

Air Force flypast, jet flip to tableaux: First-time attendees get a visual treat



PRAGYNESH & NIRBHAY THAKUR
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

AMIT KUMAR, a CRPF personnel who has served the central force for eight years so far, along with his five-year-old son, was in awe when he saw a 90-degree flip by a Rafale jet at the Republic Day parade on Sunday in the Capital. "When the Rafale suddenly went up... that was what stunned me the most. *Ek second mein 90-degree ka flip tha* (It was a 90-degree flip in a moment)," he recalled.

He said that he had been to several district-level parades earlier. But none could come close to what he witnessed at the Kartavya Path on Sunday. "This is the first time I have seen a Republic Day parade. Luckily, my seniors had a few passes, so I got one by chance. I came mostly for my son, but *mujhe bhi bohot shaandaar laga* (but even I found it splendid)," he asserted.

Showcasing India's cultural diversity, ornate tableaux from 16 states, Union Territories, and Central government departments were the highlights of the Republic Day parade on Sunday. The theme of Andhra Pradesh's tableau was 'Etikoppaka Bommalu,' featuring eco-

friendly wooden toys. While Uttar Pradesh displayed its Maha Kumbh tableau, West Bengal, on the other hand, showcased its "Lakshmir Bhandar" and "Lok Prasar Prakalpa" tableau, highlighting the state government's welfare schemes.

A total of 10,000 special guests were invited to the grand event, including members of self-help groups, tribal artisans, ASHA workers, disaster relief workers, renewable energy advocates, environmentalists, and farmers, among others. Dressed in their traditional attire, 50 Delhi-based couples from each state and union territory were also among the invitees.

Posted in Haryana's Karnal, Kumar is on holiday and is spending time at his home in Northwest Delhi's Narela with his parents, wife, and son. He shared that he was excited to see the Indian Air Force flypast — which he had only seen on TV earlier — in person.

Kritika Rani, 22, who hails from Kashmir, had never been to Delhi before. But when an opportunity came up, it was not for a usual "tour de Delhi". She was selected to perform at the Republic Day parade. "I was selected for performing in the parade around a month ago. I was nervous at first... but since I had

never been to Delhi, it was a good opportunity as well," said Kritika, who has just completed her Masters in Political Science.

For a month, Kritika had been staying with a friend in Noida's Sector 168. She had been commuting every day to Pusa Road in Delhi to practice for her parade performance. "This was also the first time I saw the Prime Minister, up and close. It was overwhelming and exciting to look at him in person. I also saw all those army weapons and jets for the first time. I feel very proud to be part of such an event," she said.

For Yamin, who came from Arunachal Pradesh for the 'Pariksha pe Charcha' event, where the PM addresses the students, the Republic Day parade was a bonus while she looks forward to her upcoming interaction with Modi.

One among the 100 students selected for the event, Yamin said the parade for her is everything that India represents to her.

"The best part for me was the last dance, where all our cultures from across the region were showcased together. It truly reflected unity in diversity," she said, referring to the cultural performances of 5,000 artists selected by the Ministry of Culture through the Sangeet Natak Academy.



(Clockwise) BSF's camel contingent; Captain Dimple Singh Bhati of the Corps of Signals, the first woman Army officer to give a salute to the President while standing on a 12-foot ladder mounted on a moving motorcycle; IAF fighter jets fly past Kartavya Path; a contingent of defence personnel from Indonesia at the R-Day parade, Sunday. Amit Mehra/Praveen Khanna

India, Indonesia call for Code of Conduct in SCS

Agree to hold early dialogue on defence, maritime and cyber security

SUBHAJIT ROY
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

UNDERLINING THE importance of "freedom of navigation and overflight" in the Indo-Pacific region, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the visiting President of Indonesia Prabowo Subianto "agreed to an early establishment of bilateral maritime dialogue and cyber security dialogue", according to a joint statement issued Sunday. They backed an "effective and substantive" Code of Conduct in South China Sea.

Subianto, the Chief Guest at the Republic Day parade, was hosted by President Droupadi Murmu later in the day for the At Home function at Rashtrapati Bhawan. As the two countries had adopted the "Shared Vision of India-Indonesia on Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific" in 2018, they agreed to hold the next Defence Ministers' Dialogue at an early date.

