

ENVIRONMENT SCAN: 16 MAR 2017

China (MARITIME), China (Continental), Pakistan, Bangladesh, Srilanka, Nepal, Afganistan, Russia, Maldives

CHINA (CONTINENTAL)

Brig Jai Singh Yadav, VSM

China Fills up US Gap, Hosts Af-Taliban for Peace Talks. China hosted a delegation of Afghan Taliban leaders recently as part of its efforts to encourage the militant group to join the peace process in Afghanistan.

The five-member delegation, led by Afghan Taliban's Qatar office chief Sher Abbas Stanikzai, included Maulvi Shahabuddin Dilawar, Jan Muhammad Madani, Salam Hanafi and Saleh. "The visit was part of the relations of the political office with European countries such as Norway, Germany, France, Britain as well as neighbouring nations," a Taliban source said. "These relations are focused on bringing about peace in Afghanistan and resolving it through negotiations."

"Being a world power, China is a main stakeholder and wants to play its role for peace and stability in Afghanistan. That is why it invited Taliban," a leader said. The Taliban trip last month came days after a trilateral meeting of diplomats from China, Pakistan and Russia in Moscow supported lifting of sanctions on Taliban leaders.

Chinese special envoy to Afghanistan, Deng Xijun, visited Kabul recently and met President Ashraf Ghani. Deng told Ghani that China has "encouraged the Taliban during our contacts with them to join the peace process". Experts said that China had been trying to promote peace and stability in Afghanistan in view of the vacuum that had emerged in the country due to the subsequent failure and confusion in the US-Afghan policy.

Why China Staged a Fresh Display of Military Might in Xinjiang.

China has staged a fresh display of military might in its western Xinjiang region, sending more than 10,000 armed police, columns of armoured vehicles and helicopters rumbling through the regional capital.

A government news website published reports and photos of Monday's exercise in the city of Urumqi, where the region's recently installed Communist Party Secretary exhorted soldiers to "bury the corpses of terrorists" in a new people's war. The rally complete with circling helicopters and armoured vehicles, was at least the fourth such mass display in the region this year, intended as a show of force after a recent uptick in violence.

People's Armed Police (PAP) and military helicopters, as well as 10 civilian aircraft, carried the forces as part of an "all new" air-land mechanism that would bring high-speed armed helicopter patrols anywhere over Xinjiang's vast and rugged territory, a notice posted to the Ministry of Defence's website said. It did not give further details on the patrols.

Uighur ISIS Fighters Vow Blood will "Flow in Rivers" in China. Vowing to plant their flag in China and that blood will "flow in rivers", a video released last week purportedly by the Islamic State group shows ethnic Uighur fighters training in Iraq, underscoring what Beijing sees as a serious threat. The video was released the same day that China held the latest in a series of mass rallies of military police in Xinjiang meant to indicate Chinese resolve in crushing security threats.

Comments. The experts have up to now expressed doubts about the strength of Uighur militants; with some saying China exaggerates the threat to justify tough security measures. A US think tank said that tough Chinese religious restrictions on Muslims may have driven more than 100 to join the Islamic State.

China to Launch Space Rockets from Airplanes. China will develop rockets that can be launched into space from aircraft, a senior official told the state run 'China Daily' newspaper, as Beijing aims to send hundreds of satellites into orbit for military, commercial and scientific purposes.

China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology has designed a solid-fuel rocket that could carry a 100kg payload into low earth orbit, said Li Tongyu, head of the agency's carrier rocket development.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has prioritised advancing China's space programme, saying it was needed to enhance national security and defence, although its progress lags behind the United States and Russia.

Li said the rockets would be carried by large Y-20 transport planes and that the academy planned to eventually develop a rocket that could carry a 200kg payload. "The rocket will be ignited after

it leaves the plane," Li said. Rockets launched from aircraft have the benefit of getting a quick and precise launch, without scheduling issues and other weather-related delays.

