

# ENVIRONMENT SCAN: 30 MAR 2017

**China (MARITIME),China (Continental),Pakistan, iran,Bangladesh,  
Srilanka,Nepal,Afganistan,Russia,  
Maldives,West Asia,Iraq,Syria,Yemen,United States Of America**

**CHINA (CONTINENTAL)**

**Brig Jai Singh Yadav, VSM**

China Evasive Over Involvement in Making Gilgit-Baltistan a Pakistani Province.

China on Friday evaded a direct response to its reported involvement in Pakistan's decision to declare the strategic Gilgit-Baltistan region, bordering Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), as the country's fifth province.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the flagship project in President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to achieve connectivity spanning continents, passes through Gilgit-Baltistan.

Asked to respond to reports that Beijing's concerns played a hand in Islamabad's decision to upgrade the status of the region because of the CPEC, foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying didn't give a direct response.

Repeating China's official stand on the dispute, she said: "It should be resolved between the two sides through dialogue and consultation. The CPEC will not affect China's position on the relevant issue."

India has reacted strongly to the move on Gilgit-Baltistan, saying it will not be able to hide the illegality of Pakistan's occupation of parts of Jammu and Kashmir.

Hua's statement was a repeat of China's official stand on the issue, without responding to new developments taking place in the region.

In 2016, the foreign ministry had responded to a question on Kashmir by saying: "The ownership of the Kashmir region is an issue between India and Pakistan left over from history and should be resolved through dialogues and consultations between the two sides. Relevant cooperation between China and Pakistan in the region aims to promote local economic and social development. It does not target any third party nor affect the positions held by different parties on the relevant dispute."

Earlier this week, external affairs ministry spokesperson Gopal Baglay said the move on Gilgit-Baltistan would not be able to hide the illegality of Pakistan's occupation of parts of Jammu and Kashmir, which it must vacate. "The entire state of Jammu and Kashmir is an integral part, has been an integral part and will be an integral part of India. No attempt or unilateral attempt or step to change that would have any legal basis, whatsoever, and it will be entirely unacceptable," he said.

UN Support for China Project Passing Through PoK Puts India's Claim in Jeopardy.

A UN Security Council resolution has for the first time incorporated China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a multi-billion inter-continental connectivity mission that has a flagship project passing through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK).

The resolution, which extends an ongoing UN assistance mission to Afghanistan, says international efforts should be strengthened to implement the BRI, President Xi Jinping's legacy project about which he first spoke in 2013.

Beijing claims it has rounded up at least 100 countries in BRI's support, including Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

India is yet to sign up for the initiative. Foreign secretary S Jaishankar spelt it out to the Chinese government in February that India has a "sovereignty" issue with the BRI because its flagship project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), passes through PoK. According to diplomats, India endorsing the BRI would mean giving up its claims on PoK.

The UN endorsing the BRI could complicate the situation as far as India's claims are concerned. The resolution in question renewed the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan for one year. In it, the 15-nation UN body urged to promote security and stability in Afghanistan and the region "to create a community of shared future for mankind".

"Also included in the newly adopted council resolution was China's Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to build a trade and infrastructure network connecting Asia with Europe and Africa along the ancient trade routes," official news agency Xinhua reported.

The resolution "welcomes and urges further efforts to strengthen the process of regional economic cooperation, including measures to facilitate regional connectivity, trade and transit, including through regional development initiatives such as the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (the

Belt and Road) Initiative". The council resolution urged "further international efforts to strengthen regional cooperation and implement the Belt and Road Initiative".

Besides the BRI, the resolution also mentions other projects like "regional development projects,

such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project, the Central Asia South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project, the Chabahar port project agreed between Afghanistan, India and the Islamic Republic of Iran”.

China has taken the inclusion of BRI in a UN resolution as a diplomatic victory of sorts.

China, Sri Lanka to deepen Defence Cooperation.

China and Sri Lanka will deepen cooperation in all sectors including defence official media said on Tuesday as defence minister and state councillor Chang Wanquan wrapped up a visit to the island nation before heading to Nepal.

The official news agency, Xinhua, quoted Chang telling President Maithripala Sirisena that the two countries agreed to promote the “strategic partnership of cooperation featuring sincere mutual support and long-lasting friendship.”

Sirisena expressed “his appreciation for China's consistent assistance for his country in economy, agriculture, science and technology, education, defence and other areas.”

