

January 16 – January 31

AREA BRIEF

www.ssii.com.pk



**STRATEGIC STUDIES
INSTITUTE ISLAMABAD**

info@ssii.com.pk

CONTENTS

Foreword (General Observations).....	3
Americas.....	6
Arms Control and Disarmament.....	10
China and East Asia.....	16
Europe.....	18
Middle East & West Asia.....	23
South Asia (I).....	31
South Asia (II).....	36
United Nations.....	41

Area Briefs: 16-31 January 2018

General Observations

Pakistan

- After an inexplicable silence for over two months despite intense accusations and threats from the US and Afghanistan, on January 30, Pakistan's Foreign Office Spokesperson, Dr Mohammad Faisal gave out that Pakistan had extradited 27 suspected Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network militants to Afghanistan in November 2017. The disclosure came a day before a high-powered Afghan delegation visited Islamabad in the wake of a major terrorist attack in Kabul on 27 January 2018, which resulted in over 100 deaths. Despite the meeting, the Afghan leadership continued to accuse Pakistan of providing safe haven to the terrorists responsible for a spate of terror attacks in and around Kabul.
- The Indonesian President, on a tour of South Asia, visited Pakistan on 26 January, where he addressed a joint session of Parliament.
- The Pak-US relationship continued on its downward spiral in January with a US drone strike on 24 January targeting an Afghan refugee camp in Kurram Agency. Pakistan condemned the strike and warned that "such unilateral actions" could prove detrimental to "the cooperation between the two countries in the fight against terrorism." The Pakistan army said that the strike ostensibly targeted an individual who had "morphed into Afghan refugees". The US also made clear to Pakistan that it would continue with such drone strikes on Pakistani territory till Pakistan fell in line with the US demands. Although the Pakistan government had said it would act against US drone strikes, so far it has failed to take any action.
- There continues to be confusion over what aid and assistance the US is still extending to Pakistan as well as what the Pakistan policy is towards the US in view of the new US policy in this region. Although the military assistance has been cut, it appears the US is continuing to fund the International Education and Training (IMET) for Pakistan's military officers – as the Foreign Secretary informed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on 17 January. The Foreign Office Spokesperson also gave out that the cooperation with the US remains unaffected despite the growing differences between Pakistan and the US.
- Meanwhile, on 25 January, a Monitoring Team of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) 1267 Sanctions Committee visited Pakistan to monitor measures taken by Pakistan against organisations listed on the UN's terror watch list.

- India continued to conduct military attacks across the LoC and the Working Boundary killing Pakistani soldiers as well as civilians. According to the Pakistan Foreign Office, India had committed more than 100 ceasefire violations in January 2018.

International

- India continues to gain access to the Supplier Cartels in the arms control and disarmament issue areas. In July 2016 India got membership of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) and in December 2017 it was welcomed into the Wassenaar Arrangement. On 19 January India became the 43rd member of the Australia Group, which seeks to prevent the spread of chemical and biological weapons' materials and technologies. India is seeking this indirect route into the Nuclear Suppliers Group where it has so far failed to gain membership despite a strong push from the US. Pakistan's diplomacy has been found wanting on this front as it has failed to show India's suspect record in a number of these issue areas. The Supplier Cartels are voluntary arrangements and have no standing in international law in terms of applicability.
- India's arms acquisitions also continue unabated. The Spike anti-tank guided missile deal which India had earlier cancelled with Israel, was revived during Israeli PM Netanyahu's visit to India. On 17 January Netanyahu stated that this \$500 million deal had been revived.
- India is also expanding its interaction eastwards, especially with ASEAN countries. One reflection of this was the presence of the ASEAN leaders as a collectivity to attend India's 69th Republic Day on January 26. This was the first time that a block of leaders were invited together as guests of honour at the Indian Republic Day celebrations. A day earlier, on 25 January, India and the ASEAN leaders held a Summit in New Delhi to celebrate 25 years of ties between the two. The focus of the Summit was on Defence and maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.
- Afghanistan saw a spate of deadly terrorist attacks in the second fortnight of January 2018. On 20 January the Taliban attacked Kabul's Intercontinental Hotel leaving 43 people dead after a siege that lasted 17 hours.

On 24 January, Daesh attacked the Save the Children office in Jalalabad leaving 6 dead. The attack was followed by a battle between the terrorists and Afghan Special forces, which lasted 10 hours.

On 27 January, the Taliban claimed responsibility for a suicide attack when an ambulance laden with explosives detonated in a high security area killing 103 people, mostly policemen.

On 29 January, Daesh claimed the attack on the Marshal Fahim Military University in Kabul, which killed 11 soldiers.

