

China primier invites Nawaz Sharif to visit

Pledges again to strengthen economic ties

AFP, Islamabad

Sharif, whose Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) party secured a convincing victory in the May 11 general election but who has yet to take office, said it would be a "personal honour" to accept Li's invitation.

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang yesterday invited Pakistan's incoming prime minister Nawaz Sharif to visit Beijing and reiterated a promise to strengthen economic ties.

Li, on the final day of a short visit to China's neighbour and long-time ally, told the Senate Beijing was ready to speed up work to improve the Karakorum Highway, which links the two countries.



"We want to not only expand our trade relations but also achieve dynamic balance in our trade," he told senators after holding talks with Sharif and senior PML-N leaders.

On Wednesday Li linked Pakistani development with that in China's restive western region and said he wanted to create an "economic corridor" between the two countries.

China took charge of the south-western Pakistani port of Gwadar earlier this year, which would give it access to the Arabian Sea and provide a shorter transit route for Gulf oil in one direction and Chinese goods in the other.

But any route to Gwadar lies through the province of Baluchistan,

which is plagued by separatist and religious violence.

The region's precarious security situation was thrown into sharp relief Thursday as a rickshaw bomb targeting security forces in the Baluchistan capital Quetta killed at least 12 people as Li prepared to make his senate address.

Aside from Pakistan's ongoing problems with violent Islamist militants, the new PML-N government also faces major challenges as it seeks to revitalise the ailing economy.

Weak growth, inflation, dwindling foreign exchange reserves and a crippling energy crisis are all pressing concerns for Sharif, who is expected to assume office in early June.

Blast kills 12 in Pakistan

AFP, Quetta

A bomb planted in a rickshaw tore through a vehicle used by security forces in southwest Pakistan yesterday, killing at least 12 people, police said.

The remotely detonated bomb containing around 100 kilos of explosives targeted a truck carrying members of a government paramilitary force on the outskirts of Quetta, the capital of restive Baluchistan province.

Baluchistan, Pakistan's largest but most undeveloped province, is wracked by Islamist and sectarian violence as well as a long-running insurgency waged by separatists, and attacks on security forces are common.

"At least 12 people have been killed, 11 of them were security personnel," senior police official Fayyaz Sumbal told AFP.

India capable of providing security to neighbours: PM

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India yesterday said it is well positioned to become a net provider of security in its immediate neighbourhood and beyond in the backdrop of multiple security challenges.

Laying the foundation stone of India's first defence university in Gurgaon, near here, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said India lives in a "difficult neighbourhood and faces the entire spectrum of security challenges".

"This is inevitable as we live in a difficult neighbourhood, which holds the full range of conventional, strategic and non-traditional challenges. We are also situated at the strategic crossroads of Asia and astride one of the busiest sea lanes of the world..... We are also living at a moment of history when the world is witnessing change on a scale and at a speed rarely seen before.

"Nowhere is this change more pronounced than in Asia where we are witnessing multiple security challenges on account of the intersection of fragile states,



internal conflicts, proliferation of arms and terrorist groups", he said.

Singh said the nature of conflict and competition is changing at the same time when national boundaries are being blurred by deepening global integration. "Therefore, while defending and securing our homeland, we also have to

be prepared to preserve India's expanding international assets".

He said India's "engagement in our immediate neighbourhood has increased. We have deepened political, economic and strategic relations in the Asia-Pacific Indian Ocean and West Asian regions. Our relations with all major powers have become stronger and more productive".

"Our defence cooperation has grown and today we have unprecedented access to high technology, capital and partnerships. We have also sought to assume our responsibility for stability in the Indian Ocean Region. We are well positioned, therefore, to become a net provider of security in our immediate region and beyond", he said.

Rafsanjani slams Iran leadership

BBC ONLINE

Former Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani has accused Iran's leaders of incompetence and ignorance, an opposition website reported yesterday.

Rafsanjani's comments come two days after he and another candidate were disqualified from next month's presidential polls.

"I don't think the country could have been run worse," he was quoted as saying on the Kalem website.