“He noted that Sri Lanka is an important country along the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, saying China would like to work together with Sri Lanka in promoting each other's development so as to benefit their two peoples,” the Xinhua report said.

In Beijing, the state media clamor that India was trying to sour China’s relations with south Asian countries continued.

“India is not supportive of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor which is a significant part of the Belt and Road initiative. Chang's visit to Sri Lanka and Nepal may help India understand that China is welcomed by not only Pakistan, but also other countries in the region,” Wang Yiwei, director of the Centre for International Studies at the Renmin University of China, told the state-controlled tabloid, Global Times.

“Many countries in South Asia are worried about India's military power in the region, so they would like to have cooperation with other countries to increase self-defense capability,” Wang said. The newspaper said the “Kingdom of Sikkim was annexed by India in 1975, which showed that India has ulterior motives with regard to its smaller neighbours.

India Shouldn't Drag China into Dispute with Pakistan Over Kashmir: Expert.

The India-Pakistan row over Kashmir shouldn't hold up Chinese projects in the region as the territorial issue doesn't relate to China, according to a leading Chinese expert on world affairs

who believes New Delhi and Islamabad should resolve the problem instead of dragging Beijing into it.

China needs to have access to ports such as Gwadar in Pakistan under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to move its huge shipments of cargo to other parts of the world, said Wang Zhan, a deputy to the National People's Congress (NPC), China's Parliament, and president of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.

"I know India has lot of disagreements with the CPEC to Gwadar port. But if you are Chinese, considering (the situation in) Malacca Strait and the South China Sea, you would be looking for alternative passageways. We have so much cargo, we surely need the ports. We have to pass by the Indian Ocean to reach Europe," he said.

Wang, who is also managing director of the China Centre for International Economic Exchanges, said China wasn't the first country to bring up the Silk Road plan to connect regions and continents. "Japan brought up the Silk Road in 1990s, an American Harvard professor brought it up in 2005, and Hillary Clinton brought it up in 2011. They all brought up the Silk Road concept earlier than China," he said, adding some proposals were north to south and China's east to west.

"If all the projects in these plans could be realised, the countries touched in the plans would definitely develop, and the economic development would decrease the element of war and chaos," he added.

Wang said China's increasing investments in infrastructure, such as ports, in South Asian countries such as Sri Lanka is purely for economic reasons.

"For sure it's for economic reasons. You can know the answer by the map. India is a peninsula, the trade between Europe and China have to pass by the sea near India and Sri Lanka. It's decided by geography. We can't go by Antarctica. If you think from China's view, you will do the same," he said.

Referring to China's objections to India drilling for oil in the South China Sea, Wang blamed Vietnam for the confusion.

"In the 1970s, the Vietnamese had completely agreed that South China Sea belongs to China. Later, they occupied 29 islands and built infrastructure. India drilled for oil in the same area, so we protested. The South China Sea is China's lifeline. It's not necessary for India to get involved in the South China Sea disputes," Wang said.

Chinese, Saudi Troops March in Pakistan Day Military Parade.

Chinese troops march during a Pakistan Day military parade in Islamabad on March 23. Pakistan

National Day commemorates the passing of the Lahore Resolution, when a separate nation for the Muslims of the British Indian Empire was demanded.

Chinese, Saudi and Turkish Troops for the first time joined the Pakistan Day parade in the capital Islamabad on Thursday, in a sign of deepening ties.

Before Pakistan showed off long-range rockets, tanks and other military hardware, armed Chinese troops marched past Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and General Qamar Javed Bajwa, the chief of Pakistan's army. Soldiers from Saudi Arabia, a long-time Pakistan ally, also joined the parade, as did a military band from Turkey, another largely Muslim nation that has strengthened ties with nuclear-armed Pakistan in recent years.

Islamabad considers China an "all-weather friend" and in recent years the countries have grown even closer on the back of the \$57 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a Beijing-funded network of road, rail and pipelines that will link western China with Pakistan's Arabian Sea port of Gwadar.

The militaries of the two countries have in recent years also increased cooperation, with Chinese officials urging Pakistan to do more to improve security to help CPEC work.

China has long pressed Pakistan to do more to rein in Islamist militants, saying they have connections with extremists and separatists in China's unruly far western region of Xinjiang.

