

March 16 – March 31

AREA BRIEF

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Area Briefs: 16-31 March 2017

General Observations

Pakistan

- At a nuclear policy conference in the US, an Indian American academic at MIT drew attention to India's nuclear doctrine that clearly was now premised on a first use of nuclear weapons in which India would attack Pakistan first with nuclear weapons so as to "completely disarm Pakistan of its nuclear advantage."

In fact the Indian claims of a No First Use policy were put aside by India much earlier. In 2003, in its enunciation of its NCA – which actually was a further expansion of the nuclear doctrine - India expanded the operational parameters for its nuclear doctrine. It would not only use nuclear weapons against a nuclear strike against its own territory but would also use nuclear weapons against a nuclear strike on Indian forces "anywhere." Also, it would use nuclear weapons even against a chemical or biological attack "against India or Indian forces anywhere" (*Government of India's Press Release of January 4, 2003 on "The Cabinet Committee on Security Reviews operationalization of India's Nuclear Doctrine."*) – effectively a First Use principle and applicable against a non-nuclear state. Pakistan has unfortunately not brought this aspect of India's nuclear doctrine effectively before the international community when its nuclear arsenal has been targeted and it has taken an Indian scholar to finally reveal the expansive and first use nature of India's nuclear doctrine.

- The controversy raised by the Hussain Haqqani article of 10 March relating to indiscriminate issuing of Pakistani visas to US special operatives and CIA personnel continued into the latter fortnight of the month. Documents continued to surface adding to the controversy. A letter from the PM House to the Foreign Office suddenly showed up in the media. In the letter, the then PM, Gillani of the PPPP had authorised then Ambassador Haqqani to directly issue visas without the security checks SOPs. The PMLN government's Foreign Affairs Adviser, Sartaj Aziz also issued a statement endorsing this revelation of former PM Gillani giving extraordinary authority to Haqqani.
- However, a greater controversy came to the fore when it was revealed that retired COAS General Raheel Sharif had been given a formal NOC by the PMLN government to head the Saudi-led military alliance ostensibly to fight terrorism but which has clear sectarian undertones. The actual TORs of the alliance remain murky but there is a very real fear that Pakistan could get sucked into the quagmire of the Yemen war where a Saudi-led Gulf countries' alliance is already embroiled in. The fact that a Parliamentary resolution clearly stated Pakistan should remain neutral in the Yemen war; questions are being raised as to why the issue of joining a Saudi-led military alliance at the time of an

ongoing Saudi-led war in Yemen was not brought before Parliament. The fact that the Trump Administration is seeking removal of all restrictions for greater US participation in the Yemen war has only added to the controversy over General (ret'd) Sharif's appointment.

- The Pakistani Prime Minister ordered the reopening of the Pak-Afghan border crossings, which had been closed in the wake of the Sehwan terror attack. Earlier, Pakistan's Foreign Affairs Adviser Sartaj Aziz met with Afghan NSA Haneef Atmar in London through the intervention of the UK's National Security Adviser Sir Mark Lyall Grant. Questions were raised in Pakistan as to why it required an intervention by the UK for Pakistani and Afghan officials to dialogue, especially when many political leaders in Pakistan had been offering to play the role of intermediaries.
- While opening the Pak-Afghan border, Pakistan also announced it had begun fencing the same border. Meanwhile, India's Home Minister Rajnath Singh, on 25 March, announced that India would be sealing its border with Pakistan and Bangladesh and this would be completed by 2018.
- After passage from both Houses of Parliament, on 31 March the President signed the 28th Constitutional Amendment Bill into law, reviving the military courts for another two years. There have been some safeguards built into this amendment relating to military courts, which are intended to be used for what Pakistan's government refers to as "jet black terrorists".
- Terrorism again surfaced in Parachinar on 31 March as a blast hit a busy market place where an entrance to an Imambargah was located – revealing the sectarian nature of this terrorist attack. Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), an offshoot of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), claimed responsibility for the attack.

International

- A UN conference in New York, on negotiating a treaty to ban nuclear weapons got off to a shaky start, on 27 March, when the US, UK, France, Russia, India and Pakistan announced they would boycott the conference. They were among 40 states that have chosen not to participate in this conference.

- The Trump Administration's lack of commitment to human rights violations across the world was reflected in its decision to do away with human rights conditionalities attached by the Obama Administration to the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Bahrain where there is a sectarian conflict going on.
- US bombings in Syria and Iraq targeting Daesh are also becoming increasingly controversial as they are resulting in heavy civilian casualties especially as a result of mis-targeting. The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, on 28 March, asked for a UNSC briefing over a 17 March US airstrike on Mosul (Iraq) in which over 200 people were killed. Earlier questions were raised over a US-led coalition air strike in northern Syria, which led to over 30 civilians being killed as a civilian target was mistakenly attacked.
- The Saudi-led Yemen war is also becoming embroiled in controversy as the civilian death toll increases. On 27 March, the UN's Emergency Relief Coordinator and Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs pointed out that this war, as it enters a third year, had destroyed the country's economy and was on the brink of famine and malnourishment amongst children was on the rise. Civilians including children have become the main sufferers in this war. An Amnesty International Report of 23 March also held the US and UK responsible for the intense civilian suffering in Yemen as a result of their multibillion dollars arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Since the start of the war by a Saudi-led coalition in early 2015, the US and UK have transferred more than US \$ 5 billion in arms to Saudi Arabia.
- Meanwhile, the UN SG showed his bias towards Israel when he pressured the head of the UN's Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) into resigning after she refused to withdraw a report accusing Israel of imposing apartheid on the Palestinians.
- An Arab League Summit on 29 March lent support to the key Palestinian demands and attempted to relaunch a peace plan. An interesting aspect of this plan is the offer to have Arab and Muslim states normalize their relations with Israel once it returns land captured in 1967 as part of a Palestinian state.
- London saw a terrorist attack on 22 March when a man drove into pedestrians on the Westminster Bridge before trying to enter Parliament. The man was a British citizen by birth and had spent time in Saudi Arabia.

- Travel from Muslim-dominant states to the US and UK became more difficult with the US and UK announcing that passengers flying from certain airports would be banned from carrying laptops into the cabin. The US ban targeted the leading travel hubs like Dubai, Istanbul and Qatar and many believe this could be related as much to the dominance of the airlines like Emirates, Qatar etc. as to actual security concerns. No US airlines fly from the targeted airports.
- India's Hindutva face came to the fore again when the BJP, in the wake of its massive electoral success in the Uttar Pradesh (UP) elections, swore-in a known Muslim-hater, Yogi Adityanath as the Chief Minister of UP. Amongst his anti-Muslim rhetoric has been his call for a Trump-like travel ban on Muslims in India.

--- Dr Shireen M Mazari

Director General

AMERICAS

Domestic

- According to *BBC* on March 31, President Donald Trump's ex-national security adviser, Michael Flynn, wants immunity to testify on alleged Russian election meddling.

Flynn's lawyer Robert Kelner said his client "has a story to tell", but needs to guard against "unfair prosecution." Trump said Flynn was right to ask for immunity. He accused Democrats of orchestrating a "witch hunt." Flynn was sacked in February after misleading the White House about his conversations with a Russian envoy.

- On March 30, the White House invited senior Republican and Democratic members of the Senate and House of Representatives intelligence panels to review new material relevant to their investigation into Russia's alleged interference in the US presidential election.

According to White House spokesman Sean Spicer, "There has been information ... material that has ... come to light, and that we want to make sure that the people who are conducting the review have that information." Spicer did not provide any details about the information.

- According to *Reuters* on March 30, Richard Burr the Republican chairman of the US Senate Intelligence Committee has promised a thorough investigation into any direct links between Russia and President Donald Trump during his 2016 campaign for the White House.

Committee Chairman Richard Burr and Mark Warner, its top Democrat, pledged at a joint news conference that they would work together, contrary to the partisan disagreement characterising a similar probe by the House of Representatives Intelligence Committee. Responding to a question about the possibility of such a link, Burr said, "We know that our challenge is to answer that question for the American people." Trump's nascent presidency has been clouded by allegations from US intelligence agencies that Russia's alleged role in influencing the election led to Trump's victory. Possible connections between his campaign personnel and Russia are also being scrutinised. Trump has dismissed the allegation and Russia has denied them.

- On March 30, the White House announced that Ivanka Trump would be officially joining President Trump's Administration as an unpaid employee.

Her title would be Assistant to the President. The US first daughter bowed to pressure following an outcry from ethics experts at her initial plans to serve in a more informal capacity. Ivanka

Trump she had “heard the concerns some have with my advising the president in my personal capacity.” Her husband, Jared Kushner, is also a senior adviser to President Donald Trump.

