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RUSSIA IS TRYING TO BE HELPFUL TO BRING INDIA, CHINA CLOSER: LAVROV



Up close: Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov speaking at the Raisina Dialogue 2023 in New Delhi on Friday. ANI

We never make friends against somebody. We have excellent relation with India and excellent relation with China, says Foreign Minister

Russia is interested in ensuring friendship between India and China and Moscow is trying to be "helpful" in this regard, said Russian Foreign Minister

Sergey Lavrov here on Thursday. Responding to a question at the annual Raisina Dialogue, Mr. Lavrov cautioned against 'outside players' and said Russia would like India and China to meet more often as the Russia-India-China trilateral has been in existence since the days of his predecessor, Yevgeny Primakov.

"We never make friends against somebody. We have excellent relation with India and excellent relation with China. The India-Russia relation is characterised in official documents signed by two leaders as specially privileged strategic partnership. This is what we believe is reflecting the reality. We are interested in these two great nations to be friends and we are trying to be helpful," said Mr. Lavrov.

The Russian Minister recollected that the RIC — Russia, India, China — trilateral was created during the tenure of the late Yevgeny Primakov when Russia took the initiative to bring the three sides together.

"We met last year and we are going to meet (again) at ministerial level this year," said Mr. Lavrov. The RIC is a regular trilateral that meets at the government and non-government levels, covering experts in trade, technology, civil society and media.

"My feeling is the more they meet, the better and RIC is a platform for India and China in our presence — because they might not feel themselves comfortable being one on one all the time — to find some additional common ground. BRICS is another platform and we strongly supported India joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, including from the point of view of providing another place where India and China can cooperate together and can look for common solutions. We will continue this policy," said Mr. Lavrov.

"We never engage in playing any country against any other country," he added.

SELECT CENTRAL STAFF CAN OPT FOR OLD PENSION SCHEME

Old vs New

A look at the difference between the old and the new pension schemes

Old Pension Scheme	National Pension Scheme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The scheme guarantees a life-long income, post-retirement ■ Government bears the expenditure incurred on the pension ■ Under the scheme, a monthly payment is assured, where the amount is equivalent to 50% of the last drawn salary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ It is a participatory scheme, where employees contribute to their pension corpus from their salaries, with matching contribution from the government ■ The funds are invested in earmarked investment schemes through Pension Fund Managers ■ On retirement, 60% of the corpus, which is tax-free, is withdrawn while the remaining 40% is invested in annuities, which is taxed

Govt. allows one-time option for those who applied for jobs advertised before Dec. 22, 2003, the day National Pension Scheme was notified, but joined service in 2004, when NPS came into effect

In a significant decision, the government has decided to give a one-time option to select Central government employees to migrate to the Old Pension Scheme (OPS).

The employees should have applied for jobs advertised before December 22, 2003, the day the National Pension System (NPS) was notified, but joined service in 2004, when the NPS came into effect. The option is available to the Central government employees enrolled under the NPS as they joined service on or after January 1, 2004.

The order will also be applicable to the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) personnel. Employees have time till August 31 to opt for the OPS. The employees' contribution to the NPS will be credited to the General Provident Fund (GPF) of the individual.

The Bharatiya Janata Party-led government has maintained that restoration of the old system will cause unnecessary financial burden on the government while several Opposition-ruled States such as Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Jharkhand and Himachal Pradesh have announced that they would restore the OPS.

Official cites litigations

A senior government official told The Hindu that the decision was taken to address the vast gamut of litigations that the government faced on the issue. "There were hundreds of litigations in courts across the country, the government did not win a single case. Through court orders, individual officials were getting benefit, we decided to issue general instructions for the benefit of all eligible officials," said the official.

The Department of Pension and Pensioners' Welfare (DPPW) held extensive consultations with the Ministries of Finance and Law and Departments of Expenditure and Personnel and reached a consensus to allow the employees the option to switch to the OPS. In 2020, the DPPW gave one-time option to

those Central government employees to opt for the OPS who were declared successful for recruitment in the results declared before December 31, 2003. However, representation was received from government employees referring to court judgment and orders by the Central Administrative Tribunals that allowed them to migrate to the OPS. Following this, the DPPW moved a proposal to issue a general circular to extend the benefit of the judgments to similarly placed employees. Union Minister of State for Personnel Jitendra Singh approved the proposal on Friday. The exact number of employees who will be covered under

the new order is not known and it will be known after eligible employees have exercised the option, said the official. "The government was spending time and resources in fighting such cases in court. There were several orders by High Courts and even the Supreme Court to give OPS benefits to those recruits who applied for jobs before the NPS was notified," said the official. Till January 31, a total of 23,65,693 Central employees and 60,32,768 State government employees have enrolled under the NPS. Except West Bengal, all States had implemented the NPS.