The United States also has a strategic relationship with Pakistan, but the ties appear transactional at times, with Washington periodically cutting off funding for the Pakistani military to penalise it for failing to do enough to curb Islamist militants destabilising the region.

China Tells Nepal to Maintain Good Ties with India.

Chinese President Xi Jinping suggested to visiting Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal "Prachanda" to maintain good relations between Nepal and India during a meeting at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.

Prachanda held talks with Xi and other senior Chinese leaders on a wide range of issues, including Nepal's relations with China and India, extending a Chinese rail link to Nepal and beyond and opening up more trade routes with China.

However, this is not the first time Chinese leaders have called on Nepalese leaders to maintain good relations with India due to proximity, the open border and close cultural, religious and social ties.

It is widely believed in Kathmandu that India played a role in ousting the pro-China government led by former premier K P Sharma Oli in August last year and installing the Prachanda-led regime that is comparatively softer on New Delhi.

At the height of the economic blockade along the Nepal-India border and protests against Nepal's new Constitution in 2015, Oli visited Beijing and signed the first bilateral transit and transportation agreement that was reportedly aimed at ending an Indian monopoly on petroleum products and other essential goods.

Apart from Prachanda seeking Chinese aid for several projects, Xi announced that China will provide 9 million RMB to assist Nepal's upcoming polls to local government bodies.

This was the third meeting between Xi and Prachanda. The Chinese leader was keen on Nepal's political stability, development and prosperity and wants to contribute to several infrastructure projects in Nepal.

Prachanda said he and the Nepalese people were waiting to see a Chinese train plying from Lhasa to Kathmandu and Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha. Xi said he would take initiatives to link the Chinese rail network to Nepal and to develop railways in Nepal.

Xi also accepted Prachanda's invitation to visit Nepal.

## **CHINA (MARITIME)**

### **Capt (IN) Ranjit Seth**

The Trump- Xi Summit. President Xi Jinping and US President Donald Trump are expected to meet at the latter's Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida on April 6-7, 2017. The meeting would undoubtedly be the most important and challenging interaction between the top world leaders and observers have cautioned that distrust over key geopolitical issues will be tough to overcome.

The US and Chinese governments are fundamentally at odds with each other on a wide range of issues. Prominent among these are America's trade imbalance with China, North Korea's missile and nuclear program and China's activity in the South China Sea.

The US has asked China to take tougher action against North Korea to force the country to abandon its nuclear weapons programme and has begun deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-missile system 200km south of Seoul to guard against North Korean missiles. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has even raised the prospect of a pre-emptive military strike against North Korea. China on the other hand sees the deployment of the THAAD system, which includes powerful radar capabilities, as posing a threat to China's security.

The two countries' interests diverge sharply in key areas with President Trump's unpredictability likely to add to uncertainties, but the meeting holds out some hope for progress on trade and economic issues. The US has not branded China a currency manipulator or imposed a 45 per cent tariff on Chinese imports, both of which President Trump vowed to do during his campaign. Official rhetoric from the two sides has become more restrained in recent weeks, raising the

prospect that the summit might offer a chance to ease bilateral tensions.

The summit would also be symbolically important because it shows the two leaders are willing to talk to each other and begin to develop a personal relationship. The meeting would be reminiscent of the Sunnylands summit between President Xi and President Barack Obama in 2013, a relaxed setting that allowed informal talk enabling frank discussion.

Both countries have extended olive branches in the run-up to the summit. In his recent trip to China, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson called for the US-China relationship to be built on “non-confrontation, no-conflict, mutual respect and always searching for win-win solutions” – echoing the themes that China has used to describe ties with Washington as a “new type of major-country relationship”.

## **PAKISTAN**

### **Brig Deepak Malhotra**

Raheel Sharif's Appointment as Chief of 39-Nation Military Alliance Approved by Pak Govt. Pakistan Defence Minister Khawaja Asif said that the government had given its green signal for retired Gen Raheel Sharif to take charge as head of a 39-nation military alliance of Muslim states after receiving a written request from the Saudi government. The coalition is envisaged to serve as a platform for security cooperation, including a provision for training, equipment and troops, and involvement of religious scholars for dealing with extremism.