According to the joint statement issued at the end of the three-day visit of the Indonesian President, the two leaders reaffirmed that India and Indonesia are "maritime neighbours and strategic partners" and emphasised the importance of regularly convening bilateral dialogue mechanisms at the leaders level, ministerial level, and senior officials level. These include the India-Indonesia Security Dialogue,



(Clockwise) Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto with President Droupadi Murmu, Prime Minister Narendra Modi during 'At Home' ceremony at Rashtrapati Bhavan Sunday; PM Modi; Union Ministers S Jaishankar, Ashwini Vaishnaw and Piyush Goyal. *Renuka Puri*



Consular Dialogue and Policy Planning Dialogue, which are the key platforms for advancing mutual understanding and cooperation. The two leaders welcomed the ratification of the Defence Agreement Cooperation (DCA) and expressed confidence that this would lead to further deepening of defence ties. They underscored the importance of regular engagements between Defence Ministers of both countries to effectively implement the DCA.

Modi and Subianto discussed the "strategic and operational interaction between the defence forces" of both countries, comprising more than two decades of continuous biannual India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol, conduct of periodic bilateral Army

(Garuda Shakti) and Naval (Samudra Shakti) exercises. They welcomed the interest to have "cadet exchanges between the Naval Academies and the National Defence University/ Academy", the joint statement said.

Recognising the importance of building "domestic defence manufacturing capabilities", President Subianto appreciated India's advancements and expressed interest in strengthening cooperation in this sector. "India agreed to support the ongoing defence modernization programmes of Indonesia," the statement said.

The Indonesian President "welcomed India's interest in enhancing cooperation on maritime security, including its engagement with regional mechanisms to en-

sure the safety and security of sea lanes of communication. Both leaders also acknowledged the significance of collaborative efforts to achieve safe and secure sea lanes in the region. In this regard, they agreed that there needs to be constant communication to discuss enhancement of maritime safety", the statement said.

It said that both also welcomed the ongoing discussions on the White Shipping Information Exchange agreement. They agreed to position an International Liaison Officer from Indonesia at Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) Gurugram. They agreed to continue discussions to identify mutually beneficial areas of cooperation in maritime security.

The statement said the leaders welcomed the "renewal of the MoU on Maritime Safety and Security Cooperation".

On South China Sea, the joint statement said, "Both leaders reaffirmed the importance of maintaining and promoting peace, stability, maritime safety and security, freedom of navigation and overflight in the region, and other lawful uses of the sea, including unimpeded lawful maritime commerce and to promote peaceful resolutions of disputes, in accordance with universally recognised principles of international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS, and the relevant standards and recommended practices by the International Civil Aviation Organization and the Inter-

national Maritime Organization."

"In this regard, they supported the full and effective implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea in its entirety and look forward to the early conclusion of an effective and substantive Code of Conduct in the South China Sea that is in accordance with international law, including the 1982 UNCLOS." Both leaders "strongly condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and reaffirmed their commitment to enhancing cooperation in combating this threat". The statement said they "called upon all countries to take concerted action against UN-proscribed terrorist organizations and their affiliates".

Amrit Bharat 2.0, train to Kashmir, Kavach to be among highlights for Railways in Budget

DHEERAJ MISHRA

NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

THE NEW Amrit Bharat Express trains, which aim to provide upgraded facilities at cheaper rates to people travelling in general and sleeper classes, are likely to find a mention in the upcoming Union Budget speech. An around 15 per cent hike for the Ministry of Railways is likely in the upcoming Budget, with much of it directed at boosting infrastructure projects

Officials said that completion of the ambitious Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla Rail Link (USBRL) in Kashmir, station development under Amrit Bharat Station Scheme, train protection system Kavach 4.0, higher capital expenditure on safety, etc., will be among the other key highlights for the Railways in the Budget this year.

“For the current financial year 2024-25, we got the budgetary



Baramulla-Banihal Rail section in Kashmir.

File

support of Rs 2.52 lakh crore. For the next FY2025-26, we are expecting a rise of around 15 per cent in the upcoming Budget. It will boost our series of infrastructure projects,” said a senior official of the ministry.

Amrit Bharat trainsets have a total of 22 coach with locomotives on both ends. These trains have a provision for dining car and with sleeper facilities. Currently, there are two Amrit Bharat Express trains in service — one between Darbhanga and Anand Vihar

Terminal and the second train is running between Malda Town and Bengaluru.

Government is looking to manufacture 50 Amrit Bharat 2.0 version trains with improved features of passenger comfort and safety in next two years. A total of 25 Amrit Bharat trains will be manufactured at the Integral Coach Factory (ICF) in Chennai and remaining 25 trains will be supplied by the Rail Coach Factory, Kapurthala.

