

ENVIRONMENT SCAN – 04 Jan 2016

CHINA, UNITED STATES, AFGHANISTAN, IRAN, AFRICA, MIDDLE EAST, SYRIA, YEMEN, BANGLADESH, PAKISTAN

Vietnam-China Row Over South China Sea Plane Landing: Vietnam has accused China of violating its sovereignty by landing a plane on an artificial island it has built in a contested part of the South China Sea. The Vietnamese foreign ministry said the airfield was built illegally on a part of the Spratly archipelago that lies within its territory.

China said it has complete sovereignty over Fiery Cross Reef and had used a civilian plane to test the airstrip. Several nations dispute China's territorial claims in the area.

The United States has said it was concerned that Saturday's flight had exacerbated tensions. A spokeswoman for the US State Department, said there was "a pressing need for claimants to publicly commit to a reciprocal halt to further land reclamation, construction of new facilities, and militarisation of disputed features".

Chinese foreign ministry said China conducted the flight to test whether the airfield facilities met the standards for civil aviation. "China has indisputable sovereignty over the Nansha Islands and their adjacent waters. China will not accept the unfounded accusation from the Vietnamese side," referring to the Spratly Islands by their Chinese name.

Hanoi's foreign ministry said Vietnam handed a protest note to China's embassy and asked China not to repeat the action, the Reuters news agency reported.

It called the flight "a serious infringement of the sovereignty of Vietnam on the Spratly archipelago".

China Building Second Aircraft Carrier: China is building a second Aircraft Carrier but this time made entirely from domestic technology, its defence ministry has announced.

The 50,000-tonne vessel is being built in the port of Dalian. It will not be nuclear powered, the ministry says. China is expanding its navy amid rising tension with its neighbours in the East and South China Seas.

China's first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, is a second-hand Soviet ship built more than 25 years ago. It was commissioned in 2012 after extensive refits.

"This [latest] aircraft carrier is being developed according to entirely domestic designs," defence ministry spokesman told a news briefing. The design and construction of the second aircraft absorbed the useful experience of research and training from the Liaoning.

It comes as China steadily adds to its fleet of cutting-edge frigates, destroyers and nuclear submarines. Increased Chinese defence expenditure in recent years has caused concern among its neighbours and the US, which is making a foreign policy "pivot" towards Asia.

The Carrier will transport China's J-15 aircraft along with other planes. It was not said when the second carrier would enter service, saying much depended on progress in the design process. Chinese naval experts say tensions in the South China Sea have made a second carrier particularly necessary.

The country's Communist leaders are spending billions modernising their armed forces so they can project military power far beyond China's borders.

But China does not yet have a fleet of aircraft or pilots ready for carrier operations. So the Liaoning is being used to test and train them, a task that experts say will probably take several years.

China's New Law to Tackle Terror: China's long-discussed counter-terrorism legislation, passed this week, frames the way the country will counter terrorist threats at home and abroad.

China faces a dual problem from terrorism; abroad, the picture is very similar to that faced by most Western countries, with Chinese nationals and interests increasingly threatened by groups affiliated with the so-called Islamic State group or al-Qaeda; at home, China has a problem with individuals angry at the state, who sometimes resort to violence against citizens and the state apparatus to express their anger.

The latter can be found particularly in the westernmost region of China's Xinjiang province, where the minority Uighur population resent the perceived encroachment by Beijing into their culture and identity.

There has also been some evidence that some Chinese nationals have gone abroad to fight alongside IS or al-Qaeda affiliates on the battlefield in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, while others have turned up in training camps in South-east Asia.

The new legislation attempts to deal with these dual problems but it does not appear to offer a clear framework for how to prevent people from being drawn to terrorist networks and ideologies in the first place. It does offer a formal framework for countering terrorism abroad, through sending Chinese security forces abroad to deal with the threat.

That is in itself a significant shift - offering Beijing an option to deploy forces abroad, in contrast to China's longstanding principle of non-interference in foreign policy.

