

## ENVIRONMENT SCAN 16-30 APR 2018

### **PAKISTAN**

Col Arvinder Singh

**India, Pakistan Should Try to Resolve their Differences like Koreas: Pak Media:** A Pakistani media reports have said that India and Pakistan should try to resolve their differences and make the quest" for normalization and peace the noblest of goals in the region, taking a cue from the recent thaw in the relations between North and South Korea. It is time for the leadership of India and Pakistan to once again tread the path of peace and friendship, the editorial said.

**Comments.** The India-Pakistan ties nosedived in recent years with no bilateral talks taking place and both sides putting it on the back-burner. Inevitably, a comparison between the renewed engagement between the two Koreas and the freeze in ties in the South Asian subcontinent will be made. The tensions and disputes between Pakistan and India are fundamentally different to the issues between the Koreas. The ties between the two countries had strained after the terror attacks by Pakistan-based groups in 2016 and India's surgical strikes inside Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. The sentencing of Indian national Kulbhushan Jadhav to death in April last year further deteriorated the bilateral ties.

**India, Pakistan to Carry out Military Drills as Part of Multi-Nation Exercise.** In a first, India and Pakistan will be part of a multi-nation counter-terror exercise in September, which will also be joined by China and several other countries. The military exercise will take place under the framework of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a China-dominated security grouping which is increasingly seen as a counterweight to NATO. The military drill will be held in the Ural Mountains of Russia and almost all SCO member countries will be part of it. The main aim of the exercise, Peace Mission, will be to enhance counter-terror cooperation among the eight SCO member countries. India's participation at the exercise was confirmed by Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman during a meeting of SCO Defense Ministers' meeting in Beijing.

**Comments.** It will be for the first time since Independence that India and Pakistan will both be part of a military exercise, though the armies of the two nations have worked together in UN peace keeping missions. The SCO was founded at a summit in Shanghai in 2001 by the Presidents of Russia, China, Kyrgyz Republic, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. India and Pakistan were admitted as observers of the grouping in 2005. Both the countries were admitted as full members of the bloc last year. India's membership was strongly pushed by Russia while Pakistan's entry into the grouping was backed by China. With expansion of the grouping, SCO now represents over 40 per cent of humanity and nearly 20 per cent of the global GDP. India feels that as an SCO member, it will be able to play a major role in addressing the threat of terrorism in the region. It is also keen on deepening its security-related cooperation with the SCO and its Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) which specifically deals with issues relating to security and defense. India has been holding military exercise with China. The two countries are likely to resume their bilateral military exercise in

September. Last year the drill was suspended following a tense standoff between their troops in Doklam.

**Pakistan Set to Launch Space Programme to Keep an Eye on Indian Side.**

Pakistan is set to launch an ambitious space programme during the next fiscal year with an aim to keep an eye on the Indian side and reduce its dependence on foreign satellites for civil and military purposes. Several projects will be initiated to develop self-reliance capacity and reduce dependence on foreign satellites, mainly the US and French satellites for civil and military communications. The budget of the Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Organization (Suparco) for the upcoming fiscal year 2018-19 is Rs 4.70 billion which includes Rs 2.55 billion for three new projects. The funding includes allocation of Rs 1.35 billion for Pakistan Multi-Mission Satellite (Pak Sat- MM1) and the country is also planning to establish Pakistan Space Centre in Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad with the allocation of Rs 1 billion. The third project is establishment of Space Application Research Centre in Karachi with the budget of Rs 200 million in 2018-19.

**Comments.** Pakistan has felt that advanced space programme as the need of time not only due to growing demand from the civil communications, including the GPS, mobile telephony and the internet but due to changing scenario in the region and to keep an eye on Indian side.

**Pak HC Ousts Asif as Foreign Minister Over UAE Work Permit.** In a setback to the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN), the Islamabad high court (IHC) on Thursday barred the country's foreign minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif from holding public office for life. He was disqualified for concealing that he owned a UAE foreign work permit. The verdict was based on Article 62 (1) (f) of the Pakistani Constitution that requires a public office holder to be honest and righteous. Ex-PM Nawaz Sharif was also disqualified from office under the same provision last July in the Panama Papers case. Earlier this month, the Pakistan SC had ruled in a unanimous order that any person declared dishonest and not righteous by court would stand disqualified from politics or holding public office for life. A three-member bench of the IHC headed by Justice Athar Minallah stated that Asif was not qualified to contest polls in 2013. The court said Asif had deliberately and willfully not disclosed his status as an employee of a UAE based company, and the substantial salary (UAE Dirham) AED 50,000 a month he received without being physically present. The HC also said Asif had not declared a bank account maintained with the National Bank of Abu Dhabi in the statement of assets and liabilities attached to his nomination paper. Asif said he will challenge the verdict in the SC, and that he had never concealed his foreign permit.

**Pakistan NSA and Army Chief in Russia Vow to Boost Security and Military Ties.** The national security advisers of Pakistan and Russia have met in Moscow and discussed the situation in South Asia and the main challenges and threats to global security. Pakistan's NSA Lt Gen (Retd) Nasser Khan Janjua visited Moscow this week and met Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation. Janjua, who led a high-level inter-ministerial delegation, reaffirmed Pakistan's desire to continue to work together with Russia for further improvement in relationship and to seek enduring peace and stability in the region. This is the first-time ever that inter-ministerial level delegations led by national security advisers of the two countries met each other. Russia's state-run Tass news agency reported that Patrushev and

Janjua stressed their interest in further security cooperation between Moscow and Islamabad.