Comments. The move by Pakistan to allow ex COAS to head the Saudi-led 39-nation military alliance of Muslim states has been criticized by many politicians and retired army officials in Pakistan. It is felt that this move is likely to spoil the relations between Pakistan with Iran. It remains to be seen whether Iran will join also join this coalition as this was one of the conditions laid down by Gen Raheel Shareef for heading this coalition.

## **IRAN**

### **Brig Deepak Malhotra**

Iran Sanctions 15 US Firms. Iran has imposed sanctions on 15 US companies for alleged human rights violations and cooperating with Israel. The Iranian move came two days after the United States imposed sanctions on 30 foreign companies or individuals for transferring sensitive technology to Iran for its missile program, or for violating export controls on Iran, North Korea and Syria. It is not yet clear if any of the companies, which included defence technology firm Raytheon, had any dealings with Iran or whether they would be affected in any way by Tehran's

action, which would include seizure of their assets and a ban on contacts with them. Comments. The wide-ranging list, from a U.S. real estate company to a major arms manufacturer, appeared more symbolic than anything else as the firms weren't immediately known to be doing business anywhere in the Islamic Republic

## **NEPAL**

### **Col Harpreet Singh**

Nepal's Prime Minister visits China. Nepal's prime Minister PK Dahal visited China and met Chinese President Xi Jinping. Xi apparently told Dahal to build trust between Nepal and China and implement agreements signed between the two countries. He was hinting at implementation of the trade and transit treaty signed by the two countries during the previous Nepalese PM's visit. No deal was signed

during the visit but an understanding on some key issues was reached, Nepal will join China's Road and Belt initiative, extend the Tibet railway to the Rasuwagadi border and down to Lumbini and reopen the earthquake damaged Kodari highway.

Comments. Dahal has always been viewed as pro India in China as he had allegedly received a lot of support from India during the war waged by his party and he had also suggested mediation by India in Nepal's internal affairs. Hence the trust issues with China were sought to be addressed during the visit, while being careful not to go overboard and avoid raising any hackles in India.

## **BANGLADESH**

### **Col Saikat Roy**

Upcoming Visit of Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina commences her state visit to India, April 7 onwards. India is likely to give Bangladesh a credit line of at least US\$3.5 billion for infrastructure projects during Sheikh Hasina's visit.

The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi described India as a "strong ally and good friend" of Bangladesh. Modi, who announced a second US\$2 billion line of credit when he visited Bangladesh in 2015 after an earlier US\$800 million credit line, has tried to integrate the region's economies with road, rail and shipping routes. The credit line, which would be India's third to its neighbour, would go toward a variety of projects ranging from nuclear and liquefied natural gas power plants to ports, railways and the establishment of special economic zones. New Delhi and

Dhaka will also sign a defence cooperation agreement and various memorandums of understanding relating to hydro projects in Bhutan, shipbuilding and upgrading border posts.

Comments. Even as India seeks to unite its neighbours against its arch-rival Pakistan and counter the Chinese overtures in the region, New Delhi's financial fire power still pales in comparison to the funds available to Chinese President Xi Jinping, who last year pledged US\$20 billion in low-cost loans for infrastructure projects, in addition to existing large investments in Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Nonetheless, Bangladesh is deeply cognizant of her stronger neighbor and would want to balance her relations with China and India, while concurrently extract as many concessions to aid her overall progress and development.

Bangladesh Army Ends Standoff with ISIS Militants, 4 Killed. The Bangladesh army said Monday March 27, 2017 that it has killed all four militants believed to have seized a building in an eastern city four days ago with a large cache of ammunition. The army operation was code named "Operation Twilight."

Military Intelligence Director Brig Gen. Mohammad Fakhru Ahsan said two bodies were found in the building on Monday in addition to six people, including two policemen, who were killed in explosions near it earlier. Ahsan said the army found a huge amount of explosives inside the building, and two of the four insurgents killed had jackets lined with explosives on them.

Comments. Bangladesh has experienced a renewed level of Islamic militancy in recent years. Dozens of atheists, liberal writers, bloggers and publishers, as well as members of minority communities and foreigners, have been targeted and killed. ISIS has claimed responsibility for the attacks in Sylhet and Dhaka, according to the SITE Intelligence group, citing the Islamic State news agency Amaq. However, the Bangladesh's government has consistently denied the presence of the militant group in the impoverished South Asian nation, and says the attacks are the work of local radical groups.