But then Chinese security forces are already increasingly going out into the world - be it as peacekeepers with more forward leaning mandates or to set up forward operating bases in places like Djibouti - and the new legislation merely strengthens this broader push.

Where China's problem becomes really complicated is in incidents such as the bombing in Bangkok, Thailand, earlier this year, when a cell linked to a Turkish-Uighur network left an explosive device outside a shrine popular with Chinese tourists. Twenty were killed, the majority ethnic Chinese.

The exact reason for the attack remains unclear, although it appeared to be part of a larger wave of anger against China and Thailand for the forced deportation of a large number of Uighurs who had fled China for South-east Asia.

In many ways, the attack was an extension of China's domestic terrorist problem. The Uighur anger that initially mostly prompted attacks against the state in Xinjiang slowly spread around China (including prominent incidents in Beijing and Kunming) and now could be found abroad.

The problem is that, while it is clear the new legislation tries to deal with the mechanics of these issues - by establishing frameworks through which people can be detained and pursued abroad - it is not clear that it deals with the underlying anger behind the terror.

China Creates Three New Military Units in Push to Modernize Army: China has created three new military units and will update equipment as well as modernizing its command structure, state media said on Friday, as part of a major overhaul of the armed forces announced by President Xi Jinping in November.

Xi's push to reform the military coincides with China becoming more assertive in its territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas. China's navy is investing in submarines and aircraft carriers and its air force is developing stealth fighters.

At a ceremony on Thursday, Xi inaugurated a new general command unit for the army, a missile force and a strategic support force for People's Liberation Army (PLA), state news agency Xinhua said.

State television showed Xi handing over a large red flag to Li Zuocheng, the new head of the land command force. Li was previously commander of the key Chengdu military region, which includes restless and strategically vital Tibet.

The missile force is taking over from the Second Artillery Corps to control the country's nuclear arsenal but keeping the same commander, Wei Fenghe.

Xinhua said Xi urged the new unit to "enhance nuclear deterrence and counter-strike capacity, medium- and long-range precision strike ability, as well as strategic check-and-balance capacity to build a strong and modern Rocket Force".

His reforms include establishing a joint operational command structure by 2020 and rejigging existing military regions, as well as cutting troop numbers by 300,000, a surprise announcement he made in September.

In a separate report listing the powerful Central Military Commission's recommendations on the reform process, Xinhua said the troop cuts will focus on non-combat personnel.

Phasing out old equipment and developing new weaponry as well as reducing the number of models operated will be another big feature of the reforms, Xinhua said.

China has been moving rapidly to upgrade its military hardware, but integration of complex systems across a regionalized command structure has been a major challenge.

The troop cuts and broader reform program have proven controversial, though, and the military's newspaper has published a series of commentaries warning of opposition to the reforms and concern about job losses.

Xi has also made rooting out deeply entrenched corruption in the military a top priority, and dozens of senior officers have been investigated and jailed.

UNITED STATES

Gp Capt GD Sharma, VSM (Retd)

The US administration contemplated to impose new financial sanctions on Iran in wake of recent missile tests by Iran but, later decided against it.

The reason for contemplating this step was the ballistic missile tests by Iran in October and November in the Persian Gulf. The one of the missile test reportedly took place in the vicinity of American carrier task force in Persian Gulf. This was considered very provocative and is perceived violating the spirit of nuclear deal which was concluded by the global powers with Iran in Jul 14. White House thus considered imposing new financial sanctions on nearly dozen companies and individuals in Iran, Hong Kong and the United Arab Emirates to curb R&D in missiles which allegedly will not remain conventional but, have strategic implications when armed with nuclear weapons due to long range of some missiles even though these are highly inaccurate. Iran's nuclear research for the time being is curbed with the nuclear deal which has been arrived by global powers (P5+1) with Iran in Jul 14. However, the US congress believes that by continuing with missile tests Iran is destabilising the Middle East and could diminish the West's ability to enforce the nuclear agreement reached between global powers and Tehran in July.

