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Nuclear Energy becomes top electricity source for Pakistan



Bilawal Bhutto meets with Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov



Suicide bomber kills more than 100 and several injured



Balochistan needs opportunities Innovative methods are needed



Putin views Pakistan as 'key partner in South Asia'



PAKISTAN'S WORSENING POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SITUATION



Shipping line from china to Iranian port city of Chabahar



US Republicans begin investigating botched Afghanistan troop withdrawal



China preparing for 'water war' with India



India Banned a BBC Documentary Critical of Modi

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Editorial

Pakistan's worsening political and economic situation

Pakistan is a country that has been fraught with problems since its birth. For Pakistani nationals thinking about the past is bliss as the past is more glorious than the present and the future outlook. It is hard for Pakistani to visualize a strong Pakistan with an independent foreign policy so much so that any thought of the sort is considered a fool's dream. The person wanting to strive for this becomes a laughingstock. These facts portray an alarming situation, and the decision-makers are not concerned about this. As long as they are financially secure, it seems, whatever happens to the country and its people is not of concern and why should it be, the ruling elites have already prepared for such a situation and established their lives abroad in developed countries. Pakistan is faced with a serious political and economic situation. While this statement has become a cliché in Pakistan, the current crisis is deeper and more serious than anything the country has faced before.

An economic crisis comes every few years in Pakistan, stemming from an economy that doesn't produce enough and spends too much and is therefore dependent on foreign debt. Each subsequent crisis is worse as the debt bill grows and payments come due. This year it was made worse by domestic political instability and a flood disaster. The crisis also has a significant external element rising global food and fuel prices as a result of Russia's war in Ukraine.

The combination of all these factors meant perhaps the greatest economic challenge Pakistan had ever seen. Still, the government is mired in politicking and the release of a \$1.1 billion loan tranche from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) remains on hold as Islamabad backed away from IMF conditions. The government has now resorted to restricting imports and closing malls and wedding halls early, small measures that do not adequately address the problem.

Pakistan may be able to avoid insolvency for the time being with help from the IMF and loans from friendly countries, especially Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. But these will not address the clear underlying malaise of the economy and the fact that something fundamental will have to change in terms of how much the economy produces and how much it spends to avoid insolvency. However, none of Pakistan's political parties seem to have the political will or ability to make such a change. Pakistan reportedly has to repay \$73 billion by 2025; it will not work without debt restructuring.

Politics will likely consume much of Pakistan's time and attention in 2023, as it will in 2022. The country's slide into political instability last spring did not end with a dramatic no-confidence vote in parliament last April that ousted then-Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan from office. Instability and polarization have only deepened since then: Imran Khan led a popular opposition movement against the existing coalition government and military, holding several large rallies across the country during the year.

The power struggle in Pakistan continues until 2023. While the incumbent government has not given in to Khan's demand for early elections, national elections are constitutionally required to be held by October this year. It benefits the present regime politically to delay them as long as possible as it tries to dig itself out of Pakistan's pressing economic crisis and its lackluster domestic performance. Khan's party has done very well in a series of by-elections held in July and October. The state tried to implicate Khan and his party in legal cases, relying on a familiar playbook used against opposition politicians in Pakistan, albeit with limited effect, involving the courts. These moves against Imran Khan and his party are going to be more decisive now with Khan's decision to dissolve both the provincial assemblies of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). This decision has further worsened the political situation as two of Pakistan's provinces are operating without assemblies and now the state will resort to discriminatory measures against the PTI which will lead to further unrest and instability. Pakistan's problems are often blamed on the powerful military of the country, however, now that the army has become apolitical, it needs to be seen whether the political forces can set aside their differences in the interest of the country or will they continue to destabilize Pakistan in their own self-interest.

Summarized News & Articles

**100+ killed, 157 wounded, as suicide blast rips through Pakistan police mosque
Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif, who visited the wounded in Peshawar, and
vowed “stern action” against those behind the terror attack**

PESHAWAR: A suicide bomber blew himself up inside a crowded mosque in a highly fortified security compound in Pakistan on Monday, the latest in a string of attacks targeting police. Police said the attacker appeared to have passed through several barricades manned by security forces to get into the Red Zone compound that houses police and counter-terrorism offices in the northwestern city of Peshawar. “It was a suicide bombing,” Peshawar police chief Muhammad Ijaz Khan said. Authorities said the bomber detonated the explosives at the moment hundreds of people lined up to pray. “We have found traces of explosives,” Khan said. A security lapse had clearly occurred as the bomber had slipped through the most secure area of the compound, he said. An inquiry was under way into how the attacker breached such an elite security cordon and whether there was any

inside help. Khan said the mosque hall was packed with up to 400 worshippers, and that most of the dead were police officers. Peshawar district administrator Riaz Mehsud told “I think 90 percent of the casualties are police personnel because most of those offering prayers in the mosque were policemen.” Taliban commander claims attack Sarbakaf Mohmand, a commander for the Pakistani Taliban, also known as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan or TTP, claimed responsibility for the attack in a post on Twitter.

4 Security Personnel Martyred in Terrorist Activity from Across Pak-Iran Border in Balochistan

By: Naveed Siddiqui | January 18, 2023

The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said that four security personnel were martyred during “terrorist activity” from across the Pakistan-Iran border in Balochistan's Panjgur district. “Today, in a terrorist activity from across Pakistan-Iran border in Chukab sector, district Panjgur, Balochistan, four security forces personnel have embraced martyrdom,” the statement said. It further said that the militants used Iranian soil to “target a convoy of security forces patrolling along the border”. Iran has been asked to hunt down the terrorists on their side, the ISPR statement said. Earlier in the day, foreign office spokesperson Mumtaz Zahra Baloch told reporters at a media briefing that Pakistan had called on Iran to hold accountable “responsible elements” behind the attack. “Pakistan strongly condemns the terrorist attack from across the Iran border,” Baloch said. “Terrorists used the territory of Iran and we hope that Iran will act against the responsible elements.” In a press statement, the Iranian embassy in Islamabad condemned attack. “Terrorism is the common pain of Iran,” the statement said. (Source: APP)

Foreign Minister holds Delegation level Talks with Foreign Minister of Russia

Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari held delegation level talks with Foreign Minister of Russia, Mr. Sergey Lavrov in Moscow on 30 January 2023. Foreign Minister is on his maiden visit to Moscow at the invitation of his Russian counterpart. The talks covered the entire range of bilateral relations with a special focus on trade and economic relations, energy cooperation as well as regional and global issues of mutual interest. Noting the multidimensional cooperation between Pakistan and Russia, the two Foreign Ministers agreed to further enhance mutually beneficial cooperation in the areas of trade, energy, education, culture, security and counter-terrorism. They also agreed on the importance of regular high-level exchanges for the mutual benefit of the two countries and peoples. The two Foreign Ministers also discussed the regional situation, especially in Afghanistan. Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari apprised the Foreign Minister Lavrov on Pakistan's efforts for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. He briefed the Russian delegation on Pakistan's perspective on stability and security in South Asia and gross human rights violations in the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK). The two sides also reviewed cooperation within various multilateral institutions including United Nations and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). (Courtesy – Ministry of Foreign Affairs) Islamabad – Pakistan 30 January 2023

Energy supplies

The ministerial meeting is taking place in the context of an intensive work by Russian and Pakistani companies to resolve all remaining issues related to energy supplies to Pakistan.

Pakistan Stream

One of the key issues of cooperation between the two countries is the North-South gas pipeline project, the parties had previously decided to rename into Pakistan Stream. In January, the Russian Energy Ministry reported that Moscow sees no obstacles to the implementation of this project and is working on an appropriate road map with Islamabad. (TASS Russian News Agency)

Putin views Pakistan as 'key partner in South Asia' High-level Russian delegation meets with Pakistan's premier in Islamabad

By: Rizwan Shehzad January 19, 2023 (The Express Tribune)

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has received a special message from Russian President Vladimir Putin, who views Pakistan as Russia's key partner in South Asia and the Islamic world, reiterating his country's keen interest in deepening bilateral relationship as well as increasing trade and investment between the two sides. The message was delivered by the visiting Russian Energy Minister Nikolay Shulginov, who called on the prime minister in Lahore. Shulginov is leading a Russian delegation for the 8th Round of Pakistan-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission meeting scheduled to be held in Islamabad on Friday. During the meeting, both the sides discussed the purchase of petroleum products from Russia on discounted rates, besides mulling over the supply of oil and gas from Russia to Pakistan on a long-term basis as well as reviewing the gas pipeline project. Through the special message, the Russian energy minister conveyed that President Putin referred to "Pakistan as Russia's important partner in South Asia and the Islamic World [and] reiterated Russia's strong interest to deepen the bilateral relationship". Welcoming the delegation, Shehbaz highlighted the importance Pakistan attached to its relations with the Russian Federation. Shehbaz recalled his meeting with President Putin in Samarkand in September 2022 and said that the meeting had reached important decisions to further strengthen Pakistan-Russia relations. Prime Minister Shehbaz also noted with satisfaction "the keen desire on both the sides to upgrade the bilateral cooperation in trade, investment and economic matters". The Russian energy minister reciprocated the prime minister's sentiments. In December, a Pakistani delegation had visited Russia. During the visit, Russia confirmed the availability of 100,000 barrels per day crude oil supply to Pakistan, and it was reported that a

delegation from Moscow would visit Islamabad in January to set terms for a deal, including rates and mode of payment.

Pakistan backs 'Two-State Formula' to End Palestinian-Israeli conflict

By: Anwar Iqbal : January 19, 2023

UNITED NATIONS: Pakistan told the UN Security Council (UNSC) that the 'two-state formula' offers the only viable solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the rising extremism in Israeli leadership “must not be allowed to foreclose the two-state solution”. Ambassador Munir Akram rejected all Israeli measures and attempts to alter the historical and legal status quo of Al Aqsa mosque and demanded full respect for the status quo at Al Aqsa and all other holy sites in the occupied Palestinian territories. Pakistan urged the Security Council to “act swiftly and resolutely to bring a halt to all such Israeli violations, ensure its full compliance with international law, and implement its own resolutions”. Ambassador Akram said Pakistan was looking forward to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the legal implications of Israeli occupation. Ambassador Akram says Islamabad looks forward to advisory opinion of ICJ on legal implications of Israeli occupation “We expect that the court's opinion will lead to Israeli accountability for its crimes in the occupied Palestinian territory. It is a measure of Israel's sense of impunity that it has taken punitive measures against the Palestinian authorities and people for merely seeking the court's opinion,” he said. Israel is incensed over a UN General Assembly resolution in late December requesting that the ICJ offer an opinion on the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and has imposed fresh sanctions on Palestinian authorities. According to a UN statement, participants at debate underscored the importance of the two-state solution and the need to avoid all measures and actions that would undermine its realisation. Mr Wennesland told the Security Council that it was “imperative” for both Israel and Palestinians to refrain “from provocations and unilateral steps that undermine... the ability to achieve a

negotiated peace”. Ahead of its Dec 29 swearing-in, the new Israeli government declared that the Jewish people had an exclusive right to all parts of the occupied land and issued fresh eviction notices. In debate, UN Security Council members expressed concern at plans to advance settlements and stress that settlement advancement undermines the prospects for a two-state solution. (Source: Dawn News)

KARACHI: 3-Day “Made in Iran” Exhibition Ends

By News desk | (16-17-18 January 2023)

The three-day “Made in Iran” exhibition of Iranian products has come to an end at the Expo Center of Karachi, the economic artery of Pakistan. The exhibition was inaugurated by Sindh Governor Kamran Tesori. Head of Iran Trade Promotion Organization Ali Raza Peyman Pak, Iranian Consul General Hasan Noorian, President of Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industries Irfan Iqbal Sheikh along with a large number of Iranian and Pakistani officials and businessmen were also present. More than 80 stalls of 75 Iranian companies were set up in the “Made in Iran” exhibition including water and power industries, food products (dairy, milk, sweets and chocolate), barbed wire, polymer products, tiles and ceramics, galvanized wire, mining, steel, copper and allied industries, construction materials, agricultural Products, various machinery, packaging products, home appliances, carpets, textiles and other products are presented for exhibition. Governor of Sindh Kamran Tesoori and Head of Iran Trade Promotion Organization Ali Raza Peyman Pak addressed the opening ceremony. Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah also visited the exhibition on the first day. On the first day of the exhibition, a large number of people, including Pakistani businessmen, industrialists, expressed their interest in Iranian products and termed the exhibition as encouraging for Pak-Iran trade events.