- On March 28, President Donald Trump signed an order to revoke Obama-era climate change regulations.

The move is the result of a campaign promise to support the coal industry. It opposes US support for an international deal to fight global warming. Trump announced his so called “Energy Independence” executive order at the headquarters of the Environmental Protection Agency. The move prompted severe backlash from a coalition of 23 states and local governments, as well as environmental groups. They called the decree a threat to public health and vowed to fight it in court. The order is aimed against former President Barack Obama’s Clean Power Plan, which required states to slash carbon emissions from power plants in order for the US to be able to meet its commitments stipulated by the 2015 Paris Agreement.

- On March 28 the House of Representatives voted to repeal an Obama-era law that required ISPs to obtain permission before sharing personal information including location data.

Supporters of the move believe it would help increase competition. However its critics argue it would have a “chilling effect” on online privacy. President Donald Trump will sign the order soon. The repeal was supported by major providers such as Verizon, AT&T and Comcast, who argued that ISPs were being subjected to stricter privacy laws than companies like Google or Facebook.

- On March 24, President Donald Trump suffered a major political setback in the US Congress when Republican leaders pulled legislation to overhaul the US healthcare system.
- On March 23, President Trump warned House Republican lawmakers he would leave Obamacare in place and move on to tax reform, if they did not support his new healthcare legislation in the March 24, 2017 vote.

Overhauling the healthcare system was an important campaign promise of the President and his allies. Faced with disagreement among conservatives and moderates in their ranks, Republican leaders pulled legislation to repeal the Affordable Care Act from consideration on the House floor. The Democrats were unified against it. House Republicans had planned to hold a vote on the measure on March 23, 2017, after Trump cut off negotiations with Republicans who had opposed the plan and issued an ultimatum to vote on March 24, 2017, irrespective of the outcome. Notwithstanding frantic efforts by the White House and Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan, the legislation was unable to round up the 216 votes needed for passage. “We’re going to be living with Obamacare for the foreseeable future,” the House speaker finally conceded. Trump supporters across the US lashed out at conservatives, Democrats, and leaders of the Republican

Party in Congress. However “Trump himself was spared their wrath.” Many people who had voted for Trump were willing to excuse Trump for failure of his campaign promise to overhaul the country’s healthcare system. They said his time in office had been too short.

- Citing *Reuters* on March 24, the *Guardian* reported that US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson had directed US diplomatic missions to identify “populations warranting increased scrutiny” and toughen screening for visa applicants in those groups.

Tillerson also ordered a “mandatory social media check” for all applicants who have ever visited territory controlled by the Islamic State. According to officials the new checks would be a broad, labour-intensive expansion of existing screening. Four memos issued by Tillerson over the past fortnight provide insight into how the US government is implementing Donald Trump’s “extreme vetting” of foreigners entering the United States.

- On March 16, President Donald Trump’s first budget outline, calling for a security-heavy realignment of federal spending, drew resistance from fellow Republicans in the US Congress.

Initially the conservatives supported the White House plan, with its 10% increase in military spending in 2018 and increased funding to help deport more illegal immigrants and build a wall on the border with Mexico. Observers have suggested that Trump’s priorities for the next four years proved too “savage for many Republicans’ taste,” thus “foreshadowing an intense battle between Congress and the White House over spending in coming months.”

International

- According to the *Guardian* on March 24, an annual African trade summit in California had no African attendees in 2017 after at least 60 people were denied visas.

The African Global Economic and Development Summit, a three-day conference at the University of Southern California (USC), brings together delegates from across Africa to meet with business leaders in the US in an effort to foster partnerships. However this year, every single African citizen who requested a visa was rejected. Observers are linking the visa denials to the anti-immigration policies of President Donald Trump.

- The *Guardian* reported on March 25 that Google had suffered a major setback after several major brands withdrew millions of dollars in advertising amid a row over extremist content on Youtube.

Telecom giants including AT&T and Verizon, pharmaceutical company GSK, Pepsi, Walmart, Johnson & Johnson and Enterprise announced their decision to pull advertising from Youtube. In Europe too a number of high-profile advertisers pulled out of YouTube following an investigation by the Times. The brands' content had been appearing next to videos promoting extremist views or hate speech, with a cut of the advertising spend going to the creators. According to reports, Verizon ads were featured alongside videos made by Egyptian cleric Wagdi Ghoneim, who was banned from the US over extremism, and the hate preacher Hanif Qureshi, whose preachings inspired the murder of Salman Taseer. "We are deeply concerned that our ads may have appeared alongside YouTube content promoting terrorism and hate," an AT&T spokesman said in a statement. "Until Google can ensure this won't happen again, we are removing our ads from Google's non-search platforms."

- On March 21, the US and UK announced their decision to ban laptops from cabin baggage on flights from certain countries in the Middle East and North Africa including Turkey.

The ban on electronic devices larger than a smartphone is being imposed as an anti-terrorist precaution. It covers inbound flights on nine airlines operating out of 10 airports. The British ban, announced hours after the American measure, is similar but applies to different airlines. According to Downing Street airline passengers on 14 carriers would not be able to carry laptops in cabin luggage on inbound direct flights from Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia. The Turkish government said the US ban was wrong and should be reversed.

- On March 17, President Donald Trump met German chancellor Angela Merkel in Washington DC.

According to observers the two leaders "struck a conciliatory tone" during the meeting but there fundamental differences in policy and style were obvious. They called Merkel a "bulwark of the post war liberal order" and Trump "a brash businessman who rose to power on a populist tide." Even as Trump used the phrase "radical Islamic terrorism" and spelled out his nationalist economic vision putting American workers first, Merkel highlighted her stance on refugees, globalisation and trade deals.

Canada

- BBC reported on March 30 that the number of American citizens turned away at the Canadian border has jumped significantly in recent years.

According to Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) figures obtained by Montreal Newspaper La Presse 31% more US citizens were turned away in 2016 than in 2015.

In 2016, 30,233 Americans were sent back compared to 23,052 the year before. La Presse also reported that in 2014, just 7,509 US citizens were refused entry to Canada. The spike has been attributed to the increased data and information sharing including of criminal records, between the two countries.

Latin America

- According to the *BBC* on March 31, demonstrations broken out in Venezuela in the aftermath of the March 30, 2017 decision by the Supreme Court to take away legislative powers from the opposition-led National Assembly.

Critics say the development takes the country closer to one-man rule under President Nicolas Maduro. According to the Organisation of American States (OAS) the move is the “final blow to democracy in the country.” The ruling dissolves the elected legislature dominated by the President’s opponents. The secretary general of the OAS, Luis Almagro, described the move as a “self-inflicted coup” by Maduro’s government. It comes after months of power consolidation by Maduro against the country’s centre-right opposition.

- On March 28, Senator Roy Blunt, a senior Republican and member of the Senate Appropriations Committee said that President Donald Trump’s proposed wall at the Mexican border may be delayed as Republicans consider putting its funding on hold.

Cash for Trump’s proposed wall at the Mexican border would be left out of a spending bill that must pass by April 28, 2017 to avert a partial government shutdown. Blunt’s remarks came after Trump requested a supplemental funding bill to include money for the wall along with military programmes. Blunt indicated that Trump’s request could complicate negotiations.

---Amina Afzal

ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

- On March 29, the Trump Administration indicated that it is planning to approve a sale of F-16 fighter jets to Bahrain without human rights conditions imposed by the Obama Administration.

Under the Obama Administration, the US had withdrawn the deal for the purchase of F-16 jets to Bahrain as the country had not taken steps that it had promised in order to improve its human rights conditions. If the Trump Administration approves the deal, Bahrain will receive 19 F-16 fighter jets from the US, and also improvements to other jets in Bahrain's fleet. The US State Department has notified the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker that it is proceeding with the sale. Given the Republican majority's strong support for the sale, the Congress has limited opportunity to block it.

- On March 27, a five-day UN conference aimed at negotiating a nuclear-weapon ban treaty started at the headquarters of the UN in New York.

According to the report, more than 100 countries launched the first ever UN talks aimed at achieving a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons. The US, the UK, France, Russia, China, India and Pakistan were among the 40 countries that boycotted the talks. Nikki Haley, the US ambassador to the UN, rejected the proposal of banning nuclear weapons. She said, "The countries skipping the conference would love to have a ban on nuclear weapons, but in this day and time we can't honestly say we can protect our people by allowing bad actors to have them and those of us that are good trying to keep peace and safety not to have them." Mentioning North Korea, she said, "We have to be realistic. Is there anyone who thinks that North Korea would ban nuclear weapons?" A total of 123 UN members had announced in October 2016 that they would convene the UN conference to negotiate a legally binding nuclear treaty. The resolution L41 to negotiate the ban treaty was adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2016.

