

April 1 – April 15

AREA BRIEF

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Area Briefs: 1-15 April 2017

General Observations

Pakistan

- On 13 April, Pakistan watched in horror as a mob comprising primarily students of a University in Khyber Pukhtunkhwa lynched a fellow student to death on mere allegation of “blasphemy”. The brutality of the mob captured on video and made viral on social media, once again questions about the abuse of the Blasphemy Law and the State’s inability to deal with this firmly despite several incidents of such mob violence leading to the death of innocent citizen across the country.
- Indian naval officer and spy Jadhav was finally given a death sentence by the Field General Court Martial on 10 April on grounds of spying and terrorism. India’s reaction while anticipated, bordered on war hysteria with threats being issued to Pakistan by the Indian Minister for External Affairs if the sentence was carried out. The Indian Embassy in Islamabad sought Consular access to Jadhav although Pakistan is not bound by any international treaty commitment to do so in this case. So far, no Indian spy sentenced in Pakistan has ever had his sentence carried out.
- The US Ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley stated that the Trump Administration would try to help reduce tensions between Pakistan and India. India immediately responded negatively while the Sharif government welcomed a US role in bringing Pakistan and India to the dialogue table and even expressed the hope that the US would help resolve the disputes between the two South Asian neighbours. Pakistan tends to forget that the US has a strategic partnership with India so would not play an honest broker in resolving disputes between the two antagonists.
- The Pakistan Foreign Office finally, on 6 April, gave a public response to the whole debate that has arisen over whether India has “retracted” its No First Use (NFU) policy on nuclear weapons in the wake of a statement by an Indian American scholar, Vipin Narang, at a conference in the US. However, the fact is that the Government of India had moved away from its NFU position in January 2003 (*see General Observations 16-31 March 2017 of Area Briefs*).
- Terrorism struck the census exercise being conducted in Pakistan when, on 5 April, a suicide attack on a census team in Lahore which led to 7 people being killed including four soldiers. The TTP claimed responsibility for the attack.

- The Minister of Defence, in response to an Adjournment Motion in the National Assembly, on 13 April, stated that the terms and parameters of the KSA-led military alliance against terrorism had not yet been formulated and once they were finalised the government would bring them before Parliament. Unfortunately this only served to raise more questions.

International

- On 13 April the US dropped the largest conventional bomb (GBU-43/B MOAB) on Afghanistan ostensibly at a Daesh camp hidden in mountainous caves close to the border with Pakistan – with reverberations that destroyed homes on the Pakistani side as well in FATA. The bomb was used in combat for the first time and had to be dropped from the rear of a cargo plane because of its massive size. The use of this weapon has raised serious concerns especially as it could be a signal from the Trump Administration of a greater military offensive on the part of the US in Afghanistan and perhaps into Pakistan as well. Hawks like ex-ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad have begun advocating US strikes inside Pakistan. The US refusal to participate in the conference on Afghanistan initiated by Russia and including Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, China, CAS and India, shows the US perhaps focusing more on a military approach to the Afghan crisis.
- Earlier, on 6 April, President Trump approved a cruise missile strike, comprising over 50 missiles, against a Syrian airbase in response to what the US and its allies saw as a Syrian government chemical weapon attack on its own people.
- Meanwhile, US-Russia relations have become increasingly acrimonious especially over Syria. The Trump Administration, on 11 April, accused Russia of trying to cover up the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons.
- In contrast, the Trump bombast against China receded in the wake of the Meeting between Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping on 9 April. The discussions focused on trade and other international issues. The Chinese government has expressed its concerns over the growing US-North Korea tensions with both sides threatening military action. The US has sent a US aircraft carrier-led strike force close to the Korean peninsula and North Korea has been displaying its ICBMs while leaving open the use of nuclear weapons.

- The Indo-Israeli military cooperation continues to pick up pace especially before the visit of PM Modi to Israel in July 2017. The Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) may also be setting up production units in India under the “Make in India” policy.
- On 2 April Israel inducted its final component of its missile defence system, referred to as David’s Sling, into its defence forces.
- The Trump Administration is also delinking its foreign policy from human rights considerations in relation to allied Arab states. On 3 April, Trump welcomed Egyptian President Sisi to the US and promised full support to him.
- Indian Occupied Kashmir continues to see Indian forces using violence against unarmed civilians. On 9 April, 8 people were killed including a young boy, and over 200 people were injured when Indian security forces fired on protestors. A by-election in Srinagar saw the lowest voter turnout in 30 years after the APHC gave a call for a boycott.
- India has once again become active in seeking permanent membership of the UN SC with India’s External Affairs Minister informing the Rajya Sabha (7 April) that India had all the required credentials for being made a permanent member of the UN SC with the same powers that the present 5 permanent members have.

--- Dr Shireen M Mazari

Director General

AMERICAS

Domestic

- On April 15, an Arkansas judge blocked the state from using one of three lethal injection drugs it planned to use in a series of executions next week.

The Supreme Court of Arkansas also granted an emergency stay of execution for one of two inmates scheduled to be executed on April 17, 2017. Lawyers said the state was acting unconstitutionally and recklessly. Pulaski County Circuit Judge Wendell Griffen issued a temporary restraining order stopping the state from administering one of the drugs used in its lethal injection cocktail. According to the suppliers of the muscle relaxant, vecuronium bromide, it had been sold to the prison system on the understanding it would be used for medical purposes.

- On April 13 Amnesty International urged the US state of Arkansas to halt the execution of eight death row prisoners, seven of whom are due to be executed in an 11-day period during April 2017.

The Amnesty International report highlighted legal concerns and stressed that two of the men facing death have serious mental disabilities. Arkansas has not sentenced anyone to death for almost ten years. However it plans to execute two men each on April 17, 20 and 24 and one man on April 27, 2017, because its supply of the controversial execution drug midazolam will expire at the end of the month.

- On April 14 the Trump White House said it would not release logs of visitors, reversing President Obama's voluntary disclosure policy.

The White House cited "grave national security risks and privacy concerns" for its decision. President Obama voluntarily disclosed more than 6 million records during his presidency. Critics say the logs allow for monitoring of individuals or groups who may be trying to influence policy. White House Communications Director, Michael Dubke, said however that the Administration is following a 2013 federal court ruling according to which most of the logs are considered presidential records and are not subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

- On April 13, New York police arrested 25 people in the lobby of Trump Tower protesting against President Donald Trump's immigration and border policies.

The demonstrators sat in front of the elevators and chanted "no ban, no raids, no wall!" The protest led security forces to close public access to the Tower. Heavily armed policemen blocked the entrances of the building while other officers carried the protesters to police vans.

- On April 11, the Alabama Senate voted to allow a church to form its own police force.

Lawmakers voted 24-4 to allow Briarwood Presbyterian church in Birmingham to establish a law enforcement department. According to the church it requires its own police officers to keep its school and also its 4,000-strong congregation safe. Critics have argued that a police department reporting to the church could be used to cover up crimes. The state has allowed few private universities to have a police force, but never a church or non-school entity. According experts such a department would be unprecedented in the US.

International

- According to the *BBC* on April 15, a huge range of security weaknesses, said to be worth over \$2m if sold on the black market, have been leaked online.

The US National Security Agency (NSA) allegedly created the tools. The accompanying documents indicate a possible breach of the Swift global banking system. According to researchers the hack could have enabled the US to covertly monitor financial transactions. Shadow Brokers, a hacking group that has previously leaked malware, released the files. If true, the incident represents the most significant exposure of NSA files since the Edward Snowden leaks in 2013. Snowden described it as the “Mother Of All Exploits” on twitter.

- On April 13, Scott Pruitt, the US Environmental Protection Agency Administrator called for an “exit” from the historic Paris agreement on April 13.

Pruitt is the Trump Administration’s top environment official. Although he has criticised it in the past too, this is the first time Pruitt has disavowed the agreement. Some 200 countries endorsed the Paris Agreement to fight climate change. Pruitt said, “Paris is something that we need to really look at closely. It’s something we need to exit in my opinion.” He also said, “It’s a bad deal for America.” And further, “It was an America second, third, or fourth kind of approach. China and India had no obligations under the agreement until 2030. We front-loaded all of our costs.”

