

## **ENVIRONMENT SCAN 01-15 APR 2018**

### **CHINA (CONTINENTAL)**

Brig Rajeev Bhutani (Retd)

Belt and Road Initiative is not a Chinese plot, Xi says. At the annual meeting of the Chinese Boao Forum for Asia in the southern province of Hainan, President Xi Jinping said "The Belt and Road Initiative is not a Chinese plot, as some people internationally have said". He added "It is neither the post-World War Two Marshall Plan, nor is it a Chinese conspiracy. If you had to (call it something), it's an 'overt plot'".

At a summit, last May, Xi pledged \$126 billion for the plan, but has failed to overcome suspicion in Western capitals, where officials suspect the professed desire to spread prosperity in the region is foremost an attempt to assert Chinese influence. China has said projects along the routes of the Belt and Road will be open to investment from all, including third party nations, but some Western governments have voiced concern the deals will overwhelmingly favour Chinese companies.

In his opening speech to the forum on Tuesday, Xi said Belt and Road pacts had been made over the last five years with more than 80 countries and international bodies. He said, "China will not engage in geopolitical games for selfish ends, nor will it create an exclusive club, nor will it force trade deals on others from above,"

China to Build Bangladesh Economic Hub. China is developing a 750-acre industrial park in Bangladesh which will largely be used by Chinese manufacturing firms, part of its push to expand links with [South Asia](#) and beyond. The industrial park will be in Bangladesh's main port city of Chittagong and will take five years to become fully operational.

State-run [China Harbour Engineering Company](#) will hold a 70% share in a joint venture being formed for the park with the Bangladesh Special Economic Zone Authority.

'Will Fight at 'Any Cost', China on Trump's \$100 bn Tariff Threat. A top Chinese official said that China will take "comprehensive countermeasures" and fight "at any cost" US President Donald Trump's directive to authorities to consider tariffs on \$100-billion worth of Chinese products.

The US, the world's largest economy, has a trade deficit of almost \$500 billion with China, the world's second largest economy. Wei Jianguo, former vice-minister of the commerce ministry, said that China may cut down service trade with the US in view of

the current trade conflict. He said, "China needs to have some countermeasures ready if the trade skirmish drags on".

The trade spat which is deteriorating into a trade war between the top two economies of the world began with Trump imposing tariffs on steel and aluminum imports into the US. China retaliated by imposing additional tariffs worth about \$three billion on 128 US products.

Trump, while demanding China to reduce the \$375 billion by \$100 billion, retaliated with tariffs on \$50 billion in Chinese products. In retaliation, China announced plans to impose new tariffs on 106 American products. China said the date of implementation of the new tariff regime will depend on when the US government imposes the tariffs on Chinese products. Yesterday, China went a step further, raising a formal complaint with the World Trade Organization over the US' decision to slap duties on Chinese steel and aluminum products. But the US and Chinese officials are still trying to play down the possibility of a full-scale trade war.

Chinese troops using new equipment for all-weather border monitoring. China's military is bolstering the management of its border defence by developing new types of equipment including a satellite early warning system that can be used to monitor the border areas in all environments. A satellite early-warning monitoring system is planned in some border areas that are in dispute or are difficult to enter and patrol.

According to media report, a surveillance camera network has also been built in border zones and the density of coverage is set to increase to cover blind spots, but it is not known which, or if all, of China's border regions are covered.

While reporting about the new border monitoring system, the Global Times mentioned Pangong Lake in Ladakh, and said that the PLA has deployed a new patrol boat there which is made of non-metallic materials, the report said. The craft has a top speed of 40 km per hour and can resist ice collisions. A type of heavy scout vehicle, called the "wild ox," capable of accommodating 17 full-armed soldiers, has been deployed to a border defence regiment in Southwest China's Yunnan Province, which shares a border with three countries. Besides a BeiDou satellite navigation system, akin to that of US Global Position System (GPS), the vehicle also has a real-time communication system installed. The scout vehicle also has water filters, a kitchen and a toilet so it can conduct patrols in tropical environments.

## **CHINA (MARITIME)**

Capt (IN) Ranjit Seth

**China Conducts Largest Naval Review.** The PLAN aircraft carrier the Liaoning, 48 warships, 80 aircraft manned by over 10,000 crew conducted China's largest ever naval exercises in the South China Sea. Chinese President Xi Jinping inspected the naval review and urged the troops to stay vigilant and be ready to defend China's sovereignty and national interests, as well as safeguard regional peace and stability.

The Chinese exercise was pre-planned and was undertaken in less sensitive, undisputed waters indicating some restraint. The naval drill sent a general signal of China's intent and capability to use force if necessary to protect its interests. Some military observers felt that the drills sent a message to Taiwan and were also a show of support for Russia diverting attention from the crisis in Syria after US President Trump threatened a strike against Syrian forces. This was the first naval exercise in the waters off Taiwan since September 2015, which occurred during the presidential elections in Taiwan. The election was won by the independence-leaning President Tsai Ing-wen, who has yet to recognise the "1992 consensus", which China holds as the foundation for cross-strait dialogue.

On April 6, 2018, three US carrier strike groups were in the area simultaneously and converged with the Chinese fleet in the South China Sea. The presence of three carrier strike groups signaled that the US is not about to yield its military dominance there. Rear Admiral Steve Kochler, the commander of the US carrier strike group Theodore Roosevelt, said: "I think operating here in the South China Sea or anywhere in the maritime commons basically sends the message that these are open for free trade, and the opportunity for all to sail in accordance to international law."

The carrier strike group visited Manila, Philippines and then continued its deployment, ostensibly "addressing shared maritime security concerns, building partnerships with partner navies and enhancing interoperability and communication with partners and allies."

A China based military analyst Zhou Chenming says, "China realizes that the military gap with the US is still very big."

In the near future it can be expected that the US will continue its freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) challenging what it views as China's "illegal" maritime claims. It will also continue to state that it is defending the freedom of navigation that is threatened by China's "militarization" of the manmade Islands in the SCS, and in doing so is upholding "international law and order." However, it will not try to remove Chinese (or others') forces on the disputed features nor will it "blockade" them. The US will continue to criticize China's positions and actions and try to convince others of the righteousness of US policy.

The US will also continue to strengthen its military relationships with its allies and strategic partners in the region and to provide them with training and assets. It will urge ASEAN members to negotiate a binding, robust code of conduct for actions taken in the disputed areas in the South China Sea.