- On March 26, Iran imposed sanctions on 15 US companies, accusing them of supporting terrorism, repression and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land.
- On March 25, the US imposed sanctions on 30 foreign companies or individuals for transferring sensitive technology to Iran for its missile programme.

The US State Department stated that 11 companies or individuals from China, North Korea and United Arab Emirates had been sanctioned owing to technology transfer to Iran that could aid the country's ballistic missile programme. Another 19 companies or individuals were sanctioned for violations under the Iran, North Korea and Syria Non-proliferation Act. They were found to have been guilty of transferring or acquiring sensitive technology that could contribute to the development of weapons of mass destruction. On March 26, 2017, in retaliation for sanctions by

the US, Iran imposed sanctions on 15 US companies. Iran's Foreign Ministry stated, "The sanctions barred companies from any agreements with Iranian firms and that former and current directors would not be eligible for visas." It also said any of the company's assets in Iran could be seized. Iran's state-run IRNA news agency called the sanctions as a "reciprocal act" without elaborating further. In its report, IRNA said that the sanctioned companies are directly or indirectly involved in atrocities committed by Israel against Palestinians.

- On March 23, a South Korean military official said that North Korea is ready to conduct a new nuclear test at any time.
- On March 22, the US and South Korean militaries stated that a missile launch attempt by North Korea failed as the missile exploded immediately after its launch.

US Pacific Command spokesman, Commander Dave Benham, stated that North Korea had failed to launch a missile from its east coast, near the city of Wonsan. South Korea also confirmed the failure and said that it was not clear what missile type it was. For further details about the launch the South Korean defence ministry has started conducting analysis. On March 23, 2017, a South Korean military official stated that the North has maintained readiness for its new nuclear device test. "We are keeping a close eye on North Korea's activities," the official added. The Washington-based think tank 38 North had indicated in February 2017 that satellite imagery showed low-level activity at North Korea's nuclear site. Continued activity at the nuclear site may be an indicator that the country would conduct another test soon.

- On March 22, India successfully test-fired its first surface-to-air missile from its aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya.

The test was conducted in the Arabian Sea as an Operational Readiness Inspection. The missile was fired at a low-flying high-speed target. According to Indian officials, the target was successfully engaged and destroyed. The Indian navy said, "The missile marks a significant milestone in providing air interception and defence capabilities, thus enhancing operational capabilities of the navy's aircraft carrier and the fleet." However, it did not provide any further details regarding the range and type of the tested missile.

- According to *The News* on March 22, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said that North Korea's uranium enrichment facility has doubled in size over the last few years.

While explaining the growing nuclear capacities of North Korea, Yukiya Amano, head of IAEA, said that the country's nuclear programme has entered into a 'new phase'. He said, "All of the indications point to the fact that North Korea is making progress." The North has expanded both its uranium and plutonium programmes in recent years. Amano also expressed doubts about the possibility of a diplomatic solution to North Korea's nuclear tensions.

- *The Nation* reported on March 21 that T. Suvarna Raju, Chief of Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), said that Indian has undertaken the development of an unmanned combat version of its light combat aircraft (LCA).

He said that his organisation has already started working on the conversion of LCA into an unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV) and he is confident of completing the project within a short period of time. HAL would also consider developing the unmanned version of Chetak helicopters, he added. HAL is India's premier aircraft manufacturer.

- On March 20, Vipin Narang, a nuclear strategist from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said that India could launch a nuclear first strike against Pakistan.

During his talk at a conference on nuclear policy hosted by Carnegie, a think tank, Narang stated that if India feared a nuclear attack was imminent from Pakistan, India could launch a nuclear first strike against the country. This first strike will be aimed at disarming Pakistan of its nuclear arsenals rather than the country's urban centres. The assessment made by Narang is in clear contrast to Indian claims of a nuclear doctrine of 'No-First Use' (NFU). Narang also cited recent remarks and policy prescriptions of Shivshankar Menon, former Indian National Security Adviser. Menon in his book, "Choices: Inside the Making of Indian Foreign Policy", published in November 2016, had stated "There is a potential gray area as to when India would use nuclear weapons first against another Nuclear Weapon State (NWS). Circumstances are conceivable in which India may find it useful to strike first against an NWS that had declared it would use its nuclear weapons, and if India were certain that adversary's launch was imminent."

- On March 20, Russia criticised the deployment of US anti-missile defence system in South Korea, saying that it poses a risk to the region.
- On March 18, hundreds of South Koreans protested against the deployment of US anti-missile defence system in South Korea.

Residents of the Seongju county, where the US' Terminal High Altitude Area Defence system (THAAD) is to be fully deployed, argued that the deployment of the system not only poses health and environmental hazards but also makes the region a priority target of North Korea. According to the report, approximately 2000 residents of Seongju and a neighbouring county gathered to protest with banners, reading: No THAAD but peace". South Korea mobilised 2000 policemen to prevent protesters from reaching the THAAD installation site. On March 20, 2017, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov also criticised the deployment of THAAD and said, "We drew attention to the serious risks posed by the deployment of elements of the American global anti-missile system in the Asia-Pacific region". He added "If this is meant to counter threats coming from North Korea, then the deployment of this system and accumulating armaments in the region is a disproportionate reply." Sergey Lavrov was talking at a press conference in Japan where Russian and Japanese foreign and defence ministers were holding

two-plus-two talks in Tokyo on March 20, 2017. The one-day meeting was aimed at strengthening regional security. The US started deploying the first elements of THAAD in South Korea on March 7, 2017. The US considers THAAD as a defensive capability that poses no threat to other countries in the region.

- According to *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)* on March 19, North Korea successfully conducted the ground test of a new type of high-thrust rocket engine on March 18, 2017.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un observed the test at the Sohae launch site and called it a revolutionary breakthrough for the country's space programme. The test was conducted to assess the engine's thrust power and confirm the reliability of its control system and structural safety. Kim said that this test "may even be called the March 18 revolution", in the development of its independent rocket industry. The test came a day after the US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated on March 17, 2017, during his official trip to China, that military action against North Korea is on the table. The report said the rocket engine would be used in the country's space and satellite launching programme. Under its five-year plan, North Korea intends to launch a number of Earth observation satellites that would become the country's first geostationary communication satellite. In response, South Korea's Defence Ministry stated on March 20, 2017, that the North's "test is a meaningful progress in its missile capability", and "further analysis was needed to show the exact thrust produced and possible uses for the engine". Two US defence officials also said that the tested engine could be used for eventual intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) development. International analysts also claimed that North Korea has likely mastered the technology to power the different stages of an ICBM launch.

- On March 16, the Pakistan Navy successfully conducted a test of a land-based anti-ship missile.

According to a press release from the Navy, the missile successfully hit its intended target. The missile is built with advanced technology and avionics that enable it to engage its target with high accuracy at sea. Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Muhammad Zakaullah said "the weapon system has added a new dimension to the operational reach of the Pakistan Navy, allowing it to bolster seaward defences by giving the Navy the capability to launch long-range, anti-ship missiles from land".

--- Moiz Khan

CHINA & EAST ASIA

China

- On March 30, China's Defence Ministry spokesman, Wu Qian said that Taiwan is wrong to think it can use weapons to prevent unification.

The remarks come as the Trump Administration seeks to offer Taiwan an arms deal that could include advanced rocket systems and anti-ship missiles. On March 20, 2017, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Hua Chunying said that Beijing's resolute opposition to US arms sales to Taiwan was clear and consistent.

- On March 17, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Hua Chunying termed the Kashmir dispute a "leftover issue from history between India and Pakistan." She called for a settlement of the Kashmir conflict through dialogue between Islamabad and New Delhi.

She said the development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor did not affect China's position on the Kashmir issue. The reaction from China came after Indian foreign ministry spokesman, Gopal Baglay said that any unilateral step by Pakistan to alter the status of Gilgit Baltistan would have no basis in law and be completely unacceptable." Baglay's remarks came in the backdrop of media reports citing Pakistan's minister for inter-provincial coordination, Riaz Hussain Pirzada that Pakistan is planning to declare the Gilgit-Baltistan region its fifth province.

- According to *Reuters* on March 17, China will begin preparatory work in 2017 for an environmental monitoring station on the Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea.