SERVICES ACTIVITY HIT 12-YEAR HIGH IN FEBRUARY, PMI SIGNALS

Strong showing

Activity in the economy's crucial services sector expanded at the fastest rate in 12 years as per the S&P Global India Services PMI Business Activity Index.



■ Demand resilience, competitive pricing underpinned

joint-best upturn in sales over the period: S&P Global Market Intelligence's Pollyanna De Lima

■ Input prices rise at slowest pace in two-and-a-half years, output charge inflation softens

■ Optimism ebbs to lowest in seven months

Favourable demand conditions, new business gains support momentum in sector, S&P Global's survey of services firms shows; Index rises to 59.4 marking the 19th straight monthly expansion

India's services sector expanded at the strongest rate in 12 years in February supported by favourable demand conditions and new business gains, a monthly survey showed on Friday.

The seasonally adjusted S&P Global India Services PMI Business Activity Index rose to 59.4 in February, from 57.2 in January.

For the 19th month in a row, the reading was above 50, denoting expansion.

"The service sector more than regained the growth momentum lost in January, posting the sharpest expansion... for 12 years as demand resilience and competitive pricing policies underpinned the joint-best upturn in sales," said Pollyanna De Lima, Economics Associate Director at S&P Global Market Intelligence.

On the prices front, there was substantial moderation in cost pressures as input prices increased at the slowest pace in almost two-and-a-half years and output charge inflation softened to a 12-month low.

The degree of optimism recorded in February was the lowest for seven months as some firms doubted demand would remain this resilient.

PICKING THE WATCHDOG

Court verdict on manner of choosing poll panel is a boost to its independence

The Supreme Court verdict taking away the power to appoint members of the Election Commission of India (ECI) from the sole domain of the executive is a major boost to the independence of the election watchdog. The Court has ruled that a three-member committee comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, or the leader of the single largest Opposition party, and the Chief Justice of India (CJI), will choose the CEC and ECs until a law is passed. As a constitutional body vested with plenary powers of superintendence, direction and control over elections, the ECI is a vital component of the republic that requires functional freedom and constitutional protection to ensure free and fair elections. It has been the practice that the President appoints the CEC and ECs on the advice of the Prime Minister, but the Constitution Bench has pointed out that the original intent of the Constitution makers was that the manner of appointment should be laid down in a parliamentary law. Article 324 says the President should appoint the CEC and Commissioners, subject to any law made in that behalf by Parliament. However, successive regimes have failed to enact a law. Justice K.M. Joseph, who has authored the main verdict, has based the Court's decision on "the inertia" of the legislature and the perceived vacuum in the absence of a law.

Few would disagree with the Court's fundamental proposition that the election watchdog should be fiercely independent and not be beholden to the executive; and there should be no room for an appointing authority to expect reciprocity or loyalty. The government's argument that the existing system was working well and there was no vacuum was quite weak, as, admittedly, the convention now is that the Prime Minister chooses a name from among a database of high-ranking civil servants and advises the President to make the appointment. However, a relevant question is whether the presence of the CJI in the selection panel is the only way in which an institution's independence can be preserved. There is no clear proof that the independence of the CBI director, who is appointed by a panel that includes the CJI, or his nominee, has been preserved or enhanced. Further, the CJI's presence may give pre-emptive legitimacy to all appointments and affect objective judicial scrutiny of any error or infirmity in the process. On its part, the government will be well-advised to enact a law — but not one that seeks to preserve the current convention to get around the verdict — that is in tune with the spirit of the Court's emphasis on the ECI's independence.

