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NAVY FOILS HIJACKING BID BY SOMALI PIRATES, RESCUES 19 PAK. NATIONALS

CONTEXT: The Indian Navy's offshore patrol vessel INS Sumitra, deployed in the Gulf of Aden, neutralised a hijack situation and rescued the Iranian-flagged fishing vessel Al Naeemi and its crew of 19 Pakistani nationals from 11 Somali pirates off the east coast of Somalia.



In another incident, a coordinated multilateral response between the Indian Navy, the Seychelles Defence Forces and the Sri Lankan Navy foiled the hijacking bid on a Sri Lankan fishing trawler.

The Gulf of Aden has seen a sudden spurt in piracy from Somalia in the last few months after going down completely from the peak around 2010. The Indian Navy has maintained continuous presence with at least one major warship deployed on anti-piracy duties since 2008.

Swift response

The INS Sumitra was pressed into action to locate and intercept the Iranian-flagged fishing vessel Al Naeemi, which had been boarded by pirates with its crew of 19 Pakistani nationals taken hostage. Responding swiftly to the developing situation, Sumitra intercepted the vessel on Monday and through coercive posturing and effective deployment of her integral helicopter and boats compelled the safe release of the crew and the vessel. The ship also undertook confirmatory boarding to sanitise and also to check on the well-being of the crew who were held captive by the Somali pirates.

The Indian Navy deployed INS Sharada from Kochi on Sunday afternoon and also tasked its Sea Guardian High Altitude Long Endurance Unmanned Aerial Vehicle with locating and intercepting the hijacked fishing vessel. Additionally, efficient

operational coordination and information sharing through the Sri Lanka and Seychelles International Liaison Officers at Information Fusion Centre for Indian Ocean Region (IFC IOR), New Delhi resulted in the interception of the hijacked fishing vessel by SCGS Topaz in Seychelles Exclusive Economic Zone.

The three pirates surrendered to the Seychelles Coast Guard (SCG), all six crew members are safe and the vessel is being escorted to Mahé, Seychelles. INS Sumitra, over the course of less than 36 hours, through swift, persistent and relentless efforts has rescued two hijacked fishing vessels along with 36 crew, 17 Iranian and 19 Pakistani, in southern Arabian Sea approximately 850 nm [nautical miles] West of Kochi, and prevented misuse of these vessels as mother ships for further acts of piracy on Merchant Vessels.

Earlier, INS Sumitra prevented a hijack incident in the area after responding to a distress message from Iranian-flagged fishing vessel Iman, with a crew of 17 Iranian nationals, which had been boarded by pirates and the crew taken hostage.

On January 27, a hijacking incident was reported aboard the Sri Lankan-flagged fishing trawler Lorenzo Putha 04 about 955 nautical miles east of Mogadishu, Somalia and three pirates had boarded and hijacked it.

ECOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENT

AFTER FOUR YEARS OF SURVEY, INDIA'S SNOW LEOPARD COUNT PUT AT 718

CONTEXT: India has an estimated 718 snow leopards in the wild, according to a first-of-its kind, four-year-long estimation exercise. The snow leopard is known to be an elusive cat and located in mountainous terrain that is hard to access, and the exercise for the first time marks a base threshold for the animal's numbers in India.



The highest number of cats was estimated to be in Ladakh (477), followed by Uttarakhand (124), Himachal Pradesh (51),

Arunachal Pradesh (36), Sikkim (21), and Jammu and Kashmir (nine). The current estimate puts the number of Indian snow leopards between 10% and 15% of the global population.

The exercise involved setting up cameras, or camera traps, in 1,971 locations and surveying 13,450 km of trails which teams surveyed for recording signs of snow leopards such as scat, hair and other body markers. The States conducted the surveys and the Dehradun-based Wildlife Institute of India, an autonomous body of the Union Environment Ministry, used software and statistical methods to estimate the number of individual cats that are present but not caught on camera and combined them with those caught on camera.

