

ENVIRONMENT SCAN 01-15 AUG 2018

CHINA (MAINLAND)

Brig Navjot Singh Bedi

Standoff at Weizhou Mosque. In his address to the 19th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in October 2017, President Xi had declared that the party must, "*uphold the principle that religions in China must be Chinese in orientation and provide active guidance to religions so that they can adapt themselves to socialist society*". In the wake of Mr Xi's pronouncement, local officials throughout China enacted sweeping crackdowns on religious practice. The campaign particularly affects China's Muslim communities. Weizhou, a tiny rural, predominantly Muslim township in China's Ningxia Hui autonomous region, is enmeshed in a growing conflict between the government and its Muslim citizens, who are protesting against the demolition of its recently completed Grand Mosque.

The population of Weizhou is over 90% ethnically Hui. The Hui trace their ancestry to Muslims who arrived in China as early as the Tang Dynasty during the 8th Century. After centuries of intermarriage and assimilation into Chinese society, most Hui are virtually indistinguishable from China's majority Han, except for their ties to the Islamic faith. It won't be incorrect to state that, "the Hui have been totally Hanified". Despite a history of violent conflict with the ruling Qing Dynasty in the 18th and 19th Centuries, Hui have come to be regarded by many in China as a model minority.

The Grand Mosque is the pride of the community and it is the largest in Ningxia. It would be large enough for the entire community to gather for Friday prayer, a beacon of faith. It is however built in the Arabic style: glistening white domes, archways, and towering minarets with crescent moon spires. The style is however not acceptable to China. Hence less than a year after its completion, the local government decided to raze the mosque on the grounds that it did not receive proper building permits, making it an *illegal building*. The predominantly Hui Muslim residents of Weizhou occupied the building to block the demolition. The conflict has reached a stalemate. The government has now promised not to demolish the mosque entirely, but maintains the need for alterations to its features, especially domes, which are as found in the Arab nations.

Comments. For centuries Hui Muslim mosques were built in a more Chinese style, and it appears that the new structure is viewed by the local government as an example of a growing Arabisation of Chinese Islam. China is determined to maintain control over how religion is practiced, but the planned demolition of the grand Weizhou mosque has threatened to backfire. The government couches such efforts in the language of security, claiming they are necessary to combat religious extremism. Weizhou was a previously rule-abiding city and tearing down the most powerful symbol of Weizhou's success risks antagonising the Hui community, which is symbolic of the triumph of China's economic reforms. It also risks peace in the model Muslim province.

The community's religious devotion grew alongside its economy. Residents of the town view themselves as exemplars of both Islamic devotion and Chinese patriotism. Weizhou residents observe Islamic tradition with devotion. Most people in the town wear hijabs, go to the mosque to pray daily. No shops in the village sell alcohol and residents maintain a strict halal diet. In antagonising them, the Chinese Communist Party risks provoking resistance among the very segment of its population it can ill afford to lose. Though a crackdown on religious practice is being undertaken to possibly "Sinicise" religion at the direction of President Xi Jinping, in an attempt to consolidate power and blunt resistance to the party-

state; yet this situation, if not handled properly, has the potential to snowball into a rallying point for all agitations against Xi, especially for the Muslim community.

(Dr David R. Stroup, University of Oklahoma & <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-45178548>)

Detention of One Million Uighurs by China? At a meeting of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, in Geneva, Committee Member Gay McDougall told Chinese officials that she was concerned by reports that Beijing had "turned the Uighur autonomous region into something that resembles a massive internment camp". China however denied that it is holding a million Muslim Uighurs in detention in Xinjiang. Chinese officials, said that Uighurs enjoyed full rights but "those deceived by religious extremism... shall be assisted by resettlement and re-education". Ms McDougall sought further clarification. However, Ms McDougall sought further clarification on how many people had been detained, the laws under which they had been detained and how many people were undergoing re-education.

Comments. The Uighurs are a Muslim ethnic minority mostly based in China's Xinjiang province. Though they make up around 45% of the population there, yet say they face discrimination. Xinjiang is officially designated as an autonomous region within China, like Tibet to its south. For years Xinjiang has seen intermittent violence, followed by crackdowns and China accuses Islamist militants and separatists of orchestrating the trouble. Reports that more and more Uighurs and other Muslim minorities are being detained in Xinjiang have been circulating for some months and human rights groups including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have submitted reports to the UN committee documenting claims of mass imprisonment, in camps, where inmates are forced to swear loyalty to China's President Xi Jinping. The World Uyghur Congress said in its report that detainees are held indefinitely without charge, are forced to shout Communist Party slogans, are poorly fed and reports of torture were widespread. Reportedly most inmates have never been charged with a crime and do not receive legal representation.

The state-run English-language Global Times newspaper defended tough security measures in the region, which it said had prevented it from turning into "China's Syria" or "China's Libya". It also said in an editorial that "The turnaround in Xinjiang's security situation has avoided a great tragedy and saved countless lives". China is said to carry out the detentions under the guise of combating religious extremism. It is however unusual for China to give public explanations about how it deals with the situation in Xinjiang. China has introduced new restrictions in the far western region of Xinjiang in what it describes as a campaign against Islamist extremism. The measures include prohibiting "abnormally" long beards, the wearing of veils in public places and refusing to watch state television. Recent years have seen bloody clashes in the region. The Chinese government blames the violence on Islamist militants and separatists but rights groups say the unrest is more a reaction to repressive policies and the new measures may end up pushing some Uighurs into extremism.

(<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-45173573>)

PAKISTAN

Col Arvinder Singh

Newly Elected Members of Pakistan Assembly Take Oath On 13 Aug, 329 newly-elected members of the National Assembly took the oath, setting the stage for Mr Khan to form the

next government, only the second democratic transition of power in the country's history. The PTI emerged as the single largest party with 116 seats in July 25 elections. Its number increased to 125 after nine independent members joined it and final tally reached 158 after it was allotted 28 out of 60 seats reserved for women and 10 seats reserved for minorities. The PTI has nominated Mr. Khan for the top post and he is scheduled to take oath on August 18 at the President House. The new government faces a strong opposition as the PML-N has a final tally of 82 seats, followed by the PPP with 53 and MMA 15 seats. The PTI has the support of smaller parties including Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) with seven seats, Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) five, Balochistan National Party (BNP) four, Pakistan Muslim League (PML) three, Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA) three, Awami Muslim League and Jamori Watan Party one seat each.

