

ENVIRONMENT SCAN – 21 DEC 2015

CHINA, UNITED STATES, RUSSIA, JAPAN, AFGHANISTAN, IRAN, AFRICA, ASEAN, MIDDLE EAST, IRAQ, SYRIA, YEMEN, BANGLADESH, NUCLEAR

China Accuses US of B-52 'Provocation' over Spratly Islands: China has accused the US of "serious provocation" after it flew B-52 bombers near one of the disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. Chinese military personnel were put on "high alert" during the incident on 10 December, and issued warnings to leave. The Pentagon said it was looking into the complaint.

China claims large swathes of the South China Sea but is in territorial dispute with a host of regional neighbours.

In October, China rebuked the US after a destroyer sailed close to a reef. A report said there were two B-52s on the mission and that one unintentionally flew within two nautical miles of Cuarteron Reef on the Spratly Islands, possibly due to bad weather.

China said the flights "constitute a serious military provocation and are rendering more complex and even militarising conditions in the South China Sea". It urged the US to take measures to prevent similar incidents.

The US has not taken sides on sovereignty issues in the area but has a "freedom of navigation" policy asserting right of passage for its military. However, Pentagon spokesman Cmdr Bill Urban said the B-52 over-flight was not part of this policy, which analysts say might suggest a navigation error.

The South China Sea region continues to cause tension in US-China relations. B-52s flew close to the Spratly Islands in November. The US said this mission was "fully in accordance with international law". Further, the US guided missile destroyer USS Lassen sailed within 12 nautical miles of Subi Reef in late October, which the Chinese branded "extremely irresponsible."

The recent decision by the US to approve a new arms package to Taiwan has also angered China.

China Protests after Washington Announces Arms Sale to Taiwan: Vice-Foreign Minister of China, Zheng Zeguang made "solemn representations" with Kaye Lee, the US charge d'affaires regarding the decision to sell US arms to Taiwan, China's foreign ministry said. The arms deal,

worth \$1.83bn (£1.22bn), comes as tensions rise over China's island-building in the South China Sea.

Taiwan expressed gratitude to Washington for helping with its defence needs.

China views Taiwan as a breakaway province which will one day be reunited with the mainland, though relations have warmed in recent weeks. Leaders from both countries met last month for the first time since the end of the civil war in 1949. China maintains a right to use force if Taiwan attempts to gain independence.

The Chinese statement said Mr Zheng had told Ms Lee at the Wednesday meeting that Taiwan "is an inalienable part of China's territory" and that it "strongly opposes the US arms sale". It added that the deal had "severely damaged China's sovereignty and security interest", and pledged to sanction the US firms involved in it.

The US said the deal, the first in four years, was consistent with its "long-standing policy on arms sales to Taiwan". Relations between the US and China are frayed over China's construction of artificial islands in the disputed South China Sea.

Two decommissioned US Navy frigates, anti-tank missiles, amphibious assault vehicles, as well as surface-to-air missiles and other equipment are all included in the deal.

It will be approved in 30 days, unless Congress objects. That is thought unlikely, as there has been growing concern in the US about Taiwan's ability to defend itself from China's military might.

State department spokesman John Kirby said the sale was consistent with the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, which requires the US to provide Taiwan with sufficient weaponry to defend itself, even though the US does not recognise Taiwan as a state independent of China.

The move did not need to have a negative effect on US-Chinese relations, he said, adding: "We still want to work to establish a better, more transparent, more effective relationship with China in the region."

BJP General Secretary Ram Madhav and Chinese Ambassador Le Yucheng Share Opposing

Views on South China Sea: BJP General Secretary Ram Madhav and Chinese ambassador Le Yucheng shared opposing views on the contentious issue of South China Sea recently.

At the Deccan Herald's Dialogue on 'The Asia Pacific Country: India and Big Power Engagement' in New Delhi, Le said: "Countries who are from outside or have nothing to do with the region should not meddle into these issues. This will make it worse.

