

ENVIRONMENT SCAN 16-28 FEB 2018

CHINA (CONTINENTAL)

Brig Rajeev Bhutani (Retd)

Life Long Chairmanship for Xi Jinping. The Communist Party Central Committee, the political body of top leaders of the party, has “proposed to remove the expression that the president and vice president of the People’s Republic of China, “shall serve no more than two consecutive terms from the country’s constitution,”. Officials have indicated that the party needed a “strong and stable leader” until the middle of the 21st century. “Especially in the period from 2020 to 2035, which is a crucial stage for China to basically realize socialist modernization, China and the CPC need a stable, strong and consistent leadership.

Thus, China may soon see the emergence of a new “emperor” as the bar on President XiJinping— already referred to as “**chairman of everything**” — getting an unprecedented third term has been lifted.

The move, increasingly anticipated after Xi’s near complete dominance of the politburo and standing committee after the last year’s Party Congress, can formally place him in the same league as modern China’s founding father Mao Zedong who remained the supreme commander till the last day of his life.

Xi’s tremendous influence has been built around three factors:-

- (a) China’s growing influence in world and military affairs;
- (b) The anti-corruption campaign that has punished more than one million party cadre and;
- (c) The revamping of almost all sections of the military.

Xi Jinping’s Term Limit Proposal Sparks Rare Public Dissent China. In a rare public expression of dissent in China, a well-known political commentator and a prominent businesswoman have penned open letters urging lawmakers to reject a plan that would allow President Xi Jinping to rule indefinitely.

Their impassioned statements on a popular messaging app were circulated widely after the ruling Communist Party announced a proposal Sunday to amend the constitution to scrap term limits on the president and vice president.

In a statement on Monday on WeChat to Beijing’s members of China’s rubber-stamp parliament, Li Datong, a former editor for the state-run China Youth Daily, wrote that lifting term limits would “sow the seeds of chaos.” In a message that was swiftly deleted, sociologist Li Yinhe called the removal of term limits “unfeasible” and would “return China to the era of Mao.”

Li added, however, that delegates to the National People’s Congress, China’s parliament, are likely to pass the amendment unanimously since “they aren’t really elected by the people, therefore they don’t represent the people in voting, but will vote according to the leadership’s design.”

Few Chinese dare speak out on political topics, even online, while the media are entirely state controlled and public polling on sensitive issues is nonexistent.

The congress is all but certain to pass the constitutional amendment when it meets for its annual session early next month, at which it will grant Xi a second five-year term and appoint new ministers and other government officials.

Xi Jinping's decision to cast aside China's presidential term limits is stoking concern he also intends to shun international rules on trade and finance, even as he champions them on the world stage.

China Coercing Neighbours to Reorder Indo-Pacific Region: Pentagon. In its annual budget proposals for the fiscal 2019 (October 1, 2018 to September 30, 2019), the Pentagon told Congress: "China is leveraging military modernisation, influence operations and predatory economics to coerce neighbouring countries to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to their advantage". It said "As China continues its economic and military ascendance, asserting power through an all-of-nation long term strategy, it will continue to pursue a military modernization programme that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the US to achieve global preeminence in the future".

According to the budgetary proposals, competitor states, especially China and Russia have narrowed department of defence's military technological advantages, demanding the US find new and innovative ways to fight in the future.

Japan Plans to Deploy Anti-missile Shield. Throughout last year, while US President [Donald Trump](#) and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un traded public insults, Beijing has been quietly bolstering its presence on the extraordinary chain of artificial isles it has been building in waters near and far, taking advantage of what it calls "the strategic window of opportunity".

Three airfields have been put into its seven bases in the disputed Spratly chain. There, and elsewhere, aerial photographs from the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington reveal facilities awash with fortified shelters for warships, hangers for aircraft and radar, underground bunkers and missile emplacement positions.