The Guardian Council approved only eight potential candidates to stand.

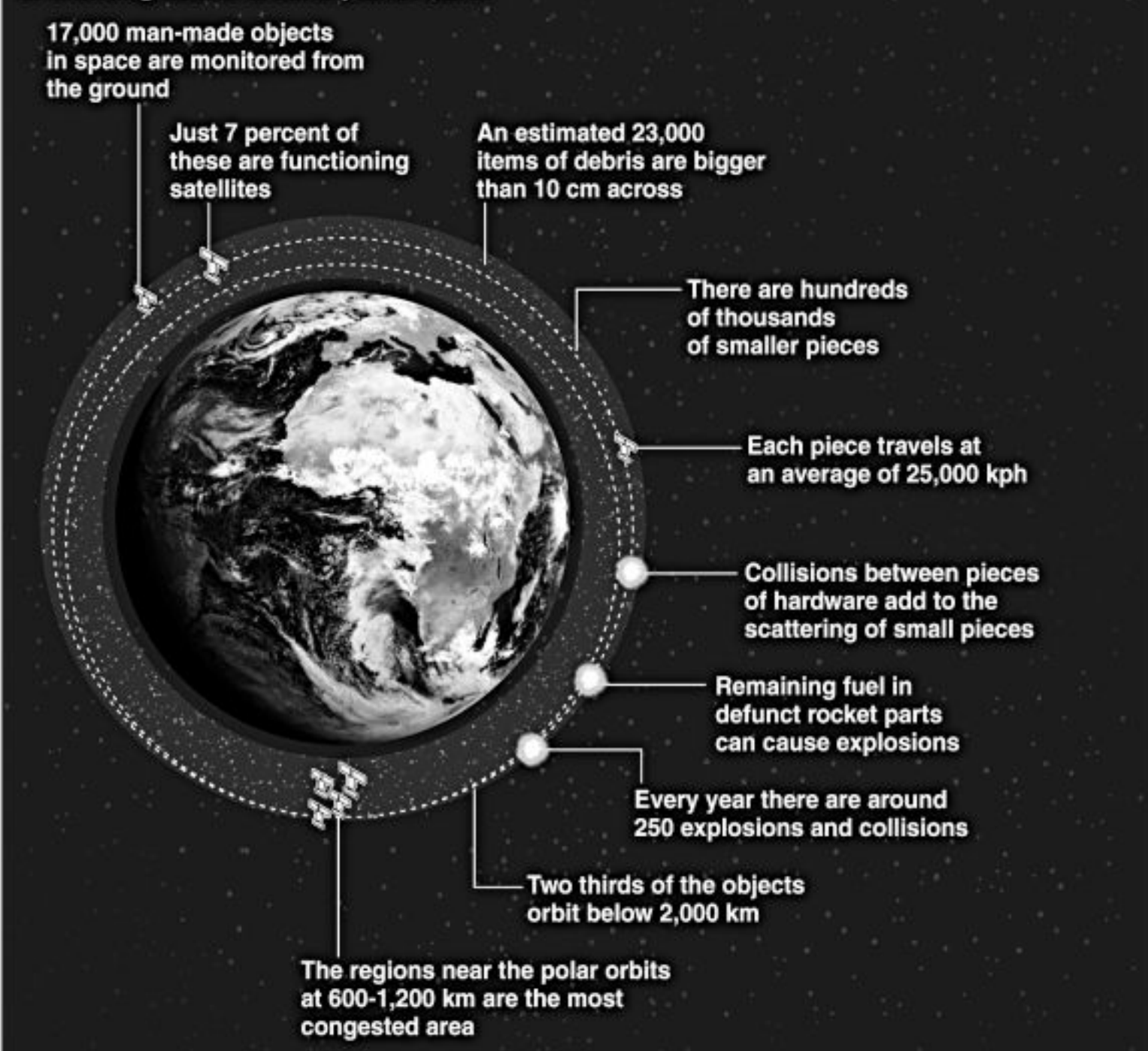
They are all considered conservatives. The Guardian Council, a body of theologians and jurists, is loyal to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

"I don't want to stoop to their propaganda and attacks but ignorance is troubling," Rafsanjani was quoted as saying in a meeting with supporters.

