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# REIGNITING THE FLAME OF INDIA-KOREA DEFENCE COOPERATION

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

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January 02, 2024 12:50 am | Updated 01:23 am IST

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'Despite recent high-level engagements, a challenge that persists is the absence of a shared vision for a new comprehensive defence framework' | Photo Credit: ANI

In the intricate tapestry of global geopolitics, defence collaboration emerges as a foundational imperative, crucial for the preservation of international peace and stability. The recent diplomatic overture during the visit of General Manoj Pande, Chief of the Army Staff of India, in November 2023, to the Republic of Korea, signifies a critical juncture in the trajectory of India-Korea defence relations. While this visit fortified diplomatic ties, it also unveiled the challenges, necessitating meticulous consideration. This prompts an exploration of the challenges faced by India and Korea in enhancing their defence cooperation, along with an examination of opportunities for mutual growth.

Despite recent high-level engagements, a challenge that persists is the absence of a shared vision for a new comprehensive defence framework, one that can provide a robust structure under which both nations can operate and align their policies to construct a novel and sustainable emerging regional order. The imperative for India and Korea is to transcend the confines of bilateral cooperation, and embrace a paradigm shift that cultivates a more profound understanding of their roles in the swiftly evolving global scenario.

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A hurdle lies in the resistance on the Korean government side to reassess India's role in the region. It is incumbent upon Korea to comprehend that India is not merely the largest consumer of defence products. Rather, it stands as a regional power capable of substantial contributions to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. A departure from Cold War mentalities, where the Korean government perceived India as standing in the opposite Soviet bloc, is imperative for Korea to forge a deeper, more meaningful partnership with India. This paradigm shift in Korean government strategic thinking is indispensable for any meaningful engagement between the two nations.

Further, the prevailing overemphasis by the Indian government side on weapons acquisition and technology transfer from Korea, while undeniably pivotal, has tended to overshadow broader strategic considerations. Similarly, the unwavering focus of the Korean defence establishment

on profit-driven weapons sales to India, devoid of strategic considerations, may prove shortsighted in the face of fast-changing geopolitical dynamics. Powerful arms lobbies in India and Korea pose a potential roadblock, emphasising the necessity to prioritise long-term strategic goals over short-term gains.

The emerging coalition of North Korea, China, and Russia poses a new serious challenge to collaborative efforts between the two nations. Divergent stances may arise, necessitating a nuanced appraisal of each party's strategic imperatives.

The high-level interactions of Gen. Pande with the top Korean military leadership and his engagements with the leadership of top Korean defence institutions, such as the Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) and the Agency of Defence Development (ADD), are anticipated to further unite the defence communities of both countries.

Leveraging their technological capabilities, India and South Korea are aiming to collaborate in developing advanced defence systems and equipment. Given their shared understanding of the pivotal role technology will play in future conflicts, the scope for cooperation in this sector is limitless. Such synergy can lead to a mutually beneficial defence technology and industry partnership, propelling both countries to the forefront of innovation and self-reliance.

In an era where defence against space warfare, information warfare, and cybersecurity is paramount, both nations can further explore opportunities for cooperation. Given Korea's status as an advanced high-tech digital superpower, vast opportunities exist in the development of robust security measures in these areas to effectively counter emerging threats in the digital domain, ensuring the security of critical infrastructure and information.

Strengthening coordinated efforts to counter terrorism aligns seamlessly with the shared concerns of India and South Korea. There is potential for collaboration in maritime security, including joint patrolling and information sharing, given the significant maritime interests both countries have in the Indian Ocean.

India and South Korea can leverage their United Nations peacekeeping expertise for collaborative efforts. Sharing insights and resources in peacekeeping operations can enhance regional and global stability, underscoring their joint commitment to peace and security. Additionally, joint exercises and the exchange of best practices in Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) demonstrate the shared responsibility of both nations in addressing vulnerabilities to natural disasters.

Lastly, mutual growth is found in enhancing joint army exercises, fostering interoperability, and strengthening the capabilities of both armies for effective collaboration in diverse scenarios. Gen. Pande's visit to Seoul has spurred the extension of cooperation beyond naval focus to other branches of India's armed forces.

While the recent visit of Gen. Pande has reignited the flame of India-Korea defence cooperation, the path forward necessitates meticulous navigation through the challenges and the wholehearted embrace of opportunities. A strategic, balanced approach, coupled with adaptability to the evolving geopolitical landscape is key to unlocking a robust and enduring defence collaboration, in turn creating a partnership that fosters peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. United, both nations stand ready to navigate the complexities and uncertainties of the future, forging a path toward a stronger and more resilient partnership.

***Lakhvinder Singh is the Director of Peace and Security Studies at the Asia Institute in Seoul***

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# WIDENING WAR: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON THE GAZA WAR GOING BEYOND ISRAEL-PALESTINE

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January 02, 2024 12:15 am | Updated 07:49 am IST

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A U.S. strike on Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi militants in the Red Sea while they were attacking a container ship is the latest sign that the [Gaza war is widening beyond Israel-Palestine](#). Three Houthi boats were sunk and [10 militants killed in a rare close combat with the rebels](#) who control much of Yemen. The Houthis say that to express solidarity with the Palestinians, they would continue to attack commercial vessels passing through the [Bab el-Mandeb Strait](#), through which the Red Sea opens into the Gulf of Aden. Since late November, at least 20 commercial tankers have come under [Houthi attacks](#), including a chemical vessel off the Indian coast, forcing some of the world's largest shipping companies, including Maersk, Hapag-Lloyd and MSC, to [suspend trading on the Red Sea](#) routes, and use the circuitous route around Africa. Traffic through the Red Sea, a crucial link between the Mediterranean and the Arabian Seas through the Suez Canal, has dropped by some 35% in recent weeks, increasing shipping and insurance costs. The crisis has prompted the U.S. to announce a new naval task force to ensure security in one of the world's busiest shipping lanes.

But the [U.S.'s attempt to deal with the Houthi threats](#) as a stand-alone security crisis might run into its own limitations. No Red Sea basin country has joined the U.S.-led task force, which includes even Egypt, whose economy has taken a hit due to the drop in the Suez traffic. This shows the growing anger in the Arab world towards the Biden's administration's unconditional support for [Israel's offensive in Gaza](#), which has killed at least 22,000 people in 11 weeks. The Houthi control of Yemen's Red Sea Coast, including the port of Hodeidah, which is some 250 km north of the Bab el-Mandeb, just 29 km wide at its narrowest point, gives them a natural advantage in carrying out sea denial attacks in and around the Strait. Over the past few weeks, the U.S. has shot down several Houthi missiles and drones over the Red Sea. But that has not stopped the Houthis from launching new attacks. Even if the U.S. carries out airstrikes in Yemen, it is not clear whether aerial attacks could deter the Houthis, who survived intense Saudi bombing for seven years. Beefing up security in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea has now become inevitable, but the U.S. should first work towards achieving a ceasefire in Gaza, addressing the core issue behind the escalation. That would help Washington build a regional consensus against the Houthis. But if the U.S. turns a blind eye towards the indiscriminate killing of Palestinians by its ally and stays focused only on the Houthis, it risks getting dragged deeper into a widening regional conflict.

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# AN 'INDIA OUT' PLAN THAT COULD IMPACT THE MALDIVES

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January 03, 2024 12:08 am | Updated 09:00 am IST

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“China has an expansive oceanographic research programme, in which ‘scientific research vessels’ are regularly deployed in the Indian Ocean’ | Photo Credit: AP

The recent decision by the Maldives [to revoke an agreement with India for joint hydrographic surveys in Maldivian waters](#) has caused considerable dismay in Indian media and strategic circles. Inked during Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to the islands in 2019, the pact was seen as a symbol of India-Maldives defence ties.

The move by Male, in mid-December 2023, came a few weeks after the archipelagic state formally asked New Delhi to withdraw its Indian military presence from its shores. As if to emphasise its reservations about defence engagement with India, Male also skipped the latest meeting of the Colombo Security Conclave, also in December.

That trust between India and the Maldives is at a low ebb is manifestly evident. Since the election of Mohamed Muizzu as Maldivian President in November 2023, there has been a deliberate, if predictable, attempt by Male to create a distance with New Delhi. The Maldives would like the world to believe that terminating the hydrography pact is a way of asserting its autonomy and agency. It is not. Far from balancing ties with India, Male has thrown in its political lot with China. The Muizzu administration’s refusal to renew the hydrography pact seems less to do with the President’s sensitivities about sovereignty than with his special relationship with Beijing. Getting Indian hydrographic ships out of Maldivian waters appears intended to aid China’s marine surveys of the surrounding seas.

It is worth noting that hydrographic data inherently has a dual nature in that the information collected from the seas can be used for civilian and military purposes. Marine scientists maintain that the data that helps advance non-military objectives, such as ensuring navigational safety, marine scientific research, and environmental monitoring, can also be used to facilitate military aims such as surveillance of a nation’s vital coastal installations and war-fighting assets.

Even so, China is unique in using its marine and seabed surveys to advance a largely strategic agenda. The country has an expansive oceanographic research programme, in which “scientific research vessels”, in particular the Shi Yan class of oceanographic survey vessels and the Yuan Wang series of intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance ships are regularly deployed in the



Indian Ocean. Their presence goes largely unnoticed, eclipsed by China's growing naval footprint. For China, however, marine surveys and reconnaissance are critical enablers of the People's Liberation Army Navy's maritime strategy in the far seas. It is no happenstance that Chinese authorities approached Sri Lanka and the Maldives many times last year to allow the docking of marine research ships.

Indian observers point out that China's ocean surveys play an important part in enhancing China's antisubmarine warfare capabilities. The mapping of the ocean's temperature profile and the study of other oceanic phenomena such as currents and eddies, they contend, is meant to improve sonar performance and detection of enemy submarines. Studying the marine environment also aids in the development of systems that help Chinese submarines elude detection and fine-tune tactics for littoral combat.

However, China's oceanographic surveys in the waters of friendly South Asian states are potentially hampered by the presence of Indian hydrographic ships in the area. The Indian Navy has the capability to track foreign ships' subsurface sensor activity. Chinese hydrographers suspect the Navy's operations in the waters of Indian Ocean island states could interfere with China's own marine survey efforts.

Meanwhile, speculation abounds in New Delhi of a Chinese plan to develop a naval base in the Maldives. In 2018, China planned an ocean observatory in Makunudhoo Atoll, north of Male — not far from India's Lakshadweep Islands. Maldivian opposition leaders had then expressed reservations about the observatory's potential military applications, including a provision for a submarine base. There is no evidence yet that China has revived that proposal, but recent developments suggest that the possibility cannot be discounted.

For its part, the Maldives has apprehensions about India's hydrographic activity being a form of intelligence collection. Its concerns are not entirely unfounded — not because Indian activity in Maldivian waters is suspect, but because the laws and legal framework governing hydrography are not different from the norms governing military surveys. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) does not explicitly authorise a coastal state to regulate hydrographic surveys or military surveys conducted beyond its territorial sea; a littoral state may only regulate marine scientific research in its exclusive economic zone (EEZs). By implication, foreign maritime agencies conducting hydrographic surveys are free to map the seas outside a coastal state's territorial waters. It is this prospect that Male finds problematic.

The discrepancy, though glaring outwardly, is better understood if one considers that the aim of hydrography is not to collect data about topography and geophysical processes for the sake of knowledge. Instead, it caters to a specific demand, which can come either from marine ecologists, scientists, and the maritime industry, or military strategists and national security planners. That does not alter the reality that many navies, in particular India's, have an exemplary track record of hydrographic surveys in their neighbourhoods. The Indian Navy has rendered hydrographic assistance to Mauritius since the 1990s, charting the vast Mauritian EEZs and helping build capacity, even assisting with the setting up of a hydrographic unit for skill development among Mauritian hydrographers.

The best bet for the Maldives to enhance maritime awareness and security remains a partnership with India. The Muizzu administration must recognise that it is not India but China that seeks to weaponise ocean surveys. The eagerness for a strategic concert with Beijing, driven plainly by political compulsions, could entail adverse consequences for Male.

***Abhijit Singh is Head of the Maritime Policy Initiative at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), New Delhi***

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Oil and natural gas prices have started rising as traders bet on the continuation of Houthi attacks disrupting shipping in the Red Sea. The Yemen-based rebel formation, backed by Iran, has been attacking shipping along this critical region with suicide drones, missiles and rockets since the Gaza War. This is part of a strategy to impose a naval blockade of Israel, since the Houthis are allies of Hamas due to their strong connections with Iran.

Many major shipping firms such as the Mediterranean Shipping Company, Maersk, Hapag-Lloyd and BP have started diverting vessels away from the Red Sea. Indeed, traffic around the Cape of Good Hope has risen by 67% since the attacks started while traffic via the Suez Canal has dropped 28% because the Suez Canal links the Red Sea to the Mediterranean.

It takes an extra 10-14 days sailing time for a cargo ship on the Asia-Europe run to go up and down the entire length of Africa rather than through the Suez Canal via the Red Sea. So, this adds considerably to shipping costs. Under normal circumstances, the Red Sea route handles around 12% of all global trade, and roughly a third of the container trade.

Even more alarmingly, the Houthi interdiction has the potential to badly disrupt energy supplies since a large proportion of the world's oil and natural gas is evacuated out through regions targeted by the Houthi. Unlike with other commodities, which can use alternate routes albeit at high cost, it is not possible for tankers out of the Arab Peninsula to easily avoid the red zone.

If the Houthi actions against shipping cannot be stopped, there will be disruptions to global energy supplies quite apart from high costs for global shipping. In addition, protests in Libya have shut down the Sharara oilfield, which could further tighten global supply.

Enter the US as the only superpower in a unipolar world. The US has sunk several Houthi ships recently but this has not stopped the attacks. Iran which was already supplying much of the armaments (rockets and drones) used by the Houthi has also got involved more directly as it has sent warships out on patrol after Houthi boats were sunk.

The US has put together a coalition which hopes to coordinate military action against Houthi attacks. Although the coalition has destroyed many Houthi drones and missiles, it cannot seem to guarantee complete suppression of these terrorist attacks without seriously ramping up military commitments. The ongoing Gaza War has also meant that Arab nations like Saudi Arabia have not entered this coalition, even though the Saudis led an earlier coalition that fought a land war in Yemen against the Houthis.

The US is now trying to coordinate stronger military action via the UN Security Council but again, the Arab nations in the region will be hesitant to get involved while the Gaza War rages on.

India has seen collateral damage since Indian ships (and Indian-crewed ships) such as the MV (Merchant Vessel) Chem Pluto and the MV Sai Baba have been targeted by Houthi attacks. The Indian Navy is now patrolling the area with a complement of destroyers as well as aerial surveillance.

If the attacks don't stop, either through naval military action or via diplomatic negotiations

(probably involving Iran), the next option would be further military escalation via bombing Houthi strongholds in Yemen, or even the involvement of UN coalition ground forces in Yemen. This could have serious consequences in terms of heightened geopolitical tensions, especially if Iran decides to face-off.

India has strong diplomatic and trade ties across the Arab World, and with Iran and Israel. Over 10 million NRIs work in Arab nations. Hence, the government has to tread very delicately through this situation. It also has to reckon with a situation where energy imports become more expensive which is worrying since India imports over 85% of its crude and over 50% of its gas. The impact on the bottomline of oil-marketing companies like BPCL, HPCL, IOC could be severe.

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# TERROR IN IRAN: ON THE BLASTS IN IRAN'S KERMAN AND THE IMPACT

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January 05, 2024 12:10 am | Updated 12:10 am IST

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The [twin blasts in the southeastern Iranian city of Kerman](#) at a memorial for [Qassem Soleimani](#), the Quds Force commander whom the U.S. assassinated in Baghdad in January 2020, expose the security vulnerabilities of the Iranian regime at a time when conflicts are spreading in West Asia. At least 84 were killed in the worst terror attack in the Islamic Republic's history. Soleimani, the brain behind the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' (IRGC) overseas operations, had enjoyed cult status when alive, and became a symbol of an embattled regime's resilience over the past four years. While Iran's leaders called it a terrorist attack but stopped short of blaming anyone, mid-rung officials said the responsibility for the attack "lies with the U.S. and the Zionist entity". However, on Thursday, the Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility. For the IS, Soleimani was a sworn enemy as he had mobilised Shia militias to fight the IS in Syria and Iraq. These groups played a role in the urban battles in Iraq during 2018-19 that saw the destruction of the physical structures of the IS Caliphate. The group lost its proto state but survived as a terrorist entity in parts of Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

For Iran, the attack has come at a precarious moment when tensions are rising in West Asia. The Kerman memorial event was bombed a day after a senior Hamas leader was killed in Beirut in a drone strike, for which Lebanese officials have blamed Israel. Hezbollah, which has been engaging Israeli troops in a limited way since October 7, has vowed retaliation. On December 25, an Israeli strike in Syria killed Seyyed Razi Mousavi, a senior IRGC adviser. Israel, whose ongoing attack on Gaza has already killed at least 22,000 people, seems ready to take more risks even at the cost of regional escalation, while in the Red Sea, Iran-backed Houthi rebels of Yemen have been repeatedly attacking commercial vessels since late November. Pro-Iran Shia militias have targeted U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria since October 7, and on Thursday, a U.S. strike in Iraq killed a Shia militia commander. The Israel-Hamas war is no longer about just Israel and Hamas. It has put the whole region in a ring of fire. As chaos spreads the IS seems to have found an opportunity to strike its old enemy which is under pressure. The attack should serve as a warning to Iran and its rivals. If chaos and instability spread it would be a boon for jihadists. This calls for a de-escalation of the current regional crisis. Iran, on the other side, should not walk into the web of provocations set by its rivals. It should show restraint and focus on strengthening internal security.

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# THE GLOBAL NUCLEAR ORDER IS UNDER STRAIN

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

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January 03, 2024 12:16 am | Updated 10:03 am IST

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'Humanity has survived 75 years of the nuclear age without blowing itself up' | Photo Credit: Getty Images

To gain legitimacy, any global order needs to fulfil two conditions. First, a convergence among the major powers of the day, and, second, successfully presenting the outcome as a global public good to the rest of the world. The global nuclear order (GNO) was no exception but, today, it is under strain.

The GNO was created in the shadow of the Cold War, with the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., leading the western and the Socialist blocs, respectively. Following the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, when the two came perilously close to launching a nuclear war, both U.S. President John F. Kennedy and General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev understood two political realities. First, as the two nuclear superpowers, they needed bilateral mechanisms to prevent tensions from escalating to the nuclear level. And, second, nuclear weapons are dangerous and, therefore, their spread should be curbed. This convergence created the GNO.

During the Cuban crisis, a secret back-channel between President Kennedy's brother, Robert Kennedy and Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, helped resolve the crisis. The first bilateral measure was the hotline, established in 1963, to enable the leaders to communicate directly. The hotline (later upgraded into nuclear risk reduction centers) was followed by arms control negotiations as the two nuclear superpowers sought to manage their nuclear arms race and maintain strategic stability.

To control proliferation, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. initiated multilateral negotiations in Geneva in 1965 on a treaty to curb the spread of nuclear weapons. Three years later, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) opened for signature. It began modestly with less than 60 parties but today, it is widely described as the cornerstone of the global nuclear order with 191 adherents.

The third element of the global nuclear order came into existence in 1975. India had chosen not to sign the NPT, and in 1974, stunned the world by conducting an underground peaceful nuclear explosive, or PNE. Seven countries (the U.S., U.S.S.R, U.K., Canada, France, Japan, and West Germany) held a series of meetings in London and concluded that ad hoc export controls were urgently needed to ensure that nuclear technology, transferred for peaceful purposes, not be used for PNEs. The London Club (as it was originally known) sounded inappropriate and later transformed into the Nuclear Suppliers Group, consisting of 48 countries today, which observe



common guidelines for exporting nuclear and related dual-use materials, equipment, and technologies. Though the Soviet Union and India enjoyed close relations, having signed the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty in 1971, the USSR was committed to upholding the GNO, and a founding member of the London Club.

The GNO has held reasonably well, particularly on two fronts. First, the taboo against nuclear weapons has held since 1945. It is a matter of debate how far the U.S.-USSR arms control process helped preserve the taboo or whether it was just plain luck, but the fact is that humanity has survived 75 years of the nuclear age without blowing itself up.

Second, non-proliferation has been a success. Despite dire predictions of more than 20 countries possessing nuclear weapons by the 1970s, (there were five in 1968 – the U.S., U.S.S.R., U.K., France, and China), only four countries have since gone nuclear, i.e., India, Israel, North Korea, and Pakistan. Even after the Cold War ended, non-proliferation remained a shared objective and Moscow and Washington cooperated to ensure that Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan that hosted Soviet nuclear weapons and possessed some capabilities, were denuclearised. In 1995, the NPT, originally concluded for 25 years, was extended into perpetuity. On other counts, the record is mixed. Arms control did not end the U.S.-U.S.S.R. nuclear race; in fact, their arsenals grew from 28,000 bombs in 1962 to over 65,000 bombs in the early 1980s but the dialogue and some agreements provided a semblance of managing the arms race. Since the late 1980s, the U.S. and Soviet arsenals have declined sharply, to below 12,000 bombs today, though much of this can be attributed to the end of the Cold War rivalry and the breakup of the U.S.S.R.

The two nuclear hegemony shared a notion of 'strategic stability' based on assured second strike capability, guaranteed by the enormous arsenals that both had built up. This eliminated any incentive to strike first ensuring deterrence stability. Arms control negotiations led to parity in strategic capacities creating a sense of arms race stability, and fail-safe communication links provided crisis management stability. These understandings of nuclear deterrence in a bipolar world outlasted the Cold War but are under question.

Today's nuclear world is no longer a bipolar world. The U.S. faces a more assertive China, determined to regain influence, regionally and globally. This rivalry is different from the Cold War because both economies are closely intertwined and further, and China is an economic and technological peer rival. China has resented the U.S.'s naval presence in the South China and East China Seas and since the last Taiwan Strait crisis in 1996, has steadily built up its naval and missile capabilities.

Changing geopolitics has taken its toll on the treaties between the U.S. and Russia. In 2002, the U.S. withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and in 2019, from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty on grounds that Russia was violating it. The only remaining agreement, New START, will lapse in 2026; its verification meetings were suspended during the COVID-19 outbreak and never resumed. Strategic stability talks began in 2021 following the Geneva meeting between Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin, but collapsed with the Ukraine war. Last year, Russia de-ratified the CTBT to bring it on a par with the U.S., raising concerns about the resumption of nuclear testing. As U.S. relations with Russia went into a nosedive, the U.S. is facing a new situation of two nuclear peer rivals who are exploring new roles for more usable weapons. Moreover, Russian nuclear sabre rattling to warn the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the U.S. against escalation in Ukraine has revived nuclear concerns. The old definitions of strategic stability no longer hold.

The Cold War convergence on non-proliferation has run its course; also, nuclear weapons technology is a 75-year-old technology. The U.S. has always had a pragmatic streak shaping its

policy approaches. It turned a blind eye when Israel went nuclear in the 1960s-70s and again, when China helped Pakistan with its nuclear programme in the 1980s. More recently, the nuclear submarine AUKUS deal (Australia, U.S., U.K.) with Australia, a non-nuclear weapon state, is raising concerns in the NPT community.

During the 1970s, South Korea began to actively consider a nuclear weapons programme, spurred by the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. However, France withdrew its offer to supply a reprocessing plant to South Korea under U.S. pressure in 1975-76 and South Korea was persuaded to join the NPT. Recent opinion polls indicate a 70% support for developing a national nuclear deterrent and 40% for reintroducing U.S. nuclear weapons (withdrawn in 1991) on its territory.

Between 1977 to 1988, the U.S. actively subverted Taiwan's nuclear weapons programme as it stepped up a normalisation of ties with China. As a nuclear victim, the Japanese public retains a strong anti-nuclear sentiment but there is a shift, visible in Japan's decision to double its defence spending over next five years.

During the Cold War, the U.S.'s nuclear umbrella tied its European allies closer. Today, domestic compulsions are turning the U.S. inwards, raising questions in the minds of its allies about its 'extended deterrence' guarantees, especially in East Asia. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have the technical capabilities to develop an independent nuclear deterrent within a short time, given political will. It is only a matter of time before U.S. pragmatism reaches the inevitable conclusion that more independent nuclear deterrent capabilities may be the best way to handle the rivalry with China.

The GNO is looking increasingly shaky.

***Rakesh Sood is a former diplomat who served as Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Nuclear Disarmament and Nonproliferation in 2013-14 and is currently Distinguished Fellow at the Council For Strategic and Defence Research***

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## MINT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The United Arab Emirates-India relationship is without question one of the region's most dynamic partnerships. It is one that stands as a global exemplar for the positive benefits that can be achieved through open, consistent and constructive dialogue; visionary leadership; and mutual respect.