For Japan, the most vulnerable point is the Senkaku, to which Beijing has laid claims with surrounding isles, in particular Ishikagi, 90 nautical miles away, seen as the obvious targets. Hundreds of fishing boats from China, escorted by coast guard ships, or, at times, warships, have been driving back Japanese fishermen, leading to clashes with Japanese coast guards. There has been a recent spate of incursions into airspace by Chinese warplanes and the appearance for the first time, a few weeks ago, of a nuclear attack submarine in these waters.

The Japanese government are now finalising the deployment of missile batteries, anti-

aircraft and anti-ship, radar installations and around 600 troops to Ishigaki. Final details are likely to emerge next month. The surface to air missiles are likely to include American-made MIM-104 Patriots capable of taking down Chinese ballistic missiles, with enemy vessels being targeted by SSM-1s, which carry up to 500lbs of high-explosives and have a range of over 100 miles. There are future plans for a joint missile system between Japan and Western Europe to be installed, as part of a project involving the British, French and Italian MBDA and Mitsubishi Electrics. The US Defence Secretary General James Mattis stressed during a visit to Tokyo that Washington is fully committed to backing Japan over the Senkakus. On a broader basis, the US has been sending warships through the China seas to underline the right to freedom of navigation.

Shinzo Abe seeks to revise Japan's post-Second World War pacifist constitution. Last month, his cabinet approved an increase of 1.3 per cent in the annual military budget raising it to a record \$45.8bn (£33bn) for the year.

Britain Plots Confrontation with Beijing by Sending Royal Navy Warship through Disputed South China Sea. Gavin Williamson, British Defence Secretary, said HMS Sutherland, an anti-submarine frigate, would sail through the sea on its way home from Australia to assert freedom of navigation rights. "She'll be sailing through the South China Sea and making it clear our Navy has a right to do that."

Beijing has been enraged with previous 'freedom of navigation' patrols, which have been carried out by the US Navy, and has sent out warships to confront them. The US patrols have sailed within 12 nautical miles of disputed territory or artificial islands built by China - the distance internationally recognised as a territorial limit. HMS Sutherland is the first Royal Navy warship to sail through the South China Sea since HMS Daring in 2014. Then the Type 45 destroyer did not challenge any of China's territorial claims. Mr Williamson would not say whether the frigate would sail within 12 nautical miles of the land formations.

China to Launch Rival Oil Futures Market in Spring. China will soon be able to trade oil using its own currency by creating a futures market to rival the international benchmark contracts which are traded exclusively in dollars.

The China Securities Regulatory Commission confirmed its plans to begin the trade of yuan-based oil futures on the Shanghai Futures Exchange from the market has always relied on benchmarks based on futures contracts traded for Brent crude or the West-Texas Intermediate (WTI). The WTI reflects trading of US crude futures, which are used to determine the price of physical oil sales, while Brent is used as the benchmark for European and Middle Eastern producers.

China's move to establish its presence in global crude futures trading has also raised eyebrows because the futures price will reflect its own growing oil demand rather than oil production.

The futures will be traded on the Shanghai International Energy Exchange.

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit in June 2018 in Qingdao.

China has announced that this year's summit of the [Shanghai Cooperation Organisation](#) (SCO) will be held in the city of Qingdao in June. As the rotating president of the SCO, China will hold the SCO summit in Qingdao. Its spokesperson, however, declined to confirm the exact date saying the summit will be held in June. Russian Ambassador to China Andrey Denisov had earlier said the SCO summit would be held on June 9.

China has been holding summit-level meetings of international organizations in different cities giving them special prominence. Last year it held the BRICS Summit in Xiamen city. Qingdao, a port city is a famous tourist spot. It forms part of Shandong province, which is the birthplace of many ancient Chinese thinkers, including Confucius.

CHINA (MARITIME)

Capt (IN) Ranjit Seth

China's BRI Could Increase its Military Presence in Indian Ocean. General Joseph Votel, Commander of the US Central Command said at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee during a Congressional hearing that China's access to Pakistan's Gwadar Port has the potential to increase its strategic presence in the Indian Ocean. "China also recently established its first overseas military base adjacent to the *Bab al Mandeb* (BAM) in Djibouti. While Beijing claims both locations support peacekeeping and humanitarian operations, the new military base and port allow China to project forces more permanently within the region and influence strategically valuable trade waterways".

