

TIES DEPEND ON PEACE ON BORDER: RAJNATH TO CHINA

The violation of existing agreements has eroded the entire basis of bilateral relations, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh told his Chinese counterpart General Li Shangfu on Thursday, adding that the development of India-China ties is premised on the prevalence of peace and tranquillity at the borders. This is the first high-level military visit from China since the start of the Ladakh stand-off in April 2020.

Just five days before the bilateral discussions, the two countries held the 18th round of Corps Commander talks as part of continuing dialogue to resolve the stand-off. Those talks remained inconclusive, with both sides agreeing that restoring peace along the border areas would "enable progress" in recently strained relations.

"The two Ministers had frank discussions about the developments in the border areas as well as bilateral relations," a Defence Ministry statement said. "He reiterated that violation of existing agreements has eroded the entire basis of bilateral relations."

All issues on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) need to be resolved in accordance with existing bilateral agreements and commitments, Mr. Singh said.

Defence sources said Mr. Singh categorically said military cooperation between the two countries can progress "only" if peace and tranquillity is established on the border. "He said, after disengagement, there should be movement towards de-escalation, and expressed hope for a positive response," a source stated.

The Chinese Minister and State Councillor is in New Delhi to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Defence Ministers' meeting scheduled for Friday.

The Defence Ministers of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan will also participate in the SCO meeting. India has also invited Belarus and Iran, currently observers in the SCO, for the meeting. The Defence Minister of Pakistan will participate virtually. The Ministers will discuss matters of regional peace and security, counter-terrorism efforts within the SCO, and an effective multilateralism, the Defence Ministry said.

As the SCO chair, India has organised two defence-related activities to



Consensus bid: Defence Minister Rajnath Singh with his Chinese counterpart General Li Shangfu and officials in New Delhi. REUTERS

Violation of existing agreements has eroded the entire basis of bilateral relations, says Defence Minister during China's first high-level military visit since the Ladakh stand-off began in 2020

enhance interoperability amongst member states: a workshop on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and a seminar of SCO nations' defence think-tanks on the issue of armed forces contributing to military medicine, healthcare and pandemic management. "SCO pursues its policy based on the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity of nations, non-interference in internal affairs, equality of all member States and mutual understanding and respect for opinions of each of them," a Ministry statement added.

MINDLESS VIOLENCE

The Maoist attack in south Bastar is reflective of the group's potency

Less than two years ago, the Union Home Minister Amit Shah had told leaders and representatives of various States that the influence of the Maoists had reduced from 96 districts in 10 States in 2010 to just 41 by late 2021. Close observers of the Maoist insurgency had warned that despite the Maoists' decline, they were still active in South Bastar, the Andhra-Odisha border or in some districts in Jharkhand. The killing on Wednesday of a District Reserve Guard team of the Chhattisgarh police in a powerful IED blast followed by gunfire is reflective of the threat still posed by Maoists in the south Bastar region. The fact that these 10 personnel were returning from a counter-insurgency operation that they had conducted after a tip-off indicates that the Maoist attacks could have been a trap and points to a possible intelligence failure. With the Maoists known to ramp up attacks on security forces before the onset of the monsoon season, the killings suggest a failure in anticipating such an attack. It is incumbent upon the government to investigate the incident, plug security loopholes, find out the Maoist cadre responsible for the attack and to bring them to justice. But it is a task that is easier said than done as this is tough terrain in a region which could be the last stronghold of the Maoists.

The inability of the Maoists to graduate beyond a violent guerrilla-based movement that utilises the remote and inaccessible forested terrain of central India, and home to tribal communities, is largely because of their incoherent and outdated ideology that has found few takers even among the most marginalised of communities. Diligent security actions have certainly curbed their presence outside their stronghold even as the responsiveness and penetration of the Indian state into areas where governmental sway was hitherto absent, has had a mitigatory effect. Yet, it is not just the terrain and topography that have acted as the obstacles in defeating the Maoists in south Bastar. The alienation of a section of tribals caught in the crossfire between security forces and the Maoists has allowed the Maoists to tap into discontent and to retain a presence in the area. In the years of counter-insurgency, hard-edged strategies of creating wedges among the tribal population to defeat the Maoists have been counter-productive. The government must continue to try to win the support and confidence of the tribal people of south Bastar as that is the surest way of defeating the Maoist movement. Any military action that is hastily put together for retribution and which could target innocent tribals will only exacerbate the problem.