Issues of bilateral military cooperation in information security and countering international terrorism were studied. The general situation in South Asia and the main challenges and threats to global security were discussed. Janjua arrived in Russia to take part in the ninth international meeting of security chiefs that was held in Sochi on April 24-26. Janjua gave an elaborate presentation on trends of global power politics. He shared his strategic thinking about evolving security challenges around the globe with particular focus on the region. He also highlighted the common opportunities for Russia and Pakistan. Regional connectivity and prospects of closer cooperation in the fields of space, defence, security, economy and trade, cyber security, intelligence-sharing remained the main focus of the delegation level talks. Both sides expressed their satisfaction at the positive trajectory and progression of mutual relationship at bilateral and multilateral levels including at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the United Nations. Meanwhile, Pakistan Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa has met Russian Army Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleg Salyukov and discussed security and defence-related issues. Salyukov said Pakistan is a geo-strategically important country and Russia is keen to expand its existing bilateral military-to-military cooperation. Bajwa said that Pakistan reciprocates desire of enhanced bilateral military engagements with Russia. Bajwa said that Russia has recently played a positive role to help resolve complex situations in the region. He also said that Pakistan will continue to play its part to keep conflicts away from the region and seek approaches which bring regional convergences into play rather than the divergences.

**Comments.** Russia-Pakistan ties have been improving steadily since the two signed a military cooperation agreement in 2014. The two countries also held joint military exercises in 2016 as Moscow and Islamabad made efforts to move past their bitter Cold War hostilities. The chill Pak-US ties, especially after President Donald Trump warned Islamabad against providing safe havens to terror groups, has further pushed Pakistan towards Russia and China.

## **AFGHANISTAN**

Col Arvinder Singh

**Kabul Voter Centre Suicide Attack Kills 57.** A suicide bomb attack at a voter registration centre in the Afghan capital Kabul has killed 57 people and 119 people were injured. The dead include 21 women and five children, killed when the blast hit the queue outside. The Islamic State group (IS) has taken the responsibility of the attack. A suicide bomber wearing an explosive belt had targeted the centre, which is in the Dashte Barchi area of western Kabul. Dashte Barchi is heavily populated by members of Afghanistan's Shia Muslim minority, who have been targeted by IS for their religion in the past.

**Comments.** Voter registration began this month for legislative elections which are due to take place in October. There have already been at least four attacks on such centers

since voter registration got under way a week ago. The legislative elections later this year will be followed by a presidential poll in 2019. IS and the Taliban are targeting civilians to provoke people against the government and create chaos. Sunday's attack was Kabul's deadliest since at least 100 people were killed in a district full of government buildings and embassies in January. BBC research earlier this year found that the Afghan government had full control over just 30% of the country, with the rest of the country is under significant threat from the Taliban, and, to a lesser extent, IS.

**Twin ISIL suicide blasts kill 29 in Afghanistan's Kabul.** At least 29 people, including nine journalists, have been killed and dozens wounded after two explosions hit Kabul on 30 Apr. The blasts went off during rush hour on Monday morning in the Shash Darak area of the Afghan capital. The armed group Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS) claimed responsibility for the attack. In the first explosion, a suicide bomber in a motorcycle detonated himself close to the National Directorate of Security (NDS), the main Afghan intelligence agency. In the explosion that followed 20 minutes later, a second suicide bomber targeted emergency medical workers and journalists who had arrived at the scene. The second suicide bomber was dressed as a journalist. Nine journalists who rushed to cover the aftermath of the first explosion were killed in the second blast.

**Comments.** The death of the nine journalists is considered as the worst attack on Afghan media in modern history. In spite of lot of security in that area which is not far from NATO headquarters the attacks haven't stopped. The explosions on Monday come just a week after a blast hit a voter registration centre in Kabul, killing at least 57 people and wounding more than 100 others. Attacks have multiplied in recent days in advance of the long-delayed parliamentary and district council elections scheduled for October this year. The series of attacks here in Kabul have made the Afghan capital most dangerous place in Afghanistan.

**Taliban Announces Spring Offensive and Dismisses Peace Overtures.** Taliban announced the start of its annual spring offensive on 25 Apr, dismissing an offer for peace talks by President Ashraf Ghani and said it will focus on U.S. forces in Afghanistan. The announcement of the Al Khandaq campaign, named after the so-called Battle of the Trench, fought by the Prophet Mohammad to defend the city of Medina in the early days of Islam, marks the symbolic start of the fighting season. Heavy fighting has been going on in different parts of Afghanistan. Hundreds of people have been killed and wounded in a series of high profile attacks in Kabul since the beginning of the year, despite Ghani's offer in February for peace talks without preconditions. Taliban statement on 25 Apr dismissed the peace overtures as a conspiracy and the main effort is to deviate public opinion from the illegitimate foreign occupation of the country, as the Americans have no serious or sincere intentions of bringing the war to an end, the Taliban said. U.S. Secretary of State John Sullivan said the Taliban announcement underscored the group's responsibility for the insecurity that destroys the lives of thousands of Afghans each year and there is no need for a new fighting season, still, the Taliban announced another campaign of senseless violence targeting the democratically elected and internationally recognized Afghan government and their fellow Afghans. The militants, fighting to restore their version of strict Islamic law to Afghanistan, said their campaign was a response to a more aggressive U.S.

military strategy adopted last year, which aims to force the militants into peace talks. The Taliban has announced that their primary target will be the American invaders and their intelligence agents. Their internal supporters will be dealt with as a secondary target.

