

ENVIRONMENT SCAN – 16 MAR 2015

UNITED STATES Gp Capt GD Sharma, VSM (Retd)

US Issues a Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Sea Power. On 13 March 15, US issued a revised strategy for the 21st Century sea power. This strategy is a follow-up of the US strategy of the same name issued in 2007 which had radically shifted the thrust area of US strategy from the cold war era to the new realities of the nineties consequent to the breakup of the Soviet Union but, it had attracted criticism as it did not lay down the detailed action plan to achieve the stated purpose in the strategy. The current strategy has removed this anomaly and to accomplish its aim it has decided that US Navy and Marine corps would maintain a combined strength of more than 300 ships including 11 aircraft carrier, 14 ballistic missile submarines and 33 amphibious ships, while the Coast guard must maintain fleet of 91 ships / fast response cutters / offshore patrol vessels. It also indicates that Navy will maintain a forward presence of 120 ships by 2020 instead of average 97 ships in 2014.

The maritime strategy presents a combined US naval force Navy, Marine Force and Coast guard which will operate jointly to accomplish its naval missions. The revised policy claims to take in account the current geopolitical changes in various regions across the world, military challenges as well as, it has been drawn by taking in account the lower budgets for the armed forces. The challenges posed by the Chinese rise in the Asia pacific region to the littoral states is sought to be met by enhanced Naval offensive capacity as well as by building and sustaining the regional capacity of the littoral states. By 2020, 60% of the naval ships and aircraft will be based in the Asia – pacific region. Similarly, in Middle East which is strategically vital, United States will enhance the number of ships from 30 to 40 ships.

India too relatively being a major Naval power in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), realizes the need to play a proactive role of a security provider in the region in collaboration with the island nations which will help in maintaining an environment for mutual growth and development of all stakeholders and as well as ward off the undesired interference and power play by the outlier states from the region. This was well articulated by our Prime Minister during his recent visit of three island nations (Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka) in the Indian Ocean region. It is

precisely in this role US wants India as its partner. Future therefore beholds a closer coordination between the Navies of both countries.

AFGHANISTAN

Capt (IN) Ranjit Seth

Seven Killed in East Afghanistan in US Drone Strike. Colonel Mohammad Ayub Hussainkhel, a border police official in eastern zone, said that seven Taliban militants, including a commander, were killed in the air raid that struck Nangarhar's Lal Pur district on Saturday.

The US-led combat mission in Afghanistan ended on December 31, 2014. However, about 13,500 foreign forces, mainly from the United States, will remain in Afghanistan in what is said to be a support mission.

Afghan Army Ops Kill 9 Militants. On 12 Mar Afghan army launched cleanup operations in Wardak, Ghazni, Kandahar and Nangarhar provinces over two, killing nine armed militants and injuring several others. A total of four army soldiers also lost their lives in enemy's heavy weapon fire and roadside bomb attacks over the same period. The army specialists also found and defused 74 roadside bombs and landmines, in addition to recovering a huge weapon cache.

President Ghani Visits Saudi Arabia, March 14, 2015. President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani left for a scheduled visit to Saudi Arabia on Saturday. He performed Umrah and prayed for the peace and stability of Afghanistan as well as the improvement of unity between Afghans.

This is the third visit of President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani to Saudi Arabia after the formation of the National Unity Government in September last year. One of the two previous visits he made to Saudi Arabia was to attend Hajj and the second one was made to offer condolences to Saudi nation for the death of King Abdullah.

The purpose of the latest visit of President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani is not announced but discussions on strengthening bilateral relationship with Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the new king of Saudi Arabia following the death of King Abdullah would be most likely. Further this visit is taking place amid the ongoing efforts of the peace talks between Taliban and the government in which Saudi Arabia and OIC could play a key role.

Few Signs of Peace Talks as Afghan Fighting Season Nears. Conflicting claims by Afghan officials and the Taliban in recent days have added to the confusion and uncertainty plaguing 'peace and reconciliation' efforts in war-torn Afghanistan.

The murky situation about prospects of a peace dialogue raises fears the country could witness another bloody year when the traditional Afghan spring fighting season begins.