The growing presence of Daesh in Afghanistan has added to the instability and confusion prevailing in that country, especially in the wake of Trump's new policy for this region, which is premised primarily on a military solution to the Afghan conflict.

- On 17 January, the US Administration revealed its intent to withhold \$65 million from the UN body for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA. In response, on 22 January, UNRWA launched a global fundraising campaign to sustain its education, health and other assistance programmes.
- On 22 January, the EU assured Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, during his meeting in Brussels, it supported his ambition to have East Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state.
- The situation in Syria became more complicated as Turkey sent in its forces to target the Kurdish militia in the Syrian border region of Afrin and on 30 January the Turkish air force conducted air strikes in that region. On 20 January, Turkey had launched its operation 'Olive Branch' against the Peoples' Protection Units (YPG) in the Afrin region of northern Syria.
- On 31 January, President Donald Trump signed an executive order to keep the Guantanamo Bay military prison open. Obama had committed to closing this prison but never did.

--- *Dr Shireen M Mazari*

Director General

AMERICAS

Domestic

- On January 31, President Donald Trump delivered his first State of the Union address.

Observers termed the one hour twenty minute speech very lengthy. Trump recounted his accomplishments during his first year in office and offered proposals he would like to see being considered in the coming year. Trump extended “an open hand” to Democrats to work together. He however insisted on a border wall with Mexico and other concessions from Democrats as part of any over-arching immigration deal.

- According to the *BBC* on January 31 US President Donald Trump will soon release a controversial Republican memo alleging anti-Trump bias at the FBI.

The House Intelligence Committee voted this week to release the classified memo, despite objections from the FBI. Democrats claim it is an attempt to discredit the FBI-led Russia probe. The FBI said it has “grave concerns about material omissions of fact that fundamentally impact” the accuracy of the controversial House memo. Trump has until the weekend to decide whether to de-classify the information for public release. Republicans in Congress, who have reviewed the four-page document, claim that it proves that the Department of Justice abused a surveillance programme to unfairly target a member of the Trump campaign.

- According to *CNN* on January 31, President Donald Trump’s attorneys are arguing that Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s team has not met the high threshold they believe is required to interview a president in person.

Trump’s statements that he was “looking forward” and would “love to” meet with Mueller were quickly followed by another one saying that any interview would be subject to his lawyers. Trump’s lawyers believe that Trump should not be required to do so. According to sources the negotiation is ongoing and the position being taken by the President’s lawyers was not final. The President’s legal team argues that he should not be treated like other people and also that Mueller’s prosecutors need to show that only the President can give them the information they require.

- According to *Reuters* on January 28, Republican Senators Susan Collins and Lindsey Graham expressed dismay at reports that President Trump told the top White House lawyer Donald McGahn to order US Justice Department officials to fire Special Counsel Robert Mueller.

“I’ve got legislation protecting Mr. Mueller, and I’d be glad to pass it tomorrow,” Graham said. In a separate interview Collins said, “It certainly wouldn’t hurt to put that extra safeguard in place, given the latest stories.” Tensions over Mueller’s probe are haunting Trump’s year-old presidency. The New York Times had reported on January 22, 2018 that President Trump ordered White House counsel Donald McGahn to fire Mueller in June 2017 but backed down after he threatened to resign rather than carry out the order.

- On January 28, four people were killed and two more wounded in a shooting rampage in

Pennsylvania.

The shooting took place at a car wash in Melcroft. The suspected shooter, Timothy O'Brien Smith, was injured seriously and not expected to survive.

- On January 23, two 15-year-old students were killed and 18 more people injured during a school shooting in Benton, Kentucky.

The incident was one of at least 11 shootings on school property recorded since the beginning of 2018 and roughly the 50th of the academic year. According to researchers, school shootings in the US have occurred at the rate of about one every week since 2013. Katherine W. Schweit, a former senior FBI official and the co-author of a study of 160 active shooting incidents in the United States said, "We have absolutely become numb to these kinds of shootings, and I think that will continue." Kentucky lawmakers continue to struggle with how to address the risk of school shootings. In 2017 state legislators considered, but did not pass, a bill that would have allowed people with concealed-carry permits to bring weapons on to public school campuses, where proponents argue they could be used to respond to active shooters. A similar bill, limited to college campuses and some government buildings, has been introduced in 2018.

- According to *USA Today* on January 26, the country is in the grips of a severe flu season.

The current flu season is expected to be as bad as the outbreak that caused an estimated 56,000 deaths in 2014-2015. The flu remains widespread in 49 states, and reports of flu-like illnesses continued to rise through the third week of January 2018.

- The US Congress ended a three-day government shutdown on January 22.