Madhav countered and said the Indian Ocean did not belong only to India, but was shared by other countries of the world and similar is the case with the South China Sea.

"The way China has propelled the global economy in this century, it should also propel peace in the region," he said.

China claims most of the South China Sea as its own, a position strongly contested by countries like Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Japan and Taiwan.

Madhav, who is involved in several crucial policy formations of the NDA government, said instead of Asia-Pacific, the region should be addressed as Indo-Pacific.

Le differed: "It is wrong to call it South China Sea dispute. There has never been a problem of freedom of navigation. Most of the world trade happens through the South China Sea."

Terming India-China ties as "strong, but difficult", Madhav said the leaderships had been working to improve it.

China Internet: Xi Jinping Calls for 'Cyber Sovereignty': China's President Xi Jinping has called on countries to respect one another's "cyber sovereignty" and different internet governance models. Mr Xi said countries had the right to choose how to develop and regulate their internet.

He was speaking at the Beijing-sponsored World Internet Conference held in Zhejiang province.

China has been criticised for its strict internet regulations where it blocks major sites and censors posts. The keynote speech by President Xi is a clear sign that internet security and control have been elevated to national priorities.

His message is that China, with 650 million internet users, should have a say in drawing up the global rules and that they should include the right to decide what to censor and block, our correspondent adds.

The idealistic internet pioneers - most of them American - saw the internet as a global community without borders, a space for free exchange of ideas untrammelled by national laws.

But whether it is China determined to shore up its Great Firewall, the US wanting to curb communications between terror groups, or indeed Europe debating at what age children should be allowed online, local politicians are asserting their right to bend the internet to their will.

The event, which is in its second year, is being attended by leaders from Russia, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and representatives from technology groups.

China has clashed with the US over hacking allegations, with both sides accusing each other of infiltrating networks to steal commercial and government information.

President Xi advocated a global governance system to "curb the abuse of information technology, oppose network surveillance and hacking, and fight against a cyberspace arms race".

"There should be no unilateralism," the Chinese leader added. "Decisions should not be made with one party calling the shots or only a few parties discussing among themselves."

UNITED STATES

Gp Capt GD Sharma, VSM (Retd)

Former Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel in a recent interview was critical of Obama as some of his decisions Hagel believe, have dealt a severe blow to the credibility of both Obama and the United States. He opined that, President Obama violated his own redline on U.S. intervention in Syria consequent to use of the chemical weapons by Syrian forces. Assad did eventually use the Chemical weapons but, Obama ignored the red lines and decided against intervention in Syria. He also alleged that white house does not have any coherent and clear policy on Syria and Ukraine. The President has faced similar criticism from former defense secretaries namely, Robert Gates and Leon Panetta.

It is however, of common knowledge that America because of a low in the economy had introduced budget cuts. With the budget crunch in defense, it was prudent to pursue security

options without direct intervention unless American interests are affected. It was thus fair for President Obama to pursue a policy of non-intervention and look for options other than use of military. Therefore, instead of militarily intervening in Syria after confirmed chemical attacks by the Syrian forces, Obama decided against direct military intervention and instead handled it at diplomatic level by seeking collaboration of Russia in getting Syrian purge their chemical weapons. Similarly, in Syria, America has avoided boots on ground and is essentially relying on U.S. led air power and the training of local forces while pushing for a diplomatic bid to end the civil war in Syria. This is wise considering that past experience in Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan shows that these are long drawn battle and should be best fought at local level with support wherever air support/ training and advise is necessary . One could hear similar criticism from other politicians as leveled by Chuck Hagel but, these are generally motivated by growing election environment as Obama tenure comes to end. But it is not lost on anybody that President Obama made the right choices in Ukraine, Iraq and Syria.