"China seeks to capitalise on regional concerns over what it perceives as waning US influence and support," he said. Toward this end, Beijing is building and strengthening trade, infrastructure, defence, and political relationships across the Middle East, Central and South Asia.

Maldives Pulls out of Milan 2018. Maldives has cited the current state of emergency" in that country as the reason behind declining India's offer to participate in a multilateral exercise naval exercise- **MILAN** in which 16 countries have so far, confirmed their participation. Maldives has intimated that its security personnel are on a heightened stance of readiness, as a result of which its Navy is "unable to participate in the naval exercise".

Vietnam to Discuss South China Sea with India. President Tran Dai Quang of Vietnam is scheduled to visit India from 02-04 Mar 2018. He is likely to discuss South China Sea-related issues, the comprehensive strategic partnership with India and the two countries were likely to sign a civil nuclear agreement during the visit. China's claims over most of the South China Sea is a major issue between the two countries, and Vietnam has been one of the more vocal countries in the 10-member ASEAN grouping calling for a solution to China's expansionist policy in the crucial waters. Incidentally Vietnam has not yet firmed up its position on the One Belt, One Road initiative.

PAKISTAN

Brig Deepak Malhotra

[Pakistan Set to be Placed on FATF's Grey List in June](#). Pakistan may find itself on the blacklist of a global financial watchdog if it does not prepare a comprehensive action plan to eradicate terrorist financing by June. The 37-nation Financial Action Task Force (FATF) held its plenary meeting in Paris last week where it placed Pakistan on a watch list of the countries where terrorist outfits are still allowed to raise funds. Pakistan did make some laws before the Paris meeting that would allow it to act against these groups but apparently that was not enough to convince the FATF.

Comments. Pakistan is drifting towards international isolation mainly due to its policy of using groups designated by the world community as terrorist outfits as instruments of foreign policy. Between now and June, Pakistan will have to work out the details of the evaluation process with the FATF and a failure to do so could trigger another process, which may push Pakistan on the blacklist of willful violators. Pakistan will have to follow the same process that it did in 2015, starting with an action plan that Islamabad is required to submit in May. If the FATF approves the action plan in June, it will make a formal announcement about placing Pakistan on the grey list. Should Islamabad fail to submit an action plan, or if the FATF does not accept it, the group can place Pakistan on its black list, along with North Korea and Iran.

[Nawaz Sharif Removed as PML-N Head after SC Rules Disqualified Person cannot Lead a Party](#). An individual disqualified under Articles 62 and 63 of the Constitution cannot serve as head of a political party, a three-judge Supreme Court (SC) bench headed by Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP) Mian Saqib Nisar ruled sending another seismic wave rippling through Pakistan's electoral system. The apex court's verdict was in response to 17 petitions [challenging the controversial Elections Act](#)

[2017](#), which had been bulldozed through parliament last year to pave the way for Nawaz Sharif's return to the PML-N's helm as party president.

Comments. Sharif had earlier been deemed [unfit to hold public office in the landmark Panama Papers judgement](#), in which a five-member bench of the Supreme Court had unanimously ruled that the former prime minister had not been 'honest' and 'truthful' in discharging his obligations as a lawmaker — both necessary conditions to hold public office in Pakistan under Article 62(1)(f) of the Constitution.

Pak Army Deploying Troops in Saudi Arabia. Taking a major decision, the Pak army announced that it is deploying troops in Saudi Arabia under an existing bilateral security pact on training and advice mission. The ISPR insists that the new deployment and nearly 1,000 Pakistani troops already stationed there would not be “employed outside KSA”. Saudi Arabia has been demanding deployment of Pakistani troops since the start of the Yemen conflict in 2015, but Pakistan has been struggling to evade the demand despite a unanimously adopted parliamentary resolution affirming the country’s “neutrality” in the conflict. There was no word on the size of the deployment, however, ISPR Director General Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor said the deployment would be much lesser than a division.

