

ENVIRONMENT SCAN – 21 MAR 2016

CHINA, BANGLADESH, NEPAL, SRI LANKA, MYANMAR, UNITED STATES, ASEAN, WEST ASIA, SYRIA, YEMEN, RUSSIA, IRAN, AFGHANISTAN, AFRICA

Japan's New Base to Stir East China Sea Dispute:

Japan is due to switch on a new radar observation station in the East China Sea on Monday, a move that will likely infuriate Beijing and mark the latest escalation in the long-simmering dispute between the two Asian heavyweights.

Tokyo's new Self Defence Force base is located on Yonaguni, an island located 150 kilometers south of the disputed territory known as the Senkaku in Japan and the Diaoyu in China. The new base can be used as a permanent intelligence gathering post as well an outlet for military operations in the region, adding to Tokyo's existing military buildup along the Yaeyama Island chain, which includes Yonaguni, Reuters reported.

China has yet to make a statement regarding the move, but strategists say it won't deter the mainland from more aggressive expansion in the zone. "This is the latest step in Japan's response to China's forceful symbolism in the East China Sea," noted Steve Wilford, Asia Pacific director for global risk analysis at Control Risks Group.

Japan has repeatedly called on Beijing to halt activity in the area, particularly the construction of oil-and-gas exploration platforms, after China declared an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) there in 2013.

The disputed area consists of eight islands, with a total area of 81,000 square miles; it's home to an estimated 200 million barrels of oil reserves, according to the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). Formally part of Japan since 1895, China began to assert claims over the islands during the 1970s given their strategic location near prominent shipping routes as well as an abundance of fishing.

But the geopolitical value of the islands is bigger than the geological value of the resources under the water, noted Richard Martin, executive vice president at IMA Asia. While neither Japan nor China have forcibly established control over the islands, the fear is that even small developments could rapidly escalate hostilities and trigger military confrontations.

"This is a situation that has gone from 30 years of being a frozen conflict to one that is increasingly warming up," said Wilford. "What China wants to do is put a mark on the fact that this territory is disputed... China's intention is to sow doubt into territorial claims and pick off the neighbors one-by-one in bilateral negotiations while changing the physical status-quo on the ground with bases and missiles."

Japan on the other hand is taking a more forceful approach and refusing to acknowledge China's claim, Wilford said. In fact, certain lawmakers from the country's ruling Liberal Democratic Party recently expressed a desire to seek international arbitration over Beijing's drilling activities.

Taiwan Enters Power Struggle: Claims Taiping Island in South China Sea:

Taiwan claims to have continuously occupied this postage stamp-sized island in the azure waters of the South China Sea for 60 years. But it wasn't until this week, that the government invited journalists to see the tiny place firsthand.

Also known as Itu Aba, Taiping island consists of little more than a 1,360 meter long airstrip bordered on two sides by palm trees and white sandy beaches. But that is enough for Taiwan to make its case in the growing struggle for control of this hotly disputed body of water -- where \$5 trillion in ship-borne trade passes through annually.

Taiping Island "is entitled to an exclusive economic zone of 200 nautical miles," outgoing Taiwan president Ma Ying-jeou told journalists -- which gives a country special rights over the seabed, and marine resources like fish.

China, with a large U shape on its maps, lays claim to virtually all of the contested waters. To cement its stance, Beijing has been building man-made islands atop seven reefs it controls in the Spratly archipelago, a series of atolls far closer to the Philippines and Malaysia than mainland China. These massive land reclamation projects have made the neighbors nervous.

"Like most countries we are opposed to militarization or military expansionism in the area," said Bruce Linghu, deputy foreign minister of Taiwan. The diplomat expressed concern that China's ambitious island-building could trigger "possible confrontations or conflicts."

The Philippines, whose military is dramatically out-gunned and out-resourced by China, is also attempting to use international law to challenge Beijing. It has taken China to the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague, arguing that China's occupation of the Spratly Islands violates the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). A ruling is expected in May.

But the Philippines-China arbitration case led to an unforeseen consequence: a challenge from Taiwan. The government of Taiwan, officially known as the Republic of China, rejects claims by the Philippines' legal team at the Hague that Taiping does not deserve to be called an island, according to international maritime law.

To prove this point, officials invited journalists on a three hour, 1577 km (980 mile) military flight from an airforce base in southern Taiwan to Taiping Island.

Such a public relations exercise is particularly important for Taiwan, which isn't a member of the U.N. and thus not a signatory to UNCLOS -- China considers Taiwan a breakaway province and blocks its membership of most international organizations.

Argentina Coast Guard Sinks Chinese Fishing Boat:

Argentina's coast guard sank a Chinese fishing boat that it claimed was fishing illegally in a restricted area near Puerto Madryn. The Argentine Naval Prefecture, the country's maritime police force, chased and sank the Lu Yan Yuan Yu 010 fishing vessel. According to Argentine officials, the Chinese ship was fishing within Argentina's exclusive economic zone.

It's unknown what precisely the fishermen involved in Tuesday's incident had caught or were in the process of catching, but this is far from the first time Chinese fishermen have been at the center of illegal fishing disputes far from Chinese shores.

SAARC

Col Saikat Roy

SUSHMA SWARAJ MEETS NEPAL PM OLI AHEAD OF SAARC SUMMIT:

Pokhara: External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj on Wednesday night (March 16) held an over hour-long meeting with Nepalese Prime Minister KP Oli, during which key bilateral issues are understood to have been discussed.