Indian Visa Rules for Bangladeshis Relaxed Further. The India visa application submission rules for Bangladeshis have been relaxed further to "liberalise, streamline and ease access" to visa, says the Indian High Commission.

From Apr 1, tourist visa applicants with confirmed air tickets to India can walk-in and submit their visa applications "up to three months" in advance from their date of journey to India at eight

Indian Visa Application Centres (IVACs) outside Dhaka in Rajshahi, Rangpur, Sylhet, Chittagong, Khulna, Jessore, Mymensingh, Barisal and one IVAC in Dhaka at Mirpur.

Comments. The walk-in tourist visa scheme was first launched in Oct 2016 for women travellers and their family members in Dhaka and was subsequently extended to all applicants and all IVACs outside of Dhaka. “These measures have been aimed at easing access to Indian visa and strengthening people-to-people contacts between India and Bangladesh,” the Indian High Commission said in a statement.

## **SRI LANKA**

### **Col Saikat Roy**

INS ‘Darshak’ Arrives at the Port of Colombo on a Training Visit. The hydrographic survey ship, INS ‘Darshak’ of the Indian Navy arrived at the Port of Colombo on Monday March 27, 2017 on a training visit. The ship was ceremonially welcomed by the Sri Lanka Navy in compliance with naval traditions on her arrival. INS ‘Darshak’ will depart from the Colombo harbour on Thursday, March 30, 2017.

## **MALDIVES**

### **Col Saikat Roy**

Nasheed Charged with Terrorism over Yameen’s Arrest. Former Maldivian President Mohamed Nasheed has been charged with terrorism over alleged arbitrary detention of President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom in 2010, when he had been the Mulaku representative at People’s Majlis.

Comments. Yameen was taken under custody of Maldives National Defense Force on 1:45 am, July 15, 2010, and was kept in Aarah until July 23, 2010. Meanwhile, Nasheed has already been sentenced to 13 years in prison for arbitrary detention of former Chief Judge of Criminal Court, Abdulla Mohamed during his administration. Nasheed currently lives in exile in UK.

## **MINISTRY OF DEFENCE**

### **Col Saikat Roy**

India to Buy \$1 Billion Israeli Anti-Tank Missiles. The Ministry of Defense (MoD) has circumvented conventional policy to ink a deal for the Spike missile with Israeli state-owned

Rafael Defense Company. The missile was developed in Israel for land-to-land missile strikes against enemy tanks. It is considered a “fire-and-forget” munition. Similar to previous deals, the Indian Army will secure 321 Spike launchers and 8,356 anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM) from Rafael for \$1 billion. Delivery could take up to 60 months. The MoD has officially “forwarded the deal to the Cabinet Committee of Security, which is likely to clear the same (deal)” in the week ending March 31. “The deal could then be signed after next month.”

Comments. Generally, the MoD prefers to procure new equipment and weaponry by soliciting bids from multiple contractors. “The single-vendor situation has arisen as the other option, American Javelin, was found to be too expensive”.

One key element of the deal involves the transfer of intellectual property from Israel to India. Particularly, a clause in the contract allows India to gain access to the steps and procedures used to make the missiles in the event that the MoD exercises its option to create another 1,500 launcher systems and 30,000 missiles in the future.

Grenades Filled with ‘Spicy Jelly’ may be used by Forces in J&K, Pellet Guns to Stay. A grenade packed with spicy jelly, which causes irritation in the eyes on exploding, is likely to be included in the weaponry of security forces in Kashmir for

quelling violent protests but pellet guns will stay. Pellet guns will be used only after less lethal weapons fail to control the stone-pelting protesters and before firing is ordered as the last resort.

Comments. Oleoresin, a semi-solid extract in a solution, mixed with spicy gel, could be put in the grenade casings to tackle rioting mobs. The oleoresin based shells are simple to operate and user-friendly to control an unruly mob. The body of the grenades is made of plastic which melts when the grenade bursts, making throwing it back difficult. Immediately after exploding, it emits gas which causes breathing difficulty and irritation in eyes.

The suggestion for using such grenades came up after the Supreme Court voiced concern over injuries caused by pellet guns to minors and asked the Centre and state to consider other effective means to quell the protests as it concerned “life and death”.

