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**COMMITTEE
ON EXTERNAL AFFAIRS
(2023-24)**

SEVENTEENTH LOK SABHA

MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

[Action Taken by the Government on the Observations/ Recommendations contained in the Twenty Second Report of the Committee on External Affairs on the subject 'India's Neighbourhood First Policy']

THIRTIETH REPORT



**LOK SABHA SECRETARIAT
NEW DELHI**

FEBRUARY, 2024 / Magha, 1945 (Saka)



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subject 'India's Neighbourhood First Policy']**

Presented to Lok Sabha on 07 February, 2024
Laid on the Table of Rajya Sabha on 07 February, 2024



LOK SABHA SECRETARIAT
NEW DELHI

FEBRUARY, 2024 / Magha, 1945 (Saka)

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COMPOSITION OF THE COMMITTEE ON EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (2023-24)

Shri P.P. Chaudhary - Chairperson

Lok Sabha

2. Smt. Harsimrat Kaur Badal
3. Shri Abhishek Banerjee
4. Shri Kalyan Banerjee
5. Shri E. T. Mohammed Basheer
6. Shri Dileshwar Kamait
7. Smt. Preneet Kaur
8. Smt. Goddeti Madhavi
9. Smt. Poonam Pramod Mahajan
10. Shri Srinivas Reddy Manne
11. Shri P. C. Mohan
12. Smt. Queen Oja
13. Shri Ritesh Pandey
14. Dr. K. C. Patel
15. Shri N.K. Premachandran
16. Smt. Navneet Ravi Rana
17. Shri Soyam Bapu Rao
18. Shri Vishnu Datt Sharma
19. Shri Rebaty Tripura
20. Dr. Harsh Vardhan
21. *Vacant*

Rajya Sabha

22. Smt. Jaya Bachchan
23. Smt. Misha Bharti
24. Shri Anil Desai
25. Shri Ranjan Gogoi
26. Shri Deepender Singh Hooda
27. Shri Prakash Javadekar
28. Dr. Wanweiroy Kharlukhi
29. Dr. Ashok Kumar Mittal
30. Shri Kapil Sibal
31. Shri Abdul Wahab

Secretariat

- | | | | |
|----|---------------------------|---|------------------|
| 1. | Shri Anjani Kumar | — | Joint Secretary |
| 2. | Smt. Reena Gopalakrishnan | — | Director |
| 3. | Ms. K. Muanniang Tunglut | - | Deputy Secretary |

INTRODUCTION

I, the Chairperson, Committee on External Affairs (2023-24) having been authorized by the Committee to submit the Report on their behalf, present this Thirtieth Report (17th Lok Sabha) on action taken by the Government on the Observations/Recommendations contained in the Twenty Second Report of the Committee on the subject 'India's Neighbourhood First Policy'.

2. The Twenty Second Report was presented to Lok Sabha and laid on the Table of Rajya Sabha on 25 July, 2023. The Action Taken Replies of the Government on all the Observations/Recommendations contained in the Report were received on 10 October, 2023 (English Version) and 25 October, 2023 (Hindi Version).

3. The Committee considered and adopted this Action Taken Report at their Sitting held on 05 February, 2024. The Minutes of the Sitting of the Committee has been given at Appendix-I to the Report.

4. An analysis of the action taken by the Government on the Observations/Recommendations contained in the Twenty Second Report of the Committee on External Affairs is given at Appendix-II.

NEW DELHI
05 February, 2024
16 Magha, 1945 (Saka)

P.P. CHAUDHARY,
Chairperson,
Committee on External Affairs

CHAPTER-I

This Report of the Committee on External Affairs deals with the action taken by the Government on the observations/recommendations contained in the Twenty Second Report of the Committee on External Affairs on the subject 'India's Neighbourhood First Policy' which was presented to the Lok Sabha and also laid on the Table of the Rajya Sabha on 25.07.2023.

2. The Action Taken Notes have been received from the Ministry of External Affairs on all the 62 observations/recommendations contained in the Report. These have been categorized as follows: -

(i) Observations/Recommendations which have been accepted by the Government: -

Recommendation Nos.1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60 and 62

Total-51

Chapter-II

(ii) Observations/Recommendations which the Committee do not desire to pursue in view of the Government's replies:-

Recommendation Nos. 55 and 58

Total- 2

Chapter-III

(iii) Observations/Recommendations in respect of which replies of the Government have not been accepted by the Committee and require reiteration: -

Recommendation Nos. 8, 17 and 27

**Total-3
Chapter-IV**

(iv) Observations/Recommendations in respect of which final replies of the Government are still awaited: -

Recommendation Nos. 5, 22, 26, 41, 53 and 61

**Total-6
Chapter-V**

3. The Committee desire that final replies to the comments and observations/recommendations contained in Chapter-I of this Report and recommendations included in Chapter V may be furnished to the Committee within three months of the presentation of this Report.

4. The Committee will now deal with the action taken by the Government on some of their observations/recommendations that require reiteration or merit comments.

PARLIAMENTARY EXCHANGES BETWEEN INDIA AND NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

Recommendation No. 5

5. The Committee in their Twenty Second Report had observed/recommended as under:

‘The Committee find that there aren’t enough Parliamentary exchanges between India and its neighbourhood countries and there has been only one Parliamentary visit from the People’s Majlis of Maldives in the recent years. The Committee are of the strong view that regular Parliamentary Exchanges with neighbouring partners can also play a pivotal role in the implementation of the Neighbourhood First Policy. The Committee, therefore, urge the Ministry to utilize the Parliamentary forum in a better way by facilitating more and more Parliamentary exchanges between India and its neighbouring countries for better interaction between Parliamentarians of India and the countries in the neighbourhood so that the philosophy of the Neighbourhood First is widely shared and upheld in its true spirit’.

6. In its Action Taken Reply furnished to the Committee, the Ministry of External Affairs has stated as under:

“Ministry has noted the recommendations of the Hon’ble Committee and would strive to work out a plan for structured interaction with the Parliamentarians from foreign countries, including from the neighbourhood”.

7. The Committee had urged the Ministry to facilitate more and more Parliamentary exchanges between India and its neighbouring countries for better interaction among Parliamentarians. While noting the recommendations of the Committee, the Ministry has stated that it would strive to work out a plan for structured interaction with the Parliamentarians from foreign countries, including from the neighbourhood. The Committee desire that the action plan for structured interaction with the Parliamentarians, especially from the neighbourhood should be worked out at the earliest to facilitate more parliamentary exchanges so that the philosophy of the Neighbourhood First is widely shared and upheld in its true spirit.

REGIONAL INFRASTRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF BORDER AREAS

Recommendation No. 8

8. The Committee in their Twenty Second Report had observed/recommended as under:

‘The Committee observe that India’s Neighbourhood First Policy has achieved over the years benefits like greater regional connectivity, improved infrastructure, and stronger development cooperation in various sectors, enhanced security and broader people-to people contacts with our immediate neighbours. Further, regular assessments are being done and the impact on the ground is measured in a real way. The Committee while acknowledging the efforts of the Ministry are of the view that more needs to be done, especially, addressing the huge deficiency in our border infrastructure. The Committee find that the deficiency relates to the way our border districts are developed compared to those facing the districts across the country. As our border areas are pivotal in unlocking the potential of our engagements with our neighbours, the need to stabilize and develop the border regions have become critical. So, for more effective engagement with our immediate neighbours, connectivity infrastructure like cross-border roads, railways, inland waterways and ports, energy, telecommunication and digital links, etc. needs to be enhanced. The Committee, therefore, desire that the Ministry of External Affairs should take it up with various Central Ministries, Departments and agencies concerned the need for regional infrastructure development of the border areas through increased allocation/investment, pooling of resources and above all, convergence of everybody’s interest and focus. The Committee also desire that the feasibility of setting up a regional development fund for connectivity infrastructure under regional frameworks like BIMSTEC may also be explored’.

9. In its Action Taken Reply furnished to the Committee, the Ministry of External Affairs has stated as under:

“The recommendation of the esteemed committee is noted for compliance. Under India’s ‘Neighbourhood First policy’, Government of India has focused on enhancing development of border areas. Issues pertaining to development of the border areas are taken up regularly with concerned line Ministries by the Ministry of External Affairs.

Further, BIMSTEC member states have successfully negotiated an Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation. Member states are also negotiating BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement on priority. Member states are also negotiating the next steps toward implementation of the BIMSTEC Master Plan on Transport Connectivity which was adopted by the Leaders during the 5th BIMSTEC Summit in Colombo”.

10. The Committee had felt the need for regional infrastructure development of the border areas through increased allocation/investment, pooling of resources and above all, convergence of everybody’s interest and had desired that the Ministry of External Affairs should take it up with various Central Ministries, Departments and agencies concerned. It was also desired that the feasibility of setting up a regional development fund for connectivity infrastructure under regional frameworks like BIMSTEC may be explored. In its Action Taken Reply, the Ministry has stated that issues pertaining to development of the border areas are taken up regularly with concerned line Ministries. However, it is silent on setting up a regional development fund under BIMSTEC. The Committee are of the view that regional infrastructure development in border areas is critical for border safety, enhanced trade, investment and broader engagement with our immediate neighbours. The Committee, hence, reiterate their earlier recommendation for increased allocation/investment, pooling of resources and convergence of interest/focus of Central Ministries, Departments and agencies

for regional infrastructural development of border areas under the Neighbourhood First Policy and establishing a regional development fund under BIMSTEC or other regional frameworks.

UPGRADATION OF BORDER SECURITY

Recommendation No. 9

11. The Committee in their Twenty Second Report had observed/recommended as under:

‘The Committee are also seized of the fact that India is facing continuing threats from cross-border terrorism, illegal migration, smuggling of fake currency and contrabands, trafficking in drugs and weapons, etc. and find it imperative to enhance security infrastructure at the borders. The Committee had also discussed the issue of border safety and security with the representatives of MEA, MHA and MoD during their meetings as well as during on-the-spot study visits. The Committee, therefore, urge the Government to take comprehensive measures for upgrading border security apparatus and bridge connectivity gaps at the borders under the Neighbourhood First Policy. The Committee also desire that Demographic changes through illegal migration in the bordering areas may also be monitored vigilantly and the Committee be apprised accordingly in this regard’.

12. The Ministry of External Affairs in its Action Taken Reply, has stated as under:

“The recommendation is duly noted for compliance. Steps for better border management in the neighbourhood are continuously being taken by Government of India through improved border infrastructure and enhanced security cooperation. The Ministry of Home Affairs is the lead agency for development of border security apparatus to curb illegal migration,

smuggling and cross-border terrorism. MEA continues to assist MHA in these endeavors”.

13. The Committee had urged the Government to take comprehensive measures for upgrading border security apparatus and bridge connectivity gaps at the borders under the Neighbourhood First Policy and had also desired vigilant monitoring of demographic changes through illegal migration in the bordering areas. While taking note of the recommendation of the Committee for compliance, the Ministry has stated that the Ministry of Home Affairs is the lead agency for development of border security apparatus to curb illegal migration, smuggling and cross-border terrorism. MEA continues to assist MHA in these endeavors. The Committee understand that priority has been attached to border safety and security under the Neighbourhood First Policy and desire that the MEA should improve its coordination with the MHA for periodic upgradation of border security apparatus, bridging connectivity gaps through infrastructural development and preventing illegal migration, cross border smuggling and terrorist infiltration.

ROADMAP FOR TRADE CONNECTIVITY

Recommendation No. 13

14. In their Twenty Second Report, the Committee had observed/recommended as under:

‘The Committee note that under the Neighbourhood First Policy, India’s engagement with its neighbours range from connectivity projects including economic, energy and digital connectivity to cultural projects; education and health care; developmental and technological cooperation; cooperation in

maritime security to humanitarian and disaster relief. It is seen that massive investment in infrastructure has improved physical connectivity in the neighbourhood. In the field of energy connectivity, India is promoting easier movement of hydrocarbons across the region and as a part of this, cross-border pipelines including the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline have been constructed. In the electricity sector, grid interconnection with our neighbouring countries is being augmented. The Committee find that India is also working on wind energy projects, renewable energy projects and solar power projects with some of the neighbouring countries. In the field of technology, the South Asia Satellite was launched in May 2017 and the India-Bhutan Satellite in November 2022. Tele-learning and telemedicine have emerged as new areas for assistance to our neighbours. Further, India is the educational hub and health care hub for the neighbourhood. On the economic front, 24 bilateral trade with our neighbouring countries have improved and there has been a quantum jump from USD 3.27 billion in 2014 to USD 14.7 billion in 2020 in India's Lines of Credit to its neighbours. In fact, almost 50% of our global soft-lending goes to our partners in the neighbourhood. Maritime security in the region has been expanded and the security capacities and capabilities of some of our neighbours upgraded through India's efforts. Above all, India is the first responder during many humanitarian disasters in the region. The Committee acknowledge the efforts and initiatives taken so far, however, in view of the incontrovertible importance of the region to India and the potential of our country to contribute towards building a safe, secure, prosperous and well-connected South Asia, the Committee urge the Ministry to continue to uphold the "non-reciprocal policy" towards its smaller neighbours in the sub-continent and its immediate perimeter in the fields of capacity building, cooperation in information and digital technologies, space, cyber security, etc. Moreover, the Committee would like that a clear roadmap should be prepared for promoting trade connectivity and contact among people of neighbouring countries so that India can achieve global role through defined role and contribution of these countries'.

15. The Ministry of External Affairs in its Action Taken Reply, has stated as under:

“The recommendation of the esteemed committee is duly noted. In line with the recommendation, promoting Connectivity and People-to- People contact is a central focus of India’s Neighbourhood First Policy. This encompasses all dimensions of connectivity including in new areas like cooperation in digital technologies, ICT, Outer Space and Cyber security, etc., apart from improving connectivity in rail, road, air, and financial connectivity. Pilgrimage to religious shrines in the neighbourhood is also facilitated by the Government.

Capacity building has remained a priority area of cooperation to assist the people, especially youth through various training programs under ITEC. India has also extended assistance to our neighboring countries in setting up institutions for higher learning and research, industrial training centers, etc”.

16. The Committee note that in line with its recommendation, promoting connectivity and people-to-people contact is a central focus of India’s Neighbourhood First Policy. This encompasses all dimensions of connectivity including facilitating pilgrimage to religious shrines in the neighbourhood. The Ministry has also stated that assistance has been extended to our neighboring countries in capacity building under ITEC, setting up institutions for higher learning and research, industrial training centers, etc. However, there is no mention of a clear roadmap for promoting trade connectivity. The Committee, hence, desire that initiatives may be taken by the Ministry in this regard under the Neighbourhood First Policy for overall social and economic development of the country.

NEGOTIATIONS ON CEPA

Recommendation No. 17

17. The Committee in their Twenty Second Report had observed/recommended as under:

‘The Committee note that India and Bangladesh enjoy a robust partnership and 2021 saw their diplomatic relations completing 50 years. Acknowledging the importance of leveraging the potential of new and emerging areas of cooperation, India and Bangladesh have agreed to collaborate in new areas of cooperation, such as, environment, climate change, cyber security, ICT, space technology, green energy and blue economy. Presently, both countries are looking forward to strengthening their trade and economic ties through a bilateral Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement. As per the Ministry, a Joint Study Report on the Agreement has been finalized and the negotiations would be commencing soon. The Committee, hence, desire that the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement with Bangladesh, be finalized at the earliest and commence negotiations on the same for its early implementation within a time frame’.

18. In its Action Taken Reply furnished to the Committee, the Ministry of External Affairs has stated as under:

“The recommendation of the esteemed committee is duly noted. India and Bangladesh finalized a Joint Study in 2022 for starting the negotiations on CEPA. Ministry of Commerce is the lead Ministry on negotiations for CEPA”.

