

Germany calls for humanitarian pauses in Gaza, 2-state solution

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At a European Union meeting held earlier this week in Brussels, German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock called for humanitarian pauses in the ongoing battle in Gaza and a two-state solution to resolve the conflict.

She, however, also acknowledged that Germany sees clearly that the people of Israel and the entire region cannot live in peace if Hamas' terror is not stopped. "We as the European Union have therefore just launched sanctions against the Hamas financing support network," she said, adding that, at the same time, it's crucial that the incredible suffering in Gaza is minimised.

"We urgently need humanitarian pauses to alleviate the situation in Gaza, to alleviate the incredible suffering, especially for children. And at the same time, we need humanitarian pauses in Gaza so that we can finally free the hostages," said Baerbock. She also called for the EU to launch an operation in the Red Sea where vessels are under attack from the Houthis. "In doing so, we show that the EU is capable of acting and that it is a reliable partner for international law," she said.

Germany has been actively campaigning for more humanitarian assistance for Gaza. Since Oct 7, it has tripled its aid to around €211 million for civilians in the Palestinian territories, primarily in Gaza.

Kyiv shot down plane with US or French missiles, not clear if deliberately or in error: Putin

Moscow: Russian President Vladimir Putin said a Russian military plane that crashed near the border with Ukraine on Wednesday was shot down by Ukrainian air defences, whether on purpose or by mistake.

Moscow accuses Kyiv of downing the Ilyushin Il-76 plane in Russia's Belgorod region and killing 74 people on board, including 65 captured Ukrainian soldiers en route to be swapped for Russian PoWs. It has not presented proof. Ukraine has not confirmed or denied whether it shot down the plane and has challenged Moscow's account of who was on board and what happened.

"I don't know if they did it on purpose or by mistake, but it is obvious that they did it," Putin said in televised comments, his first on the crash. "In any case, what happened is a crime. Either through negligence or on purpose, but in any case it is a crime." He also alleged that Ukraine knew the plane was carrying prisoners of war.

"The main intelligence department of the Ukrainian army knew that we were taking 65 servicemen there," Putin said.

Ukraine disputes Russia's assertion that it was warned in advance that a plane carrying Ukrainian prisoners of war would be flying over Russia's southwestern Belgorod region at that time. It has also said there were discrepancies in a list published by Russian media of the 65 Ukrainians alleged to have been on the aircraft.

Putin said the plane could not have been brought down by Russian "friendly fire" because Russia's air defence systems have safeguards to prevent them attacking their own planes. "There are 'friend or foe' systems there, and no matter how much the operator presses the button, our air defence systems would not work," he said. Putin said the missiles fired were mostly likely American or French, but this would be established with certainty in two to three days. REUTERS



Make In India, Make For Defending India

R-Day parade of Indian weapon systems is a reminder: Global conflicts mean stressed global supply chains. Domestic defence manufacture needs to ramp up fast

Somnath Mukherjee



Republic Day parade showcased Made-In-India military platforms like LCH Prachand chopper, Pinaka rocket launchers, Nag anti-tank missiles and Swathi Weapon Locating Radar. Good as that is, it isn't enough. Analysis by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) shows India was the world's top arms importer between 2018 and 2022. This level of imports has serious implications for India's defence preparedness in the current global scenario.

Stressed supply chains | Japan recently modified post-WWII era rules to indirectly permit export of Patriot missiles to Ukraine via US. This month, a senior General Electric executive confirmed that supplies of GE404 engines to India, crucial for LCA fighter programme, are going to be delayed by a year. A few weeks earlier, reports came of Indian-made 155mm artillery shells being used by Ukrainian army. The common thread here is global recapitalisation of militaries and inability of current military industrial complex (MIC) to adequately "surge" production to meet galloping demand. It's because of the latter that Western powers are having to scrounge into their own reserves to supply Ukraine.

Rising demand | It's showing up in numbers. Analysis by *Financial Times* of 15 defence contractors shows that order backlog of these firms topped \$777 billion in 2022, up 10% from two years earlier. Europe had its steepest rise in military expenditure in a few generations – around 30% – in 2022. Numbers for Russia and China are not available with as much granularity, but just going by China's naval buildout in recent years, order backlogs with Chinese defence contractors are likely to be very large too.

Surge isn't easy | As per SIPRI, global military expenditure rose 3.7% in real terms to touch \$2.2 trillion in 2022. In defence, lead times are high. From contractual changes to budget sanctions to order placements to actual production. Which is why actual expenditure currently is likely to be the low-end of the future. Military expenditure as % of GDP, globally, remains in the 2.2-2.3% ballpark. The issue is supply chain and skilled labour shortages resulting in supplies failing to meet demand.

