

**Ambassador Asim Iftikhar Ahmad meets top UN official Vladimir Voronkov** **Celina Ali**

Islamabad: Ambassador Asim Iftikhar Ahmad, Alternate Permanent Representative of Pakistan and Representative to the Security Council, this week met with Under-Secretary-General for Counter-Terrorism Vladimir Voronkov. They exchanged views on (Page-5)

**Gilani-led Pak parliamentary delegation visit parliaments, offices in Ireland, Austria EU funds trip** **Celina Ali**

Islamabad: The European Union is hosting a 23-member Pakistani parliamentary delegation led by Senate Chairman Yousaf Raza Gilani to visit the Parliaments and Parliamentary Budget Offices (PBOs) of Austria and Ireland. The European Union Delegation to Pakistan (Page-10)

# Trump ready for trade deal with China, calls talks with President Xi 'friendly'

**NewsWire**

Washington: US President Donald Trump this week said his conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping was friendly and he thought he could reach a trade deal with China.

The leaders of the world's two biggest economies discussed issues including TikTok, trade and Taiwan in a phone call before Trump took office. Since taking office, Trump has spoken about a 10% punitive duty on Chinese imports because he says fentanyl is being

sent from China to the U.S. via Mexico and Canada. However, he did not immediately impose tariffs as he had promised during his election campaign. Trump has also threatened tariffs against the European Union, Mexico and Canada. "It went fine. It was a good, friendly con-



versation," Trump said of his call with President Xi in an interview with Fox News. "I can do that," Trump said in the interview when asked if he could make a deal with China over fair trade practices. Trump said he would rather not use tariffs against China but called tariffs a "tremendous power." "But we have one very big power over China, and that's tariffs, and they don't

want them, and I'd rather not have to use it, but it's a tremendous power over China," Trump added. The US and China are embroiled in an array of diplomatic and economic disagreements, including an accelerating technological and military rivalry, bitter trade disputes and Washington's concerns with the ownership of famous social media app TikTok, whose parent company is Chinese firm ByteDance.

## Denmark agrees to discuss Greenland with US



**Covert Report**

Copenhagen: Denmark agreed this week to discuss the Arctic region with Washington, Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen said, after his first phone call with the top diplomat of the administration of President Donald Trump, who wants control of Greenland. Rasmussen and U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio held a 20-minute conversation in a "good and constructive tone", discussing Ukraine, European security and the situation in the Middle East, the Danish Foreign Ministry said in a statement. The State Department said late on Friday that Rubio had "reaffirmed the strength of the relationship" between the two countries in the call. Trump has expressed an interest in making Greenland, an autonomous territory of Denmark, part of the United States. He has not ruled out using military or economic power to persuade Denmark to hand it over. Greenland's strategic location along the shortest route from Europe to North America, vital for the U.S. ballistic missile warning system, has made it a priority for Trump.

Denmark's prime minister, Mette Frederiksen, on Jan. 15 said she had spoken on the phone with Trump and told him that it is up to Greenland itself to decide on any independence. The Financial Times reported that last week's call between Frederiksen and Trump was fiery, with Trump insisting he was serious about his determination to take over Greenland. The paper cited European officials. Trump took office on Jan. 20. "Arctic security was not on the agenda, but it was agreed that it will be discussed between the United States, Denmark and Greenland at a later date, the Danish ministry said. Greenland's prime minister, Mute Egede, who has stepped up a push for independence, has repeatedly said the island is not for sale and that it is up to its people to decide their future. While Trump had aired the possibility of taking over Greenland in 2019, during his first term in the White House, his refusal to rule out the use of military or economic power has caught many Danes by surprise.

## Aseefa Bhutto Zardari inaugurates People's School project

**Liaquat Ali**

Islamabad: Aseefa Bhutto Zardari, First Lady of Pakistan, Member National Assembly, and Chairperson of Sindh Peoples Welfare Trust (SPWT), this week inaugurated the groundbreaking ceremony for the People's School, a transformative educational initiative aimed at fostering quality education and youth empowerment. The Sindh Peoples Welfare Trust (SPWT), founded by Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto in February 1987, continues her legacy of uplifting communities through education and healthcare. Aseefa Bhutto Zardari was accompanied by Dr. Azra Fazal Pechuho, Chancellor of SZABIST University and Sindh's Minister for Health, along with the SPWT Board of Trustees, including Syed Qaim Ali Shah, Mr. Abdul Aziz Edhi, Khurshed Junejo, Lubna Khalid, and Dr. Suleman Shaikh. The People's School will be constructed in Karachi and is designed to provide a state-of-the-art educational environment. Under the first phase, the project will include primary and secondary school facilities, an administrative block, and external development works, ensuring a modern and holistic learning experience for students. The People's School is envisioned as a beacon of academic excellence, operating on a hybrid model to provide free education to underprivileged students while offering affordable options to others. With its modern infrastructure and comprehensive facilities, the school aims to equip students with the knowledge and skills required to thrive in a rapidly evolving world. Speaking on the occasion, Aseefa Bhutto Zardari highlighted the enduring vision of Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto and the role of education in shaping Pakistan's future. She remarked, "This groundbreaking represents our unwavering commitment to providing quality education and creating opportunities for future genera-



tions. This project is not just about building a school; it is about building a better future." Dr. Suleman Shaikh, Member Board of Trustees, reflected on the trust's journey and the commitment of its founding members. He shared, "Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto envisioned initiatives like this school. It is heartwarming to see her daughter turning this vision into reality, ensuring access to education and hope for the community."



# Pakistan eyes China's pineapple farming expertise

## China Economic Net

Beijing: As Pakistan seeks to diversify its agricultural sector and boost exports, it stands to gain valuable insights from Xuwen County in southern China, which is renowned as the "Pineapple Capital of China." With decades of expertise, Xuwen has transformed pineapple farming into a thriving industry, offering Pakistan an opportunity to adopt similar techniques for sustainable agricultural growth. The region produces over 1.4 million tons of pineapples annually. This success is attributed to advanced farming techniques, efficient supply chains, and government-backed initiatives that have empowered local farmers and positioned Xuwen as a leader in agricultural innovation, China Economic Net (CEN) reported.

"Pakistan, with its fertile lands and favorable climate, holds immense potential for pineapple cultivation. By studying Xuwen's model, Pakistan can benefit in several ways. For example, Xuwen employs precision farming techniques, such as soil analysis, irrigation management, and pest control, which ensure high-quality crops. Introducing these practices in Pakistan

could enhance yields and reduce post-harvest losses," according to Ghulam Qadir, Trade and Investment Counsellor at the Embassy of Pakistan in Beijing. During his visit to this agricultural hub in Guangdong Province, he noted that Xuwen's cooperative model encourages small farmers to pool resources and negotiate better prices. This model could be replicated in Pakistan to empower rural communities.

"By leveraging these techniques, Pakistan could reduce its reliance on traditional crops and boost its export potential, particularly in Middle Eastern and Central Asian markets. This initiative aligns with Pakistan's vision of agricultural modernization and economic diversification," said Ghulam Qadir.

Pakistan's pineapple industry is relatively underdeveloped compared to other agricultural sectors. Although certain regions, such as Sindh and southern Punjab, offer favorable climates for pineapple cultivation, the industry faces challenges due to insufficient awareness, lack of suitable varieties, and limited adoption of advanced farming techniques. Additionally,



the absence of dedicated research and development, infrastructure, and government support hampers its growth.

"Most of the pineapples consumed in Pakistan are imported, making the fruit relatively expensive for local consumers. In Sindh, approximately 16,000 metric tons of pineapples are grown annually, primarily in Thatta and Badin. However,

with targeted investment in research, farmer training, and the introduction of high-yield varieties, the pineapple industry has significant potential for growth and could contribute to the country's agricultural diversification," experts stated. It is worth noting that Xuwen County is an

important agricultural production base in Guangdong Province due to its flat terrain and fertile soil. The available area for crop planting covers over 110,000 hectares, while the area for aquaculture spans 8,800 hectares. This area forms an agricultural production model centered around pineapples, sugarcane, bananas, vegetables, and shell ginger.

