

● POLITY

● ECONOMICS

● TECHNOLOGY

● ECOLOGY

SC REFUSES TO STAY EC ORDER GIVING SENA NAME TO SHINDE

CJI dismisses Uddhav Thackeray's fears that the EC order will have an impact on party properties and bank accounts; apex court gives two weeks to Shinde and poll panel to file their responses



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KAPIL SIBAL

Counsel for
Uddhav Thackeray



**We cannot pass an
order which has**

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hearing them
[Eknath Shinde
and the EC]

D.Y. CHANDRACHUD

Chief Justice
of India



in the court was against an order of the EC pronounced under the Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order of 1968. The question before the court was confined to the allotment of the party name and symbol. The EC order did not address issues regarding bank accounts and properties, he noted.

160 members out of approximately 200-odd members in the Pratinidhi Sabha, which is the apex representative body representing the wishes of the stakeholders of the party.

More damaging, Mr. Thackeray said, was the effect of the EC order in validating a "split" in a political party. This would only encourage legislators in the future to split from the original party without the fear of having to face disqualification proceedings under the Tenth Schedule.

"But tomorrow the Shinde group can say 'we are the party' and take over everything. They are doing that," Mr. Sibal said.

"If something is part of the EC order, we can certainly look at that... All this [bank accounts and properties] do not form part of the order. The EC order is confined to the allotment of the symbol," the CJI observed.

Mr. Sibal said that looking at it in its entirety and impact the EC order was also concerned with the question of who was the "real" Shiv Sena party. "But equally, Mr. Sibal, now they [Shinde] have succeeded before the EC. We cannot pass an order which has the effect of staying the EC order without hearing them... We cannot stay the EC order at this stage," Chief Justice Chandrachud noted, while issuing notice in the case. The court gave two weeks time to Mr. Shinde and the EC to file their responses to Mr. Thackeray's challenge to the February 17 order. Mr. Thackeray will get a week thereafter to file his rejoinder, after which the case will come up for hearing again.

The Supreme Court on Wednesday declined a plea by former Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray to stay an Election Commission order allotting the 'Shiv Sena' party name and its bow-and-arrow symbol to his rival and incumbent Chief Minister Eknath Shinde.

A three-judge Bench, led by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud, did not budge when Mr. Thackeray pleaded that the Shinde faction, following the poll body's February 17 order, had started taking over party offices, properties and bank accounts.

The court, however, retained the Election Commission (EC) direction allowing the Thackeray faction to keep the name 'Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray)' and the flaming torch symbol for the upcoming byelections in the Chinchwad and Kasaba Peth constituencies.

At one point during the hearing, Mr. Thackeray's team of senior advocates Kapil Sibal, A.M. Singhvi, Devadatt Kamat and advocate Amit Anand Tiwari said that they feared that the Shinde group, armed with the EC order, would issue a whip and even disqualify Mr. Thackeray if he did not comply with it.

However, the Bench, also comprising Justices P.S. Narasimha and J.B. Pardiwala, remained unmoved.

CJI Chandrachud reminded Mr. Thackeray that his challenge

Mr. Sibal repeatedly urged the Bench to at least give them the liberty to approach the court in case the Shinde group took any “precipitate action”, leaving the Thackeray faction high and dry, in the interim weeks before the case came up for hearing. However, the court remained non-committal. It brushed aside Mr. Sibal’s fears, observing that his worries concerned issues quite outside the EC order and touched upon “contractual relationships within a political party”.

Senior advocate Neeraj Kishan Kaul, appearing on caveat for Mr. Shinde, said that the EC had found the Shiv Sena party constitution of 2018 “draconian”. He said that it gave no room for inner-party democracy. The Supreme Court itself in 2022 had refused Mr. Thackeray’s plea to stay the EC proceedings, Mr. Kaul submitted, adding that every legislator

was “organically connected” to the political party and dissent was part of democracy.

In his petition, Mr. Thackeray had argued that the EC was “unfair”, “biased” and failed in its duties as a “neutral arbiter of disputes” under the 1968 Order.

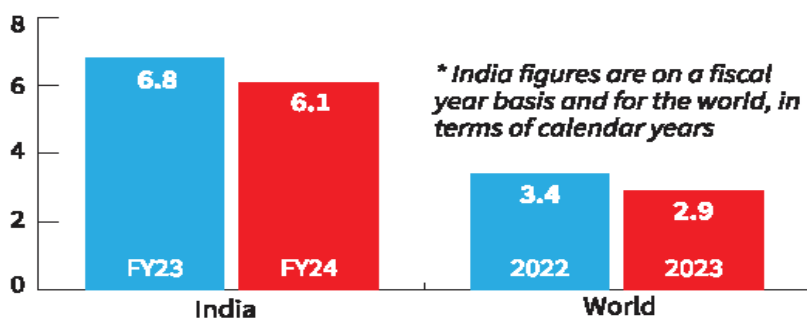
The EC order was based on proceedings under Paragraph 15 of the 1968 Order, which empowered it to identify the “recognised political party” from among rival factions or splinter groups.