19. The Committee had desired that the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement between India and Bangladesh should be finalized at the earliest and negotiations on the same should commence for an early implementation within a time-frame. In its Action taken Reply, the Ministry

has stated that a Joint Study Report on the Agreement has been finalized and the negotiations would be commencing soon, at the same time, adding that the Ministry of Commerce is the lead Ministry on negotiations for the CEPA. The Committee are of the view that the said Agreement, has the potential to strengthen trade and economic ties between the countries and reiterate their earlier recommendation for commencing the negotiations for its early implementation within a time-frame. The Committee urge the Ministry to actively coordinate with the Department of Commerce in this regard and facilitate negotiations on the CEPA for its early conclusion and operationalization.

STRENGTHENING OF BILATERAL MECHANISMS FOR MANAGEMENT OF INDO-BANGLADESH BORDER

Recommendation No. 18

20. The Committee in their Twenty Second Report had observed/recommended as under:

‘The Committee note that with the exchange of Instruments of Ratification of the India-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement on 6 June 2015, the land boundary between India and Bangladesh have been settled. Mechanisms for the peaceful and cooperative management of the 4,096 kms long international border are also actively focused on border fencing, joint inspection of boundary pillars, joint boundary demarcation including of riverine boundaries, among others. The Committee feel that there should be better management of the Indo-Bangladesh Border to prevent infiltration, cross-border smuggling, etc. and desire that the bilateral echanisms for management of this long border should be

strengthened. The Committee also desire to be apprised of the status of border fencing and the demarcation of riverine boundaries between India and Bangladesh’.

21. The Ministry of External Affairs in its Action Taken Reply, has stated as under:

“The recommendation of the esteemed Committee is duly noted for compliance. Ministry of Home Affairs is the lead Ministry for border fencing and related issues of infiltration, cross-border smuggling etc. for the management of the India-Bangladesh border”.

22. The Committee had desired that the bilateral mechanisms for management of the long Indo-Bangladesh border should be strengthened and be apprised of the status of border fencing and demarcation of riverine boundaries between India and Bangladesh. In its Action Taken Reply, the Ministry had noted the recommendations of the Committee for compliance while stating that Ministry of Home Affairs is the lead Ministry for border fencing and related issues of infiltration, cross-border smuggling etc. The Committee acknowledge the involvement of multiple stakeholders for the management of the said border and urge the Government to improve its coordination with all the Ministries/Departments/Agencies concerned for effective management of the long Indo-Bangladesh border for peace, security and development.

OPENING OF MORE ICPs and BORDER HAATS

Recommendation No. 22

23. The Committee in their Twenty Second Report had observed/recommended as under:

‘The Committee observe that efforts are being undertaken to strengthen the border infrastructure by opening and upgrading Integrated Check Posts (ICPs)/Land Customs Stations (LCS) and border haats at India-Bangladesh border. They also understand that infrastructural capacity constraints and procedural issues at border are discussed under the mechanisms of Sub-group on Infrastructure of ICPs/LCS, Commerce Secretary Level Talks (CSLT) and Joint Group on Customs (JGC) meetings. Presently, the work for upgradation of 6 more LCSs to ICPs on the India-Bangladesh border is on. In view of the importance of strengthening the infrastructure at the India-Bangladesh border from security and economic/trade perspective, the Committee urge the Government to open more ICPs/LCS as well as border haats, wherever required and upgrade the existing ones. Bilateral working mechanisms to discuss infrastructural and capacity constraints and procedural issues at border may also be strengthened’.

24. In its Action Taken Reply furnished to the Committee, the Ministry of External Affairs has submitted as under:

“The recommendation of the esteemed Committee is duly noted. Upgradation of border infrastructure is discussed between India and Bangladesh under the Sub Group on Infrastructure. Currently five Integrated Check Posts (ICPs) are operational on India-Bangladesh border, namely ICP Petrapole, ICP Agartala, ICP Sutarkandi, ICP Dawki and ICP Srimantapur. Government of India plans to upgrade seven more of the existing Land Customs Stations into ICPs to boost bilateral trade and commerce namely Sabroom, Kawrpuichhuah, Fulbari, Ghojandanga, Mahadipur, Hilli, and Changrabandha.

Currently, six Border Haats in states of Meghalaya and Tripura are functional between both countries. Work is ongoing to establish more Border Haats in Assam, West Bengal and Mizoram. Proposal for the expansion of the Border Haats is currently under consideration of the Department of Commerce”.

25. Keeping in view the importance of strengthening the infrastructure at the India-Bangladesh border from security and economic/trade perspective, the Committee had urged the Government to open more ICPs/LCS as well as Border Haats, wherever required, upgrade the existing ones and strengthen

the bilateral working mechanisms to discuss infrastructural and capacity constraints and procedural issues at border. In its Action Taken Reply, the Ministry has informed that currently five ICPs are operational on India-Bangladesh border and the Government plans to upgrade seven more of the existing Land Customs Stations into ICPs. Proposal for the expansion of the Border Haats is currently under consideration of the Department of Commerce. The Committee are of the view that bilateral trade and commerce between India and Bangladesh would get a boost through opening of more ICPs/upgradation of LCS to ICPs and establishment of Border Haats and urge the Government to finalize its plans in this regard for an early implementation. The Committee also urge the MEA to pursue the Department of Commerce for the expansion of Border Haats.

EXPANSION OF SCOPE OF SCHOLARSHIPS AND CUSTOMIZED TRAINING PROGRAMMES FOR BHUTAN

Recommendation No. 27

26. In their Twenty Second Report, the Committee had observed/recommended as under:

‘Presently, India offers seven major scholarships to Bhutan, including the well known Ambassador’s Scholarship, prestigious Nehru Wangchuck Scholarship, Five-Year Plan project-tied assistance based Undergraduate Scholarship, Nalanda

University Scholarship, ICCR Undergraduate Engineering scholarships, IIT Kanpur scholarship and AYUSH scholarships. Over 1100 Bhutanese students benefit from these scholarships, making it an important aspect of our bilateral relationship. A large number of Bhutanese civil servants and professionals from private sector and others undertake ITEC training programmes administered by the Development Partnership Administration Division of the Ministry of External Affairs. In recent times, the focus has been on developing customized ITEC programmes specifically for Bhutanese nationals. In 2021-22 alone, 340 Bhutanese nationals benefited from the e-ITEC training programmes whereas in 2020-2021, it was 250. In 2022, GoI also customised special ITEC programmes for training 100 Bhutanese young entrepreneurs at the prestigious Entrepreneurship Development Institute of India, Ahmedabad and 30 entrepreneurs at the Indian Institute of Packaging. Going by this track record, the Committee urge the Ministry to further expand the scope of scholarships and customized training programmes in the coming years to accommodate more number students, Government officials and professionals’.

27. The Ministry of External Affairs, in its Action Taken Reply, has stated as under:

“The recommendation is duly noted for compliance”.

28. The Committee had urged the Ministry to further expand the scope of scholarships and customized training programmes being run for Bhutan for the coming years to accommodate more number of students, Government officials and professionals. The Ministry had noted the recommendation of the Committee for compliance, however, the fresh initiatives taken/likely to be taken in this regard, have not been mentioned. The Committee, hence, desire that the Ministry should identify the projects/schemes that can be launched for expansion of the scope of scholarships and customized training programmes, conduct proper assessment of the increased/expected coverage

of beneficiaries and apprise the Committee of the progress made so far in this regard.

EFFECTIVE MONITORING OF PROJECTS IN NEPAL

Recommendation No. 35

29. The Committee in their Twenty Second Report had observed/recommended as under:

‘The Committee note that India’s bilateral relations with Nepal has expanded to new initiatives in agriculture, inland waterways and power sector cooperation. The ‘India Nepal New Partnership’ in Agriculture which focuses on collaborative projects in agriculture education and R&D was launched in April 2018. The Inland waterways connectivity between India and Nepal with four multi- modal transportation routes via Jharkhand, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh was announced in 2019. Two of the terminals at Varanasi and Sahibgunj have already been completed and work is underway for the remaining terminals. India and Nepal have also unveiled a Joint Vision Statement on Power Sector Cooperation in April 2022. Indian companies are currently developing large Hydro Electric Projects in Nepal including Arun III (900 MW), Lower Arun (679 MW), Arun-4 (490 MW), West Seti and SR-6 (1200MW) and Upper Karnali (900 MW). Under Lines of Credit, 44 road projects; 7 projects in hydropower and transmission lines and several others in housing and reconstruction spread all across Nepal have been financed and a large number of these projects are either completed or are nearing completion. The Committee desire that the Government should give focused attention to collaborative projects in agriculture education and R&D as it would give a boost to the rural economy of both the countries. The remaining inland waterway terminals for the multi- modal transportation routes may be completed at the earliest. The Committee are aware that India would greatly benefit from the commissioning of large hydro electric projects currently being developed by Indian companies in Nepal by way of power export and urge the

Government to monitor the progress of work effectively so that these hydro-electric projects are completed and operationalized without time and cost overruns. The Committee also desire that all the ongoing and pending projects under Lines of Credit, including housing and reconstruction projects, should be completed at the earliest’.

30. The Ministry of External Affairs in its Action Taken Reply, has stated as under:

“The recommendation is noted for compliance”.

31. The Committee take note of the fact that the Ministry has noted their recommendations regarding focused attention to collaborative projects in Nepal in agriculture education and R&D, completion of remaining inland waterway terminals for the multi-modal transportation routes, monitoring of hydro-electric projects, early completion of ongoing and pending projects, etc. for compliance. The Committee hope that in order to give focused attention for implementing the recommendations of the Committee, the Ministry would strengthen its monitoring mechanism and take concrete steps to achieve the said objectives.

RESUMPTION OF TALKS ON ETCA

Recommendation No. 44

32. The Committee in their Twenty Second Report had observed/recommended as under:

‘The Committee note that Sri Lanka is one of our major development assistance partners. Under the Indian Housing Project, 60,000 houses are being built and numerous people-oriented High Impact Projects in sectors like agriculture, health, child and women empowerment, education and livelihood generation are under implementation. Several projects under Lines of Credit are under discussion. Implementation of the USD 100 million Solar project is expected to bolster cooperation in the renewable energy sector between India and Sri Lanka. The Committee further note that eleven rounds of negotiations on an Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement (ETCA) covering goods and services have been completed as far back as in September 2018 and the Sri Lankan side has now conveyed its willingness to resume the said negotiations. The Committee understand that the said ETCA would broaden the scope of Free Trade Agreement between India and Sri Lanka strengthening economic, trade, investment and technology cooperation and therefore, desire that the negotiations should be resumed for its early and successful conclusion. It should also be the endeavour of the Government to complete all the ongoing projects in various sectors expeditiously while taking up new initiatives for cooperation in capacity building and skill development’.

33. The Ministry of External Affairs in its Action Taken Reply, has submitted as under:

“India has been carrying out people-oriented development projects across Sri Lanka in accordance with the priorities of the Government and people of Sri Lanka. These projects cut across sectors such as infrastructure, housing, health, livelihood and rehabilitation, education, industrial development etc. Indian Housing Programme is the largest housing project undertaken by India abroad. The project commenced in 2012 and close to 50,000 houses have since been completed in three different phases. Sri Lanka wide operations of the 1990 Emergency Ambulance Service prove to be of great utility across the island particularly during COVID-19. In addition, India has completed numerous projects in diverse areas including railway infrastructure and integrated water supply plants.

During the visit of the President of Sri Lanka to India in July 2023, the Governments of India and Sri Lanka have agreed to undertake discussions on Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement with new and priority areas. Accordingly, both sides are discussing suitable mutually convenient dates for resumption of talks”.

34. The Committee had desired that negotiations on an Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement (ETCA) between India and Sri Lanka should be resumed for its early and successful conclusion. The Ministry, in its Action Taken Reply has stated that the Governments of India and Sri Lanka have agreed to undertake discussions on ETCA with new and priority areas and firm up mutually convenient dates for resumption of talks. The Committee urge the Government to maintain close coordination with the Government of Sri Lanka so that the talks on the ETCA commence without further delay.

PERMANENT SOLUTION TO FISHERMEN ISSUES

Recommendation No. 46

35. The Committee in their Twenty Second Report had observed/recommended as under:

‘The Committee are aware of the long pending fishermen issue between India and Sri Lanka. The Ministry has informed that in the 5th Joint Working Group Meeting on Fisheries held in March 2022, both countries have agreed on the need to work out a long term solution to the fishermen issue. In view of Indian fishermen getting arrested and their boats being seized by Sri Lankan Navy every now and then, the Committee urge the Ministry to consistently engage with the

Sri Lankan Government through meaningful dialogues so that a permanent solution to the issue of fishermen and their livelihoods is worked out in a humanitarian manner. The Committee desire that the Ministry should also take initiatives for maritime domain awareness in its extended neighbourhood’.

36. In its Action Taken Reply furnished to the Committee, the Ministry of External Affairs has submitted as under:

“In respect of the arrest of Indian fishermen and boats, as on date, no Indian fishermen are under Sri Lankan custody. With sustained diplomatic efforts, Government of India secured release of all 2,934 fishermen, who were arrested by Sri Lankan authorities since 2014 and repatriated them to India. In case of boats, 112 boats out of 139 boats under Sri Lankan custody.

India has been regularly taking up the matter at the highest levels in the Government of Sri Lanka through diplomatic channels. India continues to remain engaged with Sri Lanka at all levels on its efforts to protect the interests of our fishing community.

During the Virtual Bilateral Summit between India and Sri Lanka on 26 September 2020, the two Prime Ministers “agreed to continue engagement to address the issues related to fishermen through regular consultation and bilateral channels according to the existing frameworks and shared goals including the UN Sustainable Development Goals”. Further, Regular meetings of Joint Working Group Meeting on Fisheries and High-Level Meetings between the Coast Guards are being held. The 5th Meeting of India - Sri Lanka Joint Working Group on fisheries took place in March 2022 in a virtual format. These mechanisms act as a communication channel for discussions on ways to improve the fisheries order and pursue fisheries cooperation between India and Sri Lanka”.

37. On the Committee's recommendation to consistently engage with the Sri Lankan Government through meaningful dialogues so that a permanent solution to the issue of fishermen and their livelihoods is worked out in a humanitarian manner, the Ministry has stated that mechanisms like virtual bilateral summit, Joint Working Group meeting on Fisheries, High-level meetings between Coastguards etc. act as communication channels for discussions on ways to improve the fisheries order and pursue fisheries cooperation between India and Sri Lanka. The Committee desire that these mechanisms should be strengthened and India should also strive for evolving a joint strategy with Sri Lanka for improved cooperation and working out a permanent solution to the issue of fishermen and their livelihoods.

INCREASED ROLE OF BIMSTEC

Recommendation No. 60

38. The Committee in their Twenty Second Report had observed/recommended as under:

‘Over the years, BIMSTEC has proven to be a key body for regional cooperation serving as a unique link between South Asia and South East Asia. Activities under BIMSTEC have served as a visible input into our ‘Neighbourhood First Policy’ and ‘Act East Policy’. Several lateral initiatives announced by India including BIMSTEC Military Exercise (MILEX) and Army Chiefs’ Conclave; BIMSTEC Ministerial Conclave at India Mobile Congress 2018; BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise; Scholarships to students from BIMSTEC countries at Nalanda University and some capacity building programmes have been implemented while work is in progress on other initiatives. In view of the pivotal role of BIMSTEC in regional cooperation, the Committee desire that work in progress on other

initiatives may be implemented speedily. BIMSTEC being a unique regional organization focusing on India's core concerns in the region and thus fulfilling India's key foreign policy priorities of 'Neighborhood First' and 'Act East Policy', the Committee urge the Ministry to take fresh initiatives to nurture and re-energize the organization to make it more outcome oriented. Inputs derived from India's engagement with BIMSTEC may also be optimally utilized in our foreign policy agenda'.