No Plan B | What does it mean for India? The primary lesson is "No Plan B" to domestic supplies, especially true for consumables like ammunition and spare parts. Expensive, multi-billion dollar platforms that excite public imagination (like Rafale fighters or S400 SAMs) are toothless if they run out of either. A lesson learnt painfully several times in recent decades.



In Kargil, IAF had less than 100 imported precision guided munitions, each specifically earmarked for a high-value target. Ergo, there was nothing that could be spared easily.

Where are the orders? | A second lesson is that it's even tougher to build surge capacities. If it's tough for American MIC, it's many times tougher for a fledgling Indian version. Domestic contractors need to have enough orderbooks to lubricate a stable supply chain that can be surged up in emergencies. An order here followed by another one in three years and a third after seven years keep supply chains fragile.

Bare bones won't do | Since 1998 nuclear tests, it has been assumed that conventional wars would be short and sharp. India's war wastage reserves, consequently, are known to be kept at bare-bones levels. Validated by all-too-frequent "emergency purchases" of ammunition every time there's tension on the border. With so much money and attention spent on big platforms – tanks, fighters, ships – it's self-defeating to have bare-bones levels of sustenance capacities for these platforms. It's only recently that India became self-sufficient in 155mm ammunition, nearly four decades after Indian army inducted the first 155mm gun.

Atmanirbhar push | Modi government has pushed the pedal hard on *Atmanirbharta* in defence. From negative lists for imports to political ownership of some marquee projects (like LCA) to wider military reforms (CDS, Agnipath). Unfortunately, India doesn't have luxury of time and space anymore. The world in general, India's neighbourhood in particular, is brimming with tensions and conflicts. S&P Aerospace and Defense Index is up 25% over the last year.

Need for robust MIC | India is the fourth largest military spender in the world, so the issue isn't about budget as much as ensuring biggest bang for the buck. But choices need to be made – whether to buy a third aircraft carrier or recapitalise a dwindling submarine fleet. Whether to focus on ownership (public sector vs private sector) or on outcomes. Whether to import the most expensive assault rifle or get Indian industry to develop a Battlefield Management System.

Along with expanded physical infrastructure and domestic capacity in critical manufactured products, scope and scale of domestic MIC is likely to be crucial in India's emergence as a pole in a bitterly contested world. We need to sweat a lot more in peace if we want to bleed less in war.

The writer is a senior executive at an asset and wealth management firm. Views are personal

Red sea container crisis to hit exports

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Chennai: A container crisis is looming in the Red Sea, thanks to geo-political issues, which has the potential to disrupt India's exports to Africa and Latin America.

According to exporters, shipping freight rates are expected to double on some routes, with exports of petroleum, automobiles, marine food and agri commodities likely to be affected.

Exporters are complaining of container shortage at ports on the west coast and have requested leasing com-

panies and shipping lines to move some of the containers from the east to the west.

"Petroleum exports are expected to be most affected, while there will be an impact on overall exports too and we see this problem persisting for a while," said Ajay Sahai, director general, FIEO.

A report by Crisil said, players operating in agricultural commodities and marine foods could see "significant impact due to the perishable nature of their goods and/or lean margin profiles, which limit their ability to absorb the risks from rising freight cost". Players opera-

ting in sectors like textiles, chemicals and capital goods may not be immediately impacted but a prolonged crisis can make these sectors also vulnerable as "working capi-

FREIGHT RATES SET TO DOUBLE

tal cycles would get stretched with orders put on hold".

Automobile companies are factoring in freight hikes and longer time shipments into margin calls. During quarterly results call, Bajaj Auto executive director Rakesh Sharma explained what the pinch means for automobile

companies. "The Red sea imbroglio has caused delays of around three weeks to Latin America and parts of Africa and freight rates have doubled to many destinations," he said, adding, December-January shipping availability had some impact. "Alternative routes have been put in place and ordering levels of channel partners adjusted to take note of longer shipping time," he said.

"Inflation is beginning to settle down but (revival to peak levels) may be delayed due to Red Sea container availability," said KN Radhakrishnan, CEO TVS Motor.

India emerges as 5th largest source of tourists for US

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New Delhi: A growing, affluent middle class and younger, intrepid Indians travelling to the United States have made India the fifth largest source for tourism to the US, projected to grow at 30% in 2024, Brand USA's chief marketing officer Staci Mellman told TOI in an exclusive interview.

Mellman said Indian tourists spend significantly more on average than other international travellers to the US, accounting for a significant share of the \$173.9 billion that international tourists spent on travel and tourism-related goods and services while travelling to the US.