RUSSIA

Col Anadi Dhaundiyal

Russia - Syria. Russia had been repeatedly voicing its support to the Syrian president, but since Western powers, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have agreed that Assad can stay in power during the transition period, Kremlin has changed its mind, as per a Western diplomat who also added that Russians are not prepared to say that publicly:-

(a) US Secy of State John Kerry told the Russian TV that US is not after regime change in Syria, but Assad must go'

(b) As per a Russian military commander, Europe and Turkey have closed airspace for Russian Long-Range Aviation planes carrying out airstrikes on Daesh positions in Syria, forcing Russian pilots to reroute. According to Gen Konovalov, Russian pilots had to leave for Syria from Russia's northernmost Olenegorsk military airport in order to bypass Europe and then cross the Mediterranean Sea toward Syria.

Comments. The likely aspects of the report are:-

(a) Rift within the Russian Alliance. The supposed leaks could be aimed at dividing the Pro Assad Shia alliance.

(b) End State. The Russian authorities could aim at installation of a pro Assad power, as a compromise for termination of Western interference in Syria.

(c) Western end. Western countries and CIA in particular, who has invested so heavily in Syria will not stop till a pro west ruler is installed at the helm in Syria.

(d) West is keen to blunt the edge of Russian bombing in Syria.

Sanctions on Russia. The European Union has agreed to prolong the anti-Russian sanctions, but the decision will be officially announced later, the Interfax news agency reported Friday, citing Elmar Brok, head of the European Parliament's foreign affairs committee. "In Brussels, the formal decision, which has already be made by the members of the EU but not yet announced, will be taken. This is the decision to extend the sanctions and it is connected with the implementation of the Minsk agreements," Brok was quoted by Interfax as saying during a meeting of the European Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee. Last week, Italy blocked the automatic prolongation of anti-Russian sanctions and called for further discussion of the issue.

Comments. Adequate pressure will be borne by US to prolong the EU ban.

Black Box of Downed Su-24 Damaged. Three of the eight microchips have clearly been damaged since the black box was stored in the jet's rear part, where the Turkish rocket hit. All memory blocks from the black box will be sent to the laboratory for fluoroscopy studies to check if they have been damaged too. Experts from China and India were present when the box was opened. Ministry official Sergey Dronov told Interfax that experts from 14 countries had been invited, but most of them refused to participate. Experts from China, United States and Britain will observe the black box data decryption process, Dronov said, RIA Novosti reported.

Comments. India is keen to show solidarity with Russia.

Smuggled ISIS oil goes to Turkey It is reported that Norwegian Foreign Ministry commissioned an independent oil and gas consulting firm called Rystad Energy to report the ISIS oil. Its newly-leaked report on illegal oil sales by Islamic State revealed that most of the IS-smuggled oil is sent by tankers via smuggling routes across the border destined for Turkey, where it is sold off at prices from \$25 to \$45 a barrel."

(a) This comes as the UNSC has passed a resolution on IS like groups.

(b) To compile the report, which is dated from July, Rystad Energy used its own database as well as sources in the region.

(c) “Exports happen in a well-established black market via Turkey,” the report concluded. “Many of the smugglers and corrupt border guards, who helped Saddam Hussein avoid international sanctions, are now helping IS export oil and import cash.”

Comments. Its an open secret by allegations cannot be proved so such reports do not affect any international situation on ground.

Modi- Putin Summit Meet. Modi embarks on a 2 day visit to Russia 23-24 Dec 15 as part of a yearly summit meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

(a) Kada. In a move to scale up cooperation in the nuclear energy sector, India and Russia are likely to sign an agreement on Kudankulam units 5 and 6 during Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Russia from Wednesday. Unit 5 and 6 of VVER technology are expected to be of the same MW like units 1-4. Dy CEO of Rosatom had paid a visit to India on December 7-8, during which he is believed to have held negotiations with Sekhar Basu, Secretary DAE regarding the possible inking of a pact of unit 5 and 6 of the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant (KKNPP) during Mr. Modi’s stay.

(b) Five S-400 systems worth over Rs 25,000 crore are sought by India. The S-400 Triumf can intercept and destroy airborne hypersonic targets like incoming hostile aircraft, ballistic missiles and also drones at a distance of up to 400 kilometers and simultaneously engage up to six targets.