Senate Democrats bowed to growing pressure to adopt a short-term spending bill to fund government operations without first addressing the fate of young undocumented immigrants. The House quickly approved the measure to fund the government through February 8, 2018 and extend funding for the popular Children's Health Insurance Programme for six years. The agreement revealed differences among Democrats, with about one-third of the party's members in the Senate and a majority in the House voting against it.

- At midnight on January 19, the US government officially shut down, after the US Senate failed to reach a temporary budget deal to keep it open.

Thousands of federal employees in the country were unable to work. Some employees will not be paid until the stalemate is resolved. Immigration was one of the main sticking points between Republicans and Democrats. Democrats refused to back a temporary budget deal until their concerns on immigration reform were dealt with. Essential federal services are still running across the country, but non-essential workers are not required to report to work. Earlier on January 16, 2018 House Republicans considered a stopgap bill to fund the US government and avert a shutdown. However, the measure did not include Democrats' demands for protection for young people brought to the US illegally as children.

International

- On January 31, President Donald Trump signed an executive order to keep the Guantanamo Bay military prison open.

Trump made the announcement during his State of the Union address. The decision reverses that of former President Barack Obama, who had said he wanted to close the controversial site “as soon as practicable.” The facility in Cuba has been used since the 9/11 attacks to detain what Washington calls “enemy combatants.” Only 41 prisoners remain there.

- According to Air Force General Paul Selva, the Vice Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, on January 29, the North Korean nuclear programme has made strides in recent months but the country has not yet demonstrated all the components of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), including a survivable re-entry vehicle.

Selva’s remarks confirmed Defence Secretary Jim Mattis’s assessment in December 2017 that North Korea’s ICBM did not pose an imminent threat to the United States.

“What he has not demonstrated yet are the fusing and targeting technologies and survivable re-entry vehicle,” Selva said, referring to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. He also added, “It is possible he has them, so we have to place the bet that he might have them, but he hasn’t demonstrated them.”

- According to senior officials on January 29, the United States will resume admissions for refugees from 11 countries identified as presenting a high security risk, but with extra vetting for these mostly Middle Eastern and African nations.

The changes follow a 90-day review of refugee admissions from Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Mali, North Korea, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria and Yemen by the State Department, Department of Homeland Security and intelligence agencies. The new rules are the latest changes to the country’s refugee programme made by the Trump Administration to address what it sees as national security issues. Some of the Administration’s actions, including an executive order to temporarily ban all refugees, have sparked lengthy court battles.

- According to Turkey on January 26, the US has pledged to stop supplying weapons to the YPG. Turkey also called on Washington to immediately remove its troops from the Syrian town of Manbij that Turkish forces plan to target.

Turkey’s air and ground offensive in Syria’s Afrin region against the YPG has opened a new front in the seven-year, multi-sided Syrian civil war. It has also strained Turkey’s ties with Washington. Ankara views the YPG as terrorists and as an extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). It remains critical of the US for providing arms and training for the militia. According to the US, Kurdish fighters have played a crucial role in US-led efforts to combat the hardline Islamic State in Syria.

- During his inaugural speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 26,

President Donald Trump said he would put the US first when it comes to trade. He however also said “America first is not America alone.”

According to President Trump “When the United States grows, so does the world.” And also, “The US is open for business,” even as he continued to attack “predatory” trade practices, warning partners that the US would not tolerate unfair trade. Aiming to protect local manufacturers from foreign competition, Trump’s election campaign centred on an “America First” policy. The policy contradicted the Davos conference’s goal of promoting globalisation and co-operation.

- On January 20 the US accused the Syrian government of a chlorine gas attack on civilians in the rebel enclave hit more than four years ago by a deadly chemical attack in the Syrian war.

The US criticised Russia for its failure to stop such assaults, which under international law are war crimes. The Russians called the American accusations “baseless.” The chlorine attack happened on January 19, 2018 in Eastern Ghouta. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, at least 13 people were hurt by rockets loaded with chlorine gas. Others said 21 became sick.

- On January 17 and 18, thousands of marchers flooded streets across the US to criticise President Trump, vowing to protect women’s rights, the environment and American ideals of free speech, religious freedom and tolerance.

Protests were held in cities including Boston, Denver, Reno, and Washington DC. Marchers waved signs and chanted “This is what democracy looks like!” The marches came a year after the inaugural Women’s March and Trump’s inauguration. Women and their families promised to use their votes to shift the course of American government during the mid-term elections in 2018.

Latin America

- On January 31 Pope Francis said he would send the Vatican’s top expert on sexual abuse to Chile to investigate accusations that a bishop covered up for an abusive priest.

