Pakistani police say polio team attacked, policeman killed

PESHAWAR: — Gunmen on Monday shot and killed a police officer assigned to protect a polio vaccination team in northwestern Pakistan, an official said. It was the third attack in two days on Pakistani policemen assigned to protect polio workers.

The deadly attack took place in the town of Kolachi in the Dera Ismail Khan district. Officer Dilawar Khan was on his motorcycle, heading to escort polio workers taking part in a nationwide campaign aimed at making Pakistan a polio-free state.

The gunmen fled the scene and a police search is underway, according to Mohammad Aslam, a local police official.

Pakistani militants often target polio teams and police assigned to protect them, claiming the vaccination campaigns are a Western conspiracy to sterilize children.

Two attacks targeted police working with polio teams on Sunday. In Peshawar, the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, gunmen killed a policeman returning home after security duty with polio workers. And a roadside bomb went off near a police van escorting a polio vaccination team in the district of South Waziristan, wounding an officer.

None of the medics on the polio teams were hurt in these attacks. No one immediately claimed responsibility for any of the attacks. Pakistan and neighboring Afghanistan are the only two remaining countries in the world where polio is endemic, after Nigeria was last year declared free of the virus.

Last week, Prime Minister Imran Khan's government launched another polio vaccination drive in an effort to eradicate the crippling disease by the end of the year. According to authorities, as many as 23.6 million children are to be vaccinated in this latest anti-polio drive.

On Sunday, Aimal Khan, a spokesman for the anti-polio program in northwestern Pakistan, said the vaccination effort would continue despite the challenges with some 17,000 trained workers going home to home to administer the vaccines in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

According to Shahzad Baig, who leads the anti-polio effort, there has only been one reported case of polio so far in 2021 in Pakistan, compared to 66 during the same time last year. On Monday, Baig appealed on the parents to get their children vaccinated to protect them from the crippling disease. AP

An Alternative Regional Framework for South Asia

By: Bipin Ghimire and Apoorva Pathak

China has managed to chaperone its South Asian neighbors by launching the China-South Asia Emergency Supplies Reserve and Poverty Alleviation and Cooperative Development Centre, the results of a virtual meeting convened by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and attended by the Foreign Ministers of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (excluding India, Bhutan, and the Maldives) on April 27, 2021. The Assistant Foreign Minister of China and the ambassadors of the above-mentioned South Asian countries got together in Chengdu on July 9 to set up these platforms, which aim to work for COVID-19 vaccination and poverty alleviation in South Asian states.

The emergency reserve aims to devise a common strategy for combating the COVID-19 pandemic through vaccine development and distribution. It also aims to create an emergency reserve to combat contingencies caused by climate change. The Poverty Alleviation and Cooperative Development Centre aims to pool strengths and integrate resources to assist South Asian countries' economic development, livelihood improvement, and poverty reduction. Such issues require long-term partnership, indicating that China intends to engage with South Asia for the long haul.

Even though strategically significant to South Asia, these initiatives went almost unnoticed by the mainstream media and think tanks of the region.

China's interest in South Asia

China's interest in the South Asian region is not new. South Asia is of vital strategic importance for China for many reasons, especially in current times.

First, geographically, South Asia lies between East Asia and the oil-rich Middle East. Also, China's trade and economy is dependent primarily on the Malacca Strait and sea lanes of communication passing through the Indian Ocean; ergo, China must increase its presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), which hitherto has been dominated by India.

Second, many South Asian countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) have become party to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with an expectation that it would provide an impetus to their developing economic environments. China wants to continuously woo and engage with these countries to maintain its newly generated strategic space. This is even more pertinent as the BRI is under academic and media scrutiny in these countries.

Thus, when India suspended its COVID-19 vaccine exports, including to its neighbors, citing its domestic needs, China used the opportunity to project itself as a benevolent neighbor and provided lifesaving vaccines to these countries. This bolstered a conducive regional environment for cooperation between South Asian countries and China. Strategically, this has enabled China to accelerate its soft power and political influence, projecting itself as a responsible great power and countering Indian's political and economic preponderance in the region.

Third, since the violent border skirmish in the Galwan Valley and the diplomatic row over India's targeting of Chinese business interests in India, China-India political relations have further degenerated in 2021. Realizing the urgency of the situation, India went ahead to form a stronger alliance with the U.S.-led Quad (Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S.), which analyst C. Raja Mohan argues is important for India's strategic autonomy. India's support to the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Strategy and its regular military exercise with the U.S. Navy indicates that India is tilting toward the United States, which it believes would help to check Chinese assertive military power.

As India opts for external balancing and thus moves its attention away from its immediate neighborhood, China wants to seize this opportunity to strengthen its relations with South Asian countries and counter India's dominant position in the region by creating an alternative regional bloc. The Observer Research Foundation (ORF), a prominent New Delhi-based think tank, even dubbed such increasing Chinese engagement as a sign of a "Quad with Chinese characteristics."

Possible implications of China-South Asia ties

The new partnerships that have been formed between some South Asian countries and China could possibly compete with the already existing regional cooperation mechanisms in South Asia.