## **AFGHANISTAN**

**Brig Deepak Malhotra**

Pakistan Starts Building Fence along Afghanistan Border. Pakistan's military has begun fencing parts of its disputed northwestern border with Afghanistan to curb the movement of militants based on Afghan soil. Fencing has started in the Pakistani Bajaur and Mohmand districts, which border the eastern Afghan provinces of Nangarhar and Kunar.

Comments. The measure may be futile because militants do not necessarily have to use the official crossings. Moreover the relations between the Afghan and Pakistani Pashtuns are so deep that any border control mechanism has a very limited chance of success.

## **WEST ASIA**

### **Brig Ranjit Singh**

#### **IRAQ**

Iraqi Security Forces Offensive to Retake West Mosul. The Iraqi security forces are preparing to launch a major offensive to retake strategic Mosque Grand Nuri al-Kabir, in old city, in West Mosul, from where Baghdadi announced Caliphate in 2014. The security forces are cutting off exit routes, evacuating civilians from the area. The operations are expected to progress very slowly with stiff resistance from ISIS.

US-led Coalition Air Strikes. The US-led Coalition has carried out large-scale air strikes and destroyed a large number of ISIS targets in West Mosul.

IDPs Rising in West Mosul. In the ongoing operations in West Mosul, 300,000 people have fled the area, so far.

ISIS Presence in Mosul. It is believed approx 2000 ISIS terrorists are still present in Mosul and around 5000 terrorists are present in Nineveh Province. ISIS has executed more than 100 civilians trying to escape from West Mosul. It is also reported that ISIS has recruited more than 18,000 children below the age of 18 in Mosul.

UN Agrees to Oversee Kurdistan Independence Referendum. The President of Kurdistan has raised the issue of referendum for independence of Kurdistan with international leaders. UN has agreed to oversee the referendum, which is likely to be held in 2017, duly supported by US. In response, Kirkuk Provincial Council has voted for a referendum on secession from Iraq and join

the autonomous Kurdistan Region. They have also decided to fly Kurdistan flag alongside Iraqi flag in Govt buildings.

Comments. The Iraqi forces are preparing an offensive in old city of West Mosul to retake strategic Mosque Grand Nuri al-Kabir, from where Baghdadi had declared Caliphate in 2014. The operations are progressing slowly and are being heavily contested by ISIS. The demand for separate state for Kurdistan is catching momentum which is likely to escalate in the days ahead. Acceptance of referendum for a separate state by UN duly supported by US, is likely to increase the intensity of protests. In the days ahead, Kurdistan as a separate state could be a reality.

## **SYRIA**

Chemical Attack in Syria.A suspected chemical attack in Idlib Province has drawn international condemnation, with US, France and UK pointing finger at Assad forces. At least 58 people were killed in the chemical attack in the town of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib Province. The UN has said it would investigate the bombing raid as a possible war crime.

US-Backed Rebels Capture Tabqa Airbase.SDF supported by US has retaken Tabqa Airbase, 45 Km from Raqqa from ISIS. It is also very close to country's largest dam that may be in danger of collapse.

US : Assad Overthrow no Longer a Priority.There has been a major shift in US policy in Syria, wherein it has said that overthrow of Assad is no longer a priority for US. It believes in finding a solution to the larger problem and people could decide Assad's fate later. However, the rebels supported by US have expressed their reservations on it.

Geneva Talks Resume to Find Solution to Syria Crisis.Syria peace talks have commenced in Geneva to find a solution to Syrian crisis amidst the intense fighting. However, prospects of the breakthrough are slim.

Comments.

There has been a major shift in US policy in Syria, wherein it has said that overthrow of Assad is no longer a priority for US. It believes in finding a solution to the larger problem and people could decide Assad's fate later. However, the rebels supported by US have expressed their reservations on it. This could help in finding early solution to the Syrian crisis.

## **YEMEN**

Govt Forces Make Gains in North Yemen. The Govt forces supported by Saudi-led coalition have made significant progress in two strategic cities of Haji and Medi along the border with Saudi Arabia.

Govt Forces Prepare to Retake Strategic Hodeida Port. Govt forces supported by Saudi-led coalition forces are preparing for a major offensive to retake strategic Hodeida Port on Red Sea. The Houthi rebels have been receiving arms through this port and levying illegal taxes on commercial imports. However, the UN and aid agencies have warned against the offensive for safety of millions of civilians.