39. The Ministry of External Affairs in its Action Taken Reply, has stated as under:

“During the 5th BIMSTEC Summit, in line with India's commitment towards strengthening BIMSTEC, Prime Minister announced initiatives which have been implemented: (i) A one time grant of USD 1 million to the operational budget of the Secretariat to complete institution building tasks; (ii) 1st capacity building program by ICRIER in collaboration with ADB on Trade Facilitation was organized in May 2023; (iii) The scope of the BIMSTEC Nalanda Scholarship Scheme was expanded. Initiatives announced by the Prime Minister at the Summit namely on the establishment of networking scheme among institutes of Marine Sciences in the BIMSTEC region and a Study by RIS on creating regional value chains on value added agricultural products in the BIMSTEC region are under various stages of implementation”.

In addition, India also organized: a training programme for law enforcement officers from BIMSTEC countries on issues pertaining to Cyber Security, Counter Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crimes, De-radicalization and other Law Enforcement Challenges; BIMSTEC Business Conclave in Kolkata in June 2023; A symposium on BIMSTEC: A Vehicle for Growth and Development in 2021; An ISCS-MEA Collaborative 2nd Conference on “BIMSTEC: 25 Years of Driving Force Behind Neighbourhood Cooperation” in 2023; a BIMSTEC Literary festival in Bhopal in January 2023; and announced

PG and PhD scholarships in Agriculture, which emphasize India's commitment to strengthen cooperation in different areas for the larger benefit of the people in the BIMSTEC region”.

40. The Committee had urged the Ministry to take fresh initiatives to nurture and re-energize BIMSTEC to make it more outcome oriented and utilize inputs derived from India's engagement with BIMSTEC optimally in our foreign policy agenda. In its Action Taken Reply, the Ministry has informed about various initiatives taken and training programmes organized for BIMSTEC countries but is silent on the aspect regarding optimum utilization of inputs derived from India's engagement with BIMSTEC in our foreign policy agenda. The Committee, hence, reiterate this aspect of their recommendation and urge the Ministry to take concrete steps in this regard.

INITIATIVES FOR BIMSTEC REGION

Recommendation No. 61

41. The Committee in their Twenty Second Report had observed/recommended as under:

‘The Committee note that India is currently leading BIMSTEC cooperation in four priority sectors, namely, Counter Terrorism & Trans-national Crime, Transport & Communication, Tourism and Environmental & Disaster Management. Besides, initiatives including HADR exercises, start-up conclaves and hackathons; capacity building; cooperation in science, technology and space; and establishment of

Parliamentary forum have also been announced in 2018. The Committee welcome these initiatives as active collaboration and hope that mutual assistance on matters of common interest in the economic, social, technical and scientific fields would be promoted. Moreover, establishment of Parliamentary forum will facilitate interaction and discussion on common areas of interests, key areas of concern and also serve as a forum for building consensus. The Committee, therefore, desire that the new initiatives announced for the BIMSTEC region including establishment of Parliamentary forums should be realised at the earliest’.

42. The Ministry of External Affairs in its Action Taken Reply, has stated as under:

“The recommendation of the esteemed Committee is duly noted for compliance. The establishment of a BIMSTEC Parliamentary Forum is under process”.

43. The Committee had desired that the new initiatives announced for the BIMSTEC region in 2018 such as, HADR exercises, start-up conclaves and hackathons; capacity building; cooperation in science, technology and space; and establishment of Parliamentary forum should be realised at the earliest. The Ministry, while noting the recommendation of the Committee for compliance, has stated that the establishment of a BIMSTEC Parliamentary Forum is under process. The Committee are of the view that collaborations between India and BIMSTEC countries in various fields are mutually beneficial and should be promoted. The Committee, hence, urge the Ministry to make further efforts for implementation of all the initiatives announced in 2018 and completion of the process for establishment of a BIMSTEC Parliamentary Forum at the earliest.

BIMSTEC MASTER PLAN FOR TRANSPORT CONNECTIVITY

Recommendation No. 62

44. The Committee in their Twenty Second Report had observed/recommended as under:

‘The Committee find that BIMSTEC member States have also recently finalized a ‘Master Plan for Transport Connectivity’ that would lay down a long term roadmap for even closer connectivity in the BIMSTEC sub- region. Implementation of the Master Plan would improve connectivity of India’s North East and beyond. In the opinion of the Committee, improved connectivity in the North Eastern Region of India will greatly contribute to the socio-economic development of the region and by virtue of the region’s close proximity to Myanmar which acts as a bridge for ASEAN, would be instrumental in the success of the Act East Policy. The Committee, therefore, desire that the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity should be implemented at the earliest and urge the Government to make coordinated efforts in this regard.

45. In its Action Taken Reply furnished to the Committee, the Ministry of External Affairs has stated as under:

“The recommendation of the esteemed Committee is duly noted for compliance. Through the BIMSTEC Working Group on Transport Connectivity, member states are regularly discussing ways to improve connectivity including the implementation of the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity”.

46. The Committee had desired that the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity should be implemented at the earliest and have urged the Government to make coordinated efforts in this regard. The Ministry had noted the recommendation of the Committee for compliance and has also informed that through the BIMSTEC Working Group on Transport Connectivity, member States are regularly discussing ways to improve connectivity including the implementation of the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity. The Committee desire that the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity should be finalized and implemented at the earliest for the socio-economic development of the region and greater success of India's Act East Policy.

CHAPTER II

OBSERVATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS WHICH HAVE BEEN ACCEPTED BY THE GOVERNMENT

Recommendation (Sl. No. 1)

The Committee note that India's Neighbourhood First Policy as a concept came about in 2008 and after 2014, it has got more focus and salience. Conceived in order to forge strong neighbourhood relations based on a consultative, non-reciprocal and outcome-oriented approach among the priority countries viz., Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, the Neighbourhood First Policy has emerged as a Central pillar of India's foreign policy in recent years. Our immediate neighbourhood forms the first circle of priority in India's relations with the world. The Committee further note that the Neighbourhood First Policy has been a cardinal component of India's foreign policy and involves the entire Government machinery so that all other Ministries and Departments approach their engagement with the neighbourhood with a similar proactive perspective. The Committee appreciate the efforts made by the Ministry as they recognize that optimal management of bilateral relations with our immediate neighbours is a strategic foreign policy requirement and not just a domestic security and economic imperative. The real impact of the Neighbourhood First Policy would, however, depend on how far mainstreaming of the Policy is successful and the extent to which the Ministry is able to coordinate across all the relevant arms of the Government – Ministries, Departments and agencies concerned to achieve its objectives. The Committee, therefore, urge the Ministry to create and maintain an effective coordination mechanism with all the Ministries, Departments and agencies of the Central and State Governments for implementation of the Neighbourhood First Policy in letter and spirit. MEA being the nodal Ministry for implementation of the Neighbourhood First Policy should establish a Cell to identify specific initiatives, projects and programmes that can be taken up by the various Ministries and Departments with our neighbouring countries and bring about convergence in the implementation of such initiatives, projects and programmes for greater impact.

Reply of the Government

Government of India's efforts to deliver benefits like greater connectivity, stronger inter-linkages and greater people-to-people connect under India's Neighbourhood First policy takes place through a whole-of-government approach with coordination involving various Ministries, Departments and agencies of GOI and of concerned State governments.

In line with the esteemed Committee's recommendation, Inter-Ministerial coordination mechanisms have been established on various issues. Where necessary, mechanisms such as the Joint Task Force at Joint Secretary Level and Inter-Ministerial Coordination Group at Secretary Level for better coordination between different Ministries and agencies have been established for steering specific initiatives, projects and programs. The Ministry takes notes of the esteemed Committee's thrust on effective coordination mechanism among various Ministries, Departments, agencies and Center and State Governments.

Coordination at Union government level is carried out through e-Samiksha portal, regular meetings of the Sectoral Group of Secretaries level. Coordination with NE Council is also carried out from time to time.

The guidance of committee is noted for compliance.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 2)

The Committee note that high-level mechanisms and Joint Working Groups exist for optimal management of bilateral relations with our immediate neighbors. In addition, there are Joint Project Monitoring Committees, Oversight Mechanism, Regional Border Committee Meetings, Boundary Working Group Talks and Staff Talks between the defence services. India's engagement with its neighbours is also driven by multilateral and regional mechanisms such as SAARC, BIMSTEC and BBIN. While acknowledging the initiatives undertaken through the said mechanisms/platforms, particularly in recent years, the Committee feel that the

impact of the Neighbourhood First Policy should be felt on the ground in a more effective and extensive manner. This calls for strengthening of the institutional and multilateral/regional mechanisms. The Committee, therefore, urge the Ministry to conduct periodic review of its bilateral and multilateral/regional relationship framework on the basis of contemporary realities and upgrade, strengthen and energize these mechanisms on a continuous basis.

Reply of the Government

The esteemed Committee's recommendation is duly noted. There are multiple institutional mechanisms for reviewing bilateral cooperation in different areas with neighboring countries. Periodic meetings of the various bilateral institutional mechanisms such as Foreign Office Consultations (FOC), Joint Commissions (JM), Ministerial and HoG-level meetings are held regularly to discuss the progress on all issues in an institutional manner. Further, new bilateral mechanisms have also been constituted to enhance our partnership in new sectors. The scope of the bilateral mechanisms is reviewed and revised as per the requirement from time to time. Further, India's engagement with SAARC and BIMSTEC are important elements of the Government's "Neighbourhood First Policy".

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 3)

The Committee observe that in keeping with Neighbourhood First Policy, India desires normal neighbourly relations with all neighbouring countries free of terror, hostility and violence. However, for more than three decades the country has been facing threats and continuous tension, instability and heightened possibility of terrorist and militant attacks from our immediate neighbourhood. The Committee fully endorse the changed approach of the Government to quell the threats posed by cross-border terrorism in a pre-emptive manner as well as maintaining a tough stand that bilateral relations with our neighbours can only be held in an atmosphere free from terror, hostility and violence. The Committee, therefore, desire that India should work towards more closer cooperation amongst the member States in the region to create an environment where all neighbouring countries speak in one

voice against the countries engaged in such activities and take proactive steps to counter the menace of terrorism and help to achieve the goal of lasting peace, stability and prosperity in the region.

Reply of the Government

There are institutional mechanisms through which regular dialogue with several neighbouring countries on the issues of terrorism and insurgency is held. There are institutional mechanisms also, at various levels and involving senior officials and experts from various Ministries/Departments and agencies, to discuss cooperation in security, defense and border management related issues.

Sharing of information on contraband smuggling, drugs, fake Indian currency, trafficking and on activities of various groups and organizations are undertaken on regular basis.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 4)

The Committee note that the philosophy of India's Neighbourhood First Policy are regularly shared through high-level bilateral interactions and Foreign Office Consultations with the neighbouring States and through the platforms of SAARC, BIMSTEC, videoconferencing, dialogues, etc. However, in Committee's view, a successful implementation of the Policy can only convey the best and convince our neighbours and requires concerted efforts, such as, timely execution of development projects and enhancing mutually beneficial cooperation. The Committee, therefore, urge the Ministry to ensure that development projects undertaken in the neighbourhood are executed within a timeframe by strengthening the Joint Project Monitoring Committees and Oversight Mechanisms for monitoring the progress of various development assistance projects for their timely execution. The scope of mutually beneficial cooperation with our neighbours may also be enhanced with fresh initiatives.

Reply of the Government

The points pertaining to need for successful implementation of Neighbourhood First Policy based on timely execution of development projects are duly noted.

India-assisted development projects, including those in the neighbourhood, are subject to multi-layered monitoring and oversight by the Government. First, within the Ministry, there are periodic reviews with direct stakeholders at different levels. Second, there are inter-Ministerial reviews under various processes that monitor project delivery. Third, the Ministry engages at the bilateral level with the host Governments concerned to provide oversight and facilitation to development projects under instituted dialogue mechanisms and/or project-specific Joint Project Monitoring Committees (JPMCs). The aforementioned Governmental monitoring efforts are over and above the day-to-day management and monitoring provided by the Project Management Consultants (PMCs).

With regard to fresh initiatives, in line with the esteemed Committee's recommendation, India is sharing its own developmental experience in the full spectrum of activities, including in infrastructure development such as railway links, roads & bridges, waterways, border-related infrastructure, transmission lines, power generation, hydropower etc. In addition, India is also enhancing the scope of mutually beneficial projects through new initiatives such as by sharing India's development experience in Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), agriculture, inland waterways, power sector cooperation, digital connectivity, financial connectivity, space cooperation, health, education, etc.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 6)

While considering the principles and objectives of ‘Neighbourhood First Policy’ and ‘Act East Policy’, the Committee note that the Neighbourhood First Policy exclusively focuses on India’s immediate neighbourhood while the Act East Policy focuses on the extended neighbourhood in the Asia-Pacific region. Both Neighbourhood First and Act East Policies focus on creating a stable and prosperous neighbourhood through continued engagement at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels. The Act East Policy can also be seen as a logical extension of the Neighbourhood First Policy. The Committee further note that enhanced connectivity with our Asian neighbourhood, which is one of the strategic priorities under Act East Policy, holds immense potential to bring about a significant positive developmental impact on the North-Eastern Region. The Committee feel that economic development of the North-Eastern Region which shares land borders with many of the neighbouring countries is also integral to the success of the Neighbourhood First Policy and would impact the successful implementation of the Act East Policy. The Committee, therefore, urge the Ministry to maintain a synergy between these two important foreign policies as it holds significant potential to bring about connectivity, economic development and security of the North-Eastern Region and apprise the Committee about the outcome accordingly.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed Committee is duly noted. The coming together of the “Act East” and the “Neighbourhood First” policies has an enormous reinforcing impact for the development of India’s North East. Enhanced connectivity of the North-East with India’s neighbours- including restoration of historical cross-border rail links, development of Land Customs Stations and Integrated Check Posts, roads, as well as multimodal corridor, namely the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Corridor are being developed. Negotiations are also underway to operationalise the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement to ensure seamless vehicular movement. Agreements for moving of goods into and from the North East through ports in Bangladesh are also being worked out. Border haats are being developed in various North-Eastern states to facilitate local exchange of goods.

In addition, digital, power, and energy connectivity is also being strengthened in the region. India is also supporting the development of the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway project. Through the BIMSTEC Working Group on Transport Connectivity, member states are regularly discussing ways to improve connectivity including the implementation of the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 7)

The Committee note that ICCR being the cultural institution under the MEA mandated to cultivate the elements of soft power for furthering India's international relations by earning goodwill, has been running Indian Cultural Centres in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Maldives and Myanmar. These cultural centres are the nodal points for promoting our cultural relations in these countries. In view of the importance of cultural engagement in our Neighbourhood First Policy, the Committee desire that the Ministry should make an assessment of the adequacy of such centres in our neighbouring countries and strengthen the existing ones in a balanced manner. The academic cooperation, special scholarships schemes and exchanges in the fields of performing/fine arts undertaken by ICCR may be scaled up in consultation with the Ministry so that increased participation in the said activities strengthen our neighbourhood relations.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed committee is noted for compliance. ICCR contributes towards promotion of Indian culture abroad through its wide range of activities which include inter-alia, teaching of Yoga, Dance & Music, scholarship schemes and exchange of cultural delegations. Under this strategy, the ICCR has also been making all efforts for strengthening the relations with its neighbouring countries, particularly Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Maldives and Myanmar in consultation and cooperation with the Ministry and the Indian Missions/Posts concerned.

In order to closely engage with the neighbouring countries the ICCR has opened its centers in Sri Lanka (1998), Nepal (2007), Afghanistan (2007), Bangladesh (2010), Bhutan (2010), Myanmar (2010) and Maldives (2011).