The Pope had met the priest’s victims during a recent visit, but then asserted that Bishop Juan Barros was innocent, and accused people of slandering him. He later apologised for the comments. Bishop Barros has not been accused of abuse himself, but of being present when another priest, Fernando Karadima, molested young boys. Karadima was accused of molesting several teenagers in Santiago, starting in the 1980s.

---Amina Afzal

ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

- According to *Reuters* on January 30, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) said that the regime of Bashar al-Assad was responsible for the most lethal chemical attacks in Syria.
- On January 23, a new initiative by France to fight the proliferation of chemical weapons, known as the International Partnership Against Impunity for Use of Chemical Weapons, was launched during a meeting of 29 countries in Paris.
- On January 23, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson accused Russia for alleged chemical weapons attacks in East Ghouta in Syria.

Laboratories working for the OPCW compared samples taken by a UN mission in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta after the August 21, 2013 attack. The tests found “markers” in samples taken at Ghouta and at the sites of two other nerve agent attacks, in the towns of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib Governorate on April 4, 2017 and Khan al-Assal, Aleppo, in March 2013. Laboratory scientists said that they had compared the sample of three attacks and found similar signatures among them. The same test results were the basis for a report by the OPCW-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism in October 2017, which said the Syrian government was responsible for the Khan Sheikhoun attack, killing dozens of people. On the basis of the test, OPCW has now determined that Damascus was responsible for the chemical attacks in Khan Shaykhun and Khan al-Assal. However, Syria and Russia have repeatedly denied using chemical weapons in their operations and blamed the insurgents for the chemical attacks. OPCW inspectors now suggest they have found proof of an ongoing chemical weapons programme in Syria, including the systematic use of chlorine barrel bombs and sarin, which they say was ordered at the highest levels of government.

In a related development on January 23, 2018, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said that Russia was responsible for latest chemical weapons attacks in Syria on January 22, 2018. According to media reports, the alleged chlorine gas attacks affected 20 civilians, many of them children, in the rebel-held Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta. Tillerson said, “Whoever conducted the attacks, Russia ultimately bears responsibility for the victims in East Ghouta and countless other Syrians targeted with chemical weapons, since Russia became involved in Syria.” The US demanded Russia to stop vetoing future UNSC votes on the use of chemical weapons in Syria, or must at least abstain. However, both Syria and Russia denied using the poisonous gas in their operations against the rebels. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov called Tillerson’s accusations “dirty and mendacious,” Ryabkov said, “This is a blatant and by any standard outrageous example of the American side’s manipulating facts and ignoring what we’ve been saying for several years.”

Tillerson's comments came during a meeting of 29 countries in Paris trying to identify and sanction those who use chemical weapons. During the meeting 25 out of 29 countries including France, Germany and Turkey approved and launched a new initiative known as the "International Partnership Against Impunity for Use of Chemical Weapons." The Partnership represents a political commitment by participating countries to hold to account those responsible for the use of chemical weapons. Some 25 countries signed on to the Declaration of Principles of the Partnership on January 23, 2018. The Partnership is also open for other countries willing to join it. The member countries committed to sharing information and compiling a list of individuals implicated in the use of chemical weapons in Syria and beyond. The Partnership will be chaired by France in 2018.

- On January 29, US President Donald Trump urged UNSC envoys to counter Iranian aggression after they were shown what US officials say is debris from an Iranian-built missile fired at Saudi Arabia.

US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley had invited UNSC envoys to Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling in Washington to show them the debris. It was unclear whether Nikki Haley provided additional material to bolster the Administration's case during a tour of the base. Journalists were not invited but photographs shared by Haley's office showed large metal pieces, a drone and other items that were part of the presentation she made in December 2017. According to reports, Haley did not explain to the envoys how those pieces had been collected. A statement released by Haley's office said, "We wanted to bring the Security Council members to see the material so they could decide for themselves. We believe what the Council saw today makes it clear that the evidence continues to grow that Iran is blatantly ignoring its international obligations." In response, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, wrote on Twitter that the field trip had been an attempt "to create an Iran-phobic narrative at the UN Security Council through wining and dining and fake evidence."

- On January 26, Russian President Vladimir Putin praised his country's newly-built supersonic strategic bomber after watching it in flight, saying it would enhance Russia's nuclear weapons capability.

Putin said, "This is a serious step towards developing our hi-tech sphere and strengthening the country's ability to defend itself." Under a contract signed on January 25, 2018, some 10 of the modernised TU-160M nuclear bombers, codenamed Blackjacks by NATO, would be delivered to the Russian Air Force at a cost of \$269 million each between 2018 and 2027. The TU-160M is capable of carrying 12 cruise missiles or 12 short-range nuclear missiles and can fly 12,000 km nonstop without re-fuelling. Tupolev, the plane's manufacturer, says the modernised version would be 60% more effective than the older version with significant improvements to its weaponry, navigation and avionics.