Essentially we use a similar statistical approach to that being used in the tiger surveys for the past 20 years. It's a rigorously tested equation and not dependent on guesswork.

Over the years, technology and statistics has improved leading to better estimates. What we now have is a good, scientifically established baseline that will be a reference for future surveys. The Snow Leopard Population Assessment in India (SPAI) began in 2019 and involves the World-Wide Fund for Nature-India and the Nature Conservation Foundation, Mysuru, along with the WII. The snow leopard is classified as 'vulnerable' by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and faces threats from free-ranging dogs, human-wildlife conflicts, and poaching.

HISTORY, ART AND CULTURE

INDIA NOMINATES 12 FORTS OF MARATHAS FOR UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE LIST

CONTEXT: India has nominated the "Maratha Military Landscapes", a network of forts that showcase the strategic military powers of Maratha rule, for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List for 2024-25.



The 12 forts included in this nomination are the forts of Salher, Shivneri, Lohagad, Khanderi, Raigad, Rajgad, Pratapgad, Suvarnadurg, Panhala, Vijaydurg and Sindhudurg in Maharashtra and Gingee in Tamil Nadu.

The "Maratha Military Landscapes", which developed between 17th and 19th centuries, represent an extraordinary fortification and military system envisioned by the Maratha rulers. They are distributed across diverse geographical and physiographic regions and showcase the strategic military powers of the Maratha rule. The extraordinary network of forts, varying in hierarchies, scales and typological features, is a result of integrating the

landscape, terrain and physiographic characteristics distinctive to the Sahyadri mountain ranges, Konkan Coast, Deccan Plateau and Eastern Ghats in the Indian Peninsula. The inception of the Maratha military ideology dates back to 17th century during the reign of the Shivaji Maharaj from 1670 and continued through subsequent rules until the Peshwa rule till 1818 CE.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

PHILIPPINES, VIETNAM SIGN DEAL ON SOUTH CHINA SEA

CONTEXT: The Philippines and Vietnam signed agreements to prevent incidents in the South China Sea and broaden cooperation between their coast guards in a growing alliance that will likely be frowned upon by China, which claims virtually the entire waters.

The agreements, along with discussions on enhancing information-sharing and training exchanges between the Vietnamese and Philippine militaries, were forged during a visit to Hanoi by Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. Both sides agreed to boost trade and investment and signed a key deal on rice.

The Philippines and Vietnam have had especially tense confrontations with China in the strategic waterway and key route for global trade in recent years. Territorial face-offs in the high seas between Chinese and Philippine ships intensified last year, fuelling fears of a wider conflict that could involve Washington, Manila's long-time treaty ally.

Although Chinese and Philippine officials agreed earlier this month at a meeting in Shanghai to take steps to de-escalate tensions, Mr. Marcos while in Hanoi raised his concerns over the long-seething disputes and cited increasingly aggressive actions by the Chinese coast guard.

Vietnamese and Philippine officials did not release specific details of their agreements on managing incidents in the South China Sea and intensifying coordination on maritime issues.

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

KHAN'S CONVICTION A WEEK BEFORE ELECTION IS A MIRROR IMAGE OF THE PAST: DIPLOMATS

CONTEXT: Former Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's latest conviction in the 'Cipher Case', 10 days before the general elections.



Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) leaders called the 10-year prison sentence against Mr. Khan and former Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi a "sham" and vowed to appeal to higher courts, it seems clear that the verdict is a blow for the party that won elections in 2018 and still claims to be the most popular party in the fray.

Role reversal

Former Indian diplomats to Pakistan pointed out that Mr. Khan is undoubtedly a victim, but of a system that he was the beneficiary of in previous elections, when roles were reversed with PML-N chief and three-time Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. In July 2018, with about two weeks to go to the elections, Mr. Sharif was convicted and handed a 10-year sentence on charges of corruption, after being disqualified from public office in the 'Panama Papers' corruption cases, involving his property in London.