In line with the recommendation of the esteemed Committee, ICCR is also increasing **scholarship slots** under different scholarship schemes for countries in the neighbourhood.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 9)

The Committee are also seized of the fact that India is facing continuing threats from cross-border terrorism, illegal migration, smuggling of fake currency and contrabands, trafficking in drugs and weapons, etc. and find it imperative to enhance security infrastructure at the borders. The Committee had also discussed the issue of border safety and security with the representatives of MEA, MHA and MoD during their meetings as well as during on-the-spot study visits. The Committee, therefore, urge the Government to take comprehensive measures for upgrading border security apparatus and bridge connectivity gaps at the borders under the Neighbourhood First Policy. The Committee also desire that Demographic changes through illegal migration in the bordering areas may also be monitored vigilantly and the Committee be apprised accordingly in this regard.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation is duly noted for compliance. Steps for better border management in the neighbourhood are continuously being taken by Government of India through improved border infrastructure and enhanced security cooperation. The Ministry of Home Affairs is the lead agency for development of border security apparatus to curb illegal migration, smuggling and cross-border terrorism. MEA continues to assist MHA in these endeavors.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 10)

The Committee note that the dividends of the Neighbourhood First Policy have translated into strong support for India in various multilateral fora such as the UN, NAM, Commonwealth, SAARC and BIMSTEC. India works in close cooperation with its neighbouring partners in these groupings towards ensuring the security and growth for all in the region. The Committee desire that the Government should not be complacent but be ever vigilant of the new developments in the neighbourhood and the region to leverage the support and cooperation from all countries in various multilateral fora in the coming years. The Committee urge the Ministry to remain focused on building closer relationships as a strong regional player while positioning itself as supporting the growing aspirations of its smaller neighbours.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation is duly noted for compliance.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 11)

India's Neighbourhood First Policy is a dynamic policy that adjusts to our renewed interests in the region while evolving according to regional circumstances. Being aware of China's Belt and Road vision and America's Indo-Pacific vision, the Committee are of the considered view that it is in India's strategic interests and foreign policy requirements to focus on wider engagements and deepening of ties with smaller neighbours. The Committee also desire that the opportunities presented by an open and competitive South Asian market may also be grasped and consolidated from both security and economic perspectives.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation is duly noted for compliance.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 12)

The Committee observe that unlike India's relationship with other countries in the neighbourhood, bilateral relations with Pakistan and China has been plagued by contentious issues. One of the core concerns with Pakistan is terrorism emanating from territories under its control. The Ministry has stated that the onus is on Pakistan to ensure a conducive atmosphere for any meaningful dialogue. The Committee have also been informed that as a result of proactive outreach with the international community, India has successfully thwarted Pakistan's attempt to present an alarmist situation of the region; interfere in its internal affairs and internationalize bilateral issues. In view of the belligerent attitude of Pakistan, the Committee desire that the Government should continue to proactively engage with the regional and multilateral bodies/organizations extensively so as to sensitize them of the role played by Pakistan in fostering terrorism and win their support in the fight against terrorism on its soil. Efforts may also be made to establish a common platform for countering terrorism under the Neighbourhood First Policy. Despite the lack of progress on the diplomatic front, the Committee urge the Government to consider the establishment of economic ties with Pakistan if they come forward and work towards broader people-to-people contacts in view of the cultural commonalities and civilizational linkages between our two countries and no feeling of enmity amongst citizens of both the countries.

Reply of the Government

The Ministry takes due note of the recommendation of the esteemed committee. The trade relations between India and Pakistan are affected by the overall political relationship between the two countries. Pakistan suspended all trade with India post August 2019 in retaliation to non-operationalization of article

370 of the Constitution of India. Pakistan partly relaxed its trade ban in September 2019 to allow imports of only pharmaceutical goods. Trade with India in other items continues to be banned by Pakistan.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 13)

The Committee note that under the Neighbourhood First Policy, India's engagement with its neighbours range from connectivity projects including economic, energy and digital connectivity to cultural projects; education and health care; developmental and technological cooperation; cooperation in maritime security to humanitarian and disaster relief. It is seen that massive investment in infrastructure has improved physical connectivity in the neighbourhood. In the field of energy connectivity, India is promoting easier movement of hydrocarbons across the region and as a part of this, cross-border pipelines including the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline have been constructed. In the electricity sector, grid interconnection with our neighbouring countries is being augmented. The Committee find that India is also working on wind energy projects, renewable energy projects and solar power projects with some of the neighbouring countries. In the field of technology, the South Asia Satellite was launched in May 2017 and the India-Bhutan Satellite in November 2022. Tele-learning and telemedicine have emerged as new areas for assistance to our neighbours. Further, India is the educational hub and health care hub for the neighbourhood. On the economic front, 24 bilateral trade with our neighbouring countries have improved and there has been a quantum jump from USD 3.27 billion in 2014 to USD 14.7 billion in 2020 in India's Lines of Credit to its neighbours. In fact, almost 50% of our global soft-lending goes to our partners in the neighbourhood. Maritime security in the region has been expanded and the security capacities and capabilities of some of our neighbours upgraded through India's efforts. Above all, India is the first responder during many humanitarian disasters in the region. The Committee acknowledge the efforts and initiatives taken so far, however, in view of the incontrovertible importance of the region to India and the potential of our country to contribute towards building a safe, secure, prosperous and well-connected South Asia, the Committee urge the Ministry to continue to uphold the "non-reciprocal policy"

towards its smaller neighbours in the sub-continent and its immediate perimeter in the fields of capacity building, cooperation in information and digital technologies, space, cyber security, etc. Moreover, the Committee would like that a clear roadmap should be prepared for promoting trade connectivity and contact among people of neighbouring countries so that India can achieve global role through defined role and contribution of these countries.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed committee is duly noted. In line with the recommendation, promoting Connectivity and People-to-People contact is a central focus of India's Neighbourhood First Policy. This encompasses all dimensions of connectivity including in new areas like cooperation in digital technologies, ICT, Outer Space and Cyber security, etc., apart from improving connectivity in rail, road, air, and financial connectivity. Pilgrimage to religious shrines in the neighbourhood is also facilitated by the Government.

Capacity building has remained a priority area of cooperation to assist the people, especially youth through various training programs under ITEC. India has also extended assistance to our neighboring countries in setting up institutions for higher learning and research, industrial training centers, etc.

Recommendation (Sl. No. 14)

The Committee appreciate the efforts made by the Government in ensuring continued movement of goods and people through India's borders during the COVID-19 lockdown facilitating the repatriation of nationals of Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, Pakistan and other countries and in providing medicines/medical equipment to combat corona virus through bilateral aid as well as through its commitments in the SAARC. The initiative taken by India for creating a COVID-19 Emergency Fund based on voluntary contributions from the Member countries and the offer of 10 million US dollars as unilateral contribution to the fund are highly commendable. The Committee are of the view that India should continue to take the lead in humanitarian outreach as such efforts reap good will and foster the spirit of solidarity amongst our neighbours. As countries in our

immediate neighbourhood are prone to natural disasters like earthquake, tsunami, extreme weather events, etc., the Committee desire that the Ministry should also explore the feasibility of creating a Disaster Relief Fund on the lines of the COVID-19 Emergency Fund under the aegis of the Neighbourhood First Policy.

Reply of the Government

India has an established reputation of being the first responder in neighbourhood countries, in the Indian Ocean Region and beyond. In line with the recommendation of the esteemed Committee, annual budgetary allocation is made under a separate Head “Aid for Disaster Relief” from amongst the budget allocated to MEA. This enables Government to timely respond to requests for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 15)

The Committee note that India’s development partnership with Afghanistan covers areas such as power, water supply, road connectivity, healthcare, education, agriculture and capacity building running into more than five hundred projects spread across each of the 34 provinces of the country. India has committed over USD 3 billion for developments in Afghanistan. The Committee have also been informed that the majority of our projects in Afghanistan have been completed and handed over. The Committee further note that despite the changes in the political landscape of Afghanistan since August 2021, India continue to provide humanitarian assistance to the people of that country. Shipments of 40,000 MT of wheat, 55 tonnes of medicines and 500,000 doses of COVID vaccine have been supplied to the Afghan people. In the wake of the earthquake which struck Eastern Afghanistan in June, 2022, India as a true first responder had dispatched 28 tonnes of emergency relief assistance to the Afghan people. In view of the long standing civilizational relationship with the Afghan people, the Committee desire that the Government should continue as per the past practice to provide humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan in times of need. As far as pending projects committed earlier are concerned, concerted efforts should be made to complete

them and hand them over at the earliest possible and also keep our arms open for other diplomatic gestures in the changed political scenario.

Reply: Reply of the Government

In line with the recommendations of the esteemed committee, Government of India continues its humanitarian assistance for the welfare of Afghan people. In this endeavor, till date, India has supplied 50,000 MTs of wheat and 200 tonnes of medical assistance, and has also provided winter clothing, stationery, female hygiene kits, blankets, etc.

India has continued ICCR scholarship schemes for Afghan students post August 15, 2021. Since then, more than 2000 students, including 301 Afghan girls have been provided ICCR scholarships. For providing opportunities to Afghans residing in Afghanistan, India has now decided to provide online scholarships for 1000 Afghan students.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 16)

Under India's Presidency, the UN Security Council met thrice to discuss the evolving situation in Afghanistan, resulting in four outcome documents. These included three press statements and a resolution. At the last of these meetings on 30 August 2021, the Council adopted UNSC Resolution 2593, which demands that the Afghan territory should not be used to threaten or attack any country or to shelter or train terrorists or to plan and finance terrorist acts. In view of the urgent need to prevent cross-border terrorism in the country, the Committee urge the Ministry to make diplomatic efforts for implementation of the said Resolution in letter and spirit so that terrorist networks and safe havens are not nurtured in the soil of Afghanistan.

Reply of the Government

In line with the recommendation of the esteemed committee, India is actively engaging with the regional and international partners to ensure stability and peace in Afghanistan, and to foster international and regional consensus on the issues related to terrorism and radicalization. With this aim, India regularly participates in various regional and international formats on Afghanistan.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 18)

The Committee note that with the exchange of Instruments of Ratification of the India-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement on 6 June 2015, the land boundary between India and Bangladesh have been settled. Mechanisms for the peaceful and cooperative management of the 4,096 kms long international border are also actively focused on border fencing, joint inspection of boundary pillars, joint boundary demarcation including of riverine boundaries, among others. The Committee feel that there should be better management of the Indo-Bangladesh Border to prevent infiltration, cross-border smuggling, etc. and desire that the bilateral mechanisms for management of this long border should be strengthened. The Committee also desire to be apprised of the status of border fencing and the demarcation of riverine boundaries between India and Bangladesh.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed Committee is duly noted for compliance. Ministry of Home Affairs is the lead Ministry for border fencing and related issues of infiltration, cross-border smuggling etc. for the management of the India-Bangladesh border.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 19)

The Committee are aware of the long outstanding issue between India and Bangladesh on sharing of Teesta River water and desire that this important issue be worked out at the earliest for improved bilateral relations with Bangladesh. The Committee also urge the Ministry to initiate meaningful dialogues with Bangladesh on a regular basis to arrive at a consensus in the matter and the progress/outcome may be informed to the Committee.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the Committee is duly noted. Water sharing is an important area of bilateral cooperation. India has regular meetings at various levels to discuss this issue including the issue of Teesta river water sharing.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 20)

The Committee find that Bangladesh being India's largest development partner, concessional credits amounting to almost USD 10 billion has been extended to them, including Lines of Credit (LOC) worth USD 7.862 billion (Rs. 59,000 crores), comprising around 25% of India's entire LOC portfolio. These include LOCs of USD 862 million (LOC-I), USD 2 billion (LOC-II), USD 4.5 billion (LOC-III) covering 42 projects across a wide range of sectors. In addition, there is a separate LOC of USD 500 million dedicated only for defence related projects. Out of the 42 projects covered under the three LOCs, 14 projects have already been completed; 8 projects are currently under execution; 7 projects are under tendering and 13 projects are under preparation stage. Besides, Concessional Financing Scheme of USD 1.6 billion is also being provided to Bangladesh. In addition to LOCs, India has also been providing grant assistance to Bangladesh for various infrastructure projects including construction of Akhaura-Agartala rail link, dredging of inland waterways and construction of India-Bangladesh Friendship

Pipeline for supply of High Speed Diesel into Bangladesh. 74 High Impact Community Development Projects including construction of student hostels, academic buildings, skill development and training institutes, cultural centers, orphanages as well as various heritage restoration projects have also been funded by India. The Committee feel that the benefits of our development partnerships with Bangladesh can best be reaped through timely and effective implementation of these projects. They, therefore, urge the Ministry to take effective steps for timely completion of all the projects including projects taken up under Lines of Credit through regular and intensive monitoring.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed Committee is duly noted for compliance. The Development Partnership Administration (DPA) Divisions of the Ministry have been tasked with continuous monitoring of implementation of projects, including those taken up under Lines of Credit.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 21)

The Committee note that recently three MoUs have been signed between India and Bangladesh viz. MoU on Collaboration in IT systems and applications for Bangladesh Railways; MoU on Scientific and Technological Cooperation between Council for Scientific 39 & Industrial Research, India and Bangladesh Council of Scientific & Industrial Research and MoU on Cooperation in the Areas of Space Technology, to boost bilateral technology cooperation. Talks to explore new areas of technological cooperation like start-up ecosystem, cyber-security, emerging technologies, Fintech Sector (particularly UPI) and tech-skilling are also on between India and Bangladesh. The Committee desire that the MoUs and talks may result in enhanced cooperation between the two countries in various areas.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed Committee is duly noted for compliance. India and Bangladesh have signed MoUs on cooperation in nuclear energy, Space, digital technologies etc. Bangladesh-Bharat Digital Service and Employment Training (BDSET), is a project funded by India in Bangladesh for employment and training of young professionals in Bangladesh. A MoU between NPCI and Bangladesh Bank for use of Unified Payments Interface (UPI) in Bangladesh has been signed and 'India-Bangladesh Startup Bridge' has also been launched following on the high-level announcement of exchanges between Startups and entrepreneurs of both countries.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 23)

The Committee are concerned to note the recurring instances of cross border terrorism, illegal migration, smuggling of fake currency and trafficking in drugs and weapons from across Bangladesh Border. The Ministry of External Affairs has been raising the issue of illegal migration but with no outcome and the bilateral institutional mechanism has also not been capable enough to tackle the situation. The Committee, therefore, desire that the existing bilateral institutional mechanisms to control all these issues should be strengthened to make it effective. They also desire that MEA should work in close coordination with the Ministry of Home Affairs and the State Governments concerned to address the issue of illegal migration by monitoring the demographic changes taking place in Indo-Bangladesh border villages and other parts of the country due to such migration and take up the issue of repatriation of such illegal migrants with the Government of Bangladesh at the highest level for an early resolution.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed committee is duly noted. Issues like cross-border terrorism, illegal migration, smuggling of fake currency and contra-band, trafficking in drugs and weapons etc. are primarily dealt by the

Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA). The Ministry of External Affairs closely coordinates with MHA in this regard.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 24)

The Committee observe that apart from ongoing cooperation in areas such as connectivity, security, water-sharing and energy, cooperation in peaceful uses of nuclear energy, space cooperation, new technologies, etc. have been identified as the areas for further strengthening of India's relationship with Bangladesh under the Neighbourhood First Policy. The Committee expect that the Government would come up with fresh mutually beneficial initiatives in these areas and implement the same for enhanced bilateral ties and growth and prosperity of both the countries.

Reply of the Government

In line with the recommendation of the esteemed committee, India has extended cooperation to Bangladesh in areas of space cooperation and peaceful uses of nuclear energy. India has also extended cooperation in capacity building at the Rooppur nuclear power project in Bangladesh. New mutually beneficial initiatives are being identified on a regular basis for further strengthening of bilateral ties.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 25)

The Committee note that India and Bhutan have agreed to expand bilateral cooperation in new areas of space, digital connectivity, health, youth exchanges and tertiary education. Four MoUs in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) areas have been signed between the Royal University of Bhutan and the premier educational institutes of India- IIT Delhi, IIT Kanpur, IIT

Bombay and NIT Silchar in August 2019. A new M.Tech scholarship (03 slots annually) at IIT Kanpur was instituted from the academic year 2020 onwards. In 2020, GoI has established 'India-Bhutan eLibrary Project' in all districts of Bhutan with support from Centre for Development of Advanced Computing. In a new chapter in our advancing development partnership, the India-Bhutan SAT, jointly developed by India and Bhutan was launched into space on 26 November 2022 by ISRO's Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle. Another significant milestone has been the complete inter-operability of RuPay card with Bhutan. Interconnection between India's Knowledge Network (NKN) and Druk Research & Education Network (DrukREN) was established in August 2019. India also formalised in November 2021, the opening of seven new trade routes for Bhutan's bilateral and transit trade with India. The Committee desire India and Bhutan to further expand the scope of bilateral cooperation under the Neighbourhood First Policy. The Committee also desire that such expansion should be made on the basis of findings of a 360 degree evaluation of the impact of the projects already implemented in Bhutan and MoUs signed for ongoing projects and after exploring the scope of expansion of bilateral cooperation under the Neighbourhood First Policy.