Mr. Thackeray contended that the EC’s decision amounted to an interference with the party’s 2018 Constitution and results of the intra-party polls, following which Mr. Thackeray was made leader. More damaging, Mr. Thackeray claimed, was the effect of the EC order in recognising and validating a “split” in a political party.

INDIA REMAINS A ‘BRIGHT SPOT’, TO CONTRIBUTE 15% OF GLOBAL GROWTH IN 2023: IMF

Outpacing global growth

According to IMF, India is expected to grow at 6.8% in FY23 and at 6.1% in FY24, well above the estimated global growth rates



India continues to remain a relative “bright spot” in the world economy, and will alone contribute 15% of the global growth in 2023, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said.

While digitisation pulled out the world’s fifth-largest economy from pandemic lows, prudent fiscal policy and significant financing for capital investments provided in the next year’s Budget will help sustain the growth momentum.

“India’s performance has been quite impressive. For this year, we expect India to retain a high growth rate, 6.8% for the year that ends in March. For FY 2023/24, (April 2023 to March 2024) we project 6.1%, a bit of slowdown like the rest of the world economy, but way above the global average. And in that way, India is providing about 15% of global growth in 2023,” Ms. Georgieva said in an interview.

That is the fastest growth rate among major economies. India remains a bright spot at a time when the IMF is

projecting 2023 to be difficult with global growth slowing down from 3.4% last year to 2.9% in 2023, she observed.

“Why is India a bright spot? Because one, it has done really well to turn the digitalisation that has been already moving quite well into a major driver of overcoming the impact of the pandemic and creating opportunities for growth and jobs,” she noted.

“Second, because India’s fiscal policy has been responsive to economic conditions. We have seen the new Budget presented, and it signals the commitment to fiscal consolidation, while at the same time provides significant financing for capital investments. And three, because India didn’t shy away to learn the lessons from the pandemic and to implement very strong policies to overcome what has been really a difficult time for a number of months,” Ms. Georgieva said.

“I particularly noticed how much attention India is paying on investing in the green economy, including renewables with potential to shift the country towards clean energy and keep growth going. What we see as potential for the future is to translate this fiscal responsibility into a medium-term framework that gives even stronger anchor to India’s public finances,” Ms. Georgieva said.

According to Ms. Georgieva, India has taken “a very brave step with the digital ID” that put the foundation for digitalisation on the scale we see today. And COVID played the role of a trigger for advancing digitalisation because it made it both necessary and possible to deliver public support to households and to businesses using digital platforms, she noted.



*I didn't fail the test,
I just found Hundred ways to do it wrong.*

- BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

RUPEE TRADE FACING FRICTION AS BANKS WARY OF U.S. SANCTIONS, SAYS GARODIA

Teething troubles

The rupee trade settlement mechanism is struggling to gain traction as banks are wary of the impact on their U.S. exposure



■ Banks are not issuing e-Bank Realisation Certificates hindering export transactions, says EEPC's Garodia

■ Engineering goods exports to the CIS region have declined by 34% this fiscal

■ Given Russia is largest regional market, rupee settlement essential to grow trade: Garodia

The RBI had set up international trade settlement mechanism in rupee last year to facilitate trade with countries under sanctions such as Russia; EEPC Chairman urges RBI, banks to work together to make the settlement process seamless

There is a lack of clarity among banks about the International Trade Settlement mechanism in rupees and those with exposure to the U.S. are wary of sanctions, the Chairman of India's Engineering Export Promotion Council (EEPC) said. Last year, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had set up the rupee settlement mechanism with a view to facilitating trade with countries under sanctions such as Russia.

The rupee trade settlement mechanism was yet to function seamlessly as banks, especially those who have offices or those dealing directly with the U.S., were wary of sanctions, EEPC Chairman Arun Kumar Garodia said in an interview. The nodal trade body for the promotion of engineering exports is backed by the Union Ministry of Commerce.

This was the reason why banks were not issuing e-Bank Realisation Certificates, which were required to complete an export transaction, he added.

The onus therefore was on the RBI and the banks to arrive at an understanding to make the rupee trade mechanism

seamless, Mr. Garodia observed.

This was all the more urgent and essential, at a time when engineering goods exports to the CIS region had fallen by 34% during the current fiscal, and especially in the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine crisis, he pointed out.

Russian market

"Russia is the largest market in the region. Once rupee settlement becomes seamless, we are sure trade is bound to grow," Mr. Garodia said.

