



● POLITY

● ECONOMICS

● TECHNOLOGY

● ECOLOGY

IN IMPHAL, STATE RELIEF CAMPS LOSE TRIBALS' TRUST

Even as residents in Imphal said the first batch of tribals stranded in the Valley had been sent back to Churachandpur and Kangpokpi, many more tribals, mostly Kukis, stranded in camps run by the Manipur government are desperately trying to move into the camps run by the Central government — either Army camps or those run by the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF).

While security forces are trying to facilitate the rehabilitation of those stranded in Imphal (tribals, mostly Kukis) and Churachandpur (Meiteis) since the violence broke out on May 3, several tribals who have lost their homes and belongings in the mob violence are finding shelter in community halls and wherever else they can.

In Imphal, at least two of the security forces' relief camps are on the Manipur Rifles (MR) compounds, which are run by the State government. Additionally, there are camps set up by the Army and the Central forces. However, tribals who are being housed at the MR camps told The Hindu that they are trying their best to relocate to either Army-run or Centre-run camps — one, because they believe Army-run facilities will be better managed and two, because there is a complete breakdown of trust towards State government forces.

"On Sunday night, a group of about 100 Kuki people were trying to get out of the MR 1st Battalion camp but the security personnel stopped them," said Golan Naulak, an Imphal resident, who had to flee to the camp. Another resident, a researcher at a government institute, said, "When we first arrived at the MR camp three days ago, it was absolute chaos. There was no food, no proper drinking water, and the authorities were also caught by surprise."

Residents said the other fear tribals in the area have is of being at the mercy of State law enforcement officials. "Whether it is real or perceived, there is a lot of fear among those in the camps. There have been a lot of allegations of police complicity in the violence so far and that is a real concern for a lot of people," the 45-year-old researcher said, adding that the MR 1 camp now has about 400-500 people.

But even as more of the people housed at the MR camps try to leave,



Left wanting: The tribals in the Manipur Rifles-run camps have complained of having no food, no proper drinking water. AFP

Lack of proper facilities and fear of being at the mercy of State police have had tribals — mostly Kukis — attempt to move to facilities run by the Army or CAPF as rehabilitation picks up slowly

those stranded there said the authorities are slowly rehabilitating them to their home towns in their respective districts. A few batches of the tribals have been sent back to Churachandpur and Kangpokpi on Monday morning. Manipur government officials did not respond to The Hindu's questions about allaying fears of tribals being housed at their facilities.

BEWARE OF GLOBAL STRESS SPILLOVERS: SITHARAMAN

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Monday asked financial sector regulators to be on their toes to ensure that the "daunting challenges" emerging from the global economy don't affect the stability of India's financial markets.

Chairing the Financial Stability and Development Council, she stressed that maintaining financial stability is a shared responsibility and mooted the need to develop "early warning indicators" to identify likely financial sector stress and take timely corrective action.

"The global financial situation is daunting, but at the same time, the Indian financial sector is well protected. But of course, we have to be cautious and be on our toes," Economic Affairs Secretary Ajay Seth said after the parleys.

"The whole range of issues [emanating from the global economy], including the spillover effects and the channels through which some spillovers can come [were discussed]. The Indian financial sector is well-regulated and

there's no spill over coming in," he asserted. The Minister called for greater preparedness to ensure cybersecurity in increasingly digitised segments of the markets. "A much higher level of preparedness is needed for cybersecurity of all regulated entities, especially that large regulated entities, systematically important financial entities as well as financial market infrastructure," Mr. Seth pointed out.

Ms. Sitharaman also asked regulators to put a system in place to facilitate the return of unclaimed financial savings to investors and depositors or their nominees and legal heirs. To help people reclaim their unclaimed deposits, shares and dividends, regulators were asked to undertake a special drive, especially where nominees' details are available but the nominees may not be aware of these unclaimed funds. To the extent that nominees' contact details are available, regulators have been urged to reach out to them and settle those claims at the earliest.

INDIA'S CHINA STRATEGY NEEDS TO BE DEBATED

The Chinese have a knack for making headlines on India's borders. The latest move, in April, saw them "renaming" 11 places in Arunachal Pradesh, which they consider to be "Zangnam" or, in English, "South Tibet". The announcement was made after approval from the State Council, implying a green light from the very top of the Chinese system. Zhang Yongpan, of the Institute of Chinese Borderland Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, claims that China's move to "standardise" names in Zangnam "completely falls within China's sovereignty and it is also in accordance with the regulation on the administration of geographical names".

Long-held tactic, much provocation

India responded typically by "rejecting outright" this act of nomenclatural aggression on part of the Chinese. But is that enough? The "re-naming" of disputed territories has been a long-held tactic of the Chinese government, and this is the third batch of "re-naming" with reference to Arunachal Pradesh. More significantly, it is not the first provocative act of Chinese provenance in recent months. Ever since the unresolved stand-off at Galwan in June 2020, there has been no serious attempt by Beijing at a resolution, let alone a restoration of the status quo ante, while several instances of further provocation have occurred

from the Chinese side. Another border skirmish in December 2022 in the Tawang area showed that whatever policy the Ministry of External Affairs is masking with its anodyne statements, it is not ensuring deterrence.