Comments. The Govt forces supported by Saudi-led coalition have been focusing on liberating strategic cities along Saudi Arabia border from Houthi rebels. This would reduce the influence of Houthi in areas along the border in Saudi Arabia. Capture of strategic Hodeida Port on Red Sea is imperative for the Govt forces to cut-off supply of arms and weapons to Houthi rebels, its capture would exert immense pressure on operations of rebels.

## **RUSSIA**

### **Col Harpreet Singh**

Russian Prime Minister in Corruption Scandal. There have been widespread protests in Russia due to corruption allegations against Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. Hundreds of Russians were arrested across 80 cities. Among those detained was Alexei Navalny, the Russian anti-corruption campaigner and opposition leader, whose investigation accusing Medvedev of amassing property portfolio worth millions of pounds via questionable deals, was the impetus behind the protests. It was alleged that Medvedev used a series of charities run by his close associates to hide control of his assets.

Comments. Till now Putin seemed to be in complete control of things in Russia. However, this new development and the scale of these protests are sending warning signals and may result in some instability in Russia in the short term if not managed properly by the Russian Government.

## **UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

### **Gp Capt GD Sharma, VSM (Retd)**

Impact of Some Initiatives of Trump Administrations on India. President Donald Trump in last three months of office, has taken many initiatives with supposed focus on “America first” and “Make America Great again”. Many of which have backfired, indicate inherent contradictions or have been nonstarters. India cannot remain insulated from their effects and will have to take into account while formulating the policy.

H-1B Visa Programme. H-1B visa programme is meant to enable U.S. companies to recruit highly-skilled foreign nationals when there is a shortage of qualified workers in the country. It is alleged that US companies intentionally hire foreign nationals even when qualified, willing, and deserving American are available. In all 85000 visa are issued under this category. Indian companies take the major chunk (86%) of visas. Now, US will permit only high end jobs to foreign nationals. Under these circumstances, Indian companies will not able to send Indian nationals for onsite positions abroad unless these are high end and on which American national is not available for employment. Indian outsourcing firms such as Infosys, Wipro, Tata Consultancy Services are badly hit. This will hit the profit margin of the companies as American remuneration standards are much higher. Besides, at higher costs, many contracts will be wrested by American companies on competitive basis which earlier went to Indian companies.

Indian Government cannot do much to seek relief in this case as it is country’s prerogative and obligation to its own nationals. Though, it is another matter that this year too Indian companies have secured majority chunk in H 1B Visa as per Honble Foreign ministers statement in Parliament.

Chahbahar Port. India and Iran signed a bilateral agreement in which India would refurbish one of the berths at Chahbahar port, and reconstruct a 600 meter long container handling facility at the port. The port will provide India connectivity with Afghanistan which presently not available due non-availability of transits facility through Pakistan. By March 2017, India is nearing completion of Chahbahar port upgrade and it has invited expression of interest from private parties to manage the port for 10 years. As on now, Adani group and Essar Group has shown interest. Once operational, it will provide a reliable trade link with Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

But, we face two challenges. First, Donald Trump has taken hard stand against Iran hence, it may put hurdles the project. US does not see it as an alternate route to Afghanistan. Pakistan will continue to stay in US reckoning and many see a possibility of resumption of US aid to Pakistan.

It seems from the articulation of US administration functionaries that it is satisfied with Pakistan's fight with terror internally. In any case, managing Indo US relations along with India Iran relations will require adept handling by the Indian diplomats

The other Challenge to Chahbahar is from the Chinese who want to participate in Chahbahar development and want to link it as extension of OBOR project. Iran may not be averse to take advantage of the Chinese funds but, unlike Pakistani they are aware that with funds china will also try to take control which Iranian may not like.

Withdrawal of US from TPP. President declared an end of 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership brokered by his predecessor Barak Obama. All eleven nations were dismayed by US action some like Australia are proposing to have TPP with minus one member i.e. US. Unlike these member states, India which was not part of TPP may actually have been constrained with it as it offered favorable deals to Members only. TPP which would have created an economic bulwark against a rising China with its cancellation has sent a signal of American disengagement from the Asia-Pacific region. China has already acted to complete an alternative pact, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which aims to unite 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations with Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and India.

India will have to take the new circumstances in its account and may have to work closely with other like-minded nations in the region to counter Chinese hegemony in the region.