The EEPC had also requested the Indian government to bring in the rupee settlement mechanism with other countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and other nations which were under U.S. sanctions or have issues relating to forex payment in hard currency, he added.

allow the transfer of money in the member's individual PF account, to the Pension Fund, which is a pooled fund. Such a decision cannot be taken in a hurry as such a transfer would mean hiving off a substantial portion of lifetime savings.

Besides, the number of prospective applicants is likely to be high, as the Court's judgment made it clear that the amended pension scheme would apply to employees of exempted establishments too — as in the case of regular establishments. Under such circumstances, a flood of submissions, online or offline, is inevitable, disrupting the normal workload of the PF authorities. The circular has also not taken into account factors in the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some employers, having suffered a severe fund crunch, have restricted their contributions to the statutory ceiling even though, till the outbreak of the pandemic, they had, like many others, been making their contributions in excess of the statutory ceiling. The EPFO has to shed light on how it will compute pension for such employees. It would not be out of place to suggest that the time period be extended. Nevertheless, with the EPFO having to comply with the Court order, it should expedite issuing all its guidelines with clear illustrations on higher PF pension.

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'HPCL FACES HURDLES PAYING FOR RUSSIAN OIL AS BANKS BALK'

Deeper and deeper: A cluster of 74 carnelian beads found underneath an offering pot at the Keeladi-Kondagai site in Tamil Nadu in 2022. MOORTHY. G

What are the different artefacts which have been unearthed from the excavations in Keeladi? How does it shed light on the Sangam age? Why did the transfer of Superintending Archaeologist Amarnath Ramakrishna create a controversy? Are there links to the Indus Valley civilisation?



EXPLAINER

The story so far:

Keeladi is a tiny hamlet in the Sivaganga district in south Tamil Nadu. It is about 12 km south-east to the temple city of Madurai and is located along the Vaigai river. The excavations here from 2015 prove that an urban civilisation existed in Tamil Nadu in the Sangam age on the banks of the Vaigai river.

How is Keeladi linked to Sangam age?

The Sangam age is a period of history in ancient Tamil Nadu which was believed to be from the third century BCE to the third century CE. The name is derived from the renowned Sangam poets of Madurai from that time. Excavations by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and Tamil Nadu State Archaeology Department (TNSDA) has pushed the Sangam age further back. In 2019, a TNSDA report dated the unearthed artefacts from Keeladi to a period between sixth century BCE and first century BCE. One of the six samples collected at a depth of 353 cm, sent for carbon dating in the U.S., dated back to 580 BCE. The findings in the TNSDA report placed Keeladi artefacts about 300 years earlier than the previously believed third century BCE. A recent ASI report by K. Amarnath Ramakrishna, the Superintendent Archaeologist who discovered Keeladi in 2015, has pushed the Sangam age to 800 BCE based on these archaeological findings.

Keeladi could also provide crucial evidence for understanding the missing links of the Iron Age (12th century BCE to sixth century BCE) to the Early Historic Period (sixth century BCE to fourth century BCE) and subsequent cultural developments.

What was the controversy surrounding Keeladi?

After reports of possible links with the Indus Valley Civilisation, the third round (2017) of diggings by the ASI saw a delayed start. Superintending Archaeologist Amarnath Ramakrishna was transferred to Assam, allegedly in a perceived attempt to play down the excavation findings. Keeladi almost faded from public memory as there was no "significant finding" in the third round. This led to criticism that the excavation had been deliberately restricted to 400 metres. Tamil Nadu politicians criticised the BJP-led Union Government of trying to suppress information about an ancient Tamil civilisation that had flourished on the banks of the Vaigai river. On the intervention of the Madurai Bench of the Madras High

Court, the ASI permitted the TNSDA to take up further excavation on its own. Since then, the TNSDA has been carrying out excavations to unearth more about the history of Tamil civilisation.

Are there links to Indus Valley?

The unearthed Keeladi artefacts have led academics to describe the site as part of the Vaigai Valley Civilisation. The findings have also invited comparisons with the Indus Valley Civilisation while acknowledging the cultural gap of 1,000 years between the two places. Till now, the gap is filled with Iron Age material in south India, which serve as residual links. However, some of the symbols found in pot sherds of Keeladi bear a close resemblance to Indus Valley signs. A lot of digging and study has to be done to establish the links between these two civilisations. TNSDA affirms that Keeladi has all the characteristics of an urban civilisation, with brick structures, luxury items and proof of internal and external trade. It comes across as an industrious and advanced civilisation and has given evidence of urban life and settlements in Tamil Nadu during the Early Historic Period. Keeladi has also added to the credibility of Sangam Literature.

What has been unearthed so far?

In the eight rounds of excavations, including the first three by the ASI, over 18,000 artefacts have been unearthed from the site and the unique artefacts will be on display at the museum to be opened soon.