Ties with India

The impact of the expected results of the elections next week on ties with India could be a "degree of thaw", including some movement on trade. But the government's ability to deliver on the bilateral relationship will remain contingent upon the will of the Army," referring to Pakistan Army chief Gen. Asim Munir.

While many of the characteristics of previous Pakistani elections are being repeated in 2024, some developments suggest the control exercised by the establishment over elections is more extreme than in the past. In the 2008 elections, held after former PM Benazir Bhutto was assassinated, Mr. Khan's and his party boycotted elections, claiming they would be "manipulated" by the U.S. and then-President Gen. Musharraf to favour Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), but his party was allowed to contest. In 2013 and 2018.

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

IMF SAYS GLOBAL 'SOFT LANDING' IN SIGHT, LIFTS 2024 GROWTH OUTLOOK

CONTEXT: The International Monetary Fund on Tuesday lifted its forecast for global economic growth, upgrading the outlook for both the United States and China — the two largest economies — and citing faster-than-expected easing of inflation.



According to the IMF's chief economist, Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas, the updated World Economic Outlook showed that a "soft landing" was in sight, but overall growth and global trade still remained lower than the historical average.

'Remarkable resilience'

The global economy continues to display remarkable resilience, with inflation declining steadily and growth holding up. The chance of a 'soft landing' has increased, but cautioned that the base of expansion was slow and risks remained, including geopolitical tensions in West Asia and attacks in the Red Sea that could disrupt commodity prices and supply chains.

Delays in announced fiscal consolidation in what Mr. Gourinchas called "the biggest global election year in history" could boost economic activity but might also spur inflation.

The IMF said the improved outlook was supported by stronger private and public spending despite tight monetary conditions, as well as increased labour force participation, mended supply chains and cheaper energy and commodity prices.

The IMF forecast global growth of 3.1 % in 2024, 0.2 percentage point higher than its October projection. The historical average for the 2000-2019 period was 3.8 %. Global trade was expected to expand by 3.3 % in 2024 and 3.6 % in 2025, well below the historical average of 4.9 %. The IMF stuck with its October forecast for headline inflation of 5.8 % for 2024, but lowered the 2025 forecast to 4.4 % from 4.6 % in October. The average oil prices would drop 2.3 % in 2024, versus the 0.7 % decline it had predicted in October, and said prices were expected to drop 4.8 % in 2025.

Raises India outlook

Growth in India is projected to remain strong at 6.5 % in both calendar 2024 and 2025, with an upgrade from October by 0.2 percentage point for both years, on resilient domestic demand.

The new commodity price spikes from geopolitical shocks, including continued attacks on shipping in the Red Sea, could prolong tight monetary conditions. The IMF was watching developments in West Asia closely, but the broader economic impact appeared “relatively limited” as of now.

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

ECONOMIC ENCOMIUM

CONTEXT: Ahead of the Interim Budget for 2024-25 on Thursday, the Finance Ministry’s 10-year review of the economy signals GDP will grow close to 7 % in 2024-25, with scope to go ‘well above’ 7 % by 2030. From about \$ 3.7 trillion this year, India’s economy will expand to \$ 5 trillion in three years, making it the world’s third largest, and could hit the \$ 7 trillion dollar mark by 2030, it reckons.

Splicing India’s growth story into two phases — 1950-2014, a period where the growth was hobbled by structural constraints such as tardy decision-making, ill-targeted subsidies and a large informal sector, while inflation was unpalatably high and a ‘decade of transformative growth’ since 2014 — where reforms have restored the economy’s ability to grow healthily with “longer and stronger” economic and financial cycles, and made India the fastest growing G-20 nation. The review asserts that India’s 7 % growth when the world is growing 2 %, is ‘qualitatively superior’ to 8 % - 9 % achieved when the global economy grows 4 %, perhaps, hinting at a few years of the UPA era. This is debatable as India’s economy is generally delinked from the world with domestic activity driving growth more than exports.