The meeting between the two leaders comes ahead of the 37th SAARC Council of Ministers meeting.

Interestingly, neither the Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar nor the Indian Ambassador here Ranjeet Ray, besides Joint-Secretary (North) Abhay Thakur were present during the meeting

Though Indian officials described the meeting as a routine call-on, even they were surprised at the duration of over hour-long meeting.

The meeting between Swaraj and Oli comes nearly a month after the Nepalese Prime Minister's visit to India.

The bilateral ties between the two countries had faced turbulence in the recent past due to the months-long Madhesi agitation and subsequent road-blocks which had put the Nepalese government in a spot.

Earlier today, Swaraj arrived here for a three-day visit to attend the SAARC Ministerial meeting during which she will push ahead India's "neighbourhood first" policy and review the progress of decisions taken by the grouping last year.

PATHANKOT ATTACK: PAK TEAM TO VISIT INDIA ON MARCH 27, INFORMS SUSHMA SWARAJ AFTER MEETING SARTAJ AZIZ:

Pokhara: In a major development in terms of Pathankot terror attack, Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj on Thursday told media that Pakistan's Joint Investigation Team (JIT) will reach India on March 27 to visit the attack site.

The development came after Sushma Swaraj's meeting with Pakistan's Foreign Affairs Advisor Sartaj Aziz in Nepal's Pokhara. "It's not possible that I and Pakistan Foreign Affairs Advisor meet (Sartaj Aziz) and Pathankot issue is not taken up. Yes, it was discussed," Sushma Swaraj said. "Looking at the way Pathankot issue has been handled and cooperation on this subject, we're hopeful of good results," Sartaj Aziz added.

"The atmosphere of this year's SAARC meeting was quite different from the previous ones," Sushma Swaraj said. Aziz also handed over an invitation to Swaraj for Prime Minister Modi to attend the SAARC Summit hosted by Pakistan on November 9 and 10.

Swaraj said she has accepted the invitation on behalf of the Prime Minister and thanked Sharif and Aziz for it.

Earlier this year, a scheduled meeting between Foreign Secretaries of Pakistan and India was postponed after the January 2 Pathankot attack for which India blames Pakistan-based terror group Jaish-e-Muhammed.

37TH SAARC COUNCIL OF MINISTERS MEET ENDS:

POKHARA: The 37th session of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation Council of Ministers concluded in Pokhara of Nepal on Thursday.

The meeting decided to hold the 19th Summit of the regional body in Pakistan on November 9-10 this year.

Before the November Summit, which will be attended by heads of the states or governments of eight member states, the Council of Ministers comprising foreign affairs ministers, the Standing Committee comprising foreign secretaries and the Programming Committee comprising foreign joint secretaries would be held in Pakistan.

Meanwhile, the Council of Ministers endorsed the SAARC Standing Committee's recommendation that the SAARC Summits be held in every alternate November. The decision however is subject to approval from the 19th Summit itself.

The meeting also endorsed Pakistan's nomination of Amjad Hussain B Sial for the next Secretary General of the regional body. Sial will replace Nepal's Arjun Bahadur Thapa in February next year.

The SAARC ministers decided to establish the SAARC Disaster Management Centre in New Delhi of India. A component of the centre overseeing environmental issues, however, will be merged into the SAARC Energy Centre, which is in Pakistan.

Thapa added that the meeting welcomed Nepal's proposal that its successful community forestry management programme be taken up by all SAARC member-states as it has received worldwide fame and acclamation in this regard. Nepal, however, is yet to hold further discussions over the project before implementing it, the DPM maintained.

SAARC NATIONS SHOULD CREATE COMMON COURT TO TACKLE TERRORISM'

United Nations: Citing the 2008 Mumbai terror attack, a Supreme Court Judge, from India has suggested the creation of a "common court" for countries in the SAARC region that comprises judges from each nation who can share their knowledge and tackle cross-border terrorism cases.

Justice Sharad Bobde was participating in the open briefing here yesterday (March 10) of the UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee on 'Upholding Justice: The effective adjudication of terrorism cases'.

The UN event for the first time brought together Supreme Court justices from across the world to discuss how terrorism cases are handled in their respective countries. Bobde was responding to a question on how courts can come together to foster regional and international cooperation and how the judiciary can help in the efforts to tackle terrorism.

BANGLADESH

Col Saikat Roy

BANGLADESH MAY REMOVE ISLAM AS COUNTRY'S OFFICIAL RELIGION:

Twenty-eight years after Islam was enshrined as the state religion in Bangladesh's constitution, the country's highest court has agreed to consider a petition challenging that status.

The High Court writ, brought this week by a group of secular activists, argues that recognizing Islam as the country's official religion contradicts the secular nature of the state. The hearing is scheduled for March 27.

The case could reopen fault lines over the role of Islam in Bangladeshi society. The South Asian nation's population is almost 90% Muslim, with Hindus making up 8% and Christians and other faiths the remaining 2%.

When Bangladesh emerged as an independent state in 1971 after a bloody nine-month war with Pakistan, the country's constitution adopted secularism as a principle of the state. In 1988, military ruler Hussein Muhammad Ershad amended the constitution, declaring Islam the state religion.

Since independence, Bangladeshi politics has been polarized over the role of Islam. Ms. Hasina's Awami League positions itself as a champion of secularism while the Bangladesh Nationalist

Party, led by former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, draws heavily on the country's Muslim heritage.