Unearthing of heaps of pottery suggest the existence of a pottery making industry, mostly made of locally available raw materials. Over 120 potsherds containing Tamil Brahmi inscriptions have been found. Keeladi, along with other Tamil Nadu sites which have over a thousand inscribed potsherds, clearly suggest the long survival of the script. Spindle whorls, copper needles, terracotta seal, hanging stones of the yarn, terracotta spheres and earthen vessels to hold liquid suggest various stages of a weaving industry. There also existed a dyeing industry and a glass bead industry.

Gold ornaments, copper articles, semi-precious stones, shell bangles, ivory bangles and ivory combs reflect the artistic, culturally rich and prosperous lifestyle of the Keeladi people. Agate and carnelian beads suggest import through commercial networks while terracotta and ivory dice, gamesmen and evidence of hopscotch have been unearthed revealing their pastime hobbies.

THE GIST

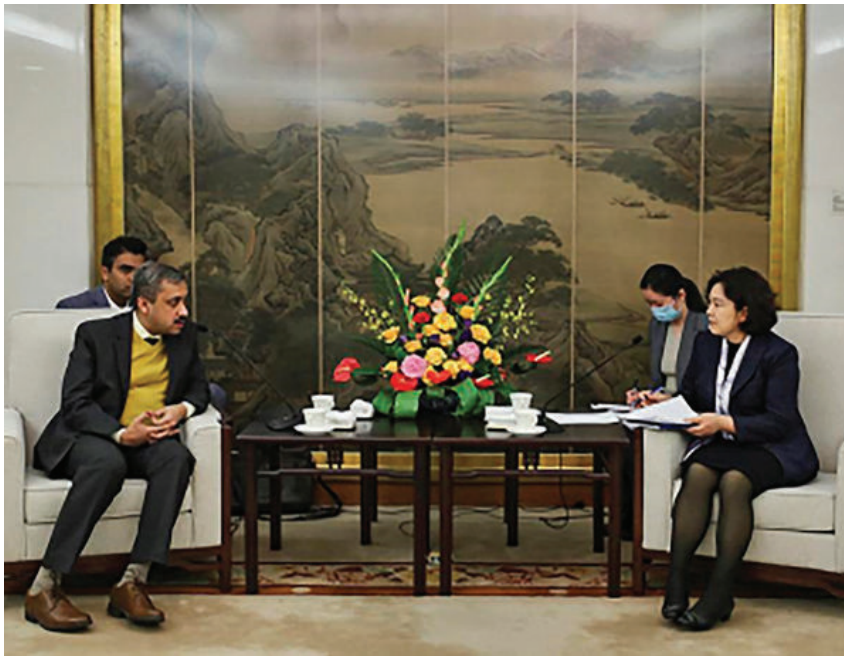
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The transfer of Superintending Archaeologist Amarnath Ramakrishna was perceived as an alleged attempt to play down the excavation findings. Tamil Nadu politicians criticised the BJP-led Union Government of trying to suppress information about an ancient Tamil civilisation that had flourished on the banks of the Vaigai river

INDIA, CHINA HOLD IN-PERSON BORDER TALKS AFTER 3 YEARS



Vladimir Putin says Russia should stand ready to resume nuclear weapons tests if the U.S. does so; hours after the announcement, Foreign Ministry says Moscow will continue to respect the cap on nuclear weapons in the agreement

In the first visit by a top Indian official to China in more than three years, the two countries have discussed proposals for disengaging in the two remaining friction areas along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) to create conditions to “restore normalcy” in relations.

Joint Secretary (East Asia) in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Shilpak Ambule, on Wednesday held talks with top Chinese border officials and also met with Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Hua Chunying. Mr. Ambule led the Indian delegation for the 26th meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC), the first such talks held in-person since July 2019. The Chinese side was led by Hong Liang, Director General of the Boundary and Oceanic Affairs Department of the Foreign Ministry.

The MEA said both sides “reviewed the situation along the LAC” and “discussed proposals for disengagement in the remaining areas in an open and constructive manner, which would help in restoration of peace and tranquillity along the LAC in Western Sector and create conditions for restoration of normalcy in bilateral relations”.

A statement from the Chinese side said both sides “reviewed the positive progress” and outcomes of disengagement in Galwan Valley and four other friction areas, while exchanging views on the next stage of talks.

Mutually acceptable

It said both sides “agreed to move forward on the basis of the consensus previously reached, accelerate the resolution of issues related to the western section of the Sino-Indian border, and reach a mutually acceptable solution at an early date”. The statement said both sides had discussed other measures to ease the situation in border areas and to return the border to normalised control. To that end, both sides have also agreed to hold the 18th round of talks between senior military commanders at an early date, with the last round held on December 20, 2022.