Within the constellation of cooperation mechanisms that bind our two countries together, the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) remains fundamental to the continued dynamism of our partnership.

Having entered into force only 18 months ago, the CEPA has catapulted the United Arab Emirates-India relationship to new heights.

Not only has it expanded market access for Emirati and Indian businesses seeking to enter each other's respective markets, it has also significantly decreased tariffs, streamlined customs procedures and introduced a series of robust and transparent regulations that support rules-based competition.

Proof of the CEPA's benefits are clear in the United Arab Emirates' continued evolution as one of India's most important economic partners.

Over the course of the past year, the United Arab Emirates has risen to the position of India's fourth-largest investor, third-largest trading partner and second-largest export destination, further underlining the transformative influence of the CEPA. This collaborative spirit extends to various sectors, mainly the field of aviation, which is key to nurturing and consolidating trade, investment and cultural ties.

Although these developments should be lauded, I would argue that the CEPA has done much more than strengthen our economic bonds.

In fact, the CEPA has served as a launch pad for the development of much deeper and more nuanced relations, and encouraged a level of strategic and political alignment that is unprecedented in the history of the relationship between United Arab Emirates and India.

India's unflinching support throughout the United Arab Emirates' presidency of CoP-28, and that of the UAE of India's G20 presidency, are indicative of the importance that both our countries place upon this partnership. Beyond this, the United Arab Emirates' recent membership of BRICS—Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa—grouping, which was supported by the Indian government, will serve to further catalyse our bilateral ties, and qualitatively expand our mutual desire to promote peace and prosperity at the global level.

Our shared dedication to working closely together will be seen in the coming days, with our two countries building a new level of cooperation upon the foundations laid by the signing of the CEPA. At this year's Vibrant Gujarat Summit, the United Arab Emirates-India CEPA Council (UICC) will be officially unveiled.

This is an exciting development in our bilateral partnership that will provide a dynamic new outlet for the business communities of our two countries to tangibly deepen their already significant

and constructive commercial ties. At its core, the Council seeks to not only grasp the opportunities provided by signing the CEPA, but also to leverage the close and constructive strategic partnership that has developed at an ever-rapid pace over recent years between the United Arab Emirates and Indian governments.

In doing so, the Council will encourage inclusive and diverse partnerships across all levels of our two business communities, with a strong emphasis on critical spheres of business such as startups, women's entrepreneurship, micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), and the services sector.

In seeking to fulfil its objective of supporting Indian and UAE businesses, both small and large, the Council will facilitate a range of events that should bring our two business communities together in a manner that supports trust, dialogue and open engagement—all facets that exemplify the broader United Arab Emirates-India relationship.

Beyond this, the Council will provide our business communities with the resources they need to truly succeed, and fully unlock the benefits and opportunities of the CEPA.

As we look forward to the United Arab Emirates' role as a partner country at this year's Vibrant Gujarat Summit, and with the active participation of a delegation of more than 250, we must celebrate all that has been achieved within the mutual partnership. From supporting free and open trade, promoting the development of resilient and sustainable economies, through to multilateral cooperation, UAE-India ties serve as a model for other countries seeking to build a long-lasting and multidimensional relationship.

The United Arab Emirates is confident that there is much more that we can accomplish by working hand-in-hand with our Indian counterparts.

We remain excited by the prospects and opportunities that our partnership will continue to open up—not only now, but also in the distant future. Through the establishment of the UAE-India CEPA Council, the continued strength of the CEPA and our burgeoning strategic bonds, I welcome our partners and friends to join us on this journey of success.

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# WHY INTERNATIONAL LAW MATTERS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: International Treaties & Agreements, and other important organizations

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Hamza Dahdouh, the eldest son of Al Jazeera's Gaza bureau chief, Wael Dahdouh, was killed by an Israeli missile strike in the western part of Khan Younis, Gaza. Hamza's sister is seen in the photo. | Photo Credit: REUTERS

Israel's bloody war in Gaza has caused unprecedented death and destruction. Images of terrified and screaming children have stained humanity's collective conscience. This war started when the world was still reeling from the shock of Russia's brazenly illegal invasion of Ukraine, which, too, has caused devastation. These two wars have led many to pronounce the death of international law, especially the rule prohibiting the use of force in international relations — the crown jewel of the United Nations Charter codified in Article 2(4). But this is not the first time international law has been declared dead. More than 50 years ago too, Thomas Franck argued that Article 2(4) was dead because it worked on the flawed assumption that the permanent members of the UN Security Council would continue to cooperate after World War-2.

While it is true that the international community has abjectly failed in preventing or stopping these wars, penning an obituary for international law is a grave mistake. True, international law suffers from several structural deficiencies. In fact, critical scholars would trace the origin of the ongoing and past military conflicts in the genealogy of international law laced with imperial and colonial character. It is also a fact that, unlike municipal law, international law lacks a global police force to enforce it successfully, notwithstanding the growth of several international courts and tribunals. Yet, international law matters.

Critics argue that a poor compliance record with international law is sufficient to show that it is inconsequential. Indeed, a central preoccupation of several international lawyers has been on compliance or rule observance of international law to determine its efficacy. However, as Robert Howse and Ruti Teitel argue, the concept of compliance is inadequate to understand whether international law has normative effects. A narrow focus on rule compliance elides international law's normative interaction with different actors, both State and non-state. For instance, national courts often use international law to interpret domestic law to enlarge its content, even if that international law has not been implemented through domestic legislation. Thus, assessing the usefulness of international law requires shifting the benchmarks away from a general theory of compliance. And if compliance alone was the matrix to determine the efficacy of law, a lot of domestic law would also have to be declared useless, given the innumerable violations in municipal legal systems.



Somewhat related to Howse and Teitel's point is Harold Hongju Koh's argument that states are accustomed to complying with international law through a complex transnational legal process. In other words, when a country engages with international law, it triggers a complex process of institutional interactions whereby global norms are debated, interpreted, and internalised by that nation's domestic legal system. In Koh's world view, this transnational legal process that leads countries to obey international law is important because there are certain material benefits or policy goals, such as combating climate change or fighting terrorism, that only international law can help achieve.

However, as Monica Hakimi argues, the significance of international law cannot be limited to material outcomes because the fundamental attribute of any legal system should be its ability to distinguish between sheer public power and legitimate authority. Hakimi argues that international law matters because, through its argumentative practices, it has the potential to hold those who wield public power accountable for their conduct. In December, South Africa moved the International Court of Justice (ICJ) alleging that Israel's conduct in Gaza violates the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. This is a case in point. This accountability need not always be in the form of punishing the decision-makers for non-compliance. However, accountability stems from several actors such as states and private individuals invoking international law to ask questions of those in power and make a case if their actions are illegitimate. While this system of holding those in power accountable is not ideal, it does push countries and actors to explain their conduct. For example, the Israel Defence Forces have tried to explain how their military offensive is consistent with international law. While one may disagree with their explanations, the fact that Israel has attempted to legitimise its actions using the phraseology of international law in the eyes of various constituents who are paying attention is critical.

International law and its attendant structures are not ideal. But the world would be worse off if they weren't there. Israel would not have to explain its conduct to the larger world, and there would be no ICJ to hear a complaint against it. As Nanjala Nyabola writes, even if there is no universal compliance with international law, especially international humanitarian law, there is a universal aspiration towards compliance. International law must be moulded and accentuated to become an instrument that holds the powerful accountable in international relations. International law should be marshalled each time men who are drunk with power wish to act as they please. The world needs more, not less, of fair international law to constrain expansionist, imperial, and illiberal propensities.

***Prabhash Ranjan teaches at the Faculty of Legal Studies, South Asian University. Views are personal.***

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# INDIA-UAE LAUNCH CEPA COUNCIL TO PUSH BUSINESS PARTNERSHIP

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Middle East

[UAE-India Business Summit](#), held under the theme of “Two Nations, One Vision”, took place on the side-lines of the [Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit 2024](#).

The event marked an important milestone in the [UAE-India economic partnership](#), with the unveiling of a range of new initiatives aimed at further bolstering the [strategic bilateral partnership](#).

Among the key outcomes of the Summit, the ceremonial launch of the [UAE-India CEPA Council \(UICC\)](#) took place in the presence of Dr. Thani bin Ahmed Al Zeyoudi, the [UAE](#) Minister of State for Foreign Trade, and Piyush Goyal, the Indian Minister of Commerce and Industry, Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, and Textiles.

Among its objectives, the UICC will encourage close partnerships and tangible cooperation across all levels of the UAE and Indian business communities, with a strong emphasis on critical industries such as start-ups, women entrepreneurs, micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), and the services sectors.

Speaking on the occasion, Al Zeyoudi stated, “The launch of the UAE-India [CEPA Council](#) underlines the strength of our economic partnership. The Council is a testament to the shared vision of creating a dynamic and resilient economic relationship, driving sustainable growth, and prosperity for both our nations.”

Highlighting the significance of economic cooperation between the UAE and India, Goyal said, “The UAE-India Business Summit reflects our shared commitment to economic growth, innovation, and mutual prosperity. This summit serves as a catalyst for the next phase of our economic collaboration and our common journey towards a greater shared growth. The launch of the UICC is a significant step in providing a structured framework to businesses keen to explore bilateral trade opportunities, thus strengthening economic cooperation between the UAE and India.”

Underlining the enduring partnership between the countries, Dr. Abdunnasser Alshaali, the UAE Ambassador to India, highlighted, “The UAE-India Business Summit reinforces the strategic collaboration between our nations, charting a path for new avenues of growth and cooperation. Our shared commitment to sustainable development and inclusive growth is evident in the initiatives unveiled today, and I am confident that this partnership will continue to flourish.”

The Summit also provided the opportunity for participants to take part in a range of focused sessions on trade finance, investment facilitation, and the gems and jewellery trade.

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## UK TO SEND NAVY SHIPS TO INDIAN OCEAN THIS YEAR: DEFENCE SECY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - UK

Amid Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's two-day visit to London, UK Defence Secretary Grant Shapps Wednesday announced plans to send the country's Littoral Response Group to the Indian Ocean Region later this year and the Carrier Strike Group in 2025 to operate and train with Indian forces.

In a statement, the UK said Shapps welcomed Singh to the UK "to agree unprecedented levels of UK-India defence cooperation". The two nations also discussed cooperation in defence from joint exercises to knowledge sharing and instructor exchanges, building on the comprehensive strategic partnership envisaged in the 2030 India-UK roadmap, announced in 2021.

"In the coming years, the UK and India will also embark on more complex exercises between their respective militaries, building up to a landmark joint exercise to be conducted before the end of 2030, supporting shared goals of protecting critical trade routes and upholding the international rules-based system," it said.

It said collaboration with industry is also key in the strategic defence partnership between the UK and India, with the two nations working together on electric propulsion systems that will power our future fleets, and cooperating on the development of complex weapons.

"There is absolutely no question that the world is becoming increasingly contested, so it's vital that we continue to build on our strategic relationships with key partners like India. Together we share the same security challenges and are steadfast on our commitment to maintaining a free and prosperous Indo-Pacific," Shapps said.

Several new joint initiatives were announced amid Singh's visit to the UK and the bilateral talks he held with Shapps Tuesday. These include launching Defence Partnership-India to boost defence collaboration between the two countries.

On Wednesday, Singh spoke with top UK defence industry leaders and CEOs at an event in Trinity House, London. The defence minister welcomed the investment and technology collaboration from the UK, and stated that India is ready with a skilled human resource base and pro-business ecosystem.

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## CHINA'S XI JINPING SAYS SUPPORTS MALDIVES IN PROTECTING 'SOVEREIGNTY': STATE MEDIA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Indian Ocean Island nations

Chinese President [Xi Jinping](#) told Maldivian counterpart [Mohamed Muizzu](#) that he supported the [strategically located](#) archipelago in protecting its " [sovereignty](#)", state media reported, after the two countries signed a number of infrastructure and other agreements.

Muizzu was elected in September as a proxy for a pro-China predecessor jailed on corruption charges, vowing to cultivate "strong ties" with Beijing.

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This week he embarked on his trip to [China](#), his first state visit since taking office, and met with Xi on Wednesday, Beijing's state media reported.

"Under the new circumstances, China-Maldives relations face a historic opportunity to build on past achievements and forge ahead," Xi told Muizzu, according to its state-run Xinhua news agency.

Xi "stressed that China respects and supports the [Maldives](#) in exploring a development path suited to its national conditions", it added, and "supports the Maldives firmly in safeguarding its national sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and national dignity".

Muizzu, in response, thanked Xi for "China's significant role in the Maldives' economic success" and Beijing's role in "infrastructure development of the Maldives", according to a readout from his office.

Muizzu's party was an eager recipient of financial largesse from China's Belt and Road infrastructure programme -- a central pillar of Xi's bid to expand China's clout overseas.

His mentor, former president Abdulla Yameen, borrowed heavily from China for construction projects and spurned India.

The two countries on Wednesday signed several agreements, including on climate, agriculture, and infrastructure, Muizzu's office said.

Primarily known as one of the most expensive holiday destinations in South Asia, with pristine white beaches and secluded resorts, the Maldives has also become a geopolitical hotspot.

Global east-west shipping lanes pass the nation's chain of 1,192 tiny coral islands, stretching around 800 kilometres (500 miles) across the equator.

Muizzu was elected promising to remove a unit of Indian security personnel, deployed to operate three aircraft gifted to the Maldives to patrol its vast maritime territory.

Last month he said he had secured their withdrawal, but did not give any timeframe.

He has denied seeking to redraw the regional balance by bringing in Chinese forces instead.

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# BEST OF BOTH SIDES: ISRAEL IS ONLY DEFENDING ITSELF

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: International Treaties & Agreements, and other important organizations

The definition of genocide was coined in 1944 by a Jewish lawyer, Raphael Lemkin, who promoted the establishment of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948, in the aftermath of the Holocaust committed by the Nazis against the Jewish people during the Second World War. Often seen as the “crime of crimes”, genocide is defined by the special intent to “destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group”.

Nonetheless, as the [International Court of Justice](#) (ICJ) itself has previously made clear, the use of force, even on a significant scale “cannot in itself constitute an act of genocide”. The proliferating misuse of claims of genocide is worrying and threatens to denude the term of its special status. If every war is a genocide, the term becomes meaningless. It will also harm the Genocide Convention should states withdraw from it, to avoid its weaponisation against them.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas and other terrorist groups initiated a war against Israel and perpetrated unprecedented savagery, including the murder, torture, rape and mutilation of over 1,200 Israelis, and the taking hostage of 240 people, including infants, the elderly and the sick. Hamas’s atrocities are in total violation of international humanitarian law, as is its brutal treatment of the hostages who are still being tortured.

In accordance with its right and obligation to defend itself and its citizens, Israel had to respond forcefully, seeking to secure the release of its infants, children, women, and men being held as hostages in Gaza, and to deny Hamas and other armed groups in Gaza the capacity to continue attacking its citizens and territory as they have explicitly vowed to do “again and again and again”.

Israel can hardly be blamed for using military force available to it to legitimately defend its citizens from further attacks in accordance with the laws of war. Israel has been consistent in defining that the IDF is targeting terror operatives and military infrastructure and not Palestinian civilians.

The intense fighting and scope of the civilian damage in Gaza is in large part the outcome of Hamas’ strategy to embed its combatants within the civilian population of Gaza, including in mosques, hospitals, schools, and UN facilities, which constitute obvious war crimes. Hamas uses civilians as human shields and strives for a high casualty count to galvanise public opinion against Israel.

Hamas had prepared to fight in a dense urban landscape for over a decade; in particular by using an unparalleled tunnel network deployed beneath civilian areas in which Israeli forces are compelled to fight an asymmetric war.

On December 29, 2023, South Africa filed an application with the International Court of Justice instituting proceedings against Israel, alleging that Israel is committing genocide. The misuse of the Genocide Convention against Israel is outrageous.

South Africa bases its case on two claims, neither of which stands up to scrutiny. The first is the

scale of civilian death and destruction in Gaza. There is no doubt that the war in Gaza has been devastating for the civilian population. However, this does not indicate that genocide has taken place.

The second are various statements by Israeli officials or former officials, which they claim prove the necessary special intent of committing genocide. The various quotes used to suggest Israel has the intention of committing genocide are not convincing. They do not reflect Israel's actions in practice, and many were said in the emotional aftermath of the mass slaughter and horrific atrocities committed on October 7, an event that would shake any civilised country to the core. It would have been better had they not been said, but they are a far cry from any reasonable proof of intent. Moreover, they are a very selective collection of cherry-picked statements, ignoring numerous statements by Israel's top political and military leaders clarifying its actual and official policies of minimising harm to civilians and ensuring humanitarian aid.

However, the true evidence of any lack of intent to commit genocide is Israel's unwavering and continuous efforts to facilitate humanitarian aid (over 7,200 trucks since the beginning of the war) and the robust measures to minimise civilian casualties, including warnings of attacks and precautionary measures which often increased the risk to its own forces.

Indeed, the US's National Security Council spokesperson stated that Israel "has published online maps of places where people can go or not to go. That's basically telegraphing your punches, and there's very few modern militaries in the world that would do that. I don't know that we would do that." This is hardly genocidal intent.

With the Holocaust, where 6 million Jews were exterminated solely based on their religion, set as a backdrop and Israel's attachment to the values of sanctifying life, the accusation of genocide is especially painful. It is a modern case of the ancient racist habit of blaming the Jews for the very crimes committed against them.

**The writer is Israel's ambassador to India**

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## INDIA MALDIVES ROW: DEROGATORY REMARKS AGAINST PM MODI: 3 MALDIVES MINISTERS SUSPENDED INDEFINITELY WITH PAY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Following [derogatory remarks](#) against Prime Minister Narendra Modi, [Maldives](#) Deputy Youth Ministers Mariyam Shiuna, Mahzoom Majid and Malsha Shareef have been suspended indefinitely, but all three will continue to receive their salaries, the President's Office has said, Maldives local media Adhadhu reported.

Providing further information about the suspensions, Maldives President's Office Communications Minister Ibrahim Khaleel told Adhadhu that the three deputy ministers were suspended indefinitely as a measure taken to look into the matter.

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"They will be paid under the normal process in the past where ministers and deputies were paid when they were suspended. They were suspended from going to work and performing the duties of their posts," Khaleel said, as per Adhadhu.

Asked about social media posts made by the deputy ministers, Khaleel said the President's Office did not have any comment.

A massive row was triggered between India and the Maldives after the deputy minister, along with other cabinet members and government officials, made disparaging references to [PM Modi](#)'s Lakshadweep visit.

Indians, including cricketers and film celebrities, have since come out in open support in promoting local beach destinations and other tourist spots.

The [Maldives government](#) has, however, distanced itself from the remarks made by its ministers. Maldivian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Moosa Zameer, said that these remarks against foreign leaders are "unacceptable" and do not reflect the official position of the Maldives government.

The Maldives Association of Tourism Industry (MATI) has strongly condemned derogatory remarks made by officials in the tourism-dependent country against Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the people of India.

Terming India as one of the closest neighbours and allies of the Maldives, MATI noted that India has always been a first responder to various crises throughout the history of the island country.

"India is one of our closest neighbours and allies. India has always been a first responder to various crises throughout our history and we are immensely grateful to the close relationship that the government as well as the people of India have maintained with us," MATI said in a statement.

It stressed that India has been a "consistent and significant contributor to the tourism industry of the Maldives." It stated that India has "greatly assisted" Maldives recovery efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic after the borders were reopened.

In a press release, MATI stated, "Since then, India has continued to remain as one of the top markets for the Maldives."

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## "BHARAT NOW A STRATEGIC POWER... NO LONGER CAN ANYONE SHOW US RED EYE AND GET AWAY WITH IT": RAJNATH SINGH IN LONDON

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Indian Diaspora

Citing a recent article published in the Chinese state-controlled Global Times, hailing India's growth story and its rising global stature and heft, Union Defence Minister [Rajnath Singh](#) on Wednesday said Beijing's perspective has altered drastically with the emergence of New Delhi as a '[strategic power](#)'.

"A columnist for the Global Times, which, in a way, is a mouthpiece for China, published an article with the headline 'What I see about [Bharat](#) narrative in India'. This article is a ringing affirmation of the changing Chinese perspective on India. It seems the Chinese government has come to accept that our economic and [foreign policies](#), as well as our changing strategic interests, have helped Bharat emerge as a key global [economic player](#) and a strategic power. We don't see anyone as our enemy but the world is aware that the relationship between India and [China](#) is currently under strain. However, we wish to cultivate good ties with all our neighbours and countries across the globe," Singh said in [London](#) on Wednesday.

Addressing community reception at the India House in London, the Raksha Mantri noted that the columnist, the Global Times piece, asserted that the Chinese government now accepts that India cannot be ignored at the global level.

"The writer also noted that the Chinese government now accepts that whether you like Bharat or not, our image and rising global standing can longer be ignored. Previously, when [trade imbalances](#) were discussed, India would count on Beijing to minimise trade imbalances between the two countries. However, that trend is no longer in vogue," the Defence Minister added.

Expanding on the country's rising global standing, the Defence Minister said, "I believe that the courage shown by our jawans during the standoff with Chinese troops at Galwan (Valley in Arunachal Pradesh) helped alter Beijing's perspective on Bharat. We are no more a weak country in the eyes of the world. We are a rising global power. *Ab aisa nhi hai ki Bharat ko ankh dikha ke jo chahe so nikal jaye* (No longer can anyone show us a red eye and get away with it).

Earlier this month, the Global Times applauded India's economic policies and diplomatic achievements over the past four years under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in a column titled 'Bharat Narrative'.

It stated that New Delhi's strategic thinking in "foreign policy has evolved, moving towards a great power strategy."

The opinion piece, written by Zhang Jiadong, the director of the Centre for South Asian Studies at Fudan University, Shanghai, also underlined India's 'remarkable achievements' across diverse fields and sectors over the past four years.

It also acknowledged India's robust economic growth, improvements in urban governance, and a shift in attitude towards international relations, notably with China.

"For example, when discussing the trade imbalance between China and India, Indian

representatives earlier used to primarily focus on China's measures to reduce the trade imbalance. But now they are placing more emphasis on India's export potential," Jiadong wrote.

The article also commended India's proactive approach to fostering a 'Bharat narrative' and emphasised the nation's strategic confidence.

The author further stated that with its rapid economic and social development, India has become more strategically confident and proactive in creating and developing a 'Bharat narrative'.

"In the political and cultural spheres, India has moved from emphasising its democratic consensus with the West to highlighting the 'Indian feature' of democratic politics. Currently, there is even more emphasis on the Indian origins of democratic politics," he added.

The rare acknowledgement of India's advancements and PM Modi's strategic vision by the Global Times indicated the growing recognition of New Delhi's burgeoning global influence and the implications of its assertive posture on the international landscape.

Earlier, on Wednesday, Singh called on UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in London.

Singh arrived in the UK on Monday night. The ongoing visit is the first by a sitting Indian Defence minister to Great Britain in 23 years.

Singh is being accompanied by a high-level Ministry of Defence delegation, comprising senior officials from the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), Service Headquarters, the Department of Defence, and the Department of Defence Production.

**END**

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## INDIA-MALDIVES ROW FRAMES THE NEED FOR INDIA'S LONG NEGLECTED MARINE DOCTRINE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The incipient tensions between India and its tiny neighbour, Maldives, simmering for over a decade, finally came to a head when three junior ministers of the island nation's government made crude and disparaging remarks on social media about Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the Lakshadweep islands. Once New Delhi conveyed its displeasure over this gross impropriety, the Maldivian government distanced itself from the remarks, and President Mohamed Muizzu "suspended" the errant ministers before departing for his maiden visit to Beijing.

While it may be tempting to dismiss this contretemps as a "storm in a teacup," there are a few dimensions to this episode, with implications that go beyond the transgressions of juvenile politicians. They could serve as lessons for the future.

First, the strategic dimension. The Maldives archipelago — consisting of 27 coral atolls dispersed north-to-south over 900 km of the southern Indian Ocean, with an exclusive economic zone of nearly a million square km — is an important element in India's maritime security matrix. While the Indian Navy (IN) has taken cognisance of this in formulating its doctrine and deployments, our decision-makers have continued to suffer from a "continental fixation", and in the absence of a national security strategy, our maritime initiatives have remained random and sporadic.

As far back as 1945, India's "[oracle](#) of maritime wisdom," K M Panikkar had pronounced that "an exclusively land-based defence policy for India will, in future, be nothing short of blindness... India's freedom will hardly be worth a day's purchase if Indian interests in the Indian Ocean are not defended." He had accurately predicted: "That China intends to embark on a policy of large-scale naval expansion is clear enough... with her bases extending as far south as Hainan, China will be in an advantageous position..." It also bears recalling that the British had maintained a Royal Air Force base on Maldives' Gan Island since 1942, which they vacated with reluctance only in 1976 and then moved 200 miles south to their Indian Ocean territory of Diego Garcia.

