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Nirmala inaugurates key bridge in Leh

Pratham-Shyok bridge will connect the region to Karakoram in north-eastern Ladakh

By Majid Jahangir

Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman today inaugurated a strategically important bridge on a road to China border that will help the Army in better manoeuvrability and communication in case of exigency.

The minister, who concluded her two-day visit to the state today, also visited the world's highest battlefield, Siachen base camp, and reviewed the security situation in the area.

The Pratham-Shyok bridge on the Indo-China border in Leh will connect the region to Karakoram in north-eastern Ladakh thus providing vital connectivity on the axis of Road Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie for military use. The Chinese army had carried out two major incursions in the area in 2013 and 2014 and the sector remains strategically important for the Army.

An officer of the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) said the construction of the bridge on the 255-km-long road was a part of a major road project, envisaging construction of seven major bridges on which the work was already in progress. The deadline for the completion of these bridges is 2020. These will give further boost to the Army in transporting heavy equipment to the Line of Actual Control.

While addressing BRO officers and jawans, Sitharaman said the construction of bridges and roads at a high-altitude terrain was a miracle.

"This state-of-the-art bridge will connect people of the region as well as increase travel and communication for strategic transport," the minister said.

Complimenting Army jawans, the Defence Minister said Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the government were for fully supporting jawans who protect the nation in all circumstances.

She met Army commanders, who extensively briefed her about the strategic locations and the continuous vigil by the soldiers to protect the nation.



Services need to avoid duplicating of assets: Air Vice-Chief

Underscores optimal use of resources

Cautioning against the duplication of assets by the three services, Vice-Chief of Air Staff Air Marshal S.B. Deo on Friday said that jointmanship among the services was not just about joint operations but also about the optimal use of resources.

"Ours is a growing country and our budget is limited. We cannot afford duplicating capabilities...We cannot have an Air Force with the Army, an Air Force with the Navy and another Air Force," said Air Marshal Deo, addressing the 14th Subroto Mukherjee seminar organised by the Centre for Air Power Studies and the Indian Air Force (IAF).

His comments came against the backdrop of the Army aggressively pushing for its own dedicated fleet of attack helicopters. Recently, the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) had approved the procurement of six

AH-64 Apache helicopters from the US. In addition, Army Chief General Bipin Rawat recently called for the primacy of the Army in a tri-service environment.

The Army has put forward a demand for 39 Apache helicopters to equip all its strike Corps and the Government recently approved the acquisition of six. The IAF is already in the process of procuring 22 Apaches from an earlier deal.

The Navy is expanding its fleet of carrier-based fighter aircraft. It is currently scouting the global market for 57 fighters, which will join the 45 Mig-29Ks in service to operate off the present and future carriers.

Air Marshal Deo also put forward the IAF's opposition to the concept of 'theatre commands'. Observing that the area of operations are limited, he referred to the capabilities of the air assets in reaching long distances.

"When we did the first cross-border strike, our helicopters flew all the way from Pathankot for any eventuality," he added, referring to the surgical strike by the Indian Army on insurgent camps inside Myanmar in 2015.

The concept of creating theatre commands has been a touchy issue between the three services and discussions have remained inconclusive.



Sun, 01 Oct, 2017

After Doklam, China seeks a friend in India

After the Doklam stand-off ended and PM Narendra Modi and China President Xi Jinping held a meeting, toasted as a success by both sides, there seems to be a conscious attempt by Beijing to build a favourable public opinion in India, suggesting the two nations can start a new chapter.

After weeks of hostile rhetoric from Beijing, often articulated by quasi-official mouthpieces like 'Global Times', finally ended with a truce in Doklam, there have been full-page advertisements in Indian newspapers carrying the ambassador's message that Xi and Modi hit it off and ties could now soar.

The military stand-off at Doklam ended with a vindication of India's position that China was only trying to unilaterally change the status quo near the India-Bhutan-China tri-junction, though Beijing claimed the Indian side had moved out. But China's tenor seems to indicate a keenness to move on, with Chinese ambassador to India Luo Zhaohui saying it is time for India and China to turn the old page and start a new chapter.

Luo emphasised the countries had made a lot of progress at bilateral level, iterating the good vibes of the Modi-Xi meeting as he had done in an edit piece in 'The Hindu'. The emphasis seems to be on furthering economic ties and consciously burying the acrimony of militaristic statements.

While Indian officials don't want to gloat about how China gave up its attempt to build a road through territory that is disputed between it and Bhutan, there is an understanding here that China's efforts to make amends follow a realisation that Beijing could have avoided the confrontation, more so because it wasn't really a high-stakes test for China.

Though the test of the pudding remains with issues like India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, blocked by China, as also Beijing's hold on Pakistani terror mastermind Masood Azhar being sanctioned by the UN, the effort to tone down a prolonged period of suspicion and edginess marks progress in ties.

Speaking on the occasion of the 68th anniversary of the People's Republic of China, Luo said Xi and Modi, who met at the BRICS Summit this month, sent a clear message of "reconciliation" and "cooperation". "We should dance together. We should make one plus one eleven. China is the largest trading partner of India.

We have made a lot of progress at the bilateral level, as well as in international and regional affairs, “ Luo said. The diplomat also recalled one of his teachers, Prof Xu Fancheng, who lived at Aurobindo Ashram in Puducherry from 1945 to 1978. Xu is known for translating Upanishads, Bhagawad Gita and Shakuntala from Sanskrit to Chinese. His reference to ancient cultural exchanges, that include the transmission of Buddhist sutras to China, also stood out.

Luo's comments follow his newspaper article, in which he said both countries should consider actively exploring the strategic synergy between China's Belt and Road Initiative and India's 'Act East Policy'.