A CLEAN GAMBLE

Carbon trading should help India to accelerate the shift away from fossil fuel

The Centre is expected to clarify, later this year, the specifics of a carbon trading market in India. An amendment to the Energy Conservation Act, passed in 2022 and, separately, approval by the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change via the Paris and Glasgow agreements ensured that carbon markets (where ‘carbon credits’ and ‘emission certificates’ can be traded) have acquired greater global currency. ‘Carbon markets’ are a catch-all term and need clarity, especially in the Indian context. A decade or more ago, they meant stock-market-like exchanges that traded in ‘carbon offsets’ made legitimate under the Clean Development Mechanism. Here, industrial projects in developing countries that avoided greenhouse gas emissions were eligible for credits that, after verification, could be sold to European companies that could buy them in lieu of cutting emissions themselves. Alongside are the EU-Emissions Trading Systems (ETS) where government-mandated emission limits on industrial sectors such as aluminium or steel plants require industries to either cut emissions or buy government-certified permits from companies that cut more emissions than required or were auctioned by governments. Carbon credits became valuable because they could be used as permits in EU-ETS exchanges. Such permits are a ‘right to pollute’ and being tradeable on an exchange, akin to

shares, are expected to fluctuate in value depending on a company’s need to balance profitability and comply with pollution norms.

The objective of such markets is to incentivise investments in renewable energy sources. While India has maintained its right to grow its carbon emissions in the near future, it has committed to cutting the emissions intensity (emissions per unit of GDP) of its growth by 45% (of 2005 levels) by 2030. It has been doing this, partly, via the Perform, Achieve and Trade (PAT) scheme, where around 1,000 industries have been involved in procuring and trading energy saving certificates (ESCs). Since 2015, various cycles of the PAT have shown emission reductions of around 3%-5%. The European Union, which runs the oldest emission trading scheme since 2005, had cut emissions by 35% from 2005-2019 and 9% in 2009, over the previous years. Whether carbon trading can meaningfully lead to emissions reductions in the Indian context is a question that can be answered only decades later. It would, however, be a victory in itself, if it is able to mobilise domestic finance and accelerate the shift away from fossil fuel. With that end in mind, the government must intervene to bring in the right amount of pressure on industry to participate in the market but not ignore proven non-market initiatives to achieve greenhouse gas reductions.

INDIA CAN BECOME A BIODIVERSITY CHAMPION

The sum and variation of our biological wealth, known as biodiversity, is essential to the future of this planet. The importance of our planet's biodiversity was strongly articulated at the United Nations Biodiversity Conference in Montreal, Canada. On December 19, 2022, 188 country representatives adopted an agreement to "halt and reverse" biodiversity loss by conserving 30% of the world's land and 30% of the world's oceans by 2030, known as the 30x30 pledge. India currently hosts 17% of the planet's human population and 17% of the global area in biodiversity hotspots, placing it at the helm to guide the planet in becoming biodiversity champions.

Programmes with potential

In response to this call, the Union Budget 2023 mentioned "Green Growth" as one of the seven priorities or Saptarishis. The emphasis on green growth is welcome news for India's biological wealth as the country is facing serious losses of natural assets such as soils, land, water, and biodiversity.

The National Mission for a Green India aims to increase forest cover on degraded lands and protect existing forested lands. The Green Credit Programme has the objective to "incentivize environmentally sustainable and responsive actions by companies, individuals and local bodies". The Mangrove Initiative for Shoreline Habitats & Tangible Incomes (MISHTI) is particularly significant because of the extraordinary importance of mangroves and coastal ecosystems in mitigating climate change. The Prime Minister Programme for Restoration, Awareness, Nourishment, and Amelioration of Mother Earth (PM-PRANAM) for reducing inputs of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides is critical for sustaining our agriculture. Finally, the Amrit Dharohar scheme directly mentions our biological wealth and is expected to "encourage optimal use of wetlands, and enhance biodiversity, carbon stock, eco-tourism opportunities and income generation for local communities". If implemented in letter and spirit, Amrit Dharohar, with its emphasis on sustainability by balancing competing demands, will benefit aquatic biodiversity and ecosystem services. The recent intervention by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change to stop the draining of Haiderpur, a Ramsar wetland in Uttar Pradesh, to safeguard migratory waterfowl is encouraging.

Must be science-based

It is critical that these programmes respond to the current state of the country's biodiversity with evidence-based implementation. A science-based and inclusive monitoring programme is critical not only for the success of these efforts

but also for documentation and distillation of lessons learnt for replication, nationally as well as globally.

New missions and programmes should effectively use modern concepts of sustainability and valuation of ecosystems that consider ecological, cultural, and sociological aspects of our biological wealth. With clear system boundaries, prioritisation of the benefits to 'resource people', and fund-services (rather than stock-flows) as the economic foundation for generating value has enormous potential for multiple sustainable bio-economies.