(c) FGCA T-50. Flight-testing will help decide the way forward on the collaboration between the two countries on the FGFA. All options, ranging from an off-the-shelf purchase of 60-65 jets to joint production, are on the table. India had earlier also slashed its requirement from the original 166 single-seat and 48 twin-seat fighters to just 127 single-seat jets.

Five prototypes of the PAK FA are flying using engines of the first stage; the AL-41F1. These are capable of developing a thrust of 86.3 kN, and 147 kN in the afterburner mode, but this does not meet the requirements of a fifth generation fighter, or the thrust-weight ratio, or fuel consumption requirements. New engine for FGCA may be developed by 2018. PAK FA is a heavy fighter jet, with a special aerodynamic configuration of the airframe. The skin consists of 70% composite materials, and its weapons are stored inside the

fuselage in order to reduce radar visibility. Byelka Radar, equipped with active electronically scanned array (AESA), allows simultaneous tracking of 4 surface and 30 air targets, and firing on 8 of them.

Comments.

(a) It has been kept as low key on the media, keeping the western sensibilities in mind.

(b) Russia may link Indian purchase of S 400s with the final signing of the co-development of FGCA. Moscow wants greater clarity on whether the India would proceed with joint FGFA development or just buy the aircraft. India will release its share of \$10 billion toward development only after final agreement is approved.

(c) The Su-35s that are now entering active service in the military – are already almost fifth generation fighters, and these can be used for a long time. There is no strong opponent in existence. Even the Americans have also significantly reduced their purchases of Raptors (F-22s) – which are quite expensive.

Indian stake in Russian Oil. Modi government has approved the acquisition of a 15% stake in the Vankor field by the ONGC. The deal will be finalized by April 2016, and is estimated to be worth around \$1.26 billion. Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) also plans to buy up to 10% of Vankorneft. Two other Indian oil companies are also looking at buying a stake in the Vankor Field. This is in keeping with new Russian intentions to open the Russian market to foreign oil traders in 2016. The decision to attract foreign participants to the local market is likely to initiate the launch of Russian benchmark in trading of oil export contracts. The St. Petersburg International Mercantile Exchange together with Energy Ministry, Central Bank, Finance Ministry and oil companies have been involved in creating a new Russian oil benchmark for almost 2 years.

Comments.

(a) The benchmark will provide the budget and Russian oil companies with extra revenues of \$0.5-1 a barrel.

(b) It gives the leverage to switch from the current dollar trade to euro/ ruble/ yuan at a later date.

JAPAN

Col Anadi Dhaundiyal

Abe Visit 11 – 13 Dec 15.

(a) Visit was to sustain the momentum already built up. Japan was the first country foreign visit by Modi visited outside the subcontinent taking the relations to a “Special Strategic and Global Partnership.”

(b) Signing of the deal for Japan to supply its Shinkansen (bullet train) technology to India, beginning with the Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet train corridor.

(c) Abe’s desire to sell the \$1.3 billion, 12 Japanese-made US-2 maritime reconnaissance aircraft, incl tech transfer, marking a first for Japan, which has traditionally been reticent to export Japanese-made military hardware. India had earlier also asked Japan if it was interested in fielding its Soryuclass submarines for the over Rs 60,000 crore project to build six stealth submarines in India.

(d) Security. Broader convergences between India, Japan, US and Australia by participating in the India-U.S. Malabar naval exercises.

(e) Japan is setting up its specialized intelligence gathering unit to collect information on terrorist activities in India. This is the fourth centre after Jordan, Egypt, and Indonesia. Two defence agreements signed were for the transfer of defence equipment and technology, and the other one on protection of classified information.

(f) The memorandum on civil nuclear energy cooperation. The formal signing of the agreement has been put off citing the need to finalise technical details so as to allow Japan to even partner other countries, particularly both Westinghouse and GE had Japanese partners in their nuclear reactor offers.