# Henan's foreign trade increasingly resilient: Foreign trade value hits 820 billion in 2024

## Henan Daily

Zhengzhou: In 2024, the total import and export value of foreign trade in Central China's Henan province reached 820.17 billion yuan, ranking among the top 10 nationwide for five consecutive years, with a year-on-year increase of 1.2 percent, reflecting resilience and momentum for sustained development, according to Zhengzhou Customs on January 16. In the face of a complex and ever-changing external environment, Henan has implemented a series of measures to solidify the foundation of foreign trade, driving its growth on an upward trajectory despite the challenges. In the second half of last year, Henan's import and export sector continued to recover, recording year-on-year growth for six consecutive months. By November, the growth rate turned positive for the first time. Especially in December, Henan's foreign trade reached 80.03 billion yuan, growing by 7.7 percent, surpassing the national growth rate by 0.9 percentage points. Of this, exports totaled 54.48 billion yuan, up by 8.3 percent, while imports

reached 25.55 billion yuan, growing by 6.5 percent, achieving growth in both exports and imports.

In terms of the trade market, Henan's "friend circle" continues to expand, with increasingly diverse trading partners. Last year, Henan's import and export with ASEAN totaled 109.15 billion yuan, growing by 1.7 percent; with the EU, it reached 106.63 billion yuan, up by 13.3 percent; with Africa, it amounted to 30.83 billion yuan, increasing by 20.1 percent; and with both Australia and Peru, imports and exports saw growth. In addition, the import and export with countries and regions participating in the Belt and Road Initiative totaled 383.87 billion yuan, growing by 3.6 percent, exceeding the overall growth rate of the province.



# 'China travel' continues to heat up as impact of visa-free policies grows

## Newsire

Zhengzhou: With China relaxing and optimizing its visa-free policies and introducing measures to facilitate foreign travelers, "China travel" has become a top choice for many international tourists. According to the latest data from the National Immigration Administration of China, in 2024,

immigration authorities nationwide handled 610 million border crossings, a year-on-year increase of 43.9 percent. Among them, 291 million border crossings are made by Chinese mainland residents, 254 million by Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan residents, as well as 64.88 million by foreign nationals. These three figures went up by 41.3 percent, 38.8 percent and 82.9 percent, respectively,

compared to 2023. Nearly 20.12 million inbound trips by foreigners were made visa-free last year, a year-on-year increase of 112.3 percent. This ease of travel has opened new windows and channels for the world to understand China, showcasing a true, diverse, and vibrant image of the country.

Recently, "Travel to China after work on Friday" became a trending topic on South Korean social media. Data from South Korea's Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport showed a significant increase in South Korean tourists traveling to China since China implemented a visa-free policy for South Korea on Nov. 8, 2024. In that month, 993,400 South Korean tourist visits were made to China, up 47 percent from the same period in 2023. Since the end of 2023, China's visa-free "circle of friends" has been steadily expanding. To date, China has implemented a complete mutual visa exemption with 26 countries. It has issued a unilateral visa-free policy for 38 countries, a visa-free transit policy for 54 countries, and reached mutual visa-free agreements with 157 countries and regions.

On Dec. 17 last year, China comprehensively relaxed its visa-free transit policy, extending the permitted stay for eligible foreign travelers from the previous 72 and 144 hours to 240 hours and increasing the number of ports

designated for visa-free entry and exit to 60. Foreign nationals entering China through the visa-free transit policy can make cross-province travels within allowed areas in 24 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities. Visa-free policies are increasingly taking effect, further boosting the popularity of "China travel." Within half an hour of China's visa-free policy announcement for Poland in June 2024, searches for related keywords by Polish users on Trip.com increased by 40 percent from a day ago. A resident in Warsaw named Milena, who loves Chinese culture, immediately decided to visit China. After spending 10 days exploring places like Zhangjiajie, she was deeply impressed. "It was incredible! I hope my friends can see China's landscapes with their own eyes."

Belgian tourists Patrick, Luc, and Ingrid recently returned from a trip to China. "Waking up on the train's sleeper to the stunning views of the Qinghai-Xizang Plateau was amazing," one of them said. "The more you explore China, the more you feel its charm. One visit isn't enough, we're eager to come back and learn more about Chinese culture."

Not long ago, Juergen Kremer, a German who speaks fluent Chinese, embarked on a trip to China. As the chief commercial officer of Shanghai China International Travel Service Ltd., Frankfurt Office, he went to China to develop hiking routes there for German tourists and partici-

pate in the China International Travel Mart. "Our China routes are very popular, with many products selling out quickly upon launch," Kremer noted. According to him, besides traditional routes, newly developed ones like those to the Yangtze River and the Three Gorges are also in high demand. The number of tourists to China the company received in 2024 has returned to the levels of 2019, and is expected to keep growing in 2025.

The surge in "China travel" has also driven growth in the aviation transport market. Daniel Lee, CEO of Malaysia's travel service provider Gofay Airways, stated that with the growing enthusiasm for cross-border travel between Malaysia and China, the aviation sector has seen continuous growth. Recently, 18 new direct flight routes have been launched between the two countries, covering multiple cities, better meeting the needs of tourists.

As the adage goes, seeing is believing. Inbound tourism is a crucial way for international tourists to understand China. Zeng Bowei, director of China Tourism Economy and Policy Research Center of Beijing Union University, said the visa-free policies not only boost inbound tourism but also send a strong signal of China's opening up. As the effects of these policies unfold, more foreign tourists are expected to visit China, he noted.

An article published on The Independent Singapore believes that China's expansion of visa-free policies has broader implications for global tourism. By actively providing more convenient entry and exit services for international tourists, China helps reduce travel barriers, rapidly grows its tourism industry, and encourages other countries to adopt similar policies, making global travel more convenient and fostering internation-





# Trump whisperer? Italy's Meloni navigates a high-stakes relationship



reverse the U.S. trade deficit with the European Union, possibly through hiked excise tolls. The G7 member state registered a 42.1 billion euro (\$43.6 billion) trade surplus with the United States in 2023, according to the EU statistics office, the second-highest in the bloc after Germany, making it especially vulnerable to tariffs. Italian newspapers have said Meloni will look to use her alliance with Trump to deflect tax hikes away from local firms, such as its food producers. Meloni's office refused to comment on such speculation, but analysts say Italy would still suffer, even if Trump directed his ire elsewhere.

"The Italian economy is so tied to the European economy that thinking tariffs could only penalize France or Germany without hurting us is an illusion," said Arturo Varvelli, director of the European Council on Foreign Relations in Rome. "Meloni knows this, so for better or worse, she will have to represent Europe's interests to Trump," he added.

A senior EU official in Brussels, speaking on condition of anonymity, said it was not yet clear that Trump wanted to build any bridges to Europe, with or without Meloni. Another official said Meloni's friendship with Trump would be valuable if she can persuade him to stick by Ukraine in its war with Russia. The White House didn't immediately respond to a request for comment on relations between Trump and Meloni. Meloni is also close to billionaire Elon Musk, who has emerged as a key mover and shaker in the president's inner circle, and the pair have engaged in a flurry of praise. Musk described Meloni as "someone who is even more beautiful inside than outside" at a black-tie event in New York in September last year, for example, prompting the Italian leader to reply that the entrepreneur was a "precious genius".

Meloni's government has entered into talks to sign a possible five-year contract with Starlink, part of the Musk empire, worth 1.5 billion euros. Italian officials say the nation's military and diplomats need secure satellite communications of the type offered by Starlink and cannot wait until 2030, when a rival European system IRIS2 is expected to go on line.