India has lost access to 26 out of 65 Patrolling Points (PP) in eastern Ladakh, according to a research paper submitted by a senior police officer at the annual police meet in Delhi, last December. The “play safe” approach has turned areas that were accessible (before April 2020) for patrolling by the Indian Army into informal “buffer” zones, resulting in the loss of pasture lands at Gogra hills, the North Bank of Pangong Tso, and Kakjung areas. This is a matter of national security and of grave concern. Prime Minister Narendra Modi assures the nation that no “Indian territory” has been occupied, but such surrenders of access to lands traditionally used by Indians have become routine. Yet, the government refuses to openly call out the Chinese threat. The Prime Minister was willing to stand up and proclaim that “this is not an era of war” while sharing a platform with the Russian President, Vladimir Putin — the leader of a warring country with which India shares deep and friendly relations. What stops him from speaking out on a series of egregious transgressions by China on his own country’s borders?

Explaining the Indian stand

There are arguably several factors that have possibly led to the Indian aversion to denouncing the Chinese. Happymon Jacob has identified several: the growing power differential between the two countries; uncertainty about the strategic actions of major powers such as the U.S. in case of a military stand-off; the military capability differential between the two countries (India is not equipped for a major war with China); pressure from Indian business interests anxious to safeguard trade (India’s trade dependence on China has now crossed over \$100 billion); lack of consensus within the various ministries of the government about the kind of response the Chinese threat merits; and lack of political will within an increasingly hyper-nationalist, image-conscious Bharatiya Janata Party government (Mr. Modi is obsessively anxious not to appear weak, especially just in advance of a general election).

These considerations have led to the emergence of overcautious self-restraint on the part of the Indian government, marked by a refusal to permit even a basic discussion of China in Parliament, on the grounds of national security. This overlooks growing Chinese self-assertiveness on its land and sea borders, bordering on belligerence, which has already set alarm bells ringing in a number of Asian capitals and in Washington. Is India repeating the errors made in its pre-1962 engagement with Communist China? Nehru’s vision of India and China as the two major south Asian civilizations led to India being one of the first countries to recognise the Communist government in China and ended up with its softening its line on China’s invasion and occupation of Tibet, its encroachment on India’s borders and its cartographical aggression in the

pursuit of Chinese goodwill. Mr. Modi’s current policy of Chinese appeasement seems eerily similar, and could end just as badly.

What lesson does this have for the Indian response today? The ruling party vociferously argues that in the 1950s, India failed to call a spade a spade, behaved too cautiously in its diplomacy, and left too much for too late. The only difference 60 years later appears to be that the Indian government is today reinforcing its border defences and building roads and other infrastructure on the Indian side. While these may prepare India better to resist a People’s Liberation Army sweep into India, it does nothing to deter a Chinese build-up and continuing “salami-slicing” tactics on the disputed frontier, while India’s diplomacy only emboldens Beijing and leaves potential allies puzzled. Only if there is an acknowledgement of the problem can there be the initiation of a process of resolving it.

China’s assertive image building exercise

As a one-party state, China does not have to worry about public approval, but the Chinese Communist Party has shored up its domestic credibility by valorising its international image. Once anchored in the “peaceful rise” theory, it is now about showing strength, determination, economic might and an unwillingness to compromise on what it sees as its core national interests. The absence of a tough rhetorical response to Chinese actions in public is usually viewed there as a Chinese gain, whereas acrimony in public unsettles them.

In fact, China’s public image is a source of its vulnerability. It has always had a fear of being isolated in global affairs: this is why its assertiveness today is accompanied by diplomatic overtures in Europe, Russia and West Asia, to add an adroit diplomatic gloss to its uncompromising military determination. India was able to capitalise on China’s image-consciousness to get Masood Azhar blacklisted by the 1267 UN Sanctions Committee after China blocked India’s efforts for more than a decade, cornering Beijing through nimble, stakeholder-oriented diplomacy, so that in the end, China did not want to be seen as the lone holdout. Hence, image matters to Beijing, and can be exploited to India’s advantage.

When dealing with the Chinese, India must always remember Mark Twain’s observation, that history does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes. The period since Galwan, 2020-23, is not the same as 1949-62, but the same pattern of appeasement and self-denial is ominously emerging. India is missing an opportunity to loudly and proudly raise matters of its own vital interest by not using a strategy that fractures China’s image by challenging it publicly on its transgressions. The government must do what Nehru did, and take the Indian people into confidence. It is time for an urgent debate in Parliament on India’s China strategy.

BUDDHISM, INDIA’S SOFT POWER PROJECTION TOOL

There is much significance to India having hosted a two-day global Buddhist summit in New Delhi (April 20-21), which was organised by the Ministry of Culture in collaboration with the International Buddhist Confederation. The summit saw the participation of key figures from the global Buddhist community, including the Dalai Lama. It was at this summit that the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, laid emphasis on the continuing relevance of the Buddha’s teachings in today’s world. The summit was a significant opportunity for India to project and connect with the Buddhist population around the world, thereby strengthening the country’s soft power.