Officials said that Amrit Bharat

Express trains will have semi-automatic couplers instead of semi-permanent ones for easy attachment and detachment of coaches, vacuum evacuation system similar to Vande Bharat Express trains, toilets built using Sheet Metal Compound (SMC) material, On-Board Condition Monitoring system (OBCMS), crashworthy features such as crash tubes in the coupler, quick brake application system, etc.

The train will also have modern passenger amenities such as foldable snack table, mobile holder, foldable bottle holder, improved seats and berths, Radium illuminated flooring strip, Tejas type Gangway, two Indian-two western style toilets in each coach, automatic hygiene odour control system, automatic-soap dispenser, streamlined-LED light fitting, one Divyangjan toilet in sleeper coach, etc. **FULL REPORT ON**

www.indianexpress.com

In 14 pollution control boards, only 167 posts filled out of total 2,228

NIKHIL GHANEKAR

NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

REFLECTING TARDY progress on compliance of a National Green Tribunal (NGT) order to fill up vacant posts across pollution control boards in the country by April end, only 167 posts out of 2,228 vacancies have been filled so far in 12 states and two union territories. The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), the country's top pollution control watchdog, submitted this information to the NGT on Friday.

Based on affidavits submitted to the NGT last year, out of 11,562 sanctioned posts, 5,671 or 49.04 per cent, were reported to be vacant in 28 states and 8 union territories.

The CPCB had not received progress reports on filling of the remaining 3,443 vacancies from 16 state pollution control boards and six pollution control committees of union territories, the CPCB's affidavit stated. Pollution control boards cited delays due to reasons ranging from unavailability of candidates from feeder cadres in other state departments, backlog in filling reserved quota posts, conduct of recruitment exams and vacancies which were under process due to promotions.

"Out of 36 SPCBs/PCC's, CPCB has received advance copy of affidavits (progress report) from only 14 SPCBs/PCC namely Andhra Pradesh, Assam,

Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Punjab, Telangana, Tripura, Ladakh and Puducherry," the CPCB stated. Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland among states and Lakshadweep among union territories are the only ones with zero vacancies.

The states which did not submit progress reports are Arunachal Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Manipur, Nagaland, Odisha, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh & West Bengal. Andaman & Nicobar, Chandigarh, Dadra Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu, Delhi, Jammu & Kashmir, Lakshadweep were among union territories which did not submit a progress report.

The CPCB's affidavit was filed in compliance with an order passed by the NGT's principal bench last September 11, directing all states, except Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh to fill vacant posts by April 30, 2025.

The NGT's direction left out states falling in the National Capital Region as a Supreme Court order of August 27 had already covered them. NGT's September 11 order was passed in a matter it had taken up suo moto, based on a news report.

Out of 5,671 posts, the CPCB's affidavit consisted of data for 2,228 posts across 12 states and 2 union territories.

MSMEs: Centre may review import barriers that 'protect' big players

**AGGAM WALIA
& RAVI DUTTA MISHRA**
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

■ After intense lobbying by Indian Steel Association (ISA), an industry body led by big steel companies, the Ministry of Commerce in December initiated a safeguard duty probe on the import of certain steel items. Protection for domestic steel producers has been in place at least since 2010, but calls for a sharp 25 per cent duty hike has triggered a pushback from MSMEs this time around – the Engineering Export Promotion Council (EEPC) told the govern-

EXPLAINED



**MSMEs
& jobs**

Industry bodies representing MSMEs have brought to the notice of the government curbs on imports that have started hurting them. Given the employment potential of MSMEs, and their large number, the Budget is likely to set right the duty structure in these sectors.

ment that domestic steel prices are much higher than imports

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

MEETS TOP CPC LEADER, TO HOLD TALKS WITH COUNTERPART TODAY

Foreign Secy Misri lands in Beijing as India, China attempt to repair ties

SHUBHAJIT ROY

NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

MOVING TO resume bilateral engagements after the border disengagement, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri on Sunday landed in Beijing and met a top Communist Party of China (CPC) leader.

Misri will meet his Chinese counterpart, Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong, on Monday for bilateral talks.

In Misri's meeting with Liu Jianchao, head of the International Department of the CPC's central committee, "the two sides exchanged views on jointly implementing the important consensus reached by the leaders of the two countries, strengthening exchanges and dialogues, and promoting the improvement and healthy and stable development of China-India relations, as well as international and regional issues of common concern", Chinese state-backed outlet Global Times reported. The Foreign Secretary's visit is a move to repair damaged bilateral ties after Chinese incursions in 2020 triggered a military standoff along the Line of Actual

Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh. Earlier, Chinese officials had said the two sides were discussing ways to bring ties back to "normal" — as it was before the face-off began in April-May 2020.