**Comments.** Thousands more U.S. troops have been sent to Afghanistan to help train the army, and commanders have been given greater authority to carry out air strikes against the militants in a major reversal of the previous policy of phased withdrawal of American forces. Estimates of Taliban territorial control vary but the Pentagon estimates that 56 percent of the country is under government control, while a BBC survey this year estimated the insurgents were active in 70 percent of Afghanistan.

Emergency Alerts Loom as Drought Takes Hold in War-torn Afghanistan. Afghanistan faces the threat of serious drought this year after recording the lowest snowfall and rain in years over the winter with at least 20 of 34 provinces already suffering badly. The 20 provinces in the war-torn country saw a 60 percent shortfall in rain and snowfall during the winter season. Due to drought an emergency has been announced in several parts of the country and Afghanistan would have to import, or receive donations, to overcome food shortages. The U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF) appealed for \$10 million to help children and their families in drought-affected provinces. The UN agency stated that food insecurity and reduced access to drinking water were beginning to take their toll in the 10 worst affected provinces, where 20 to 30 percent of water sources were reportedly dry. An official at the agriculture ministry said that they would start distribution of 2,000 metric tonnes of wheat imported from India and Kazakhstan before seeking fresh aid.

**Comments.** Snow melt is an important source of water for crops and irrigation in a country where food is scarce for many households. Poor rains and scanty snowfall mean less winter wheat, Afghanistan's most reliable, resilient cereal crop. But the situation is further complicated by an escalating conflict that often picks up with the start of warmer spring weather, leading to increased displacement and reduced access for humanitarian worker this year. The series of attacks here in Kabul have made the Afghan capital most dangerous place in Afghanistan.

## **IRAN**

Col Arvinder Singh

**Rouhani Lashes out at Trump, says no Changes to Nuclear Deal.** Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has accused the United States and France of acting unilaterally in announcing potential plans to reshape a landmark nuclear deal signed between Iran and world powers in 2015. Rouhani questioned comments made on 24 Apr by French President Emmanuel Macron, alongside his US counterpart Donald

Trump, regarding a potential new deal. He questioned the authority of US on deciding for an agreement reached among seven parties and asked if the deal is very bad then why the US government signed it. He further stated that he had spoken with Macron several times by phone, and one time in person at length and told him explicitly that we will not add anything to the deal or remove anything from it, even one sentence. The nuclear deal is the nuclear deal. Rouhani has warned of severe consequences should the deal falter. Earlier this month, a senior Iranian official warned that the country could ramp its uranium enrichment to 20 percent on short notice if the US withdrew from the nuclear agreement. On 24 Apr, during a three-day state visit to the US, Macron said France hoped to work on a new deal with Iran following frank discussions with Trump, who is a fierce critic of the 2015 agreement signed during the administration of Barack Obama, Trump's predecessor. He added that any new deal must block all Iranian nuclear activity to 2025, prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, and contain Tehran's influence in countries throughout the Middle East, including Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. Under the terms of the current agreement, Iran would be able to restart part of its nuclear programme from 2025 onwards as part of a so-called "sunset clause".

**Comments.** The Iran nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), eased sanctions on Iran in return for it agreeing that it would not develop nuclear weapons. The US, Iran, France, Russia, Germany, China, the UK and the European Union are signatories to the agreement. In October, the US president refused to recertify that Iran was in compliance with the nuclear deal, despite the International Atomic Energy Agency having repeatedly certified Tehran's compliance with the agreement. Trump's decision meant the US Congress had 60 days to decide whether to re-impose sanctions that would have likely killed the deal, which it elected not to do. His comments come less than three weeks before he faces a 12 May deadline to decide whether or not to renew the agreement's prescribed sanctions relief for Iran. Under US law, the president is required to renew the waiver on sanctions every 120 days. Trump last issued a waiver in January, but a White House statement said he would not do so again unless an agreement was reached between the US and Europe to strengthen the deal. Trump had said on 12 January that either fix the deal's disastrous flaws, or the United States will withdraw. Washington is not seeking to renegotiate JCPOA, rather it wants an entirely new supplemental agreement that would in some fashion layer upon it a series of additional rules, restrictions, terms and parameters. UK, as a JCPOA signatory, has said that it would coordinate with its international partners to address the challenges Iran poses in the Middle East. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has been a vocal supporter of maintaining the 2015 deal. Other signatories Russia and China meanwhile are seeking international support for a joint statement defending the existing nuclear deal.