Xiao Jie, mayor of China's Sansha city said that the monitoring stations, along with docks and other infrastructure, form part of island restoration and erosion prevention efforts planned for 2017. The shoal is also claimed by the Philippines. The US had warned China against carrying out land reclamation work there that it has done in other parts of the South China Sea. Meanwhile, Philippines' cabinet minister said that the country may file a protest against China. The Philippine's President Rodrigo Duterte said that his country can't stop China's actions.

South Korea

- On March 31, South Korea's former president, Park Geun-hye was imprisoned at a detention centre following a court decision to approve a warrant for her arrest.

In December, 2016 the South Korean parliament voted to impeach Park, and she was formally removed from office on March 10, 2017. Park is accused of colluding with a friend, Choi Soon-sil, to pressure big businesses, including Samsung, to contribute huge sums to non-profit foundations that were set up to support her initiatives. Park has denied any wrongdoing.

North Korea

- According to the *Korean Central News Agency* on March 21, North Korean foreign ministry's spokesman said that the US should accept that North Korea is a nuclear-capable nation and that it "has the will and capability to fully respond to any war the US would like to ignite."

The reaction came after US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson issued strong warning to North Korea of tougher sanctions and more pressure. Tillerson also signalled a tougher strategy that leaves open the possibility of pre-emptive military action against North Korea. Tillerson had also described the years of US policy towards North Korea as a failure during his visit to Japan earlier in March 2017.

Myanmar

- According to *Aljazeera* on March 27, Myanmar's Army Chief, Min Aung Hlaing denounced the claim to citizenship by Rohingya Muslims and defended the government's crackdown on them.

The remarks came after the UN said on March 24, 2017 that it will send an international fact-finding mission to investigate widespread allegations of killings, rape and torture by security forces against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar's Rakhine state. UN investigators believe that Myanmar's security forces may have committed human rights violations.

--- Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

EUROPE

- BBC reported on March 31 that European Council President Donald Tusk would soon issue draft guidelines on how the EU intends to negotiate the UK's exit from the bloc.

The proposals will then be sent to the governments of 27 EU members. They will help set the tone for two years of tough negotiations and efforts to finalise a deal. EU leaders say the UK must first agree its exit terms before talks can move on to future ties. London is calling for simultaneous talks.

- On March 31, the EU outlined its Brexit strategy, saying that trade talks could begin after “sufficient progress” on a separation settlement with the UK.

The draft guidelines announced by European Council President Donald Tusk in Malta, advocate a “phased approach.” They will be sent to the 27 member states for approval and will set the tone for ensuing negotiations. The EU's foreign policy chief suggested the EU could manage without the UK in defence matters.

- On March 30, Russian President Vladimir Putin said he wanted to meet US President Donald Trump at an Arctic nations summit in Finland in May.

Putin rejected allegations that Russia had interfered in the 2016 US presidential election. He also said sanctions against Russia were hurting both the US and Europe.

Trump has expressed hopes for improved relations with Russia. However his efforts have been marred by claims of links between his election campaign and Russia. The Federal Bureau of Investigation and both houses of the US Congress are investigating alleged Russian interference in the election.

- According to British Prime Minister Theresa May on March 30, Britain's departure from the EU is “an historic moment from which there can be no turning back.”
- British Prime Minister Theresa May formally triggered the Brexit process on March 29 by sending the Article 50 notification to European Council President Donald Tusk.

EU Council President Donald Tusk said it was not a “happy day” for him or the EU. The European Parliament warned security cooperation was not an option as it “fired its opening salvo in what are expected to be tough negotiations.”

- On March 30, Italian Police detained three adults and a girl in Venice as suspects in an alleged jihadist cell.

Police had been monitoring the group from Kosovo for months amid concerns they were planning to join Islamist militants in Syria. However, they conducted a raid on March 30 amid fears of a potential attack in the wake of last week's murder of four people in London. Twelve addresses were raided including 10 in the city's historic centre. Police said all four of those held had Italian residence permits. Italy's specialist Digos crime squad had been investigating the three adults on suspicion of radicalisation.

- On March 26, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's party won a state election in Saarland.

Merkel's CDU took 40.7% votes against the Social Democrats (SPD), who secured 29.6%. Merkel is hoping for a fourth term as chancellor but is under pressure. The centre-left SPD has seen a recent surge in popularity under new leader Martin Schulz. Saarland is a small southwestern state with one million inhabitants. It is currently governed by a coalition of the CDU and SPD as junior partner, mirroring the national government.

- According to the *Telegraph* on March 24 Marine Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, the commander of US Africa Command, said the link between Russia and General Haftar, the head of the Libyan National Army, is "undeniable."

Waldhauser said that Russia has deployed troops to Egypt amid a strengthening of ties between Moscow and General Khalifa Haftar, the warlord who controls much of the eastern part of Libya. "They are on the ground. They are trying to influence the action. We watch what they do with great concern," he told reporters at the Pentagon.

- On March 28, the wife of French presidential candidate François Fillon was placed under formal investigation for the "fake jobs" inquiry.

Penelope Fillon spent the day being questioned by magistrates. Her husband was placed under formal investigation earlier this month. Fillon has been accused of paying hundreds of thousands of euros to his family for work they did not do. Both Fillon and his Welsh-born wife deny any wrongdoing.

- On March 28, violence erupted in Paris over police killing of a Chinese man.

Three police officers were injured and at least 35 people were detained. Demonstrators had gathered outside a police station to pay homage to the dead man. His family denies he attacked an officer with scissors as they responded to reports of a domestic dispute. A French inquiry is under way. China has made a complaint and is calling for its nationals to be protected.

- On March 27 the Kremlin responded to mass protests by accusing the opposition of encouraging law-breaking and provoking violence.

According to a presidential spokesman, some young people were paid to attend. However, defiant opposition leader Alexei Navalny, one of hundreds of people held, was fined the minimum 20,000 roubles and was not detained when he appeared in court.

- On March 27, Russia's main opposition leader, Alexei Navalny, was arrested at an anti-corruption protest he organised in Moscow.

Thousands of people joined rallies nationwide, calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev over corruption allegations. At least 500 other protesters were detained in the capital and across the country. Most of the marches were organised without official permission.

- On March 26, thousands of NATO military personnel arrived in Scotland for one of the largest military exercises in Europe.

Joint Warrior is held twice every year during spring and autumn. The first of the 2017 exercises runs to April 6, 2017 and involves warships operating from Faslane on the Clyde and aircraft from RAF Lossiemouth, Moray. Live firing training will also be held at a Ministry of Defence range at Cape Wrath in Sutherland. Thirty-five naval units and some 50 aircraft will be used during Joint Warrior. Participating countries include Denmark, Belgium, Estonia, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, the UK and the US. About 430 of the thousands of personnel involved are co-ordinating the exercise from HM Naval Base Clyde's Maritime Operations Centre.

- On March 23, a French national of North African origin was arrested in the Belgian city of Antwerp on suspicion of trying to drive into a crowd.

A car was driven "at high speed" on De Meir, the city's main shopping street, before it was intercepted. There were no reports of any injuries. Knives, a non-lethal gun and some unidentifiable liquid were found in the car. Belgian PM Charles Michel praised the authorities for an "outstanding job." The attack comes a day after a car was driven at high speed along London's Westminster Bridge, hitting many people, before the driver got out and entered the grounds of Parliament.

- On March 20, Matthew Brittin, Google's European boss apologised after advertisements from major firms and government agencies appeared next to extremist content on its YouTube site.

Marks and Spencer became the latest firm to remove its online ads over the issue, joining others such as Audi, RBS and L'Oreal. Brittin promised to review the firm's policies and strengthen enforcement. However observers have questioned Google's commitment to tackling the issue. A recent investigation by the Times found advertisements from a range of well-known firms and organisations had appeared alongside content from supporters of extremist groups on YouTube's video site. An advertisement appearing alongside a video earns the poster about £6 for every 1,000 clicks it generates, meaning brands may have unintentionally contributed money to extremists.

- According to an announcement made by 10 Downing Street on March 20, British Prime Minister Theresa May will trigger the two-year process of leaving the European Union on March 29.

Sir Tim Barrow, the UK's ambassador to the EU, formally notified the office of Donald Tusk, the EU Council president, with a letter. Next week May will formally notify Tusk by writing him a letter and then giving a statement to MPs later in Parliament.

- According to an Amnesty International Report on March 23, the USA and UK are responsible for serious violations that have caused devastating civilian suffering.

Amnesty International asserted that the US and UK's multibillion-dollar arms transfers to Saudi Arabia vastly overshadowed the humanitarian efforts by them. Since the conflict began in March 2015, the US and UK have together transferred more than US\$5 billion worth of arms to Saudi Arabia which is leading the military coalition in Yemen. This is more than 10 times the estimated US\$450 million that the US State Department and the UK's Department for International Development have spent in aid to Yemen.