Comments. This will be the third consecutive democratic government in Pakistan since 2008 when military ruler Musharraf announced general elections after serving as president from 2001 to 2008 following a coup in 1999. The PPP formed the government in 2008, followed by the PML-N led by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in 2013. Pakistan's powerful military has ruled the country through various coups for nearly half of the country's history since independence in 1947. Even during the civilian rule, the generals have wielded enormous power, setting the agenda for the country's foreign and security policies.

US Stops Funds to Train Pakistani Army Officers.¹ American military institutions are struggling to fill the 66 slots they had kept aside for officers from Pakistan for the next academic year as the Trump administration refused to provide funds for their training, a development that could emerge as a key irritant for the incoming Imran Khan government. The funds for training Pakistani officers come from the US government's International Military Education and Training Programme (IMET) but no funds have been made available for Pakistan for the next year. Pakistan has not officially commented on this move by the US. The US National Defence University (NDU), Washington, has reserved seats for Pakistani officers for more than a decade now. The outgoing Pakistani officers were, however, told that the university had been asked to fill the positions for the next year with officers from other nations. The NDU is one of several US military institutions that train officers from Pakistan. Pakistani military officers have been receiving military training and education in the United States since early 1960s, barring a suspension in the 1990s before the programme was restored after the September 11, 2001 attacks. Both the US and Pakistani military officials have privately slammed the Trump administration's move. US officials said they were worried the decision could undermine a key trust-building measure. Pakistani officials warned it could push their military to further look to China or Russia for leadership training.

1 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com>

Comments. The new government's key challenge will be to improve military ties between the two countries. The fact that these educational exchanges have suffered this blow now suggests that the relationship could be entering into a new phase where even the supposedly safe and protected dimensions of the relationship can become casualties of wider tensions and ill will. Earlier, the US Congress passed a bill to slash Pakistan's defense aid to \$150 million, significantly below the historic level of more than \$1 billion per year.

Pakistan Plans to Borrow \$4bn Loan from IDB: Report². Pakistan is planning to borrow over \$4 billion from Islamic Development Bank (IDB) to bail out its economy, which is facing a balance-of-payments crisis. It has been reported that Saudi-backed IDB has agreed to make a formal offer to lend Pakistan the money after formation of new government.

Comments. Asad Umar, PTI leader and likely new finance minister has said Pakistan must decide by the end of September if it will go to the IMF to bail out its economy and was also examining other options as well as the IMF, including loans from friendly countries or remittances from overseas Pakistanis. It is estimated that Pakistan needs a loan of around \$12 billion to turn the corner.

BANGLADESH

Brig HS Cheema

Bangladesh: Scrap Almost All Quotas. Almost all quotas in civil service should be abolished and merit-based recruitment prioritised, suggests the committee formed to evaluate the quota system. The panel, however, would seek the Supreme Court's opinion about the 30 percent quota for freedom fighters' children and grandchildren. Cabinet Secretary M ShafiulAlam, who leads the seven-member committee formed on July 2, told this to journalists at the Secretariat after a cabinet meeting yesterday. He said time has come for open competition and this is the key finding of the committee, which has almost finalised its recommendations. There is an SC verdict regarding freedom fighters' quota and if any post under this quota is not filled, it should be left vacant, he said. "This quota [for freedom fighters' children and grandchildren] will be abolished if the court wants," said the cabinet secretary.

Of the 56 percent spots reserved in the civil service, 30 percent are for freedom fighters' children and grandchildren, 10 percent for women, 10 percent for people of underdeveloped districts, five percent for members of indigenous communities and one percent for the physically challenged. Amid a quota reform movement, the government formed the committee and asked it to submit a report within 15 working days. The committee, which includes secretaries to the public administration ministry, finance ministry, Liberation War affairs ministry, law ministry (legislative division), Public Service Commission, and the acting secretary to the Prime Minister's Office, later got 90 days more time to do its job.

2 <https://www.thenews.com.pk>

Daily Star 14 Aug. 18

Comments. Bangladesh Govt is attempting to do away with reservation in jobs in spite of agitation. It is a welcome step for better selection system. India needs to take a cue from what is happening in neighbouring state. There is a need to revamp education system as also selection system for jobs. Reservation has to go if India has to progress.

For Four Million, Another Chance to Make it to National Register of Citizens. Some 2,500 NagarikSevaKendras (NSKs) in Assam began issuing claim, objection and correction forms on 10 Aug for people excluded from the complete draft of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) published on July 30. NRC officials could not specify how many forms were collected, but they expect the pace of collecting forms to pick up within a week. Nearly 40 lakh of the 3.29 crore applicants had been left out of the complete draft because of the lack of sufficient documentary evidence of their citizenship, officials said. They can reapply through the claims form, while those whose names have been misspelt can use the correction form. The objection form is for those who suspect the nationality of a person and feel he or she does not deserve to be on the final, error-free NRC. Assam Finance and Health Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said the government had completed only 30% of the work related to the NRC. "Preparation of the NRC will take a long time, and by the time it is completed, people's perception about it may change. People should not come to any final conclusion at this juncture, when only 30% work is done," he said at a function in Agartala on Friday. "People whose names are missing from the NRC can apply again with valid documents. Then there are the courts to file objections later. There is no need to panic or create unrest," Mr. Sarma said. He advised tribal political parties in Tripura, such as the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura, an ally of the ruling BJP, to wait for the "expensive" Assam exercise to be completed successfully before demanding the NRC for their State.
Hindu 10 Aug 2018

Comments. It will take time before NRC list is finalised. However, the other aspect is what to do with those who will not make into the list. Lot of assurance is being given by the ruling Govt that no person will be deported then this complete exercise is likely to be futile.