Beijing has outlined its "wish-list": Resumption of direct flights between the two countries, easing of visa curbs on Chinese nationals including diplomats and scholars, lifting of the ban on Chinese mobile apps, letting Chinese journalists report from India, and allowing more Indian movies in Chinese theatres.

These restrictions were imposed after the Galwan clashes in June 2020 in which 20 Indian soldiers, including a Colonel-rank officer, and at least four Chinese soldiers were killed.

But although disengagement was completed in early November and patrolling has resumed at some of the friction points, the next steps of de-escalation and de-induction of troops is still to be done. Delhi has so far maintained that it would like to see progress on the border situation before moving on to normalising the relationship. There might be some movement on direct flights and



Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri. File

visas for Chinese nationals. But going back to the pre-2020 levels will take some time.

China had Friday welcomed Foreign Secretary Misri's visit and had sounded positive about its outcome, saying the development followed a series of interactions between top leaders and officials from both countries after over four years of stalled ties over the Ladakh military standoff.

"We welcome Foreign Secretary Shri Vikram Misri's travel to China for the meeting of the Foreign Secretary-Vice Minister mechanism between China and India," Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning had told a media briefing in Beijing. Referencing the talks be-

tween Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping and the talks between Special Representatives, Foreign ministers and Defence ministers, Mao had said during the talks both sides agreed to improve and strengthen interactions, resume institutional dialogues as well as exchanges and cooperation in various fields, including working on bringing the China-India relations back on track with sound and steady growth at an early date. Recently, both sides have acted to earnestly implement these common understandings, she had said.

The MEA had said on Thursday that "Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri will be visiting Beijing on January 26 and 27 for a meeting of the Foreign Secretary-Vice Minister mechanism between India and China".

"The resumption of this bilateral mechanism flows from the agreement at the leadership level to discuss the next steps for India-China relations, including in the political, economic, and people-to-people domains," it said in a brief statement.

His visit comes just over a

month after National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who are also the Special Representatives, met in Beijing on December 18 — less than two months after a border patrolling arrangement was announced on October 21, which was followed by a meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia on October 23.

Misri was India's Ambassador in Beijing in 2020 when the border standoff started, and is familiar with the Chinese leadership and the cast of characters in the establishment in Beijing. His visit will be the first such engagement at the Foreign Secretary level since the border standoff. At the Special Representatives' meeting in Beijing last month, India and China said they agreed on a set of "six consensus" including resumption of the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, trans-border river cooperation and Nathula border trade. This was the first meeting of the SRs "since frictions emerged in the western sector of the India-China border areas in 2020".

DEADLINE FOR ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL PASSES

Israel kills 22 in south Lebanon as residents try to return: Beirut

124 injured in deadliest day since US-brokered ceasefire

REUTERS

BEIRUT, JANUARY 26

ISRAELI FORCES killed 22 people in south Lebanon on Sunday as a deadline for their withdrawal passed and thousands of people tried to return to their homes in defiance of Israeli military orders, Lebanese authorities said.

Israel said on Friday it would keep troops in the south beyond the Sunday deadline set out in a U.S.-brokered ceasefire that halted last year's war with Hezbollah, saying Lebanon had not yet fully enforced terms requiring south Lebanon to be free of Hezbollah arms and the Lebanese army to be deployed.

Lebanon's US-backed military, which reported one of its soldiers among those killed by Israeli forces on Sunday, has accused Israel of procrastinating in its withdrawal. Lebanon's health ministry said 22 people were killed and another 124 wounded in numerous locations in the south, as a result of what it described as Israeli attacks on citizens while they were trying to enter their still-occupied towns.

The Israeli military said that its troops "operating in southern Lebanon fired warning shots to remove threats in a number of areas where suspects were identified approaching the troops". It also said "a number of suspects...



An injured person carried to safety in Burj al-Muluk in south Lebanon on Sunday. *Reuters*

that posed an imminent threat" were apprehended.

Hezbollah's *al-Manar* television, broadcasting from several locations in the south, showed footage of residents moving towards villages early on Sunday.

An Israeli military spokesperson, addressing the people of south Lebanon in a post on X, accused Hezbollah of trying to "heat up the situation" and said the Israeli army would "in the near future" inform them of places to which they can return.