WE AIM TO INSPIRE YOU

NOT BY 'VANDE BHARAT' ALONE

K. Balakesari belonging to the Indian Railway Service of Mechanical Engineers, was Member Staff, Railway Board

There is a touch of wry irony in the fact that today most of the news about the Indian Railways concerns Vande Bharat trains, and more particularly the fact that every new Vande Bharat train is being personally flagged off by the Prime Minister. For, a little over four years ago, the launch of Train 18, the precursor to the Vande Bharat train, was heralded by the initiation of vigilance investigations against some of the top architects of the project on wholly specious grounds.

The Train 18 project was one that was wholly conceived, planned and executed with élan in record time, by a team of inspired, talented and committed Railway professionals of the Integral Coach Factory, Perambur, Chennai, with minimum official support. Thankfully, the witch hunt came to naught. Today it seems it is raining Vande Bharat trains all over the country, a unique example of the success of a purely local initiative driving policy at the highest level.

Amid the publicity blitz and euphoria surrounding the successive introduction of Vande Bharat trains, almost on a weekly basis in various parts of the country, it is easy to lose sight of the larger picture and the serious issues confronting the Indian Railways.

With the elimination of a separate Railway Budget and its merger with the General Budget from 2017 onwards, there has been a welcome shift towards ramping up investments in the Indian Railways, both through increased budgetary support from the General Exchequer and through institutional borrowings, aimed at creating additional rail transport capacity ahead of demand.

Needed, more relevant metrics

Accordingly, the Annual Plan outlay of the Indian Railways which was ₹1,09,935 crore in 2016-17 in the last separate Railway Budget has ballooned to ₹2,60,200 crore in the Budget for 2023-24, an increase of 137%. While unprecedented levels of investment to build rail infrastructure are a welcome development, unless these investments translate into concrete progress towards capacity building, highlighting only the inputs without looking at the outcomes serves no purpose. Therefore, the performance of the Indian Railways needs to be evaluated using more relevant metrics.

This article will look at two areas (one each on the freight and the passenger fronts). The National Rail Plan 2030 (NRP) envisages raising the rail share in freight traffic vis-à-vis roadways from 27% to 45% by 2050 and the raising of the average speed of goods trains to 50 kilometres per hour from the present 25 kmph and concurrent reduction in tariff rates for freight by up to 30%. It may be mentioned that the rail share of freight carried reduced from 51.5% in 2008-09 to 32.4% in 2018-19 for leads over 300 km.

Further, almost the entire increase in volume of traffic carried by rail over the decade 2008-09 to 2018-19 has been in short lead traffic (leads up to 300 km) and 55% of the increase was through the transport of just one commodity, viz. coal. As yet, there is no evidence of higher levels of traffic being achieved concurrently with diversification of commodities carried or an increase in rail share vis-à-vis road transport. In other words, in the race towards achieving the targets set in NRP 2030, the Indian Railways is at or near the

starting block.

The subject of punctuality, other core issues

On the passenger front, perhaps the single most important operational index is punctuality. Here, a radical shift in emphasis is called for. If stations in the Indian Railways network can be remodelled to 'international standards', perhaps it is time to aim for international standards in punctuality of trains as well. Japanese Railways reckon the punctuality of their high speed trains in seconds. The Indian Railways should aim to be at least within five minutes (without any adjustment) of the scheduled time. While published statistics of punctuality usually are above 90%, these figures are arrived at with a dose of adjustment and only the destination arrival time is considered irrespective of the fact that a train might have been off schedule en route at all the important intermediate stations.

More than a decade ago, when an exercise was undertaken to plot the status of all passenger trains on the move in the Indian Railways network on real time basis, the punctuality of all passenger-carrying trains at any given time hovered around 60%.

It is high time to move away from the traditional concept of destination punctuality and evolve an index of punctuality that will also reflect the punctuality at select intermediate stations, at least for all mail/express trains. With developments in IT and data analytics, this should be possible. Real time punctuality of 90% should be a challenging target to aim for. The focus should be to improve overall passenger experience, not merely statistics.

These are only two examples. There is a vast range of issues such as financial performance, physical performance, safety, organisational/human resource issues, project execution, customer relations, effect of the dedicated freight corridors on the Indian Railways system capacity and so on that need to be critically analysed/reviewed and the necessary course corrections effected. Have an annual report

Seven years ago, in the wake of the elimination of a separate Rail Budget, an article by this writer (The Hindu, "Railway Budget — a vanishing trick", September 22, 2016) had suggested that the government should consider tabling an annual report on the performance of the Railways in Parliament — on the lines of the annual Economic Survey prepared by the Finance Ministry ahead of the General Budget. This report, unlike a publicity pamphlet like the Indian Railways Year Book, should be an internal performance audit that should serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, serious students and also researchers in the field of rail transport.