US eventually decided against imposing sanctions as Ballistic missile tests by Iran are banned under United Nations Security Council resolution which remains in effect until the nuclear deal is fully implemented. Once the deal takes effect, Iran could be called upon called, not to undertake any ballistic missile work designed to deliver nuclear weapons for a period of up to eight years. Hence, the step of imposing new sanctions still could be taken which as per state administration is held up due to technical reasons.

Iran calls missile testing a defensive programme and condemning U.S. plans to issue sanctions after ballistic missile tests and asserts that such sanctions would be "arbitrary and illegal".

U.S. could begin implementing the nuclear agreement in January, as Iran is already taking steps to begin rolling back key parts of its nuclear programme therefore, as part of the deal, the U.S. committed to unfreezing as much as \$100 billion in Iranian oil money frozen in overseas accounts. Hence, it is strange that at this stage Iran is spoiling the environment by resorting to missile testing particularly as its economy is in shambles and sanctions could further affect it. It is thus a moot question, "What is Iran's motivation to resort to this behaviour?" Is it because of

domestic compulsions of impending elections or desire for dominance in Middle East turmoil and current state of relationship with Saudi Arabia and its allies which has escalated to level leading to suspension of diplomatic relations?

AFGHANISTAN

Capt Ranjit Seth

The first round of a quadrilateral meeting of Pakistan, Afghanistan, United States and China would be held on January 16 to work out a comprehensive roadmap for the second round of Afghan peace process. As a result of the recent visit of Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) General Raheel Sharif to Kabul, the Pak govt feels the meeting would demarcate responsibilities of each stakeholder at all stages. The COAS conveyed the message to the Afghan government that the reconciliation process would be purely Afghan-owned and Afghan-led, and the three countries, including Pakistan, the United States and China, would facilitate it. The Pak defence minister said majority of Taliban groups were in favour of talks and the reconciliation process should not be affected due to the minority. On the other hand neither Pak nor Afghanistan has said Taliban representatives themselves would attend. The Taliban, which has grown in strength this year following the withdrawal of most foreign troops, has so far ruled out taking part in any talks as long as foreign troops remain in Afghanistan. The important issue would be clarified in the next few days.

Talking about the security situation in Afghanistan, Andrew Wilder, vice president of Asia programs at the United States Institute of Peace, stated in an interview, "there's been a failure on the Afghan government side, a failure of leadership, under President Karzai where he adopted a leadership style of backing sort of corrupt and predatory local leaders and many Afghans at the local level are sort of caught between, corrupt and predatory local government officials and the Taliban, neither of whom which they like." He feels that "if the US pull out of Afghanistan too quickly we could see the collapse of the state again and a return back to the anarchic situation which we had in the 1990s, then you will see Afghanistan become a safe haven for transnational terrorist groups again."

IRAN

Capt Ranjit Seth

While the world may hope the nuclear deal would lead to a more peaceful Middle East, it risks turning Saudi competition with Iran up a notch. The nuclear deal's success may exacerbate regional tensions in the short term by escalating the cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. While the Saudis will publicly acquiesce to the agreement, the depth of its hostility toward Iran remains unchanged. If anything, a deal that Saudi Arabia perceives as a rapprochement between its key ally (US) and its arch nemesis will only intensify the proxy war.

Saudi Arabia is working to counter Iran on even the most minor of issues. From banning Iranian carpets in Mecca, to tracking the movement and numbers of Shiites in countries like Egypt, to removing the head of a university in Islamabad, Saudi diplomacy is extremely active and effective thanks to the power of its riches and the relentless pursuit of its key goal: countering the Islamic Republic.

AFRICA

Brig Jai Singh Yadav, VSM

Nigerian president offers talks with Boko Haram over Chibok girls

Nigeria's president has said he is prepared to negotiate with Boko Haram militants to secure the release of about 200 schoolgirls. Muhammadu Buhari said that if a credible Boko Haram leadership could be identified then he was prepared to talk with them without preconditions. But he said he had no intelligence on the girls' whereabouts or their health. Boko Haram seized the girls from their dormitories in the north-eastern town of Chibok in April 2014.