Officials in Afghanistan and Pakistan have in recent statements said that peace talks between the Afghan government and the Islamist insurgent group could begin sometime in March. However the Taliban has rejected the claims and rubbished rumours that Pakistan was playing a role in facilitating the dialogue.

Meanwhile there have also been reports of a Taliban delegation visiting Islamabad recently for secret talks with Pakistani officials and Chinese diplomats on how to further the peace process. President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah are among the Afghan officials who have publicly discussed efforts to open peace talks with the Taliban. Several days ago Pakistan's national security adviser, Sartaj Aziz, said efforts aimed at pushing the Afghan peace and reconciliation process are progressing.

But Davood Moradian, director general of the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies, suggested that the prolonged conflict has caused a rift among the Taliban ranks and the dialogue may not produce the desired results. Skeptics of the process and critics of the talks suggest that the Taliban's refusal to acknowledge contacts with Afghan and other stakeholders for possible talks could be an attempt to dismiss suggestions of division within its ranks.

MIDDLE EAST

Col RS Kang

ISIS Rolled Back in Syria and Iraq as US-led Coalition Ramps up Airstrikes and Regional Forces Recapture Strategic Hotspots. Aggressive ground assaults aided by a flurry of Coalition airstrikes have forced ISIS from its territory in Syria and Iraq. 10 separate bombardments in a 24-hour period helped Kurdish and Christian fighters recapture a strategic village from the militants in north-eastern Syria. A joint force of Christian and Kurdish soldiers have now seized control of Tal-Maghas in Syria's Al-Hasakah province.

Previously under Islamic State's tyrannical control, the village which lies just 200km east of its adopted capital of Raqqa gave them an easy supply route into neighbouring Iraq. Syria's main Kurdish force the People's Protection Unit (YPG) called for air support in the region on Friday following weeks of intense ground fighting which killed dozens on both sides. Airstrikes since the request have struck one of Islamic State's tactical units and destroyed a 'fighting position', the US military has revealed.

Iraq is Reportedly 'One Week Away' from Taking Back the City of Tikrit. A 20,000-strong force in Iraq is reportedly 'one week away' from taking back the city of Tikrit - former President Saddam Hussein's home town. While in Iraq, four separate strikes took out a 'large fighting unit', two tactical units, four buildings and vehicles near the northern city of Kirkuk. Soldiers on the ground have had to pause their charge through the ISIS-held city of Tikrit as they wait for reinforcements. Despite taking areas to the north and south, Islamic State fighters still hold about half the city, have booby-trapped buildings and laid roadside bombs making it a death-trap to traverse. The pro-government force desperate to drive the extremists out of the city comprises 3,000 Iraqi troops, 20,000 militiamen and smaller factions of tribesmen.

One militia group's leader said ISIS still hold about 70 per cent of Tikrit's town centre but they would 'liberate' it even if street-to-street fighting was needed. Taking Tikrit could be a major turning point in the war against ISIS. The city was a stepping stone to other ISIS-held territory which includes the country's second largest city Mosul. The liberation of this city [Tikrit] and province will serve as a launch pad for reclaiming the north and the west of Iraq.

Kirkuk. ISIS is also on the back foot in northern Iraq where militia forces and Kurdish Peshmerga stepped up their offensive on the oil-rich city of Kirkuk on Friday. They began attacking the militants' positions near the city on Monday and have since retaken territory and a number of villages to the south-west. Kurdish commanders said they faced weak resistance but were held up by home-made bombs the extremists laid in the city before retreating to their stronghold of Hawijah.

BANGLADESH

Col Amit Sinha

India Proposes Anti-Terror Pact with Bangladesh. Months after a blast in Burdwan blew the lid of a thriving network of Bangladeshi terror outfit Jamaa-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh, Home

Secretary Shri L C Goyal has proposed an anti terror pact with the Eastern Neighbour, envisaging a structured mechanism for exchange of terror information and updates.

