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WEST ASIA DIGEST

Monthly Compilation of News Items from West Asia

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi visits the UAE

Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the UAE on June 28, 2022, and met with the UAE's President Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Modi conveyed his condolences to Al Nahyan and other royal family members on the demise of former President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan last month. During the visit, Modi congratulated Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan on getting elected as the new President of the UAE and becoming the ruler of Abu Dhabi. Besides, both the leaders reviewed the multiple aspects of the bilateral relationship including the India-UAE Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. The UAE is India's third-largest trading partner and both countries signed the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement in February this year.

Israeli Defence Minister Visits India

Israel's Defence Minister Benny Gantz visited India and met with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval. They held talks on issues related to bilateral, regional and defence industrial cooperation. Prime Minister Modi encouraged Israel's defence companies to utilize "the opportunities of co-development and co-production in India." Gantz and Singh discussed ways to deepen the ties "in all domains with a focus on research and development in future technologies and defence co-production". To strengthen the existing framework of the Indo-Israeli defence ties, the countries adopted the India-Israel Vision on Defence Cooperation. In addition, both sides also exchanged a Letter of Intent on enhancing cooperation in the field of futuristic defence technologies.

Negev Forum meeting held in Bahrain

Bahrain hosted the first meeting of the Negev Forum Steering Committee on June

29, 2022, which saw the participation of the foreign ministers of the six founding countries namely the US, the UAE, Bahrain, Israel, Egypt and Morocco. The forum aimed at fostering prosperity, security and stability in the Middle East through developing sustainable frameworks to strengthen cooperation among themselves. The key areas of development and cooperation in the meeting were identified such as security, health, economics, education and environment. In addition, a four-part structure was put forward including working groups on six fields namely clean energy, food, tourism, regional security, health and water security. A statement during the meeting emphasised achieving progress in Israel-Palestinian relations through negotiations to resolve the conflict.

Israel and UAE sign free trade agreement

Israel and the UAE signed a free trade agreement on May 31, 2022. This was the first such agreement signed by Israel with an Arab country aimed at taking the annual bilateral trade to more than US\$ 10 billion, and it granted tax exemption on 96 per cent of trade between the two countries. The agreement also included "regulatory and regulatory issues, customs, cooperation, government procurement, e-commerce and the preservation of intellectual property rights". The UAE's Minister of Trade, Thani Al Zeyoudi said that the agreement has written "a new chapter in the history of the Middle East".

Saudi Crown Prince visits Egypt, Jordan and Türkiye

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman visited Egypt and met with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El Sisi. During the visit, both leaders discussed ways to enhance ties between the two countries in various areas along with issues related to regional and international

concerns. Both the countries signed 14 deals, worth US\$ 7.7 billion in areas such as energy, information technology, e-commerce, infrastructure, food, cyber security, pharmaceutical and logistics.

Thereafter, the Saudi Crown Prince visited Jordan on June 21 and met with King Abdullah II and Crown Prince Hussein Bin Abdullah. The leaders discussed the developments in the region and beyond and stressed resolving the Palestinian issues with a two-state solution. Both the leaders discussed fluctuation in oil prices and noted the need to find a solution to this problem by suitable means. The issue of political stability in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon was also discussed.

The final leg of the visit of the Saudi Crown Prince was to Türkiye which was his first since Jamal Khashoggi's murder in 2018. In Türkiye, he met with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and agreed to strengthen consultation and cooperation on regional issues to maintain stability and peace within the region. Both expressed their aspiration to collaborate in the energy sector which includes petroleum, refining and petrochemicals, energy efficiency, electricity, renewable energy, innovation and clean technologies for hydrocarbon resources, low-carbon fuels and so on. They also highlighted the significance of increasing the "number of flights between the two countries" and agreed upon simplifying the "procedures of bilateral trade" and "exploring investment opportunities". Saudi Arabia also ended the travel ban on Türkiye imposed after the Khashoggi murder case.