- On January 23, Russia deployed four units of its S-400 air and missile defence system in Syria.

Two units of the S-400 system were delivered by air to the Khmeimim Airbase in the Syrian province of Latakia, while the other two units were shipped to a Russian maritime facility located in Tartus. Khmeimim serves as Russia's permanent airbase inside Syria and is adjacent to the Bassel al-Assad International Airport, with which it shares some airfield facilities. Both Russia and Syria had signed a treaty in 2016 to lease the base to Russian military forces for 49 years, extendable for an additional 25 years. The S-400 is the latest Russian mobile air defence system designed to target airborne targets including ballistic missiles. It is capable of simultaneously engaging up to 36 targets.

- On January 23, the European Union imposed sanctions and froze assets of 17 more North Koreans accused of helping the country evade United Nations sanctions related to its nuclear and ballistic missile tests.

EU Foreign Ministers signed off the sanctions at a meeting in Brussels. The EU said, "It was imposing the measures to press North Korea because of its continued and accelerated development of nuclear and ballistic programmes in flagrant disregard of UN Security Council resolutions." The imposition of sanctions on 17 more individuals and entities brought the total number to 58 individuals and 10 entities. The North Korean officials targeted by new sanctions include Chol Yun, third Secretary at the North Korean Embassy in China, as well as Pyongyang's diplomats in Bangladesh, Angola, South Africa and Egypt. According to the EU, Chol was involved in the sale of Lithium-6, a nuclear-related material prohibited by the UN, while Son Young-Nam, who is based at the North Korean Embassy in Bangladesh, has been accused of involvement in the smuggling of gold and other banned items.

- During an address to the Israeli Parliament on January 22, US Vice President Mike Pence said that the US would never allow Iran to develop a nuclear weapon.
- On January 22, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson expressed his hope regarding the European countries joining the US to fix the flaws in Iran's July 2015 Nuclear Agreement, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Pence said, "I have a solemn promise to Israel, to all the Middle East and to the world - the United States of America will never allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon." Regarding Iran's nuclear agreement, he said the agreement was a disaster and the US would not re-certify it. He also warned that the US would withdraw from the deal unless it was fixed. Responding to Pence's comments, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Western powers must "seize the opportunity to correct the failings of a failed deal, but if those leaders do not seize that opportunity, Israel will unequivocally support the President's decision to walk away from a bad deal." US President Donald Trump had waived nuclear related sanctions on Iran on January 12, 2018. However, he had threatened that his extension of relief from the sanctions was for the last time and demanded his European allies to fix the deal.

In a related development on January 22, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said that he hoped to make progress with European signatories to the JCPOA on how to overhaul the agreement. Tillerson said, "I think there is a common view among the E3 (Britain, France, Germany) that there are some areas of the JCPOA or some areas of Iran behaviour that should be addressed." His comments came during his meeting with British Prime Minister Theresa May, British National Security Adviser Mark Sedwill, and Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson. After the meeting, Tillerson indicated that they had agreed to set up a working group of experts on fixing flaws in the nuclear deal. The British Prime Minister's spokesperson said that Theresa May had reiterated the UK's commitment to the Iran nuclear deal and agreed on the importance of the international community coming together to counter Iran's destabilising regional activities. Both Tillerson and Johnson also agreed that they would examine Iran's ballistic missile programme, which was not part of the 2015 accord. Moreover, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian also indicated on January 22, 2018, that EU Foreign Ministers would discuss Iran's ballistic missile programme during their meeting in Brussels. Le Drian said, "We will also have the opportunity of underlining our firmness on Iran's compliance with United Nations Resolution 2231, which limits access to ballistic missile capacity and which Iran does not respect." He also indicated that he would visit Iran in March 2018 to discuss the country's missile programme. However, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qasemi rejected the statement. He said, "If there is such a quote (from the French Foreign Minister) that we held talks, we deny it. We have not had any negotiations about our missile and defence capabilities and will not talk about these issues with others." On January 23, 2018, Le Drian, ahead of his meeting with Tillerson, expressed annoyance that the US was pressuring Europe to redesign the Iran nuclear agreement. He said, "If the agreement is respected by Iran which is what the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) says, and we do not have any reason not to believe it, and the signatories must stand by their word."

- On January 19, India became the 43rd member of the informal and voluntary Australia Group (AG) working to counter the spread of materials, equipment and technologies that could contribute to the development or acquisition of chemical and biological weapons.