Reply of the Government

India and Bhutan have a strong tradition of high level exchanges on bilateral cooperation. In line with this tradition, His Majesty the King of Bhutan visited India on 03-04 April 2023 which provided an opportunity for both countries to review the entire gamut of bilateral cooperation and to advance the bilateral partnership.

In line with the recommendation of the esteemed committee, several initiatives have been agreed by both sides to further expand bilateral cooperation on trade, technology, cross-border connectivity, and mutual investments include (i) long-term sustainable arrangements for export of agricultural commodities from Bhutan and import of essential agricultural commodities from India. (ii) long-term bilateral arrangements for assured supply of critical commodities to Bhutan such as petroleum, fertilizers, and coal. (iii) consider setting up the first Integrated Check

Post along India-Bhutan border near Jaigaon and Phuntsholing (iv) proposed cross border rail link connecting Kokrajhar in Assam to Gelephu in Bhutan (v) Third International Internet Gateway for Bhutan (vi) development of inland waterways connectivity (vii) work towards opening of additional Foreigners Check posts between Bhutan and Assam.

In the field of education cooperation, the number of scholarships offered to Bhutanese students in India has been regularly increased. At the request of the Royal Government of Bhutan, a new initiative of recruiting Indian teachers through MEA for teaching in schools of Bhutan was started. Engagement in space cooperation further deepened with the visit of Chairman, ISRO in March, 2023 for inauguration of Ground Earth Station for India-Bhutan SAT. A Joint Plan of Action (JPoA) is being finalized between India and Bhutan to take forward space cooperation.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 28)

The Committee understand that India shares over 699 km of open border with Bhutan across Sikkim, West Bengal, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. In view of the open border between India and Bhutan, the Committee desire that the Government should work towards a regular border management and enhanced security cooperation and Central Government level by strengthening the existing mechanisms and not only leaving it open for annual border districts coordination meetings. The Committee also urge the Government to maintain closer coordination at Central level in sharing information on illegal activities; smuggling of drugs; fake Indian currency; trafficking; etc. between India and Bhutan for a safe and secure regional neighbourhood.

Reply of the Government

In line with the recommendation of the esteemed committee, India and Bhutan have a Border Management and Security mechanism headed at the level of Home Secretary. The mechanism discusses issues pertaining to cross-

border crimes and strengthening security arrangements. In addition to this, Border District Coordination meetings between local level officials from Bhutan and States of Assam and West Bengal takes place regularly.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 29)

The Committee note that Maldives has always been a close and important maritime neighbour of India. It has been observed that despite the pandemic related disruptions and political instability in Maldives, our multifaceted ties have got further strengthened. In April, 2022, MoUs for taking up 7 new High Impact Community Development projects were signed with Maldives. In November 2022, budgetary support of USD 100 million was given to Maldives by India to overcome the impact of the ongoing economic crisis. RBI and MMA also signed a Currency Swap Agreement of USD 200 million in December 2022. Nine large infrastructure projects have been taken up for implementation under the USD 800 55 million LOC extended to Maldives in December 2018. A number of projects, namely, construction of Addu Roads and Establishment of Water and Sanitation Network for 34 islands; redevelopment of Hanimaadhoo airport; expansion of Cricket Stadium in Hulhumale; upgradation of MIFCO's fish processing units; construction of a new port in Gulhifalhu; expansion of Gan Airport in Addu and Cancer hospital; conservation of the Friday Mosque in Male, etc. are at different stages of implementation. Besides, five sports infrastructure projects and proposals of the Government of Maldives under USD 50 million defence LOC are also at PQ stage. The Committee further note that several ongoing initiatives are being carried out in new areas of cooperation between India and Maldives. Efforts are on to strengthen cooperation in the area of renewable energy and grid inter-connectivity. Tourism and health sector are also potential areas for investment. The Committee feel that effective implementation and early completion of all the ongoing and pending projects in Maldives would be of immense mutual benefit to both countries and bring a new impetus to our bilateral relations. The Committee, therefore, urge the Ministry to make concerted efforts in this direction. The proposals for sports infrastructure projects and defence projects through LOC which are at PQ stage, may be finalized at the earliest. The Committee also desire

that institutional linkages for cooperation in new areas like renewable energy and grid inter-connectivity, tourism and health sector, etc. be deepened.

Reply of the Government

India has been implementing various grant & concessional LoCs supported projects across Maldives. Large number of projects have been completed and many are under various stages of implementation and progress is regularly monitored and reviewed through various institutional mechanisms. Several of the sports and defence LOC projects have moved ahead from preliminary stage and new/revised proposals from Maldivian side in these sectors are also being received and processed. Efforts are being made to deepen the cooperation in new areas like renewable energy and grid inter-connectivity, tourism and health sector, etc. Discussions are ongoing to have cooperation in renewable energy and grid interconnection based on mutual priorities of the two sides. Under the MoU on health cooperation, the Joint Working Groups have been meeting at regular intervals and various initiatives are being implemented/discussed. Regular cross border tourism expo/marts are being held by the private sector in both India and Maldives.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 30)

The Committee note that efforts are being made to tap the potential of seafood exports from Maldives to India. Facilitation of duty free tuna exports to India was announced in August 2022. Recognizing the potential for seafood export-import trade between India and Maldives, the Committee desire MEA to work in close coordination with the Ministries/Departments concerned for promotion of seafood trade between the two countries. India should also explore investment and partnership synergies with Maldives to tap the full potential for seafood trade between the two countries.

Reply of the Government

India has been supporting various projects in Maldives to expand the capacity of Tuna fishing in Maldives by supporting fish processing capacity up gradation under High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) & Line of Credit (LoC) projects. A large scale fish processing factory with state of the art technology is being built under LOC. Once operational, this will be the first facility of this kind in Maldives and would significantly augment their fish processing capabilities thus enabling higher trade in this sector. For knowledge sharing and capacity development, an MoU has been recently signed between INCOIS India and Maldives' Ministry of Fisheries (MoFMRA) for cooperation in Fisheries sector with aim to enhance potential fishing zone forecast capacity building and conduct of marine scientific research & capacity building.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 31)

The Committee observe that the tourism sector directly accounts for about 75% of the GDP of Maldives. Since 2020, India has been the largest source of tourist arrivals to Maldives. Further, medical tourism is an important aspect of the India-Maldives health cooperation. In view of the opportunities and potential for economic development and employment generation offered by the tourism sector under its development partnerships with Maldives, the Committee urge the Ministry to promote investment in the tourism sector including medical tourism segment under the Neighbourhood First Policy.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed committee is duly noted for compliance. India is an important Medical treatment destination for Maldivians. A large number of Maldivians travel to India for medical consultations and treatment. Recently, Maldivians are also traveling to India for consultations/treatment in traditional systems of Medicine including Ayurveda. A framework MoU was signed in June 2019 and under it the first JWG meeting was held in Jan 2020 at

Male. Second JWG on Health Cooperation was held (in virtual mode) in August 2023.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 32)

The Committee note that Myanmar is a key partner for both India's Neighbourhood First Policy and Act East Policy. The pace of new initiatives being taken with Myanmar has slowed down since 2020, firstly due to the COVID-19 Pandemic and then due to the political crisis that has ensued after the military takeover of that country in February 2021. However, India has maintained its bilateral engagements with Myanmar with initiatives being finalized as and when feasible. GoI has also been providing technical and financial support to set up Indo-Myanmar Industrial Training Centres with two centres established in Pakkoku and Myingyan, and two more being set up in Monywa and Thaton. In 2022, India signed a Project Agreement for Establishment of Modern Integrated Check Post at Tamu. Out of 24 projects under LOCs (total worth \$ 745.57 million), 21 projects have already been completed. The Committee further note that security situation in the area has been a challenge for progress of the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project and IndiaMyanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway. The Committee desire that implementation of development projects in Myanmar should not suffer on account of change in its political landscape and urge the Government to make consistent efforts towards insulating such projects from political turmoil and make all out efforts for timely completion of the ongoing projects.

Reply of the Government

In line with the recommendation of the esteemed committee, steps are being undertaken for making progress on development projects, despite the political crisis and the associated security challenges in Myanmar. The Sittwe Port, part of Kaladan Multimodal Transit Project, and funded through Government of

India assistance was inaugurated in May 2023. Issues arising in making progress on projects are regularly taken up at the highest levels to ensure timely completion.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 33)

Though there is no border dispute between India and Myanmar, the Committee understand that the boundary demarcation work remains to be completed in some sectors of the India-Myanmar border. Various initiatives have also been taken to strengthen border infrastructure like establishment of an Integrated Check Point at Moreh and a Land Crossing Station at Zokhawthar. A Project Agreement has been signed with Myanmar in 2022 for establishing a Modern Integrated Check Post at Tamu while framework for mode of operationalization of Border Haats is also under discussion. The Committee desire that the institutionalized bilateral mechanisms between India and Myanmar should be strengthened and boundary demarcation in the remaining sectors of India-Myanmar boundary should be completed at the earliest. Concerted efforts may also be made to establish Integrated Check Point/Modern Integrated Check Post and Land Crossing Station at the finalized locations. The Committee also urge the Ministry to speed up the process for establishing a framework for mode of operationalization of Border Haats. Progress achieved in this regard may be communicated to the Committee.

Reply of the Government

Efforts are ongoing towards boundary demarcation in unsettled areas. This is being discussed through various institutional mechanisms such as the Joint Boundary Working Group and Heads of Survey Department Meeting. The progress on the establishment of Modern Integrated Check Post and Border Haats has been affected by the ongoing internal conflict in Myanmar as some of the worst affected areas are along the India-Myanmar border.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 34)

The Committee note that the issues of cross border terrorism, illegal migration, smuggling of fake currency and trafficking in drugs and weapons are discussed at established bilateral institutional mechanisms with Myanmar. On the issue of illegal migration, MEA assists the concerned State Government and Ministry of Home Affairs to verify the nationality of the individuals for their repatriation and has also raised the issue of repatriation of illegal migrants with the Government of Myanmar from time to time. Trafficking of drugs and other cross-border security concerns are dealt through relevant bilateral institutional mechanisms with Myanmar. In view of the recurring instances of cross border terrorism, illegal migration, smuggling of fake currency, trafficking in drugs and weapons, etc., the Committee desire that the bilateral institutional mechanisms to check the same may be strengthened. MEA should work in close coordination with the Ministry of Home Affairs and the State Governments concerned for speedy identification and repatriation of illegal Myanmarese immigrants. The issue of repatriation of illegal migrants may also be taken up with the Government of Myanmar at the highest level.

Reply of the Government

India and Myanmar have established bilateral mechanisms to discuss these issues. MEA coordinates closely with MHA which is the lead Ministry on these matters.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 35)

The Committee note that India's bilateral relations with Nepal has expanded to new initiatives in agriculture, inland waterways and power sector cooperation. The 'India Nepal New Partnership' in Agriculture which focuses on collaborative projects in agriculture education and R&D was launched in April 2018. The Inland waterways connectivity between India and Nepal with four multi-modal transportation routes via Jharkhand, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh was announced in

2019. Two of the terminals at Varanasi and Sahibgunj have already been completed and work is underway for the remaining terminals. India and Nepal have also unveiled a Joint Vision Statement on Power Sector Cooperation in April 2022. Indian companies are currently developing large Hydro Electric Projects in Nepal including Arun III (900 MW), Lower Arun (679 MW), Arun-4 (490 MW), West Seti and SR-6 (1200MW) and Upper Karnali (900 MW). Under Lines of Credit, 44 road projects; 7 projects in hydropower and transmission lines and several others in housing and reconstruction spread all across Nepal have been financed and a large number of these projects are either completed or are nearing completion. The Committee desire that the Government should give focused attention to collaborative projects in agriculture education and R&D as it would give a boost to the rural economy of both the countries. The remaining inland waterway terminals for the multi-modal transportation routes may be completed at the earliest. The Committee are aware that India would greatly benefit from the commissioning of large hydro electric projects currently being developed by Indian companies in Nepal by way of power export and urge the Government to monitor the progress of work effectively so that these hydro-electric projects are completed and operationalized without time and cost overruns. The Committee also desire that all the ongoing and pending projects under Lines of Credit, including housing and reconstruction projects, should be completed at the earliest.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation is noted for compliance.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 36)

The Committee understand that ‘Operation Maitree’, the rescue, relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction assistance provided by India to Nepal in the wake of the earthquake in April 2015, was India’s largest post-disaster assistance programme outside the country. Under ‘Operation Maitree’ India committed an assistance package of USD 1 billion including USD 250 million in grants and

US\$ 750 million as Line of Credit, for post-earthquake reconstruction projects. Grant of US\$ 50 million is allocated for reconstruction of 28 cultural heritage projects in 7 districts of Nepal. As of now, work is in progress in 24 sites; 2 projects are in tendering process and 2 projects are at DPR preparation stage. Though major components of the assistance package that have either been successfully completed or are progressing towards completion include the sectors of housing, education, health care and cultural heritage restoration, the Committee urge the Ministry to monitor the progress of works that are progressing with a view to getting them completed expeditiously. Efforts may also be made for timely finalization of the projects at tendering stage and preparation of DPR and the Committee may be apprised accordingly.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation is duly noted for compliance.

The post-earthquake reconstruction projects are categorized into four sectors- namely Housing, Health, Education and Culture. Out of these, housing sector projects have been completed in November 2021. Education sector projects are going to be completed by October 2023. Health Sector projects are ongoing and expected to be completed by June 2024.

With regard to culture sector, out of 28 projects, 2 have been completed and handed over to the Government of Nepal while 22 are ongoing.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 37)

The Committee note that India and Nepal have established bilateral mechanisms for regular discussion on the issues of flood and inundation management, namely the Joint Committee on Inundation and Flood Management and the Joint Committee on Kosi and Gandak Projects. Both countries also cooperate closely in the area of flood forecasting for which a network of meteorological and hydro-

meteorological sites have been set up in India and Nepal. The Committee are aware about the difficulties faced by both the countries due to flooding of the Kosi and Gandak rivers. They, therefore, desire that the bilateral mechanisms should be strengthened so that regular and meaningful interactions are maintained between India and Nepal for cooperation on flood and inundation management as well as in carrying out river training projects across both sides of the border. The network of meteorological and hydro-meteorological sites in India and Nepal should also be upgraded with the latest technological advancement for accurate flood forecast and data inputs be shared for mutual benefits.

Reply of the Government

India and Nepal have established a three-tier bilateral mechanism at the Ministerial, Secretary and technical levels to oversee the entire gamut of cooperation in water related issues. These are (i) Joint Ministerial level Commission on Water Resources (JCMWR) at apex level; (ii) Joint Committee on Water Resources (JCWR) at Secretary level; and (iii) Joint Standing Technical Committee (JSTC) at technical level. Besides the above, there are specialized committees which implement the recommendations of the three-tier mechanism that meet more regularly and report to this three-tier mechanism.