The twin-balance sheet problem inherited from the UPA days has turned into an ‘advantage’, translate into a wider private investment revival. That would hinge on a broad-based consumption rebound rather than the K-shaped recovery vehemently dismissed by the Government. Four years of 7 %-plus growth, post-pandemic, would be commendable indeed. However, India needs to grow faster to create jobs at the scale its youth need and ensure that a rising growth tide lifts most boats, if not all.

The review expects an ‘all-inclusive welfare approach’ to help enlarge the consumption base by expanding the middle class. But those dependent on handouts, such as the 800 million that need free food by the Centre’s reckoning, must progressively shrink for growth to be meaningful and equitable. The report rightly mentions reforms in learning outcomes, health, easier compliances for smaller firms, as priorities, with some critical changes at the ‘sub-national government’ level to accelerate growth.



“Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence.” - Robert Frost

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

VETTING FOR VENDETTA

CONTEXT: The Supreme Court’s suggestion for a mechanism to eliminate the perception of vendetta behind the use of investigative agencies against political opponents is sound in principle, but may not address all aspects of the problem. A case under formal investigation may be scrutinised for its legal tenability or political motive, but such a mechanism can do nothing about offences and allegations that are covered up for political reasons.

During a recent hearing on a bribery case against an Enforcement Directorate (ED) officer in Tamil Nadu, the ED sought the transfer of the probe to the CBI. It also charged that the State police was not sharing details of FIRs it had registered on complaints against Ministers, officials and others in instances of corruption and illegal mining. The ED, presumably, wants to probe the money-laundering aspects of these offences, whereas the State government believes these details will be used to target its ministers and officials as the State is run by a party opposed to the ruling BJP at the Centre. The Bench’s idea that an independent, pan-India mechanism to vet such cases appears reasonable. However, much of the criticism of the use of central agencies against political adversaries of the BJP stems from the view that similar allegations against its party members and allies across the country are seldom investigated.

Corruption allegations abound in several States against key political figures seen as friendly to the Centre, but the Opposition parties believe the CBI, ED and Income-Tax Department are hardly active there. The Bench is right in observing that offenders should not be spared only because they claimed to be victims of vendetta. Its remarks disapproving of retaliatory arrests are also salutary. However, despite the Solicitor-General’s argument that the courts could intervene in the case of vindictive action, it has to be noted that the ED’s power to summon and arrest anyone, and the difficulty in obtaining bail in money-laundering cases, renders the Union government quite invincible if it chose persecution in the name of prosecution.

An unsavoury instance of how far politics over the use of central agencies can sully institutions is the recent episode of a Calcutta High Court judge ordering a CBI probe into charges against the ruling party in West Bengal, and a Division Bench staying the order. The single judge chose to ignore the Bench’s order, accusing its presiding judge of political motive. In a welcome move, the Supreme Court formed a Bench of its senior-most judges and transferred the whole case file to itself for disposal. The perception of vendetta can only be removed if all agencies chose independence over subservience.

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POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

A DARK MESSAGE TO DELHI FROM KANGLA FORT

CONTEXT: 38 Meitei legislators took a six-point public oath-taking at the Kangla Fort, Imphal, on January 24. Unlike the four-generic resolutions passed by the State Assembly, and reportedly endorsed by 34-odd State legislators (this included a Meitei Pangal and five Nagas) three days earlier, the six-points oath, later endorsed by the Chief Minister of Manipur, N. Biren Singh made explicit its communal overtones by castigating the 'Kuki' for unilaterally fomenting violence since May 3.

Arambai Tenggol

Although the Arambai Tenggol is largely seen as a private militia (started and sustained under the patronage of Leisemba Sanajaoba, the titular king of Manipur, and the powers-that-be), it also represents a calibrated organisational attempt to revive Meitei indigenous culture, tradition and religion (Sanamahi).