**Iran Nuclear Deal: France's Emmanuel Macron Pushes for Talks.** French President Emmanuel Macron has spoken to his Iranian counterpart to urge him to enter nuclear talks. However President Hassan Rouhani said the existing seven-nation deal is non-negotiable. Earlier, France, the UK and Germany agreed that pursuing the current nuclear deal with Iran was the best way to stop it developing nuclear weapons. But they also said some of the concerns raised by US President Donald Trump must be addressed. In a call lasting more than an hour, President Macron said talks would have

to be broadened to cover "three additional, indispensable subjects": the need to discuss what would happen in 2025 when the current deal expires, plus Iran's involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts, and its ballistic missile programme. These are all issues that have been raised by President Trump, who Mr Macron met in the US last week. President Rouhani told Mr Macron that Iran will not accept any restrictions beyond its commitments to comply with international rules after 2025. He added that even if the US stays in the deal, it won't be acceptable, as the Trump administration's recent conduct has upset Iran's international standing. However, Mr Rouhani also said that he would work to strengthen relations with France and wanted to co-operate in all fields. Emmanuel Macron, British Prime Minister Theresa May and German Chancellor Angela Merkel discussed the importance of maintaining the existing deal in separate phone calls with each other over the weekend. In a statement on Sunday, UK said that Mrs May had agreed with her European counterparts that the Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) was the best way of neutralizing the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran. They agreed that there were important elements that the deal does not cover, but which are required to be addressed - including ballistic missiles, what happens when the deal expires, and Iran's destabilising regional activity. The new US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also strongly condemned what he said were Iran's efforts to destabilize the region, on his first visit to Saudi Arabia as it supports proxy militias and terrorist groups. He said in a joint news conference that Iran is an arms dealer to the Houthi rebels in Yemen and it supports the murderous Assad regime [in Syria] as well.

**Comments.** The 2015 nuclear deal was struck between Iran and the US, UK, Russia, France, China and Germany, and was the signature foreign policy achievement of Barack Obama's US presidency. Trump is due to decide in the coming weeks whether to abandon the 2015 deal. The US president has been a strong critic of the international accord, calling it "insane". Both Mr Macron and Mrs Merkel have tried to persuade the US president not to drop the deal in visits to Washington in the past week.

## **NORTHEAST**

Brig HS Cheema

**Myanmar Ready to Receive 'Verified' Rohingya Refugees, says Suu Kyi.** Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi said on 1 May that her country was ready for the return of "verified" Rohingya refugees and sought more cooperation from Bangladesh for the repatriation to begin after delays since early this year. During talks that lasted over an hour with a UN Security Council delegation, she also said violence in the area could recur "any time", an official release from her office said without further elaboration. The Security Council team comprising representatives from the five permanent members and 10 non-permanent member states arrived in Naypyidaw on 1 May afternoon for a two-day visit to investigate the Rohingya refugee.

**Comments.** Myanmar Army and local vigilantes systematically raped and murdered Rohingya civilians while carrying out clearance operations in Rakhne state targeting Rohingya militants. This operation was launched in last August resulted into exodus of very large number of refugees into Bangladesh. Myanmar has to clear itself either through the UN nominated agency like ICC or Myanmar government should hold comprehensive enquiry itself and also set on the modalities to get its own citizens back. Rohingya refugees crisis is a major security concern for India and there is a need to do more by India to resolve this crisis.

**India, Nepal to Revive 22-Year-Old Mega Dam Project.** India and Nepal are reviving the ambitious Pancheshwar dam project conceived over 22 years ago. To get the project moving on the ground, the two countries have agreed to hold negotiations to resolve critical issues related to water sharing and the quantum of electricity to be sold by Kathmandu to New Delhi under this plan. A detailed project report has also been prepared to kick-start work on the dam. An important part of the February 1996 Mahakali Treaty between the two countries, the dam will generate hydro-power to the tune of 4,800 MW, augment irrigation potential and help control floods. It also has the potential to address India's water demand through the proposed interlinking of Sharda and Yamuna rivers. The move comes following Nepal's Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli's visit to India last month.

**PM Modi to Visit Nepal on May 11.** Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be the first foreign head of government/state to visit the capital of a Nepali province after the country become a federal state. Modi, who arrives in Janakpur on May 11 in his third visit to Nepal after 2014, will worship at the Janaki temple and participate in a civil reception at the Barhabigha ground of the Janakpur Sub-metropolitan City in Province 2. Modi will fly to the ancient town directly from the nearby Indian city of Patna. Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli will welcome him in Janakpur, according to Home Minister Ram Bahadur Thapa. Even as the visit is said to be for building trust and resetting bilateral ties, Modi wants to portray himself as a "neighborhood friendly" PM in view of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. He will be visiting Bhutan and Bangladesh shortly after wrapping up his Nepal trip. Three pacts on extension of the Indian railway, inland waterway navigation and agriculture cooperation were signed during the state visit of Prime Minister Oli to India last month. Officials from both sides are looking for more concrete forms of the agreements. A detailed survey of railway from the Indian border to Kathmandu will be announced during the visit, said the official. A similar kind of study involving route and other specifics is expected on water navigation for Nepal's access to the sea via India. A concrete agreement on the agricultural sector is also on cards, said officials. Modi will announce on May 11 that Janakpur will be linked with the Ramayan Circuit, which connects as many as 15 pilgrimage sites in India including four in Uttar Pradesh. Prime ministers Oli and Modi will jointly inaugurate the circuit at the Janaki temple after Modi completes his special worship there, according to sources.

**Comments.** India has to reset itself to mend and improve relations with newly elected Govt of Nepal. India need to invest more not only through integrating itself economically but amend its policy not to interfere in issues of neighbouring countries where they feel hurt and compel them to choose alternative with China. It will be India's action which may compel neighbouring small countries to move away from it even against their will or losing more in long run.