Rafsanjani, who was president between 1989 and 1997, entered the election race at the last minute as a reformist candidate.

Space junk

More than 50-years of human space exploration has produced a hazardous belt of orbiting debris around planet Earth

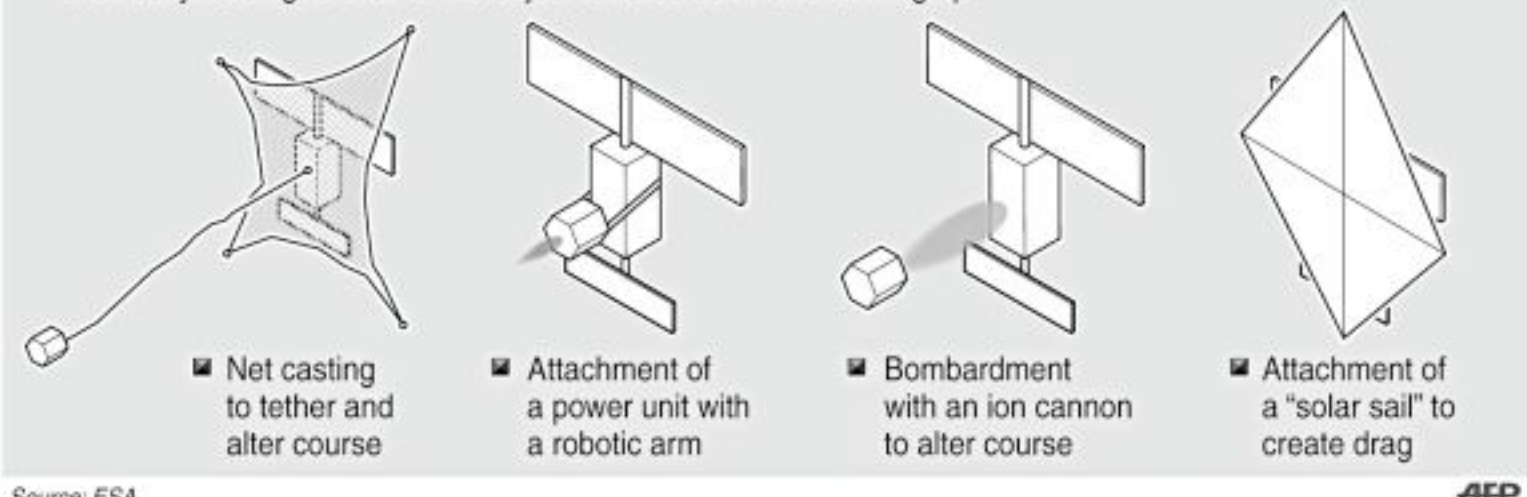


Managing the problem

The debris cannot be controlled, therefore attempts are made to alter the course of functioning hardware. The European Space Agency carries out about 3 collision avoidance manoeuvres a year

Potential solutions in the future

Proposals are aimed at slowing down the track of large pieces, or altering their course to lower their orbit, eventually leading to a fall of the object towards earth and burning up



Source: ESA

FRIENDS OF SYRIA MEET

Nations agree to boost aid to Syria rebels

AFP, Amman

World powers urged Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to commit to peace, but yesterday warned that if he fails to negotiate a political transition they would boost their backing of the opposition.

The stark warning came from a meeting of the Friends of Syria group, which held talks on Wednesday in Amman to try to agree the contours of a peace conference to end the war.

The conflict, now in its third year, has claimed some 94,000 lives.

The United States and Russia have backed opposite sides in the conflict, but hope to bring the warring sides together at the conference next month, although a date and venue remain unclear.

"We would call on President Assad to exhibit the same commitment to trying to find peace in his own country. That is critical," US Secretary of State Kerry told a joint press conference with Jordanian Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh ahead of the talks.