Much like the radicalisation of youths in Punjab in the 1980s under Bhindranwale's Damdami Taksal, the Arambai Tenggol has succeeded in reorienting many unemployed Meitei youth to the cause of a sovereign Kangleipak under the veneer of reviving Meitei's fast-vanishing indigenous religion, traditions and cultures such as traditional martial arts that focus on the use of sword, and a horse-mount dart as a weapon. In doing so, the Arambai Tenggol has galvanised popular interest and support in quick time. However, given that it operates in an insurgent space where the 'radical' agenda and interest of a motley of non-state actors including armed groups which espouse a sovereign Kangleipak intersect and often either coalesce or reinforce one another, the Arambai Tenggol is susceptible to manipulation and control by powerful social forces and political actors.

Everything other than disarmament

The six-points oath called upon the Centre to

- Abrogate the tripartite Suspension of Agreement (SoO) that it signed with the State and Kuki-Zomi-Hmar militants since 2008;
- Implement the National Register of Citizens but using 1951 as the base year;
- Construct a border-fence across the India-Myanmar border;
- Replace the Assam Rifles with other central paramilitary forces;
- Delete 'Kuki' from the Scheduled Tribe list, and relocate 'Kuki refugees' in Manipur to Mizoram.

If these were implemented, they would not only further expose the vulnerability of the Kuki-Zomi-Hmar groups but would also effectively erase their long-standing protective discrimination benefits.

An abandonment of constitutional duty

Given the extensive reports of Arambais being involved in violent attacks against several Kuki-Zomi-Hmar villages, the legislators' decision to publicly partake in the Arambais agenda only reinforces the partisan image and the

role of the Meitei legislators in Manipur's violence.

The immediate fallout of this was evident during the event as three legislators, who included Meghachandra, the President of Congress Pradesh Committee, were physically assaulted by the Arambais for attributing the violence to misrule by the Bharatiya Janata Party in the State. The muzzling of dissent and violent intolerance stems from this. That the Arambai Tenggol brooks no dissent and might unleash terror was also evident when its cadres vandalised the residences of human rights activist Babloo Loitangbam and a retired police official, Thounaojam Brinda, when they implicated the Arambai Tenggol for its role in this cycle of violence.

By giving in to the diktat of the Arambai Tenggol and Korounganba Khuman, its commander-in-chief (out of fear of being labelled 'enemy' and 'traitor' of the Meitei 'community'), the Meitei legislators have abandoned their primary constitutional duty and oath to protect India's Constitution.

This dramatic event is also remarkable for its symbolic and iterative significance. That an armed militia chose Kangla Fort as the site for public oath-taking demonstrates its determination to not only revive the glorious past of Kangleipak (the local name for Meitei Kingdom) from its symbolic and traditional seat of power, but also project this as a fulcrum to revive Meitei indigenous tradition, culture, and religion (Sanamahi). The event is also significant for another reason — that elected representatives of a democratic state, whose primary oath of allegiance is to the Indian Constitution, are very pliable and can be blackmailed under duress to capitulate to the partisan communal agenda of an unelected, and armed militant group. That elected legislators could be overshadowed in a democratic and constitutional state is disturbing as it strikes at the very root of the legitimacy of the Indian state.

Dangers of a radical agenda

The fact that this event was organised to convey a strong political message to New Delhi is clear as it happened within days of backroom attempts by a three-member team of the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (headed by A.K. Mishra, a retired police officer and an interlocutor with Kuki-Zomi-Hmar SoO groups in Manipur), to persuade the Arambai Tenggol to either cancel or postpone the event. In its ambition to upstage the 38-odd Meitei legislators (plus the Chief Minister who later signed the pledge) as the bearers of democratic legitimacy, the Arambai Tenggol and this oath reinforced the communal and partisan agenda/interest of large segments of Meitei non-state actors and their legislators in targeting the 'Kuki' as the problematic 'other'.