Pakistan's Biggest Tractor Manufacturer (Millat Tractors) shuts down operations

(WebDesk : JANUARY 5, 2023)

Pakistan's biggest agricultural machinery manufacturer, Millat Tractors Limited, has announced to shut down its operations from January 6 till further notice, citing low demand and cash flow constraints. The company shared the development in its notice to the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX). "Due to continuing reduced demand of tractors and cash flow constraints, the Company will remain closed from Friday, January 06, 2023 till further notice," read the statement. The development comes as dozens of companies in recently have announced either a shutdown or reduction in operations in Pakistan owing to reduced demand, inventory shortage, energy crunch and supply chain disruptions. Last month, MTL announced that it would observe non-production days on Friday, citing lower demand. The company then said that "due to reduced demand of tractors, the company will observe Fridays as non-production days from December 16, 2022, till further notice". Earlier, KSB Pumps Company Limited (KSBP), a manufacturer of industrial pumps, suspended its plant operations from January 02, 2023, citing import restrictions. Moreover, an automobile company Pak Suzuki Motor Company Limited has announced to shut down its production plant from January 2 to 6. Pakistan Suzuki Motors wrote a letter to the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) that the production process of cars and motorcycles will be completely shut down from January 2 to 6. (Source: Daily Times)

Brief News International

Taliban signs first international deal with China for major foreign investment in Afghanistan

Chinese petroleum company CAPEIC to invest \$150m (£124m) a year (6 Jan 2023)
Afghanistan's Taliban-led administration has signed a contract with a Chinese company to extract oil from the Amu Darya basin and develop an oil reserve in the country's northern Sar-e Pul province. The contract was signed on Thursday

6th January, by acting Minister of Mines and Petroleum Sheikh Shahabuddin Delawar and an official of Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Co (CAPEIC) in a ceremony held in capital Kabul. It was the first major public commodities extraction deal the Taliban administration has signed with a foreign company since taking power in 2021. Acting Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and Chinese ambassador to Afghanistan Wang Yu also witnessed the signing ceremony, state-run Bakhtar News Agency reported. "Recently, several projects were approved by the Economic Commission, and with their undertaking, fundamental steps will be taken for the prosperity of the country and public welfare," the agency quoted Baradar as saying. "We request that the company continue the procedure in accordance with international standards and in the best interests of the people of Sar-e Pul," he added. Speaking on the occasion, Delawar said under the deal the Chinese company will be extracting oil from an area covering 4,500 square kilometres (1,737 square miles) collectively in northern Sar-e Pul, Jawzjan, and Faryab provinces. "Over 3,000 local people will get jobs in this project," he said. CAPEIC will invest \$150m a year in Afghanistan under the contract, the spokesperson for the Taliban-run administration, Zabihullah Mujahid, said on Twitter. Its investment would increase to \$540m in three years for the 25-year contract, he said. The Taliban-run administration will have a 20 percent partnership in the project, which can be increased to 75 percent, he added. The state-owned company China National Petroleum Corp (CNPC) signed a contract with Afghanistan's previous, United States-backed government in 2012 to extract oil at the Amu Darya basin in the northern provinces of Faryab and Sar-e Pul. At the time, up to 87 million barrels of crude were estimated to be in Amu Darya. Delawar said a condition of the deal was that the oil be processed in Afghanistan. A Chinese state-owned company is also in talks with the Taliban-led administration over the operation of a Copper Mine in eastern Logar province, another deal that was first signed under the previous government. China has not formally recognised the Taliban administration but it

has significant interests in a country at the centre of a region important for its Belt and Road infrastructure initiative. (SOURCE: NEWS AGENCIES)

US Republicans begin investigating Botched Afghanistan troop withdrawal

Republicans have launched an investigation into the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan that sparked a lightning takeover of the war-ravaged country by the Taliban and the death of 13 American troops in a militant attack that also killed around 190 Afghan locals. Michael McCaul, the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said on Friday he had written to Secretary of State Antony Blinken requesting an array of records, from intelligence assessments to communications with the Taliban. "It is absurd and disgraceful that the Biden administration has repeatedly denied our longstanding oversight requests and continues to withhold information related to the withdrawal," said McCaul, a longstanding opposition member on the panel who became its chairman after the House flipped to Republican control at the start of the year. "In the event of continued noncompliance, the committee will use the authorities available to it to enforce these requests as necessary, including through a compulsory process." The US soldiers were killed on August 26, 2021, in a bombing outside Kabul's airport as the capital fell, with the government crumbling days later despite \$2 trillion pumped into Afghanistan over two decades. Images of crowds storming parked planes, climbing atop aircraft, and some clinging to a departing US military cargo plane as it rolled down the runway, were aired around the world. The scenes preceded a sharp drop in President Joe Biden's approval ratings, nine months after he was elected, promising smooth, competent leadership after the pandemonium under his predecessor Donald Trump. While Trump sealed the withdrawal with the Taliban, his Republican Party has roundly criticised Biden's handling of the operation and vowed hearings as part of a series of probes into his administration. The State Department did not respond immediately to a

request for comment but says it has provided more than 150 briefings to members of Congress since the August 2021 withdrawal, according to US media. Around 2,500 US troops were killed in America's longest war, but Afghanistan is no longer a priority back home, with 50 percent of respondents to a Gallup poll conducted a year after the withdrawal saying the entire war was a mistake. (Source: AFP)

First direct shipping line from china to Iranian port city of Chabahar

By: IFP January 2023

The announcement was made by Amir Moghadam, the managing director of the Chabahar Free Zone Organization, Tasnim news agency reported. According to Moghadam, Chinese ships previously unloaded in Bandar Abbas, the capital city of the southern province of Hormozgan, with their cargos then being transferred to Chabahar in Sistan-Ba The announcement was made by Amir Moghadam, the managing director of the Chabahar Free Zone Organization, Tasnim news agency reported. According to Moghadam, Chinese ships previously unloaded in Bandar Abbas, the capital city of the southern province of Hormozgan, with their cargos then being transferred to Chabahar in Sistan-Baluchestan Province via smaller ships. With the establishment of the direct shipping line between China and Chabahar, cargos are delivered ten days earlier, while the cost of loading and unloading is reduced by \$400 per container, the official explained. In addition, the establishment of the mentioned shipping line plays a great role in the development of transit via Chabahar Port, he added. As Iran's only oceanic port on the Gulf of Oman, Chabahar port holds great significance for the country both politically and economically. The country has taken serious measures for developing this port in order to improve the country's maritime trade. In this regard, the Islamic Republic has been welcoming investors from all over the world to take part in the development of this port and benefit from its distinguished position as a trade hub in the region. Chabahar port consists of Shahid Kalantari

and Shahid Beheshti terminals, each of which has five berth facilities. The port is located in Iran's Sistan-Balouchestan Province and is about 120 kilometers southwest of Pakistan's Baluchistan province, where the China-funded Gwadar port is situated. (Source: Tehran Times)

Iran Thwarts Drone Attack on Military Site

DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

A loud explosion at a military plant in Iran's central city of Isfahan was caused by an "unsuccessful" drone attack, Iranian state media reported Sunday, citing the defense ministry. "One of (the drones) was hit by the ... air defense and the other two were caught in defense traps and blew up. Fortunately, this unsuccessful attack did not cause any loss of life and caused minor damage to the workshop's roof," the ministry said in a statement carried by the state news agency IRNA. Iranian news agencies earlier reported the loud blast and carried a video showing a flash of light at the plant, said to be an ammunition factory, and footage of emergency vehicles and fire trucks outside the plant. In July, Iran said it had arrested a sabotage team made up of Kurdish militants working for Israel who planned to blow up a "Sensitive" defense industry center in Isfahan. The announcement came amid heightening tensions with arch-enemy Israel over Tehran's nuclear program. Israel says Iran is seeking to develop nuclear weapons. Tehran denies this. "(The attack) has not affected our installations and mission...and such blind measures will not have an impact on the continuation of the country's progress," the defense ministry statement said. There have been several explosions and fires around Iranian military, nuclear and industrial facilities in the past few years. The blasts have at times caused concern amid tensions over Iran's nuclear program with Israel and the United States. Israel has long threatened military action against Iran if indirect talks between Washington and Tehran fail to salvage a 2015 nuclear pact. Israel appears to have been behind an overnight drone attack on a military factory in Iran, a U.S. official said.

Iran claimed to have intercepted drones that struck a military industry target near the central city of Isfahan, and said there were no casualties or serious damage. The extent of damage could not be independently ascertained. Iranian state media released footage showing a flash in the sky and emergency vehicles at the scene. (Source: Reuters /VOA)

Iran hangs former defence ministry official for spying for UK

The judiciary's official news outlet confirmed that Alireza Akbari, a British-Iranian dual national, was hanged after being convicted of “corruption on Earth” and acting against national security by spying for British intelligence. It added that Akbari was earlier sentenced to death for “harming the country's internal and external security by passing on intelligence”. “The actions of the British spy service in this case have shown the value of the convict, the importance of his access and the enemy's trust in him,” it added. It claimed he had received training from the MI-6, established shell companies to thwart Iranian intelligence services, had intelligence meetings in various countries, including Austria and the UAE, and received British citizenship as a reward for “betraying” his country. According to the Iranian judiciary, Akbari began working with British intelligence in 2004 for five years before leaving the country. In 2009, he was allegedly advised by the UK to leave Iran. Akbari then allegedly re-entered Iran several years later to continue his activities, and was ultimately arrested. The judiciary did not announce the date of his arrest but he was reportedly taken into custody in 2019. Earlier, the state-run IRNA news agency released a video purporting to show “confessions” by Akbari, who is said to have been a close ally of Ali Shamkhani, Iran's current security chief and defence minister from 1997 to 2005, when Akbari was his deputy. Akbari's family had told British media he was innocent and had fallen victim to “political games” in Iran. (SOURCE: AL JAZEERA News Agency)

Dassault (Rafale) Chief Says European Union's Sanctions Against Russia Have Created Problems For Industry

By: Sputnik | January 9, 2023

Chairman and CEO of French aircraft manufacturer Dassault Aviation, Eric Trappier, said that the European Union's sanctions against Russia had created problems for the European industry. "Since the start of hostilities in Europe, in Ukraine, there have been sanctions that have created problems in the supply chain of some materials and energy," Trappier told French radio broadcaster Europe 1. While acknowledging sanctions as a "normal" political decision, he complained that the restrictions against Russia had a major impact on the energy sector in Europe and many European countries were suffering from the lack of Russian gas. "There are concerns about rising energy prices, which makes it difficult for businesses, especially in Europe, while there are no problems with access to gas in the United States," Dassault Aviation's chief said. Western countries and their allies have been facing high energy prices in the aftermath of imposing sanctions on Russia after it launched a military operation in Ukraine on February 24. The Ukraine crisis and sanctions have led to disruptions in supply chains and a spike in energy prices worldwide. (Source: Via: Sputnik News Agency)

Israel far-right minister enters Al-Aqsa in 'provocation'

(3 Jan, 2023) Israel's National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir has entered the compound that houses the Al-Aqsa Mosque in occupied East Jerusalem, prompting condemnations from the United States, several Arab countries and Palestinians, who labelled the storming of the holy site an "unprecedented provocation". Ben-Gvir was seen at the site – Islam's third holiest site – under heavy security. "Our government will not surrender to the threats of Hamas," Ben-Gvir said in a statement published by his spokesman, after the Palestinian group that governs the besieged Gaza Strip warned that such a move would cross a "red line". Ben-Gvir has long called for greater Jewish access to the holy site,

which is viewed by Palestinians as provocative and as a potential precursor to Israel taking complete control over the compound. Leading rabbis forbid Jews from praying at the site. Ben-Gvir wrote on Twitter after his visit that the site “is open to all and if Hamas thinks that if it threatens me it will deter me, they should understand that times have changed”. Ofir Gendelman, who has long served as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Arabic-language spokesman, released a video saying that the “situation is completely calm” at the holy site following Ben-Gvir's departure.. 'A dangerous escalation of the conflict' However, the Palestinian foreign ministry said it “strongly condemns the storming of Al-Aqsa mosque by the extremist minister Ben-Gvir and views it as unprecedented provocation and a dangerous escalation of the conflict”. Jordan, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, which have peace treaties with Israel, have condemned what they called Ben-Gvir's “storming” of Al-Aqsa. Amman summoned the Israeli ambassador and said the visit had violated international law and “the historic and legal status quo in Jerusalem”. Saudi Arabia, with which Netanyahu wants to forge a peace deal, also criticised Ben-Gvir's action. Turkey, which has recently ended a long-running diplomatic rift with Israel, condemned the visit as “provocative” as well.

