 8.37 billion by mid-December 2024 of the current fiscal year.

Similarly, sunflower oil worth Rs. 4.98 billion, carpets worth Rs. 6.09 billion, tea and coffee worth Rs. 3.20 billion and cardamom worth Rs. 4.56 billion have been exported during the first six months of the current fiscal year.

During the review period, the export of palm oil decreased to Rs. 1.13 million. The country exported palm oil worth Rs. 2.907 billion during the first six months of the last fiscal year.

Similarly, petroleum products worth Rs. 126.30 billion have been imported during the first six months of the current fiscal year.

Diesel is the most imported commodity in the first six months of the current fiscal year. Diesel worth Rs. 54.36 billion has been imported during the period.

Climate Change

The Kathmandu Post, Kathmandu, January 22, 2025

First Sagarmatha Sambad to be held on May 16-18

Discussions will focus on the theme 'Climate change, mountains, and the future of humanity'.

Post Report

The government has decided to resume the flagship Sagarmatha Sambad, the first edition of which was to be held in March 2020. The event, which was to focus on the issue of climate change, climate justice, its impacts,

and related issues, had to be cancelled due to the Covid pandemic.

Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli announced the resumption of the dialogue amid a function in Kathmandu on Tuesday.

The event will be held on May 16-18, according to a statement issued by the prime minister's private secretariat.

Inspired by global platforms like the World Economic Forum of Davos, the Shangri-La Dialogue of Singapore, and the Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi, the Sagarmatha Sambad was first announced by the Oli government in 2019, but was canceled due to the pandemic.

During a joint function organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Forest and Environment on Tuesday, the prime minister officially launched the resumption of the Sagarmatha Sambad, a multi-stakeholder forum aimed at deliberating on important global, regional and national issues. This time Nepal has decided to focus on the issue of climate change, climate justice, and related issues.

The venue for the dialogue is yet to be decided, but it is expected to be organised in Kathmandu.

Taking the lead among mountainous countries and several problems they are facing, particularly in the area of climate change, the theme of the first Sambad will be "Climate Change, Mountains and Future of the Humanity", according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Heads of state and government and other stakeholders working in the field of climate change will be invited to the forum, according to officials.

Earlier, Nepal had taken several initiatives to raise awareness about climate change, like drawing the attention of the International Court of Justice to its impacts and making a strong plea for climate justice to alleviate the suffering climate change has inflicted on the Nepali people.

During a presentation at the court's public hearings on the 'Obligations of States in respect of Climate Change' on December 11, Minister for Foreign Affairs Arzu Rana Deuba

said that global warming and consequent climate change increasingly threaten Nepal's snow-capped mountains and glaciers.

To showcase the impact of global warming, in December 2009, the government also hosted a Cabinet meeting at Kala Patthar near Mt Everest. But this is the first time Nepal is taking the lead as a mountainous country to further sensitise the donor community, major contributors to carbon footprints, and multilateral agencies working in this field.

In November 2023, at the government's invitation, United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres visited Nepal and travelled to the Everest and Annapurna regions, which have been highly affected by the impacts of climate change, and delivered a global message about the vulnerabilities of climate change.

"It's time to stop the looting and generating climate change because we must preserve these wonderful mountains and these wonderful glaciers," Guterres told media persons at Pokhara Airport. "And it's essential to support Nepal and... other countries that do not contribute to climate change but suffer the consequences."

Guterres, who addressed the joint sitting of Nepal's federal parliament the next day, said the country was facing catastrophic consequences of climate change despite its negligible contribution to global emissions.

In his address to the 79th session of the UN General Assembly in September last year, the prime minister raised the issue of climate change and its impact on poor nations like Nepal whose contribution is minimal but which bear the gravest impacts of climate change and global warming.

PM Oli had informed UN Secretary-General Guterres about Nepal's plan to convene the Sagarmatha Sambad to champion the agenda of the mountain ecosystem, and invited him to address the dialogue platform. According to the Office of the UN Secretary-General, the meeting also touched on climate change, particularly the mountain agenda.

After their meeting, Nepal's permanent mission in New York said in a press statement that the secretary-general had emphasised

climate change as a priority for the UN, and highlighted the need for a drastic reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and addressing vulnerabilities of mountain countries like Nepal.

The Rising Nepal, Kathmandu, January 23, 2025

Effective Climate Dialogue

Located in the heart of Asia, Nepal stands to play a constructive role in promoting win-win diplomacy, spearheading crusade for climate action and spurring the regional economic integration. Its geostrategic location has attracted a host of powerful countries to make their presence effective here. Nepal has gained traction also because of Sagarmatha (Mt Everest), the world's tallest peak, when it comes to the climate change effects and mitigation strategies. As its snowy mountains are melting fast owing to the rising global warming, the country has found itself in a unique position to advocate for the climate justice on the world stage. Climate change, triggered by the rising temperature, has become a real threat to humanity. Nepal, despite having little role in causing the global heat, is being hit hardest by it. The climate change has played a catastrophic role is increasing the sea level on the surface and melting down the white mountains high on the skyline.

In recent months, Nepal suffered some of worst natural disasters such as floods, landslides and burst of glacial lakes, further exacerbating its vulnerabilities. Its fragile ecology is prone to calamities when heavy downpours and earthquakes buffet it. Experts link climate change behind the increasing number of natural disasters facing the country from time to time. It has become imperative for the country not only to inform the international community about the climate-induced consequences it is facing but should also lead the mountainous and small island nations for the effective climate action and compensation as the developed nations are not bearing their responsibility, despite the fact that they have greater contribution to the greenhouse gas emissions. Owing to elevation-dependent warming, the

temperature in the mountainous areas is increasing faster than the global average.

Against this backdrop, Nepal has announced to organise the first edition of Sagarmatha Sambaad (dialogue) in Kathmandu from May 16 to 18, 2025. Themed "Climate Change, Mountains and the Future of Humanity," it will primarily seek to deal with the issue of climate change - especially in the context of mountains. Announcing the upcoming event, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli said that climate change was not only a part of the poly-crisis but it could equally morph into a 'perma-crisis.' According to PM Oli, Nepal's snow-clad mountains serve as a natural stabilizer for the planet's climate for the Himalayas are often referred to as the 'Third Pole' because of their significant impact on maintaining the health of the oceans. These shiny mountains also act as heatsinks while their glaciers and snowmelt-fed rivers sustain vegetation, ecosystems and the livelihood of the people living downstream.

Sagarmatha Sambaad should serve as a viable platform for the country to effectively convey its message to the world. Nepal should bring together international experts, policy makers, climate activists and political leaders, who should be updated about the gloomy scenario of Nepali mountains. It should be an opportune moment to foster a shared understanding of climate-induced natural calamities so that the countries will pursue an integrated response to the devastation wrought by global warming. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation is essential to fight the monster of climate change that is not sparing even the mighty and technologically-sophisticated countries. The dialogue needs to be comprehensive and inclusive, and should come up with unanimous stand on the matters pertaining to climate finance, adaptation policy, technology and capacity building of poor countries. Only then will it be successful in achieving its grand objectives and vision.

Iran
Economy/Trade/Investment

Tehran Times, Iran, January 29, 2025

Iran's trade balance with West Asian countries turns positive in 9 months

TEHRAN – Iran's trade balance with West Asian countries turned positive during the first nine months of the current Iranian year, according to the Director General for West Asia at the Trade Promotion Organization (TPO) of Iran.

Abdolamir Rabiavi, citing non-oil export statistics, stated that Iran's trade with Iraq grew by 35 percent, the UAE by 11 percent, Turkey by 59 percent, Kuwait by 31 percent, Syria by 21 percent, Qatar by 14 percent, Jordan by 508 percent, Oman by 15 percent, Lebanon by 30 percent, and Saudi Arabia by a staggering 9,795 percent over the period.

Rabiavi highlighted significant growth in specific trade figures, noting that trade with Saudi Arabia increased from \$200,000 to \$23 million, with Lebanon from \$18 million to \$23 million, and with Bahrain from \$7.0 million to \$11 million.

He explained that Iraq's import restrictions on Iranian goods are seasonal, often implemented to support domestic production. For instance, Iraqi authorities periodically raise tariffs or impose import bans on agricultural and industrial products to prioritize local producers. Despite these restrictions, Iran's trade with Iraq grew by 35 percent in the first nine months of the year, reaching \$9.413 billion compared to \$6.972 billion in the same period last year. Notably, this figure equals the total trade volume for the entire previous year.

Rabiavi also reported substantial growth in trade with Turkey, rising from \$3.271 billion last year to \$5.203 billion in the first nine months of this year, an increase of nearly \$2.0 billion, reflecting significant progress.

In response to whether Iran's trade balance with West Asian countries is trending positively, Rabiavi confirmed that the trade balance for the period was indeed positive. Exports to these countries increased by approximately 31 percent, while imports grew by 21 percent, resulting in export growth outpacing imports.

EF/MA

Tehran Times, Iran, January 27, 2025

Inflation rate drops 0.5%

TEHRAN - The Statistical Center of Iran (SCI) has put the average inflation rate in the twelve-month period ended on January 20, which marks the end of the tenth Iranian calendar month Dey, at 32 percent, falling 0.5 percent from the figure for the twelve-month ended to the ninth month.

The center put the country's point-to-point inflation rate at 31.8 percent in the tenth month, which means families have paid an average of 31.8 percent more for purchasing the same package of commodities and services in that month, compared to the same month in the preceding year.

The point-to-point inflation rate rose 0.4 percent in the tenth month from the previous month.

The SCI has announced that Iran's economy grew by 5.7 percent in the past Iranian calendar year (ended on March 19, 2024), marking the highest growth since 2017.

In its latest report, the SCI said the growth of the gross domestic product (GDP) for the year ending in March 2024 at the constant prices of 2017 is equivalent to 5.7 percent of the total GDP and 3.4 percent of the GDP minus oil.

The field of activities of industries and mines group grew by 6.9 percent, the services group by 5.7 percent, and the agriculture group by 2.2 percent compared to the previous year.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF), in its latest World Economic Outlook, has estimated Iran's inflation to decline to 31.7 percent in 2024 from 40.7 percent last year.

The IMF forecasted that Iran's gross domestic product (GDP) will grow by 3.7 percent this year, up from a previous estimate of 3.3 percent announced in July, IRNA reported.

The IMF said that Iran's current account balance will be 2.9 percent of its GDP this year, slightly up from 2.8 last year.

MA

Tehran Times, Iran, January 20, 2025

Export of farmed caviar rises 112% in 9 months on year

TEHRAN - Naser Karami-Rad, Director-General of the Office for the Restoration and Conservation of Genetic Aquatic Resources at Iran's Fisheries Organization (IFO), announced a 112 percent increase in the country's official exports of farmed caviar during the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year 1403 (March 20 - December 20, 2024), compared to the total exports of the previous year.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Karami-Rad stated on Sunday that 5,346 kilograms of farmed caviar, valued at \$3.2 million, were exported through Iranian customs during this period, marking a significant growth over the 4,784 kilograms exported in the entire year of 1402.

He estimated that an additional 50 percent of this amount may have been exported unofficially by travelers, IRNA reported.

Iranian farmed caviar has reached 28 countries this year, with the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Belgium ranking as the top three destinations. Karami-Rad attributed the rise in exports primarily to the high quality of Iran's farmed caviar and its prominent demand in international markets. Last year, Iran produced 21,612 kilograms of farmed caviar, and this year's total production figures will be finalized soon, he added.

The official also noted that as of the first half of this year, 304 active sturgeon farms were operating across 22 provinces in Iran, with Gilan, Mazandaran, and Fars leading in production.

EF/MA

Tehran Times, Iran, January 20, 2025

Iran exports non-oil goods worth \$1.7b to Pakistan in 9 months

TEHRAN - Iran exported non-oil commodities valued at \$1.7 billion to Pakistan during the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 20-December 21, 2024), the head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA) announced. Foroud Asgari said that Pakistan was Iran's sixth top export destination in the mentioned nine-month period.

Foroud Asgari said that Pakistan was Iran's sixth top export destination in the mentioned nine-month period.

In a meeting between Head of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture (ICCIMA) Samad Hassanzadeh and Pakistani Ambassador to Iran Muhammad Mudassir Tipu in Tehran in late June 2024, the officials stressed the need for Iran and Pakistan to exercise barter trade and free trade to materialize a \$10 billion trade target.

Also, during a meeting between Iran's Industry, Mining, and Trade Minister Mohammad Atabak and Pakistan's Federal Minister for Commerce Jam Kamal Khan in mid-October 2024, the two sides discussed trade ties between the two countries, with both agreeing that economic exchanges should be promoted further.

The two ministers met in Pakistan's capital Islamabad on the sidelines of the 23rd meeting of the Council of Heads of Government of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Atabak told IRNA that he and the Pakistani minister discussed trade ties between the two countries and agreed to hold further talks in order to explore ways to remove obstacles to the promotion of bilateral trade.

"Considering the historical and cultural commonalities of the two countries, we should take advantage of the strong potentials to expand trade exchanges between Iran and Pakistan," the minister stated.

He stated that the current amount of trade exchanges between the two countries is not acceptable from the point of view of both Iran and Pakistan, and considering the strong relations and common links of the two countries, the two sides are confident that they will be able to increase the volume of trade exchanges several times.

The Pakistani minister spoke with IRNA as well. He described his talks with the Iranian minister as constructive, adding, "We had good talks with my Iranian counterpart and reached constructive agreements, and we believe that there are many remaining tasks

that the two countries are determined to pursue."

In mid-July 2024, the 11th meeting of the Joint Border Trade Committee of Iran and Pakistan opened in the southeastern Iranian city of Zahedan, where the two sides pursue the increase of bilateral trade to \$10 billion per annum.

Pakistan's Ambassador to Iran Muhammad Mudassir Tipu, who attends the meeting online, announced that Iranian and Pakistani delegations are scheduled to discuss the mechanism to increase mutual trade.

Iran's consul general in Quetta, Pakistan's consul general in Zahedan, and other senior officials of Sistan-Baluchestan province took part in the meeting.

Such joint meetings are held to pave the way for reviewing obstacles, removing barriers, and developing trade and economic relations between the two friendly and neighboring countries.

The two sides make the necessary coordination to help improve trade and economic ties, exchange economic delegations, organize joint exhibitions, attract bilateral investment, and establish joint industrial centers and retail markets.

The head of the Pakistani delegation to the 11th meeting of the Joint Border Trade Committee said that Islamabad strongly supports the development of joint markets and investment, which can increase the level of trust between the two nations.

Irfan Javed added that Pakistan also calls for cooperation in the field of transportation because it can affect the livelihood of the people who are living in border regions.

The deputy coordinator of economic affairs of Sistan-Baluchestan governor's office said that Iran is keen on expanding trade exchanges with Pakistan.

Davoud Shahraki added that the relationship between the two countries is historic and long-standing.

Increasing non-oil exports to the neighboring countries is one of the major plans that the Iranian government has been pursuing in recent years.

Iran shares land or water borders with 15 countries namely UAE, Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Kazakhstan, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Russia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Saudi Arabia.
MA

Afghanistan

Trade and Investment

The Kabul Times, Kabul, January 19, 2025

Saffron worth \$29 million exported in 9 months

KABUL: The Ministry of Industry and Commerce announced Saturday that 2.22 tons of saffron worth \$29 million have been exported to the world markets within the past 9 months of the ongoing solar year. Most of the exports went to India, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the U.S., Canada, Türkiye, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Spain, France and Australia, the ministry said, adding that Afghan saffron has been recognized as one of the country's most valuable agricultural products, enjoys global acclaim. According to the ministry, approximately 40 metric tons of saffron were harvested from 9,500 hectares of land in 1403. The ministry said that saffron cultivation has expanded to 30 provinces, and this crop has been introduced as an alternative to poppy cultivation. Saffron has been promoted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock as a replacement for poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. The Kabul Times

The Kabul Times, Kabul, January 27, 2025

Dried fruit worth \$518 million exported in 10 months

KABUL: The Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Investment (ACCI) said Saturday that dried fruit worth \$518 million have been exported to various countries over the past ten months of the current solar year. Dried fruit particularly pine nuts, most of which have been exported to China and some to Pakistan, ACCI said. "In 2024, pine nuts exports reached 970 tons, worth approximately \$12 million, to China, Pakistan, India, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and other countries," the spokesman of the Ministry of Industry and

Commerce Abdul Salam Jawad Akhundzada said. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Economy officials said they are working on new plans to develop exports and find new markets for Afghan products daily. Deputy Minister of Economy Abdul Latif Nazari said: "The Islamic Emirate's policy is export-oriented. If there are imports at the moment, it is due to the needs of the people of Afghanistan. Based on this policy, for example, we have had more than \$5 million in export development for dried fruit, specifically to China." Afghanistan's main export items include minerals, cotton, medicinal plants, fresh and dried fruits, carpets, and saffron. The Kabul Times

The Kabul Times, Kabul, January 19, 2025

Trade, employment achievements in country

Afghanistan under the Islamic Emirate has made great achievements in the sectors of trade and employment. No such achievements have been made during the former governments over the past twenty years. Reports quoting local officials of the country's southern province of Kandahar, said that thousands of tons dried fruits have been exported to within last year. "The Kandahar Chamber of Commerce and Investment has announced the export of 9,800 tons of dried fruits from southern Afghanistan to China since the solar year 1402," according to a statement from the provincial chamber office. This quantity of dried fruits, valued at 5.825 million U.S.dollar, has been exported from the southern region. "Unfortunately, for various reasons, our exports, which were 8,400 tons last year, have decreased to 1,400 tons this year. The use of sulfur is one of the main reasons for this decline," Abdul Baqi Bina, Deputy Head of the Kandahar Chamber of Commerce, stated. Saleh Mohammad Alokozai, a businessman from Kandahar, was also quoted by TOLONews TV as saying that they were ready to cooperate in the field of packaging, but the use of sulfur by farmers continues. "The Ministry of Agriculture must resolve this issue; otherwise, the farmers themselves will suffer losses." According to officials from the

chamber, the excessive use of sulfur during the drying process of dried fruits has caused a decline in raisin exports this year. On the other hand, the Kandahar Directorate of Agriculture and Irrigation has reported efforts to enhance farmers' capacity to naturally dry their fruits. Emal Hakimi, an agricultural specialist at the Kandahar Directorate of Agriculture and Irrigation, said: "Some farmers use sulfur to change the color of their products, which has led to some of our commercial products being rejected abroad this year. We will take steps to prevent this issue." A Chinese businessman residing in Kandahar told the TV that traditional methods of processing dried fruits should be replaced with modern technology. Mohammad Omar Omari, a Chinese businessman in Kandahar, stated: "Food safety is a very serious issue in China. Food, fruits, and any goods imported to China are thoroughly inspected at customs and related departments. Here in Afghanistan, fruits are processed traditionally. I have discussed this issue with the Ministry of Industry and Commerce to ensure this process is done using machines." Most raisins are exported from Kandahar and Zabul provinces to China, and the reduction in tariffs on Afghan goods has made Afghan traders more optimistic about increasing trade with this country. In the field of employment, reports quoted officials of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs say that 33,000 work permits have been issued in the past three months. Samiullah Ebrahimi, spokesperson for the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, said that during this period, 21,000 people were employed in government offices, while nearly 10,000 others found jobs in the private sector. "Work permits were issued to 21,567 of our compatriots in Emirate offices, 9,809 people in the private sector, and 1,920 foreign nationals," he added. Poverty and unemployment have remained persistent challenges in Afghanistan for years. Some residents of the capital are calling for the creation of more job opportunities in the country. Faheem, a 27-year-old street vendor trying to provide for his family, appealed to

the Islamic Emirate: "My request is that the government should create job opportunities for us. Jobs should be provided based on each person's education. I work as a street vendor from morning until evening and can't even earn 200 afghani a day." Economic experts have also emphasized the need to improve access to jobs by attracting both domestic and foreign investment in the country. Abdul Nasir Rashtya, an economic expert, said: "The esteemed Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs should work to provide job opportunities for Afghan workers abroad. On the other hand, since Afghanistan unfortunately lacks skilled and professional workers, efforts should be made to bring in foreign professionals." The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs has recently announced that it was planned to create 1.5 million jobs in various sectors over the next five years. If the plan by the related organs of the Islamic Emirate continue, then the graph of poverty would decline and the trust between the people and the system get stronger. Inam Hashemi

Pakistan
Economy/Planning/Reform
The Express Tribune
January 20, 2025
Growth trajectory

Editorial
 While growth continues to remain sluggish worldwide, owing to a host of factors such as slump in manufacturing, low consumer confidence, brewing trade and tariff wars and energy supply constraints, the IMF still believes that global growth shall remain unchanged at 3.3 percentage points for current and next year. However, the Washington-based lender is a little sceptical on Pakistan where it has lowered the country's growth estimate to 3% from its own earlier projected horizon of 3.2%. This revision incidentally has come weeks before the cash-strapped country was supposed to hit the table with the IMF on its \$7 billion bailout programme. The fact that the donor is exercising a stringent scrutiny on promises made by Pakistan in introducing structural

reforms and goes on to hold back tranches of funds makes it a troublesome proposition.

It is an established fact that Pakistan is mired in a serious balance of payments crisis, and has slashed its developmental budget as it struggles to meet the tax generation targets. The IMF has also pointed out that lower than estimated cotton output and a decline in industrial production are key reasons behind substantial revenue shortfalls. Thus, it is no surprise that the Fund has revised down the growth target by 0.2%, but at the same time has ushered confidence by keeping its growth forecast for next fiscal year unchanged at 4%. This can be conveniently read with the confidence that donors have in Pakistan, as recently the World Bank has agreed to funnel in \$20 billion in social strata mushrooming, and a matching \$20 billion liquidity for fostering the private sector. All that they look for is reforms and an economy that is on its own by broadening the tax net and plugging loopholes that make it go wayward. Pakistan has a telling tale of resilience as it successfully overcome pandemic constraints and has kept the economy afloat by avoiding a default. By focusing on sustained growth, exports-driven produce and slashing of energy tariffs, the economy can surely bounce back.

The News

January 27, 2025

WB urges Pakistan to double investment to boost growth

Country's economy is forecast to grow 3% this year, according to Bloomberg survey of economists

By Our Correspondent

LAHORE: Pakistan must simplify regulations and make its economic outlook predictable to attract more investment and significantly spur growth, according to a senior official from the World Bank quoted by Bloomberg.

The South Asian country can see its annual growth rate accelerate to as much as 8pc if it doubles investment and better utilizes its assets and human capital, Martin Raiser, the bank's vice president for South Asia, said in an interview in Islamabad on Friday.

"If you invest 12pc of gross domestic product, don't expect miracles," he said. "You're not going to grow. It's as simple as that."

Pakistan's average investment-to-GDP ratio has fallen below 15% in recent years, the lowest in the region, data from the finance ministry shows.

The country's economy is forecast to grow 3pc this year, according to a Bloomberg survey of economists. The Washington-based lender last week approved a 10-year partnership framework for Pakistan, which, Raiser says, is meant to help the government make the country's business climate more stable. Pakistan's economy has faced successive boom-and-bust cycles after imbalanced and unsustainable fiscal policies caused funding shortages for critical sectors, including health and education, with almost half of government revenue being spent on debt repayment and defense. The nation of 240 million people ranks lower in the World Bank's Human Capital Index than other South Asian countries. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif aims to achieve growth of 3.6pc by the end of June after dodging economic default last year with external help. As part of the International Monetary Fund's three-year loan programme, he has pledged to raise government revenue and plug financial leaks by restructuring and privatizing state-owned enterprises. Increasing the tax-to-GDP ratio to 15pc is "eminently doable" by slashing exemptions that protect "some special interests" and cracking down on tax evasion and digitalizing the collection system, Raiser said.

Dawn

January 16, 2025

Exports to five Central Asian states fall 9pc

Staff Reporter

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's exports to five Central Asian countries (CACs) witnessed a negative growth of 8.87 per cent during the first five months of the current fiscal year over the corresponding period last year.

