

ENVIRONMENT SCAN: 16-31 DEC 2017

PAKISTAN

Brig Deepak Malhotra

Pak [Army Warns US Against 'Unilateral Action' in Pakistan](#). The Pak military warned the US against 'unilateral action', saying that despite its desire for cooperation on Afghanistan, there could be no compromise on national respect and sovereignty. Earlier this month, CIA Director Mike Pompeo warned the US would do everything it could to ensure the elimination of "terrorist safe havens" in Pakistan. Meanwhile, a Pentagon report on Afghanistan, released alongside Mr Pompeo's statement, said the US could take "unilateral steps in areas of divergence". The warnings were accentuated further when, during his trip to Afghanistan last week, Vice President Mike Pence said President Trump had put Pakistan on notice.

Comments. This is perhaps the strongest-ever reaction from Islamabad since US functionaries and statements recently began alluding to the possibility of unilateral action, amidst an ongoing row over alleged terrorist sanctuaries.

[Hafiz Saeed Opens MML Office in NA-120](#). Notwithstanding the opposition by the interior ministry to entry of offshoots of proscribed entities into the national political arena, Jamaatud Dawa Emir Hafiz Muhammad Saeed opened an office of a subsidiary of the JuDin Lahore.

Comments. The MML, which surfaced in the by-polls for NA-120 in September this year and gained fourth position with votes double than the tally of Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Jamaat-i-Islami combined, is yet to be registered with the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). The [interior ministry has opposed registration of the MML](#) as a political party terming it an offshoot of banned outfits.

AFGHANISTAN

Brig Deepak Malhotra

Scores Killed in ISIS Bombing of Kabul News Agency and Shia Centre. At least 41 people killed and 80 wounded in sectarian attack in Afghan capital that UN said deliberately targeted children. Islamic State has killed at least 41 people and injured more than 80 others in an attack on a Shia cultural centre and news agency that share a building in Kabul. The bombings were the latest in a particularly bloody year for the Afghan capital, even by the standards of a country inured to decades of conflict. Isis's Amaaq news agency said the cultural centre, had been targeted by Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), the full name of the group's Afghan affiliate, because it was funded by Iran and used to spread Shia beliefs.

Comments. It was the latest sectarian attack in a capital that had once been relatively immune to such violence. For all the civilian deaths in Kabul over four decades of civil war, until the rise of ISIS very few could be chalked up to the Sunni-Shia tensions that have claimed so many lives from Iraq to Pakistan. Now a group with a strong sectarian agenda appears to have outstripped the home-grown Taliban in inflicting violence on Kabul. This is ISKP's 7th suicide bombing in the capital since 20 Oct, killing 130 people in total, making ISKP a larger threat in Kabul than Taliban for this period.

IRAN

Brig Deepak Malhotra_

Protests Reported in Tehran, Kermanshah and Mashhad. Sparked by a sudden surge in the price of basic food supplies, anti-regime protesters took to the streets of several towns and cities complaining that economic reforms, promised by President Hassan Rouhani when he took office in 2013, have been slow to materialize. Cuts to welfare and fuel price increases, announced earlier this month, have compounded their woes. The US has also warned Iran to respect people's right to protest.

Comments. The demonstrations are said to be the biggest display of public dissent since pro-reform rallies swept the country in 2009. Inflation has reached 10 percent and the unemployment rate has reached a three-year high of 12.7 percent last year, according to the World Bank. Rouhani, who was re-elected to a second term in May, has been under pressure from his conservative opponents inside Iran over perceived efforts to liberalize the country.