AFGHANISTAN

Capt Ranjit Seth

US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter visited Afghanistan Friday for meetings with military commanders, amidst a deteriorating security situation with a surge in Taliban attacks, and the creeping emergence of the Islamic State group. During an event with soldiers at a US base near

Jalalabad city in the eastern province of Nangarhar, Secretary Carter warned of the Taliban's continued threat to security in the country. The volatile province of Nangarhar also faces an emerging threat from loyalists of the Islamic State group (IS), which is making gradual inroads in Afghanistan, challenging the Taliban.

Afghanistan wins approval to join WTO. Afghanistan has won formal approval to join the World Trade Organisation in a move the Afghan government hopes will help lift its war-shattered economy and create jobs in one of the world's poorest countries. Afghanistan has until June 30 to ratify the agreement, the final step before becoming a full member of the Organisation that underpins the global system of international trade.

IRAN

Capt Ranjit Seth

Iran on Visa Restrictions. The U.S. has legislated for clamp visa restrictions on people who have traveled to Iran. Iranian officials have publicly complained the new U.S. rules will unfairly target travelers who visit Iran and could dampen investment interest in their country.

Secretary of State John Kerry wrote to his Iranian counterpart on Saturday to assure him the visa changes approved by Congress last week won't undermine business opportunities in Iran or violate the terms of the nuclear agreement between global powers and Tehran in July.

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif said in New York on Friday that the visa regulations could serve as a de facto new sanction on Iran, in violation of the nuclear deal. He also said Tehran could declare the visa rules a breach of that agreement.

Iran To Ship Enriched Uranium. Iran will export most of its enriched uranium stockpile to Russia in the coming days as it implements a nuclear deal to secure relief from international sanctions. Around nine tons of Iran's enriched uranium will be exported to Russia. That is roughly the amount that Iran must export to bring its stockpile down to the required level under the sanctions-relief deal. Under the terms of the nuclear deal it reached in July, Iran must reduce its stockpile of enriched uranium to around 300 kilograms. It also needs to deactivate and store most of its centrifuges, and remove the core of a heavy water reactor in Arak.

Iran applied for WTO membership in July 1996, but progress has been minimal due to tensions over the nuclear crisis. Iran is now preparing to begin negotiations for membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO).

AFRICA

Brig Jai Singh Yadav, VSM

Nigerian military attacks Shia group over blocked road, killing some

The Nigerian military launched an attack on a Shia Muslim group in one of the country's northern cities over the weekend, killing numerous people after a military convoy got stuck by a march. The trouble began Saturday, when thousands of members of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria, a pro-Iranian Shia group, held a march in Zaria, in Kaduna State, to mark the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed.

The Nigerian Chief of Army Staff, Lt. Gen. Tukur Yusuf Buratai, and his convoy wound up trapped in the gridlock. According to some accounts, a metal object was thrown at the general's vehicle by someone in the crowd. Soldiers mistook the sound for gunshots and apparently thought it was part of an attempt to assassinate the general. At any rate, soldiers in the convoy opened fire, killing a number of people. Members of the sect put the number at more than 100.

After receiving reports that members of the Islamic group were "mobilizing" following the shootings at the march, troops targeted the group's shrines and enclaves, according to Maj. Gen. Adeniyi Oyebo. Troops reportedly firebombed the Husseiniyya, the group's religious center, and destroyed another religious center on the outskirts of the city. In the evening, the troops, backed by tanks, moved to the area where the group's leader, Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky, lives. Hundreds of Zakzaky's followers went to the house to try to prevent his arrest. A night-long battle ensued, in which more people were killed. The home was firebombed and demolished.

Libya militia chases away US troops

US forces flown to Libya to support government troops had to leave after landing because of demands from a local militia group on 14 Dec. 20 US special forces troops, equipped with advanced weaponry, landed at an airbase in western Libya.

The troops chose to leave "in an effort to avoid conflict".

It was undoubtedly an embarrassing revelation for the Americans.