India Grants Rs 470m for Postal Highway Project to Nepal. On behalf of the Government of India, the Indian Ambassador to Nepal presented a cheque of Rs 470 million to Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transport Secretary. The amount released will maintain fund liquidity for the ongoing construction of 14 road packages under Postal Highway Project, the Indian embassy said in a statement. With this payment, India has released Rs 2.35 billion to the Government of Nepal out of the total grant assistance of Rs8.00 billion committed by the Government of India to implement 14 packages under Packages 2-6 of the Phase I of the Postal Highway Project, the statement said. The Package 1 of the Project comprising two road sections Dhangadhi-Bhajaniya-Satti road and Lamki-Tikapur-Khakraula have already been completed with Government of India's grant assistance worth Rs 1.02 billion. The two roads opened for service on January 19, 2017. India provides financial assistance to Nepal since 1950 for infrastructure development as part of its multi-sectoral India-Nepal Economic Co-operation Programme.

<http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2018-08-15/india-grants-rs-470m-for-postal-highway-project.html>

Comments. The relation between the two neighbours suffered a setback in the recent times. India has to ensure that any promise it made to develop Nepal must be honoured and projects undertaken must be completed in time bound manner. India needs to ensure better

connectivity than what is going to be offered in due course by China so that Nepal continue to be engaged more with India.

SRI LANKA

Brig Navjot Singh Bedi

Family Resettlement and Peace Building. UK funding of £1 million will help nearly 600 families in the Jaffna, Killinochchi, Mullaithivu and Batticaloa districts of Sri Lanka, towards family resettlement and peace building. These families are resettled on newly released land in the North and East of Sri Lanka. They will benefit from the funding to support the provision of basic infrastructure and services by contributing towards roads, wells and sanitary services, and help re-establish access to local government services as well as local civil society organisations.

Comments. The funding is being provided through the UK's Conflict Security and Stability Fund (CSSF), increasing the UK's contribution through the CSSF for Sri Lanka to £7.9 million between 2016 and 2019. The funding is part of the UK's contribution to Sri Lanka's Peace building Priority Plan; a joint strategy agreed by the UN and the Government of Sri Lanka to support long term post-conflict peace building in Sri Lanka. Helping families return to their villages is a crucial element of Sri Lanka addressing the legacy of civil war and is a key part of the joint strategy agreed upon. It will also help families rebuild their lives by supporting livelihood development through training on small business management, and provision of essential fishing and agricultural equipment.

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/family-resettlement-and-peacebuilding-in-sri-lanka-boosted-by-1-million>)

TELECOM

Extension for TRAI Chief. The Appointments Committee of the Cabinet has approved reappointment of Mr RS Sharma as chairperson of the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) for a further period beyond 10 August, 2018 up to 30 September, 2020. Mr Sharma was appointed TRAI chief for three years in July 2015. Before that he was Secretary to the Department of Electronics and Information Technology. He has also worked as Director-General and Mission Director of the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI).

Comments. During his current tenure at TRAI, some of the key decisions and recommendations taken include slashing of call-connect charges, the position on the provision of points of interconnect and predatory pricing rules. Some of the decisions led to attacks by the industry. For instance, TRAI's predatory pricing norms sparked a furore as old telecom operators and the industry association COAI had criticised the new rules.

(<https://www.thequint.com/news/india/ram-sewak-sharma-reappointed-as-tra-chie> & http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/65338431.cms?utm_source)

Impending Ban by US against Huawei and ZTE Technology. Huawei and ZTE Technology will largely be banned from use by the US government and government contractors. The ban was signed into place by President Trump today as a component of the much larger Defense Authorization Act. The ban goes into effect over the next two years.

Comments. The ban covers the use of Huawei and ZTE components or services that are "essential" or "critical" to the system they're used in. Some components from these

companies are still allowed, so long as they cannot be used to route or view data. The bill also instructs several government agencies to prioritize funding to assist businesses that will have to change their technology as a result of the ban.

([https://www.theverge.com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/www.theverge.com/platform/amp/2018/8/13](https://www.theverge.com/cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/www.theverge.com/platform/amp/2018/8/13))

IRAN

Col Arvinder Singh

India is Considering 50 Per Cent Iran Oil Cut to Win US Waiver³. India may cut its imports from Iran by half to secure a waiver from the U.S as per reports and discussions on conditional waiver on sanctions held last month in New Delhi. India has expressed its inability to scrap oil imports from Iran completely as its supplies are being offered at competitive rates. US has been forced to reconsider its plan to choke off all of Iran's oil exports after countries including China and India which together comprise about half of Iran's oil exports expressed their inability make significant cuts to their energy purchases from Iran. Washington is now said to project a 50 percent cut in exports when it re imposes energy sanctions in early November. Iran has Offered Oil to India and other countries at Cheapest Rate in 14 years due to impact of US sanctions.

Comments. It's likely that Iran could still see its oil sales drop by around 700,000 barrels per day from their current level of around 2.3 million. Much will depend on the European Union, which has vowed to resist US sanctions on Iran, but whose companies and financial institutions are more vulnerable to US financial pressure than their Asian counterparts.