The Awami League party, led by current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, brought in constitutional amendments in 2011 that restored secularism to the constitution but retained Islam as the state religion.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party, now in opposition, supported the provision of Islam as the official religion when it came to power in 1991, arguing that it reflected the heritage of the vast majority of the population.

Some lawyers and activists have argued that Article 2A of the constitution, which recognizes Islam as the "religion of the Republic," contradicts Article 12 which declares secularism to be a principle of the state.

Those who oppose dropping Islam as the state religion point out Article 2A also says: "The State shall ensure equal status and equal right in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions."

Bangladesh's religious traditions are largely tolerant and the South Asian country has long been held up as an example of a moderate Muslim state. However, that tradition has been marred recently by a spate of violent attacks on religious minorities. The Islamic State group has claimed responsibility for attacks on foreigners, Shia Muslim shrines and Christian and Hindu priests.

However the hard-line Muslims are have been propagating that; "...if the court removes Islam as the state religion, there will be violence in the streets. We will provoke a national outcry against this."

ISIS CLAIMS KILLING OF `PREACHER` IN BANGLADESH:

The Islamic State group said Tuesday (Mar 15), it killed a Bangladeshi who was hacked to death this week, describing the victim as a top Shiite preacher. Police confirmed that Abdul Razzaq, was killed on Monday night but rejected the IS claim of responsibility.

IS has claimed a series of killings in Bangladesh, but authorities deny that it has a presence there and instead blame local Islamist groups.

Police said the latest victim was a homeopathic medicine practitioner who owned a shop in the southwestern town of Kaliganj.

IS said in a statement its fighters in Bangladesh "were able to assassinate the polytheist apostate Hafidh Abdul Razzaq, one of the top preachers for the Rafidha (Shiite) religion," according to US monitoring group SITE.

Bangladesh police said the victim was a Sunni Muslim.

In recent months, the IS also said it was behind a series of attacks targeting foreigners and minorities including Shiite, Ahmadi and Sufi Muslims, Hindus and Christians in the Sunni-majority country.

Police have instead blamed the banned militant group Jamayetul Mujahideen Bangladesh for the upsurge in deadly violence.

Bangladesh has been plagued by unrest in the last three years. Experts say a long-running political crisis has radicalised opponents of the government.

BANGLADESH'S TOP COURT UPHOLDS ISLAMIST TYCOON'S DEATH SENTENCE:

Dhaka: Bangladesh's Supreme Court on Tuesday upheld the death sentence of Jamaat-e-Islami's chief financier, imposed for war crimes, in a major blow to the country's biggest Islamist party.

Mir Quasem Ali, a shipping and real estate tycoon, was convicted in 2014 of abducting and murdering a young fighter during Bangladesh's 1971 war of independence against Pakistan.

Three senior Jamaat officials and a leader of the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) have been executed since December 2013 for war crimes, despite global criticism of their trials by a controversial tribunal.

The 63-year-old senior party leader faces the gallows within months unless his case is reviewed by the same court or he is granted clemency by the Bangladeshi president.

Abdur Rob, professor of political science at the North South University in Dhaka, said the ruling was a big setback for Jamaat. "He was the main financier of the party," he told "He also ran Jamaat's social and business enterprises and had very good connections across the world, especially in the Middle East."

The latest verdict is expected to widen the divide between secular groups and Islamic hardliners in the Muslim-majority nation, which has seen recent killings of secular bloggers, religious minorities and foreigners.

Opposition parties say the trials are politically motivated, aimed at weakening rivals to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's secular government. The trials come as the government has also been accused of a recent crackdown on dissent, including in independent media. Since it was set up by the government in 2010, the tribunal has sentenced more than a dozen opposition leaders for their roles in the war.

The government maintains the trials are needed to heal the wounds of the conflict, which it says left three million people dead.

India-Bangladesh border guarding forces to hold joint exercise today:

Kolkata: In a first, border guarding forces of India and Bangladesh will hold a joint exercise beginning Saturday along the International Border they share in the Sunderbans area of West Bengal.

Officials said a company-level (about 100 personnel) strength of Border Security Force and Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) each along with their equipment, floating border posts and patrol boats engaged with each other for three days between March 11-14.

The two forces will undertake joint 'long-range' patrolling on mechanised vessels, undertake mutual checking of cargo vessels deep inside border areas before they go in international waters and exchange common information and communication.

"The joint exercise will help in enhancing mutual cooperation and coordination between the two forces and help further improve the border management along Indo-Bangla border," a senior BSF official said.

NEPAL

Col Saikat Roy

PRINCE HARRY VISITS NEPAL EARTHQUAKE SITES:

Prince Harry has visited sites damaged by April and May's earthquakes in Nepal during the second day of his five-day trip to the country.

He arrived in Kathmandu on Saturday (March 19) evening, and met the country's president the next morning.

They discussed climate change and conservation, Kensington Palace said.

Prince Harry met survivors of the earthquakes - which killed nearly 9,000 people - as well as Gurkhas who helped the rescue efforts.

He praised the Nepalese people for what he called their "resolve and resilience" in the wake of the disaster.

He visited artisans and apprentices working to restore the royal palace at Patan Durbar Square, which was heavily damaged by the quake. The Unesco World Heritage Site was among many damaged by the 7.8-magnitude earthquake on 25 April and the second tremor on 12 May.