Comments. Gen Bajwa had earlier this month quietly visited Saudi Arabia, where he stayed for nearly three days. The deployment is being made at a time when Saudi Arabia’s Yemen woes are aggravating. The kingdom’s air campaign against Houthi militias has failed to achieve victory, whereas on the ground local Yemeni allies of Saudi Arabia and the UAE have turned the guns on each other, further complicating the conflict.

NORTHEAST

Brig HS Cheema

Bhutan China Bdy Talks. Bhutan and China will hold the 25th round of their bdy talks in Thimphu next month. The teams will be led by Bhutanese Foreign Minister Lyonpo Damcho Dorji and Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou. The bdy talks were cancelled last year in the wake of the Doklam crisis, when Indian and Chinese tps faced off in the remote Himalayan plateau for 73 days in territory claimed by both Bhutan and China. But the fact remains that despite Doklam, the Chinese are keen to resolve the bdy issue with Bhutan, and will press Thimphu again during their talks. The fact that Indian troops faced off with Chinese troops on Bhutan’s disputed boundary indicates that in the imdt future as well, Delhi and Thimphu will coord their approaches on these matters.

China will Supply Bangladesh 300 Upgraded Tanks. China will supply outdated 300 type 59 tanks to the Bangladesh army. The fact that Bangladesh budget constraints do not allow it to acquire modern equipment for its army. It was therefore decided by Bangladesh to acquire these tanks which were in operation and removed from armament combat vehicles of the Chinese army. As reported on the website of the ministry of defense of Bangladesh in *Face book*, upgrade of the type 59 will receive the designation of Durjoy. 300 tanks are a huge number the question is where does Bangladesh going to employ these combat powers. China is arming India’s neighbours and due note need to be taken.

The Relations between Nepal, China and were Highlighted During a Talk Event Organised in Khatmandu on 26 Feb. Organised by Nepal Economic Forum the event shed light upon China-Nepal-India trilateral relations. The event also shed light on how these two countries have been friends for Nepal since the past and have been helping in the country's development. Talking about mutual relations between Nepal with China, Pramod Jaiswal, senior fellow at the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi and Senior Fellow at the Pangoal Institution Beijing informed how Nepal has been maintaining friendly relations with China and India. Shedding light on Nepal-China relations after Nepal became a Republic and the strategic relations with China, Jaiswal highlighted the country's development and the aid it has been receiving for its development and prosperity. Shedding light on relations between India and China he also talked about how Nepal has to prosper with the help of other countries and also the challenges it faces because of its geographic location between two large countries. The event also dealt with trilateralism and how it could be mutually advantageous to India, China and Nepal and how all these three countries could develop and connect themselves through transportation and make an impact on world economy. The speaker talked about the Nepal-China relations, democratic forces of Nepal and support provided by India to Nepal.