NORTH EAST

Brig HS Cheema

Repatriation Process of Myanmar Refugees Begins from Mizoram: Assam Rifles. Repatriation process of around 1,500 people who had taken shelter in southern Mizoram's Lawngtlai district to Myanmar has commenced from 27 Dec, an official statement of Assam Rifles said. The statement said that "Assam Rifles has contacted all the stakeholders in repatriation including Myanmar Army, local Indian villagers, refugees as well as district administration so as to commence repatriation of refugees at the earliest". The Myanmarese nationals, mainly Zakhai and Khumi, began to cross the Mizoram-Myanmar border on November 25 and took shelter in four villages – Zochachhuah, Hmawngbuchhuah, Laitlang and Dumzautlang – and the number of refugees crossed 1,600 at one time. . The refugees were mainly from the border villages of Varang, Paletwa, Pakangwa and Mulaw in Myanmar's Chin State and came to Mizoram after the Myanmar Army launched offensive against the Arakan rebels. Assam Rifles troops were keeping a close watch on the border areas to contain any ingress of Myanmarese insurgents in hope of a safe haven inside the Indian soil, the statement said.

Rohingya Repatriation: 450 to Return in First Batch. Myanmar plans to begin the repatriation of its nationals from Bangladesh on January 22 with a group of 450 Hindu refugees. A refugee camp has been set up. As per the agreement signed between Dhaka and Naypyitaw on November 23, the repatriation process must start within two months of its signing. In the first phase, The Myanmar government has already sent application/verification forms for its Hindu nationals. But it could not be known whether it also sent such forms for the Muslim refugees. The Bangladesh government has already completed the database of 923,000 Rohingyas with fingerprints and other necessary information. Of them, 19,000 are displaced orphan children who arrived in Bangladesh during the persecution, he said.

Rules on Illegal Migrants Revised: Rijju. India has revised the ground rules for handling illegal immigrants and has laid down new procedures, including the one that allows the authorities to send them back at the border itself. In a Lok Sabha reply, MOS for Home Affairs, Kiren Rijju said that a procedure for detection and deportation of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants had been set out and circulated to the state governments in November, 2009, and it was partially modified in February, 2011, with further modification in February, 2013. The Central government is implementing a mission mode project on IVFRT (immigration, visa and foreigners registration, and tracking), which will facilitate improved tracking of foreigners by integrating and sharing information gathered during visa issuance at diplomatic missions, during immigration check at the immigration check posts and during registration at the foreigners regional registration offices and foreigners registration offices, Rijju said. Illegal immigrants fall into two categories: (1) foreign nationals who have entered India on valid travel documents and found to be overstaying, and (2) foreign nationals who have entered into the country without any valid travel documents. In the first category, 7,685 foreigners were found to be overstaying as on December 31, 2016. There are also reports of foreign nationals having entered the country without valid travel documents. As entry of such foreign nationals into the country is clandestine and surreptitious, there is no correct estimate of the total number of such illegal immigrants staying in the country. As and when a foreign national is detected to be overstaying in India violating the visa rules or found to be staying without any valid travel documents, necessary action is taken under the relevant provisions of the Foreigners Act, 1946, including deportation of such a foreign national. The Central government is vested with powers to deport a foreign national under Section 3(2) (c) of the Foreigners Act, 1946. The powers to identify and deport illegally staying foreign nationals have also been delegated to the state governments and to the Bureau of Immigration. In reply to a separate question by Ramen Deka, Minister of State for Home Affairs Hansraj Gangaram Ahir said that Section 14A(2) of the Citizenship Act, 1955 provides for maintenance of the National Register of Indian Citizens by the Central government. For the purpose, the Central government has to carry throughout the country a house-to-house enumeration for collection of specified particulars relating to each family and individual, residing in a local area, including the citizenship status. Accordingly, a house-to-house enumeration was carried out in 2010 under Rule 4 of the Citizenship (Citizens Registration and Issue of National Identity Cards), Rules 2003 to prepare the Population Register, which was updated in 2015-16 except in Assam and Meghalaya. In Assam, the manner of preparation of the National Register of Citizens is governed by Rule 4(A) of the Citizenship Rules, 2003 and NRC, 1951, Assam is being updated as per these provisions.

Nepal Elections Under Progress. The Nepal government plans to announce the date for National Assembly election by January 12, the deadline set by the Election Commission to register political parties willing to take part in the upper house vote. After President Bidya Devi Bhandari authenticated the ordinance on NA elections on 29 Dec, the door has opened for electing the Assembly. However, the Electoral College consisting of Provincial Assembly members and chiefs and deputy chiefs of the local federal units is still incomplete as proportional candidates to be elected from the parties for provincial assemblies are yet to be finalised.