- On March 22, an assailant drove a sport utility vehicle over panicked pedestrians and stabbed a police officer outside the British Parliament in a deadly assault.

The attack prompted the hasty evacuation of the prime minister. At least four people, including the assailant, were killed and at least 40 others injured in the ensuing violence, which the police said had been "inspired by international terrorism." It appeared to be the most serious such assault in London since the deadly subway bombings more than ten years ago.

- On March 18, French security forces shot dead a gunman as he attacked a patrol at Orly airport south of Paris.

Ziyed Ben Belgacem was killed after putting a gun to a female soldier's head saying he wanted to "die by Allah." Belgacem had been involved in a shooting and then a carjacking in the Paris area. He had been reported as radicalised in the past, and was on a police watch-list. His criminal record included convictions for armed robbery and drugs offences, Paris prosecutor Francois

Molins told reporters. He fell under the influence of Islamist radicals was while serving prison time.

- According to a joint report released by the International Rescue Committee, the Norwegian Refugee Council & Oxfam on March 17, flawed policies are eroding refugee rights in European states.

According to the report the EU-Turkey deal has turned Greece into a testing ground for EU policies that are eroding the rights of refugees and asylum seekers, and expose people to risk and abuse. The humanitarian agencies warned the deal is causing human suffering and should under no circumstances be replicated with other countries. March 20 2017 marks one year since the implementation of the EU-Turkey deal, which allows Europe to return asylum seekers from Greece to Turkey, outsourcing their responsibilities to protect people who come to Europe in search of safety.

- According to the *New York Times* on March 17, US President Donald Trump caused a rare public dispute with Britain after his White House aired an explosive and unsubstantiated claim that Britain's spy agency had secretly eavesdropped on him at the behest of his predecessor President Obama during the 2016 campaign.

British officials adamantly denied the accusation even as senior White House officials promised never to repeat it. However a defiant Trump refused to back down, making clear that the White House had nothing to retract or apologize for because his spokesman had simply repeated an assertion made by a Fox News commentator. Fox itself later disavowed the report.

--- Amina Afzal

MIDDLE EAST & WEST ASIA

Egypt

- On March 24, former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was freed from the military hospital after spending six years in detention.

Mubarak had been cleared for release earlier on March 2, 2017, after a top court finally acquitted him of involvement in protesters' deaths during the 2011 revolt that ousted him. Mubarak was accused of inciting the deaths of protesters during the 18-day revolt, in which about 850 people were killed as police clashed with demonstrators. He was sentenced to life in jail in 2012 in the case, but an appeals court ordered a retrial which dismissed the charges two years later. Throughout the trial, prosecutors remained unable to provide conclusive evidence of Mubarak's complicity.

Iran

- On March 28, Russia and Iran agreed to boost their energy ties and continue joint efforts to help reach peace in Syria and Afghanistan.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani was on a two-day official visit to Russia. It was Rouhani's first official visit to Moscow. He met with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin to discuss a range of bilateral and regional issues. Following talks at the Kremlin, Putin said that Moscow and Tehran would continue to strengthen cooperation in the fight against international terrorism. Russia, Turkey and Iran have brokered a ceasefire that has helped reduce hostilities in Syria. They have already co-sponsored three rounds of Syria peace talks in Astana, Kazakhstan and are now preparing for a fourth round. Putin also welcomed Tehran's efforts to encourage dialogue between the Afghan government and the Taliban. In a joint statement, Putin and Rouhani welcomed an OPEC agreement to cut oil production in order to stabilise slumping petroleum prices. The joint statement said, "Russia and Iran will continue cooperation in that sphere to help stabilise the global energy market and ensure a steady economic growth." Rouhani said the steady development of trade and economic ties has made Russian-Iranian relations truly strategic. Putin said Russia has provided 2.2 billion euros in loans to fund the construction of the Sirik thermal power plant on the coast of the Persian Gulf, and a project to modernise a railway link in northern Iran. He also said that Iran has shown interest in purchasing Russian passenger jets and helicopters. The visit is a sign of closer relations between the two countries.

Iraq

- *PressTv* reported on March 28 that Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov called for a UNSC briefing over a recent US airstrike on Mosul in which at least 237 people were killed.

On March 17, 2017 Iraq's Rudaw television network reported that 237 people were killed following US-led coalition airstrikes on a Daesh-held neighbourhood in western Mosul. During a press conference on March 27, 2017, Lavrov said, "The most recent tragedy happened on March 17, to be precise it is not the latest one as there were numerous incidents that claimed civilian lives after it. However, the March 17 tragedy, when the bombings lasted for several hours and an estimated 200 civilians were killed, stands out because of its scale." Lavrov added that it was quite strange that the US had not realised they were hitting wrong targets for hours despite using advanced targeting equipment. The UN also expressed "profound concern" over the increase of civilian casualties in Mosul and called on all parties engaged in anti-terror operations in the country to avoid "indiscriminate use of firepower." Meanwhile, Amnesty International also expressed concern over the number of civilian casualties in Mosul, suggesting the US-led coalition may not be doing enough to avoid such casualties. The Pentagon announced that it was analysing over 700 video feeds from airstrikes on west Mosul following the increasing number of reports of civilian casualties. Iran's Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, urged the international community to urgently address the issue. He suggested taking the case to the International Criminal Court (ICC).

- While addressing thousands of supporters at a rally on March 24 in Baghdad, Iraq's influential Shia cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, said that only Iraq's military should hold territory recaptured from Daesh.

Mogtada said, "They should be the only ones that hold ground after liberating it; no others, whether the occupier, foreign forces or others." This was an apparent sign of concern from Mogtada that rival militias might use the gains to expand their influence. The ongoing US-backed offensive to recapture Mosul involves 100,000 strong Iraqi force including Kurdish and Shia fighters. The Shia paramilitary groups, which include rivals of Mogtada's own militia, have played a key role in encircling the extremist group in areas around Mosul. There was no immediate reaction from Kurdish officials and other Shia militia leaders. Some Sunni officials fear that Shia groups will try to hold territory in the region as the battle against Daesh nears its end, raising sectarian tension. According to analysts, Sadr's fears are more political as he is concerned about rival Shia militias gaining strength by taking ground in the north. Sadr's Saraya al-Islam, or Peace Brigades, are only deployed in and around the northern city of Samarra where the shrine of a holy Shia Imam is located.

Israel

- *BBC* reported on March 30 that Israel has approved the building of the first new settlement in the occupied West Bank in more than two decades.

According to a statement issued after a meeting of the country's security cabinet, the construction would take place in the Emek Shilo area near Nablus. Palestinian officials condemned the move. Hanan Ashrawi, an executive committee member of the Palestine Liberation Organisation said, "Today's announcement once again proves that Israel is more committed to appeasing its illegal settler population than to abiding by the requirements for stability and a just peace." The new settlement will be used to house Jewish families evicted from Amona outpost which was cleared in February 2017 after the Israeli Supreme Court ruled it had been built illegally on private Palestinian land. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had promised Amona residents that a new area would be found for them. The issue of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem has long been a major source of dispute between Israel and the Palestinians. The settlements are considered illegal under international law.

- On March 24, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution condemning the Israeli regime for violating the rights of the Palestinian people and settlement construction in the occupied Palestinian territories and Syria's Golan Heights.

The resolution called on Israel to put an end to all human rights violations linked to settlements, and especially of the right to self-determination. It condemned the Tel Aviv regime for the "continuation... of settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including in East Jerusalem (al-Quds), in violation of international humanitarian law... and in defiance of calls by the international community to cease all settlement activities." UN Middle East envoy Nickolay Mladenov told the UNSC that Israel has failed to abide by the 2015 Resolution 2334, the first condemnatory measure against Tel Aviv in about eight years. Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to press ahead with building new settler units, stressing that the Tel Aviv regime had no plan to limit settlement construction in East Jerusalem al-Quds.

Jordan

- During the one-day Arab League Summit in Jordan on March 29, Arab leaders endorsed key Palestinian positions in the conflict with Israel and relaunched a peace plan.