The prince held talks with Nepal's first female president, Bidya Devi Bhandari, on Sunday morning.

He told her the flight was long, but "worth the hours to be in Nepal, finally".

It is the prince's first official visit to the country. The trip is celebrating 200 years of joint relations between Nepal and Britain.

Prince Harry served with the Gurkhas in Afghanistan, as a soldier in the British Army, and will meet members of the brigade during his visit.

The Gurkhas have since served in every major conflict involving British forces for two centuries, and won 13 Victoria Crosses - the highest British military decoration for valour.

More than 200,000 Gurkhas fought in the two world wars, and there are about 2,600 Gurkhas currently in the British armed forces.

NEPAL PM TO LEAVE FOR CHINA ON OFFICIAL VISIT:

Kathmandu: Nepal Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli is leaving for China today (Mar 20) at the invitation of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang.

Oli is leading a 56-member delegation to Beijing.

During his visit, several agreements and MoUs are expected to be signed between the two countries, reports The Himalayan Times. Both countries are preparing to formalise Transit and Transportation Agreement and Hilsa Bridge Construction Project besides signing a loan agreement with China EXIM bank for the construction of a regional international airport in Pokhara, according to Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Kamal Thapa.

The two countries are also likely to sign MoUs on Free Trade Agreement, Patent Rights and Banking Regulations, said Thapa.

The Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB) will sign an MoU with China Banking Regulatory Commission (CBRC), enabling both regulators to exchange supervisory information.

The construction of the Hilsa Bridge will be the third friendly bridge connecting Nepal and China after Tatopani in Sindhupalchok and Kerung in Rasuwa.

Several feasibility studies, including Kimathanka-Biratnagar road, second phase of Ring Road expansion, Kerung-Kathmandu rail and petroleum storage facilities in three locations and a mono rail for Kathmandu are also high on agenda.

This is Oli's second foreign visit after India last month since he became the Prime Minister.

During the visit, he will pay courtesy calls on Chinese President Xi Jinping and his Chinese counterpart Li Keqiang.

Oli is also scheduled to address the scholars, academics, business people and students at Renmin University on the theme 'Nepal-China Relations in the Context of Belt and Road Initiatives'.

He will also witness the signing ceremony of MoU on Granting Nepal the Status of Dialogue Partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

The Prime Minister is scheduled to return on March 27 from Chengdu. (ANI)

SRI LANKA

Col Saikat Roy

SRI LANKAN PRESIDENT REITERATES THAT NO FOREIGN JUDGES IN INVESTIGATIONS ON HUMAN RIGHT VIOLATIONS

Mar 19, Colombo: Sri Lanka President Maithripala Sirisena has reaffirmed that he will not agree to inviting foreign judges if a need arises to take judicial action following the investigations on human rights violations allegedly committed by government troops and the LTTE.

"I will not agree to get foreign judges in to any kind of investigations into human rights violations allegations. We must have faith in our local judges," the President said.

Speaking at the occasion President Sirisena said he has utmost confidence in the judiciary and his personal belief as well as the government policy is to make the judiciary independent and impartial, and to strengthen the judiciary to make the system more efficient.

President Sirisena assured that the government will take every measure to safeguard the impartiality and the independency of the judicial system and strengthen the judiciary.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, Justice Minister Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe, Chief Justice K. Sripavan, Attorney general Jayantha Jayasuriya, Bar Association President Jeffrey Alagaratnam and members of judiciary were present at the occasion.

MYANMAR

Gp Capt GD Sharma, VSM (Retd)

Would Regime Change in Myanmar Impact its relations with neighbours:?

With NLD overwhelming majority in the parliament, the election of its nominee, Mr. Hu Hytin Kyaw as the new president was a foregone conclusion. The other two nominees ie Mr.Chin Christian, NLD,s ethnic nominee and U Myint Swe, the military nominee would be the two vice president. The president and two vice presidents would take oath of the office on 30 March and assume office wef 01 Apr16.

President designate, Mr. Hu Hytin Kyaw is a long time associate of Suu Kyi This will facilitate Suu Kyi to act as a de-facto supreme leader and pursue her agenda. Suu Kyi however

,will be constrained due to peculiar ruling arrangement in Myanmar which comprises NLD chosen executive, NLD dominated parliament and military. The military with final say in crucial areas of Defence, Home and internal security will not allow any major change in policy. These constraints and past demeanour of Suu Kyi suggests that there would not be any substantial change in Myanmar's foreign policy (Suu Kyi had developed rapport with the military government).

India's major concern remains the security of its eastern borders adjoining Myanmar and to checkmate Chinese influence which over the years has slackened. On both these counts, India need not worry as like the Thein Seine government, Myanmar's new regime would remain cautious of the Chinese's who tend to exploit and are not generally liked by the populace. Therefore, despite Chinese deep purse and offer of investments, Myanmar would remain sceptical of their intentions and maintain a neutral stance as before and avoid involvement in the China-US lead west power game.

Unlike China, India's engagements of the Myanmar's military regime in past has helped it in overcoming international isolation and consequent lifting of western sanctions. This has also lessened Myanmar's reliance on China. Hence, India would continue to be seen by the new regime as a partner in the region. We can substantially change the equation between us by fruition of several infrastructural projects which are still awaiting completion. The 4-lane, 3200 km (India Myanmar Thailand friendship highway), a triangular highway connecting India, Myanmar and Thailand and Kaladan multimodal transit route which connects Kolkata to Sitwe port in Myanmar by sea which is further linked to Lashio in Myanmar by Kaladan river boat and further to Mizoram in India through road transport. Indian projects are marred with delays. This impacts our credibility to deliver and affects relations. India has historical ties with Myanmar. It still has considerable population of Indian origin in Myanmar. The road will allow greater mobility and mingling of populace of countries in the region thus leading to better relations amongst them.