Chinese state media said last month China planned to launch its first cargo space craft in April, taking a step towards its goal of establishing a permanently manned space station by 2022.

US missile shield in S Korea irks Beijing The US deployed its anti-missile defence system in South Korea on Tuesday after North Korea's test of four ballistic missiles, despite opposition from China.

The announcement came as North Korean state media said leader Kim Jongun had supervised Monday's missile launches that was positioned to strike US bases in Japan. "Continued provocative actions by North Korea only confirm the prudence of our alliance decision last year to deploy THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defence) to South Korea," US Pacific Commander Admiral Harry Harris said. The move is likely to deepen the brewing conflict between South Korea and China, which says the THAAD deployment destroys the regional security balance.

US President Donald Trump and Japanese PM Shinzo Abe discussed the launches by nuclear-armed North. "(North Korea's) threat has entered a new phase," Abe said.

CHINA (MARITIME)

Capt (IN) Ranjit Seth

South China Sea. Japan plans to dispatch its largest warship on a three-month tour through the South China Sea beginning in May. The Izumo helicopter carrier, commissioned only two years ago, will make stops in Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka before joining the Malabar joint naval exercise with Indian and U.S. naval vessels in the Indian Ocean in July. It will return to Japan in August.

The 249 meter-long Izumo can operate up to nine helicopters. It resembles the amphibious assault carriers used by US Marines, but lacks their well deck for launching landing craft and other vessels. It has been designated as a destroyer because the Japanese constitution forbids the acquisition of offensive weapons. The Izumo's primary mission is anti-submarine warfare.

China claims almost all the disputed waters and its growing military presence has fuelled concern in Japan and the West, with the United States holding regular air and naval patrols to ensure

freedom of navigation. China in January said it had "irrefutable" sovereignty over the disputed islands. Japan does not have any claim to the waters, but has a separate maritime dispute with China in the East China Sea.

Meanwhile China's Supreme Court has extended its maritime jurisdiction to cover all seas under the country's 'sovereign control', as China firmed up its hold over the disputed South China Sea. China will resolutely safeguard maritime rights and interests, a report of the Supreme People's Court said. China's maritime jurisdiction extends to cover all jurisdictional seas, the report said.

According to the regulation in effect since last August, jurisdictional seas not only include inland waters and territorial seas, but also cover regions, including contiguous zones, exclusive economic zones, continental shelves, and other sea areas under China's jurisdiction.

PAKISTAN

Brig Deepak Malhotra

Bill to Name Pakistan as State Sponsor of Terrorism Introduced in US Congress. An influential US Congressman introduced a strongly worded bill in Congress to declare "untrustworthy ally" Pakistan a state sponsor of terrorism. "Not only is Pakistan an untrustworthy ally, Islamabad has also aided and abetted enemies of the United States for years," said Congressman Ted Poe, who is Chair of the House Subcommittee on Terrorism. The bill requires the US President to issue a report within 90 days, answering whether Pakistan has provided support for international terrorism. Thirty days after that, the Secretary of State is required to submit a follow-up report, which says that Pakistan is a state sponsor of terrorism, or a detailed justification as to why it does not meet the legal criteria for such a designation.

Comments. The so called radical reset with Pakistan as demanded by the Congressman is unlikely to find any favour due to ongoing operations in Afghanistan by USA which requires Pakistan to be on its side, especially in view of recent Russian and Chinese forays in Afghanistan. Pakistan's name also does not figure in the recently introduced travel ban by President Donald Trump.

Pakistan Government Approves Merger of FATA with Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. Pakistan government approved the merger of Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) with the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province to bring the impoverished and politically deprived tribal region at par with the rest of the country. As per the plan the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) will be replaced and the proposed merger would be carried out over a period of five years.