Lebanon, Egypt and Syria sign agreement to import natural gas

Lebanon, Egypt and Syria signed a deal to ship natural gas to Lebanon's northern Deir Ammar power plant on June 21, 2022. According to the agreement, Egypt will ship 650 million cubic metres of natural gas

per year from Egypt to Lebanon via Syria. The deal is yet to be approved by the World Bank which has pledged to finance the arrangement; and the US in light of its sanctions on Syria. This agreement is expected to stabilise Lebanon's electricity supplies which are badly suffering due to the severe economic and energy crises in the country.

Israeli Foreign Minister visits Türkiye

Foreign Minister of Israel, Yair Lapid visited Tukey and met with his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu. The visit came amidst rising security threats looming over the Israeli nationals in Türkiye. In the past few weeks, Israel has issued various warnings of an imminent attack by Iran on its nationals travelling to Türkiye. Several reports also suggested that Turkish intelligence foiled an Iranian plot to attack Israeli nationals in Istanbul. Lapid appreciated the Turkish government for "this professional and coordinated activity". During the visit, he also discussed the possibility of Israeli airlines flying directly to Ankara and Istanbul and returning their ambassadors. Furthermore, both the leaders also discussed important international developments such as the Ukraine war, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Syrian crisis and the expansion of the free trade agreement to increase bilateral trade between them.

Qatari Emir visits Egypt

Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani paid a two-day visit to Egypt – the first time since the boycott of Qatar. He met with the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi and discussed the "full normalisation" of ties between the two countries along with other regional and global issues. The Emir expressed Qatar's keenness to "maximise Qatari investments in Egypt and take advantage of the vast investment opportunities available" along

with cooperation in various fields such as agriculture and energy. The Egyptian-Qatari Business Council also met to explore ways of improving trade and investment between the countries. Furthermore, the Emir also appreciated Egypt's efforts at reconstruction in the Gaza strip.

EU signs energy deal with Egypt and Israel

The European Union (EU) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on energy with Egypt and Israel to reduce the EU's energy dependence on Russia. The natural gas from Israel and Egypt will be shipped to the EU via the Egyptian liquid natural gas export infrastructure. The agreement will help the EU achieve the "long-term decarbonization objectives" and will aid its efforts at stabilising its energy security architecture. Furthermore, the EU will also help Egypt and Israel in gas exploration and production in their territorial waters.

Lavrov visits the Gulf and Türkiye

To consolidate relations with the Gulf region, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. In Bahrain, he met with Bahraini Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa and discussed the developments happening in the region and beyond, including the situation in Ukraine. In Saudi Arabia Lavrov met with foreign ministry officials from all the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Lavrov appreciated GCC's balanced position on the Russia-Ukraine conflict and their decision not to join the Western sanctions against Russia. Thereafter, he went on a two-day visit to Türkiye and held talks with his Turkish counterpart, Mevlut Cavusoglu and discussed the situation in Syria and Libya and the Ukraine war. They also discussed the United Nations-led plan of providing a

safe sea corridor in the Black Sea for the shipment of Ukrainian grains.

Muqtada Al Sadr's bloc resigns from parliament

The political crisis in Iraq took a sharp turn after 73 lawmakers from the powerful Shiite cleric Muqtada Al Sadr's bloc submitted their resignation from the parliament. Sadr had the highest number of members in the parliament. The decision came as a protest against the eight months-long political impasse, which has stalled the process of government formation since the general election in October 2021. The Sadr bloc has stated that the resignation of its members is intended to end the political deadlock and create space for the establishment of a new government in Iraq. Though several rounds of intense negotiations were held among the political factions, they failed to choose a new prime minister to succeed Mustafa Al Kadhimi.

Indian Vice President visits Qatar

The Vice President of India M. Venkaiah Naidu visited Doha on June 4, 2022. This was the first-ever visit of an Indian Vice President to Qatar. On June 5, he met with the Qatari Prime Minister and Interior Minister Sheikh Khalid bin Khalifa bin Abdulaziz Al Thani and discussed issues related to bilateral relations including trade, investment, economic and security cooperation. Both agreed that the high-level engagement between the two nations must sustain and bilateral parliamentary exchanges must be promoted. Naidu also addressed the India-Qatar Business Forum collectively organised by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM), along with the Qatar Chamber of Commerce and Industry.