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UNITED STATES

Gp Capt GD Sharma, VSM (Retd)

Obama's Cuba visit is latest step towards 'new alliances of the America:

Obama's three days Cuba visit after 88 years is path breaking . News papers report that in his election campaign in 2008, Obama had declared his resolve to build new alliances for America. With Eight years in power, Obama has brought in substantial changes in US foreign policy. He has mended relations with countries which hitherto were seen as adversaries of America. Like his predecessor, He devoted attention to Middle East, Russia and Indo pacific region. Latin America in the neighbourhood by far remained neglected. By reaching out to Cuba, a sworn enemy of America of the cold war era, President Obama has ushered a change. He has other states too in mind like Columbia, Haiti, Venezuela and Mexico. Compared to former Presidents, Obama has adopted a humble stance and called for partnership with other countries particularly the neighbours. This has helped in changing image of America from being an aggressor and an arrogant nation. In final analysis, Obama has turned out to be a successful president by taking proactive foreign policy initiatives such as with Iran and now with Latin America. He can also take credit for domestic upswing in economy while most countries in the world including China, are in throes of economic slowdown.

ASEAN

Brig Jai Singh Yadav, VSM

India kicks off first army drill with ASEAN

CREATOR: gd-jpeg v1.0 (using IJG JPEG v80), quality = 90

The first and largest multinational military ground forces exercise on Indian soil involving the 10-nation Asean grouping and eight of its dialogue partners, among them India, was conducted in the city of Pune, Maharashtra state, on March 2-8, 2016.

The largest multinational military exercise on Indian soil involving the 10-nation ASEAN grouping and eight of its dialogue partners, among them India, started yesterday, reflecting the South Asian giant's increasing focus on deepening defence ties with South-east Asia.

More than 300 soldiers are taking part in the seven-day exercise, the aim of which, the Indian Defence Ministry said, is "to learn and share best practices with the other armies of the world, and display commitment for peace and stability in the region".

The foreign troops, together with the Indian Army, yesterday began training in peacekeeping and de-mining operations in the city of Pune in western Maharashtra state.

The theme of the joint training exercise is Humanitarian Mine Action and Peacekeeping Operations.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been looking to boost co-operation with ASEAN countries since he took office and has even changed the name of India's policy from "Look East" to "Act East".

The past year has seen a flurry of high-level political engagements between India and South-east Asia, including Vice-President Mohammad Hamid Ansari's visits to Brunei and Thailand last month, and Mr Modi's visit to Singapore last year.

Trade, the mainstay of India-ASEAN ties, hit US\$76.6 billion (S\$107.4 billion) in 2014/2015, with security and defence co-operation now coming into greater focus.

The current exercise is taking place under the framework of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus.

Besides India, ASEAN's other dialogue partners in this drill are Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea and the United States.

Experts said that the exercise signalled India's interest in pushing defence co-operation with ASEAN.

Last month, India held its biggest-ever maritime exercise as part of the International Fleet Review that saw participation from 50 countries.

Last year, it expanded maritime exercises with the US in the Indian Ocean to permanently include Japan. It also held its first exercise involving border troops with China in the northern state of J&k.

Malaysia seeks Australian support in South China Sea dispute

Malaysian defence minister calls for 'pushback' against alleged Chinese military buildup in the Spratly islands

The Malaysian defence minister, Hishammuddin Hussein, said he will meet his Australian counterpart next week to discuss China's military buildup in the disputed South China Sea.

Hishammuddin said he would meet the Australian defence minister, Marise Payne, to ensure efforts are made to “hold China to their promise of not placing military assets in the area”.

China claims most of the energy-rich waters through which about \$5tn in ship-borne trade passes every year. Neighbours Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam also have claims.

Beijing is feeling public pressure at home to show it can protect its claims to the waters after the United States began conducting “freedom of navigation” operations near islands where China has been carrying out controversial reclamation work and stationing advanced weapons.

“If the reports we’ve received from various sources regarding the buildup and placement of military assets in the Spratlys are true – this forces us in a pushback against China,”

The director of US national intelligence, James Clapper, said in a letter in February that China’s land reclamation and construction work on the islands had established infrastructure needed “to project military capabilities in the South China Sea beyond that which is required for point defence of its outposts”.

The 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) said last month it was “seriously concerned” over developments in the disputed waters, which include recent missile and fighter jet deployments by China in the Paracel island chain.

Hishammuddin said he would also meet with authorities in Vietnam and the Philippines as, if reports on China’s military expansion were true, Malaysia “cannot act alone in stopping the aggressive actions”.

“We need the support of other Asean countries, and I will continue to [seek that support]”, Hishammuddin said. “This is important for us to maintain balance and to curb the actions by superpowers, whether it is China or the United States.”

US, Brunei Mull New Military Partnership

Brunei and the United States are eyeing a new defense partnership linking the sultanate’s military with the U.S. national guard.