Afghanistan and Iraq the 'Unintended Casualty' Of U.S. Sanctions on Iran⁴. As the United States reinstates crippling economic sanctions on Iran, Washington's ally in the region, Afghanistan, could become collateral damage as it has forged increasingly strong economic links with its western neighbor. Pakistan has historically been Afghanistan's biggest trading partner but Iran has now taken its place. The trade between the two countries in the past year amounted to nearly \$2 billion, an almost 30 percent increase from the previous year. In comparison, trade with Pakistan amounted to \$1.2 billion. As Iran's financial woes worsen, an exodus of Afghan migrant workers is expected and an economy in Afghanistan that relies on remittances flowing in from Iran will suffer. A record 440,000 Afghans migrants left Iran this year, largely driven by Iran's crippling economic crisis, which has sent unemployment soaring and the national currency plummeting, hitting migrant workers particularly hard. As all Afghans living in Iran typically send home the main parts of their earnings in the form of monthly remittances, the Afghan economy itself will suffer direct and immediate effects. Afghanistan suffers from around 40 percent unemployment, is heavily dependent on dwindling foreign aid, and is in the midst of the worst drought in decades. The new U.S. sanctions could also lead to landlocked Afghanistan losing access to Iran's sea routes and a budding trade could be scaled back. Afghanistan's economic future is also linked with Tehran via Iran's Chabahar port complex, a project that is part of a new

3 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com>

4 <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan>

transportation corridor for Afghanistan that could potentially open the way for millions of dollars in trade and cut its dependence on rival Pakistan. The project could be derailed by U.S. sanctions. Afghanistan has applied for a sanctions waiver for Chabahar, but Washington has yet to make a final decision. Washington has indicated that it would not sabotage the Chabahar port project. The Pentagon and the U.S. State Department have encouraged India to use Chabahar to increase its investments in Afghanistan. Iran could also retaliate to U.S. sanctions by ramping up its covert support for the Afghan Taliban, the militant group that has fought against U.S. forces since 2001. Iran has been long been accused of providing support to the Taliban, an allegation it denies. Iran has already provided small arms and other support to the insurgents, and the sanctions regime could give it a powerful incentive to increase that support in an effort to strengthen Washington's enemy. Rising support from a powerful regional actor would be a blow to Kabul and Washington, who are trying to convince the Taliban to agree to a negotiated end to the 17-year-long war.

Similarly Iraqi investors have suffered dramatic losses due to US sanctions on Iran. As their country flirted with economic collapse in 2015 under the weight of an Islamic State onslaught, Iraqis poured millions of dollars into Iranian banks that were offering sky-high interest rates following Iran's nuclear accord with the United States. Many Iraqis used mules to carry thousands of dollars into Iran to bypass laws regulating how much money could be taken out of the country. Now, with the US pulling out of the nuclear deal and renewing trade sanctions on Iran, the value of the Iranian rial has plummeted to historic lows, staggering investors. The economic well-being of regular Iraqis is more closely linked with Iran's market than with the United States, whose influence is rarely felt in day-to-day life. And there is little relief in sight as the rial is expected to continue to lose value into November, when a second round of American sanctions, on oil sales, will go into effect. To make matters worse for the Iraqi investors looking to salvage what is left of their money; Iran's banks have placed strict restrictions on withdrawals, limiting them to the equivalent of about \$200 per day.

AFGHANISTAN

Col Arvinder Singh

Taliban Kill More Than 200 Afghan Defenders on 4 Fronts. ⁵ Afghan government forces lost more than 200 officers and soldiers in fighting over the past few days as Taliban insurgents launched sustained attacks on four different fronts. The hardest-hit area was the southeastern city of Ghazni, where more than 100 police officers and soldiers had been killed and over 130 injured and the insurgents appeared to be in control of most of the strategic city aside from a few important government facilities. The Afghan army's chief-of-staff said that Ghazni was not under threat of falling into the militants' hands. But people inside Ghazni say it has been overrun, with very little still under government control. The Taliban launched the assault in the early hours of 10 Aug 18. News of what exactly is happening in Ghazni, is difficult to get after the militants damaged a telecommunications tower. Only the governor's office, police headquarters and intelligence agency's compound are in the hands of the

5 <https://www.nytimes.com>

government and Taliban are pushing to take them. The roads outside the city have been mined; making it difficult for residents to escape and heavy fighting was underway to push back the Taliban from city limits. The insurgents have also taken over most of the rural areas in Ghazni Province. As the last reports came in, only two of the province's 18 rural districts were confirmed to be completely in government control. That raised the prospect that if the insurgents did fully take the city, they might also be in a position to control an entire province for the first time in the 17-year war in Afghanistan.

In Faryab Province, 250 miles to the northwest, an isolated Afghan National Army base of 100 soldiers lost more than half of its men in a Taliban assault. The Taliban had besieged the base for three days before the massive push on it late on 13 Aug night. The base fell to the Taliban after the soldiers, who had resisted the three-day onslaught, failed to get any reinforcements and ran out of ammunition, food and water. Ninety miles west, in Ghazni Province, the Taliban seized control of the Ajristan District. The elite army commando unit that had been defending the district had dead from 40 to 100. At a base in northern Baghlan Province insurgents killed seven policemen and nine soldiers.

Comments. The fighting has demonstrated that the insurgents have a capacity for carrying out ambitious operations on multiple fronts, while the government has struggled to respond on a single front in Ghazni. The attack comes as pressure continues on the Taliban to enter peace talks with the Afghan government. Secret talks were recently held in Qatar between Taliban and US officials after an unprecedented three-day ceasefire during Eid celebrations in June that was largely respected by both sides. The attack, the heaviest blow struck by the Taliban since they came close to overrunning the western city of Farah in May have dampened hopes of peace talks. The Taliban have not taken a major provincial centre since they overran the northern city of Kunduz in 2015 and the assault on Ghazni was a major blow to the Western-backed government just weeks before parliamentary elections scheduled for October.

Taliban Delegation Visits Uzbekistan to Talk Peace, Security.⁶ A Taliban delegation travelled to Uzbekistan earlier this month to discuss the Afghan peace process and withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, peace and future national projects such as security for railroad and power lines. The meetings in Afghanistan's northern neighbor follow recent reports that the Taliban sent similar delegations to China, illustrating the groups rising ambitions to engage in independent talks with foreign governments as momentum for a peace settlement in the country builds. The talks follow an earlier trip to Uzbekistan by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in late March.