The AG said in a statement, "There was very strong support expressed for India's membership at the June 2017 Australia Group Plenary Meeting, after which consensus was reached to admit India in the group." The statement added, "India has demonstrated the will to implement rigorous controls of high standards in international trade and its capacity to adapt its national regulatory system to meet the necessities of its expanding economy." Raveesh Kumar, spokesman of India's Ministry of External Affairs, said that India's entry into the AG would be mutually beneficial and would contribute further to international security and non-proliferation objectives. He also stated that India's export control system enables the country to implement the obligations arising from the AG's Guidelines and Common Control Lists including its reporting requirements. In response to India's AG membership, Australia, France and the US congratulated the country. Heather Nauert, US State Department's spokesperson, said, "This

latest accomplishment underscores the Indian government's excellent non-proliferation credentials and commitment to preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, including by regulating the trade of sensitive goods and technologies."

After becoming a member of the AG, India is now a part of three out of four major multilateral export control groups. Earlier, India had gained the membership of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) in July 2016 and the Wassenaar Arrangement (WA) in December 2017. Experts believe that India's AG membership would help the country in building a strong case for its candidature of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). India's application for membership of the NSG is still pending owing to China's opposition. China wants NSG to first draw up guidelines for membership of those candidates who have not signed the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). Moreover, the discussion on membership of the non-NPT states in the NSG also focuses on the requirement for clear and strict separation of current and future civilian nuclear facilities from non-civilian nuclear facilities. In this regard, Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Centre for Science and International Affairs released a paper on January 22, 2018, warning that admitting India into the NSG without proper safeguards would have serious implications for countries like Pakistan. Author of the paper, John Carlson, a former Director General of Australian Safeguards and Non-proliferation Office, has examined India's Separation Plan and safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Carlson has argued that India's separation plan does not meet NSG standards and the country's current arrangements create an unverified grey zone between military and civilian fissile material. He stressed that India for its NSG membership must demonstrate a clear separation between civilian and non-civilian nuclear programmes and apply safeguards to the civilian materials and facilities in order to verify that they are not being used for military purposes.

- On January 18, India successfully test-fired its nuclear capable surface-to-surface intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) Agni-V.

The test was conducted for its full range from Dr Abdul Kalam Island in Odisha. India's Defence Ministry said, "All objectives of the mission have been successfully met. This successful test of Agni-V reaffirms the country's indigenous missile capabilities and further strengthens our credible deterrence." The missile travelled for 19 minutes and covered a distance of 4,900 kilometres. According to the Ministry, this was the first pre-induction trial of the Agni-V missile, and it would go through another similar trial before its final induction. Collectively, this was the fifth test of the missile and the third consecutive one from a canister on a road mobile launcher. The canister-launch version provides the capability to quickly transport the missile and launch it from anywhere. With a strike range of 5500 kilometres, Agni-V is capable of carrying a 1.5 tonne nuclear warhead.

- On January 17, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that the \$500-million Spike anti-tank guided missile deal between India and Israel was back on the table.

Netanyahu said, “They are re-authorising the Spike deal.” He made his comments while talking to reporters on board a flight from Ahmedabad to Mumbai. Netanyahu was on a six-day visit to India. Moreover, Israeli National Security Advisor Meir Ben-Shabbat also indicated that talks with India on the Spike missile deal were moving in a positive direction. He said that further details regarding the deal would be disclosed later. India had formally scrapped the deal for Spike missiles with Israel’s state-owned defence contractor Rafael Advanced Defence Systems a week before Netanyahu’s visit to the country. On January 3, 2018, Rafael had confirmed the cancellation of the deal. However, India is now reviving the deal because the country considers the Spike missiles battle-proven. The missile has a longer range and is lighter than the Indian Nag missile.

- According to the Indian Defence Ministry on January 16, the Indian Government approved the purchase of assault rifles and carbines from Israel to meet the immediate requirement of troops.

India’s Defence Acquisition Council (DAC), headed by Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, cleared the procurement of 72,000 assault rifles and 93,895 carbines worth \$553 million. According to media reports, the procurement would be made available to the forces in two tranches – one fourth by the state-owned Ordnance Factory Board and the remaining by local private industry. India has been investing millions of dollars in updating its Soviet-era military hardware. Following its collaboration with Israel, India would now offer its troops high-quality small arms. According to IHS Janes, the Tavor assault rifle manufactured by Israel Weapon Industries (IWI) is one of the world’s best assault rifles. The DAC also introduced significant changes in its Defence Procurement Procedure in order to encourage participation of the private sector in defence design and production and to give a boost to the ‘Make in India’ programme. The changes simplified the procedure to make it industry friendly, with minimal government control. The DAC has relaxed its minimum qualification criteria to participate in ‘Make in India’ projects by removing conditions related to credit ratings and reducing financial net worth criteria.