Israel Army kills Nine Palestinians, Including Elderly Woman

(26 Jan 2023) Israeli troops have killed at least nine Palestinians in one of the deadliest days in the occupied West Bank since Israeli raids intensified at the start of last year. The Palestinian Ministry of Health said 20 others were wounded with live ammunition in the raid on the Jenin refugee camp on Thursday, which Palestinians have described as a “massacre”. Four of them were in critical condition. The dead included an elderly woman, according to Palestinian officials. She was identified as Magda Obaid by the Jenin hospital authorities. Israeli forces, who withdrew from Jenin after the killings, said they were looking into reports of the woman's death. Meanwhile, Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade – an armed militia

affiliated with the Palestinian political party Fatah – said the dead included one of its fighters, Izz al-Din Salahat. According to the health ministry, another person, Saeb Azriqi, 24, succumbed to his injuries in a hospital. Israeli forces also fired tear gas canisters towards the hospital, affecting the children's division, Baker said. It caused suffocation injuries to children and others, he said. (SOURCE: AL JAZEERA AND NEWS AGENCIES)

Israel's outgoing army chief rebukes far-right government

(BY AP · 13 January 2023) JERUSALEM: Israel's outgoing army chief warned against plans by Benjamin Netanyahu's new coalition to grant more control to pro-settler lawmakers and make other changes to the Israeli security establishment, joining a loud chorus of criticism against the new right-wing government. In several interviews with Israeli news outlets just days before he steps down, Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi took unusually sharp aim at Netanyahu's coalition agreements with hard-line Jewish settler activists who seek to entrench Israeli rule in the occupied West Bank, restructure the Defense Ministry and control a special paramilitary police unit. “This is likely to cause damage and adversely affect our preparedness for war,” Kochavi told the Israeli news site Ynet. While the coalition deals have sparked furor from many segments of Israeli society, Kochavi's worries have deep significance. Among Jewish Israelis, the military is considered an emblem of stability and among the country's most trusted institutions. Kochavi expressed particular concern about the coalition's plans to create three separate sources of authority in the West Bank. Netanyahu's deal with Bezalel Smotrich gave the powerful, right-wing finance minister control over an Israeli military body that regulates planning for Israeli settlements and Palestinian construction in parts of the West Bank where Israel maintains civilian control. Smotrich is an advocate of the outright annexation of parts of the West Bank that the Palestinians want for their hoped-for independent state. “There cannot be two commanding authorities (in the West Bank),” Kochavi said. “The separation between us is not

good and may cause damage and lead to a worse situation for all populations.” In other interviews, Kochavi said he called Netanyahu twice to warn him about the far-reaching consequences of the coalition's moves for the cohesion of the defense establishment. Netanyahu has sought to assure the public as well as the US and Israel's European and Arab allies that he has veto power over any changes that the far-right ministers make. But critics say he has so far failed to restrain his coalition partners. (Source: Arab News)

Iraq to hang 14 people for Daesh massacre of over a thousand cadets

(26-1—2023) The Al-Rusafa Criminal Court in the capital Baghdad "issued death sentences against 14 criminal terrorists for their participation in the Camp Speicher massacre in 2014", the judicial authority said in a statement on Thursday, without specifying their nationalities. The massacre, one of the worst committed by the Daesh, saw the terror group in June 2014 abduct up to 1,700 mainly Shia cadets from the former US Speicher military base in the Tikrit region and execute them. The 14 men have 30 days to appeal the sentence. Decrees authorizing executions must also be signed by the president. In 2016, 36 men were hanged for their participation in the massacre. The Tikrit massacre took place in the early days of the terror group's advance in Iraq, when its forces seized the second city Mosul and turned it into its stronghold — until it was driven out by the Iraqi army and an international coalition in 2017. According to propaganda images released by Daesh, the terror group executed the recruits one by one. Some bodies had been thrown into the Tigris River, which runs through Tikrit, while others were buried in mass graves. While Iraqi authorities do not give figures, several thousand people accused or convicted of Daesh links are detained in Iraqi prisons. The United Nations estimated in 2018 that more than 12,000 Iraqi and foreign "combatants" were being held in Iraqi prisons. (Source: AFP)

Sri Lanka to slash military by a third to cut

(13 Jan 2023) Sri Lanka will drastically slash its military, the Ministry of Defence has announced, as the country tries to cut costs in the face of its worst economic crisis in decades. The bankrupt nation will cut the number of army personnel by a third to 135,000 by next year and 100,000 by 2030, the state minister of defence said on Friday as the government works to overhaul its finances. “Military spending is basically state-borne expenditure which indirectly stimulates and opens avenues for economic growth by way of assuring national and human security,” Premitha Bandara Thennakoon said in a statement. The aim of the move is to create a “technically and tactically sound and well-balanced” defence force by 2030, Thennakoon said. The island nation of 22 million people is reeling from months of food and fuel shortages and spiralling inflation. The government cut back on expenditures after the country slid into a deep economic crisis last year when its foreign exchange reserves dried up. President Ranil Wickremesinghe has hiked taxes and imposed harsh spending cuts to smooth the approval of an expected International Monetary Fund bailout following a government debt default. The size of Sri Lanka's armed forces peaked between 2017 and 2019 with 317,000 personnel, according to World Bank data. That was more than a decade after the end of the country's civil war, a 25-year-long conflict with the Tamil Tigers separatist movement, which ended in 2009. The share of the defence sector in Sri Lanka's total expenditures peaked in 2021 at 2.3 percent of its gross domestic product but fell to 2 percent last year, according to the Colombo-based think tank Verite Research. Defence accounted for nearly 10 percent of public spending last year, and according to analysts, pay for security force personnel makes up half the government's salary bill. The crisis peaked in July when protesters angered by the crisis stormed the official residence of then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who briefly fled the country and tendered his resignation from abroad. (SOURCE: NEWS AGENCIES)

In a first, South Korea Declares Nuclear Weapons a Policy Option

BY CHOE SANG-HUN | THE NEW YORK TIMES | Jan 13, 2023

SEOUL South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol said for the first time, that if North Korea's nuclear threat grows, South Korea would consider building nuclear weapons of its own or ask the United States to redeploy them on the Korean Peninsula. Speaking during a joint policy briefing by his defense and foreign ministries, Yoon was quick to add that building nuclear weapons was not yet an official policy. He stressed that South Korea would for now deal with North Korea's nuclear threat by strengthening its alliance with the United States. Such a policy includes finding ways to increase the reliability of Washington's commitment to protect its ally with all of its defense capabilities, including nuclear weapons. Yoon's comments marked the first time since the United States withdrew all of its nuclear weapons from the South in 1991 that a South Korean president officially mentioned arming the country with nuclear weapons. Washington removed its nuclear weapons from South Korea as part of its global nuclear arms reduction efforts. South Korea is a signatory of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, or NPT, which bans the country from seeking nuclear weapons. It also signed a joint declaration with North Korea in 1991 in which both Koreas agreed not to "test, manufacture, produce, receive, possess, store, deploy or use nuclear weapons." But North Korea has reneged on the agreement by conducting six nuclear tests since 2006. Years of negotiations have failed to remove a single nuclear warhead in the North. (American and South Korean officials say that North Korea could conduct another nuclear test, its seventh, at any moment.) As North Korea vowed to expand its nuclear arsenal and threatened to use it against the South in recent months, voices have grown in South Korea among analysts and within Yoon's conservative ruling People Power Party calling for South Korea to reconsider a nuclear option. Policymakers in Seoul, South Korea, have disavowed the option for decades, arguing that the so-called nuclear-umbrella protection from the United States would keep the country safe from North Korea. In its 2022 Nuclear Posture Review, a document

that outlines Washington's nuclear policy for the next five to 10 years, the Pentagon itself noted the “deterrence dilemmas” that the North posed to the United States. “A crisis or conflict on the Korean Peninsula could involve a number of nuclear-armed actors, raising the risk of broader conflict,” it said. (Source: The New York Times)

Japan likely to release treated Fukushima water in spring or summer

Tokyo, Jan. 13 (EFE).- The Japanese government announced, that the long-planned release of treated water accumulated at Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant will take place between the upcoming spring and summer, despite opposition by local fishermen. On Jan 13, the government approved a revised plan for the release, which also includes compensations for the fishing industry that could be affected by the step. Neighboring countries like South Korea and China have also protested against the proposed spill. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is supervising Japan's plan to discharge the water once it is processed and most of the radioactive elements are removed. The agency will send its fourth delegation to Japan to review the on-ground preparations. Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno said after a cabinet meeting, in which the plan was approved, that before proceeding with the release, they will wait for the IAEA to release its general report, strengthen supervisory capabilities and work against the spreading of negative information. Matsuno, who estimated the exact release date to be between spring and summer of 2023, said that the water will be discharged in the Pacific Ocean once the preparations for the release, the research by Japan's Nuclear Regulation Authority (NRA) and IAEA's report are all completed. The water is treated with a processing system that eliminates most of the radioactive materials considered dangerous, with the exception of tritium, an isotope present in nature, although in a low concentration. Japanese authorities insist that the discharged water will have radioactivity levels below the limit fixed for drinking water by the World Health Organisation (WHO), and therefore will

not be a threat to human health or the environment. However, the plan still faces opposition from local fishing communities, whose activities have barely been restored after the nuclear disaster of 2011. The communities fear that the stigma surrounding the fish and seafood of the area will worsen following the release. The area around the Fukushima Daiichi plant still suffers from the devastating consequences of the 2011 nuclear accident, including thousands of people who still remain displaced, and the continuous crisis of fishing, ranching and local agriculture.

France, Germany renew alliance strained amid war in Ukraine

(22 Jan 2023) German Chancellor Olaf Scholz was in Paris for talks with French President Emmanuel Macron, as the two leaders seek to overcome differences laid bare by the Ukraine war. The German leader visited the French capital for a day of ceremonies marking 60 years since a landmark treaty sealed a bond between the longtime enemies that underpins today's European Union. Germany's entire Cabinet was in Paris and 300 lawmakers from both countries met at the Sorbonne University. Both leaders will oversee two rounds of talks at the Elysee Palace, focusing on energy and economic policy as well as defence. "Let us use our inseparable friendship ... to shape the present and future of our continent, together with our European partners," Scholz said at the ceremony at the Sorbonne. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February last year, the European peace project is at a "turning point", he said. "Putin's imperialism will not win ... We will not allow Europe to revert to a time when violence replaced politics and our continent was torn apart by hatred and national rivalries." Pierre Haski, a political analyst, said the meeting comes as an occasion to show how France and Germany still hold trust and confidence in each other. "This was a good occasion ... a political expression, a joint commitment to supporting Ukraine and solving the problem between them in Europe," Haski said. Paris and Berlin have adopted different approaches on several issues, from handling the

coronavirus pandemic and its economic fallout to the energy crisis triggered by the war in Ukraine. (SOURCE: AL JAZEERA AND NEWS AGENCIES)

Russia-Ukraine live news: Soledar: Russia claims victory in battle for Ukraine salt mine town

By Will Vernon in Moscow & Paul Kirby in London : BBC News

Russia's military says it has captured the Ukrainian salt-mine town of Soledar after a long battle, calling it an "important" step for its offensive. The victory would allow Russian troops to push on to the nearby city of Bakhmut, and cut off the Ukrainian forces there, a spokesman said. This was a very confident and ambitious statement from Moscow. But Ukrainian officials said the fight for Soledar was still going on and accused Russia of "information noise". The battle for Soledar has been one of the bloodiest of the war. The town is relatively small, with a pre-war population of just 10,000, and its strategic significance is debatable. But if it is confirmed that Russian forces have seized control of it, then there will likely be a big sigh of relief in the Kremlin.

US announces additional \$2.5B in military assistance for Ukraine

By: Betül Yürük |20-01-2023

The new package of security assistance includes eight Avenger air defense systems, 59 Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicles and 90 Stryker Armored Personnel Carriers. The latest military assistance brings the number of equipment drawdowns from Defense Department inventories for Ukraine since August 2021 to 30. The US has committed more than \$26.7 billion in security assistance to Ukraine since the beginning of Russia's invasion on Feb. 24, 2022.(Source: Anadolu Agency)

US to send 31 Abrams tanks to Kyiv

(By Edna Mohamed and Dalia Hatuqa) 25 Jan 2023

U.S. plans to send M1 Abrams tanks to Ukraine

Biden's Abrams tank decision is policy reversal: AJ correspondent

President Biden has made it clear that sending Abram tanks to Ukraine is not an offensive threat to Russia, Kimberly Halkett, Al Jazeera's White House correspondent reports. "This is more of a signal to Americans here in the US who might be worried about 'mission creep' if you will. Russia is a nuclear power and there are many Americans who are worried about the escalation and the impact this might have," Halkett said, reporting from Washington, DC. Slovakia is ready to send 30 T-72 tanks to Ukraine "immediately" if it can receive Western tanks to replace them, defence minister Jaroslav Nad said. Nad told a briefing that Slovakia had sent 30 Soviet-era BVP-1 infantry fighting vehicles to Ukraine last year after agreeing that Germany would deliver 15 Leopard 2 tanks to Slovakia to take their place. Abrams and Leopard tanks: Why are they important to Ukraine?