Comments. The FATA reforms committee had no member belonging to FATA nor anyone had any relationship whatsoever with the region denying it the requisite credibility and legitimacy. Accordingly, the Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP), Jamiat-ulima-e-Islam (F) and majority of FATA people have strongly opposed merger of FATA into any part of Pakistan and a petition has been filed by five tribal leaders belonging to various FATA agencies.

Pak Inducts LY 80 LOMADS Air Defence System. Pakistan Army has inducted Chinese-built Low to Medium Altitude Air Defence System (LOMADS) LY-80 (HQ16A) in its air defense arsenal to increase their response capability to current and emerging air defense threats. The system is claimed to intercept an aerial flying target from a 15 m to 18 km altitude. Its maximum interception range for combat aircraft is 40km and between 3.5 km and 12 km for cruise missiles flying at an altitude of 50 meters at a speed of 300 meters/second. Pakistan had procured six LY-80 (i.e. HQ-16) surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems from China for \$373 million U.S. in the fiscal year 2014-2015.

Comments. This induction appears to be a follow-on order from the armed forces initial HQ-16 procurement, in 2013-2014 which included three HQ-16 SAM systems for \$226 million along with eight IBIS-150 radars for \$40 million.

NEPAL

Col Harpreet Singh

Anti India Protests in Nepal. A Nepalese citizen was killed in firing by SSB on the Indo-Nepal border, at Kanchanpur-LakhimpurKheri. SSB tried to stop a culvert across the Sano Kholariver when the Nepalese locals started pelting stones at SSB, which resulted in injuries to nine SSB pers, and killing of the Nepalese citizen. Subsequently there were protests outside the Indian Embassy in Nepal and more stone throwing on the SSB post causing three more injuries. NSA AjitDoval has spoken to Nepal's PM and assured of a probe into the incident.

Comments. The incident appears to be local in nature and must be diffused at the earliest by both governments

BANGLADESH

Col Saikat Roy

PM to Visit India from Apr 7 to 10. PM Sheikh Hasina will visit India from April 7 to 10 on a state visit based on an invitation extended by PM Narendra Modi. PM Hasina last visited India in

January 2010. The upcoming visit is expected to further expand the cordial and cooperative relationship between India and Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, BNP Secretary General on March 13, 2017, warned that people of Bangladesh would not accept any deal except Teesta water sharing, if it were signed during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's India tour on April 08, 2017. He urged PM Hasina to make public her agenda that will be discussed during her India visit.

Comments. The opposition claimed that BNP had been expecting to get water from Teesta River for over the last 11 years as Awami League has good relations with India. He faulted the Govt and asserted that Bangladesh is also not getting its due share of waters from the 54 common rivers with India. He decried that the Govt had further extended transit facility to use Bangladeshi ports, waterways and roads to India.

Bangladesh Yet to Give Transit Facility to any Country. Finance Minister Muhith reiterated that Bangladesh has not yet given any country the permission to carry goods through the country under transit facility. "Goods from India are being carried under trans-shipment facility of the existing Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT) between Bangladesh and India," he clarified in reply to a query in Parliament on Sunday. Bangladesh also received duty for letting India use its infrastructure. Further, the protocol facilitates trade and development not only between India and Bangladesh but in the entire sub-region promoting trade and development.

Comments. BNP is against granting India the facility to carry goods through Bangladesh. It claims the service will threaten the sovereignty of the country.

Bangladesh Starts Head Count for Rohingya Relocation. Bangladesh authorities have began a census of Rohingya refugees living in the country as part of a controversial move to relocate them to Thengar Char island in the Bay of Bengal. Dhaka estimates 400,000 Rohingya refugees are living in the country, including nearly 73,000 who fled a military crackdown across the border since October.

Comments. The idea caused an outcry when first mooted in 2015. Government officials have described it as a temporary measure and claim that refugees would have better access to humanitarian assistance. Most of the Rohingya refugees who fled to Bangladesh live in squalid conditions in refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. The government last month pushed forward with the relocation plan despite warnings that the island is prone to flooding that leaves it entirely underwater at times.