China became an observer state in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 2005, and since then, it has been pushing to be a full member of the regional organization. China has also contributed US$ $300,000 to the SAARC Development Fund. However, India's long and continuous objection to Chinese membership in the South Asian regional forum has prevented China from becoming a full member. While India is obstructing China's membership in SAARC on the one hand, New Delhi itself is reluctant to lead the SAARC process forward on the other, resulting in SAARC falling victim to what Ernst Haas described as "turbulent nongrowth."

The SAARC summit, which was supposed to happen in every two years, has not been held since 2014 (Kathmandu), primarily because of India's opposition to convening the summit in Pakistan. India has been accusing Pakistan of cross-border terrorism and spared no effort to diplomatically isolate the latter, accusing Islamabad of posing a serious obstacle to regional peace and stability. The SAARC process has been in a frozen state from continuous hindrances, mostly because of the antagonistic bilateral relations between India and Pakistan.

As the SAARC process is in limbo, India's neighbors have become open to other avenues for regional interactions and cooperation. This has created a fertile ground for the seeds of Chinese collaboration and influence in the South Asian region.

Other than SAARC, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is another regional organization which since its inception in 1997 aspires to provide a platform for sectoral development cooperation for its member countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand). Even though it was created as an "alternative" to the failing SAARC, BIMSTEC too has not made any significant mark in promoting regionalism in South Asia. Its next (in-person) Summit is due to be held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in December this year.

There is a probability that the China-led "minus-India" initiative would undermine the existing regional processes in South Asia. At a time when the SAARC and BIMSTEC processes are suffering an uncertain future, these regional organizations might see China's new platforms as direct competition to their regional integration agenda.

Such a scenario could intensify geopolitical and economic competition between India's traditional power and China's new, accelerating power in the region. Greater Sino-Pakistan interaction via regional cooperation would make it diplomatically challenging for India to maintain its influence in the region. It also could embolden Pakistan's confidence and voice over regional economic and political issues, which could be a strategic blow to India's effort to isolate Pakistan diplomatically.

The project also carries a symbolic meaning. It seems China wanted to kill two birds with a single stone. First, it is a message to India about its position against China's membership to SAARC and also an exhibition of China's power to form a parallel organization in India's immediate neighborhood. Through this initiation, China successfully showcased that South Asia is no longer India's sphere of influence.

Second, it is a demonstrative message from China to the Western powers that it still enjoys confidence from many South Asian countries and is capable of consolidating its position by creating a new regional grouping with like-minded countries. The launch of this China-led initiative is an answer to the critics of its BRI project, illustrating that China still has an amiable allure when it comes to cooperation on economic development. Through this initiative, China is also looking to counter the West's attempt to isolate it at the global level in post-pandemic times.

This changing geopolitical scenario should push India forward to revive the process under existing regional organizations likes SAARC and BIMSTEC to protect its interests and the overall prosperity of the region. Western powers, especially G-7 countries, should also expedite the mechanisms to provide economic assistance as declared at the recently concluded G-7 summit in Cornwall, UK. (Bipin Ghimire is a doctoral candidate at the Department of International Relations, South Asian University, New Delhi and Apoorva Pathak is a doctoral candidate at the Department of Legal Studies, South Asian University, New Delhi)

The ministry of public education and the united states embassy welcomes 25 english language teaching experts to Uzbekistan

Tashkent, Uzbekistan, August 2, 2021 –Advisor to the Minister for International Donors & Projects at the Minister of Public Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan Ulugbek Kasimkhodjaev and U.S. Embassy Tashkent Cultural Affairs Officer Joanne Kramb welcomed 25 American English Teacher Experts to Uzbekistan as part of the English-Speaking Nation: English Summer Excellence Training (ESN: ESET). These 25 English Teacher Experts will join seven locally embedded American Teacher Coaches in conducting a 108-hour English language training for over 420 Uzbekistan secondary school English teachers. The objective of the 18-day training is to help Uzbekistani English teachers refine their English speaking, writing, listening, and presentation skills.

The 25 English Teacher Experts will conduct seven concurrent trainings in Andijan, Namangan, Samarkand, Termez, Qarshi, Bukhara, and Urgench from August 1 – 22 at local public schools and in-service requalification centers. The trainings will focus on building confidence in using general English in everyday activities as well classroom instruction and communication with students. The English teacher experts will teach cohorts of 15 local teachers who will benefit from direct interaction with native English speakers. In addition to general English and classroom English practice, the ESN: ESET program will help teachers with provide instruction in English and deliver final presentations in condensed micro-teaching sessions conducted only in English. Additionally, the program will emphasize reflective practice, public presentation, and peer review, further strengthening the local teachers' learning process and will equip them with tools they can use in their classrooms in the future.

The English-Speaking Nation: Summer Excellence Training (ESN: ESET) is a component of the English-Speaking Nation: Secondary Teacher Training Program (ESN: STT), a nationwide initiative to strengthen Uzbekistan's English teachers' classroom English language competency and English teaching skills. Through a cascading model, the program intends to reach 15,000 English teachers in Uzbekistan over a three-year period. The English-Speaking Nation program is an educational reform partnership between the Public Affairs Section of the United States Embassy in Uzbekistan and the Ministry of Public Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan. American Councils for International Education, an international education non-governmental non-profit organization, serves as the implementing partner for the English-Speaking Nation program.