It is precisely here that one should be wary of the Janus-faced Arambai Tenggol. Allowing the mighty Indian state to capitulate to this armed militia, or other powerful social forces, just because it is amenable to cultural and nationalist appropriation by some vested parties in their electoral pursuit cannot be used as a ruse to denude what the eminent sociologist Michael Mann in a different context calls the 'infrastructural power' of the state — that is, the autonomous power to regulate state-society relations. Otherwise, this public event could turn out to be India's Bhindranwale moment again.

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

A BLURRED MAPPING OF INTERNAL FEMALE MIGRATION

CONTEXT: The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), which collects data on employment and unemployment indicators in the country, has estimated it to be 27% from June 2020 to 2021. Normative literature (Rajan et al., 2020; Jesline et al., 2021) usually documents it as a male-dominated narrative. However, women, especially of working age, comprise a greater share of the migrant pool but there is little dialogue surrounding them. This is a concern given India's falling Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR). It also raises the question of whether women face employment barriers due to post-migration conditions.

National surveys, inaccurate picture

National surveys such as the PLFS capture information about female migrants but often convey an inaccurate picture. For instance, surveys only ask the respondents regarding their primary reason for migration. PLFS data suggest that the leading reason for migration among women is marriage (81%), followed by migration of family members (10%), employment (2.42%), and migration for education opportunities (0.48%). There is no provision to know the secondary reasons/motivations such as climate shocks and food insecurity, which can be a crucial driver of migration for women.

In the same vein, data from these surveys regarding migrant women's labour force participation can be misinforming. According to the PLFS, approximately three quarters of migrant women are unemployed, approximately 14% of migrant women are in self and wage-employed jobs and approximately 12% are in casual labour. This round of data collection was during the COVID-19 pandemic, which might explain the low numbers, but does not adequately underscore the problem of underreporting of their employment status. Anecdotal evidence and findings from the respective works of researchers Sonalde Desai and Ashwini Deshpande suggest that it is not uncommon for migrant women to engage in casual employment, indicating the underestimation of the number of migrant women involved in the various sectors that might be categorised as casual (or even informal) such as agriculture, construction, and domestic help.

Second, definitional issues and women's own beliefs also lead to an underreporting of employment of migrant women. According to the definition of employment used by national surveys, only those with some form of verbal or written contract with their employer are considered part of the labour force. Consequently, women are largely classified as unemployed.

However, what is often overlooked is that women choose forms of employment that allow them to handle their domestic duties while contributing to the household's production or finances. Thus, working as unpaid family workers, in household enterprises, or being self-employed is common amongst them (S. Rukmini, 2023). But they may view that as an extension of their domestic commitment instead of a form of employment which leads to them

misreporting their employment status.

Human and social capital

Notwithstanding these arguments, if indeed entry to the formal labour force is challenging, one important factor restricting their entry into the labour force could be the need for more human and social capital. In the PLFS data, 85% of the women have less than 10 years of education, which can create problems. While there is no significant difference in the educational levels of migrant and non-migrant women, migrant women are proportionally less employed than the non-migrant women. Coupled with the lack of social networks, especially after they migrate, these factors can significantly hinder their employment chances.

Such barriers might also explain the dismal recovery of women's labour activity after the pandemic. A study by Yale University on this issue observed that after the COVID-19-induced lockdown, 55% of women never returned to their places of employment, and those who did so, earned only 56% of their pre-pandemic income levels.