General Bipin Rawat's Remarks about Influx in Assam Local Assam Newspaper Paper Report Certain Interesting Facts. Soon after General Rawat started getting criticized for making 'political' statements, the Indian Army sought to downplay its chief's comments. In his speech at a seminar on 21 Feb, Rawat had said, "There is a party called AIUDF. If you look at it, they have grown in a faster time-frame than the BJP grew over the years." The comment was made in reference to BJP winning only 2 seats in 1984. The AIUDF is moving at a faster pace in Assam, he added. The AIUDF, which was formed in 2005 with an aim to champion the cause of Muslim community, currently has three parliamentarians in Lok Sabha and 13 legislators in the state assembly. Reacting to the army chiefs statement, AIUDF chief Badruddin Ajmal tweeted: Gen Bipin Rawat has made a political statement, shocking! Why is it a concern for the Army Chief that a political party, based on democratic and secular values, is rising faster than the BJP? Alternative parties like the AIUDF, the AAP have grown because of the misgovernance of big parties. Sri Prakash Singh Jaiswal, then minister of state for home had said in 2001 that there were 50 lakh "foreigners" in the state. On the other hand, former chief minister of Assam late Sri Hiteshwar Saikia had stated in the Assam Assembly on 12 April, 1992 that there were no "foreigners in the state". Similarly, there is no unanimity amongst political parties, NGOs and social organisations on who is an illegal migrant. Some political parties demand 1951 as the cutoff year for the detection of Bangladeshis while most have accepted 1971 as the "cut of year". Meanwhile, a social organisation by the name of Assam Sanmilita Mahasangha has filed a case in the Supreme Court on the grounds that the voters' list of 1951 should be taken as the cutoff year to detect foreigners, as in the rest of India. They argue that why Assam should have a separate cutoff date – of 24 March, 1971. In case the apex court decides 1951 as the cutoff year, as in the rest of the country, the whole process of the preparation of National Register of Citizens (NRC) may become null and void. General Rawat's comment comparing the AIUDF's and the BJP's growth were later criticised by AIUDF president Badruddin Ajmal who questioned, "Why is it a concern for the Army Chief that a political party, based on democratic and secular values, is rising faster than BJP?" Rawat's statement may also

draw reactions from China and Pakistan though he has not named the countries. It is a known fact that China till the mid-1980s supported the North East insurgent groups by way of training, shelter and providing arms and equipment. Even today most of the sophisticated arms recovered in the North East are of Chinese origin. Moreover, many insurgent groups have their office in Rulie, a small town located in the Yunnan province of China, bordering Myanmar. Pakistan, of course, would like to continue to bleed India in whatever way it can. Fortunately, present Bangladeshi leadership has been taking concerted steps to root out terrorism from the country. But, Inter-Service Intelligence of Pakistan (ISI) has a strong presence in the region (including Nepal) and will always try to destabilise the North East region. The ISI has all along been supporting NE insurgent groups, fundamentalists and jihadi elements.

Comments. Having gone through this article COAS concern on migration from neighbouring countries gets reiterated and needs focused approach by all organs of state and Chiefs remarks has made adequate attention of the nation on this issue.

ASEAN

Col Shyamji Yadav

China, ASEAN 'Affirm Hope' to Complete Code of Conduct for South China Sea Disputes: Ng Eng Hen. China and ASEAN have "affirmed the hope" to complete the code of conduct to handle disputes in the South China Sea, said Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen on Saturday (Feb 17).

Speaking at the 54th Munich Security Conference roundtable in Germany, Dr Ng stressed that the approach of ASEAN member states to South China Sea issues has been "a pragmatic one".

He highlighted that there have been at least 38 reported small-scale incidents between claimant states' ship in the South China Sea since 2013. Dr Ng noted that many of these incidents involved fishing vessels that were eventually resolved peacefully.

Singapore, as ASEAN Chair for 2018, hopes to develop a set of guidelines for air encounters between regional military aircraft, he added. "We seek to enhance practical cooperation and build confidence through the conduct of multilateral exercises, including the ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise this year," Dr Ng said.

India, Indonesia Joint Military Drill in Bandung. The Indian and Indonesian armies on Monday began the sixth edition of their annual military exercises in the West Java province of the archipelago country.

The opening ceremony of the two-week Garuda Shakti military drill between the Special Forces of the Indian Army and the Indonesian Army was held at Bandung. The exercises include experience sharing in counter-terrorism operations, close quarter combat, and other areas of special operations, an official statement said. Indian Ambassador to Indonesia Pradeep Kumar Rawat attended the opening ceremony along with Indonesian military officers.

[Indonesia Defence Minister General RyamizardRyacudu](#) visited India last month for the Biennial Defence Ministers Dialogue in New Delhi. The two sides renewed their commitment to deepen defence and security exchanges.

Visit by Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang. In a move that could put China on the back foot, strategic partners India and Vietnam are to boost defence ties and sign pacts on civil nuclear cooperation and port development during a visit by Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang from 02 Mar to 04 Mar.

