

## ENVIRONMENT SCAN: 29 JUL 2016

### **AFGHANISTAN**

Capt Ranjit Seth

At least 81 people were killed and 286 wounded on Saturday 23 Jul, in a twin bombing that targeted a demonstration by members of the Shiite Hazara minority. The attack was claimed by the Islamic State. A NATO spokesman stated that Islamic State militants in Afghanistan were probably “in the same or even in a worse position today” than they were in recent months. It is assessed that their numbers range between 1,000 and 3,000. The current strategy of targeting the group is unlikely to change and US forces would continue to unilaterally target the ISIS. In January, the US President had allowed U.S. forces to specifically target Islamic State militants in Afghanistan as part of their counter-terrorism mission in the country. That is separate from its NATO mission in the country, which focuses on training, advising and assisting Afghan forces.

Interestingly, in March 16, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani had declared that the Islamic State had been defeated in the country’s east. But it appears that the militants have had an apparent resurgence this summer, despite continued Afghan ground operations and air-strikes by U.S. forces.

### **IRAN**

Capt Ranjit Seth

**New Appointments in the Army.** Major General Mohammed Bagheri of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has been appointed as head of Iran’s Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS). Gen Bagheri has had a distinguished military career in the IRGC and the AFGS intelligence since the Iran-Iraq War. He succeeds Gen Hassan Firouzabadi, who had little military background prior to his appointment except strong connections with Supreme Leader Grand Imam Ali Khamenei. The new appointment may indicate a shift to individuals who possess institutional loyalty to the IRGC, revolutionary ideals, and strong professional credentials.

Brigadier General Abdolrahim Mousavi has been appointed as the Commander of the *Khatam al-Anbiya* Central Headquarters. *Khatam al-Anbiya* played a significant role in the Iran-Iraq War by coordinating operations between the IRGC and Army. It is worth noting, however, that the AFGS was created to make up for the failings of *Khatam al-Anbiya*. The army’s Special Forces deployments to Syria in coordination with the IRGC may point at Iran’s desire to further develop inter-service capability. The resurrection of *Khatam al-Anbiya* likely shows a new emphasis on improving inter-military operational coordination an effort to increase interoperability and cohesion between the forces.

Gen Bagheri has stated his five key thrust themes: furthering the capabilities of the Basij (that oversees and coordinates the military activities of the IRGC’s local paramilitary organization), the IRGC’s Quds Force, and cyber forces, while increasing intelligence operations and extending Iran’s naval reach into the Indian Ocean.

Iran since 1979 has focused on a mostly defensive and asymmetric military. The Middle East nations remain vary of whether Iran will take a more traditional regional power approach to provide greater operational deterrence against the better equipped Gulf Arab states, after international restrictions (under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA) are lifted.

Grinding sectarian conflicts in Syria and Iraq, restrictions on Iran's purchase of conventional weapons till 2023 under the JCPOA and a likely new supreme leader (and commander in chief) are the big factors will determine how the Iranian military will move forward.

## **ASEAN**

Brig Jai Singh Yadav, VSM



VIENTIANE, Laos — Daring to take on China in a territorial dispute in the South China Sea, the Philippines went to an international tribunal for justice, and won big. But it turned out to be a pyrrhic victory.

Beijing came back with such ferocity and manipulative diplomacy that other Southeast Asian countries that have similar disputes with it are apparently backing down.

One by one, their positions became clear at meetings this week of Asia-Pacific and Southeast Asian nations, a gathering that was supposed to unanimously call out China for a host of actions in the resource-rich South China Sea — building artificial islands and military airstrips, sending warships, staging live-firing exercises and shooving away fishermen from other countries.

And so, the four-day conclave in Vientiane, the Laotian capital, ended Tuesday with China's muscles bulging more than ever, and the vaunted unity of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations in disarray.