Regardless of the sparse number of migrant women formally counted in the labour force, female migration for labour/employment increased by 101% between 2001 and 2011. However, they remain largely invisible, facing significant hurdles and marginalisation. Consequently, this results in unaddressed struggles and a lack of targeted policies. From a political standpoint, women migrants are not a considerable vote bank, and, therefore, their needs are not addressed. Although recent polls would disagree, political parties do not campaign to gain migrant women's votes. This has several detrimental outcomes, such as a lack of good data on female migrants and treating migrant men and women as the same. This engenders policy-making, which is poorly informed about the needs, motivations, and conditions of female migrants. Policies such as One Nation One ration card, e-Shram, and affordable rental housing complexes are examples of this as they are mainly targeted towards the male migrant population.

Steps to take

To remedy this, several steps should be taken. National surveys should compile more information regarding their socio-economic conditions post-migration as very little is known about it. For instance, the PLFS indicates that a minute percentage (approximately 7%) have access to social security benefits; there is no data for the rest of the populace. There is also a lack of time-use data (Nadal et al., 2020; Charmes, 2019) for migrants, as India has not made that the norm yet. Time-use data would significantly help advance existing knowledge regarding unemployed female migrants. On a broader scale, a change in narrative is required, starting with an increased collection of female-specific data. It will illustrate the largely anecdotal problem and bring awareness about the plight of these women to encourage progressive policymaking.

"Intelligence plus character-that is the goal of true education. — Martin Luther King Jr.



INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

PAKISTAN AND IRAN: CALM AFTER THE STORM

CONTEXT: Iran launched missile strikes in Pakistan's Balochistan province, targeting alleged strongholds of the Jaish al-Adl. In response, Pakistan condemned the attacks, recalling its Ambassador and expelling the Iranian Ambassador, while also suspending high profile bilateral visits. A day later, Pakistan retaliated by targeting individuals and terrorist groups in Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province.



On January 19, at a National Security Council meeting aimed at addressing security concerns for regional peace, both nations decided to de-escalate, reinstating ambassadors, and by January 28, Iran's Foreign Minister arrived in Islamabad to discuss economic and security matters, signalling a shift towards dialogue and cooperation.

What is special about the two Baloch provinces in Iran and Pakistan?

Sistan-Baluchestan province, one of the largest provinces in Iran, shares the border with Pakistan's Balochistan and Afghanistan's southern provinces. The Baloch, the majority in the Sistan-Baluchestan province belong to Sunni, while Sistanis, a minority belong to Shias.

Balochistan, the largest of four provinces shares a long border with Iran, around 900 km. A Baloch majority is now being threatened by the Pashtun ingress from Afghanistan and Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. However, Baloch are a minority within Pakistan. Unlike the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, which is disputed by Kabul, the Pakistan-Iran border is settled. Both countries have been building a concrete wall along the border to prevent illegal crossings between Balochistan (in Pakistan) and Sistan-Baluchestan (in Iran) provinces. However, the border remains ineffective in preventing the illicit movement of people and goods, especially along the land and maritime borders. Smuggling is common, especially in the south, closer to the Pakistan-Iran maritime border.

Third, two ports of strategic importance — Gwadar in Pakistan and Chabahar in Iran, are situated on the mouths of the Arabian Sea less than 200 km apart. China and India have invested in these two ports and see them as exit and entry points from/into maritime/mainland Asia. Baloch provinces are

strategically important for Iran and Pakistan; however, they remain in the political periphery and are alienated from the national capitals. For the national capitals, the control of the provinces and the two ports is paramount.

Who are the militants that Iran and Pakistan targeted in each other's territory?

In Pakistan, Iran targeted a relatively little-known Sunni militant group — “Jaish al-Adl,” based in Balochistan. According to Iran's Foreign Minister, “none of the nationals of the friendly and brotherly country of Pakistan were targeted by Iranian missiles and drones.” Considered as a remnant of Jundullah, Iran has been fighting it since the late 2000s.

The Jundullah, believed to be founded by Abdolmalek Rigi, was present then in the Sistan-Baluchestan province and has repeatedly been targeting Iran's security forces and civilian targets through terrorist activities, including suicide bombings. Iran has been targeting the Jundullah leader; Rigi, a Baloch, was captured and executed in 2010.