Second, our diplomatic approach to Maldives (and perhaps other neighbours) needs scrutiny. Politics in Muslim-majority Maldives has been influenced, as much by hyper-nationalism and religious fervour, as by the India-China rivalry. Alarms should have rung in the MEA as early as 2011 when the relationship actually started fraying. A blunt signal was the peremptory cancellation of a contract to develop Male's international airport awarded to Indian conglomerate GMR, driven ostensibly by Opposition charges of "compromise of national sovereignty". But some questions remain unanswered: Did New [Delhi](#) receive a warning of emerging hostility from its Male representatives? If so, was anything done to stem the slide in relations?

While China's politico-economic seduction, coupled with Pakistan's religious incitement — using the "Islamic card" — has no doubt played an important role in alienating Maldives, there is room for introspection on India's part too. Given its population of just half a million, Maldives is Asia's smallest country and hyper-sensitivity to "big-brotherly" attitudes is to be expected. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Indian diplomats often arouse resentment, especially in neighbourhood capitals, by their condescending attitudes, over-emphasis on India's cultural dominance and projecting a "viceroy's" rather than envoy's image. When coupled with India's ongoing domestic

churn, wherein communal “hate speeches” are often seen going unchecked, the overall picture for neighbours could not be an attractive one.

Third, as India and China vie for influence in the Indo-Pacific, we need to shift exclusive focus from border disputes to the larger geopolitical competition. In the Indian Ocean Region China suffers from the “tyranny of distance.” For example, Male is about 6,000 km from the nearest Chinese port of Hainan and only 700 km from Kochi. To reach Male a ship, at 15 knots, would take just a day and a half from Kochi and more than 10 days from Hainan.

The distinct advantages of having a friendly neighbour next-door should have become obvious to Maldivians during the 1988 abortive “coup d’etat”, the 2004 tsunami, and the 2014 drinking-water crisis, when the Indian Navy was the “first responder” in each case. One is confident that India’s good-neighbourly attitude will endure, regardless of transient diplomatic hiccups.

However, China being the world’s largest trading nation, has its own compulsions. Its economy and industry, being overwhelmingly dependent on the uninterrupted passage of seaborne trade, have rendered the country’s Indian Ocean sea lanes akin to a “jugular vein,” to be protected at all costs. It is to this end that Beijing has developed potential maritime footholds in the Indian Ocean Region, like Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Gwadar in Pakistan, and leased a military/naval base in Djibouti. Herein lies the imperative of checkmating India to enlist Maldives as an IOR ally.

As a final corollary to the Maldives episode, one would urge better exploitation of the potential of maritime diplomacy – not as a substitute, but as a vital instrument of conventional diplomacy. The “diplomatic role” is the second of four roles assigned by the Maritime Doctrine to the Indian Navy, its larger purpose being, “to favourably shape the maritime environment in furtherance of national interests, in consonance with the foreign policy and national security objectives.”

For decades, the Indian Navy would receive urgent requests from maritime neighbours, for training, naval presence, advisers and hardware. Very often, we had to disappoint them, due to bureaucratic impediments, and lack of funding. Finally, in 2005-06, the Naval HQ, on its own, created an organisation headed by a two-star admiral devoted to foreign cooperation. Patrol boats, aircraft and helicopters, withdrawn from the navy’s own inventory, were transferred to Sri Lanka, Maldives, Myanmar and Maldives. This maritime diplomacy has had long-lasting and salutary consequences.

Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) had, in 2015, coined the slogan, “security and growth for all in the region,” whose acronym SAGAR has become a foreign-policy catchphrase, representing broad regional maritime cooperation. However, there is no document amplifying the vision underpinning SAGAR. Perhaps, it is time to flesh out SAGAR as a new and comprehensive maritime doctrine that will lend direction and purpose to regional diplomacy — both maritime and conventional.

**The writer is a retired chief of naval staff**

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## BEST OF BOTH SIDES: ISRAEL IS ONLY DEFENDING ITSELF

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: International Treaties & Agreements, and other important organizations

Starting Thursday, January 11, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) will hold a two-day hearing to decide whether it will order “provisional measures” (the equivalent of seeking urgent interim relief in pending cases in Indian courts) in a case South Africa has filed against Israel for violating its obligations under the Genocide Convention in relation to Palestinians in Gaza. The ICJ is the principal judicial organ of the United Nations that settles legal disputes between states. It is not a criminal court and it does not try individuals. That is the role of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Both courts are in The Hague.

The ICJ cannot automatically decide all cases involving breaches of international law. It can only decide cases that are brought before it by states that consent to its jurisdiction. This consent can be expressed in different ways. In this case, the consent stems from an article in the Genocide Convention that states that disputes between parties relating to the interpretation, application or fulfilment of the Convention, including disputes relating to the responsibility of a state for genocide, shall be submitted to the ICJ at the request of any of the parties to the dispute. Both South Africa and Israel are parties to the Convention.

The Genocide Convention defines genocide as the following five acts: killing members of a group; causing serious bodily or mental harm; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about their physical destruction; imposing measures intended to prevent births within a group and forcibly transferring children to another group “with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” In other words, it contains two separate elements: The physical acts and the specific intent “to destroy, in whole or in part” a specific group. The need to demonstrate this specific intent to destroy is what distinguishes genocide from war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. The commission of the acts is not enough. Also, the commission of war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity do not provide an avenue for states to approach the ICJ because it does not have automatic jurisdiction over those crimes.

South Africa alleges that Israel has committed several of these acts and that the evidence of Israeli state officials’ specific intent (*dolus specialis*) to commit and persist in committing genocidal acts or to fail to prevent them has been significant and overt since October 2023. This, when combined with the level of killing, maiming, displacement and destruction on the ground, together with the siege — “evidence an unfolding and continuing genocide.” South Africa has set out nine pages of statements by senior Israeli officials, including its president, prime minister and ministers, to show the existence of specific intent. Additionally, and importantly, South Africa states that Israel has failed to prevent genocide and to prosecute the direct and public incitement to genocide and that it “has engaged in, is engaging in and risks further engaging in genocidal acts against the Palestinian people in Gaza”.

South Africa argues that urgent relief is necessary to protect against further, severe and irreparable harm to the rights of the Palestinian people which continue to be violated, and to prevent any aggravation or extension of the dispute. Accordingly, it has asked the Court to order Israel to immediately suspend all military operations in Gaza; abide by its obligations under the Convention to prevent genocide; prevent expulsion and forced displacement; the deprivation of access to adequate food and water; access to humanitarian assistance; medical supplies and

assistance; and the destruction of Palestinian life in Gaza. It also asks that Israel be directed to prevent the destruction of evidence, including by not denying access to fact-finding missions; to submit reports on measures taken to implement the Court's order and finally, refrain from acts which might aggravate the dispute.

South Africa's case appears to meet the threshold for the Court to make a provisional measures order. (The Court must be satisfied it has prima facie jurisdiction; there is a "plausible" link between the rights asserted by South Africa and the measures it requests; a risk of irreparable harm and urgency). That order will come within weeks and will have legal significance for all states that are parties to the Genocide Convention because it will create legally binding obligations.

This is not the first case the Court will hear under the Genocide Convention. In 2022, [Ukraine](#) filed a case against Russia, and in 2019, the Gambia filed a case against Myanmar with respect to the Rohingya people. That was the first time a state invoked the Court's jurisdiction to seek redress for genocidal acts committed against the citizens of another state. The Court agreed that the Gambia had standing to bring the case. Like the Gambia, South Africa basis its jurisdiction under obligations erga omnes partes, namely that as a party to the Convention, it can bring this case because of its community interest in preventing genocide.

**The writer is an international lawyer who represented Croatia in a case against Serbia, under the Genocide Convention, before the ICJ**

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## RAKSHA MANTRI CALLS ON UK PRIME MINISTER IN LONDON

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - UK

Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh called on the Prime Minister of United Kingdom Mr Rishi Sunak at 10 Downing Street, London on January 10, 2024. The meeting was warm and cordial. The Raksha Mantri highlighted that both nations have made significant strides in moulding and recrafting the historic ties into a modern, multifaceted and mutually beneficial partnership, under the direction of the leaders of both the countries.

Shri Rajnath Singh recalled the recent enhancement in bilateral defence engagement, spanning joint exercises, training, capability building, increased interoperability, military-to-military ties especially in the maritime domain. He emphasised the ongoing efforts to enhance defence industrial cooperation, including in the technology domain. He briefed Mr Rishi Sunak about his positive interactions with the UK defence industry and the new positive energy in the bilateral defence relationship.

The Raksha Mantri stated that the UK and other like-minded countries should work with India for strengthening a peaceful and stable global rules-based order, including through partnering India in its inexorable rise, which can be strengthened, reinforced and speeded up with friendly collaboration.

Shri Rajnath Singh further stated that Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi is leading the quest of 1.4 billion Indians towards the national objective of becoming a developed country by mid-21<sup>st</sup> century. Prime Minister Modi's efforts have borne remarkable fruits, growth is sustainably on the upswing, poverty has been reduced drastically, and a business friendly architecture has been put in place. At the international level, the Government of India is ready to partner with friends like the UK to strengthen the rule-based world order.

Prime Minister Sunak fully agreed with the Raksha Mantri on the need for UK and India to work in the domains of trade, defence and technology. In particular, he expressed hope that the ongoing Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations could be brought to a successful conclusion soon. He also underlined his keenness, and that of his Government, to strengthen the defence and security pillar of the bilateral relationship, including through Government backing for stronger business and technology partnerships with Indian counterpart entities.

Shri Rajnath Singh gifted a Ram Darbar statue to the UK PM during the meeting, which was also attended by UK NSA Sir Tim Barrow.

The Raksha Mantri also met with the UK's Foreign Minister Lord David Cameron at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. The Ministers appreciated the new momentum and direction of the India-UK partnership, symbolised by intense engagements at various levels.

Shri Rajnath Singh outlined his goal of integrating defence industries of both countries including through supply chain integration to build resilience. He also emphasised the importance of bilateral start-up level interaction, and identification and discussion of joint projects which India and UK could implement together.

Foreign Secretary Cameron reiterated the UK government's desire to collaborate with India in the defence areas, particularly in the field of defence industrial collaboration, as one of the

means by which the UK hopes to strengthen the support for a rule-based international order.

Later, the Raksha Mantri interacted with the Indian community at India House, London. Over 160 prominent persons of Indian origin attended the interaction. A number of Indian military ex-servicemen, including few family members of World War II veterans were also present.

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## **ABB/Savvy**

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# ISRAEL TO FACE GAZA GENOCIDE CHARGES AT WORLD COURT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: UNO and its various Agencies

Israel prepared to defend itself on Thursday at the top U.N. court against accusations of genocide in [Gaza](#), as Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) publicly rebuffed for the first time calls by some right-wing ministers to permanently occupy the enclave.

As Israel's war in Gaza continued to rage, the International Court of Justice in The Hague, also known as the World Court, was to hold hearings on Thursday and Friday in a case brought by South Africa in December claiming Israel's war against Hamas militants in Gaza violates the 1948 Genocide Convention.

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Israeli government spokesperson Eylon Levy said on Wednesday: "Tomorrow, the State of Israel will appear before the International Court of Justice to dispel South Africa's absurd blood libel, as Pretoria gives political and legal cover to the Hamas Rapist Regime."

The hearings will deal exclusively with South Africa's request for emergency measures ordering Israel to suspend its military actions in Gaza while the court hears the merits of the case - a process which could take years. Colombia and Brazil expressed their support of South Africa late Wednesday.

Israel launched its offensive after Hamas fighters carried out an Oct. 7 cross-border rampage in which Israel says 1,200 people were killed and 240 abducted.

Since then, Israeli forces have laid much of Gaza to waste, and nearly all its 2.3 million people have been driven from their homes at least once, causing a humanitarian catastrophe. More than 23,000 Palestinians have been killed.

On the eve of the hearings, Netanyahu for the first time publicly stated opposition to calls from right-wing members of his government, including Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, for Palestinians to leave Gaza voluntarily, making way for Israelis to settle there.

While the stance has been Israel's official policy, Netanyahu's prior comments on permanent occupation of Gaza have been inconsistent and at times opaque.

"I want to make a few points absolutely clear: Israel has no intention of permanently occupying Gaza or displacing its civilian population," Netanyahu said on social media platform X.

Potentially timing his comments ahead of the ICJ hearings, he added: "Israel is fighting Hamas terrorists, not the Palestinian population, and we are doing so in full compliance with international law."

Jordan and Egypt warned on Wednesday against any Israeli reoccupation of the Gaza Strip and appealed for uprooted residents to be allowed to return to their homes as Jordan's King Abdullah and Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi met.

## U.N. DEMANDS HOUTHIS STOP SHIP ATTACKS

On the ground in Gaza, the fighting appeared as intense as ever. Israeli strikes in southern and central Gaza intensified on Wednesday despite a pledge by Israel that it would pull out some troops and shift to a more targeted campaign, and pleading from its ally Washington to reduce civilian casualties.

Israel's chief military spokesperson Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari said in a televised briefing late on Wednesday that the military was focusing its operations on Khan Younis and the refugee camps in the centre of the strip.

In the latest sign of the three-month-old war spreading, U.S. and British warships in the Red Sea fended off the biggest attack yet from Yemen's Houthi movement, which says it is acting to support Gaza. Washington and London said they shot down 21 drones and missiles aimed at shipping lanes. No one was hurt.

The U.N. Security Council late Wednesday approved a resolution demanding the Houthis immediately cease the shipping attacks.

Israel had said this week it was planning to begin drawing down troops, at least from the northern part of Gaza, after weeks of U.S. pressure to scale down its operations and shift to what Washington says should be a more targeted campaign.

The World Health Organization cancelled a planned medical aid mission to Gaza due to security concerns, the sixth such cancellation in two weeks.

The Palestinian Red Crescent said four of its staffers were killed when their ambulance was hit by an Israeli strike on the main road near Deir al-Balah, in the central Gaza Strip. Two passengers in the ambulance were wounded and later died.

Palestinian health officials at Abu Youssef An-Najar Hospital in Rafah, said four Palestinian children were killed in an Israeli air strike on a house in Rafah.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, on his fourth trip to the region since the war began, went to Ramallah in the Israeli occupied West Bank on Wednesday and met Palestinian leaders, including Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

The State Department said Blinken expressed support for a Palestinian state and discussed efforts to protect and aid civilians in Gaza. The Palestinian Authority said Abbas told Blinken no Palestinians should be displaced from Gaza or the West Bank.

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# MALDIVES, CHINA SIGN 20 AGREEMENTS AFTER MUIZZU-XI MEETING AMID DIPLOMATIC ROW WITH INDIA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Indian Ocean Island nations

Chinese President [Xi Jinping](#) on Wednesday held talks with his Maldivian counterpart Mohamed Muizzu following which the two countries signed 20 key agreements, including one on tourism cooperation, and elevated their bilateral ties to a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership. The two heads of state announced the elevation of bilateral ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership, state-run Xinhua news agency reported.

"20 key agreements were signed today between the Government of the Maldives and the Government of [China](#) this afternoon and both the Presidents witnessed the signing ceremony," Maldivian President's office said in a post on X.

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The agreements signed included one tourism cooperation, disaster risk reduction, blue economy, strengthening investment in the digital economy and the Belt and Road Initiative. China will also provide grant assistance to the Maldives, but the amount was not disclosed.

Muizzu and his wife Sajida Mohammad were given a ceremonial red carpet welcome at the Great Hall of People. President Xi and his wife Peng Liyuan later hosted a state banquet in their honour.

Muizzu's state visit to China is taking place amid a diplomatic row with India over derogatory remarks by his ministers against Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) and the release of a report by EU Election Observation Mission of Maldives that said the ruling coalition of Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) and the People's National Congress (PNC) deployed anti-India sentiments and attempted to spread disinformation in the 2023 presidential elections in which Muizzu won.

Muizzu, who is regarded as a pro-China leader, is visiting China amid the row with India after some Maldivian ministers posted derogatory remarks against Prime Minister Modi leading to a spate of cancellations of reservations by Indian tourists, who constitute the largest number of visitors to the tourism-dependent island nation.

Besides talks with Xi, Muizzu is expected to meet Chinese [Premier](#) Li Qiang and other senior officials before his return to Male on January 12.

Muizzu reached Beijing last night after staying in the Chinese city of Fujian for two days.

In his address to the Maldives Business Forum in Fujian Province on Tuesday, Muizzu appealed to China to "intensify" efforts to send more tourists to his country.

"China was our (Maldives') number one market (for tourism) pre-Covid, and it is my request that we intensify efforts for China to regain this position," he said.

His appeal for more Chinese tourists came amid a diplomatic row with India.

Muizzu's government suspended three deputy ministers for their derogatory posts on social

media.

Also, the Maldives Association of Tourism Industry (MATI) strongly condemned the derogatory comments.

According to data released by the Maldives Tourism Ministry earlier, India has remained the largest tourist market for the country in 2023.

The highest number of visitors to the Maldives were from India, with 209,198 arrivals, followed by Russia in second place with 209,146 arrivals, and China in third place with 187,118 arrivals.

Muizzu also said that China remains "one of our closest allies and development partners."

He praised the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects launched by President Xi in 2014, saying that they "delivered the most significant infrastructure projects witnessed in Maldivian history", according to his speech.

He also said that his administration is committed to the quick implementation of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) signed with China, describing it as a symbol of the close commercial ties between the two countries.

Maldives and China signed the FTA in December 2014 during the pro-China President Abdulla Yameen administration. However, his successor President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's administration did not implement the agreement, according to Maldives media reports.

He said the FTA is a symbol of the close commercial ties between the two countries.

"The FTA's aim to boost bilateral trade and investments, especially increasing our export of fish products to China is a key priority for us through the FTA," he said.

China-Maldives bilateral trade in 2022 totalled to USD 451.29 million of which China's exports constituted USD 451.29 million against USD 60,000 of exports from Maldives.

Muizzu also sought investments from Chinese companies for 11 projects at the Maldives Investment Forum.

**END**

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# A CHANGE FOR THE WORSE: ON THE RAPID DECLINE IN INDIA-MALDIVES TIES

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Indian Ocean Island nations

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January 11, 2024 12:20 am | Updated 10:27 am IST

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The rapid decline in ties between India and the Maldives, just a month after [Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with the newly elected Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu](#), should set alarm bells ringing. The trigger came from [tweets by three Maldivian Ministers](#), attacking Mr. Modi for promoting the Lakshadweep islands during [his recent sojourn there](#) at a perceived cost to the Maldives and for his close ties with Israel; the Ministers also made derogatory remarks about Indians. The tweets have been deleted, the Ministers suspended, and the Maldivian government has distanced itself from them, but the damage has been done. The respective Ambassadors were summoned. Hurt Indians have crowded [social media sites calling for an economic “boycott” of the Maldives](#) — Indian tourists make up the most arrivals post-COVID-19. However, the underlying reasons run deeper, and could have a broader impact on India-Maldives relations and the neighbourhood, accruing to the change in government in Male. Mr. Muizzu rode to power on the back of the PPM’s “India Out” campaign. Despite its disappointment with the win of ‘anti-Indian forces’, given the warm relationship it shared with his predecessor Ibrahim Solih, the Modi government sent a Minister to his swearing in, and there was a Modi-Muizzu meet at the COP28. However, Mr. Muizzu chose Turkey as his first bilateral destination, and is now [visiting China](#) — becoming the first President not to make India his first priority. Even President Yameen, who began the “India Out” movement and cozied up to Beijing, visited Delhi first in 2014. Mr. Muizzu has continued to press India on the withdrawal of its military personnel, even though India has clarified their role.

With the calls for boycotts and rising hypernationalistic rhetoric, Delhi and Male need to take a step back and reassess their responses. Mr. Muizzu can ill-afford to antagonise India, given its proximity, economic might and historical position as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean, something Maldives has relied on. India too must see the futility of muscling in a much smaller neighbour, however egregious the provocation. The last few years of ties between the Solih government and Delhi show the benefits of a stronger relationship: India’s infrastructure forays and development projects in the islands, an intense strategic partnership, support during the COVID-19 pandemic, and cooperation on the international stage. For India, in a region that sees several elections this year, it is paramount to ensure that domestic political changes in the neighbourhood do not change the basic structure of bilateral ties, or affect regional stability.

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# A BANGLADESH 'ONE-PARTY STATE' AND INDIA'S OPTIONS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Bangladesh

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January 12, 2024 12:08 am | Updated 01:35 am IST

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Sheikh Hasina gestures during a meeting with foreign observers and journalists at the Prime Minister's residence in Dhaka on January 8, 2024. | Photo Credit: Reuters

India has been joined by China and Russia in congratulating [Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina](#) on her [return to power](#) in yet another election without the participation of the principal opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party-Jamaat-e-Islami coalition. Unlike China and Russia, India is a functional democracy and will have to live with allegations of United States-type double standards of 'democracy at home and support for autocracies abroad' to suit strategic interests.

With [Ms. Hasina back in power for a record fifth time](#) (fourth in a row), India stands assured of continuity in the excellent bilateral relationship it has with Bangladesh, as Ms. Hasina has certainly addressed India's security and connectivity concerns unlike any other foreign leader. But she cannot turn Bangladesh into a one-party state and count on Indian support as she often tends to.

The world's most populous democracy having to back a friendly government sustained by three highly controversial elections sits uneasy on India's image as a global big player (if not big power). This also explains why anti-Indian sentiments are at an all-time high in Bangladesh — India's support for an increasingly autocratic regime sustained by rigged and non-participatory elections has not gone down well, especially with the youth (60% of the population in Bangladesh is below 25 years) who resent the massive corruption through large-scale bank defaults and extensive money laundering, the mismanagement of economy and the abnormal price rise that tainted the Hasina government in its third term after a decade of substantial economic growth.

**Editorial | [Predictably comfortable: On Sheikh Hasina's electoral win in Bangladesh](#)**

That India's strategic partner, the United States, and its European and Asian allies are intensely critical of the Bangladesh elections makes it doubly difficult for India to defend elections where large-scale false voting under the active watch of the uniformed forces has been reported to boost voter turnout statistics or to ensure the defeat of candidates unacceptable to Ms. Hasina's close circles.

The Bangladesh Parliament now resembles an extended national Council of the ruling Awami

League, with 61 independents from the party (allowed to contest to boost participation) emerging as the main 'Opposition bloc' to the League's 223 elected Member of Parliament in a 300-member House.

Analysts see this election as “a firm step towards a one-party police state”. But Ms. Hasina's adviser, Salman F. Rahman, sought to justify the absence of Opposition by referring to the Indian situation. “The Indian parliament does not have an Opposition leader because the Congress failed to get the mandatory ten percent seats needed to get that. Should we call India a one-party state?” Mr. Rahman was quoted as saying.

Mr. Rahman is at the heart of many unseemly controversies faced by the Awami League such as stock market scams, large-scale money laundering and bank defaults, and now electoral frauds such as the use of under-age children caught on camera voting by turn several times over. His Bangladesh Export Import Company Limited (Beximco) conglomerate is synonymous with crony capitalism eating into the vitals of a vibrant economy and his political influence on Ms. Hasina has earned him the adage of being the de facto Prime Minister.

He is also spearheading the Awami League's new Islamist agenda that operates at the political and social levels — electoral understanding with Islamist groups such as the Hefazat-e-Islam and a push for the government's plans to create 560 model mosque cum islamic cultural centres which could supplant the vibrant syncretic and secular Bengali linguistic cultural space that paved the way for Independence and sustained Bangladesh's largely secular identity .

**[Also read | India is a 'great friend' of Bangladesh, says PM Sheikh Hasina after her election victory](#)**

Immediately after securing her fourth consecutive term in office, Ms. Hasina described India as a “trusted friend” and recalled her seven years of personal uncertainties after the 1975 military coup that left almost her entire family dead. But most pro-Indian elements in the Awami League have been eliminated in three stages — nominations, poll process and then during the formation of the cabinet and parliament committees. So, India's only hope of having some actual influence is to push Ms. Hasina hard to induct some pro-Indian leaders in the cabinet.

India battling with its western allies over Bangladesh will be at considerable diplomatic cost at a time when New Delhi needs them to keep China in check. The loss of influence, both at the decision-making and popular levels, in Bangladesh is unacceptable and a double-whammy, more so because it comes in the wake of India's loss of influence in almost the entire neighbourhood, from Nepal to the Maldives, and calls into question Prime Minister Narendra Modi's much trumpeted “Neighbourhood First” policy.

A very prominent Indian business house and its political patrons may feel happy over the lucrative power purchase agreement signed by the Hasina government, but it is poor compensation for the actual loss of influence.