Furthermore, the Election Commission (EC) has to submit the results of provincial assembly elections to the provincial chiefs who have yet to be appointed by the government due to the differences among the parties. President Bhandari put the ordinance on hold for more than two months after the government forwarded it to her amid a dispute between the parties. According to the law, the Electoral College in each province elects eight members ensuring representation of at least three women, a Dalit, and a member from the physically impaired group or from a minority community.

RUSSIA

Col Harpreet Singh

Australian Air Force Put On Alert After Russian Long-Range Bombers Headed South. An Australian air force base was put on alert while Russian strategic bombers conducted exercises in neutral waters off Indonesia, a move experts said showed Moscow was looking to extend its influence in the Pacific. The base in Darwin was briefly put on a state of “increased readiness” in early December during the Russian exercises, which, according to the Russian Ministry of Defence, involved two nuclear-capable Tu-95MS bombers and more than 100 personnel. The exercise was the first Russian air patrol in the Pacific launched from Indonesia.

The aircraft took off from Indonesia’s Biak airfield, on an island north of Papua, and stayed in the air for more than eight hours. The aircraft flew only above neutral waters, according to the Russian military. The two bombers had earlier arrived at the Biak airfield from the Amur region in Russia’s south-east. The Russian military said the bombers were refueled by Il-78 aircraft over the Pacific Ocean on their way to Indonesia. The bombers, commonly referred to as “bears”, have a range of almost 15,000km without refueling. Australian defence forces might have feared the bombers were being used to gather intelligence.

Comments. The exercises showed Russia was again extending its influence to the peripheries of the world. It’s not the first time Russia has sought to demonstrate influence in the Pacific. Last year, it was revealed Russia had sent a secret shipment of 20 containers of weapons and military hardware to its newfound regional partner, Fiji. The shipment was followed by Russian military personnel, who were to train the Fijians in the use of the weapons.

In 2014, Russian naval vessels moved to the north of Australia, days before the G20 summit in Brisbane and at a time of heightened tensions between Moscow and Canberra. The 2014 Ukraine tensions and a need to diversify trade has deepened Moscow’s long-standing impulse to re-engage with both Asia and the Pacific.

Russia Upset As Japan Looks To US-Made Aegis Land System To Destroy North Korean Missiles. Russia is upset that a U.S.-built Aegis land-based missile defense system is getting deployed in Japan, and Moscow sent a strong protest and threatened the move would have consequences. Russia also said the system has attack capabilities and represented a treaty violation by the United States. Even so, the Aegis Ashore system is meant to defend against enemy missile attacks such as North Korean ballistic missiles.

A U.S. State Department spokesperson countered, "The United States remains committed to our deep and long-standing U.S.-Japan Alliance. Third parties will not deter us from taking appropriate defensive measures in the face of growing security challenges."

Last week, Japan's Cabinet approved a record 5.19 trillion yen (\$46 billion) defense budget and funds to survey potential sites for two Aegis ground interceptor batteries. A ship-based version of the Lockheed Martin-made Aegis system is already installed on Japanese warships. Japan is expected to deploy the Aegis Ashore system by 2023.

The Aegis ground-based system, which uses a collection of powerful radar installations, computers and interceptors, already is used by NATO countries such as Romania to protect against incoming ballistic missiles as well as enemy cruise missiles and aircraft. A system in Poland is scheduled to become fully operational in 2018.

Russia asserted the Aegis Ashore system is capable of using attack weapons and represented a new violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) by the U.S. with practical assistance from Japan. The U.S. State Department spokesperson said in an email response: "The United States is in full compliance with the INF treaty. Russian claims to the contrary are false and meant to deflect attention from Russia's own very clear violation." According to U.S. defense experts, the Aegis ship-based system can use cruise missiles but the ground system is not designed for it.

Russia said the anti-ballistic missile system in Japan would have consequences for Moscow-Tokyo relations.