The country's exports to the region have yet to attain their full potential. Similarly, imports from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan

have increased significantly despite regular high-profile visits to balance the trade deficit. In absolute terms, the value of Pakistan's exports to the five central Asian countries — Kazakhs-tan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan — dipped by 8.87pc to \$80.82 million during July-November 2024-25 from \$88.69m in the same period last year. Imports from the region increased by \$75.57m to \$82.03m in 5MFY25 from \$6.46m during the same period last year. The majority of these imports came from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

Despite existing prospects, bilateral trade volume has yet to attain its full potential. Pakistan's trade with CACs ranged between \$400m and \$500m annually via Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has already implemented its transit trade agreement with Pakistan. Under the agreement, Uzbekistan has started importing goods under the transit agreement as well.

Published in Dawn, January 16th, 2025

Dawn

January 18, 2025

IT exports thrive despite internet issues

Staff Reporter

KARACHI: Despite challenges such as internet disruptions and firewalls, Pakistan achieved its highest-ever monthly IT exports of \$348 million in December 2024, an increase of 15 per cent year-on-year (YoY) and 12pc month-on-month (MoM).

These exports in December 2024 surpassed the 12-month average of \$299m.

This marks the 15th consecutive month of YoY IT export growth, starting from October 2023. For the first half of FY25, IT exports reached \$1.86 billion, reflecting a 28pc YoY increase, according to Nasheed Malik of Top Line Securities.

Export proceeds per day in December 2024 were recorded at \$16.6m, up from \$14.8m in November 2024.

Explaining the YoY growth in IT exports, Mr Malik attributed the increase to the expanding client base of Pakistani companies, particularly in the GCC region. He also highlighted the relaxation of the permissible

retention limit by the State Bank of Pakistan, which was increased from 35pc to 50pc in the exporters' specialised foreign currency accounts.

Additionally, the allowance of equity investment abroad through these accounts, along with stability in the Pakistani rupee, encouraged IT exporters to bring a larger portion of profits back to Pakistan.

Mr Malik noted that Pakistani IT companies are actively engaging with global clients, with leading firms recently participating in events such as Oslo Innovation Week 2024 and the Pak-US Tech Investment Conference.

A survey by the Pakistan Software Houses Association (P@SHA) found that 62pc of IT companies are maintaining specialised foreign currency accounts.

Mr Malik also pointed to a key development in FY25, with the SBP introducing a new category of Equity Investment Abroad (EIA) specifically for export-oriented IT companies. IT exporters can now acquire shareholding in foreign entities using up to 50pc of proceeds from these specialised foreign currency accounts. The move is expected to further boost the confidence of IT exporters in remitting proceeds back to Pakistan.

Mr Malik believed that the IT sector will continue its growth trajectory, with an expected growth rate of 10-15pc in FY25, bringing exports to \$3.5-3.7bn.

Under the 'Uraan Pakistan' national economic plan, the government has set a target of \$10bn in IT exports by FY29.

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The News

January 21, 2025

Textile exports growth slows down to 5.55% in December

This signals shift in industry toward exporting finished goods rather than raw materials

By Our Correspondent

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's textile sector, which had experienced double-digit growth for four consecutive months since August 2024, saw a slowdown in December, posting a modest 5.55 per cent increase. Exports for the month

totalled \$1.477 billion, up from \$1.399 billion in December 2023.

The slowdown in growth follows a period of robust performance but still reflects ongoing challenges in the global and domestic market conditions. However, a key aspect of the growth was that all sub-sectors, mainly finished products, saw increases, while exports of unfinished or raw items declined. This signals a shift in the industry toward exporting finished goods rather than raw materials.

In textile sector, ready-made garments were the standout category, witnessing growth of 19.6 per cent to 357.2 million, according to the latest data from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS).

In December 2024, cotton cloth exports increased by 3.64 per cent to \$148.8 million, knitwear exports up by 6.8 per cent to \$391.7 million, bedwear by 13.2 per cent to \$256.2 million, and towels by 0.77 per cent to \$88.3 million over December 2023.

Exports of unfinished products, primarily raw items, saw a notable decline. Cotton yarn exports dropped significantly by 34.1 per cent, falling to \$62.8 million. Raw cotton exports dropped by 95.5 per cent to only \$0.6 million against \$13.69 million in December 2023. Pakistan's food exports saw a significant decline in December 2024, dropping 4.23 per cent to \$804.8 million from \$840.4 million in December 2023.

The most striking aspect of the decline was the sharp drop in rice exports, following the reopening of Indian rice exports. Rice exports fell by 30.6 per cent to \$360 million, down from \$518.6 million in December 2023. Basmati rice exports plummeted by 40.9 per cent to \$47.7 million, while exports of other rice varieties dropped 28.7 per cent to \$312 million. Additionally, fruit exports decreased by 15.5 per cent to \$36.5 million, and vegetable exports fell by 48.9 per cent totalling \$20.64 million.

Among other food categories, fish and fish preparation exports increased by 6.98 per cent to \$39.7 million, meat and meat preparation exports increased by 7.4 per cent to \$47.3 million, and sugar exports stood at

\$145.85 million compared to zero sugar exports in the corresponding month of last year.

Exports of sports goods declined by 6.35 per cent to \$32.26 million, with football exports contracting by 11.4 per cent to \$19.6 million. However, surgical goods and medical instruments exports were up by 6.8 per cent to \$39.3 million and cement exports up by 45.5 per cent to \$31.9 million. Likewise, chemical and pharmaceutical exports also increased 31.2 per cent to \$152.8 million in December 2024 compared to the same month last year, of which pharmaceutical products exports increased by 174 per cent to \$63.4 million.

On the import side, Pakistan's petroleum imports in December 2024 increased by 0.85 per cent to \$1.565 billion from \$1.55 billion in December 2023. Crude oil imports declined by 5.8 per cent to \$526.2 million and LNG import fell by 10.44 per cent to \$346.2 million. Imports of petroleum products increased by 9.7 per cent to \$584.2 million, and liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) increased by 46.4 per cent to \$108.4 million.

Total imports of machinery in December 2024 increased by 28.1 per cent year-on-year to \$857.9 million. In this group, textile machinery imports increased by 72.5 per cent to \$20.9 million, power generation machinery by 165.7 per cent to \$80.25 million, and agriculture machinery by 76.5 per cent to \$8.5 million. Likewise, construction and mining machinery imports increased by 127 per cent to \$14.65 million, and electrical machinery and apparatus saw an increase of 30.3 per cent to \$292.3 million.

Telecom machinery imports, however, declined by 6.2 per cent to \$202.7 million, with mobile phone imports declined by 7.3 per cent to \$163.2 million.

Transport sector's total imports in December 2024 increased by 5.2 per cent to \$191 million. In this group, spending on road motor vehicles (built units, CKD/SKD) stood at \$183.4 million, 6.9 per cent more than the previous year. Imports of completely built units (CBU) for buses, trucks, and other heavy vehicles increased by 13.6 per cent to \$31.76

million, with motor car imports falling by 14.9 per cent to \$17.4 million. CKD/SKD imports for buses, trucks, and other heavy vehicles also increased by 1.98 per cent to \$115 million, and motor car imports declined by 22.6 per cent to \$76.2 million. Motorcycle imports increased by 40.8 per cent to \$3.88 million, while parts and accessories imports increased by 13.7 per cent to \$32.4 million.

The News **January 18, 2025**

FDI rises 20% to \$1.33bn in July-December

By Our Correspondent

KARACHI: Pakistan's net foreign direct investment (FDI) increased by 20 per cent, reaching \$1.329 billion in the first six months of this fiscal year, according to data from the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) released on Friday.

In December, the country recorded a net FDI inflow of \$170 million, reflecting a 33 per cent decline compared with the \$252 million inflow during the same period last year. This figure also represents a 23 per cent decrease from the \$219 million received in November of this fiscal year.

The SBP's data indicates that a majority of direct investments came from China, with FDI from Chinese companies rising by 48 per cent to \$436 million from July to December FY25. Investments from Hong Kong also grew by 14 per cent, reaching \$134 million.

The United Kingdom contributed \$130 million in FDI during the same period, compared with \$118 million last year. In terms of sector-specific investments, the power sector saw a 26 per cent increase, with FDI amounting to \$488 million from July to December FY25. The financial sector received \$353 million in FDI during this period, a 17 per cent increase from \$301 million a year earlier. FDI in the gas and exploration sector rose by 9.0 per cent, reaching \$167 million during the same time.

Pakistan needs FDI inflows to support its external account. While the government continues to sign memorandums of understanding (MOUs), no major agreements

have materialised yet. Last month, the federal cabinet approved the sale of a 15 per cent stake in the Reko Diq mining project to Saudi Arabia under an intergovernmental transaction agreement. This deal, valued at \$540 million, will involve the transfer of shares in two instalments. In a related development, the Saudi Fund for Development has pledged an additional \$150 million to support the mining sector in Balochistan. Analysts are hopeful that the execution of these deals will help increase FDI in the future.

The News **January 19, 2025**

Pakistan first country to implement digital FDI: PM

Shehbaz remarks that initiative reflects government's commitment to fostering economic growth

By APP

LAHORE: Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said on Saturday that Pakistan is the first country to implement the Digital Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) Initiative, launched by the World Economic Forum (WEF) and Digital Cooperation Organisation (DCO).

According to a spokesperson, the premier said Pakistan's first Digital FDI project had been making significant efforts to identify targets and promote digital progress. He elaborated that Pakistan's Digital FDI project was a framework aimed at implementing digital infrastructure, digitisation and export of digital services.

It would focus on sectors likely to attract foreign investment into the country, he added.

"It is an important milestone towards creating an investment-friendly environment in the country," the premier said, adding that the country was heading towards a vibrant digital economy, which was a vital step in achieving sustainable progress and prosperity.

Shehbaz remarked that the initiative reflected the government's commitment to fostering economic growth.

Dawn **January 19, 2025**

Trade deficit with nine countries surges 43pc

Mubarak Zeb Khan

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's trade deficit with nine neighbouring countries surged by 43.22 per cent to \$5.328 billion during the first half of the current fiscal year (FY25) from \$3.72bn in the corresponding period last year.

The trade gap with the regional countries widened mainly due to higher imports from China, India and Bangladesh during the months under review.

China's imports increased the most, while Pakistan's exports to the same country decreased.

In contrast to last year, exports to Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka increased unusually. This growth has largely offset the decline in exports to China.

In FY24, the trade deficit with these countries was \$9.506bn, up 49pc from \$6.382bn in the preceding year.

Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka saw a paltry growth in July-December FY25. Still, exports to other countries, especially China, continued to decline during the period, according to data compiled by the State Bank of Pakistan.

The value of Pakistan's exports to nine countries — Afghanistan, China, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India, Iran, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives — rose 7.85pc to \$2.404bn in July-December FY25 from \$2.229bn over the same period last year.

Pakistan's total exports reached to \$16.56bn in the first half of FY25, up 10.52pc from \$14.98bn over the corresponding months last year.

Pakistan's share in total exports to the regional countries is just around 14.51pc.

Contrary to this, imports surged 29.97pc to \$7.732bn in 6MFY25 from \$5.949bn over the same period of the previous fiscal year.

Further analysis showed that imports from China grew by 30.42pc to \$7.541bn in 6MFY25 from \$5.782bn over the same period last year. In FY24, imports from China stood at \$13.506bn, up by 39.78pc from \$9.662bn over the previous year. The bulk of imports in

the region are sourced from China, followed partially by India and Bangladesh.

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The News

January 18, 2025

SPI drops to 1.16%, lowest since 2014

By Israr Khan

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's kitchen inflation has hit a milestone, sinking to its lowest level in nearly a decade. The Sensitive Price Indicator (SPI) registered a 1.16 per cent year-on-year increase for the week ending January 16, 2025, the lowest since October 2014. Last week, the SPI was at 1.9 per cent.

This marks a sharp contrast to the staggering 48.35 per cent recorded in May 2023, according to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS). Weekly SPI also dipped by 0.39 per cent, signalling a mixed trend across 51 essential items monitored in 17 cities. Tomatoes and potatoes led the decline, plunging 18.3 per cent and 10.4 per cent, respectively. Eggs saw an 8.6 per cent drop, while chicken, liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), mash pulse and mustard oil fell modestly against previous week's prices.

Conversely, some items price moderately increased. Bananas price increased by 3.2 per cent, petrol 1.4 per cent, vegetable, ghee, cooking oil, firewood and diesel prices increased by 1 per cent each. Likewise, moong pulse price up by 0.89 per cent, shirting 0.74 per cent, sugar 0.72 per cent and rice basmati (broken) price increased by 0.58 per cent over previous week.

Economists predict that with a sharp decline in SPI, the monthly headline inflation measured by Consumer Price Index (CPI) may also fell sizably for January 2025, with estimates ranging between 2.5 per cent to 3.0 per cent, down from 4.1 per cent in December 2024.

They believe that with the significant decline in price-hike rate, the State Bank's policy board that meeting on January 27, may also consider to cut the policy rate at least 150 basis points to 11.5 per cent. Currently, the policy rate is at 13 per cent.

SPI data also revealed disparities in how inflation impacts different income groups.

Households earning less than Rs17,732 per month faced a 0.20 per cent increase in prices year-on-year, while those with monthly earnings exceeding Rs44,175 experienced a 1.66 per cent rise.

Despite the overall decline, some items were dearer on year-on-year basis. Ladies' sandals surged by 75 per cent, potatoes 48 per cent, gram pulses rose by 38 per cent. Similarly, moong pulse price increased by 33 per cent, powdered milk by 26 per cent, beef by 23 per cent, and vegetable ghee by 16 per cent. Gas charges for the lowest consumption slab increased by 15.5 per cent, cooked daal and garlic and shirting by 15 per cent each, and firewood by 13 per cent over the past year. Conversely, some items such as onions and wheat flour saw significant price reductions of 47 per cent and 36 per cent respectively. Likewise, eggs price fell 32 per cent, chili powder and tomatoes by 20 per cent each. Electricity charges for the lowest consumption slab decreased by 18.1 per cent. Other items that became cheaper included masoor pulse by 11 per cent, mash pulse 9.2 per cent, rice basmati broken by 8.9 per cent, diesel by 5.47 per cent, and petrol by 1.18 per cent.

The Nation

January 21, 2025

Petty Corruption

As Pakistani authorities initiate a purge of officials from the Federal Investigation Agency, airport customs, and the national identification and passport departments over their alleged roles in human trafficking networks, a troubling picture of entrenched corruption emerges. This latest crackdown underscores how deeply rooted malpractice often necessitates a top-down shakedown to expose and expel those complicit within the system. While international pressure and the grim headlines of migrant tragedies may spur government action, the quieter, everyday tales of petty corruption remain overlooked. Yet, it is precisely these smaller acts of misconduct that inflict the greatest damage on law enforcement, eroding trust and fostering a culture of impunity.

Recent reports from the Chiniot district illustrate this dynamic. District Police Officer Abdullah Ahmed has reportedly suspended a subordinate officer who blew the whistle on alleged corrupt practices within the department. The whistleblower's accusations are damning: that the station house officer (SHO) and the district police officer (DPO) provide shelter to hardened criminals, refuse to register legitimate complaints, ignore emergency calls to the 15 helpline, and engage in various small-scale profiteering schemes. These allegations, if true, reveal a disturbing pattern of behaviour that undermines the very purpose of law enforcement.

However, instead of investigating these claims, the department chose to dismiss the whistleblower, a move that epitomises the impunity enjoyed by corrupt officials. This act not only silences accountability but also discourages others from coming forward with similar allegations. Pakistan must urgently address this culture of silence and retaliation. While large-scale reforms and purges may grab headlines, there is an equally pressing need to establish robust mechanisms that protect whistleblowers, both within law enforcement and among ordinary citizens. These mechanisms must ensure anonymity, shield whistleblowers from reprisal, and facilitate swift investigations into their claims. Without such systems in place, the cycle of corruption and cover-up will persist unchecked.

Climate Change

Dawn

January 16, 2025

Geopolitics of climate change

Ali Tauqeer Sheikh

DESPITE dismissing climate change as a hoax, the incoming Trump administration's strategic interest in the Panama Canal, Greenland, and Canada suggests an implicit recognition of climate change's geopolitical implications. President-elect Donald Trump has not ruled out the use of military force, if needed, to secure the canal and Greenland, and "economic force" in the case of Canada. This reflects a broader strategy of seizing

climate opportunities while denying climate change's existence.

The apparent contradiction is recognised by American foreign policy expert Richard Haass who has highlighted the growing recognition of climate change's role in shaping global power dynamics, even among climate change sceptics. The US is planning to checkmate Chinese trade and investments, particularly in America's backyard, by reincarnating the Monroe Doctrine that now seeks a US sphere of influence stretching from southern and central America to the outer reaches of the Arctic regions.

Trump has questioned the artificially drawn border lines — a global gift of colonialism and perpetuated by nationalism since the Napoleonic wars. Apart from plans to rename the Gulf of Mexico, the US has laid claim to the following three strategic assets, all driven by climate change impacts.

Panama Canal: The waterway faces significant challenges due to climate change. Severe drought in 2023, for example, has reduced daily vessel transits by 36 per cent. Washington has opposed Chinese investments to develop alternatives including a Nicaragua canal, and a rail system in Colombia or Mexico, to connect the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Trump's consideration of military action to 'reclaim' control reflects concerns about both climate vulnerability and China's economic presence enabled by this crucial maritime chokepoint.

Greenland: The strategic importance of this territory has increased dramatically as climate change accelerates ice melt, revealing vast deposits of rare earth elements (REE). The US Geological Survey (USGS) believes that Greenland may have the largest untapped REE reserves outside China. This also creates new shipping routes while raising US security concerns about increased accessibility to China. With Greenland's icesheet melting, trans-Arctic shipping routes are significantly shorter than traditional ones such as the Suez Canal. China and Russia are developing the Northern Sea Route (NSR) following the Sino-Russian shipping corridor and the Arctic Express to boost their trade

with Asia. The US has deployed Nato's Arctic Strategy that contains Russia, an Arctic country, and refuses to accommodate China's claim of being a 'near-Arctic' country.

Canada: The country's vast Arctic territories contain an estimated \$1trillion worth of minerals essential for clean energy technologies. The USGS reports that Canadian rare earth deposits could potentially supply 25pc of global demand. Trump's approach to bilateral ties with Canada focuses on securing unhindered access to these resources while challenging Canadian climate policies.

Trump's electoral promise to cut gas prices by half will hinge on Canada revisiting its climate commitments, particularly cutting carbon tax and cancelling the energy cap, and Quebec's agreement with California on carbon trading. Trump's 'drill, baby, drill' mission has significant implications for North American energy markets.

Geopolitical strategy to counter China: It seems that the emerging US strategy to counter Chinese influence focuses on controlling key maritime routes and resource deposits. The Pentagon's 2024 Indo-Pacific Strategy Review emphasises the critical nature of securing strategic chokepoints and resource-rich territories. Chinese investments in Panama are said to have exceeded \$10 billion over the past decade, while Arctic investments have topped \$90bn according to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

Control over maritime routes has become increasingly critical as climate change opens new shipping lanes. The NSR could reduce shipping times between Asia and Europe by up to 40pc. Chinese shipping through Arctic waters is said to have increased by 300pc between 2018 and 2023.

Climate change paradox: While Trump has repeatedly called climate change a scam, the Department of Defence has identified it as a threat multiplier. The Pentagon's 2024 Climate Adaptation Plan highlights the strategic importance of assets affected by climate change, including Arctic territories and maritime chokepoints.

Nato's Strategic Concept has, for the first time, recorded China as a "systemic challenge" to Euro-Atlantic security. It addresses the need to balance collective defence with environmental security, and expresses concern at unilateral military actions affecting alliance members' territories. The Chinese response on the other hand, has emphasised economic cooperation and scientific collaboration, while warning against the militarisation of climate-vulnerable regions.

Trump's approach represents a complex interplay between climate denial and the pursuit of climate-affected strategic assets. It is a contradiction between public rhetoric and strategic planning. This approach has implications for the global security architecture, economic ties, and global cooperation on climate change. The aggressive posture towards securing climate-vulnerable assets will strain traditional alliances and bilateral ties.

Implications for Pakistan: Pakistan's maritime interests are limited to its immediate proximity, but it could still be affected by uncertainties surrounding control over global shipping routes. Our maritime trade accounts for 95pc of our international trade volume; it passes through volatile regions and chokepoints in the Indian Ocean. Our position is particularly precarious given the country's climate vulnerability.

Pakistan's position in this evolving geopolitical landscape is complex given its strategic partnership with China. The country's participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative, with investments exceeding \$62bn in CPEC, makes it overly sensitive to the US-China competition.

The Gwadar port, developed under CPEC with a Chinese investment of \$1.1bn, has a crucial role in China's Maritime Silk Road strategy. Any disruption to global shipping patterns or increased US control over strategic waterways could impact Pakistan's maritime trade, valued at around \$100bn annually. Can Pakistan reduce this vulnerability by boosting its transborder trade with India and other neighbours? Regional trade corridors are

perhaps the cheapest insurance against the unfolding geostrategic chessboard and changing climate.

The writer is an Islamabad-based climate change and sustainable development expert.

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The News

January 29, 2025

A green vision for Pakistan's survival

Contributing less than 1% of global greenhouse gas emissions, Pakistan bears disproportionate share of climate impacts

By Soha Nisar

As the world confronts the escalating impacts of climate change, 2025 begins with a stark reminder: 2024 was the hottest year on record. This alarming milestone has turned scientific warnings into daily realities, with unprecedented wildfires, deadly floods, and record-breaking heatwaves dominating headlines.

Amid this global crisis, the decision by US President Donald Trump to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement for the second time sends shockwaves through international climate efforts. This move, which undermines collective action at a critical juncture, is particularly devastating for vulnerable nations like Pakistan that are already enduring the brunt of climate chaos.

For Pakistan, the Paris Agreement symbolised more than a global pact; it was a lifeline. Contributing less than 1.0 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions, Pakistan bears a disproportionate share of climate impacts, from glacial melts threatening water security to catastrophic floods submerging entire regions. The 2022 floods, which inundated one-third of the country, remain etched in collective memory as a chilling preview of what unchecked global warming portends.

The US withdrawal jeopardises the fragile hope the Paris Agreement offered, casting doubt on the global commitment to limit warming and achieve climate justice. It sends a dangerous signal that the world's second-largest historical emitter is abdicating its moral and practical responsibilities, leaving countries like Pakistan to navigate the climate crisis with diminished support.

President Trump's justification that the Paris Agreement is "unfair" to the US while benefiting countries like China collapses under scrutiny. Climate change is indifferent to national borders or economies. The wildfires ravaging Californian forests are interconnected with the floods, heatwaves, and droughts devastating South Asia. Rising seas threatening Karachi's coastal neighbourhoods echo the challenges faced by Miami and Venice. Yet, the US's retreat risks emboldening other nations to scale back their commitments, potentially triggering a domino effect of reduced ambition. For countries in South Asia, already grappling with intensified monsoons and prolonged droughts, such abdication is a profound betrayal, worsening vulnerabilities for millions.

Pakistan finds itself at a critical juncture. The challenges are immense: water insecurity, agricultural vulnerability, urban heatwaves, and rising sea levels threaten not only ecosystems but also economic stability and social cohesion. Yet, the withdrawal of the US from the Paris Agreement also underscores an imperative for self-reliance and regional collaboration. Pakistan must pivot from waiting for global powers to act and instead chart its own path. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) emerges as a key instrument in this endeavour, not merely as an infrastructure and economic initiative but as a foundation for a potential green transformation.

CPEC, often heralded as the backbone of Pakistan's development strategy, has already made significant strides in infrastructure and energy projects. The Quaid-e-Azam Solar Park in Punjab and wind farms in Sindh exemplify the promise of renewable energy investments. However, these efforts must now evolve into a broader vision – what could be termed 'CPEC 2.0'. This next phase should prioritise sustainability, leveraging China's technological expertise and financial resources to accelerate Pakistan's transition to a low-carbon economy. By expanding solar, wind, and hydropower projects, Pakistan can reduce its dependence on imported fossil

fuels, improve air quality and create green jobs.