--- Moiz Khan

CHINA, EAST ASIA & PACIFIC

China

- During her visit to China on January 31, British Prime Minister Theresa May met with Chinese Premier, Li Keqiang.

May stressed that her visit would “intensify the golden era in UK-China relations”. May also expressed her desire for a free trade agreement with China and called for new education links with the country. According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry Beijing saw May’s visit as “an opportunity to achieve new development of the China-UK global comprehensive strategic partnership”. May’s three-day visit is the first by a British Prime Minister to China since Chinese President, Xi Jinping visited Britain in October 2015. May is expected to meet President Xi Jinping in Beijing on February 1, 2018.

- On January 28, Japanese Foreign Minister, Taro Kono visited Beijing and held talks with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi.

During the meeting, the two sides expressed their mutual desire to overcome historical and territorial disputes to improve bilateral relations. Wang Yi told the Japanese Foreign Minister that China is willing to work with Japan to normalise relations, stressing that improved ties were in the interest of both countries.

- Responding to the US National Defence Strategy released on January 19, the Chinese Embassy in the US said that Cold War mentality and a zero-sum game mindset would only lead to conflict and confrontation.

In its latest National Defence Strategy, the US named China and Russia as “revisionist powers” that “seek to create a world consistent with their authoritarian models”. Unveiling the unclassified version of the new Defence Strategy, US Defence Secretary James Mattis suggested that the US military strategy was shifting away from its primary focus from “terrorism” to “great power competition.” Beijing says it seeks “global partnership, not global dominance”.

- On January 19, the Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee said that amending the State Constitution was necessary given that “socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era”.

Principal among these is the development of President Xi Jinping’s political thought into the country’s constitution, which the CCP adopted into its party charter at the 19th Party Congress in October 2017. The amendment in the state constitution needs formal approval from the parliament, which means that it would likely take place in March 2018 when the national legislature convenes.

- On January 16, Chinese President Xi Jinping held a telephonic conversation with his US counterpart, Donald Trump. During the talks, Xi told Trump that China is ready to continue its joint efforts with the US and other members of the international community

to achieve progress that would finally lead to a proper resolution of the Korean Peninsula issue.

Xi called on all related parties to work together to create conditions for the resumption of talks over the Korean Peninsula. In response, Trump said the US values China's significant role in resolving the issue and is willing to strengthen communication and coordination with China over the issue.

North Korea

- On January 27, the North Korean Foreign Ministry condemned the latest sanctions imposed by the US against Pyongyang, calling them an attempt at sabotaging the inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation.

The latest sanctions came in the aftermath of negotiations between North and South Korea aimed at defusing long-running tensions. Earlier, on January 24, 2018, the US Treasury Department imposed sanctions on nine North Korean entities accusing them of involvement in helping Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programme. Referring to the sanctions, North Korea said the US had to stop such an "anachronistic" policy toward North Korea.

South Korea

- On January 25, South Korean Foreign Minister, Kang Kyung-wha said that talks were the only viable option for resolving the crisis over North Korea's nuclear programme and stressed, "The idea of a military solution is unacceptable."

Her remarks came on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos. Kyung-wha said she was positive that the US would obtain South Korea's approval before undertaking any military action.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

EUROPE

- On January 31, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel warned Israel that it faced growing frustration in Europe amid concern for the future of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Contrary to US Vice President Mike Pence, Gabriel's tone was stern. Pence, who was on his visit to Israel embraced President Donald Trump's Dec. 6, 2017 announcement that his Administration recognises Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and that it will move the US Embassy to the city. "With regard to the Palestinians and the Iran question, the Americans are taking your side more clearly than ever before. But is this really only a good thing?" Gabriel said in Tel Aviv. In a thinly veiled threat about cutting off aid, he said some members of Israel's cabinet were "explicitly against the two-state solution" but that such a solution "has always been the foundation of our engagement for Israeli-Palestinian peace and for the large amount of funding" from Germany and Europe.

- On January 31, the European Commission welcomed the final report by its High-Level Expert Group on Sustainable Finance (HLEG), which sets out strategic recommendations for a financial system that supports sustainable investments.

The Commission will now finalise its strategy on sustainable finance on the basis of these recommendations. Delivering an EU strategy on sustainable finance is a priority action as well as one of the key steps towards implementing the Paris Agreement and the EU's Agenda for sustainable development.

- According to Russian President Vladimir Putin on January 30 a list of officials and businessmen published by the US has in effect targeted all Russian people.