"The government says this deal isn't detrimental to Europe, but it's clear that if you spend 1.5 billion on Starlink, you won't walk away from it



H.E. Marilina ARMELLIN,  
Italian Ambassador to Pakistan.

**Newswire**

Rome: Italian Prime Minister Meloni was the sole European leader at Trump's presidential inauguration last Monday, an honour that came barely two weeks after she flew to Florida to meet him at his Mar-a-Lago retreat, and propelled her into pole position to become Washington's new go-to ally in Europe.

"Trump has chosen her for credibility, reliability and for the stability of our government as the preferred interlocutor in the EU," Italian Deputy Foreign Minister Edmondo Cirielli, a member of Meloni's Brothers of Italy party, said. "This is useful for Italy and will also be useful for the EU."

Indeed, in theory, Meloni has much to benefit by being in Trump's good books. NATO member Italy has a big trade surplus with the United States and a diminished defence budget, putting her on a collision course with the new administration, unless she can leverage her ties with the president to deflect this.

But aligning herself too closely with the mercurial American commander-in-chief also carries potential dangers. Meloni has worked hard to convince Brussels she is a reliable partner and could undermine her standing if she blatantly promotes Italian interests at the expense of the rest of the 27-nation bloc.

"Meloni is actually in a very awkward position," said Francesco Galietti, founder of political risk firm Policy Sonar.

"She hopes that having Trump's ear will prove valuable, but she risks isolating herself in Europe, while having no guarantees that she can shield Italy from threatened American tariffs or blowback for the underwhelming defence spending."

In less than 10 years, Meloni has gone from being the leader of a marginalized, ultranationalist party, to head of one of the most stable governments in post-war Italian history, serving as a bridge between far-right and conservative factions in Europe.

The election of Trump, a natural ideological



partner, has given her the opportunity to play a similar role on a much bigger stage – one that has seen the emergence of powerful personal alliances between leaders such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the 1980s who cemented what is widely termed the "special relationship" between Britain and America. "Italy will always be committed to consolidating the dialogue between the United States and Europe, as an essential pillar for the stability and growth of our communities," Meloni said in a statement after applauding Trump's swearing-in. Despite Meloni's move away from her far-right roots, some analysts in Rome who have followed her meteoric rise believe her deep-rooted eurosceptic instincts will prevail.

"Thinking that she's going to do things in Europe's interest and be the Trump whisperer is totally naive," said Nathalie Tocci, director of the Italian international relations think-tank Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

"She will always instinctively opt for national interests rather than European interests." Trump and Meloni have showered each other

with praise since the president sealed his return to the White House.

"This is very exciting. I'm here with a fantastic woman," Trump said during Meloni's visit to Mar-a-Lago this month. "She's really taken Europe by storm."

Meloni, for her part, has insisted the U.S. president-elect will defend Western interests and said his geopolitical skills could force Russian leader Vladimir Putin to the negotiating table to resolve the Ukraine conflict.

"Trump has the ability to balance diplomacy and deterrence," she said after her Florida trip.

Potentially, Italy has much to lose from a Trump presidency, especially from his threat to



in five years to join IRIS," said IAI's Tocci. "This is a very obvious example of Meloni putting national interests above European interests."

A Starlink contract would provide a small boost to Italian defence spending, but nowhere near enough to satisfy Washington. While NATO has said the military budget of member states should total 2% of national output, Trump has called for this to jump to 5%. In Italy, spending is hovering around 1.5%, with the country's huge debt mountain preventing any additional splurge.

Policy Sonar's Galietti said he didn't believe Washington would accept the sort of vague pledges that Rome has offered over the past decade to lift spending.

"We will not deliver on our promises and just being Trump's bestie isn't going to help Meloni on this one."



# China-US Trade: Washington's imagined scenario vs reality



**Ding Gang**

US President Donald Trump's inauguration has recently become a focal point for the media. My attention was drawn to a group photograph featuring some American business leaders gathered at the ceremony, including Elon Musk from Tesla, Tim Cook from Apple, Jeff Bezos from Amazon and Mark Zuckerberg from Meta. These names and faces are not strange to the Chinese people, as their companies have extensive operations in China, and their success is closely tied to China's development.

Thus, while reviewing the "America First Trade Policy" document released by the White House after the inauguration, I naturally thought of them and the companies they manage.

Among the executive orders issued is one which calls for an investigation of foreign trade. The document suggests that the US will prioritize

ensuring that trade serves its national interests, particularly reviewing the China-US trade agreement to evaluate whether it aligns with American economic interests.

This means calculating the accounts to see how much the US has earned, or lost, from this trade. In 2018, the Trump administration initiated a trade war with China, believing that Americans were at a loss, which led to the imposition of extra tariffs.

What if we calculate the accounts based on the businesses run by these entrepreneurs? The logic of the China-US trade story might not align with Washington's imagined scenario.

Elon Musk has achieved great success in the Chinese electric vehicle market through the operation of Shanghai Gigafactory. The Chinese market contributes over 20 percent of Tesla's global revenue and has become one of its largest production and export bases.

Tim Cook is a frequent visitor to China. Apple's production relies on the Chinese supply chains, and Chinese consumers contribute nearly one-fifth of its global revenue.

Although Amazon has exited the local e-commerce market in China, its cross-border e-commerce platform helps countless Chinese sellers sell products globally each year.

Meta's advertising business also relies on support from Chinese companies, as many Chinese cross-border e-commerce and gaming firms enter international markets through its advertising platform.

These companies have made substantial profits in China while bringing technology, jobs and market vitality to China. The deep interconnection of the China-US economies means these companies are both beneficiaries of economic cooperation between the two countries and a bond in their relationship.

However, the turbulence in China-US trade relations over the past few years has weakened this bond. Measures such as the trade war, tariff barriers and technology blockades, although ostensibly aimed at protecting US interests, have also harmed these companies. An important reason is the different ways and perspectives of calculating accounts.

China is one of US' largest trading partners, and the US is also an important export market for China. The trade volume between the two countries reaches hundreds of billions of dollars yearly, covering everything from agricultural products to high-tech goods.

The stability of China-US economic and trade relations directly impact the interests of businesses and consumers' interests. It has far-reaching effects on the global supply chains and economic growth.



However, the recent tension in China-US trade relations has made this "ballast stone" less stable. The US hopes to reduce its trade deficit with China through tariffs and restrictions while relying on the Chinese market and manufacturing capacity to meet the needs of its businesses and consumers. This results in both sides paying for this contradictory policy.

During the China-US trade war, US consumers and enterprises bore the burden of increased tariffs, while Chinese export companies also faced pressure. Ultimately, neither side benefited from the situation.

In recent years, China has increased its openness to foreign investment in finance, technology and healthcare sectors, creating more opportunities for US companies to enter the Chinese market.

With the Trump administration proposing to reassess foreign trade policies, China-US trade relations have reached a new juncture.

In my view, to stabilize this "ballast stone" again, it is crucial to recalculate the US companies' accounts, recognize the win-win potential and strive to expand the space for mutual benefit.

**The writer is a senior editor with People's Daily, and currently a senior fellow with the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China**

# The future belongs to inclusive groups like BRICS

**Andrey Kortunov**

Though the BRICS group has already been around for quite some time, in recent days it has once again become the center of public attention. The renewed interest most likely came from the recent enlargement of the group, which saw its membership double within one year. Earlier this month, Indonesia became a full member of BRICS group and Nigeria becomes the ninth partner country.