Twenty-one leaders and senior officials attended the Summit. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was absent as he was not invited. Syria was suspended from the Arab League following Assad's crackdown during a 2011 uprising. The relaunched peace plan offers Israel normalisation with Arab and Muslim states, provided it cedes lands it captured in 1967 to a future Palestinian state. A statement issued following the Summit said that 'peace is a strategic option' for Arab states. The Arab peace plan was first launched in 2002. The Summit comes ahead of White House

meetings in coming weeks between President Trump and three Arab leaders; Jordan's King Abdullah II, Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el Sisi and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. The renewed stance on the Arab peace plan is a signal to US President Donald Trump that a deal on Palestinian statehood must precede any Israeli-Arab normalisation. Following the Summit, Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas said that President Donald Trump is serious about solving the Israel-Palestinian conflict. He also said that the Arab League Summit confirmed that the Arab world had a clear vision for peace on the basis of two-states.

Libya

- During a March 18 meeting in Cairo, a quartet of international groups supported efforts by Libya's unity government to assert control over Tripoli after several days of fighting with rival militias.

The quartet included representatives from the UN, EU, Arab League and African Union. EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini, UN envoy Martin Kobler and head of African Union Commission Moussa Paki Mahamat also attended the meeting. Speaking at a press conference afterwards, Arab League chief Ahmed Abul Gheit said the quartet had followed the "dangerous developments in Tripoli. We agreed on supporting the UN-backed presidential council in its efforts to exert security control in the capital, including the implementation of the truce agreement." Kobler said it would not be prudent to lift the arms embargo on Libya until its armed forces had a clear chain of command. The fighting in Tripoli lasted four days and subsided only after the Government of National Accord (GNA) signed a ceasefire agreement with militias from Tripoli and Misrata, along with local mayors.

Saudi Arabia

- During Saudi King Salman's state visit to China on March 16, Riyadh and Beijing signed agreements worth billions of dollars.

The visit by the Saudi King is important as China is pursuing an active and friendly approach towards the Middle East. The two countries signed 14 memoranda of understanding including agreements in energy, and a range of other spheres. Details were not available regarding other agreements; however China's Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming told reporters that various projects could be worth up to \$65bn. He said that the two sides also discussed the ongoing wars in Syria and Yemen, with the two parties agreeing that the crises should be resolved through political discussions. King Salman arrived in China on March 15, 2017 after visiting Japan, Malaysia and Indonesia as part of a month-long Asia tour. According to analysts, China is pivoting towards the Middle East, and Saudi Arabia is strengthening its alliances in east Asia.

China depends on the Middle East for oil supplies and has remained Saudi Arabia's largest trading partner since 2015.

Syria

- On March 23, at least 33 civilians were killed in a US-led coalition strike in northern Syria.

The strikes were carried out following the Pentagon's announcement of reinforcements to allies battling Daesh in Raqqa. The suspected coalition air raid hit a school being used as a temporary shelter for displaced families between Raqqa city and Tabga. According to the Pentagon, the US-led coalition has increased its involvement through airlifts and fire support for allied forces on the ground. In a related development on March 22, 2017 senior diplomats from the 68-member alliance met in Washington to hear details of US President Donald Trump's new tough strategy to eradicate Daesh in Iraq and Syria. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, on March 21, a coalition air strike killed many civilians near the town of Al-Mansura. A statement from the coalition said it had carried out 18 strikes near Raqqa, and a Pentagon spokesman said the coalition would investigate the reported deaths. Earlier in March 2017, the coalition admitted that its campaign in Syria and Iraq had unintentionally killed at least 220 civilians, but monitors say the real number is far higher. In addition to its air strikes, airlifts and artillery, the US has several hundred troops on the ground in Syria supporting the anti-Daesh offensive by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters.

- On March 20, Redur Xelil, spokesman of the Kurdish militia (YPG), announced that Russia is setting up a military base in northwestern Syria in agreement with the YPG and will be training YPG fighters against terrorism.

Xelil said that the agreement with Russia was concluded on March 18, 2017, and that Russian troops had already assumed position in the northwestern region of Afrin with troop carriers and armoured vehicles. According to analysts, the move may anger neighbouring Turkey. Ankara views the YPG as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is waging an insurgency inside Turkey. Turkey has launched a cross-border offensive to prevent further gains by the YPG, which controls much of the territory in northeastern Syria and the Afrin area in northwestern Syria. The YPG is also allied with the US in the fight against Daesh, and is playing a major role in the US-backed offensive against Daesh in Raqqa.

- On March 19, Heavy fighting erupted in the eastern districts of Damascus as rebels and militants from Al Qaeda affiliate Fateh al-Sham Front tried to fight their way into the city centre.

The new round of clashes started after militants launched a surprise assault on government forces. In December 2016, rebels and government forces agreed to a nationwide cessation of

hostilities, but fighting has continued across much of the country, including in Damascus. According to Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, rebels seized several buildings in Jobar and advanced into the nearby Abbasid Square area, seizing part of a large bus station and firing rockets into multiple neighbourhoods. He also said that regime warplanes had targeted rebel positions with more than 30 air strikes in a day. State media denied that rebel groups had entered the Abbasid district. However, it reported that the army had successfully 'blocked an attack by terrorists on military points and residential buildings in Jobar.' Control of Jobar which has been a battleground for more than two years is divided between rebels and allied militants and government forces.

- The Russian Foreign Ministry said on March 20 that it summoned the Israeli ambassador to Moscow over airstrikes inside the Syrian territory.
- On March 17, Israeli warplanes hit several targets in Syria, prompting retaliatory missile launches.

The Syrian army condemned Tel Aviv's strikes as "an act of aggression" meant to assist the Takfiri Daesh terror group. Syria's military said it had downed an Israeli plane and hit another as they were carrying out strikes near Palmyra that it recaptured from militants earlier in March 2017. The Israeli military denied that any planes had been struck. The air force said that it had carried out several strikes on Syria overnight, and that none of the ground-to-air missiles fired by Syrian forces in response had hit Israeli aircraft. One missile was intercepted by Israel's Arrow air defence system. According to analysts, the incident represented a significant shift in Syria's response to Israeli air strikes inside its territory. In a related development on March 19, 2017, Israel's minister for military affairs, Avigdor Lieberman, warned the Syrian government against launching ground-to-air missiles at Israeli warplanes carrying out strikes inside Syria. Lieberman said, "The next time the Syrians use their air defence systems against our planes we will destroy them without the slightest hesitation." Russia also expressed concern over Israeli air strikes as it has been conducting an aerial campaign against Daesh and other terror outfits in Syria at the government's request. Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu spoke about the incursion claiming that the strikes targeted weapons shipments to Hezbollah. In April 2016, Netanyahu admitted for the first time that Israel had attacked dozens of convoys transporting weapons in Syria destined for Lebanon's Hezbollah.

Turkey

- During his visit to Ankara on March 30, US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, said that Washington faced difficult choices in the fight against Daesh in Syria but sought to minimise differences with NATO ally Turkey over support for Kurdish militia fighters.

Tillerson gave these comments following meetings in Ankara with Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan and senior government ministers. Tillerson said, "There was 'no space' between Turkey and the US in their determination to defeat Daesh." Erdogan and his government have been criticising US support for the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia. Pentagon considers them a reliable partner but Turkey sees them as an enemy with deep links to Kurdish PKK militants who have waged an insurgency against the Turkish state. During a joint press conference with Tillerson, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Washington accepted there was no difference between the YPG militia and the PKK. Tillerson, however, condemned recent PKK attacks in Turkey but made no such comment. Tillerson's visit comes at a time when US-Turkish relations are at an all-time low. Ties were strained under former US President Barack Obama. Ankara was hopeful for better relations under Donald Trump, but there have been few signs of improvement. Apart from differences over Syria, relations have also been strained by the continued presence of Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen in the US. He is blamed for the July 2016 failed coup in Turkey.

UAE

- *PressTv* reported on March 20 that the UAE summoned the Swiss ambassador over remarks made by Switzerland at the UN over human rights violations in Bahrain.

Earlier, on March 14, 2017, Switzerland's UN ambassador, Valentin Zellweger, called on Manama to cooperate with the Human Rights Council, while voicing his dismay over Bahrain's "repression of civil society." Zellweger said, "The use of torture, inadequate fair trial guarantees and excessive use of force during peaceful demonstrations, as well as reprisals against victims of human rights violations or those who cooperate with the UN, are of concern." UAE's Deputy Foreign Minister Abdul Rahim Awadhi said that the Swiss statement was inconsistent with reality, as Bahrain had taken a number of steps aimed at protecting human rights. Awadhi also said the Swiss statement set ground for the provocation of disruptive and terrorist activities. He expressed hope that Switzerland would revise its position on the issue. He pointed out that it would be better to resolve such issues via bilateral channels created between Switzerland and Bahrain. On March 18, 2017, the GCC Secretary-General, Dr Abdullatif bin Rashid Al-Zayani also strongly condemned the statement made by the Swiss representative before the UNHRC. Earlier, on March 16, 2017, Human Rights Watch voiced its deep concern over the UNHRC's failure to address the situation in Bahrain. Anti-regime protesters have held demonstrations in Bahrain on an almost daily basis ever since a popular uprising began in the country in February 2011.