India’s efforts so far

The Indian government has been actively investing in its Buddhist diplomacy efforts, with a focus on promoting tourism through the development of the “Buddhist tourist circuit”. Additionally, Mr. Modi has made it a point to visit Buddhist sites during his Southeast and East Asian visits. By hosting such a high-profile event, the Indian government hopes to demonstrate its commitment to preserving and promoting Buddhist culture and heritage, as well as strengthening ties with the global Buddhist community. With its strong historical and cultural ties to Buddhism, India is well-positioned to play a leading role in shaping the discourse around Buddhist issues on the global stage.

Against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine crisis, Mr. Modi said, “India has not given ‘Yuddha’ to the world but ‘Buddha’.” This resonates with his earlier statement of his telling the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, that “this is not the era of war”. The Delhi summit’s theme, “Responses to Contemporary Challenges: Philosophy to Praxis”, also highlights India’s attempts to provide an alternative to contested global politics, with morality as the guiding principle.

Buddhist diplomacy has the potential to promote regional cohesion, given that nearly 97% of the global Buddhist population is based in Asia. During

the Cold War, China effectively used Buddhist diplomacy to engage with its neighbouring countries, and it continues to employ this approach to gain legitimacy for its Belt and Road Initiative. As India and China compete to dominate the Buddhist heritage as a tool for soft power, India holds an advantage due to the faith’s origins in the country. However, despite being home to a number of key Buddhist sites, such as Bodhgaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar, India has struggled to attract Buddhist tourists, who tend to favour sites in Thailand and Cambodia.

The guiding principle, China factor

India’s efforts to position itself as a great power committed to cooperation rather than coercion are rooted in its deep historical and cultural ties to the region. The current government’s guiding principles for foreign policy, Panchamrit principles include “Sanskriti Evam Sabhyata” which means cultural and civilizational links, which were highlighted during the Delhi summit, which saw a diverse group of 171 foreign delegates from South Korea, Thailand, Cambodia, Japan, and Taiwan, along with 150 delegates from Indian Buddhist organisations. Also in attendance were prominent scholars, sangha leaders, and dharma practitioners. Through such efforts, India hopes to reinforce its image as a responsible global power committed to peaceful cooperation and regional stability. By laying an emphasis on cultural and civilisational ties, India seeks to promote greater understanding and cooperation between nations and to demonstrate the unique role it can play in shaping the region’s future.

India recognises the importance of Buddhism as a means of conducting public diplomacy and has utilised it to its advantage. However, to maintain its edge over China, more action is needed. China is actively seeking to exert control over the appointment of the next Dalai Lama, which would be a blow to India’s efforts to project its soft power through Buddhism. India must act

to ensure that it remains a key player in the global Buddhist community.

To further strengthen its Buddhist diplomacy, India should continue promoting Buddhism at the highest levels of government, while also organising cultural events to showcase the country's rich Buddhist history. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) could play a significant role in promoting such events within and outside India. Additionally, India should work to strengthen its ties with key Buddhist institutions and leaders around the world. The Delhi summit was a step in the right direction, providing a valuable opportunity for cultural exchange and the sharing of ideas.

The film link

India also needs to utilise the reach of Bollywood in promoting its

Buddhist heritage. China, with its influence over Hollywood, has completely dominated the narrative around Buddhism through cinema. In contrast, India is behind in this domain; there have not been any efforts made through cinema. India's G-20 presidency this year could be used to promote Buddhist diplomacy on a bigger scale through various cultural meetings, especially as Buddhist teachings align with the motto of India's G-20 presidency, 'One Earth, One Family, One Future'.

As Buddha was the first diplomat of peace, his teachings of peace and cooperation in these tough times can become the guiding light of Indian diplomacy on the world stage.

THE LACK OF A DRUG RECALL LAW IN INDIA

The story so far:

On April 25, Abbot, a multinational pharmaceutical company, published a public notice in newspapers alerting people about a mislabelled batch of medicine that it had inadvertently shipped to the market. While such recalls take place regularly in the U.S., we have never witnessed domestic or foreign pharmaceutical companies recall substandard or mislabelled drugs in India.

Is there a drug recall law in India?

One of the reasons for this difference in behaviour in India and the U.S. is because the law in the latter requires pharmaceutical companies to recall from the market those batches of drugs that have failed to meet quality parameters. India, on the other hand, has been mulling the creation of a mandatory recall law for substandard drugs since 1976, and yet no law exists that mandates such medicine be removed from the market to this day.