CREATIVE FORMULAS

India must help find the middle ground on Ukraine among the G-20

After the conclusion of two key G-20 ministerial meetings, of the Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors (FMCBG) in Bengaluru and Foreign Ministers Meeting (FMM) in Delhi, without consensus over the Ukraine war, diplomats and G-20 officials must pause for a stock-taking exercise on the government's strategy for its G-20 presidency. The FMCBG is part of the key "Finance track" of the 20 most advanced economies, set up in 1999 to help global economic coordination after the Asian financial crisis. The other, the "Sherpa track", works on the G-20's goal setting process. With the experience India gained in Indonesia last year to bridge the Russia-West divide, the challenges for India's presidency, amid dynamic geopolitical changes, should have been clear. In Bengaluru, however, the surprise was when Russia and China refused to accept the language on the Ukraine war that they had agreed

to just three months ago. As a result, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman was constrained to issue only a Chair's summary and outcome document, rather than a joint communique. The government also decided to include the paragraphs that Russia and China had objected to, naming them in the document. This is something of a precedent, as last year, the Indonesian chair's joint communiqués at the Leader level and FMCBG expressed the sentiments of "many" and "most" countries. After the brinkmanship in Bengaluru, it was ambitious, if not a bit surprising, that the government chose to attempt negotiations for a joint statement for the FMM. Eventually, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar issued a Chairman's summary and outcome documents too, citing differences over the two Bali paragraphs. This was a first, as FMMs have not attempted to issue statements at all.

While the two meetings have given India's G-20 process a rocky start,

there is a long road ahead to the Leaders' summit in September. Mr. Jaishankar has pointed out that the bulk of the statements that pertain to the critical issues for the Global South, such as food and energy security and debt management, have been ironed out. Second, there is clarity that India cannot bank on the language of the Bali Summit, and Sherpas will need to iron out a new consensus language on Ukraine. This will require a keen ear and creative formulas that

take into account Russian grievances with the language, as well as the western desire to retain its successes in condemning Russia's actions in the Bali document. As host, India is in the 'hot-seat' and will benefit from enlisting those countries in the grouping other than the entrenched camps of the G-7, U.S.-led developed world, and the now-strengthened Russia-China combine, to ensure that a middle path is found.

NEPAL'S COALITION POLITICS, A GAME OF MUSICAL CHAIRS

Rakesh Sood is a former diplomat who has served as Ambassador to Nepal

Coalition politics in Nepal increasingly resembles the game of musical chairs; in Kathmandu too, it is the same cast of characters who have been taking turns for nearly two decades. The tragedy is that scant attention is paid to the critical issues — unemployment, national indebtedness and development challenges.

A coalition collapses again

The last coalition government, formed in December after the elections last November, has lasted just two months. It was stitched together by UML leader K.P. Sharma Oli with the idea of breaking away the Maoists by promising the prime-ministership to their leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda'.

Mr. Prachanda had formed an alliance with Mr. Oli in 2018 that broke down in 2020 after a series of decisions by Mr. Oli (he was then Prime Minister) seeking to marginalise Prachanda and other senior leaders. Later, Prachanda and the Madhav Nepal-led breakaway faction of UML, rechristened as the CPN (Unified-Socialist), joined with the Nepali Congress (NC) and formed an electoral alliance in 2022.

The Nepali Congress emerged as the largest party with 89 seats (the House strength is 275) and Maoists were a distant third with 32. Power-sharing talks collapsed because Prachanda insisted on becoming Prime Minister first. Knowing Prachanda's weakness, Mr. Oli made him an offer he could not refuse. On December 26, Mr. Prachanda was sworn in as Prime Minister and in return, he assured support to the UML for the posts of House Speaker and President. Six other parties had joined the coalition. These included disparate groups such as the Rashtriya Prajatantra Party (14 seats) that espouses a pro-monarchy and a pro-Hindutva agenda, and the newly created Rashtriya Swatantra Party (20 seats) consisting of professionals who professed disenchantment with the rampant opportunism in traditional Nepali politics. However, both were tempted with offers of Deputy Prime Minister-ships and Prachanda's cabinet had four deputy Prime Ministers, one each from the Maoists, UML, RSP and RPP.