Hezbollah has put the onus on the Lebanese state to ensure Israel's withdrawal. Hezbollah lawmaker Hassan Fadlallah said

Lebanon is committed to the ceasefire deal but that Israel had turned against it with U.S. support. The White House said on Friday that a short, temporary ceasefire extension was urgently needed.

President Joseph Aoun, Lebanon's army commander until parliament elected him head of state on Jan. 9, called on the people of the south to exercise self-restraint and trust in the Lebanese military.

"Lebanon's sovereignty and territorial integrity are non-negotiable, and I am following up on this issue at the highest levels to ensure your rights and dignity," he said in a statement.

Colombian president says it won't accept deportation flights from US

ASSOCIATED PRESS

BOGOTA, JANUARY 26

COLOMBIAN PRESIDENT Gustavo Petro on Sunday said that his government wouldn't accept flights carrying migrants deported from the United States until the Trump administration creates a protocol that treats them with "dignity".

Petro made the announcement in two X posts, one of which included a news video of migrants reportedly deported to Brazil walking on a tarmac with their hands and feet restrained.

Brazilian officials also demanded that U.S. agents remove handcuffs from a group of deportees who were flown to the South American country Friday, with Justice Minister Ricardo



A Brazilian migrant, deported from the US, is welcomed by his kin

Lewandowski calling the practice "blatant disrespect" for the rights of his fellow citizens.

"A migrant is not a criminal and must be treated with the dignity that a human being deserves," Petro said. "That is why I returned the US military planes that were carrying Colombian migrants." The US government

didn't immediately respond to a request for comment from The Associated Press regarding aircraft and protocols used in deportations to Colombia.

Petro added that his country would receive Colombians in "civilian airplanes" and "without treatment like criminals".

As part of a flurry of actions to make good on US President Donald Trump's campaign promises to crack down on illegal immigration, his government is using active-duty military to help secure the border and carry out deportations. Two Air Force C-17 cargo planes carrying migrants removed from the US touched down early Friday in Guatemala. That same day, Honduras received two deportation flights carrying a total of 193 people. **WITH REUTERS INPUT**

Bangladesh envoy announces direct flights with Pakistan

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

DHAKA, JANUARY 26

TO FURTHER strengthen bilateral ties, Bangladesh's High Commissioner to Pakistan announced plans to begin direct air services between Bangladesh and Pakistan. According to *The Express Tribune*, Mohammad Iqbal Hussain was speaking at a press meet in Peshawar on Saturday.

Hussain emphasised the deep and historic relationship between the two countries and expressed the intention to initiate direct flights to facilitate travel and con-



**Bangladesh
envoy to
Pakistan
Md Iqbal
Hussain**

nectivity. He noted that such a move would enhance cooperation in various sectors, including tourism, education, and trade.

However, no timeline for the direct flights was announced.

The High Commissioner also highlighted the growing trade and diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan,

stating that these ties would continue to grow stronger.

He underscored Bangladesh's commitment to freedom of expression, noting how social media has empowered the younger generation to voice their rights, contributing to a robust culture of free speech in the country.

Hussain pointed out the vast investment opportunities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, particularly in healthcare and industries. He also mentioned the demand for Bangladeshi products in Pakistan, with trade ongoing between the two nations via Chittagong and Karachi.

Jordan and Egypt should take more Palestinians to clean out Gaza: Trump

**WILL WEISSERT
& ZEKE MILLER**

ABOARD AIR FORCE ONE, JAN 26

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump said he would like to see Jordan, Egypt and other Arab nations increase the number of Palestinian refugees they are accepting from the Gaza Strip, potentially moving out enough of the population to “just clean out” the war-torn area to create a virtual clean slate.

During a 20-minute question-and-answer session Saturday with reporters aboard Air Force One, Trump also said he has ended his predecessor’s hold on sending 2,000-pound bombs to Israel. That lifts a pressure point meant to reduce civilian ca-



Displaced Palestinians wait to return to their homes amid the truce, in central Gaza on Sunday. *Reuters*

sualties during Israel's war with Hamas in Gaza, which is now halted by a tenuous ceasefire.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

● Trump

“We released them today,” Trump said of the bombs. “They’ve been waiting for them for a long time.” Asked why he lifted the ban on those bombs, Trump responded, “Because they bought them.”

Trump has built his political career around being unapologetically pro-Israel. On his larger vision for Gaza, Trump said he had a call earlier in the day with King Abdullah II of Jordan and would speak Sunday with President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi of Egypt. “I’d like Egypt to take people, and I’d like Jordan to take people,” Trump said. “You’re talking about probably a million and a half people, we just clean out that whole thing.”