Imagine a Pakistan where rural communities are powered by affordable solar panels, where urban centres rely on electric buses and trains designed with Chinese innovation, and where agricultural systems are resilient to erratic weather patterns through climate-smart practices. These visions are not only feasible but also essential. Pakistan's sprawling rural areas and growing urban populations represent vast opportunities to pioneer sustainable solutions. Investments in energy efficiency, smart grids, and green infrastructure can transform Pakistan into a model of climate resilience for the Global South.

The agricultural sector, which employs nearly 40 per cent of Pakistan's workforce and contributes significantly to GDP, remains acutely vulnerable to climate change. Prolonged droughts, shifting rainfall patterns, and extreme weather events threaten food security and rural livelihoods. To address these challenges, Pakistan must adopt climate-smart agricultural practices such as precision irrigation, drought-resistant crop varieties, and agroforestry.

Reforestation initiatives like the Billion Tree Tsunami can evolve into sustained, nationwide efforts, including mangrove restoration along coastal areas to shield against rising seas and provide carbon sinks. These strategies not only enhance resilience but also align with global climate goals, showcasing Pakistan's commitment to sustainable development.

The key to realising this vision lies in political will, innovation, and international collaboration. While the U.S. withdrawal creates a leadership vacuum, it also offers an opportunity for countries like Pakistan, alongside China and other like-minded nations, to champion global climate action. At international platforms such as COP meetings, Pakistan must advocate for the fulfilment of climate finance commitments from developed nations, holding them accountable for their historical emissions. Regional collaboration in South Asia is

equally critical. Shared challenges such as water management, disaster preparedness, and renewable energy development demand cooperative solutions, transcending geopolitical tensions to address existential threats.

Innovation will be pivotal in Pakistan's climate strategy. The country's burgeoning tech sector, driven by a dynamic youth population, offers immense potential for transformative solutions. Artificial intelligence can optimise water usage in agriculture, blockchain can enhance transparency in carbon trading, and digital platforms can democratise climate education. Public-private partnerships should be encouraged to fund research and development in clean technologies, turning adaptation challenges into economic opportunities. By fostering a culture of innovation, Pakistan can position itself as a leader in climate resilience and sustainable development.

Education and awareness must complement these efforts. Climate literacy campaigns should extend beyond urban elites to engage grassroots communities, empowering citizens to adopt sustainable practices and demand accountability from leaders. A society that understands the gravity of the climate crisis and is equipped to act will be instrumental in driving long-term change. Public engagement can also amplify local and national initiatives, creating a groundswell of support for transformative policies.

Despite the disheartening nature of Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, it is a clarion call for Pakistan to redefine its role in the global climate landscape. The stakes are too high to wait for international consensus. By embracing a vision of a green Pakistan through CPEC 2.0, climate-smart policies, innovation, and education, the country can turn its vulnerabilities into strengths. This is not merely a matter of survival – it is an opportunity to lead by example, inspiring other nations facing similar challenges.

The fight against climate change is no longer a distant challenge but an immediate reality that demands bold action. From the glacial

peaks of the Himalayas to the floodplains of the Indus, Pakistan stands at the crossroads of crisis and opportunity. By rising to this challenge, the country can secure its future and contribute to a global movement for a livable planet.

Let this moment of global retreat serve as Pakistan's moment of resolve, reminding the world that the fight for a sustainable future is not a burden but a shared destiny.

The writer is a policy analyst and researcher with a Master's degree in public policy from King's College London.

Daily Times

January 31, 2025

Editorial

Mangrove Healing

In a fast-changing world, Pakistan stands at a crucial crossroads in its battle against climate change, particularly when on the one hand, its negligible share in carbon emissions continues to be ignored while others expect it to find the finances to foot the burgeoning bill itself. Amidst such desperate times, Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah should be applauded for spearheading a shining example of a forward-thinking approach that turns towards innovative solutions like carbon trading. With the help of mangroves, his initiative has attracted an overwhelming \$50 million investment through the Delta Blue Carbon project, proving that environmental conservation can be a robust economic strategy.

Though still in its early stages when compared to other firms in the region, this public-private partnership aims to restore 225,000 hectares of mangrove cover – celebrated worldwide as one of the most efficient carbon sinks. These green landscapes have the extraordinary potential to sequester carbon dioxide, playing a direct role in combating greenhouse gas emissions. As neighbouring China prepares to roll out its groundbreaking carbon trading scheme, Sindh's proactive approach could serve as an inspiring blueprint for other provinces eager to follow suit.

To meet its ambitious goal of a 50 percent reduction in emissions by 2030, as outlined in the Nationally Determined Contributions, Pakistan must move beyond intentions to take real, measurable action. Despite criticism from climate activists regarding “false solutions” propagated by the Global North, the potential to replicate Sindh’s model across the country is enormous, especially given the staggering \$380 billion needed for climate resilience by 2030.

Currently, Pakistan holds less than one per cent of the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) market share while the African dense forest cover offers great competition, underlining the immediate need to establish a comprehensive registry to monitor greenhouse gas emissions, which would not only enhance accountability but also attract valuable foreign investment.

The catastrophic floods of 2022, which inflicted around \$40 billion in damages, have amplified the necessity for long-lasting carbon reduction strategies. Sindh is stepping up as a frontline province, leading the charge with its ambitious forest blocks, extensive investments in solar energy, and efforts to engage local communities as active stakeholders rather than mere spectators. However, for these sustainable developments to thrive, baseline data is essential. Unfortunately, Pakistan currently lacks the necessary resources, technology, and expertise to conduct the required studies, posing a significant challenge to national climate action.*

China

Economy/Planning/Reform

People’s Daily, China, January 17, 2025

Commentary: China's economic resilience makes a case for faith

BEIJING, Jan. 16 (Xinhua) -- Uncertainties and rising protectionism worldwide might fuel China skeptics' pessimism, but the country's economic resilience underscores why confidence in its growth potential remains well-founded.

As the Year of the Dragon draws to a close, the Chinese economy has manifested the legendary cultural symbol of might in 2024. A

thorough review of the country's 2024 economic performance will be possible as some key growth figures are about to be released on Friday.

A set of disclosed data already pointed to solid advances in its pursuit of high-quality development. Grain output, new energy vehicle production, railway passenger trips and trade volume, among others, all logged new highs.

These robust figures, however, did not come easily. China's economic growth last year traced a fluctuating trajectory: after a strong start, the economy faced increasing downward pressure in the second and third quarters, before rebounding in recent months.

In a timely and well-coordinated response to the evolving economic landscape, Chinese authorities have rolled out a comprehensive set of policies to stimulate growth since late September, while the implementation of reforms outlined in a key July meeting has been unlocking growth potential. These combined efforts have buttressed the economy, with the manufacturing purchasing managers' index staying in expansionary territory for three consecutive months since October. Meanwhile, the housing market experienced positive shifts in both transaction volumes and prices. The country's fiscal revenue growth turned positive in October, with recent momentum continuing to build.

China's ability to tide over difficulties in 2024 is not a rare instance. In recent years, the Chinese economy has consistently navigated a range of risks and obstacles, demonstrating remarkable resilience. For years, it has contributed around 30 percent to global economic growth.

In 2025, China will wrap up its 14th Five-Year Plan, which calls for a steady GDP expansion and more proactive efforts in the face of economic pressures such as growing trade tensions and weak domestic demand. Nevertheless, the country is confident and capable of surmounting challenges and securing a sustained economic recovery.

China's economic resilience is well-founded. It benefits from a strong capacity for innovation, a large domestic market, a well-developed industrial ecosystem, extensive infrastructure, and a vast talent pool, among others. Beyond solid fundamentals, Chinese authorities, equipped with refined macro-control acumen and a robust policy toolkit, are poised to sustain economic growth while ongoing structural reforms will enhance its quality and sustainability.

While there are no certainties regarding a country's future growth trajectory, China's track record of resilience makes it a safe bet that the economy will continue to surpass expectations, defy skeptics and reward those who place their faith in its potential.

Global Times, China, January 17, 2025

China's GDP expands 5% in 2024, in line with annual growth target

By Global Times

China's GDP grew 5 percent year-on-year to 134.9 trillion yuan (\$18.41 trillion) in 2024, according to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) on Friday. The positive expansion is in line with the country's annual growth target, demonstrating that the world's second-largest economy has successfully navigated turbulent waters last year and maintained its good growth momentum, analysts said. In the fourth quarter, China's GDP expanded 5.4 percent year-on-year, NBS data showed. The reading in the fourth quarter accelerated from the 4.6-percent growth recorded in the third quarter and also represented the highest quarterly growth of the year. Chinese economists said that was partly driven by the manifestation of a package of incremental policies that have effectively shored up domestic consumption and lifted up market expectation. China's GDP grew by 5.3 percent and 4.7 percent in the first and second quarter of 2024, respectively. Chinese economy has achieved a relatively stable growth last year despite immense pressure ranging from a complex global environment, insufficient domestic demand to rising geopolitical uncertainties, which is not an easy task, Tian Yun, an economist

based in Beijing, told the Global Times. He added that while tackling with those downward pressures, China has gradually established a mechanism for endogenous and innovative growth, which is propelled by industries involving new quality productive forces such as artificial intelligence. In 2024, the added value of industrial enterprises above designated size increased by 5.8 percent year-on-year, while fixed-asset investment also edging up by 3.2 percent, according to NBS. In terms of domestic consumption, the retail sales of consumer goods in the first three quarters were up 3.5 percent, NBS data showed.

"Chinese policymakers have introduced a series of incremental policies since September, and key economic indicators have gradually stabilized after several months of adjustments. Following that, more measures have been launched intensively at the beginning of 2025, and the continuity of these policies has positive significance for boosting market confidence and promoting high-quality economic development," Yao Jingyuan, a special researcher of the Counselors' Office of the State Council, told the Global Times.

Chinese analysts noted that the slew of measures are targeted to address key structural contradictions of the economy, such as shoring up domestic demand with trade-in programs, driving up various investment initiatives and stabilizing property market downturn. The effective implementation of macro-policy support is one of the important foundations to achieve China's annual economic growth target, Li Changan, a professor at the Academy of China Open Economy Studies at the University of International Business and Economics, told the Global Times.

China Daily, China, January 17, 2025

China reports 5% GDP growth in 2024

By Ouyang Shijia

China's gross domestic product expanded by 5 percent in 2024 - meeting the country's preset annual growth target of around 5 percent, fueled by a slew of policy measures

taking effect gradually last year, official data showed on Friday.

The country's annual GDP came in at 134.9 trillion yuan (\$18.4 trillion) in 2024, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. For the fourth quarter of 2024, the Chinese economy grew 5.4 percent year-on-year, following a 4.6 percent growth in the third quarter.

China's value-added industrial output grew by 5.8 percent year-on-year in 2024. The figure rose by 6.2 percent in December following a 5.4 percent growth in November. Retail sales, a key measurement of consumer spending, grew by 3.5 percent for the year, while retail sales in December increased by 3.7 percent versus the 3 percent growth recorded a month earlier.

Fixed-asset investment - a gauge of expenditures on items including infrastructure, property, machinery and equipment - rose by 3.2 percent in 2024, while in the first 11 months, it grew by 3.3 percent.

The surveyed urban jobless rate came in at 5.1 percent in December versus 5 percent in November, according to the NBS.

NBS data showed over the past five years, China's contribution to global economic growth has averaged around 30 percent, making it the largest driver of growth for the world economy.

Looking ahead, Zhang Ming, deputy director of the Institute of Finance and Banking, which is part of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said China's annual GDP growth rate is likely to reach 4.7 percent to 5 percent in 2025 if the government takes expansionary moves in macroeconomic adjustments.

People's Daily, China, January 18, 2025

China achieves 2024 growth target, bolsters global economy

*** China's GDP grew 5 percent year on year in 2024, meeting the government's full-year target.**

*** Boosted by pro-growth measures, China's GDP growth quickened to 5.4 percent in Q4.**

*** Official said China's current potential economic growth rate remains at a medium to high level.**

BEIJING, Jan. 17 (Xinhua) -- China's economy reached its 2024 growth target despite a complex domestic and global landscape, providing much-needed certainty and confidence to the global economy.

The world's second-largest economy expanded 5 percent year on year in 2024, with its gross domestic product (GDP) reaching 134.9084 trillion yuan (about 18.77 trillion U.S. dollars), the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) said Friday.

Kang Yi, head of the NBS, described the economic achievements as "hard-won," and said they would provide a solid foundation for achieving goals outlined in the country's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025).

China's growth rate is among the highest of the world's major economies, reinforcing its continued role as a key driver of global economic growth, Kang told a press conference.

ECONOMIC REBOUND

In the fourth quarter of 2024, the economy expanded 5.4 percent year on year, faster than the growth rate of 4.6 percent recorded in the previous quarter, according to the NBS.

On a quarterly basis, China's GDP grew by 1.6 percent in October-December 2024, reflecting an acceleration from the 0.9 percent increase in the third quarter.

The acceleration came despite various challenges. Domestically, consumer spending growth remained modest, many enterprises faced operational difficulties, employment pressure persisted, and risks in certain sectors continued to pose concerns. Globally, geopolitical conflicts and rising protectionism added to the complexities already confronting China's economy.

Value-added industrial output went up 5.8 percent year on year in 2024, accelerating from 4.6 percent growth achieved in 2023. Retail sales, a main gauge of consumption, gained 3.5 percent year on year, while fixed-asset investment expanded 3.2 percent, according to the NBS.

During the past year, China has made significant strides in its pursuit of high-quality development, achieving record highs in grain output, new energy vehicle production, railway trips, and foreign trade volume, among other key indicators.

Its policy push to foster new quality productive forces has accelerated the upgrading of traditional industries, the development of emerging sectors, the planning of future industries, and the building of a modern industrial system.

The Global Innovation Index 2024, released by the World Intellectual Property Organization, ranks China 11th among the world's most innovative economies, up one spot from the previous year.

POLICY BOOSTS

Since September, China has unveiled a series of measures to boost the economy. These include cuts in the market-based benchmark lending rates and banks' reserve requirement ratios, and a package of 10 trillion yuan in new fiscal funding to address local government debt risks. A trade-in program for consumer goods such as appliances and automobiles was expanded to revive consumption.

Authorities have taken steps to create a more favorable business environment for all entities. Efforts to combat cross-region, profit-driven law enforcement -- referred to as "distant fishing," which typically targets private entrepreneurs beyond local jurisdictions -- have intensified, while restrictions on foreign investment have been further relaxed.

In the real estate sector, adjustments have also been made to home purchase mortgage rates, transaction taxes and downpayment ratios in order to stabilize the market and reverse a downturn.

These policies have played a "decisive role" in boosting economic rebound in the fourth quarter and achieving the full-year target, Kang said.

He noted that, despite its large GDP, China remains a developing country, with a big gap in per-capita GDP compared to developed nations. He cautioned that imbalances and

inadequacies in development remain prominent, and substantial efforts are still required to achieve the long-term objectives set for 2035.

Looking ahead, China plans a stronger macroeconomic policy push for 2025. Authorities have pledged to adopt a more proactive fiscal policy and a moderately loose monetary policy, strengthen unconventional counter-cyclical adjustments, and expand domestic demand across all sectors.

As part of the policy push, the country will significantly increase the size of its fiscal deficit in 2025, and allocate a larger scale of government bonds, including ultra-long special treasury bonds and local government special bonds, according to Vice Minister of Finance Liao Min.

Final details, including this year's GDP growth target, deficit-to-GDP ratio and other arrangements, will be available during this year's annual sessions of China's top legislature and political advisory body in March.

ROBUST ENGINE

Contributing around 30 percent to global economic growth annually in recent years, China has been the largest engine driving the world economy, Kang noted.

As the world's second-largest importer and a major trading partner of more than 150 countries and regions, China's unwavering commitment to opening up and sharing development benefits with others has created new opportunities for the growth of other countries, according to analysts.

For seven consecutive years, China has hosted the China International Import Expo, inviting businesses from around the globe to explore the vast potential of its consumer market. Having fully opened its manufacturing sector to foreign investors, China is committed to further opening up sectors such as telecommunications, education, medical services, and more.

The steady growth of China's economy and the continuous expansion of high-standard opening up are the greatest sources of confidence for foreign investors to increase their stake in China, Chinese Foreign Ministry

spokesperson Guo Jiakun told a press conference last week.

In December, the World Bank raised its forecast for China's economic growth in 2025, citing "higher-than-expected fiscal spending and more decisive policy actions to stabilize the property sector, following recent guidance from policymakers," which could push growth above baseline expectations.

Noting that China's current potential economic growth rate remains at a medium to high level, Kang expressed confidence in the country's economic development prospects for 2025, despite the potential for worsening adverse effects stemming from changes in the external environment.

"China's extensive experience in macro control, along with the willingness of our enterprises to pioneer and the hardworking nature and wisdom of our people, have together strengthened our confidence in promoting high-quality development and addressing risks and challenges," he said.

Global Times, China, January 18, 2025

Fruitful 5 percent growth is certainty that China's economy brings to world: Global Times editorial

By Global Times

The data released by China's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) on January 17 shows that the country's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2024 reached a record 134.9084 trillion yuan (about \$18.77 trillion), which was 5 percent higher than the previous year. The main goals and tasks of economic and social development were successfully accomplished. When talking about how to evaluate China's economic performance in 2024, the NBS used the term "hard-won" five times in a row, which shows that the 5 percent growth rate conveys a wealth of information. So, how should we objectively view China's 5 percent economic growth?

Whether it's the 5 percent growth rate that is among the highest in the world's major economies, or the GDP exceeding 130 trillion yuan for the first time and steadily sitting at second place globally, it is not easy to realize this achievement under the complex and severe situation of increasing external

pressure and internal difficulties last year. And that makes this "report card" even more inspiring. As NBS head Kang Yi said at the press conference, this means that China's economic strength, scientific and technological strength and comprehensive national power have leaped to a new level. It also means that the country's development is based on a firmer foundation, under better conditions as well as with more dynamism and greater resistance to risks. Previously, some believed that China's economic performance "exceeded expectations" due to luck. However, China's economy has always "exceeded expectations," which obviously cannot be explained by "luck." This means that China still has a lot of effective tools in its policy "toolbox," particularly the introduction and implementation of the policy package following the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee's meeting on September 26, 2024, which led to a strong upturn in the economy in the fourth quarter. At the same time, China has insisted on a parallel focus on exports and imports, with zero-tariff treatment on 100 percent of tariff lines to the least developed countries with which it has diplomatic relations and a number of consecutive successful import exhibitions. It should be said that China has, for some time now, presented well its characteristics as a "major economic power," contributing to the systematic circulation of the world economy and realizing its own development in the process. This is the deep-rooted certainty of China's economy, and it is also the basis for our confidence in China's future. In recent years, China's annual contribution to global economic growth has consistently been around 30 percent. In 2024, the economic increment alone is equivalent to the annual economic output of a medium-sized country. China's large economic scale, significant growth increment, and vast market are natural advantages for its economic development. More importantly, China is the only country with industries across all categories in the UN

industrial classification. Moreover, we are accelerating the upgrading of traditional industries and fostering new growth drivers through technological innovation. Several sets of data from the past year's "report card" stand out: China's production of new energy vehicles, integrated circuits and industrial robots grew by 38.7 percent, 22.2 percent and 14.2 percent, respectively, while investment in high-tech industries grew by 8 percent. This demonstrates that we have greater confidence in addressing risks and challenges and stronger, higher-quality capabilities to make new contributions to the global economy.

It is worth highlighting that China achieved its 5 percent growth target, with import and export data standing out prominently. Over the past year, China has continued to provide high-quality and affordable goods to the world, helping some countries ease inflationary pressures while supporting the development of green energy in others. At the same time, China's imports have also maintained growth, contributing to global economic expansion.

From a medium-term perspective, China continues to be the largest contributor to global economic growth. This reflects the true interaction between China's economy and the rest of the world. Precisely because China still holds the advantage of "timing" and "momentum" in development, the dynamism of the Chinese economy serves as a positive catalyst for the global economy. The Chinese people place great emphasis on practical action. Once a goal is set, they work steadily and diligently to achieve it. This year marks the final year of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025), and many regions across the country have demonstrated a strong determination to "make doing our top priority" and "break waves and forge ahead." This reflects the drive and pioneering spirit of Chinese society. Currently, many countries are emphasizing the importance of confidence, but true confidence can only arise from solid efforts. In a nation with a population of over 1.4 billion, the internal driving force for

development continues to surge forward with vigor. For the world, China's mega-market is still unleashing its energy for global trade, and the rapid rise of various sectors, including the digital economy, green energy and advanced manufacturing, will become a key force leading future development. China's economy remains stable and continues to achieve breakthroughs and advancements. A recent global opinion poll on China's international image conducted by Global Times, involving more than 51,000 respondents from 46 countries, revealed that more than 90 percent of foreign respondents believe that China's economy will continue to grow in the next decade, and nearly 60 percent believe that China is a major driving force of world economic growth. The giant ship of China's economy has always confidently navigated through storms and waves. As a major engine of world economic growth, China's firm promotion of high-quality development and high-level opening-up will make the world feel such certainty and gain more confidence from it. [Global Times, China, January 18, 2025](#)

China's 2024 GDP growth 'ahead of expectations,' thanks to policy supports: lead analyst at global ratings firm

By Global Times

China's GDP growth rate in 2024 exceeded expectations, as effective policy supports underpinned economic resilience, a lead analyst at a global ratings agency told the Global Times on Saturday. "China's economy rebounded more than we had anticipated in the fourth quarter on the back of a step-up in fiscal stimulus and strong export performance. The acceleration in the final quarter of the year helped China achieve its 5 percent target for the full year 2024, coming in slightly ahead of our expectations of 4.8 percent," Jeremy Zook, lead analyst for China at US-based Fitch Ratings, said in a note sent to the Global Times. China's GDP grew 5 percent year-on-year to 134.9 trillion yuan (\$18.41 trillion) in 2024, breaking the 130-trillion-yuan mark for the first time, according to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) on Friday.

The growth rate was in line with the country's annual growth target of around 5 percent.

Zook noted that China's fiscal policy turned sharply expansionary in the second half of 2024, underpinning the economy's resilient performance and offsetting some of the domestic demand challenges. External demand has also been quite supportive of growth reflected by robust export growth, which created positive spillovers to industrial production activity, the analyst said. Other analysts at international organizations also attributed China's better-than-expected GDP growth rate to effective policy supports, according to China Media Group (CMG). Tamas Hajba, senior advisor for China and head of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Beijing Office, said that China made strides in transitioning to a sustainable growth model in 2024 and effectively utilized fiscal and monetary policies to stimulate economic activity, CMG reported on Saturday.

"China has also introduced measures to support consumption, which certainly has potential and will become an important driver of China's economic growth," Hajba said, adding that despite some economic headwinds and uncertainties in external markets, China has both potential and room for structural reforms in 2025 and a solid foundation for sustained growth. Regarding China's economic outlook in 2025, Xu Xiangrong, chief China economist at Citigroup, said that China's GDP growth target for 2025 is expected to remain "around 5 percent," according to a statement sent the US bank sent to the Global Times. With the support of policies, infrastructure investment and manufacturing investment are expected to continue to maintain high single-digit growth, offsetting the downward pressure on real estate investment, Xu said.

China Daily, China, January 18, 2025

GDP growth of 5% hits target

By OUYANG SHIJIA and ZHOU LANXU

China's gross domestic product expanded 5 percent in 2024, official data showed on Friday, which is in line with the country's

preset target of around 5 percent and provides a solid base for stabilizing the economy this year.

Economists said China's economy will likely continue to grow at around 5 percent this year if the government adopts more expansionary moves for macroeconomic adjustment to boost domestic demand.