Within weeks, Prachanda started chafing as Mr. Oli reverted to his old autocratic ways of calling the shots from behind the scenes. Realising that with the Oli nominees as President and Speaker he could easily be out manoeuvred, Prachanda reached out to the NC. Anticipating this, NC had voted in support of Prachanda in the confidence vote on January 10, announcing that it had done so in the interests of national consensus governance that could provide stability. Prachanda saw his opportunity to return the favour by espousing the idea of a national consensus presidency and promised support to the NC's candidate Ram Chandra Poudel. The UML called it a "betrayal" and pulled out of the coalition. However, other than the RPP, the other members of the Oli-led coalition declined to follow, announcing their support for Poudel's candidature. Presidential elections

The Election Commission has announced that presidential elections will be held on March 9, followed by elections for the Vice-President on March 17. Since the code of conduct will be in effect till March 19, no overt political activity is possible. Given that Mr. Prachanda is now heading a minority government with 16 vacant cabinet positions, power-sharing talks will gain momentum though the final outcome will remain a matter of speculation.

Mr. Prachanda has till month end to seek a fresh vote of confidence. Once Mr. Poudel is elected, the NC is likely to throw its weight behind Prachanda. The RSP, Janata Samajbadi Party (12 seats), Janmat Party (six seats) and the Nagrik Unmukti Party (three seats), earlier with the Oli coalition, have

switched their support to Mr. Poudel. In addition, NC coalition members, the Loktantrik Samajbadi Party (four seats), CPN (U-S) (10 seats) and Rashtriya Janamorcha (one seat) will also support Mr. Poudel.

The UML has put up former Speaker Subas Nembang as its presidential candidate. The Electoral College for these elections is made up of 275 members of the House of Representatives and the 59 members of the National Assembly together with the 550 members of the seven provincial assemblies, with votes being weighted. Given the current assurances of support, Mr. Poudel will win with nearly three-fourths of the Electoral College. In the election for the Vice-President, it appears that the JSP candidate will obtain the coalition backing.

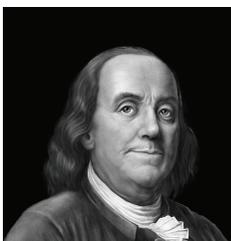
Prachanda's real challenge will emerge the following week. Managing negotiations between the competing demands of the NC and these seven parties will not be easy. This is his third stint as Prime Minister; his first time in 2008 was the only time he came to power on the basis of his electoral victory but his coalition collapsed in less than a year because he failed to make the transition from being Comrade Prachanda to an elected leader. The second and third times have been purely opportunistic gambles of teaming up with Oli and then getting burnt. After the second time, he even naively merged his party with the UML in 2018. Fortunately for him, the Supreme Court annulled the merger in 2021 giving him a political lifeline. However, he candidly admits to being easily tempted. On the other hand, NC leader Sher Bahadur Deuba, nearly 78 and a five-time Prime Minister, is convinced that he should be Prime Minister again. Hopefully, the events of the last two months should have a sobering influence on both because while Deuba's intransigence led to the breakdown of talks in December, Prachanda should realise that his bromance with Mr. Oli will always be short lived.

The foreign hand

Since 2008, when Nepal declared a republic, the game of political musical chairs has been a regular phenomenon. In 15 years, Nepal has had three NC Prime Ministers (G.P. Koirala, Sushil Koirala and Sher Bahadur Deuba twice), two Maoist Prime Ministers (Prachanda, now thrice, and Baburam Bhattarai), three UML Prime Ministers (Madhav Nepal, Jhala Nath Khanal and K.P. Oli twice), and a Chief Justice as caretaker Prime Minister in 2013. It is the resulting disenchantment of the electorate that led to new political forces in the 2022 elections.

Normally, it is during these rounds of musical chairs that Nepali politicians start wearing their 'nationalist' colours by looking for the convenient scapegoat of the 'foreign hand'. While India has often been blamed, China has played a visible hand in seeking to keep a united communist front but has failed to find a compromise between Oli's egoistical tendencies and Prachanda's opportunistic impulses. In recent years, India has retrieved some lost ground by focusing on project implementation, such as the Jayanagar-Bardibas railway and the Motihari-Amlekhgunj oil pipeline. Power export from Nepal has picked up: the agreement for 364 MW signed in June has yielded export earnings of \$60 million in 2022, while looking at increasing power transmission on the 400 kV Muzaffarpur-Dhalkebar line to 800 MW. The 900 MW Arun 3 is expected to be operational later in 2023. Meanwhile, some of the high-profile infrastructure projects by China have generated concerns about their economic viability and long-term debt implications.

A good 'neighbourhood first' policy for India is to focus on connectivity and development while letting the Nepali politicians continue with their game of 'musical chairs'.