No government or organisation would willingly submit itself to such a self-analysis in the public domain. But with the huge sums already invested, and proposed to be invested in the future in the rail sector, the nation can ill-afford to let the performance of its prime transporter and its largest public undertaking to be judged merely on the basis of the number of Vande Bharat trains introduced, the glitz and opulence of its remodelled stations or the record-breaking length of its railway station platforms.

DIMASA REBEL GROUP SIGNS PEACE PACT WITH CENTRE, ASSAM GOVT.



An Assam-based insurgent group — Dimasa National Liberation Army (DNLA)/Dimasa People's Supreme Council (DPSC) — which operates in Dima Hasao district, signed a peace agreement with the State government and the Centre in the presence of Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday. After the signing of the memorandum of understanding (MoU), Mr. Shah said, "The agreement will put a complete end to insurgency and there are no more armed groups in Assam today."

He said that under the agreement, the DNLA representatives have agreed to give up violence, surrender including the surrender of arms and ammunition, disband their armed organisation, vacate all camps occupied by DNLA cadres and join the mainstream. As a result over 168 armed cadres of DNLA surrendered with their weapons and joined the mainstream, he said.

The Minister said the agreement will bring a complete end to the insurgency in Dima Hasao district of Assam.

"Dimasa Welfare Council will be set up by the Assam government to protect, preserve and promote a social, cultural, and linguistic identity to meet political, economic and educational aspirations and will ensure speedy and focused development of the Dimasa people residing outside the Autonomous Council," he said.

The MoU also provides for the appointment of a Commission under Paragraph 14 of the Sixth

Schedule to the Constitution of India to examine the demand for the inclusion of additional villages contiguous to the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (NCHAC) with the Council.

It also provides for necessary measures to be taken by the Government of India and the Assam government to rehabilitate the cadres of

DNLA. "A Special Development package of ₹500 crore each, will also be provided by the Government of India and Government of Assam over a period of five years, for all-round development of NCHAC and Dimasas people residing in other parts of the State," the Ministry said in a statement.

THE THREAT OF RISING SEA LEVELS



Rising sea level causing land erosion on Mousuni island in West Bengal. Supratim Bhattacharjee

What is the rate at which sea levels are rising? What are the reasons behind the accelerated sea-level rise? What does the report by the World Meteorological Organisation show? What problems can be caused by rising sea levels?

The World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) has found in a new report that the world's sea level is rising at an unprecedented rate, portending potentially disastrous consequences for the weather, agriculture, the extant groundwater crisis, and social disparities.

The report, entitled 'State of the Global Climate 2022', was published last week. Along with accelerating sea-level rise, it focused on a consistent rise in global temperatures, record-breaking increases in the concentration of greenhouse gases as well as glacier loss, sustained drought-like conditions in East Africa, record rainfall in Pakistan, and unprecedented heatwaves that struck Europe and China in 2022.

A release said "droughts, floods and heatwaves affected communities on every continent and cost many billions of dollars. Antarctic sea ice fell to its lowest extent on record and the melting of some European glaciers was, literally, off the charts."

While the sea-level rise is one of several compounding disasters, it also merits individual attention for the unique crises it can precipitate, especially for coastal areas, the communities there that depend on life in the sea, and its ability to render the loss of land.

How much is the sea rising?

The press release said, "The rate of global mean sea-level [GSML] rise has doubled between the first decade of the satellite record and the last." Since the 1990s, scientists have been measuring sea-level rise using satellite altimeters. These instruments send radar pulses to the sea surface and measure the time they take to get back and the change in their intensity. The higher the sea level, the faster and stronger the return signal.

Researchers are able to determine GSML by collecting this data from different points on earth and calculating the average. To calculate the rate of change in the GSML — i.e. how fast or slow the sea level is changing — we can calculate the difference in the GSML across a few years, usually a decade, and then divide the difference by the number of years. This provides an estimate of

the rate of sea-level change.

According to the WMO report, the sea level has been rising in the three decades for which satellite altimeter data is available (1993-2022). But, while the rate of sea-level rise was 2.27 mm/year in 1993-2002, it shot up to 4.62 mm/year in 2013-2022.

What causes accelerated sea-level rise?