- According to the Pentagon on April 13, the US dropped the “mother of all bombs” on an Islamic State cave complex in Afghanistan.

Formally named the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast, the bomb has never been used in combat and was so massive that it had to be dropped from the rear of a cargo plane. Trump did not say whether he had personally approved the mission. He however gave additional authority to the Pentagon during his initial months in office; a move the military argues would help it defeat the Islamic State more easily.

- On April 12, US President Donald Trump described US relations with Russia as being at “an all-time low” over Syria but reversed his position on NATO saying the alliance was “no longer obsolete.”

The US President said, “Right now we’re not getting along with Russia at all.” The remarks came in the aftermath of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s meeting with Vladimir Putin to persuade him to distance himself from Bashar al-Assad.

- On April 11, White House spokesman Sean Spicer was criticised on social media when he said Adolf Hitler did not use chemical weapons.

Spicer apologised later when his comments drew criticism for overlooking the fact that millions of Jews were killed in Nazi gas chambers. He made the comment at a daily news briefing, during a discussion about the chemical weapons attack in Syria that killed 87 people. Washington has blamed the attack on the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. “You had someone as despicable as Hitler who didn’t even sink to using chemical weapons,” Spicer said when asked about Russia’s alliance with the Syrian government.

- On April 11, the White House accused Moscow of trying to cover up the Syrian government’s role in a chemical weapons attack on April 4, 2017.

A report produced by the National Security Council containing declassified US intelligence on the attack, negated Moscow’s claims that insurgents had used the gas to frame the Syrian government. According to the White House, Damascus and Moscow have released “false narratives” to mislead the world. The document also urges international condemnation of the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons and harshly criticises Russia for “shielding” an ally that has used weapons of mass destruction.

- On April 6, President Trump ordered a cruise missile strike against Syria, saying “no child of God should ever suffer” the horror of the chemical weapons attack Syria launched on its own people.

The attack was the first conventional attack on another country ordered by Trump. It came a day after he declared that the chemical weapons assault had “crossed many, many lines,” including causing the deaths of 27 children. Trump said Syrian President Assad “launched a horrible chemical attack on innocent civilians using a deadly nerve agent. Assad choked out the lives of helpless men, women and children. It was a slow and brutal death for so many. Even beautiful babies were cruelly murdered at this very barbaric attack. No child of God should ever suffer such horror.” He said, “Tonight I ordered a targeted military strike on the airfield in Syria from where

the chemical attack was launched. It is in this vital national security interest of the United States to prevent and deter the spread and use of deadly chemical weapons.”

- On April 11, President Donald Trump threatened North Korea on Twitter, when he wrote that the country was “looking for trouble”, and that the US may step in to “solve the problem.”

His tweets followed the North Korean announcement that it was “ready for war.” The country’s state media warned of a nuclear attack against the US if America takes military action against North Korea. Trump is trying to pressure China to rein in North Korea. Earlier, he tweeted that he had informed Chinese President Xi Jinping during his state visit to the US, that “a trade deal with the US will be far better” if Beijing solves the “North Korea problem.”

- According to US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, on April 7, the United States and China plan to increase their cooperation in convincing North Korea to curb its nuclear ambitions. *The announcement follows Chinese President Xi Jinping’s first state visit to the United States since the new Administration assumed office. Tillerson said that no specific action had yet been planned but President Xi had agreed the nuclear programme had advanced to a serious stage. President Trump met his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping on April 6, 2017 at Palm Beach Florida. The North Korean nuclear issue was at the top of the agenda of the summit between the two leaders. They also talked about other issues including trade, cyber crime and control of the South China Sea. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross said the two world leaders have agreed to a 100-day plan for trade talks to boost US exports and reduce the country’s trade deficit with China.*

- On April 3, President Trump warned China that if it fails to put pressure on North Korea to disable its nuclear programme, the US is prepared to take action against Pyongyang on its own.

“Well, if China is not going to solve North Korea, we will,” the President said. He however added that he had “great respect” for the Chinese President and his country. He said, “I would not be at all surprised if we did something that would be very dramatic and good for both countries and I hope so.” Responding to a question on how he would tackle North Korea, Trump said, “I’m not going to tell you. You know, I am not the United States of the past where we tell you where we are going to hit in the Middle East.” His comments alarmed many experts working on the region.

- The *Wall Street Journal* reported on April 3 that visitors to the US could be forced to provide cellphone contacts and social-media passwords as well as answering questions about their ideology.

Tourists from close allies including Britain could now be forced to share mobile phone contacts, social media passwords and financial data under “extreme vetting” practices being considered by the Trump Administration. Travellers who want to enter the US could also face questioning over their ideology, as Washington heads towards a more sceptical approach to visitors. “Extreme vetting” of foreign nationals to combat terrorism was a major theme of Trump’s election campaign. However, his executive order imposing a ban on several Muslim-majority countries has twice been blocked in courts. According to media reports the ban has hurt the tourism industry.

Latin America

- On April 15 electoral authorities in Ecuador ordered a partial recount of the votes cast in the presidential election earlier in April 2017.

The losing candidate Guillermo Lasso requested the recount of almost 1.3 million votes after allegations of fraud. He has refused to accept anything less than a full recount. His rival, the Socialist candidate, Lenin Moreno, won the second round with a majority of 51.15%.

---Amina Afzal

ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

- On April 15, North Korea displayed two new types of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) in canister launchers at its annual military parade in Pyongyang, marking the 105th birthday anniversary of its late founder Kim Il Sung.

According to reports, North Korea also displayed its submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) and its land-based version for the first time. North Korea's SLBM is known as KN-11 and its land-based version is known as KN-15. International nuclear experts consider the appearance of ICBMs, which are not flight-tested yet, significant. The display of the missiles implies that North Korea is working on the development of solid-fuelled, canisterised ICBMs. Melissa Hanham, senior research associate at the James Martin Centre for Non-proliferation Studies in California, stated that North Korea displayed its new ICBMs in response to the dispatch of aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson by the US Navy. Experts said that the main objective of showcasing missiles was to send a message to the US that the North is capable of threatening the US mainland. During the ceremony, Choe Ryong-hae, Vice Chairman of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party, warned the US not to take provocative actions. He said, "We will respond to an all-out war with an all-out war and a nuclear war with our style of a nuclear attack."

- On April 13, Ambassador Odette Melono, Chairperson of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Executive Council, and Director-General of the OPCW, Ambassador Ahmet Uzumcu, convened a meeting of the Council to discuss the alleged use of chemical weapons in the Khan Sheikhun area of southern Idlib in Syria.

During the meeting, Ahmet Uzumcu shared the immediate steps taken by the technical secretariat experts to analyse the available information and their preliminary assessment of the chemical weapons attack. According to Uzumcu, OPCW Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) is investigating the incident in Khan Sheikhun and it has collected samples, which have been sent to the OPCW designated laboratories for further analysis. However, the OPCW did not share the information about an on-going investigation as a matter of policy, in order to ensure the safety and security of OPCW experts. The Director-General also urged the states parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) to share any relevant information with the OPCW without any delay and allow the FFM to complete its work within the next two to three weeks. The findings of the FFM will be submitted in a report to the OPCW Executive Council. The OPCW is a treaty-based international organisation responsible for the implementation of the CWC that comprehensively prohibits the use, development, production, stockpiling and transfer of chemical weapons.

- According to the Japanese military on April 13, Japan's air force scrambled a record number of fighter jets since 2016 in response to increased Chinese military activities in and around the East China Sea.

Japan's Air Self Defence Force reported that its fighter jets had scrambled 1,168 times over the last 12 months. Japan's top military commander, Admiral Katsutoshi Kawano, stated that considering the modernisation trends in the Chinese military, its activities were on the rise in terms of their frequency, area and duration. He said that Chinese military aircrafts' operations closer to main Okinawa island and other parts of the island chain were increasing tensions in East Asia. Japan's military also indicated that operations of Russian aircraft have also increased in the region.