"Neither China nor ASEAN emerged from the Vientiane meetings with honor," said Ian Storey, a senior fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, a Singapore-based think tank. "It's a sad state of affairs when expectations of ASEAN being able to do anything to lower tensions in the South China Sea are zero, and instead the focus is on whether it can get its act together."

Philippine Foreign Secretary Perfecto Yasay Jr. sought to put a positive spin on the developments. "Be that as it may, the actual resolution of this dispute between

China and the Philippines is a matter between China and the Philippines," he said, reflecting a position that suits China perfectly.

The first coup de grace China dealt was at an ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting, where it successfully prevented a joint communiqué from mentioning the July 12 ruling by the Hague-based arbitration panel in favor of the Philippines. While the communiqué did express concerns about the tensions in the South China Sea, it did so without naming China.

A millstone around the neck of ASEAN — Southeast Asia's main grouping — is that it can issue statements only when there is consensus among all 10 members. China leveraged that by ensuring that Cambodia and Laos would not provide that consensus. Both countries receive massive aid from China, which recently announced a \$600 million package to Cambodia.

"As an association, ASEAN loses power and relevance when it punts on the most important regional issues," said John Ciorciari, a Southeast Asia expert at the University of Michigan. "Yet ASEAN operates by consensus, and when push comes to shove, national interests tend to trump regional solidarity."

"Aid has won China some close friends in Southeast Asia, and Cambodia in particular has been quite willing to cast vetoes on communiqué language inimical to Chinese interests," he said.

China does not accept the arbitration panel's ruling, and says all disputes should be settled bilaterally through negotiations. It did not participate in the panel's hearings, and insists that almost all of the South China Sea, which is ringed by claimants China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines and Taiwan, belongs to it historically.

It also accuses outside parties — the United States, Japan and Australia — of needling ASEAN countries and raising tensions. After ASEAN's failure to rebuke China, those three countries issued a joint statement in Vientiane saying they strongly oppose "any coercive unilateral actions that could alter the status quo and increase tensions."

China lashed out at them on Wednesday, with Foreign Minister Wang Yi saying in a statement that the three countries were "fanning the flames" of regional tension. "Now it is the time to test whether you are peacekeepers or troublemakers," he said. Diplomats who attended the Laos meetings said it was interesting to see that claimant countries appeared less enthusiastic than others in wanting to rebuke China. Even the Philippines was not too forceful in asking for strong language in the joint ASEAN statement. It repeatedly pointed out that the ruling by the arbitration panel was the result of its "unilateral" lawsuit, implying that ASEAN should not get involved.

Malaysia's foreign minister didn't even show up for the meetings. At a later meeting of ASEAN and Asia-Pacific nations, Brunei took pains to praise China's leadership, according to diplomats who attended the meeting.

And on Tuesday, Vietnam's deputy foreign minister, Le Hoai Trung, told The Associated Press that his country prefers bilateral dialogue with China, which Beijing wants.

The Philippines is in a tight spot because even though it went to the tribunal and won, that was under the previous government of Benigno Aquino III. President Rodrigo Duterte, Aquino's successor, has made friendly overtures to Beijing and is leaning toward bilateral negotiations. But the bottom line is that the tribunal's decision, although legally binding, is non-enforceable. The arbitration panel didn't take a position on who owns the disputed territories, which include reefs and rocky outcroppings in the vast sea. It concluded only that many of them are legally rocks, even if they've been built into islands, and therefore do not include the international rights to develop the surrounding waters.

Now it is up to China to decide what concessions it wants to make, and how much pressure the smaller countries can take. "At this point, it (the ruling) is not a magic stick ... it's not a solution to everything, but rather it needs to be combined with other measures," said Tran Viet Thai, deputy director of the Institute of Strategic Studies, a Vietnamese government think tank.

China is showing no signs of slowing down its efforts to exert control over the South China Sea. Along with creating new islands by piling sand on top of coral reefs, China has built airstrips, harbors and lighthouses that it says will benefit fishermen and ship owners who transit the strategic waterway. Clearly, China is not giving up the sea — tribunal or no tribunal — yet the ruling will continue to hang over it like a dagger.