He had said both sides should appropriately manage differences, get under control the problems left over by history such as issues related to the boundary and the Dalai Lama, while finding solutions to new problems.



Sun, 01 Oct, 2017

North Korea moves missiles from development centre, says South Korean broadcaster

The report said the missiles could be either intermediate range Hwasong-12s or intercontinental ballistic Hwasong-14s.

Several North Korean missiles were recently spotted moved from a rocket facility in the capital Pyongyang, South Korea's Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) reported late on Friday amid speculation that the North was preparing to take more provocative actions.

The report cited an unnamed intelligence source saying South Korean and US intelligence officials detected missiles being transported away from North Korea's Missile Research and Development Facility at Sanum-dong in the northern part of Pyongyang.

The report did not say when or where they had been moved.

The missiles could be either intermediate range Hwasong-12 or intercontinental ballistic Hwasong-14 missiles, according to the report, though the missile facility at Sanum-dong has been dedicated to the production of intercontinental ballistic missiles.

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A source from South Korea's defence ministry said he could not confirm details of the report or whether there has been any unusual activities in the area mentioned.

South Korean official have voiced concerns that North Korea could conduct more provocative acts near the anniversary of the founding of its communist party on October 10, or possibly when China holds its Communist Party Congress on October 18.

Amid heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula, South Korea and US forces recently held their first joint short range air defence training exercise in South Korea, according to a statement released by the US Pacific Command on Friday.

The statement did not give the date of the exercise, but said the next exercise is scheduled to take place over the next few months as the two forces become more familiar with each other's capabilities.

Sun, 01 Oct, 2017

Iran, Iraq plan joint drills over Kurdish independence vote

Tehran: Iran will hold a joint military exercise with Iraq in response to the Iraqi Kurdistan region's "illegitimate" independence referendum, an Iranian military official announced today.

Iran, which borders Iraq and the autonomous Kurdish region, strongly opposed the vote held on Monday, fearing it would provoke separatists among its own Kurdish population. Iraq's central government has demanded the annulment of the referendum, which resulted in a huge "yes" for independence.

"A joint military exercise between Iran's armed forces and units from the Iraqi army will be held in the coming days along the shared border," Iranian Armed Forces spokesman Masoud Jazayeri told reporters. The drills will take place at several crossings on Iran's border with Iraqi Kurdistan, he said, speaking after a high-level meeting of Iranian commanders.

"In the meeting, the territorial integrity and unity of Iraq and the illegitimacy of the independence referendum in northern Iraq have stressed again and necessary decisions were taken to provide security at the borders and welcome Iraq's central government forces to take the position at border crossings."

Tehran has accepted a request by Baghdad for an Iraqi army presence at border crossings. Iraqi soldiers on Tuesday also took part in a Turkish military drill close to the Iraqi frontier. Iran has been cooperating with Baghdad in building pressure on Kurdistan, notably by suspending all flights to and from the autonomous region and banning fuel exports and imports.

Sun, 01 Oct, 2017

Iran urges Europe to defy US President Trump on imposing new sanctions

Tehran: Iran has warned that the only way to stop its nuclear deal from collapsing is for Europe to defy any US reimposition of sanctions, Tasnim news agency reported on Saturday.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said Iran would develop much more advanced nuclear technology -- though not for weapons purposes -- if Europe followed the United States in returning to a sanctions regime, Xinhua reports.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is responsible for verifying that Iran meets the terms of the agreement.

The US President Donald Trump has attacked the deal on numerous occasions, vowing to tear it up.

On October 15, Trump is due to testify to Congress whether Tehran is complying with the deal and whether it remains in the United States' interests to stick by it.

If he decides it is not, it could open the way for the US lawmakers to reimpose sanctions, leading to the potential collapse of the agreement.

Sun, 01 Oct, 2017

Chinese 'repair' genetic defect causing thalassemia

By *DurgeshNandan Jha*

In a big breakthrough, Chinese researchers claim to have successfully repaired genetic defect that causes beta thalassemia, a blood disorder, in human embryos. The result has been published in the journal *Protein and Cell's* September issue.

The scientists at China's Sun Yat-sen University, study report says, conducted the experiment in cloned human embryos.

They took skin cells of beta thalassemia patients, removed their DNA-containing nuclei and introduced them into donor eggs collected from infertile couples. The eggs developed into early stage embryos that carried the beta thalassemia mutation.

Then, they edited the bases, single building blocks of DNA, using a technique called Crispr. Our DNA is made up of four bases, namely adenine, cytosine, guanine and thymine.

In beta-thalassemia patients, the disease is caused by a defect in a single base in the genetic code. The scientists claim they were able to fix the defect by 20%. Scientists say if the experimental success is replicated further, it might pave the way for similar action to prevent hereditary disorders where genetic mutation is the cause of transmission.

“The explosive growth of human genomic data has revealed unprecedented numbers of disease-causing point mutations. Repairing such mutations may offer the best, and in some cases, the only cure for genetic diseases,” they have reported.

Dr Anupam Sibal, medical director of Apollo hospital, said the successful experiment is a scientific marvel. “It holds out a big hope for thousands of patients suffering from genetic disorders. But that may take time,” he said.

Beta thalassemia is a common genetic disease in China, India, and South East Asia region. It is a blood disorder that reduces the production of haemoglobin, the iron-containing protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen to cells throughout the body.

In beta thalassemia patients, low levels of hemoglobin leads to a lack of oxygen in many parts of the body which can cause anaemia, and other serious complications. People with beta thalassemia are at an increased risk of developing abnormal blood clots.

The signs and symptoms of thalassemia major appear within the first 2 years of life. Without treatment, doctors say , many patients suffering from the disease die before they are five years of age. Those who survive require lifelong blood transfusion and iron chelation treatment and even then complications remain.