Trump said he complimented Jordan for having successfully accepted Palestinian refugees and that he told the king, “I’d love for you to take on more, cause I’m looking at the whole Gaza Strip right now, and it’s a mess. It’s a real mess.”

Such a drastic displacement of

people would openly contradict Palestinian identity and deep connection to Gaza. Still, Trump said the part of the world that encompasses Gaza, has “had many, many conflicts” over centuries. He said resettling “could be temporary or long term.”

“Something has to happen,” Trump said. “But it’s literally a demolition site right now. Almost everything’s demolished, and people are dying there.” He added: “So, I’d rather get involved with some of the Arab nations, and build housing in a different location, where they can maybe live in peace for a change.”

Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu, in a statement, thanked Trump for “keeping your promise to give Israel the tools it needs to defend itself.” He did not mention Trump’s suggestion on Palestinian refugees.

But Jordan’s Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi told reporters that his country’s rejection of the proposed transfer of Palestinians was “firm and unwavering.” **AP**

Why Trump wants Greenland

Trump has said Denmark would be committing a 'very unfriendly act' if it did not allow the US to take over Greenland. What's behind the US President's increasingly aggressive bid for a snow-covered island?

AMITABH SINHA & YASHEE
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

IN HIS first remarks on Greenland after taking office, US President Donald Trump Saturday said he was sure America was "going to have it". He also said Denmark would be committing a "very unfriendly act" if it decided to not let that happen. Trump said he wanted Greenland "for the protection of the free world".

Greenland was once a Danish colony and is now an autonomous province of Denmark.

It has also emerged that Trump's conversation with Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen on this issue earlier in January turned very cold.

Frederiksen's office had then said she reiterated to Trump that Greenland was not for sale, and that it was up to the Greenlanders to decide their future. However, several European media organisations had reported that Trump had used threats during that conversation, including imposing tariffs on Danish goods coming into the US. On Saturday, the *Financial Times*, quoting sources, said Trump was aggressive and confrontational during that 45-minute conversation.

Greenland is the world's largest but sparsely populated island. Abundant in natural resources, particularly minerals critical to many future technologies, and located strategically near the emerging shipping lanes around the Arctic, it had been leading an inconspicuous existence till Trump brought it under global spotlight shortly after his election last year, saying he would like to make it a part of America, by force, if necessary.

Buying or annexing a foreign territory by force might seem like an idea totally out of place in a 21st-century world. But Trump is not exactly a conventional leader. Besides, the Greenland offer has a history that goes beyond Trump.

Trump's earlier offer

This is not the first time that Trump has expressed his desire for Greenland. He had done so during his first term as well.

In August 2019, he had cancelled a scheduled visit to Denmark apparently because Frederiksen, who was Prime Minister of Denmark then too, had turned down his offer to buy Greenland, calling it "absurd".

Trump was well into the third year of his Presidency at that time, and within a few

RED FLAG OVER GREENLAND

Trump has had a tense call with Denmark's PM



Donald Trump

Mette Frederiksen

- Critical Raw Material (CRM) deposit
- Non-Critical Raw Material (CRM) deposit
- Important Occurrence



Source: Geological Survey of Denmark and Greenland, Government of Greenland. CRM as defined by EC2023.

months, the Covid-19 pandemic had pushed everything else to the backburner.

This time Trump began early, even before taking office. Within days of his public statement, his son Donald Trump Jr made a visit to Greenland earlier this month, ostensibly on a leisure trip.

In his latest remarks on the issue on Saturday, Trump said he knew the people of Greenland were in favour of joining America.

"I don't know what claim Denmark has to (the island), but it would be engaging in a very unfriendly act if they didn't allow that to happen (let America take Greenland)," he said, insisting that he wanted the island not for America but for the "free world".

"It really has to do with the freedom of the world. It has nothing to do with the United States, other than that we are the one that can provide the freedom, they (Denmark) can't," he said.

US wanted it in 1940s also

The American interest in Greenland goes much longer back in history. Way back in 1946, American officials put forward a proposal to buy Greenland from Denmark. That offer followed a 1941 agreement between the United States and Denmark over the defence of Greenland, which allowed US troops

to be based on Greenland for the first time. At that time, German forces had already taken over Denmark and there was the threat of Greenland being attacked as well.

Denmark had rejected the 1946 offer. "While we owe much to America, I do not feel that we owe them the whole island of Greenland," the then Danish foreign minister Gustav Rasmussen, to whom the offer had been made, had said.