## **WEST ASIA**

Brig Ranjit Singh

### **IRAQ**

**Cleansing Operations in Fallujah.** The Iraqi forces continue cleansing operations around Fallujah to eliminate remnant ISIS elements in the area. Visualizing threat from ISIS, the Iraqi forces are believed to have created defensive positions around the city, entry and exit from the city is being monitored.

**Liberation of Khalidiya.** The Iraqi forces have launched a major offensive for retake of Khalidiya, an important place, approx 20 km west of Ramadi, along the axis to Fallujah. The attack has been launched from all four directions, resistance is expected to be weak. In the ensuing operation 20 ISIS elements have been killed.

**ISIS Preparing to Launch Offensive in Heet.** It is believed ISIS is making preparations to launch a major offensive to retake the city of Heet from the Govt forces.

**Operations for Retake of Mosul Province.** After liberation of Fallujah, the Iraqi security forces are now focusing on liberation of Mosul. The Iraqi forces have been making slow but steady progress. The Coalition forces have intensified airstrikes in Mosul, killed 10 ISIS elements and destroyed their HQ in central Mosul.

**US to Establish Military Base in Kurdistan.** It is learnt that a MoU has been signed between US and Peshmerga Governing Council to establish a US military base in Kurdistan, till ISIS is completely defeated in the region.

**IDP Fleeing Mosul may Rise to One Million.** It has been reported by ICRC that as the fighting intensifies in Mosul, the number of internally displaced people is likely to rise

to one million. Thus, there is a need to make necessary arrangements to avert humanitarian crisis.

### **Comments.**

**Post Liberation of Fallujah, cleansing operations are continuing to eliminate the remnant ISIS elements in the area. Anticipating the threat from ISIS, the Iraqi forces have prepared defensive positions around the city, entry and exit to the city are being monitored.**

**The operations to retake Mosul, the last stronghold of ISIS in Iraq are progressing well, but slowly. The Iraqi forces have made significant gains, inching closer to central part of the city. In the ongoing operations to retake Mosul, the security forces have been exerting pressure from all fronts and significant gains have been made.**

**US proposes to set up a military base in Kurdistan, till ISIS is defeated in the region. A MoU between US and Peshmerga Governing Council has been signed.**

### **SYRIA**

**Deadly Airstrikes Continue Across Syria.** Deadly airstrikes by Govt forces supported by Russia continue across Syria in areas held by rebels in Aleppo, Idlib, Homs and southern Damascus, resulting in large civilian casualties and damage to property.

**Deadly Airstrikes by Govt Forces in Raqqa.** The Syrian Air Force supported by Russia has been carrying out deadly airstrikes in Raqqa, resulting in large number of casualties.

**Govt Forces Cut off East Aleppo.** The Govt forces have cut off Castello Road, the only supply road to eastern Aleppo held by rebels. The rebels have made several attempts to reopen the road but have failed, suffering large number of casualties. The Govt forces would lay siege in the area like in other rebel held areas, preventing routine supply to these areas.

**Safe Passage to People in East Aleppo.** The Govt forces and Russians are believed to planned a safe passage for people trapped in east Aleppo, however, doubts are being raised on implementation of the proposal.

**Al Nusra Announces Separation from Al Qaeda.** Al Nusra, a terrorist organization, an affiliate of Al Qaeda has announced separation from Al Qaeda, named itself as Jabhat Fatah Al Sham, it is believed to an amicable settlement.