After meeting late into the night, the 11 ministers from the Friends of Syria group laid out a grim choice for Assad: he and his associates with "blood on their hands" had no role to play in the future of Syria, they said.

If the regime refused to negotiate a transitional government, then they would boost their support for the opposition, they said.

"The ministers also emphasized that until such time as the Geneva meeting produces a transitional government, they will further increase their support for the opposition and

take all other steps as necessary," a final statement said.

A US official would not confirm whether that meant Washington would finally overcome its reluctance to send arms to the rebels.

Meanwhile, Germany's foreign intelligence service believes Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces have gained strength, revising its prediction from last year of a quick regime collapse, a media report said.

Assad's forces are now able to keep the rebels in check, although victory remains elusive, according to a report by the service chief Gerhard Schindler, news site Spiegel Online reported.

All eyes are likely now to turn to Istanbul where the opposition is to start meetings on electing a new president, expand its "parliament" and begin the process of choosing an interim government.

Neither the opposition nor Damascus has yet publicly said who they would send to attend the peace conference, likely to be held in June.

However, Syrian state news agency SANA yesterday said the pro-opposition Friends of Syria meeting held in Amman has blocked the way for the international peace conference proposed by the United States and Russia.

"The participants, who have declared themselves spokesperson for the Syrian people, have blocked the way to the international conference (proposed by Moscow and Washington) by saying that they were going to boost support to the Syrian opposition," the agency said.

Iran expanding nuclear activities: IAEA

AFP, Vienna

Iran is making significant progress in expanding its nuclear programme, including in opening up a potential second route to developing the bomb, a new UN atomic agency report showed Wednesday.

The International Atomic Energy Agency's latest quarterly update said Tehran had accelerated the installation of advanced uranium enrichment equipment at its central Natanz plant.

It also outlined further progress at a reactor under construction at Arak, also in central Iran, which Western countries fear could provide Iran with plutonium if the fuel is reprocessed.

The US State Department said the report was an "unfortunate milestone" marking a decade of Iran expanding its nuclear activities "in blatant violation of its international obligations". A US congressional panel backed tougher sanctions against Iran.

Highly enriched uranium and plutonium can both be used in a nuclear weapon. North Korea used plutonium in two tests in 2006 and 2009, while uranium was used in the "Little Boy" atomic bomb dropped by the US on Hiroshima, Japan in 1945.

The new IAEA report, seen by AFP, said Iran has installed at Natanz almost 700 IR-2m centrifuges and/or empty centrifuge casings, compared with just 180 in February. None was operating, however.

Sonia, Manmohan seek to dispel leadership confusion

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

As India's Congress party-led UPA II government entered the last lap of its five-year reign ahead of fresh parliamentary elections scheduled early next year, party president Sonia Gandhi and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh sought to dispel public perception that there are two power centres in the ruling coalition and about differences between the two leaders.

Marking the fourth anniversary celebrations of UPA-II, Sonia spoke warmly of Singh's leadership of the government for the last nine years and stressed that "we all stand by him".

"There are no differences between the prime minister and me. There is collective leadership," she said in reply to a question from the media here on Wednesday night.

Singh, for his part, too said there was never any difference of opinion with the Congress president, and on the contrary, she provided him with strength in steering the government.

"Mrs Gandhi has always been a constant source of inspiration. She has in fact helped me navigate the coalition. There has never been any differences in these last nine years," he said, adding he never felt the need for any reassurance from her because he "always had that assurance".

The political circles in the Indian capital has always been abuzz with speculations about the presence of two power centres in the form of the Prime Minister and the Congress President. The speculations had come under focus after Congress party general secretary Digvijay Singh expressed strong views against such an arrangement.

Main opposition BJP quickly latched on to it to attack UPA to suggest that the political leadership and executive head were not on the same page on policy issues.

On Wednesday, Congress Vice President Rahul Gandhi too chipped in to stamp out speculation and media reports about two power centres when he said blamed the buzz about divergence on propaganda by the opposition.

"There is no difference between the party and the government. There is no difference between Sonia Gandhi and the Prime Minister. This is a creation of the opposition," Rahul said.