The timing of the incident, so close to the long-awaited deal signed by Libya's rival parliaments few days back, has fuelled speculation among Libyans over what they see as the ulterior motives of the US and other Western nations. There has been increasing suspicion that foreign troops are looking to establish their presence on the ground in Libya, especially with the so-called Islamic State grabbing more territory in recent months.

Reactions on social media ranged from accusations that the US was promoting one side of the conflict, to questions over the West's long-term military aims in Libya.

Western nations have repeatedly spoken of their intent to support Libyan armed forces to help secure the country and combat extremism.

However, if nothing else, the incident chiefly serves as a reminder of the challenges foreign military forces will face trying to operate in a country with no central security structure.

ASEAN

Brig Jai Singh Yadav, VSM

Secretary-General of ASEAN Visits India

India expressed its strong commitment to further deepen its strategic partnership with ASEAN and to continue supporting ASEAN's integration as the regional grouping becomes a Community from 31 December 2015. Minister of External Affairs of India, Hon. Srimati Sushma Swaraj, conveyed this to Secretary-General of ASEAN H.E. Le Luong Minh during a bilateral meeting in New Delhi. Secretary-General Minh was on an official visit to India on 10 to 13 December at the invitation of Minister Swaraj.

Minister Swaraj said that India would continue to add substance to ASEAN-India relations and take forward initiatives that were agreed at the recent 13th ASEAN-India Summit. She particularly highlighted connectivity, maritime cooperation, cyber security and innovation as potential areas for enhanced collaboration.

Secretary-General Minh thanked India for its commitment to further strengthen ASEAN-India partnership and continued support for ASEAN Community building and integration. He encouraged India to align the implementation of the newly adopted ASEAN-India Plan of Action (2016-2020) to that of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 which sets the course for ASEAN's progress and evolution over the next 10 years. Secretary-General Minh added that ASEAN and India should work closely to forge stronger partnership in connectivity. He called on both sides to explore innovative ways to mobilise resources including through public-private partnership to fund connectivity projects. He also encouraged India to work with ASEAN to finalise the Memorandum of Understanding on the Establishment of the ASEAN-India Centre (AIC) as soon as possible so that the Centre could play its role to further promote the partnership.

Minister Swaraj reassured Secretary-General Minh that India would demonstrate in all its actions its strong support for ASEAN centrality. Secretary-General Minh encouraged India to play an active role in promoting peace and security through ASEAN-led regional mechanisms. They also exchanged views on regional and global issues.

During the visit, Secretary-General Minh also had meetings with business leaders from the Confederation of Indian Industry and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry to discuss ways to further enhance trade and investment between ASEAN and India as well as to deepen private sector engagement.

ASEAN, Norway to Enhance Partnership through Closer Cooperation

ASEAN and Norway would forge substantial partnership cooperation for maximum benefits to both sides." This was stressed by H.E. Morten Høglund, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway in his keynote address at the First ASEAN-Norway Joint Sectoral Cooperation Committee (AN-JSCC) held at the ASEAN Secretariat on 11 December.

Norway was conferred Sectoral Dialogue Partner status by the ASEAN Foreign Ministers at their meeting in August 2015 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The establishment of this formal partnership paves the way for closer ASEAN-Norway cooperation including mutually agreed projects and programmes that will benefit ASEAN Member States.

The AN-JSCC is the cooperation mechanism to consider and approve projects and programmes within the framework of this partnership. The Inaugural AN-JSCC, beyond adopting its term of reference, also discussed modalities and processes to carry the partnership forward as well as priority cooperation areas. The meeting agreed that this partnership will be guided and work

within the framework of the Joint Statement on ASEAN-Norway Partnership adopted in August 2014 in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, and the recently adopted ASEAN Community vision 2025: Forging Ahead Together.

MIDDLE EAST

Brig Ranjit Singh

IRAQ

Iraqi Forces Liberate Aramil, South of Ramadi from ISIS. The Iraqi joint forces liberated Aramil 6 Km south of Ramadi, killing 22 ISIS elements.