## **ASEAN**

Col Shyamji Yadav

**ASEAN, ROK Reaffirm Commitment to Further Strengthen Partnership.** ASEAN and the Republic of Korea (ROK) reaffirmed commitment to further strengthen their strategic partnership and enhance cooperation following an Ambassador-level meeting at the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta on 20 April.

At the meeting, both sides reviewed the implementation of the Plan of Action 2016-2020. Both sides also discussed cooperation in areas of mutual interest including in trade and investment, food and agriculture, disaster management, environmental protection, connectivity, culture, education, and people to people exchanges, and agreed to redouble efforts to further enhance collaboration in these areas.

They exchanged views on recent developments in their respective regions, including developments on the Korean Peninsula. ASEAN Member States welcomed the New Southern Policy initiated by President Moon Jae-in in which the ROK will seek to substantially enhance cooperation with ASEAN to further deepen and broaden the ASEAN-ROK Strategic Partnership

**ASEAN Steps up Efforts to Prioritise Infrastructure and Connectivity.** Senior officials and representatives from ASEAN Member States involved in infrastructure and connectivity matters participated in the *Inception Workshop on Establishing the Initial Rolling Priority Pipeline of Potential ASEAN Infrastructure Projects* which was held on 18 and 19 April in Jakarta, Indonesia. The two-day workshop was organised by the ASEAN Connectivity Coordinating Committee (ACCC) and Lead Implementing Body for Sustainable Infrastructure (LIB-SI) with the assistance of the ASEAN Secretariat

In his remarks, the Chair of the ACCC and Singapore's Permanent Representative to ASEAN Ambassador Tan Hung Seng made three key points regarding the issue. First, ASEAN governments need to increase the visibility of infrastructure projects and improve their bankability, as well as enhance the quality and quantity of data available on the projects in order to secure the buy-in of the private sector and multinational development banks to invest in ASEAN infrastructure projects. Second, infrastructure development is important as a key enabler of economic growth. Third, ASEAN has to strengthen regional cooperation to achieve sustainable infrastructure development.

During the workshop, the participants exchanged views on the objectives and methodology that would be used to develop the initial pipeline and provide inputs to the approach, as well as consider potential ASEAN infrastructure projects for inclusion in the pipeline

The workshop was attended by 106 participants, including delegates from ACCC, LIB-SI, National Coordinators (NCs), ASEAN Finance and Central Bank Deputies Meeting (AFCDM), Senior Transport Officials Meeting (STOM), Senior Officials Meeting on Energy (SOME), and Telecommunications and Information Technology Senior Officials Meeting (TELSOM).

**Comment.** The workshop is part of continuous efforts by ASEAN to promote infrastructure development and attract more investments in the region. There is a need to develop an ecosystem for planning, developing, financing and operating infrastructure in the region which entails close coordination among the agencies responsible for different infrastructure assets. This workshop is an important step towards the collective efforts to build capacity to deliver infrastructure which would support greater connectivity among ASEAN Member States, the broader region and beyond.

**ASEAN, EU Launch Flagship Programmes on Policy Dialogue and Economic Integration.** EU and ASEAN held a launch event to celebrate the recent start of EU-ASEAN initiatives on policy dialogue and regional economic integration. The Enhanced Regional EU-ASEAN Dialogue Instrument (E-READI) and the Enhanced ASEAN Regional Integration Support from the EU (ARISE Plus) are two flagship programmes of EU development cooperation in ASEAN with an overall budget of EUR 61 million.. Important areas of the ASEAN economic integration process will be supported by ARISE Plus such as the single market, trade facilitation, reducing non-tariff barriers to trade, along with Intellectual Property Rights, civil aviation and ASEAN statistics. Via E-READI, ASEAN's integration process would be supported through sharing of the EU integration experience.

E-READI is a cooperation programme that facilitates dialogue forums between the EU and ASEAN on policy areas across all three ASEAN Community pillars (Political and Security, Economic and Socio-Cultural). With a budget of EUR 20 million and an implementation period of six years, E-READI builds on the achievements of its predecessor READI and further assists ASEAN in the development and implementation of regional integration strategies and community building, drawing on relevant EU experience.

The ARISE Plus-Regional programme consolidates and enhances the results achieved with past EU-ASEAN technical assistance programmes to meaningfully support the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint 2025, thus supporting greater economic integration in ASEAN. The programme reflects the growing strategic relations and cooperation of the EU and ASEAN as a regional block. With a budget of EUR 41 million, the six-year initiative is the largest ever EU-funded ASEAN action.

**Comments.** The start of two biggest flagship programmes – ARISE Plus and E-READI reflects the commitment of the EU in supporting ASEAN's regional economic integration in a holistic manner, as well as the interest in strengthening EU-ASEAN dialogue in areas of strategic importance. These two initiatives will benefit ASEAN and its people through the consolidation of ASEAN Community <http://asean.org>

## WEST ASIA

Col Sumit Rana

### SYRIA

As many as 674 civilians have been killed in nearly two weeks by the continuous air attacks on the Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta, a Syrian volunteer group has said.

The Syrian Civil Defense, also known as the [White Helmets](#), said on Friday that more than 670 people have been killed since the Syrian government, aided by [Russia](#), launched an air offensive on the largely rural area outside the capital on February 18.

The aerial bombardment has drawn international condemnation, but a 30-day ceasefire unanimously voted for by the members of the United Nations Security Council last Saturday has largely [failed to hold](#), as air raids have continued unabated.