(By: AJLabs) "The Leopard and American Abrams are actually twins," Sydney Freedberg, contributing editor of the digital magazine, Breaking Defence, told Al Jazeera. The Leopard 2 was first produced in 1979 by Krauss-Maffei for the German Ministry of Defence. They are in service with the armies of Austria, Canada, Chile, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Singapore, Switzerland, Sweden, Spain and Turkey. The first M1 tank was manufactured by General Dynamics Land Systems (GDLS) in 1978 and was delivered to the US Army in 1980. "They are very similar. Big vehicles, heavily armoured. Much better protected than anything the Soviets built, or anything the Russians currently have," said Freedberg. The main difference between the Abrams and Leopards is the engine. The Leopard 2 has a diesel-powered MTU MB 873 engine, which is much easier to maintain and more widely used across Europe, while the Abrams uses a more powerful and more complex turbine engine. According to Freedberg, because the Abram tanks are used significantly less across Europe, Ukraine may struggle to cope with logistic infrastructure such as obtaining spare parts, warehousing and general maintenance. The four-person tank will also require additional training on the complex machinery.

Tank deliveries 'direct involvement' of Europe, NATO: Moscow

Raising the specter of escalation of the Ukraine war, a Kremlin spokesman has said that Russia sees European and NATO countries supplying weapons to Ukraine – including a host of just-announced tank supplies – as their "direct involvement" in the "conflict." "Statements are constantly being made from European capitals and Washington that sending various weapons systems, including tanks, to Ukraine in no case means that these countries or the alliance are involved in the fighting that is taking place in Ukraine. We categorically disagree with this," Dmitry Peskov told a press briefing in Moscow. "In Moscow, everything that the alliance and the capitals I mentioned are doing is perceived as direct involvement in the conflict," he explained. He added that Moscow noted that this involvement has been growing.

California storm damage could top \$1 billion

'Years to rebuild': Biden takes in scale of California storm destruction on visit

President highlighted damage from punishing storms which hit state for weeks and claimed at least 21 lives

By Christopher Flavelle | Jan. 10, 2023

The damage from weeks of storms and flooding in California could exceed a billion dollars, according to the state's emergency agency and private weather forecasters. That toll comes on the heels of 2022, one of the worst on record for large-scale weather and climate disasters around the United States, according to data released by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. "It's likely that this is going to be at least several billion dollars," said Jonathan Porter, chief meteorologist at AccuWeather. "It will unfortunately join the club of billion-dollar disasters." The nation was struck last year by 18 disasters that caused more than \$1 billion each in damage. That's the third-highest number in the 43 years that NOAA has been keeping records. The only other years on record with more

billion-dollar disasters, adjusted for inflation, are 2020 and 2021. At the top of the 2022 list is Hurricane Ian, which caused \$113 billion in damage, the country's third-costliest hurricane since 1980 behind Hurricanes Katrina and Harvey. The drought and heat wave in the Western and Central United States was the second-worst disaster in 2022, causing \$22 billion in damage. All told, last year's 18 large-scale disasters caused \$165 billion in damage, according to NOAA greater than the annual economic output of West Virginia and Alaska put together. (Source: New York Times)

At least 68 killed in Nepal's worst air crash in three decades

By Gopal Sharma

KATHMANDU, Jan 15 (Reuters) - At least 68 people were killed on Sunday when a domestic flight of Yeti Airlines crashed in Pokhara in Nepal, the worst air crash in three decades in the small Himalayan nation. Local TV footage earlier showed rescue workers scrambling around broken sections of the aircraft. It was Nepal's deadliest air crash since 1992, the Aviation Safety Network database showed, when a Pakistan International Airlines Airbus A300 crashed into a hillside upon approach to Kathmandu, killing all 167 people on board. Nearly 350 people have died since 2000 in plane or helicopter crashes in Nepal - home to eight of the world's 14 highest mountains, including Everest - where sudden weather changes can make for hazardous conditions. The European Union has banned Nepali airlines from its airspace since 2013, citing safety concerns. The government has established a panel to investigate the cause of the crash and it is expected to report within 45 days, finance minister Bishnu Paudel told reporters. France's air accident investigation agency BEA said it would participate in the probe into the causes of the crash and coordinate with all other parties involved. Passengers included five Indians, four Russians and one Irish, two South Korean, one Australian, one French and one Argentine national. "ATR specialists are fully

engaged to support both the investigation and the customer," ATR said in a statement.(Source: Reuters)

Philippines agrees to allow US wider access to military bases

(2 Feb 2023) The Philippines and the United States have agreed to expand their defence pact, with US troops allowed access to four more military bases in the Southeast Asian nation, according to a joint statement from the two countries' defence departments. The agreement was unveiled during a visit to Manila by US Defense Secretary, Lloyd Austin, during which he held talks with Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr, who took office last year. "The Philippines and the United States are proud to announce their plans to accelerate the full implementation of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the agreement to designate four new Agreed Locations in strategic areas of the country and the substantial completion of the projects in the existing five Agreed Locations," the joint statement said. It was published on the websites of the US Department of Defense and on the Philippines' Department of National Defense. EDCA forms part of a decades-long security alliance between the US and the Philippines, and allows US troops to rotate through five Philippine bases, including those near disputed waters. It also allows for the US military to store defence equipment and supplies on those bases. The statement said the expansion would make the two countries' alliance "stronger and more resilient" and "accelerate modernization of our combined military capabilities". The statement did not elaborate on the new locations, but said they would "allow more rapid support for humanitarian and climate-related disasters in the Philippines". The US had allocated more than \$82 million towards infrastructure investments at EDCA's existing five sites, it added. The expansion comes as China becomes increasingly assertive in pressing its claim to the self-ruled island of Taiwan, as well as in the South China Sea where it claims almost the entire waterway under its controversial nine-dash line. The Philippines, other Southeast Asian nations and

Taiwan also have overlapping claims to the sea, which is a major global trade route.

India Banned a BBC Documentary Critical of Modi

What is the BBC's Modi documentary about?

The documentary aired Jan. 17 and charts Modi's political rise through the ranks of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and becoming chief minister of the western state of Gujarat. It focuses at length on the 2002 Gujarat riots one of the worst outbreaks of religious violence in India's recent history that took place while he led the state. After a train carrying Hindu pilgrims was set on fire in the state, and 59 people were killed, grieving citizens blamed Muslims. Revenge attacks led to over 1,000 deaths. The documentary highlighted an unpublished report from the U.K. Foreign Office that claims Modi was "directly responsible" for the "climate of impunity" that enabled the violence. Modi denies accusations of personal responsibility for the riots, and his supporters cite a 2013 Supreme Court ruling of there being insufficient evidence to prosecute him. Mr Modi has long rejected accusations that he had any responsibility for the violence and not apologised for the riots. In 2013, a Supreme Court panel also said there was insufficient evidence to prosecute him. BBC Documentary On PM Modi "Propaganda Piece", "Colonial Mindset": India "A look at tensions between Indian PM Narendra Modi and India's Muslim minority, investigating claims about his role in the 2002 riots that left over a thousand dead," says the series descriptor.

India News Reported by Maha Siddiqui, Edited by Deepshikha Ghosh Updated: January 19, 2023 6:14 pm. The BBC series called "India: The Modi Question" has provoked sharp reactions. The Indian government strongly condemned a BBC series on Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the 2002 Gujarat riots as a "propaganda piece designed to push a discredited narrative" that shouldn't be "dignified" with a response. (Source: BBC/NDTV)

India Seeks Changes in Decades-Old Water Pact With Pakistan

First notice in sixty years to change water-sharing treaty Pakistan has refused to negotiate water-sharing Dispute India wants to keep third parties out of water treaty with Pakistan

NEW DELHI, Jan 27 (Reuters) - India has asked Pakistan to change a decades-old water-sharing agreement by barring third parties from intervening in disputes, an Indian government source said, a suggestion likely to rile Islamabad. Pakistan is concerned that India's planned hydropower dams will cut flows on the river, which feeds 80% of its irrigated agriculture. Over the years it has asked for a neutral expert and then an arbitration court to intervene. India has accused Pakistan of dragging out the complaints process, and says the construction of its Kishanganga and Ratle Hydro Electric projects is allowed by the six-decade-old Indus Water Treaty. An Indian government source said New Delhi had served Pakistan a notice to modify the treaty and wanted to meet to start resolving the long-running dispute within 90 days. (Source: Reuters)

Indians View US as Biggest Threat After China, Survey Shows

ByL Eltaf Najafizada | January 17, 2023

Some 43% of the 1,000 respondents perceived China — with whom India has a long-lingering border dispute and has seen tensions flare again since 2020 — as the greatest threat, according to the survey by Morning Consult, a US-based global business intelligence company. However, 22% saw the US as the second-most significant security threat, ahead of India's historic arch-rival Pakistan, the survey showed. “While the world's two largest democracies would seem to make for natural partners, especially given their mutual mistrust of China, Indians have strategic reasons to be wary of the world's Western superpower,” according to Sonnet Frisbie and Scott Moskowitz, who oversaw the survey released. “As tensions between Washington and Beijing increase, the Indian public may be

worried about getting caught in the middle of a US-China conflict that destabilizes regional security, putting India at risk.”

India's Perceived Military Threat

Indians perceive China and the United States as their country's biggest threats. The concerns reflected in the survey — conducted Oct. 14-15 — about the risks from Washington persist despite the South Asian nation's closer partnership with the US, Australia, and Japan — or the Quad, a grouping of democracies formed to counter Beijing's economic and military ambitions. India has remained neutral on the Russian war in Ukraine despite pressure from its Quad partners — refraining from UN censure votes, while urging a diplomatic solution to ease the food and fertilizer crunch triggered by the crisis. It has also continued to snap up cheap Russian oil. Blame for Russia's war in Ukraine New Delhi and Moscow have a long-standing relationship that spans sectors such as defense and security. India is the world's largest buyer of Russian weapons, and a surge in oil purchases by Asia's second-biggest importer has helped the Kremlin to maintain exports as it tackles Western sanctions. (Source: Bloomberg)

Bharat Jodo Yatra: Rahul Gandhi's unity march ends in Kashmir

Rahul Gandhi, MP and a senior leader of India's main opposition Congress party, is at the end of his 4,000km (2,485-mile)-long "unity march" across India. The five-month-long march began in Kanyakumari in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, and finished in Srinagar, the capital of Jammu and Kashmir. The march has drawn large crowds across the country, with a number of celebrities endorsing it. Analysts, however, say it is unclear if this will translate into votes. Mr Gandhi said the march - called Bharat Jodo Yatra - was aimed at uniting Indians against hatred and fear being spread in society. Political analysts say it was also aimed at reviving the flagging spirits of the beleaguered Congress party which has been in free fall since 2014, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi swept to power in India. The

march culminated with a rally in a stadium in Srinagar on Monday afternoon. It was attended by Mr Gandhi and several other Congress leaders and also leaders from some opposition parties who joined in a show of unity. Addressing the rally, Mr Gandhi said he was warned against travelling on foot by the local administration who said a grenade could be hurled at him. The Congress leader said he insisted on walking because "my family and [Mahatma] Gandhi taught me to live fearlessly, otherwise, that is not living". Mr Gandhi said he had received "wholehearted love" in the region where he spent the last leg of his march. On Sunday 29 Jan., the Congress MP told a press conference in Srinagar that he had received a "great response" across the country. "The yatra's purpose is also that people of this country get to hear true voice of the country," he said. (Courtesy: BBC News).

ARTICLES

PAKISTAN

VISIT OF THE MEDIA PERSONALS NUCLEAR POWER PLANT K3 AT KARACHI

Visit to the Nuclear Power Plant K3 on 30th January 2023 by Media Personals, Senior Anchor Persons, Editors and Analysts Mr Saeed-ur-Rehman Member Power Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission briefed the media personals on the state of art Nuclear Power plant and also shown the different sections of the nuclear power plants prior to the official Inauguration of the power plant by the Prime Minister of Pakistan. The Chief Editor of Interaction was also present during the briefing and visit of the different section of the power plant.

Possibilities of Border trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan in the wake of new regime in Afghanistan

By Qari Anwar ul Haq Haqqani

Balochistan Think Tank Network (BTTN)

Balochistan Think Tank Network (BTTN) and Majlis Fiqr-O-Danish (Center of Research and Knowledge) jointly conducted a Seminar on the Theme of "Pakistan's Borders with Afghanistan and Iran Borders Management" on August 30, 2022. Interaction has published the speeches of Barrister Abdul Mateen Akhunzada and Barrister Sheikh Amir

Khan Mandokhail in January 2023 issue. The speech of Brig. (R) Agha Ahmad Gul was published in the month of December 2022.