50 ISIS Elements Killed in Military operations. Media War Cell reported liberation of areas South of city of Fallujah, killing 50 ISIS elements. These were part of operations to liberate Fallujah.

Peshmerga Forces Liberate Khazar Axis from ISIS. Peshmerga forces have liberated Khazar Axis, 40 Km East of Mosul from ISIS, killing 42 ISIS elements.

ISIS Claim Attack on Ba'ashiqa Camp Near Mosul. ISIS claimed attack on Ba'ashiqa Camp where Turkish soldiers were stationed. Kurdish security forces claimed the attack had been foiled in 70 ISIS elements were killed.

61 ISIS Elements Killed NW of Kirkuk. Peshmerga forces announced violent clashes NW of Kirkuk, killing 61 ISIS elements.

66 Suspects arrested in Kirkuk. The security forces arrested 66 suspects in routine raid & search operations in Kirkuk, while 53 refugees were arrested, without valid documents.

ISIS kidnaps Qatari hunters. ISIS kidnapped 26 Qatari hunters in Samawah City, 250 Km South of Baghdad, in Muthanna Province. It is believed that 9 of the abducted hunters have been released.

Italy plans to send 450 soldiers to protect Mosul Dam. It is reported that Italy is planning to send 450 soldiers to protect the Mosul Dam, the largest in Iraq, which has been damaged in clashes. An Italian company has won the bid to repair the dam.

Comments. A major offensive has been launched to liberate Fallujah, however, the operations are expected to progress slowly.

Kurdish forces have been gaining limited success in North Iraq in the areas of Kirkuk, however, the Kurdish forces have been appealing for help to fight against ISIS.

A large scale incursion of Turkish forces has taken place into Iraq, in the areas North of Mosul in the garb of reinforcing their elements training Kurdish forces. The Turkish action has led to protests in Iraq & raised international furore, US president has asked Turkey to withdraw immediately.

SYRIA

UN Security Council Agrees to Syria Peace Plan. UN Security Council has unanimously agreed on the text of a draft resolution for peace plan talks in Jan 16 & a cease fire aimed at ending the war in Syria. There was lot of resistance from Russia but Western diplomats had their way. The resolution aims to install a transition Govt within first six months, paving way for election within next 18 months. The agreement excludes ISIS & Nusra Front. The text does not include mention of Assad's fate or which opposition groups will be included in the peace talks. US President has insisted that Assad should step down in the interest of the country.

Comments. Russia & Iran are being supposedly sidelined in the peace process, raising questions on the likely success of peace plan.

The peace plan has no mention of President Assad; a transition Govt without Assad in the present situation in Syria may not be practical.

The plan proposes elections in next two years imply defeating ISIS prior to elections, which appears to be unlikely.

YEMEN

Yemen Cease Fire. A UN sponsored cease fire came into effect in Yemen for one week from 15 to 22 Dec 15, in view of peace talks in Switzerland. The talks are aimed at finding lasting solution to Yemen crisis.

Al Houthis Walk out of Talks. Yemeni peace talks in Switzerland were halted on 18 Dec after Houthi rebels delegation suspended all meetings to protest cease fire violation by Govt forces. Yemeni Govt denied the charge & accused Houthis of making excuses to delay peace process.

Yemen Rivals Agree to Swap Prisoners. Warring parties agreed on exchange of prisoners as part of confidence building measures. Al Houthi 370 rebels were exchanged for 285 civilians & Govt fighters.

Comments. UN sponsored peace process has failed on two previous occasions & unlikely to succeed this time as well. The two warring parties have no faith and violate cease fire to take advantage of the situation. Houthis may not be keen to get involved in the peace process as they would have to lay down arms & vacate areas under their control.

BANGLADESH

Col Saikat Roy

Bangladesh Upgrades Diplomatic Mission in Agartala. Bangladesh has diplomatic missions in New Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai. It recently upgraded its diplomatic mission in Agartala to an Assistant High Commission and posted Sakhawat Hussain as the first assistant high commissioner to further boost bilateral relations.