SRI LANKA

Col Saikat Roy

Two Pakistan Naval Ships Arrive at Sri Lanka Port on a Goodwill Mission. Sri Lanka Navy ceremonially welcomed two Pakistan naval ships PNS NASR and PNS SAIF arrived at the Port of Colombo Sunday March 12, 2017 on a goodwill visit. During their four-day stay in Sri Lanka, the ships' crew is scheduled to participate in several programs and sports activities organized by the Sri Lanka Navy to strengthen the mutual relationship between the two navies. The two Pakistani ships are scheduled to depart from the Colombo Harbor on 15th of this month.

Comments. Pakistan Navy Ship (PNS) SAIF is a SWORD class F22P Frigates of Chinese origin. It is equipped with state of the art weapons, sensors and machinery, making it capable of undertaking a variety of maritime operations while PNS NASR is a leading unit of Pakistani Navy Fleet's 9th Auxiliary and Mine Warfare Squadron. Both ships have taken part in a large number of the multinational exercises and PNS NASR has also extensively participated in Tsunami relief operations in 2004.

US Navy's Pacific Partnership 2017 Commences in Sri Lanka Centering Hambantota. Sri Lanka Navy, welcomed the Military Sealift Command expeditionary fast transport USNS Fall River of the US Pacific Command, which arrived at the Port of Hambantota on Tuesday Mar 7, 2017 along with Marine personnel from US, Australia and Japan onboard take part in Pacific Partnership 2017.

Pacific Partnership is the largest annual multilateral HADR preparedness mission conducted in the Indo-Asia-Pacific and aims to enhance regional coordination in areas such as medical readiness and preparedness for manmade and natural disasters. Military and civilian experts from Australia and Japan will participate in the exercise along with the United States and Sri Lanka.

Comments. The initiative is a demonstration of the state of interoperability of Sri Lanka Navy with other navies in responding to crisis situations. During its anchorage, the ship's crew together with Sri Lanka Navy is set to conduct a wide range of activities including health clinics, renovation of schools and hospitals, subject matter expert exchange, community relation projects and band performance and programs on women's role in keeping peace and security.

MALDIVES

Col Saikat Roy

Saudi Project at Faafu Atoll in Maldives. India might be faced with another security challenge in its neighbourhood with a controversy erupting in the Maldives over Abdulla Yameen government's plan to “sell” Faafu - one of the 26 natural atolls in Maldives, to Saudi Arabia.

Members of the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) has called on the Government of Saudi Arabia to disavow any and all involvement in the Faafu project and clarify whether members of the Saudi Royal Family or Saudi businessmen are involved. The Saudi Arabian embassy in Male’ recently released a statement denying the Government of Saudi Arabia was buying land in Faafu atoll. However, the statement stopped short of ruling out investments in the project from the Saudi Royal Family or Saudi government-linked businessmen.

Comments. On 1 March, President Yameen confirmed that Saudi Arabia and the Saudi Royal Family would invest in a US\$10 billion project at Faafu atoll. Yameen said the investment would resemble “mixed development projects in French Riviera” and would involve “international sea sports, mixed development, residential high-class development, many tourist resorts, many airports” and other industries. In March, Housing Minister Mohamed Muizz told foreign journalists, that people of Faafu atoll would be relocated to make way for the development. The Government has refused to provide any information on the proposed deal to a Parliamentary Committee, or engage with public concerns other than to dismiss them. Given that the government of Maldives stands accused of unprecedented levels of corruption and mired in accusations of money laundering, the government’s behavior on Faafu project has only added to public consternation and suspicion.

The decision to "sell" Faafu to Saudi Arabia would aggravate creeping Wahabism in the country. According to some international estimates, the archipelago already accounts for one of the highest numbers of foreign fighters in Syria in terms of per capita. Radicalisation in the Maldives though adds another layer to India's security concerns in the Indian Ocean, as it seeks to keep pace with growing presence of Chinese navy and Beijing's infrastructure-building activities in the region.