In addition, economists said they expect more policy easing in 2025 to offset the headwinds from a more complicated and grimmer external environment, with the shift toward consumption-driven and high-quality growth seen as the key to fostering the economy's endogenous growth momentum.

The country's annual GDP came in at 134.9 trillion yuan (\$18.4 trillion) in 2024, data from the National Bureau of Statistics showed on Friday. In the fourth quarter of last year, the Chinese economy grew 5.4 percent year-on-year, following 4.6 percent growth in the third quarter.

"China's GDP for the first time surpassed 130 trillion yuan last year, maintaining its position as the world's second-largest economy," Kang Yi, head of the NBS, said at a news conference in Beijing on Friday. "China is among the top ranks of major economies in terms of annual growth rate, and it continues to serve as a key growth driver for global economic growth."

Citing the latest economic indicators, Jeremy Zook, lead analyst for China at Fitch Ratings, said China's economy rebounded more than anticipated in the fourth quarter on the back of a step-up in fiscal stimulus and strong export performance.

"This has created positive spillovers to industrial production activity, which performed well in December," Zook said.

NBS data showed that China's value-added industrial output grew 6.2 percent year-on-year in December, following 5.4 percent growth in November.

Zook noted that domestic activity remains a clear challenge for the economy, stemming from weak consumer confidence.

Retail sales, a key measurement of consumer spending, increased 3.7 percent year-on-year in December, compared with the 3 percent

growth recorded a month earlier. China's fixed-asset investment rose 3.2 percent in 2024, and in the first 11 months it grew 3.3 percent.

As increasing external challenges from a likely rise in trade tensions with the United States may add to headwinds from the still subdued domestic demand, Zook said his team expects "a considerable step-up in fiscal policy in 2025 to help mitigate part of the impact from an expected rise in US tariffs and to help boost domestic confidence".

"Ultimately, the ability of fiscal policy in sustainably boosting domestic demand ... will likely depend on whether it is effectively targeted to spur a recovery in household confidence," he added.

As part of the country's ongoing efforts to spur consumption, the Ministry of Commerce, together with several other central departments, issued a notice on Friday about extending the program for auto trade-in deals.

To provide an incentive for consumers to replace old vehicles with new ones, consumers who purchase new energy vehicles will be eligible for subsidies of 20,000 yuan, while those who purchase gasoline-powered passenger vehicles will be eligible for subsidies of 15,000 yuan, according to the new policy.

The National Development and Reform Commission announced earlier this month that the country will significantly increase the issuance of ultra-long-term special treasury bonds in 2025 to stimulate consumption and fund key national projects. In addition, it will extend the programs for large-scale equipment upgrades and trade-in deals for consumer goods and expand the scope to more consumption fields.

Louise Loo, lead economist at British think tank Oxford Economics, said, "With recent policy signals remaining decidedly dovish and authorities recognizing the importance of finding a sustainable growth engine, the coming months will likely feature more consumption-oriented stimulus."

Wang Tao, head of Asia economics and chief China economist at UBS Investment Bank,

said she expects stronger macroeconomic policy support to be launched this year, with total government bond issuance likely to increase by more than 3 trillion yuan compared with last year, while the budgetary deficit-to-GDP ratio is likely to rise to nearly 4 percent, compared with 3 percent in 2024.

Wang also said that, apart from financing the investments of key projects and infrastructure, this year's fiscal stimulus may become more oriented to supporting consumption by boosting expenditures on pensions, medical insurance and childbirth subsidies, while doubling the support for trade-in deals for consumer goods.

With a package of incremental policies continuously taking effect this year and more policy easing in the pipeline, Zhang Yongjun, secretary-general of the China Center for International Economic Exchanges, said China's economy will likely expand by around 5 percent in 2025.

People's Daily, China, January 20, 2025

Xizang's GDP grows by 6.3% in 2024, targeting 7-8% expansion in 2025

The GDP of Southwest China's Xizang Autonomous Region expanded by 6.3 percent in 2024, continuing its positive trajectory of stable development, according to the region's government work report released on Sunday. The growth rate of Xizang's key economic indicators in the past year ranked among the top in China, Gama Cedain, acting chairman of the regional government, said in a report delivered to the annual session of the regional people's congress on Sunday.

The region has set ambitious economic and social development goals for 2025, with a GDP growth target of between 7 to 8 percent, Gama said.

Infrastructure construction, eco-environmental conservation, and reconstruction in the earthquake-affected areas have been identified as key priorities in the government work report.

In 2024, per capita disposable income for urban residents in Xizang grew by 6.8 percent, while rural residents saw an increase of 8.3 percent, according to official data.

The region's total fixed asset investment grew by 19.6 percent, retail sales of consumer goods increased by 7.2 percent year-on-year, with the added value of large-scale industrial enterprises increasing by 18.3 percent and the total import-export trade volume growing by 15.4 percent.

Xizang made notable progress in infrastructure, investing over 170 billion yuan (\$23.2 billion) across 21 major projects. Among the projects was the Lhasa-Xigaze Highway, which began operating in 2024.

In the year of 2025, the region plans to increase investment to over 200 billion yuan in the construction of major projects, including the Sichuan-Xizang Railway, according to the report.

In the past year, the cultural sector saw a 22 percent year-on-year increase in output value, receiving 16 percent more visitors, and total tourism spending increased by 15 percent, according to the regional government.

In terms of new energy development, Xizang set up a dedicated fund for the clean energy industry, initially allocating 5 billion yuan in 2024, with installed power capacity reaching 27.05 million kilowatts.

Xizang's foreign trade remained dynamic in 2024. From January to November, its total import-export trade reached 11.22 billion yuan, up by 9.4 percent year-on-year.

Thanks to government policy support, in the first 11 months of 2024, Xizang reopened all 14 traditional border trade points with Nepal, enabling transactions totaling 57.45 million yuan, per the report.

This year will commemorate the 60th anniversary of the founding of Xizang Autonomous Region.

People's Daily, China, January 23, 2025

Chinese economy demonstrates precious resilience

By He Yin

China recently unveiled its economic performance for 2024, revealing a total economic output of 134.9 trillion yuan (\$18.44 trillion), marking a 5.0 percent increase from the previous year. This not only highlights the robust resilience of the Chinese

economy but also presents a promising outlook for high-quality development to the world.

In the midst of a sluggish global economic recovery, the resilience of major economies holds significant value.

Confronted with a complex and challenging landscape characterized by mounting external pressures and internal obstacles, China achieved a milestone in 2024 as its total economic output exceeded 130 trillion yuan for the first time.

With a growth rate that places it at the forefront among major world economies, China continues to serve as a pivotal driving force for global economic expansion.

Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas, chief economist of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), characterized this development as a "positive surprise." Subsequently, the IMF revised its growth projections for the Chinese economy in 2025 upwards in its most recent World Economic Outlook report.

Every day in China, the economy buzzes with activity: more than 80,000 vehicles are freshly minted, 3.4 million smartphones are crafted, and over 470 million parcels embark on their journeys. These staggering numbers vividly illustrate the sheer dynamism of China's economy.

With a robust economic foundation, a colossal market, and a comprehensive industrial ecosystem, China stands resilient in the face of risks and challenges.

Despite deepening adverse impacts from external changes, as well as the difficulties and challenges confronting China's economy, the country's economic strength, technological prowess, and overall national strength have reached new heights, with a more solid foundation, better conditions, stronger driving force, and enhanced resilience against risks.

China is capable of translating various favorable factors into tangible development achievements, propelling the economy to continue its positive trajectory.

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, chair of the China-Britain Business Council, remarked that the overall trend of China's economic growth is

highly positive, and China will continue to develop and play a significant role in shaping the world's future.

A foreign journalist who recently visited rural areas in China highlighted the country's innovative use of high technology to enhance food production. This included practices like vertical vegetable farming and the use of drones for monitoring and managing agricultural activities. These advanced techniques showcase how new quality productive forces are driving China's development towards higher quality and efficiency.

In the past year, China's economic structure has undergone further optimization, as evidenced by the value added of high-tech manufacturing enterprises above the designated size increasing by 8.9 percent. This growth rate surpassed that of the overall industry and equipment manufacturing sectors, highlighting the significant progress in China's high-tech manufacturing sector.

The value added of the information transmission, software, and information technology services industries all experienced double-digit growth. Additionally, there was a notable increase in the production of new energy vehicles, integrated circuits, industrial robots, and other products. These developments underscore China's focus on industrial upgrading and evolution.

China is steadfastly advancing high-level opening up, demonstrating a strong sense of responsibility amidst the intensification of trade protectionism and the trend of global economic fragmentation.

In 2024, China's total goods import and export volume reached 43.8 trillion yuan, marking a five percent increase and hitting a historic high. The country is steadily expanding institutional opening up, deepening institutional reforms for promoting foreign investment, introducing more policies for voluntary and unilateral opening up, expanding the globally oriented network of high-standard free trade areas, and comprehensively relaxing and optimizing visa-free transit policies.

China's endeavor to promote high-quality development through high-level opening up is another important reason for the strong resilience of the Chinese economy.

According to statistics, in 2024, China's investment structure continued to improve, with 52,000 foreign-funded enterprises established in the first 11 months, with total investment of 749.7 billion yuan.

Marcos Pires, director of the Institute of Economics and International Studies at Sao Paulo State University in Brazil, believes that China's ongoing commitment to reform and opening up has not only driven its own development but also facilitated its integration into the global economy, consistently contributing to the progress and prosperity of the world.

The dominating trend of a sound Chinese economy for the long term and the elements supporting it have not changed, and the momentum for high-quality development remains unchanged. Despite the challenges on the path ahead, China is confident in its ability to continue driving high-quality economic growth, bringing new surprises and opportunities to the world.

People's Daily, China, January 24, 2025

Chinese economy demonstrates precious resilience

By He Yin

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China is capable of translating various favorable factors into tangible development achievements, propelling the economy to continue its positive trajectory.

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, chair of the China-Britain Business Council, remarked that the overall trend of China's economic growth is highly positive, and China will continue to develop and play a significant role in shaping the world's future.

A foreign journalist who recently visited rural areas in China highlighted the country's innovative use of high technology to enhance food production. This included practices like vertical vegetable farming and the use of drones for monitoring and managing agricultural activities. These advanced techniques showcase how new quality productive forces are driving China's

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China Daily, China, January 25, 2025

Consumers to play bigger role in spurring growth

China's consumption, powered by a more proactive fiscal policy and a moderately loose monetary policy, will bring out greater vitality and play a bigger role in spurring overall economic growth this year, said officials and executives.

Consumer goods trade-in initiatives will serve a strong catalyst in boosting market sentiment and fueling consumer spending in the world's second-largest economy, in the face of escalating trade barriers and the tepid appetite in the property market, they added.

China has put scaling up domestic demand high on its policy agenda this year, with expanding consumption a top priority. Policymakers have fleshed out a set of specific measures to this end, Vice-Minister of Commerce Sheng Qiuping said at a news conference.

"Governmental stimulus is key to elevating consumer sentiment, and this significant support will be instrumental in upgrading consumption and driving high-quality development," said Jean-Paul Agon, chairman of L'Oreal Group.

In particular, the country's trade-in initiatives, which have contributed to a more than 1 percentage point increase in the annual growth of the country's total retail sales last year, will cover a wider range of consumer goods and offer more attractive incentives this year, Sheng said.

China is likely to double the funding for its consumer goods trade-in initiatives this year, reaching 300 billion yuan (\$41.4 billion), said Wang Qing, chief macroeconomic analyst at Golden Credit Rating International.

This move is forecast to lead to an additional 750 billion yuan in consumption in 2025, equivalent to a 1.5 percentage point acceleration in the growth rate of total retail sales of consumer goods, Wang added.

As of Thursday, the government has received 34,000 applications for car trade-ins so far this year, while 844,000 consumers have purchased more than 1 million home appliances under the initiative, data from the ministry showed.

Notably, some 7.92 million consumers have already applied for 10.79 million digital devices, since the trade-in program in this newly added category began on Monday, according to the ministry.

These consumption-boosting initiatives are off to a good start, as they align with the growing consumer desire for technological innovation, improved efficiency and enhanced aesthetics, Wang said.

In China's rapidly evolving consumer market, marked by a constant stream of new products and technologies, the key to success is not just the sheer volume of offerings, but rather the level of personalization, sophistication and relevance that companies can bring to the table, said Victor Leal Negre, senior vice-president of Greater China Grooming at Procter & Gamble.

"Each year, we feel the evolving consumption demands of Chinese consumers, which translates into our product innovations, allowing us to serve consumers more effectively," Negre said.

Looking ahead to this year, China will continue to expand high-level opening-up, particularly in the services sector, which will further strengthen its role in stabilizing growth, employment and household incomes, Zhu said.

Meanwhile, the government can offer more policy support to help localities purchase existing housing stock for affordable and rental housing purposes, which will also

address the financing difficulties faced by real estate developers, Zhu added.

With the gradual stabilization of the real estate market and the deepening implementation of government policies to stimulate consumption, consumer confidence is expected to rebound substantially in the next 12 to 18 months, global management consultancy McKinsey & Company said in a report in October.

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China Daily, China, January 28, 2025

Local to-do lists underscore China's economic vitality

Xinhua

In the run-up to Chinese New Year, the local "two sessions" meetings, which recently concluded, have devised pragmatic roadmaps for high-quality growth in 2025, highlighting the Chinese economy's remarkable resilience and dynamic potential.

Provincial-level "two sessions" -- the annual meetings of provincial legislative and political advisory bodies -- generally take place before the national "two sessions" and offer a glimpse into the country's economic operations for the year ahead. The world's second-largest economy met its annual growth target in 2024, with GDP expanding 5 percent year on year thanks to a raft of pro-growth policies.

Based on government reports unveiled at local "two sessions," most of China's provincial-level regions have set their local GDP growth targets for 2025 at about 5 percent or higher. These local growth targets provide a clue to the prospects of the national economy in the final year of the country's 14th Five-Year Plan.

Guangdong, a manufacturing hub in south China, has announced a growth target of around 5 percent for 2025. In the past year, Guangdong became the first province to boast a GDP of 14 trillion yuan (\$1.95 trillion dollars), exceeding that of the Republic of Korea.

Jiangsu province, another economic powerhouse, has projected growth of over 5 percent for this year, backed by a structural optimization strategy focused on "eliminating

outdated production capacities" and "nurturing future industries." This approach of balancing quality with quantity is at the heart of China's sustainable economic development.

New quality productive forces, industrial upgrades and technological innovation have continued to figure prominently in local economic roadmaps. Beijing's government work report highlights a focus on 20 emerging sectors, including humanoid robotics, bio-manufacturing and new materials. Such initiatives will help solidify the foundation for economic stability and accumulate momentum for future progress.

Thanks to the country's visa-free policy and various incentives, cultural and tourism sectors expect a strong growth this year. The ongoing winter tourism boom and the upcoming Spring Festival holiday may well secure a good start in the sectors. Shaanxi province, a major tourism power in northwest China, reaped a double-digit growth in cultural and tourism income in 2024, the province expects a further growth of over 5 percent this year.

In response to fluctuating external demand, local governments have zeroed in on expanding domestic consumption as a key growth driver. Many provinces and cities are focusing on upgrading equipment and encouraging the replacement of old consumer goods, including automotive and household appliances.

Some regions also place emphasis on investment. Shanghai is pushing forward major projects with a total investment of 240 billion yuan. Such moves are set to create a positive cycle of investment and consumption to reinforce economic stability.

Far from retreating under external pressure, China is expanding its opening-up efforts to counteract the risks of de-globalization. Jiangsu is implementing measures to eliminate restrictions on foreign investment in the manufacturing sector, offering incentives for foreign enterprises to reinvest profits, and supporting pilot zones to attract foreign capital in industries like telecommunication and health care.

High-quality development and high-standard opening up are China's answer to an uncertain external environment. Local governments are putting them into practice. Both the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have recently raised their forecasts for China's economic growth in 2025. As China has been a major engine for global economic growth, this should be a shot in the arm for a world eager to walk out years of sluggish growth.

China Daily, China, January 28, 2025

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Global Times, China, January 31, 2025

China's exports to over 160 countries, regions achieve growth in 2024

By Xinhua

China's exports to over 160 countries and regions saw growth in 2024, according to the General Administration of Customs (GAC). The country's exports grew 7.1 percent year on year, reaching 25.45 trillion yuan (about 3.55 trillion U.S. dollars) last year, marking the eighth consecutive year of growth, according to the latest data released by the GAC.

Exports to Brazil, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia increased by 23.3 percent, 19.2 percent and 18.2 percent year on year, respectively. Exports to ASEAN countries and nations participating in the Belt and Road Initiative grew by 13.4 percent and 9.6 percent, respectively. Meanwhile, exports to traditional markets, such as the European Union and the United States, rose by 4.3 percent and 6.1 percent, respectively. Lyu Daliang, a GAC official, said that despite growing uncertainties and challenges, China's exports -- characterized by a wide range of products -- are expected to remain resilient and dynamic, supported by both incremental and existing policies.

China Daily, China, January 24, 2025

China's imports to increase despite trade frictions

By WANG KEJU

China will actively expand imports this year even in the face of escalating trade protectionism, transforming its super-sized market into a shared global one that injects fresh momentum into the global economy, officials and experts said on Thursday.

"China's ongoing efforts to scale up its imports represent a proactive response to its responsibilities as a major world economy, and a significant contribution to global economic development," He Yadong, a spokesman for the Ministry of Commerce, said at a news conference.

China's core advantages as a massive, multilayered consumer market with immense growth potential have not changed, nor has its attitude of effectively implementing import expansion policies, He said.

China's total imports reached a record-breaking 18 trillion yuan (\$2.47 trillion) in 2024, marking a 2.3 percent year-on-year increase and solidifying the country's position as the world's second-largest import market for a 16th consecutive year, data from the ministry showed.

Sang Baichuan, dean of the University of International Business and Economics' Institute of International Economy, said that China's proactive stance toward greater openness stands in sharp contrast to the protectionist tendencies of certain countries, especially in the current global landscape characterized by rampant trade protectionism.

The United States on Tuesday floated a 10 percent tariff on imports of Chinese-made goods as soon as Feb 1.

"Tariff measures are not beneficial for either China or the US, and they also harm the interests of the entire world," said the ministry's spokesman.

China is willing to work with the US on the basis of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation to steer the countries' economic and trade relations toward a stable, healthy and sustainable path, He added.

"The core of China-US economic and trade relations is mutual benefit and win-win outcomes," He said. "The ministry has been in regular communication with its US counterparts to this end."

China hopes to strengthen dialogue and consultation with the US, appropriately manage differences, and expand mutually beneficial cooperation, He added.

The White House did not sign any immediate executive orders imposing additional tariffs on China, but it directed relevant agencies to investigate and remedy persistent trade deficits.

With a population of over 1.4 billion and the world's largest and fastest-growing middle-income group, China's market potential is immense, providing ample opportunities for expanding imports, including high-quality US products and services to meet the country's rapidly expanding market demand, Sang said.

"Strengthening trade collaboration between the two countries can help optimize the allocation of resources and drive economic structural adjustments in both countries. This, in turn, can deepen the mutually beneficial nature of the China-US economic relationship," Sang said.

Strengthening trade ties between the world's two largest economies can also bolster global market confidence and maintain the stability of global industrial and supply chains, Sang added.

China Daily, China, January 17, 2025

High-tech sectors to attract more FDI

By ZHONG NAN

Fueled by advancements in high-tech manufacturing, green energy and consumer goods industries, foreign direct investment (FDI) into China will continue to recover this year, market watchers and business executives said.

Despite challenges like disruptions in global supply chains, escalating geopolitical tensions and a slow economic recovery in several regions, multinational corporations have shifted their investment focus from building factories to fostering innovation, developing supply chains and advancing green industries in China, they said.

A total of 52,379 new foreign-invested enterprises were established across China in January-November, representing a year-on-year growth of 8.9 percent. This marks the highest level ever for the same time frame, data from the Ministry of Commerce showed.

FDI in actual use in the Chinese mainland climbed 6 percent year-on-year in November from the same period the previous year, in a

sign of growing foreign investor confidence in the nation's market potential and the effectiveness of policies supporting foreign investment.

"The immense opportunities for investing in China are not only found in new technologies and emerging fields, but also in the continuously upgraded and evolving modern industrial system," said Wan Zhe, a professor at the Belt and Road School of Beijing Normal University.

Since last year, China has removed all market access restrictions for foreign investors in the manufacturing sector, and has continuously relaxed market access in industries such as telecommunications and healthcare.

Foreign investments in China are increasingly concentrated in high-tech sectors, accelerating integration into the high-quality development framework, Wan said.

Henkel, a German industrial and consumer goods company, has been heading in that direction. The company's new plant, built with an investment of 900 million yuan (\$122.75 million), is expected to begin test production in Yantai, Shandong province, in early 2025, strengthening its ability to supply high-end adhesives for industries such as electronics and automotive.

"We are also planning to launch our new inspiration center for adhesive technologies in Shanghai this year, boosting our innovation capabilities for industrial businesses across China and the broader Asia-Pacific region," said Anna An, president of Henkel Greater China.

An said that Henkel is optimistic about the long-term potential of the Chinese market, driven by the country's economic resilience and commitment to innovation and opening-up.

"The tone-setting Central Economic Work Conference held in December emphasized technological innovation and the promotion of consumption, creating significant opportunities for multinational companies like Henkel," she added.

Also upbeat about the Chinese market, Treasury Wine Estates, Australia's largest winemaker by sales revenue and the parent

company of Australian wine brand Penfolds, announced last month that it had entered into an agreement to acquire a 75 percent equity stake in Ningxia Stone & Moon Winery Co Ltd in Ningxia Hui autonomous region for 130 million yuan.

"This acquisition aligns with our vision to grow our presence in luxury wines in key international markets while strengthening our commitment and investment in China's wine industry," said Tim Ford, CEO of TWE, noting that the transaction will be completed in the first half of this year.

The national commerce work conference, held in Beijing over the weekend, highlighted the government's commitment to enhancing efforts to attract foreign investment, reducing restrictions in the negative list, improving business environment and steadily advancing institutional openness this year.

Through comprehensive efforts, China has steadily expanded the scope of international cooperation, inviting more global partners to share in the benefits, said Liu Chunsheng, an associate professor at Central University of Finance and Economics in Beijing.

China has decided to abolish the terms of a previous circular in 2011 and lift restrictions on foreign companies using domestic loans to carry out equity investments to encourage multinational companies in establishing headquarters-type institutions in the country, the Ministry of Commerce announced last week.

The scale of reinvestment by foreign-funded companies in China has continued to grow in recent years, and some foreign businesses have expressed hope for the removal of restrictions to address their capital needs for reinvestment through domestic loans.

People's Daily, China, January 20, 2025

China continues expanding circle of friends in foreign trade

By He Yin

In 2024, 88.38 million customs declarations were processed in China, which indicates a stable rise in the total volume, incremental growth, and quality of China's foreign trade.

According to data released by China's General Administration of Customs, the country's

total goods imports and exports reached 43.85 trillion yuan (about \$6 trillion) in 2024, up 5 percent year on year, hitting a record high.

China's foreign trade growth reached 2.1 trillion yuan in 2024, as the world's second-largest economy further consolidated its top position globally in goods trade. The structure of import and export products has also been continuously optimized and upgraded, with high-tech products reporting good growth numbers and a boom in new types of trade.

Despite the increasing challenges and uncertainties, China's foreign trade continues to show resilience, demonstrating the vitality and potential of the Chinese economy. This underscores that in the face of rising protectionism, openness and cooperation remain a strategic choice for global economic development.

The United Nations (UN) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have recently warned that rising tariffs could hamper global economic growth. As protectionism is on the rise, many countries are exploring ways to mitigate the impact of growing trade barriers on their economies.

While following an innovation-driven development approach and vigorously boosting consumption, China has been steadily advancing high-level opening up and enhancing its capacity for open and win-win cooperation amid the headwinds against globalization, with an ever-expanding "circle of friends" in foreign trade.