The two countries will also exchange views on developments in the South China Sea where Vietnam and some other South-East Asian nations are locked in a maritime dispute with China, Vietnam's ambassador to India Ton Sinh Thanh told reporters in New Delhi.

The three-day visit comes at a time when India is warily watching China make inroads into its neighbourhood with an increased naval presence as well as a stepped up infrastructure profile in countries like the Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka as part of its multi-billion dollar Belt and Road Initiative. India views South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region as its traditional sphere of influence while China sees the South China Sea as its backyard. In the past, China has objected to India's ONGC Videsh Ltd exploring for oil in blocks off the Vietnamese coast in the South China Sea—claiming it to be in its territorial water of the 26 countries that Vietnam has a strategic partnership with, “the level of the strategic partnership with India is the highest,” Ton Sinh Thanh said, adding that there was “strong political trust” between the two countries as there was a “strong convergence of strategic interests.”

The Vietnamese president's visit would aim to make the partnership more comprehensive with the addition of economic, scientific and cultural elements, he said, adding that one of the agreements expected to be signed was in the area of peaceful uses of civil nuclear energy.

Apart from the civil nuclear pact, which will be signed between the two governments, three other pacts—including one on the development of a port in the Nghe An province in north-central Vietnam —will be signed with Indian companies, Tran Le Tien, economic counsellor in the Vietnamese embassy in New Delhi, said. Indian companies will be looking at “developing the port for operations, to raise its capacity to

5 million tonnes (cargo handling) capacity,” he said. Another pact envisages the setting up a \$50 million coal terminal in Vietnam.

According to the ambassador, the two countries will aim to deepen trade and defence ties during the president’s trip. India had extended a \$500 million line of credit to purchase military equipment during a visit by Modi to Vietnam in 2016. This was in addition to another \$100 million extended in 2014.

Comments. There is a “strong convergence of strategic interests.” The Vietnamese president’s visit would make the partnership more comprehensive with the addition of economic, scientific and cultural elements. The joint exercise between Indian and Indonesian Special Forces highlights the increasing trust and cooperation between the two armies.”

WEST ASIA

Col Sumit Rana

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.

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."

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

Russian losses in Syria cause problems for Kremlin. At night between 7 and 8 February, US forces carried out airstrikes on columns of pro-Assad troops, including a group of Russian soldiers from the so-called private military company Wagner Group, near Deirez-Zor. This was their response to Russian attempts to seize control of a local base of the Syrian Democratic Forces (an armed Syrian opposition group, mainly consisting of Kurds, backed by the USA) and probably to take possession of a local oil and gas production field. It is believed that dozens of Russians were killed at the spot during the US airstrikes, which makes it the most serious Russian-US incident of this type since the 1970s.

The main element of Russia's military engagement in Syria are air and missile attacks (at the peak around 80 Russian aircraft and helicopters were deployed in Syria and periodically in Iran, and missile attacks were launched from ships operating in the Caspian and Mediterranean Seas). They have had a great impact on the character and the course of the conflict, reversing the military situation for the benefit of Assad. The core Russian land troops present in Syria is the grouping of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation consisting of at least 4,000 soldiers, while in the peak period up to 10,000 soldiers and marines were engaged simultaneously. By the end of 2017, over 48,000 Russian soldiers had taken part in the operation since it began on 30 September 2015. Another very important role has also been played by Russian advisors who have staged and implemented at least part of the Syrian army's offensives and soldiers from secret services (Spetsnaz and reconnaissance brigades of the Ground Troops).

