

India intensifying engagement with global partners from position of strength: EAM

MUMBAI, FEB 17: India is engaging with international partners more intensively and from a “position of strength”, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said on Tuesday, citing a string of recent trade agreements as evidence of the country’s growing economic clout.

In an address at the Global Economic Cooperation conference, Jaishankar highlighted the successful negotiation of several high-profile deals, including a significant trade pact with the United States.

The Global Economic Cooperation is an event organised by the Future Economic Cooperation Council in partnership with the Ministry of External Affairs and the Government of Maharashtra.

Describing the current international landscape as perhaps the most turbulent in living memory, the minister warned that the world is witnessing the “weaponisation” of production and finance, alongside tightening export controls and volatile market shifts.

“The established global order is clearly changing. Replacements are hard to create, and we appear to be headed to a long twilight zone. This will be messy, risky, unpredictable, perhaps even dangerous,” he said.

Long-standing assumptions and expectations have now become questionable, the minister pointed out.

Key dimensions are transforming simultaneously, be it strategic, political, economic or technological. Solutions lie



in derisking and diversifying across multiple domains. This approach is increasingly visible in the policy of nations, the EAM said.

Jaishankar stressed that the “reform express” will continue to roll on.

“From a position of strength, India is engaging international partners more intensively. This is demonstrated in the recently concluded trade deals,” he said.

Economic security is best served through stronger self-reliance and more trusted partners, the minister added.

Following a phone conversation between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Donald Trump, both sides recently announced a reduction of US tariffs on Indian goods to 18 per cent from 50 per cent.

However, Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, has alleged that the government “sold Bharat Mata” through the trade deal with the US, say-

ing it was a “wholesale surrender”, with India’s energy security handed over to America and farmers’ interests compromised.

Last month, India and the European Union (EU) concluded negotiations for the proposed free trade agreement (FTA), which will help boost two-way commerce and strengthen economic ties between the two sides. Over the last year, India has also finalised trade deals with the UK, New Zealand and Oman.

Jaishankar said that the world has entered a volatile and uncertain era, possibly the most turbulent in living memory. He emphasised that India will also be more salient in the global calculus of production, on services, technology, skills and knowledge.

Economics will give way to politics and security when it comes to making choices and technology in the age of AI (Artificial Intelligence), he noted.

The minister further said that the US is determined to reindustrialise at any cost, and this is central to its tech future.

China’s manufacturing and export focus continues unabated and may even expand, he added.

Technology competition is intensifying and polarising. Energy trade flows are being significantly redefined. New mindsets are encouraging greater risk-taking, including through military means. Migration and even mobility are getting contentious, he pointed out.

“Each nation and each society will respond as per their interests and calculations,” Jaishankar said. (AGENCIES)

Students emerge relieved after writing ‘easy’ first paper of CBSE board exams

NEW DELHI, FEB 17: Nervousness before entering the exam hall turned into relief and confidence for several students who stepped out after appearing for the Class 10 and 12 examinations on Tuesday, saying the paper was easy to moderate.

They said the paper was largely based on the syllabus of the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT).

The Class 10 and 12 board examinations conducted by the Central Board of Secondary Education began on Tuesday across the country and will conclude on March 10 and April 10, respectively.

Air Force Bal Bharati School’s Omisha Dhondiyal, who appeared for the Class 10 Standard Mathematics paper, said her nervousness faded once she went through the question paper.

“There was a lot of anxiety before the exam but during the reading time, I felt confident. The paper was much easier compared to last year and I managed to finish it before time,” she said, adding



that she had ample time for revision.

A Class 12 student from the same school, who had the Bio-tech paper, said that the questions were mostly theoretical.

“The paper was easy compared to the previous year. The questions were asked largely from the book and most of them were theory-based which was easier to answer,” he added.

Nishtha, a Class 10 student

from Delhi Public School, described the paper as straightforward.

“Most of the questions were directly from the NCERT and the case-study questions were easy. Like everyone else, I was nervous in the beginning but the paper turned out to be manageable,” she said.