According to statistics, China has import and export records with almost all countries and regions designated in the UN Statistics Division. China's trade with over 160 trading partners around the world achieved growth, and the country has become a major trading partner for more than 150 countries and regions.

China's foreign trade with traditional markets, including the European Union and the United States, grew in 2024. Besides, for the first time, Belt and Road partner countries accounted for more than 50 percent of China's total foreign trade value. A significant

portion of China's foreign trade last year came from emerging markets such as ASEAN. It is the continuous expansion of opening up that further strengthens the country's foreign trade resilience.

Providing high-end, green, and intelligent products to global trading partners

At the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) recently concluded in the U.S. city of Las Vegas, American journalist Patrick George tries on Chinese electric vehicles (EVs) for three times. He was drawn by what he described as "impeccable build quality" of the Chinese EVs. He attributed the progress of China's automotive industry to copious investments, a single-minded focus on electrification and software, learning from partners, a well-established supply chain, and intense internal competition.

The popularity of Chinese products at the CES demonstrated that the upgraded version of "Made in China" is a key driver for the high-quality development of China's foreign trade. Based on the complete industrial system, China continues boosting scientific and technological innovation to develop new quality productive forces.

The upgraded Chinese manufacturing provides China's trading partners with more high-end, green, and intelligent products. For instance, AI-enabled washing machines produced by Chinese companies can automatically identify the weight and materials of clothes to be washed and select the optimal washing mode. China's smart cooking machines are equipped with different types of menus and can prepare delicious dishes only within the time of a song. As China continues to enhance its innovation capacity, Chinese products are gaining more popularity and recognition worldwide.

Opening China's huge market to share development opportunities

The vast Chinese market is another crucial factor behind the high-quality development and expanding "circle of friends" in China's foreign trade.

China has been steadily expanding voluntary and unilateral opening up as well as institutional opening up, unleashing the

potential of the massive Chinese market. These efforts have contributed to the high-quality development of the country's foreign trade, providing more market opportunities to the world.

Via the cold-chain transportation of the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor, tripe from New Zealand, greenfin horse-faced filefish from Vietnam, and other products have been transported to China and featured on Chinese hotpot menus. Fruits like Thai durians and Lao bananas enter the Chinese market through the China-Laos Railway, enriching consumption choices of the Chinese people.

On December 1, 2024, China granted zero tariff treatment to 100 percent of tariff lines from all the least developed countries that have diplomatic relations with China, which led to an 18.1 percent growth in imports from relevant countries in the month, 5.8 percentage points higher than the first eleven months in 2024. This further demonstrates the immense potential of the vast Chinese market, which is bound to provide tremendous opportunities for more countries in the world.

China's economy has a stable foundation, multiple advantages, strong resilience and great potential. The dominating trend of a sound Chinese economy for the long term and the elements supporting it have not changed. This gives China more confidence in sharing opportunities and pursuing common development with the rest of the world.

[China Daily, China, January 21, 2025](#)

Zhejiang's foreign trade hits record 5 trillion yuan

Zhejiang province's foreign trade reached a record 5.26 trillion yuan (\$718 billion) in 2024, a 7.4 percent increase year-over-year, according to Hangzhou Customs on Jan 16.

Exports surged 9.5 percent to 3.9 trillion yuan, while imports grew 1.9 percent to 1.36 trillion yuan. The province's share of China's total exports and imports rose by 0.3 percentage points.

The number of active foreign trade businesses in Zhejiang grew by 8,450 from 2023 to 119,000.

Trade with the European Union and the United States rebounded sharply, growing 7.4 percent and 13.9 percent, respectively, after declines in 2023.

Emerging markets showed strong momentum, with trade rising 3.2 percent with the Middle East, 11.8 percent with Latin America, and 7.1 percent with Africa — outpacing national averages.

Agricultural imports totaled 113.57 billion yuan, up 2.4 percent, driven by a 48.6 percent increase from the Middle East and 15.5 percent growth from Africa.

Trade through bonded zones surged 24.7 percent, significantly outpacing the national growth rate by 19.9 percentage points.

Selections from Regional Press

Defence, Nuclear Development and Space Technology

India

Defence and Security Affairs

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 25, 2025

Army gets Rs 2,402-crore hi-tech battlefield surveillance system

Tribune News Service

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh today flagged off from South Block a new hi-tech military surveillance system capable of providing a clear and multi-dimensional picture of battlefields.

Called 'Sanjay Battlefield Surveillance System', it integrates inputs from both ground and aerial battlefield sensors, processing them to confirm their accuracy and prevent duplication.

'Sanjay' then produces a common surveillance picture of battlefield, which is communicated over a secured Army data and satellite communication network.

The system is equipped with state-of-the-art sensors and cutting-edge analytics. It would monitor the country's vast land borders, prevent intrusions, assess situations with unparalleled accuracy and prove to be a force multiplier in intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, said an official. It has been developed at a cost of Rs 2,402 crore.

Allowing commanders to operate in both conventional and sub-conventional operations, the system has been indigenously and jointly developed by the Army and Bharat Electronics Limited.

"These systems will be inducted in all operational brigades, divisions and Army Corps in three phases between March and October 2025," said the Ministry of Defence.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 19, 2025

Indian Navy joins 9-nation exercise near busiest shipping route

Tribune News Service

The Indian Navy warship INS Mumbai has joined a nine-nation maritime exercise being conducted near the busiest shipping routes – the Malacca, Sunda and Lombok straits.

Among those at the exercise are the Navies of the US, the UK, Canada, France, Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. The exercise named La Perouse, which began on January 16, will continue till January 24.

The straits of Malacca, Sunda and Lombok, which are the mainstays of global maritime trade, are subject to numerous human-induced risks, such as maritime and environmental accidents, illegal immigration, drug trafficking, and also natural risks, like earthquakes and tsunamis.

Indian Navy warship INS Mumbai is participating in the exercise that aims to develop common maritime situational awareness by enhancing the cooperation in the field of maritime surveillance, maritime interdiction operations and air operations along with the conduct of progressive training and information sharing.

The exercise provides an opportunity for like-minded Navies to develop closer links in planning, coordination and information sharing for enhanced interoperability. The exercise will witness complex and advanced multi-domain exercises, including anti-air warfare, air-defence, cross deck landings and tactical manoeuvres.

Strengthening maritime safety would be the focus of this exercise, with the improvement of interoperability among the participating nations to respond collectively to maritime crisis. The exercise would train all Navies in the use of IORIS, a system for communication and coordination during maritime crisis to synchronise their efforts.

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 30, 2025

For Nirmala Sitharaman, a wishlist from the armed forces

Ajai Shukla

The military's financial planners are awaiting the Union Budget with bated breath. Since September, their various arms, services, directorates and departments have been finalising their financial wish lists for the year ahead. Soon they will know how much of that will be made available. All that is presently

clear is that the military is not among the government's top priorities. In the current year's budget, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman allocated less than 13 per cent of government expenditure to defence, continuing a multi-year trend of falling allocations.

Over the last five budgets, defence spending, as a percentage of central government spending, has fallen steadily from 13.81 per cent in 2020-21; to 13.2 per cent in 2021-22; to 13.65 per cent in 2022-23. Last year, in 2023-24, it was 13.25 per cent and this year it is testing the 13 per cent mark. As a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), defence allocations have similarly fallen from 2.4 per cent in 2020-21; to 2.12 per cent in 2021-22; to 2.1 per cent in 2022-23. Last year, in 2023-24, it dropped below the 2 per cent mark to 1.97 per cent. In the current year, it dropped to 1.9 per cent.

Defence spending as a percentage of GDP is an important marker. Spending up to 3 per cent of GDP on defence is considered acceptable by lending agencies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) charter enjoins member countries to spend at least 2 per cent of their GDP on defence, so as to contribute effectively to NATO's collective defence. China, like India, spends less than 2 per cent of its GDP on defence; while the US spends more than 4 per cent.

The services' capital spend has risen over the past four years by about Rs 40,000 crore, from Rs 1,31,697 crore in 2020-21 to Rs 1,72,000 crore in 2024-25. That averages out to a rise of about 7 per cent every year, an inadequate raise for funding a military modernisation programme as ambitious as India's Atmanirbharta (self-reliance) programme.

The distribution of the capex budget between the three services is disproportionate to the workload that each service handles. Of the 1.5 million-strong military, the army fields 1.26 million personnel, or 84 per cent of the total, with many of them embroiled in active combat in Kashmir and the northeastern

states. Yet, the army's share of the capital budget has been limited to 22-28 per cent of the total capex allocation. This leaves the army with a limited kitty from which to pay for badly needed weaponry, such as artillery guns, attack helicopters, personal protective clothing for soldiers, etc.

Meanwhile, the equipment-intensive navy, with 5.5 per cent of India's military personnel, was allocated between 31-36 per cent of the capital budget during the period 2020-2025. It remains short of warships – especially capital warships and submarines – that are essential for protecting our 7,500-kilometre coastline, over two million square kilometres of exclusive economic zone (EEZ), the Indian Ocean sea lines of communication (SLOCs) through which more than half the world's sea-borne trade passes; and global commons, such as freedom of navigation.

Paradoxically, the most worrisome equipment shortages exist in the Indian Air Force (IAF) – even though that service already gets the largest share of capex. With just 10.5 per cent of the military donning the IAF's blue uniform, the air force has been spending between 38-45 per cent of the modernisation budget. That is partly because military aircraft are prohibitively expensive: 36 Rafale fighters cost the IAF US \$8.7 billion. The defence ministry's commitment to the "Make in India" policy makes aircraft even costlier. Each Sukhoi-30MKI fighter built in Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd's (HAL's) Nashik plant costs about Rs 100 crore more than the same fighter when it is built in Russia.

At the broader level, the defence ministry receives a higher allocation than any other ministry. The broad pattern of allocations remains similar from year to year. In the current defence budget, almost 15 per cent was earmarked for sustenance and operational preparedness. About 57 per cent went on personnel costs: Including 30.7 per cent for salaries and allowances, 22.7 per cent on defence pensions and 4.1 per cent on civil organisations under the MoD. Finally, 27.7 per cent was allocated to the capital expenditure head, for modernising the country's arsenal.

Most modern militaries spend between 50-60 per cent of their total defence outlay on the capital account so that modern weaponry and equipment ensure a combat edge over the adversary. This is a longstanding weakness in India's military where there is a severe shortfall of funding for high-technology research and development (R&D). During her Budget speech last year, FM Sitharaman announced that the government would spend Rs 11,11,111 crore under the capital head. Given the claimants on that amount, the military can get only a limited share of the pie.

Finally, defence budget watchers remain bewildered by the (absence of) accounting logic that governs the grouping of several items. It remains unclear why the allocations to the Border Roads Development Board (BRDB), the Coast Guard organisation (CG) and the Jammu & Kashmir Light Infantry (JAK LI) have been placed in the MoD (Civil) accounting head. The BRDB and JAK LI clearly belong in the Army's accounting head, while the Coast Guard belongs under the Navy's head. Similarly, the capital budget was earlier crystal clear, with allocations to each of the three services grouped separately, in their own sub-heads. Now they have all been grouped together and it is impossible to differentiate the army's allocations from those of the navy and air force. Perhaps that was the intention.

The writer is a retired army officer and journalist

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 22, 2025

Crucial for hypersonic missiles, DRDO tests Scramjet engine

Tribune News Service

The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) has carried out a ground test of a "cooled Scramjet engine" that is a crucial milestone in developing the next-generation hypersonic missiles.

This was the first such test of a Scramjet in India, the Ministry of Defence said. The Scramjet engine has been developed by the Defence Research & Development Laboratory

(DRDL), a Hyderabad-based laboratory of the DRDO.

The Ministry of Defence said, "The indigenous development of endothermic Scramjet fuel, the first time in India, jointly by the DRDL and industry is central to this breakthrough." The fuel offers dual benefits of significant cooling improvement and ease of ignition.

Another key achievement is the development of state-of-the-art thermal barrier coating (TBC), which is designed to withstand extreme temperatures encountered during a hypersonic flight. A new advanced ceramic TBC having high thermal resistance and capable of operating beyond melting point of steel has been jointly developed by the DRDL and Department of Science & Technology (DST) Laboratory.

"The breakthrough sets the stage for the next-generation hypersonic missiles," the MoD said.

Hypersonic missiles are a class of advanced weaponry that travel at speeds greater than Mach 5 — five times the speed of sound or more than 5,400 kms per hour. These advanced weapons have the potential to bypass existing air defence systems of the enemy and deliver rapid and high-impact strikes.

Several countries, including the US, Russia, India and China, are pursuing hypersonic technology. The key to hypersonic vehicles is the Scramjet engines, which are capable of sustaining combustion at supersonic speeds. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh complimented the DRDO and industry for the successful Scramjet engine ground test.

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 22, 2025

India carries out ground test of scramjet engine, key to hypersonic missiles

HT Correspondent

The defence ministry described ground test as a crucial milestone in developing next-generation hypersonic missiles that can travel at speeds of more than Mach 5 or five times the speed of sound

NEW DELHI: India has for the first time carried out a successful ground test of a scramjet engine, an air breathing engine

capable of sustaining combustion during supersonic flights, with the defence ministry on Tuesday describing the development as a crucial milestone in developing next-generation hypersonic missiles that can travel at speeds of more than Mach 5 or five times the speed of sound.

"These advanced weapons (hypersonic missiles) have the potential to bypass existing air defence systems and deliver rapid and high-impact strikes. The key to hypersonic vehicles is the scramjet --- an air breathing engine capable of sustaining combustion at supersonic speeds without using any moving parts," the defence ministry said in a statement.

Only the United States, Russia and China have developed technologies to field fast-maneuvring hypersonic missiles that fly at lower altitudes and are extremely hard to track and intercept.

An improvement over ramjet technology, the scramjet engine operates efficiently at hypersonic speeds and allows supersonic combustion.

The Defence Research and Development Laboratory (DRDL), a Hyderabad-based unit of Defence Research and Development Organisation, is developing a long-duration supersonic combustion ramjet (scramjet) powered hypersonic technology.

"The DRDL recently developed these technologies and demonstrated a cutting-edge active cooled scramjet combustor ground test for 120 seconds for the first time in India. The successful ground test marks a crucial milestone in developing next-generation hypersonic missiles," the statement said.

The ground test of scramjet combustor showcased several notable achievements, including successful ignition and stable combustion, demonstrating its potential for operational use in hypersonic vehicles, it said. Scramjet combustor incorporates an innovative flame stabilisation technique that holds continuous flame inside the combustor even with an air speed of more than 1.5 km/second.

"The indigenous development of scramjet fuel for the first time, jointly by the DRDL and industry is, central to this breakthrough. The fuel offers dual benefits of significant cooling improvement and ease of ignition. The team developed a special manufacturing process to achieve stringent fuel requirements of the DRDL on an industrial scale," the ministry said.

Another notable achievement is the development of state-of-art thermal barrier coating (TBC), designed to withstand extreme temperatures during hypersonic flight, it said. A new advanced ceramic TBC, with high thermal resistance and capable of operating beyond the melting point of steel, has been jointly developed by the DRDL and the department of science and technology.

Defence minister Rajnath Singh complimented the DRDO and the industry for the successful ground test. DRDO chief Samir V Kamat also congratulated the DRDL and the industry for demonstrating capabilities in stable combustion, enhanced performance, and advanced thermal management tests.

The development comes two months after India announced that the DRDO had successfully test-fired the country's first long-range hypersonic missile off the Odisha coast, a step towards strengthening the military's capabilities with a new weapon system.

The hypersonic missile tested is designed to carry various payloads for ranges greater than 1,500 kms for the armed forces. It was tracked by various range systems, deployed in multiple domains, and the flight data obtained from down range ship stations confirmed the successful terminal manoeuvres and impact with a high degree of accuracy.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 16, 2025

India emerging as major maritime power: PM Modi

Tribune News Service

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in a veiled reference to China's hegemonic activities at sea, asserted on Wednesday that India stands for "development, not expansion", while

advocating for an “open, secure, inclusive and prosperous” Indo-Pacific region.

Addressing a gathering at the commissioning ceremony of three frontline naval platforms — INS Surat, INS Nilgiri and INS Vaghsheer — at the Naval Dockyard in Mumbai, Modi said, “India operates with a spirit of development, not expansionism. We have always supported an open, secure, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.”

In the strategic context, terms like “open, secure and inclusive” are commonly employed to counter China’s unilateral maritime claims and self-declared no-fly zones over the South China Sea. Modi emphasised the critical role of maritime nations like India in shaping global security, economics and geopolitics.

“There is a need to protect territorial waters, ensure freedom of navigation and secure trade supply lines and sea routes for economic progress and energy security,” he said. The Prime Minister also called for the prevention of misuse of oceanic resources such as rare minerals and fish stocks.

Highlighting India’s economic ties, Modi pointed to partnerships with the 10-nation ASEAN bloc, Australia, Gulf countries and African nations. “India is today recognised as a reliable and responsible global partner, especially among Global South countries,” he said, adding that the country is emerging as a major maritime power.

Modi linked the commissioned platforms to India’s maritime heritage and culture. He said the INS Nilgiri reflects the maritime prowess of the Chola dynasty, INS Surat evokes the era when Gujarat’s ports connected India to West Asia and INS Vaghsheer represents the sixth and final vessel of the Kalvari-class submarines.

Congratulating the armed forces for advancing the “Make-in-India” initiative, Modi highlighted that India’s defence production has surpassed Rs 1.25 lakh crore and that the country now exports defence equipment to over 100 nations. He noted that 60 large ships, worth Rs 1.5 lakh crore, are currently under construction in India.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh described the commissioning of INS Surat, INS Nilgiri and INS Vaghsheer as a historic milestone, demonstrating the growing strength of the Indian Navy and India’s rising prominence in the Indian Ocean Region.

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 16, 2025

India, Russia, Indonesia agree on pricing of BrahMos deal

Rezaul H Laskar

New Delhi and Jakarta have been negotiating the supply of the cruise missile jointly developed by India and Russia for more than seven years

New Delhi: India, Russia and Indonesia have agreed on the pricing for a deal to supply BrahMos cruise missiles to the Indonesian armed forces ahead of President Prabowo Subianto’s visit to New Delhi as chief guest at the Republic Day celebrations, people familiar with the matter said.

New Delhi and Jakarta have been negotiating the supply of the cruise missile jointly developed by India and Russia for more than seven years, and Rosoboronexport, Russia’s state organisation for weapons exports, has been part of the negotiations as Moscow has to sign off on all BrahMos deals. The three sides have now agreed on a deal worth \$450 million, two persons familiar with the talks said on condition of anonymity.

The Indian side is expected to make an official announcement on Thursday about Prabowo’s visit to participate in the Republic Day celebrations on January 26. The people did not rule out the possibility of some formal announcement about the BrahMos missile deal during Prabowo’s trip.

Several formal procedures are yet to be completed by the Indian and Russian sides and financing for the contract is still being finalised, the people said, indicating that the final deal could be several months down the road.

Once the deal is done, Indonesia will become the second foreign customer for the BrahMos, which is named after the Brahmaputra and Moskva rivers and is manufactured by the Indo-Russian joint venture BrahMos

Aerospace. The Philippines concluded a deal worth \$375 million to acquire three batteries of BrahMos cruise missiles, giving a shot in the arm to New Delhi's efforts to emerge as an exporter of major defence hardware.

In recent years, the Indonesian side has insisted on transfer of technology related to the missile to ensure that it would not face any shortage of spares and components. The demand was raised after other countries that purchased Russian military equipment faced delays in acquiring spares because of Russia's war with Ukraine.

The proposed deal with Indonesia was also affected by the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the people said.

A team from BrahMos Aerospace visited the state-run PT PAL shipyard in Surabaya in 2018 to assess the fitting of the missile on Indonesian warships. Besides the BrahMos, India has offered to supply coastal defence radars and marine grade steel to Indonesia, and to service Russian-made Su-30 combat jets flown by the Indonesian Air Force.

Under Indonesia's previous president Joko Widodo, the country significantly stepped up naval cooperation with India, including joint exercises and port visits by warships, as part of Jakarta's focus on maritime security across the Indian Ocean. Prabowo, a former army general who served in the special forces, is widely expected to continue to expand military and maritime security cooperation with India.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 17, 2025

Rs 2,960 crore contract inked for missiles on board Indian Navy warships

Tribune News Service

Public Sector Undertaking Bharat Dynamics Limited (BDL) has given a Rs 2,960 crore order for the supply of Medium-Range Surface-to-Air Missiles (MRSAM).

These types of missiles are already on board a number of Indian Navy warships. The latest order will allow installation of these missiles on board additional number of ships.

The Ministry of Defence said the MRSAM system is a standard fit, onboard multiple Indian Naval Ships and is planned to be fitted

on the majority of the future platforms planned for acquisition.

The ministry signed the contract with BDL on Thursday. It was inked by the officials of MoD and BDL in the presence of Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh in Delhi.

"The contract marks a critical milestone in the ongoing efforts to bolster India's defence capabilities and indigenise advanced military technology."

The Indian Navy's MRSAM is a state-of-the-art air defence system designed to neutralize aerial threats like aircraft, missiles, and drones. Developed jointly by the Defense Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI), it is manufactured by Bharat Dynamics Limited (BDL).

It has a high-response rate and allows a quick-reaction and is capable of intercepting targets at supersonic speeds. It is effective against targets at distances up to 70 km.

A MRSAM significantly boosts the Navy's ability to protect warships from aerial attacks.

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 22, 2025

Defence ministry signs 1,561-crore contract for bridge laying tanks

HT Correspondent

The deal comes a week after the defence ministry signed a 2,960-crore contract with Bharat Dynamics Limited to equip the navy with medium-range surface-to-air missiles

NEW DELHI: The defence ministry on Tuesday inked a 1,561-crore contract with Heavy Vehicles Factory (HVF), based at Avadi in Chennai, to equip the Indian Army with 47 T-72 bridge laying tanks (BLT) for the faster movement of mechanised forces in the battle zone, in a boost for the self-reliance drive in the defence manufacturing sector, the ministry said.

BLT is a critical equipment used for launching bridges during offensive and defensive operations by the army's mechanised forces.

"It provides integral bridging capability to the tank, enhancing battlefield mobility and offensive capability. The present case being

under the Buy Indian-Indigenously Designed Developed and Manufactured (IDDM) category will give impetus to the Make-in-India initiative in defence,” the ministry said in a statement.

The Indian-IDDM category is the most important category of acquisition for indigenisation under the defence procurement policy.

The project will play a pivotal role in boosting the overall economy and increasing employment avenues in the country, the ministry said. HVF is a unit of Armoured Vehicle Nigam Limited, one of the seven defence companies carved out of the erstwhile Ordnance Factory Board in 2021 as part of the board’s corporatisation.

The aim was to boost efficiency and competitiveness in the country’s defence manufacturing sector. The other companies created were India Optel Limited, Munitions India Limited, Troop Comforts Limited, Advanced Weapons and Equipment India Limited, Gliders India Limited and Yantra India Limited.

OFB, which earlier controlled 41 ordnance factories, was split into seven government-owned entities that are producing ammunition and explosives, vehicles, weapons and equipment, troop comfort items, opto-electronics gear, parachutes and ancillary products.

The BLT contract was signed by senior officials of the defence ministry and HVF/AVNL in the presence of defence secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh.

India has taken a raft of measures to boost self-reliance in the defence manufacturing sector during recent years. These include imposing phased import bans on different types of weapons, systems, ammunition, and critical sub-systems and components, creating a separate budget for buying locally made military hardware, increasing foreign direct investment (FDI) from 49% to 74% and improving ease of doing business.

The country is eyeing a turnover of 1.75 lakh crore in the defence manufacturing sector in the financial year 2024-25.

The latest deal comes a week after the defence ministry signed a 2,960-crore contract with Bharat Dynamics Limited to equip the navy with medium-range surface-to-air missiles.