For rivers other than Gandak and Kosi, the Joint Committee on Inundation and Flood Management (JCIFM) has been established. It is headed by Member, Ganga Flood Control Commission (GFCC), Ministry of Jal Shakti (MoJS) and has representatives from Governments of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh as well as from MEA. This mechanism also takes care of funding of river training works in Nepal under 'Aid to Nepal' budget. For Gandak and Kosi rivers, the Joint Committee on Kosi and Gandak Projects (JCKGP) has been established. It is headed by Secretary, Water Resources, Government of Bihar and has members from MEA, MoJS and Government of Uttar Pradesh. Further, to address repeated concerns on inundation and flooding along border areas, a Sub Committee of JCIFM was constituted in 2018 to carry out joint inspection and suggest possible solutions. Works recommended by the Sub Committee are regularly taken up for resolution of such inundation and flooding issues. India and Nepal are also cooperating closely in the

area of flood forecasting. Towards this end, a network of meteorological and hydro-meteorological sites have been set-up in Nepal and in India.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 38)

The Committee note that the Government is in the process of upgrading India-Nepal border trade infrastructure with an objective to reduce bottlenecks, accelerate clearances and promote the creation of regional economic hubs. In recent years, India has been assisting Nepal in the development of border infrastructure through upgradation of 10 roads in the Terai area; development of cross-border rail links at Jogbani-Biratnagar, Jaynagar-Bardibas and establishment of ICPs at Birgunj, Biratnagar, Bhairahawa and Nepalgunj. The Committee further note that construction of ICP at Nepalgunj is ongoing while operationalization of ICP at Bairahawa would commence soon. Keeping in view the vast potential for border trade between India and Nepal, the Committee urge the Government to complete the construction work of the ICP at Nepalgunj and operationalize it at the earliest. The Committee also expect that the ICP at Bairahawa would commence functioning very soon. In order to achieve the goal of economic prosperity and stability in the region under the Neighbourhood First Policy, the Committee further urge the Government to facilitate the creation of regional economic hubs.

Reply of the Government

In line with 'Neighbourhood First' policy, the Government of India is committed to enhance connectivity with Nepal, including facilitating and promoting border trade and economic activities. In this pursuit, Government of India is building Integrated Check Posts (ICP) on either sides of Indo-Nepal border to systematize the movement of cross-border cargo trucks between the two countries by bringing customs and immigration facilities under one roof. The ICP facility is envisaged to promote systematic approach to cargo handling and, therefore, will result in saving of time and inconvenience to visitors and reduce overall transaction costs for cross-border trade and commerce.

ICP at Nepalgunj (Nepal), along with mirror ICP Rupaidiha (India) was inaugurated by PMs of India and Nepal in June 2023. Further, ground breaking ceremony for implementation of a fourth ICP at Bhairahawa in Nepal (along with mirror ICP at Sunauli, (U.P), was done in June 2023 and construction has commenced. In addition to the above, an MoU was signed during the visit of Nepali PM to India in June 2023, for initiating development of ICP DodharaChandani (mirroring ICP Banbasa in Uttarakhand) in Nepal under GoI assistance.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 39)

The Committee note that India is funding cross-border railway link between India and Nepal at Jaynagar in India to Bardibas in Nepal and Jogbani in India to Biratnagar in Nepal. Jaynagar-Kurtha stretch of the Jaynagar-Bardibas Project has been operationalised in April 2022. Work on the railway connectivity at Kurtha to Bijalpura stretch and extension upto Bardibas and on the 17.65 km Jogbani – Biratnagar rail link is ongoing. The Government has also provided funding for carrying out feasibility study of the proposed Raxaul-Kathmandu broad gauge rail link between both the countries. In view of the importance of cross-border railway link between India and Nepal for strengthening of border infrastructure and greater people to people connect, the Committee urge the Government for early operationalization of the ongoing rail link projects and completion of the feasibility study of the proposed Raxaul-Kathmandu broad gauge rail link.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation is duly noted for compliance. Status updates of these projects are as follows:

- a) Jayanagar-Bijalpura-Bardibas rail link: The length of the Jayanagar-Kurtha-Bijalpura-Bardibas Rail Link is 68.72 km, out of which 2.98 km is in India and 65.75 km is in Nepal. Jaynagar-Kurtha cross-border rail section (34.9

Kms.) was flagged off and operationalised by PMs of India and Nepal in April 2022. Kurtha-Bijalpura section was made operational in July 2023 and survey work is ongoing in the final segment.

- b) Jogbani-Biratnagar rail link: The length of Jogbani-Biratnagar railway line is 18.6 km, out of which 5.45 km is in India and 13.15 km is in Nepal. Track of 7.74 km section between Bathnaha (India) and Nepal Customs Yard(Nepal) has been completed. This stretch was flagged off for cargo traffic in June 2023, by PMs of India and Nepal. Work is ongoing in the remaining segment.
- c) Raxaul-Kathmandu rail link: Final Location Survey report for Raxaul-Kathmandu rail link was handed over to Nepali side in June 2023.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 40)

The Committee observe that a large number of Indians are attracted to Nepal for religious tourism while Nepalese nationals also visit tourist places, shrines and temples located in the farthest corners of India. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Cooperation in the field of Tourism was signed between the two Governments on 25 November, 2014 in Kathmandu. The Committee desire that the Government should make sincere efforts to achieve the aims and objectives of the MoU such as, enhanced cooperation between India and Nepal in the field of tourism; facilitating direct communication between the stakeholders of tourism and hospitality industry and bringing about better and improved tourism cooperation while enhancing economic development and employment generation in the country. The Committee also desire that periodic assessment of the impact of the said MoU may be made under intimation to the Committee.

Reply of the Government

Government has taken several steps for enhancing tourism between India and Nepal, some of which are as follows:

1. Nepal India Chamber of Commerce and Industry in association with Embassy of India Kathmandu organised an event to promote bilateral tourism between India and Nepal on 27 March 2023. Mr Sudan Kirati, Hon'ble Minister for Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation of Nepal was the Chief Guest.
2. A coffee table book on religious and spiritual circuits in India and Nepal was launched.
3. Government has been implementing various connectivity initiatives to facilitate movement of tourists between the two countries. Rail services such as Jaynagar-Kurtha connects cities of touristic importance of Nepal to India. Launch of RuPay Card in Nepal has further helped Indian tourists in Nepal.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 42)

The Committee note that India has been pursuing the humanitarian issue of release of prisoners and fishermen in Pakistan's custody. Since 2014, India has been successful in securing the release and repatriation of more than 2,700 Indian prisoners including 40 Indian fishermen and 05 Indian civilian prisoners. The Committee are aware that many more Indian nationals including fishermen have been languishing in Pakistani prisons for a long time and desire that the Ministry should step up its diplomatic efforts to secure their early release and repatriation to India.

Reply of the Government

Highest priority is attached to the welfare, safety, security and repatriation of Indian prisoners in Pakistani custody. As soon as cases of apprehension of Indian nationals by Pakistan are reported, immediate steps are taken by the Indian Mission in Islamabad towards seeking Consular Access from the Government of Pakistan.

All possible assistance is extended to the Indian prisoners for their early release and repatriation. Cases of apprehension of Indian prisoners and fishermen are raised continually with the Government of Pakistan and it is reiterated that prisoner and fishermen matters should be considered as a humanitarian issue.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 43)

The Committee note that several rounds of talks were held under the aegis of the Composite Dialogue Process between 1998 and 2012 to discuss various issues including terrorism and drug trafficking; peace and security including Confidence Building Measures; Sir Creek, etc. between India and Pakistan. The Committee further note that many a times, initiatives of India for resumption of the Dialogue have been responded with acts of cross-border terrorism and violence by Pakistan. The Committee recommend that India should continue to remain active and fully prepared to expose Pakistan's act of cross border terrorism and violence against India at the United Nations and various multilateral and regional fora and counter their raising the issue of Kashmir appropriately.

Reply of the Government

India continues to call upon Pakistan to take credible and verifiable actions to not allow any territory under its control to be used for cross-border terrorism against India. The issue of cross-border terrorism emanating from territory under Pakistan's control is highlighted by India with partners through bilateral diplomatic channels and at international fora. The Government has been assiduously countering the anti-India propaganda efforts made by Pakistan at various international and regional fora.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 44)

The Committee note that Sri Lanka is one of our major development assistance partners. Under the Indian Housing Project, 60,000 houses are being built and numerous people-oriented High Impact Projects in sectors like agriculture, health, child and women empowerment, education and livelihood generation are under implementation. Several projects under Lines of Credit are under discussion. Implementation of the USD 100 million Solar project is expected to bolster cooperation in the renewable energy sector between India and Sri Lanka. The Committee further note that eleven rounds of negotiations on an Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement (ETCA) covering goods and services have been completed as far back as in September 2018 and the Sri Lankan side has now conveyed its willingness to resume the said negotiations. The Committee understand that the said ETCA would broaden the scope of Free Trade Agreement between India and Sri Lanka strengthening economic, trade, investment and technology cooperation and therefore, desire that the negotiations should be resumed for its early and successful conclusion. It should also be the endeavour of the Government to complete all the ongoing projects in various sectors expeditiously while taking up new initiatives for cooperation in capacity building and skill development.

Reply of the Government

India has been carrying out people-oriented development projects across Sri Lanka in accordance with the priorities of the Government and people of Sri Lanka. These projects cut across sectors such as infrastructure, housing, health, livelihood and rehabilitation, education, industrial development etc. Indian Housing Programme is the largest housing project undertaken by India abroad. The project commenced in 2012 and close to 50,000 houses have since been completed in three different phases. Sri Lanka wide operations of the 1990 Emergency Ambulance Service prove to be of great utility across the island particularly during COVID-19. In addition, India has completed numerous projects in diverse areas including railway infrastructure and integrated water supply plants.

During the visit of the President of Sri Lanka to India in July 2023, the Governments of India and Sri Lanka have agreed to undertake discussions on Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement with an aim to comprehensively enhance bilateral trade and investments in new and priority areas. Accordingly, both sides are discussing suitable mutually convenient dates for resumption of talks.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 45)

The Committee note that the ongoing economic uncertainty in Sri Lanka along with the acute scarcity of forex have created challenges in financing of imports from India such as through Letters of Credit. Imposition of licensing requirements and restrictions on certain imports by Sri Lanka to reduce forex outflow to stabilize their current economic situation have impacted a few of India's major exports to Sri Lanka such as vehicles. In addition, some pre-existing challenges in terms of non-tariff measures and regulations also have had some repercussions. The Committee also note that many of these issues have been resolved successfully while efforts are underway to address others. The Committee feel that despite the ongoing economic crisis in Sri Lanka, there is scope for smooth and enhanced bilateral trade between the two countries and they, therefore, urge the Ministry and Indian Mission to play a more proactive role in resolving all the pending issues so that significant increase in Indian exports to Sri Lanka is achieved.

Reply of the Government

India is engaging Sri Lanka for early resolution of bilateral trade issues. Despite the economic crisis in Sri Lanka last year and the scarcity of forex, bilateral trade in 2022-23 was to the tune of USD 6.12 billion (Indian export USD 5.1 billion). Recent decisions taken by both sides to further strengthen trade and

commercial engagement include the decision to designate INR as currency for trade settlements; facilitation of digital financial payments; enhancing air & sea connectivity; and exchange of technology/know how etc.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 46)

The Committee are aware of the long pending fishermen issue between India and Sri Lanka. The Ministry has informed that in the 5th Joint Working Group Meeting on Fisheries held in March 2022, both countries have agreed on the need to work out a long term solution to the fishermen issue. In view of Indian fishermen getting arrested and their boats being seized by Sri Lankan Navy every now and then, the Committee urge the Ministry to consistently engage with the Sri Lankan Government through meaningful dialogues so that a permanent solution to the issue of fishermen and their livelihoods is worked out in a humanitarian manner. The Committee desire that the Ministry should also take initiatives for maritime domain awareness in its extended neighbourhood.

Reply of the Government

In respect of the arrest of Indian fishermen and boats, as on date, no Indian fishermen are under Sri Lankan custody. With sustained diplomatic efforts, Government of India secured release of all 2,934 fishermen, who were arrested by Sri Lankan authorities since 2014 and repatriated them to India. In case of boats, 112 boats out of 139 boats under Sri Lankan custody.

India has been regularly taking up the matter at the highest levels in the Government of Sri Lanka through diplomatic channels. India continues to remain engaged with Sri Lanka at all levels on its efforts to protect the interests of our fishing community.

During the Virtual Bilateral Summit between India and Sri Lanka on 26 September 2020, the two Prime Ministers “agreed to continue engagement to address the

issues related to fishermen through regular consultation and bilateral channels according to the existing frameworks and shared goals including the UN Sustainable Development Goals”. Further, Regular meetings of Joint Working Group Meeting on Fisheries and High-Level Meetings between the Coast Guards are being held. The 5th Meeting of India - Sri Lanka Joint Working Group on fisheries took place in March 2022 in a virtual format. These mechanisms act as a communication channel for discussions on ways to improve the fisheries order and pursue fisheries cooperation between India and Sri Lanka.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 47)

The Committee note that India and Sri Lanka share a robust defence and security partnership. Our cooperation includes capacity building to prevent crimes across maritime boundary ranging from establishment of Maritime Rescue Coordination Center, Floating Dock for Sri Lankan Navy, Dornier Aircraft, etc. Security cooperation between India and Sri Lanka also involves sharing of information on issues of counter terrorism, narcotic smuggling, gold smuggling, human trafficking and illegal migration. Besides, the Colombo Security Conclave wherein maritime countries of the region (India, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Mauritius as members and Bangladesh and Seychelles as observers) discuss collective security concerns, is convened regularly. The Committee desire that security partnership with Sri Lanka should further be strengthened for enhanced inter-agency cooperation and coordination. The Committee also desire that the Ministry should take fresh initiatives for enhancing the maritime domain awareness of Sri Lanka in the interest of the country and the region as a whole.

Reply of the Government

In line with the recommendation of the esteemed committee, as a part of capacity building initiatives, a MoU/ Agreement for sourcing of MRCC and Floating Dock was signed in March 2023 with scheduled delivery in early 2024

and end 2025. Further, the IN Dornier was deployed to Sri Lanka in August 2022 and is being used for maritime surveillance by Sri Lankan Air Force. In addition, MoU's related to Hydrography, NDC interaction and Defence Cooperation are being pursued for early conclusion with Sri Lankan side. Additionally, an Indian Liaison Officer from Sri Lanka was deputed to Integrated Fusion Center-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) since March 2022.

Under security partnership under Colombo Security Conclave, various initiatives like scientific research by academic institutes, focused operations by Navy's and Coast Guard, and workshops by IFC IOR are being pursued.

Towards improved Maritime Domain Awareness, MRCC project and sourcing of Dornier aircraft are being processed with Sri Lanka. In addition, seamless information sharing and coordinated efforts to tackle common maritime security challenges like illegal immigration, IUU fishing and drug trafficking are being undertaken by the Navy & Coast Guard of two countries.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 48)

The Committee find that in 2022, India had offered US\$ 1555 million credit facility to Sri Lanka in response to their requests for support to tide over the economic crisis they were facing. This included US\$ 500 million LOC for purchase of petroleum products, US\$ 1 billion Credit Facility for supply of food, fuel and other essential items and US\$ 55 million LOC for the procurement of urea fertilizer. Apart from these, the RBI provided US\$ 400 million as currency swap for Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL) in January 2022. In addition to the above financial assistance, RBI also deferred about US\$ 2 billion payment liabilities by CBSL under the Asian Clearing Union mechanism. Since Sri Lanka is still reeling under financial crisis, the Committee desire that the Government should continue to be Sri Lanka's biggest friend in times of crisis and support Sri Lanka by offering favourable terms for Lines of Credit, currency swap and other financial measures, if required by Sri Lanka.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed committee is duly noted. In line with its 'Neighbourhood First' policy, the Government of India has continued the support extended to the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) last year during its economic crisis. Accordingly, after announcement of the debt repayment suspension by GOSL in April 2022, India is one of the only bilateral partners which continued to implement projects in sectors of priority to the Government of Sri Lanka for its early economic recovery. India (along with Japan and France) is also the co-chair of the Creditors Committee formed to expeditiously finalize terms and conditions of restructuring Sri Lanka's debt owed to its external bilateral creditors. The significance of India's continued support and investment for Sri Lanka's sustainable, equitable and stable growth and the need to forge a closer and deeper bilateral economic partnership between the two countries has also been highlighted in the joint vision document released during the visit of President of Sri Lanka to India in July 2023.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 49)

The Committee note that India is also the largest source of FDI for Sri Lanka with an inflow of US\$ 142 million in 2021. Indian public and private sector entities are examining ways and projects to further expand their presence and investments in Sri Lanka in areas such as energy, power, real estate, ports & connectivity, renewable energy, minerals and manufacturing. As investment led growth is perhaps the most sustainable pathway for Sri Lanka to achieve expedited economic recovery, the Committee urge the Government to facilitate Indian public and private sector companies to invest in projects and set up businesses in Sri Lanka.