The militants regard the girls as their most invaluable captives and their leader, Abubakar Shekau, said last year that most of them had converted to Islam and had been married off.

Ebola outbreak ends in Guinea, says WHO

The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared the end of the Ebola outbreak in Guinea, two years after the epidemic began there.

Guineans are expected to celebrate the landmark with concerts and fireworks. The disease killed more than 2,500 people in the West African state, and a further 9,000 in neighbouring Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Liberia was declared Ebola-free by the WHO in September, and Sierra Leone in November.

However, Liberia has had new cases since the declaration.

A country is considered free of human-to-human transmission once two 21-day incubation periods have passed since the last known case tested negative for a second time. Local health workers echoed a warning from the WHO that vigilance was still vital despite the mood of celebration. "We have to be very careful, because even if open transmission has been stopped, the disease has not been totally defeated," said Alpha SenySouhmah, a Guinean health worker and Ebola survivor.

MIDDLE EAST

Brig Ranjit Singh

IRAQ

Iraqi Forces liberate Ramadi from ISIS. The Iraqi joint forces liberated Ramadi from ISIS. It is reported that 80% of the city has been destroyed and 30% is still controlled by ISIS. It is also reported that 700 ISIS elements exist on the outskirts of Ramadi.

ISIS attacks 10 Division HQ north of Ramadi. ISIS suicide bomber attacked 10 Division HQ north of Ramadi, extent of casualties is not known.

20 ISIS elements arrested trying to escape from Ramadi after its liberation from ISIS.

54 ISIS elements killed south of Fallujah. Baghdad Operation Centre reported killing of 54 ISIS elements and 85 explosive devices dismantled south of Fallujah. The focus of operations is now shifting towards liberation of Fallujah.

20 ISIS elements killed west of Mosul. 20 ISIS elements were killed and several wounded west of Mosul when their suicide bomber drove on bicycle into one of its HQ.

Comments.

Liberation of Ramadi is being seen as a big success in operations against ISIS, however, the battle is far from over. A large number of ISIS elements are still holding on in the outskirts of Ramadi.

The focus of operations is now shifting towards liberation of Fallujah, a major operation is already underway.

SYRIA

Impact of Russian air Strikes seen in operations in Syria. The impact of Russian air strikes is being reflected in the success being achieved by Syrian Govt forces at number of places. Syrian Army is focusing operations in Aleppo and gained success against ISIS as well as FSA. Syrian Army launched attacks in eastern Damascus achieving considerable success. Syrian Army liberated strategic mountains in Homs after clashes with ISIS. Syrian Army also seizes strategic areas in Latakia.

Syrian rebels surrender to Syrian authorities. 157 Syrian rebel elements have surrendered to Syrian authorities in Aleppo, Homs, Hama and Damascus. Syrian Govt has vowed to pardon all those rebels who lay down their arms voluntarily.

UN sponsored deal for safe passage to rebels falls through. UN sponsored safe passage to 2000 rebels holed up south of Damascus to Raqqa has been suspended a important rebel leader was killed in air strike.

Comments

The positive impact of Russian air strikes is visible in the success being achieved by Syrian Army in the operations at number of places. The surrender by large number of rebels to Govt authorities is also the result of successful Russian air campaign against ISIS and FSA.

YEMEN

Saudi led coalition ends Yemen Cease fire. The Saudi led coalition has announced end of ceasefire that commenced on 15 Dec citing violations by Houthi rebels.

Kuwait to send troops to Saudi Arabia to fight Houthi rebels. Kuwait has decided to send one Artillery unit to Saudi Arabia to strike against Houthi rebel positions in Yemen.

City of Taiz remains under seize of Houthi rebels. The city of Taiz remains under seize of Houthi rebels, six lakh people are under dire need of humanitarian aid. UN aid is not reaching people due to seize by Houthi rebels.

Comments.

UN sponsored peace talks scheduled to commence in mid Jan appears unlikely.

