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Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



Pakistan at Davos: World Economic Forum 2017

Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif participated in the World Economic forum (WEF) 2017 held in Davos from 17-20 January 2017. Over the four days, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif held bilateral meetings with Sweden, Switzerland, Sri Lanka, Norway, Netherlands and the United Nations. During those discussions the prospects of deepening relations with the above countries had emerged. The Kashmir issue was also constantly raised whenever Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif held talks with foreign leaders at the WEF. He also met with Alibaba's Chairman Jack Ma and Microsoft's founder Mr Bill Gates as well as several other global corporate giants. This paper provides a detailed analysis of Pakistan's participation in the World Economic Forum 2017.

Anish Mishra¹

The World Economic Forum (WEF) was established in 1971 as a Swiss non-profit international foundation.² “It is independent, impartial and not tied to any special interests.”³ The WEF acts as a non-political platform that allows for constructive dialogue to take place between “political, business and other leaders of society to shape global, regional and industry

¹ Mr Anish Mishra is a student at the Singapore Institute of Management, and a former Intern at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at anishmisrasg@hotmail.com. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper

² “Our Mission.” World Economic Forum, www.weforum.org/about/world-economic-forum.

³ Ibid

agendas.”⁴ Every year towards the end of January the WEF would host its key flagship summit in Switzerland’s winter resort of Davos. This year’s event took place from 17-20 January 2017 under the theme “Responsive and Responsible Leadership.”⁵ It focused on “five critical challenges – strengthening global collaboration, revitalizing economic growth, reforming capitalism, preparing for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and restoring a sense of shared identity.”⁶

The Pakistani delegation was led by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. This was an occasion he utilised to promote Pakistan as a destination for foreign direct investments (FDI). He also conducted bilateral meetings with the leaders of Sweden, Switzerland, Sri Lanka, Norway, Netherlands and the United Nations on the sidelines of the WEF. During those meetings the Prime Minister took advantage of the opportunity to present Pakistan’s position on the Kashmir Issue to those leaders.

Bilateral Meetings at Davos

In a discussion with Sweden’s Prime Minister Stefan Lofven, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif informed him about the human rights violations taking place in the Indian Jammu and Kashmir.⁷ He explained to his Swedish counterpart that Pakistan “extends full political, moral and diplomatic support to the people of Kashmir who were striving for their right of self-determination.”⁸ The Swedish Prime Minister expressed his interest to “strengthen and broaden ties with Pakistan, in all spheres”⁹, given that his government is already working very closely with Pakistan in many areas.¹⁰ Sweden’s main exports to Pakistan are “paper and pulp, telecommunication equipment, machinery, trucks, chemicals, metals and defense equipment”¹¹. Pakistan has been a recipient of FDI from Sweden’s multinational companies

⁴ Ibid

⁵ “World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2017: Responsive and Responsible Leadership.” World Economic Forum, www.weforum.org/reports/world-economic-forum-annual-meeting-2017-responsive-and-responsible-leadership.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ “Pakistan and Sweden to further boost bilateral ties.” Prime Minister’s Office, Islamabad, Pakistan www.pmo.gov.pk/press_release_details.php?pr_id=1664.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ “Trade between Sweden and Pakistan.” Embassy of Sweden, Islamabad, www.swedenabroad.com/en-GB/Embassies/Islamabad/Business/Trade-between-Sweden-and-Pakistan/.

such as “Ericsson, Saab, Tetrapak, Volvo, ABB, Atlas Copco, Oriflame and Alfa Lava.”¹² It also sells textiles to Sweden’s IKEA, H&M and Lindex.¹³ These companies then export Pakistani goods as their finished products to other international markets.¹⁴ Hence, the desire to increase total bilateral trade volumes has been on the common agenda of both Pakistan and Sweden.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif also met with the President of Switzerland, Doris Leuthard.¹⁵ The Swiss President expressed special interest to work with the Government of Pakistan on hydropower projects.¹⁶ She also stated that “the Swiss companies are more than willing to work in Pakistan’s positive and enabling environment.”¹⁷ President Leuthard also acknowledged Pakistan’s contribution to its western neighbour; Afghanistan. She said that “Pakistan has played a great role by giving refuge to three million Afghan refugees on its soil, and we hope Pakistan will continue to play its role in promoting good relationship with Afghanistan.”¹⁸ Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif responded to the President’s remarks on Afghanistan and said “Pakistan believes that security of Pakistan is directly linked to peace and stability in Afghanistan. Pakistan has continued to host millions of Afghan refugees for more than three decades. We are still hosting around 1.5 million refugees and about an equal number of undocumented Afghans.”¹⁹ Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif complimented Switzerland for its “objective, non-discriminatory and criteria-based approach on NSG (Nuclear Suppliers Group) membership.” He said “I hope that as part of the NSG troika, Switzerland would continue to maintain this principled stand, especially when it takes over the Chair of the group later this year.”²⁰ Therefore given Switzerland’s key position in the NSG, it is an important country in Pakistan’s diplomatic efforts to secure its bid for the NSG membership. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif also brought up the issue of human rights violations taking place in Jammu and Kashmir in his meeting with President Leuthard.