Ocean, a Class 12 student who received Set 2 of the question paper, said even the multiple-choice questions

were not tricky this time.

“MCQs are usually difficult but this year they were easy. Overall, the paper was NCERT-based and doable,” the student said, adding that time was sufficient to attempt all questions.

Several students said the relatively easy paper helped them start the board examinations on a positive note, with some expressing confidence about scoring above 90 marks. (PTI)

SC adjourns to April 22 hearing on CBI’s appeal against bail to Lalu Prasad in Deoghar treasury scam

NEW DELHI, FEB 17: The Supreme Court on Tuesday adjourned to April 22 the hearing on a plea filed by the CBI, challenging the bail granted by the Jharkhand High Court to RJD chief Lalu Prasad Yadav in a scam related to the Deoghar treasury.

A bench of Justices MM Sundresh and N Kotiswar Singh deferred the matter, noting that the pleadings were not complete and some accused have died.

During the hearing, Additional Solicitor General SV

Raju, appearing for the CBI, argued that the high court has passed an illegal order and the sentence has been suspended in violation of law.

Senior advocate Kapil Sibal, appearing for Lalu, submitted that some accused have not been served notice.

The court observed, “Both of us know what this special leave petition is. We think both of you know what the result is. We all know what the question of law is. The persons are in their 60s, 70s and 80s.

“The files are just languishing. We will give a date in April. Those cases in which the respondent has died, we will close them,” the bench said.

The Jharkhand High Court in July last year admitted an appeal by the CBI for increasing the period of sentence given to Yadav.

Yadav was convicted in the scam related to the Deoghar treasury, which involved alleged defalcation of Rs 89 lakh. The special CBI court had convicted Yadav in the case and sentenced him to

undergo imprisonment for 3.5 years.

The CBI moved an appeal against the order, stating that Yadav was overall in charge of the animal husbandry department at that time.

Investigation had revealed that he was aware of the defalcation in the Deoghar treasury. Yet the lower court only awarded a sentence of 3.5 years for the offence, which carries a maximum sentence of seven years, it said.

Jharkhand was part of Bihar when the irregularities had taken place.

Pilot invokes 1971 legacy as Congress faces CPI(M), BJP fire over Jamaat-e-Islami link

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, FEB 17: Under attack from the CPI(M) and the BJP over its alleged electoral understanding with the Jamaat-e-Islami in poll-bound Kerala, Congress leader Sachin Pilot said his party did not need to be lectured on nationalism and reminded them of the role played by Indira Gandhi in dividing Pakistan in 1971.

In an interview with PTI, Pilot, who is the senior AICC observer for Kerala, where elections will be held in a couple of months, also asserted that the Congress is a secular party and that the Constitution of India is the most sacrosanct document in which it believes.

The Congress leader said that every religion and every community has equal rights, that there is no favouritism, and that the Congress has always sought votes in the name of development and work, drawing on its long history of the freedom struggle and of keeping the country together.

He was reacting to a query over accusations by the ruling LDF and the BJP that the Congress is in alliance with the Jamaat-e-Islami, which it claims does not adhere to secular principles, especially in light of a recent public statement by the Jamaat leadership expressing its continued commitment to the idea of an Islamic republic.

“Do not forget that it was Indira Gandhi who broke Pakistan into two, so on nationalism and patriotism we do not need to be lectured by anybody else, but the Congress has always had secular



credentials, and I am proud to say that,” Pilot said.

He said that one need only look at the BJP, which he alleged decides to give tickets in certain states by excluding some religions, arguing that this is not secularism and that the party adopts different positions in different states depending on what it finds suitable and conducive.

“The Congress has remained the same throughout its long history; we have upheld our ideals and ideology, we stand by them, and we will not compromise on our secular values. We will bring like-minded parties together, and the UDF is a very strong alliance in Kerala,” the Congress leader from Rajasthan said.