In 1976, the Drugs Consultative Committee, which consists of all the state drug controllers along with senior bureaucrats from the Ministry of Health and the national drug regulator, the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO), discussed the issue of drug recalls. The minutes of this meeting record a discussion on how drugs ordered to be recalled by a state drug controller in one State were found to be on sale in another State. While the meeting resolved to have greater cooperation between various state drug controllers to facilitate better coordination, this decision never translated into amending the law to create a legally binding structure to enforce such recalls. Since then the issue has come up repeatedly in regulatory meetings in 1989, 1996, 1998, 2004, 2007, 2011, 2016, 2018 and 2019 but none of them resulted in amendments to the Drugs and Cosmetics Act to create a mandatory recall mechanism. In 2012, certain recall guidelines were published by the CDSCO but they lacked the force of law.

Why is there no recall law?

There are three possible answers to this question. The first is that the Drug Regulation Section of the Union Health Ministry is not up to the task of tackling complex drug regulatory issues due to a combination of factors including apathy, lack of expertise and a greater interest in enabling the growth of the pharmaceutical industry than protecting public health. The second possible factor is India's highly fragmented regulatory structure, with each State having its own drug regulator. But despite the fragmentation, drugs manufactured in one State can seamlessly cross borders to be sold in all States around the country. To create an effective recall mechanism, the responsibility of recalling drugs has to be centralised, with one authority wielding the legal power to hold companies liable for failures to recall drugs from across the country. However, both the pharmaceutical industry and state drug regulators have resisted greater centralisation of regulatory powers. This opposition has little grounding in logic. If



What happens when substandard drugs are indiscriminately distributed in the market? Have there been discussions on implementing a drug recall law in the country? Why are pharmaceutical companies resisting a centralised drug recall authority?

India is a single market for drugs, it follows that it should have one regulator. If not, the incompetence of a regulator in one State can lead to adverse effects for patients in other States.

The third possible factor is that India's drug regulators are aware of the fact that a mandatory drug recall system, which necessarily has to be centred on a system of wide publicity, will bring to public attention the state of affairs in India's pharmaceutical industry.

What happens when substandard drugs are not recalled?

People, including children, are almost certainly dying or suffering from adverse health events because substandard drugs are not swiftly removed from the market. Every month, dozens of drugs fail random-testing in government laboratories. Ideally, these drugs will be necessarily recalled in a transparent manner, with the people being informed of the failures.

If this were to actually happen in India, the people would be flooded with alerts on an almost daily basis, which then would increase the pressure on drug regulators to institute extensive reforms.

If the bureaucracy's intention is to avoid accountability, it might prefer to keep quiet and let substandard drugs, even those with dangerous consequences for consumers, circulate in the market. This has been their modus operandi for decades, until recently, when drug failures overseas brought attention to this issue. Yet nothing has changed on the ground.

WHAT ARE THE REGULATIONS TO CURTAIL MISLEADING FOOD ADS?

The story so far:

On April 29, the Advertisement Monitoring Committee at the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) flagged 32 fresh cases of food business operators (FBOs) making misleading claims and advertisements. As per the regulator, the count of such offences has shot up to 170 in the last six months.

What are the regulations?

There are varied regulations to combat misleading advertisements and claims, some are broad, while others are product specific. For example, FSSAI uses the Food Safety and Standards (Advertising & Claims) Regulations, 2018 which specifically deals with food (and related products) while the Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA)'s regulations cover goods, products and services. Further, the Programme and Advertising Codes prescribed under the

Cable Television Network Rules, 1994 stipulate that advertisements must not imply that the products have "some special or miraculous or supernatural property or quality, which is difficult of being proved." The FSSAI seeks that the advertisements and claims be "truthful, unambiguous, meaningful, not misleading and help consumers to comprehend the information provided". The claims must be scientifically substantiated by validated methods of characterising or quantifying the ingredient or substance that is the basis for the claim.

Product claims suggesting a prevention, alleviation, treatment or cure of a disease, disorder or particular psychological condition is prohibited unless specifically permitted under the regulations of the FSS Act, 2006.

When can a product be referred to as 'natural' and 'fresh'?

A food product can be referred to as 'natural' if it is a single food derived from a

recognised natural source and has nothing added to it. It should only have been processed to render it suitable for human consumption. The packaging too must be done sans chemicals and preservatives. Composite foods, which are essentially a mixture of plant and processed constituents, cannot call themselves 'natural', instead, they can say 'made from natural ingredients'.

'Fresh' can be used for products which are not processed in any manner other than washing, peeling, chilling, trimming, cutting or irradiation by ionising radiation not exceeding 1 kGy or any other processing such that it remains safe for consumption with the basic characteristics unaltered. Those with additives (to increase shelf life) may instead use 'freshly frozen', 'fresh frozen', or 'frozen from fresh' to contextualise that it was quickly frozen while fresh.

What about 'pure' and 'original'?