This month we are publishing the speech of Qari Anwar-ul-Haq Haqqani. Mr. Abdul Mateen Akhonzada raised some questions in his speech. These questions were addressed by Brig. (R) Agha Ahmad Gul with reference to the historical background to the satisfaction of the audience of this journal. As it is a magazine, the seminar proceedings were not published in chronological order nor were all speeches published in one edition but were in order of importance of the content and availability of space, as per media practice.

Qari Anwar-ul-Haq's talk in verbatim follows. "I thank Brig Gul for inviting me for this Seminar. I wish to talk about trade in the wake of the new regime in Afghanistan. Islam encourages and there are several Quranic injunctions relating to trade and the economy. Peace is however, indispensable for trade activities.

All three countries have great trade potential. They can collaborate in the fields of energy, trade, and other areas. These three countries have deep-rooted cordial and fraternal relations based on centuries-old religious and cultural affinities.

The Holy Quran, which is a comprehensive book, mentions peace and the economy. The people of Quraysh were under the special favor of Allah, and they used to visit every part of Arabia fearlessly. They used to go to Syria and Yemen for trade. Being the neighbors of Baitullah, they were respected.

He added that Hazrat Ibrahim (AS) also said this prayer: "Make this city secure." and "Grant the people of this city the fruits and all the necessities of life". So firstly, peace has been mentioned, and then there is mention of economy and life. If we examine many aspects of life through the Qur'an and Sunnah, we can draw a meaning that peace is fundamental for any economic activity.

There are four broad assertions of peace: protection of human life; respect and honor; peace in pathways; and peace of wealth. So, in this way the economic activities can be ensured, and sources of earnings can be provided if peace is maintained. Pakistan was created in the name of Islam.

The creation of Pakistan was based on the ideology of Islam. Muslims believed that the Hindu majority of the United India would dominate Muslims and suppress their religion and culture. They would also suppress Muslims economically, as the Hindus were more advanced and skilled than Muslims in terms of trade and commerce.

So, Islam was the main factor in the creation of Pakistan as Muslims wanted to live independently in an Islamic society. Also, that Muslims would prosper economically in a separate country. Pakistan's relations with Iran and Afghanistan are rooted in historical linkages and are based on religious, linguistic, cultural, and spiritual affiliations.

The current regime in Iran was established in 1979. The Iranian revolution took place, not for religious reasons, but for political reasons. The main objective of the revolution was to overthrow the Shah of Iran and bring an end to the Monarchy. People associated

with all fields of life were involved, such as trade unions, political parties, and religious people.

The religious section of Iranian society had a dominant role in Iran, hence the revolution transformed into a religious revolution. They established a form of government according to their religious ideas. Iran has been facing international sanctions. But despite these sanctions, they have progressed in many ways.

So far as Afghanistan is concerned, many foreign countries have tried to occupy Afghanistan, especially during the last four decades. Afghanistan's geography, coupled with tribal and religious culture, generated elements of resistance in Afghan society. In 1979, Russia invaded Afghanistan but faced fierce resistance from the Mujahedeen.

Pakistan had its interests at that time. The main issues were economic, but Islam was used as a tool to achieve this objective. The Soviet Union eventually got disintegrated; new states were established as they got independence. The Taliban regime was established and remained for five years until it was removed by America in 2001. The US, along with several other countries, invaded Afghanistan. This time, Pakistan supported the US against the Taliban government.

I visited Afghanistan for 25 days in June 2022. While visiting various places, I met with the Taliban leadership. The Taliban had three main objectives while returning to power. First, their regime was removed by force and they wanted to reclaim it. Second, to remove foreign forces from Afghanistan. Third, to establish the Islamic system and impose Sharia.

The Taliban have achieved their goals to a great extent since they have returned to power. There is a perception about the Taliban regime that they have taken Kabul by force and that there is no inclusive government. The Taliban are of the view that the previous regime also did not include their people. In addition, Taliban government represents almost all the ethnic groups of Afghanistan including Hazaras, Tajiks and Uzbeks.

The Taliban organized a Grand Jirga in Kabul consisting of several thousand people. The Taliban's leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, called for the implementation of Sharia law, for which they had made sacrifices. The world can witness the advantages of imposing this system. There has been a significant decrease in the number of crimes in Afghanistan, and peace has been maintained.

Pakistan has great potential for trade both with Iran and Afghanistan. At present Pakistan is exporting many goods to Iran and Afghanistan, but these are below their full potential. Afghanistan is a good market for Pakistani products. Afghanistan also exports multiple goods to Pakistan.

There are enormous opportunities for bilateral trade between Iran and Pakistan. We need to import oil and gas from Iran. We also need to increase bilateral trade with Iran.

Recommendations

1. We should maintain good friendly ties with these countries and make efforts to promote economic activities. At present, Pakistan's trade with Iran and Afghanistan is below its full potential. We need to enhance trade with these two countries.
 2. Measures should be taken to benefit Balochistan from the TAPI gas pipeline agreement. Also, Pakistan has signed a gas agreement with Iran, we need to take advantage of this for the development of Balochistan as well as for the whole nation.
 3. At present, we are importing many goods from Iran. In the same way, Pakistan is also exporting many goods to Iran. Maintaining friendly relations with Iran will help in increasing trade activities between Pakistan and Iran, and this will help in strengthening our national economy.
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Balochistan needs opportunities

Innovative methods are needed

By Asadullah Raisani

Many scholars reflect that income stability is a great source of satisfaction, let that satisfaction be at both the individual or the collective level. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals number eight which talk of "decent work and economic growth" is also related to income stability. The Gross National Happiness Index has nine indicators or domains of happiness, the top three of them, that is, psychological well-being, health, and education, are in one way or other are also related to income stability or economic well-being of an individual or a society. According to a research paper published in the "Journal of Happiness Studies, income inequality is found to have a negative effect on life satisfaction. Where does Pakistan's poorest province, Balochistan, stand in this regard is a question worthy enough to be analyzed critically. According to an Assistant Professor of Business Administration in the Organizational Behavior Unit at Harvard Business School, Jon Jachimowicz, "... cash is key in an important way: it helps people avoid many of the day-to-day hassles that cause stress." He and his colleagues did research and found that financial hardship is an established source of shame, leading to guilt. Because, "we have normalized this idea that when you are poor, it's your fault and so you should be ashamed of it," he argues. In yet another paper Jachimowicz and his colleagues argue that financial instability causes greater distress intensity in everyday life. The paper also hypothesizes that money may not buy happiness, but it can reduce the intensity of stress in daily life. Like from ordering an Uber to paying an unexpected hospital bill, you need money. In a survey conducted by Jachimowicz and his colleagues, where they observed 522 participants for 30 days, they reached the conclusion that money reduces intense stress, brings greater control, and high incomes lead to higher satisfaction. However, figures show dissatisfaction in Balochistan in this regard. For instance, as per the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics some 30 percent of Balochistan's population which is over 3.5 million, had reported food

insecurity by the end of the first quarter of 2020. According to Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, over a million people (1,178,000) in Balochistan are stressed and some 571,000 are in crisis. Over 70 percent of people in the province live in multidimensional poverty. The unemployment rate in the province stands at 4.3 percent for this year which means some 531,050 people in the province will remain unemployed for this fiscal year. Moreover, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the participation rate of youth in labour for Balochistan is 44.44 percent which is the lowest among the provinces of the country. It also claims, "There has been no youth employment strategy or policy over the last 70 years in the country". These figures give an idea of desperation among the youth of the country in general and of the province in particular. While the opportunities for livelihood in the province are minimal, most of the people of the province dream of having a government job. It is because they are told since their childhood that they should work hard and bring good grades to get a respectable Sarkari Naukri (government job) after completing their education. Also, government jobs ensure old age pensions. Second, lack of career counseling leads many on the track of becoming either a doctor or an engineer, where many are filtered out in the very first attempt and are left with fewer options. Most of them then opt for competitive exams and many get in an unending race of doing double and triple BA or MAs without acquiring marketable skills. Even those who want to adopt modern trends of learning and earning online, fall victim to slow internet, electricity load-shedding, and lots of disappointments on account of increasing responsibilities and fewer opportunities. A great number, particularly from interior Balochistan, lower middle class, and lower class, start helping their parents in earning a livelihood for their families, and quit education. Talking of private jobs, there are not many industries in the province that can give jobs to so many unemployed people. The wages are also low. While those who depend on daily wages are also open to poverty every now and then. Opportunities for a prosperous business are also not good in Balochistan, particularly in the south for security reasons. Quetta, the provincial capital, has almost, already reached its maximum capacity in this regard. Trade on the porous borders of Iran and Afghanistan remains the last option for many to earn a respectable livelihood, but the closure of these borders and harassment by the security personnel on both sides is a great source of distress and depression among the people. Furthermore, various studies also show that poverty and income inequality lead to crimes. It is also assumed that a person with a government job will hardly go violent or commit a crime. Even connecting lesser opportunities with an increase in the number of insurgents in the province is not a bad hypothesis either. Because it is common sense that a person who has a family to feed and has a government job or other opportunities of earning a respectable livelihood, is less likely to join the insurgents and go against the state. While those who hardly earn anything, are exposed to vulnerabilities, particularly when they keep listening to their people's grievances with the state. Such people are more likely to react. Governments (federal as

well as provincial) can meet the challenge by first and foremost, ensuring peace in the province. Without peace, no other right can be ensured. Second, an integrated and coherent Youth Employment Strategy is necessary to make a significant impact, as concluded by the provincial consultation on youth employment held in Quetta in November 2017 in collaboration with the Prime Minister's Youth Program and ILO. Seven areas were discussed in that consultation; i) education and training; ii) employment opportunities in the province; iii) employment of the youth in rural value chains; iv) employment [of the youth in mega development projects; v) overseas employment; vi) self-employment & enterprise development and; vii) social protection for unemployed youth. Universal Basic Income (UBI) can be social protection for unemployed youth (area number 7). UBI is a government programme in which every adult citizen of the state receives a fixed amount on a regular basis. A province like Balochistan can mould the model a little to provide a basic amount to its unemployed and needy citizens until they are provided with decent employment. Third, efforts should be made to make fast internet available in every corner of the province and encourage youth to learn online means of earning through reputable and free platforms like Digiskills.pk. They can earn a suitable amount through freelancing, without being a burden or a liability on the government, as the government does not have the capacity to offer enough jobs. Finally, the provincial government should make genuine efforts to legalize trade and human capital movement across the borders with Iran and Afghanistan to ensure the smooth running of the borders and encourage investors to invest in Balochistan and create opportunities by making industries in the province. This is only possible when there is peace in Balochistan as the road to progress goes through peace.

Nuclear energy becomes top electricity source for Pakistan

In December, out of the total pie of electricity generated from all sources, the share of nuclear energy was 27.15 percent

By Israr Khan & Tanveer Malik

Nuclear energy became Pakistan's top power source for the first time, as it met over 27 percent of the country's energy demand in December 2022 at a cost of less than half a US cent. In November too, nuclear generation was the top source after hydropower. Nuclear sources contributed 2,338 GWh of electricity to the national grid. Pakistan has been actively pursuing the plan to increase the share of cleaner energy sources in its energy mix, as carbon-based power, especially oil and gas not only affect the environment but are also expensive. Each year, Islamabad spends multi-billion dollars on fossil fuels imports.

In December, out of the total pie of electricity generated from all sources, the share of nuclear energy was 27.15 percent (or 2,284.8 GWh) generated at Rs1.073/unit, followed

by hydel with 20.44 percent (1,720.4 GWh), coal-based power 18.1 percent (1,520.9 GWh) at Rs11.5/unit, natural gas 15.13 percent (1,273.8 GWh) at Rs10.5/unit, RLNG 13.7 percent (1,153.7 GWh) at Rs20.2/unit.

Besides, 0.46 percent (38.91 GWh) of expensive electricity was generated from furnace oil during December at Rs25.7971/unit. No electricity was generated from high-speed diesel. Wind power contributed 2.5 percent (or 211.6 GWh) of electricity to the national grid, and Bagasse-based power was 1.2 percent (101 GWh) at Rs5.97/unit, while solar-based energy's contribution was 0.8 percent or 69.5GWh in December 2022.

This resulted in Pakistan's December 2022 power generation cost recording significant decline of 14.5 percent, data showed on Thursday. The data also showed that overall power generation in the country declined by 4.7 percent in the month under review, compared to the same month of last year. In December 2022, fuel cost for power generation decreased by 14.5 percent year-on-year to an average of Rs7.04/KWh compared with an average cost of Rs8.24/KWh during the corresponding month in the last financial year. However, it went up by 17.6 percent month-on-month.

On a YoY basis, the decrease in fuel cost was witnessed mainly due to a rise in nuclear, and solar based generation along with 14 percent YoY decline in coal-based cost of generation due to the addition of local coal-based plants. On MoM basis, the rise in fuel cost was triggered by a decline in hydropower generation and nuclear-based generation, said Tahir Abbas, Head of Research at Arif Habib Limited.