The future of our wetland ecosystems will depend on how we are able to sustain ecological flows through reduction in water use in key sectors such as agriculture by encouraging changes to less-water intensive crops such as millets as well as investments in water recycling in urban areas using a combination of grey and blue-green infrastructure.

As far as the Green India Mission is concerned, implementation should focus on ecological restoration rather than tree plantation and choose sites where it can contribute to ecological connectivity in landscapes fragmented by linear infrastructure. Furthermore, choice of species and density should be informed by available knowledge and evidence on resilience under emerging climate change and synergies and trade-offs with respect to hydrologic services. Site selection should also be carefully considered for the mangrove initiative with a greater emphasis on diversity of mangrove species with retention of the integrity of coastal mud-flats and salt pans themselves, as they too are important for biodiversity.

Local community involvement

Finally, each of these efforts must be inclusive of local and nomadic communities where these initiatives will be implemented. Traditional knowledge and practices of these communities should be integrated into the implementation plans. Each of these programmes has the potential to greatly improve the state of our nation's biodiversity if their implementation is based on the latest scientific and ecological knowledge. As a consequence, each programme should include significant educational and research funding to critically appraise and bring awareness to India's biological wealth. In response to this need, we hope that the National Mission on Biodiversity and Human Wellbeing, already approved by the Prime Minister's Science, Technology, and Innovation Advisory Council (PM-STI-AC), will be immediately launched by the government. This mission seeks to harness the power of interdisciplinary knowledge — for greening India and its economy, to restore and enrich our natural capital for the well-being of our people, and to position India as a global leader in applied biodiversity science.

END THE WAR

As the war in Ukraine seems endless, talks are the only way out

As Russia's war in Ukraine enters its second year, there are no signs of any side relenting. Moscow has mobilised some 5,00,000 troops, more than twice the size of the forces it deployed to launch the invasion last February, for a widely expected spring offensive. The West, Kyiv's main financial and military backer, is sending armoured vehicles, precision bombs, battle tanks and missile defence systems to Ukraine to bolster its defensive and offensive capabilities. In his surprise visit to Kyiv on Monday, U.S. President Joe Biden pledged America's lasting support to the war-battered nation. The next day, Russian President Vladimir Putin, in his State of the Nation address, signalled his country's readiness for a long war, and suspended its participation in the New START treaty, which marked a breakdown of ties with the West and could also trigger a nuclear arms race. The past year has been disastrous for all parties. Mr. Putin, who wanted a quick victory, miscalculated Kyiv's response and the West's resolve to back it. Ukraine inflicted huge human and material costs on Russia, but still lost swathes of its territories. The West stays united, despite differences over its approach towards Russia, but has also been reeling under the economic costs of the war. However, despite the setbacks, no side is ready for talks. Mr. Putin is ready to fight

as long as it takes and the West is ready to arm Ukraine as long as it takes. A long war would be catastrophic for Ukraine as the entire fighting is taking place within its borders. The country has lost land, weapons and tens of thousands of lives. Its infrastructure is under attack and the economy has been battered. Without the steady supply of arms from the West, it is unlikely to survive the Russian onslaught. Further, if the war prolongs, the risks of a Russia-NATO direct conflict would be higher. The rapid destruction of security in Europe and the deepening mistrust between major powers is comparable with the pre-First World War situation in the continent. An open confrontation between the great powers today would be cataclysmic because of the threat of nuclear weapons. The possibility of such a conflict would mean that the war is not just a European problem. Bringing the war to an end is imperative for global security and safety. Wars typically come to an end either through outright victories or talks.

The first year of the war suggests that the first option is unrealistic for either side, which means Russia, Ukraine and the West should prepare for an eventual settlement. The earlier they begin talking to each other the better it would be for the whole world.

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WHY HAVE FRENCH TROOPS WITHDRAWN FROM BURKINA FASO?

How successful was Paris' operation in taking back regions from the Islamist groups in the Sahel region?

The story so far:

On February 19, Burkina Faso announced an official end to the operations led by France in the country. France had signed a military agreement with Burkina Faso in 2018 to achieve stability against the threat of Islamist militant groups. France signed a series of similar agreements with other West African nations, including Mali who terminated the operation in late 2022.

Why is France withdrawing?

For Paris, the military governments in West Africa pose multiple challenges. In February 2022, while announcing the withdrawal of France and its allies from Mali, French President Emmanuel Macron said, "Victory against terror is not possible if it's not supported by the state itself." France has also been critical of Russian inroads into Africa. It has accused the Russian private military company Wagner Group for working closely with the military governments in West Africa.

On January 23, Burkina Faso's military government announced its decision to end the military agreement with France and called on Paris to withdraw its troops within a month. A Burkinabe government spokesperson said that the military government and the country wanted themselves "to be the prime actors in the recapture of our territory," which was controlled by Islamist militant groups. On January 26, France agreed to withdraw its troops from Burkina Faso.