During the Indo-Bangladesh Home Secretary level talks in New Delhi on February 16 and 17, Mr Goyal handed over to his counterpart Md Mozammel Haque Khan a list of 39 camps of Indian Insurgents still operating out of Bangladesh territory.

Seeking a crackdown on the camps of ULFA, NDFB, National Liberation Front of Tripura and United National Liberation Front (Manipur) etc, concentrated in the Chittagong region. The Indian side is believed to have provided Bangladesh with their detailed coordinates.

The proposed Indo Bangladesh anti terror pact seeks to boost security ties between the two countries through regular exchange of terror information and intelligence on short term / long term threats, joint investigation of terror cases with cross country linkages (including one related to JMB activities), coordinated counter terror action as well as exchange of training and best counter terror practices. The formalization of the agreement will also pave the way for enhanced cooperation between Indian and Bangladeshi agencies to check terror financing and circulation of counterfeit currency.

Meanwhile the Mr Goyal updated his counterpart on the status of the ratification of the Indo Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement. A Constitutional amendment bill is expected to be taken up in the coming session of the Parliament for consideration and passage. Even as the bill is piloted in Parliament, the Home Ministry is working on rehabilitating the nearly 3,500 Indians now settled in enclaves in Bangladesh but who plan to cross over to the Indian side as and when the enclaves are swapped.

Mamata Meets PM of Bangladesh Discusses Teesta Deal & LBA. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has told Bangladesh that breakthroughs will be achieved in the Teesta water sharing deal and the Land Boundary Agreement, which have been hanging fire since she blocked them four years ago. Meeting Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina exclusively for half an hour at the end of her three-day visit here on Saturday, Ms. Banerjee said the Land Boundary Agreement was likely to go through in the Rajya Sabha session beginning February-end. Ms. Banerjee, who was served hilsa for lunch at the Prime Minister's official residence, Ganabhaban, said the famed fish was now unavailable in West Bengal. "You give us water, we will give you hilsa," Ms. Hasina quipped. The Prime Minister reminded her of the problems being faced by the people living in the

enclaves, referring to the delay in the ratification of the Land Boundary Agreement. Ms. Banerjee said she had seen their problems.

In 2011, she stalled the two deals on the ground that West Bengal's interests would be affected. The Bangladeshi leadership hopes Ms. Banerjee's visit will pave the way for a solution. On Friday, addressing a gathering in Dhaka, she asked the Bangladeshis to repose faith in her to deliver a settlement to the Teesta issue. She said she wanted to act as "a bridge" between the two countries. The Chief Minister visited Dhaka with 39 people, mostly from West Bengal's cultural fraternity and including two Ministers and big businessmen. Before visiting Ms. Hasina's residence, Ms. Banerjee paid tributes to the Bengali language martyrs by placing a wreath at the Central Shaheed Minar in Dhaka.

Comments. The steps taken by India and Bangladesh augur well for peace and stability in the region. The visit of the West Bengal Chief Minister to Bangladesh would have further reinforced Government of India's willingness to resolve the outstanding issues India and Bangladesh.

Khaleda Determined to Topple Government. Bangladesh's opposition leader Khaleda Zia vowed on Friday i.e., on 13 March 2015 to push on with her campaign to topple the government as she struck a defiant note in her first public appearance since being effectively confined to her office.

While Zia remains holed up at her headquarters in Dhaka, authorities allowed her to address the media for the first time since she called for anti-government protests and a transport blockade at the turn of the year, sparking a wave of violence that has killed more than 110 people. Khaleda, a two-time former premier, used the press conference to lash out at the current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina whom she accused of turning the country into a one-party state by refusing her calls for new polls.

"They have effectively created a one-party system in the country," said the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader who refused to take part in elections in 2014 over fears they would be rigged. "If we don't fight against it, our freedom will be at stake... Our protests will continue until they reach logical conclusion. "This crisis will end only after an inclusive election is organized quickly under a neutral and non-party government," she added.

Comments. Bangladesh is heading towards a downward spiral with regard to development, peace, stability and economy with violence not abating. Despite international pressured, Bangladesh is not seeing the writing on the wall. It is high time that egos of both the ruling as well as the opposition parties are set aside to finding solution to this impasse.