'Pure' is to be used for single-ingredient foods to which nothing has been added and which are devoid of all avoidable contamination, while unavoidable contaminants are within prescribed controls. 'Original' is used to describe food products made to a formulation, with a traceable origin that has remained unchanged over time. They do not contain replacements for any major

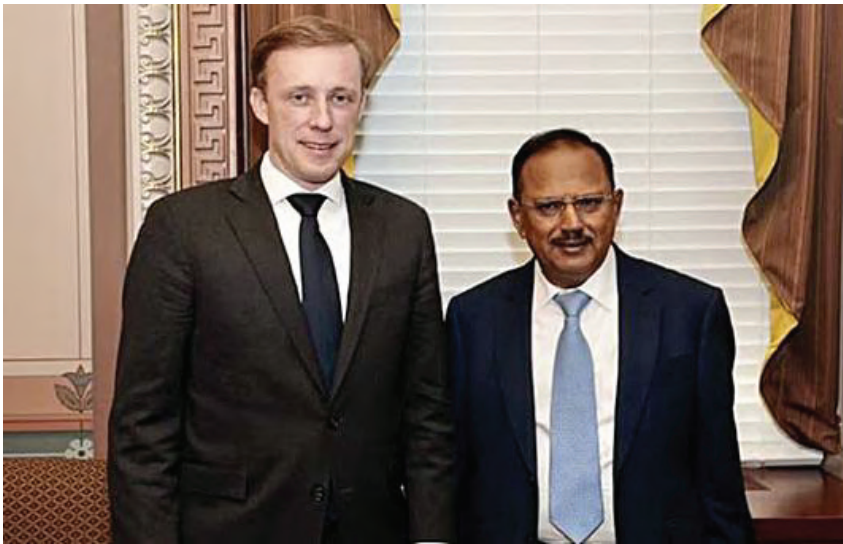
ingredients. It may similarly be used to describe a unique process which has remained unchanged over time, although the product may be mass-produced.

What about 'nutritional claims'?

Nutritional claims may either be about the specific contents of a product or comparisons with some other foodstuff. Claims of equivalence such as "contains the same of (nutrient) as a (food)" or "as much (nutrient) as a (food)" may be used in the labelling provided that it gives the equivalent nutritional value as the reference food. According to Manisha Kapoor, Chief Executive Officer and Secretary General at the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), most complaints of misleading ads were related to the nutrition of a product, its benefits and the ingredient mix not being based on adequate evidence.

"A lot of claim data is to be based on technical data. For example, if you say, that there is Vitamin D in my product, we need evidence to substantiate that there indeed is Vitamin D in your product," she says, adding, "then if you claim that Vitamin D in your product can also help reduce fatigue, improve stamina or another claim like that — then there needs to be enough literature to substantiate that the ingredient does what is being stated".

IN NEW 'QUAD' MEET WITH U.S., SAUDI ARABIA, UAE, DOVAL DISCUSSES INFRASTRUCTURE PLANS IN GULF



Strengthening ties: A file photo of National Security Adviser Ajit Doval with U.S. counterpart Jake Sullivan. Special arrangement

In what is being billed as another important "Quad" in West Asia, Saudi Prince and Prime Minister Mohammad Bin Salman (MbS) hosted a special meeting of the National Security Advisers (NSAs) of India, the U.S. and the UAE, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on Sunday.

The meeting, to consider regional initiatives on infrastructure, was billed last week by U.S. NSA Jake Sullivan as "unlike anything seen in the region in recent years". Mr. Doval's visit is significant as it follows a week after his visit to Iran, which recently agreed to restart ties in a meeting brokered by Beijing. The MEA and the National Security Council did not comment on Mr. Doval's travels, but both Saudi Arabia and the U.S. government issued formal statements on the discussions.

"During the meeting, [the leaders] discussed means to strengthen relations and ties between their countries in a way that enhances growth and stability in the region," said the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the meetings that included the UAE NSA and Deputy Ruler of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Tahnoun, U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Mr. Doval. 'Shared vision'

According to a U.S. White House statement, the meeting sought to "advance their shared vision of a more secure and prosperous Middle East region interconnected with India and the world".

In particular, the bilateral meeting between Mr. Sullivan and Mr. Doval is one of a number of meetings set over the next few weeks to prepare for upcoming meetings of Prime Minister Narendra Modi with U.S. President Joseph Biden this month, and the PM's state visit to the U.S. in June. U.S. Ambassador Eric Garcetti will finally present his credentials to President Droupadi Murmu on May 11, and is expected to begin formal meetings on preparations for the state visit.

Mr. Sullivan and Mr. Doval will meet again "on the margins of the Quad Summit later this month in Australia," announced a White House statement on Monday.

Mr. Modi is due to travel to Hiroshima as part of the G-7 outreach to other countries (May 19-21), which President Biden will attend; to Papua New Guinea for a bilateral visit where Mr. Biden will also be making a visit at the same time (May 21-23); and then meet Mr. Biden at the US-India-Australia-Japan Quad summit in Sydney (May 24) as well.

The visit to Saudi Arabia is one of several high-profile engagements abroad by Mr. Doval, who was in Tehran and met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, NSA Shamkhani and Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian last Monday.