Sonia said "the prime minister is carrying out his responsibility with great dignity in the face of unrelenting hostility and abuse from the Opposition. We respect him and we all stand by him".

North Korea wants peace

Envoy tells China

AFP, Beijing

A special envoy from North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un yesterday told one of China's top officials that Pyongyang wants peace and is willing to pursue dialogue with key countries, state media reported.

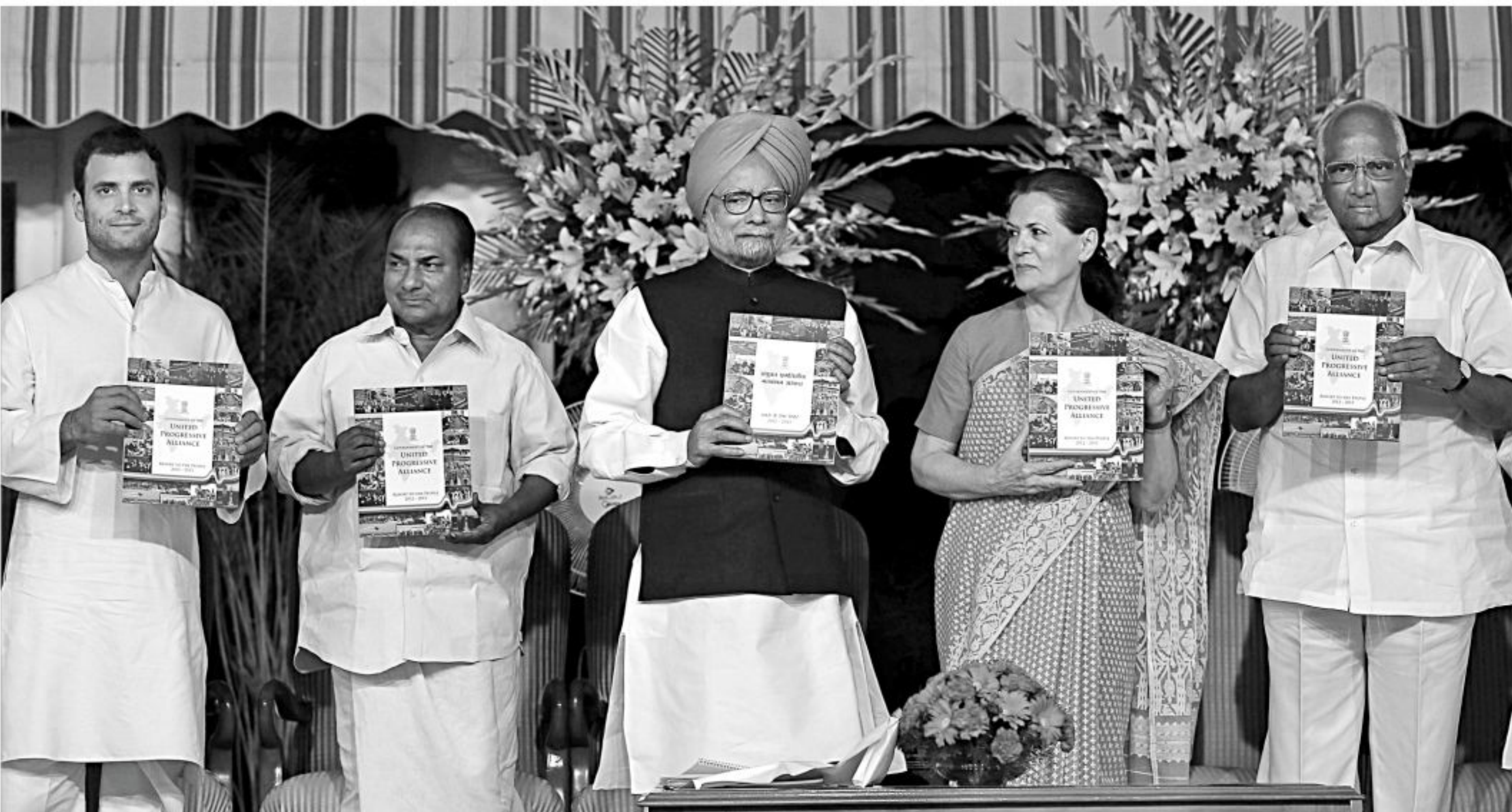
Envoy Choe Ryong-Hae met Liu Yunshan, a member of the Chinese Communist Party's highest ranking body the Politburo Standing Committee, state television reported on its evening newscast.