- On April 13, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe indicated that North Korea may be capable of launching a warhead equipped with sarin nerve gas.

While addressing the Japanese parliament's Diplomacy and Defence committee, Abe said, "We have just talked about Syria. There is a possibility that North Korea already has a capability to put sarin on warheads to strike the ground." Abe, however, did not provide any evidence how and why he felt that North Korea might arm its missiles with chemical weapons. Yoshihide Suga, the Japanese government's chief spokesman, stated that North Korea was likely to maintain several facilities to produce chemical weapons and already possesses a number of them. According to experts, North Korea has not signed the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). South Korea's 2016 Defence White Paper has also noted that the North has been developing chemical weapons since the 1980s.

- On April 10, a group of lawmakers from the US requested President Donald Trump's Administration for more information about the potential sale of precision-guided munitions (PGMs) to Saudi Arabia.

Expressing concern about civilian casualties in the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen, thirty Democratic lawmakers sent a letter to US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, and Secretary of Defence, James Mattis, enquiring about the proposed sale. The letter said that the previous administration had halted a planned sale of PGMs to Saudi Arabia in December 2016 owing to concerns over widespread civilian casualties in the campaign in Yemen. The State Department has now reversed course and removed the suspension on these PGM sales. According to reports, the Trump Administration will send a formal notification to Congress about the sale, after which a formal 30-day review would be held to allow members of Congress to pass legislation about the approval of the sale. Notwithstanding the review process, Congressional aides believe that any effort to pass legislation to stop the PGM sale is expected to fail. A similar measure aimed at blocking the sale of tanks to Saudi Arabia also failed in September 2016. Trump is interested in clearing US arms sales abroad in order to bolster efforts by US allies to fight militancy. The Trump Administration is also planning to approve arms sales to Bahrain and Nigeria that were delayed under President Obama due to human rights concerns.

- On April 7, Israel signed a deal worth \$2 billion with India for providing it a missile defence system.

Israel's state-owned Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) said that it had awarded its largest defence contract for supplying advanced medium-range surface-to-air missile systems (MRSAM) to India. IAI would also provide India another long-range surface-to-air missile defence system for its aircraft carrier. The contracts indicate enormous confidence by India in IAI's capabilities and advanced technologies. The MRSAM system includes an advanced radar, command and control, mobile launchers and missiles. IAI said that some of the components of the defence systems would be assembled in India.

- On April 5, North Korea launched a ballistic missile into the Sea of Japan from its Sinpo region.

South Korea's defence minister said that the missile flew about 60 kilometres before falling into the Sea of Japan and it was launched from the ground, not sea. The US military also confirmed the launch and identified the missile as KN-15 medium-range ballistic missile. In response, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson issued a short notice, saying, "North Korea had launched yet another intermediate-range ballistic missile. The United States has spoken enough about North Korea. We have no further comment." Tillerson's statement appeared to be contradictory to the US military identification of the missile type. David Schmerler, a Research Associate at James Martin Centre for Non-proliferation Studies, stated that Tillerson was either wrong or they knew something we did not. The North's missile launch came ahead of US President Donald Trump's meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping at Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida on April 6, 2017, where both leaders discussed growing tensions on the Korean peninsula.

- According to India's *Economic Times* on April 3, India may soon receive 10 Heron TP-armed drones from Israel, bought in 2015 at a cost of \$400 million,

The delivery is expected ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the country in July 2017. The Heron TPs are manufactured by Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI). These are the most advanced Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) capable of detecting, tracking and launching air to ground missiles. They can be used for reconnaissance as well as combat and support roles. The report stated that 10 Heron TP-armed drones are ready for delivery. However, the final payment for the drones is still pending. Israel displayed these drones in India during the Aero India show in Bangalore in February 2017. As India is one of the leading markets for IAI, the company is interested in shifting its production houses to India under the so-called 'Make in India' initiative. India is already operating nearly 180 Israeli made UAVs, including 108 IAI-made Searchers and 68 unarmed Heron 1s for surveillance and intelligence gathering. India also has a fleet of IAI-produced Harpy UAVs which do not carry missiles but have self-destructing systems used for targeting enemy radar positions. Heron TP will be India's first armed drones.

- On April 2, US President Donald Trump said that the US would take unilateral action against North Korea if China did not cooperate with the US in containing Pyongyang.

In his interview with the Financial Times, Trump said that China has great influence over North Korea. If China helps the US with North Korea, it would be good, but if China does not solve the North Korea issue, the US will do so itself. Trump, however, did not talk about measures that he will adopt in addressing the North Korean issue. He said, "I'm not going to tell you. You know, I am not the United States of the past where we tell you where we are going to hit in the Middle East." US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson had also indicated the adoption of new policy measures vis-à-vis North Korea in March 2017. Tillerson stated that the policy of strategic patience has ended and the US is now exploring a new set of security and diplomatic measures.

- On April 2, the final piece of Israel's missile defence system, named David's Sling, was inducted into the country's defence apparatus.

During the ceremony of operational integration of David's Sling missile defence system, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that the latest addition to Israel's missile defences meant that those seeking to destroy the Jewish state would be endangering their own existence. David's Sling is a medium-range interceptor capable of destroying incoming tactical, medium-range ballistic and cruise missiles. It has a range of 40 km-300 km and is designed to fill the gap between the longer-range Arrow missile defence system and the shorter-range Iron Dome interceptor. David's Sling is developed under joint collaboration between Israel's Rafael Advanced Defence Systems and US company Raytheon. In conjunction with missile defence systems, the Patriot defence system, designed to destroy manned and unmanned aerial vehicles, would continue to operate for the next five years.

--- Moiz Khan

CHINA & EAST ASIA

China

- On April 14, Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi warned that “conflict could break out at any moment” on the Korean Peninsula, as North Korea and the US increasingly seem headed for a potential military confrontation.

Wang Yi also said “Dialogue is the only possible solution,” adding that “there would be no winner” in a potential war. Tensions between North Korea and the US have significantly ratcheted up in recent months and the US has deployed a strike group, including a large aircraft carrier, to the Korean Peninsula. Meanwhile, North Korea has said it is ready for war and threatened to unleash a “merciless” response against American targets.

- During his visit to the US on April 9, Chinese President Xi Jinping met his American counterpart, Donald Trump to discuss trade, environmental protocol and international policy.

The Trump-Xi meeting focused on trade tensions between the two countries. Other items high on the agenda included discussing a response to an increased North Korean nuclear threat. Following talks between the two leaders, US President Donald Trump said, “tremendous progress” has been made in talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping. President Trump, however, urged Chinese President Xi Jinping to do more to restrict North Korea’s nuclear programme. Meanwhile, Chinese President Xi Jinping urged cooperation with the US on trade and investment. Experts have suggested that the talks between two leaders were a success given that both sides took a step toward tackling the trade issue by increasing China’s imports from the US. Chinese state media also hailed the meeting between the two leaders.

North Korea

- Citing North Korean state media on April 11, *Reuters* reported that North Korea has warned of a nuclear attack on the US at any sign of American aggression.

North Korea also warned that its “revolutionary strong army is keenly watching every move by enemy elements. Pyongyang also warned that it would counter “reckless acts of aggression” no matter what “methods the US wants to take.” The threat was made after a US aircraft carrier-led strike group set course for the western Pacific Ocean close to the Korean peninsula after North Korea’s missile launch on April 5, 2017. Meanwhile, President Trump said that North Korea was “looking for trouble” and the US would “solve the problem” with or without Beijing’s help. He also said that China could expect a better trade deal with the US if it worked to neutralise the nuclear threat that North Korea posed. During a telephonic conversation with US President Donald Trump, Chinese President Xi Jinping called for a peaceful resolution to the

issue. Earlier on April 10, China agreed to new measures to punish North Korea if it carries out a nuclear test.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

EUROPE

- On April 14, Uzbekistan said it warned the West that the man accused of carrying out the April 7 lorry attack in Stockholm was recruited by the Islamic State (IS).