Jundullah was a Sunni group with links to al Qaeda and fighting for “Sunni” rights, rather than an ethnic Baloch militant group. However, Tehran considers that the Jundullah had the support of the Baloch people across the Sistan-Baluchestan and Balochistan provinces in Iran and Pakistan, respectively. After Rigi's death, a few Jundullah members formed the Jaish al-Adl and continued attacking Iran during the 2010s.

Between 2013-2023, the Jaish al-Adl is accused of having carried out numerous attacks, mainly targeting Iran's security officials; the latest one was in December 2023, where they targeted a police station in Rask in Sistan-Baluchestan, killing 11 security personnel.

In Iran, Pakistan targeted the hideouts belonging to the “Balochistan Liberation Army” and “Balochistan Liberation Front.” Pakistan has been fighting multiple waves of Baloch insurgency since 1947. The latest wave of insurgency intensified after the killing of Akbar Bugti, one of the tallest Baloch leaders. Unlike the Jundullah, the Baloch militant organisations do not have a sectarian agenda or have links with international organisations such as al Qaeda. They have an ethnic agenda and fight for greater rights for the Baloch; some of them have a separatist agenda and want to establish an independent Balochistan.

Why did Pakistan and Iran de-escalate immediately after the missile attacks?

If the escalation was fast, de-escalation was faster. Immediately after Iran's initial attack, Pakistan recalled its Ambassador and asked the Iranian Ambassador to leave. Two days later, Pakistan targeted a few militant targets in the Sistan-Baluchestan province in Iran. After the swift diplomatic and military escalation, there was a de-escalation. China is believed to have pressured Islamabad and Tehran. But more than any external pressure, the bilateral dynamics might have led to the de-escalation.

Given the regional security situation and the immediate neighbourhood, both countries cannot afford an escalation now, which was reflected in their statements. Pakistan's official statement talked about “dialogue and cooperation as key tools for addressing common challenges,

including terrorism,” while Iran’s underlined adhering to “the policy of good neighbourliness and brotherhood between the two nations” and not allowing “enemies to strain the amicable and brotherly relations of Tehran and Islamabad.”

It appears that Iran’s missile strikes in Pakistan had a limited objective as a part of its targets in Syria and Iraq in response to an earlier attack in January 2024 in Kerman. Similarly, Pakistan’s response seems limited in making a domestic and a bilateral statement. Both have been careful with their statements to ensure it does not escalate. Besides there have been efforts in recent years aimed at a rapprochement, which they did not want to jeopardise.

What challenges lie ahead for Pakistan and Iran?

Though Tehran was one of the first to recognise Pakistan, since the 1979 Iranian revolution, the two countries had a troubled relationship. Iran’s revolution in 1979 and Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq’s regime in Pakistan during the 1980s brought the Sunni-Shia sectarian divide to the fore between the two. Though both refer to the “brotherly Muslim countries” rhetoric, the sectarian factor was too strong to patch the divide.

Globally, Iran saw Pakistan under the American sphere of influence during the Cold War and post 9/11, especially in Afghanistan. Pakistan and Iran remained in opposite groups; only in recent years has China tried to bring Islamabad and Tehran together.

And regionally, the struggle for supremacy, within the West Asia, pitches Iran and Saudi Arabia on opposite camps, with Pakistan aligned with the latter. On Afghanistan and the Taliban, both countries have differed on objectives and strategies. Until recently, Pakistan viewed Tehran as closer to New Delhi than Islamabad. Pakistan’s nuclear bomb is seen as a Sunni one, pushing Tehran to have its own for the Shia world.

Finally, economically, the bilateral relationship is not strong enough to create a political stake; the fact that Iran is planning to approach international arbitration for Pakistan’s reluctance to move ahead with the Iran-Pakistan pipeline should underline the harsh realities for Islamabad and Tehran.



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