It is time India stops putting all its eggs in the Awami League basket and takes a close look at genuinely secular platforms in the gender, minority, labour and youth spaces where there could be potential for a party like India's Aam Aadmi Party to emerge. This could also help India avoid a dilemma that it faced in 2001 when the A.B. Vajpayee government tried to establish good relations with the BNP-Jamaat coalition government (Ms. Hasina blamed India's Research and Analysis Wing for her defeat) only to regret the spurt in Islamist radicalism spilling over into Indian territory.

Subir Bhaumik is a former BBC and Reuters correspondent, a former fellow at Oxford and

Frankfurt universities and the author of five books on India's Northeast and Bangladesh

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# CHINA MEDIA WARNS AGAINST TAKING CHINA'S INDIAN OCEAN RESEARCH AS THREATS

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The aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson transits the Indian Ocean April 15, 2017. | Photo Credit: Reuters

Chinese state media warned on Friday that a report by a prominent U.S. think tank on the military uses of Chinese scientific research across the Indian Ocean gave "ammunition" to countries bent on concocting threats from China.

The report this week by the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) "comes at a time when some countries need to manufacture a 'China threat' narrative in the Indian Ocean region and provides them with ammunition", the state-controlled tabloid Global Times said in an editorial.

"The timing of this report is delicate," given that the Maldives and China are upgrading ties after the election of President Mohamed Muizzu, while Sri Lanka recently suspended foreign research vessels, including from China, from visiting its ports.

The CSIS study traced data over four years of deployments by nominally Chinese civilian oceanographic and energy research ships, concluding that the work would in part serve the Chinese navy's needs to project power into the region.

Detailed knowledge of ocean depths, currents and temperature was vital to China's growing submarine operations, the study said.

"While scientific and commercial benefits may accrue from Chinese oceanographic research, these activities may also prove crucial for the (People's Liberation Army) in expanding its operational reach and capabilities in the Indian Ocean," it said.

"This expansion poses a significant challenge to key regional players like India, as well as to the United States and its allies."

Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said China's marine scientific research fully complied with the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea.

"We hope that the relevant parties will take an objective view of China's marine scientific

research activities and refrain from speculating through coloured glasses," Mao said.

The Chinese defence ministry did not immediately respond to faxed requests for comment.

Reuters last month outlined extensive Chinese military vulnerabilities across the Indian Ocean, where the its navy lacks a hard base network and air cover despite its reliance on oil shipments through the region.

The Global Times defended ongoing research missions, saying China and regional partners were exploring the natural ecology of the region "without any hidden agenda".

"The Indian Ocean is one of the least understood oceans by the scientific community, and a fundamental reason is the lack of sufficient on-site observations."

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# JOINT STATEMENT ON INDIA - UNITED STATES TRADE POLICY FORUM

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - USA

The 14th Ministerial-level meeting of the India-United States Trade Policy Forum (TPF) was held in New Delhi, India on January 12, 2024. Minister of Commerce and Industry, India, Shri Piyush Goyal and U.S. Trade Representative, Ambassador Katherine Tai co-chaired the TPF meeting.

2. The Ministers underlined the significance of the TPF in forging robust bilateral trade ties and in enhancing the overall economic relationship. They welcomed the strong momentum in India-US bilateral trade in goods and services, which continued to rise and likely surpassed \$200 billion in calendar year 2023 despite a challenging global trade environment. They acknowledged that considering the size of their economies, significant potential remains unrealized and expressed their mutual desire to further enhance engagement with the goal of continuing to increase and diversify bilateral trade. In this regard, the Ministers underlined the significance of the TPF in forging a robust economic relationship.

3. The Ministers took stock of the significant progress made in addressing concerns impacting the bilateral trade relationship since the 13th TPF held in January 2023. This was highlighted by the historic settlement of all seven longstanding trade disputes at the World Trade Organization (WTO) between the two countries as well as the understandings on market access related to products of significance to the bilateral trade relationship. These outcomes were delivered in the context of the historic state visit of India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the United States in June 2023 and subsequently during the visit of U.S. President Biden to India for the G20 Summit in September 2023.

4. The Ministers agreed that their governments will pursue enhanced engagement leading to mutually beneficial outcomes in several areas, with a view to deepen the trade relationship for the benefit of working people. They identified certain areas, including critical minerals, customs and trade facilitation, supply chains, and trade in high tech products, in which the United States and India will develop an ambitious and forward looking roadmap for enhanced cooperation in order to achieve economically meaningful outcomes. The Ministers committed to pursue these efforts with a view to establish the foundation to launch future joint initiatives.

5. Ambassador Tai congratulated India on the successful completion and hosting of the G20 Presidency and the G20 summit, which saw the unanimous adoption of the G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration. She welcomed the positive outcomes achieved in the G20 Trade and Investment Working Group, and in particular the adoption of the High Level Principles on Digitalization of Trade Documents. The Ministers agreed to further pursue support for the implementation of these principles in other forums so as to strengthen the pathways for digitalization of trade documents. The Ministers emphasized that the G20 is a valuable platform for initiating constructive dialogue and fostering cooperation among members on global trade issues and agreed to work together in that regard. Progress on Bilateral Trade Concerns

6. The Ministers highlighted the work undertaken by the TPF Working Groups since the 13th TPF Ministerial through regular high-level meetings. They expressed their intent to continue to work together on resolving outstanding trade issues and highlighted both progress and upcoming engagement on a select number of those issues. Non-Agricultural Goods

7. The Ministers agreed to establish a pathway in which India and the United States will mutually

recognize results from accredited conformity assessment bodies utilizing International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (ILAC) and International Accreditation Forum (IAF) mutual recognition arrangements (MRAs), on a bilateral basis whenever possible. This will allow labs and conformity assessment bodies to certify that products are compliant with certain standards. This would eliminate duplicative testing requirements and reduce compliance costs for trade in high-quality goods. The Ministers committed to identify priority sectors of mutual interest for implementation and establish a Joint Facilitative Mechanism (JFM) for the same, the terms of reference of which will be finalized at the earliest.

8. The Ministers welcomed the finalization of the Turtle Excluder Device (TED) design developed with the technical support of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The collaboration between India and the United States to expedite the TED demonstrations will confirm that the TED design effectively minimizes the impact of commercial shrimp trawl operations on sea turtle populations. The Ministers acknowledged that NOAA has scheduled its visit to India for February 2024 to carry out field demonstrations with the newly designed TED and conduct workshops for stakeholders. Both sides acknowledged that the timely completion of the field demonstrations could contribute to the sustainable management and protection of marine and coastal ecosystems, thereby fostering enhanced seafood trade between the two countries.

9. The Ministers reiterated their commitment to ensure that technical regulations, such as Quality Control Orders, do not create unnecessary barriers to trade by providing sufficient opportunities for stakeholder consultations and ensuring that relevant domestic standards align with international standards to the extent feasible.

10. The Ministers emphasized their mutual interest in furthering public health discussions to ensure safe and effective medical products. India emphasized the need to increase the number of inspections by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (U.S. FDA) in India to facilitate trade and continue to reduce the backlog. The United States appreciated India's remarks, noting that the U.S. FDA has increased staffing to increase pharmaceutical inspections conducted by the agency.

11. The Ministers acknowledged the ongoing discussions related to ensuring patient access to affordable medical devices, including through the Trade Margin Rationalization (TMR) approach. They also emphasized the importance of enhancing engagement to address measures that could negatively impact the ongoing trade in the sector, such as standards and pricing issues for medical devices, including for cardiac stents and knee implants. The Ministers noted that this engagement would facilitate access to cutting-edge medical technology for patients. The Ministers shared concerns related to the overdependence and lack of diversity in Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients within the global pharmaceutical supply chain and welcomed the opportunity to collaborate to derisk and diversify with a focus on Key Starting Materials.

12. Ambassador Tai raised the issue of India's new import requirements for computers, tablets, and servers. Minister Goyal described India's objectives, including those related to national security concerns, and Ambassador Tai expressed a willingness to collaborate with India on the shared objective of supply chain resilience in this sector. India conveyed its willingness to continue engaging on this issue with the United States and other interested stakeholders. She further welcomed that India has implemented the "import management system for specified IT Hardware" in a facilitative manner that has thus far minimized the impact on trade and urged India to ensure that the end-to-end online system currently in operation and related policies do not restrict trade going forward.

13. Minister Goyal reiterated India's interest in restoration of its beneficiary status under the U.S.

Generalized System of Preferences program. Ambassador Tai noted that this could be considered, as warranted, in relation to the eligibility criteria determined by the U.S. Congress.

14. The United States welcomed India's decision to reduce the timeline for reaching 20 percent ethanol blending with petrol from 2030 to 2025 and for the launch of the Global Biofuels Alliance as well as the India-U.S. Biofuels Task Force. They offered to explore ways that the United States can supplement ethanol supply in India for fuel blending in the event that stocks in India fall short of demand. Indian side noted the United States' request for cooperation in this regard.

Intellectual Property

15. The Ministers appreciated the positive ongoing engagement on intellectual property (IP) in the TPF IP Working Group and acknowledge the important role protection and enforcement of IP plays in promoting innovation, bilateral trade, and investment in IP-intensive industries. The United States welcomed India's efforts to modernize its patent system and registration processes across its IP offices, particularly through recently proposed amendments to the patent rules which aim towards streamlining compliance requirements and easing the process of patent filing and granting. The Working Group also discussed a number of other issues, including protection for geographical indications and trade secrets. Both sides welcomed each other's commitment to comply with the World Intellectual Property Organization Copyright Treaty and World Intellectual Property Organization Performance and Phonogram Treaty. The United States and India committed to continuing to engage on IP matters concerning both sides.

Agriculture

16. The Ministers acknowledged the pending work to be completed for early finalization of market access for certain agricultural products of interest to both sides. They also conveyed their interest in enhancing their ongoing dialogue on food and agricultural trade issues in 2024 and to continue working to address outstanding issues through the Agriculture Working Groups, as well as the relevant sub-groups, utilizing science and risk-based principles. The Ministers welcomed the engagement and information exchange on necessary regulations regarding import of animal feed products, including alfalfa hay.

Services

17. The Ministers acknowledged the constructive engagement of the Services Working Group under the Trade Policy Forum. The Ministers emphasized that bilateral cooperation on digital trade and services should support the growth of their dynamic economies, while also addressing shared challenges and providing tangible benefits for workers and small businesses.

18. The Ministers acknowledged the ongoing discussions on a Social Security totalization agreement and receipt of additional information by the United States from India. They also encouraged further engagement in order to establish a stronger basis for a future agreement.

19. The Ministers exchanged views on the potential of digital trade to spur economic growth and innovation. The Ministers discussed India's new Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA). Ambassador Tai appreciated India's extensive consultations and noted that India's approach of enhancing data protection, privacy and security while enabling connectivity will support further expansion of the bilateral digital trade. Both Ministers expressed their desire to continue engaging as India begins to draft rules for implementing the DPDPA.

20. The Ministers acknowledged the discussions on telemedicine services and encouraged stakeholder engagement on both sides to create an enabling framework for future collaboration in this area.

21. Ambassador Tai welcomed the positive amendments to the Direct Selling Rules and appreciated India's continued engagement on the issue.



22. Minister Goyal highlighted India's leadership in further developing Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI). Both sides recognized the potential of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) approaches for enabling open and inclusive digital economies. The Ministers expressed their interest in further collaborating to ensure that DPI is utilized in a manner that ensures competitive markets and promotes inclusive development, and includes appropriate safeguards to protect privacy, data security, and intellectual property.

23. The Ministers acknowledged the role of professional services in catalyzing bilateral trade between the two countries and noted that issues related to recognition of professional qualifications and experience can facilitate services trade. In this context, both sides agreed to continue discussions on promoting engagement in these sectors.

24. The Ministers noted that the movement of professional and skilled workers, students, investors and business visitors between the countries contributes immensely to enhancing the bilateral economic and technological partnership. Minister Goyal highlighted challenges being faced by business visitors from India due to visa processing time periods and requested the United States to augment processing. Resilient Trade

25. The Ministers welcomed the continued engagement on the use of best practices with respect to customs and trade facilitation, including continued collaboration on issues related to the WTO's Trade Facilitation Agreement and adopting provisions on digitalization of trade facilitation measures.

26. The Ministers reiterated their commitment towards policies that ensure transparent regulatory practices, including online accessibility to information regarding regulations and regulatory processes, and adequate time for public consultations.

27. Minister Goyal conveyed India's interest in being recognized as a Trade Agreements Act designated country by the United States. The Ministers highlighted the initiation in 2023 of discussions on issues related to bilateral government procurement, such as transparency and procedural fairness, and welcomed plans for further technical engagement between their officials.

28. The Ministers recognized the importance of eliminating forced labor in global supply chains to promote resilient and sustainable trade and committed to work together on issues pertaining to child and forced labor in global supply chains.

29. The Ministers appreciated the positive spirit of collaboration demonstrated by both sides while resolving bilateral WTO disputes and in that spirit emphasized that the TPF will continue to act as the key platform to discuss all outstanding trade issues with the aim to both strengthen the bilateral economic partnership and to address these issues bilaterally.

30. The Ministers concluded the meeting by directing the five TPF Working Groups to reconvene quarterly, either in person or virtually, and identify specific trade outcomes to ensure that the trade relationship continues on its positive trajectory. They also instructed senior officials to hold an in person inter-sessional TPF meeting by mid-2024 and plan to reconvene the TPF at the Ministerial level before the end of 2024.

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## EXPRESS VIEW ON INDIA-MALDIVES RELATIONS: DON'T OVERREACT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Indian Ocean Island nations

Since the election of Mohamed Muizzu as president, Maldives has undoubtedly been moving away from India and closer to China. The China-Maldives joint statement at the end of Muizzu's visit bears testimony to their bonhomie. The trip saw barely veiled references to India's "bullying". Then on Sunday, Ahmed Nazim, policy director at the Maldives President's office reportedly said that the "Maldivian delegation" at the first India-Maldives High-Level Core Group meeting "proposed the removal of Indian troops by March 15".

The deadline did not find a mention in the official statements by the foreign offices of the two countries. The statement, coming as it does on the heels of the controversy over the juvenile remarks by Maldivian ministers about Prime Minister Modi's Lakshadweep visit, deserves attention. But an outsize reaction must be avoided.

Muizzu's turn to Beijing may seem like a decisive shift but it is of a piece with the political see-saw in Male, which has had an unfortunate effect on the country's external orientation. Muizzu's predecessor, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, was seen as being pro-India and the current president ran on an "India out" campaign.

The withdrawal of Indian troops from the country was a poll promise, more political than strategic — India reportedly has less than 90 soldiers in Maldives. Solih's predecessor Abdulla Yameen tilted towards Beijing. The fact that India plays a significant role in Maldivian politics should not be surprising.

Militarily, economically and strategically, India looms large over its neighbours. Some aspects of India's internal politics — expansionist rhetoric, conflating religion and illegal migration during polls — too can make many in the neighbourhood uncomfortable and be used to whip up sentiments by those seeking power. Social media jingoism and calls for boycotting a smaller neighbour do not help matters.

How should [Delhi](#) react to the Muizzu government's snubs? The answer is clear and was framed by External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Saturday: "... politics is politics," he said and added that "it can't be guaranteed that every country will support or agree with India every time." Smaller countries like Maldives will do their best to leverage the rivalries among greater powers — in this case, India and China. What makes the current "India Out" push disturbing is the all-or-nothing approach. There seems to be little recognition of the realities of geography or convergent interests. The fact remains that Maldives is a mere 700 km from the Indian coast and over 6,000 km from China. From the tsunami in 2004 to the drinking water crisis a decade later, India was the first to rush to the Maldivians' aid. At the same time, China's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean make smaller littoral states perfect targets for Beijing's diplomatic outreach. Delhi must continue to engage with Male, as well as the people of Maldives. As the regional power, it need not be thin-skinned.

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## MINT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Taiwan is pivotal to the geopolitics of Asia and the future of global technological leadership. Communist China has never controlled Taiwan, a self-governing democracy, but arrogates to itself the right to take Taiwan over at a time of its choice, regardless of what Taiwanese think.

How to deal with Communist China is therefore always a central issue in Taiwan's elections. On Saturday, Taiwan's people handed the island's presidency to Vice President Lai Ching-te. It was the third consecutive presidential election won by the independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). But the DPP lost its narrow legislative majority, constraining Lai's ability to act on his inclination to actualize Taiwan's independence from mainland China.

Taiwan is home to over 60% of the world's semiconductor manufacturing and makes over 90% of the world's most advanced chips. Those chips help run laptops, smartphones, satellites, cars and a slew of electrical appliances, including fridges and TVs. But Taiwan's prowess in electronics extends far beyond semiconductors. Chinese electronics exports are mostly produced by Taiwanese-owned companies (like Foxconn, Pegatron, Acer and Asustek) that assemble products in China and export them to the rest of world, using high-end components made in Taiwan. Thus, while China has an annual trade surplus of nearly \$900 billion with the world, it runs a bilateral trade deficit with Taiwan of over \$100 billion annually.

Taiwan was ruled by Japan for 50 years (1895-1945) and achieved rapid development. However, upon Japan's World War II surrender in August 1945, the island came under the control of the KMT (KuoMinTang), then the ruling party in mainland China. Japanese assets in Taiwan were expropriated by KMT members, generating strong resentment among native Taiwanese, who looked upon KMT cadres as "carpet-baggers." On 28 February 1947, there was an uprising by Taiwanese nationalists that was brutally suppressed by the KMT, whose armed forces killed thousands in response. Ironically, when KMT nationalists led by Chiang Kai-shek lost the mainland civil war to Communists in 1949, they fled to Taiwan, bringing along their most loyal supporters and China's business elite. About 2 million people migrated with the KMT from China to Taiwan, taking the island's population to 8 million. 'Mainlanders' are still about a quarter of Taiwan's population.

The KMT ran Taiwan as a dictatorship, but rapidly built its economy, with a special focus on electronics and technology. In 1987, Morris Chang, once a top engineer-manager at Texas Instruments, was recruited to run Taiwan's Industrial Technology Research Institute (ITRI). Chang worked with the government to establish Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company. (TSMC) , with seed funds from the government and private companies. TSMC is today the world's largest semiconductor maker, having displaced Intel partly because Apple devices run on microprocessors made by TSMC.

Chiang Kai-shek (who had led China from 1928 to 1949) remained president of the 'Republic of China' (Taiwan's official name) until 1975. His son Chiang Ching-kuo succeeded him after a 3-year interregnum. The latter began political liberalisation, appointing a native-Taiwanese KMT member, Lee Teng-hui, as his vice-president. When the younger Chiang died in 1988, Lee became president and sped up democratization.

Lee preferred speaking Taiwanese, a language closely linked to the Hokkien spoken in Fujian province, and liberally used Japanese words in his Mandarin. Lee's language and move to full



democracy infuriated Beijing, which responded by firing hundreds of missiles into the Taiwan Strait during the island's first free presidential election in 1996, which Lee won. The US sent warships into the Straits as a signal of support for Taiwan.

The DPP, representing Taiwanese nationalists, quickly gained popularity and its candidate Chen Shui-bian won the first presidential election after Lee's retirement in 2000. Ever since democracy was established in Taiwan, only one 'mainlander' has been elected president: the KMT's Ma Ying-jeou in 2008 and 2012. Despite its historic animosity towards China's communist party, the KMT agrees with the latter that there is only "One China," with each side of the Strait choosing its own interpretation of that idea. The DPP, though, does not believe Taiwan is part of China.

All three candidates for presidency this year, including the KMT's Hou Yu-ih, were native-Taiwanese, an implicit triumph for the DPP's identity politics. Hou's opposition to China's formulation of "one country, two systems" (unpopular in Taiwan after China's 2019 crackdown on Hong Kong's democracy activists) often put him at loggerheads with KMT grandees. Ko Wen-je of the Taiwan People's Party (formed in 2019) won more than a quarter of last week's vote. In 2014, Ko was elected Taipei's mayor as an independent with DPP support, but he shifted to the middle ground in 2019. He will hold the balance of legislative power, a factor that should help stabilize relations with Beijing as Lai is inevitably obliged to moderate his stance.

Taiwanese firms like Apple-suppliers Foxconn and Pegatron remain crucial to India's drive to attract global supply chains, just as TSMC and UMC are pivotal in Indian efforts to build modern semiconductor capacity. And a stable Taiwan Strait would be good for India, just as an autonomous Taiwan suits New Delhi well.

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# INDIA SIGNS AGREEMENT FOR LITHIUM EXPLORATION & MINING PROJECT IN ARGENTINA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - South America

Ministry of Mines, Government of India has achieved a significant milestone with the signing of an agreement between Khanij Bidesh India Limited (**KABIL**) and the state-owned enterprise of Catamarca province of Argentina CATAMARCA MINERA Y ENERGÉTICA SOCIEDAD DEL ESTADO (CAMYEN SE) at Catamarca, Argentina today i.e., on 15<sup>th</sup> January, 2024.

The Agreement was signed in presence of Governor of Catamarca Lic. Raul Jalil, Vice Governor of Catamarca, Eng. Ruben Dusso and Minister of Mines Catamarca, H. E. Marcelo Murua and Ambassador of India to Argentina, H. E. Dinesh Bhatia. The signing ceremony was virtually attended by the Union Minister of Parliamentary Affairs, Coal and Mines, Government of India, H. E. Shri Pralhad Joshi & Secretary, Ministry of Mines, Government of India, Shri V. L. Kantha Rao.







Speaking on the occasion, Shri Pralhad Joshi said that *“This is a historic day for both India and Argentina as we are scripting a new chapter in bilateral ties with the Agreement signing between KABIL and CAMYEN – a step which will not only play a crucial role in driving the energy transition for sustainable future, but also ensure a resilient and diversified supply chain for critical and strategic minerals essential for various industries in India.”*.



This is the first ever lithium exploration and mining project by a Government Company of India. KABIL will start exploration and development of 5 lithium brine blocks viz 1. Cortadera-I, 2. Cortadera-VII, 3. Cortadera-VIII, 4. Cateo-2022-01810132 and 5. Cortadera-VI covering an area of about 15,703 Hectare, located in the Catamarca province of Argentina. KABIL is also preparing to set up a branch office at Catamarca, Argentina. The project cost is about 200 crores.

With this Agreement, KABIL has obtained Exploration and Exclusivity Right for 5 blocks to evaluate, prospect and explore and subsequent to existence/discovery of lithium mineral, exploitation right for commercial production. This will not only boost its quest for sourcing lithium for India but will also help in bringing in technical & operational experience for Brine type lithium exploration, exploitation and extraction.

Argentina is the part of "Lithium Triangle" along with Chile and Bolivia with more than half of world's total lithium resources and having the distinction of having 2<sup>nd</sup> largest lithium resources, 3<sup>rd</sup> largest lithium reserves and 4<sup>th</sup> largest production in world.

This strategic move not only strengthens the bilateral ties between India and Argentina but also contributes to the sustainable development of the mining sector, ensuring a resilient and diversified supply chain for critical and strategic minerals essential for various industries.

**BY/RKP**

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**BY/RKP**

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## MINT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Taiwan has voted: bringing the independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party an unprecedented consecutive third term in the presidency. Now the world is waiting on Beijing, which claims Taiwan but doesn't rule it.

Saturday's DPP victory, with around 40% of the vote, could mean more scary headlines in the near-term. Another set of large-scale military exercises, similar to the blockade mock-up in the wake of Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit in 2022, is possible. Beijing announced it would cancel preferential tariff rates for 12 Taiwanese petrochemical products in late December. More trade broadsides are probably on the way.

But it is also true that Taiwan itself, as well as its friends, still has enormous economic leverage over China that may help keep Beijing's worst impulses in check.

Chinese officials' reaction so far has been predictably surly, but relatively restrained: Repeating boilerplate language that Taiwan is part of China and warning of the dire consequences of any formal moves toward independence.

Markets also seem to be pricing in a continuation of the status quo. Shares of Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co., which manufactures most of the world's most advanced logic chips, were up modestly by about 0.3% on Monday. Shares of electronics giant Hon Hai Precision Industry Co., which assembles iPhones in China, were down half a percent.

One open question is whether the new DPP administration, under President-elect Lai Ching-te, will make a concerted effort to reach out to China—and whether Beijing will be willing to engage in any meaningful way, even behind the scenes. Lai, in an interview with *The Wall Street Journal* before the election, said he welcomed dialogue “on the basis of parity and dignity,” but also pointedly criticized commentary suggesting that the responsibility for peace was solely Taiwan's.

Another unknown is the real state of China's military. China's top military brass has experienced an unusually wrenching period of turnover in recent weeks, including the unexplained removal of the defense minister in late 2023. A recent report by Bloomberg suggested the purges were related to corruption in the military-industrial complex which could impact combat readiness. China's military hasn't seen large-scale combat since the 1970s.