His statement comes as the Congress has come under sharp attack from both the CPI(M) and the BJP, who accuse it of having an electoral understanding with the Jamaat-e-Islami, alleging that the link undermines the party’s claim to secular credentials.

Asked how the Supreme Court’s decision to review the Sabarimala women’s entry verdict by constituting a nine-member Constitution

Bench would affect the forthcoming elections, Pilot said he did not wish to comment on the court’s observations or judgments but alleged that the state government’s intentions in the alleged “gold theft case” from the hill shrine were not noble.

“There is an allegation that some people close to the ruling party were involved in some sort of events. So I don’t want to comment on it, but I think the state government has not pursued the matter as transparently as it should have,” he said.

Asked about the Sabarimala gold theft issue and the questioning of UDF convener Adoor Prakash by the SIT functioning under the High Court, Pilot said anyone involved in any wrongdoing must be held accountable, regardless of how high or powerful the person may be.

The Congress leader added that despite being in power for 10 years, the state government had not done enough to assist the SIT in getting to the bottom of the case.

Targeting CPI(M), he further alleged that there had been instances of corruption

in Kannur district, where funds meant for a martyr’s family were allegedly siphoned off by someone close to the ruling party.

He claimed that a ruling party MLA had been named in connection with the allegations.

According to him, these incidents reflected the broader symptoms of corruption, nepotism and administrative mismanagement within the government.

Despite propaganda, advertisements and publicity, people had made up their minds that such governance needed to be voted out, the Congress leader said.

Responding to former Union Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar’s controversial remarks that Pinarayi Vijayan-led LDF government will return to power in Kerala, Pilot said Aiyar was no longer part of the Congress, having been suspended earlier, and therefore there was no reason to comment on his personal opinion.

He also claimed that the people of Kerala had already decided to vote for the Congress-led UDF.

Responding to a question on candidate selection for the Assembly polls, Pilot said the party was united in backing the most winnable candidates and that the Congress continued its tradition of promoting younger leaders to positions of responsibility.

He said winnability, a clean image and broad acceptability would be the key factors in deciding candidates. Pilot said the Congress screening committee, led by Madhusudan Mistry, were working on the process.

GENEVA, Feb 17: Delegations from Moscow and Kyiv were in Geneva on Tuesday for another round of US-brokered peace talks, a week before the fourth anniversary of Russia’s full-scale invasion of its neighbour.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said his government’s delegation was in Switzerland, and Russian state news agency Tass said the Russian delegation also had arrived. Talks, due to be held over two days, were expected to start later in the day.

“Tough” discussions about the future of Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory are expected as US President Donald Trump’s envoy, Steve Witkoff, and son-in-law Jared Kushner, sit down with the delegations, according to a person familiar with the talks who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter. That’s because Russian officials are still insisting that Ukraine cede control of its eastern Donbas region.

In Geneva, military leaders from the three countries will discuss how ceasefire monitoring will work, and what’s needed to implement it, the person said. During previous talks in Abu Dhabi, military leaders looked at how a demilitarised zone could be arranged and how everyone’s militaries could talk to one another, they said.

But expectations for any breakthrough in the latest negotiations are low, with neither side apparently ready to budge from their positions on key territorial issues, despite the United States setting a June deadline for a settlement.

Ukraine’s short-handed army is locked in a war of attrition with Russia’s bigger forces along the roughly 1,250-kilometre (750-mile) front line. Ukrainian civilians are enduring Russian aerial barrages that repeatedly knock out power and destroy homes.

The future of the almost 20 per cent of Ukrainian land that Russia occupies or still covets is a central question in the talks, as are Kyiv’s demands for postwar security guarantees with a US backstop to deter Moscow from invading again.

Trump described the Geneva meeting as “big talks.”

“Ukraine better come to the table fast,” he told reporters late Monday as he



flew back to Washington from his home in Florida. It wasn’t immediately clear what Trump was referring to in his comment about Ukraine, which has committed to and taken part in negotiations in the hope of ending Russia’s devastating onslaught.