Reply of the Government

Investment-led growth is key for Sri Lanka's early economic recovery and overall socio-economic growth. In the past few years, Indian investment into Sri Lanka has seen encouraging trends, with India being the largest contributor of FDI to Sri Lanka over the past 4 years. Indian entities continue to develop projects related to energy, connectivity, renewable energy, real estate, hospitality and infrastructure in Sri Lanka. There are further opportunities for investors in India in the divestment of Sri Lankan State-owned Enterprises and in manufacturing/economic zones in various sectors in Sri Lanka. These opportunities are regularly highlighted to Indian public and private entities directly, through the Ministry and relevant industry chambers in India. Whenever required, Our High Commission facilitates Indian public and private Company' interactions with the Government of Sri Lanka and relevant stakeholders.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 50)

The Committee has noticed that India has also engaged constructively with Sri Lanka on debt restructuring and in enabling the approval of the support programme for Sri Lanka in the IMF. The Committee appreciate the approach of India and desire that the Government should also strongly advocate the need for supporting Sri Lanka at the IMF, to other countries.

Reply of the Government

The Government of India (GOI) supported the people and the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) through an unprecedented assistance of USD 4 billion extended last year. GOI has also conveyed its support for GOSL's efforts to address its debt challenges unequivocally at various forums. In [April 2022](#), on the sidelines

of the Spring Meetings of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank in Washington DC, the Minister of Finance of India not only conveyed India's commitment to assist and support Sri Lanka but urged the international community to come forward and do the same.

India was Sri Lanka's first bilateral creditor to support debt restructuring and convey specific and credible financing assurances to IMF as early as [16 January 2023](#), following which Paris Club and China also conveyed their financing assurances to IMF. This paved the way for approval of the IMF Executive Board to Sri Lanka's Extended Fund Facility (EFF) Programme to support its economic policies and reforms in March, 2023. In April 2023, India, Japan and France launched a Creditors Committee to hold talks among Sri Lanka's bilateral creditors to finalize a plan for restructuring Sri Lanka's debt. Three meetings of this Committee have been held till date (on [May 09](#), [June 08](#) and [July 24](#), 2023).

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 51)

The Committee note that India's engagement with its neighbours under regional frameworks like SAARC, BIMSTEC and BBIN is an important element of the Neighbourhood First Policy. The Committee recognize the potential for promoting deeper cooperation and regional integration through better partnerships under these regional frameworks. From the perspective of security also, a collective and coordinated efforts of member States in the region will prove more effective in countering terrorism and keeping a check on the various instruments used by terrorists to expand their activities. This would result in a secure and peaceful neighbourhood where growth and development can be accelerated. The Committee, therefore, urge the Ministry to make persistent efforts for strengthening and re-energizing these regional bodies to make them function more effectively.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed Committee is duly noted.

India's engagement with SAARC and BIMSTEC are important elements of the Government's "Neighbourhood First Policy". As a founding member of both SAARC and BIMSTEC, India believes these are important vehicles for building a peaceful, friendly and prosperous neighbourhood.

India remains steadfast in its commitment to SAARC in building a connected, integrated, safe and prosperous South Asia. As a founding member, India remains committed to working with member states in SAARC to achieve the objectives laid down in the SAARC Charter including cooperation in areas of common interest. It continues to make significant contributions to SAARC institutions and support various initiatives to achieve closer cooperation in diverse areas for the development and progress of all countries in the region. India has continued its commitment to SAARC with initiatives such as extension of India's national knowledge network, launch of South Asia Satellite, and continued support to SAARC Secretariat and SAARC institutions including South Asian University and SAARC Disaster Management Center. However, despite our sincere efforts, SAARC is not able to function optimally due to hurdles created by one SAARC member state, as a result of which, SAARC meetings have not been held in recent years and the progress on this platform has been limited.

BIMSTEC's unique strength is the connectivity it forges between South and South East Asia. The participation of BIMSTEC leaders at the swearing in of the Government of Prime Minister Modi in 2019 was a testament to its importance for India. India is committed to further building the momentum of regional cooperation under BIMSTEC. At the 5th BIMSTEC Summit in 2022 in Colombo, the Leaders adopted the BIMSTEC Charter, a milestone in the transition of BIMSTEC from a grouping into a regional organization. Prime Minister announced several initiatives at the Summit to take forward the BIMSTEC platform, several of which have been implemented including the grant of USD 1 million to the operational budget of the BIMSTEC Secretariat to complete institution building tasks.

With regard to BIMSTEC, the 2016 Leaders' Retreat of BIMSTEC Member states organized by India in October 2016 has added momentum to the BIMSTEC platform. Two Summits (4th Summit in 2018 and 5th Summit in 2022) have taken place since; BIMSTEC Charter was adopted at the 5th Summit and priority sectors of cooperation have been reorganized with each member state leading a crucial pillar of cooperation. Member states have also finalized Rules of Procedure for BIMSTEC core, sectoral mechanisms and for BIMSTEC's external relations. A BIMSTEC Eminent Persons Group (EPG) to study the current functioning of BIMSTEC, and suggest practical steps to further strengthen the organization and take the cooperation to the next level will be launched soon. To further strengthen and guide the BIMSTEC platform, the 6th BIMSTEC Summit is scheduled to be held on 30 November 2023.

BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) was signed in June, 2015 during the meeting of the Transport Ministers of the participating countries in Bhutan. Bhutan, pending ratification by its Parliament, in April 2017 gave its consent for implementation of the BBIN MVA by the three countries Bangladesh, India and Nepal. A draft MoU to implement the BBIN MVA amongst these three countries was agreed in a meeting held in March 2022. Draft Cargo Protocol and Passenger Protocol are also under discussions to operationalize the BBIN MVA at the earliest.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 52)

The Committee are aware that BIMSTEC has emerged as an important regional organization in recent years while not much progress has been made under SAARC due to hurdles created by one member State. As one of the founding members of SAARC and BIMSTEC, the Committee desire that in the interest of the region, India should play a more pro-active role in both the bodies and formulate a fresh strategy for the purpose and to keep them active and utilize both whenever the

occasion arises. As enhancing greater cooperation and partnerships amongst the countries in the neighbourhood is essential to achieve regional integration in all spheres, the Committee urge the Ministry to take the initiative for collective and coordinated efforts so that the member countries are able to work more effectively towards ensuring peace, stability and prosperity in the region and do not start looking elsewhere.

Reply of the Government

India has taken several unilateral initiatives in SAARC to share the fruits of its technological advances with interested Member States such as extension of National Knowledge Network (NKN) to Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Bhutan; launching of South Asian Satellite (SAS) and the countries such as Bhutan, Maldives and Bangladesh are currently utilizing its services in telecommunication and broadcasting, tele-medicine, tele-education, e-governance, banking/ ATM services, cellular back-haul, meteorological data transmission, disaster response and networking of academic and research institutions.

India is committed to further strengthen regional cooperation through BIMSTEC. During the 4th and 5th Summits, Prime Minister has announced several initiatives, many of which have been implemented with active participation and cooperation by member states. During the 5th Summit, in order for BIMSTEC to meet the expectations of member states and realizing the need to increase the capacity of the Secretariat, India announced financial assistance of one million dollars to the operational budget of the Secretariat. Member states finalized important rules of procedure which will help strengthen BIMSTEC mechanisms.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 54)

The Committee note that networking among institutes of Marine Sciences in the BIMSTEC region and study on creating value chains for agricultural products in the BIMSTEC region are under process. With a view to promoting deeper cooperation through collective efforts in the BIMSTEC region, the Committee urge the Government to actively coordinate with BIMSTEC countries for early implementation of the above networking scheme and urge RIS to complete their study on creating value chains for value added agricultural products in the BIMSTEC region.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed Committee is noted for compliance. India is actively pursuing the initiative of networking among institutes of marine sciences in the BIMSTEC region. RIS is also actively working on completing the Study on creating value chains for agricultural products in the BIMSTEC region.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 56)

Though SAARC has made good progress in some areas of cooperation, it has not been able to achieve its full potential as several important connectivity and trade initiatives such as SAARC Motor Vehicle Agreement, SAARC Railways Agreement, Agreement on Regional Air Services, Agreement on Trade in Services, etc. are held up since 2014 due to lack of consensus among all member States. Efforts toward collective collaboration and prosperity have been hampered by acts of terrorism and threats to national security by one country. In view of the vast potential offered by the South Asian region, it should be the endeavour of the Government to work towards realization of the full potential of SAARC through increased cooperation and collaboration with all other member countries isolating the defaulter country. The feasibility of establishing a common platform to fight

against acts of terrorism may also be explored. The Committee are hopeful that India would be instrumental in bringing the SAARC countries together and in jointly addressing the issue of cross border terrorism as done during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed Committee is duly noted. India has on various occasions reiterated that the region's efforts for greater collaboration have been repeatedly challenged with threats and acts of terrorism. India also reiterated that it is necessary to eliminate the scourge of terrorism in all its forms, without any discrimination, and end the ecosystem of its support for the region's survival. All decisions in SAARC are taken by consensus. However, SAARC is not able to function optimally due to hurdles created by one SAARC member state, as a result of which, SAARC meetings have not been held in recent years and the progress on this platform has been limited. India has been steadfast in its commitment towards regional cooperation through SAARC. India invited the SAARC Secretary General for the Third Ministerial Conference on Counter Terrorism Financing "No Money for Terror" in Delhi in November 2022.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 57)

The Committee note that at the last Summit of SAARC held in November 2014 in Kathmandu, India made a number of announcements to boost regional cooperation including enhancing cross border connectivity by rail, road and air; increasing intraregional tourism and creating cross-border tourist circuits; setting up a Special Purpose Facility for Infrastructure Development; introduction of the SAARC Business Traveler card; use of solar energy and micro-grids to provide electricity; monitoring and surveillance of polio free countries in the region; funds to establish SAARC Regional Supra Reference Laboratory for TB; providing immediate medical visas to patients and their attendants visiting India for treatment, etc. Some of these announcements have been implemented while work is in

progress on others. The Committee are of the view that effective implementation of all the said announcements would promote regional integration and improved regional cooperation under SAARC and urge the Ministry to make all our efforts for effective and early implementation of all the said initiatives.

Reply of the Government

India is actively monitoring the implementation of announcements made in the last SAARC Summit. Extension of India's National Knowledge Network (NKN) to SAARC countries has been implemented in Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Maldives. Bangladesh, Bhutan and Maldives are utilizing the services of South Asian Satellite launched by India. Provision of funds to establish SAARC Regional Supra Reference Laboratory for TB is being worked out. However, progress on other initiatives, particularly in infrastructure and in improving business is being blocked due to hurdles created by one member state.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 59)

The Committee note that BIMSTEC has evolved from a sub-regional forum in 1997 into a distinctive regional organization. The BIMSTEC Charter was also adopted in 2022. BIMSTEC is playing an important role in regional cooperation through numerous activities and projects in 14 diverse sectors with extensive cooperation among the member States. The Committee further note that BIMSTEC countries have institutionalized some important mechanisms for stability, such as BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking (2009) while BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters is ready for signing at the next BIMSTEC Summit. The Committee are aware that regional growth and prosperity cannot be achieved without stability and urge the Ministry to work towards strengthening BIMSTEC and ensuring the effective functioning of its institutionalized mechanisms, in close coordination with other BIMSTEC countries. The Committee also desire that India should take more initiatives for

elimination of destabilizing forces like terrorism, organized crime, drug trafficking, etc. in the region through collective efforts of all the member countries.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed Committee is duly noted for compliance. India is the lead country for BIMSTEC cooperation in the security pillar. The BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking was signed in 2009 and has entered into force on March 16, 2021. The BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters was signed during the 5th Summit in Colombo on 30 March 2022, and is yet to be ratified by all member states. The draft text of the BIMSTEC Convention against Trafficking in Persons has been finalized by the member states.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 60)

Over the years, BIMSTEC has proven to be a key body for regional cooperation serving as a unique link between South Asia and South East Asia. Activities under BIMSTEC have served as a visible input into our 'Neighbourhood First Policy' and 'Act East Policy'. Several unilateral initiatives announced by India including BIMSTEC Military Exercise (MILEX) and Army Chiefs' Conclave; BIMSTEC Ministerial Conclave at India Mobile Congress 2018; BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise; Scholarships to students from BIMSTEC countries at Nalanda University and some capacity building programmes have been implemented while work is in progress on other initiatives. In view of the pivotal role of BIMSTEC in regional cooperation, the Committee desire that work in progress on other initiatives may be implemented speedily. BIMSTEC being a unique regional organization focusing on India's core concerns in the region and thus fulfilling India's key foreign policy priorities of 'Neighborhood First' and 'Act East Policy', the Committee urge the Ministry to take fresh initiatives to nurture and re-energize the organization to make it more outcome oriented. Inputs derived

from India's engagement with BIMSTEC may also be optimally utilized in our foreign policy agenda.

Reply of the Government

During the 5th BIMSTEC Summit, in line with India's commitment towards strengthening BIMSTEC, Prime Minister announced initiatives which have been implemented: (i) A onetime grant of USD 1 million to the operational budget of the Secretariat to complete institution building tasks; (ii) 1st capacity building program by ICRIER in collaboration with ADB on Trade Facilitation was organized in May 2023; (iii) The scope of the BIMSTEC Nalanda Scholarship Scheme was expanded. Initiatives announced by the Prime Minister at the Summit namely on the establishment of networking scheme among institutes of Marine Sciences in the BIMSTEC region and a Study by RIS on creating regional value chains on value added agricultural products in the BIMSTEC region are under various stages of implementation.

In addition, India also organized: a training programme for law enforcement officers from BIMSTEC countries on issues pertaining to Cyber Security, Counter Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crimes, De-radicalization and other Law Enforcement Challenges; BIMSTEC Business Conclave in Kolkata in June 2023; A symposium on BIMSTEC: A Vehicle for Growth and Development in 2021; An ISCS-MEA Collaborative 2nd Conference on "BIMSTEC: 25 Years of Driving Force Behind Neighbourhood Cooperation" in 2023; a BIMSTEC Literary festival in Bhopal in January 2023; and announced PG and PhD scholarships in Agriculture, which emphasize India's commitment to strengthen cooperation in different areas for the larger benefit of the people in the BIMSTEC region.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 62)

The Committee find that BIMSTEC member States have also recently finalized a 'Master Plan for Transport Connectivity' that would lay down a long term roadmap

for even closer connectivity in the BIMSTEC sub-region. Implementation of the Master Plan would improve connectivity of India's North East and beyond. In the opinion of the Committee, improved connectivity in the North Eastern Region of India will greatly contribute to the socio-economic development of the region and by virtue of the region's close proximity to Myanmar which acts as a bridge for ASEAN, would be instrumental in the success of the Act East Policy. The Committee, therefore, desire that the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity should be implemented at the earliest and urge the Government to make coordinated efforts in this regard.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed Committee is duly noted for compliance. Through the BIMSTEC Working Group on Transport Connectivity, member states are regularly discussing ways to improve connectivity including the implementation of the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

CHAPTER-III

OBSERVATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS WHICH THE COMMITTEE DO NOT DESIRE TO PURSUE IN VIEW OF THE REPLIES OF THE GOVERNMENT

Recommendation (Sl. No. 55)

The Committee note that the scope and substance of cooperation under SAARC has expanded over the years to diverse fields including trade and finance, economic integration, security, environment, education, culture, agriculture, border connectivity, telecommunication, S&T, etc. providing a firm basis for genuine partnership among the people of the region. A number of sub-regional and regional projects in social, economic and infrastructure fields are at different stages of implementation under the SAARC Development Fund. The Ministry has stated that SAARC leaders have pronounced that their ultimate goal is to create South Asian Economic Union in a phased and planned manner through a Free Trade Area, a Customs Union, a Common Market and a Common Economic and Monetary Union. The Committee desire that tangible outcomes and maximum benefits should be ensured under the SAARC Development Fund and urge the Government to work in close coordination with the member States towards fulfilling the ultimate goal of creating a South Asian Economic Union.