### TURKEY

Turkey has warned the Syrian government not to help Kurds fighting against Turkish forces in northern Syria.

Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdag said Turkey's operations were going ahead as planned and it would be a "disaster" if Syrian troops were to intervene. Syrian media had earlier said the army would help Kurds resist Turkish operations in the enclave of Afrin. But there has been no sign of this so far, and the Kurdish YPG militia has denied there is a deal with Damascus. Turkey regards the Kurdish fighters, just across its border in Afrin, as terrorists. It launched a major offensive against them last month.

**Why has Turkey Targeted Afrin? Turkey Began its Cross-Border Offensive** - which it has dubbed operation Olive Tree - in January.

It is trying to oust the People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD).

The Kurds have administered semi-autonomous enclaves south of the Turkish border since Syrian forces pulled out in 2012, and the YPG has taken control of other territory after driving out Islamic State (IS) fighters.

Turkey sees the YPG as an extension of the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has fought for Kurdish autonomy in Turkey for three decades. The YPG denies any direct military or political links with the PKK.

**What Role Could the Syrian Government Take?** Syria has not had a military presence in the Afrin area for nearly six years.

During the course of the Syrian war, pro-government forces have largely avoided direct conflict with the YPG, but they have had sporadic clashes.

The government of President Bashar al-Assad opposes the YPG's demands for autonomy and has vowed to retake control of all Syrian territory. However the two sides are united in wanting to block Turkey's advances.

From the Kurdish perspective, MrJia Kurd said: "We can co-operate with any side that lends us a helping hand in light of the barbaric crimes and the international silence."

## **ISRAEL**

**Israel intercepts Iranian Drone – Syrians down Israel's F-16.** On 10 February, Israel intercepted an Iranian drone flying over its territory and in response launched a range of attacks on the area near Palmyra in Syria from where the drone allegedly took flight. Reacting to Israel, the Syrians downed an Israeli F-16 returning from the attack, a first since 1980s. The Israelis fired back with a vengeance at multiple Syrian and Iranian targets within Syria.

The series of counterattacks between Israel and Syria over the last few days have rung alarm bells across West Asia. The events prove, thus far a relatively dormant Syria-Israel armistice line in the Golan Heights, might become a theatre of another conflict with global ramifications.

These exchanges of fire may well be remembered as a starting point of the next possible war in West Asia. Some observers of the region have long feared that the conflict between Israel and Iran would be played out in the south of Syria.

## **IRAQ**

Tillerson urges coalition unity in fight against ISIL. The fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant ([ISIL](#), also known as ISIS) group is far from over, the [US](#) secretary of state has said, urging unity among Arab countries in the Gulf for the sake of regional stability.

Rex Tillerson says the rift between [Qatar](#) and its former allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council ([GCC](#)) - namely Saudi Arabia, the [UAE](#) and Bahrain, as well as [Egypt](#) - is counterproductive to efforts to root out the group.

"The end of major combat operations does not mean we have achieved the enduring defeat of ISIS," Tillerson said during a meeting on Tuesday in Kuwait City.

He said US priorities are to prevent ISIS from establishing a so-called caliphate in [Iraq](#) and Syria, recruiting new members and being able to train for future attacks.

"Without continued attention and support from coalition members, we risk the return of extremist groups like ISIS in liberated areas of Iraq and Syria and their spread to new locations," he said.

The US also pledged \$200m to support stabilisation efforts in [Syria](#), Tillerson announced.

## **RUSSIA**

Col Harpreet Singh

**Russia Wipes out 'ISIS Sleeper Cells' with KILLER ROBOT in World Cup Terror Crackdown.** Footage has emerged of Russian operations slaying jihadist "sleeper cells" and "underground units" ahead of the World Cup. A total of 11 alleged terrorists were "liquidated" in the tinderbox Islamic region of Dagestan over several days.

In one incident Vladimir Putin's law enforcement officers stormed a house where a special police "shooting robot" was used against the suspects, say sources. A dramatic video shows police marksmen pounding the house with bullets from an armoured vehicle. The bullet-ridden bodies of six men were later shown in pictures revealed by the investigative authorities. The rebels were reported to have waived a jihadist flag. A statement from the Russian Investigative Committee, which probes serious crime, read: "Guns, bullets, knives and grenades were discovered at the scene." A handmade bomb was found equal in power to five kilograms of TNT. The house went up in flames.

**Comments.** Russia along with Israel seems to have a good idea on how to deal with insurgents through use of technology, especially in the field of Artificial Intelligence. India must also explore options for procuring/manufacturing such equipment to reduce combatant casualties in CI operations.

**India Caught in Crossfire of US Sanctions on Russian Arms.** US sanctions on Russian military exports have put the brakes on a \$6 billion deal with India and may derail the arms purchases of other US allies around Asia. Under a law that US President Donald Trump signed in August, any country trading with Russia's defence and intelligence sectors will face sanctions. The law is designed to punish Russian President Vladimir Putin for the 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, involvement in the Syrian civil war and meddling in the 2016 US presidential election.