⁶<https://dunyanews.tv/en/World>

Comments. The Taliban have continued to push for direct negotiations with the US rather than the government in Kabul, which the insurgents see as illegitimate but have also attempted to build independent contacts with other governments. These kinds of meetings are going to continue until the real talks begin. Taliban's political stature rises with talks in Uzbekistan. The Taliban have repeatedly rejected overtures from the Afghan government to join a peace process, as they intensify attacks across the country. Recently US has change its longstanding policy when they said that they were prepared to support, facilitate and participate in talks, opening the way to militants to meet US officials in Qatar. The Taliban have gained increasing attention from Russia as well as Uzbekistan, which view the insurgency as a bulwark against the spread of the Islamic State group in Afghanistan. The United States has accused Moscow of giving weapons to the Taliban.

Talk to the Taliban to End the War in Afghanistan.⁷ The Trump administration has reportedly instructed its top diplomats to engage in direct talks with the Taliban. That's a welcome and important step toward ending the wasteful war in Afghanistan. A preliminary discussion was held last month in Qatar and they agreed to meet again soon and resolve the Afghan conflict through dialogue.

Comments. While it is too soon to say what might come of such talks, engaging with the Taliban is a critical development in winding down the conflict. The alternative — perpetual war with no prospects for a diplomatic resolution, or any resolution, for that matter has proven to be a deadly, costly and futile effort. For 17 years, the United States has been bogged down in Afghanistan with little to show for it. Even the notion that the U.S. must remain there to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a "safe haven" for terrorists falls apart when one realizes Afghanistan is still a safe haven for groups that want to do Americans harm. There are more groups that want to launch attacks against the U.S. operating there than what existed before they started. ISIS, for example, did not exist when the U.S. launched its war on terror, yet it now operates in countries around the world, including Afghanistan. The victory in Afghanistan for US has been elusive in large part because what victory would actually entail hasn't properly been defined. Perhaps the talks are a sign of things to come and if Trump can preside over the end of the war in Afghanistan, it will be a commendable achievement for him.

India, Afghanistan Discuss Development Projects.⁸ India and Afghanistan have discussed several ongoing development projects spread over varied areas of cooperation such as capacity building, infrastructure, education, healthcare, good-governance and human resource development. Officials from both the countries discussed the projects during

7 <http://www.phillytrib.com>

8 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>

the second meeting of India-Afghanistan Joint Working Group on Development Cooperation in Kabul on 09 Aug 18 and expressed satisfaction over the successful completion of several development projects such as the Afghan Parliament building, Afghan-India Friendship Dam, the first phase of Chabahar port and others. The Afghan side highly appreciated India's timely assistance of 170,000 tonnes of wheat and 2,000 tonnes of pulses during this year when large parts of the country are suffering from drought and expressed satisfaction that these large scale deliveries were made from India to Afghanistan via Chabahar highlighting the viability of Chabahar as a route for trade and commerce.

Comments. Both sides underscored the importance of access through Chabahar port for strengthening trade and economic relations. Encouraged by high level of cooperation in the field of development assistance and deep mutual trust between the two sides, it was decided to take up several small, medium and large scale projects for implementation in the near future based on the priorities of the people and the Government of Afghanistan.

Drought Raises Food Security Fears in Afghanistan.⁹ A shortage of precipitation during the winter months, both rain and snow, left much of Afghanistan with a severe scarcity of water and a decimated winter harvest. The situation has not improved during the drier spring and summer months, and the wheat harvest is likely to be the lowest since 2011. The shortfall in wheat this year could be as much as 2.5 million tonnes. This would result in more than two million people facing food insecurity and being left in desperate need of humanitarian assistance within the next six months. It has been reported tens of thousands of sheep and goats have died as pastures have turned to dust. Farmers have been forced to eat seeds intended for planting for the next harvest.

Comments. Nearly 15 million people are employed in the agricultural sector in the 20 provinces worst affected by the drought. Afghanistan is no stranger to drought as localized droughts occur every three to five years, while major droughts have a return period of nine to 11 years. The last major drought was from 2008 to 2010. This ended with heavy snowfall during 2012.

RUSSIA

Col Harpreet Singh

Pakistani Soldiers to Train in Russia. Pakistani soldiers and officers will soon be able to train at Russian military training institutes, in yet another indication of the deepening defence ties between the two countries who till a few years ago were in the opposing camp of world

⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news>

politics. The two countries on Tuesday signed the Contract on Admission of Service Members of Pakistan in Russian Federation Training Institutes, paving the way for Pakistani troops to undergo training in Russia, a country which has been India's biggest ally and suppliers of weapons and defence equipment.

The agreement was signed after the first Russia-Pakistan Joint Military Consultative Committee (JMCC) meeting in Rawalpindi on 07 Aug 18. While the Russian delegation was led by Russian Deputy Defence Minister Colonel General Alexander Fomin, the Pakistani side was headed by Defence Secretary Lieutenant General (retired) Zamirul Hassan Shah. Gen Fomin also visited the General Headquarters and met General Qamar Javed Bajwa, the chief of the Pakistani Army.

Both the countries had signed a defence cooperation pact in November 2014 and in October 2015 inked the military-technical cooperation accord under which the two countries would cooperate in developing weapons and Russia may also supply arms to Pakistan. Pakistan has already received four Mi-35M combat and cargo helicopters from Russia since then while the soldiers of the two countries have also held a military exercise 'Friendship'.

Comments.

Russian Viewpoint. The Contract on Admission of Service Members of Pakistan in Russian Federation Training Institutes comes just days after a Russian defence and strategic think tank gave a call to sell the Su-35 fighter jet to Pakistan and not worry about India as it had pulled out of the programme to jointly develop the Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft (FGFA). They believe that against the backdrop of India's 'hesitation' about the project of the fifth generation fighter, Russia should promote the Su-35 fighter jet in Pakistan, otherwise, Chinese, South Korean or even Turkish companies will take this market in about five years. Hence Russia should discard the self-restraint of not selling state-of-art weapons to Pakistan.