Based on less expensive energy generated in December, the Central Power Purchasing Agency (CPPA-G) has sought the National Electric Power Regulatory Authority's nod for a reduction of Rs2.1995/unit in tariff for the Ex-Wapda Distribution Companies (XWDiscos) consumers on account of fuel charges adjustments (FCA) for December 2022. If it was approved, Discos will refund it in February 2023 bills.

In its petition submitted to NEPRA, on behalf of XWDiscos, the CPPA-G said that for December, the reference fuel charges from the consumers were Rs9.3193/unit while the actual fuel cost was Rs7.1198/unit. Therefore, it should be allowed to refund Rs2.1995/unit, which it had overcharged from the consumers. During the month, 8,416.91 GWh of electricity was generated at the cost of Rs59.289 billion (or Rs7.0441/unit) and 8,096.88 GWh had been delivered to Discos at Rs57.648 billion (or Rs7.1198/unit).

The transmission losses during December were 3.35 percent (or 282.10kWh). The power regulator will hold a public hearing on the petition of CPPA-G on January 30, 2023. In earlier months, NEPRA had been allowed to collect additional amounts from the consumers due to the high cost of imported fuel. FCA for November 2022 was Rs4.3/unit, which would be collected in January 2023 bills. However, for October, the FCA was negative 0.3213/unit, which was being refunded to consumers in their December bills.

It should be noted that cost of other fuels went up on YoY basis. The cost of RFO increased by 16 percent, RLNG went up 12.5 percent, whereas domestic gas price increased 25 percent. The power generation data showed that it was down by 4.7 percent YoY during December of this fiscal compared to the same month of last fiscal. Power generation went down by 4.7 percent YoY to 8,417 GWh (11,313MW) during the month under review compared to 8,828 GWh (11,866MW) during the same month of last financial year. On MoM basis, generation increased by 0.6 percent.

Aman - A step closer towards blue economy and regional stability

By Myrah Baloch

Pakistan is a country that has never refrained from extending its support towards other countries. It has been an active member of UN peacekeeping missions and has strived hard to endorse regional cooperation and harmony. One such initiative on behalf of Pakistan Navy was the conduct of AMAN exercise in 2007 where different friendly regional and international naval forces were invited. Ever since, AMAN has become a major international naval exercise held biennially that serves as a joint forum for collective exchange of ideas, adopting strategic approach, tactics and techniques involved to counter maritime threats and enhance regional cooperation. Up till now seven AMAN exercises have been held with increased number of participants every time. 'AMAN', as the name suggests, is an embodiment of Pakistan Navy's commitment to maintaining peace and stability in maritime domain. This year, the 8th AMAN exercise is scheduled from 10th – 14th Feb 2023 with expected participation of more than 50 countries in addition to Pakistan International Maritime Expo and Conference (PIMEC), which would be the major highlight of the event. The flagship event aims to promote blue economy, attract investors, stakeholders and display latest maritime technology and services. It is expected to yield fruitful results in the form of regional cooperation and national and international recognition. The conduct of AMAN exercise is divided into two phases. The harbour phase aims to promote mutual exchange of maritime information, regional and cultural cooperation and security measures via International Maritime Conference (IMC) and sports matches. Whereas, the second phase includes sea activities comprising of RAS operations, Search & Rescue operations (SAR), fly pasts, Rocket Depth Charge (RDC) firing, International Fleet Review (IFR), counter piracy exercise with an approach to tackle asymmetric threats through multinational cooperation. The second phase also aims to develop practices and protocols in synergy with friendly countries while dealing with threats in maritime domain.

At a time where the world is turning to oceans for trade due to scarcity of land resources, the Indian Ocean contributes US \$1.5 trillion to the world economy. It has a diverse aquaculture, fish produce, minerals and countless marine species. This adds to Pakistan's significant geostrategic location on the world map.

Its warm seaports remain active throughout the year, providing access to the land locked Central Asian countries, Afghanistan and China through Gwadar and Karachi. The deep sea port of Gwadar has greatly aided the reliance on warm waters for trade and foreign import and export and in turn has made sea trade a much cheaper means of transport of goods rather than land.

Moreover, following China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the one belt one road initiative has made Pakistan the hub of sea trade which has offered feasible transit routes and enhanced regional connectivity. On the contrary, it has also made our adversaries more rigid in their efforts to corner and isolate Pakistan and defame its image by making our waters prone to maritime vices like narcotics, drug smuggling, human trafficking, and sea piracy.

Hence events like AMAN and PIMEC are crucial as means to counter the above mentioned malicious intents and to present Pakistan as a reliable partner for future cooperation. Under these circumstances, AMAN emerges as a collaborated effort that reflects Pakistan's soft image at a global platform. AMAN serves as a united resolve against sea piracy and crimes in maritime domain.

PIMEC on the other hand tends to serve as an ideal opportunity to raise awareness regarding maritime affairs, explore joint ventures and to draw investments from industries across the globe. It serves as a platform for showcasing our maritime potential, enables to establish mutually beneficial relationships among different stakeholders worldwide, helps in paving way for regional connectivity that will greatly boost up the economy. It is a first of its kind event meant to set a precedent for times to come highlighting the importance of blue economy.

Thus AMAN and PIMEC sends out a clear cut message to the world in general and to our enemies in particular that when push comes to shovel, Pakistan will not leave any stone unturned or deter to overcome malicious schemes and that, it still continues to emerge as a strong regional power, whose importance can never be undermined. In regards to PIMEC, Pakistan is taking the challenge of adopting practices of blue economy head on while stream lining its economic environment to further promote it.

Blue economy of Pakistan offers a wide range of maritime sectors peculiar to its geostrategic position which includes coastal tourism, deep sea-bed mining, resource extraction, fisheries, oceanic renewable energy etc. Furthermore it tends to offer great opportunities for investment in Pakistan mainly in Port development, ship-breaking, coastal urbanization and tourism sectors.

In a nutshell, Pakistan is naturally favoured and bestowed with huge natural resources which makes it a key player in the Indian Ocean region thus bringing us a step closer to greater prosperity and economic progress if put to effective use.

Deterrence in the world of multiple nuclear competitors

By Syed Samiullah

Having nuclear warheads for state security has been a keen desire of every nation since the emergence of nuclear technology. However, the era of the race of having nuclear warheads can be divided into three phases: the era of cold war, the interregnum that followed the period of cold war and the current multipolar world especially after 2010.

In the bipolar world, the great aspiration for possessing more and more nuclear arsenals from both the powers, Russia and America, ushered the world to strive for it. In the race, on one hand the numbers of nuclear warheads in both the states were increased rapidly while on the other hand some other states, following them, endeavored to get nuclear technology. India's and then in response Pakistan's move for the technology was also one of the consequences of the security of Pakistan.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulted in a unipolar world in terms of political affairs. Competition decreased after the end of the cold war, especially on nuclear issues. Despite the numerous difficulties the region experienced, the use of nuclear weapons was never a top priority of any nation. Even South Africa, which got nuclear power in 1965, preferred to be de-nuclearized during the age. President F. W. de Klerk declared officially on March 24, 1993, in an address to the South African parliament, that his country had secretly produced and dismantled six nuclear bombs.

The current era is, however, quite different from both the phases of past. Especially after 2010 the world hasn't remained unipolar. A great geopolitical competition has been observed among global and regional powers on two different surfaces. Though America, China and Russia are the most active and prominent players of this race but they are not the all in all like of the two powers in the cold war period.

Nearly all nuclear-armed states pursue their own nuclear capabilities and rivalries, and almost all of them are independent in how they decide on policies. They range greatly in character and objectives. For instance, Pakistan and India both have nuclear arsenals that provide some defense against great power piracy but are mostly intended to influence or deter one another. India on the other hand is also worried about China. In the meantime, North Korea is attempting to use its increasingly diverse nuclear weapons to intimidate South Korea and dissuade the US.

Although, future nuclear development by Iran, Saudi Arabia, or Turkey could influence the circumstances in some more ways. Israel's tiny but advanced arsenal is expressly designed to fend off conventional threats in its region. Britain and France both also possess nuclear arsenals with global reach, despite the fact that currently both the countries are having only regional security concerns. Now, because such a world has never been existed before, drawing the perfect sketch that how the two-tiered, multi-actor nuclear world would behave in future in both peacetime and wartime is difficult.

However, in peacetime, it is important for every nuclear state to be more meticulous in handling conflicts with rivals as the existence of numerous nuclear rivals at both the

regional and the great power level is likely to have across-the-board consequences. Comprehending the fact, Pakistan, as a nuclear state, showed an exemplary conduct when India provoked it by dropping Israeli-developed SPICE-2000 bombs on Balakot in the recent past. The strike provided Pakistan quite a big reason to respond harshly and extend the conflict to nuclear-war but the country showed a very responsible and positive gesture.

The benefits of global deterrence are genuine and of great significance in general but when observed and ponder over in various perspectives, they appear small because of the expected severe destabilizing repercussions. For instance, China modernizes her nuclear arsenals in order to face any threat from United States, India claims that its modernization in arms is China-centered; while Pakistan advances its arsenals in order to cope with India's war frenzy. Consequently the chain involves in a race on a rounded track which, after completing one round, starts to turn upside down and then from India to Pakistan, from India to China and from China to the USA, all of them justify their further nuclear arms advancement and proliferation.

The alliance dynamics in a world with numerous nuclear competitors, as well as nuclear competition among the triangle of great powers, have the potential to intensify the incentives to engage in a security race. Thus, there is a significant danger of an uncontrolled, multidimensional crisis or war along with the optimism of stronger reasons for states to deliberately avoid any kind of conflict with their opponents in a world populated by numerous nuclear competitors or their allies. To depict the future picture more clearly, an exclusive debate like that of the iconic Waltz-Sagan debate is needed to be done among the nuclear experts so that all the inhabitants may have a safe and placid future.

RUSSIA

Tanks & tragedy

By Michael Brenner

Never in memory has it been so daunting to figure out what's going on during a major international crisis as with the Ukraine affair. That sad truth owes much to the total absence of truthful reporting and honest interpretative analysis by the MSM. We are served heavy portions of falsity, fantasy and farrago crudely mixed into a narrative whose relation to reality is tenuous.

The near universal swallowing of this confection is made possible by the abdication of responsibility intellectual and political by America's political class, from Washington's high & mighty down through the galaxy of unthink tanks and self-absorbed academia. Now, the legion of scripters for this fictional story are working with renewed energy to incorporate a few fresh elements: the Biden/NATO decision to send an eclectic array of armor to buttress Ukraine's faltering forces; and the mounting evidence of crippling,

incremental dismantling of its army by Russia's superior military. As always, that reaction turns out to be an exercise in avoidance behavior. The roughly 100 tanks slated to arrive in piecemeal fashion over the coming year will be a "game-changer." Putin's army is a proven "paper tiger." "Democracy" is destined to prevail over despotic barbarism. Or so we are told in stomach-churning doses of snake-oil. I guess that we all have ways if amusing ourselves. A systematic refutation of this mythic construction is both superfluous and futile. It has been done over the past year by able, experienced and thoughtful analysts who actually know what they are talking about: Colonel Douglas Macgregor, Professor Jeffrey Sachs, Colonel Scott Ritter and a handful of others who together are relegated to obscure websites and scorned by the MSM. Attached is an acute analysis by Ritter of the actual military value of the infusion of tanks and other armor, and what that move augurs for the war's future trajectory. By way of introduction, I am adding my own assessment of the present strategic picture and where we are headed. It is based on inference to some extent as well as my reading of the conflict's genealogy. The main points are made in blunt, declaratory sentences. That strikes me as necessary to break through the fog of fabrications (lies) and calculated distortions which obscure what should be evident.

1. The crisis' starting point was in February 2014 when the Obama administration inspired and orchestrated a coup in Kyiv that usurped the democratically elected President Viktor Yanukovich. Victoria Nuland was there in Maidan Square cheer-leading and conniving together with her brother in color revolution Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt. They collaborated with violent, extreme ultra-nationalist groups with whom Washington actively had been cultivating ties for a number of years. Those ultras dominate Ukraine's security service and the government's key policy body, the Security Council, to this day.
2. The Maidan coup was the culmination of the deeply rooted American objective of incorporating an anti-Russian Ukraine into the Western organizational orbit: NATO above all - as President George W. Bush sought to do as early as 2008. The picket-fencing of a Russia kept at the margins of an American directed Europe had been an objective since 1991. The emergence of a strong, highly effective leader as represented by Vladimir Putin quickened the perceived need to keep Russia weak and boxed in.
3. The Donbass uprising/secession, provoked by the Maiden coup attended by the coming to power of rabid elements dedicated to subjugating the country's 10 million or so Russians, resulted in the autonomy of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts as well as the integration of the Crimea (historically and demographically part of Russia) into the Russian Federation. From that moment on, the United States fashioned and executed a strategy to reverse both shifts, to put Russia back in its place and to draw a stark line of separation between it and all of Europe to its West.