'Counter to China'

The quadrilateral meeting that saw Mr. Doval fly to Jeddah, was first reported by news portal Axios from Tel Aviv, which said the meetings on infrastructure were meant to provide a counter to China's Belt and Road Initiative and other inroads in the region, and come months after Beijing brokered a breakthrough in the Saudi-Iran ties.

Quoting U.S. officials in its report, Axios had said that among the projects is a plan to connect Gulf countries via a railway network and connect to India via shipping lanes from "two ports" in the region. However, it did not explain how this would differ from the already existing connections between India and the Gulf region.

In a speech at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy ahead of the visit, Mr. Sullivan said his meetings in Saudi Arabia were meant to "discuss new areas of cooperation between New Delhi and the Gulf as well as the United States and the rest of the region, fuelled in part by the comprehensive economic partnership signed last year between India and the UAE."

A TRAGEDY FORETOLD

Kerala should ensure the maritime board is able to enforce regulations

Every time a boat capsizes in Kerala, where inland cruise tourism is flourishing largely unregulated, the familiar refrain is that it was a tragedy waiting to happen. The boat that sank in the Poorapuzha estuary in Tanur municipality on Sunday evening, killing 22 people, 15 of them children, was packed with local tourists to twice its capacity and was not cleared for post-dusk operations. It remains unclear how a fishing boat fitted with an upper deck received clearance,

if at all it did, to conduct inland tourist operations. Rescue workers, most of them fishermen, sustained injuries from the broken glass panels that covered the windows on its lower deck where most victims had got trapped. The Kerala government has ordered a judicial inquiry, with the support of experts, into the accident and the police have arrested the owner of the vessel.

It was just a month ago that international disaster management expert

Muralee Thummarukudy issued a prescient warning, which sounds eerie in hindsight, of an imminent houseboat tragedy in Kerala with at least 10 casualties. The cautionary note flagged the absence of crew training, sparse availability and use of safety material such as life vests, lack of on-board briefing of guests and erratic renewal of operational licence and enforcement thereon. Inquiring into the Thekkady boat capsize, in 2009, the worst Kerala has seen with 45 casualties, the former judge, E. Moideen Kunju, had recommended expeditious formation of a maritime board to regulate water transport. The Kerala Maritime Board was formed in 2017 by merging the Directorate of Ports, Kerala State Maritime Development Corporation Limited, and the Kerala Maritime Society. But the police investigation in the case dragged on, with a second charge sheet filed 10 years after the accident. The trial has not begun yet. As per official data, 3,213

inland vessels are in operation in Kerala's numerous waterways, but industry insiders give a ballpark figure of about 4,000 vessels, also counting the unlicensed ones. The maritime board, vested with the responsibility to ensure the fitness, licensing and safe operation of all tourist vessels in Kerala including houseboats, is short of adequate manpower to carry out its job. It has no enforcement wing to keep a tab on errant vessels including those that dodge periodic renewal of licence. Boat tourism holds tremendous potential in a State lined with waterways, but to be able to reap its benefits, the safety of the people using it should be given top priority. The government should expeditiously arm the maritime board with the wherewithal to carry out enforcement. This will ensure that erring officials are taken to task and not just the boat crew and managers.

3 CIVILIANS KILLED AS MIG-21 CRASHES INTO RAJASTHAN HOUSE



Tragedy strikes: Rescue operations under way after an IAF MiG-21 fighter aircraft crashed in Hanumangarh district of Rajasthan on Monday. PTI

Pilot sustains minor injuries as he ejected after failing to recover the jet from an emergency; IAF constitutes Court of Inquiry to ascertain cause; MiG has been involved in 400 accidents till date

Three civilians were killed after an Indian Air Force (IAF) MiG-21 fighter jet crashed into a house in Hanumangarh district of Rajasthan on Monday. The

pilot ejected safely and sustained minor injuries.

"The aircraft had got airborne for a routine operational training sortie from the Air Force Station at Suratgarh. Soon thereafter, the pilot experienced an onboard emergency, following which he attempted to recover the aircraft as per existing procedures. Having failed to do so, he initiated an ejection, sustaining minor injuries in the process," the IAF said in a statement. The incident took place around 9.45 a.m.

The pilot was recovered from about 25 km northeast of Suratgarh base.

The aircraft wreckage fell on a house in Bahlol Nagar in Hanumangarh district, leading to the loss of three lives, the IAF said.

A Court of Inquiry has been constituted to ascertain the cause of the accident.

In a tragic accident in July 2022, a twin-seater MiG-21 trainer crashed in Rajasthan, killing both pilots onboard — Wing Commander M. Rana and Flight Lieutenant Advitiya Bal. The IAF, which currently has 31 fighter squadrons, operates three MiG-21 Bison squadrons in service which will be phased out by 2025, one each every year.

An Air Force representative recently informed the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence that it was essential to phase out the aircraft. The MiG-21 was inducted into the IAF in the early 1960s, and since then, more than 800 variants of the supersonic fighter were inducted into service. It remained the frontline fighter jet of the force for a long time.

During this period, there were over 400 accidents involving the jet which claimed the lives of around 200 pilots.