Reply of the Government

SAARC Development Fund (SDF) is an umbrella financial institution with a comprehensive funding mechanism for all SAARC projects and programmes. It is aimed to contribute to regional cooperation and integration through project-based collaboration with the provision of three Windows (Social, Economic and Infrastructure). Due to hurdles created by one member state in finalizing the modalities of selection of the CEO, SDF is currently functioning without a duly appointed head. As a result, necessary meetings of SDF have not been held in recent years and the progress in this body of SAARC has been limited.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 58)

In view of the strategic importance of the regional body SAARC, the Committee are of the opinion that that no member country should be allowed to impede the effective functioning of this forum and collective efforts need to be made by the other member countries to thwart any attempts to destabilize it. On account of the pivotal role of India in SAARC, the Committee urge the Government to take the initiative for coordinated efforts amongst the majority of the member countries ignoring the one so that regional cooperation under SAARC is promoted and not hampered due to lack of response from one country.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed Committee is duly noted. India attaches highest priority to the development and prosperity of the region under its “Neighbourhood First” policy. As a founding member of SAARC, India believes that is an important vehicle for building a peaceful, friendly and prosperous neighborhood. India has taken various initiatives including asymmetrical responsibilities for enhancing regional cooperation under SAARC. However, all decisions in SAARC are based on consensus. Due to hurdles created by one SAARC member state, SAARC meetings have not been held in recent years and the progress on this platform has been limited.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

CHAPTER- IV

OBSERVATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS IN RESPECT OF WHICH REPLIES OF THE GOVERNMENT HAVE NOT BEEN ACCEPTED BY THE COMMITTEE AND REQUIRE REITERATION

Recommendation (Sl. No. 8)

The Committee observe that India's Neighbourhood First Policy has achieved over the years benefits like greater regional connectivity, improved infrastructure, and stronger development cooperation in various sectors, enhanced security and broader people-to-people contacts with our immediate neighbours. Further, regular assessments are being done and the impact on the ground is measured in a real way. The Committee while acknowledging the efforts of the Ministry are of the view that more needs to be done, especially, addressing the huge deficiency in our border infrastructure. The Committee find that the deficiency relates to the way our border districts are developed compared to those facing the districts across the country. As our border areas are pivotal in unlocking the potential of our engagements with our neighbours, the need to stabilise and develop the border regions have become critical. So, for more effective engagement with our immediate neighbours, connectivity infrastructure like cross-border roads, railways, inland waterways and ports, energy, telecommunication and digital links, etc. needs to be enhanced. The Committee, therefore, desire that the Ministry of External Affairs should take it up with various Central Ministries, Departments and agencies concerned the need for regional infrastructure development of the border areas through increased allocation/investment, pooling of resources and above all, convergence of everybody's interest and focus. The Committee also desire that the feasibility of setting up a regional development fund for connectivity infrastructure under regional frameworks like BIMSTEC may also be explored.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed committee is noted for compliance. Under India's 'Neighbourhood First policy', Government of India has focused on enhancing development of border areas. Issues pertaining to development of the

border areas are taken up regularly with concerned line Ministries by the Ministry of External Affairs.

Further, BIMSTEC member states have successfully negotiated an Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation. Member states are also negotiating BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement on priority. Member states are also negotiating the next steps toward implementation of the BIMSTEC Master Plan on Transport Connectivity which was adopted by the Leaders during the 5th BIMSTEC Summit in Colombo.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Comments of the Committee

Please refer to Para No. 10 of Chapter I of this Report

Recommendation (Sl. No. 17)

The Committee note that India and Bangladesh enjoy a robust partnership and 2021 saw their diplomatic relations completing 50 years. Acknowledging the importance of leveraging the potential of new and emerging areas of cooperation, India and Bangladesh have agreed to collaborate in new areas of cooperation, such as, environment, climate change, cyber security, ICT, space technology, green energy and blue economy. Presently, both countries are looking forward to strengthening their trade and economic ties through a bilateral Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement. As per the Ministry, a Joint Study Report on the Agreement has been finalized and the negotiations would be commencing soon. The Committee, hence, desire that the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement with Bangladesh, be finalized at the earliest and commence negotiations on the same for its early implementation within a time frame.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed committee is duly noted. India and Bangladesh finalized a Joint Study in 2022 for starting the negotiations on CEPA. Ministry of Commerce is the lead Ministry on negotiations for CEPA.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Comments of the Committee

Please refer to Para No. 19 of Chapter I of this Report

Recommendation (Sl. No. 27)

Presently, India offers seven major scholarships to Bhutan, including the wellknown Ambassador's Scholarship, prestigious Nehru Wangchuck Scholarship, Five-Year Plan project-tied assistance based Undergraduate Scholarship, Nalanda University Scholarship, ICCR Undergraduate Engineering scholarships, IIT Kanpur scholarship and AYUSH scholarships. Over 1100 Bhutanese students benefit from these scholarships, making it an important aspect of our bilateral relationship. A large number of Bhutanese civil servants and professionals from private sector and others undertake ITEC training programmes administered by the Development Partnership Administration Division of the Ministry of External Affairs. In recent times, the focus has been on developing customized ITEC programmes specifically for Bhutanese nationals. In 2021-22 alone, 340 Bhutanese nationals benefited from the e-ITEC training programmes whereas in 2020-2021, it was 250. In 2022, GoI also customised special ITEC programmes for training 100 Bhutanese young entrepreneurs at the prestigious Entrepreneurship Development Institute of India, Ahmedabad and 30 entrepreneurs at the Indian Institute of Packaging. Going by this track record, the Committee urge the Ministry to further expand the scope of scholarships and customized training programmes in the coming years to accommodate more number of students, Government officials and professionals.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation is duly noted for compliance.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Comments of the Committee

Please refer to Para No. 28 of Chapter I of this Report

CHAPTER-V

OBSERVATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS IN RESPECT OF WHICH FINAL REPLIES OF THE GOVERNMENT ARE STILL AWAITED

Recommendation (Sl. No. 5)

The Committee find that there aren't enough Parliamentary exchanges between India and its neighbourhood countries and there has been only one Parliamentary visit from the People's Majlis of Maldives in the recent years. The Committee are of the strong view that regular Parliamentary Exchanges with neighbouring partners can also play a pivotal role in the implementation of the Neighbourhood First Policy. The Committee, therefore, urge the Ministry to utilize the Parliamentary forum in a better way by facilitating more and more Parliamentary exchanges between India and its neighbouring countries for better interaction between Parliamentarians of India and the countries in the neighbourhood so that the philosophy of the Neighbourhood First is widely shared and upheld in its true spirit.

Reply of the Government

Ministry has noted the recommendations of the Hon'ble Committee and would strive to work out a plan for structured interaction with the Parliamentarians from foreign countries, including from the neighbourhood.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Comments of the Committee

Please refer to Para No. 7 of Chapter I of this Report

Recommendation (Sl. No. 22)

The Committee observe that efforts are being undertaken to strengthen the border infrastructure by opening and upgrading Integrated Check Posts (ICPs)/Land Customs Stations (LCS) and border haats at India-Bangladesh border. They also understand that infrastructural capacity constraints and procedural issues at border are discussed under the mechanisms of Sub-group on Infrastructure of ICPs/LCS, Commerce Secretary Level Talks (CSLT) and Joint Group on Customs (JGC)

meetings. Presently, the work for upgradation of 6 more LCSs to ICPs on the India-Bangladesh border is on. In view of the importance of strengthening the infrastructure at the India-Bangladesh border from security and economic/trade perspective, the Committee urge the Government to open more ICPs/LCS as well as border haats, wherever required and upgrade the existing ones. Bilateral working mechanisms to discuss infrastructural and capacity constraints and procedural issues at border may also be strengthened.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed Committee is duly noted. Upgradation of border infrastructure is discussed between India and Bangladesh under the Sub Group on Infrastructure. Currently five Integrated Check Posts (ICPs) are operational on India-Bangladesh border, namely ICP Petrapole, ICP Agartala, ICP Sutarkandi, ICP Dawki and ICP Srimantapur. Government of India plans to upgrade seven more of the existing Land Customs Stations into ICPs to boost bilateral trade and commerce namely Sabroom, Kawrpuichhuah, Fulbari, Ghojandanga, Mahadipur, Hilli, and Changrabandha.

Currently, six Border Haats in states of Meghalaya and Tripura are functional between both countries. Work is ongoing to establish more Border Haats in Assam, West Bengal and Mizoram. Proposal for the expansion of the Border Haats is currently under consideration of the Department of Commerce.

Comments of the Committee

Please refer to Para No. 25 of Chapter I of this Report

Recommendation (Sl. No. 26)

The Committee note that a number of proposals for new projects in Bhutan are currently in nascent stage, viz., establishment of a wholly-owned Subsidiary of the Bank of Bhutan (which has 20% shares by SBI) in India; construction of a railway line between Gelephu in Bhutan and Kokrajhar in India; construction of Integrated Check Post at Jaigaon, etc. The Committee, therefore, desire that the Ministry of External Affairs should facilitate for an early finalization and implementation of

these projects through effective coordination with the Ministries/Departments concerned.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed committee is duly noted. The establishment of a wholly owned subsidiary of the bank of Bhutan in India is being discussed at the technical level between RBI and the Royal Monetary Authority of Bhutan.

The preliminary study for construction of a railway line between Gelephu (Bhutan) and Kokrajhar (India) has been carried out for establishing rail connectivity between India and Bhutan and the report is being finalized by the Ministry of Railways.

Currently there is no Integrated Check Post (ICP) on the India Bhutan border. West Bengal Government has offered 54 acres of land recently for development of ICP Jaigaon. The land acquisition process is presently underway.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 41)

The Committee note that with the launch of RuPay card in India and Nepal, RuPay has become the new element of our digital and financial connectivity. Interoperability of our financial platforms and products is something which is very intrinsic and fundamental to the financial and digital connectivity between our two countries. The Committee, hence, desire that the Government should explore the digital e-market and e-commerce platforms in neighbouring countries to market Indian products and vice versa so as to achieve upgraded digital and financial connectivity in the region.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed Committee is duly noted for further action.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 53)

The Committee find that a draft MoU to implement BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement among Bangladesh, India and Nepal was agreed in March 2022 and draft Cargo and Passenger Protocols are under discussion to operationalize the BBIN MVA. As BBIN MVA would result in tremendous economic benefits for border trade and transport through the North Eastern Region, the Committee urge the Government to make concerted efforts for early finalization of the Cargo Protocol and Passenger Protocol for operationalizing BBIN MVA.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed Committee is duly noted. BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement (MVA) was signed in June, 2015 during the meeting of the Transport Ministers of the participating countries in Bhutan. Bhutan, pending ratification by its Parliament, in April 2017 gave its consent for implementation of the BBIN MVA by the three countries Bangladesh, India and Nepal. A draft MoU to implement the BBIN MVA amongst these three countries was agreed in a meeting held in March 2022. Draft Cargo Protocol and Passenger Protocol are also under discussions to operationalize the BBIN MVA at the earliest.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Recommendation (Sl. No. 61)

The Committee note that India is currently leading BIMSTEC cooperation in four priority sectors, namely, Counter Terrorism & Trans-national Crime, Transport & Communication, Tourism and Environmental & Disaster Management. Besides, initiatives including HADR exercises, start-up conclaves and hackathons; capacity building; cooperation in science, technology and space; and establishment of Parliamentary forum have also been announced in 2018. The Committee welcome these initiatives as active collaboration and hope that mutual assistance on matters of common interest in the economic, social, technical and scientific fields would be promoted. Moreover, establishment of Parliamentary forum will facilitate interaction and discussion on common areas of interests, key areas of concern and also serve as a forum for building consensus. The Committee, therefore, desire that the new initiatives announced for the BIMSTEC region including establishment of Parliamentary forums should be realised at the earliest.

Reply of the Government

The recommendation of the esteemed Committee is duly noted for compliance. The establishment of a BIMSTEC Parliamentary Forum is under process.

[File No. AA/Parl/125/74/2023 dated 10/10/2023]

Comments of the Committee

Please refer to Para No. 43 of Chapter I of this Report

NEW DELHI
05 February, 2024
16 Magha, 1945 (Saka)

P.P. CHAUDHARY,
Chairperson,
Committee on External Affairs

MINUTES OF THE TENTH SITTING OF THE COMMITTEE ON EXTERNAL
AFFAIRS (2023-24) HELD ON 5 FEBRUARY, 2024

The Committee sat on Monday, 5 February, 2024 from 1500 hrs. to 1520 hrs. in
Main Committee Room, Parliament House Annexe, New Delhi.

PRESENT

1. Shri P.P. Chaudhary, Chairperson

Lok Sabha

2. Smt. Harsimrat Kaur Badal
3. Shri Dileshwar Kamait
4. Smt. Preneet Kaur
5. Shri P. C. Mohan
6. Smt. Queen Oja
7. Dr. K. C. Patel
8. Shri N.K. Premachandran
9. Shri Soyam Babu Rao
10. Dr. Harsh Vardhan
11. Shri E.T. Mohammed Basheer

Rajya Sabha

12. Smt. Jaya Bachchan
13. Shri Anil Desai
14. Dr. Ashok Kumar Mittal

Secretariat

- | | | | |
|----|---------------------------|---|------------------|
| 1. | Shri Anjani Kumar | - | Joint Secretary |
| 2. | Smt. Reena Gopalakrishnan | - | Director |
| 3. | Ms. K. Muanniang Tunglut | - | Deputy Secretary |
| 4. | Smt. Maya Menon | - | Under Secretary |

2. At the outset, the Chairperson welcomed the Members to the Sitting of the Committee.

3. XXXX XXXX XXXX XXXX

4. XXXX XXXX XXXX XXXX

5. XXXX XXXX XXXX XXXX

6. Thereafter, the Committee took up for consideration the draft Report on the Action Taken by the Government on the Observations/Recommendations contained in the Twenty-Second Report of the Committee on External Affairs on the subject ‘‘India’s Neighbourhood First Policy’.

7. The Chairperson invited the members to offer their suggestions, if any, for incorporation in the draft Report after some deliberations. The Committee adopted the draft report without any modification.

8. The Committee then authorized the Chairperson to finalize the Action Taken Report and present the same to Parliament.

The Committee then adjourned.

(Vide Para 4 of Introduction of Report)

**ANALYSIS OF ACTION TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT ON THE OBSERVATIONS/
RECOMMENDATIONS CONTAINED IN THE TWENTY SECOND REPORT OF THE
COMMITTEE ON EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (17TH LOK SABHA)**

**(i) Total Number of
Recommendations**

62

**(ii) Observations/Recommendations which have been accepted by the
Government.**

Recommendation Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21,
23, 24, 25, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47,
48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60 and 62

Total-51

Percentage: 82.26%

**(iii) Observations/Recommendations which the Committee do not desire to
pursue in view of the Government's replies.**

Recommendation Nos. 55 and 58

Total- 02

Percentage: 3.22 %

**(iv) Observations/Recommendations in respect of which replies of
the Government have not been accepted by the Committee and require
reiteration.**

Recommendation Nos. 8, 17 and 27

Total-03

Percentage: 4.84%

**(v) Observations/Recommendations in respect of which final replies
of the Government are still awaited.**

Recommendation Nos. 5, 22, 26, 41, 53 and 61

Total- 06

Percentage: 9.68%