According to Major General Mark Dillon, vice-commander of the U.S. Pacific Air Forces, Brunei has expressed interest in joining the State Partnership Program (SPP), a U.S. program which links

a National Guard of one of America's 50 states with the armed forces or equivalent in a partner country.

The news comes as Brunei, one of four Southeast Asian claimants in the South China Sea disputes – along with Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam – is struggling to adequately fund its defense needs as its economy suffers with low oil prices.

The U.S. commander also said that fellow ASEAN member states Malaysia and Laos are also keen to participate, which would further the U.S. military's goal of boosting its relationships with Southeast Asia.

Currently, the SPP comprises 70 partnerships, with just eight under the U.S. Pacific Command. These include five ASEAN countries – Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam – along with Bangladesh, Mongolia, and Tonga.

Under the program, the Army National Guard (ARNG) in a state and the partner country engage in regular interactions designed to facilitate greater awareness, capacity-building, and greater interoperability. With the exchanges generally involving the same ARNG personnel annually and the ARNG units being made of individuals from both civilian and military professions, the SPP program is seen as being an important way to foster relationships with regional states and promote U.S. objectives.

WEST ASIA

Brig Ranjit Singh

IRAQ

Cleansing Operations Continue in Ramadi: Post capture of Ramadi in Dec last year, cleansing operations continues in the outskirts of Ramadi to eliminate terrorists still holding on in various locations. Iraqi forces killed 15 ISIS elements west of Ramadi and 78 ISIS elements were killed in western Anbar Province.

Operations Continue for Liberation of Fallujah: The Iraqi Forces continue operations for liberation of Fallujah. In the ongoing operations, 40 ISIS elements were killed in liberation of two areas East of Fallujah and security forces killed another 18 ISIS elements in east of Fallujah.

ISIS Executed 20 of its Fighters Refusing to take Part in Operations in Mosul:

Operations in Sinjar by KDP Workers: During the month, KDP workers killed 43 ISIS elements in two separate incidents in Sinjar.

Security Forces Continue Operations in Mosul: 12 ISIS elements were killed in Arty shelling by Peshmerga Forces north of Mosul.

Comments: Post Liberation of Ramadi, the Iraqi security forces are progressing operations to capture areas around Ramadi from ISIS, progressing operations towards Fallujah. The operations launched to liberate Fallujah continue to progress slowly.

The financial crunch faced by ISIS has impacted the morale of ISIS elements leading to refusal of some of their cadres to participate in operations.

SYRIA

Russia begins withdrawing forces from Syria: In a surprise move, Russia has started withdrawing its forces from Syria. The announcement came as UN sponsored Syria peace talks resumed in Geneva. The decision was supposedly taken in consultation with Syrian Govt. Russia has announced that they have achieved all the stated objectives. Russia will maintain an Aviation Support Centre to monitor compliance of ongoing cessation of hostilities.

Progress of Syria Peace Talks: As per the UN envoy, the peace talks in Geneva are progressing calmly; there is no breakthrough but no break down as well. The opposition has blamed the Govt of dragging its feet and not serious about political transition. The fate of President Assad is a major sticking point as the Gulf countries insist that he should go.

Comments: Russia has pulled out of Syrian conflict supposedly after putting Assad in a position of advantage in the negotiating table. Keeping in view its fragile economy, Russia would not like to undertake prolonged operations in Syria.

The UN sponsored peace process could get stalled due to the complexity of the role for President Assad in any future dispensation.

YEMEN

Parts of city of Taiz liberated from Houthi rebels: In a significant development, the Govt forces have succeeded in liberating western suburbs of city of Taiz from Houthi rebels, thus ending the

siege for over a year now. The liberated areas include the road connecting the city to Aden. The humanitarian aid has started arriving in the liberated areas of the city.

Yemen forces liberate key cities in Marib and Shabwa Provinces: The Govt forces have liberated two important cities in Marib and Shabwa Provinces and regained control of oil and gas resources in these areas.

Yemen in the final stage of battle: Reliable sources have reported that the Govt forces are at the threshold of fighting final battle to free the capital city of Sana'a. Some reports are suggesting that there may be no requirement of launching a major offensive. It appears that some sort of an agreement has been reached between the Govt and Houthi rebels.

Comments: The recent reports from reliable sources suggest that some sort of agreement has been arrived between the Hadi Govt and Houthi rebels, which could bring an end to the ongoing struggle for power by the former ruler Selah. However, nothing can be said unless the violence comes to an end.

The liberation of parts of city of Taiz and road connecting the city of Aden has paved way for rushing the much needed humanitarian aid to the city of Taiz.

RUSSIA

Col Anadi Dhaundiyal

Russian Force Withdrawl from Syria: On 15 Mar 2016, Mr Vladamir Putin ordered withdrawl of Russian Forces from Syria.

Russia has, in 160 days, carried out more than 9,000 flights as well as strikes with both air- and sea-based cruise missiles. Russia also aimed to significantly hinder resource support for terrorists by intercepting the oil trade. Air Force destroyed 209 facilities for producing, processing and transferring fuel, as well as 2,912 petroleum product delivery vehicles. It blocked the main routes of weapons and ammunition deliveries from Turkey.

The terrorists have been driven out of Latakia, land routes have been restored with Aleppo.

Russia has helped to clear most of the provinces of Hama and Homs, unblock the Kweires airbase, and establish control over oil and gas fields near Palmyra: as of now, three large fields have begun to operate steadily.