China will continue to strongly object to the US FONOPs. It will also continue to enhance its "defensive" capabilities on the features it occupies and argue that it is doing so because of the US FONOPs. China will also continue to claim that all the features and their "relevant waters" have belonged to China since "time immemorial" - despite the arbitration decision rejecting its historic maritime claims. It will continue to lobby both ASEAN claimants and other members to support its position that the disputes should be resolved through bilateral negotiations. China will also continue to drag out the negotiations on a code of conduct and push for weak and ambiguous wording in it.

## **PAKISTAN**

Col Arvinder Singh

**Pakistan HC bars Nawaz Sharif from Contesting Elections for Life.** Sharif, 68, was disqualified for not being honest and righteous as he failed to declare in 2013 a salary he got from the company of his son in UAE. Pakistan's deposed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on 13 Apr 18 became ineligible to hold public office for life after the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that the disqualification of two lawmakers, including him was permanent, in a landmark verdict ending the political future of the three-time premier ahead of general elections this year. The verdict was issued by the apex court while hearing a case related to the determination of time duration for disqualification of a lawmaker under the Constitution. In February, the court also disqualified Sharif as the head of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz\_(PML-N). In Friday's verdict, it said that under the country's Constitution, no person once disqualified from office by the top court can hold public office again.

**Comments.** The historic ruling ended Sharif's hopes to stage a political comeback in general elections slated after June. From India's perspective, Nawaz was never innocent because of his stand on Kashmir, and this judgment has rendered him helpless. But the verdict plunges Pakistan into more political instability in the lead-up to its General Elections, expected this summer. After the latest decision, though Nawaz will continue to play a big role in the party and Pakistan's politics, he will be completely behind curtains. After his disqualification, Nawaz fielded his wife from the Lahore seat, but though Kulsoom Nawaz won, she could not attend Parliament even for a day due to ill health. She is still undergoing treatment in London. It was believed that Kulsoom could fill the void created by his absence, but that hope has turned out false. In this scenario, the question of who inherits his political legacy just before the elections looms large. Two names are doing the rounds. It is being speculated that Nawaz may pass on the baton to either his daughter Maryam or his brother Shahbaz Sharif. It is worth mentioning that Shahbaz is the chief minister of Punjab, and after Nawaz's disqualification last year, was a prominent person leading the party. It was believed that he would fill Nawaz's shoes, and place Punjab in his son's hand. But nothing of the sort happened. After Nawaz's disqualification, the political stature of the present Prime Minister, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, is definitely going to grow. This is because Abbasi was supposed to be in the PM's chair only for a brief period, as it was believed that Kulsoom would recover soon and take over. But that did not happen. Thereafter, it was announced that until the General Elections, Abbasi would retain the PM's post. Now that Nawaz has been disqualified for life, there is every possibility that Abbasi's stature rises. Even before the Pakistan Muslim League, there is confusion on who would be the chief of the party. After the Supreme Court's decision, PM Abbasi will have to shoulder the responsibility of the party and the nation.

**Iran Eyes CPEC with growing Interest after Port Visit.** Iran's Minister for Roads and Urbanization expressed keen interest in exploring avenues available under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The minister is leading a high level Iranian delegation which visited Karachi Port Trust (KPT) on Friday. He said that Iran is keen to work with Pakistan for interconnection linkage between Karachi Port and Bandar Abbas as well as the development of tourism and facilitation of religious pilgrims. He further said there was ample space of 204,000 hectares available at Bandar Abbas for promoting transshipment cargo handling facility.

Comments. The Iranian delegation took keen interest in the deepwater container port project of KPT along with other future projects including the multipurpose bulk terminal, cargo village, LNG terminal and port elevated expressway.

## **AFGHANISTAN**

Col Arvinder Singh

**The United States Diminishing Leverage in Afghanistan.** Since the military transition from NATO to Afghan forces in 2014, Afghanistan has been in a downward spiral. Deteriorating security, a severe economic crisis, political fragmentation among the elite, and ethnic polarization have contributed to growing pessimism inside and outside the country. Furthermore, regional consensus on Afghanistan, which was considered an important achievement during the past 16 years, is on the verge of collapse, because key players such as Russia, Iran and Pakistan have adopted a concerted effort to undermine the US mission in the country. Meanwhile, despite China's converging interest with the US in Afghanistan, its strategic partnership with Pakistan and common regional strategy with its partners within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) prevent it from meaningful cooperation with the United States. It appears that key members of the SCO are in the process of adopting a common strategy for Afghanistan as a counterbalance to the military presence of the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in the country. These countries have developed deep relationships with different Afghan political and armed groups, and could easily extend their influence in a time when Washington has engaged in a forceful confrontational policy against Moscow and Beijing. For instance, Russia and Iran have adopted a more assertive policy in Afghanistan by supporting different armed groups including some splinter Taliban factions. In addition, Moscow has been engaged in a diplomatic effort by organizing a series of regional meetings on Afghanistan in Moscow and allied capital's as a counterbalance to America's and NATO's diplomatic efforts in view of an ultimate political settlement between Kabul and the insurgents. Meanwhile, China has used its growing economic leverage, and particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), for a mediation role between Pakistan and Afghanistan in an attempt to reduce the impact of US pressure on Pakistan. In fact internal political fragmentation within Afghanistan's National Unity Government (NUG), amid growing ambiguity about the United States' long-term agenda in Afghanistan, has further contributed to the degradation of the security situation and uncertainty about the political stability of the country. However, the US and its NATO allies look at the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) as a game changer. The best outcome for the US after more than 16 years of military commitment would be an ANDSF capable of defending major population centers against the insurgents.

The US and its NATO allies have invested tremendously for a viable state in Afghanistan, and their key objective is to salvage the current political process, which originated from the famous Bonn Agreement in December 2001. This will only be possible if the insurgents are prevented from breaking the current military stalemate and are convinced that they will not be allowed to force another brutal regime change in Kabul. The new US strategy for the country through a mini-surge of an additional several thousand soldiers might not change the tide, but it will provide breathing space for the Afghan forces, and it could also send a clear message to the insurgents and their regional backers that the best outcome would be a negotiated settlement. The US and its NATO allies in Afghanistan have enough resources and still enjoy broad public support in the country. However, there will be more hostilities and direct challenges toward their military presence from some of Afghanistan's neighbors and regional

powers using their proxies in the country. Lack of clarity and resolve in the US military mission, and hesitation from its NATO allies for a significant long-term commitment in Afghanistan, has further weakened the US leverage in Afghanistan and thus strengthened the SCO's position vis-à-vis NATO's in the region.