The Uzbek Foreign Minister, Abdulaziz Kamilov, said information about Rakhmat Akilov had been “passed to one of our Western partners, so that the Swedish side could be informed.” It is unusual for Uzbek authorities to disclose such intelligence details. The Swedish security service says has neither confirmed nor denied receiving such information from Uzbekistan. According to reports on April 10, the Stockholm attack suspect was an illegal Uzbek immigrant, wanted by the police and awaiting deportation. Meanwhile thousands of Swedes gathered in central Stockholm to honour the victims of the April 7, 2017 attack.

- On April 7, a lorry smashed into a store in central Stockholm, killing at least four people.

At least a dozen people were also injured in the incident on Queen Street, one of the city’s busiest pedestrian streets. Swedish Prime Minister, Stefan Lofven said it was a terror attack.

- According to German investigators on April 14, there is “significant doubt” that the April 11 attack on the Borussia Dortmund team bus was the work of radical Islamists.

Investigators said letters found at the scene could be an attempt to trick people into thinking there was an Islamist motive. They, however, suggested it could have been the work of political extremists from the left or right or even violent football fans. On April 11, 2017, three explosions hit a bus carrying the Borussia Dortmund football team to their home Champions League quarterfinal match against Monaco. The head of Dortmund police said it was a targeted attack. Player Marc Bartra underwent an operation after breaking a bone in his wrist. However, no other players were hurt.

- According to *The Guardian* on April 13, spy agencies in Britain played an important role in alerting US spy agencies about contacts between members of Donald Trump’s campaign team and Russian intelligence operatives.

The Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) became aware of suspicious “interactions” between some Trump aides and suspected Russian agents in late 2015. The information was shared with the US as part of a routine exchange of information. By summer 2016, many other western agencies had also shared information on contacts between Trump’s inner circle and Russians. European countries including Germany, Estonia and Poland passed on electronic intelligence or sigint. Australia, a member of the “Five Eyes” spying alliance that also includes the US, UK, Canada and New Zealand, also relayed material.

- On April 12, US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson said ties with Russia are at a low point and must improve.

Following his two hour long meeting with President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov in Moscow, he said that the “two foremost nuclear powers cannot have this relationship.” Tillerson said there was some “common ground” on Syria, but he acknowledged that “broad differences” still remained. Lavrov said the two sides needed to overcome “time-bomb issues” inherited from Barack Obama’s Administration. Tensions have increased considerably since a suspected chemical attack on the rebel-held Syrian town of Khan Sheikhoun. The US blamed the Syrian government, and fired 59 cruise missiles at Syria’s Shayrat airbase in response.

- On April 11, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said that President Assad’s reign in Syria would end soon, warning that Russia was at risk of becoming irrelevant in the Middle East by continuing to support him.

His remarks came five days after the United States carried out strikes in Syria in retaliation for a chemical attack for which Washington and its allies blamed the Assad regime. The remarks came at a G7 foreign ministers’ meeting in the Tuscany region of Italy just before Tillerson flew to Moscow to meet Russia’s President Putin.

- On April 12, German Finance Minister, Wolfgang Schaeuble said Muslims who migrate to Europe should understand that there are better places for them to live if they do not want to accept the European way of life.

Such migrants who do not accept Europe’s way of living should be told, “you have made the wrong decision”, Schaeuble said during a round table discussion in Berlin. “There are better places in the world to live under Islamic law than Europe,” he added.

- *The Guardian* reported on April 12 that the EU executive is investigating a Hungarian law that threatens a leading university with closure.

Frans Timmermans, the first vice-president of the European Commission said the new law had caused widespread concern and was perceived by many as an attempt to close down the Central European University. The Hungarian-American financier and philanthropist George Soros founded the University. The investigation comes amid growing fear that Hungary’s Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, is eroding democracy. Meanwhile the country’s minister for state education, Laszlo Palkovics, suggested a loophole the university could use to bypass the new law. “The government is open and willing to discuss any solution,” he said. Earlier on April 10,

2017 thousands of people took part in a protest in Hungary to demand the abolition of laws, which could force the closure of the Central European University. Under new rules introduced by the government the Central European University (CEU) would be unable to award diplomas because it is registered in the US. The legislation has already been approved by parliament. Demonstrators urged President Janos Ader not to sign the legislation backed by the governing right-wing Fidesz party of Prime Minister Viktor Orban. Hungarian government spokesman Zoltan Kovacs said the demonstrations would not cause the government to back down. "There's no reason to," he said. "It's possible for CEU to fulfill the requirements set out in the new law - they have a year to comply." On April 2, 2017 at least ten thousand students, staff and their supporters marched through Budapest to express solidarity with the Central European University. CEU is ranked among the top 200 universities in the world in eight disciplines, and excels in political science and international studies.

- According to reports on April 12, a surprise seven-point lead by the "wildcard leftwing" candidate Jean-Luc Melenchon has turning the French presidential race into a possible four-way contest.

Independent centrist Emmanuel Macron and far-right Marine Le Pen, both with 23%-24% of the vote, are favourites to go through to the run-off round. However Mélenchon's radical tax-and-spend proposal is merely five or six points behind. Some recent polls placed him in third position, ahead of the scandal-hit centre-right candidate, Francois Fillon. Marine Le Pen remains a front-runner after working hard to portray a better image of her party, the National Front. She also distanced it from associations with Europe's far right. However the inner workings of her party as well as court documents have raised fresh doubts about the success and sincerity of those efforts. In a related development on April 4, 2017 Marine Le Pen was attacked from all sides during the second live TV debate. Centrist candidate Emmanuel Macron said Le Pen's nationalist proposals amounted to "economic warfare." She was also accused of not being tough enough on France's membership of the EU. Fillon said that France needed Europe when up against the US and China. Le Pen promised to restore control of France's borders and scrap the euro, or else hold a referendum on EU membership.

- According to the BBC on April 11, French authorities are struggling to find shelter for 1,500 migrants left homeless after fire destroyed the Grande-Synthe camp near Dunkirk.

About 500 people were accommodated in gymnasiums but the rest, including unaccompanied children as young as 12, were forced to sleep outside. Migration has been a key issue in the run-up to the April 23, 2017 poll. According to officials the fire began during a fight between Afghans and Kurds. At least 10 people were injured. Officials had warned in March 2017 that the camp would be dismantled because of unrest.

- On April 8, French Police found nearly 3.5 tonnes of weapons, explosives and other material in eight caches handed over by Basque separatist group Eta.

Prime Minister Bernard Cazeneuve said the weapons would be destroyed. Eta says it has now surrendered all its weapons. The group killed more than 800 people in four decades of violence in pursuit of an independent country between France and Spain. Cazeneuve approved of the move but Spain called on Eta to disband. Eta declared a ceasefire in 2011 but did not disarm.

- On April 8, Norwegian intelligence services raised the national terror threat level, after a homemade bomb was found in Oslo.

According to the security services, the risk of an attack had now become “probable”. Police cordoned off a large part of Gronland in central Oslo, and carried out a controlled detonation of an explosive device. A 17-year-old Russian citizen was arrested. His lawyer said he denied any wrongdoing and that his actions were a prank. The teenager moved to Norway in 2010 and had applied for asylum.

- On April 5, The European parliament voted overwhelmingly in favour of a tough negotiating stance towards the British government during Brexit negotiations.

MEPs in Strasbourg approved a resolution identifying the red lines in the upcoming talks. They voted 516 votes to 133, with 50 abstentions, exceeding the two-thirds majority sought by parliament leaders to show unity behind their approach. The resolution supports “phased negotiations” in the proceedings. This is contrary to the wishes of Theresa May’s government, which would like exit talks and discussions of a future trade arrangement to happen in parallel. Talks on such a deal can occur only when London reaches a settlement with the EU on its financial liabilities and the rights of citizens.

- According to Russian investigators on April 4, a bomb detonated by a suicide bomber caused the St Petersburg metro explosion.

The April 3, 2017 blast between two stations killed 14 people and injured almost 50. The Kyrgyz security service identified the suspect as Akbarzhon Jalilov, born in the Kyrgyz city of Osh in 1995. He later became a Russian citizen. Russian investigators confirmed the news saying he also planted a second bomb that did not explode.