Even so, some things remain clear. Even after recent rounds of tech restrictions from Washington, China relies on Taiwan for close to 40% of its semiconductor imports by value, according to Chinese figures—a figure that has actually risen slightly in recent years as TSMC's star has risen. Adding in imports from South Korea, a formal U.S. ally, takes that percentage to near 60%. Taiwan manufactures nearly all of the world's top-end logic chips—needed for applications such as artificial intelligence—and about 60% of all semiconductors used globally.

If chips are the new oil—and China happens to be the world's top chip importer—then disrupting that supply would be ruinous. And producing chips isn't like pulling oil out of the ground; it relies on constant investment and innovation. Taiwan's cutting-edge chip plants, for instance, depend directly on U.S., European and Japanese equipment—meaning that even if Beijing somehow managed to capture them intact, they could quickly lose value.



Equally ruinous would be a loss of foreign markets. Unlike energy giant Russia, China's prosperity is inextricably linked to its status as the world's factory floor. A recent analysis from Bloomberg Economics found that an actual conflict drawing in the U.S. and China, featuring a complete cut-off of trade from Taiwan and 50% tariffs between U.S. allies and China, would knock nearly 20% off China's economy in the first year alone. It would also cut global gross domestic product by about \$10 trillion, or roughly 10%—nearly twice as bad as the hit from Covid-19 in 2020. U.S. GDP would contract 6.7%. Even harsher trade or financial restrictions could magnify the impact—and that is before counting the cost in lives and treasure for all sides.

In short, by opting for military action, Xi Jinping would be taking a massive economic gamble, one whose fallout could even threaten the viability of the Communist Party, in exchange for highly uncertain prospects. Xi could still be pushed toward such a course, or aim to build up China's capacity for conflict over the longer term. But lurching into it in a knee-jerk reaction to Taiwan's elections would make little sense.

This is especially the case since, while there are big differences between the DPP and opposition parties such as the more China-leaning Kuomintang, known as the KMT, many of the forces stoking both economic and political "decoupling" with the mainland are in a sense external: China's increasingly nationalistic bent under Xi, Washington's new predilection for wielding chip technology as a weapon, and the rush of Taiwan's multinational clients—such as Apple—to diversify sourcing away from the mainland.

An electoral victory for the KMT might have helped head off more coercive trade tactics—and eased the way for limited economic exchanges such as more tourism. But in the grand scheme of things it likely would have mattered less than many might think.

"Most of the factories or supply chains that gradually moved to Vietnam and Thailand were their own business decisions," said Alexander Huang, Director of International Affairs at the KMT, in an interview before the election. "I think the economic relationship across the Taiwan Strait will be largely about the same if we win."

Taiwan occupied a precarious, but also largely irreplaceable, position in the global economy before Saturday's election. Two days later that is still true. Nascent shifts in global supply chains might change that eventually. But for now, at least, that centrality probably comes with a certain degree of protection—as well as a large dose of anxiety about maintaining it.

Lai, in his victory speech on Saturday, emphasized that the semiconductor industry is a global endeavor, and expressed hope that China would "treasure" it. The rest of the world is hoping too.

*Write to Nathaniel Taplin at [nathaniel.taplin@wsj.com](mailto:nathaniel.taplin@wsj.com)*

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## EXPRESS VIEW ON BANGLADESH ELECTIONS: SHEIKH HASINA, AGAIN

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Bangladesh

The victory of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League in Bangladesh's parliamentary election was all but guaranteed after the main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), decided to stay away from the polls. The party's leader, Khaleda Zia, is ailing and under house arrest on corruption charges, which her supporters claim to be politically motivated.

The government had rejected the BNP's demand for a neutral authority to oversee the polls. Zia's party has accused the Awami League of propping up dummy Opposition candidates and alleged that more than 20,000 BNP members were arrested in the run-up to elections. The government has disputed these allegations. But a barely 40 per cent turnout in the polls — it was about 80 per cent in 2018 — should be indication enough for the PM that she begins her fourth consecutive term in office in a deeply troubled political landscape.

Hasina's legacy has to a great extent been shaped by Bangladesh's economic success in the last decade and a half, fueled by infrastructure, poverty alleviation and energy projects. She has also dealt with militancy with a firm hand, often inviting accusations of high-handedness. Post-pandemic, however, the country has been hard hit by [inflation](#).

The taka has depreciated by over 40 per cent against the US dollar and Bangladesh has negotiated loans with the World Bank, IMF and Asian Development Bank.

Already notorious for poor standards on freedom of speech, the Hasina regime is seen to have become more authoritarian in the strained economic circumstances. It has been criticised for weaponising the judiciary and resorting to mass arrests of political opponents. Those affiliated with the ruling party — especially its youth wing, the Jubo League — appear to enjoy impunity for violent attacks. In the run-up to elections, the US imposed visa restrictions on a large section of Bangladesh's political class and bureaucracy in order to "restore the democratic system".

Hasina has skilfully balanced ties with Bangladesh's powerful neighbours — India and China. It has joined the Belt and Road Initiative, attracted Chinese investments in infrastructure projects and is among the major importers of Chinese weapons. At the same time, Hasina's crackdown on anti-India elements has eased [Delhi](#)'s security concerns in the East. With the situation in Myanmar deteriorating, the partnership between the two countries that share a 4,100 km long border is crucial to peace in South Asia. But the Hasina regime must also realise that without meaningful democracy, political stability will remain precarious.

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## EXPRESS VIEW ON INDIA-MALDIVES ROW: DANGERS OF HYPERNATIONALISM ON BOTH SIDES

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Indian Ocean Island nations

Few would have thought that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Lakshadweep would [kick up a tsunami of controversy](#) engulfing relations between India and Maldives, already under considerable strain. While both sides have reasons to manage the fallout from the entirely avoidable episode, it highlights the dangers of hypernationalism for two South Asian neighbours with much at stake in wide-ranging cooperation. It is also a reminder to the new rulers of Maldives that small nations must exercise prudence in dealing with their neighbours. Needless provocations can trigger consequences that could, in the end, hurt the smaller neighbour a lot more. While Delhi's official reaction has been tough and correct in communicating its outrage through diplomatic channels, India's thin-skinned social media warriors have made a bad situation worse. The managers of these warriors must know that you can't bully your neighbours into submission; they must also recognise that hypernationalists do more harm to India than to the target of the day. Above all, they constrain the freedom of action for Indian diplomacy and alienate many of Delhi's friends and partners in the neighbourhood.

There is no question that the blame for this controversy lies at the door of Maldives — it began when three brash deputy ministers used offensive language against PM Modi's posts on a social media platform about his trip to Lakshadweep last week, celebrating the natural beauty of the islands and its potential attractions for the Indian tourist. As two former presidents — Ibrahim Solih and Mohamed Nasheed — strongly condemned the ministers' remarks, the incumbent president, Mohamed Muizzu, moved quickly to suspend the three deputy ministers. But make no mistake, the sentiment in the tweets represents real hostility against India. Having come to power on an anti-India platform in the elections last year, the new government of Maldives has wasted no time in asking Indian military personnel to leave the country and ending the agreement with the Indian navy for a hydrographic survey of its waters. Muizzu had ostentatiously chosen to travel to Turkey on his first official visit late last year, is now on a state visit to China and appears confident that he can diminish India's salience in the island republic.

But if the episode underlines a bristling ultranationalism in Maldives, the social media response in India has also been over the top. The trending hashtag "boycott Maldives" is self-defeating — China is well-positioned to step in. There are various other sources of tourist inflow into Maldives, including Europe and Russia. The social media claim that Lakshadweep is an alternative to Maldives is delusional; India is far from developing the necessary infrastructure in Lakshadweep and connectivity to the islands. PM Modi's visit to the islands was an important first step that requires sustained follow-up action. Boycotting Maldives in any form will only reduce India's leverage in the islands. [Delhi](#) should instead double down on a firm but patient engagement with Maldives that will rally friendly forces in the country and remind the ruling party of the dangers of pushing too hard against India.

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## TAIWAN ELECTION RESULTS — GOOD FOR INDIA, BAD FOR CHINA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

In an excruciating but efficient electoral campaign, Taiwan's estimated 69 per cent of 19 million eligible voters surprised everyone by [electing incumbent Vice President Lai Ching-te to become President](#). This is an unprecedented third win for the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), albeit with a smaller majority.

The DPP candidate Lai secured 5.5 million or 40.1 per cent of votes, while the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) candidate Hou Yu-ih got 4.6 million or 33.5 per cent and [Taiwan](#) People's Party (TPP) candidate Ko Wen-je about 3.6 million or 26.5 percent of vote share. The going for Lai is tough, given that KMT and TPP have a majority in the Legislative Yuan where important bills need to be passed. However, despite the political divide, Taiwan sent a clear message to Beijing that its intimidation does not work.

Moreover, by consistently participating in all eight presidential elections with nearly 70 per cent of voters turning up each time since the first elections in 1996, the Taiwanese have questioned the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) claim for representation and political legitimacy. Taiwan's democracy thus stands as a beacon with the communist party-state authoritarian rule clamping down on Hong Kong.

Since the 19th Communist Party Congress in 2017, Beijing has been dishing out its authoritarian party-state "China model" to the rest of the world. It has criticised democracies for being corrupt, cacophonous, ineffective in addressing the Covid pandemic, using money power during elections, and engaging in fraudulent practices. By embracing competitive politics, bringing the decision-making processes closer to the people, periodic elections and maintaining relatively higher growth rates, Taiwan is conveying how shallow and dangerous the "China model" could be.

By electing Lai, the Taiwanese electorate is cocking a snook at Beijing's intimidating tactics that began during the first elections in 1996 when China launched live missile fire across the Taiwan Straits. That did not deter the Taiwanese. In the last few years, China has flown thousands of air and naval sorties, crossed the imaginary median line, intruded into Taiwan's air defence identification zone and even conducted cyber attacks and influenced operations in Taiwan to subjugate the will of the electorate. This did not frighten the Taiwanese either.

Lai, however, will have a tough time during his tenure facing China's reported 2027 invasion scenario. The People's Liberation Army centennial falls in that year and it is speculated that "China's rejuvenation" should start by integrating with Taiwan. To become a maritime power, it was argued that China should first invade Taiwan. Even though President Xi Jinping reportedly denied any such invasion during his November 15, 2023 meeting with US President [Joe Biden](#) in Filoli estate, San Francisco, given China's unpredictable behaviour and disregard for international norms, Lai has to be on guard.

Lai, a professed "pragmatic worker for Taiwan's independence" is constrained by the lack of internal political cohesion, support in the Legislative Yuan, asymmetry in power relations across the Straits as well as lack of explicit support from the international community for pursuing any independence movement. He is likely to mellow down, but remain firm on challenges coming from across the Straits. Significantly, there is a definitive new-found self-respect among the

electorate in Taiwan today that deters China from military invasion.

As the largest democracy, India is weighing its options in the emerging situation in the Taiwan Straits. It is noticeable that India has not sent official congratulatory messages to Taipei, unlike the United States, Europe and other countries. Nevertheless, as China disregards all agreements with India on the borders, and has taken the Kashmir issue to the United Nations thrice in 2019 and 2020, New [Delhi](#) is sending signals of a change in its perception of the “one China” policy. Since 2010, India had not reiterated such a position in any official announcement.

Secondly, as China’s aggressive posturing in the Taiwan Straits increased in the last few years, India advocated “restraint, avoidance of unilateral actions to change status quo, de-escalation of tensions and efforts to maintain peace and stability in the region”. Since the launch of its “Look East” and the recent “Act East” policies, India is dependent on maritime trade and investments flowing through the Taiwan Straits, the South China Sea and other maritime domains. Any invasion of Taiwan is bound to destabilise the region, thus affecting India’s rise.

Thirdly, bilateral contacts have been stepped up between India and Taiwan with the three former chiefs of Army, Navy and Air Force of India visiting Taipei last year and several deals to set up semiconductor manufacturing centres were made by both sides, besides the visits of parliamentarians and increasing people-to-people contacts. Yet, the democratic ideological glue is missing in India’s cautious response to Taiwan’s elections.

Taiwan’s “New Southbound” policy, refurbished under current President Tsai Ing-wen, is likely to be continued by Lai, even though it appears to be losing momentum, specifically regarding the South Asian region. Free Trade Area proposals between India and Taiwan are also in limbo and need fresh thinking and thrust.

At the brass-tacks level, the Indian Election Commission could take a cue from the order, efficiency and swiftness with which vote counting and election results were declared in a span of four hours from the time of closing the voter booths. Even though India has to address over 800 million voters, there are several areas where institutional cooperation is possible for mutual benefit. Intensification of media and civil society interactions is also necessary.

***The writer is the Dean of School of International Studies, JNU***

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# EXPRESS VIEW ON MODI-PUTIN CALL: THE NEW MULTI-ALIGNMENT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Russia

The current moment in international affairs is marked by renewed great power rivalry. The conflicts in Europe and West Asia – between Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Hamas – and the broader tussle between the US and China on economic, technological and strategic fronts make it tempting to view the global scenario in binaries. Two recent events, however, show that New Delhi has managed to engage with diverse partners who are often at odds with each other. If India's non-alignment during the Cold War was — in principle if not practice — defined by its claim of equidistance from the two blocs, its current “multi-alignment” is guided by national interest and the need to forge bilateral relationships.

On Monday, Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) and Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#) had a phone conversation in which they reportedly discussed the “special and privileged strategic partnership” between the two countries, the [Ukraine](#) conflict and a further deepening of bilateral ties. Around the same time, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar was concluding a two-day visit to Iran, where he met his counterpart and other senior officials and finalised cooperation on developing the Chabahar Port. Russia and Iran are, in a sense, on the “other side” vis-a-vis India and China.

In the early stage of the Ukraine conflict, the US put considerable pressure on [Delhi](#) to take a stronger position against Russia's aggression. Iran, too, is embroiled in a regional cold war with Israel and Saudi Arabia — India has deep partnerships with both nations. That it has managed to maintain these bilateral ties even as its partnership with the US and Europe grows is significant. Significantly with both nations, Delhi hasn't compromised on its core principles: PM Modi reportedly reiterated India's position to Putin — that war cannot be a solution and Jaishankar communicated zero tolerance for terror and how the Houthi attacks on merchant vessels harm India's interests.

It is equally important to recognise the underlying conditions that have allowed New Delhi room to manoeuvre on the global stage. The first of these is India's continuing economic rise. The size of its market as well as its potential for future growth give Delhi both strategic and diplomatic heft. Second, as China has grown more aggressive in Asia, and beyond, many in the US and the West see India as a crucial regional counterbalance. Among the many factors that make India an attractive partner is its credentials as a liberal, pluralist democracy. As it continues to navigate the choppy waters of geopolitics and geoeconomics to secure its interests, India must ensure it does not slip on either front.

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# C RAJA MOHAN WRITES: FROM DAVOS TO NAM, UNRAVELLING OF THE OLD WORLD ORDER, THE END OF PEACE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: NAM and its relevance

Three summits this week — one in Davos, Switzerland and the other two (NAM and G77) in Kampala, Uganda — point to the shifting terrain of global politics in 2024. The world's rich and powerful in Davos and the underprivileged in Kampala have a shared problem — dealing with structural changes in the international system. The old slogans — on globalism in Davos and collectivism of the Global South in Kampala — are no longer credible or sustainable. The summits also highlight the contrast between the agendas of India and China.

The annual gathering at Davos is tempered by the recognition that renewed great power conflict and economic nationalism have upended the [apple](#) cart of globalisation. The back-to-back summits of the Non-Aligned Movement and the G77 in Kampala may find that the renewed political euphoria about the Global South is insufficient to deal with the challenges and opportunities of the changing world order.

But first to the 'Davos Man', the moniker of the globalist elite that has shaped the world since the 1990s. The Berlin Wall collapsed in 1989, and the Soviet Union in 1991. The end of the Cold War was followed by a period of relative harmony within the great power constellation dominated by the US. On the economic front, the so-called Washington Consensus heralded an era marked by the free movement of capital, goods, services, and labour across borders.

The era also saw the redistribution of global economic activity to take advantage of cost differentials and policy permissiveness. Markets and efficiency were the new mantras for the ruling elites worldwide. New political ideas of global governance matched this economic transformation. They were rooted in the conviction that supra-national institutions that transcend sovereignty were necessary to manage the growing economic integration of the world as well as collective threats like climate change.

The world that the Davos Man made in the last few decades has begun to unravel. The long peace between major powers has ended with the war in [Ukraine](#). If the West could not address the political resentments of post-Soviet Russia, it is finding it even harder to cope with the ambitions of a rising China. The new alliance between Russia and China has presented the West with the greatest challenge since World War II. If the war in the heart of Europe has dramatically undermined the journey towards an integrated world, the mounting tensions in East Asia driven by China's muscular regional policies and a revitalisation of US alliances in the region have added to it. Meanwhile, Israel's war on Gaza, the Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping, and the US bombing of Houthi bases in Yemen highlight the dangers of a wider war in the vital Middle East and its devastating consequences for the world.

Well before these conflicts began to disrupt global economic flows and fragment the world order, the Davos Man's worldview was under attack as too elitist. The sweeping globalism of the Davos Man inevitably produced a nationalist reaction. The attempts to impose a new climate change agenda triggered the so-called "greenlash" within Western societies. But the coup de grace to the world that Davos made came from the principal champion of globalisation — the US. In the 2016 presidential election, [Donald Trump](#) mobilised the brewing resentments in America against free trade in general, China's weaponisation of economic interdependence in particular, global

institutions, immigration, and climate activism to storm into the White House. Trump's tenure at the White House decisively moved the US away from the Davos agenda. [Joe Biden](#)'s election as US president in 2020 did not reverse this agenda. While the Democrats returned to supporting global institutions and actions to mitigate climate change, they reinforced Trump's policies on "fair trade" and limiting exposure to China. Biden has sought to rework the global economic order, reducing the reliance on markets, developing industrial policies, attending to the interests of workers, jobs, and communities, restructuring global supply chains that focus on resilience rather than efficiency and reforming the WTO and the global development institutions.

Trump, who is seeking reelection, is promising to go back to the agenda that junks globalism in favour of nationalism. It also involves shredding the climate change agenda, restoring fossil fuel production, limiting immigration and raising tariffs on imported goods. Given the growing chances that Trump will be president again, the challenge for Davos is to cope with a rapidly changing world that no longer conforms to its traditional agenda.

The problem of change is equally demanding on the NAM and G77 agenda. The renewed political enthusiasm for the Global South in the international discourse does not easily translate into practical outcomes for both these institutions, which have a long history of proclaiming solidarity and collective bargaining but limited accomplishments. The weight of both NAM and G77 has been undermined by the rise of regionalism across the Global South. Regional institutions like the Association of SouthEast Asian Nations and the African Union are today more consequential than the NAM or G77. Groupings like the BRICS now have co-opted some of the traditional agenda of NAM and G77 and have a greater political impact. The presence of Russia (once seen as part of the North) in the BRICS muddies the old North-South framework.

China was never part of NAM or G77 but actively engages with both forums. As the world's second-largest economy and the principal challenger to the US-led world order, China today presents itself as the champion of the Global South. Several initiatives, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI), and Global Security Initiative (GSI) reflect Beijing's determination to mobilise the Global South in rearranging the global order on Chinese terms.

India's current political emphasis on the Global South is about reclaiming its traditional role in the NAM and G77. For both China and India, the challenge is to adapt to the structural shifts in the global order while seeking greater influence in the Global South. Meanwhile, there are new possibilities for major countries in the Global South to exploit the renewed great power contest for elite or national benefit. Countries occupying critical locations or having vital natural resources have significant leverage to negotiate individually with the great powers.

China and India will be represented at the ministerial level in both Davos and Kampala. In Davos, both will make a pitch for a greater engagement with the Western capital. However, there is a crucial difference in their objectives. While China's ambition is to revise the global economic order, India's focus is on integration and reform. In Kampala, Beijing will present itself as an alternative to the current order built by the US, while India sees itself as a bridge between the North and the South.

***The writer is a contributing editor on international affairs for [The Indian Express](#)***

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# THE GEOPOLITICS IN THE BANGLADESH ELECTION RESULTS

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'Bangladesh's political history around past elections remains problematic and the nature of politics, confrontational' | Photo Credit: AP

Bangladesh held its national elections on January 7, 2024 amidst violence and protests as the polls became embroiled in controversy. The ruling Awami League and allies achieved a resounding victory by getting 225 out of the 300 contested seats. The main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), whose leader and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia is imprisoned under allegations of corruption, boycotted the polls, demanding that elections be held under a neutral caretaker government, the constitutional provision of which was abrogated by the Awami League after it came into power in 2009.

Bangladesh's political history around past elections remains problematic and the nature of politics, confrontational. In the previous elections of 2014 and 2018 under the Awami League, the party faced similar allegations of electoral manipulation, irregularities, and violence, drawing criticism from international election observation missions.

Once overlooked on the global stage, Bangladesh has ascended as a rising economic powerhouse in South Asia with 7.1% annual GDP growth in 2022, an economy exceeding \$400 billion, and population of over 165 million. This strategically located nation has been at the centre of a geopolitical tug-of-war, with regional and global powers such as China, India, Russia and the United States vying for influence.

**Editorial | [Predictably comfortable: On Sheikh Hasina's electoral win in Bangladesh](#)**

As its closest neighbour with shared historical, economic, social and cultural linkages, India harbours deep strategic interests in Bangladesh. Bilateral trade is nearing \$15 billion annually and agreements across a range of issues such as investment, counterterrorism, energy, and river water sharing underscore a close bilateral relationship. Bangladesh is India's crucial partner for balancing China's growing regional economic and diplomatic clout, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure financing. A stable Bangladesh, seen as a counterweight offsetting instability from neighbours such as Pakistan and Afghanistan, keeps India actively invested in its neighbour. It is no surprise that the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi promptly congratulated Sheikh Hasina after her win, committing to fortify the partnership between India and Bangladesh.

The [U.S. has been critical of the Bangladesh government](#) for democratic shortcomings, the suppression of human rights and muzzling press freedom. America's messaging is torn between advancing core strategic interests by maintaining healthy ties with Bangladeshi authorities while upholding democratic values, as echoed in the U.S. Department of State pre-electoral press statement: "We are taking steps to impose visa restrictions on Bangladeshi individuals responsible for, or complicit in, undermining the democratic election process in Bangladesh."

In contrast, Yao Wen, Ambassador of China to Bangladesh — China is Bangladesh's number one trading partner with annual bilateral trade exceeding \$25 billion — stated, "Election is completely an internal issue of Bangladesh...Bangladesh knows the kind of election required." Under its BRI, China has financed over \$10 billion worth of ports, bridges, highways and other critical infrastructure.

Post elections, the U.S. has aligned with other observers in asserting that the elections were neither free nor fair and largely non-participative. On the other hand, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning felicitated the Awami League for its victory, "China congratulates Bangladesh on successfully holding its national election as scheduled and congratulates the Awami League on winning the election".

Moscow has drawn Bangladesh closer through financing one of the nation's largest infrastructure projects, the Rooppur 2,400-megawatt nuclear power plant worth over \$12 billion. With major investments at stake, Russia has taken a keen interest in Bangladesh's election. In a unique act of collaboration, when a Russian ship carrying nuclear materials was denied entry due to U.S. sanctions in late 2022, India intervened to receive the cargo and transported it by road to the construction site. Russia also congratulated Sheikh Hasina on her election victory; Alexander Mantytsky, Ambassador of Russia to Bangladesh, was received at her official residence. In a similar vein, prior to the elections, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova had quipped in 2023, "We have repeatedly highlighted attempts by the US and its allies to influence the internal political processes in Bangladesh".

The 2024 election results have evolved into a geopolitical battleground driven by Bangladesh's increasing economic and strategic heft. Geopolitical considerations make it a little tricky for the U.S. and its allies to conduct normal business with Bangladesh. The extent to which they may take actions remains uncertain. The readymade garment industry is a significant source of foreign exchange earnings for Bangladesh and any restrictions imposed by the U.S. and European Union could pose a serious challenge as they import a significant bulk of Bangladesh's readymade garments.

In 2007, when the opposition BNP tried to manipulate elections, the United Nations issued a stern warning, indicating a potential halt to Bangladesh's involvement in peacekeeping operations; this led to the military-backed caretaker government stepping in to hold elections in 2008 which the then opposition Awami League won. This time, apart from criticism, whether the UN would go any further remains to be seen.

Last but not the least have been surging living costs triggering protests in recent months as the government grapples with the challenges of dealing with soaring energy import prices, diminishing dollar reserves and a weakening local currency. The International Monetary Fund highlighted multiple shocks to Bangladesh's economy in its post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery, aggravated by supply chain disruptions and inflationary pressures due to the Ukraine war. For Ms. Hasina's government, the months ahead are expected to be fraught with challenges, both at home and abroad, as she tries to manage a weakening economy and delicately balance geopolitics with national interests.