Hindustan Times, New Delhi, January 24, 2025

Two firms emerge front-runners as govt begins 70K-cr sub deal talks

HT Correspondent

MDL and tkMS lead a 70,000-crore project to build six advanced submarines for India, enhancing navy’s capabilities amid regional tensions.

Mazagaon Dock Shipbuilders Limited (MDL) and German yard Thyssenkrupp Marine Systems (tkMS), have emerged as the frontrunner for a 70,000-crore project to build six advanced submarines in India to sharpen the navy’s underwater capabilities, edging out their only competitor the Larsen & Toubro-Navantia combine that did not meet the navy’s requirements, people aware of the matter said on Thursday.

Commercial negotiations for the project called P-75I will now follow, the people added.

The Mumbai-based MDL on Thursday informed the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE) that the defence ministry has opened its commercial bid for P-75I for “further processing.” It also informed the BSE that commercial negotiations for building three additional Scorpene class submarines are in process. MDL has already built six Kalvari-class (Scorpene) diesel-electric attack submarines under P-75, with technology transfer from the French firm, Naval Group.

P-75I will take time to mature. If all goes well after a contract is awarded, the first submarine will be delivered to the navy only after seven years with the rest following at the rate of one per year, HT has learnt.

These advanced submarines, a variant of HDW Class 214 vessels, will come with air independent propulsion (AIP) systems. AIP significantly increases a submarine’s underwater endurance and reduces the risk of detection. tkMS will transfer the submarine’s design and technology to India,

enabling the goal of self-reliance in the defence manufacturing sector, as previously reported by HT.

The first submarine under P-75I must have a minimum of 45% indigenisation, with the local content going up to 60% in the sixth.

Last month, defence ministry signed two separate contracts worth 2,867 crore to strengthen the Indian Navy's underwater capabilities - for retrofitting its Kalvari-class submarines with AIP systems to enhance their endurance, and integration of electronic heavy-weight torpedoes (EHWT) to boost their firepower capabilities.

The ministry signed a 1,990-crore contract with MDL for the construction of AIP plug for the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO)-AIP system and its integration on the conventional submarines, and another contract worth 877 crore with Frances's Naval Group for integration of the torpedoes to augment firepower capabilities of the Kalvari-Class submarines.

These submarines are capable of various missions such as anti-surface warfare, anti-submarine warfare, long-range strikes, special operations, and intelligence.

The development comes at a time when China is modernising its navy with new platforms, including submarines, and seeking to boost its influence in the vast Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The challenges in this strategic maritime expanse include China's carefully calculated power play for influence and defending the rules-based international order. India has also approved two nuclear-powered submarines to be designed and constructed indigenously. The first submarine is expected to be ready by 2036-37 and the second one two years thereafter. The navy's overall plan is to deploy six such nuclear-powered conventionally armed submarines.

The navy's submarine strength is dwindling rapidly and apart from the six new Scorpenes, the rest of the force is quite old and obsolescent, said former navy chief Admiral Arun Prakash (ret'd), making a case for modernising India's underwater capabilities.

"The numbers should come up and we need to put AIP-equipped submarines at sea as soon as possible. It's important that we conclude this deal soon and start producing these submarines in India. Our submarine strength is running down in comparison to our adversaries. Pakistan is also getting Chinese submarines soon," he added.

The AIP system will be retrofitted when it's ready and the submarines come for refit.

India Space Programme

The Indian Express, Mumbai, January 16, 2025

How and why are plants grown in space: Takeaways from ISRO's success

Alind Chauhan

The lobia (black-eyed pea) seeds that the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) sent to space on December 30 as a part of its Compact Research Module for Orbital Plant Studies (CROPS) **germinated last week.**

As humans venture out on lengthy space missions to colonise celestial bodies like Mars and the Moon, space-grown plants can provide a sustainable food source. With minimal scope of restocking supplies, astronauts cannot simply rely on a limited stock of multivitamins during missions that may go on for years. Besides, pre-packaged vitamins break down and lose their nutritive value over long periods of time.

Since plants release oxygen during photosynthesis, growing them in space can help keep the air aboard spacecraft breathable, Siddharth Pandey, an affiliate research scientist with US-based Blue Marble Space Institute of Science, told The Indian Express. "Plants can recycle carbon dioxide and organic waste, creating a closed-loop life support system," Pandey said.

Tending to plants can also help reduce stress and improve astronauts' overall mental well-being, he said.

Why is it hard to grow plants in space?

The most significant challenge is microgravity, the condition in which people or objects appear to be weightless.

The lack of gravity precludes plants' roots from growing downwards, in addition to making nutrient delivery a difficult task. Since

water tends to cling to any surface it touches in microgravity, when sprayed onto the base of a plant, it does not trickle down to the roots where it would be absorbed.

Plants grown in space also need to be protected from the high levels of radiation that can damage their DNA and hinder growth, and insulated from temperature fluctuations — often hundreds of degrees — that are normal in space, Pandey said.

Light conditions, especially in the outer Solar System where sunlight is scarce, pose another challenge. Without light, photosynthesis stops, and plants begin to consume more oxygen than they produce.

How are plants being grown in space?

Scientists have so far grown plants in space on a fairly small scale. The space garden aboard the International Space Station, known as 'Veggie' or the Vegetable Production System, is the size of the average carry-on bag. It typically holds six plants.

There are several ways in which plants can be grown in space. The most common is hydroponics, Pushkar Ganesh Vaidya, head of the Indian Astrobiology Research Foundation, said. Water and nutrients in hydroponically grown plants are delivered via liquid solutions, rather than through the soil.

Plants can also be grown aeroponically, which eliminates the need for soil or any other medium. This method reduces water usage by 98%, fertiliser usage by 60%, and eliminates the need for pesticides altogether. "Plants grown in aeroponic systems have been shown to absorb more minerals and vitamins, making them healthier and potentially more nutritious," according to the US space agency NASA.

Plants can also be grown in space in soil-like media.

How did ISRO grow lobia in space?

"The ISRO CROPS box is like a mini greenhouse," Vaidya said. It has a soil-like medium, lobia, water, sunlight-mimicking lights, and Earth-like air. "The only thing different is gravity, at around 0.01 g", or 1% of the gravitational strength on the Earth's surface, he said.

For the soil-like medium, ISRO used some highly porous clay comprising tiny pellets. The porosity helped absorb and retain water. The pellets consisted of a water-activated slow-release fertiliser, which was to provide nutrients to the plant in a controlled manner over a period of time.

For photosynthesis, ISRO used four warm LEDs and four cool LEDs. "The lights are programmed to be on for 16 hours and off for 8 hours, simulating day and night conditions... These durations can be changed based on various requirements," ISRO said in a statement.

Temperatures inside the module were regulated between 20 and 30 degrees Celsius, and Earth-like atmospheric conditions were maintained. Water was injected into the soil-like medium by an electric valve operated from Earth.

Seeds sprouted on the fourth day of the experiment, and the next day, two leaves were also visible.

What kind of plants are ideal for growing in space?

Plants are selected based on their growth rate, nutrient content, and compatibility with space farming systems, Pandey said.

Leafy green vegetables like lettuce, spinach, and kale, which grow quickly, require little space, and are rich in nutrients, are ideal space plants.

Beans and peas are also cultivated since they are protein-dense and can fix nitrogen in the soil-like medium, improving nutrient cycles.

"Radishes and carrots grow well in compact spaces... Wheat and rice are grown for long-term sustenance in space habitats," Pandey said. Fruits such as tomatoes and strawberries can also be grown.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 17, 2025

ISRO docks 2 satellites in space as India joins elite 4-nation club

Shubhadeep ChaudharySetting at rest the uncertainties resulting from multiple deferments, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) on Thursday successfully carried out the docking of two satellites in space, making India the fourth country in the

world after the US, Russia and China to accomplish the feat.

In space, docking technology is essential when multiple rocket launches are required to achieve common mission objectives. The in-space docking experiment is crucial for the smooth conduct of the country's ambitious future missions, including Chandrayaan-4, Gaganyaan, setting up a space station and landing an astronaut on the moon.

Nod to 3rd launch pad at Sriharikota

The Cabinet has approved setting up of the 3rd launch pad at Satish Dhawan Space Centre at Sriharikota

The project envisages the establishment of launch infrastructure for ISRO's next gen launch vehicles

Will also enhance launch capacity for future missions

Mission crucial for Chandrayaan-4

Space docking tech needed for multiple rocket launches

Crucial for future missions, including Chandrayaan-4 and Gaganyaan

Required for setting up own space station and landing an astronaut on the moon

Last October, the government had announced that India would have by 2035 its own space station, "Bharatiya Antariksh Station".

"Spacecraft docking successfully completed! A historic moment," ISRO said in a post on X. "Let's walk through the SpaDeX docking process: Manoeuvre from 15 metres to 3 metres hold point completed. Docking initiated with precision, leading to successful spacecraft capture. Retraction completed smoothly, followed by rigidisation for stability. Docking successfully completed," the post added.

After docking, the control of two satellites—Chaser and Target—as a single object was successful, ISRO said, adding that undocking and power transfer from one satellite to the other would follow in the coming days.

"India's space programme achieves historic milestone with the successful docking of the two satellites launched under Space docking experiment, SpaDeX!" President Droupadi Murmu wrote on X, congratulating ISRO.

"Congratulations to our scientists at ISRO and the entire space fraternity for the successful demonstration of space docking of satellites. It is a significant stepping stone for India's ambitious space missions in the years to come," Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in a message.

Jitendra Singh, MoS, Science and Technology, said the feat was all the more memorable as the technology used was "indigenous Bharatiya Docking System".

V Narayanan, ISRO chief, congratulated the team. The two satellites, each weighing 220 kg, were originally supposed to dock on January 7. The experiment was deferred to January 9 after scientists felt the process required further validation through ground simulations in view of an abort scenario identified by them.

A day ahead of the docking planned on January 9, the space agency initiated the drift on Spacecraft A (Chaser) to move closer to the other spacecraft (Target) from 500 metres to 225 metres. But the operation was postponed as the drift was found to be more than expected.

On January 12, the two satellites were brought as close as 3 metres from each other, but then moved away following signal issues. The two satellites were put in space in a low earth orbit by a PSLV rocket on December 30. With the successful docking, ISRO has achieved the primary objective of the mission. Undocking and separation of the two satellites will follow. The satellites will be deployed for the operation of their respective payloads.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 18, 2025

China lauds ISRO on successful docking of satellites in space

Tribune News Service

China on Friday congratulated Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) for the successful docking of its satellites in space.

"Congratulations to India #ISRO for successful docking of satellites under the SpaDeX mission!" Chinese spokesperson in India Yu Jing said.

The Indian space agency had successfully carried out the docking of two satellites in space on Thursday, making India the fourth country in the world to accomplish the feat. Before India, the United States of America, Russia and China had successfully docked their satellites in space.

This is not the first time that China has praised India. In September 2014, India's Mars Orbiter Mission (MOM), also known as Mangalyaan, successfully entered the Mars' orbit. China immediately congratulated India for its successful Mars mission, saying that it was not only a proud achievement for the country and Asia but also a "landmark progress" in the mankind's exploration of outer space.

The MOM made India the first Asian nation to reach Mars' orbit and the first country worldwide to do so on its maiden attempt. China's own maiden mission to Mars, Tianwen-1, which was launched in 2020, had successfully entered Mars' orbit in February 2021.

A decade prior to that Beijing had lost out on a Mars orbit when its orbiter, 'Yinghuo-1', riding on the Russian spacecraft 'Phobos', failed midway. Both Russian and Chinese spacecraft burned up in the Earth's atmosphere.

Also after India's moon landing in 2023, Chinese Communist Party mouth-piece 'Global Times' quoted experts, who congratulated India on the achievement.

The 'Global Times' had added that given that the two countries were both emerging economies and member states of the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, there was a vast room for cooperation between the two sides, both in the fields of deep-space exploration and manned missions such as data sharing, experience sharing and astronaut training.

On the military use of space, both India and China have carried out anti-satellite tests. This ability is to launch a missile which can bring down a satellite.

The Tribune, Chandigarh, January 29, 2025

ISROs 100th rocket launch: A milestone for India's regional satellite navigation system

Vijay Mohan

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) on Tuesday began its final countdown for the launch of its 100th rocket into space – a milestone in its largely successful exploratory odyssey beyond the Earth's atmosphere.

A Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle (GSLV), designated F-15, is scheduled to lift-off from the spaceport at Sriharikota, off the coast of Odisha, at 6:23 pm on January 29. It is carrying the navigation satellite NVS-02 that would form a vital element of India's independent regional navigation satellite system that has civilian as well as military applications.

GSLV-F15 is the 17th flight of this type of rocket and the 8th operational flight with an indigenous Cryogenic stage engine. Cryogenics are critical because they require optimal functioning at extremely low temperatures – around minus 160 degrees Celsius encountered in outer space.

The GSLV is designed to inject heavy satellites into a geosynchronous transfer orbit which enables them to be maneuvered into a geosynchronous orbit (GSO) about 36,000 km above the Earth.

The GSLV has two variants – Mark-II that can carry payloads weighing up to 2,500 kg into GSO and 6,000 kg to low Earth orbit (LEO) at altitudes of about 600 km, and the LVM-III with a payload capacity of 4,000 kg and 8,000 kg respectively.

The NVS-02 will be part of the Navigation with Indian Constellation (NavIC) system designed to provide accurate position, velocity and timing (PVT) service to users in India as well as the region extending about 1,500 km beyond the Indian landmass.

According to ISRO, NavIC is providing two types of services – Standard Positioning Service (SPS) that provides a position accuracy of better than 20 meters and timing accuracy better than 40 nano-seconds over the primary service area, and Restricted Service (RS) through encrypted links

available only to authorised users for specific purposes, including the military.

Five second-generation NavIC satellites, NVS-01/02/03/04/05 are envisaged to augment the NavIC base layer constellation with enhanced features for ensuring continuity of services.

It was recognised by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) as a part of the World-Wide Radio Navigation System (WWRNS) for operation in the Indian Ocean Region in 2020. The potential uses of NavIC listed by ISRO include terrestrial, aerial and marine navigation, disaster management, vehicle tracking and fleet management, integration with mobile phones, and mapping and geodetic data capture.

The NVS satellites additionally incorporate L1 band signals, the most used GPS frequency band for navigation and considered effective for wearable devices, to widen their services. The lead satellite of this series was launched onboard the GSLV F12 on May 29, 2023. It was also for the first time that an indigenous atomic clock was flown into space.

The second, NVS-02, weighing about 2250 kg, is configured with navigation payload in L1, L5 and S bands, which increase interoperability with other satellite-based navigation systems, in addition to a ranging payload in the C-band like its predecessor, the NVS-01.

The L5 is the preferred aeronautical band while the S-band is used for telecommunications, remote sensing, weather monitoring, and scientific research. C-Band is an open general purpose band having a wide reach.

NVS-02 satellite was designed, developed and integrated at ISRO's UR Satellite Centre (URSC) in collaboration with other satellite-based work centres.

On completion of assembly and integrated testing, it was subjected to a thermos-vacuum test in November-December 2024 to validate its design and performance in a simulated space environment, followed by a dynamic test to determine its ability to withstand the stress load during launch.

The satellite was flagged off to the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota on January 5, 2025 for integration with the rocket and other pre-launch activities. On January 26, ISRO posted on its official X handle that integration of the F-15 and its positioning at the launch-pad was complete.

NVS-02 will replace the IRNSS-1E, the fifth of seven earlier generation spacecrafts in Indian Regional Navigational Satellite System (IRNSS) that had been placed into orbit on January 20, 2016 onboard a Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle.

ISRO is also working on setting up ground stations in countries like Japan, France, and Russia. These additional ground stations will enhance the accuracy and coverage of NavIC signals through better triangulation.

According to ISRO, NavIC signals reach India at a 90-degree angle, making it easier for them to penetrate congested areas, dense forests, and mountainous terrain, and are aimed to reach even remote or hard-to-reach areas. In contrast, GPS signals arrive at an angle, which can sometimes pose challenges for reception in certain locations.

At present, four global navigation networks are available. These are the Global Positioning System (GPS) from the USA, GLONASS from Russia, Galileo from the European Union and BeiDou from China.

Bangladesh

UN Peacekeeping

Daily Observer, Dhaka, January 28, 2025

BD peacekeepers in Congo are safe: ISPR

Bangladeshi peacekeepers deployed in Democratic Republic of Congo are safe amid the ongoing conflict there, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said on Monday. "All Bangladeshi peacekeepers in DR Congo are safe and communication with them remains uninterrupted amid the ongoing conflict," said an ISPR press release. Bangladesh has been actively participating in United Nations peacekeeping missions for decades, with a significant presence in DR Congo, contributing to global peace and security efforts. Fighting has escalated sharply

in recent weeks in eastern Congo, where rebels have seized key towns and are closing in on the city of Goma, the government's last stronghold in the region bordering Rwanda, reports AP.

The offensive by the Rwanda-backed M23 rebel group has stretched local hospitals to the limit, with hundreds of wounded coming in every day as civilians get caught in the crossfire.

Thousands have been displaced, exacerbating an existing humanitarian crisis and prompting fears of an all-out regional war.

—UNB

The Kabul Times, Kabul, January 29, 2025

Over 150 cadets join national army, ministry

KABUL: A total of 151 military cadets received graduation certificates after completing a three-month professional course in the training center of the Joint Military Training Command of Hazrate-Abdullah ibn Masood (Kabul Military Training Center), the Ministry of National Defense said in a statement Tuesday. The graduation ceremony was attended by scores of top officials of the National Defense Ministry, scholars, and students, the statement said. Congratulating the graduates, the officials emphasized the significance of continuous education and professional development aligned with the demands of the current era and asked them to prioritize the principles of Sharia and the Islamic system over personal interests, the statement added. All graduated soldiers, while receiving their certificates, expressed their commitment to safeguarding the Islamic system and their country, pledging to protect them with their lives and blood. After the resumption of power by the Islamic Emirate, hundreds of thousands of people graduated from the military centers of the Ministry of National Defense and were assigned to military units nationwide. The Kabul Times

Sri Lanka

Defence Affairs

Daily News, Colombo, January 18, 2025

Prospects of domestic aviation services in Sri Lanka

PK Balachandran

The Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) on Monday conducted a test landing on an 850-meter section of the renovated runway at the Hingurakgoda Airport in the Polonnaruwa district. A Y-12 aircraft, piloted by the Commander of the SLAF, Air Marshal Udeni Rajapaksa, successfully completed the test landing. The SLAF stated that the next stage of construction would extend the runway by another 850 meters, with the ultimate aim of laying a 2,500-meter runway to accommodate larger aircraft such as the Airbus A320 and Boeing 737.

The rebuilding of the Hingurakgoda airfield to receive large passenger aircraft is intended to inspire the extension and modernization of several airfields across the island, many of which were constructed by the British at a rapid pace in 1942, during World War II, when the Japanese were threatening Ceylon.

At the time, the British had neither an army, navy, nor air force of significant strength in Ceylon. By March 1942, Admiral Geoffrey Layton of the Royal Navy (RN) had been placed in charge of both the defense forces and civil institutions in Ceylon as an emergency measure. Layton oversaw the construction of airfields at breakneck speed, often clashing with the equally outspoken and acerbic Ceylon Works Minister, Sir John Kotelawala. Kotelawala's frustration stemmed from Layton's decision to demolish solid buildings in Colombo to make way for military facilities. For instance, the conversion of the Colombo Racecourse into an airfield forced the relocation of Royal College, which was turned into a military hospital.

Nevertheless, in 1942–43, Layton successfully pushed forward with the construction of airfields at the Colombo Racecourse, Ratmalana, Katukurunda, Negombo, China Bay, Minneriya, Vavuniya, Kankesanthurai, Sigiriya, Dambulla, Mawanella, Koggala,

Kalametiya, and Puttalam. It was said that the Royal Air Force (RAF) could lay an airfield in just three days. The Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm (FAA) also secured facilities at China Bay (Trincomalee), Colombo Racecourse, Ratmalana, Katukurunda, and Puttalam.

These airfields, though primitive, played a crucial role in the defense of Ceylon, particularly in protecting strategic assets in Colombo and Trincomalee. As former Sri Lankan Navy Chief Admiral Jayanath Colombage noted, these airfields were designed to allow pilots to operate safely without the need for sophisticated equipment.

China Bay was later upgraded to accommodate the United States Army Air Forces' (USAAF) Boeing B-29 Superfortresses. Ground troops had to be rushed in from other parts of the British Empire, including Australia, India, and East Africa. The Eastern Fleet relocated from Singapore, and aircraft were flown in from North Africa after containing German forces there.

The Spitfires and Hurricanes based at the coastal airbases provided an effective counter to Japanese aircraft during their attacks on Colombo and Trincomalee on April 5 and 8, 1942, respectively. A Catalina aircraft stationed at Koggala provided intelligence about a Japanese fleet approaching Ceylon a day before the fleet's aircraft bombed the Colombo port on April 5, 1942. However, as the information was not relayed to Colombo in time, over 2,000 service personnel and 85 civilians were killed in just 20 minutes in and around the Colombo port. Despite the devastation, the port continued to operate.

In 1946, after World War II ended, the airfields were decommissioned and handed over to the Ceylon government, which later transferred them to the Ceylon (now Sri Lankan) Air Force. During the war against Tamil militants, these airfields were used by the SLAF and, to some extent, by domestic private sector flight operators.

Tourist Flights

After the internal conflict ended in 2009, efforts were made to utilize these airfields for operating tourist flights. However, these

efforts have yet to bear fruit due to the lack of a suitable policy framework. While domestic aviation has potential in the tourism sector, it still has a long way to go. A study by the World Bank concluded that the market was not strong enough for the private sector to operate domestic services profitably, despite Sri Lanka having a large number of airfields ranging from the Bandaranaike International Airport (BIA) in Katunayake to smaller airports that are little more than landing strips.

With the exception of Mattala International Airport (MIA), which was commissioned in 2013, most of the remaining 14 domestic airports are still operated by the SLAF. Some civilian aviation services are provided by private sector operators on a small scale.

According to the proceedings of a seminar organized by the Organization of Professional Associations (OPA), the domestic aviation market grew significantly after the end of the internal war in 2009. By 2014, domestic air travel accounted for nearly 60,000 airport passengers (total arrivals and departures at all airports), a substantial increase compared to the 2010–2012 period, when domestic passenger numbers averaged below 10,000 per year.

However, the costs of offering domestic air services were found to be too high relative to the demand. Tourism growth was expected to continue driving increased demand for domestic aviation services and to remain the primary contributing factor—albeit not the only one—to growing traffic volumes. However, the relationship between tourism growth and demand for domestic air services was not straightforward. Factors such as the nature and characteristics of Sri Lanka's tourists, their preferences for destinations, the supply of domestic air services, and the availability of alternative transport options played a significant role, the World Bank's report revealed.

"Overall, the market is fairly underdeveloped. The limited tourist demand for some domestic routes, the restricted availability of scheduled seats, and the perceived high cost of air tickets from private operators are some

of the key factors leading to low traffic levels. A key consideration from the analysis of the domestic aviation market is that the low traffic volume limits opportunities for private sector participation and, more generally, for profitable operations,” the report said.

The government subsidized the SLAF’s involvement in managing domestic airports and providing commercial air services. Helitours played a significant role in the market by helping to serve and generate demand for air services that might not have been available otherwise. However, the report noted that the price distortion caused by subsidized fares made it harder for private sector operators to enter the market and compete effectively, thereby hindering the development of the domestic aviation industry.

Growth in Tourist Arrivals

Sri Lanka has experienced rapid growth in inbound tourism since the end of its domestic conflict in 2009. Tourist arrivals increased from 450,000 in 2009 to over 1.5 million in 2014 and are now expected to reach 2 million by 2025. Projections indicate this number could rise to 5.4 million by 2035. Correspondingly, the number of tourist passengers (inbound and outbound airport movements) at BIA, which was 3.1 million in 2014, is expected to increase to 10.8 million by 2035.