Denmark, however, did allow the US much greater access to Greenland through several subsequent agreements. The US, thus, is not a complete outsider to Greenland. It has stakes and interests in Greenland as well as the wider Arctic region.

Renewed attempt

The 1946 offer was based on security considerations. The United States had entered Greenland in 1941 to counter potential German aggression. After the second World War, however, it wanted control of Greenland to neutralise Soviet Union influence in the Arctic region. It had mentioned the emergence of "modern weapons" to push for its case in the 1946 proposal.

Through subsequent agreements, the US not just set up military bases — including the Pituffik Space Base, earlier the Thule Air Base

— but also built a nuclear reactor and a facility to dispose of nuclear waste.

The competition with the Soviet Union, and its successor state Russia, is no longer that keen. The renewed attempt to acquire Greenland under Trump is now being seen as prompted by the desire to counter the rising influence of China in the region.

Greenland is mineral-rich, having large deposits of traditional resources like gold, nickel and cobalt, but also some of the biggest reserves of rare earth minerals like dysprosium, praseodymium, neodymium, and terbium. Of the 34 classified rare earth minerals, Greenland has about 23. It is these that have brought the island a lot of attention, along with several prospecting mining companies.

The rare earth minerals have suddenly gained prominence because of their use in critical emerging technologies in the renewable energy sector, new military applications, and consumer electronics.

Outside of Greenland, these critical minerals are heavily concentrated in China, which controls the bulk of the global production and supply.

Crucially, China too has entered Greenland in a big way. Chinese companies are very actively involved in prospecting, mining and processing these mineral resources. Chinese companies now account for 11 per cent of the investments in the mineral sector in Greenland, just behind Australia and the United States, data from the island's mineral department shows.

The China shadow

The Chinese presence is not limited to the mineral sector in Greenland. It has also been involved in creation of new infrastructure in Greenland, aimed at facilitating greater usage of Arctic sea routes. In 2018, it released a white paper on its Arctic policy, in which it unveiled plans of creating a 'Polar Silk Road', an extension of its Belt and Road Initiative in Asia and Europe.

The United States, with its defence assets in Greenland, is of course unnerved by these developments, and has even tried to dissuade Denmark from allowing too many Chinese companies in the island.

Trump acknowledged the Chinese incursions in the area in his remarks on Saturday. "Right now, you have Russian ships, you have Chinese ships, you have ships from various countries (in the area). It is not a good situation," he said.

NO REGULAR PASSENGER FLIGHTS SINCE EARLY 2020

No India-China direct flights: Singapore, Vietnam, Dhaka gain as connecting hubs

SUKALP SHARMA
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 26

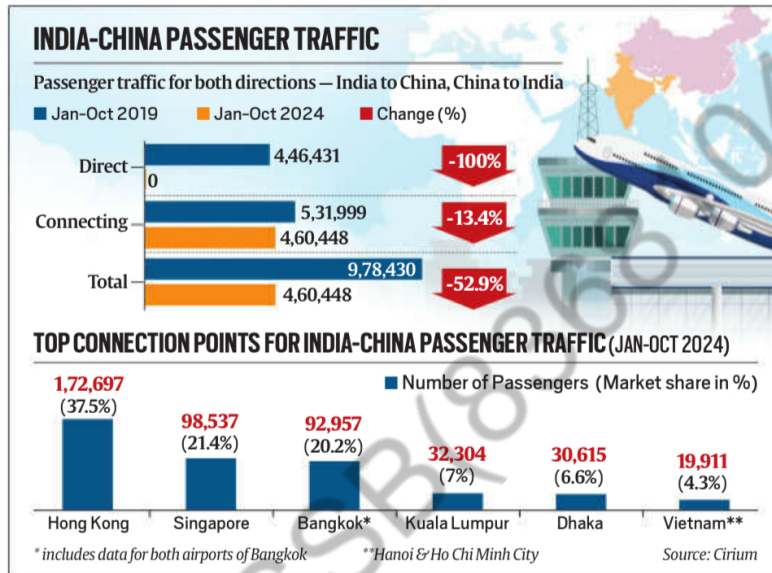
THE EVIDENT signs of a thaw in India-China relations has built hopes of normalisation of air connectivity between the world's two most populous nations, which haven't had regular passenger flights between them since early 2020. Resumption of direct flights and normalisation of visa issuances—demands China has been making over the past couple of years—are expected to come up

in Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri's discussions with Beijing during his visit, which began Sunday. Chinese and Indian airlines would be watching keenly.