**Comments.** In the context of the current geopolitical competition among major powers in Asia, it will be difficult to reach a regional consensus on the future of Afghanistan, and there is a risk moving toward a situation similar to that in Syria, where the US and its NATO allies will be militarily challenged by a new coalition led by Russia.

**Pakistan Calls on Afghan Taliban to join Peace Process.** Pakistan and Afghanistan have called upon the Afghan Taliban to join a new peace process in the war-torn country, after a visit by the Pakistani prime minister to his country's northwest neighbor. Pakistani Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani called upon the Taliban to avail the Afghan government's latest offer of direct talks without delay. They agreed that there was no military solution to the ongoing Afghan conflict and that the political solution was the best way forward. Pakistani Prime Minister Abbasi announced a gift of 40,000 tons of wheat for the Afghan people, and pledged to waive an additional regulatory duty on Afghan exports to Pakistan during the visit. The two sides also pledged to move forward on a number of economic and infrastructure initiatives that would increase rail, road and gas pipeline links between them, Pakistan's foreign ministry said.

**Comments.** In February, Ghani offered to reopen negotiations with the Afghan Taliban without preconditions, despite ongoing attacks. He offered to recognize the group as a political party, and proposed a ceasefire and exchange of prisoners in a bid to begin a process that could end more than 16 years of war. The Taliban have not yet officially responded to that offer.

The Pakistani prime minister's visit was aimed at reducing tensions between the neighbors, both of whom accuse each other of allowing armed groups to use their soil for attacks on the other. Afghanistan has long alleged that Pakistan allows the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani Network leadership to find safe haven on its soil. Pakistan accuses Afghanistan of not doing enough against Pakistan Taliban fighters allegedly based in the Afghan provinces of Nangarhar and Kunar.

**14 killed including district governor killed in Taliban attack in Afghanistan's Ghazni province.** Fourteen people including a district governor were killed in a Taliban attack in Afghanistan's southeastern Ghazni province on 12 Apr. The Taliban claim to have taken control of key parts of the Khwaja Omari district, but provincial officials denied that. The attack began at about 2 am when Taliban fighters attacked the district and police headquarters in Khwaja Omari district. Khawaja Omari is near the provincial capital, also called Ghazni, a city of 150,000 people 150 km (95 miles) southwest of the Afghan capital, Kabul. Fighting went on for about three hours until fresh troops were deployed to the district and the Taliban escaped from the area. The Taliban used heavy

weapons. Other than the district governor, Ali Dost Shams, all the casualties were security forces. Taliban spokesman in a statement to media said the militants had taken the key parts of the district including the district and police headquarters. He said Taliban fighters had killed about 20 Afghan security force members.

**Attacks in Afghanistan Leave Dozens Dead and 2 Schools Burned.** Four attacks across Afghanistan on 13 and 14 Apr night killed at least 26 government security officers, while two schools were also set ablaze, according to Afghan officials. The four attacks struck government outposts in northern and eastern Afghanistan; at least three appeared coordinated. They occurred late at night or early in the morning, with the attackers using long-range sniper rifles and night-vision equipment, according to Afghan officials, who tallied at least 10 wounded in all, along with those killed. In separate assaults, a girls' high school in Logar Province, near the capital, Kabul, was burned on April 11, and masked attackers struck a school in the village of Momandara, in Nangarhar Province, on Saturday night, setting archives and labs ablaze, according to education officials. There was no immediate claim of responsibility, but government officials blamed Taliban insurgents for the attacks on the government outposts. In recent years, mainstream Taliban forces have normally refrained from attacking schools.

**Comments.** Since the beginning of this year, ISIL and the Taliban have launched a series of deadly attacks across the country. Fighting in Afghanistan traditionally increases in the spring when warmer weather melts snow blocking mountain passes, increasing the mobility of the insurgents. The Taliban usually announce the launch of a spring offensive in April.

**UN: Over 700 Civilians Killed In Afghanistan So Far In 2018** In its quarterly report issued on April 12, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) said 763 civilians were killed and 1,495 others injured between January 1 and March 31, a similar figure to the same period in 2017. UNAMA said it was concerned by a 6 percent increase in civilian casualties caused by antigovernment groups.

**Comments.** Afghan civilians continue to suffer as it was the fourth year in a row with more than 10,000 civilian casualties. The UN figures are considered a conservative estimate because they need at least three independent sources to officially register a case.

## **IRAN**

Col Arvinder Singh

**Iran reiterates support for Syria in face of foreign aggression.** Tehran has said that it will stand by Bashar al-Assad in the event of a US-led strike, as a senior adviser to the Iranian supreme leader met the Syrian president in Damascus on 12 Apr 18. Ali Akbar Velayati, a top foreign policy aide to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, visited eastern Ghouta earlier in the week. He said Iran condemned any use of chemical weapons by any country or group, according to the Tasnim news agency. Such allegations by the US and some other western countries reveal a new conspiracy against the Syrian government and people. This is an excuse for military action against Syrians and will definitely add to the complexity of the situation in this country and region. Russian President Vladimir Putin has told Iranian President Hassan Rouhani that further attacks by Western allies in Syria would inevitably lead to chaos in international relations. In a phone conversation on Sunday, the two leaders agreed that this illegal action seriously damages the prospects for a political settlement in Syria.

**Comments.** Iran, which has been propping up Assad since the conflict began, has provided the Syrian government with crucial ground support, along with combination of Hezbollah fighters, Shia volunteers from across the Middle East and its own Revolutionary Guards. Russian and Iranian backing has swung the conflict in Assad's favor, at the same time as the so-called caliphate of the Islamic State (Isis) has crumbled. Its remaining fighters have been pushed back to a modest piece of land along the Euphrates valley near the Iraqi border. The post-Isis era has also changed the dynamic of the war as Israel is concerned about Iran's growing influence on its doorstep and has become more involved militarily. An Israeli airstrike on a Syrian airbase near Homs on Sunday killed at least seven Iranian military personnel.

**Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu warns Iran over influence in Syria.** Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has warned Iran not to test his country's resolve as Tehran builds its military presence in neighboring Syria. He said on 11 Apr 18 on the eve of Israel's Holocaust Remembrance Day that their policy can be summed up in three words: aggression against aggression and Iran should not test the determination of the State of Israel. Referring to Iran, he added that even today an extremist regime threatens us, threatening world peace. This regime explicitly declares that it intends to destroy the Jewish state. Netanyahu also spoke on 11 Apr 18 with President Vladimir Putin of Russia, Syria's main backer. During the conversation, the prime minister reiterated that Israel would not allow an Iranian military buildup in Syria. Meanwhile, Ali Akbar Velayati, the Iranian supreme leader's most senior adviser on foreign affairs, told that the crime by Israel in their attack against a Syrian air base will not be left without a response.