City of Taiz is heading for a humanitarian crisis as there is acute shortage of medicines and food supplies due to seize laid by Houthi rebels. UN aid is unable to reach th

BANGLADESH

Col Saikat Roy

Death for Bangladesh blogger killers

Owing to intense media pressure (national and international), several blogger murder cases have been handled by "fast-track trial courts". Five more secular bloggers and writers were killed in Bangladesh in 2015.[1] Six persons were convicted of involvement in the murder of Ahmed Rajib Haider, who was hacked to death as he was returning home from a rally in the capital, Dhaka on the night of Feb 15, 2013.

On Dec 30, 2015, just under three years, two members of Ansarullah Bangla Team, Md Faisal Bin Nayem and Redwanul Azad Rana were found guilty of murder and sentenced to death for the murder. Faisal, the court said, was the one who attacked Haider with a meat cleaver. Rana is absconding and was sentenced in absentia. Another member of the outlawed outfit, Maksudul Hasan was also guilty of murder and given a life sentence. Five other members of ABT, including firebrand leader Mufti Jasim Uddin Rahmani received jail terms of five to ten years. One person had a term of three years.

Haider was among a group of bloggers who had called for the execution of Islamist leaders for crimes committed in the 1971 war.

BNP decides to hold rally in Dhaka on Jan 5

The BNP plans to hold a rally in Dhaka on Jan 5 to mark the second anniversary of the 10th national election, which it had sat out. "After the farcical polls of 2014, we marked the day (Jan 5) as the Murder of Democracy Day. To observe it, we have decided to hold a rally at the Suhrawardy Udyan," Mirza Fakhrul the BNP acting secretary general, said on Saturday. "We hope that the government will allow us to hold the rally and thus pave the way to a proper democracy in Bangladesh." The party said it has written to authorities seeking permission to use the

Suhrawardy Udyan for the rally, which BNP chief Khaleda Zia will address.

In 2015, the BNP-led alliance called for non-stop blockade of roads, rail and waterways when police refused to let them hold a rally on Jan 5 in front of BNP headquarters in the capital's Paltan area. Large-scale street violence was unleashed during the three-month blockade. Over a hundred people died in the violence that followed, mostly in firebombing of vehicles. However, after the agitation failed, the BNP joined the city corporation polls in Dhaka and Chittagong city corporations in April last year. But it withdrew midway, alleging large scale vote fraud.

It also joined the recent polls in 234 municipal polls, but fared poorly. The party says it fared badly in the elections because of vote-rigging and intimidation practiced by the Awami League.

After BNP, Awami League Too Will Observe Jan 5 Polls Anniversary

The ruling Awami League will also observe the second anniversary of the tenth parliamentary elections on Jan 5. They will observe the occasion as 'Democracy Protection Day', as they did last year.

But tension is likely to rise because its arch rival the BNP has called for a rally on the same day it, calling it 'Democracy Murder Day'. After failing to hold rallies last year, BNP chief Khaleda Zia called for a nonstop blockade which sparked off massive violence across the country. More than a 100 people died, mostly in pro-blockade arson and bomb attacks, during the three-month-long mayhem.

The BNP, which boycotted the Jan 5 elections in 2014 and ended up with no representation in parliament for the first time in over two decades, will observe the day this year as 'Democracy Murder Day'.

YEAR IN REVIEW: IMPORTANT ISSUES BANGLADESH IN 2015

Execution of three war criminals

Three top war criminals were executed in the year.

On Nov 22, Al-Badr commander, Jamaat-e-Islami Secretary General Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahid[2] and BNP Standing Committee member Salauddin Quader Chowdhury[3] were hanged for their crimes against humanity committed during the War of Independence in 1971.

Earlier in April, Jamaat Assistant Secretary General Mohammad Kamaruzzaman was hanged for similar crimes.

The verdict of Jamaat chief Matiur Rahman Nizami's appeal against his death sentence will be delivered on Jan 6.