Yemen

- On March 25, the Specialised Criminal Court of Yemen sentenced former president Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, and six of his close aides to death on charges of treason and misuse of power.

Former Foreign Minister, Riyad Yassin as well as Deputy Prime Minister, and former Minister of Civil Service and Insurance, Abdulaziz Jabari are also among the officials who have been sentenced to death. The report came as the Yemeni court pressed charges against the individuals for threatening national security by giving a green light to the Saudi campaign against Yemen in March 2015. Yemen's Legal Centre of Rights and Development announced that the Saudi campaign has claimed the lives of over 12,040 Yemenis and left another 20,000 wounded. The centre added that there was a total of 2,568 children and 1,870 women among the fatalities, noting that the war had also destroyed 757 schools and institutes, 111 university facilities, 271 factories as well as 1,520 bridges and roads.

- Dawn reported on March 23 that according to regional and western sources, Iran is sending advanced weapons and military advisers to aid Yemen's rebel Houthi movement.

According to a senior Iranian official, Major General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force met top IRGC officials in Tehran in February 2017, to look at ways to 'empower' the Houthis. The official said, "In this meeting, they agreed to increase the amount of help, through training, arms and financial support." Iran has rejected accusations from Saudi Arabia that it is providing financial and military support to the Houthis in the struggle for Yemen, blaming the deepening crisis on Riyadh. Brigadier General Ahmed Asseri, spokesman for the Arab coalition fighting the Houthis, said, "We don't lack information or evidence that the Iranians, by various means, are smuggling weapons into the area. We observe that the Kornet anti-tank weapon is on the ground, whereas before it wasn't in the arsenal of the Yemeni army or of the Houthis." According to another Houthi leader, coalition accusations that Iran was smuggling weapons into Yemen were an attempt to cover up Saudi Arabia's failure to prevail in an intractable war in which at least 10,000 people have been killed and the country is on the brink of famine.

A US defence official said that Iranian weapons smuggling to the Houthis had continued since March 2015. The equipment included long-range ballistic missiles capable of reaching deep into Saudi Arabia. Nic Jenzen-Jones, a military arms specialist and director of Armament Research Services, which has tracked Iranian equipment ending up in Yemen, also said quantities had increased. A former senior Iranian security official said, "Iran's hardline rulers planned to empower Houthi militia in Yemen to strengthen their hand in the region. They are planning to create a Hezbollah-like militia in Yemen."

- On March 19, Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen called on the UN to place the strategic Red Sea port under its supervision.

The coalition called for this action following a helicopter attack on a boatload of Somali refugees on March 17, 2017 which killed at least 42 people. According to the UN Refugee Agency, the refugees had departed from the western port city of Hodeidah towards Sudan when the gunship opened fire on them. UN agencies and the ICRC condemned the attack with the latter also demanding an immediate investigation. The Red Sea port near the Bab al-Mandab strait is under the control of the Houthi movement, which has been fighting Saudi Arabia and its allies. While the Arab alliance denied responsibility for the attack, it called for jurisdiction over Hodeidah port to be transferred to the UN. Hodeidah is part of a broad battlefield where forces loyal to Yemeni President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, backed by the Saudi-led coalition, are fighting the Iran-allied Houthi movement which controls most of north and western Yemen.

---Muhammad Shoaib

SOUTH ASIA

Pakistan External

- According to *Dawn* on March 26, US Secretary of Defence, Jim Mattis said that by killing a Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) terrorist in Afghanistan, the US has sent a clear message to the extremists that those who kill innocent people cannot escape justice.

Earlier on March 25, 2017, the US Department of Defence confirmed that a US drone had killed TTP leader Qari Yasin in Afghanistan. Yasin is believed to be responsible for a 2009 attack on a bus carrying the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore and the September 20, 2008, bombing at the Marriott hotel in Islamabad.

- *The News* reported on March 25 that the government of Pakistan had formally permitted former army chief General Raheel Sharif to lead the Saudi-led, 39-country Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFI).

The government has yet to share the details of the agreement under which General (ret'd) Sharif has been appointed the commander of the Saudi-led alliance. Observers have criticised the move arguing the coalition is engaged in a military operation in Yemen. In 2015, Pakistan's parliament voted against a request by Saudi Arabia to join the coalition fighting in Yemen against the Houthis fearing sectarian reprisals. However, Pakistan's Foreign Office said on March 31, 2017 that Pakistan's participation in the Saudi-led military alliance will not challenge its efforts for maintaining the policy of neutrality in Middle East as the alliance is being built to fight terrorism. According to Saudi Arabia, the alliance has been created to fight Daesh militant group and other terrorist outfits.

- On March 24, Pakistan's Ambassador to the US, Aizaz Chaudhry said that Pakistan's ties with China and its efforts to bolster relations with Russia do not represent "a zero-sum game for any country".

The Ambassador stressed that Pakistan's outreach towards Russia can be attributed to Islamabad's interests in the region. After decades of hostility, Russia and Pakistan are moving towards closer relations particularly because of their common concern over the growing presence of Daesh in Afghanistan. Independent observers contend that whilst Moscow continues to be the key weapons supplier to India, its growing military ties with Islamabad may strengthen in future. In September 2016, 70 Russian and 130 Pakistani Special Forces conducted their first ever joint military exercise (Friendship 2016) in Pakistan. In 2014, Russia lifted its arms embargo on Pakistan, enabling Islamabad to purchase four Mi-35 gunship helicopters from Moscow. Pakistan's Foreign Office has also said that Pakistan will attend a meeting of 12 countries on April 14, 2017 in Moscow, for developing a regional approach for peace in Afghanistan.

- *The Nation* reported on March 24 that Pakistani officials have hosted seven Taliban leaders in Islamabad to persuade them into peace talks ahead of a multi-nation meeting scheduled in April 2017 in Moscow.

There was no official confirmation of the media reports by Pakistani officials. Meanwhile, the Afghan Taliban also rejected reports that their representatives had recently visited Pakistan and discussed the prospect of holding direct peace talks with the Afghan government.

- Speaking at the 10th Global Coalition ministerial meeting on Daesh in Washington on March 22, US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson warned that the militant group has increased its efforts to recruit young people from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq.

During the meeting, Afghan Foreign Minister, Salahuddin Rabbani, urged the US to send more forces to help battle the Taliban and Daesh extremists. Rabbani also accused Pakistan for the on-going situation in Afghanistan and urged the coalition partners to press Islamabad to stop cross-border terrorist attacks. Islamabad continues to reject such claims calling them unfounded. It instead accuses Afghan based terrorist and fugitive TTP militants hiding in Afghanistan of orchestrating attacks in Pakistan. Islamabad demanded that Kabul take action against them. A recent US reports on Afghanistan has warned that the growing tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan are helping Daesh and other militant groups to establish a foothold in the region.

- On March 21, Foreign Affairs Adviser, Sartaj Aziz said that the Pakistan's People Party (PPP) had formally empowered former Ambassador Hussain Haqqani to directly issue visas to Americans entering the country during the time it was in power.

Meanwhile, a letter sent by Prime Minister's House to the Foreign Office in 2010 also surfaced in the media. The letter suggested that former prime minister, Yousaf Raza Gillani had empowered Hussain Haqqani, the former ambassador of Pakistan in Washington, to directly issue visas to Americans without clearance from relevant authorities. The latest controversy follows Haqqani's disclosure that he had assisted the US in "stationing US Special Operations and intelligence personnel on the ground in Pakistan." In a Washington Post op-ed on March 10, 2017, Haqqani wrote that the decision was taken "without the knowledge of Pakistan's army" and was authorised by the then civilian government headed by former President Asif Ali Zardari.

- During his visit to China on March 17, Pakistan's Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa met Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi in Beijing.

Following the meeting, both sides agreed to continue and further increase their military-to-military cooperation. Foreign Minister Yi appreciated Pakistan's contributions towards regional peace and stability and its efforts for the realisation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as part of the One Belt One Road project.

- According to Dawn on March 17, Pakistan's Foreign Office spokesman, Nafees Zakaria accused India of imperilling South Asian peace and security and urged New Delhi to recognise the importance of bilateral dialogue between the two countries.