BRICS proudly claims more than a third of the global purchasing power parity GDP, attracts a quarter of the

world's foreign direct investments and accounts for 18 percent of overall global trade. Moreover, every second person on our planet lives in a BRICS country. The aggregate share of BRICS members in the global economy, along with advancements in new technologies and finances, is destined to grow fast in the coming years, inevitably upstaging some of the old leaders and formerly undisputed rule-setters in the international system. Naturally, external attention to the rise of BRICS is not always benign or benevolent. Many Western politicians and analysts - especially in the US - seem genuinely concerned about the continuous ascension of this explicitly non-Western multilateral body that might challenge the existing world order and question the fundamentals of the West-made international system. Numerous opponents of BRICS try to find comfort in articulating serious disagreements and even direct conflicts of interests within the group. Allegedly, the very heterogeneous nature of BRICS could jeopardize its cohesion and efficiency. Furthermore, they argued that the divergence

of interests among member states might even result in the implosion of the body in the not-so-distant future. If so, the West at large or the US in particular should not be too concerned about the BRICS challenge.

Indeed, the BRICS group is very heterogeneous and its ongoing enlargement is making it more diverse than ever. It is not always easy to reach consensus on the most sensitive and divisive matters that appear on the group's agenda. However, all divergences of positions are only natural since they reflect diversity and pluralism characteristics of our whole world.

The intention of the BRICS founders has never been to forge a rigid political or military alliance like NATO or AUKUS. Their intention has not been to put together an ambitious economic integration project similar to the EU. They have not even attempted to launch a less formal coalition of like-minded countries like G7.

Most West-centered institutions are erected around common values and development models - like liberal democracy and market economy. It appears the shared foundations make it easier to reach agreements and maintain political cohesion. On top of that, most multilateral West-centered institutions are explicitly or implicitly hierarchical - though all members to NATO, AUKUS, G7, IBRD, IMF, among others, may be formally equal, it is clear that the final decisions on truly important matters are made in Washington.

BRICS offers a different approach to multilateralism. The idea behind BRICS has always been to create appropriate room for discussing critical issues of security and development where consensus is not that easy to reach. Plus, within BRICS there is no indisputable hegemonic leader willing, or capable, of imposing its position on the rest of the group. That means that it is predictably harder to come to a common position within BRICS than it is within NATO or G7, but the progress in the former is steadier and the agreements should be more sustainable.



The emergence of BRICS reflects the ongoing changes in the modern international system. Over time, our shared world is getting more and more diverse. We have to work with each other, even when we cannot agree on every single point of the global agenda. BRICS, along with SCO, ASEAN and other non-Western multilateral bodies, is an attempt to define rules of engagement within this increasingly diverse and complex international environment.

The future belongs to new flexible, inclusive mechanisms rather than to old, rigid hierarchical blocks. As ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu wisely noted, "whoever is stiff and inflexible is a disciple of death. Whoever is soft and yielding is a disciple of life. The hard and stiff will be broken. The soft and supple will prevail." Ultimately, Western politi-

cians and analysts have good reason to be concerned, not about BRICS, but about the future of their own stiff and inflexible institutions.

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# High Commissioner Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri boosts Pakistan-Australia friendly relations



**Covert Report**  
 Canberra: Pakistani High Commissioner to Australia Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri has been instrumental in taking the Pakistan-Australia friendly relations to new heights. The seasoned diplomat during his ongoing tenure has been holding high-level meetings and hosting numerous events to promote the cause. Pakistan-Australia relations have evolved significantly since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1947. This relationship, shaped by both historical and contemporary dynamics, has seen consistent collaboration across a full range of fields. In the early years, Australia's focus on South Asia was limited, with engagement driven by Commonwealth connections and shared interests during the Cold War. Over time, the relationship broadened to include economic cooperation, particularly in trade and education, as well as collaboration in defense and counterterrorism. In the present, Pakistan and Australia

maintain a multifaceted relationship characterised by mutual interests in regional security, economic growth, and people-to-people links. Both nations continue to seek common ground, recognising the potential for enhanced bilateral cooperation. Looking ahead, High commissioner Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri said, the future of Australia-Pakistan relations is promising albeit both nations have to take stock of broader regional dynamics, including Australia's evolving role in the Indo-Pacific and Pakistan's strategic positioning in South Asia. He said strengthening ties will require both countries to navigate complex geopolitical landscapes, address shared concerns such as climate change and economic development, and deepen cultural and educational exchanges. As Australia and Pakistan traverse their past, present, and future, he said, the potential for a more robust and resilient partnership remains, contingent on mutual understanding and shared interests. Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri is a seasoned diplomat currently serving as Pakistan's High Commissioner to Australia, with concurrent accreditation to Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Nauru. He has held several prominent positions, including Spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Additional Foreign Secretary for the Asia Pacific. He



has also served as Director General at the President's Secretariat and as Joint Secretary at Pakistan's National Security Division.

Throughout his diplomatic career, High Commissioner Chaudhri has been posted to key capitals around the world, including Washington, London, and Paris.

# Ambassador Asim Iftikhar Ahmad meets top UN official Vladimir Voronkov

**Celina Ali**  
 Islamabad: Ambassador Asim Iftikhar Ahmad, Alternate Permanent Representative of Pakistan and Representative to the Security Council, this week met with Under-Secretary-General for Counter-Terrorism Vladimir Voronkov. They exchanged views on counter-terrorism, important work of the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), upcoming review of the Global Counter-terrorism Strategy, cooperation in capacity building and training programs, and other areas of mutual interest. The Pakistani diplomat said this in his statement at the sixth committee of the UN General Assembly in New York. Jadoon emphasized Pakistan's role in the fight against terrorism and its key contribution in dismantling Al-Qaeda as well as the 80,000 casualties it suffered in the war on terror. He raised concerns about state-sponsored terrorism from across Pakistan's borders, highlighting threats posed by groups like the TTP, Daesh, and the [Baloch separatist] Majeed Brigade.



He urged the international community to ensure that counter-terrorism measures are not misused to violate human rights and international humanitarian law as is occurring in occupied Palestine and Jammu and Kashmir.

Pakistan, which has fought militants for decades, has strengthened its protocols and agreed to enhance cooperation with multiple countries in counter-terrorism domain in recent years.

# Pakistan to curb increasing incidents of migrant smuggling to Europe

**Celina Ali**  
 Islamabad: Authorities in Pakistan said this week they will begin surveillance of travelers between the ages of 15 and 40 on their way to Europe. This is to try and curb increasing incidents of migrant smuggling. Two Pakistani officials said they will begin questioning all passengers aged between 15 and 40 towards around 15 countries thought to be on the transit routes of smuggling gangs transporting people towards Europe. At least two officers from the country's Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) said it wanted to crack down on the increasing numbers of younger Pakistanis who attempt to reach Europe via air, land and sea routes through Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The FIA reportedly issued an advisory to all its staff at airports to begin profiling passengers headed towards alleged smuggling hotspots. The advisory, reports dpa, was sent out after several incidents of Pakistani citizens drowning in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean. Pakistani officials have said they believe hundreds of thousands of individuals have attempted to travel with smugglers towards Europe, although no official figures are available. Similar to many other countries around the world, local smuggling agents in Pakistan are part of global gangs, who often engage local hire members on the ground as the migrants' journey progresses. As well as the dangers of drowning at sea, migrants also can face perilous land journeys in overcrowded or

unsafe vehicles, often resulting in car accidents. Sometimes the vehicles might break down in the desert regions where there have been reports of migrants dying of thirst and hunger as they try and find their way through inhospitable climates and geography. There have also been reported deaths at the hands of border guards in countries such as Iran, Turkey, Libya or even Greece. According to the officials, who spoke to dpa, most Pakistanis will attempt to travel to Europe via countries like Azerbaijan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Egypt, Senegal, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia, Libya, Mauritania, Iraq, Turkey and Kyrgyzstan. Last week, more than 40 Pakistanis were feared to be among those who drowned after their boat capsized off the coast of Mauritania. The boat had been attempting to reach the Spanish Canary Islands archipelago in the Atlantic Ocean when it capsized. Pakistani officials from Morocco named at least 21 Pakistani nationals who survived the incident who were being looked after near the town of Dakhla, in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara. Most of the Pakistanis on the boat, are believed to have come from the same district in the eastern Punjab province. One man in a village called Dhola in Gujrat district of Punjab, Ahsan Shehzad said he believed his son Sufyan Ali had died on the boat when it capsized. Shehzad said that he had received a voice message from his son saying that the boat was already overcrowded