Comments. Russia has previously claimed the U.S. was in violation of the INF treaty with regard to Aegis ground-based defense systems in Romania and Poland. The U.S. also has made the case in the past that Moscow too violated the landmark arms control treaty by deploying nuclear-capable, ground-launched cruise missiles. The Aegis Ashore system the Japanese want is simply using the same system that Japan already has deployed on ships. So Russia's criticism may be disingenuous because it's simply more of what Japan already has that Russia has not protested in the past.

Russian Ships Deliver Oil to North Korea. In an apparent violation of a U.N. Security Council resolution, Russian ships have allegedly transferred oil products to North Korean vessels out at sea on several occasions. The Security Council

resolution bars the Hermit Kingdom from importing natural gas and capped its crude oil imports in September.

Russian ships conducted ship-to-ship transfers at least three times during October and November. In September, a number of North Korean ships fueled up directly from Russia and sailed the product back to their country by lying about where the cargo would be delivered. Naval intelligence and satellite imagery appears to back up these claims of Russian ships aiding in North Korea's efforts to secure oil and fuel despite an international crackdown to cut off Pyongyang in hopes of curbing its nuclear missile program. The vessels are probably smuggling Russian fuel from Russian Far Eastern ports to North Korea.

Comments. The news follows President Donald Trump's criticism of China regarding a South Korean report that Chinese ships have illegally supplied oil to North Korean ships at sea dozens of times since October. It is clear that both Russia and China will continue to support North Korea indirectly, without being in the forefront, against the US.

India to Assist in Constructing Mongolia's First Oil Refinery. Mongolia and India are expected to soon start the construction work at Mongolia's first oil refinery as the landlocked country hopes to eliminate its dependency on its neighbours for energy needs. The Engineers India Limited (EIL) has developed the detailed project report (DPR) of the refinery while the Mongolian Oil Refinery will work as the focal agency of the project. Furthermore, India has provided a line of credit, which includes a \$700 million loan for the oil refinery and \$264 million for oil pipelines. The loan was announced during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the East Asian country in 2015. The 20-year loan will have an interest rate of 1.75 percent and principal payments will be waived during the first five years.

The refinery will have a processing capacity of 1.5 million metric tons of oil per year and will annually produce 560,000 tons of gasoline and 670,000 tons of diesel fuel, as well as 107,000 tons of liquefied gas. The refinery could boost Mongolia's gross domestic product by 10 percent. Presently, Mongolia exports crude oil to China while importing petroleum products from the Russian Federation.

Mongolia is just recovering from a severe economic downturn caused by falling commodities prices, which, in turn, forced the country to renegotiate a \$4.2 billion loan from Beijing.

Comments. The Dalai Lama's visit to Ulaanbaatar last year caused a major strain in the relationship between China and Mongolia after which Beijing blocked essential food supplies to Mongolia, thereby forcing Mongolia to warm up to other countries including India. New Delhi has been working on consolidating this new found strategic cooperation as evident from the back to back high-profile visits of dignitaries between the countries scheduled for 2018. Rajnath Singh, India's minister of home affairs is scheduled to visit Mongolia early next year, which was originally slated for June this year, but had to be postponed as the minister suffered a bone fracture. Soon after that, Mongolian President Khaltmaa Battulga, a vocal critic of China, will visit India. The Mongolian people had wholeheartedly supported Battulga in the election due to his advocacy for greater economic independence from China to which the country exports 90 percent of its goods. The oil refinery project will help Mongolia to eradicate or reduce the dependency. At the same time,

Mongolia is very much hoping it would help to save a lot of foreign exchange and reallocate it for other necessities.