The WMO report points to the following factors as being responsible for a rising GSML: "ocean warming, ice loss from glaciers and ice sheets, and changes in land water storage".

The report also quantifies the individual contribution of these factors to yield, what researchers call the "GSML budget".

According to the report, in 2005-2019, loss of glaciers and ice sheets contributed 36% to the GSML rise. Ocean warming — the phenomenon of rising mean ocean temperatures — contributed 55%, and changes in the storage of land water contributed less than 10%.

As increasing concentrations of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases drive global warming, 90% of the 'extra' heat is stored in the oceans. This leads to ocean warming. And as the ocean heats up, it undergoes thermal expansion, which in turn leads to a rise in the GSML. One measure of ocean warming is the ocean heat content (OHC).

As per the report, OHC measures in 2022 touched a new record.

The report also says that the earth's ice cover, known as the cryosphere, has thinned. The cryosphere includes the Arctic and Antarctic regions (called "sea ice"), glaciers, the ice sheets of Greenland and Antarctica (area of ice on land covering more than 50,000 km²), seasonal snow cover, and permafrost (mass of land that remains below 0 degree Celsius for at least two straight years).

What do the report's findings mean?

Nehru Prabakaran, a scientist at the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), Dehradun, who works on the effect of sea-level change on coastal ecosystems, told The Hindu that the WMO report confirms trends that are already well-known. "They have used more or less the best possible data," he said.

Raj Bhagat Palanichamy, a senior programme manager with WRI-India and an expert on the use of geoanalytics for urban development and transport, added that "the findings of the report are consistent with observations made by others and predictions from climate models."

Both Dr. Prabakaran and Mr. Palanichamy told The Hindu that given the GSML is expected to continue rising, the accelerating pace is particularly worrisome.

What problems will sea-level rise cause?

One, Mr. Palanichamy said, is that the accelerated pace will cause changes in land cover, i.e., "what will be land and what will be sea", in the future. Dr. Prabakaran added that as rising seas swallow more of the land cover, particularly in coastal areas, coastal communities will face an "acute shortage of land for human use".

This land crunch, according to Dr. Prabakaran, will mean that those who are better off will be able to cope better than marginalised groups, leading to an increase in social disparities between people living in coastal areas.

Second, weather formations such as cyclones are known to typically originate in the open seas. As the GSML continues to rise, along with a rise in ocean temperatures, the chances of cyclones could increase, affecting coastal communities and leading to large economic liabilities for tropical countries such as India and South Africa, which have high population densities.

Besides this, the WMO report says that South Africa was affected by five cyclones in over two months in 2022, leading to the displacement of "hundreds of thousands of people".

Third, Mr. Palanichamy said that as the GSML continues to rise, more sea water could seep into the ground, leading to the groundwater — which is usually freshwater — turning more and more saline.

This, in turn, can exacerbate water crises in coastal areas as well as agriculture in adjacent regions.

How will sea-level rise affect societies?

Dr. Prabakaran said that coastal ecosystems could be "completely changed".

For example, he said that in the Sundarbans delta in West Bengal, the world's largest mangrove area, rising sea levels and coastal erosion, due to loss of land and sediment from coastal areas, has left more islands submerged under water, and that, in turn, has forced members of local communities to migrate.

Since the lives of coastal communities, including their economic activities, is tied intricately with the coastal ecosystem, changes in the coastal ecosystem as a result of GSML rise — especially when it happens faster than rehabilitative policies and laws can catch up — will further endanger the socio-economic stability of these communities.

INDIA SENDS THIRD SHIP INS TARKASH TO PORT SUDAN FOR EVACUATING CITIZENS

INS Tarkash, an Indian naval ship, reached Port Sudan on Thursday to evacuate stranded Indians. Announcing the progress of Operation Kaveri to bring back Indians from the war-torn Sudan, Foreign Secretary Vinay Mohan Kwatra said India would do "all that it requires to be done" to help its citizens in Sudan.

The country was "extremely grateful" to Saudi Arabia for its support in the evacuation.

"On April 25, *INS Sumedha* brought 278 Indian nationals. It's the same *INS Sumedha* which has gone back and re-docked today. Two sorties of C-130J brought in 121 and 135 passengers, respectively. Yesterday on 26th April, another batch of 297 Indians have sailed out on *INS Teg* and there were two more sorties of C-130J to evacuate 264 Indians," he said giving an update on Indians and persons of Indian origin (PIOs) evacuated so far.