The nature and characteristics of Sri Lanka’s tourists are also expected to change. While traditionally dominated by visitors from Europe seeking beach holidays, primarily along the South Coast, the country’s tourism market is increasingly characterized by visitors desiring broader holiday experiences. These include cultural, heritage, shopping, and beach elements. This shift is leading to the emergence of multi-destination and circular tourism routes as more popular alternatives to the single-destination beach holiday, the report noted.

Inbound tourism growth is anticipated to generate a higher number of visits to each of the key tourist regions. Taking these factors into account through econometric modeling,

the World Bank developed a 20-year traffic forecast for domestic aviation in Sri Lanka.

Some key considerations impacting the traffic forecast included:

1. Short Internal Flight Distances

Sri Lanka is a relatively small island in aviation terms, resulting in short internal flight distances. The longest domestic flight leg is between Colombo and Jaffna at approximately 275 km, with all other airports being under 200 km. In comparable countries, the average sector distance is between 250 and 300 km—roughly 60% longer than the Sri Lankan average. These short distances limit the opportunity to use air transport compared to surface access.

2. Competition from Road Transport

Another key factor is the increasing strength of competition from road transport. Sri Lanka is upgrading its road network with new expressways, significantly reducing road transit times and costs, thereby eroding the advantages of air travel. Improved roads effectively increase the minimum distance at which aviation becomes attractive. For instance, the time saved by air travel is expected to drop to less than two hours for journeys from Colombo to the Ancient Cities or the South Coast.

3. Cost Comparison

While air travel is not more expensive than private car hires, it remains significantly costlier than bus or coach services, which are frequently used by tour operators.

The potential for domestic aviation activity was projected to rise from a base level of 135,000 airport passengers in 2014 to 307,000 in 2021. However, it was expected to decline to approximately 198,000 by 2024 as road network improvements came into effect. Thereafter, the consultants forecasted that domestic aviation growth would resume, provided no further significant enhancements to surface connectivity occurred, reaching around 350,000 passengers by 2035.

Market Limitations

Overall, the consultants cautioned that the total demand for domestic aviation services throughout the forecast period would remain relatively low. By 2035, the total forecast

demand for domestic seats was expected to be 250,000 across the entire country. This figure contrasts with the current Cambodian and Laotian domestic aviation markets, which offer 450,000 and 713,000 seats, respectively. Furthermore, if additional surface transport improvements were implemented beyond those assumed in the study, the demand for domestic aviation services was likely to drop even further. Field visits to the airfields also revealed that the level of additional investment required for selected airports was not justified. The limited size of the domestic aviation market left little room for private sector participation. The potential to achieve sufficient economies of scale for profitable business remained unclear in both the short and medium-to-long term.

Daily News, Colombo, January 24, 2025

ROYAL WINGS OVER CEYLON:

SLAF LAUNCHES HISTORICAL PUBLICATION

The SLAF made a special commemoration of its rich aviation legacy today, (21 January 2025), with the launch of its latest historical publication, 'Royal Wings Over Ceylon'. The event, held at the Air Force Museum – SLAF Base Ratmalana, was graced by the Commander of the Air Force, Air Marshal Udeni Rajapaksa, as the Chief Guest and the Deputy High Commissioner at the British High Commission in Sri Lanka, Lisa Whanstall, as the Guest of Honour. This milestone publication highlights the early years of air power in Sri Lanka during the Royal Air Force era, which paved the way for the establishment of the Royal Ceylon Air Force in 1951.

The event began with a warm welcome to the distinguished guests and an introductory speech highlighting the significance of the publication.

Following that, a co-author and member of the editorial board, Squadron Leader Rehan Goonetilleke, introduced the publication, detailing its aim to preserve the nation's aviation heritage. A diplomatic historian and former Sri Lankan diplomat, Dr. George Cooke, a further enriched the ceremony with a detailed review of the book, emphasising its

value in understanding the historical ties between Sri Lanka and the Royal Air Force.

First copy

The ceremonial launch of the publication was the highlight of the event. The first copy of 'Royal Wings Over Ceylon' was presented by the Editor-in-Chief, Air Commodore Poojana Gunatilake and Air Secretary, Air Commodore Dushan Wijesinghe, to the Commander of the Air Force. This was followed by the second copy being ceremonially handed over to the Guest of Honour, Ms. Lisa Whanstall, who also received a memento in appreciation of her presence.

Distinguished Defence Advisors and Attachés from diplomatic missions in Sri Lanka were also presented copies of the publication, which included Defence Advisor of the Australian High Commission, Colonel Amanda Johnston, Defence Advisor of the Bangladesh High Commission, Commodore Mohammad Moniruzzaman, Defence Advisor of the Chinese High Commission, Senior Colonel Joe, Defence Attaché at the Japanese Embassy, Captain Yuki Yokohari, Defence Advisor at the Maldives High Commission, Lieutenant Colonel Hassan Amir, Defence Advisor at the Pakistan High Commission, Colonel Muhammad Farooq and Deputy Chief, Office of Defence Cooperation at the US Embassy in Sri Lanka, Major Elizabeth Hewett.

The event concluded with the Commander of the Air Force presenting a token of appreciation to Dr. George Cooke for his invaluable review and contributions to the occasion.

The event was attended by the Chief of Staff, Deputy Chief of Staff, members of the Board of Management, Commandant, Base Commanders, Commanding Officers, Dishan Joseph, a renowned top-class journalist who initiated this research and all other officers.

The Royal Air Force played a crucial role in the defence of Ceylon and the Indian Ocean Region, alongside the Fleet Air Arm.

The book captures many of the interesting facets of air defence and gallant air battles. The RAF airfields and bases were in Colombo, Ratmalana, China Bay-Trincomalee, Koggala, Sigiriya, Katunayake, Palavi, Katukurunda and

other locations. Ceylon witnessed the arrival of many flying squadrons with zealous aircrews- fighter aircraft, long range heavy bombers, Catalina boat planes, reconnaissance aircraft and transport planes- as the allied forces enhanced their defence objectives.

Easter Sunday air raid

From the now famous Easter Sunday air raid on Colombo to the Koggala incident manifesting in the form of the "Saviour of Ceylon"- Squadron Leader Leonard Birchall- whose solitary airborne radio message alerted the RAF an impending air raid- the pulsating aviation book is woven with suspense, aerial warfare, allied combat counter responses, aviation innovation and also the robust resilience of a generation that defended our nation.

The Ceylonese were mesmerized and also perhaps frightened as these aerial wars unfolded. These serene skies were now theatres of combat. The book also pays tribute and appreciates the brave Ceylonese pilots who responded to the call to defend the nation. Readers can also learn about a dynamic Ceylonese lady pilot who served with honour. This valuable book also has rare historic photos that captures that golden era of combat aviation in vintage Ceylon.

It is a must read for all aviation lovers, students of military history and all those who love to indulge in the history of Sri Lanka. The book truly captures the essence of the impact of WW2 on Ceylon, and captivates the reader with so much of action and military facts. The gallant flying of the pilots is echoed in almost every chapter. This book is a vital study tool that should be read in all the Commonwealth nations.

The Sri Lanka Air Force has magnificently displayed its professional excellence in this splendid book. The SLAF editorial team had spent many months in deep research, travelling across the country visiting all their operational bases, supplemented by fact checking from various sources. This book fulfills a lacuna that was once there in our aviation history. The SLAF the "Guardians of our Skies" have once again presented a

history laden aviation book which unfolds with enchanting facts, which is real value for money. It is guaranteed to be an inspiring and wonderful read.

Iran

Defence and Security Affaris

Tehran Times, Iran, January 22, 2025

JCPOA talks depend on changes in other parties' behavior, says Iran deputy FM

TEHRAN – Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs, Kazem Gharibabadi, has reaffirmed the country's willingness to resume negotiations aimed at lifting sanctions, provided other parties demonstrate readiness for constructive dialogue.

Speaking to reporters on Tuesday morning, Gharibabadi emphasized Iran's consistent openness to negotiations. "We have always been prepared for this, and if the other parties are ready as well, we believe talks can proceed and lead to a conclusion," he stated.

He further noted that Iran's approach would remain flexible and responsive to the policies of the other negotiating parties. "If we observe a different policy or approach from the other side, Iran will adjust its own policies accordingly," he added.

Gharibabadi expressed optimism about the potential for meaningful dialogue, highlighting the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program and criticizing the ineffectiveness of unilateral sanctions. "There are proper opportunities for dialogue and understanding," he remarked. "The most logical path forward is to initiate talks on lifting sanctions, which is the reasonable and correct approach."

Gharibabadi also responded to remarks made earlier by former U.S. President Donald Trump, who claimed that Iranian oil sales were being halted due to its support for Resistance groups fighting Israeli occupation. In his statement to reporters, Gharibabadi reaffirmed Iran's willingness to engage in diplomacy. "The Islamic Republic of Iran, as always, is ready to initiate and resume negotiations aimed at lifting sanctions," he said. "We have consistently been prepared,

and if the other parties demonstrate the same readiness, we are confident that talks can proceed and yield positive results.”

He added that Iran’s stance remains flexible and responsive to the behavior of other parties involved. “If we observe a different policy or approach from the other side, Iran will adjust its own approach accordingly,” Gharibabadi concluded.

He also revealed that consultations are ongoing to determine the date and time for future discussions, underlining Iran’s commitment to advancing the negotiations.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the landmark nuclear deal signed in 2015 between Iran and the P5+1 group of nations—comprising the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and Germany—has faced significant challenges since its inception. U.S. President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the agreement in 2018, reinstating sanctions against Iran.

Negotiations to revive the JCPOA resumed in Vienna in April 2021, aiming to assess Washington’s commitment to rejoining the agreement and lifting the sanctions imposed by the previous administration.

Iran has been stepping up the measures in response to the other parties’ continued refusal to uphold their obligations under the nuclear deal.

Gharibabadi also emphasized the need for constructive dialogue with European countries to address the economic hardships that have affected the daily lives of ordinary citizens, stressing that such talks could pave the way for resolving the challenges.

Direct talks with U.S. subject to Leader, National Security Council approval: Iranian MP

In an interview with SNNTV, a member of Iran’s National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, Mohammad Qashqavi, outlined the conditions under which direct negotiations between Iran and the United States could take place.

Speaking on the matter, Qashqavi emphasized the historical and political sensitivity of direct talks between the two nations, stating that

such negotiations have been a contentious issue since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. “Direct negotiations between Iran and the U.S. have always been a significant matter, and the mechanism for decision-making in this area is entirely clear,” he explained.

The MP underscored that decisions regarding Iran-U.S. relations are governed by the country’s established legal frameworks.

“At the top of this decision-making structure are the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, the President, and the Supreme National Security Council,” Qashqavi said. He stressed that if the possibility of direct negotiations is raised, it must be carefully reviewed and approved within these institutional boundaries.

Iran’s Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi previously said Tehran will only consider direct talks with the U.S. after the country has returned to the JCPOA.

Tehran Times, Iran, January 26, 2025

IRGC naval forces successfully test AI-powered missiles in major exercise

TEHRAN – In a demonstration of advanced capabilities, the naval forces of Iran’s Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) successfully fired missiles equipped with artificial intelligence, hitting mock enemy targets during a large-scale military exercise.

The exercises, code-named “Great Prophet Authority 19,” were conducted across the southern Iranian provinces of Bushehr and Khuzestan. On the final day of the drills, the IRGC Navy deployed the Qaem and Almas missiles, launched from advanced Mohajer 6 and Ababil 5 drones, showcasing the integration of AI into Iran’s missile systems.

Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri, the IRGC Navy’s Commander, who oversaw the exercises, emphasized the significant upgrades made to the Navy’s equipment and systems. The drills saw the launch of various ballistic and surface-to-surface missiles, including an offensive missile from the strategic Shahid Soleimani warship, and the interception of enemy targets using Kowsar 222 missiles. Tangsiri explained that the extensive military drills, held in the northern and central regions of the Persian Gulf, were aimed at enhancing coordination and combat

readiness within the IRGC naval forces. The drills also served to send a message of peace and friendship to neighboring countries, reinforcing Iran's desire for regional stability. This exercise comes as part of the Islamic Republic's ongoing efforts to improve its military capabilities under the leadership of Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei. Iran's Armed Forces, including both the Army and the IRGC, continue to enhance their combat readiness in response to perceived external threats, reaffirming their commitment to defending the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Tehran Times, Iran, January 30, 2025

IRGC chief highlights AI's growing role in military and civilian sectors

TEHRAN – The commander of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) has emphasized the increasing role of artificial intelligence (AI) in military applications while stressing the need for ethical considerations in its use.

Speaking at the International Conference on Artificial Intelligence and Future Civilization in Tehran on Wednesday, Major General Hossein Salami highlighted AI's potential to enhance Iran's military capabilities, particularly in naval operations.

"There are times when we must engage in battles at sea. In the future, we may rely even more on AI for such operations," Salami said. He explained that enemy ships often disable their GPS systems to conceal their positions as they move across vast distances. However, AI-driven technologies can help Iran detect and track these vessels more effectively.

"Identifying a target's location is critical, but even more important is knowing exactly where to strike," he said, adding that advanced AI image-matching technology enables Iran to pinpoint and track specific ships. Beyond military applications, Salami stressed the significance of AI in various fields, including transportation, disaster response, healthcare, education, cybersecurity, and national security. During the conference, Salami unveiled the IRGC's "Comprehensive Artificial Intelligence Map," a

strategic initiative aimed at integrating AI across multiple sectors.

The event, the first of its kind in Iran, was attended by high-ranking IRGC officials, including General Mohammad Reza Naqdi, Deputy Coordinator of the IRGC, and General Hassan Hassani Ahangar, President of Imam Hussein University.

Tehran Times, Iran, January 21, 2025

Iran testing combat robots, developing new models, Army tells Tehran Times

By Mona Hojat Ansari

TEHRAN – Iran's Army is currently engaged in the testing of combat robots, while simultaneously developing new models, Deputy Commander of the Army Ground Force Brigadier General Nozar Nemati told the Tehran Times.

The high-ranking military official did not provide specific details on the types of robots being tested or developed but said the Army is deploying a range of them in a drill that began Sunday night in northeastern Iran.

The ongoing drill, described as an "offensive" exercise, seems to mark a new stage in a larger series of maneuvers that began nationwide at the start of the new year. The early stages of the national exercise involved a diverse range of forces, encompassing the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC), the Army (Artesh), the Basij, and the Coast Guard. The wargames have so far seen Iran reveal two new underground military bases, simulate counter-terrorism operations in its western provinces, and practice intercepting bunker-buster attacks near its nuclear facilities in central and northern regions. Brigadier General Nemati told the Tehran Times that the latest stage of the drill primarily focused on evaluating combat strategies rather than defensive ones.

Below is the full text of the deputy Army chief's interview with the Tehran Times:

Which units of the Ground Force are participating in this exercise?

The exercise involves artillery, armored units, air assault teams, drone operators, electronic warfare units, missile groups, and various supporting units.

What new equipment and tools are being used in this exercise?

We are using "Fajr 5" rocket launchers, which have a range of over 110 kilometers. Additionally, we'll deploy various reconnaissance, combat, and surveillance drones from the Army Ground Forces that can fly continuously and without interruption. We'll also utilize precision-guided bombs like the "Ghaem" and precision-guided missiles such as "Almas." Furthermore, we'll incorporate various smart fire-and-forget missiles and enhance our combat robots to transport equipment for friendly forces and target enemy munitions.

Iran faces various threats. What role does the Army Ground Force play in addressing these threats as a key component of the country's military capability?

The Army Ground Force enhances the country's combat and defensive capabilities by effectively utilizing its personnel across multiple tasks. This includes improving reconnaissance, fire support, transportation, offensive electronic warfare, and robotics. By conducting continuous operations at any time and place, the Ground Force plays a vital role in countering surrounding threats and serves as a backbone for the armed forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The term "offensive" has been used to describe this exercise. Why is that?

The term "offensive" reflects our approach in this exercise, where we ensured that units and equipment were not confined to predetermined locations. Instead, all combat tools and equipment were deployed in a fully mobile manner. This allows us to test the capabilities and combat strategies of the Army Ground Force in line with the characteristics of modern warfare.

It seems that advanced technologies are playing a larger role in warfare compared to just a few years ago. How is the Ground Force leveraging these technologies for both offensive and defensive purposes?

We are continuously improving our offensive and defensive capabilities by incorporating updated long-range, precision-guided, smart, and network-centric equipment and

weapons. This includes tripling the range of our smart anti-tank missiles and increasing the range of helicopter-launched precision-guided missiles sevenfold. All rapid reaction units are being equipped with modern weaponry. We are also designing and implementing connections between special forces and robots for future warfare while employing various attacking drones and an integrated system to counter enemy drones. These advancements reflect our commitment to developing cutting-edge technologies within the Army Ground Force.

Tehran Times, Iran, January 16, 2025

Iran to expand military drills near nuclear sites

TEHRAN – After demonstrating successful air defense capabilities near its nuclear facilities in Esfahan, Qom, and Markazi provinces, Iran will further enhance security through additional military drills in these areas, according to Mohammad Eslami, Head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization.

The nuclear chief made the announcement on the sidelines of a cabinet meeting on Wednesday, praising the nation's military and civil defense readiness.

Eslami underscored the significance of the air defense drill, which showcased the capabilities of Iran's armed forces to protect the country's skies. "The air defense exercise near Natanz demonstrated the extensive capacities of our military forces and their ability to safeguard the nation's airspace. This exercise is a testament to the dedication and readiness of our forces," he stated.

During the past two weeks, Iran's Army and the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) conducted a joint air defense exercise near Iran's nuclear facilities in Natanz, Fordow, and Khondab. The drill aimed to assess the readiness of air defense units to safeguard the sensitive site from potential aerial threats. On at least one occasion, Iranian forces practiced downing bunker busters over the country's nuclear sites.

The heightened media focus on what seems to be a routine military exercise likely stems from recent speculation in Western and Israeli media regarding potential plans by the

incoming Trump administration to target Iran's nuclear facilities.

This speculation was further fueled by a report from Axios, which claimed that National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan recently presented President Biden with potential U.S. military strike options on Iranian nuclear sites, should Tehran take steps toward developing nuclear weapons prior to Trump's inauguration later this month.

Eslami also provided updates on Iran's nuclear energy ambitions, specifically the 20,000-megawatt nuclear power generation project, a long-term national priority set for completion by 2041.

"Nuclear power is a vital component of our national development strategy," he explained. "While many countries have developed nuclear power facilities, the Islamic Republic of Iran faces no legal or regulatory barriers to pursuing this path. Despite years of opposition from the United States and certain European nations, we have overcome their attempts to disrupt our progress."

Eslami criticized the historical interference of the U.S. and three European countries, accusing them of using political pressure to hinder Iran's peaceful nuclear program. Nevertheless, he asserted that these efforts have been futile in preventing Iran from advancing its nuclear energy goals.

Iran's energy strategy revolves around generating 20,000 megawatts of nuclear power by 2041. Eslami outlined the government's roadmap for achieving this ambitious target, emphasizing that the project is progressing as planned.

"We started this initiative with a clear vision and detailed planning. So far, we have achieved significant milestones according to our timeline. We remain committed to continuing on this path and achieving our objectives," Eslami said.

Tehran Times, Iran, January 22, 2025

Iran set to join Pakistan's AMAN-25 naval drills

TEHRAN – Iran's Armed Forces Chief of Staff, Major General Mohammad Bagheri, has confirmed the nation's participation in the

upcoming AMAN-25 naval exercises, scheduled for February 7-11 in Karachi.

Bagheri made the announcement during his visit to Islamabad, where he held discussions with high-ranking Pakistani officials, including the army chief, air force commander, defense minister, prime minister, and president.

The biennial AMAN exercises, organized by the Pakistan Navy, aim to strengthen maritime security through international collaboration.

Key focuses include countering terrorism, preventing piracy, and executing search and rescue missions.

The drills will feature various naval operations, such as live-fire exercises, communication drills, and humanitarian assistance efforts, designed to enhance the capabilities of the attending forces.

These exercises offer a venue for naval forces to share tactics and strategies, boosting interoperability among participants.

So far, confirmed participants in AMAN-25 include Iran, the U.S., China, Russia, the U.K., Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, showcasing a blend of regional and global naval powers.

Iran's engagement in AMAN-25 follows a series of diplomatic and military interactions with Pakistan.

General Bagheri's recent visit to Islamabad was his third to the South Asian nation, following previous trips in 2018 and 2021.

The expanding framework of military cooperation between the two countries is to a large extent fueled by mutual security concerns along the Iran-Pakistan border.

In 2023, the two nations conducted a joint border security exercise to combat terrorism and drug trafficking. This partnership was further cemented with a security cooperation agreement in April 2024, which included the deployment of high-ranking officers in border regions to enhance counterterrorism efforts.

Tehran Times, Iran, January 29, 2025

Iranian Army's Ground Forces showcase defensive, security prowess in major drill

TEHRAN – In a display of advanced military capabilities, the Iranian Army's Ground Force conducted a significant maneuver involving a

fleet of 100 helicopters in Kermanshah, western Iran.

The maneuvers, which started on Monday, were attended by high-ranking officials including Commander of the Ground Force Brigadier General Kioumars Heidari.

Described as "security, offensive, and mobile exercises," the drills included the overhaul and addition of several helicopter models—205, 206, 209, and 214—previously grounded due to the need for parts production and supply.

The exercises aimed to enhance the Army Ground Force's defensive readiness against any external threats to national security.

The drills were conducted in Naftshahr, a region in Kermanshah Province's Qasr-e Shirin County, western Iran.

The 35th Special Forces Brigade, the 55th Airborne Brigade, the 181st Armored Brigade, Army Aviation, Electronic Warfare Battalions, and drones were among the participating units.

Brigadier General Karim Chashak, Deputy Commander of Operations for the Ground Force, highlighted that the goal of the drill was to enhance the forces' readiness for countering any foreign threats against order and security in the country.

We are ready for any war: top General

On Tuesday, the final stage of the Army Ground Force's exercises in the country's western region took place.

Major General Mohammad Bagheri, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, Major General Abdolrahim Mousavi, Commander of the Iranian Army, and a group of senior officials, commanders, and top brass from the Armed Forces General Staff and the Army were present.

Addressing the troops and commanders, Major General Bagheri emphasized the importance of incorporating modern technologies into military strategies.

"Due to the advancement and proliferation of artificial intelligence and robotic sciences, modern battles have significantly diverged from past battles," he stated.

Bagheri noted that the Army Ground Force maximized the use of these technologies,

employing equipment developed by the Army Ground Force's Research and Self-Sufficiency Jihad Organization.

He pointed out that one of the notable aspects of the drills was the offensive and defensive flight operations of the Army Ground Force's micro aerial vehicles.

"The force's offensive successfully targeted and destroyed the intended objectives, while the defensive micro aerial vehicles demonstrated the Army Ground Force's seven-layer defensive capabilities in countering the enemy's offensive micro aerial vehicles," Bagheri explained.

Additionally, the top general lauded the successful execution of the maneuvers and the integration of advanced technologies.

Bagheri concluded by reiterating the commitment to maintaining maximum readiness and sending a clear message to adversaries about the country's preparedness to confront any threats, particularly in electronic warfare.

Tehran Times, Iran, January 25, 2025

IRGC Navy commander to Tehran Times:

2,400km of Iran's coast fortified with network of hardened underground bases

TEHRAN – Last week, Iranian television unveiled an underground base of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) Navy in the Persian Gulf that made immediate headlines. The facility, housing numerous fast-attack craft, was widely viewed as a critical component of Iran's naval strategy, both defensive and offensive.

This view seems to be accurate, with Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri, commander of the IRGC Navy, confirming its strategic importance in an exclusive interview with the Tehran Times, where he discussed the development and significance of this and similar bases, and emphasized their role in safeguarding Iranian interests in the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman.

"For years, we meticulously studied our adversaries' movements," Tangsiri stated. "Guided by the Leader of the Islamic Revolution's directive to cultivate naval capabilities befitting the values and principles

of the Islamic Revolution, we have achieved exactly that.”