Given the engagement of regular forces, mercenaries from the so-called private military company (Russian abbreviation ChVK) Wagner Group have only been an addition to Russia's military presence in Syria. Around 2,500 ChVK personnel serve in the Syrian army and other pro-Assad military groupings. According to various calculations, between 73 and 101 ChVK personnel were killed in Syria until the end of 2017. It has been claimed on the Internet that the death toll among Russian mercenaries was higher, around 150–200, but this information is impossible to verify. According to strongly contradictory reports, over 300 Russians were killed at the beginning of February near Deirez-Zor, which gives a picture of the clash as a massacre of the Russian forces. The Russian government, being aware of this problem, has been making efforts to downplay and even ignore this incident. The Russian Ministry of Defence has not commented the incident and only confirmed that there were clashes in this area in which Syrians were injured and no Russian forces were present there. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs kept repeating the Kremlin's stance but, faced with the facts revealed by journalists, admitted on 15 February that five Russian citizens might have been killed in Syria. Some Russian media published unofficial information reportedly originating from the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation that the death toll reached 13 or 14.

The Kremlin has in fact applied an information blockade with regard to the Deirez-Zor bombardment. There has been no information about it in the mainstream TV channels, and news agencies have repeated only sparse statements from government representatives. However, news concerning these developments began to spread via alternative channels: in social media and then in Russian media independent of the

Kremlin. They made references both to reports in Western media and – to an increasing extent – their own information originating, for example, from soldiers from the Wagner Group, the families and friends of those killed, and doctors. The information blockade has thus lost its impermeability.

Comments. The Russian government views this incident as a political problem in two aspects – the domestic and international – because it undermines the image of Russia as a winner in the conflict in Syria which is currently establishing peace there while withdrawing its armed forces. This also creates the risk of the potential escalation of the Russian-US conflict which the Russian side has been recently trying to soften. This is the reason why Moscow has thus far been trying very hard to pass over this incident in silence or downplay it despite criticism from a section of public opinion. Further in its response, the Kremlin is likely to employ a restrained tactic, hoping to ‘wait out the problem’ and avoid escalating it.

The deaths of the Russian mercenaries near Deirez-Zor have undermined the key theses of the official Russian propaganda concerning Syria. Firstly, this has challenged the thesis that the wars in Syria and Russia’s participation in it are basically over and have ended in a Russian victory. It has also challenged the idea that Russian losses in this war are small and are likely to be lessening (due to the alleged ‘withdrawal’ of a significant part of the Russian armed forces from Syria). Thirdly, that Russia has political and military dominance in Syria which ensures, for example, that the USA is trying not to antagonise Russia politically and coordinate its military activity with Russian forces.

However, the main political problem for the Kremlin is above all the growing dissatisfaction among a section of the public with the stance adopted by the Russian government in this situation. Comments on Russian social media and the standpoint taken by some of the media suggest that sections of the Russian public are outraged by what has happened. Firstly, this outrage is directed against the USA, especially among those who are more inclined towards nationalism; they insist that the Russian government should take action against the USA at least politically if not militarily. Secondly – and this is more widespread – this outrage is directed against the Russian government which is being blamed for concealing the truth, downplaying the tragic events, failing to honour those killed and, especially, for squandering the lives of Russian citizens by sending them on secret military operations abroad without proper security measures being applied. The latter in particular is a potential political problem in the context of the upcoming presidential election scheduled for 18 March; and the Kremlin needs a high turnout and high support for Vladimir Putin during this election, especially given the fact that this issue has already been raised in the Russian election campaign.

The bombardment near Deirez-Zor can be treated by both a section of the public and government of Russia as an intentional military attack from the USA on Russia which should meet with retaliatory action; this is a problem for the Kremlin in the foreign policy context. This problem is only slightly mollified by the fact that formally the Wagner Group is a private initiative (operating openly, even though serving as a mercenary is a crime under Russian law), and its moves allegedly are not coordinated with the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. On the other hand, it is a well-known fact that the company’s leaders are linked to Russian military intelligence (GRU), that it has received technical, logistic and training support from the Russian secret services and that soldiers from the Wagner Group have been used for special

operations in Ukraine in Syria. All this makes it an informal part of the Russian law enforcement structures.