4. Ukraine became a de facto American protectorate. Key ministries were salted with American advisers, including the key Ministry of Finance headed by an American citizen dispatched from Washington. A massive program of arming, training and generally reconstituting the Ukraine army was undertaken. (In the Obama years, the overseer of the project was Joe Biden).
5. Washington also used its influence to undercut the Minsk II accords wherein Ukraine and Russian signed onto a formula for peaceful resolution of the Donbass issue, supposedly underwritten by Germany and France. We now know from candid public testimony that Kyiv, Berlin and Paris had no intention from the outset of implementing it. Rather, it was device to buy time for strengthening Ukraine to the point where it could retake the 'lost' territories by inflicting a military defeat on Russia.
6. Preparations were made by the Biden administration to heighten tensions to the point where an armed conflict was inescapable. The sporadic shelling of Donetsk city (where 16,000 civilians were killed between 2015 and 2002 official estimate by UN commission) was increased several fold, Ukrainian army units assembled en masse along the demarcated boundary. Russia preempted. The rest is history.
(All of the above recitation is a matter of public record and documented)

Where are we now? Here, inference takes precedence.

1. The Biden administration has committed itself to escalation by the deployment of previously precluded heavy weapons systems. It has strong-armed its Western European allies to provide armaments, too. Why? The people driving policy in Washington cannot stomach the prospect of a defeat.
2. That is to say, a Russian crushing of the Ukrainian army, its incorporation of the claimed four provinces, and the fatuous Western narrative shown to be little more than a string of lies. Too much in the way of prestige, money, and political capital has been invested for that outcome to be tolerated.
3. Moreover, just as Ukraine has been used cynically as an instrument for bringing Russia to its knees, so is the denaturing of Russia as power seen as integral to the global confrontation with China that dominates all strategic thinking. The option of working out terms of co-existence and non-coercive competition with China has been rejected outright. Americas' near entire political class is determined to reinforce the country's global hegemony and is girding itself to do so.
4. The rest of the country has yet to be informed, and it is too distracted to bother paying attention to the self-evident signs of what's afoot. The strategic program was laid out in Paul Wolfowitz's notorious memo of March 1991 which has become Scripture for most of the foreign policy community. (It's contents, along with the genesis of the Neo-Cons who adopted it long ago as holy writ - and made the historic transformation from just one sect to being the semi-official doctrinal faith of

the entire American imperium - is examined in a long piece that I distributed a few months ago, also attached).

5. The absolute failure to crash the Russian economy, thereby to open the way to political change in Moscow, and to render its supplement to Chinese power nugatory is a disappointment; but that does not faze the true believers. The United States has unified a bridled Collective West as its willing pawns who acquiesce in whatever moves Washington wants them to follow.

The signal event that punctuates that extraordinary subordination was the Germany's agreement to allowing the United States (and associates) to blow up the Nordstrom II which successive Berlin governments had deemed essential to meeting German industry's energy needs. One can rationalize it as the readiness of the Schulz to "take one for the team." What team? What overriding national interest? The annals of history record no comparable instance of a sovereign state inflicting such severe damage on itself on its own volition. An additional plus from the Ukraine affair, in the eyes of American policy-makers, is the crystallization of an international system whose foundational structure is bipolar a "we vs they" world similar to the Cold War - is convenient insofar as it places few demands on intellectual imagination or skillful diplomacy for which they have neither aptitude nor appetite.

2. All members of the Collective West have signed on to the Biden escalation plan. So, too, - of course the dominant factions in Zelensky's government. There is good reason to think that the purpose of CIA Director William Burns sudden visit to Kiev a few days before the Abrams tank deployment was announced was to ensure that there would be no defectors among Zelensky's inner circle or other senior officials who might get cold feet at the prospect of Ukraine becoming the battleground for a Russo-American war with effects similar to what it had endured from 1941-1944.

Burns visit was followed almost immediately by a massive purge of the leadership ranks along with officials at lower levels. The official line, accepted by the ever-pliable MSM, has been that this purge represented a virtuous anti-corruption campaign albeit in the midst of a full-scale war. We've been told that Burns came all that way to clear up a few minor issues (and perhaps to take the baths?) Zelensky himself had become too much of an asset as the heralded savior of Ukraine to be disposed of himself as was Diem in Vietnam in 1963. Burns doubtless offered guarantees that he was secure whomever else was going to be tossed overboard.

3. It is near impossible to see how the United States' objectives can be reached in Ukraine. However, the neo-cons have no 'reverse gear' to use Alexander Mercouris' apt phrase. They have instigated a crusade aimed at securing America's global dominance forever and anon. Ukraine is a waystation on the road to that visionary Jerusalem. In their grand scheme, though, they have failed to bother with a coherent, feasible strategy for resolving the current crisis.

As for President Biden, he looks to be only nominally in charge. He has been entirely captured by the Neo-Cons. He hears no other voices. As a life-long, instinctive hawk, he leans in their direction. He is old, weak and perhaps suffering from early-stage Parkinson's.

4. Before the end of the year, we all are likely to face the moment of truth. Russian forces will be on the Dnieper and, in some places, beyond it. Ukraine's army will be on its last legs Abrams, Leopard Iis, Challengers, Bradleys etc. Notwithstanding. What does the outwitted and feckless Biden bunch do then? Anything is possible.

US climbs escalation ladder in Ukraine

By M K Bhadrakumar

In all probability, the message conveyed to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov from his American counterpart Antony Blinken via Israel's new foreign minister Eli Cohen concerned the Ukrainian missile attack on Makeyevka (Donetsk) on New Year Day at 12.02 am killing 89 Russian conscripts. Kiev claimed that upto 400 Russian soldiers might have been killed. Russian MOD has made a rare acknowledgment of scores of deaths latest figure is 83. Moscow rarely releases figures for casualties in the war.

The Russian statements stressed that US-made Himars missiles were used in the attack. The site was an "a temporary deployment facility" (a vocational school temporarily used as barracks for scores of recently mobilised troops sent by Moscow. The incident sparked renewed public criticism over the state of Russia's military and the decision to use civilian infrastructure to house soldiers. The First Deputy Head of the Main Military-Political Department of the Russian Armed Forces Lieutenant General Sergey Sevryukov told reporters:

"It has already become obvious at present that the main cause of the occurrence was activation and large-scale use, contrary to the ban, of personal phones by personnel within the reach of enemy's destruction means. This factor enabled the enemy to take the bearing and determine coordinates of servicemen location to deliver a missile strike. Required measures are being taken at present to exclude such tragic incidents in the future." Apparently, blame game has begun that the "main cause" of the tragedy was the unruly behaviour of soldiers who used mobile phones on the warfront. But there is going to be consequences. Public pressure may increase demanding maximum use of force to end the war quickly. There is always the danger of escalation if certain unwritten, unspoken red lines in the conduct of the war are crossed.

It is entirely conceivable that there could be Cold-War style "strategic deconfliction" parameters worked out between the general staff in Moscow and the Pentagon aimed at avoiding miscalculation or any set of actions (by either side) that could lead to unnecessary conflict. The US and Russian forces have been operating in Syria for years and a communications line, used daily, has helped the two sides avoid direct conflict.

Now, the New Year attack comes as the Biden administration is trying to provide billions in weaponry to Ukraine while also claiming that avoiding a direct clash with Russia has been a top US priority. At any rate, although Russian intelligence would have a fair idea of the location of NATO officers conducting the Ukrainian operations, they have not been so far targeted. That is why, the Russian MOD's decision on Monday to highlight that US-supplied HIMARS missiles have killed scores of Russian soldiers on Sunday night would have caused some uneasiness in Washington.

The big question is whether Moscow will also now go up the escalation ladder and directly target American military personnel deployed in Ukraine. Of course, any killing of American military personnel in Ukraine will make very damaging headlines in the US news cycle for the Biden Administration. So far, there has not been a single instance of a body bag arriving from Ukraine. The Russian generals probably ensured that.

The Russian reports often mention publicly that the highly advanced HIMARS missile systems supplied to Ukraine are in reality operated by the US personnel. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told Tass news agency as recently as last week:

"The Kiev regime is deliberately flooded with the most advanced weapons, including samples that have not yet been put into service in the Western armies, apparently in order to see how they will do in combat conditions... Meanwhile, Westerners are saying they prefer to remain 'above the fray' and find a direct face-off between NATO and Russia unacceptable, which is unadulterated hypocrisy.

Already now, NATO members have de facto become parties to the conflict: Western private military companies and military instructors are fighting on the side of the Ukrainian forces. The Americans transmit satellite and other reconnaissance data to the Ukrainian command almost in real time and participate in planning and carrying out military operations."

Neither Washington nor Brussels ever endeavoured to refute these damning Russian allegations. Instead, they choose to tread warily since a public discussion may jeopardise the delicate "strategic deconfliction" arrangement / understanding worked out with the Russian general staff. It comes as no surprise if Washington distances itself from the dastardly attack on New Year Day in Donetsk, which drew Russian blood.

Quoting an unnamed Israeli diplomat, the Times of Israel reported that the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken had a call with the newly appointed Israeli foreign minister Eli Cohen on Monday and asked him "to pass messages on to Lavrov but did not say what they were." The Russian readout of Cohen's phone conversation with Lavrov on Tuesday mentioned that the latter "informed his Israeli counterpart about certain aspects of the situation in Ukraine in the context of Russia's special military operation." Lavrov probably had his say on Blinken's charade that the US had nothing to do with the killing of 89 Russian soldiers. The fact that as many as six deadly HIMARS missiles were fired in rapid sequence at a single target at 12.02 am shows a high level of certainty on the part of the Ukrainian side and/or their western mentors that maximum damage would

be inflicted. The intelligence inputs in real time show direct American participation in the horrific operation targeting the Russian conscripts' New Year party just when the toasts began. Of course, whipping up public sentiments in Russia against Putin is a core American objective in the war. We are entering a grey zone. Expect "surgical strikes" by the Russian forces, too. After all, at some point soon enough, it will emerge that what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

CHINA

China preparing for 'water war' with India

By Hemant Waje

China has stepped up preparations for a future water war with India by accelerating the construction of a huge dam on the Mabja Zangbo River, just a few kilometres north of the trijunction border with India and Nepal, Kathmandu-based online magazine Epardafas.

According to Epardafas, with this project, China can increase tensions in the future and can establish complete control over the water in the area. Open-source intelligence has revealed that on the basis of its latest satellite images, the Chinese dam is located very close to the Kalapani region of Uttarakhand. Not only this, China is also building an airport near this dam, which can prove to be very effective for the Chinese Air Force. It can be seen from the pictures that the construction work of this Chinese dam has not been completed yet, but continuous work is going on, Epardafas reported. The news about China building a dam near Nepal comes at a time when China has started finalising a huge dam near Arunachal Pradesh. According to Epardafas, China is building this dam on the Yarlung Tsagpo River, a tributary of the Brahmaputra.

This Chinese dam is being built on the Medog border which is very close to Arunachal. According to sources, China can change the water flow of the Brahmaputra River through this dam. The Brahmaputra River is not only the lifeline of the Northeast but also of Bangladesh. This will either lead to water shortage in Arunachal and Assam or so much water will come that many areas will be submerged in flood. A recent media report said that China is trying to create a "hydro-hegemony" to dominate the water economy and ecology in south and south-east Asia by pursuing a series of mega-dam projects over rivers in Tibet. Since Tibet's occupation, China has disrupted the natural flow of rivers by pursuing a series of ill-conceived environmental and developmental policies such as the Great Leap Forward, the South-North Water Diversion Project, etc, the report said, adding that, this has led to a dam-building spree on the Tibetan plateau with disastrous impacts on Asia's major rivers.

China's Economy is on Rebound

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China's economic data for the year 2022 has been released in Beijing on Tuesday. The striking part is that China's GDP growth slowed down to 3%. From an Indian perspective, it may seem momentarily that China's economy is slowing while India's expanded by nearly 7% (as per World Bank predictions.) Can India catch up with China in a medium-term scenario? This is where the devil lies in the fine print. The heart of the matter is that China's GDP growth of 3% translates as a year-on-year expansion of its economy touching a whopping \$18 trillion. To put matters in perspective, China has an economy that is five and a half times the size of India's economy (GDP: \$3.5 trillion).

Yet, this is being regarded as a lacklustre economic performance, attributed to headwinds stemming from a combination of adverse circumstances characteristic of 2022 ranging from the coronavirus and geopolitical tensions to repeated US interest rate hikes and the waning overseas demand due to the world economy tiptoeing toward recession.