The Spokesman said that India's aggressive posture, massive military build-up were endangering peace and security in the region and beyond. He expressed hope that India would

soon realise that dialogue is a key to peace and stability in the region. Zakaria also criticised the BJP government for using the “Pakistan card” in its internal politics, terming it as “unfortunate and regrettable”. In a related development on March 18, 2017, Pakistan’s High Commissioner to India Abdul Basit said the issue of terrorism could not alone define the scope of ties between Pakistan and India and asked New Delhi to resolve the core issues between the two countries including Kashmir, Siachen and Sir Creek.

- On March 21, Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif ordered the reopening of border crossings with Afghanistan as a “goodwill gesture”.

A statement from the Prime Minister’s office stated that the decision was taken on “humanitarian grounds”. The statement further said that Pakistan was hopeful that the Afghan Government would take “necessary measures” to address the reasons for which the border was closed. Pakistan had closed the Torkham and Chaman crossings along the Afghan border on February 16, 2017 following a terrorist attack at the Lal Shahbaz Qalandar shrine in Sehwan that killed 75 people. Pakistan claims that the Sehwan attack was coordinated and plotted in Afghanistan. Islamabad has urged Kabul to act against militant sanctuaries on its territory. In the aftermath of the incident, Pakistan has also begun fencing its border with Afghanistan.

- According to *Radio Pakistan* on March 21, Pakistan and India have agreed to redesign the Miyar Hydroelectric project.

The development came following the two-day meeting of the Indus Water Commissioners of Pakistan and India in Islamabad. After the discussions, India also agreed that Lower Kalnai, Pakal Dul projects would be inspected again. Pakistan believes the planned Pakal Dul, Lower Kalnai and Miyar power generation facilities violate the 1960 Indus Water Treaty and could disrupt water flow into Pakistan. Pakistan has also been protesting against the design and construction of the 330MW Kishanganga and the 850MW Ratle projects.

- On March 16, Pakistan’s Foreign Affairs Adviser, Sartaj Aziz met Afghan National Security Adviser (NSA) Haneef Atmar and discussed various issues including Pakistan’s concerns about Afghan soil being used to launch terrorist attacks inside Pakistan.

Kabul termed the meeting “constructive”. Omar Zakhilwal, the Afghan ambassador in Islamabad, said the two sides have agreed to form a “mechanism” to fight terrorism. The meeting was arranged by Britain’s National Security Adviser Sir Mark Lyall Grant who asked both countries to ease tensions in order to defeat terrorism. The meeting was the first between Pakistani and Afghan officials since tensions mounted between the two sides following a series of terrorist attacks across Pakistan killing more than 100 people. Pakistan claimed the attacks had been planned in militant sanctuaries in Afghanistan and had thus closed its Torkham and Chaman crossings along the Afghan border on February 16, 2017. In retaliation, Pakistan also shelled four training camps of Jamaatul Ahrar across the border in Afghanistan.

Pakistan Internal

- On March 31, Pakistan's President, Mamnoon Hussain signed the 28th Amendment Bill 2017, extending the duration of military courts for another two years.

The bill has now become an act of parliament. The military courts were created to ensure speedy trials of militants after the terrorist attack on Army Public School in Peshawar in December 2014, killing more than 150 people.

- On March 31, at least 22 people were killed in a blast outside an imambargah in Parachinar.

Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), a faction of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, claimed responsibility for the attack. Following a string of terrorist attacks earlier in 2017, the latest attack adds to fears of an increase in sectarian violence in Pakistan. In February 2017, more than 80 people were killed in an attack on a Sufi shrine in southern Pakistan that was claimed by Daesh.

- On March 28, four civilians were killed and 28 others injured during anti-India protests in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK).

According to Indian authorities, the clashes erupted between protesters and Indian troops after Indian forces raided a house of a suspected rebel in Budgam district of IOK. Pakistan's Foreign Office spokesman, Nafees Zakaria confirmed the killings of civilians by the Indian security forces and condemned the "brutality". On March 29, 2017, members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) were also denied permission by India to evaluate the situation in IOK.

India

- On March 25, Indian Home Minister Rajnath Singh said that India plans to seal its international borders with Pakistan and Bangladesh by 2018.

He said that India has taken the decision in the wake of increased infiltration attempts. Rajnath previously said New Delhi wants to completely seal the Pakistan border by 2018 by employing physical barriers and surveillance tools.

- On March 19, Yogi Adityanath, was sworn in as the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh.

Yogi Adityanath, a Hindu religious leader, is known for his anti-Muslim rhetoric. Adityanath had also proposed a Donald Trump-style travel ban on Muslims in India. The BJP secured 301 of the 403 seats in Uttar Pradesh, the country's most populous state, giving BJP the largest majority scored by any party in the state since 1980. Following Adityanath's confirmation as Chief Minister, independent observers fear that his appointment may prompt communal tensions in India.

Afghanistan

- During a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on March 23, Curtis Scaparrotti, a US general and NATO's Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, accused Russia of providing weapons and other support to the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Russia's foreign ministry rejected the allegations that it is supporting the Afghan Taliban to try to cover up for the failure of its own policies in Afghanistan. Earlier in February, 2017, General John Nicholson, the US commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, also said that Russia is encouraging the Taliban and providing them with diplomatic cover in a bid to undermine US influence and defeat NATO.

Bangladesh

- On March 25, at least six people including two police officers were killed in twin bombings in Bangladesh's city of Sylhet.

The Daesh militant group has claimed responsibility for the attacks. According to local authorities the attack targeted police and a large crowd. The Bangladeshi authorities have carried out a number of raids against militants across the country since terrorist attack in Dhaka in July 2016 killing 22 people, most of them foreigners.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

UNITED NATIONS

- On March 27, Stephen O'Brien, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator and Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, stated that a war in Yemen that is entering the third year has not only wrecked the country's economy but has also pushed it to the brink of a famine.

While talking about his third visit to the country in March 2017, he expressed fear of looming famine in Yemen. He also said that the number of malnourished children was increasing every day. Stephen O'Brien called upon the warring parties in the country to provide immediate and timely humanitarian access to the people in need. The UN and its partners are already providing life-saving assistance to all of Yemen's 22 governorates, reaching almost 6 million people every month. According to the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), seven million people in Yemen are suffering from severe starvation and approximately 19 million Yemenis need humanitarian assistance.

- On March 23, UN General-Secretary Antonio Guterres urged the leadership of South Sudan to ensure unrestricted humanitarian access to the people and work towards restoration of peace in the country.

During a Security Council briefing, Guterres said, "All the optimism that accompanied the birth of South Sudan has been shattered by internal divisions, rivalries and the irresponsible behaviour of some of its leaders." He noted that approximately 1.9 million people are displaced internally, more than 220,000 people are seeking safety in protection sites of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). Owing to the famine, some 5.5 million people may suffer from food security in the summer season of 2017. On March 21, 2017, Hervy Ladsous, the Under Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations, also indicated that the security situation in South Sudan has become worse.

- On March 18, the head of UN's Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) resigned after being pressurised by the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres for withdrawing a report accusing Israel of imposing an apartheid regime on Palestinians.
- According to *Dawn* on March 17, a new report released by the UN has accused Israel of imposing an 'apartheid regime' of racial discrimination on the Palestinian people.

The report "Israeli Practices towards the Palestinian People and the Question of Apartheid" was commissioned and published by the ESCWA on March 15, 2017. The report concluded that Israel has established an apartheid regime that oppresses and dominates the Palestinian people. The report also condemned the Israeli government for operating a system of divide and rule and violating international law. Rima Khalaf, UN Under-Secretary General and ESCWA Executive Secretary, said, "The report was the first of its type from a UN body that clearly and frankly

concludes that Israel is a racist state that has established an apartheid system that persecutes the Palestinian people.” However, Israel’s Foreign Ministry rejected the report and compared it to a Nazi propaganda report that was strongly anti-Semitic. The UN also distanced itself from the report. UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric stated that the report was published without any prior consultation with the UN Secretariat and its views did not reflect those of the UN Secretary-General. Later, on March 18, 2017, Rima Khalaf resigned from her post. She said that she submitted her resignation after Antonio Guterres insisted on the withdrawal of the report. Khalaf stood by the report and indicated that it was expected that Israel and its allies would put pressure on UN to renounce the report.

- On March 17, the United Nations Security Council extended the mandate of the UN assistance operation in Afghanistan until March 17, 2018.

The resolution was unanimously adopted by the UNSC. For an effective support to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the Council also requested the UN Secretary-General to conduct a review of UNAMA and report back its results by July 2017. The Council also requested uninterrupted support for the establishment of a fair and transparent justice system. The UNSC also reiterated its support for the Government of Afghanistan, and in particular to the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF).

--- Moiz Khan