The incident took place in a situation where the Russian government – guided on the one hand by some hope of normalising relations with the USA to a limited extent, and on the other by the fear of new US sanctions – has been trying very hard to avoid political or military confrontation with the USA. The Kremlin is aware of the fact that Russia would find it very difficult to win a confrontation of that kind, and its potential political and especially economic costs would be very high. This does not mean that the Kremlin has not become more determined to deal a blow against US interests in Syria.

The clashes near Deirez-Zor have weakened the Russian position in the Syrian conflict. The Russian side has been making consistent efforts to build its image as a power which can impose its will in the military and the political dimension. The humiliating losses sustained by Russian mercenaries due to the attack by US forces will undermine the reliability of Russia as a deciding arbiter in the conflict in the eyes of the participants of the conflict.

The issue will likely boil down to attempting to ‘wait out the problem’. This may, but does not have to, involve admitting to a very limited extent that losses have been sustained, possibly expressing the government’s solidarity with the families of those killed and paying significant compensation to them, as well as distancing the Russian government and Armed Forces from sharing the responsibility for the death toll, while suggesting – not too ostentatiously – that it is the US side which is to blame for the deaths. It cannot be ruled out that Russia will respond to the USA with delay and asymmetrically (for example, the Russian secret services might launch a secret operation against the US or its forces in a manner that will be difficult to prove).

Russia Tests New Stealth Fighter Jet in Syria. Russia has deployed its new Sukhoi Su-57 stealth fighter jet to Syria to test it in real-life conditions and show off the country's air power. Intended as the Russian answer to the US military's Lockheed Martin F-22 Raptor, this fifth-generation stealth fighter is designed to overwhelm both air and ground targets while eluding radar. Intended as the successor to Russia's workhorse Su-27 Flanker, the single-seat Su-57 features twin engines with thrust-vector nozzles for tighter turning and has an expected range of 3,500km and maximum speed of Mach 2. It has been in development since 2001 and in flight tests since 2010, but will enter production in 2019. A Twitter account that monitors the Syrian conflict posted a video and photos last week of what appeared to be two pairs of Su-57s landing at Russia's Khmeimim airbase in Syria.

Comments. Although Russia's air contingent has been intensively bombing eastern Ghouta over the past week in support of Bashar Assad's campaign against the rebel stronghold, the Su-57s in Syria will not be deployed in actual fighting. Instead, they were being tested in near-combat conditions, with military brass evaluating their radar and electronic warfare systems. A main objective of the Su-57s would be to test their radar systems on real targets in the skies above Syria, including the US military's F-22 and the Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II, which is in deployment by Israel.

Western militaries are sure to take note of the new stealth fighter's debut, as only the United States and China can currently produce fifth-generation aircraft.

AIR DEFENCE

Gp Capt G D Sharma, VSM (Retd)

Missile Defence System. On 19 Feb 17, Israel Missile Defense Agency in coordination with Israeli Air Force successfully tested the Arrow 3 weapons system that is designed to defend against ballistic missiles outside of the atmosphere. The system has already part of the Israeli multilayered defence array which is based on four layers; Iron Dome and David's Sling, and the Arrow 2 and Arrow 3 systems. With this Israel has a most credible defence system against all types of threats with ability to defend itself against current and future threats in the region.

Missile Defence System in India is still at the development stage. Due to impending delay in indigenous systems, the import of S400 from Russia has often been debated. Mind you India too needs defence in all domains i.e. from short range to long range against the missile strategic threats.

India has also tested several times its two-layered ballistic missile defense (BMD) system which is designed to shoot down incoming enemy missiles in the endo/exo-atmosphere at altitudes of 20-40 kilometers and above up to 80 km respectively. AAD missiles are meant for terminal phase by intercepting missiles after they re-enter the earth's atmosphere whereas, the PAD is designed for mid-course interception.

Currently, Israel, Russia and the United States are the only three countries to have successfully developed and built an indigenous ballistic missile defense system. We need to operationalize our own system and also develop systems to take on the low level drone and missile threats in the Tactical battle area.