XI JINPING TO HOST FIRST MEET WITH ALL CENTRAL ASIA LEADERS

Chinese President Xi Jinping will host a two-day summit with the leaders of five Central Asian nations next week, Beijing said on Monday, as China moves to increase its influence in the region.

Leaders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are expected to attend the China-Central Asia Summit from May 18 to 19, China's Foreign Ministry said.

The summit in the historic city of Xi'an on the ancient Silk Road is the first of its kind since the establishment of formal relations 31 years ago, according to the ministry, and will focus on strengthening economic and diplomatic ties with Beijing.

China has invested billions of dollars to tap natural gas reserves in Central Asia.

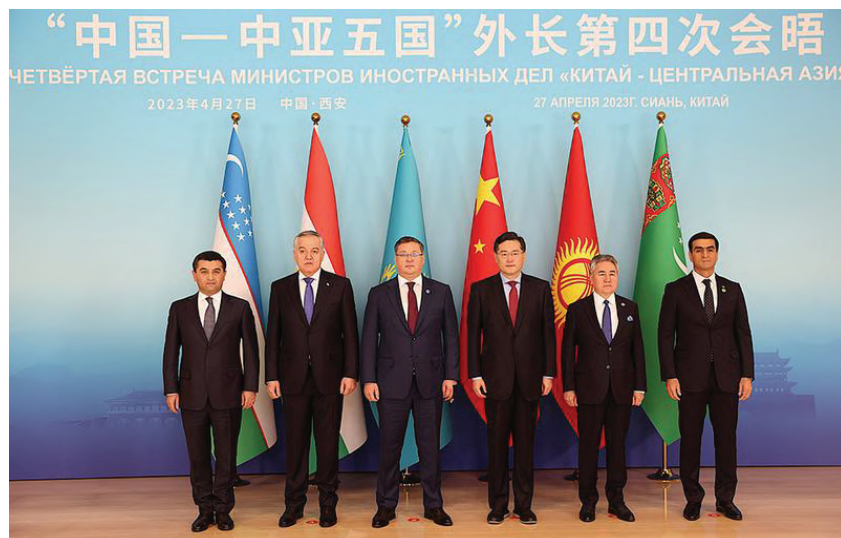
Rail links connecting China to Europe criss-cross the region and are key to the success of Mr. Xi's trillion-dollar global infrastructure project, the Belt and Road Initiative.

Russian influence

Foreign Ministry Spokesman Wang Wenbin said on Monday that Mr. Xi would deliver a keynote speech during the summit and the leaders would jointly sign "important political documents".

The republics of Central Asia were part of the Soviet Union and have been dominated by Moscow since the mid-19th century.

But Russia's influence has been increasingly challenged since its invasion of Ukraine, with Beijing courting Moscow's traditional allies in the region.



Team building: A file photo of Foreign Ministers of the five Central Asian countries with their Chinese counterpart Qin Gang.

The summit in the historic city of Xi'an on the ancient Silk Road is the first of its kind since the establishment of formal relations 31 years ago following the fall of the Soviet Union

INDICES RISE AFTER BANK STOCKS REBOUND FROM FRIDAY'S SLIDE

Surge follows slump

Equity indices climbed on strong earnings and robust economic data from the U.S.

■ **IndusInd Bank rose almost 5% after having shed over 5% on Friday following the resignation of its chief risk officer**

■ **Marico surged 7.5% after posting a 20% jump in March-quarter profit**

■ **One 97 Communication climbed 5% after reporting a narrower loss in the fourth quarter**



Eleven of the 13 major sectoral indices advance, with high-weightage financials rising 1.5%; financial sector index recovers from Friday's 2.34% drop, its worst day in more than three months

Benchmark equity indices advanced 1% on Monday, aided by a recovery in financial stocks, strong earnings and improved sentiment following robust economic data from the U.S.

The Nifty 50 closed 1.08% higher at 18,264.40, while the S&P BSE Sensex rose 1.16% to 61,764.25. Both benchmarks posted their best single-day gains in more than a month.

Eleven of the 13 major sectoral indices advanced, with high weightage financials rising 1.5%.

The financials index recovered from a 2.34% drop on Friday, its worst day in more than three months, dragged by HDFC and HDFC Bank on concerns of foreign funds' outflows from their merged entity.

On Monday, IndusInd Bank rose almost 5% after having shed over 5% on Friday following the resignation of its chief risk officer. Jefferies said the exit should not warrant such a price correction and reiterated its "buy" rating.

Marico surged 7.5% after posting a 20% jump in March-quarter profit. One 97 Communication climbed 5% after reporting a narrower loss in the fourth quarter.

CHINESE BOATS CROSS INDIAN AND ASEAN SHIPS DURING MILITARY EXERCISE

Boats belonging to a Chinese maritime militia approached an area where the Navies of India and ASEAN countries were taking part in drills in the South China Sea, two Indian sources said on Monday.

An independent expert in Vietnam said Beijing appeared to be using the militia to intimidate and disrupt the naval exercise.