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With 2,279 new cases, Nepal's Covid-19 tally reaches 699,649

Nepal on Monday reported 2,279 new coronavirus cases in the last 24 hours taking the nationwide infection tally to 699,649.

Similarly, 846 people tested positive in a total of 3,198 antigen tests, according to the Health Ministry.

As of Monday, 3,622,480 PCR and 325,799 antigen tests have been carried out across the country. A total of 10,613 PCR tests were performed in the past 24 hours, according to the Health Ministry.

In its regular situation report, the ministry did not mention the death toll over the past 24 hours. It, however, reported 23 Covid-19-related fatalities, which included the number of deaths managed by Nepal Army on different dates.

The countrywide death toll has now reached 9,898. The number of active cases stands at 31,629.

According to the ministry, 658,122 infected people have recovered from the disease so far. 1,925 of them in the last 24 hours.

Kathmandu Valley recorded 770 new infections in the past 24 hours. Of these, 556 cases were confirmed in Kathmandu, 115 in Lalitpur and 99 in Bhaktapur.

In the past 24 hours, 350 new infections were recorded in Province 1, 26 in Province 2, 1,299 in Bagmati, 402 in Gandaki, 141 in Lumbini, 6 in Karnali and 55 Sudurpaschim.

According to the data released by the ministry, 14 districts are home to more than 500 active cases each and 21 other districts host more than 200 active cases each.

On Monday, 690 individuals infected with the virus were being treated in intensive care units across the country. Another 175—54 in Province 1, 96 in Bagmati, 10 in Gandaki, eight in Lumbini and three in Karnali and four in Sudurpaschim—were on ventilator support. Nepal on Sunday reported 1,981 new coronavirus cases and 18 deaths. Similarly, 2,280 new coronavirus cases and 23 deaths were reported on Saturday and 2,467 new coronavirus cases and 27 deaths were reported on Friday.

World Bank appoints new country manager for Tajikistan and Turkmenistan

DUSHANBE: The World Bank is pleased to announce the appointment of Ozan Sevimli as the new World Bank Country Manager for Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, effective August 2, 2021. He will succeed Jan-Peter Olters who was in this position since April 2017.

Ozan Sevimli has worked for the World Bank in several positions since 2005 across Europe and Central Asia, Africa and the Latin America and the Caribbean regions. Most recently, between 2019 and 2021, he was the World Bank's Resident Representative for Jamaica and Guyana, responsible for overseeing a portfolio of about $500 million.

Prior to this assignment, from 2016 to 2019, Mr. Sevimli served as the Program Coordinator for the South Caucasus unit of the World Bank based in Tbilisi, Georgia. Before that, he was the Senior Strategy and Operations Officer in the Vice President's office for the Europe and Central Asia Region of the World Bank, based in the headquarters, in Washington, D.C. In that post, he supported the Vice President and the Director of Strategy in the development and implementation of the regional strategy and portfolio, as well as corporate priorities.

Between 2005 and 2012, Mr. Sevimli worked in the World Bank's Operations Policy and Country Services departments, as well as the Africa Regional department as a labor economist. Before joining the World Bank, he was a labor market specialist at the German Employment Agency. Mr. Sevimli holds a Master's degree in Business Administration from the University of Texas (USA) and a Master's degree in Labor Economics from the University of Applied Sciences of Mannheim (Germany).

"I am delighted to start my assignment as Country Manager for Tajikistan and Turkmenistan and look forward to continuing our strong collaboration with our government counterparts, development partners, the civil society and citizens of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan," said Ozan Sevimli. "A top priority for me in the coming months will be to ensure that the World Bank continues to provide the best possible support to these two countries through their post-pandemic recovery and efforts directed at restoring their economies, protecting human lives and strengthening the healthcare systems."

Since the start of the pandemic in early 2020, the World Bank's support to Tajikistan aimed at tackling the COVID-19 pandemic and protecting the poorest households has totaled $32.5 million, which includes $8.63 million for vaccination of priority populations groups against COVID-19. In Turkmenistan, the World Bank recently approved a $20 million loan to support the country's efforts in strengthening the health system and mitigating the impacts of the pandemic.

Over the last four years the World Bank's financial and analytical support in Tajikistan has grown by three times from $366 million in fiscal year 2017 to over $1.2 billion in fiscal year 2021, almost entirely grant-financed, proving strong commitment to support Tajikistan's transition to a new growth model led by investment and exports in line with the National Development Strategy up to 2030. The World Bank's country program in Tajikistan currently comprises 24 projects with a net commitment of $1.2 billion including 19 national and five regional projects that focus on energy sector and tax reforms, improving transport connectivity and trade, investing in education, early childhood development, disaster risk management, water supply and sanitation, agriculture and response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Turkmenistan the main focus of the World Bank remains the support is transfer of global knowledge and provision of advisory services and other technical assistance, mainly, through Reimbursable Advisory Service (RAS) program.

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