The effects of the US sanctions law could be more sweeping than intended. American allies who buy weapons and equipment from Russia, the world's second-largest arms exporter, could suffer as well. India wants to buy five S-400 long-range surface-to-air missile systems that the country's military sees as a game changer. The systems are

touted as being able to counter the ballistic missiles and stealth aircraft that China is developing, while overwhelming the capabilities of Pakistan, India's other main adversary. The deal, which Putin and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi struck as part of an inter-government agreement in 2016, has run headlong into the US sanctions law.

Indian foreign secretary Vijay Gokhale and defence secretary Sanjay Mitra held discussions with US officials in Washington last month to try to find a solution.

Indonesia and Vietnam also buy weapons from Russia while being regional partners of the United States. Jakarta closed a \$1.14 billion pact for Sukhoi fighters recently, while Vietnam is seeking more jet fighter-bombers from Russia. With both Almaz-Antey Air and Space Defense Corporation, which makes the S-400, and Rosoboron export, which negotiates Russian export deals, listed as under sanction, those deals have become trickier. Vietnam, whose air force flies Russian-made Su-30 fighters and uses the S-300 air defence system, wants to continue modernising its inventory. Moscow was still pushing Hanoi to invest in state-of-the-art S-400 missile defences as part of its long-term military plans. The two countries already have had reciprocal visits by defence ministers this year. But with the United States working hard to promote sales of American military hardware, and sanctions against Russia's exporting agencies, Vietnam's plans could prove overly costly. Indonesia, meanwhile, said the delivery of the first couple of Sukhoi Su-35 jets out of a total of 11 is on track for this year. Officials said that so far they did not anticipate any changes to the deal with the Russians.

**Comments.** The issue is crucial to the Indian military, because without Russian parts, supplies and maintenance help there will be a major effect on serviceability of ships and planes. India can play the card that it can hardly be the regional security provider that America wants it to be if Russian arms procurement is not allowed. The US is looking to provide an alibi to India to continue to buy Russian arms and spares. One way to avoid secondary sanctions would be if the US determines that India is reducing its dependence on Russian arms. Russian hardware represented 62 percent of the country's total weapons imports during the past five years, compared with 79 percent in 2008-2012. The US administration could also declare that imposing sanctions on India, a major defence partner, would hurt US national security interests. That would allow a waiver permitting India to do business with Russia.

**Russia's Attempt to Block Telegram Crashes the Country's Internet.** Earlier this month, a Russian court gave regulators the authority to block Telegram, a popular encrypted messaging app that's used not only by an estimated 13 million Russian users but Kremlin officials as well. As government officials tried to pull the plug on Telegram, the company responded by repeatedly switching IP addresses, encouraging users to rely on VPNs, and moving to American hosts Google Cloud and Amazon Web Services. After playing "whack-a-mole" with thousands of individual IP addresses, the regulatory agency Roskomnadzor ham-handedly began blacking out entire subnets.

The entire Russian internet quickly spiraled into chaos, with hundreds of unrelated businesses unable to access the web. Among those affected was Viber, a Kremlin-approved messaging service, as well as museums, car dealerships, and schools. Maria V. Alyokhina, a member of the band Pussy Riot, which has been a thorn in the Kremlin's side for several years, spearheaded a public protest against the ban. Demonstrators littered the sidewalk in front of the FSB with paper airplanes, the corporate symbol of Telegram.

**Comments.** The clumsy nature of enforcement by Roskomnadzor is not unusual. There have been a lot of complaints against Roskomnadzor because they do a lot of arbitrary blocking.

Telegram is quite popular in Russia because of its encryption. Legislation introduced in 2016 mandated that all messaging services needed to provide back-door access to the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB). The country has previously attempted to make all internet communication companies store their information on Russian servers, and even suggested that Russia might disconnect from the rest of the world and create its own internet.

This could be a warm-up act for blocking even high-profile companies. The Kremlin could move on to block Facebook or Twitter as they are willing to shut down half of the Russian internet and disrupt the work of so many other companies, including Google, Microsoft, Adobe, and some Russian companies. US companies may face the brunt in such a case. It may be payback time against US sanctions.

## **MANGOLIA**

Col Harpreet Singh

**Rajnath Singh to visit Mongolia.** Home minister Rajnath Singh will visit Mongolia soon, with India drawing up a plan to step up bilateral ties across sectors following the visit of external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj to Ulaanbaatar in the last week of April. Swaraj's visit was the first visit by Indian foreign minister to Mongolia in 42 years. Prime Minister Modi had visited Mongolia in 2015 and a plan for a comprehensive partnership was in the works since then.

According to the agreed minutes of India-Mongolia joint committee, which Swaraj co-chaired on April 25, the two countries have agreed to promote the links between ministries and agencies from both sides, including closer ties between their national security councils. The two sides take part in joint exercises and they wish to step up the security cooperation. The forthcoming visit of home minister Rajnath Singh comes in this context.

New Delhi will be hosting senior government officials from Mongolia at premier Indian institutes to train them in public policy and governance, said the minutes of the committee. For example, the Foreign Service Institute, which trains Indian diplomats, will host training programmes for Mongolian diplomats as well.

The two sides also decided to step up the cooperation in the mineral exploration sector and to speed up the plans to set up an oil refinery in Mongolia with an Indian line of credit of \$ 1 billion. The two sides also agreed to explore the possibility of direct air connectivity and cooperation in the fields of telecommunication, education and health.