China is the North's sole major ally and key economic benefactor. But relations have taken a downturn in recent months in the face of escalating tensions on the Korean peninsula after Pyongyang's nuclear and missile tests, which saw international sanctions tightened.

The North -- angered by the sanctions and US-South Korean exercises -- threatened nuclear attacks on Seoul and Washington, sending military tensions sharply higher.

The report quoted Choe as telling Liu he was sent by Kim to improve, consolidate and further develop relations and that the North was willing to work with China.

Choe also praised China's efforts for peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. He said the North was willing to accept Beijing's proposals to develop dialogue with other parties.



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (CL) and the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) chairperson Sonia Gandhi (CR), along with UPA members, display the 'Report to the People' a self-assessment report during a function to celebrate the completion of four years of the UPA second term in power in New Delhi on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWSIN brief

US backs new Iran sanctions

AFP, Washington

Iran could face tightened sanctions within months after a US congressional panel on Wednesday adopted a measure targeting the nation's auto and mining industries as well as its foreign currency reserves.

The House Foreign Affairs Committee unanimously passed the Nuclear Iran Prevention Act, which would extend existing sanctions to the auto and mining sectors and allow the US president to subject other Iranian industries, such as engineering, to similar restrictions.

Today's US sanctions focus on Iran's finance and energy sectors, notably its oil exports. Six countries and territories -- China, India, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Turkey -- still import Iranian oil, but they have reduced their imports since 2012, with

US admits Awlaki killing

AFP, Washington

The United States formally said for the first time on Wednesday that it had killed radical Yemeni-American cleric Anwar al-Awlaki and three other US citizens in anti-terror strikes abroad.

The acknowledgement that Washington targeted Awlaki in Yemen in September 2011 and that the three others were not directly targeted, but were also killed, came on the eve of a speech on terror policy by President Barack Obama.

US Attorney General Eric Holder acknowledged the killing of Awlaki in a

Militants kill 19 in Niger attacks

AFP, Niamey

Islamist militants staged brazen twin car bomb attacks on an army base and a French-run uranium mine in Niger yesterday, killing at least 19 people and taking several trainee army officers hostage in the impoverished west African nation, the government said.

The unprecedented attacks were claimed by an Islamist group as revenge for Niger's involvement in a French-led military offensive in neighbouring Mali and come just four months after Al-Qaeda linked militants seized a desert gas plant in neighbouring Algeria in a siege that left 38 hostages dead.

Japan PM due in Myanmar today

AFP, Tokyo

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe flies to Myanmar today bearing almost \$1 billion in development aid and a plan for a nationwide electricity grid as Japan tries to grab the box seats in the country's quickening development.

In the first visit by a Japanese premier since 1977, Abe will be playing the role of salesman-in-chief for Japan Inc. as part of an attempt to treble the value of infrastructure exports to help revive his country's slumbering economy.

Diplomatic niceties were being observed ahead of the trip, with a foreign ministry official saying Tokyo wanted to help at a time

Over 10m Galaxy S4 sold

AFP, Seoul

South Korea's Samsung Electronics said yesterday its latest flagship Galaxy S4 had become its fastest selling smartphone to date, topping 10 million units globally less than a month after its debut.

A company statement said the S4 had already passed the 10-million sales mark following its April 26 launch. It's predecessor, the S3, took 50 days to reach the same threshold.

The world's top handset maker hopes the S4 will expand its presence in high-end markets in the United States and elsewhere, crowding out archival Apple and its iconic iPhone.

Apple has asked a US federal judge to add the S4 to the list of Samsung devices targeted in a patent lawsuit involving Siri personal assis-