before a further 25 people forcibly boarded it. In another village, Jurah, mourners gathered last week. One man, Muhammad Akram said he had lost his son Abu Bakar in the same incident. He claimed he had paid millions of rupees to a migrant smuggler. Akram said his son had flown to Morocco and that he hadn't realized the last part of the journey was by sea. Another family in another village in the same province said they had sold property in order to raise the money to send their son abroad. The families all hoped their sons would get good jobs abroad and be able to send money back home. Organizations that work with migrants believe that efforts to shut down the once-frequently used smuggling routes between North Africa and Europe's Mediterranean coasts have encouraged smugglers to turn to the more dangerous Atlantic route. Although the numbers are still in the hundreds of arrivals rather than thousands, some believe that smugglers may be trying to sell the Atlantic route towards the Canary Islands to more would-be migrants from South Asia. The costs can be much higher since much of the journey can be done by plane. Some who have used the route have told Spanish officials they paid around 16,000 euros to enter Spain via the Canary Islands. The route is also potentially faster because of that and is seen by some in South Asia as less risk because they focus on the plane transfers, without thinking about the final leg of the journey across the Atlantic Ocean, with

its strong currents and often dangerous weather patterns. The Spanish NGO Caminando Fronteras (Walking Borders) estimates that last year around 9,700 people could have died or gone missing on the Atlantic route. They branded it "the most dangerous in the world." Hundreds of Pakistanis are believed to have been among the victims of the overcrowded former fishing vessel

that sank off the Greek mainland in June 2023. The exact number is difficult to quantify, but officials estimated around 350 Pakistanis died in one of the deadliest incidents in the Mediterranean Sea. After that incident, the Pakistani authorities also announced they would launch a crackdown on human traffickers and migrant smugglers.





# Umar Rehman Malik highlights Institute of Research & Reforms, International's philanthropic efforts

## Ali Rehman Malik speaks about devastating impact of terrorism



**Abdullah Jan**  
Islamabad: Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leader Umar Rehman Malik this week highlighted the philanthropic efforts of the Institute of Research & Reforms, International (IRRI).  
"We organised a thermal tracksuit distribution tonight because of the freezing temperatures and the alarming rise of rough sleepers in London. More must be done to tackle the homelessness crisis in the capital," he said on X, reposting his brother Ali Rehman Malik's post.  
The Institute of Research & Reforms International, founded by former Interior Minister of Pakistan Senator A. Rehman Malik, has been largely commended for its humanitarian services to victims of terrorism, including the successful evacuation of 40 female athletes and their families from Afghanistan, who were at high risk.  
IRRI and the Rehman Malik Foundation chief, Ali Rehman Malik recently spoke about the devastating impact of terrorism on the social and economic fabric of Pakistan and Afghanistan.  
He emphasized that Afghan women, especially young girls, are the most vulnerable under Taliban rule.  
Ali Rehman Malik stressed the importance of international solidarity in addressing these atrocities and urged continued support for the Afghan population in their struggle for basic human rights and freedoms.  
Expressing grave concerns over the new

wave of terrorism in Pakistan, Ali Rehman Malik commended Pakistan's resolve and continued efforts to eliminate terrorism. He noted that no country has suffered more than Pakistan in the war against terrorism, enduring massive economic and developmental losses and the sacrifice of over 76,000 civilians and troops. Ali Rehman Malik expressed pride in IRR International's commitment to helping those in distress, particularly those affected by terrorism. He also reflected on his late father, former Interior Minister Senator A. Rehman Malik, who fought terrorism on the front lines and supported subjugated humanity, often referring to the Taliban as "Zaliman"—the cruel.





# 33-year-old American living in Germany: 'I don't worry about not being able to pay my bills here'

## Vanessa Wachtmeister

Berlin: At the age of 33, I sometimes feel like I've already lived a thousand lives. I'm originally from Los Angeles, and over the last decade, I've done everything from teaching English in China to serving as an emergency aid worker in Turkey during the war in Syria. After I completed my master's degree in London, I started working as a product manager for a global travel tech company, and I had the option to transfer to the U.S. or to Germany, where my husband is from. When considering my decision, I did some math and I realized that in Germany, even on a lower salary than what I would be potentially earning in the U.S., I could achieve my financial goals,

like paying off my student debt, faster. Since February 2020, I have called Berlin, Germany home, and I have never been happier. Here is why I love living here: I adore our quiet, cozy neighborhood: My husband and I live in an area west of Berlin called Charlottenburg, a relatively quiet neighborhood filled with cozy coffee shops and middle-class families. I am on a first-name basis with many of the shop owners, and I love the community here. We live in a 1,100-square-foot, 2-bedroom apartment with a balcony. We pay \$1,843 per month for rent, about \$350 for utilities, and \$240 for parking. We were paying about the same in London, but our Berlin apartment is double the size, and the building is much newer.

Taking in the sunshine and a beautiful day in the city. For groceries, I'm a big fan of METRO, which is essentially the Costco of Germany. Every two weeks, we spend about \$300 on our bulk staples. We fill in as necessary with other items bought from local budget retailers like Aldi and Lidl. Lidl sells 45 cent Brötchen, or bread rolls, that are my favorite. Moving here helped me pay off debt: In Germany, the government provides things like guaranteed healthcare, pensions, parental leave, tuition-free university and even unemployment insurance. I have a few friends who were laid off, but thanks to that insurance, they were able to receive 80% of their salary for one year. When I was deciding between the U.S. and Germany, I crunched some numbers and realized that with the social safety net — and not having to set aside thousands of dollars for medical emergencies, for example — I would be able to save between \$1,000 and \$3,000 each month. That's made a huge difference.



In front of Brandenburg Gate: When I arrived, I was facing down \$130,000 in student debt. I was able to pay off all of it in November 2023, all while still saving and investing for my future. It has been a huge weight off my shoulders, and I don't worry about not being able to pay my bills here. My money goes farther, and I'm also happy to contribute my fair share so people can access support when they need it. There is a palpable sense of community: What surprised and delighted me the most when I arrived in Berlin was the deep sense of egalitarianism that everyone seemed to share, no matter their background. Many cultural events have free entry, because access and participation are big core values here. One of my favorite things to do during the summer is explore cafes in other neighborhoods and go to food festivals. Enjoying a beverage and the ambiance at an outdoor cafe: The festivals are fun, inexpensive (I'm usually spending just \$12 on a drink and snacks) and often

celebrate different cultures and countries. It's a great way to meet like-minded people in a city of 6 million. I've also found that Berlin's immigrant community, which I'm so proud to be a member of, is especially friendly. We all understand how isolating the experience of finding your footing in a new place can be. I have access to the rest of the European Union: In February, I will have been a German resident for five years. That means I'll be eligible to apply for a passport and dual citizenship, instead of just permanent residency. Holding a German passport means I'll have the opportunity to move wherever I please in the European Economic Area. My long-term dream is to retire early, get some chickens and live peacefully in the Italian countryside. Getting an EEA passport is a key part of this plan. Ultimately, even though I have called many places home, the decision to come to Berlin has opened up more paths to me than I ever thought possible.