Bangladesh Foreign Minister Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali said that the step is aimed at boosting bilateral trade & economy and people-to-people contacts.

Increasing in diplomatic and consular presence in north-east India would promote multi-sectoral engagements with India to achieve greater economic integration between Bangladesh and India's north-east for mutual benefit. It would also facilitate north-east's socio-economic development and better connectivity with the rest of India.

New Delhi has Assistant High Commissions in Khulna and Sylhet in Bangladesh.

India and Bangladesh earlier decided to upgrade the existing 27 custom stations in Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya and Mizoram.

Bangladesh Lifts Month-long Ban on Social Media. Bangladesh on Monday lifted a ban on social media imposed in anticipation of protests after the Supreme Court upheld death penalties for two opposition leaders.

The ban was imposed on Nov. 18. Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed and Salauddin Quader Chowdhury were hanged four days later on charges related to atrocities committed during Bangladesh's 1971 war of independence.

A special tribunal sentenced Mujaheed to death on July 17, 2013, for the murder of intellectuals and his involvement in the killing and torture of Hindus in 1971. Mujaheed, the second most senior member of Jamaat-e-Islami, was found to be a key mastermind of the massacre of the country's top intelligentsia just ahead of the December 16, 1971 independence war victory.

Chowdhury was sentenced to death by a War Crimes Tribunal on October 1, 2013, for the mass killing and torture of Hindus and Awami League supporters. Chowdhury, a top aide to BNP chief Khaleda Zia, carried out atrocities at his home district of southeastern Chittagong, leading a violent campaign against Hindus. He has been an influential politician - he was elected MP six times. The bench had upheld Chowdhury's death penalty on July 29 after hearing his appeal against the tribunal decision.

The two top opposition leaders were executed on Sunday, Nov 22, after the President rejected their mercy petitions. With Mujahid and Chowdhury's execution, Bangladesh has hanged four war crimes convicts so far. Two other 1971 war crime convicts Abdul Quader Mollah and Mohammad Kamaruzzaman had been executed so far.

A one-day general strike was held in a peaceful national protest the day after the court's decision and again the day after the hangings.

NUCLEAR

Gp Capt GD Sharma, VSM (Retd)

Recently, two articles published in an reputed western magazine asserted on India growing appetite for bigger nuclear weapons in thermonuclear category to match China. The article alleges related research is being carried out at new site near Mysore where large tract of tribal land has been acquired. The article also speculates that project may also be linked to development of fuel for the nuclear reactors of nuclear submarine project of India. The articles also dwell on the environment effects of the nuclear activity in light of poor safety standard. To substantiate the latter, it narrates some incidents which related to loss of semi processed nuclear material and existence of internal security problem in India and presence of terror outfits in the neighboring countries who would always be eager lay hand on the nuclear material .In the articles, the authors

narrate some questionable practices in the nuclear establishments of India which speaks poorly of the nuclear material safety. The authors lament that despite American offer for help the Indian are not forthcoming to seek advice to improve their nuclear safety.

The articles are biased towards Indian nuclear programme and trying to create an alarm when no such reason exists. India's nuclear policy unlike other nuclear powers is unambiguously articulated. We have a declared No First Use policy. We have also declared moratorium on further testing of nuclear weapons after 1998 nuclear tests. Hence speculation about further R&D on thermonuclear nuclear weapon is unfounded. Moreover, in 1998 nuclear tests we have we have already have validated this capability and as per nuclear scientists no further research is needed. Nuclear reactors for the nuclear submarine are the area of research but this aspect is well known. As regards to nuclear safety standard India the authors' claims are unsubstantiated. It is possible that U.S. while concluding may had an agenda to monitor/ exercise control India's nuclear programme but, that was not possible as the deal is civil nuclear deal and military programme is outside its preview. As regards to India we have benefited as it spurred similar nuclear deals with other countries and have resulted in positive nuclear trade