The nearly 30% increase in spending in the period Jan to Oct 2023 when compared to the year before coincides with the easing of delays in processing visas, improved flight connectivity, and a wider cross-section of tourism product offerings, including culinary, sports, transformational and adventure activities.

"In 2023, US received 1.7 million Indian visitors.



Reuters

In 2023, US received 1.7 million Indian visitors. A 30% growth is projected in 2024

There is a lot more interest in exploring the landscape beyond the gateway and Indian travellers also spend significantly more on average than other international travellers," she said.

Though delays in processing visas remains a challenge — wait time for a US visa in India is currently about 250 days — Mellman said. "We have seen visa wait time shorten though they are still not what they were historically. In 2023, 1.2 million new visas were issued to Indians travelling to the US. The US has also opened 2.5 lakh new tourist visa appointments for Indians. To decrease wait time, the consulate in Hyderabad now sees 3,500 appointments a day, with processing done over weekends too," Mellman said.

On 75th R-Day, a long list of many firsts

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New Delhi: The Republic Day parade on Friday saw several firsts: a troupe of 100 women artistes playing traditional music instruments in place of military bands that led the parade in the past; all-women marching contingents of the Army, Navy and Air Force, medical services and Delhi Police; the rollout of six all-terrain specialist vehicles; a couple in the Army marching in the same parade; and the debut of recently-inducted IAF's C-295 medium transport aircraft.

Witnessing these breaks in traditions on Kartavya Path were 13,000 special guests, from space scientists to sarpanches and from entrepreneurs to street vendors.



Piyal Bhattacharjee

Specialist vehicles gave the parade a novel edge

The presence of French President Emmanuel Macron, who arrived at the parade venue with President Droupadi Murmu in a horse-drawn buggy, marked the European country's sixth participation in the Jan 26 event, the most among all nations.

A French military team also marched down the historical avenue alongside the In-

dian contingents.

While the display of six modern specialist vehicles, each tailored for different terrains, gave the parade a novel edge, nari shakti in India's armed forces couldn't be missed, with women dominating the ceremonial march down Kartavya Path. Captain Sandhya Mahla led an all-women tri-service contingent, comprising women Agniveers, alongside sub-lieutenant Aashu Yadav, flight lieutenant Shrishti Verma and captain Sharanya Rao.

In another first, major Srishti Khulla, an eye surgeon and a paratrooper, led an all-women Armed Forces Medical Services marching contingent. Lt Deepti Rana and Lt Priyanka Sevda oversaw the progress of the Swathi weapon-locating radar and

Pinaka rocket system. They were among the 10 women officers commissioned into the Regiment of Artillery for the first time last year.

A 149-member, all-male contingent of the Bombay Sappers, which returned to the parade after two decades, was also led by a woman officer, major Divya Tyagi. And the all-women Delhi Police marchers were led by Indian Police Service officer Shweta K Sugathan, additional DCP (North).

Major Jerry Blaize and captain Supreetha CT became the first couple to march down Kartavya Path as members of two contingents. "This is the first occurrence of this sort in the parade's history," said Blaize, who is from the Madras Regiment. His wife was part of the Corps of Military Police.

31 CBI officers

U'khand likely to pass UCC bill in session on Feb 5

BJP-governed Uttarakhand is likely to pass a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) bill during its next assembly session from Feb 5. If it happens, it will become the first state to enact such a law, reports **Kautilya Singh**.

CM Pushkar Singh Dharmi has announced that a five-member panel is giving finishing touches to the draft law and it would be submitted soon. "Once we get the draft, we will start the process to implement UCC in the Himalayan state," Dharmi said. UCC was a key poll promise of BJP in the 2022 assembly polls in which the saffron party returned to power in the state. **P 8**

Modi, Macron unveil roadmap for military weapon mfg, space ties

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New Delhi: The visit by French President Emmanuel Macron saw the two sides finalise several agreements, including one for a defence industrial roadmap, which will facilitate joint development and manufacturing of advanced military equipment, and another for defence space co-operation. There was an agreement also for joint production of civil helicopters by Tata and Airbus.

There was no announcement though about the proposed deals for Rafale (M) fighter jets or Scorpene submarines that India and France are currently negotiating.



Macron with PM Modi on Friday

“The roadmap priority is to identify opportunities for partnership in the defence-industrial sector that prioritise co-designing, co-development, co-production and also

building the defence supply chains between the two countries, so that they can not only fulfil the defence needs of India and France, but also contribute to the security partnership with other countries who might be in use of similar products,” said foreign secretary Vinay Kwatra, adding that 2026 will be celebrated as ‘India-France Year of Innovation’.

Kwatra said an industrial partnership between Tata and Airbus helicopters and an MoU between New Space India Limited (NSIL) and Ariane-space with regard to satellite launches had been concluded.

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