Why did Burkina Faso end it?

France was asked to withdraw its troops from Burkina Faso months after it pulled out its troops from Mali. The primary reason behind the withdrawal is the failure of its counter insurgency operations in the Sahel region against Islamist groups. Islamist insurgency has surged since 2015 and fuelled two coups in Burkina Faso last year. The violence linked to al-Qaeda and Islamic State groups has killed thousands and forced more than two million to flee their homes in the country.

Secondly, as Islamist insurgency kept intensifying, France's military presence in Burkina Faso came under scrutiny. After the second coup in September 2022, anti-France protests increased in Burkina Faso with demonstrators demanding French withdrawal from the country. There was also an increasing pro-Russia sentiment. And finally, the ruling military junta of Burkina Faso was

looking beyond its traditional allies for support in its counterinsurgency campaign. Dissatisfaction with the French approach has made other actors including Russia and China more preferable partners to fight insurgency.

Is there Russian involvement?

Russia's engagements in Africa have been under scrutiny for a few years, especially after the resurgence of military governments in West Africa since 2020.

Following Ouagadougou's announcement of the termination of France operations, Burkinabe Prime Minister Apollinaire Kyelem de Tambela termed Russia "a reasonable choice". Simultaneously, Moscow has been courting African countries; in 2023 alone, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited seven countries in Africa: Angola, Eswatini, South Africa, Eritrea, Mali, Sudan and Mauritania.

What next for France and Burkina Faso?

Paris has accepted the military governments' decision which marks a significant change in its West Africa approach. In Burkina Faso, in the absence of France's troops, the alleged Russian mercenaries may fill the security void, as part of its bid to enhance military engagements in the continent. However, the new developments are unlikely to address the insurgency and the consequent insecurity.

THE GIST

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Burkinabe Prime Minister Apollinaire Kyelem de Tambela termed Russia as "a reasonable choice" to continue counter insurgency efforts.

BIDEN ADMINISTRATION MAKES RENEWED PUSH TO NAME ERIC GARCETTI AS U.S. ENVOY TO INDIA



Eric Garcetti

The Biden administration is making another attempt to push through its nominee for U.S. Ambassador to India next week, as the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations has scheduled a nomination hearing for former Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti and six other nominees to various positions.

The listing of Mr. Garcetti as part of a business meeting scheduled by the Foreign Relations Committee for February 28 will pave the way for a full Senate vote in the new Congress, where it has a greater chance of going through now as the Democrats have a 51-49 slim majority.

Significantly, the listing coincided with Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer's travel to Delhi and Mumbai this week, where he led a senior U.S. Congress delegation for meetings, including with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday.

"India, with its democratic traditions, can be a very strong partner in outcompeting China. And India joining the Western partnership could serve the purpose of advancing democracy," he added, in a statement about the visit.

On January 3 this year, Mr. Garcetti, whose first nomination to the post made in 2021 lapsed with the previous U.S. Congress, was re-nominated as the Biden nominee for New Delhi, despite the pushback he faced from Republicans and even some Democrat lawmakers over a sexual harassment scandal involving his deputy in his mayoral office.

The U.S. administration has repeatedly said it remains committed to the nomination and that it in no way affects the bilateral relationship, which has seen a record number of high-level meetings in the past two years. Mr. Schumer's visit, during his first visit abroad leading a Congressional Member Delegation as Majority Leader, also sought to show "commitment to the important U.S.-India relationship," the Senator said.

The renewed push for sending Mr. Garcetti to New Delhi comes ahead of a crowded diplomatic bilateral calendar, with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken due in March for the G-20 Foreign Minister's meeting, Raisina conference, and a proposed, but not yet confirmed, Quad Foreign Minister's meeting. Mr. Modi will see Mr. Biden at the G-7 outreach summit in Hiroshima in May, followed by the Quad Summit in Sydney.

GERMAN, DANISH VISITS TO INDIA TO FOCUS ON CLIMATE CHANGE, UKRAINE AND CHINA



Olaf Scholz

Partnering with India on climate change mitigation and energy transitions will be at the top of agenda during two big visits from Europe this weekend, as German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and the Danish Crown Prince travel to India for talks. Mr. Scholz's visit, his first since he became Chancellor last year, will focus on environmental cooperation, as well as business and skilled labour migration. Germany's Ambassador to India said that the visit will focus on geopolitical issues as well, with the year-long Russian war in Ukraine, and difficulties in dealing with China at the forefront of discussions between Chancellor Scholz and Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The two big visits will kick off a busy diplomatic season in Delhi, with the G-20 Foreign Ministers' meeting, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Finance Ministers' meeting and the Ministry of External Affairs's (MEA) annual Raisina Dialogue set to follow them next week.