INS Tarkash is the third ship to join the evacuation, which is being supported also by *INS Sumedha* and *INS Teg*. The ships are being used to ferry stranded Indians from Port Sudan to the Saudi port of Jeddah from where they are being flown to India. "The pockets of concentration of Indians are in Khartoum city and its suburbs. There are also pockets in Omdurman, Port Sudan," he said.

The Foreign Secretary said India had set up control rooms in Jeddah and Port Sudan, and the evacuation had to deal with factors such as lack of diesel and buses. He said 42 Indian nationals were evacuated to South Sudan. "There were evacuation requests from other nationalities also. From our side, we are willing to provide all possible assistance to everybody who approaches us for such assistance," he said explaining that such a process would have to take into account procedures in the transit country, Saudi Arabia.

Describing the situation in Sudan as "highly volatile and unpredictable", he said India was in touch with the Rapid Support Forces and the Sudanese Armed Forces. India has been aiming to bring its citizens to the "greater safety zone" as the first step and then shift them to Port Sudan before evacuating them to India, via Jeddah. "Substantial number of buses are currently on their way from Khartoum city to Port Sudan. Between 1,700 and

Indeed, a combination of these forces having increased child trafficking in the Sundarbans area has already been documented.

Thus, for Dr. Prabakaran, it is crucial that reports such as the WMO's 'State of the Global Climate 2022' continue to generate and accumulate data on climate change.

"I hope it presses for global and local policy-level changes related to climate change," he told *The Hindu*.

Sayantan Datta works with the feminist multimedia science collective, *TheLifeofScience.com*



Indian citizens who were evacuated from Sudan outside the Mumbai International Airport on Thursday. Emmanuel Yogini

The Foreign Secretary says evacuation efforts face challenges such as lack of diesel and buses, calls situation in Sudan 'highly volatile and unpredictable'; he expresses gratitude to Saudi Arabia for cooperation in 'Operation Kaveri'

2,000 people have already moved out from the conflict zone," he said.

Late on Thursday, Minister of State for External Affairs V. Muraleedharan announced that the seventh batch of stranded Indians from Port Sudan had landed in Jeddah. There were 135 passengers onboard the C-130J aircraft.

DAS URGES LENDERS TO CONTINUALLY ASSESS RISKS, BOLSTER CAPITAL BUFFERS

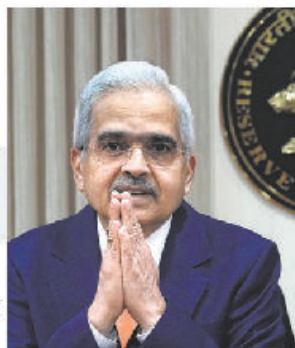
On guard

RBI Governor exhorts banks to reappraise risks at frequent intervals and build adequate capital and liquidity buffers

■ **Flags likelihood of risks cropping up from segments of a bank's balance sheet which may have hitherto been considered relatively safer**

■ **Recent stress test results show Indian banking sector has remained resilient**

■ **Gross NPA ratio for SCBs was 4.41% at end December, down from 5.8% on March 31, 2022, and 7.3% on March 31, 2021**



RBI chief cites financial instability in some advanced economies to stress need to boost liquidity buffers beyond regulatory minimum; central bank Governor says lenders can thereby ensure continued organisational resilience and sustain growth

Flagging the recent financial instability in some advanced economies, Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Governor Shaktikanta Das has urged bank boards to continually assess the financial risks and build enough capital buffers to remain resilient and sustain growth.

"The recent events in the banking landscape of the U.S. and Europe suggest that risks for an individual bank could crop up from segments of its balance sheet which might have been considered relatively safer," Mr. Das observed in his address at a Global Conference on Financial Resilience.

"Hence, we expect the management and Board of Directors of each bank to continually assess the financial risks and focus on building up adequate capital and liquidity buffers even beyond the regulatory minimum for continued resilience and sustainable growth," he said.

Mr. Das stressed that as a consequence of measures taken by the RBI and the banks, the Indian banking system had remained resilient and had not been affected adversely by the recent 'sparks of financial instability' seen in some advanced economies. "This also comes out clearly in our recent

stress test results," he added.

Banks' asset quality had improved, he said. Gross NPA ratio for scheduled commercial banks (SCBs) was 4.41% at end December, down from 5.8% as on March 31, 2022, and 7.3% on March 31, 2021.

"Macro stress tests for credit risk indicate that SCBs would be able to comply with the minimum capital requirements even under severe stress scenarios," Mr. Das emphasised.



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