# Sofia Metro leads Bulgaria's Leva 32 billion EU boost

## NewsWire

Sofia: In 2024, Bulgaria secured approximately 32 billion leva in EU funding. A significant portion of these funds has been directed toward large-scale infrastructure ventures, making a visible impact across the country. Sofia received the largest portion, total-

ling 6.2 billion leva. Significant investments include expanding the Sofia Metro and other critical infrastructure upgrades. Plovdiv allocated 1.6 billion leva to water systems and plumbing projects. Burgas directed funds towards an upgraded public transit system and revamped bypass roads.

The nation's average EU funding per capita exceeds 5,000 leva. Sofia emerged as the top beneficiary of all regions, receiving 6.2 billion leva. Much of this went to enhance the city's metro system. The expansion benefits residents and appeals to international visitors seeking hassle-free transit.

While the capital takes centre stage, other regions also made remarkable use of EU funds: Plovdiv: 1.6 billion leva transformed water and sewer infrastructure.

Burgas: Funds improved transit options and smoothed traffic with modern bypass routes.

EU funds reached every corner of Bulgaria, averaging 5,000 leva per person. Notably, smaller municipalities saw the most dramatic funding per capita:

Malko Tarnovo, Byala (Varna), and Svilengrad led with over 7,000 leva per person.

Gabrovo and Vratsa ranked as leading regional cities.

On the other hand, some municipalities lagged, with fewer than 1,000 leva per



capita. These communities include Yakoruda, Dulovo, and Svoge. Smaller towns struggled more with absorbing EU funding. Limited administrative capacity often redirected focus to projects like stadiums or parks, which offer unclear long-term benefits. As these areas grapple with resource management, experts highlight the need for fiscal re-

forms. This would enable local governments to raise funds and address regional priorities independently. Bulgaria's EU funding has steered attention toward infrastructure. The Sofia Metro, highways, and water systems reflect the urgency of large-scale improvements. While the road wasn't smooth for everyone, the benefits are visible in many parts of the country.





# Portugal-Pakistan: Urdu translation of the novel 'Blank Gaze' by José Luís Peixoto launched



**Celina Ali** Islamabad: The Pakistan Academy of Letters this week hosted the launch of the Urdu translation of Portuguese author José Luís Peixoto's novel *Nenhum Olhar* (*Blank Gaze*), with the participation of Ambassador of Portugal Frederico Silva. The acclaimed novel, now beautifully rendered in Urdu as *Viran Nazar* by the renowned Pakistani author Muhammad Atif Alam, is a testament to the power of literature to bridge cultures and foster mutual understanding between nations, bringing the literary treasures of Portugal closer to Urdu-speaking readers. The translation has been done by the initiative of Pakistan Academy of Letters through their distinguished Chair-



person, Ms. Najeeba Arif and the Director General, Mr. Sultan Nasir. It is a follow up of the 2024 interaction sessions held between the Embassy of Portugal, the author José Luís Peixoto and the Pakistan Academy of Letters in Islamabad. This translation is adding to other literary works translated from Portuguese into Urdu, including literary masterpieces by Portuguese authors such as José Saramago and Fernando Pessoa. José Luís Peixoto is one of Portugal's most prominent contemporary writers, known for his evocative literary work and profound exploration of human emotions and relationships through novels, poetry, musical lyrics, and short stories. His debut novel, *Nenhum Olhar* (*Blank Gaze*), won the prestigious José Saramago Literary Prize in 2001, earning international acclaim. His works have been translated into more than 30 languages, captivating readers worldwide.



# Japan's imperial family gets 19 million likes on Instagram in 6 months



**Covert Report**

Tokyo: The Imperial Household Agency said that its official Instagram account showcasing the activities of Japanese Emperor Naruhito and Empress Masako has been viewed more than 200 million times and received about 19 million likes in the six months since it was launched in April. The most popular post, which garnered more than 690,000 likes, was one in June with photos of the imperial couple and their daughter Princess Aiko digging up bamboo shoots at the Imperial Stock Farm in Tochigi Prefecture, dressed casually and appearing relaxed. The account, aimed at connecting with younger people, has drawn around 1.8 million followers, with more than 300,000, or 17%, aged between 13 and 34, the agency said late last year. "There is still room to deliver information more effectively to young people. We will consider further improvements with input from external experts," an agency official said. This screenshot of the most-liked post on the Imperial Household Agency's official Instagram account shows a photo of Emperor Naruhito and Empress Masako digging up bamboo shoots. This screenshot of the most-liked post on the Imperial Household Agency's official Instagram account shows a photo of Emperor Naruhito and Empress Masako digging up bamboo shoots.



According to the agency, followers aged 45 to 54 made up the largest group at 28.0%, followed by those aged 55 to 64 at 26.7% and those aged 35 to 44 at 16.3%. Followers aged 65 and older stood at 11.7%. The account, officially launched on April 1, had reached 1 million followers by April 21. Posts highlighting key moments, such as the fifth anniversary of the emperor's accession in May, scenes from the couple's visit to the Imperial Stock Farm and their official visit to Britain in June, contributed to a significant increase in followers, according to the agency. Establishing a formal public relations office in 2023 to revamp its outreach, the agency set up the social media account to proactively share information about the family after struggling with sharp online reactions to former princess Mako's engagement and 2021 marriage to her university sweetheart, Kei Komuro.

# Afghan refugees in Pakistan worry as US suspends resettlement program

**Covert Report**

Washington: The Sultani family was nearing the final stages of their case to resettle in the US, though their plan was disrupted after President Donald Trump signed an executive order on January 20 suspending the relocation of refugees to the US. "My family and I couldn't sleep at night" since the executive order was signed, said 50-year-old Ahmad Zahir Sultani, who fled to Pakistan alongside his wife and four children a few months after the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan in August 2021.

"We are very worried ... as we face an uncertain future," said Sultani, who worked with U.S.-run projects in Afghanistan before the U.S. pulled out of the country in 2021. Just hours after his swearing-in as the 47th President of the U.S., Trump signed the executive order suspending the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program beginning Jan. 27. The Sultani family was identified as a Priority 1 case for resettlement under that program. "This order suspends the USRAP until such time as the further entry into the United States of refugees aligned with the interest of the United States," stated the order. The order calls on the secretary of the Homeland Security Department, in consultation with the

secretary of state, to report to the president within 90 days if the program "would be in the interests of the United States." The order added that every 90 days, a report would be submitted to the president until he "determine[s] that resumption of the USRAP is in the interests of the United States." Sultani and other Afghan refugees who have been waiting in Pakistan for resettlement in the U.S. told VOA that staying in Pakistan would be "very difficult" for them as the crackdown on Afghan refugees continues in Islamabad, where the Sultanis currently reside.



"We are facing harassment and arrests by the police [in Pakistan]. And we can't go back to Afghanistan as we fled because of the threats there," Sultani said. According to Pakistan's Foreign Office in July, among more than 44,000 Afghans living in Pakistan to be relocated to third countries, about 25,000 Afghan refugees are waiting to be resettled in the U.S. Fahimi Zahid, an Afghan activist living in Islamabad, told VOA that after the suspension of their relocation program to the U.S., Afghan refugees in Pakistan are "very concerned" about their future in Pakistan. "In the past, refugees had a hope that the U.S. was in talks with Pakistan to ensure they wouldn't face any harassment," she said, "but after the



executive order, it is for sure that Afghans would face further harassment and deportation." According to the U.S. State Department, more than 180,000 Afghans were relocated in the U.S. from August 2021, after the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan, to December 2024. Thousands of Afghans who helped the U.S. during its two-decade war in Afghanistan are still waiting to be relocated to the U.S. Shawn VanDiver, the president of AfghanEvac, a California-based coalition of organizations helping the U.S., told VOA that until the USRAP resumes, "there won't be any travel. Refugees won't be flying here or anywhere else." US media reported that the flights of Afghan refugees who were supposed to be relocated to the US were cancelled only days before the order would go into effect.