**Comments.** Syria's alleged chemical attack on a rebel enclave near Damascus has resulted in United States, France and Britain launching coordinated attacks on Syria's alleged chemical facilities. But in Israel, evidence that Iran is entrenching just across its northeastern border in Syria has caused serious worry. Israel has become increasingly

alarmed at the growing influence of Iran and the Iran-backed Lebanese group Hezbollah, particularly in Syria. Israel has struck inside Syria more than 100 times since 2012, and its forces are widely believed to have bombed an air base in Syria Monday, which Iranian state media reported killed seven Iranian military personnel.

**Khamenei: Big mistake to negotiate with Israel.** Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said on 11 Apr 18 that any move to negotiate with Israel would be an unforgivable mistake that will push back the victory of the people of Palestine. In his statement, Khamenei called on the people of Muslim countries to defeat Israel. The statement, which did not explicitly name Saudi Arabia, said it was the duty of all Muslims to support Palestinian resistance movements and it pledged continued Iranian backing for the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas

**Comments.** The comments by Khamenei came after Saudi Arabia's crown prince said that Israelis were entitled to live peacefully on their own land. Saudi Arabia does not officially recognize Israel, but Mohammed bin Salman's comments are a further sign of an apparent thawing in bilateral ties. They come as mainly Sunni Muslim Saudi Arabia faces off against predominantly Shia Iran in a regional power struggle. Tehran and Riyadh back opposing sides in the conflicts in Yemen and Syria as well as rival political groups in Iraq and Lebanon. Riyadh has long maintained that normalizing ties with Israel hinges on an Israeli withdrawal from Arab lands captured in the 1967 Middle East war - territory Palestinians seek for a future state. However, Saudi Arabia opened its airspace for the first time to a commercial flight to Israel last month, which an Israeli official hailed as historic following two years of efforts. In November, an Israeli cabinet member disclosed covert contacts with Saudi Arabia, a rare acknowledgement of long-rumored secret dealings which Riyadh still denies.

## **NORTHEAST**

Brig HS Cheema

**Quota in Govt Jobs: Sought Reform, Got Abolition in Bangladesh.** Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on 11 Apr announced scrapping of the quota system in public service recruitments. However, different arrangement will be made so that members of ethnic minorities and physically-challenged people can get government jobs. The quota system was introduced through an executive order in 1972 and was amended several times. Under quota system, 44 percent were recruited on merit and 56 percent under various quotas. Of the 56 percent, 30 percent was kept for freedom fighters' children and grandchildren, 10 percent for women, 10 percent for people of districts lagging behind, 5 percent for members of indigenous communities, and one percent for physically-challenged people.

**Myanmar Minister Visits Rohingya Camp.** Social Welfare Minister Win Myat Aye tours one of the Bangladesh camps to take stock of the situation on 11 Apr, the first such visit since a Myanmar Army crackdown sparked a massive refugee crisis. Minister met with Rohingya leaders at the giant Kutupalong camp near the border city of Cox's Bazar, where a group of refugees tried to stage a protest during his visit. He met with some 30 Rohingya community leaders and was briefed on the situation in the sprawling refugee camps by Bangladeshi and UN officials. The leaders from the displaced minority

group handed a statement to the Myanmar Minister saying "it was not safe for them to return".

**Rohingya Crisis: Myanmar Says ICC has No Jurisdiction.** Myanmar has expressed "serious concern" over an attempt at the International Criminal Court to open a probe into mass deportations of Rohingya Muslims, dismissing the claims and saying the court has no jurisdiction. The statement highlights the legal thorniness around the possible probe by arguing that Myanmar is not a party to the Rome statute that countries must sign on to as ICC member states. "Nowhere in the ICC Charter does it say that the Court has jurisdiction over States which have not accepted that jurisdiction," Myanmar's statement says. Bangladesh is a member, however, and chief prosecutor Fatou Bensouda said in her filing that her office does have the authority to investigate.

**India to fortify vigil along Bangladesh borders: Tripura CM.** India will strengthen vigilance along the Bangladesh border to stop infiltration and border crimes, besides preventing inimical activities, Tripura Chief Minister Biplab Kumar Deb said on 11 Apr. There is a proposal by home ministry to seek the feasibility of installation of CCTV cameras on the fencing along the India-Bangladesh border for better border management. Ministry would also consider setting up the Central Control and Monitoring Rooms so as to prevent any illegal activities on the border and suitable steps will be taken for the better maintenance of the roads along the international borders. Five Indian states - West Bengal (2,216 km), Tripura (856 km), Meghalaya (443 km), Mizoram (318 km), and Assam (263 km) - share a 4,096-km border with Bangladesh. The mountainous terrain, dense forests and other hindrances make the unfenced borders porous and vulnerable, enabling illegal immigrants and intruders to cross over without any hurdle.

**Visit of Prime Minister of Nepal.** On April 7, 2018, Mr. K.P. Sharma Oli, Prime Minister of Nepal and the Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi comprehensively reviewed the entire spectrum of multifaceted ties between the two countries. The two Prime Ministers resolved to work together to take bilateral relations to newer heights on the basis of equality, mutual trust, respect and benefit. Prime Minister Modi stated that Government of India's vision of 'Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas' is a guiding framework for India's engagement with its neighbours for a shared vision of inclusive development and prosperity. Prime Minister Oli stated that after the landmark political transformation, his Government has given priority to economic transformation with the motto 'Samriddha Nepal Sukhi Nepali'. Prime Minister Modi congratulated the people and the Government of Nepal for successful conduct of local level, federal parliament and first-ever provincial elections in Nepal and appreciated their vision for stability, and development. The two Prime Ministers inaugurated the Integrated Check Post at Birgunj in Nepal. They hoped that its early operationalization will enhance cross-border trade and transit of goods and movement of people bringing greater opportunities for shared growth and development. The two Prime Ministers witnessed the ground-breaking ceremony of the Motihari-Amlekhgunj cross-border petroleum products pipeline at Motihari, India.

The two Prime Ministers underlined the need for expeditious implementation of bilateral projects in Nepal, and to reinvigorate the existing bilateral mechanisms to promote cooperative agenda across diverse spheres. Three other key areas of mutual interest are:-

- (a) India-Nepal: New Partnership in Agriculture:-

- (b) Expanding Rail Linkages: Connecting Raxaul in India to Kathmandu.
- (c) New Connectivity between India and Nepal through Inland Waterways.

## ASEAN

Col Shyamji Yadav

**Xi Jinping Meets with President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines.** On April 10, 2018, President Xi Jinping met with President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines in Hainan Province. Xi Jinping pointed out that the China-Philippines relations have experienced from “turnaround” to “consolidation” in the past two years, ascending two steps in succession. The task of this year should be “improvement”. To this end, the leaders of the two countries should intensify communication and strengthen strategic guidance and top-level design for the China-Philippines relations. The two countries should step up the alignment of the development strategies and promote mutually beneficial cooperation within the “Belt and Road” framework and in various fields as well as deepen security cooperation. China supports the Philippines in its efforts to push forward anti-terrorism, drug elimination and crime eradication campaigns. The departments in charge of news and media of the two sides should strengthen exchanges, fully mobilize the civil society to participate in the cause of the China-Philippines friendship, expand people-to-people and cultural exchanges and consolidate the public opinion foundation. China and the Philippines should continue to properly address the South China Sea issue and explore cooperation in joint exploitation and development at an appropriate time, making the South China Sea a sea of cooperation and friendship.

Rodrigo Duterte said that The Philippine side is willing to actively participate in the co-building of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and cement cooperation with China in such fields as economy and trade, fishery, tourism, education, infrastructure, law enforcement and security.. The Philippines will assume the post of the country coordinator for ASEAN-China relations and stands ready to actively promote and deepen the cooperation between the ASEAN and China.

**Comments.** China and the Philippines chart the course towards a calmer South China Sea. The recent China-Philippines relationship opens up a pragmatic way to build confidence. The improvement in China-Philippine relations contributes greatly to building trust in the region, not only between Beijing and Manila, but also between China and other Asean countries. While the Philippines was once a vanguard against China in the South China Sea, now it has adopted a [more constructive attitude](#). This will make other Asean members rethink relations with China.

**India-US-Japan discuss South China Sea tensions; Indo-Pacific region.** India, Japan and the United States on Wednesday held their 9th [Trilateral](#) Meeting here to give momentum to the [Indo-Pacific](#) construct through partnership with like-minded countries in the region including ASEAN amid rising tensions in the South [China](#) Sea region and Beijing’s growing expansionist ambitions. The three sides led by their Joint Secretaries also discussed how to involve ASEAN countries to safeguard security and stability of the Indo-Pacific region. The current tensions in the South China Sea region was also on the agenda of discussion as the three sides emphasised on Freedom of

Navigation through the region. This comes amid Vietnam's apprehension that tension in the South China Sea will hurt Petro Vietnam's offshore exploration and exploitation activities this year, weeks after the Southeast Asian nation suspended a Spanish project under pressure from China. In accordance with the directions received from their Foreign Ministers, who met in New York on 18 September 2017 on the margins of UNGA, the officials explored practical steps to enhance cooperation in the areas of connectivity and infrastructure development; counter-proliferation; counter-terrorism; maritime security, maritime domain awareness and HADR.

Jakarta looks to China for Infrastructure Investments. The Indonesian government, which is in dire need of funds to finance several construction projects in the pipeline, will approach Chinese investors and ask them to engage in infrastructure development across the archipelago.

Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs Luhut Pandjaitan departed for China on Wednesday to offer 15 infrastructure projects to the investors. The locations suggest that the projects are related to Indonesia's offering made at the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in May last year. Mr Luhut spelt out the government's four conditions for foreign-funded infrastructure projects: environmental safety, the use of local workers, an industry with added value and a transfer of technology during the construction. That shift takes place ahead of the 2019 presidential election, in which Mr Joko is seeking a second term in office.

Philippines Eyes Joint Exploration Deal with China in South China Sea. Philippines is looking to seal a pact with China within a few months to jointly explore for oil and gas in a part of the busy South China Sea waterway claimed by both countries, a Philippine official said on Monday (April 9).

Chinese Foreign Minister Visits Vietnam. From March 30 to April 2, Wang Yi, China's foreign minister as well as a member of the State Council paid an official four-day visit to Vietnam. Officially, Wang was in Vietnam this time mainly to attend the sixth Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Economic Cooperation Leaders' Meeting. But the disputed South China Sea issue apparently dominated the hidden agenda for both countries, particularly at a time when China has been intensifying military drills in South China Sea. Since the Philippines has backed down on the South China Sea dispute under President Rodrigo Duterte's administration, Vietnam has become the most vocal opponent of China's claims in the South China Sea. Located close to Hainan Island geographically, Vietnam undoubtedly has been paying close attention to China's recent military operations.

Recent reports also indicate that China successfully pressured Vietnam to end work on a natural gas project in the South China Sea, in an area claimed by Vietnam as its Exclusive Economic Zone but also within China's nine-dash line claim.

China and Vietnam vowed on April 1 to keep the peace in the South China Sea, the resource-rich waterway that has long been a source of tension between Hanoi and its powerhouse communist neighbour.

**Foreign ministers from China and Vietnam vowed to address disputes peacefully.**

"Both sides should abide by the basic governing principles on resolving maritime issues. Both sides should not apply unilateral measures that would complicate the situation," China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi told reporters in Hanoi during an official visit to Vietnam.

He added both sides should "properly manage differences, not expand disputes (and) respect legitimate rights and interests of the other in accordance with international law".

Vietnam also vowed to deepen bilateral relations with China and "better dovetail China's Belt and Road Initiative with Vietnam's 'Two Corridors and One Economic Circle' plan and push forward trade and subnational cooperation between the two countries," according to *Xinhua*.

**Comments.** Faced with the latest U.S. FONOP in the South China Sea, Beijing aimed to pull Hanoi to its side by providing Hanoi more economic opportunities through Wang's latest visit.

However, while Vietnam does show great interest in China's funding, it's highly doubtful if Hanoi will really bandwagon with Beijing as the Philippines has chosen to do. Early in March, the U.S. aircraft carrier USS *Carl Vinson* made a historic visit to Vietnam, the first U.S. aircraft carrier to do so since the end of the Vietnam war in 1975. It was an obvious demonstration of Vietnam's intention to intensify its military cooperation with the United States.

Three years, no takers for India's \$1-billion credit line for ASEAN digital links. Nearly 40 months after Prime Minister Narendra Modi offered a \$1-billion credit line for digital connectivity for 10 ASEAN countries from India, there are few takers.

The credit line was announced at the India-ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur in November 2015, as part of India's "Act East" policy.

Surprised by this lack of interest from ASEAN countries, in January, Delhi decided to give a grant of \$40 million for pilot projects in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (CLMV) countries to help "kick-start" the credit line.

Government sources said that the pilot projects "had been planned to ensure better takeoff of credit line projects and to reduce the dependence of the ASEAN countries solely on China. The overall responsibility for the \$1-billion credit line, which includes both physical and digital connectivity in ASEAN countries, is with the Ministry of External Affairs, with funds released by the Export-Import Bank of India (EXIM Bank). The Department of Telecom (DoT) and Telecom Equipment and Services Export Promotion Council (TEPC) are the lead agencies from the Indian side for connectivity projects.

Of the 10 ASEAN countries, only Laos has so far sent formal requests for digital connectivity projects under the credit line. But, this request for three projects, made through diplomatic channels last May, has not progressed as EXIM Bank has no "Telecom Consultant" on its panel. (An empanelled Telecom Consultant is required to

prepare a detailed project report for the projects requested by a foreign nation, as per procedure.)

Terming the past two years “a learning process”, former telecom secretary and Chairman of TEPC, Shyamal Ghosh told The Indian Express that “the credit line and pilot projects will enable Indian companies to establish footprints in the East, which would effectively actualize our Look-East policy besides providing an impetus to our indigenous manufacturing.”

Sources said a major impediment in any progress on availing the credit line is the issue of sovereign guarantee which is to be provided by the foreign government. As the telecom sector in ASEAN countries is in the private sector, no government is keen to provide a sovereign guarantee for a loan given by India to a private firm.

Even Laos, which has been the most forthcoming, proposed that it could, at best, issue a “letter of comfort.” The proposal from Laos is still under consideration by Delhi.

Other countries, sources said, have also “raised questions about the terms offered for the credit line and the technology being transferred”. In discussions in Myanmar last December, Myanmar officials told their Indian counterparts that China was offering them a credit line at better terms than India, with a guarantee of modern technology transfer. As per TEPC officials, modern technology can only be transferred if the government is willing to let private Indian telecom companies execute the projects, and not restrict them to public sector firms.

DoT officials said the procedure at EXIM Bank is “very cumbersome and bureaucratic” which makes the credit line “unattractive” for ASEAN countries. Most of these countries, they said, also have a lengthy process for initiating projects at their end. For example, in Myanmar, inter-ministerial, parliamentary and Presidential clearances for such a project will take two years.

Sources said they are keen to show progress as Modi will address the ASEAN-India Summit in Vietnam on November 18.

7 Myanmar soldiers jailed for massacre Yangon. Seven Myanmar soldiers have been sentenced to “10 years in prison with hard labour in a remote area” for participating in a massacre of 10 Rohingya Muslim men in a village in western Rakhine state last September, the army said.

Myanmar repatriates first Rohingya refugee family. Myanmar on Saturday (April 14) repatriated the first Rohingya family from nearly 700,000 refugees who have fled to Bangladesh, after months of fraught talks with Dhaka and amid the United Nations' warnings that the country is not ready for their return.

Myanmar and Bangladesh agreed in January to complete a voluntary repatriation of the refugees in two years. Myanmar set up two reception centers and what it says is a temporary camp near the border in Rakhine to receive the first arrivals.

It added that the family members who "are in line with the rules" were issued the National Verification Cards (NVCs) upon entering Myanmar. NVCs are part of the government's ongoing effort to register Rohingya that falls short of offering them citizenship. The card has been widely rejected by Rohingya community leaders, who say they treat life-long residents like new immigrants. She cited a continued lack of access to health services, concerns among the Rohingya about protection and continued displacements. She also described conditions in camps for internally-displaced people from previous bouts of violence as "deplorable".

## **WEST ASIA**

Col Sumit Rana

## **SYRIA**

The US, British and French jets that took off from the British base in Akrotiri in Cyprus, France, the Mediterranean and perhaps other bases in the Middle East never came close to the Russian or Syrian air defence systems.

The cruise missiles fired by the US B1-B Lancer heavy bombers, French Rafales and UK Tornados GR4s – as well as from frigates in the Mediterranean – were among the world's most modern. They had ranges of hundreds of kilometres, designed to be fired from a distance to avoid the risk of aircraft being targeted by Syria's largely Soviet-era anti-aircraft missile systems.

In the space of around 45 minutes, perhaps \$50m (£35m) worth of weapons were fired. How effective the strikes in the early hours of Saturday were in targeting the chemical weapons facilities of the Assad regime is an open question, as are the claims by the Russian military that Syria took down 71 of more than 100 missiles launched.

For its part, the Pentagon countered that assessment, saying no missiles were intercepted and calling the strikes "precise, overwhelming and effective", adding that it successfully hit every target.

The missiles launched were among some of the most sophisticated in the countries' arsenals and included the US military's JASSM cruise missile, which was used in combat for the first time, according to reports.

As a demonstration of military firepower, it appears to have been as staged (with ample prior warning to Russia and, in that case Syria as well, as France admitted) as it was extremely limited in its scope, leaving most of the Syrian military's key assets untouched.

## **TURKEY**

Turkey's Erdogan backs strikes on Syrian chemical facilities. Turkish President RecepTayyip Erdogan has welcomed the combined strikes on Syria's alleged chemical facilities, saying that the operation sent a message to his Syrian counterpart Bashar al-Assad.

The US and its allies, Britain and France, carried out a wave of strikes against Assad's government on Saturday, a week after a suspected deadly gas attack on the rebel-held Damascus suburb of Douma.

The White Helmets, a local civil defence agency, accused the Assad government of carrying out the gas attack, which is believed to have killed 85 civilians, including children, and injured hundreds of others.

"With the joint operation by US, UK and France ... the Syrian regime received the message that its massacres wouldn't be left unanswered," Erdogan told his ruling Justice and Development Party supporters in a meeting on Saturday in Istanbul.

## **ISRAEL**

Russian Supply of S-300 Systems to Syria Major Threat to IAF. Since the Russians entered the bloody conflict in 2015, the Syrian regime has become more brazen in its responses to Israeli strikes. With Russia considering supplying the S-300 surface-to-air missile systems to Syria, Israel's air superiority is at risk of being challenged in one of its most difficult arenas. With a de-confliction mechanism in place with Russia over Syria in order to avoid any unwanted conflict with the superpower, Israel has largely had free reign over Syrian skies to carry out strikes on targets deemed a threat to the Jewish state. Over the course of Syria's seven-year-long civil war, Israel has publicly admitted to having struck over 100 Hezbollah convoys and other targets in Syria, while keeping mum on hundreds of other strikes that have been attributed to the Jewish state.

But following US-led air strikes on the Syrian regime's chemical weapons infrastructure, Russia considers "it possible to return to an examination of this issue, not only in regard to Syria but to other countries as well," he said.

The advanced S-300 would be a major upgrade to Syrian air defenses and pose a threat to Israeli jets as the long-range missile defense system can track objects like aircraft and ballistic missiles over a range of 300 kilometers.

A full battalion includes six launcher vehicles, with each vehicle carrying four missile containers for a total of 24 missiles, as well as command- and-control and long-range radar detection vehicles.

The system's engagement radar, which can guide up to 12 missiles simultaneously, helps guide the missiles toward the target. With two missiles per target, each launcher vehicle can engage up to six targets at once. Since the Russians entered the bloody conflict in 2015, the Syrian regime has become more brazen in its responses to Israeli strikes.

## **QATAR**

### **Arab summit**

- **Qatari flags:** On April 12, dozens of Qatari flags were raised in the eastern city of Dammam in Saudi Arabia, which is due to host the Arab League summit on April 15.
- On April 5, [Qatar](#) confirmed that it had been officially invited to attend this year's Arab League summit, but that it has not yet decided on the level of representation it will send.
- "Qatar has received the invitation to participate in the Arab Summit and will participate, but we have not yet decided the level of participation," Lulwa al-Khater, a spokesperson for Qatar's foreign ministry, said.
- Saudi Arabia announced in March that it would host the next Arab summit, following a request from the UAE. Preparatory and ministerial meetings for the summit will be in the capital Riyadh.

### **Qatar - US**

- **Military:** On April 11, the US approved a \$300m sale of guided missiles to Qatar.
- On April 6, Qatar's emir began his official US tour with a meeting at the US Central Command (CENTCOM) headquarters in Tampa, Florida, and [met](#) with the US Secretary of Defence at the Pentagon on April 9.
- **Economy:** On April 11, Qatar's emir also participated in the Qatar-US economic Forum and said that the country is [planning](#) to "double" the \$125bn partnership in coming years.

## **YEMEN**

- Eastern Ghouta Militants to be deployed to Yemen Via Saudi Arabia.
- The Russian Defense Ministry has reported that a total of 170,152 people, including 63,117 militants and their relatives, had been evacuated from the

Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta during a large-scale humanitarian operation in the area.

- 500 Jaysh al-Islam\* militants who were earlier evacuated from Eastern Ghouta, plan to go to Yemen, according to the pan-Arabic satellite television channel Al Mayadeen.
- It cited its own source as saying that the terrorists first intend to illegally arrive in Saudi Arabia, from where they will try to enter Yemen.
- On Friday, Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov told a news briefing that the Russian Reconciliation Center along with Syrian authorities are wrapping up a large-scale humanitarian operation in the Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta.
- The Syria attack reveals the hypocrisy of the West – which fuels the Saudi-led bombing campaign in Yemen despite documented abuses – but relies on unverified claims to punish Syria, journalist and broadcaster Neil Clark told RT.
- As Riyadh's campaign in Yemen enters its fourth year, it has been repeatedly accused by rights groups of civilian casualties during the bombardment. However, in Syria's case, reports of a chemical weapon attack in Douma that are yet to be independently corroborated became the trigger for a coordinated military action, Clark pointed out. *"On the one hand, they are rolling out the red carpet for Saudi leaders and they are supporting, either directly or indirectly, the Saudi bombing of Yemen, which is causing a great humanitarian catastrophe – and how many children has that conflict killed?"*
- *"On the other hand, they pose as moral paragons, as moral crusaders when they claim children have died in Syria's chemical weapons attack without evidence,"* he said.
- Clark argued that by [continuing](#) its weapons sales to Riyadh, the West *"has been feeding and supporting that conflict."*
- Between March 2015 (the start of the Saudi-led campaign) and February 2018, almost 6,000 civilians were killed and 9,500 wounded, according to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. In its report in March, Amnesty International said it has documented at least 36 coalition airstrikes that appeared to be carried out in violation of international humanitarian law, many of which may constitute a war crime. At least 513 civilians perished in their raids, including 157 children, it said.
- *"So, on one hand we have got documented evidence of children dying in huge numbers in Yemen through cholera and through bombing. That's true, that's evidence, actually. And the same powers responsible for that are bombing Syria*

*in response to unverified claims of attacks on children in Syria," Clark said. "The double standards are totally, totally off-the-scale."*

- Just last month, UK Prime Minister Theresa May, US President Donald Trump, and French President Emmanuel Macron welcomed Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Gulf country's defense minister and de-facto ruler who is on a charm offensive in Europe and the US.
- As a result, the UK, which has provided a steady supply of arms to the ultraconservative kingdom, signed a huge arms deal with Riyadh that will see it purchasing 48 Typhoon jets from British firm BAE Systems.
- In his own meeting with bin Salman in Washington, President Trump boasted about \$12.5 billion in finalized sales of American weapons to Saudi Arabia. In May 2017, he chose Saudi Arabia for his first foreign trip as president and signed a record \$350-billion arms deal.
- France, which according to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) was Saudi Arabia's third biggest weapons supplier between 2013 and 2017, might soon also conclude a new series of deals with the kingdom.
- Last week, a French defense minister official told Reuters that France had agreed on a new arms export strategy with Saudi Arabia. According to reports in French media, Paris can soon start selling navy patrol boats and Caesar artillery canons to Saudi Arabia, manufactured by CMN and Nexter respectively.

## **IRAQ**

Iraqis begin campaigning for parliamentary elections

- *Nearly 7,000 candidates are competing for 329 seats on May 12, which marks Iraq's fourth parliamentary elections since the 2003 US-led invasion that removed Saddam Hussein from power.*
- Political parties in Iraq have started campaigning for parliamentary elections next month.
- Nearly 7,000 candidates are competing for 329 seats, but they face tough challenges following the three-year war against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS) group.

## **RUSSIA**

Col Harpreet Singh

**Russia warns of 'consequences' for US-led strike on Syria.** Russia responded angrily to a U.S.-led strike against Syria on 13 Apr 18, warning of unspecified "consequences" that stoked fears the conflict could escalate. President Donald Trump ordered targeted military action in the country, following an alleged chemical weapons attack that reportedly left dozens of citizens dead. The result was 105 missiles raining down on three of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's chemical weapons facilities Friday night.

Russia, which has backed the government of Syrian President Bashar Assad, has joined Damascus in denying an attack even took place — even though U.S. authorities have declared it did with near certainty. The dispute over Syria was the latest wedge between the West and Russia, which has been embroiled in conflicts on multiple fronts with western governments.

Russia's ambassador to the U.S. said the country was being "threatened," and issued an ominous warning that reprisals could follow. In the near term, the military strike appeared to ramp up a searing war of words between Washington and Moscow, which regarded the action as an attack on Russia itself.

A top Russian official as likening Trump to Nazi leader Adolf Hitler. Alexander Sherin, deputy head of the State Duma's defense committee, said Trump "can be called Adolf Hitler No. 2 of our time — because, you see, he even chose the time that Hitler attacked the Soviet Union."

Trump has singled out Russian President Vladimir Putin for his support of Assad, as well as Iran. In his speech announcing military action in Syria, Trump pointedly asked: "What kind of a nation wants to be associated with the mass murder of innocent men, women, and children?" He also tweeted "mission accomplished" after the US strike.

**Comments.** Since 2011, the Assad government has been locked in a deadly and protracted conflict with resistance fighters, and elements of ISIS, and has been backed by Russian forces, with US opposing Assad. The US strikes were "quite measured, the administration wants to mete out punishment" without getting embroiled in a long-term conflict. The response in fact can be called "weak", and the larger question for the US and the coalition is question for the US and the coalition is how long are they prepared to sustain this and what next ? Fundamentally the U.S. is going to have to prove does it have a goal in Syria, and that it has an endgame in mind.

**Russia pushes back on multiple fronts as conflict with West escalates** Russia banned a popular messaging app, threatened to pirate U.S. goods, and claimed

Great Britain had orchestrated a staged chemical attack in Syria — all on the same day (12 Apr 18).

At the Tagansky District Court in eastern Moscow, a judge heard the state telecommunications watchdog's request to block access to the Telegram messaging app because it had refused to provide its encryption keys to authorities. The app, founded by Russian entrepreneur Pavel Durov, is one of the country's business success stories, with 200 million users worldwide. The app's "channels" function allows users to broadcast lengthy messages to their followers and forms a key part of Russia's political culture, especially for Kremlin critics, who are finding traditional media more and more inaccessible. The contention of Kremlin is that Telegram can be used by "terrorist organizations and extremist organizations," With Telegram's lawyers boycotting the hearing, the court quickly upheld the regulator's request and ordered the messaging service blocked.

At the State Duma, members of the lower house of parliament were detailing proposed new legislation to retaliate against U.S. sanctions. While the sanctions announced by the Treasury Department in Washington this month target certain people and companies close to the Kremlin, the Russian lawmakers' proposed response was much broader. They said Russia could curb U.S. food, drug, medical and services imports, and even pirate U.S. goods without regard for intellectual property rights.

Russia further dug in as tensions remained high over Syria. The Defense Ministry's chief spokesman, Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov, told reporters in Moscow that Western assessments of a Syrian government chemical weapons attack in the town of Douma last weekend were a fabrication. Instead, he doubled down on Russia's previous claim that the attack was staged — by Great Britain, he said, in concert with the Syrian volunteer aid group known as the White Helmets. "We are aware with certainty that from April 3 to 6, representatives of the so-called White Helmets were under intense pressure from, specifically, London to carry out a previously prepared provocation as quickly as possible," Konashenkov said.

Another source of contention is the case of poisoned former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the United Kingdom. While the British government made public intelligence findings that it said offered further evidence of Russian culpability in the poisoning, Russia's ambassador to London staged a news conference and repeated his government's insistence that Russia never even produced the nerve agent that Britain says poisoned the Skripals.

**Comments.** The rapid-fire series of events underscored the intensity with which Russia's estrangement from the West and its rollback of domestic freedoms continues to play out. It seems that rock bottom is still far off.

The Kremlin stopped short of endorsing the specifics of the legislation to retaliate against US sanctions, and some analysts said they expect the measure to be softened in its final version. But the move showed that Moscow was looking for creative ways to hit back against U.S. sanctions, given Russia's relative economic weakness compared to the United States.

Despite the rather intense pressure from abroad, the Kremlin for now is controlling the situation and not allowing full anti-Western hysteria to take hold. But the way Friday unfolded showed how Putin is girding for an escalating battle on multiple fronts — from tamping down the opposition at home to engaging in an expanding economic — and potentially even military — conflict abroad.

**Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman visits Russia.** Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman is on a three-day visit to Russia to attend the VII Moscow Conference on International Security. She held extensive talks with her Russian counterpart General Sergey Shoygu and Industry and Trade Minister Denis Manturov in Moscow during which both sides decided to expedite negotiations for various military platforms soon. Defence ministry officials in Delhi said that during the talks, both sides also agreed to further ramp up bilateral defence cooperation.

Both sides agreed to expedite negotiations for various military platforms. The two countries are yet to finalise a nearly Rs. 40,000-crore deal to procure S-400 Triumf air defence missile systems for the Indian armed forces mainly due to differences over price. India also wants to procure the long-range missile systems to tighten its air defence mechanism, particularly when China has been ramping up its military manoeuvring along the nearly 4,000 km Sino-India border. About her talks with Manturov yesterday, the defence ministry here said both the leaders reviewed the ongoing military technical cooperation projects between the two countries, including measures to promote India-Russia joint industrial activities under the 'Make in India' programme, especially for after-sales support. The two leaders also discussed participation of Russia in Defence Expo to be held in Chennai from April 11 to 14.

In her talks with General Shoygu, Sitharaman discussed issues of bilateral importance, especially military-to-military cooperation and other regional issues. These included a review of the roadmap of military cooperation involving exercises, training, exchange of visits, and India's participation in International Army Games to be held in Russia later this year.

Ms Sitharaman met Defence Minister of Vietnam General Ngo Xuan Lich on the sidelines of the Moscow conference on security. She also met Serbian Defence Minister Aleksandar Vulin and discussed ways to enhance bilateral defence cooperation. Ms Sitharaman also attended a concert by Sarod Maestro Ustad Amjad Ali Khan to mark the closing of the year-long celebrations of the 70th anniversary of India-Russia diplomatic relations.

**Comments.** A vision document, issued after the talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin in St Petersburg, had said both the countries decided to work towards a "qualitatively higher level of military-to military cooperation" and this visit is an effort towards this.

Russia has been one of India's key suppliers of arms and ammunition. However, it has been a long-standing grievance of the armed forces that supply of critical spares and equipment from Russia takes a long time affecting maintenance of military systems procured from that country. India has been pressing Russia to adopt a liberal approach in sharing technology for components of major defence platforms as it was critical to keep them in operational readiness. The issue is understood to have figured during Sitharaman's talks with both General Shoygu and Manturov.

Though not in open domain, the recent news of Russia planning to sell military equipment to Pakistan may also have come up during the talks.