In September 2024, resumption of direct passenger flights between India and China was discussed in a meeting between India's Civil Aviation Minister K Ram Mohan Naidu and Song Zhiyong, the Administrator of the Civil Aviation Administration of China. Earlier in June, *Reuters* had reported that China was pressing India to resume direct air connectivity between the two countries, while India was resisting it.

In November, resumption of direct flights featured in the discussions between Foreign Minister S Jaishankar and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi at their meeting in Rio de Janeiro during the G20 Summit. That meeting took place less than a month after India and China announced a border patrolling arrangement on October 21, a clear sign of de-escalation. Two days later, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping met at the BRICS Summit in Russia.

Lack of direct air connectivity between India and mainland China, along with stringent visa restrictions, have led to airlines from both countries losing out on potential passenger loads. No wonder passenger traffic between the two countries—now solely



through connecting hubs in South and Southeast Asia—is less than half of what it was in 2019. Nevertheless, it is still not insignificant, and a few airlines from other countries have spotted and capitalised on the opportunity.

In January-October of 2024, the total number of flyers (in both directions) between India and China was over 4.60 lakh, sharply down from close to a million in the corresponding 10 months of 2019, shows an analysis of passenger data provided by global aviation analytics company Cirium. In January-October of 2019, direct flight passengers accounted for almost 46 per cent of the total passenger flows between the two countries.

Despite the slump in the overall numbers, airports in Singapore, Vietnam, and even Bangladesh have managed to clock higher India-China passenger traffic than they did in 2019, largely thanks to their respective home airlines' strategy to focus on connecting such flyers. Other hubs, however,

are either yet to catch up, or are struggling.

Singapore, Bangladesh, Vietnam gain

In the first 10 months of 2024, over 98,000 passengers travelling between India and China connected in Singapore, up 16.6 per cent from the corresponding period of 2019. This can be attributed to the Singapore Airlines group offering connections to various points in China from a number of Indian airports via the city-state. Singapore is now the second-largest connecting hub—after Hong Kong—for India-China passengers, up from the third spot in 2019.

Bangladesh's capital Dhaka, which connected just over 4,500 India-China passengers in the first 10 months of 2019, saw the numbers surge to over 30,000 in the corresponding period of 2024, with Bangladeshi carriers US-Bangla Airlines and Biman Bangladesh capitalising on the opportunity.

Notably, Vietnam's two major airports—Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh—that had hardly any India-China connecting passengers in 2019, together served as the connecting hubs for nearly 20,000 such flyers in January-October 2024, thanks to Vietnamese carriers VietJet Air and Vietnam Airlines having densified their networks to facilitate transfer traffic via Vietnam.

Where other connecting hubs stand

The Hong Kong airport, which is not exactly considered a Chinese airport due to Hong Kong's special autonomous status and a different visa regime than mainland China, continues to be the leading connecting hub between India and mainland China. The number of passengers connecting at Hong Kong—almost 1.73 lakh in January-October 2024—was 12.5 per cent lower than the corresponding period of 2019.

Thailand's capital Bangkok—with its two airports—was the sec-

ond-largest connecting hub for flyers between India and China in 2019. In January-October 2024, it was at the third spot, connecting nearly 93,000 passengers via the two airports, down around 31 per cent from five years ago. Thai carriers, primarily the Thai AirAsia group, are making efforts to increase their share of this market by adding more capacity on flights to Bangkok from Indian airports.

Kuala Lumpur, too, saw a notable decline in India-China connecting passenger numbers vis-à-vis 2019. Malaysian carriers' capacities deployed on routes between Kuala Lumpur and both India and China were lower than the pre-pandemic levels. In January-October of 2024, Kuala Lumpur's India-China connecting traffic was just over 32,000 passengers, down over 44 per cent from the first 10 months of 2019.

Colombo, where over 43,000 passengers travelling between India and China connected in January-October 2019, saw a steep drop of over 82 per cent in the comparable period of 2024. This primarily was on account of aircraft capacity constraints affecting the Sri Lankan Airlines network. Cirium data shows that Sri Lankan operated just 290 flights between Colombo and Chinese airports in January-October of last year, sharply down from over 1,200 flights in the same period of 2019.

Opportunity for Chinese, Indian airlines

Although normalisation of air connectivity would likely benefit airlines from both India and China, Beijing likely believes that Chinese carriers have more to gain as they enjoyed the dominant share of the direct flight market between the two countries before the pandemic. It is not surprising then that China has been nudging India to allow reestablishment of direct air connectivity and normalise visa issuances to Chinese nationals.

FULL REPORT ON

www.indianexpress.com