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

- BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

CLEAN-TECH AS THE NEXT BIG THING IN RURAL INDIA

What do Meera Jatt, a dairy company director from the Dooni Tonk area in Rajasthan, Pooja Verma, who organised and trained hundreds of women in silk reeling, and Lalita Devi, who leads a farmer producer company with a ₹6 crore annual turnover in Fatehpur, Uttar Pradesh have in common? They are women from rural India who have adopted clean energy-based livelihood technologies to catalyse their businesses. From solar refrigerators to silk-reeling machines and biomass-based cold storage to bulk milk chillers, distributed renewable energy (DRE) is transforming women's livelihoods at the grassroots.

A recent Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) study has shown that out of the 13,000 early adopters of clean tech livelihood appliances, more than 80% are women. DRE-powered technologies provide an additional advantage to women farmers and microentrepreneurs by enhancing income opportunities through mechanisation. They also free women from several gender-assigned manual activities that are laborious.

By 2030, India is expected to see 30 million women-owned micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) employing around 150 million people. DRE livelihood technologies — a \$50 billion market opportunity in India alone — have the potential to transform rural livelihoods, with women at the core of this transition.

But how do we scale up this impact from thousands of women to millions of them? Here are key steps from reaching rural women as part of the Powering Livelihoods initiative.

First, leverage the experience of early women adopters. Because of their novelty and high starting price, DRE appliances are perceived as high-risk purchases, especially by women users with a relatively lower risk appetite due to socio-economic reasons. To overcome the challenge, technology providers must leverage early users to share their experiences with potential customers, becoming demo champions/sales agents to market these products, based on their first-hand product experience and local credibility.

For example, Kissan Dharmbir, an energy-efficient food processor manufacturer, engaged Neetu Tandan, an Agra-based micro-entrepreneur using the processor to produce fruit squashes and jams, as a demo champion. Her demonstrations are generating sales leads.

Importance of live events, financing

Second, organise hyperlocal events and demos. People want to touch and see a high-tech, high-ticket-size product before believing in its ability and promised benefits, especially when it comes to women who historically have limited access to new information. These events also create spaces for women

to network, become aware of the product and connect with people who can help them procure, finance and use these machines. At an event in Hamirpur, Uttar Pradesh, more than 200 women booked seven appliances on the spot, including solar sewing machines and multi-purpose food processors.

Third, enable easy finance to purchase products. Limited avenues to avail financing for these clean technology products remain a bottleneck. Financiers supporting women farmers and microentrepreneurs should consider the technologies themselves as collaterals while easing the loan application process. For example, Samunnati Finance, a financier in the agri-value chain, availed an 80% first-loan default guarantee to support six women-led FPOs in Andhra Pradesh that purchased 100-kg solar dryers.

Technology manufacturers and promoters should also ensure adequate after-sales services and buy-backs. To build financiers' confidence, evidence on the economic viability of these technologies should be shared and promoters must offer partial default guarantees.

Fourth, support backwards and forward market linkages. Only technology provision is not enough in all cases. Many rural products have larger market potential. Thus, finding and connecting producers to consumption hubs in urban areas are equally important to generate higher incomes.

Women often struggle with established market linkages because of their limited mobility and networks outside their villages. Here, collectivising women or establishing business models that enable them to sell to an intermediary can ensure a regular revenue stream. Reshamsutra, a manufacturer of solar silk-reeling machines, is partnering with local procurement organisations to establish silk cocoon banks and equipment training for women reelers in Chhattisgarh.

Facilitate convergence

Fifth, enable policy convergence. No private sector entity has the kind of reach and scale government institutions have, so leveraging their reach is imperative to exponentially scale up. Multiple Ministries are working towards promoting livelihoods for women — from State rural livelihood missions, horticulture and agriculture departments, Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, to the Ministry of Textiles. They should embrace clean energy solutions to further their respective programmes and outcomes.

Much like it takes a village to raise a child, scaling the impact of clean energy solutions on women's livelihoods needs a village of policymakers, investors, financiers, technology promoters and other ecosystem enablers. Only then can we truly unlock the potential of rural women and clean technologies simultaneously.

VEDHIK DAILY QUIZ

1. What is the name of the Russian Scientist who developed Sputnik 5 Covid 19 vaccine?
2. Which Department of Finance Ministry prepares Economic Survey of India
3. Which Indian Has been selected as external Auditor of International Labour organisation

Space for Rough work