The sporadic outbreaks of Covid in manufacturing bases including Shanghai and South China's Guangdong Province disrupted production in local factories and logistics, which combined with a property market slump.

To be sure, "Zero-covid" has been a well-documented drag on the Chinese economy over the past year; factories suffered when workers were locked down, and consumers reined in their spending as they lost pay checks and jobs. Externally, the escalating geopolitical tensions due to the Western sanctions against Russia drove up bulk commodity prices, subjecting China to imported inflation pressure. Second, the historical reality is that as the Chinese economy and the US economy grew closer and closer during the decades since 1980, the extent and depth of the Chinese economy affected by the US monetary policy also grew stronger and stronger. That is to say, the US interest rates and the Chinese economy are inversely related, especially in import, export, and China-US exchange rate. 2022 witnessed extraordinary fluctuations in the US financial market, which was bad news for China. Nonetheless, China's 3% GDP growth compares by far favourably with those of the US and Japan "the peer competitors" whose GDP grew by less than 2% (per IMF projections.) Analysts expect a much better performance in the year 2023, exceeding 5% in GDP growth. (In comparison, the World Bank estimates that global growth will slow from 2.9% in 2022 to 1.7% in 2023, and the US' GDP is expected to increase by just about 0.5% in 2023, the weakest forecast in three decades.)

This has geopolitical ramifications, as China is well-placed to make a far more significant contribution to global growth than any other major economic power, which would inevitably translate as increased prestige in the world community and create greater opportunity to leverage foreign policy objectives. China's consumer-led rebound to

buttress global growth implies that its vast market potential will be seen as a locomotive of growth by other economies, especially in the ASEAN region, Africa and Latin America. Contrary to doomsday predictions, China's transition away from the "zero-Covid" policy has been relatively smooth. The new regime aims to cope with the Covid mutants that are highly contagious, but less potent and dangerous. In retrospect, hundreds of thousands of human lives were saved in China, unlike in India or America.

Interestingly, the latest economic data from China also showed that notwithstanding the 3% growth rate last year, the country's GDP per capita has stayed above the \$12,000-mark, which is close to the high-income countries defined by the World Bank. Equally, the Chinese stock markets remain bullish indicative of the optimism. In political terms, this sets the stage for China's most important annual political gatherings ahead in March, which are expected to unleash the economy once more.

What Indian analysts in their schadenfreude tend to overlook is that an attitude toward China predicated on that country's misfortunes and setbacks is a road to nowhere. There are some profound conclusions to be drawn from the data on the Chinese economy.

Clearly, with global economic growth likely to decline sharply and global inflation still hovering at high levels in 2023, the economies of major developed economies are likely to show stagflation. Suffice it to say that the European countries will be inclined to view the Chinese market as holding the key to an early economic recovery. Recasting the global supply chains by decoupling from China is going to be easier said than done.

Second, the US simply cannot compete with China anymore as a manufacturing country. In infrastructure, the gap is so patently wide. Ukraine has shown that the US lacks the capability to fight Russia and needs a coalition. It is no different when it comes to China. Surely, the economic data on the Chinese economy will be taken very seriously in Washington.

The US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen was due to meet with Chinese Vice Premier ("economic czar") Liu He in Zurich on Wednesday on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos with view to "expand communication" between the two largest economies in the world. According to Politico, Secretary of State Antony Blinken will visit Beijing on Feb. 5-6. Blinken's talks will show whether the dialogue between President Biden and President Xi Jinping at Bali has led to more productive bilateral relations. A serious rapprochement seems difficult to achieve after the US House of Representatives created a committee on strategic competition with China recently.

However, both powers want to put the deterioration of relations on pause or at least keep it under control. They will try to avoid crises, although that is not guaranteed. Typically, it has been Washington who invariably initiated any deterioration of relations.

Addressing the CSIS in Washington last week, Biden's advisor on China, Kurt Campbell described the Bali summit meeting as "an effort to build a foundation for a new relationship with China." He said 2023 will be the year "to build some guardrails," although the dominant feature of US-China relationship will continue to be competitive.

Campbell messaged that the US wants it to be “a productive, peaceful competition” that can be channelled for the betterment of life of the two peoples. MK Bhadrakumar is a former diplomat. He was India’s ambassador to Uzbekistan and Turkey. The views are personal.

Are the Americans at it again?

Still licking its wounds after a humiliating, hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan, the United States probably wants to revive its so-called 'war on terror' once again, taking Pakistan on board. The recent statements by Washington in which it 'pledged support for Islamabad's anti-TTP efforts', and showed 'concerns on TTP threat against Pakistan' suggest there might be some brainstorming on the matter in the relevant circles. This, however, seems to be old wine in a new bottle. We never asked for US help following a small border skirmish with Afghan security forces that has nothing to do with the US. But the US is trying to 'help' us in an apparent bid to seek and get military bases in Pakistan and then bringing its own army on lame excuses.

The fact is we do not need US assistance at all as our battle-hardened army can tackle the handful of Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) terrorists. The army has done it in the past, and can and will do it again. The fact that the US intends to fight against its own proxy terrorist organisation, the TTP, is nothing but a joke. In fact, the US spread terrorism in Pakistan for several years through the TTP, leaving over 80,000 Pakistanis martyred, including hundreds of Army Public School (APS) schoolchildren and thousands of soldiers.

A chief foreign correspondent of a US news channel, Richard Engel, had visited Jalalabad, Afghanistan, in 2008, and had reported about the terrorist training camps there and in Amritsar that, according to him, had state-of-the-art weapons which even the Pakistan Army did not have at the time. Who else could have supplied such advanced weaponry to terrorists except the US and its 'special friend' Israel? How can we forget the attack at Salala checkpost by the US forces where we lost 26 soldiers? They were guarding a sensitive checkpost which was earlier being used by TTP terrorists for infiltrating into Pakistan. This made US, especially its military, jittery as it could not send in fresh groups for spreading terrorism inside Pakistan. Therefore, the US army attacked the post in a bid to clear the route for the TTP terrorists. Now we are told the US wants to help Pakistan against TTP.

If the US was serious in stopping TTP from entering Pakistan when it was in Afghanistan, why could it not locate and kill the terrorists despite having the most advanced technology and precision-guided ammunition? The US has been crying wolf about terrorism in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Afghanistan and Pakistan; all Islamic countries. But Washington has never talked about which country provides training as well as state-of-the-art weapons to these terrorists. Which country arranges their movement through

special aircraft without visas or travel documents from one country to another? Most importantly, who finances them?

The US has never accused any country of spreading terrorism in these countries because such organisations have for long been its proxies, trained and financed in collaboration with 'friendly' countries. No country in the world could finance and manage terrorism at such a massive scale. The US left Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen after killing millions of Muslims in those countries. The Pakistanis realise very well that the US wants to repeat its actions in Pakistan. The US has also been trying to create rift between the people of Pakistan and its armed forces for long. It may have succeeded to some extent, but the people of Pakistan at large trust their forces and will stand with them. We must not embroil ourselves in another bogus 'war on terror' by swallowing the American bait.

INDIA

India's got the BRICS blues

The Brazilian news agency reported that Lula da Silva's inauguration as the new president on January 1 for a historic third term amidst a carnival-like backdrop was attended by over five dozen foreign delegations, composed of heads of government, vice presidents, foreign ministers, special envoys and representatives of international organisations. It was the largest event with high-level international figures in Brazil since the Rio 2016 Olympic Games. The BRICS leaders flocked to Brasilia the vice-presidents of China and Russia and the foreign minister of South Africa. The solitary exception was India. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar prioritised a tour of the beautiful Mediterranean island of Cyprus and Austria.

India's "underrepresentation" probably was due to the close equations between PM Modi and Jair Bolsonaro, who served as the 38th president of Brazil from 2019 until 2022, whom Lula defeated. For some strange reason, Modi government invested heavily in Bolsonaro by inviting him as the chief guest at India's Republic Day in January 2020.

It was a controversial decision, given Bolsonaro's obnoxious record on misogyny and homophobia, and his perversion for targeting the indigenous people. In a scandalous incident, he once told an opposition politician Maria do Rosario during a debate in the parliament, "I wouldn't rape you because you're not worthy of it." Later, he explained that he wouldn't rape her because she was "ugly". Bolsonaro's misogyny surged when he once remarked "I have five children. Four are men, and then in a moment of weakness the fifth came out a girl." Again, his homophobic views got the better of him when he threatened that "if I see two men kissing each other on the street, I'll beat them up." Indeed, it remains a mystery what attracted the Indian ruling elite to Bolsonaro, an ex-military officer. Maybe, his "strong man" image and fascist ideology? Be that as it may, ignoring Lula's historic return to power in Brazil is incomprehensible. It is not only

that he's, arguably, the most charismatic statesman from a developing country, but he is certain to steer the BRICS to a higher destiny during his 4-year term.

Lula's return comes at a juncture when the BRICS is going from introvert to extrovert and its greater global ambition raises hopes across the wide expanses of the Global South of material changes in the global economic system. The ongoing polarisation between the West and the Rest over Ukraine issue accentuates the trend. The hallmark of China's BRICS chairmanship in 2022 has been the launch of the extended BRICS+ meeting at the level of foreign ministers. China also has plans to open up the possibility of developing countries joining the core BRICS grouping. In fact, Algeria, Argentina and Iran have already applied to join BRICS, while Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt have announced their interest in becoming the group's members.

Looking ahead, the vitality of the BRICS trajectory will largely depend on the success of the BRICS+ enterprise. While an inert, introvert BRICS has neither global capacity nor global mission, a stronger, more inclusive and open BRICS has the potential to become the basis for a new system of global governance. This is the crux of the matter.

To be sure, the BRICS association needs to overcome its mounting internal contradictions. On the one hand, a fundamental transformation of the globalisation process has begun (and this process is only gaining momentum) and there are calls for the basic principles and mechanisms which bring the BRICS countries together to undergo reform. On the other hand, this is also an inflection point as multipolarity gains traction and all global multilateral organisations are faced with the loss of their status as universal platforms for overseeing the global rules of the game. India faces an acute problem of self-identification, since it notionally advocates the transformation of global mechanisms imposed by developed countries but also happens to be a votary of the so-called "rules-based order", which is a metaphor for the political ideology of the US as the dominant state and "lone superpower" in the 1990s.

Indeed, the difficulties of the BRICS were also caused by internal reasons. BRICS became internally highly heterogeneous and the main reason for this is India's unwillingness to work with China as leaders of economic growth. To be sure, the aggravation of contradictions between China and India has led to a slowdown in active work in the BRICS. Enter Brazil. The victory of Bolsonaro in 2018 would also have been a moment of risk for the BRICS, as the new elites in power in Brasilia made no secret of their desire to place their main stake on rapprochement with the US. Surely, India saw in Bolsonaro a "natural ally" within the BRICS, which largely explains the high honour Modi bestowed on him on 2020 Republic Day.

Bolsonaro, like Modi, felt no commitment to the idea of uniting the Global South under the banner of reshaping the world order. Both preferred pragmatic, technocratic areas as the BRICS agenda that are objectively beneficial to them (eg., technological cooperation, the fight against organised crime, digitalisation, the Development Bank and so on) although this resulted in an atrophy of the *raison d'être* of BRICS agenda.

But, as luck would have it, Joe Biden's victory in the November 2020 US election led to a cooling of the enthusiasm on the part of Bolsonaro and the Brazilian elites regarding the prospects for rapprochement with the US. The apple of discord was Bolsonaro's policy toward the Amazon River. Bolsonaro worried about the inclusion of environmental issues in the NATO agenda and he discarded his previously restrained approach to the BRICS, recognising its importance as a tool to counter isolation in the event of worsening relations with the US and the EU. Suffice it to say that Lula's return is happening at a defining moment. In his first remarks after assuming power on Sunday, Lula vowed a drastic change of course to rescue his nation plagued by hunger, poverty and racism.

Lula made clear his main focus would be on ending hunger and narrowing rampant inequality. He also said he aims to improve the rights of women, and attack racism and Brazil's legacy of slavery. Lula declared that social conscience will be "the hallmark of our government." Unsurprisingly, India feels uneasy that the centre of gravity in BRICS is poised to shift further to the left of centre. Equally, India will find it difficult to maintain its role as a regional leader with the entry of Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia into the portals of BRICS. Being an acolyte of the US-led "rules-based order," India faces the spectre of isolation.

Beijing, whose approaches to diplomacy and international politics are known for their strategic vision for the long term, is biding its time. Lula told Chinese vice-president Wang Qishan who participated in the ceremony in Brasilia as Xi Jinping's special representative, that he looked forward to visiting Beijing "to further deepen bilateral practical cooperation in various fields, enhance friendship between peoples, and lift Brazil-China relations to a new level."