The commander of the US military – and NATO forces – in Europe, Gen. Alexis Grynkeiwich, and Secretary of the US Army Dan Driscoll will attend the meeting in Geneva on behalf of the US military and meet with their Russian and Ukrainian counterparts, Col Martin O’Donnell, a spokesman for the US commander said.

Overnight, Russia used almost 400 long-range drones and 29 missiles of various types to strike 12 regions of Ukraine, injuring nine people, including children, according to the Ukrainian president.

Zelenskyy said tens of thousands residents were left without heating and running

water in the southern port city of Odesa.

Zelenskyy said Moscow should be “held accountable” for the relentless attacks, which he said undermine the US push for peace.

“The more this evil comes from Russia, the harder it will be for everyone to reach any agreements with them. Partners must understand this. First and foremost, this concerns the United States,” the Ukrainian leader said on social media late Monday.

“We agreed to all realistic proposals from the United States, starting with the proposal for an unconditional and long-term ceasefire,” Zelenskyy noted.

American, Russian and Ukrainian military chiefs will discuss how ceasefire monitoring might work after any peace deal, the AP source said.

Talks earlier this year in Abu Dhabi focused on issues such as how a demilitarized zone might be set up in disputed areas and how all the sides’ militaries could remain in contact, the source said.

The commander of NATO forces in Europe, Gen Alexis Grynkeiwich, and US Secretary of the Army Dan Driscoll will attend the talks and meet with their Russian and Ukrainian counterparts, said Col Martin O’Donnell, a spokesman for Grynkeiwich.

The talks in Geneva took place as US officials also held indirect talks with Iran in the Swiss city.

US and Iran to hold a second round of nuclear talks in Geneva

GENEVA, FEB 17: The US and Iran are expected to hold their second round of talks about Iran’s nuclear program Tuesday in Geneva as the United States ramps up its military presence in the Middle East and Iran holds large-scale maritime exercises.

US President Donald Trump has repeatedly threatened to use force to compel Iran to agree to constrain its nuclear program. Iran has said it would respond with an attack of its own. Trump has also threatened Iran over its deadly crackdown on recent nationwide protests.

The first round of talks Feb. 6 were held in Oman, a sultanate on the eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula, and were indirect, with SUVs flying the American flag enter-

ing the palace venue only after it appeared the Iranian officials had left. The arrangements for Tuesday’s round of negotiations were not clear.

Trump’s envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner were traveling for the new round of talks. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, visiting Budapest, Hungary, said Monday that the US hopes to achieve a deal with Iran, despite the difficulties. “I’m not going to prejudice these talks,” Rubio said. “The president always prefers peaceful outcomes and negotiated outcomes to things.”

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, who is leading the talks for Iran, met with the head of the UN nuclear watchdog agency Monday in Geneva.

“I am in Geneva with real

ideas to achieve a fair and equitable deal,” Araghchi wrote on X. “What is not on the table: submission before threats.”

Last week, a top Iranian security official traveled to Oman and met with Omani Foreign Minister Badr al-Busaidi, the chief intermediary in the talks, in a meeting likely focused on updates from the first round and next steps.

“Regional peace and security is our priority, and we urge restraint and wise compromise,” al-Busaidi wrote on X after his meeting with Ali Larijani, a former Iranian parliament speaker who now serves as the secretary to the country’s Supreme National Security Council.

Iran has in the past communicated its positions in

writing when dealing with the Americans. Famously, Japan’s then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe tried to hand Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei a letter from Trump in 2019 that he refused to take.

Iran announced that its paramilitary Revolutionary Guard started a drill early Monday morning in the Strait of Hormuz, the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, waterways that are crucial international trade routes through which 20% of the world’s oil passes.

Separately, EOS Risk Group said sailors passing through the region received a radio warning that the northern lane of the Strait of Hormuz, in Iranian territorial waters, likely would see a live-fire drill Tuesday.