### **Comments.**

**The situation in Syria remains grim with intense fighting in large parts of the country, due to failure of peace process.**

**Govt forces continue deadly airstrikes across Syria, causing large number of civilians and damage to property. Capture of Castello Road, the only supply route to east Aleppo by the Govt forces is likely to result in siege in the area. The proposed safe passage for people trapped in east Aleppo is suspect by various agencies.**

**Formal announcement on separation of Al Nusra from its parent organization Al Qaeda, may be an attempt to unite all the rebel groups in Syria against the Govt forces as well as ISIS. The impact would be seen in due course.**

## **YEMEN**

**UN Sponsored Peace Talks in Kuwait.** The UN peace talks resumed on insistence of UN, Hadi Govt joined the peace talks being held in Kuwait, after series of attempts to walk out of the talks. The talks were scheduled to end in a stalemate on 30 Jul, have been extended by one week up to 5 Aug 16.

**UN Peace Deal.** UN representative has put forward a Peace Deal, which has been accepted by the Hadi Govt and Houthi rebels have been given time till 7 Aug to sign the deal. The Peace Deal calls for an end to the armed conflict, and calls on the Houthi Rebels to withdraw from the cities of Sana'a, Taiz and Hudaida. All decisions made by the rebels since Sep 14, are null and void. The controversial Supreme Political Council set up by the rebels is abolished. The political dialogue to commence, 45 days after rebels withdraw and hand over heavy weapons to Military Committee formed by the Hadi Govt.

### **Comments.**

**UN sponsored peace talks being held in Kuwait scheduled to end on 30 Jul were extended by one week to 5 Aug.**

**UN has proposed a peace deal, which has been accepted by the Hadi Govt and the rebels have been given time up to 7 Aug to sign the deal. The rebels are unlikely to accept the peace deal.**

## **AFRICA**

Brig Jai Singh Yadav, VSM

### **Nigeria's 'Avengers' are Crippling the Oil Sector.**

22 July 2016

**The vast wetlands of the Niger Delta region are home to Nigeria's vast oil resources, but are once again at the centre of a security crisis.** The militants or the "boys" are back in the creeks, destroying pipelines, attacking oil installations, and kidnapping workers. The violence has slashed Nigeria's oil production by a third.

The chaos here is dealing a serious blow to the Nigerian government who are dependent upon oil sales for most of its revenues. It has also helped push up the global oil price to almost \$50 (£38) a barrel.

The renewed militancy was triggered late last year by the cash-strapped government's decision to cancel lucrative security contracts and reduce the budget to pay former militants by 70% .

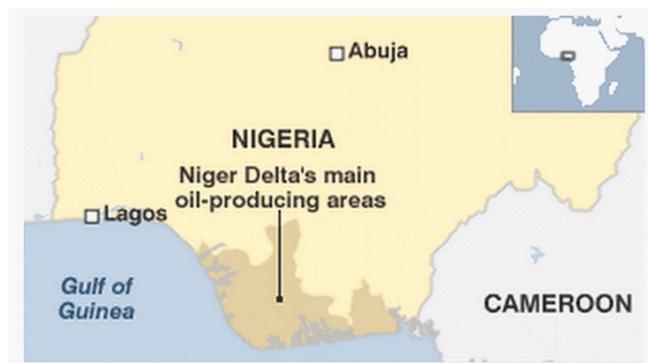


Part of an amnesty programme agreed upon in 2009 that largely ended the previous bout of militancy, which had crippled the oil industry a decade ago.

As part of the agreement, tens of thousands of militants gave up their arms in return for a monthly stipend worth around \$400 at the time and the opportunity to retrain as divers, welders and boat builders at colleges overseas.

Critics regarded the deal as little more than a "bribe for peace". Now with the payments drying up, many fighters with a grievance and a gun feel they have little to lose.

**'Broken Promises'.** Oil was first discovered in the Niger Delta in the 1950s. It should have been a blessing but many locals see it as a curse. Thousands of oil spills have ruined fishing grounds, contaminated water supplies, and destroyed croplands.



There have been widespread allegations of corruption, with accusations that politicians and local leaders siphon off cash that should be spent on building schools, hospitals and providing electricity.

Locals also complain that the jobs in the oil industry are frequently given to outsiders. It is hard to ignore the painful irony that communities lying on top of some of the world's richest oil deposits are mostly living in abject poverty.

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