**Syed Munir Khasru ([www.syedmunirkhasru.org](http://www.syedmunirkhasru.org)) is Chairman of the international think tank The Institute for Policy, Advocacy, and Governance (IPAG) with a presence in Dhaka, Delhi, Melbourne, Dubai, and Vienna**

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# CABINET APPROVES MEMORANDUM OF INTENT (MOI) BETWEEN INDIA AND NETHERLANDS ON COOPERATION IN THE FIELD OF MEDICAL PRODUCTS REGULATION

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Europe, European Union (EU) and India

The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi was apprised of a Memorandum of Intent (MoI) signed between the Central Drugs standard Control Organization (CDSCO), Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, Kingdom of the Netherlands on behalf of Medicines Evaluation Board, Health and Youth Care Inspectorate, Central Committee on research Involving Human Subjects “on cooperation in the field of Medical products Regulation”. The MoI was signed on 7<sup>th</sup> November, 2023.

The MoI seeks to establish a framework for fruitful cooperation and exchange of information between the Central Drugs Standard Control Organization (CDSCO) and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, Kingdom of the Netherlands on behalf of Medicines Evaluation Board, Health and Youth Care Inspectorate, Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects in matters relating to Medical products regulation in line with their International responsibilities.

The MoI between the regulatory authorities of the two countries will facilitate better understanding of medical products regulation with regard to pharmaceuticals including raw materials for pharmaceutical use, biological products, medical devices and cosmetic products.

Convergence in the regulatory practices could help in increasing export of medicines from India and consequentially help in better employment opportunities for educated professionals in the Pharmaceutical sector.

The MoI will facilitate export of medical products leading to foreign exchange earnings. This would be a step towards an Atmanirbhar Bharat.

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# CHINA-KYRGYZSTAN-UZBEKISTAN RAILWAY: COULD CHINA BE AT INDIA'S BORDER?

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

Only two outlets connect China's Xinjiang to South and Central Asia — one from Kashgar via the Khunjerab Pass to PoK, and the other from Kashgar via Irkashtam Pass to Kyrgyzstan. Another narrow cliff-side road runs through the Pamir Mountains into Tajikistan.

For decades, China built roads, railroads and pipelines through the steppe of Kazakhstan, but the grandest dream to enter Fergana Valley with a railway since the 1990s remained elusive due to multiple geopolitical hurdles.

But as Russia's power declines, Eurasia is turning into China's opportunity. The most recent case in point is the renewed zeal to build the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway (CKU-R) in the backdrop of the [Ukraine](#) crisis, supply chain disruptions and the demand for alternative routes to bypass Russia. China brought it back to life during the BRI's 10th anniversary summit at Xi'an in 2023. Uzbekistan ending its isolationist policy made it possible. The 454-km long CKU-R will connect Kashgar with Osh and Andijan and further link up with the European railway network through Turkmenistan, Iran, and Turkey.

The CKU-R will come as a huge strategic and economic boon for China. Once completed, Xinjiang, hitherto terra incognita but bordering eight countries including India, will be connected with Fergana Valley, the heart of Eurasia and the intersection of Central Asia, Trans-Caspian, South Asia, and West Asia. It will boost China's presence in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, and amplify its Europe-bound freight, bypassing the longer Russian route besides transforming the region into a business hub.

Central Asia will once become "central" to East and West transit trade. The Chinese trains will arrive closer to India through the proposed Trans-Afghan Railway.

However, CKU-R confronts numerous hurdles. The Chinese are aware that Fergana is a hotbed of radical Salafi-Jihadi terror groups. Experts see the corridor as becoming a double-edged sword — crucial for Central Asian integration into global supply chains but still running the risk of becoming a conduit for smuggling illicit goods to Russia.

The region is already known for grey zone trade. Since the Ukraine crisis, parallel imports into Kyrgyzstan from Western suppliers have increased, suggesting massive smuggling to evade sanctions against Russia.

The CKU-R's delay is mainly due to Kyrgyzstan's political and financial problems. Bishkek wants the corridor but doesn't have the money (\$4.7 billion) to build its part of the route. Attracting investment is a challenging task, but raising a loan is even more difficult due to its chronic debt to China — currently \$2 billion. The fear of further sinking into the debt trap is viewed as a "threat" to the country's sovereignty.

Kyrgyzstan wants CKU-R to be a strategic project hoping other players to form a consortium to pay for its construction. The transit country shouldn't be made to pay is an argument among others. The Kyrgyz want the project but without having to pay for it.

The theory linking the project to "Chinese expansionism" runs deep. The last time the Chinese

controlled Syr and Amu Darya region was during the 7th century. The Kyrgyz fear that CKU-R will lead to an influx of Chinese migrants, intruding upon their sovereignty.

China can fund the project but Beijing intends to get in exchange Kyrgyzstan's largest iron ore and gold mining site Zhetim Too worth \$50 billion, located in Naryn at the China-Kyrgyz border. The area is also located at a big glacier water belt that China wants to divert.

Beijing can wait till the Kyrgyz are ready. President Sadyr Japarov opted to skip the 2023 BRI Forum in Beijing citing a "tight schedule" However, Premier Li Qiang immediately landed in Bishkek to discuss the CKU-R.

China is not known for writing off debt. Tajikistan had to cede 1,122 sq km of its territory to China in 2011.

While the hope is for the CKU-R construction to begin in 2024, Uzbek experts have already joined the Kyrgyz and Chinese specialists to prepare the technical reports. Sceptics feel it is nowhere close to reality.

Central Asian geopolitics can be tricky, especially if the players prematurely discount the Russian factor. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are closer to Moscow but Uzbekistan has opened up to the West and even warmed up with the Taliban regime. Tajikistan is critical of the Taliban government, but its porous border is notorious for opium trafficking,

China has changed its terms of engagement. It relies less on the consensus-based SCO grouping, and instead prefers to operate through the 5+1 format and BRI schemes. China's trade with Kazakhstan stands for \$21.7 billion exceeding Russia's \$18.9 billion. Similarly, China's trade with Uzbekistan accounts for \$12.23 billion, compared to Russia's \$8.86 billion.

Compared to the belligerent Russian stance, the Chinese diplomats operate with subtlety in sharp contrast to "wolf warrior" diplomacy elsewhere.

Chinese trains had reached Afghanistan's Hairatan city in 2022. Tashkent wants to build a 753-km long Trans-Afghan Railway (TAR) from Hairatan to Kabul and then into Pakistan via Peshawar — it looks problematic due to security concerns in Afghanistan.

Moscow's response towards CKU-R remains muted, but its position is subject to change, for it would mean replacing the Russia-oriented south-north directed connectivity by a China-led east-west network.

In the 19th century, the Russian railway in the Karakum desert underpinned the great-power rivalry involving British India. This time, CKU-R could become an instrument of Chinese expansion to skirt the Himalayan terrain and gain a foothold in Babur's land to reach the gates of India.

India's connectivity via Chabahar is not proving to be viable in many ways. A direct railroad to Central Asia is possible without compromising on India's territorial integrity so long as it learns to defend its interest in Eurasia while maneuvering regional norms in the shifting balance of power.

**The writer is a former diplomat who served in Central Asia**

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## EXPRESS VIEW ON IRAN-PAKISTAN CONFLICT: STEP BACK FROM BRINK

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The complex relationship between Iran and Pakistan is teetering on the edge. On Tuesday, Iran carried out strikes in Pakistan's Balochistan province — its aircraft reportedly crossed into Pakistani air space — ostensibly to target Jaish al-Adl, a Sunni group that has carried out attacks within Iran. Pakistan has claimed that two minors died in the attack. Islamabad's first reaction was diplomatic: It recalled its ambassador from Tehran, registered a protest with the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and suspended bilateral visits. On Thursday, Pakistan launched its own strikes in Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province, claiming to target "Pakistan-origin terrorists" who have bases in Iran. Neither Iran nor Pakistan can afford an escalation of this conflict. The former is already involved in multiple proxy wars in West Asia, not least the Israel-Hamas conflict. Pakistan has volatile and militarised borders with India and Afghanistan, and is mired in deep economic crisis.

Pakistan and Iran are Islamic republics yet in both countries Muslim minorities at the so-called periphery have not found adequate representation or equal rights. The Balochistan region (the province in Pakistan that is the country's largest) has a large area and a sparse population. Among the Baloch people, while there is a broad cultural and linguistic affinity, there are also significant internal differences — of sect, class and tribe. The community has often been treated with suspicion and outright discrimination by both states. This has been taken advantage of by violent separatist groups as well as external actors. The former has used the frontier regions of each country against the other. Both Tehran and Islamabad have often accused each other of providing tacit support to — or at the very least, of not doing enough to counter — these violent groups. Jaish al-Adl is one of several Sunni-Salafist outfits fighting for an independent Sistan-Baluchestan said to operate from Pakistan. The group has claimed responsibility for bombings and attacks on Iran's border police in the past. Last year, there were several attacks on both sides of the border in which security forces were killed.

The immediate trigger for Iran's audacious attack remains unclear. Given the regional context — it carried out similar strikes in Syria and Iraq earlier this week — the action against Pakistan could be part of a larger muscle-flexing in light of the Israel-Hamas war spreading to other parts of West Asia. There has also been a reported increase in Jaish al-Adl activity recently. Whatever the provocations, it is now imperative for both sides to act with maturity. Pakistan's Foreign Office has said that the sole objective of the attack was protecting the country's security while the Army has said that "dialogue and cooperation" can solve bilateral issues. Beyond the current moment, governments and armies need to cease their support for terrorism. In the long run, addressing the concerns of disaffected minorities in the region will help tackle the challenge posed by violent separatist movements.

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# CRAFTING A NEW PHASE IN INDIA-U.K. DEFENCE TIES

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Defence Minister Rajnath Singh inspects a ceremonial Guard of Honour at the Horse Guards Parade on January 9, 2024 in London. | Photo Credit: Getty Images

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's recent visit to the United Kingdom (U.K.) [came after a hiatus of 22 years](#). Opportunities have grown significantly in the past few years as opposed to two decades ago. The growth of Chinese military power and in particular, its expansion into the Indian Ocean which threatens India and also Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs), on which the U.K. depends, have given the British an opportunity to reorient their strategic priorities.

The Indian Navy has several capability-related needs to make up for the shortfalls the service faces vis-à-vis the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). Securing key technologies has been an integral part of Mr. Singh's visit to the U.K. The U.K. is in a position to help redress the Indian Navy's technological gaps against the Chinese.

One key area where London and New Delhi are cementing cooperation is in electrical propulsion to power aircraft carriers. The Indian Navy's carriers, at present, are not powered by electric propulsion technology. The Queen Elizabeth Class aircraft carriers of the Royal Navy (RN) use electric propulsion and the RN has mastered this technology.

In the run-up to Mr. Singh's visit, there were already preliminary engagements between the Indian and U.K. governments regarding the Indian Navy securing electric propulsion technology. Though the PLAN for its part struggled to overcome the technical challenges associated with electric propulsion, there is increasing yet anecdotal evidence emerging that it is in the process of integrating electric propulsion into its warships such as the Type 054B frigates.

The Indian Navy cannot sit idly and allow the Chinese navy to steal a march on a key piece of maritime technology for its advanced surface combatants in the future. The advantage of using electric propulsion is that warships integrated with this capability produce a low acoustic signature by removing the link between the principal mover and propulsion. There is also the added advantage of enhanced electrical power generation for subsystems in major warships of the Indian Navy's surface fleet.

The establishment of a joint working group dubbed the "India-UK electric propulsion capability partnership" first met in February 2023 and thereafter a delegation-level discussion was held on the Royal Navy frigate HMS Lancaster, which made a port visit to Kochi in March last year. Extensive discussion took place the following month on the transfer of technical know-how and

the Royal Navy's experience in maritime electric propulsion for the Indian Navy's major surface combatants in the future.

In November 2023, the India-U.K. electric propulsion capability partnership again met to discuss the possibility of the Indian Navy's future warships to be integrated with electric propulsion technology. The British have agreed to train, equip and help establish the infrastructure necessary to develop an electric propulsion system. Initially, the technology is expected to be tested on landing platforms docks and thereafter on surface vessels such as guided missile destroyers belonging to the next generation with a displacement of over 6,000 tonnes.

While there are considerable opportunities in the India-U.K. defence relationship, challenges remain. A key challenge relates to legacy issues, especially in London's effort to balance its ties between India and Pakistan. Successive U.K. governments have simultaneously supplied India and Pakistan with weapons or curbed weapons exports, leaving many in India frustrated with British motives and objectives in the Subcontinent.

Nettlesome issues surrounding Khalistan and Sikh separatism will cloud the relationship. But today strategic realities have shifted with the emergence of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a major naval power whose deployments in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) are expanding rapidly, creating a very strong rationale for forging closer defence ties between the U.K. and India. Several joint military exercises have already taken place between the two countries with deeper defence industrial cooperation on the anvil and during Mr. Singh's visit, the British officially declared that they will be deploying a littoral response group, a specialised amphibious warfare group in 2024 and carrier strike group in 2025 to train and increase interoperability with the Indian Navy.

With Mr. Singh's visit to the U.K., London is both rediscovering and bolstering its military involvement and presence East of Suez, which it had considerably until the late 1960s.

***Harsh V. Pant is Vice President, Studies and Foreign Policy, Observer Research Foundation (ORF); Kartik Bommakanti is Fellow with the Strategic Studies Programme, ORF***

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# HOUTHİ ATTACKS ON THE RED SEA: INDIA NEEDS TO TAKE A STAND

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Middle East

The airstrikes on Houthi rebel targets inside Yemen on January 11 by the US and the UK, with support from Australia, Canada, Bahrain and the Netherlands, was a significant event in the seemingly escalating Red Sea conundrum. About 72 targets were attacked using precision weapons. The Houthi targets comprised command and control nodes, ammunition depots, weapon launching systems, production facilities, and air defence radar systems. While British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak termed it an act of “self-defence,” the strikes drew condemnation from Russia, Iran, the Houthis, Hamas, Turkey, Hezbollah, and Oman. Egypt and Saudi Arabia were more nuanced, calling out their “concern” over the escalation. Expectedly, the Houthis have vowed to retaliate. The internationally recognised government of Yemen has blamed the Houthis for dragging Yemen into a quagmire.

The Houthi-Saudi animosity dates back three decades ago. The conflict can be traced to the increasing influence of the Saudi-propagated Salafi version of Islam that started taking strong roots in Yemen. This was perceived negatively by the Zaydi sect of Islam in Yemen. The first decade of this century witnessed the Houthis rebelling against the Yemeni government over allegations of corruption and misgovernance. The Arab Spring of 2011 led to widespread protests in Yemen, leading to the resignation of then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, backed by Saudi Arabia, replaced him as the leader. This led to a civil war that, to date, shows no signs of abating. The complicated geopolitics of the Arabian Peninsula ensured that Iran, which considered Saudi Arabia its geopolitical rival, supported the Houthis. Since then, the Iranian moral, material, financial and military support for the Houthis has only grown. Emboldened by the support and with the active connivance of Iran, the Houthis have been targeting ships of Saudi Arabia and UAE for a long time. However, Iran and the Houthis have opportunistically seized the Israeli reaction to the October 7 terrorist attack by Hamas to escalate and widen the scope of attacks on maritime shipping in and around the Red Sea.

The escalatory attacks by Houthis have added to the global economic woes perpetuated by the Russian invasion of [Ukraine](#). Four out of five of the world’s largest container-shipping companies have suspended routing through the Red Sea. The alternate route via Cape of Good Hope adds about 14 days to a trip from West Asia to Europe, incurs additional costs, and implies higher greenhouse gas emissions. About \$1 trillion of world trade passes through the Red Sea every day. The Houthis’ actions have already raised oil and gas prices besides increasing shipping insurance premiums. Last month, the US launched Operation Prosperity Guardian, a multi-national security initiative to jointly address security challenges in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden to ensure freedom of navigation for all countries and bolster regional security and prosperity. As the increasing attacks by the Houthis show, this did not deter them, hence the need for the recent air strikes.

By the reactions so far, the million-dollar question is: Will the air strikes halt or at least slow the Houthis? First, the Houthis have never shown any inclination for a peaceful resolution. The Trump administration had designated Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO). In 2021, the Biden administration removed this to support peace efforts, enable humanitarian relief, and deliver aid to millions of suffering Yemeni citizens. Unfortunately, this emboldened the Houthis, and since the 2021 lifting of the FTO status, the number and intensity of attacks on merchant shipping have only increased.

Second, the strikes should be seen as a resolve to enforce international law in the commons. While they may not stop attacks by the Houthis, they at least partially signal deterrence and perhaps deplete the Houthis' ability to maintain the tempo of attacks. Inaction by the US would have signalled helplessness, further emboldening the Houthis.

Third is the Iran factor. Iran continues to punch above its weight despite a tottering economy, rising unemployment, and social unrest. Using a mix of religion, sectarianism and hybrid warfare through proxies such as the Houthis, Iran keeps the pot boiling. Until such time, the US and its allies can effectively target Iranian logistics and supply lines into Yemen, the Houthis will have the wherewithal to continue their aggressive and illegitimate actions.

It would be a fallacy to think that the Red Sea conundrum concerns only a few countries or is a sub-regional issue. The implications are global, both economically and geopolitically. Any unilateral concessions to the Houthis and their backers (read: Iran) means further diluting the already tenuous adherence to international norms, encouraging more such groups and countries that have no moral compulsions to resort to engaging in hybrid warfare and destabilisation. India, too, is not unaffected by the happenings in the Red Sea. Even as Indian Naval ships have increased their presence, it is in the diplomatic realm that India needs to display more initiative, drive and imagination. For starters, we must read the riot act to Iran quietly and "behind the scenes", if need be. Next, we ought to actively reach out to emerging economies, middle powers, and lesser developed countries to form a consensus to call out the Houthis. An India-sponsored resolution in the UN condemning the Houthis (and any country that backs it) is likely to find widespread support. The Russians may oppose it, and the Chinese may abstain. The Houthis may not stop their attacks. But by introducing and sponsoring such a resolution, India will be seen as a true champion of the Global South and a country that does not forever sit on the fringes. One expects nothing less from an emerging power.

***The writer served in the Indian Air Force. Views are personal***

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## IRAN-PAKISTAN STRIKES: THE DEEP TERROR LINKS EMERGING AMIDST RISING CONFLICT IN WEST ASIA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

On January 16, through a combination of missile and drone strikes, Iran claimed to have destroyed bases of the Jaish-al-Adl (JAA) terror group in border areas of Kooch Sabz in Balochistan, Pakistan. The Iranian Foreign Minister clarified that the strikes did not target Pakistan or its nationals, only fighters who had been mounting serious attacks inside Iran. He cited a deadly attack on a police station in Rask in the neighbouring province of Sistan-Baluchistan by JAA on December 15, which resulted in over 18 casualties. The next day, while Pakistan was mounting diplomatic retaliations, JAA again claimed the assassination of three Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officials, including Colonel Hossein-Ali Javdanfar, commander of the Sistan-Baluchistan Corps of the Quds force.

On January 18, Pakistan forces, using drones and rockets, carried out strikes against “hideouts” of the Baloch Liberation Front (BLA) and Baloch Liberation Army (BLF) inside Iran which they accused of recent attacks in Pakistan. Since then, the two neighbours, nudged by China, Turkey and others are seen moving towards dialogue and diplomacy. However, Iranian strikes into Pakistan on January 16 and into Iraq and Syria a day earlier suggest deeper links amongst groups and threats they pose to the region and beyond.

The JAA, a Sunni Baloch group of Iran — earlier known as Jundallah — was founded around 2002 by Abdolmalek Regi, who was executed by Iran in 2010. Following deadly suicide attacks in Iran in 2009-10, the US designated Jundallah as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation in November 2010 and amended the designation in 2019 to rename it as the JAA. Though the JAA describes itself as the Baloch Resistance of Iran, it is not believed to have any visible links with the Baloch resistance groups of Pakistan. For years, Iran and Pakistan have been accusing each other of sheltering groups and carrying out cross-border raids in “hot pursuit” in the border areas.

The return of the Taliban to power in 2021 may have initially raised the prospects of Taliban support to the JAA against Iran for leverage. However, Iran has been consistently warning only Pakistan. The deep divide between the Taliban and the Pakistan army may have reassured Iran that there is much likelihood of the JAA getting support from the Taliban against Iran. However, the strikes in Pakistan also demonstrate Iranian “over the horizon” capability to Afghanistan. Though Iran chose to refer to the Rask attack as the trigger for the strikes, the JAA has mounted a series of serious attacks in Iran since 2017, especially on security forces. The group seemed to have upped the ante in recent months, frequently targeting border guards, military posts, police stations and security patrols. In 2023, the JAA also began posting long videos featuring IRGC cells supposedly active outside Iran and claiming attacks on such cells.

In parallel, Iran has been facing growing propaganda by Daesh and greater intent to attack. Iran has made several interdictions in this regard. The most prominent of these was in September when it claimed to have prevented over 30 simultaneous bombings across Iran by arresting Daesh-linked operatives — some with links in Syria, the Kurdish region of Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan. On January 3, Iran witnessed the deadliest twin suicide attacks in Kerman, in which over 100 people were killed and scores were injured. Daesh claimed the attacks and Iran vowed to take revenge.



With quick arrests of reported supporters of the Kerman plot, Iranian officials identified a Tajik national known by his alias Abdollah Tajiki as the ringleader and bomb-maker, who they claimed had entered Iran by mid-December from the southeast border of Iran. After making the bombs, he had left before the attacks. The officials also reportedly identified one of the bombers as a 24-year-old with the surname Bozrov who had dual Tajik and Israeli nationalities and believed he had come to Iran from the south-eastern border after months of training by Daesh in Afghanistan. Thus, the Kerman plot seemed to have highlighted the facilitation networks for Daesh in the south-eastern border along Pakistan and connections with potential Daesh trainers in some parts of Afghanistan.

Interestingly, Iran has in the past accused the JAA of cooperation with Kurdish separatists and the JAA has criticised Iran for its intervention in Syria. Following a suicide attack by the JAA on an IRGC convoy in February 2019 resulting in over 47 casualties, though warning Pakistan, IRGC Commander in Chief Mohammad Ali Jafari accused Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the US and Israel of conspiring for such attacks in Iran.

On January 15, Iran mounted missile attacks into Erbil in the Kurdish area of Iraq, apparently killing a well-known Kurdish real estate developer and some civilians. Iran described the site as the “espionage headquarters of Mossad”, responsible for attacks on IRGC targets in the region. Do back-to-back strikes by Iran indicate that groups are coordinating across Af-Pak and the Middle East? Though a deeper probe is needed, it is clear that Iran has demonstrated its resolve in chasing targets across Af-Pak as well as the Middle East. This surely raises the threat perception for the region and beyond.

As for Pakistan, a single retaliatory strike against the so-called hub of Baloch groups is unlikely to make much difference to its dire security situation. In 2023, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claimed over 881 attacks and 2,193 casualties of security forces, while the BLA claimed 247 attacks and 422 casualties of security forces. Pakistan forces have mounted several air strikes and drone strikes into Afghanistan to eliminate TTP hideouts but with no tangible outcome. Already facing hostilities along the Afghan and Indian borders, Pakistan forces seem to have limited bandwidth for direct action.

***The writer is a security analyst and former Director General of Police***

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# A REVIVAL OF THE IMEC IDEA AMID CHOPPY GEOPOLITICS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Middle East

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The Suez Canal | Photo Credit: Getty Images

The Yemen conflict has seen an alarming erosion in the shipping industry's confidence in the Suez Canal continuing to be the backbone of east-west trade. Shippers are not baulking at taking the long, circuitous voyage around Africa.

The Yemen conflict has beefed up the case for the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) which the Gaza war has seemingly dealt a major, if not fatal, blow. Seshadri Vasani, Director-General of the Chennai Centre for China Studies, says that even if the Yemen conflict — ironically, an offshoot of the Gaza war — abates soon, it has made the case for viable alternatives to the Suez Canal stronger.

Critics of IMEC say the Arab Street would simply not allow any major trade link between Saudi Arabia and Israel many years after the Gaza war ends. A United States government press release of September 9 on the IMEC memorandum of understanding promised that stakeholders would meet within 60 days to flesh out the details, but the Gaza war has ensured that no such meeting could possibly happen.

Connecting Al Haditha in Saudi to Haifa in Israel is at the core of IMEC but it was always going to be challenging. Rail projects such as Etihad Rail and the GCC Railway (Gulf Railway), one of whose routes is proposed to terminate at Al Haditha, are already underway in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia independently, which would dovetail with IMEC that targets ports such as Fujairah and Jebel Ali.

Geopolitics is probably the biggest hurdle before IMEC. Harsh Pant, Vice-President for Studies at the Observer Research Foundation, says after the Gaza war, West Asia will look much different. Turkey, which has been explicitly left out of IMEC, has already been expressive about its irritation and proposed an alternative to Saudi Arabia and Israel through Iraq and itself to access the Mediterranean.