Maldives remains the only country in India's neighbourhood which PM Narendra Modi has avoided visiting. India has been unwilling to be seen as obtruding upon the internal affairs of Maldives, especially those related to political instability. However, it may soon be required to take a position with elections likely next year in the strategically located country in the Indian Ocean.

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

Col Saikat Roy

India's Defense Export Proposal. India's successful membership to the Missile Technology Control Regime has removed all caps on missile test ranges. Consequently, India on Saturday, March 11, 2017, tested the extended range variant of the supersonic BrahMos cruise missile from the Integrated Test Range at Chandipur, Odisha. The strike range was enhanced from 290 km to 450 km. Officials called it a successfully and 'textbook launch' executed with high precision.

Comments. In March 2016, the then Defence Minister M Parrikar expressed India's willingness to export Aakash and BrahMos missile systems along with Tejas fighter jets after Indian Air Force's needs are met.

India and Russia had agreed to export BrahMos to Vietnam, UAE, South Africa and Chile in principle.

AFGHANISTAN

Brig Deepak Malhotra

US commander in Afghanistan requests several thousand new troops. Gen John Nicholson, the commander of the US war in Afghanistan, has requested several thousand new troops for America's longest-ever conflict to break what he described as a stalemate. Gen Nicholson told a Senate panel that he was facing a shortfall of troops necessary for training Afghan forces to ultimately replace their US and Nato counterparts. One reason for the deadlock, Nicholson said, was the increasing spoiler role of Russia which was seeking to undermine the US and Nato in Afghanistan, adding that he was "concerned about the increasing level" of unspecified Russian support for Taliban insurgents.

Comments. Gen. Joseph Votel, commander of U.S. Central Command Votel has also agreed with the assessment Gen Nicholson and advised for deployment of more U.S. troops over and above the 8,500 currently in Afghanistan to assist the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces in regaining territory lost to the Taliban. President Trump has yet not responded to Nicholson's request as he has over the years publicly advocated withdrawal from Afghanistan and characterized the war as a disaster.

RUSSIA

Col Harpreet Singh

Russia Sends Forces to Egypt. Russia has deployed Special Forces at an airbase in western Egypt near the border with Libya in recent days. Russian special operations forces and drones have been seen at Sidi Barrani, about 100 km from the Egypt-Libya border. A force of several dozen armed private security contractors from Russia also operated until February in a part of Libya that is under Libyan military commander KhalifaHaftar's control.

Several Western countries, including the U.S., have sent special operations forces and military advisors into Libya over the past two years. The U.S. military also carried out air strikes to support a successful Libyan campaign last year to oust Islamic State from its stronghold in the city of Sirte.

The U.N.-backed government in Tripoli is in a deadlock with Haftar and Russian officials have met with both sides in recent months. Moscow appears prepared to back up its public diplomatic support for Haftar Russia says that its primary objective in the Middle

East is to contain the spread of violent Islamist groups. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov pledged this month to help unify Libya and foster dialogue when he met the leader of the U.N.-backed government, Fayeze Seraj.

Comments. Russian deployment might be part of a bid to support Haftar, who suffered a setback with an attack on March 3 by the Benghazi Defence Brigades (BDB) on oil ports controlled by his forces. Questions about Russia's role in North Africa coincide with growing concerns in Washington about Moscow's intentions in oil-rich Libya, which has become a patchwork of rival fiefdoms in the aftermath of a 2011 NATO-backed uprising against the late leader Muammar Gaddafi.