India hopes to cash in on this aspiration of the Mongolian public to divert the trade risk based on traditional bilateral connections. India was the first country outside the then Socialist Bloc to establish diplomatic ties with Mongolia in 1955. India had also supported Mongolia in getting United Nations and Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) berths.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Gp Capt GD Sharma, VSM (Retd)

Will India's Palestine Vote in UN General Assembly Impact on India US Relations. Critics of India's vote in UN point out that Palestine has never supported India on Kashmir issue and Pakistan exported terrorism. Their view got traction with a recent report in the media that Palestinian ambassador in Pakistan had shared a stage with UN proscribed terrorist Hafez Saeed in Karachi recently. This was rectified by Palestine authority which recalled its ambassador from Pakistan and assured India of its support in fighting terrorism. Hence, blind support to Palestine has been questioned despite its support to India inimical forces. Second, a view that our developing close ties with Israel could get affected is difficult to ignore especially, as Israel has consistently supported India on Kashmir and during wars with Pakistan. The third objection is about its adverse effect on strategic relations with U.S. which we need to further strengthen particularly, in view of our need to counter Chinese assertiveness which is likely to grow in coming years and may impact India growth, for China could not tolerate another pole in the region.

Since beginning, India has maintained a consistent policy on Israel and Palestine. We support two nations, i.e.co- existence of independent Israel and Palestine and believe that differences between Israel and Palestine be decided between the affected parties without any external interference. We are also supportive of the Palestine cause. In 1988, we had supported a resolution towards proclamation of 'State of Palestine' in United Nations general assembly. Thereafter, in 2012 India supported a UN resolution for grant of non-member observer status to Palestine in the United Nations. So all along India supported Palestine cause.

We have always maintained independent view on international matters as per our national interest. US is aware of our position on Israel and Palestine all along. Apart from the humanitarian issue, Palestine cause is supported by Arab world and Iran with which are our energy import sources and we maintain close trade ties with them with balance of trade in our favour. Our large Indian Diaspora (Between 7-8 millions) has also been gainfully employed in the Middle East and they contribute significantly towards Indian economy with their huge remittance (nearly \$36billion) every year. These factors are difficult to ignore in formulating national West Asia policy.

In UN, apart from some insignificant small pacific nations, majority (128 nations) voted against the resolution which called for recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel which had been annexed by Israel in the 1967 war. Countries supported the status quo, as these believed that claims of Palestine and Israel can only be settled after arriving a final peace deal between the two countries without any imposition of any decision by an external force. Even U.S. allies did not vote in favour of US resolution and preferred to abstain. No negative fallout is expected in their relations. After all, they too have to look after their national interest just as U.S. is doing (appeasement of Jewish lobby which has heavy clout in US politics). In the same vein, India's relations with U.S. are not going to get affected as US needs us as much as we need them. We both require each other's support for strategic reasons. India also looks forward that its close relations with US will eventually boost its economic and military clout which though is yet to fructify despite frequent assertions by U.S. administration and its leadership.

CAR

Air Cmde T Chand (Retd)

Central Asian Republics (CARs) Outlook-2018. CARs region generally remained stable and a number of positive developments took place during 2017 which are likely to advance India's interests during 2018. The SCO Heads of State meeting held in Kazakhstan in June saw India's entry in the SCO enabling India to have closer relations with the CARs. This mutually beneficial relationship is likely to get strengthened in the years to come as was witnessed during the SCO Heads of Govt meeting at Sochi. Central Asian region witnessed the progress of Chinese OBOR without any opposition. This infrastructure development initiative is likely to progress further during this year as well. This initiative is likely to advance further in to Russia and development of Arctic Circle ports and rail-road connection infrastructure for connecting CARs to these ports is likely to be initiated. China has reportedly already earmarked funds for this project. Iran has announced the commencement of the INSTC railway lines connecting CARs to its Chabahar port. It will give access to warm waters to these landlocked countries and also enable India to have better connectivity with the region for progressing transportation of goods. Peaceful transition of Govt in Uzbekistan saw emergence of better cooperation among the countries. Uzbekistan is also likely to move slowly towards Eurasian Economic Union during this year. Turkmenistan continues to maintain a relative strategic autonomy in the region. Its work on TAPI pipeline is progressing satisfactorily. It is likely to continue the present stance and may look for more integration toward its south and west. Uncertainties in the region on account of Afghanistan situation will remain but more and more Republics are likely to push for better relations with Afghanistan as the connectivity improves through various initiatives under progress.