But Mr. Pant hopes Turkey will eventually be brought into the project. He is also optimistic that the long-term trend towards greater trade and strategic links between Israel and Arab nations that was championed by the Abraham Accords will hold.

The political resurrection of Donald Trump has two implications, Mr. Pant says. IMEC will be the sort of project that would sync with a business-focused Trump if he were to become President of the U.S. again. What is in doubt is his patience and interest in a major global project, bolstering China's doubts regarding U.S. commitment towards the IMEC.

Besides trade, electricity and digital cables, IMEC is proposed to carry hydrogen pipelines. As the world moves towards decarbonisation, hydrogen produced from fossil fuel-based processes such as methane reforming will continue to be the transition fuel until electrolysis or other "green" processes become practical. Hydrogen sourced from fossil fuels would keep Gulf nations in business in the hydrogen economy too with the corridor serving that purpose.

For India, however, the containerisation through rail and road in IMEC is a big draw. Containerisation radically quickens trade, reduces port costs. India's National Logistics Policy, unveiled in 2022, seeks to lower logistics costs to global levels by 2030. Beefing up containerisation would be a key pathway towards achieving that goal.

In India, some 70% of containers move by road but optimum splits should be 30% road, 30% rail and the rest, coastal and inland shipping, says Ennarasu Karunesan, a shipping industry professional whose long career includes heading Chennai Container Terminal Terminal and Adani Ports & Special Economic Zone, Gujarat. "Road is faster but rail movement of containers is cheaper," he says.

The dedicated rail freight corridors that link to two IMEC ports of Mundra and the Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust (JNPT) will play into IMEC logic. But these rail projects skirt southern India, by and large. Containers in the south typically find their way to the Colombo transshipment container terminal via Chennai, Tuticorin/Thoothukudi and so on. The south can potentially leverage IMEC that promises to cut delivery schedules by 40% if it also sees dedicated freight corridors as part of an all-India network.

Meanwhile, IMEC will have to undergo a key debottlenecking. Haifa cannot be India's main gateway to the West since its current container traffic is barely one third of Mundra or JNPT and a tenth of India's current container exports. The Adani stake in Haifa port could help sync it with Adani-owned Mundra in terms of planning for capacity expansion.

Ammar Malik, who leads the Chinese development finance programme for the Belt & Road Initiative at AidData, a research lab at William & Mary University, U.S., says IMEC will likely draw U.S., European, and Saudi financing, coupled with Indian financing and implementation capacity, particularly in ports. He says the United States International Development Finance Corporation funding for Adani Ports-owned Colombo deepwater container terminal could be a template for Haifa.

***M. Kalyanaraman is a marine engineer-turned journalist***

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## INDIAN ARMY SPECIAL FORCES CONTINGENT REACHES EGYPT FOR JOINT EXERCISE 'CYCLONE'

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Africa, African Union (AU) and India

The Indian Army contingent comprising 25 personnel reached Egypt to take part in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of India-Egypt Joint Special Forces Exercise CYCLONE. The Exercise will be conducted at Anshas, Egypt from 22<sup>nd</sup> January to 1<sup>st</sup> February 2024. The first edition of the exercise was conducted last year in India.

The Indian contingent is being represented by troops from The Parachute Regiment (Special Forces) and Egyptian contingent comprising 25 personnel is being represented by Egyptian Commando Squadron and Egyptian Airborne Platoon.

Aim of the Exercise is to acquaint both the sides with each other's operating procedures in the backdrop of Special Operations in desert/ semi desert terrain under Chapter VII of United Nations Charter. Exercise CYCLONE is designed to develop bilateral military cooperation and strengthen bond between two armies through conduct of discussions and rehearsal of tactical military drills.

The Exercise will involve planning and execution of special operations in sub conventional domain and conducted in three phases. While the first phase will include Military Exhibitions and Tactical Interactions, second phase will focus on training on Improvised Explosive Device (IED), counter IED and Combat First Aid. The third and final phase will encompass Joint Tactical Exercise based on Fighting in Built-up Area and Hostage Rescue Scenarios.

The Exercise will provide an opportunity to both the contingents to strengthen their bond and share best practices. It will also act as a platform to achieve shared security objectives and foster bilateral relations between two friendly nations.

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**SC/VBY/GKA**

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# INDIAN – KYRGYZSTAN JOINT SPECIAL FORCES EXERCISE KHANJAR COMMENCES IN HIMACHAL PRADESH

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Central Asia

The 11<sup>th</sup> edition of India-Kyrgyzstan Joint Special Forces Exercise KHANJAR has commenced at the Special Forces Training School in Bakloh, Himachal Pradesh. The exercise is scheduled to be conducted from 22<sup>nd</sup> January to 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2024. It is an annual event conducted alternatively in both the countries.

The Indian Army contingent comprising 20 personnel is being represented by troops from The Parachute Regiment (Special Forces) and the Kyrgyzstan contingent comprising 20 personnel is represented by Scorpion Brigade.

Aim of the exercise is to exchange experiences and best practices in Counter Terrorism and Special Forces Operations in Built-up Area and Mountainous Terrain under Chapter VII of United Nations Charter. The exercise will emphasise on developing Special Forces skills, advanced techniques of insertion and extraction.

The exercise will provide an opportunity for both the sides of fortify defence ties while addressing common concerns of international terrorism and extremism. The exercise will also accord opportunity to showcase capabilities of cutting edge indigenous defence equipment besides achieving shared security objectives and foster bilateral relations.

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# INDIAN RENEWABLE ENERGY COMPANY - ACME AND JAPANESE HEAVY INDUSTRY MAJOR IHI AND SIGN ONE OF THE LARGEST PACT TO SUPPLY GREEN AMMONIA FROM INDIA TO JAPAN

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Japan

ACME Group, a leading renewable energy company in India, and IHI Corporation, a Japanese integrated heavy industry group, signed an offtake term sheet for supply of green ammonia from Odisha, India to Japan. The term sheet was signed by Founder and Chairman of Acme Group, Shri Manoj Upadhyay and President and CEO of IHI Corporation, Shri Hiroshi Ide, in the presence of Union Minister for Power and New & Renewable Energy Shri R. K. Singh; New & Renewable Energy Secretary Shri Bhupinder Singh Bhalla, and Ambassador of Japan to India Mr. Hiroshi Suzuki.



The term sheet between IHI and Acme covers the supply of 0.4 MMTPA (million metric tons per annum) of green ammonia from Phase-1 of Odisha project in Gopalpur on a long-term basis. Both companies wish to partner across the value chain, starting from production to logistics, supply to the Japanese customers and to create the market for green ammonia for use in a range of applications in power generation and various industrial uses in Japan to reduce the overall emissions.



Speaking about the agreement, the Union Minister for Power and New & Renewable Energy Shri R. K. Singh said that this is one of the first and largest agreements in the world in the field of green hydrogen and green ammonia. “Japan has been a close friend and partner of India. This collaboration in renewable energy in going green will further strengthen our partnership. India’s cost of making green hydrogen and green ammonia is already among the most competitive in the world. We are going to emerge as one of the largest manufacturers of green hydrogen and green ammonia in the world.”

The Minister underlined the strategic importance of the partnership between India and Japan. “Our partnership with Japan is strategic; it will grow stronger. Japan and other developed countries have huge requirements for green hydrogen and green ammonia, which India shall be able to supply at most competitive rates.”

Shri Singh said that the agreement marks a landmark occasion, ushering in a new world. “This is a new world where we replace fossil fuels and carbon with green and renewable fuels such as green hydrogen and green ammonia. I congratulate both Acme and IHI for this partnership. May the partnership between Japan and India become bigger and stronger in the times to come.”





Speaking about the strategic partnership, Ambassador of Japan to India Mr. Hiroshi Suzuki said that the signing of the term sheet marks a major milestone. “The partnership between Acme and IHI will bring remarkable success, given the potential of globally competitive green hydrogen in India. I express the Government of Japan’s unwavering support in taking forward the collaboration between India and Japan in the energy sector”, he added.

The Ambassador said that India-Japan Clean Energy Partnership, established by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, has been driving the cooperation between the two countries. “I express the Government of Japan’s unwavering support in taking forward the collaboration between India and Japan in the energy sector”, he added.

The Ambassador also requested the Union Power & NRE minister for early signing of Green Hydrogen and Green Ammonia Joint Declaration of Intent (JDI) involving the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, Government of Japan and Ministry of New & Renewable Energy (MNRE) Government of India.

Speaking on the occasion, President and Director, Acme Group, Shri Ashwani Dudeja said: “India is well positioned to develop the renewable resources and produce competitive green molecules for export as well as domestic consumption in applications which are otherwise difficult to decarbonise”. He also emphasised the need for support from the Government of India and Government of Odisha in developing the green ammonia project at Gopalpur.

Director and Managing Executive Officer, IHI Corporation, Shri Jun Kobayashi said: “This agreement builds upon our earlier MoU with ACME and represents the strong relationship and alignment between the two companies in developing the market for this new generation fuel”.

The senior management of both the companies earlier visited Bhubaneswar and called on Chief Minister of Odisha, Shri Naveen Patnaik and other officials of Government of Odisha. The green hydrogen and ammonia project at Gopalpur, Odisha is being developed by ACME with a

planned capacity of 1.2 MMTPA to be developed in phases; and the first production is likely within 2027. Over its life cycle, the project will help reduce global GHG emissions by 54 million tons of CO2 equivalent.



### About ACME

ACME Group is one of the largest renewable Independent Power Producer in India with a portfolio of more than 5 GW of renewable energy capacity under operation and various stages of implementation. In 2021, Acme built what is perhaps the world's first Green Ammonia plant in Bikaner, Rajasthan. Drawing upon its experience and strengths, ACME aspires to become a leading green energy provider from electrons to molecules and is developing several green hydrogen and ammonia projects in India, Oman and USA with an aim to have a portfolio of c. 10 MMTPA of green ammonia or equivalent hydrogen/derivatives by 2032. In line with the Government of India's mission to establish India as a hub for green fuels, Acme is working with many potential customers in India to supply green hydrogen and ammonia. Acme has a global footprint with offices and representatives in Japan, Middle East, Europe and USA for the marketing and supply of green hydrogen and its derivatives to the international markets. For more information, please visit <http://www.acme.in>.

### About IHI

IHI is a preeminent Japanese integrated heavy industry group that originated in 1853 and leveraged its shipbuilding technology to expand into onshore machinery, bridge, plant, aero-engine, and other manufacturing fields. IHI has provided various solutions in the Resource, Energy and Environment; Social Infrastructure; Industrial Systems and General-Purpose



Machinery; and Aero Engine, Space and Defence business segments. It is developing technology for ammonia firing and is constructing a carbon-free fuel ammonia supply chain to help decarbonise the economy. For more information about IHI, please visit: <https://www.ihi.co.jp/en/>

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### **PIB DELHI | Alok Mishra / Dheep Joy Mampilly**

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ACME Group is one of the largest renewable Independent Power Producer in India with a portfolio of more than 5 GW of renewable energy capacity under operation and various stages of implementation. In 2021, Acme built what is perhaps the world's first Green Ammonia plant in Bikaner, Rajasthan. Drawing upon its experience and strengths, ACME aspires to become a leading green energy provider from electrons to molecules and is developing several green hydrogen and ammonia projects in India, Oman and USA with an aim to have a portfolio of c. 10 MMTPA of green ammonia or equivalent hydrogen/derivatives by 2032. In line with the Government of India's mission to establish India as a hub for green fuels, Acme is working with many potential customers in India to supply green hydrogen and ammonia. Acme has a global footprint with offices and representatives in Japan, Middle East, Europe and USA for the marketing and supply of green hydrogen and its derivatives to the international markets. For more information, please visit <http://www.acme.in>.

### About IHI

IHI is a preeminent Japanese integrated heavy industry group that originated in 1853 and leveraged its shipbuilding technology to expand into onshore machinery, bridge, plant, aero-engine, and other manufacturing fields. IHI has provided various solutions in the Resource, Energy and Environment; Social Infrastructure; Industrial Systems and General-Purpose

Machinery; and Aero Engine, Space and Defence business segments. It is developing technology for ammonia firing and is constructing a carbon-free fuel ammonia supply chain to help decarbonise the economy. For more information about IHI, please visit: <https://www.ihi.co.jp/en/>

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**PIB DELHI | Alok Mishra / Dheep Joy Mampilly**

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# NORTH KOREA AND SOUTH KOREA: SPIKING TENSIONS

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January 23, 2024 12:15 am | Updated 07:29 am IST

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Kim Jong-un's decision to declare South Korea as an enemy state of the North and abandon the idea of peaceful reunification signals that Pyongyang is adopting a more aggressive stand. Recent months also saw increased war rhetoric from Mr. Kim as well as a series of weapons tests by the North. Last week, [Pyongyang claimed to have fired a medium-range hypersonic missile that could travel at low altitudes](#). It has also tested underwater, unmanned, nuclear-capable drones. Earlier this month, the North fired hundreds of artillery shells near the South's islands of Yeonpyeong and Baengnyeong, closer to the Northern Limit Line, a disputed inter-Korean maritime border. It is evident from these actions that the Kim regime is seeking to alter the status quo. But Mr. Kim's actions were not entirely unprovoked. He sees the growing military convergence between South Korea, Japan, and the U.S. as a security threat. The three countries recently linked up their missile radar data with one another. The U.S. and South Korea also routinely conduct joint military exercises, which triggers sharp reactions from the North. South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, who assumed office in May 2022, has also maintained a hawkish stand towards Pyongyang, saying that peace can be achieved only through strength.

In the past, despite its rhetoric, North Korea was open to diplomatic engagement with the South and the U.S. In 1994, it reached the Agreed Framework with the Clinton administration. As part of this, it agreed to freeze the operation and construction of its nuclear reactors. It was after the collapse of the Agreed Framework during the George Bush Jr. administration that Pyongyang went nuclear. President Donald Trump reached out to the North, which temporarily stabilised inter-Korean ties. When the Trump initiative failed, tensions spiked again. The North's leaders, given what happened to Libya, Iraq, and the Iran nuclear agreement, have little incentive to give up their nuclear weapons for an agreement with the U.S. In an apparent rejection of the path of reconciliation with the U.S., Pyongyang has ruled out talks on denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula and has taken measures to strengthen ties with China and Russia. But even a complicated diplomatic path would be preferable to a military path any day. A direct conflict between the two Koreas, one a nuclear power and the other backed by the world's most powerful country, would be disastrous for the entire region. Dialling down tensions and rebuilding confidence in inter-Korean relations should be an immediate priority for all stakeholders — Seoul, Pyongyang, and Washington.

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## EXPRESS VIEW ON INDIA-MYANMAR BORDER: KEEP IT POROUS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Myanmar

The Centre should rethink its decision to fence the country's 1,643-km border with Myanmar. Announcing the move last week, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said that plans to formally end the Free Movement Regime (FMR) regime, suspended since September 2022, are also on the government's anvil.

The FMR, which came into effect in 2018, allowed people living along the border of either side to travel up to 16 km into the other country without any visa.

Admittedly, the situation along the Indo-Myanmar border has deteriorated after the Tatmadaw seized power in Yangon in February 2021. The junta has persecuted the Kuki-Chin people and the turmoil has resulted in an influx of Myanmarese refugees in the country's Northeast.

The instability has sparked security concerns in [Delhi](#). The trafficking of arms and drugs is also worrying. But sealing borders could complicate matters in parts of the Northeast that bear the scars of insurgencies and ethnic strife, past and present. Undermining people-to-people relations can cause heartburn amongst tribal groups like the Kukis in Mizoram and Manipur who share kinship ties with Myanmar's Chin community. Mizoram's Chief Minister [Lalduhoma](#) — like his predecessor Zoramthanga — has opposed the fencing and civil society groups in the state have also criticised the move.

The junta has ruled Myanmar for all but five years since 1990. Unlike Western powers, which have made democracy the sole prism of their Myanmar policy, India has chosen to do business with the military regime, and that also has to do with the latter's help in the denial of a safe haven to insurgents from the Northeast.

Myanmar has also been a part of India's Look East Policy. The strategy to do business with Yangon worked to a large extent till the latest military takeover three years ago. Since February 2021, the country's Chin province which shares a border with Mizoram has become a major battleground in the conflict between the junta and its opposition.

Entire villages have reportedly been burnt down for failing to comply with the Tatmadaw's writ. In August last year, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar told his counterpart in Myanmar that "India's border areas have been seriously disturbed and any action that aggravates the situation should be avoided". That, however, was a rare admonition. Delhi has, by and large, failed to restrain Yangon from acting against Indian interests. Instead, the Union Home Ministry now seems to be picking on the junta's victims.

Mizoram has provided a sanctuary to the refugees. In neighbouring Manipur, however, the Biren Singh government has framed the crisis in ways that help him gloss over his own government's failures to stanch the state's nearly nine-month-long ethnic strife. Singh has accused the chiefs of the Kuki community of "illegally settling immigrants" from Myanmar. Such hostility is part of a playbook that fails to acknowledge and address the complex nature of the frontiers in the Subcontinent, many of which are a creation of the colonial state. India's border with Myanmar cuts through villages and divides families in Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur. It should remain porous.

END

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# THE LARGER MESSAGE TO NEW DELHI FROM THE RED SEA

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A China PLA warship | Photo Credit: Getty Images

The arrival of the Indo-Pacific marked India's great break out from the unfriendly continental theatre, hemmed in by China and Pakistan and constrained by the vagaries of geopolitics on most of the remaining land borders. But is this ocean of opportunity, quite literally so, steadily becoming yet another theatre of conflict, competition and containment?

The Houthi terror attacks on MV Chem Pluto, an oil and chemical tanker, on its way to the New Mangalore port from the Al Jubail port in Saudi Arabia, and MV Sai Baba, a Gabon-owned, Indian-flagged crude oil tanker, with predominantly Indian crew forced India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar to rush to Tehran to persuade the principal Houthi sponsor to help cease the attacks. India's military response to the Red sea situation has also been swift: the Indian Navy deployed the guided missile destroyers, INS Mormugao, INS Kochi and INS Kolkata in the broader region.

The Houthi attack on commercial ships in the Red Sea and the fragility of order and stability in the Indo-Pacific, a direct result of Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, is also a reminder of the rough weather ahead in the Indo-Pacific in general and India's maritime space in particular. For India, the Houthi challenge may soon pass, given New Delhi's ties with Tehran. And yet, beyond the action-reaction mode, there is a larger question we must ponder. Does India have a maritime grand strategy that goes beyond occasional fire-fighting, naval exercises with friendly nations and a snail-pace increase of the budget allocation for the Indian Navy? What indeed is India's long-term vision for the Indo-Pacific?

New Delhi for sure has made a big, and welcome, shift in its grand strategy — from its continental obsession to maritime theatre. This is India's opening to the world at a time when its land borders are becoming increasingly testy allowing little access for the country to trade with and transit to the rest of the world. But, New Delhi's maritime turn also presents a major challenge, elements of which are becoming increasingly apparent.

India's new two front challenge is not Pakistan and China posing a nutcracker situation for India, but a combination of its continental and maritime challenges.

Having an aggressive and rising China attempting to contain India on its continental and

maritime fronts is a classic two-front situation. While India has been allowing itself to be obsessed with the Line of Control with Pakistan in the west, defending the Line of Actual Control with China in the north, and picking needless quarrels with its neighbours, Beijing was quietly building its empire of influence in the eastern, southern and western oceanic planks. For decades, Beijing (by arming Pakistan) ensured that India is boxed in in South Asia, ignoring the China challenge. By the time New Delhi put its unresolved conflicts with Pakistan in cold storage and shifted gears to the China challenge on the LAC, the game had already gotten bigger.

While the People's Liberation Army keeps up the pressure on the LAC, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has been increasing its presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) at an alarming rate. Consider the following. To begin with, take note of the stupendous growth of the Chinese Navy which is perhaps the largest in the world today: according to one account, it has "an overall battle force of over 370 ships and submarines, including more than 140 major surface combatants". This number is expected to jump to 435 ships by 2030. By way of comparison, the Indian Navy today has 132 warships.

Take a look at China's push for overseas military bases. Beijing today has a military base in Djibouti. Growing Chinese activities in Pakistan's Gwadar and Sri Lanka's Hambantota should worry Indian strategists, even if they are not yet military bases. In Myanmar, the Kyaukpyu port which China is constructing will enable PLAN to inch closer to the Indian Navy in the Bay of Bengal — a maritime space India hereto enjoyed unrivalled. Beijing is reportedly expanding an artificial island in Maldives and the China-Maldives strategic partnership is bound to increase due to tensions between Male and New Delhi. One had the visit of the anti-India Maldivian President to China recently. China is also exploring strategic investment options in the Seychelles, and is also building a naval base in Ream, Cambodia. The small Indian Ocean island nation of Comoros is the latest to join China's fan club in the Indo-Pacific.

The emerging picture is this: from the Horn of Africa (Djibouti) to Myanmar, Sri Lanka, the Seychelles, the Maldives in the Indian Ocean to Gwadar in the Arabian Sea, China's actions will amount to a containment of India in the Indo-Pacific. Read these developments alongside China's expanding outreach to the global South, its port building efforts around the world, and strengthening of relations with West Asia and Africa.

Two things stand out. First, India's assessment about China's strategy to contain India in the continental space in South Asia is not a misplaced one, but is definitely an insufficient one. China is parallelly attempting to contain India in the larger maritime theatre as well.

Second, Beijing's attempt is to influence, among others, those spaces and countries that India has historically engaged with. While the IOR was India's traditional sphere of influence until the Chinese came in with goodies, the far-off regions such as Africa had historical, cultural and political links with India. In that sense, it appears to be a zero sum game — China's gain is India's loss.

So what should India do? To begin with, India should use the growing global attention on the Indo-Pacific which is easily the most consequential geopolitical construct of our times. The good news is that the Indian Ocean is too important for the rest of the world to let China take over. If China poses a challenge to India's regional security and interests in the broader IOR, it also poses a challenge to the commercial and security interests of the United States and its allies.

Every major country is today interested in the Indo-Pacific and its future trajectory as is India, which provides an opportunity for New Delhi to make coalitions with like-minded countries especially at a time Beijing has little great power backing in the maritime theatre. Second, India cannot balance against the growing Chinese power in the Indian Ocean all by itself. India

occupies a pivotal location in the Indo-Pacific moment just as it is the heart of the Chinese attempts to create an empire of influence. Creating, and enhancing, partnerships with like-minded countries is perhaps an important way forward.

Even more importantly, perhaps, New Delhi must invest in a cohesive and well thought-out Indo-Pacific strategy that goes beyond noble intentions and nobler declarations. While Quad and Malabar are useful initiatives, they are at best a modest response to a grand futuristic challenge that is unfolding quickly. For sure, New Delhi already has several pieces of what could constitute the elements of a maritime grand strategy, but they need to be put together in a purposeful and cohesive manner.

The Red Sea situation will fade away eventually, but India's new two-front situation will become more and more apparent in the years to come. In that sense, New Delhi's decision not to join the U.S.-led 'Operation Prosperity Guardian' may have been the right choice for now, but in the longer run, its ability to meet the China challenge without being part of collective efforts would be limited.

***Happymon Jacob teaches at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and is the founder of the Council for Strategic and Defense Research***

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# CABINET APPROVES SIGNING OF A MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING (MOU) BETWEEN INDIA AND OMAN ON COOPERATION IN THE FIELD OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Middle East

The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi was apprised of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), signed on 15<sup>th</sup> December, 2023, between the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology of the Republic of India and the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology of the Sultanate of Oman on cooperation in the field of Information Technology.

The MoU intends to promote comprehensive cooperation between the Parties through mutual support, sharing of technologies, information and investments in the field of Information Technology.

The MoU shall come into effect from the date of signature of the Parties and shall remain in force for a period of 3 years.

Both G2G and B2B bilateral Cooperation in the field of Information Technology will be enhanced.

MoU envisages improved collaboration leading to employment opportunities in the field of IT.

## **Background:**

MeitY has been mandated to promote international cooperation in emerging and frontier areas of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) under bilateral and regional frameworks of cooperation. MeitY is collaborating with a number of countries and multilateral agencies for fostering bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the ICT domain.

Over the period, MeitY has entered into MoUs/Agreements with its counterpart organizations/agencies from various countries to promote cooperation and exchange of information in the ICT domain. This is in consonance with the various initiatives taken by Government of India such as Digital India, Atmanirbhar Bharat, Make in India etc. to transform the country into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy. In this changing paradigm, there is an imminent need for exploring business opportunities, sharing of best practices and attracting investment in the digital sector with the objective of enhancing mutual cooperation.

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## FRANCE'S EARLY BET ON INDIA IS PAYING OFF

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Europe, European Union (EU) and India

India and France are kindred souls on the global stage. They are both systemically important powers, with France being a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council. What they say and do matters. The relationship has attracted attention in all major capitals, from Washington to Berlin to Moscow to Beijing. This is not without justification.