The only South Asian leader that the Pakistani Prime Minister met at Davos was the Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. In this meeting Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ “Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif met the President of Swiss Confederation Doris Leuthard.” Prime Minister's Office, Islamabad, Pakistan, http://pmo.gov.pk/press_release_details.php?pr_id=165

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

emphasised on Pakistan's commitment towards the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). He told Prime Minister Wickremesinghe that "It is our desire to promote good relations with the countries of our region, so that our people may benefit from the fruits of regional integration.... Pakistan attaches great importance to SAARC and is fully committed to the principles and objectives of the SAARC Charter. Pakistan wishes to see SAARC as a vibrant regional organization."²¹ Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif also ruled out substitutes for SAARC and stated that "Pakistan believes that SAARC cannot be replaced by BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation)."²² Once again, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif raised the issue of Human Rights atrocities taking place in the Indian administered Kashmir.²³ He also alleged India of "escalating tensions along the line of control to distract the world's attention away"²⁴ from this issue. In closing the meeting Prime Minister Wickremesinghe said that "We want more cooperation in trade and defense."²⁵ This is a manifestation of the presently cordial relations between Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It can also be observed that compared to Pakistan's relations with the other SAARC countries, the relationship it has with Sri Lanka is the friendliest among them.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif also used the Davos Summit to engage United Nations Secretary General (UNSG) Antonio Guterres on the Kashmir issue. He told the UNSG that "Kashmir is an international dispute, which remains on the Agenda of the Security Council....we invited India for discussions on the resolution of the Kashmir dispute, in accordance with the relevant resolutions of the UN Security Council and aspirations of the Kashmiri people. India did not respond positively. By adopting a no-talks posture, vitiating the atmosphere through incendiary statements, and trying to muzzle the voice for the legitimate right to self-determination of the Kashmiri people, New Delhi is fueling instability in an already tense region"²⁶ This shows Pakistan's posture of projecting itself as being the party that is willing to conduct peace talks with India which is avoiding dialogue with Pakistan. Before assuming office as the UNSG, Antonio Guterres was previously the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Prime

²¹ "Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif meeting with H.E. Mr. Ranil Wickremesinghe, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka." Prime Minister's Office, Islamabad, Pakistan www.pmo.gov.pk/press_release_details.php?pr_id=1651

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ "Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif meeting with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres." Prime Minister's Office, Islamabad, Pakistan, www.pmo.gov.pk/press_release_details.php?pr_id=1661.

Minister Nawaz Sharif reminded him that “Your visits to Pakistan in that tenure enabled you to understand our challenges in hosting millions of refugees.”²⁷ Pakistan received praises from the UNSG for hosting millions of Afghan refugees.²⁸ The Pakistani Prime Minister then extended an invitation to the UNSG to Pakistan and said that his visit will “showcase support and commitment to peace and progress in the region.”²⁹

Meetings with CEOs

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif also met with leaders of the corporate world on the sidelines of the WEF, canvassing for FDI on behalf of Pakistan. In his meeting with Alibaba’s Chairman Jack Ma, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif invited him to visit Pakistan.³⁰ Mr Jack Ma accepted the invitation and in return invited Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to visit Alibaba in Guangzhou, China.³¹ He also expressed interest in investing in Pakistan and building an e-commerce platform.³² Mr Ma also stated that the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) provided immense opportunities and that he plans to invest in small medium enterprises to benefit developing countries.³³

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was called upon by Microsoft’s founder Bill Gates. Mr Bill Gates expressed his satisfaction on the success of Pakistan in the field of polio eradication over the last three years under the leadership of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.³⁴ He also said that “he is looking forward to his visit in the coming months to Pakistan.”³⁵

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif also met with the CEOs of Vimplecom, Procter & Gamble and Standard Chartered Bank.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ “PM met with Chairman of Alibaba Group Mr. Jack Ma today in Davos, Switzerland on the sidelines of the 2017 World Economic Forum.” Prime Minister's Office, Islamabad, Pakistan, www.pmo.gov.pk/press_release_details.php?pr_id=1653.

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

³³ Ibid

³⁴ “Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif meeting with Bill Gates.” Prime Minister's Office, Islamabad, Pakistan, http://pmo.gov.pk/press_release_details.php?pr_id=1659

³⁵ Ibid

Pakistan's former Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General (R) Raheel Sharif also participated in the WEF. He spoke in a panel discussion titled "Terrorism in the Digital Age."³⁶ General (R) Sharif shared about his country's experience combating terrorism. On the subject of Military Courts, he said that "We have the military courts, 170 odd individuals were convicted and punished, a number of them came under death sentence...there is still a very large number going through the process...This was the need of the hour."³⁷ The constitutional term of military courts in Pakistan had recently expired on 7 January 2017. Thus the Pakistani Government is tasked with finding alternative mechanisms to ensure swift justice to captured terrorist. Highlighting Pakistan's success in curbing terrorist attacks, General (R) Sharif said "we were having 150 odd incidents a month and from that we came down to a single figure in 2016 and now with the help of God Almighty, we have 1 odd incident every one or two months."³⁸ This proves the substantial reduction of terrorism in Pakistan during General (R) Raheel Sharif's tenure as COAS.

An analysis of Pakistan's participation in Davos shows that the incumbent Pakistani government is increasingly marketing its potential for FDI. Pakistan is also projecting itself as an attractive country for investors that have essential safeguards in place to protect the interest of foreign investors. It is also an indication of Pakistan's ability to absorb more FDI on top of the Chinese investments in CPEC. This is on par with the FDI oriented directive of India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Thus there could lead to a possibility of these countries competing with each other for FDI in the coming years. This will enable a business friendly environment to emerge in South Asia that would be beneficial to the entire region.

During bilateral meeting conducted by Pakistan on the sidelines of the WEF the Kashmir Issue was constantly featured in the discussions. This is evident that while Kashmir continues to attract a disproportionate share of Pakistan's diplomacy, Nawaz Sharif sought to use the WEF as a platform to better engage the global leadership across a broad spectrum of issues, in order to enhance the stake of the international community more substantively in Pakistan's development and welfare.

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³⁶ "Terrorism in the Digital Age." World Economic Forum, www.weforum.org/events/world-economic-forum-annual-meeting-2017/sessions/terrorism-in-the-digital-age.

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid