

## ENVIRONMENT SCAN 16-31 MAR 2018

### **CHINA (CONTINENTAL)**

Brig Rajeev Bhutani (Retd)

#### **OBOR important initiative to foster regional cooperation, but entails risks as well:**

**IMF.** IMF spokesperson Gery Rice told reporters at his fortnightly news conference "The Belt and Road initiative is a very important initiative that can foster regional cooperation, including in trade and investment and finance, and it could indeed make a very significant contribution in terms of infrastructure, connectivity to countries and, again, all of this supporting trade and growth,".

On the other hand, he said, like other major initiatives of this type, it can entail risks, including issues of debt sustainability and spillovers to other countries, as well as risks for China, including credit risk. He said, "*the key is to balance, obviously, the potential benefits with the potential risks,*" He said it depends on how the project would be implemented to ensure debt sustainability and participation of the private sector.

IMF managing director Christine Lagarde will travel to Beijing early next month to attend the joint IMF-PBC, the Peoples Bank of China conference on the Belt and Road Initiative. During her visit to China between April 9 and 12, Lagarde will attend the Boao forum and address the gathering during the opening ceremony on April 10.

**3 Lakh Troops Cut Completed, More Reforms to Follow: Chinese Military.** On 29 March, it was declared by Chinese Defence spokesman Col Ren Guoqiang "Our target of downsizing the military by three hundred thousand is basically achieved," he hinted at more reforms to optimise the quality and combat efficiency of the now two-million-strong force.

China also hiked its defence budget this year to 1.11 trillion yuan (\$175 billion), an 8.1 percent increase in military spending, three times higher than that of India.

The PLA also announced last year that it would reduce its ground troops to less than a million as part of Chinese military modernisation plan under which the navy has been given greater role to expand China's global influence. *From manpower intensive to high-tech intensive was the essence of the modernisation of the defence and the military,* he said.

**China's Aircraft Carrier Spotted in Huge Naval Drill.** China's sole operational aircraft carrier Liaoning, apparently took part in a huge naval drill with dozens of other vessels in the South China Sea. The pictures taken by Planet Labs Inc., appeared to show the Liaoning carrier at the centre of a formation of more than 40 other ships lined up in pairs south of China's Hainan province island on 26 March.

James Char, a military expert at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University said "Such a formation serves more of as a visual spectacle with the Liaoning the status symbol of the PLA (People's Liberation Army)".

"This formation is unlikely to be used in actual combat situations," he said, adding that he would "not be surprised" if it was purposely aimed at being picked up by satellite images.

Over the last week, Beijing had conducted major military drills, including reportedly sending its aircraft carrier through the Taiwan Strait and flying jets between Japan's southernmost islands. These drills are both a response to recent US military actions and a bold statement of China's intent to keep up the pressure.

**China Launches 2 Satellites to Boost its Navigation System.** China on 30 March successfully launched two satellites with a single rocket to strengthen its BeiDou Navigation Satellite System (BDS), which will serve countries along the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative by the end of this year. Named after the Chinese term for Big Dipper, the BeiDou system started providing independent services over China in 2000. It is being projected by Beijing as a rival to the American Global Positioning System (GPS). By around 2020, when the BDS goes global, it is expected to have more than 30 satellites. The two satellites are coded as the 30th and 31st members in the BDS. They entered orbit more than three hours after the launch and will work together with six previously launched BeiDou-3 satellites once they pass a series of tests.

**China Confirms Kim's Visit, Showing Off Its Influence Over North Korea.** China has confirmed North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's "unofficial" visit to Beijing which resulted in the first-ever meeting between him and Chinese president Xi Jinping. Optics mattered in this groundbreaking visit, which would upset US president Donald Trump's well-laid strategy of directly dealing with Kim with the help of US ally South Korea. Trump had recently offered to meet Kim to resolve the nuclear issue.

By successfully persuading Kim to make his first foreign visit since taking power in 2011, Beijing has now sent out a signal to Washington that it is the gatekeeper of any talks on North Korea. This upsets US plans to sideline China by directly dealing with North Korea. Analysts have said Kim has been under terrible pressure since China, its biggest supporter, started cutting off supplies of essential goods including petroleum in order to abide by sanctions imposed by the United Nations. He is now working on ways to get China and hopefully the US to get the UN sanctions softened. Kim is also exploiting the rising differences between China and the US to bargain for the maximum advantage instead of resorting to his past practice of releasing missiles and making threats.

**An Escalating Trade War Between the US and China.** A full-blown economic collision between the world's top consumers of raw materials and energy could hit demand hard for key commodities such as oil and metals.

President Donald Trump raised the stakes with Beijing earlier this month when he proposed tariffs on imports of steel and aluminum coming into the world's largest economy. China was the target of this legislation with the country's overproduction of vital products in the manufacturing supply chain, which he blames for weakening America's economy long term.

Although the initial impact of these regulations is likely to be limited, the raising of new trade barriers and the winding back of globalisation could tilt the scales negatively for commodities markets, which have boomed since China joined the ranks of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001.

China's impact on commodities markets has been profound. Beijing's economic operating model is brutally simple: gather up supplies of global raw materials and turn them into finished exportable products at competitive prices, or use them to build strategically important infrastructure efficiently and quickly by utilising its vast pool of labour. Consequently, demand for almost every commodity locked underground has soared.

Take crude oil for example. In 2000, before China joined the WTO, world oil demand was stagnating below 80m barrels per day of crude, according to BP's statistics. After 18 years of Chinese economic growth and an explosion in the country's exports over that period, global consumption is expected to hit a new record above 100m b/d this year, according to S&P Global Platt Analytics estimates. This growth in demand BP expects to continue through to 2040, with the world potentially requiring another 13m b/d of liquid fuel provided China's economy performs as expected. But a protracted and escalating trade war with the US could fundamentally blow these forecasts apart. Instead of oil markets being obsessed about global oversupply, the balance would then shift back to concerns over demand. Whereas the US has focused on boosting its own energy security and domestic supply, China is trying to become more independent in the trading space. The world's largest importer of crude has recently launched a new oil futures contract on the Shanghai International Energy Exchange to help it hedge against future price fluctuations and establish its own global benchmark behind Brent and West Texas Intermediate (WTI). Denominated in Yuan, not dollars, international traders are also permitted to buy and sell for the first time. However, a much bigger jolt to the greenback's dominance in the \$14 trillion global oil market could be on the horizon. Should China also decide to pay for its crude in Yuan this would signal an even more profound change ahead for how commodities and raw materials are traded. In terms of the market, Beijing increasingly holds all the cards in any face off with the US and Trump.

## **CHINA (MARITIME)**

Capt (IN) Ranjit Seth

**China's Economic based strategy in the IOR.** China has been granting huge loans to smaller states with the aim of aggressively employing economic prowess to advance its geostrategic interests. Such financial instruments greatly strengthen its leverage over the small states.

In December last, Sri Lanka formally handed over its Hambantota port to China under a 99-year lease valued at \$1.12 billion. China has also acquired several islets in the Maldives, an archipelago of 1,190 tiny coral islands, of which only 188 are inhabited. Maldives' economy too is heavily indebted. China has taken on lease Feydhoo Finolhu close to the capital Malé, and the seven-kilometre-long Kalhufahalufushi is. It paid just \$4 million for Feydhoo Finolhu and even less for Kalhufahalufushi. Incidentally Maldives facilitated China's island acquisitions by amending its Constitution in 2015 to legalise foreign ownership of land. The new rules for foreign ownership require a minimal \$1 billion construction project that reclaims at least 70 per cent of the desired land from the ocean.

Further west China had extended loans amounting to billions of dollars to Djibouti and later last year it established its first overseas military base in that port, located on the northwestern edge of the Indian Ocean. And to the east China is now seeking Myanmar's Kyaukpyu port on a 99-year lease in exchange for debt reduction.

China's strategy is aimed at creating a Sinosphere of trade, communication, transportation and security links. By financially shackling smaller states through projects it funds and builds, it constrains their decision-making autonomy in a way that brings them within its strategic orbit.

**Philippines Places A Marker At Benham Rise.** Philippines would on April 12 place another marker at Philippine Rise (Benham Rise) to further solidify the country's maritime rights over the 13-million-hectare underwater plateau off the coast of eastern Luzon.

On April 12, 2012, the UN approved the Philippines' maritime rights for an extended continental shelf over Benham Rise, which Manila later renamed Philippine Rise. The new maritime marker will be composed of buoys to complement an earlier Philippine flag that was installed underwater at one of the highest submarine mountains in the area last year.

Located northeast of Aurora province, Philippine Rise is considered a strategic spot that serves as a gateway to the Pacific Ocean as well as to the East China Sea for commercial and military vessels sailing through Bashi Channel, a body of water that separates Batanes and Taiwan.

**Indian Navy's Missions in the Indian Ocean.** The Indian Navy is maintaining vigil over the Indian Ocean through its new "Mission Based Deployments" (MDP) that has nearly 15 warships patrolling several areas beyond the country's Exclusive Economic Zone, covering all entry and exit routes to and from the Indian Ocean.

The deployments with the new pattern were announced in October 2017. Warships are turned around every three months. In addition to these deployments, Long Range Maritime Reconnaissance (LRMR) aircraft – the Boeing-made Poseidon 8i planes – are also tasked to patrol the Indian Ocean.

The seven ship deployments are:-

- (a) MALDEP: An IN ship is permanently sailing near the mouths of the Straits of Malacca;
- (b) NORDEP: Patrolling of the North Bay of Bengal, in waters north of the Andamans and the coasts of Bangladesh and Myanmar;
- (c) ANDEP: Patrolling between the North Andamans and South Nicobar;
- (d) GULFDEP: Patrolling of the North Arabian Sea and the approaches to the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf;
- (e) POGDEP: Anti-piracy patrolling of the Gulf of Aden, the oldest of the missions;

(f) CENDEP: Patrolling in waters south of India, off the Maldives and Sri Lanka;

(g) IODEP: Patrolling in the South Indian Ocean, off Mauritius, the Seychelles and Madagascar.

## **PAKISTAN**

Col Arvinder Singh

**Malala's brief return to Pakistan .** Malala Yousafzai is back in Pakistan, even though temporarily. Almost all important political leaders from the government and opposition welcomed her, but there was not a single open celebration for her. The fans and followers of the world's youngest and Pakistan's only woman Nobel Peace Prize winner celebrated her homecoming only on Twitter, not on the streets. She arrived in Pakistan with extraordinary tight security. She met a select few people inside the highly-guarded Prime Minister's office where she expressed happiness at her return. Malala thanked both the civilian and Army leadership for facilitating her return to Pakistan. She is returning to Oxford University on Monday where she is studying Politics, Philosophy and Economics. She said she was committed to settling back in Pakistan permanently.

**Comments** On October 9, 2012, as she was returning home from school in Mingora with some girlfriends, the Taliban opened fire on her school-bus. They singled Malala out and shot her in the head. Malala said she wanted to do something for peace not through politics but through education. She said India and Pakistan should start talking again. Repeatedly, she added, "Education is the solution of our problems in this region".

**Round Table Discussion on Bilateral, Regional and International Issues Between Iran and Pakistan.** Dr Kamal Kharrazi, head of the Strategic Council of Foreign Relations and Iran's former minister of foreign affairs, said on 30 Mar that people of Iran and of Pakistan had deep-rooted religious and cultural bonds. With the improvement in diplomatic and political ties, they would come closer and the bilateral trade and economic cooperation would increase to the benefit of both sides, he said while speaking at a roundtable discussion on bilateral, regional and international issues with members of the Pakistan Institute of International Affairs (PIIA). Besides a delegation of Iranian scholars and the Iranian consul general in Karachi, senior media persons, writers and intellectuals participated. Dr Kharrazi noted that there were ups and downs in the relations at the government level, but through the ongoing dialogue on different issues, including trade and investment, the two neighborly Muslim nations would come closer and emerge as strong supporters on many fronts. "A free trade agreement (FTA) is under negotiations, and if successful, there will come a big change," he remarked, adding that Iranians and Pakistanis had great respect and love for each other. He said these two nations could not be separated and there was a big economic potential on both sides. The bilateral trade and economic cooperation could grow a lot, he added. Referring to the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project, he said Iran had laid the pipeline up to a few kilometers from its border with Pakistan at a cost of billions of dollars, and it was waiting for Pakistan's action.

**Pakistan: 'Common Ground' Remains Elusive In U.S. Talks.** The spokesman for the Pakistani Foreign Ministry says Islamabad and Washington have yet to find "common ground" on a range of issues, including U.S. accusations that Pakistan is not pulling its weight in the fight against terrorism. Mohammad Faisal made the remarks on

31 March days after a senior U.S. State Department official arrived in Pakistan for high-level talks. The State Department said earlier that senior bureau official for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Ambassador Alice Wells would discuss Washington's strategy for the region and "Pakistan's stated commitment to eliminate all terrorist groups present in its country." Wells' meetings in Pakistan included talks with Foreign Secretary Tehmina Janjua and national security adviser Nasser Khan Janjua. Faisal described talks with Wells in Pakistan as positive but said that the two sides were still seeking "common ground." Asked about U.S. criticism that Pakistan must step up its counterterrorism efforts, Faisal said arrangements must be made for the return of an estimated 3 million Afghan refugees currently living in Pakistan. Besides, there is the issue of poppy cultivation and the use of opium money in the war. And attacks from Afghanistan inside Pakistan also continue. When all these problems are addressed, so the rest of the issues will also be resolved," Faisal said.

**Comments.** In January, the State Department said it was suspending at least \$900 million in security assistance to Pakistan, after President Donald Trump criticized Islamabad for not doing enough to combat terrorism. Afghan officials, along with the Trump administration, have accused Pakistan of providing a safe haven for terrorists operating in Afghanistan, a charge Islamabad denies. A senior U.S. administration official said a day earlier that Pakistan has done "the bare minimum to appear responsive to our requests."

**Military Cooperation between Pakistan and China will Maintain Regional Peace: PLA.** The Peoples Liberation Army has said that the close ties between the armed forces of Pakistan and China will help maintain regional peace and global stability. The statement from the Chinese military on 29 Mar also added that the military cooperation was evidence of 'an all-weather partnership' between the two countries. China has the largest military in the world, at 2.3 million strong, and Pakistan is the largest consumer of Chinese military hardware. According to recent report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the country has bought 41 per cent of the weapons exported by China. Defense analysts are of the opinion that Pakistan is establishing itself as the main buyer of Chinese weapons as the two countries improve their bilateral ties even further, according to the Indian publication.

Earlier, it was reported that China had sold a 'high performing' tracking system for the missile programme of Pakistan in an unprecedented deal which reportedly speeds up the development of multi-warhead missiles by Islamabad. Researchers told the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* that Pakistan had bought a highly sophisticated, large-scale optical tracking and measurement system from China and deployed it "at a firing range" for use in testing and developing its new missiles. China was the first country to export such sensitive equipment to Pakistan, the report said. Chinese authorities declassified information about the sale of the tracking system only recently. Pakistan has focused its efforts on developing multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs), a type of missile-carrying several nuclear warheads that can be directed towards different targets, the report said.

**Comments.** Unlike the US, which accounts for one-third of exports and supplies at least 100 countries, China delivered major arms to 44 countries, mostly in Asia and Africa. More than 60 per cent of China's exports went to Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar and another 22 per cent went to Africa, the study by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute outlined.

## **AFGHANISTAN**

Col Arvinder Singh

**An Offer of Peace Talks with Taliban by the Afghan Government.** An offer of talks by the Ghani government was met with silence from the Taliban. That, in itself, could be a good sign. On February 28, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani offered the Taliban peace talks without preconditions as a way to end the nearly two-decade-long conflict in his country. A month later, as delegates from more than 20 countries gathered in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, to discuss ways to restore stability to Afghanistan, there still hasn't been a formal response from the Taliban. Officials, meanwhile, have held out hope that the absence of a reply is cause for optimism. Ghani's unprecedented overture to the Taliban includes the offer of talks without preconditions. It would also allow its members to run for government, release Taliban fighters from prison, and require foreign forces to leave Afghanistan. The Taliban, who ruled the country until the U.S.-led invasion in retaliation for the attacks of September 11, 2001 is reportedly considering the offer. That has not prevented it from carrying out attacks across the country nor does it mean its leaders will accept the proposal.

**Comments.** Ghani's offer is significant in that it addresses many of the Taliban's major concerns. But, it doesn't address its main concern: its belief that Ghani lacks the legitimacy to make such an offer. The Afghan Taliban was not overthrown by the Afghan government. They were overthrown by the United States and they want to talk to the United States. If they talk to the Afghan government, to them, it's like surrendering because, to them, it means that it was legitimate to overthrow them. After years of criticizing America's war in Afghanistan, President Trump followed his two predecessors by sending U.S. soldiers to the country. His South Asia strategy involved pressuring Pakistan, which he accused of giving safe haven to the terrorists, by suspending security assistance to Islamabad. He also wants India to do more. As part of this effort, the U.S. is helping Afghan forces fight the Taliban in order to drive them to the negotiating table. The Taliban remains the most powerful insurgent group in Afghanistan. Its membership is Afghan (unlike the other groups, whose ranks include many foreign fighters), it enjoys some support among the population, and controls about one third of the country—more territory than at any point since the U.S.-led invasion in 2001. However the Afghan government controls all the major population centers. What all these international efforts underscore is that while the international community wants a reconciliation process between the Afghan government and the Taliban, many global powers who have meddled in the country for decades still influence what happens within its borders. U.S. Army General John Nicholson, the senior-most U.S. commander

in Afghanistan, told the BBC last week that weapons seized from Taliban fighters were allegedly supplied by Russia though the same was denied by Russia. Russia is reportedly backing the Taliban in order to fight the Islamic State, which has gained a foothold in the country. Hanif Atmar, Afghanistan's national-security adviser, said last week in Washington that Kabul disagreed with Moscow's distinction between good and bad terrorists and they have been provided assurance that the Taliban will not be provided with weapons and resources.

Afghanistan's other neighbors have their own interest which are often at odds with one another, as well as with the Afghan government. Pakistan, the Taliban's ally and major benefactor, is afraid of being hemmed in between two unfriendly neighbors, India and Afghanistan. India, in turn, is nervous about the prospect of the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan because they provide a semblance of stability to the region. Iran, which borders Afghanistan in the west, is also supporting the Taliban. China sees stability in the country as a major necessity if the belt-and-road initiative, its massive infrastructure project, is to succeed. China is also nervous about the presence of Uighur separatists inside Afghanistan. Atmar said the number of foreign fighters had increased in the country, as the number of international forces fell over the past four years. The government's goal, he said, was to separate the Afghan Taliban from the foreign fighters as they can make peace with them because they are Afghans.

If the Taliban accepted Ghani's offer of talks, it would mark the first time since 2010 that the group's leadership met with Afghan government officials. That earlier attempt failed after Pakistan played spoiler by arresting a key member of the Taliban leadership. Subsequent efforts faltered as well. Hamid Karzai, the previous Afghan president, tried in 2014 to talk secretly to the Taliban, but the Obama administration blocked his attempts. Karzai himself had opposed previous U.S. attempts to negotiate with the insurgents. The U.S. role in Afghanistan itself has changed since 2001. At the height of the war on terrorism, there were about 100,000 U.S. troops in the country. Today, that figure is down to about 15,000 troops who work with the Afghan military to fight the Taliban and international terrorist groups, including ISIS.

Atmar, the Afghan national-security adviser, cast doubt over whether the Taliban were still monolithic, arguing that because it lacks the strong leadership it once had, and it is brought together by foreign influence. There are leaders now among the Taliban that question the continuation of the conflict and they are in contact with the government, and they are asking for a process whereby they and their families are protected to engage in peace. But, there are also elements that are irreconcilable. The Afghan government, he said, would engage with one group and fight the other.

But Rubin, who previously worked as a U.S. diplomat and talked to the Taliban, said the militants are less fragmented than they are perceived to be. There's a stereotype about the Taliban that they're a bunch of fractious tribesmen, but it's not true, he said. They do speak with one voice. In fact, they are much more consistent in their policy positions than either the U.S or Afghan governments.

**Dozens killed in ISIL attack near Kabul University.** At least 29 people have been killed and 52 others wounded in a mid-day explosion in the Afghan capital, Kabul on 20 Mar 18. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS) group claimed responsibility for Wednesday's attack, which took place close to Kabul University and Ali Abad hospital. A suicide bomber had detonated his explosives while walking among a group of people. The attack happened as many Afghans are marking the Nowruz holiday, a celebration of the start of spring and the Persian New Year.

**Comments.** Since the beginning of this year, ISIL and the Taliban have launched a series of deadly attacks across the country, killing more than 200 people in Kabul alone. Amid the deteriorating security situation, General John W Nicholson Jr of the US Army said in December that his country would deploy more troops in an advisory role to Afghan forces in 2018, on top of the 14,000 American soldiers already stationed in the country.

**Opium Production in Afghanistan Reaches Record High.** Despite US and international efforts to destroy poppy fields and opium production, unemployment and 16 years of war have driven an increase in both supply and demand in Afghanistan. Opium production in Afghanistan has been on the rise since the US invasion in 2001. Last year 9,000 tonnes were produced, an increase of 87 percent.

**Comments.** As a result, the record number of people turning to drugs in desperation is also increasing.

## **IRAN**

Col Arvinder Singh

**Iranian Official Calls Mohammed Bin Salman 'Delusional' after Prince Warns of War.** Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman has lashed out at Saudi Arabia's crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, after the 32-year-old heir to the throne warned war with Tehran could be just 10 to 15 years away. Bahram Qassemi warned bin Salman not to dice with death and called on veteran Saudi officials to teach the "delusional novice" of the fate former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein endured after he challenged the Iranian nation's resolve. This delusional novice, who is still too big for his boots, either does not know what war is, or has not studied history, or unfortunately has not talked to a venerable person, Qassemi was quoted by Iranian media as saying. Reciting a verse from a 13th-century poem, Qassemi added: "The ant seeking to grapple with an eagle is hastening to perish."

**Comments.** Qassemi's comments came after bin Salman said that Saudi Arabia could engage in a military confrontation against Iran if tougher international sanctions were not imposed against the Islamic Republic. Saudi Arabia has expressed alarm at what it views as creeping Iranian influence in the region and has stepped up its efforts to contain what it considers Iran's expansion through proxy conflicts and direct military engagement in Yemen. The kingdom has been a staunch critic of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, which it says will alleviate Iran's economic woes and allow it to prop up affiliates

like Hezbollah. Saudi authorities have repeatedly commended US President Donald Trump's tough stance on the landmark agreement.

**Iran Nuclear Deal Hangs in the Balance as US Appoints John Bolton as National Security Advisor.** In January, Trump delivered an ultimatum to his European allies to either fix the accord or the US would walk away from it by 12 May when the next US sanctions waiver is due to be ratified. Trump identified three problems with the deal, its failure to address Iran's ballistic missile programme, the terms under which international inspectors can visit suspect Iranian nuclear sites and the "sunset" clause under which limits on the Iranian nuclear programme start to expire after 10 years. When other parties to the agreement rejected to fix these points, claiming they are all outside the boundaries of JCPOA, Trump proposed a hushed-up supplemental agreement that addresses "Iran's development or testing long-range missiles, ensures strong IAEA inspections, and fixes the flaws of the "sunset clause". The addition of John Bolton to Trump's national security team is another boost for critics of the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran. Bolton is in favour of killing the deal and has previously supported the idea of bombing Iran. Many Iranians say they won't miss the deal if it is scrapped, as small businesses feel it hasn't helped them much. An Iranian official has called the appointment of two hardliners in President Donald Trump's administration evidence that the United States is planning to overthrow the country. The naming of John Bolton to the role of National Security Adviser was shameful, Iranian media quoted an official as saying on Sunday, citing his involvement with an opposition group once named a "terrorist" organization. Bolton advocates regime change in Iran and is opposed to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. Since the deal was signed in 2015, the EU has been bearing the responsibility of protecting an increasingly fragile balance, safeguarding Iran's commitment to the nuclear agreement while simultaneously trying to dissuade the US from using a language of containment and sanctions. This task became even harder when the Trump administration started pressuring European leaders into signing a "supplemental agreement" with Iran that would also regulate the Islamic Republic's ballistic missile programme and its role in Syria. The EU is faced with having to make a choice between preserving the Iran deal that it regards as a major diplomatic achievement and breaking away with its most important political ally, the United States of America. This is an extremely difficult choice for Europe to make, because it may trigger a trade war with the US.

**Comments.** President Trump is reportedly entering into a new potentially lucrative atomic energy agreement with Saudi Arabia, which may explain why he is so adamant to tighten the conditions of the Iran deal. According to a report by the Washington Post, the Gulf kingdom is refusing to include in the billion dollar agreement any clauses that would restrict its uranium enrichment capabilities; unless the nuclear deal with its arch foe Iran is tightened. The EU must continue to resist US pressure to once again isolate Iran. At the same time, it must pursue "tough diplomacy" with Iran over other issues.

**CBI Files Three More FIRs in Four Staged Shootout Deaths in Manipur.** The FIRs were filed by the CBI on 24 Mar following the Supreme Court's March 12 order on writ petitions filed by the families of the deceased. The CBI has registered three cases in connection with four alleged staged shootout deaths in Manipur in which personnel of the state police, Assam Rifles and CRPF are accused. In the first FIR, the CBI named five Manipur Police personnel and some unidentified policemen for taking Manipur resident R.K. Laksana in custody on February 15, 1999, and later allegedly killing him in a staged shootout. In the second case, the CBI booked unidentified personnel of 20 Assam Rifles on the charge of killing Ramaso Shingnaisui on July 17, 1997, in custody. In third FIR, the CBI booked unidentified personnel of the CRPF 121 and 134 Battalions for killing Asem Romajit and Yumnam Robita Devi in a staged shootout in 2002. In fourth case, the CBI had registered an FIR against unidentified personnel of 19 Assam Rifles to probe the alleged arrest, torture and murder of Manipur college student Khundrakpam Tejkumar Singh in 2004.

**Nepal PM KP Sharma Oli to Visit India from 6 April.** On his maiden foreign trip after assuming office, Nepal's Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli will visit India from 6-8 April during which he will hold talks with the top leadership here to strengthen the partnership between the two countries. The upcoming visit will provide an opportunity to the two sides to review the wide-ranging cooperative partnership, and to progress it further for the benefit of the two peoples.

**India's Aid to Nepal up 73% to Check China's Infra Push.** Indian Govt has decided to hike its financial aid for the financial year beginning April this year to Nepal to Rs 650 crore, a 73% increase from the previous year allocation, while expressing concern over increasing Chinese presence in some of the neighbourhood countries. India's aid to Nepal in 2017-18 financial year stood at Rs 375 crore. However, the largest allocation of aid by India has yet again been kept for Bhutan at Rs 1,813 crore, which is part of the five-year commitment to help the royal government build hydro-electric projects at Punatsangchhu, and Mangdechhu among other infrastructure works. The allocation of funds under to Bhutan and Nepal for 2018-19 is a reflection of India's expanded development partnership with the two countries and continued emphasis on expeditious implementation of ongoing projects, in consultation and coordination with the respective governments, for mutual benefits.



**Myanmar's New President Vows to Amend Army Drafted Charter.** Myanmar's new president promised to amend the country's army-written constitution in an inaugural speech on 28 Mar, challenging a charter that bans Aung San Suu Kyi from top office and gives the military major powers. Win Myint, a 66-year-old former political prisoner and staunch ally of Suu Kyi, was elected president on 28 Mar after his predecessor suddenly resigned. Suu Kyi, the Nobel laureate who championed Myanmar's emergence from junta rule by sweeping 2015 elections, is constitutionally barred from the presidency because she was married to a foreigner. To circumvent that snag, her party created a new position for her called state counsellor -- allowing Suu Kyi to rule "above" the president. That makes it vital for her to have a reliable proxy in office, especially as she manages the delicate power-sharing arrangement with the military, which ruled the country for almost half a century and remains enormously influential. In his first address to parliament, the famously straight-talking Win Myint said he would focus on the rule of law, national reconciliation and "amending the constitution to build a democratic federal union". The three issues are touchstones of Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party. But talk of amendments to Myanmar's 2008 constitution is likely to rise heckles among Myanmar's still-powerful generals. The army has ceded some power to the civilian administration but retains 25 percent of parliamentary seats and total control of security affairs under the charter. Win Myint also said he would work to "protect human rights", a thorny subject in a country accused of ethnic cleansing by the UN against its Rohingya Muslim population. A violent military crackdown has forced some 700,000 Rohingya -- a long-persecuted stateless minority -- over the border to Bangladesh since August. The army insists the campaign was a legitimate response to Rohingya militant attacks against border-guard police posts.

## **ASEAN**

Col Shyamji Yadav

ASEAN Australia Summit. Non-militarisation in the disputed South China Sea and the "complex" Rohingya crisis took centre stage.

Leaders from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, at the three-day meeting in Sydney, also agreed to work more closely to tackle the growing menace of violent extremism and radicalisation.

Tensions in the South China Sea remain a big worry for regional leaders, as Beijing continues to build artificial islands capable of hosting military installations -- much to the chagrin of other claimants to the area.

Vietnam remains the most vocal in the dispute with the Philippines backing off under China-friendly President Rodrigo Duterte. Taiwan, Malaysia and Brunei also have

claims.

Canberra and ASEAN reaffirmed "the importance of maintaining and promoting peace, stability, maritime safety and security, freedom of navigation and over flight in the region", without naming Beijing.

The leaders added they wanted to see an "early conclusion of an effective code of conduct in the South China Sea".

"We will uphold our commitment to the rules-based order and international law in the region, including the South China Sea," stressed Turnbull.

With China flexing its muscle, they also committed to enhancing "the scope and sophistication of defence cooperation", while expressing "grave concern" about escalating tensions on the Korean peninsula.

Day two of the summit on Saturday was devoted to counter-terrorism, with an agreement to work together to tackle extremism amid growing concern about the use of the "dark web", or encrypted messaging apps, by terrorists to plan attacks.

Fears have been heightened by jihadists now being forced out of Syria and Iraq with the Islamic State caliphate mostly crushed, and into other countries.

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak cited the flow of the displaced Rohingya as a potential new security threat, with desperate people more susceptible to radicalisation.

With the Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade pact, without the United States, now signed, Turnbull urged leaders to get behind a "high quality" Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership deal.

Australia, the full ASEAN bloc, as well as China and India are among countries still negotiating that deal. Singapore's Lee said there was hope it could be finalised this year.

Enhancing Regional Collaboration to Strengthen Our Security and Prosperity: Prime Minister of Australia. Australia and the leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will work together to shape a more secure and prosperous region.

Our joint statement from the Special Summit – The Sydney Declaration – sets out a clear vision for the future of the ASEAN-Australia partnership and our shared commitment to elevate our cooperation.

We have committed to intensify our response to regional and global challenges such as North Korea, terrorism and violent extremism. We will uphold our commitment to the rules-based order and international law in the region, including the South China Sea.

Australia and ASEAN will build greater links between our defence forces through new defence scholarships. We agreed to enhance our cooperation on transnational crime, maritime cooperation capacity building initiatives, cyber affairs, countering people trafficking and dealing with emerging health threats in the region.

The Memorandum of Understanding on Counter-Terrorism will intensify Australia's engagement with ASEAN in our shared efforts to combat terrorism. This agreement will strengthen information sharing arrangements across our governments, and deepen dialogue across security and law enforcement institutions.

We also agreed to boost trade, investment and business links between Australia and ASEAN. We will be taking forward new initiatives on smart cities, infrastructure development, economic policy cooperation and digital standards – and important new education exchanges – to shape our economic partnership for the 21st century.

**Region's Security.** We unequivocally condemn in the strongest terms terrorism in all its forms and manifestations. We reiterate our commitment to work together even more closely to enhance regional cooperation to counter terrorism, including preventing and suppressing the flow of foreign terrorist fighters in our region, and addressing the underlying factors and conditions that contribute to the growth and spread of violent extremism and radicalisation. The Memorandum of Understanding between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Government of Australia on Cooperation to Counter International Terrorism signed on 17 March 2018 will deepen and expand our strong existing cooperation.

State heads expressed grave concerns about the escalation of tensions in the Korean Peninsula including the DPRK's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes, which threaten regional and global peace and security. They strongly urged the DPRK to immediately and fully comply with its obligations under all relevant United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR). They reiterated support for the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner as well as initiatives towards establishing peace in the Korean Peninsula

We reaffirm the importance of maintaining and promoting peace, stability, maritime safety and security, freedom of navigation and over flight in the region. We emphasise the importance of non-militarisation and the need to enhance mutual trust and confidence, exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities and avoid actions that may complicate the situation. We reaffirm the need for states to pursue the peaceful resolutions of disputes, in accordance with universally recognised principles of international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and to comply with the relevant standards and recommended practices by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO). In this regard, we support the full and effective implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) in its entirety and look forward to an early conclusion of an effective Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC).

We will further enhance our efforts to tackle shared and complex maritime issues, including food security and livelihoods, piracy and armed robbery against ships and other crimes at sea, along with improved vessel search safety capability, as well as through implementation of the EAS Statement on Enhancing Regional Maritime Cooperation.

We rededicate ourselves to strengthening our long-standing cooperation on law enforcement, customs and immigration in countering transnational crime in the region, including illicit drug trafficking, arms smuggling, illicit trafficking of wildlife and timber, cybercrime and other emerging forms of transnational crime. We reaffirm our commitment to enhance cooperation to combat trafficking in persons and people smuggling and promote safe, orderly and regular migration.

**Comments.** The competitive roles of the major powers have always been at the heart of ASEAN's political and security focus. The United States under the Obama administration pursued a rebalance towards East Asia which emphasised an enhanced military and security presence, economic engagement through the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and involvement in multilateral institutions with a special focus on ASEAN. The policy directions of the Trump administration since January 2017 are continuing to emerge but in the administration's first year there has been some uncertainty about what its approach will be. Some policy areas have been reaffirmed, with the US renewing commitments to its alliances and expressing the US's ongoing concern at the dangers posed by North Korea's missile and nuclear programs.

With Southeast Asia, US involvement has been emphasised in visits by the Vice President and the President and by the Secretaries for State and Defense. The National Security Strategy issued by President Trump in December 2017 criticised China's 'efforts to build and militarize outposts in the South China Sea' and also stated that ASEAN and APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) '... remain centerpieces of the Indo-Pacific's regional architecture and platforms for promoting an order based on freedom'. However, the US withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement just after President Trump visited Southeast Asia for bilateral and multilateral meetings in November 2017, he did not participate fully in the meeting of the East Asia Summit. There remains uncertainty in Southeast Asia about the direction of US policy in relation to the region and ASEAN.

China has continued its close interest in the ASEAN region, with a substantial part of that attention directed towards the South China Sea. In 2017, China, under President Xi Jinping, emphasised its support for globalisation and multilateral cooperation and institutions. China is also giving high priority to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a highly ambitious program to extend communication, trade and commerce across Central and East Asia. The BRI was unveiled formally in May 2017 and promises a massive process of infrastructure investment, although there have been doubts about the long-term viability and likely sustainability of some projects. China is continuing to expand its capacities for power projection in relation to East and Southeast Asia and in 2017, unveiled the world's largest coastguard vessel, the largest amphibious aircraft and a new dredging vessel, claimed to be the largest in Asia, all of which could boost China's presence and capabilities in the South China Sea.

Japan has had a major role as an economic partner for the ASEAN region since the Association's inception. Japan has recently moved to expand its interest in contributing to the security of the ASEAN region, including in the maritime domain. Japan's coastguard has pursued cooperation with its Philippine counterpart and has supplied coastguard vessels and surveillance aircraft to that country and to Vietnam. Japanese Self Defense Force vessels have made regional visits. In the wake of the US withdrawal from the TPP, Japan, along with Australia, has led efforts to advance the negotiations with the remaining 11 participants, four of which are ASEAN members. India has also heightened its multilateral relationship with ASEAN, including by inviting the ASEAN heads of government to attend its National Day celebrations on 25 January 2018. Such initiatives assume greater significance for maintain peace and prosperity in South East Asia.

## **WEST ASIA**

Col Sumit Rana

## **SYRIA**

**Last Eastern Ghouta Rebels Poised to Surrender- Syrian State Media.** The group in control of the last rebel bastion near Damascus appeared on Sunday to have agreed a deal for its fighters to make peace with the government or quit the eastern Ghouta enclave, Syrian state media said. Jaish al Islam, most of whose members are drawn from the area, has been defending the city of Douma against a months-long onslaught by government forces.

If confirmed, its surrender or departure for rebel-held areas in northwest Syria would herald an end to large-scale conflict in the enclave.

State television and Syrian newspapers said information indicated that, under the deal, the group would hand over heavy and mid-sized weapons and acknowledge the restoration of state sovereignty over Douma.

A Hezbollah run-media unit said on Sunday an agreement had been reached after several days of negotiations to spare bloodshed in Douma. The unit of the powerful Lebanese Shi'ite militia that has been fighting with the Syrian army said among the terms of the deal was setting up a Syrian government-approved local council to run the city's affairs after rebels withdraw.

It also said a Russian-led committee with representatives from Turkey, Iran and Russia, the three guarantors of the Astana peace talks who set up “de-escalation” zones across Syria, would be responsible for handing over prisoners of war jailed by the rebels.

**US Pull Out of Syria.** Sen. [Lindsey Graham](#) (R-S.C.) on Sunday cautioned [President Trump](#) against pulling American troops out of Syria, saying that doing so would be “a disaster in the making.”

“If we withdrew our troops any time soon, ISIS [the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria] would come back, the war between Turkey and the Kurds would get out of hand, and you’d be giving Damascus to the Iranians without an American presence, and Russia and Iran would dominate Syria,” Graham warned on “Fox News Sunday.”

“It would be the single worst decision the president could make. I’ve seen this movie before when Obama did the same thing in Iraq,” the senator added.

Trump said during a speech on Thursday in Ohio that the U.S. [will be out of Syria](#) “very soon” in light of successes in the fight against ISIS. Trump also reportedly ordered the State Department [to freeze](#) \$200 million in funds to help recovery efforts in Syria.

Roughly 2,000 U.S. troops in Syria are backing Kurdish fighters in the fight against ISIS in the region.

Former Secretary of State [Rex Tillerson](#) indicated earlier this year that the U.S. [would remain in Syria](#) indefinitely, adding that a total withdrawal of American forces would allow Syrian President Bashar Assad to “continue his brutal treatment of his own people.”

## TURKEY

Turkish President [RecepTayyip Erdogan](#) has slammed Israeli Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) over his comments targeting Turkey's ongoing military operation in the northwestern Syrian region of Afrin. His remarks on Sunday came in response to Netanyahu's earlier comments rejecting Ankara's "moral lessons" over the Israeli army's killing of Palestinian protesters in [Gaza](#), and labelling Erdogan as someone who "bombs Kurdish villagers". "He says our soldiers are oppressing people in Afrin. Netanyahu, you are very weak, very poor," Erdogan told the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party) congress in the southern Adana province. "We are dealing with terrorists, but you are not. Because you are a terror state," Erdogan added.

Calling the Israeli prime minister "an occupier" in Palestine, Erdogan said: "You are also a terrorist. History is recording what you have done to all those oppressed Palestinians ... We are not guilty of any act of occupation."

## ISRAEL

At least [17 Palestinians were killed](#) and more than 1,500 were wounded on Friday when Israeli forces opened fire on "Land Day" protesters near the Gaza Strip's eastern border.

Land Day is an event commemorating six Palestinian citizens of Israel who were shot dead by Israeli forces after protesting the government's confiscation of large swaths of Palestinian land on March 30, 1976.

On Saturday, Erdogan "strongly" condemned "the Israeli government over its inhumane attack" in Gaza.

Friday's rallies were also the start of a six-week protest that culminates on May 15, the day the Palestinians call "Nakba," or the Catastrophe, when Israel was officially declared a state 70 years ago and more than 750,000 Palestinians were expelled from their homes.

The demonstrators are demanding that Palestinian refugees be allowed the right of return to towns and villages which their families fled from, or were driven out of, in 1948.

Turkey - together with the Syrian opposition Free Syrian Army ([FSA](#)) rebel group - last month launched an air-and-ground [operation into Afrin](#) to vanquish the US-backed Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) fighters near its border.

## SAUDI ARABIA

**Saudi Crown Prince Warns War Likely if Iran Mischief not Checked.** If we do not succeed in creating more pressure on the regime in Tehran, war is likely in 10-15 years

Saudi Arabia's crown prince sounded the alarm to the international community that if action is not taken soon to rein in Iran's mischief in the region and world, that war is

inevitable. He called on world leaders to help check Iran's blatant violations by squeezing it economically and politically. "If we don't succeed in what we are trying to do, we will likely have war with Iran in 10-15 years," he said in an interview with the Wall Street Journal. The crown prince is currently on a three-week visit to the US, hoping to ramp up support for Saudi Arabia, both economically and politically. He urged nations to keep up sanctions on Iran.

How Gaza Clashes Could Ignite Flashpoints All Over the Middle East. Tightly wound and anticipating trouble, Israeli troops opened fire before the Gaza border protests had even begun. The Palestinian health ministry said Omar Samour, a 31-year-old farmer, was picking parsley in his field near Khan Yunis early on Friday morning when he was killed. Another farmer was injured by shrapnel. Israel's military later confirmed its tanks had fired at ["suspicious figures" on the border](#).

Samour's death was a grim augury of what was to come. As Palestinians observed a day of mourning on Saturday, both sides warned of possible escalation in the weeks ahead. But a bigger question is exercising regional analysts. Will this violent yet long-predicted rekindling of the Israel-Palestine conflict trigger [a wider crisis](#) drawing in Lebanon, Syria and Iran?

The absence of a credible peace process underlies the latest confrontation, as happened in 2000 when the second intifada began, and again in 2014. Once again, Hamas and its supporters in Gaza, blockaded by [Israel](#) and Egypt and at odds with their Fatah rivals in the West Bank, are using mass civilian protest to end their isolation. Once again, Israel's rightwing leaders, unwilling or unable to contemplate a two-state solution, compound myopic intransigence with a disproportionate use of force.

The dangerous difference now is timing and context. Friday was the start of six weeks of protests leading up to the 70th anniversary of Nakba day on 15 May, literally the "catastrophe", as Arabs see it, that followed Israel's declaration of independence on 14 May, 1948. The US will also move its embassy to Jerusalem in May, effectively recognising the city as Israel's sovereign capital while ignoring Palestine's claims. In short, a spring season of looming flashpoints is now begun.

Historical precedents also suggest local confrontations produce negative, region-wide reactions. The biggest worry is Lebanon, where [Hezbollah](#), Israel's sworn foe and Iran's close ally, is the dominant political and military force. Strains are already apparent over Israel's erection of a Gaza-style fence on its northern border and over disputed offshore oil and gas fields. But for Israel's generals, [the main threat is Hezbollah's modernised stockpile](#) of an estimated 130,000 short-, medium- and long-range missiles and rockets, and its 50,000 fighters, many of them battle-hardened in Syria. If the Gaza violence continues and spreads, Hezbollah hardliners can be expected to try to intervene. Iran's leadership has repeatedly warned, in turn, that unlike the last Lebanon war in 2006, it will directly assist Hezbollah in any fight. [Israel, it says, will be "eradicated"](#).

Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, has made plain, to Russia's Vladimir Putin among others, that current effort by Iran to create a permanent military presence in Syria and Lebanon cross an Israeli red line. Netanyahu recently underscored his stance

by shooting down an Iranian drone and [launching air raids on Syrian bases](#) used by Iran.

Previous checks and balances are missing. It is no use looking to the UN Security Council. When it met in “emergency” session on Friday night to discuss [Gaza](#), it could not even agree a joint statement. Saudi Arabia, which once pursued its own peace plan, is firmly (though tacitly) in the pro-Israel, anti-Iran camp. Likewise Egypt, where Sisi obsesses about jihadists, not justice.

Urging the Americans to step in as honest broker is a waste of breath, too. On this subject, [Donald Trump](#) has shown himself to be as ignorant as he is partisan. And here’s another incendiary May date for your diary. On 12 May, Trump is expected to [repudiate the Iran nuclear deal](#) – potentially toppling the whole Middle East house of cards.

## **RUSSIA**

Col Harpreet Singh

**Russia Diplomatic Expulsions.** Earlier this week, over 25 countries, including numerous EU member states and the United States, announced their decision to expel Russian diplomatic workers after London stated that it was “highly likely” that Moscow was responsible for poisoning of Col Skripal and his daughter in the UK town of Salisbury earlier in March. Russia has announced further measures against UK diplomats while at the same time declaring tit-for-tat expulsions of officials from 23 other countries.

After the poisoning, Britain reacted by announcing it would expel 23 Russian diplomats, suspend high-level diplomatic contact with Moscow and not send any members of the royal family to the 2018 football World Cup hosted by Russia.

Moscow had announced that it would expel 60 US diplomats and close the US consulate in Saint Petersburg after the expulsion of its own diplomats and the closure of one of its US consulates.

The hospital where Skripal and his daughter are being treated said Thursday that Yulia, was “improving rapidly and is no longer in a critical condition”, while 66-year-old Sergei remained in a critical but stable condition.

**Comments.** Ever since the British government first accused Russia of the Skripals poisoning, Moscow has been complaining about the “presumption of guilt” applied to it by western countries. However, US and EU countries have their reasons for expulsion’s of Russian diplomats. Germany has openly cited hacker attacks on its parliament as a background reason for the expulsion, and there are other grievances against Russia such as its stoking of anti-immigrant tensions over the alleged rape of a Russian-speaking girl in Berlin by Muslim immigrants, eventually proven to be false. French president Emmanuel Macron seems to be welcoming the opportunity to act tough to establish his foreign policy credentials. With Germany and France united in their resolve to push against Russia, it was inevitable that the rest of the EU would follow suit. The US was already preparing more sanctions against Russia as part of the Russian sanctions Bill passed by the Congress last year, so the White House welcomed the opportunity offered by the Skripal case for further escalation.

Russia shouldn't protest too much as its credibility has been destroyed over the last four years by three important events. Firstly, President Vladimir Putin first publicly denied, and then publicly confirmed that there were Russian regular troops involved in the early stages of the Crimea takeover in spring 2014. Secondly, Russia's persistent and extraordinary effort to deny any responsibility for shooting down the Malaysian passenger plane over Ukraine in July 2014, even when there was clear evidence to the contrary. And thirdly, Russia's denial of any involvement in Alexander Litvinenko's poisoning, even though there was a clearly traceable radioactive trail back to Russia and identified culprits, one of whom was elected to the Russian parliament.

While the expulsions may not hurt Russia, the problems for Russia could increase, for example, there could be a lot more pressure on Germany to cancel the flagship Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia, though Berlin will resist this given significant economic benefits to it from that project. The talk about going after Russian oligarchs in the UK and beyond is unlikely to worry Putin much as he may actually prefer if oligarchs spent more of their money in Russia. But other financial sanctions, already envisioned in the US sanctions Bill, would be extremely painful for Russia.

However, would Iran-style sanctions be workable against such a large and important country as Russia? As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, it could paralyse the working of the UN, making the introduction of new sanction against Iran or North Korea impossible. Moscow could also increase its military and economic co-operation with Iran, for example by supplying it with more advanced air defence systems making possible US interventions more risky. And it can break the economic embargo on North Korea and resist any further tightening of UN sanctions on that country.

On a more strategic level, the Kremlin could abandon key arms control treaties such as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty prohibiting deployment of such land-based missiles. It could continue to build up its military around the Baltic States or escalate its involvement in Syria. All these scenarios have a potential for an open conflict with the US and NATO.

The rhetoric coming from western politicians such as Boris Johnson increasingly points to their belief in a regime change in Russia as the only possible resolution to the current impasse in relations. However, it's seen very differently in Russia, with Putin just winning another term with the biggest vote ever.

This raises deeper questions about European security. Can there be a sustainable long-term security in Europe in which Russia is not fully invested? How to deal with a country that doesn't share western liberal values? What implications does the rise of western illiberal populism have for relations with Russia? Can it really be reduced to Russian meddling in the western democracy? These questions go beyond the diplomatic expulsions over the Skripal affair. And at the moment there are no clear answers to them.

India's stand has been clarified by the external affairs minister that our national interest and relations with Russia are paramount and India will not be a party to diplomatic expulsions.

**Russia Tests New Intercontinental Ballistic Missile.** The Russian [Defense Ministry](#) said that a new ICBM, Sarmat, was launched from Plesetsk in northwestern [Russia](#) and tested the missile's performance in the early stage of its flight. Sarmat is intended to

replace the Soviet-designed Voyevoda, the world's heaviest ICBM known as "Satan" in the West. Sarmat weighs 200 metric tons and has a higher range than Satan, allowing it to fly over the North or the [South Poles](#) and strike targets anywhere in the world. He added that Sarmat also carries a bigger number of nuclear warheads, which are more powerful than the ones on Satan. Sarmat could carry an array of warheads capable of dodging missile defenses.

**Specifications.** Its large payload of about 10 tonnes would allow for up to 10 heavy MIRV warheads or 15 lighter ones (350 kilotons yield each) or up to 24 Avangard hypersonic glide vehicles, or a combination of warheads and massive amounts of countermeasures designed to defeat anti-missile systems. It was heralded by the Russian military as a response to the U.S. Prompt Global Strike. Sarmat has a short boost phase, which shortens the interval when it can be tracked by satellites with infrared sensors, like Space-Based Infrared System and makes it harder to intercept. It is speculated that RS-28 could fly a trajectory over the South Pole, completely bypassing any current U.S. missile defense system. It is suspected to have a Fractional Orbital Bombardment (FOBS) capability. The *Sarmat* is expected to be ready for deployment around 2020.

**Comments.** The timing of the test coincides with the diplomat expulsion row and it is a clear signal to the western world that Russia will not back down from a confrontation, even when it stares at sanctions.

## **CYBER SECURITY**

Air Cmde T Chand (Retd)

### **US (MIT) and China (Sense Time) to Partner in Artificial Intelligence (AI) Research.**

MIT has announced that it is partnering with Chinese Company Sense Time in the field of AI research. It is perhaps likely to be the first of its kind official partnership. A recent survey conducted by the PWC showed that areas of impact by the AI applications are likely to be cyber security, cancer treatment, clean energy, personal finance security and global education among others. MIT and Sense Time are likely to include, facial recognition technology, computer vision, human intelligence inspired algorithms and robotics in the joint research programme.

The Sense Time was founded by the Tang Xiao'ou in 2014 and is worth USD 3 bn now and has attracted investment from the likes of Qualcomm, CDX Investment and Alibaba Investment. Mr Tang a Ph.D from the MIT in 1996 specialising in computer vision and deep learning is a professor at Hong Kong University and is widely respected by the MIT fraternity. Sense Time is reportedly serving nearly 400 companies. China Mobile, Union Pay, Sina Weibo, many smartphone and autonomous driving technology companies are its customers. MIT on the other hand is in the research field of the AI since 1950. Neural networks, data encryption and crowdsourcing etc were its areas of interest. It has started an 'I Quest' programme in Feb 2018 for developing human machine intelligence learning systems and plans to deliver 30 to 50 projects on AI annually. Dr Chandrakasan is also part of this project.

China has launched a major 'AO Awakening Programme' and has set a target of 150 bn USD for 2030. Alibaba is a major sponsor and is aiming to compete with the likes of Google, Amazon, IBM and Microsoft to serve up AI applications. AI is likely to have many important defense applications in the field of autonomous weapons, cryptography

and command and control systems as it is a dual use technology. MIT – Sense Time partnership is likely to enrich Chinese research in this field.

## **SPACE**

Gp Capt G D Sharma, VSM (Retd)

**President Trump proposed a Space force.** Last month President Trump made an off the cuff remark on considering a “space force” in United States that would be equivalent to the Land, Air and Naval forces. Though he was not serious but, it does raise a question that, whether space could ever become the arena for warfare. Space satellites are already being used by the defence forces for various support roles for the armed forces all over world particularly in the realm of ISR, navigation and targeting and for extension of command and control and communication services to wide reaches across the world but, using space assets in direct warfare role is still farfetched. Ever since space age started, there has been the military and national security aspects to the space even though there are treaties that talk of keeping the space as a global common and a place of peace for common good of the humanity . There are telltale signs already that In time to come this may change. Space assets now are no longer safe. Adversary could employ hard and soft kill techniques to destroy our space assets. US, Russia and China are already known to have soft and hard kill capabilities to accomplish this and have show cased these in the past. They are continually engaged to refine these. In United States for example, Boeing has developed a reusable unmanned orbital test vehicles (X37B) in 2006 as per DARPA requirement which now looks harmless but, its capabilities point at possible uses in the offensive roles if required. This space vehicle till date has carried out four secretive missions. In the last flight, it remained in the space for 270 days before it landed. The design resembles space vehicles like challenger as it lands after its mission like an aircraft. This gives glimpse of several possibilities of its use in attacking key targets of the adversary on land and space adversary’s key space satellites. Chinese are also engaged in developing a similar space vehicles .The Chinese interest in the space apart from the gaining the prestige attached is also focused to gain an asymmetric advantage against United States, its chief adversary.

**Unsuccessful Launch of GSat-6A.** After the successful launch of G Sat 6A on 29 Mar 18 in GTO, on board of a indigenously designed GSLV-F08, when the satellite was on course to normal operating configuration for the third and the final firing, scheduled for April 1, 2018, communication with the satellite was lost. This is indeed a setback for ISRO and its possible users particularly the military for which it had reserved transponders for use. This has probably happened due to the failure of the main power supply. Efforts are underway to reestablish the contact which still remains a possibility. If successful, the satellite could be operated on solar supply. There is however, a silver lining in the whole operation, as the copy book launch with indigenous GSLV shows that in time to come it would become a workhorse like the PSLV. Presently, it is known to take aloft a 4 tons satellite. It ranks lower than ISRO is working to increase its lift capacity to 10 tons.

For instance, Japan's H-IIB rocket can place an eight tons rocket in GTO. Chinese long March can place a payload of 14 tons in GTO, European Ariane 5 10.9 tons. As per

ISRO scientists, India may not need heavy rockets as nearly 55-60 percent of a satellite's weight consists of its chemical fuel. This can be reduced by shifting to electric propulsion of satellites. However, some experts do not agree that chemical fuel can be eliminated as they feel electric propulsion would be used later to locate the satellite in the GTO slot. Use of composite in various stages yet is another way to lower the weight of the launch vehicle substantially with consequent enhancement in lifting capacity.