The two countries complement each other in many areas. They do not carry historical baggage and do not have any major bilateral differences. Where such differences exist, the two sides have shown a remarkable ability to overcome them. Relations between them are time tested in every sense of the term.

The visit of French President Emmanuel Macron to India as the chief guest for the Republic Day exemplifies the natural bonds of friendship between the two countries. France occupies a unique position in India's strategic thinking. It is seen as a country that has stood by India through thick and thin — in 1998 when India went nuclear, its support to India on [Jammu](#) and Kashmir, its advocacy of India's claim to permanent membership of the UN Security Council, standing with India to counter Pakistan-sponsored terrorism or bolstering India's capabilities against China.

Its cooperation on security issues such as in defence production, nuclear and space sectors and intelligence sharing has been open-ended and has strengthened Indian hard power. France has not shied away from sharing the most advanced defence and civil technologies and building India's production and manufacturing base. It has promoted India's interests within the European Union without hesitation, becoming both the gateway for and a strong partner of India in Europe. It has offered its biggest strategic asset, its vast Indo-Pacific territory, and equities in organisations such as the Indian Ocean Commission, to India. Indian Air Force planes have been deployed to Reunion Island. France has also refrained from commenting on India's internal affairs.

This is a remarkable record of cooperation between two countries. India has reciprocated by treating France as a dependable source of high-end defence equipment and technology that has led to military purchases worth billions of dollars.

There are good reasons for this to happen.

France values its strategic autonomy like India. France's ability to look at India differently from the Anglo-Saxon world gives it immense advantage in dealing with India. For India too, the relationship with France exemplifies its policy of strategic autonomy without being labelled anti-Western. In doing so, both countries celebrate their commitment to multiculturalism and pluralism at the domestic and international level. They empathise with each other's challenges, such as at the moment of France's sense of betrayal over the cancellation of the contract for French nuclear submarines by Australia and the accompanying announcement of the AUKUS grouping, or India's experience with cross-border terrorism.

The two countries have developed a culture of supporting each other. France was the co-founder of one of Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)'s flagship international initiatives, the International Solar Alliance. It was the first European country to accept the UPI payments system. Several mechanisms have been established to strengthen the India-France partnership in the Indo-Pacific region even though France is not a member of the Quad. Bilateral strategic maritime cooperation between the two predates the Quad.

Every summit meeting between the leaders results in new areas of cooperation. The forthcoming one is expected to be no different. Apart from exceptional protocol gestures, the visit is likely to result in new announcements in the area of military and technical cooperation, relating to engines, aircraft, submarines and space, digitalisation, cyber security and climate change.

President Macron's personal contribution to the India relationship cannot be overstated. This will be his third visit to India, and with it, France gets the unique honour of being the country that has been invited the highest number of times as chief guest for the Republic Day.

Furthermore, President Macron's role at this time of global tensions and uncertainty is even more important. He is the youngest leader to be sworn in as President of France since Napoleon, yet today, in his second and last term, at the age of 46, he is the senior-most leader in Europe. The world needs a bridge between the West and the East and between the North and the South. Prime Minister Modi and President Macron have a unique opportunity to harness their friendship to these ends.

France bet on India very early on. India fully reciprocated. Today, those bets are paying off.

**The writer is member, National Security Advisory Board and former deputy National Security Advisor**

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# CHOPPY WATERS: ON INDIA-MALDIVES TIES

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January 25, 2024 12:10 am | Updated 01:13 am IST

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Within weeks of the [India-Maldives showdown](#) over derogatory [remarks by Maldivian Ministers](#) and the [call for Indian tourists to boycott the archipelago](#), as well as the tussle over Indian troops stationed in Maldives, Delhi and Male are dealing with another controversy. This time it is over the Chinese “research” ship Xiang Yang Hong 03, that is expected to dock in Male in February. India has made its concerns over Chinese ships in the Indian Ocean clear. After [objecting to visits by Chinese “research” vessels to Sri Lanka](#), New Delhi managed to ensure that Colombo banned, from 2024, all foreign research ships, that are believed to collect data for military and civilian purposes, from docking there. For New Delhi, the welcome mat for Chinese ships, at a time the new government of President Muizzu has [scrapped the India-Maldives hydrography agreement](#), has played out as a rebuff. Male also welcomed a visit by the commander of the United States Indo-Pacific Command, who presented equipment. That the developments follow other setbacks, beginning with Mr. Muizzu’s electoral win last year after he ran with an “India Out” campaign slogan, his [government’s plans to push out Indian personnel](#) and his decision to prioritise visits to Türkiye, the UAE and China have made it more worrying.

It is significant that despite Male’s pushback and hyper nationalist calls within India, New Delhi has not stopped engaging the Muizzu government. Prime Minister Narendra Modi met Mr. Muizzu in December and set up a high-level core group for bilateral negotiations on tricky issues. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar also met with his Maldivian counterpart last week. It is hoped that both sides realise that their tensions are merely symptoms of problems that could get larger: one, a regional power that aspires to be a global power, and the other, an archipelago dependent for its economic and regional security needs on external forces. While sovereignty is paramount for any country, it is important that the two sides see the benefit of a détente over confrontation. For India, whose neighbourhood first policy focuses on helping according to its neighbour’s priorities, it is ungainly to be seen as foisting its military, that has carried out humanitarian operations, on the Maldives. For the Muizzu government, that just lost a significant election for Male mayor, the impact of the animus with India on upcoming Majlis (parliamentary) elections should also be a worry. In that sense, the Maldives decision to invite the Xiang Yang Hong 03, but not to allow it more than a routine port call is hopefully a sign that quiet diplomacy is working. A rational approach is more likely to shore troubled bilateral ties out of the choppy waters now.

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## MINT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

There is no lack of American engagement in Asian capitals on security and geopolitics. That is what all the talk of a "free and open Indo-Pacific" is about—seeking friends and allies in a new great-power contest, to China's annoyance. There has been much less evidence of an economic dimension to America's Asian diplomacy—despite a strong desire for one across the region.

Countries in East and South-East Asia thrive on their economic ties with China, but want an American counterbalance. They fear that over-relying on the regional giant would erode their agency and sovereignty. Yet hopes of serious American engagement were dashed when, in one of his first acts as president, Donald Trump in 2017 pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a high-grade trade deal with 12 members. What remained of those hopes has just taken another beating. A cornerstone of President Joe Biden's economic initiative for Asia, launched in May 2022 and called the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), has crumbled.

At the initiative's unveiling in Tokyo, Mr Biden called it "an economic vision" that would underpin "new rules for the 21st-century economy". Four pillars were envisaged: that America and its Asian partners would co-operate to promote clean energy; fight tax evasion and money laundering; boost trade, especially of the digital sort; and build resilient supply chains in the face of such things as pandemics. IPEF was emphatically not a trade pact to open markets and cut tariffs. Trade deals need congressional approval, which is a non-starter in Washington these days, given the protectionist turn in both America's main parties. Yet if IPEF looked weaker for that, it was thought to be executive-led, so relatively fleet and flexible. Countries swiftly signed up, including Australia, Brunei, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam.

A summit of APEC, the Asia-Pacific trade talking-shop, held in San Francisco on November 16th and 17th, was due to showcase this American initiative. After months of negotiation among ipef members, agreements on all four pillars were promised. A signed deal to co-operate more on supply chains was announced, along with in-principle agreements on green energy and fighting corruption. Yet the most important pillar, concerning trade, collapsed. At the last minute America dropped plans to announce even a partial agreement on enforceable trade rules.

This has left Asian negotiators (Australian and Japanese above all) and Asian and American business executives utterly dismayed. They had known something was wrong for months. For one, America flipped its negotiating position on digital trade, from pushing to ease access to data to opposing it. That seemed to be in response to pressure from Senator Elizabeth Warren, a left-winger who thinks big tech has conspired to capture government. Additional opposition, it emerged last week, had come from another leftist Democrat, Senator Sherrod Brown, who is up for re-election next year in Ohio, a battleground midwestern state. Last week Mr Brown criticised the proposed trade pillar on the basis that it "lacks enforceable labour standards". That seems to have put the kibosh on it.

The US Trade Representative, Katherine Tai, no avid fan of open trade herself, says the negotiations will continue and a conclusion is possible. That seems unlikely. To develop digital business with America and others, countries such as Indonesia and Vietnam were prepared to allow more scrutiny of their labour and environmental standards and resist their own protectionist impulse to wall off national data. Now, says Deborah Elms of the Hinrich Foundation, a think-tank in Singapore, that carrot is off the table.

China's trade web is meanwhile growing. Asian policymakers have no illusions about the dysfunctional nature of American politics or how long it may last—this week Mr Trump promised to “knock out” IPEF if he is re-elected next year. Even so, there is still Asian goodwill towards America, though dwindling.

Despite their growing sense of frustration, Asian governments want to persist with IPEF. That is partly because, as one South-East Asian diplomat says, the region views the framework as of more strategic than economic value. So it is better to keep America engaged in lengthy discussions about Asian supply chains and standards than to see it wander off altogether. And (who knows?) maybe one day it might even rediscover that trade liberalisation is in its interest.

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## EXPRESS VIEW ON MACRON IN INDIA: BUILDING ON TRUST

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

President Emmanuel Macron's two-day visit — he was chief guest at the country's 75th Republic Day function — has reinforced France's special place in India's strategic calculus. The partnership underlined during PM Modi's visit last year to France, is built on three pillars — deepening cooperation in defence, sustained engagement in global issues, especially in emerging and green technologies, and people-to-people contact. These have emerged stronger after Modi-Macron talks in the past two days.

The two countries have adopted a roadmap for defence industrial production. This cooperation aims to create supply chains that fulfil [Delhi](#)'s security needs and provide it with the necessary bandwidth to negotiate partnerships with other countries. The pacts on clean energy and technology take forward the engagement begun on the sidelines of the Paris Climate Pact in 2015 — the International Solar Alliance, an expanding club of nations, is amongst the most tangible outcomes of this collaboration.

In 2021, the two signed a memorandum on green hydrogen, which aims “to bring the French and Indian hydrogen ecosystems together.” Macron's reiteration of his last year's commitment to increase the number of students studying in France to 30,000 and give them attractive post-study work visas will also go down well in a country undergoing an educational churn. The Alliance Francaise network will also be strengthened — this will be particularly welcomed by Indian students who often find language a barrier in accessing French higher education institutes, 35 of which find place in the QS ratings.

In recent years, India has inched closer to Washington. France, too, acknowledges the US's place in the global order. At the same time, the traditional importance that Paris attaches to its strategic autonomy vis-a-vis Washington has earned Delhi's trust, especially after the French government refused to toe the dominant Western line after India's nuclear tests in 1998. France recognised India's strategic importance at a time when other Western powers turned their back on it. In 2019, France blocked China from raising the Kashmir issue at the UN Security Council after the abrogation of Article 370. French domestic procedures on defence deals have made the country a reliable defence partner. While pacts with the US are dogged by unpredictability due to Congressional interventions and export control regimes, French deals have no such strings attached.

Modi and Macron also exchanged perspectives on Gaza, Red Sea turmoil and conflict in [Ukraine](#). In recent months, it has become clear that peace in these theatres of conflict will require a multi-pronged effort. The Red Sea is a significant conduit for Indo-European trade and the frailties of a US-led defence against the Houthi attacks are already evident. With Trump's return to the White House becoming imminent, fears that the US will be a less engaged player on the global stage may not be unfounded. Indo-French collaboration could be among the keys to ensuring stability in a complex geopolitical environment.

Sunny Deol, known for his professionalism on film sets, shared a funny incident where he got agitated when co-star Sridevi tried to pull a prank on him during the shoot of their 1989 film

Chaalbaaz. He also talked about actors' insecurities and how it can ruin a film. Sunny will be seen in Aamir Khan's production Lahore 1947, directed by Rajkumar Santoshi.

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# THE YEAR COMMENCES, BUT WITH DEEP FOREBODING

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'The Israel-Hamas conflict has resurrected many fires that had plagued the region previously' | Photo Credit: AP

Seldom has a new year commenced with such deep foreboding as 2024. Both the geopolitical and domestic outlook appear distinctly unfavourable. Predicting how much worse the situation could become as the year advances could, however, be hazardous.

The war in Ukraine, while stalemated at present, is set to enter a new phase. Since neither side appears ready for peace talks or negotiations, the danger is that one side or the other might be tempted to escalate matters in their favour by resorting to still more dangerous weapons available in their armoury, not excluding nuclear. It is obvious that neither Russia nor Ukraine (plus the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) can afford to be seen as having been forced to retreat — for if Russia is compelled to step back, not only would it mean the humbling of Russia per se but it would also signal a major victory for the West. If, on the other hand, Ukraine (plus NATO) is compelled to accept peace on Russia's terms, it would comprehensively alter the politics of Europe. Key questions would thereafter arise about the very utility of NATO as a bulwark against aggression.

It is the situation in West Asia that is cause for greater alarm. The Israel-Hamas conflict has resurrected many fires that had plagued the region previously. The conflict is getting further enlarged as the Iran-Pakistan stand-off in recent weeks has demonstrated. It could well set-off a 'prairie fire' across the region, which would have consequences for much of the world.

Iran is, in the meantime, displaying an aggressive mien, and Arab monarchies are preparing for the worst. Iran is encouraging the Houthis in Yemen to attack United States and foreign ships, while engaging in open warfare with both Iraq, and of late, Pakistan; Iran is also accusing Pakistan of instigating terror groups located within their country to attack Iranian targets. The outcome is that West Asia which has always had a cornucopia of problems, is beginning to see many of them come alive. U.S. diplomacy, which has been largely confined to steps such as sending its Sixth Fleet to the region, is making little impression. The absence of purposeful diplomacy means that the situation can only worsen.

The Indo-Pacific region may appear less incendiary as of now, but there are several underlying

tensions that could turn the situation explosive during the year. The elections in Taiwan have produced an anti-China dispensation, whose leader Lai Ching-te is on record stating that his mission is to defend Taiwan from intimidation from China and protect its democratic way of life. China is least likely to take kindly to this, though it may not be provoked into taking any pre-emptory steps just yet.

Nevertheless, an 'anti-Main Land China Government' in Taiwan could well act as a lightning rod. Many countries in east Asia such as the Philippines, may feel encouraged to display a more aggressive mien in their disputes with China over territories lying within the First and Second Island Chains. This could provoke China, thus raising the stakes for everyone in the East Asia and Indo-Pacific regions. The area is already being touted as one of the main areas of strategic contestation between the U.S. and China, and, hence, could bring in the U.S. to stake its claims. The consequential result would be heightened tension across the region, involving many countries of East and Southeast Asia, not excluding India.

All this also suggests that 2024 may not see any lowering of tensions between India and China, including on the issue of the disputed border between the two countries. China may remain preoccupied with several of its other concerns, but India cannot but maintain a strict vigil as far as the China-Indian border is concerned. Not to be lost sight of also is the fact that despite China's economic difficulties, the West's aggressive wooing of India at this time may well provoke China into taking measures that could result in the humbling of India in the eyes of the world. Hence, heightened vigil is called for against any possible manoeuvre on China's part.

India may also be required this year to spruce up its relationship with some of its neighbours. Any simulation of 'wolf-warrior diplomacy' of the kind practised by China, would not suit India when it comes to its neighbours such as the Maldives. India must adhere to its traditional policy of maintaining excellent relations with all countries, specially those in the South Asian region. Bhutan falls into a special category and will need close attention. Every effort needs to be made in 2024 to strengthen relations with Bhutan which is being aggressively wooed by China.

The global outlook notwithstanding, India may face its share of internal problems in 2024. Elections are scheduled to be held in the middle of the year, and though the results, ipso facto, may not provoke any problems, there could be other issues. The build up to the elections and the immediate aftermath could become a problem. A feature of the forthcoming elections is the strong veneer of religiosity that pervades the campaign propaganda of certain groups, unlike that in many previous elections. More to the point: an impression exists that this election is in the mould of a 'do or die struggle', leaving little scope for any 'give or take', which is greatly inflaming passions across the spectrum.

In popular imagination, the Ramjanmabhoomi issue and the installation of Ram's idol in Ayodhya have currently become intertwined with the ruling dispensation's election campaign. Further, the current campaign rhetoric across all parties is not helping matters. It is contributing to a sharp cleavage among the electorate along religious and other lines, a consequence of which could be heightened communal tensions following the elections. It is imperative, after the elections, that care is taken to see that the situation does not get out of hand.

Apart from the communal aspect, close attention may also need to be paid to some of the other problems that had plagued India in the past, but have remained dormant. Manipur is a case in point, viz., that peace in the Northeast cannot be taken for granted. Apart from Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Assam, especially the last named with the United Liberation Front of Assam's anti-talk faction again raising its head need close attention. On the mainland, left-wing extremist activity has declined of late, but should not be ignored since its underpinnings and its ability to resort to violent attacks in some of the mainland States of the country remain. Internal



security during 2024 will, thus, demand heightened vigilance.

The year 2024 could also be the year of reckoning for India's Parliament. Much more than damage control may be needed. The final weeks of Parliament in 2023 had witnessed an unfortunate series of events that besmirched India's record as an upholder of parliamentary traditions. First, came the lamentable incident where Parliament security was breached by two outsiders. The sequel to this was an unprecedented stand-off between the Opposition and the ruling party, followed by the suspension of 146 members of both Houses. In the surcharged atmosphere that might prevail after the elections, many more efforts of this kind to stall parliamentary proceedings may well occur. It is important that after the new Parliament is convened, House leaders of all parties ensure the smooth conduct of Parliament. One of the fundamental responsibilities of Parliament is to protect constitutionally guaranteed liberties, and if an elected Parliament fails to do this, it would deal a mortal blow to the nation.

If the situation does not improve even after a new Parliament is convened, it would only provide ammunition to opponents of parliamentary democracy. This, then, could well become the key issue in 2024. It is vitally important, and necessary, to reinforce the unambiguous understanding that Parliament is fundamental to the functioning of democracy as we have known it.

M.K. Narayanan is a former Director, Intelligence Bureau, a former National Security Adviser, and a former Governor of West Bengal

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# A CLOSER LOOK AT MYANMAR'S DISCONTENT

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'If one objective of the coup was to strengthen national unity, the Myanmar military has failed spectacularly' | Photo Credit: AFP

In February, it will be three years since [the army seized power in Myanmar](#), overthrowing a democratically elected government headed by Aung San Suu Kyi. The coup prompted a massive civil disobedience movement. The deposed members of parliament formed a National Unity Government that constituted the People's Defence Forces (PDFs) and called for an armed uprising. The fragile peace between major ethnic armed organisations and the military collapsed, as the former's objective of establishing federal democracy was no longer feasible under army dictatorship.

Last October, an alliance of the Arakan Army, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and Ta'ang National Liberation Army [launched coordinated attacks on the military](#), and inflicted massive losses on the military in the Shan State. Paletwa town on the country's western borders, and a critical node in India's Kaladan project, is currently under the control of the Arakan Army. At the same time, the regions inhabited by the majority Bamar ethnic community, such as Sagaing, Bago and Magwe, also witnessed a significant spike in resistance, and the PDFs gained ground against the military.

If one objective of the coup was to strengthen national unity, the Myanmar military has failed spectacularly. In fact, the military has conceded large tracts of territory to the ethnic armed organisations and PDFs. But losing control of territory to armed groups is not new for the army; the military has frequently lost ground to ethnic armed groups and the now defunct Communist Party of Burma, but subsequently recovered some of the losses.

It should be noted that when international sanctions were substantially diluted between 2010 and 2020, the military acquired air and army equipment. Numerous reports indicate that the coup leaders have used firepower even on unarmed civilians, resulting in significant internal displacement and neighbouring countries facing refugee crises. The reasons for losing territory now have less to do with military incapacity and more to do with growing popular discontent. Reports suggest that the military finds it difficult to recruit even from the regions dominated by Bamars, who constitute the bulk of army personnel. Since the coup, there have been sporadic reports of government officials, doctors, and police personnel assisting the resistance movement. In the past year, a fairly large number of military personnel have surrendered to the ethnic armed organisations and PDFs. A month ago, to evade an attack by the resistance groups, over 150 Myanmar soldiers moved into India and surrendered. There are reports of

army officers served with severe punishment for failure to stop desertions, suggesting that military cohesion is coming under increasing stress.

Given these circumstances, China has a multi-layered strategy to protect its interests. On international platforms, China robustly defends the Myanmar military from international censure. Simultaneously, various ethnic armed organisations on Myanmar's northern border have close relations with China, and it is unlikely that the uprising in Shan State, given its scale, could have happened without Chinese consent. It is rumoured that Beijing used the ethnic alliance to stamp out online scams and criminal syndicates that were fleecing millions from Chinese citizens. Having achieved its objectives, Beijing was able [to get the rebels and the Myanmar army to agree to a ceasefire](#). With the momentum of the ethnic offensive stalled and the army not recovering lost territory, it is not certain how long this truce will last. Neither ethnic armed organisations nor the coup leaders will be comfortable with Beijing's ability to influence their operations.

The principal regional actor, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has articulated a five-point consensus and denied the Myanmar military a place at its summits. Despite repeated efforts, the ASEAN special envoy to Myanmar was prevented from having meaningful interactions with all the relevant stakeholders. Therefore ASEAN has not been able to alter the trajectory of Myanmar's politics, but some ASEAN members are shunning their customary reticence and are now sharply critical of the Myanmar coup.

With a shared border of about 2,416 km, Thailand wields significant influence in Myanmar. Last year, Thailand's Foreign Minister not only interacted with Myanmar's military leadership but also with the imprisoned leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Thailand hosts and engages with Myanmar's exile organisations and, in the recent past, has made efforts to scale up its humanitarian assistance.

India could also consider a more proactive humanitarian approach to provide succour to displaced communities in Myanmar. Such an initiative could also reduce the inflow of refugees into India. In its engagement with Myanmar, India should factor in the three political realities.

First, discontent against the coup shows no signs of abating. The military often hinted at the possibility of conducting elections under proportional representation, but has failed to do so because of inability to ensure sufficient stability in the country.

Second, despite the absence of a charismatic leader and meaningful international support, resistance to the coup has demonstrated considerable resilience over the past years.

Third, Myanmar today is politically fragmented, with the military, ethnic armed organisations and PDFs having varying degrees of control in different parts of the country. The military seems to be losing more ground than gaining it. Perhaps it is time for India to re-calibrate its Myanmar policy after consultations with all the relevant stakeholders.

***Krishnan Srinivasan is a former Foreign Secretary. Sanjay Pulipaka is Chairperson of the Politeia Research Foundation***

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## CEREMONY AND SUBSTANCE: ON THE MACRON VISIT, INDIA-FRANCE TIES

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Given the circumstances behind the invitation to the French President Emmanuel Macron, [his visit to India](#) last week was always going to be more about symbolism and ceremony than about substance. Mr. Macron, the sixth French President to grace the Republic Day celebrations, [stepped into the breach](#) when U.S. President Joseph Biden declined the invitation. In addition, India and France had in 2023 already sealed a number of agreements as they marked [25 years of their strategic partnership](#) — a year that saw Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Mr. Macron meet a number of times. Not only had the two countries already announced a fairly ambitious “Horizon 2047” relationship road map but they had also stated plans for joint production of military hardware, cutting-edge technology transfers and new purchase deals for French aircraft, engines and submarines. Diplomats had their work cut out for them with the two sides having to prepare for the Republic Day visit with little time to spare, and with so many agreements already announced. Many even speculated whether India had “missed an opportunity” to extend invitations to other partners including from the South Asian neighbourhood or Global South, rather than getting a much-invited France.

As a result, it is understandable that many of the agreements announced after the Modi-Macron meeting in Jaipur, and their time together watching the Republic Day Parade, were essentially built on the road map. These included the “Defence industrial” road map, meant to expand on plans for the two countries to co-design, co-develop and co-produce defence hardware in the air, on land and sea, as well as a space-defence partnership. In addition, the two sides signed MoU documents on agriculture, digital health and science and technology cooperation. An assembly-line manufacture of civilian helicopters (Airbus-Tata) was a first, but a private B2B deal. The two sides also issued a joint statement on regional and international developments. India has been unable to find such common ground with other partners including the U.S. and Russia on these issues but was able to take shared positions with France on the condemnation of terror attacks in Israel, the need for humanitarian assistance in Gaza and Ukraine, and concerns over the Red Sea attacks. While they did not demonstrate progress in other areas of cooperation, including big ticket defence hardware deals being negotiated, nuclear cooperation for the long-delayed power project in Jaitapur and for small modular reactors, it is clear that each is a work in progress, demonstrating the continuity in a partnership built on a mutual respect for strategic autonomy, which Mr. Macron said at the presidential banquet was also driven by their shared commitment to “tradition and innovation”.

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