Beijing has not responded to Reuters queries about the alleged incident and its possible motives. The Indian and Vietnamese governments declined to comment.

No face-off

The two-day sea phase of the ASEAN-India Maritime Exercise (AIME 2023) began on Sunday with naval ships and aircraft from India, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia and Brunei taking part.

They were in the Vietnamese Exclusive Economic Zone when the Chinese boats moved towards them, the Indian sources said. However, the militia boats and naval vessels crossed each other without any face-off, they said.

Indian authorities were tracking the movements of at least five militia boats, according to the sources, who did not wish to be identified as they are not authorised to speak to the media.

A Chinese research vessel was also following these boats towards the same area, they said.

Ray Powell, who leads Project Myoushu on the South China Sea at Stanford University, said the boats belong to the Qiong Sansha Yu militia fleet in the area.

RBI GOLD RESERVES ROSE BY 34 TONNES TO 795 TONNES IN FY23

The Reserve Bank's gold reserves increased by 34.22 tonnes year-on-year to reach 794.64 tonne at March-end 2023, central bank data showed on Monday. The Reserve Bank held 760.42 metric tonnes (MT) of gold (including gold deposits of 11.08 MT) at the end of March 2022.

"As at end-March 2023, the Reserve Bank held 794.64 metric tonne of gold (including gold deposits of 56.32 metric tonne)," the central bank said in its Half Yearly Report on Management of Foreign Exchange Reserves: October

2022-March 2023.

While 437.22 tonnes of gold are placed overseas in safe custody with the Bank of England and the Bank of International Settlements (BIS), 301.1 tonnes of gold are held domestically.

In value terms, the share of gold in the total foreign exchange reserves increased from about 7.06% at September-end 2022 to about 7.81% at March-end 2023, as per the report.

OF HOPE AND VIGILANCE

WHO's announcement gives hope, but there is a message of caution

The world's lived experience with pandemics has conferred it with the certitude that epidemics wane to die down, or transform into seasonal outbreaks; COVID-19 is no exception. The World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, last week declared, on the basis of advice from the emergency committee (comprising independent experts), that the COVID-19 pandemic was no longer a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. After over three years, he was reading down an emergency that he first announced on January 30, 2020, forced by a rapidly spreading infection that moved from China to 20 other nations across the world. Dr. Tedros notably invoked hope when he declared that COVID-19 was over as a global health emergency, but followed it up with a rider: it did not mean COVID-19 was no longer a global health threat. Over the months leading up to the

announcement, various experts with WHO were laying the ground, urging that it was time to treat COVID quite like seasonal influenza. For a world fatigued by great loss, human and otherwise, caused by the COVID pandemic, and exhaustively on guard, the DG's announcement brought a collective sigh of relief.

However, the task now for WHO and nations is to ensure that this announcement is not selectively received, to prevent the world from slipping into a torpor of complacency. For, COVID is not over — multiple variants and sub variants continue to emerge regularly, and it has not yet settled into a seasonal pattern that one can read, or prevent. At any point of time, it is possible that a new variant, or recombinant may lead to rapid transmission and cause severe disease, resulting in hospitalisations and even higher mortality rates. As global

health experts continue to insist: for health systems, eternal vigilance is essential, to maintain a level of care and periodically test their capacity to respond to epidemic situations. The impressive network of INSACOG laboratories capable of genetic sequencing and even routine health infrastructure built up during the COVID years must be utilised well. It is also important to not take the foot off the pedal in terms of research and development into vaccine platforms, drug delivery

systems, anti virals, and antibiotics. This will enable nations to be prepared and on guard not just for COVID-19 but also other emerging infections. At a personal level, individuals will benefit from following the hygiene and precautions that became a habit during the COVID years, particularly adhering to the vaccination schedule, and following hand hygiene and masking under certain circumstances.

COAL IMPORTS ROSE 30% IN FY23 TO 162 MT ON DEMAND

India's coal imports increased by 30% to 162.46 million tonnes (mt) in the 2022-23 financial year against 124.99 mt in the year-earlier period, according to a report. The import of coking coal rose 5.44% to 54.46 mt over 51.65 mt in FY22, mjunction said in a report.

In March alone, non-coking coal import stood at 13.88 mt against 12.61 mt a year earlier. Coking coal imports were 3.96 mt (4.76 mt). India is among the top five coal-producing countries in the world.

However, some parts of its coal requirement are met through imports as the country is also among the major consumers of the dry fuel.

For coking coal — a key raw material used in steel making — the country remains heavily dependent on imports.

"The persistently high demand for steam coal in India, coupled with the weakening of seaborne prices led to increased volumes during March. This trend is likely to continue in coming months in view of the above-normal average temperature expected this summer," mjunction CEO Vinaya Varma said.

Along with other varieties of coal like anthracite, pulverised coal injection (PCI coal), met coke and pet coke, total imports in FY23 were at 249.06 mt, up from 200.71 mt in FY22, a rise of more than 24%.



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