Xenophobia Time Bomb on Illegal Bangladeshi Immigrants. The issue of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants aka IBIs in the Northeast is a ticking bomb. And after Assam, Nagaland is on the boil over the issue. The unseemly facet of the anti-illegal immigrants sentiments brewing in the state came to the fore last week when a 10,000-strong mob lynched a Bengali Muslim from Assam, accused of raping a Naga girl. The irony, of course, was that the mob had mistaken him for a Bangladeshi immigrant. There is a growing perception in the Northeast that all Muslims, who speak Bengali, are Bangladeshis. When Khan was arrested after the girl's family filed a complaint, even the cops had dubbed him an IBI, a recently-coined term increasingly used by all and sundry in the state to refer to Bengali Muslims.

Dimapur is state's largest town and commercial hub. The Nagas say the Bengali-speaking Muslims constitute at least 10 to 15 per cent of the town's five lakh-strong population. This excludes the floating population of Bengali-speaking Muslims. The retail trade here is controlled by Bengali Muslims, who also have a sizeable presence across the state. Nagaland is one of the "protected" states in India and it is mandatory for any Indian citizen to obtain an official document called Inner Line Permit (ILP) to enter the state. But the ILP is not needed to visit or stay in Dimapur. Nagas say this has largely contributed to the influx of immigrants.

Comments. The issue of illegal immigration by Bangladeshi's be checked and measured put in place to ensure that the issue does not spiral out of hand and permeate to other North Eastern States.

India's Reliance Group Plans Four LNG Based Power Plants in Bangladesh. Anil Ambani led Reliance Group has shown interest in setting up four LNG based power plants in Bangladesh, United News of Bangladesh (UNB) reported Friday. The Indian firm has proposed to invest \$3 billion to set up the four power plants which will have a combined generating capacity of 3,000 megawatt.

"Initially the Reliance Group will invest \$1.5 billion and it would be gradually doubled," Prime Minister's Energy Advisor Dr Tawfiq-e-Elahi told journalists on Thursday, reported UNB. A meeting to undertake coordinated steps to examine the proposal was held at the PMO today with Dr Tawfiq-e-Elahi in the chair.

There are two proposed locations--one in Moheshkhali and another in Meghnaghat--to set up the power plants. Reliance Group will build a floating LNG terminal and will import LNG to supply it to the power plants.

Comments. This is a positive development as this will aid in meeting the power requirement in Bangladesh as well as to the North Eastern states of India. In addition, it would also provide employment to the people residing in those areas.

MYANMAR

Gp Capt GD Sharma, VSM (Retd)

Myanmar Air Force Targets Kokang Rebels in Chinese Yunnan Border Province. Myanmar has achieved truce and reconciliation with 10 to 11 warring tribal factions but, the mandarin speaking Kokang faction which essentially is of Chinese origin, has not come to terms with Thein Sein regime. It seeks autonomy and are fighting the government forces. In the ongoing fight, recently Myanmar's MiG-29 fighter plane flew over a Chinese village in the border province of Yunnan and bombed a house believed to be a safe haven for the Kokang rebels. Chinese government expressed its displeasure and asked Myanmar to take effective measures to prevent such incidents. However, another air strike next day has resulted in death of four Chinese civilians. This has infuriated the Chinese and Myanmar was warned of reprisal.

The fighting has been triggered with return of rebel leader PhoneKya Shin after five years of exile in China. Myanmar also accuses former Chinese soldiers of training the rebels - an allegation denied by the rebels. China has also rejected any links with the rebels.

The incident points at deteriorating relations between China and Myanmar and also reflects a greater confidence of Myanmar which after the last election, has been gradually democratizing and also ushering economic reforms. This in effect has resulted in softening of the western economic sanctions. Therefore, unlike the yesteryears, Myanmar is not captive to Chinese influence and gradually moving away. Several incidence earlier like cancelling of Chinese dam over Irrawaddy in deference to the adverse public opinion, opposition to the rail / gas pipeline from Sitwe to Yunnan region point at lessening of Chinese influence over Myanmar.