- On April 3, British Prime Minister Theresa May “laughed off” questions about going to war with Spain following the Gibraltar Brexit row.

May said her approach to negotiations was “definitely jaw jaw.” Ex-Tory leader Lord Howard

said the PM would defend Gibraltar in the same way as Margaret Thatcher defended the Falklands in the 1982 war. Spain's foreign minister said his government was "surprised by the tone of comments coming out of Britain." Alfonso Dastis told a conference in Madrid, "It seems someone is losing their cool." The row was sparked by draft Brexit negotiating guidelines published by the EU saying any decisions affecting Gibraltar would be run past Spain. According to the guidelines, "After the United Kingdom leaves the Union, no agreement between the EU and the United Kingdom may apply to the territory of Gibraltar without the agreement between the Kingdom of Spain and the United Kingdom."

- Former head of the British embassy in Benghazi, Joe Walker-Cousins, warned on April 2 that as many as one million migrants are already on the way to Libya and Europe from countries across Africa.

Cousins' was head of the UK's Libya mission between 2012 and 2014. The warning comes as European governments struggle to find a response to the flow of migrants from the Mediterranean, and the appalling conditions in detention camps run by traffickers or the Libyan government. More than 590 migrants have drowned on the central Mediterranean route in the first three months of 2017. The International Organisation for Migration estimates 21,900 refugees reached Italy during this time, up from 14,500 during 2016.

---Amina Afzal

MIDDLE EAST & WEST ASIA

Egypt

- On April 9, at least 43 people were killed and 100 injured in two separate bomb attacks on Coptic churches in Egypt.

Daesh claimed responsibility for the twin attacks. The explosions occurred against people observing Palm Sunday, one of the most important days on the Christian calendar. The first explosion occurred during a Palm Sunday service at Mar Girgis (St. George's) Coptic church in Tanta. The explosive device was planted under a seat in the church and was detonated in the main prayer hall. A short time later, a suicide bomb attack occurred outside Saint Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Alexandria. Egyptian President, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi declared a three-month state of emergency in Egypt following the bombings.

- On April 3, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi met his US counterpart President Donald Trump in the White House and discussed matters related to international terrorism and Egypt's economy.

This was Sisi's first official state visit to Washington as Egypt's president. Although the US has long viewed Egypt as a vital strategic ally in the Middle East, former US President Barack Obama had refused to meet Sisi over concerns about alleged human rights abuses. Trump, however, praised the Egyptian president's leadership signalling an effort to improve ties that had become strained following the 2011 uprisings and security crackdowns. President Trump said, "You have a great friend and ally in the US and in me." He also said, "I just want to let everybody know that we are very much behind President Sisi, he has done a fantastic job in a very difficult situation." According to observers, the meeting signifies that Washington is ready to ignore the Obama Administration's concerns over human rights abuses in Egypt. Egypt is among the top recipients of US military and economic assistance; however the aid is being evaluated as part of the Trump Administration's push for budget cuts to diplomacy and development.

Iraq

- On April 13, at least 13 civilians were killed in a US-led airstrike in western Mosul.

According to a report published by the Anadolu Agency, the strike targeted several civilian homes in a residential area of Mosul's al-Yarmouk neighbourhood, which was recently liberated from Daesh. The latest civilian casualties came just a day after three members of one Iraqi family were killed in a US airstrike in the city. The UN expressed "profound concern" over the increase of civilian casualties in the Iraqi city and called on all parties engaged in anti-terror operations in the country to avoid "indiscriminate use of firepower." The US and some of its

allies have been carrying out airstrikes in Iraq since June 2014 allegedly targeting Daesh terrorists. The raids, which have done little to dislodge the terror group, have on numerous occasions claimed many civilian lives and damaged the country's infrastructure. Observers are deeply suspicious of the real intention behind Washington's so-called anti-Daesh raids. During an April 13, 2017 interview with Press TV, Mike Harris, a Veterans Today editor, said the US military is pursuing "another agenda" under the guise of fighting terrorism. He also maintained that the agenda is to keep Daesh terrorists "alive" and "prosperous" in order to use them as a tool to destabilise and topple certain governments within the Middle East for the benefit of Washington's allies in the region - namely Israel, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

- On April 5, at least 31 people were killed in a bomb attack at a cafe in the north of Baghdad.

In another development on April 5, 2017, at least 11 troopers were killed in a car bomb attack in Mosul. An operation is underway in Mosul against Daesh militants. Although Daesh has suffered heavy losses, it has managed to conduct sporadic attacks in areas across Iraq. Earlier, on April 4, 2017, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said Iraqi people blamed Saudi Arabia for the terrorist bombings in their country, as many of the assailants conducting such bombings were Saudi nationals.

- On April 3, US President Donald Trump's son-in-law and White House senior adviser, Jared Kushner, visited Iraq on behalf of the President to meet Iraqi leaders and review the fight against Daesh.

According to a statement from Navy Captain, Greg Hicks, General Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, asked Kushner and White House homeland security adviser Tom Bossert to accompany him on the trip. The visit came at a time when Iraqi forces were fighting to retake Mosul from Daesh with support from US-led air strikes which were criticised for causing civilian deaths in the city's west. Captain Hicks said, "As well as receiving briefings and updates, Mr Kushner is travelling on behalf of the President to express the President's support and commitment to the government of Iraq and US personnel currently engaged in the campaign." Although Kushner has no previous experience in government, he has become one of the most powerful men in Washington as a trusted adviser to the President with a broad portfolio of responsibilities. Captain Hicks further said, "Mr Bossert is travelling in his role as assistant to the President and will participate in meetings and briefings to reinforce the strong US-Iraqi partnership to defeat Daesh."

Israel

- On April 5, Israel's Knesset passed a controversial law called the "Kaminitz Law" allowing the demolition of Palestinian buildings.

The law was passed with 43 votes for and 33 against. It increases the maximum imprisonment term for those convicted of building without permits to three years from the current two years. The legislation further increases fines and reduces the powers of courts to postpone the date of demolition orders. It will also target 300,000 Palestinians living in the occupied East Jerusalem al-Quds. The law is backed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing government and has sparked widespread criticism. Several Israeli human rights NGOs warned in January 2017 that the legislation would lead to a "dramatic rise" in home demolitions in Arab towns. Tel Aviv has accelerated its land grab and settlement construction activities in the occupied Palestinian lands after US President Donald Trump took office in January 2017. According to human rights groups, Israel's sustained demolition of Palestinian homes is aimed at uprooting Palestinians from their native territories and expropriating more land for the expansion of settlements.

- On April 5, Palestinian Prisoners' Club, a rights monitor, reported that at least 300 Palestinian children have been arrested by Israeli forces since the beginning of 2017.

The rights group released the figures in a report documenting a series of violent raids in which Palestinian children were detained, beaten and abused. The report also called on the UNICEF and other international human rights groups to pay more attention to the plight of Palestinian children. The Palestinian Ministry of Culture also called on the global community to help protect the children of Palestine, who make up 45.8 % of its total population. It stressed that Israel's crackdown on children is "clear-cut proof that Tel Aviv has started a real war on Palestinian children, who are the guardians of the future." More than 7,000 Palestinians are being held in Israeli jails. Hundreds of inmates have apparently been incarcerated under the practice of administrative detention, which is a policy under which Palestinian inmates are kept in Israeli detention facilities without a trial or charge.

Saudi Arabia

- On April 4, British Prime Minister, Theresa May arrived in Riyadh for a two-day visit to the Kingdom.

It was May's first official visit to the Kingdom. The visit was aimed at discussing trade and securing post-Brexit investments from Saudi Arabia. In March 2017, May triggered Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, formally starting a two-year process of negotiations that will lead Britain to leave the EU after 44 years. During her visit, May held meetings with head of the Saudi stock exchange, Sarah al-Suhaimi, and Interior Minister, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef. Saudi Arabia is Britain's largest trading partner in the Middle East. Saudi exports to the country amounted to more than \$8bn in 2015. Riyadh is also looking to boost its foreign investments as part of a long-term plan known as "Vision 2030", which aims to diversify the economy and reduce dependence on oil revenues.