In total, with the support of the Russian Air Force, Syrian troops have liberated 400 towns and over 10,000 square kilometers of territory, thus achieving a significant turning point in the fight against international terrorism.

Russia's naval base in Tartus and its air base at Hmeymim will function as before. This part of the Russian military group has been in Syria for a number of years, and will continue to fulfill its role in monitoring the ceasefire and creating conditions for the peace process.

Redeployment: Russia, on 16 Mar 16 has said that it may redeploy forces back in Syria, on a short notice, if required.

Comments: Russian Forces created conditions for the start of the peace process. Their stand, which erstwhile was not heard, was considered and therefore enabled the peace process to move forward.

Indian Stakes in Russian Oil Fields: Indian Oil Corp, Oil India and Bharat Petroleum on Wednesday signed an agreement to buy stakes in Russia's Taas-Yuriakh oil field in

East Siberia for about \$1.28 billion (about Rs 8,750 crore). The three firms will equally split the 29.9% they bought from Rosneft in Taas-Yuriah oilfield. Taas-Yuriah oilfield which currently produces 20,000 barrels per day, officials said. The field has proven reserves of 137 million tons and output will reach 100,000 bpd in two years.

They also signed Heads of Agreements for buying 23.9% in Vankor oilfield in Siberia.

A separate MoU was also inked by ONGC Videsh Ltd with Rosneft taking additional 11% in Vankor oil field in addition to 15% it bought in September last year (for \$1.26 billion).

IOC, OIL and Bharat Petro Resources Ltd (BPRL), a unit of BPCL, will after buying 29.9% stake in Taas-Yuriakh also pay \$180 million as their share of future capex.

They also signed MoU with Rosneft for possible stake in Vankor Cluster fields.

Comments: More than \$4 billion worth deals are good news for the Russian cash strapped economy, while the Indian companies are taking the Indo- Russian strategic relationship to new economic levels.

Nadezhda Savchenko Trial: Ukrainian pilot Nadezhda Savchenko, in June 2014, reported the location of Russian journalists to Ukrainian troops, according to the Russian prosecution counsel. Kiev forces shelled the area, killing two reporters and other civilians. Ukrainian Air Force officer Nadezhda Savchenko is currently on trial in Russia on charges of murder and illegal border crossing. US President Barack Obama, urged Putin to release Savchenko during a telephone conversation earlier this week.

Comments: For info only. Russia has said that Minsk agreement, on the ceasefire in eastern Ukraine, do not cover such cases as killing press representatives.

Oil Producers Countries Meeting: 17 oil producing countries are meeting on 17 Apr 2016 at Doha in order to freeze escalation of oil production. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait will join a meeting of producers from within and outside OPEC. Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak, speaking to reporters in Moscow, said that 15 countries have confirmed they'll participate and that Iran is willing to join in. The proposed freeze is to "put a floor under oil prices."

Comments. Declines in U.S. shale output are contributing more to the rise in oil prices than talks between major crude-exporting nations on a potential production freeze. Iran may not participate in any accord until its output has recovered as it will seek to increase production after the end of economic sanctions.

IRAN

Capt (IN) Ranjit Seth

Nuclear Deal Benefiting Iranian economy: Iran's economy is expected to grow at a faster clip in 2016, as the lifting of international sanctions helps to counter weak oil prices, Iran's Statistical Centre announced last week. The economy has remained buoyant since Tehran achieved a historic nuclear accord with six world powers last July. The deal, which sought to curb Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief, came into force in January.

President Barack Obama addressed the Iranian people in his annual video message marking Nowruz, the Persian New Year. He said the benefits of the Iranian nuclear deal are "undeniable" although it may still take time for people to begin enjoying them. He further said that the deal makes it possible for Iran to rejoin the global economy through increased trade and investment, creating jobs and opportunities for Iranians to sell their goods around the world. The U.S. still has

"profound differences" with Iran, but the President feels the fact that the countries are talking regularly for the first time in decades could help solve them.

"Iran's economic growth slowed down in 2015 but domestic and international predictions indicate that growth in 2016 will be beyond 5%," Iranian central bank chief Valiollah Seif said earlier this month.

The World Bank predicted in January that Iran's economy would grow by 5.8% this year. Growth is expected to reach 6.7% in 2017 before easing back down to 6% the year after that.

"A rebounding Iranian economy will affect neighboring countries within the Middle East and North Africa to varying degrees," the World Bank said in January. "A rapid rise in Iranian oil production would dampen growth prospects in oil-exporting countries and improve them in oil-importing countries."

The pick-up in growth is necessary for the Iranian economy as it remains well below what the country needs to fight unemployment, and inflation currently stands above 10%. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said last month that his country needs growth of around 8% in order to reach broader macroeconomic goals.

Iran's oil industry is expected to be a major linchpin of the country's growth efforts. The country's oil exports reached 1.55 million barrels per day in January, a more than 9% increase over the previous month and the highest level since March 2014. The Iranians are currently in the process of ramping up oil production to at least 4 million barrels per day in an effort to reclaim lost market share. Last month Iranian oil reached Europe for the first time since 2012.

Iran is unlikely to join regional and global producers in freezing crude production. Iranian oil minister Bijan Zanganeh said last week that Iran would not consider curbing output below 4 million barrels per day.

Iran, Russia and Syrian truce: Foreign ministers of Iran and Russia recently discussed the latest developments in Syria, particularly the implementation of a sustainable ceasefire in the crisis-hit country. They called for constant bilateral consultations and closer coordinated efforts to help promote the ceasefire that has largely been holding in Syria over the past weeks. They stressed the need for a stable political process, the dispatch of humanitarian aid and the fight against terrorist groups.