VanDiver said the order mainly would affect Afghan refugees with Priority 1 and Priority 2 cases. He said he and others at AfghanEvac are trying to have President Trump issue "an exemption for Afghans." "People that pass security and waiting medical and all that, we got to make sure they get here," he added. VanDiver noted that somewhere between 150,000 to 200,000 Afghans have resettlement cases. Sultani said that he and other Afghan refugees who waited for years to be relocated to the U.S. are now facing an uncertain future. "Going back to Afghanistan is no option for us, and here [in Pakistan] we face many problems," he said.



# Gilani-led Pak parliamentary delegation visits parliaments, offices in Ireland, Austria

## EU funds trip



Ambassador of the European Union to Pakistan, Dr Riina Kionka

our democratic institutions and enhancing responsible governance.” The visit will focus on observing the operational models of the Austrian and Irish PBOs, both established in the last decade, to address critical challenges such as budget transparency and parliamentary independence. Austria’s PBO, established in 2012, enhances parliament’s role in budgetary discussions through independent expertise, while Ireland’s PBO, modelled on the Westminster system, provides a familiar framework for Pakistan’s legislators. Andrea Wicke, Ambassador of Austria to Pakistan, noted: “The establishment of PBOs strengthens the accountability and transparency of governance. We are delighted to host Pakistan’s delegation and share Austria’s journey in creating an independent budget office.” Declan Johnston, Deputy Ambassador of Ireland to Pakistan, emphasised: “Well-informed and quality independent advice and analysis is crucial in facilitating any parliament to fulfil its



mandate. Ireland’s Parliamentary Budget Office was established in 2017, and provides independent and impartial information, analysis and advice to our parliamentarians as they address the pivotal economic questions and issues of the day. We are very excited to have the opportunity to share our experiences with Pakistani parliamentarians, as they similarly seek to deliver high quality and effective economic legislation and policy for their constituents.”

The parliamentarians visit aligns with Mustehkam Parlamaan’s objectives of supporting the National Parliament and Provincial Assemblies in legislative capacity-building, oversight enhancement, and inclusive governance. It will also enable participants to develop an action plan for establishing a PBO in Pakistan, informed by best practices from Austria and Ireland.

**Celina Ali**  
Islamabad: The European Union is hosting a 23-member Pakistani parliamentary delegation led by Senate Chairman Yousaf Raza Gilani to visit the Parliaments and Parliamentary Budget Offices (PBOs) of Austria and Ireland. The European Union Delegation to Pakistan earlier hosted a pre-departure reception ahead of the visit, starting at the weekend. This high-level delegation, comprising 23 members, is led by the Chairman of the Senate of Pakistan Yousaf Raza Gilani. Representing Pakistan’s diverse political leadership, the delegation includes the Speakers of the Provincial Assemblies, members of parliament from various political parties, as well as senior parliamentary secretariat officials. The visit is organised under a 15 million euros European Union-funded project named Support to Parliamentary Development in Pakistan (also known as Mustehkam Parlamaan). Implemented jointly by GIZ International Services and the Pakistan Institute for Parliamentary Services (PIPS), the project focuses on enhancing parliamentary oversight, fiscal responsibility and inclusive and effective legislative processes. The reception, hosted by Dr Riina Kionka, Ambassador of the European Union Delegation to Pakistan, highlighted the EU’s commitment to strengthening Pakistan’s parliamentary democracy through this project. Addressing the gathering, the EU Ambassador remarked: “The European Union has been a steadfast partner in strengthening Pakistan’s

democratic institutions. This visit offers a valuable opportunity for Pakistani legislators to learn from the successful practices of Austria and Ireland in establishing PBOs. They play a critical role in independent budgetary analysis and effective parliamentary oversight. We remain committed to support the assemblies’ initiatives towards inclusive, transparent, and accountable governance in Pakistan.” The visit is a pivotal step in advancing Pakistan’s legislative capacity, specifically in establishing an independent Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) to provide parliamentarians with professional, non-partisan, and in-depth analysis on the economy, budgetary and fiscal matters. Yousaf Raza Gilani, Chairman of the Senate of Pakistan and Head of Delegation, said: “This visit reflects the enduring and close ties between Pakistan and the European Union, highlighting our shared commitment to fostering democratic governance and addressing common challenges. By learning from the successful Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) models implemented in Austria and Ireland, we aim to establish a framework in Pakistan that promotes transparency, accountability, and fiscal responsibility. This will empower our federal parliament and provincial assemblies with data-driven insights for more informed budgetary decisions. We extend our deepest appreciation to the parliaments of Ireland and Austria and their leadership for their invaluable cooperation and support. Their experiences will provide us with practical knowledge and best practices to guide the establishment of a PBO in Pakistan, strengthening





# British High Commissioner Jane Marriott for continuing cooperation to promote entrepreneurial culture in Pakistan



British Deputy High Commissioner in Pakistan Matt Cannell

Islamabad: British High Commissioner to Pakistan Jane Marriott this week said that the United Kingdom will always continue its full cooperation with Pakistan to promote entrepreneurial culture and skills and instil entrepreneurial spirit in youth of the country. Pakistani youth have entrepreneurial skills and potential and the British High Commission in Islamabad will continue its due support to develop this potential and such programs will be continued in the future to enhance their business skills, the British High Commissioner said. She said that today, young students from five

different schools and education institutions belonging to all the provinces of the country including Sindh, Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Baluchistan and Islamabad Capital presented their business models and business-related ideas, which reflect their excellent entrepreneurial skills and business capabilities and such talented youth in Pakistan are testifying to the bright future of the country. The British High Commissioner said that in an annual inter-school business competition held here today in British High Commission Islamabad, students from different education institutions demonstrated their full potential and in



this, especially girl students expressed their talents in the best way. The envoy said that the British High Commission Islamabad has already started various programs to promote girls' education and entrepreneurship in Pakistan and more programs are being planned in this regard in the future. She said that the private sector, especially Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), play a very important role in any economy and such programs will improve the national economy by promoting SMEs in Pakistan. In today's modern world, start-ups, innovation, and entrepreneurial skills are the backbone of any emerging economy and especially to increase the role of youth in the future economy, these skills must be taught to them, she said. The High Commissioner said that there is a lot of potential in economic and trade relations between the United Kingdom and Pakistan and there are vast opportunities for promoting future bilateral trade on both sides.

She said that at present, the volume of bilateral trade between the two countries is 4.4 billion pounds, which is much less than its potential and it needs to be enhanced in the future. The British envoy said that the United Kingdom has historical social, economic and cultural relations with Pakistan, which are growing day by day. At present, 1.6 million Pakistanis are present as the Pakistan diaspora in the UK, which plays the significant role of a cultural bridge between the two countries and is also our cultural heritage. Enterprise Challenge Pakistan (Enterprise Challenge Pakistan) is an annual inter-school business competition, a joint initiative from Prince's Trust International and SEED Ventures. Now in its eighth year, the programme enables school students to learn practical business skills through coaching, mentoring and an online

business simulation game. Enterprise Challenge Pakistan received a mention in Forbes as one of the "Five Leading Programs Supporting the Next Generation of Entrepreneurs". The event will host 100 guests from a diverse range of sectors. The event commences at 3:00 p.m. and will conclude at 6:00 p.m with the speech from the High commissioner and the winner. In annual Inter-School business competition was hosted by the British High Commissioner team "Eco-EduTech from Daharki" won the eighth cycle of Enterprise Challenge Pakistan. The King's Trust International delivers interventions in 20 countries, providing opportunities for young people to develop the skills and confidence to learn, earn and thrive.





“The time is always right to do what is right.” - Martin Luther King, Jr.