Syria

- On April 15, at least 24 people were killed in a car bomb blast targeting a convoy of coaches carrying evacuees from government-held towns near Aleppo.

The blast hit the Rashidin area where dozens of buses carrying mostly Shiite residents of two villages that were being evacuated in a deal, were waiting to enter the city. An agreement called the "Four Towns" deal was reached between the Syrian government and the rebels allowing some 30,000 besieged people to be taken out of two rebel-held towns and two towns under government control. The deal was brokered by Iran and Qatar. According to AFP news agency thousands of evacuees from both sides of Syria's civil war have been stuck in hostile territory since April 14, 2017 as the evacuation deal was stalled. Rebels say Damascus breached the terms of the deal, accusing the government of trying to bring out more loyalist fighters than agreed. In December 2016, a similar evacuation deal failed when rebels burnt coaches due to be sent to the towns.

- According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, on April 4, at least 89 people, including children, were killed in a suspected Syrian government chemical attack in the town of Khan Sheikhoun in the province of Idlib.

The Union of Medical Care Organisations, a coalition of international aid agencies that funds hospitals in Syria, said at least 100 people were killed in the attack. The Syrian military denied responsibility and said it would never use chemical weapons. The military further blamed any use of chemical weapons on Syria's opposition and those who support them, noting that militants fabricate accusations of toxic gas attacks to divert attention from their failures on the ground. Director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Rami Abdulrahman said the assessment that Syrian government warplanes were to blame was based on several factors such as the type of aircraft, including Sukhoi 22 jets, that carried out the raid. The Russian Defence Ministry said its aircraft had not carried out the attack. Meanwhile, a commission affiliated to the UN Human Rights Council, whose mission is to investigate rights violations in Syria, said it had launched a probe into the suspected chemical attack in Idlib Province. Iran strongly condemned the use of chemical weapons in Syria, underlying the need for disarming terrorists operating in the country.

- On April 6, US President Donald Trump ordered a massive military strike against Syria's Shayrat air base in retaliation for a chemical attack he blamed on President Bashar al-Assad.
- On April 10, Russia sent two corvettes, an oiler, and a tugboat to the Eastern Mediterranean, off the coast of Syria, following US military strike on a Syrian air base.

According to officials, the US fired 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles at the airfield at 3:40am Syrian time on April 7, 2017. The missiles were fired from the USS Porter and the USS Ross, which

belong to the US Navy's Sixth Fleet and are located in the eastern Mediterranean. The strike targeted radars, aircraft, air defence systems and other logistical components at the military base south of Homs in central Syria, from where Washington believes the chemical attack was launched. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, at least nine civilians and five servicemen including an air commodore were killed. The base was the second most important for Syria's air force. The US said it notified both Russia and Turkey before the missile strike. The US military strike was the first direct US action against Assad's government and Trump's biggest military decision since taking office. The Syrian regime denied any use of chemical weapons and state media described the US strike as an "act of aggression." Russia also denounced the US action, with Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov saying President Vladimir Putin considered it an "aggression against a sovereign state" that would inflict "considerable damage" on US-Russia ties. Tensions between the US and Russia have escalated since the US conducted strikes against Syria. Russia has warned of "extremely serious" consequences for the US strike and suspended a deal with the US which was aimed at preventing mid-air collisions over Syria.

- *During an April 13 interview with AFP in Damascus, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad accused the West of fabricating a suspected chemical weapons attack that prompted an unprecedented US missile strike.*
- *On April 12, Russia vetoed a UN draft resolution demanding the Syrian government to cooperate with an OPCW-led investigation of the suspected chemical attack.*

It was the eighth time that Russia used its veto power at the UNSC to block action directed at Damascus. Britain, France and the US put forward the measure in response to the suspected sarin gas attack in Khan Sheikhun. China abstained, as did Kazakhstan and Ethiopia. Bolivia voted against the measure and 10 other council members supported it. The proposed resolution would have condemned the alleged attack and expressed the Council's full backing to investigators from the OPCW. The draft specifically would have demanded that the Syrian government provide flight plans, flight logs and other information on its military operations conducted on April 4, 2017, hand over the names of commanders of any aircraft and provide access to air bases to UN investigators. Bashar al-Assad, during his interview, said that he could "only allow any investigation when it's impartial, when we make sure that unbiased countries will participate in this delegation in order to make sure that they won't use it for politicised purposes." He insisted several times that his forces had turned over all chemical weapons stockpiles under the 2013 deal. Syria's government signed the Chemical Weapons Convention and agreed to hand over its stockpiles in 2013, under a Russian-brokered deal.

Assad said his firepower had not been affected by the attack ordered by US President Donald Trump and acknowledged that further strikes were possible. He also insisted his government would never use the banned arms against Syrian people. Assad said, "Our impression is that the West, mainly the US, is hand in glove with the terrorists. They fabricated the whole story in

order to have a pretext for the attack.” He further said that evidence of the suspected chemical attack came only from “a branch of Al Qaeda”. He said, “It is not clear whether it happened or not, because how can you verify a video? You have a lot of fake videos now. We don’t know whether those dead children were killed in Khan Sheikun.”

- On April 11, US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson said that the Trump Administration prefers a political process for changing the Syrian government but sees no further role for President Bashar al-Assad.

A transcript of Tillerson’s remarks was released by the State Department in Washington. Tillerson was addressing a news conference in Lucca, Italy. He said the US favoured ‘a unified Syria,’ governed by its people, but without its present leader. This statement gives the first comprehensive insight into how the Trump Administration wants to deal with the Syrian crisis and also reflects its desire to maintain a cordial relationship with Russia, despite differences over Syria. Tillerson advised the Russian government to realise that ‘they have aligned themselves with an unreliable partner in Bashar al-Assad.’ He reminded Moscow that the Syrian leader pledged to them to destroy all chemical weapons but did not, making ‘the Russians look not so good under these circumstances.’ Secretary Tillerson further said that Russia can be a part of and play an important role in Syria’s stable and secure future created by the US, or Russia can maintain its alliance with this group, which we believe is not going to serve Russia’s long-term interests.

- During a meeting of the Group of Seven (G-7) industrialised nations in Italy on April 10, the participants discussed ways to launch a common response to the chemical attack in Syria.

The foreign ministers of France, Germany, Britain, Japan, Canada, the US and current G-7 president Italy, as well as EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini attended the meeting. The G-7 meeting was held to gather wide international support for the US’ retaliatory missile strikes to push Russia to abandon Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and join a new peace effort for Syria. The foreign ministers also discussed new sanctions against Russia for backing Assad. Speaking after his meeting with US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, British Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson said, “Ministers will be discussing the possibility of further sanctions, certainly, on some of the Syrian military figures and indeed on some of the Russian military figures.” He also said, “Russia had a choice to continue backing the toxic Assad regime, or to work with the rest of the world to find a political solution for Syria.”

Turkey

- On April 13, Turkey accused the UN of meddling in its internal politics.

The accusation comes on the heels of a referendum that could give President Recep Tayyip Erdogan enhanced presidential powers. According to an April 13, 2017 statement from UN rights experts, Turkey's security crackdown after a failed coup attempt in July 2016 had undermined the chance for informed debate on the referendum. They said a state of emergency imposed after the coup attempt had been used to justify repressive measures that might intensify if Erdogan's powers are enhanced. Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman, Huseyin Muftuoglu said the UN statement was 'worrisome' and its timing indicated a deliberate political approach ahead of the referendum. According to Muftuoglu, the statement before the April 16, 2017 public vote contained political comments which strengthen the view that this approach is deliberate. He also said that Turkey calls on the UN to continue constructive dialogue and cooperation.

---Muhammad Shoaib

SOUTH ASIA

Pakistan

External

- On April 10, Pakistan's Field General Court Martial sentenced Indian spy Kulbhushan Jadhav to death following a trial for involvement in espionage and fomenting terrorism in Pakistan.
- In a related development on April 11, India's Minister for External Affairs (MEA) Sushma Swaraj warned Pakistan of "consequences" if it proceeds with the death sentence of Kulbhushan Jadhav.
- *Radio Pakistan* reported on April 14 that Indian High Commissioner, Gautam Bambawale, called on the Foreign Secretary Tehmina Janjua in Islamabad and discussed the issue of Indian serving Naval Officer and RAW agent Kulbhushan Jadhav.