The military official made the remarks hours before overseeing the launch of extensive military drills on Friday. These ongoing maneuvers, encompassing vast areas of the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, are part of broader exercises that various branches of the Iranian Armed Forces began earlier this year.

Tangsiri explained that Iran has developed various strategies and weapons systems to counter threats in its southern waters. One such measure involves the deployment of missile-equipped fast attack craft, which are also armed with smart mines and rockets and can engage in electronic warfare.

"These boats," he explained, "are among the fastest ever produced, and their weaponry is characterized by both precision and power."

He added that Iran's strategy is to position these craft in numerous deep underground bases along the coasts of the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman. "While I cannot disclose the exact number of these bases," Tangsiri stated, "I can confirm that we have utilized the entire 2,440-kilometer southern coastline of Iran."

According to Tangsiri, each fast-attack boat is equipped with specialized mobile platforms, enabling rapid deployment. "Our adversaries will never know when scores of these lethal boats will suddenly engage them. Moreover, these bases are impossible to precisely locate or destroy. They are fortified even against bunker-buster bombs."

The IRGC Navy showcased a glimpse of this potential on Friday. Footage released by the IRGC depicts a portion of the exercises where scores of high-speed boats rapidly approach a sea target, and then overwhelm it with direct fire.

Iran's investment in fast attack craft: a reminiscence of its drone success

Iran's military thinkers and manufacturers have established a reputation for their innovative solutions, often adopting methods that other countries have overlooked. A prime example of this is their strategic investment in drone technology, an area long overlooked by many major powers.

Rather than solely investing in costly fighter jets, Iran has focused on developing affordable and effective Kamikaze drones. These drones cost only a couple thousand dollars, can travel hundreds of kilometers, and bring only success to their deployers: they either hit their targets or bleed the enemy's financial resources as it's forced to expend disproportionately expensive air defense assets for interception.

Iranian drones have become world leaders in their class, and some Western think tanks fear they could reshape the future of global conflicts. This innovative approach now extends to naval capabilities. After last week's unveiling of an underground base packed with fast attack craft, many are now wondering whether these vessels will emerge as the next Iranian sensation in the military domain.

"If we were to draw an analogy," explained seasoned war reporter Mehdi Bakhtiari, "you can imagine a bear being attacked by wasps. A single sting won't do much harm, but a large swarm of these angry insects can be extremely dangerous. I believe these Iranian vessels function similarly." He elaborated, noting that while the Iranian [Artesh] Navy focuses on activities in distant territories and waters, the IRGC naval forces are responsible for safeguarding Iranian assets in the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, and the Strait of Hormuz. "As potential targets would all be in close proximity, the IRGC has opted for equipment that does not require constant deployment on the water. The fast attack craft, stored in hardened and protected underground bases, can rapidly become operational and reach their aims quickly. It is also not easy to target them. Finally, like Iranian drones, these vessels incorporate crucial new capabilities, the result of meticulous effort and focused development."

By Mona Hojat Ansari

Afghanistan

The Kabul Times, Kabul, January 23, 2025

Editorial

Islamic Emirate forces should be strengthened in number and quality

Under the Islamic Emirate, the country's army was officially reestablished on 8 November 2021 after the fall of the Western-backed republic government on 15 August 2021 after unsuccessfully ruling Afghanistan for twenty years. As the Islamic Emirate's authorities assert, the number of the country's security forces members, including the army, police, and intelligence agency, exceeds 450,000. After reaching power, the country's army relies heavily on the captured military hardware from the defeated former army, with approximately 2,000 vehicles falling into Mujahidin's hands after the fall of Kabul. According to reports, from 1 September 2021 to 10 January 2022, 15,102 newly trained Afghan fighters were inducted into the Islamic Emirate Army with the average number of new soldiers estimated at 120 soldiers per week, while the number increased in the ensuing years. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan needs more professionally trained and equipped forces within the country's national defense and interior ministry and intelligence agency besides strengthening the country's air force. A powerful army that is counted as the backbone of any system to defend the country's territorial integrity, is a must apart from what any nation considers noninterference in the internal affairs of each other as their firm national and cross-border policy. Afghanistan, under the Islamic Emirate leadership, never wants to interfere in other countries' affairs but has to waste no time and use any means to have powerful security forces, particularly the Islamic National Army. As the authorities of the Islamic Emirate have frequently emphasized, Afghanistan, with a new Islamic feature and programs wants to go forward based on the Islamic Sharia laws, bilateral interests with the world and regional countries, and most importantly considering the international standards of relations with the worlds and its neighbors. Afghanistan has opened a new chapter with its nation and the world. It wants peace and security and never wants to enter another

war and bloodshed again. The country wants to have powerful skilled, trained, and experienced security and defense forces and has the right to secure all needed military hardware from any country as part of its plan to defend its national interests without intending to turn into a threat to other nations. The Islamic Emirate's leaders have repeatedly assured that the country's defense and security forces have eliminated militant groups, including the so-called Islamic State's Khurasan branch in the country and no reason for concern has remained for other countries in this respect. As respect and good relations come from both sides, other countries should honestly deal with the Islamic Emirate based on mutual respect, and any interference from the other side would have a similar and reciprocal reaction. The Islamic Emirate extends the hands of cooperation to all friendly countries and expects the same from others. The Afghan people want to live in peace and stability under the shadow and support of their brave Islamic and devoted forces and oppose any malicious plots endangering this right and the right of co-existence with their neighbors and regional partners.

Pakistan

Defence and Security Affairs

The News

January 21, 2025

Pakistan, Turkey conduct joint naval drill in Mediterranean Sea

Pakistan Navy's recently commissioned ship, PNS Yamama, participated in exercise

By Our Correspondent

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan Navy and Turkish Navy have conducted bilateral exercise Turgutreis-XI in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea.

The Turgutreis series of bilateral exercises is named in honour of the great Ottoman Admiral Turgut Reis, symbolising a shared maritime legacy and strong naval ties between the two brotherly nations.

Pakistan Navy's recently commissioned ship, PNS Yamama, participated in the exercise during her maiden voyage from Romania to Pakistan. The ship was joined by Turkish

Navy vessels TCG Buyukada and TCG Derya, and helicopter TNF SH-70.

The exercise was meticulously planned to enhance interoperability between the two navies, as participating units engaged in a variety of maritime operations and tactical manoeuvres.

Throughout the exercise, both navies reaffirmed their mutual commitment to strengthening cooperation in addressing emerging maritime challenges and ensuring regional maritime security. The collaboration underscores the shared objective of maintaining safe and secure global commons for the benefit of all.

Dawn

January 27, 2025

Navy to hold 9th Aman exercise from Feb 7

Staff Reporter

KARACHI: The Pakistan Navy is set to host Aman-25, the ninth edition of multinational Aman exercise, from February 7 to 11.

According to the navy, a key feature of this year's exercise will be the Aman Dialogue, where chiefs of naval forces, heads of coast guards, and senior leaders from around the world will convene to discuss regional maritime security and devise joint strategies to counter evolving maritime threats.

Around 60 countries will participate in Aman-25, contributing with ships, aircraft, Special Operation Forces (SOF), Explosives Ordnance Disposal (EOD) teams, Marines and observers.

Delegations from across the globe will also attend the inaugural International Aman Dialogue, which will take place alongside the exercise.

The Aman series has been a hallmark of the Pakistan Navy's efforts to promote regional peace and cooperation. Launched in 2007, the inaugural exercise saw the participation of 28 countries. By 2023, the number of participating nations had grown to 50, including major naval powers. The motto of the Aman series, 'Together for Peace', reflects its core mission, while this year's theme, 'Secure Seas; Prosperous Future', emphasises the importance of maritime security for global prosperity.

The Aman exercise consists of harbour and sea phases.

Published in Dawn, January 27th, 2025

Dawn

January 19, 2025

Pakistan, Italian navies conduct joint sailing operations

Staff Reporter

KARACHI: Pakistan Navy's sail training ship Rah Naward successfully conducted joint sailing operations with Italian Navy Sail Ship Amerigo Vespucci in the Gulf of Oman.

The exercise was part of Rah Naward's overseas deployment to Oman, aimed at fostering goodwill and providing practical training to cadets from Pakistan Naval Academy.

This collaborative exercise with the Italian Navy sail ship offered valuable opportunities for cadets to enhance their skills in joint sailing operations. While international tall ship regattas are common, such coordinated manoeuvres between them are rarely witnessed. The planning and execution of this exercise, conducted while both ships were on their respective national tasking, exemplifies the high level of coordination and professionalism shared between the two navies.

The joint sailing operations also showcased the distinct sailing techniques of two iconic tall ships from different regions. This interaction underscores the enduring collaboration and growing interoperability between the Pakistan Navy and global naval forces.

Published in Dawn, January 19th, 2025

Pakistan Space Programme

The Nation

January 17, 2025

Pakistan set to launch its first fully indigenous Electro-Optical Satellite EO-1

NEWS WIRE

ISLAMABAD - Continuing its strides toward excellence in space technology, Pakistan Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Commission (SUPARCO) is all set to launch its first fully indigenous Electro-Optical (EO-1) Satellite today (Friday, January 17). The landmark event will take place at the Jiuquan

Satellite Launch Centre (JSLC) in China, symbolizing a significant leap in Pakistan's space journey and a testament to its growing technological expertise. Designed and developed entirely by Pakistani engineers, EO-1 represents a breakthrough in the country's space science capabilities. The satellite, equipped with cutting-edge imaging technology, is expected to provide substantial benefits across various sectors, including agriculture, environmental monitoring, urban planning, and disaster management. This achievement aligns with Pakistan's National Space Policy and reinforces its commitment to harnessing advanced technologies for national progress. "This is a historic milestone for Pakistan," said Zain Bukhari, an expert at SUPARCO, in an interview with News Wire. "EO-1 is equipped with a high-resolution camera that will capture detailed images of Earth, offering multiple applications. It is the first satellite fully designed and manufactured locally by SUPARCO's engineers, demonstrating the nation's capability to achieve self-reliance in space technology." "The satellite has undergone rigorous testing to ensure its operational readiness, and today's launch is expected to be a proud moment for the entire nation", he said. Recalling the country's achievements, Zain Bukhari who is General Manager at SUPARCO, shared that Pakistan's space journey began in 2011 with the launch of PakSat-1R, a communication satellite developed with the support of China, which continues to function effectively. SUPARCO achieved another milestone in 2018 by launching two satellites—PakTES-1A and Pakistan Remote Sensing Satellite-1—on the same launcher with China's assistance. While in 2024, the successful launch of PakSat-MM1-a communication satellite- brought high-speed internet to remote areas, further solidifying Pakistan's space ambitions. The expert shared that SUPARCO also facilitated the development of the iCube Qamar satellite in 2024, a project led by students of the Institute of Space Technology (IST). The satellite, which observed the lunar surface and captured real-time images, not

only showcased local talent but also encouraged the younger generation to pursue careers in space science. As an agrarian country, Pakistan stands to benefit significantly from the EO-1 satellite. According to Zain Bukhari, the satellite's capabilities will revolutionize agricultural practices by providing data on crop suitability, water requirements, and efficient resource use. This will help educate farmers and minimize resource wastage. In addition to its agricultural applications, EO-1 will play a critical role in disaster management. "During floods and earthquakes, it is often impossible to assess damages immediately. Satellites like EO-1 can provide crucial data in real time, enabling authorities to make informed decisions about relief and rescue operations," he explained. He also emphasized the satellite's importance in addressing climate change. With advanced technology to monitor deforestation, glacier melting, and other environmental changes, EO-1 will provide valuable insights to tackle global warming and drive sustainable development. Meanwhile, Aisha Rabia, another expert from SUPARCO, highlighted the satellite's potential to benefit sectors like urban development, resource extraction, and conservation. "EO-1 will aid in monitoring minerals, oil and gas fields, glacier recession, and water resources. It reflects Pakistan's ability to achieve self-sufficiency in satellite manufacturing despite economic challenges," she said. About the agency's programs for students, Aisha Rabia shared that SUPARCO's efforts extend beyond satellite launches, with initiatives to nurture the next generation of space scientists. The programs like the Space Education Awareness Drive (SEAD) and the annual celebration of World Space Week aim to engage students from primary schools to universities in space-related activities. Looking ahead, Zain Bukhari said that SUPARCO has ambitious plans for deep space missions and scientific research to further expand Pakistan's presence in the global space arena. The launch of EO-1 is expected to inspire greater investment in space technology, create job opportunities for

youth, and strengthen Pakistan's position in global space arena, he said. For him today's launch will undoubtedly be a historic occasion, symbolizing Pakistan's determination to advance in space technology and contribute to national progress.

The News

January 22, 2025

6 planets to align in January's cosmic spectacle

"Though millions of miles apart, the planets seem to march together across the heavens," says Suparco

By News Desk

ISLAMABAD: In a breathtaking celestial event, six planets — Venus, Jupiter, Mars, Saturn, Neptune and Uranus — are likely to grace the night sky at the end of January, according to the Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Commission (Suparco).

In a statement, a Suparco spokesperson said people will be able to witness the "spectacular planetary parade" next week. Venus, Jupiter, Mars, and Saturn would be visible to the naked eye, the spokesperson said, adding that Neptune and Uranus, however, can be seen using a telescope. In another event, the official said that a "rare seven-planet parade" will begin in late February. The planets will appear in a straight line from Earth's perspective, creating a stunning view, the spokesperson added.

"Though millions of miles apart, the planets seem to march together across the heavens," the Suparco official added.

On the other hand, social media is flooded with posts and videos claiming that the upcoming planetary alignment on January 25 happens "once in 396 billion years". However, planetary alignments are not something out of the ordinary, nor are they irregular or a weird phenomenon; but are indeed a spectacular sight.

China

Defence and Security Affairs

Global Times, China, January 22, 2025

PLA Navy commissions first Type 054B frigate, making breakthroughs in stealth,

combat command and firepower integrated control

By Liu Xuanzun and Guo Yuandan

The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy's first Type 054B frigate, the *Luohe*, was officially commissioned on Wednesday. The 5,000-ton-class warship features advancements in stealth, combat command systems and integrated firepower control. The first 054B frigate of the PLA Navy was handed over and commissioned at a naval port in Qingdao, East China's Shandong Province on Wednesday morning, the Xinhua News Agency reported. At the naval port, the *Luohe* hoisted full ceremonial flags, and officers and soldiers stood in formation with high spirits. At about 10 am, the commissioning and flag-giving ceremony began. Attendees sang the national anthem as the Five-Starred Red Flag was raised slowly. The honor guards escorted the August 1 military flag and the naval flag and marched to the rostrum. The flag-raiser of the *Luohe* hoisted the flags on the fore and aft decks of the ship. The ceremony ended with the military song of the PLA, according to the report.

With the hull number 545 and a displacement of about 5,000 tons, the *Luohe* is a new generation of frigate independently developed and built by China. It has made breakthroughs in vessel stealth technology, combat command systems and firepower integrated control, among other aspects, significantly enhancing its performances, said Xinhua.

The ship possesses strong comprehensive combat capabilities and diversified military mission capabilities, which are of great significance for improving the overall combat effectiveness of naval warship formations. It is an important piece of equipment for the transformation and development of the Chinese navy, according to Xinhua. Song Zhongping, a Chinese military expert, told the Global Times on Wednesday that the new Type 054B frigate has undergone significant upgrades across its systems compared with its predecessor, the Type 054A.

The Type 054B is larger than the Type 054A, allowing for enhanced firepower and the ability to carry larger utility helicopters such as the Z-20, Song said. Many of the most advanced technologies, including those applied on the Type 055 large destroyer, have likely been incorporated into the design of the Type 054B, Song believed. The Type 054B frigate was reportedly launched in 2023. In response to the reports, Senior Colonel Wu Qian, a spokesperson at China's Ministry of National Defense, said at a regular press conference in August 2023 that it is a normal arrangement addressing national security needs and the overall naval trend of the PLA Navy developing equipment including main combat vessels according to related plans. The goal is to defend national sovereignty, security and development interests, and better safeguard world and regional peace and stability, Wu said, noting that China always follows a path of peaceful development, and unswervingly adheres to a national defense policy that is defensive in nature.

The 054B features extended endurance, enabling operations in both coastal and far seas environments. It is expected to take up the missions of the small Type 056 corvettes in coastal waters and join the Type 055 large destroyers in far seas missions, Song said. The expert expected the Type 054B to be mass produced like the Type 054A. Zhang Xuefeng, another Chinese military expert, told the Global Times on Wednesday that the PLA Navy could build a large number of Type 054B frigates to address diverse maritime threats. He highlighted the frigate's balanced capabilities in anti-submarine, anti-ship and air defense missions, as well as its cost-effectiveness through the use of advanced technologies. It is one of the most advanced frigates in the world, Zhang said. Chinese naval expert Zhang Junshe noted that the Type 054B can also operate as part of aircraft carrier and amphibious assault groups, providing escort in air defense and anti-submarine roles.

He told the Global Times on Wednesday that the commissioning of the Type 054B frigate demonstrates the PLA Navy's progress in equipment development and manufacturing, significantly enhancing China's national defense. "With advanced warships like the Type 054B, the PLA Navy will strengthen its comprehensive combat capabilities in far seas, better safeguarding national sovereignty, security, and development interests," he said.

Global Times, China, January 17, 2025

Chinese space station expected to welcome onboard first scientific research project from HKSAR within this year

By Global Times

China's Tiangong Space Station is expected to host its first scientific research project conducted by scientists from Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) as early as this year, according to the Technology and Engineering Center for Space Utilization under the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Hong Kong media reported on Tuesday. The project will contribute to the green emission reduction cause in the Greater Bay Area, offering robust data support for China's carbon peaking and neutrality goals, as well as carbon emission plans for partner countries and regions along the Belt and Road.

Ba Jin, deputy director of the center's application and development division, told Hong Kong media Wen Wei Po that the research team from the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology proposed the concept and collaborated with the Changchun Institute of Optics under the Chinese Academy of Sciences to develop a high-resolution greenhouse gas point-source detector. At present, the project is progressing smoothly and has been approved, and it is slated for deployment to the space station for experiments soon, the Wen Wei Po report said.

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology explained that the detector will track the carbon dioxide and methane emission hotspots in the global mid-low latitude range, and measure carbon dioxide

and methane concentrations at facilities including power plants, coal mines, and landfills.

The research team will use these data to derive near-real-time carbon emission fluxes, delivering reliable, precise, and high-frequency data for carbon monitoring and verification of key emission sources, providing decision-makers with quantitative information to formulate effective carbon reduction measures, and supporting the evaluation of carbon reduction measures. This project will offer critical data to support China's carbon peaking and neutrality efforts, and will also serve many countries and regions along the Belt and Road, and contribute to mitigating global climate change.

"The Greater Bay Area plays a crucial role in China's scientific and technological advancement. Hong Kong has a profound scientific and educational background and many renowned universities," Ba said. He encouraged more Hong Kong researchers to participate in the team of space station scientific applications.

"We hope that Hong Kong's participation in the science application projects of the space station will establish a sustainable framework. In the future, with the increasing participation of Hong Kong, it is expected to form a more clustered regional advantage, advancing the Greater Bay Area's space technology to new heights," Ba added. In the two years since the space station's completion, over 180 scientific and application projects have been conducted in orbit, with nearly two tons of scientific materials delivered and nearly 100 experimental sample types returned, Ba said at a press conference introducing Tiangong's scientific application progress held on Monday.

According to the official, China's space station is set to undertake over 1,000 research projects, foster scientific outreach and strengthen international collaboration over the next 10 to 15 years, Xinhua News Agency reported.

In the field of new space technologies and

applications, efforts will prioritize national strategic objectives, including near-Earth and Earth-moon space, manned deep-space exploration, and in-orbit services. Additional work will target innovative space applications and critical technology verification, per the Xinhua report.

Global Times, China, January 30, 2025

Chinese satellite enterprises provide expanded, improved global services

By Xinhua

Chinese space companies have been expanding their satellite services, including communication, navigation and remote sensing, while also accelerating the deployment of satellite constellations in pursuit of better services. At the start of 2025, China Great Wall Industry Corporation (CGWIC), which offers commercial launch and satellite in-orbit delivery services, completed the delivery of an intelligent remote sensing satellite, known as IRSS-1, to an Omani company. Launched on Nov. 11, 2024, this one-meter resolution satellite weighs 95 kilograms and has a design life of five years. It will be used for surveys of land and forests, as well as urban planning and disaster monitoring. The successful delivery of the satellite will play an important role in improving Oman's remote sensing satellite application capabilities, the CGWIC said.

Wide remote sensing coverage

Users from around the world who log on to the website of Chang Guang Satellite Technology Co., Ltd, can browse satellite images captured by the company's Jilin-1 satellite constellation.

The Jilin-1 constellation, which had its first group of satellites launched back in October 2015, now features more than 117 satellites and is capable of observing any point on the globe about 40 times a day, according to Huang Jian, head of Chang Guang's overseas business data application.

The Jilin-1 constellation can cover the world six times a year and the entire China 24 times annually, and so can provide frequent updates of satellite images of any location, Huang said, while adding that this capability

supports the company's overseas business expansion.

Chang Guang has been cooperating with more than 130 overseas users in providing services regarding land surveys, urban building investigations, agriculture and forestry. In response to disasters and emergencies, the company has recently provided satellite images of fires and floods in different parts of the world, following a request from the United Nations.

Notably, the company is planning a new constellation consisting of 200 satellites, according to Xuan Ming, chairman and general manager of Chang Guang. This new constellation will have a spatial resolution of 20 centimeters and can cover the entire globe once a day.

Its temporal resolution, combined with the contribution of the Jilin-1 constellation, will make it possible to revisit any point on Earth within approximately three minutes.

EFFICIENT COMMUNICATION NETWORKS

The commercialization of China's aerospace sector started in 2014, when the country's State Council, in a guideline, encouraged private capital to participate in the construction of national civil space infrastructure.

Founded in 2018, Geespace is a science and technology innovation enterprise under the Chinese automaker Geely. It currently operates 30 satellites in three orbital planes, thereby achieving 24-hour coverage of 90 percent of the world, and provides satellite communication services to overseas users. These satellites are part of the Geesatcom constellation. The low-orbit communication constellation can enable direct satellite connection for automotive autonomous driving, intelligent internet connection, smartphones and other consumer electronic products.

Geesatcom in June 2024 completed its first commercial deployment test in the Middle East. It will cooperate with a number of global operators in switching on a worldwide commercial application.

Through a combination of Geesatcom and its ground system, Geespace provides global

medium-and-low-speed satellite communication operations, satellite-based high-precision positioning services and a satellite remote sensing AI service, according to Wan Yang, founder of Geespace. In the future, Geespace expects to provide access to its satellite application services to clients in both Southeast Asia and Africa. Another Chinese commercial satellite constellation, Spacesail, will provide satellite communication services to Brazil and broadband internet access for that country's remote and under-served regions from 2026. Spacesail is a low Earth orbit mega-constellation with full frequency bands and a multi-layer and multi-orbit design. Its commercial network construction was officially launched on Aug. 6, 2024. The market for connecting smartphones directly to satellites has become increasingly promising. "Except for the North Pole and South Pole, almost any location on Earth, including oceans, deserts and remote mountainous regions where traditional communications are difficult to achieve, will enjoy a stable network connection -- with smartphones directly connected to satellites," said Wang.

By the end of June 2024, 546 commercial space enterprises were registered and effectively operating in China, China Space Foundation Secretary General Wang Cheng said in November last year at the 15th China International Aviation and Aerospace Exhibition (Airshow China) in Zhuhai, south China's Guangdong Province. This booming development of Chinese commercial satellite companies was firmly supported by a series of related policies. China has issued both a medium- and long-term development plan for civil space infrastructure for the period from 2015 to 2025, aiming to support and regulate the development of its commercial space industry.

The country is also mapping a development plan for civil space infrastructure from 2026 to 2035, according to Li Guoping, chief engineer at the China National Space Administration (CNSA)