The US Angle. The signing of agreement with Russia for training of Pakistani military officers also coincided with the news that Trump administration has cut down coveted training and educational programmes that have been a hallmark of bilateral military relations for more than a decade. The effective suspension of Pakistan from the US government's International Military Education and Training programme (IMET) will close off places that had been set aside for 66 Pakistani officers this year. For example, the US Army's War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, which would normally have two Pakistani military officers per year, boasts graduates including Lieutenant General Naveed Mukhtar, the current director-general of

Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The War College, the US Army's premier school for foreign officers, says it has hosted 37 participants from Pakistan over the past several decades. It will have no Pakistani students in the upcoming academic year. Pakistan has also been removed from programmes at the US Naval War College, Naval Staff College and courses including cyber security studies. The places will either be unfilled or given to officers from other countries. How will it affect the already fractured ties between Washington and Islamabad is not clear yet but early indicators are that Russia is moving quickly to cover this void left by US.

India's Concerns. The cut in the US training programme is likely to have little impact on Pakistan as it has already shifted its focus on military needs towards Russia and China and latest accord with Moscow is a sign that both nations are getting closer than ever. For the last two years, Russia has been trying to underplay its growing relationship with Pakistan and giving statements to India which are in conflict with its actions. The movement of Russia towards Pakistan is slow but the direction of these 'baby steps' is clear. India needs to make renewed diplomatic and political efforts and the annual Indo-Russia meet scheduled in Sep 2018 must be used to get some clarity from Russia towards its long term plans to woo Pakistan.

CAATSA Waiver for India on S-400 Deal. U.S. Congress's report allowing the introduction of a presidential waiver of its controversial [Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act \(CAATSA\)](#) will be greeted with a sense of relief in both New Delhi and Washington. The two governments have been working hard to avert a stand-off over the issue. The matter was particularly heated with India making it clear it would go ahead with the S-400 Triumph missile system deal with Russia regardless of the U.S. law and the threat of sanctions. CAATSA, signed reluctantly by President Donald Trump last August would have forced his administration to impose sanctions on any country carrying out significant defence and energy trade with sanctioned entities in Russia, Iran and North Korea. Mr. Trump had objected, arguing that the law took away his powers to decide on such matters.

Indian delegations led by the Foreign Secretary had made a three-fold case for the waiver: that no weapons India bought would be used against the US; that the US, which wants to partner with India in the Indo-Pacific, would hamper India's military abilities by applying the sanctions or denying the country crucial technology; and that India has significantly reduced its dependence on Russian military hardware while increasing defence purchases from the US, and it would be unfair if the US rewarded the effort with punitive measures. After months of testimony, including a final push for waiver for countries like India, Indonesia and Vietnam by U.S. Defence Secretary James Mattis a few days ago, the Congressional committee has relented. The Joint Explanatory Statement of the Committee of Conference, which reconciles House and Senate versions, has accepted the need for waivers. The "modified waiver authority", or amendment to Section 231 of CAATSA proposed by Congress, allows the President to waive sanctions in certain circumstances, for six months at a time, as long as he certifies that it is in the U.S.'s national security interests and does not "endanger" ongoing operations.

Comments. While the resolution of CAATSA-related sanctions is welcome, it is not the only irritant in the U.S.-India relationship that needs the attention of the External Affairs and Defence Ministers at the '2+2 dialogue' with their American counterparts scheduled for September. The sanctions proposed by the Trump administration for energy trade with Iran still loom, as do possible punitive measures at the World Trade Organisation over tariffs and counter-tariffs the two countries have imposed on each other. New Delhi will also be aware that the waivers are contingent on Mr. Trump's continued support to Indian defence requirements. Given the capricious and unpredictable policy swings Mr. Trump has shown, it will be prudent for New Delhi not to presume that the problems over CAATSA have fully blown over.

ASEAN

Col Shyamji Yadav

ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise. China and the 10 ASEAN member states held the first ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise from 02Aug to 03Aug at RSS Singapora - Changi Naval Base, with plans to hold a field exercise in China involving navies from all 11 countries in October.

The two-day table-top exercise, which did not involve actual drills, was hosted by the Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN) at the base's Multinational Operations and Exercises Centre. It saw participants cooperate on maritime safety incidents in international waters, such as the collision of merchant ships and an oil tanker catching fire.

During the exercise, naval officers from the 11 countries discussed plans that will be exercised, for the ASEAN-China Maritime Field Training Exercise to be held in October this year which will be co-led by Singapore and China.

The participants developed a joint search and rescue operation plan to assist civilian or merchant ships under distress in international waters by applying the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) - an agreement reached in 2014 with the aim of reducing incidents at sea.

Applying CUES, they developed plans on how their respective ships should manoeuvre together towards the incident location. They also worked out plans for the transfer of people or supplies from one ship to another via helicopters. Other plans included the evacuation of the critically injured to a ship with the necessary medical facilities or to a hospital on shore.

The ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise followed discussions held at the ASEAN-China Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting in February.

Comments. Multilateral maritime exercises, as a traditional form of cooperative naval diplomacy, are not a new thing in the region; and not least between ASEAN and China. Such

drills have been conducted before under various formats, including bilateral ones between individual ASEAN navies and their Chinese counterpart.

A noteworthy example is the ADMM-Plus Maritime Security and Counter-Terrorism Exercise in May 2016, involving all ten ASEAN countries as well as the eight dialogue partners, totalling 3,500 personnel, 18 naval vessels, 25 aircraft and 40 Special Forces teams.

There were also smaller-scale multilateral maritime exercises, which did not involve all ASEAN member states. In October 2017, China and some ASEAN member states – Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand – conducted a “Human Life Rescue and Win-Win Cooperation-themed” maritime search and rescue drill off Zhanjiang, involving about 1000 personnel, 20 vessels and three helicopters. The drill, touted as largest of its kind between China and ASEAN members, simulated a collision between a Chinese passenger ship and a Cambodian bulk cargo vessel.