The ceasefire, brokered by Russia and the US, came into force across Syria on February 27. It is supported by the Syrian government and dozens of militant groups on the ground. Daesh and al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front terrorist groups are excluded from the ceasefire. The Syrian government and the Saudi-backed opposition concluded a week of UN-backed peace talks in Geneva, Switzerland, in a diplomatic push to resolve the deadly crisis gripping the Arab country since 2011.

It is estimated that the Syria conflict has claimed over 470,000 lives, injured 1.9 million others, and displaced nearly half of the pre-war population of about 23 million.

AFGHANISTAN

Capt (In) Ranjit Seth

In Afghanistan security forces are battling with a resurgent Taliban. The U.S. military command in Kabul has even sent a brigadier general to Helmand province in the south to coordinate the fighting, as Taliban forces continue to push the Afghan army and police out of key districts and direct the rebuilding of the Afghan army's battered 215th Corps, which has been torn up by months of constant fighting and a corrupt and incompetent leadership structure.

Seen against the backdrop of a planned reduction of U.S. forces by the end of this year, drawing down from 9,800 to about 5,500, it is causing anxiety in Afghan the defence establishment. That drawdown has plenty of critics, however. Chief among them is recently retired commander of the NATO mission in Afghanistan, Gen. John Campbell, who throughout his tenure made the case for slowing troop drawdown plans and expanding the role of U.S. advisers on the ground.

Gen Campbell had requested the US govt to allow U.S. warplanes to start hitting Taliban targets, something they've been precluded from doing for the past year. This is presents a stark choice for President Barack Obama in the waning days of his administration: open up the air war and keep more troops in the country, or put his faith in the Afghan forces to be able to hold the line. On March 15, five influential Republican leaders in the House of Representatives sent a letter to Obama encouraging him to let the bombs fly against the Taliban.

Further the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joseph Dunford, stated to the Senate Armed Services Committee on Thursday: "We're in the process of making recommendations to the president for changes that might be made to make us more effective in supporting Afghan forces in 2016 and making them more successful."

He stated that the situation in Afghanistan is challenging and added that assessments by the current commander in the country -- Army Gen. John W. Nicholson Jr. -- and the previous commander -- Army Gen. John F. Campbell -- are realistic and that the Taliban remain a threat.

AFRICA

Brig Jai Singh Yadav, VSM

Africa's Super Sunday : Five major elections:

There are five major votes have taken place on the African continent on last Sunday Mar 20.

Zanzibar election re-run for the islands' government

Senegal referendum on reducing presidential terms

Benin presidential run-off

Niger presidential run-off

Congo-Brazzaville presidential election

The results of last year's elections on Tanzania's semi-autonomous Zanzibar islands were controversially annulled after the opposition presidential candidate declared himself the winner.

In Senegal, the referendum is on President Macky Sall's proposal to alter the constitution so that the length of future presidential mandates are reduced from seven to five years.

In Benin, the race to succeed Thomas Boni Yayi is between Prime Minister Lionel Zinsou and a top businessman Patrice Talon in the second round run-off vote.

In the first round there was only a small difference in the votes that the two men got.

Congo-Brazzaville presidential election, brings up an ongoing theme of elections across the continent recently - third terms.

The constitution didn't allow President Denis Sassou to run for the job because he has already won two terms.

But in October the country voted to change that. Mr Nguesso, is one of Africa's longest-serving rulers, first coming to power in 1979.

The second round of the Niger presidential election takes place on Sunday 20 March, and the result may have implications for regional stability and the fight against Islamist terrorism in West Africa.

Incumbent President Mahamadou Issoufou looks set to secure a second term in office, as opposition candidate Hama Amadou has been evacuated from prison to France for specialized medical treatment just days before the run-off, raising concerns over the poll.

Niger is seen as a key ally in the fight against Boko Haram, and President Issoufou has been praised in the West for rallying neighbouring countries to fight the group.

Hundreds of al-Shabab fighters 'surrounded' in Puntland:

The authorities in Somalia's semi-autonomous region of Puntland say the military has surrounded 250 fighters from the Islamist group al-Shabab.

Puntland's Vice President Abdihakim Abdullahi Haji Omar Amey told BBC Somali that the militants were trapped in a valley, with no food to eat.

He said some had tried to escape but had been either killed or captured.

Al-Shabab has had bases in Puntland for several years.

Last year, a splinter group in the area declared allegiance to so-called Islamic state.

Most of al-Shabab is allied to al-Qaeda.

AFP

CYBER SECURITY

Kazakhstan Parliamentary Elections

Air Cmde T Chand (Retd)

Voting for Parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan took place on 20 Mar 2016. There were 234 candidates who contested for 98 seats in the 107-seat lower house of parliament, or Mazhilis, with the remaining nine seats designated by the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan. Main election issues included: managing Islamic revivalism; expanding the development of the country's vast energy resources and exporting them to world markets; diversifying the economy outside the oil, gas, and mining sectors; enhancing Kazakhstan's economic competitiveness; major deposits of petroleum, natural gas, coal, iron ore, manganese, chrome ore, nickel, cobalt, copper, molybdenum, lead, zinc, bauxite, gold, uranium.

The results of the parliamentary elections indicate.