**Comments.** Sushma Swaraj's visit and Rajnath Singh's proposed visit to Mongolia, comes at a time when Beijing is expanding its influence in Delhi's periphery in South Asia. Strengthening ties with Mongolia is long overdue. It makes for strategic prudence for Delhi to invest in and be engaged with Mongolia. India's Buddhist profile is very revered in that country and it is time that people to people contact is also increased.

## **UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

Gp Capt G D Sharma, VSM (Retd)

**Does US has any Role in Korean and China- India Leadership Summits?** Two significant events which occurred in quick succession have raised the positive sentiments across the world. On 27 April, the first informal meeting of unpredictable North Korean leader Kim Jong UN with South Korean President Moon Jae in, took place at the DMZ on 28 parallel. This was the first summit between the two countries since 2007 and only the third time leaders of the two Koreas have met since an armistice agreement ended the Korean War in 1953. Prior to the meeting, North Korea halted its nuclear and missile test programme raising hopes that the Kim is serious about negotiating for full denuclearization. The positive signs for this meeting emerged after Kim's sister, Kim Yo-Jong, who visited South Korea during the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in February. All this happened after sharp talk between President Trump and Kim till Jan this year. Then suddenly softening of the stand between American and North Korean leadership took place with Trump willing to talk with the North Korean leader. It was almost unbelievable that North Korea which till some time ago was extremely hostile and threatening US and its allies with nuclear strike has changed its stance. There can be three reasons for this change in stance. One, now that North Korea has developed its nuclear capability it need not maintain a hard stand. Second, Kim was probably mortally scared of his life. Third, the sanctions had brought its state to a dangerously low resource crunch and in order to avoid a civil uprising or even a coup he may has sought rapprochement. The resource crunch was aggravated with Chinese implementing nearly 90% sanctions on North Korea. Finally, may be all these have forced Kim to seek negotiations.

Kim has agreed for denuclearization subject to condition that US signs a peace treaty which guarantees North Korea safety from US attack. In around end of May President Trump and Kim Jong UN are stated to meet. It can be argued that US hard and non compromising stand has forced Kim to negotiate. Time however, will tell how much will be achieved by both leaders but, it would be truly a historic meet and may usher peace in the region and the world at large.

In the other event PM Modi and President XI Jinping met at Wuhan on 27-28 April in an in formal two days summit. This may bridge the mistrust between two nations and avoid Doklam type of situations in future by seeking diplomatic solutions to the differences on the borders. This summit was proposed by President Jinping and was readily accepted by Indian PM. Consequent to the summit, both sides agreed to provide strategic guidance to their respective militaries to avoid border standoffs situations and intrusions. This however, appears ambiguous as militaries do not act on their own and the political leadership is always in known of their actions which have strategic implications.

In all probability, the developing geo strategic situation in the Indo- Pacific region and exploration of measures by the littoral states in the region to checkmate Chinese aggressive behaviour could be reason. United States sees India to play as a net security provider of the region and intends to help it in capacity building to face Chinese challenge. It is trying to convince India in signing its foundational agreements such as Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) and Basic Exchange and cooperation Agreement (BECA) are efforts towards this. Other main players in the Indo- pacific region viz; ASEAN, Australia, Japan and Korea see India as a counter balance to assertive China. India is a natural choice for this role because of India's size, capacity and its strategic location in the Indian ocean region. With informal meeting, Jinping may have intended to bring ambiguity or fissures in possible co-operative

arrangements. The other factor is the recent trade war unleashed by President Trump. In that China is the main target. Chinese losses on account of trade war can be offset by exports by India.

Hence, indirectly United States could have played a role in prompting President Jinping to seek India's co-operation. We however, await long-term outcome with caution, as China under particularly during President Jinping tenure have clearly shown expansionist tendencies. This is likely to continue as president has appointed himself as chairman of CPC for life. The recent discovery of deployment of anti shipping cruise missiles and surface to air missiles on three Sparty group of islands in the South China sea with are counter claims on them by Vietnam and Taiwan proves the point.

## **CAR**

Air Cmde T Chand (Retd)

**SCO Council of Foreign Ministers Meeting.** A meeting of Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was held on 24 Apr 2018 at Shanghai, China. Foreign Minister of India Sushma Swaraj alongwith others, attended the meeting. State Councillor and Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China Wang Yi chaired the meeting. Following important points were discussed during the meeting:<sup>1</sup>

- (a) Review and reorientation of the priorities of the SCO in the light of India and Pakistan joining the organisation.
- (b) Need for countering the threats posed by terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, communicable diseases and climate change.
- (c) Enhancement of cooperation for promoting a political settlement in Afghanistan and facilitating sustainable economic development in that country.
- (d) Settlement of the crisis in Syria without violating sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria. The ministers expressed grave concerns about the missile strikes launched by three permanent members of the UN Security Council on Syrian territory on 14 April 2018.
- (e) Implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on the Iranian nuclear programme and importance of strict compliance by the parties.
- (f) Political settlement to the crisis in Ukraine based on rapid and full implementation of the Minsk Agreements of 12 February 2015.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://eng.sectsc.org/news/20180424/413326.html>, Press release on the SCO Council of Foreign Ministers meeting, 24 April 2018

(g) The foreign ministers of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan reaffirmed their support for China's Belt and Road initiative.

Most of these points are likely to be discussed further during the SCO Heads of State Council meeting that will take place in June 2018 in Qingdao, China. India's viewpoint on these issues will be keenly observed by the countries in the West.