While largely symbolic, the inaugural ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise serves as a first step forward in promoting practical measures for confidence-building and maritime safety despite ongoing disputes in the South China Sea. It may facilitate ASEAN and China to work together to promote peace and stability in the waters, thereby facilitating eventual settlement of the disputes.

This inaugural, CUES-based ASEAN-China maritime exercise, if seen more from the humanitarian than geopolitical perspective, will kick start new practical measures ASEAN and Chinese navies can adopt to build confidence and promote maritime safety in the South China Sea. This naval diplomacy may undermine India’s role in evolving a regional security architecture.

COC (Code of Conduct) in the South China Sea. ASEAN and China have agreed on a single text to negotiate the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, said Foreign Minister of Singapore, Vivian Balakrishnan.

They have also agreed on the "key modalities" for future rounds of negotiations, he said in opening remarks at the ASEAN-China Ministerial Meeting, which was held alongside the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Singapore in the first week of Aug.

Dr Balakrishnan said the single draft negotiating text will be the basis for future Code of Conduct (COC) negotiations and a living document. This means it will be edited and updated continually.

Comments. Their competing territorial claims to the disputed waters have been a long-running thorny issue in regional relations, though the situation has been calm since last year.

Progress on coming up with a set of rules, however, has been slow. China and ASEAN have been working to implement the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties, the precursor to the COC, since 2002. Negotiations on the COC began in March this year, following last year's adoption of the framework for the COC. Moreover it is likely to be ineffective if it is not legally binding. India will continue to play a pivotal role in working with ASEAN towards evolving a regional security architecture.

ASEAN-US Ministerial Meeting. The United States remains committed to ASEAN centrality under America's Indo-Pacific strategy, and looks forward to broadening and deepening its

strategic partnership with the region, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in his first meeting with his ASEAN counterparts in the first week of August.

"Our economic engagement has created hundreds of thousands of jobs on both sides of the Pacific. ASEAN is the No. 1 destination for US investment in Asia, and ASEAN member states have increased their investment into the US by over 1,300 per cent between 2004 and 2016," he added.

Speaking at the start of the ASEAN-US ministerial meeting, Mr Pompeo underlined his country's continued commitment to ASEAN, citing the US\$113 million (S\$154 million) initiative he had announced earlier this week to help fund energy, infrastructure and digital economy projects in the region.

He added: "On security, we appreciate ASEAN's ongoing efforts to promote peace and stability in the region, support the rule of law in the South China Sea and to strictly enforce sanctions on North Korea."

Comments. The ASEAN-US meeting is one of a series of annual meetings that ASEAN foreign ministers are holding with key partners to take stock of ties and see if they can be expanded. This year's meetings take place amid trade tensions and geopolitical uncertainty.

ASEAN members have also been lukewarm to the notion of an Indo-Pacific strategy, as they are wary of being drawn into a tussle between great powers and want to be sure that ASEAN stays central - in the driver's seat - when it comes to decisions affecting the region. India sees ASEAN as the fulcrum of peace, prosperity and stability in the region and remains committed to promoting ASEAN's primacy in the regional architecture.

Cambodia to Form New Government. The ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) will form a new government within 60 days, its spokesman said on Tuesday (July 31), two days after a general election that critics called neither free nor fair, after the main opposition was disbanded last year.

King Norodom Sihamoni will invite all of Parliament's new members-elect to a meeting to be held within 60 days of the July 29 vote, said ruling party spokesman Sok Eysan.

Exiled former opposition leader Sam Rainsy called Sunday's election a farce. "It was a farce, a sham election, it doesn't represent the will of the people."

The CPP has said it won all 125 parliamentary seats up for grabs in an election heavily criticised by rights groups, the United States and other Western countries.

As Western nations cool ties with Cambodia, regional powerhouse China remains a close ally. By far the biggest investor in Cambodia, it is also its biggest trade partner and has voiced support for the general election.

China's Foreign Ministry said it hoped the international community would remain supportive of Cambodia.

Comments. Critics call the election a step backward for democracy, following last year's dissolution of the main opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) and the jailing of its leader, Kem Sokha, on treason charges. The lack of genuine electoral competition and the absence of an inclusive political process mean that the election is not representative of the democratic will of the Cambodian electorate, and therefore its outcome lacks credibility.

Opposition members had urged voters to boycott the election. Invalid and spoilt ballots accounted for 8.4 per cent of the 7.64 million votes cast, representing a protest against the election.

The White House said it would consider steps, such as an expansion of visa restrictions placed on some government members, in response to the "flawed" elections.

The United States has imposed visa curbs on some Cambodian officials over the crackdown and levied sanctions in June on a high-ranking official close to Mr Hun Sen.

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www.currentaffairs.gktoday.in

WEST ASIA

Col Sumit Rana

Explosion Kills Dozens, Including Children, in Syria's Idlib 13 Aug 18. *Blast brought down six-storey building in the Syrian rebel-held town of Sarmada, close to the Turkish border. An explosion flattened a residential building in [Syria](#)'s war-torn northwest, killing at least 36 people including 12 children. The blast brought down the six-storey building in the town of Sarmada, 350km north of the capital Damascus, close to the Turkish border. The White Helmets rescue group, also known as the Syrian Civil Defence, described the scene on Sunday as one of "destruction and death," adding 10 people had been rescued from under the rubble.*

The group said the cause of the blast was unknown.

Syrian military repels 'Israeli enemy' attack near Damascus. *Air defences confront incursion breaching the country's airspace above the area of Deir al-Asha'ir.*

Syrian air defences confronted a "hostile target" breaching the country's airspace west of the capital Damascus, state media reported.

The area is close to the country's border with [Lebanon](#). Saturday's report suggested [Israel](#) was to blame for the incursion.

State news agency SANA said there were reports of "air defences confronting a hostile target breaching the skies above the area of Deir al-Asha'ir in the Damascus countryside".

"Our air defences confronted an enemy target that penetrated airspace," SANA reported. "In the past few weeks, the Israeli enemy has attacked military positions."