Gautam Bambawale said it would appeal against the death sentence to Kulbhushan Jadhav and demanded from Pakistan a certified copy of the charge sheet as well as the army court order in the case, besides seeking consular access to the Indian navy officer Jadhav. On April 14, Pakistan's Foreign Affairs Adviser, Sartaj Aziz had shared the charge sheet against Jadhav and said that "Inflammatory statements and rhetoric" about 'pre-meditated murder' will only result in escalation, serving no useful purpose." Pakistani authorities had arrested Jadhav from Balochistan on March 3, 2016. According to the Pakistan military, "The spy was tried through Field General Court Martial (FGCM) under the Pakistan Army Act (PAA) and awarded the death sentence." Jadhav was also provided a defending officer according to legal provisions. Meanwhile, India lodged a formal protest with Pakistan over Jadhav's death sentence and announced that in case the punishment was carried out it would regard it as 'premeditated murder'. Jadhav had confessed before the court that he was tasked by RAW to plan, coordinate and organise subversive activities in Karachi and Balochistan. In January 2017, Pakistan had shared a dossier on India's interference and terrorism in Pakistan with the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres. The dossier also contained proof of India's interference in Pakistan and its involvement in destabilising the country.

- On April 13, Pakistan's Foreign Office spokesman, Nafees Zakaria said, "it can't rule out the involvement of hostile agencies," in the disappearance of Habib Zahir, a retired Pakistan Army officer from Nepal.

Zakaria, however, denounced Indian media for linking Lt Col (ret'd) Habib Zahir's disappearance with the case of Kulbhushan Jadhav, an Indian spy sentenced to death by a Pakistani military court for espionage and sabotage. Earlier on April 8, Pakistan's foreign office spokesman had said that a former Pakistan's army officer, Lt Col Mohammad Habib Zahir, had gone missing in Nepal. The Foreign Office also said that Pakistani authorities were in touch with the Nepal government to trace Zahir and Kathmandu was cooperating.

- According to *The Nation* on April 12, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif expressed hope that the Trump Administration would help resolve the Kashmir dispute between Pakistan and India.

The Premier said, “The US can play a very critical role, which it has not done.” He added that the world, including the US, is aware of the danger the dispute poses to world peace. PM Sharif stressed that the UN Security Council must also ensure the implementation of its resolutions on Kashmir and criticised the UN for its failure to do so. On Pakistan-US relations, the premier expressed the hope that the ties between the two countries would improve under President Trump.

- *Dawn* reported on April 12 that the US Department of Defence had authorised the disbursement of \$550 million to Pakistan in 2017 in recognition of the significant sacrifices the Pakistani military has made in the fight against terrorism.

This disbursement does not require a certification by the US Secretary of Defence confirming that Pakistan is taking action against the Haqqani network. Earlier in April 2016, the US Congress adopted the Defence Appropriation Bill for 2017, which also includes \$900m for providing economic and military assistance to Pakistan. The remaining \$350m is restricted by the Secretary of Defence’s certification of Pakistan’s actions against the Haqqani network. According to Adam Stump, a US Defence Department spokesman, the US Defence Secretary “has not yet made a decision on certification.”

- On April 6, Pakistan’s Foreign Office spokesman, Nafees Zakaria said that “India’s ambiguous no-first use (NFU) declaration is not verifiable and hence nothing more than an empty political statement,” and added, “it cannot substitute for verifiable arms control and restraint measures.

The reaction from Pakistan’s Foreign Office came after media reports citing nuclear strategist, Vipin Narang noted that India might be reinterpreting its No-First use, by replacing it with the so-called pre-emptive doctrine. Zakaria said that Pakistan has to consider capabilities and not intentions, which can change anytime. In November 2016, Indian Defence Minister, Manohar Parrikar had also questioned India’s NFU saying India should not say that it won’t use nuclear weapons first’ but it should say that ‘India is a responsible nuclear power’. Despite India’s official declaration of NFU, the strategic community continues to debate India’s nuclear posture with some arguing that India had moved away from its NFU commitment in January 2003 after the government of India announced that it reserved the right to use nuclear weapons against any WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction) attack against the country.

- Briefing the National Assembly Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs on April 5, Pakistan’s Foreign Affairs Adviser, Sartaj Aziz said that Pakistan is pursuing a policy of strengthening its relations with Afghanistan.

Sartaj Aziz reiterated that there is no military solution to the Afghan conflict and there is need of focused efforts for a politically negotiated settlement for lasting peace in Afghanistan. He noted that Pakistan remains committed to facilitating an Afghan-owned Afghan-led peace process. Earlier on April 3, 2017 Sartaj Aziz met a 14-member delegation of the Afghan media and highlighted “serious efforts made by Pakistan” to facilitate peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

- Speaking during a meeting of the National Assembly’s Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs on April 4, Pakistan’s Foreign Secretary, Tehmina Janjua said that the country remains committed to its policy of non-interference in the conflicts of Muslim countries.

Janjua assured the Committee that there is no change in Pakistan’s policy regarding Iran, Yemen and Saudi Arabia. She also stressed that Pakistan is trying to ease tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Earlier in March 2017, the Government of Pakistan agreed to the appointment of former army chief General (retd) Raheel Sharif as the head of the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance. Iran reacted strongly to the decision. On April 3, 2017 Iranian Ambassador to Islamabad, Mehdi Honardoost expressed “concerns” regarding General (retd) Sharif’s appointment saying, “It may impact the unity of Islamic countries.” The Iranian ambassador said that Pakistan had approached Iran before Sharif’s appointment. He, however warned that this does not suggest that Tehran is “satisfied with this decision or it had accepted the same”.

- On April 3, US Ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley said that the Trump Administration would try and “find its place” to be a part of efforts to de-escalate tensions between India and Pakistan.

Haley also indicated that US President Donald Trump might also participate in the process. She said that the US policy has been to ensure de-escalation of tensions between Pakistan and India but the US never saw a role for itself in resolving issues between the two countries. She spoke of a more “proactive” US role in the wake of escalating tensions between nuclear-armed Pakistan and India. Following Haley’s remarks, Pakistan’s envoy in Washington, Aizaz Chaudhry welcomed the suggestion saying “Any positive role that the US plays to bring peace and stability in South Asia can serve the region well.” Meanwhile, Gopal Baglay, India’s spokesman for Ministry of External Affairs, dismissed Ambassador Haley’s idea of Washington’s more proactive role in resolving the issues between India and Pakistan and insisted that India’s position for “bilateral redressal of all India-Pakistan issues in an environment free of terror and violence hasn’t changed”. It is important to note that New Delhi has long been opposed to any third-party intervention in resolving the unsettled issues between India and Pakistan.

Pakistan Internal

- On April 9, at least 8 people including a 12-year old boy were killed and more than 200 injured after the Indian security forces opened fire at a protest campaigning against the parliamentary by-election in Srinagar.

The voter turnout in Srinagar was 6.5 %, the lowest in thirty years. Following the clashes, Indian authorities imposed curfew-like restrictions in some parts of Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK). The Joint Hurriyat leadership under Syed Ali Geelani, Mirwaiz Umer Farooq and Yasin Malik called for a two-day strike in protest. They also called for a boycott of the vote, which was held to fill a vacant seat after Peoples Democratic Party leader, Tariq Karra resigned to protest against the killing of more than 100 civilians during the 2016 unrest in the region. India's top court had asked the government to consider using measures other than pellet guns to deal with protests in IOK.