Of the 21 verdicts handed down by the International Crimes Tribunal since its constitution in 2010, six were pronounced this year.

End of enclaves

After Jul 31 midnight, a swap of 162 enclaves between India and Bangladesh ended one of the world's most intractable border disputes. As per the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) between the two neighbours, some 17,160 acres of Indian land within Bangladesh territory became part of Bangladesh. Similarly, 51 Bangladeshi enclaves, comprising over nearly 7,110 acres within India, became part of India.

A joint India-Bangladesh census in 2011 found that Bangladeshi enclaves had around 14,000 residents, while those of India had 37,000.

Perilous voyages

Migrants fleeing poverty in Bangladesh and persecution in Myanmar made global headlines with thousands adrift on the Andaman Sea. Several mass graves of such migrants were discovered in Thailand and Malaysia, prompting a crackdown on human trafficking. According to the UN, around 25,000 Bangladeshis and Myanmar Rohingyas were trafficked in the first three months of 2015.

Bangladesh brought back several of them, picked up by the Myanmar Navy in the Bay of Bengal.

Social networking sites blocked

On Nov 18, the government blocked Facebook, Viber, and Whatsapp in Bangladesh citing security concerns over the execution of war criminals Salauddin Quader Chowdhury and Ali Ahsan Md Mujahid.

The government said the move, taken after the killing of two foreign nationals and an attack on a police checkpoint, was aimed at cutting communication channels among militants and terrorists.

Facebook was restored on Dec 10 after a suspension of 22 days.

But three days later, on Dec 13, Twitter, Skype, and Imo were also jammed. However, all social networking sites were unblocked the next day.

For about an hour and a half, Bangladesh lost its link with the World Wide Web the day the social networking sites were shut down in the country.

Human chains were formed in several places, demanding the restoration of the sites. Many found their own means of using Facebook despite the official clamp on it.

The restrictions on the Internet and the networking sites adversely impacted outsourcing, online marketing, and other business activities.

PAKISTAN

Lt Col Anil Gorshi, SM**

Pathankote Terrorist Strike

New Approach.

PM Modi Surprise landing in Lahore has set up a new year with potential to charts a virtuous path in South Asia. Yet the brooding shadow of terrorism and the back log of mistrust.

How far the constructive turn goes depends on whether Pak will kick its terror addiction despite the disturbing attack on pathankote. Now there has been control over the Jihadist violation along the loc and infiltration have also dipped. The J&K Situation is stable. India's is keen to crush terrorist activity by pushing to terminate arming and financing terrorists. India's is also insisting that India will judge progress on Pakistan Commitment on Terrorism.

Factors for Pathankote Strike.

Mr. Nawaz Sharif is not in full control of Pak national security apparatus.

Pak Army and ISI are controlling the terror taps Mr. Modi visit and bilateral dialogue hurted Pak army, ISI and their vested interests.

Domestic constraints limit both the leaders especially PM Sharif. His power is eclipsed by Pak Army. Pak Army controls the fast growing nuclear weapon programme in the world and has played a double game of taking US assistance while supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Pak army is exploiting tension with India to control Pakistan. Whether Pak Army is Supporting PM Nawaz Sharif new outreach to India is unclear.

Major framework for change.

Major test for India and Pak govt will be whether the two can work together to promote the peace talks between Afghanistan govt and the Taliban. Pak has given assistance and a safe haven to Afghanistan Taliban as a hedge against India, while India has supported and provided military assistance to Afghan govt. US officials believe that Pak army has become more serious about fighting. The Taliban victory could make Afghanistan a more attractive magnet for Islam State.

Future Key Elements.

First India govt must resist the temptation to call off the dialogue with Pak govt initiated. Talking is not surrender. Even nation and state locked in combat after all use their diplomatic talks.

Indian govt to pressurize Pak to take on terrorism and road map to be prepared.

India to consider what element of national power it can marshal to deter Jihad groups.

Inducting steps like military use at large scale can hurt Indian economic objectives. India needs a plan to counter terrorism capacity building based on honest admission of weakness.