A spokeswoman for the Israeli military said it would not comment on foreign media reports.

Syrian Scientist Killed in Apparent Car-bomb Attack. Director of Syrian research facility Aziz Asber died after his car was blown up in Masyaf near Hama. The head of a Syrian research centre that the West accuses of being part of a chemical weapons programme was killed after his car exploded, reports said.

Aziz Asber, director of the Syrian Scientific Research Centre in Masyaf, a town close to the city of Hama, died in the blast, the pro-Syrian government newspaper al-Watan reported on Sunday.

"[Asber] died after an explosion targeted his car in the Hama countryside," it said.

A UK-based war monitor, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, also confirmed his death, which it said occurred on Saturday night.

Esber played a role in Syria's missile development programme and had close links with the government and its Iranian allies, the Syrian Observatory added.

Russia Confirms Syrian Refugee Proposal Sent to United States. In a letter, Moscow said it was ready to discuss with Damascus safety guarantees for refugees stranded at Rukban.

Russia's defence ministry confirmed it proposed working with the [United States](#) on funding the return of Syrian refugees to their homes in the war-torn country, but the proposition was reportedly rejected.

The proposal, which came in the form of a letter addressed to the senior US military general in July, referenced an informal refugee camp in Rukban, the ministry said in a statement on Saturday.

The poorly equipped [camp](#), home to at least 55,000 Syrians, is located in a desert area near the convergence of the Iraqi, Syrian and Jordanian borders.

In the letter, the Russian chief of staff, General Valery Gerasimov, said Moscow was ready to discuss with Damascus safety guarantees for refugees stranded at Rukban, as well as creating conditions for their return home.

"A proposal was also made to coordinate humanitarian de-mining, including in [Raqqa](#), and other priority humanitarian issues for the urgent establishment of peaceful life in Syria," the ministry said.

TURKEY

The fallout from Turkey's crisis will cause damage far beyond its borders. (Simon Tisdall a foreign affairs commentator). The immediate focus of this very Turkish tragedy is the

collapse of the lira, [down 40% or more](#) against the dollar. This reflects wider debt and inflation problems, which Erdoğan has failed to tackle. In truth, he called the elections early because he feared rising prices and growing shortages of food staples could undermine his chances. The resulting lack of confidence in Turkey's economic management and fears of a default have [now infected global markets](#), adversely affecting lender banks, the value of the euro, and developing economies from Asia to Africa.

This turmoil is about far more than the price of onions in Istanbul. Turkey's many troubles have wide geopolitical and strategic ramifications. The country is, as ever, awkwardly positioned between two ostensibly friendly but imperious powers: the US and Russia. Since taking national office in 2003, Erdoğan has tried to play them off against each other, with mixed success. Now the many contradictions in his policy positions are coming to a head, with unpredictable implications for Syria, Iran, NATO and already strained relations with [Europe](#).

The president's fierce grip on power is such that he is unlikely to be dislodged soon. The army, responsible for a [failed coup in 2016](#), has been purged. So, too, have other centres of possible opposition. Parliament has been reduced to a toothless talking shop. Erdoğan's mistakes, including his refusal to raise interest rates to cool the overheating economy and his unashamedly nepotistic appointment of his son-in-law as finance minister, thus go uncorrected. There will be no U-turns. His self-righteous stubbornness is Thatcher-esque.

But the US and Turkey have long been at odds over more weighty matters such as Syria, where Erdoğan has seized territory, ostensibly to contain the threat posed by Kurdish militias (whom he regards as terrorists). Latest reports say the Turkish army [is encouraging the formation](#) of a new force of non-Kurdish Syrian rebel factions with a view to creating a permanent border buffer zone. Naturally, this is opposed by Bashar al-Assad's regime in Damascus. The US, informally allied to Kurdish forces, is not keen on the idea, either.

And yet, in a rarely matched piece of geo-strategic incompetence, Erdoğan is now in danger of simultaneously alienating Vladimir Putin. [The issue is Idlib](#), the north-western Syrian province that is the last refuge of anti-Assad forces and a haven for 2.5 million internally displaced people. Putin wants Turkish support for the expected autumn offensive by Syrian, Iranian and Russian forces. Turkey fears another cross-border exodus of refugees. Erdoğan is also sticking to his buffer-zone idea. The result: a standoff that further underscores Turkey's international isolation and the sense of developing crisis.

ISRAEL

An Israeli attack on Wednesday killed at least three people, including a pregnant woman and her 18-month-old daughter.

10 Aug 18

Palestinians in [Gaza](#) are expected to protest in large numbers on Friday following [deadly Israeli air attacks](#) and artillery shelling on the besieged strip.

On Wednesday, Israel [killed three people](#) in Gaza, including a 23-year-old [woman](#) who was almost nine months pregnant and her 18-month-old daughter. Israel launched more than 140 attacks after about 150 rockets were fired from the coastal enclave.

A statement by Hamas' military force said it was responsible for the rockets. It said the Palestinian "resistance" had fired a large number of projectiles at "enemy positions in the Gaza envelope".

Friday's protests, which are expected to begin at around 14:00 GMT, come a day after [Hamas](#) and Israel reached an Egypt-brokered deal to end the flare-up in violence.

Thousands of Druze protest against Israel's Jewish nation law- 04 Aug 18 [A law that divides and discriminates](#). The Druze are an Arabic-speaking group with their own distinct religious and cultural traditions. They make up two percent of Israel's 8.8 million populations and are found mainly in the northern regions of Galilee and Carmel.

The Druze have had special status since the 1950s, when they were drafted into the military, unlike Israel's Muslim and Christian populations.

Critics say the new legislation makes Israel's non-Jewish minorities into second-class citizens, further marginalising some 1.8 million Palestinians with Israeli citizenship and other smaller minorities, including the Druze.

The Basic Law, which has standing similar to a constitution, gives only Jews the right to self-determination.

The new law also strips Arabic of its official language designation, downgrading it to a "special status".