“If you’re offered a seat on a rocket ship, don’t ask what seat. Just get on.” - Sheryl Sandberg

# Giorgia Meloni and the path ahead for Italy

Jean-Pierre Darnis

Rome: Giorgia Meloni was the only leader of a European Union member state at the second inauguration of Donald Trump. The Meloni government’s relationship with the Trump presidency appears to be a crucial issue, both at the Italian and European level. The question is whether, yielding to Trump’s siren calls, the government may be tempted to go it alone in order to benefit from a privileged trade regime with the United States, or if Italy is seeking to act as a link between Brussels and Washington within the EU framework. This rapprochement seems to obey different logics. It’s worth recalling that, since the Christian Democrats backed the US at the end of the Second World War, transatlantic relations have been one of the pillars of government in Italy. Indeed, the relationship between Meloni and former US president Joe Biden was described as “very good”. However, in the Italian political panorama, the “America first” path embodied by Trump has sometimes represented

a model. Matteo Salvini’s far-right League party has always shown its appreciation of the Trumpian design. During the Republican’s first presidency, it was premier Giuseppe Conte, a member of the populist Five Star movement, who emerged as Trump’s privileged counterpart in Italy. Until Trump’s re-election, Giorgia Meloni’s position was cautious. A member of her party attended the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee last July, but not as a signal of commitment from all its members. The outcome of the US elections changed the situation. Italy, like other EU members, is concerned about the possible introduction of tariffs that could harm exports to the US. For Rome, maintaining a trade surplus is a political and economic priority. Secondly, the nationalist Meloni wants to appear capable of establishing a privileged dialogue with Trump, which could be an advantage in Europe amid the weakness of the Olaf Scholz chancellor in Germany and the Emmanuel Macron presidency in

France. Italy-US relations have also intensified amid two more recent situations. Following the imprisonment of Italian journalist Cecilia Sala in Iran on December 19, the Italian government worked to secure her release, which was obtained in exchange for a promise to free Mohammad Abedini, an Iranian national who had been arrested in Italy following a warrant issued by the US. Meloni’s whirlwind visit to Trump’s Mar-a-Lago resort on January 4 helped secure the incoming administration’s understanding of the case. Her success shows she was able to establish a direct channel with Trump. On the other hand, since December, there has been debate in Italy about a potential public service contract with Starlink, the satellite network created by billionaire Trump supporter Elon Musk. Last autumn, the government raised the possibility of using Starlink to compensate for weaknesses in the connectivity component of its infrastructure plan. There was discussion of extending this connection to public users in emergency situations, such as the armed forces and the diplomatic network, with feasibility studies under way. However, this provoked an outcry. Musk’s recent stances toward various European leaders have been perceived within the Union as a form of interference, given the US tycoon’s ability to amplify influence through his social platform X. In Italy’s parliament, opposition members voiced strong criticism of an initiative which, even if technically and operationally sound, could introduce a form of control by Musk’s company, and therefore the US administration, over data considered sensitive and sovereign. Moreover, the issue of technological sovereignty comes at a time when Italy’s national industry, led by the Leonardo Group, is involved in the EU Governmental Satellite Communications (GOVSATCOM) and IRIS2 satellite constellation programmes. Meloni had already developed a relationship seen as cordial with Musk, who was invited to Atriju, a youth event for her Brothers of Italy party, in late 2023. But amid alarm among parties including Italy’s defence community and its presidency, there has been an increasing politicization of the potential Starlink contract. The issue may become a turning point in relations

between the Meloni government and the second Trump administration. On the one hand, there is an aspect of federalism within the European Union, which has a body of legislation, notably the Digital Service Act, that applies to global platforms it intends to regulate. On the other, some in Italy, as elsewhere, may be tempted by rightward turn of big tech that preceded Trump’s second term, with a vision of economic development unhindered by regulation. We therefore have a paradoxical position from the Italian government: the resolution of the Cecilia Sala affair sanctions the establishment of a good diplomatic channel with Trump and his teams, while the brake put on the Starlink contract signals questions around tech sovereignty. Rome must further examine national and European implications before playing a transatlantic game. Italy is firmly anchored within the EU, a position in which Meloni has hitherto shown remarkable orthodoxy by, for example, displaying impeccable support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression. Any calculation that favours a national path to the detriment of the bloc, motivated perhaps by thinking that Washington could be a kind of alternative to Brussels, would be entering a negative-sum game spiral whereas the essence of the EU is a positive-sum one. The view of Trump in Europe, already highly divisive, could be further intensified if there are waves of arrests of illegal immigrants in the US. It may be useful for the prime minister to have her own capacity for dialogue with Washington, but only if it is also developed within a framework of pan-European mediation, in particular by maintaining close relations with France and Germany. Going it alone would not only isolate Rome in the medium term but also potentially weaken Europe. In Italy, Meloni has succeeded in establishing a



H.E. Marilina ARMELLIN, Italian Ambassador to Pakistan.



# France calls on EU to delay, water down sustainability reporting and due diligence requirements



Mark Segal

Paris: The government of France has called for a significant implementation delay and major amendments to some of the key European sustainability reporting and environmental due diligence regulations introduced over the past few years, in a bid to help reduce bureaucratic burdens and simplify compliance obligations for companies, and for small and medium-sized businesses in particular. In a submission sent to the European Commission this week, France urged the EU to put in place a “massive regulatory pause” on key pieces of legislation, including the EU Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), citing the loss of GDP potential caused by excessive regulatory complexity, and in light of a new competitive environment and the “uncooperative policies of our main competitors.” The submission follows a push for some similar

measures to delay and ease the EU’s green reporting rules under way by the German government, and comes as the EU Commission considers new omnibus legislation as part of its regulatory simplification agenda, which could potentially open settled legislation – such as the CSRD, CSDDD and EU Taxonomy – to new amendments. Several major businesses have called on the EU to avoid watering down the existing legislation, warning that changes at this stage would lead to policy uncertainty, and undermine significant investments that companies have already put in place to comply with the new rules. Among the most significant changes urged by France is a call to put in place “an indefinite postponement” of the implementation of the CSDDD. The CSDDD was initially proposed by the European Commission in February 2022, setting out obligations for companies to identify, assess, prevent, mitigate, address and remedy impacts on people and planet – ranging from child labor and slavery to pollution and emissions, deforestation and damage to ecosystems – in their upstream supply chain and some downstream activities such as distribution and recycling. The legislation was adopted in May 2024, but only after a long process that ultimately required revisions in the legislation that significantly scaled back the number of companies covered by the law, and extended the timeline to its full implementation. One of the key factors that jeopardized the

passage of the CSDDD legislation was a last minute effort by France to significantly scale back the scope of the new rules to apply only to companies with more than 5,000 employees, instead of the proposed 500 employee threshold, effectively removing roughly 80% of businesses from the CSDDD obligations. The new submission by France again calls to increase the threshold to companies with more than 5,000 employees and revenues greater than €1.5 billion, in addition to other amendments to simplify and ease the legislation’s obligations. The French government’s submission also called for major changes to the CSRD sustainability reporting legislation, including echoing Germany’s call to delay implementation of the rules for smaller companies set to begin reporting next year, and to pause sector-specific reporting requirements under the regulation. France also proposes reducing reporting obligations for medium-sized companies, requiring them only to be subject to the less onerous rules provided for listed SMEs. The submission also calls for the CSRD’s “reporting obligations to be significantly lightened by drastically reducing the number of indicators and focusing

them on climate objectives.” Additionally, France called for a clarification from the Commission on the requirement under the CSRD for transition plans, indicating that the plans should not require the plans to align with the Paris Agreement, but instead for the plans to only include a comparison of a company’s targets with the Paris Agreement’s objectives. In the submission, the government of France said: “A powerful means of improving the competitiveness of European businesses is to simplify and accelerate administrative procedures to promote investment projects in the EU, and to create a simple and predictable regulatory environment, particularly for SMEs and mid-sized companies.”