Russia appears to be trying to exert influence in Libya to strengthen its leverage over whoever ultimately holds power. Russia's aim in Libya appeared to be an effort to regain a toe-hold where the Soviet Union once had an ally in Gaddafi. At the same time, as in Syria, they appear to be trying to limit their military involvement and apply enough to force some resolution but not enough to leave them owning the problem. Russia's courting of Haftar, who tends to brand his armed rivals as Islamist extremists and who some Libyans see as the strongman their country needs after years of instability, appears to draw parallels with Syria, another longtime Soviet client. Though Russia was looking to back Haftar, its initial focus would likely be on Libya's "oil crescent."

The question is, why Egypt is allowing Russians to use their bases. It may be a trade off to persuade the Russians to resume flights to Egypt, which have been suspended since a Russian plane carrying 224 people from the Red Sea resort of Sharm al-Sheikh to St Petersburg was brought down by a bomb in October 2015. Also Egypt is worried about chaos spreading from its western neighbor and it has hosted a flurry of diplomatic meetings between leaders of the east and west in recent months.

Russia, meanwhile, is also deepening its relations with Egypt, which had ties to the Soviet Union from 1956 to 1972. The two countries held joint military exercises - something the U.S. and Egypt did regularly until 2011 - for the first time in October.

Russian Submarines in Gibraltar. RUSSIAN submarines have flooded the Gibraltar Strait sending British and Spanish alarm bells ringing as tensions rise between Vladimir Putin and the west. The new cold war developing between Russia and their Western enemies is becoming increasingly focused on the Mediterranean, which Vladimir Putin has been utilizing strategically due to the war in Syria. There are growing concerns about the exact actions of Russian subs as they travel past Gibraltar and the Spanish coast.

A new Russian advanced stealth submarine, dubbed a “black hole” by NATO for its ability to be undetectable, is believed to be in the Mediterranean. The diesel-electric stealth sub is believed to be the quietest in the world. It also possesses an extended combat range, and its relatively small size helps it maneuver in shallow waters. The sub carries 533 mm torpedoes and eight surface-to-air missiles, in addition to a new Caliber land attack cruise missile complex. Its tonnage is 4,000 tons; its underwater speed reaches 40 knots, and its maximal submersion is 300 meters. Its crew consists of 52 persons and it can fulfill its duty autonomously for 45 days.

Comments. There appears to be nothing the west can do to dissuade Russia from deploying its naval assets in the Mediterranean except make diplomatic noises, to which Russia is unlikely to pay heed to unless it is given some concessions, like lifting of economic sanctions.

NATO Military Build-up on Russia’s Border. Over the past four months, NATO has been flexing its muscles. It has deployed thousands of soldiers and heavy weapons along Russia’s border. The treaty alliance’s annual report calls it the largest reinforcement of collective defense since the Cold War -- and a response to Russia’s invasion of Crimea and the destabilization of Ukraine.

However, there appear to be cracks in NATO. On the campaign trail, Donald Trump said he'd be reluctant to defend countries that hadn't paid their fair share toward collective defense, and just last month Mr. Trump's new Secretary of Defense James Mattis visited NATO Headquarters with what can only be described as a mixed message. Secretary Mattis warned that America might moderate its support of the alliance if the other NATO allies fail to increase their spending. NATO guidelines say members must spend two percent of their GDP on defense. Right now only five of the 28 NATO member countries do that, including the U.S.

Moreover Turkey, a key NATO member, is warming up to Russia. Vladimir Putin has met with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Moscow. The main focus of this meeting was to discuss the mending of ties between the two countries. Erdogan's been threatening Holland and Germany in a very aggressive and confident manner. Some German MPs have called for Troop Withdrawal from Turkish Airlines Base. "I think we can abandon the word 'normalisation of relations, because we think we have already passed that stage," President Erdogan told reporters after the meeting Putin, wearing a broad smile which he did not have after another recent three hour meeting with Theresa May.

Comments. The NATO build-up is meant as both a warning, and a deterrent. But for Russia to take the deterrent seriously, NATO has to remain united. The basic pact must hold; if one country in the alliance is attacked, all the others must come to its defence. But the cracks appear to be widening especially with statements from US and Turkey.