'Valuable partner'

"In a difficult international environment, we see India as a valuable partner," said German Ambassador Philip Ackerman giving details of Mr. Scholz's travel, where he will visit Delhi on February 25 and Bengaluru on February 26. Mr. Scholz will be accompanied by a 12-person business delegation keen to expand business opportunities in India, particularly in India's renewable energy sector. Sources said that he is also likely to discuss the possibility of India joining the "Climate Club" set up during the G7 meeting in Bavaria last year, which invites "climate-ambitious" countries to work together on limiting global warming, accelerating net-zero carbon emissions by or around 2050 and decarbonising industry. India has committed to net-zero emission targets by 2070 only.

The Ambassador said that Mr. Scholz would also brief Mr. Modi on his recent visit to China, and about the focus of Germany's Indo-Pacific strategy on Indian cooperation. In addition, given that the Chancellor would arrive in India a day after the anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, talks are likely to discuss their respective stands on the issue. India has thus far refused to criticise Russia, or join sanctions imposed by Germany and other EU countries, the U.S. and U.K.

XI JINPING CALLS FOR CHINA'S 'SELF-RELIANCE' IN TECHNOLOGY AMID GROWING COMPETITION



Xi Jinping

China's top leadership at a meeting of the ruling Communist Party's Politburo on Tuesday outlined plans to push research and "consolidate self-reliance and strength" in high-tech industries, an issue that is set to assume prominence in Xi Jinping's third term.

Mr. Xi, addressing a "group study session" of the Politburo, said: "strengthening basic research is an urgent requirement for achieving greater self-reliance and strength in science and technology, and it is the only way for building a world leader in science and technology".

"International competition in basic research is moving to the forefront," he said, adding that it was "necessary to strengthen the country's strategic strength in science and technology".

The issue of "self-reliance" in critical high-tech industries has emerged as a priority area for the Chinese leadership in the wake of the trade and tech war with the U.S., with the once-in-five-year Party Congress in October 2022, when Mr. Xi began his third term, outlining plans for a push in research and development spending as well as warning of limitations in China's capabilities.

At Tuesday's Politburo meeting, the top Party leadership also announced that a key annual meeting of the Party's Central Committee will take place on Sunday, and discuss "a draft plan on reform of Party and state institutions".

Mr. Xi has already overhauled the governance structure by increasing Party oversight over government bodies. Further reforms will continue to follow the "principles of upholding the Party's overall leadership," a statement said.

The statement issued after the Politburo meet also called for "effectively forestalling and defusing major economic and financial risks", with growth for this year set to be challenged by continuing concerns over the property sector and rising local government debt.

The meeting, the statement added, also "discussed candidates for the leading positions of state institutions", with a number of Ministerial appointments for the next five year term, expected to be announced when the annual meeting of the Parliament, or National People's Congress, convenes in Beijing on March 5.

CHINA-RUSSIA TIES NOT AIMED AT OTHER COUNTRIES: WANG YI



Shared goals: Vladimir Putin and Wang Yi said both Russia and China supported democratisation of international relations. AP During a visit to Moscow, CCP's foreign policy chief says both nations support multipolarity; Russian President says relations between two countries are key to stabilise international situation

Russia and China showcased their deepening ties on Wednesday in a series of meetings closely watched for signs that Beijing might offer the Kremlin stronger support for its war in Ukraine.

The visit by Wang Yi, the Chinese Communist Party's most senior foreign policy official, to Moscow comes as the conflict in Ukraine continues to upend the global diplomatic order.

Relations between Russia and the West are at their lowest point since the Cold War, and ties between China and the U.S. are also under serious strain. Moscow suspended its participation in the last remaining nuclear arms control treaty

with Washington this week. And the U.S. expressed concern in recent days that China could provide arms and ammunition to Russia.

Invite for Xi

Speaking at the start of talks with Mr. Wang, Russian President Vladimir Putin hailed ties between the two countries and added that the Kremlin expects Chinese President Xi Jinping to visit Russia.

The Russian leader noted escalating international tensions, adding that "in this context, cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on the global arena is particularly important for stabilising the international situation."

While Mr. Wang said that "Chinese-Russian relations aren't directed against any third countries and certainly can't be subject to pressure from any third countries," the spectre of the war and the ways in which it has galvanised the West and deepened its divide with Russia hung over his meeting with Mr. Putin.

For instance, Mr. Wang emphasised that Moscow and Beijing both support "multipolarity and democratisation of international relations" — a reference to their shared goal of countering the perceived U.S. dominance in global affairs.

Backing each other

Earlier on Wednesday, Wang held talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. "Our ties have continued to develop dynamically, and despite high turbulence in the global arena, we have shown the readiness to speak in defence of each other's interests," Mr. Lavrov said.

Mr. Wang responded in kind, underlining Beijing's focus on deepening ties with Russia — a relationship it has said has "no limits."



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