The casualties drew immediate condemnation from Pakistan with Sartaj Aziz, Pakistan's Foreign Affairs Adviser rejecting "the sham elections," saying, "It cannot be an alternative to the numerous UNSC resolutions". Pakistan has maintained that the elections in the region were not recognised by the UN Security Council and also rejected by the people of Kashmir. In 1957, following the first elections of the IOK Legislative Assembly, India began to term elections as an alternate to the right of self-determination. However, it is important to note that the UN Security Council by its Resolution (122) had rejected elections as a recognised means of ascertaining the wishes of the people. Meanwhile, during his visit to Pakistan on 10th April 2017, Yusuf Ahmad Al-Othaimeen, Secretary General of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) said that India had declined the OIC's request for a visit to Occupied Kashmir for assessing the human rights situation there.

- On April 5, at least seven people including four soldiers were killed in a suicide bomb attack on a population census team in Lahore.

The attack was claimed by Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Pakistan's census commissioner, Asif Bajwa said that security arrangements would be reviewed but the counting process would continue. Earlier in March 2017, Pakistan had launched the national census, the country's first since 1998, the first stage of which is scheduled to be completed on May 25, 2017. Around 200,000 Pakistani troops are reported to be assisting civilian enumerators in collecting the population data.

- According to *Dawn* on April 2, the custodian of a shrine in Sargodha allegedly tortured and then murdered at least 20 worshippers, including four women.

Pakistani authorities said that they had arrested three suspects, including the shrine's custodian, who is believed to be mentally unstable. Reports indicated that the victims had been intoxicated and tortured before being killed.

India

- Speaking to the Rajya Sabha on April 7, India's Minister for External Affairs (MEA), Sushma Swaraj said that India has all the credentials to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC).

Swaraj said four permanent members, US, UK, France and Russia have all extended support and China, had "not publicly opposed it." She also said that India has been making diplomatic efforts to ensure not only expansion, but also reform in the Security Council. The Minister said India was expecting that new members would have the same rights, including the veto power enjoyed by the existing permanent members. Pakistan has opposed India's bid for permanent seats in the UN Security Council, maintaining that "adding more permanent seats to Security Council will not address issue of representation."

- During her visit to India on April 7, Bangladeshi PM Sheikh Hasina met with Indian PM Narendra Modi. Following the meeting, the two countries signed 22 pacts including in the areas of civil nuclear cooperation and defence.

PM Modi assured Sheikh Hasina of an "early solution" to the Teesta waters sharing issue. He also announced \$4.5 bn line of credit to Bangladesh for development projects in the country and another \$500 million for defence hardware purchases for Dhaka in a bid to deepen political and strategic ties between the two nations. A separate event to honour Indian soldiers killed in the 1971 war with Pakistan, Modi without naming Pakistan said "there is an ideology in South Asia which promotes terrorism, and thus obstructs growth in the whole region".

- On April 4, Indian Minister of State for Home Kiren Rijiju said that China should not interfere in its internal affairs.

The statement came as the Dalai Lama visited the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. Kiren Rijiju said that the Dalai Lama's visit to the border state was completely religious and no political motive should be attached to it. He said that India has never interfered in China's internal affairs and it expects China to do the same. Earlier, in March 2017, the Chinese Foreign Ministry had warned India that the visit of the Dalai Lama to Arunachal Pradesh, which Beijing claims as part of Tibet, would cause "serious damage" to bilateral ties.

Afghanistan

- On April 13, the Pentagon said it had dropped "the mother of all bombs," a 21,600 lb (9,800 kg) bomb on a tunnel and cave complex of Daesh militant group in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province killing at least 36 militants.

According to media reports, the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast Bomb (MOAB), known as "the mother of all bombs", is the largest non-nuclear bomb ever used by the US in a conflict.

Following the attack, US President Donald Trump said the Afghanistan bombing was “another successful job,” whereas the commander of US forces in Afghanistan, General John Nicholson, said that the GBU-43/B was the “right munition” to use against the Daesh. The bomb is designed to destroy underground targets and was developed during the Iraq war.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

UNITED NATIONS

- On April 10, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, asked the European Union (EU) to temporarily suspend return of asylum-seekers to Hungary.

He also expressed concerns about Hungary's new policy of detaining migrants at the border or expelling those without proper papers. He said the situation had become worse since the new law introducing mandatory detention for asylum-seekers came into effect. Grandi urged the EU states to suspend any transfers of asylum-seekers to Hungary until the country revises its laws and practices as per European and international law. The EU's 'Dublin Regulations', adopted in 2003, is an instrument that determines which European state is responsible for examining the application of asylum-seekers. The Dublin system is based on the assumption that asylum laws and practices of the EU states are formed on common standards. However, the European Parliament noted in its 2008 evaluation that the Dublin system would continue to be unfair until laws and practices of EU states were harmonised. The difference in laws and practices results in asylum-seekers receiving different treatments across the EU.

- On April 10, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres designated Nobel Laureate Malala Yousafzai the youngest-ever UN Messenger of Peace with a special focus on girls' education.

During a ceremony in the Trusteeship Council chamber at the UN Headquarters in New York, Guterres said that Malala Yousafzai has been to a number of most difficult places and refugee camps around the world. He called her a 'symbol of education for all.' After accepting the accolade, Yousafzai talked about the importance of education, especially education of girls, for the betterment of communities and societies. She said, "Bringing change starts with us and it should start now. If you want to see your future bright, you have to start working now." UN Messengers of Peace are distinguished individuals, selected from different walks of life. These prominent individuals volunteer their time, talent and passion to raise awareness of the UN's efforts to improve the lives of billions of people across the world.

- On April 9, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) called for the immediate release of Rohingya children detained by Myanmar's government as part of a crackdown on the Muslim minority group in the Rakhine state.

UNICEF's deputy executive director Justin Forsyth stated that he has shared the details of around a dozen youngsters being held at Buthidaung prison with Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi. He said, "Any child that is detained is an issue for us." Myanmar's army chief and Suu Kyi recognised the issue but did not make comments about their release. More than 600 people were detained in a crackdown launched by the Myanmar government against

the minority Muslim community in October 2016. As a result, some 75000 people have fled to Bangladesh since the crackdown began. Moreover, there are numerous accounts of executions, rapes and arson attacks by the Myanmar military against Muslims. The UN Human Rights Council plans to send a mission to Myanmar to conduct an investigation regarding allegations of killings, rape and torture of Rohingya Muslims by the country's military.

- On April 7, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged restraint to avoid any escalation of the situation in Syria, following the US cruise missile strikes on Syria's Shayrat Airbase in response to an alleged Syrian government's use of chemical weapons.

Guterres said, "Mindful of the risk of escalation, I appeal for restraint to avoid any acts that could deepen the suffering of the Syrian people." He also said that there is no other way to solve the conflict than through a political solution. While criticising the chemical weapons attack, Guterres stressed the need for accountability for such crimes in line with existing international norms and Security Council resolutions. During his talk, however, he did not criticise the unilateral action of the US against the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government. According to international law experts, unilateral humanitarian intervention or the institution of the 'responsibility to protect' without UNSC authorisation is not possible under international law. The experts believe that the missile strike on Syria conducted by the US was a clear violation of international law.

- On April 7, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNCHR) condemned the execution of three men in Gaza for "collaboration with the occupier" and urged authorities to halt all further executions.

Ravina Shamdasani, a spokesperson for the Office of the UNCHR, stated that the executions were carried out in breach of Palestine's obligations under international law, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The defendants were convicted of treason under the Palestine Liberation Organisation's (PLO) Revolutionary Penal Code and they were tried in military courts, in contravention of international law. She urged the authorities in Gaza to halt further executions and comply with Palestine's obligations under international law.

- According to the UN environment agency on April 4, Mali became the first country to ratify the Kigali Amendment.

The Kigali Amendment is a significant amendment to the Montreal Protocol, which aims to phase out hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), a major source of greenhouse gas emissions. While congratulating Mali, Erik Solheim, Head of UN Environment, urged other countries to ratify the amendment in order to protect the climate. By ratifying the Kigali Amendment, countries commit to cut the production and consumption of greenhouse gases. The amendment aims at cutting HFCs by more than 80% over the next 30 years. The Kigali Amendment will enter into force on January 1, 2019, following its ratification by at least 20 countries that are party to the Montreal

Protocol. Solheim said that the Kigali Amendment is consistent with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

--- Moiz Khan