The list names 210 top Russians as part of a sanctions law aimed at punishing Moscow for meddling in the US election. However, the US stressed those named were not subject to new sanctions. Putin said the list was an unfriendly act that complicated US-Russia ties but he said he did not want to escalate the situation. The list was also derided by a number of senior Russian officials who said it bore a strong resemblance to the Forbes magazine ranking of Russian billionaires.

- On January 30, the British government refused to publish a leaked report document predicting an economic hit from Brexit.

Brexit Minister Steve Baker said the document was at a "preliminary" stage and releasing it in full could damage the UK's negotiations with the EU. The report said growth would be lower in each of three different Brexit outcomes than if the UK had stayed in the EU. Labour has called for it to be published and debated in Parliament.

- On January 29, the US and Poland issued a joint statement condemning a proposed gas pipeline that would link Germany and Russia, saying the project could undermine attempts to make Europe less reliant on Moscow for energy.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Polish Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz denounced the pipeline after a meeting in Warsaw. The so-called Nord Stream 2, would bypass Poland and be the second pipeline to carry Russian gas directly to Germany and Western Europe via the Baltic Sea instead of through Poland and Ukraine. "Like Poland, the United States opposes the Nord Stream 2 pipeline," Tillerson said at a news conference with Czaputowicz. "We see it as undermining Europe's overall energy security and stability and provides Russia with yet another instrument to use energy as a political tool." Czaputowicz said the pipeline was "not a healthy piece of infrastructure" for Europe's energy stability.

- On January 29, the River Seine in Paris, peaked at about four metres above its normal water level for this time of the year.

The flood level rose to 5.84m early on and is not expected to begin receding for another 24 hours. Weeks of rainfall led to a rise in the water level. Around 1,500 people have been evacuated from their homes in the greater Paris region, while a similar number of homes remain without electricity. In 2016, the last significant flood in Paris, the river floodwater reached a high of 6.1m. Seven stations of a main commuter line, the RER C, have been closed until at least 5 February, and some expressways that run alongside the Seine have been closed. The river burst its banks on January 24, 2018. Metro lines and stations were closed after France's wettest January for more than 100 years.

- On January 29, Finland's President Sauli Niinisto was re-elected for a second six-year term.

Niinisto secured 62.7% of the vote in the January 28, 2018 poll, beating his Green party rival (12.4%). He is the first candidate to win in the first round of voting since the electoral system was changed in 1994. Niinisto won popularity by maintaining relations with Moscow, despite Finland backing economic sanctions against Russia over its annexation of Crimea from Ukraine. In 2012, he won the presidency as a candidate for the centre-right National Coalition Party, but he campaigned as an independent in this election.

- On January 29 Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny was freed after being detained by police at a Moscow rally in support of a presidential election boycott.

Navalny's lawyer told the press that he had been released without charge but will have to appear in court at a later date and may then face charges. Police also raided his offices in Moscow, reportedly seizing equipment. Navalny is President Vladimir Putin's most vocal critic and has been barred from contesting the March 18, 2108 election.

- On January 27 Czech President Milos Zeman won a second term in office following a vote against rival Jiri Drahos.

Zeman, who fiercely opposes immigration and objects to EU sanctions against Russia, took 52% of the vote to beat Drahos, a pro-EU academic with no prior political experience. Voter turnout exceeded 66%. The role of the Czech president is influential; Zeman can name the prime minister and sign bills passed by parliament into law.

- According to *CNN* on January 29 President Trump has warned that the US Administration may soon address “very unfair” trade with the EU.

“I’ve had a lot of problems with the European Union, and it may morph into something very big from ... a trade standpoint,” Trump said. “It’s a very unfair situation,” he added. “We cannot get our product in. It’s very, very tough, and yet they send their product to us – no taxes, very little taxes.” Trump has criticised the EU over trade on several occasions, singling out Germany for running a big trade deficit with the US. Trump’s rhetoric has not yet translated into substantial action, but the Trump Administration’s efforts to crack down on what it perceives as unfair trade now appear to be gaining momentum.

- According to *Reuters* on January 29, Argentina sent 600,000 tonnes of biodiesel to Europe between September 2017 and mid-January 2018 after the EU lowered import duties.

The EU cut anti-dumping duties in September 2017 to between 4.5 and 8.1 % from 22 to 25.7% previously. However, the European Commission is set to launch an investigation into whether Argentine producers exporting biodiesel to the bloc are benefiting from unfair subsidies. In November, a Carbio analyst estimated that Argentina would ship 500,000 tonnes of biodiesel to Europe in 2018. Biodiesel is used by itself or with petroleum-based diesel mainly as a motor fuel.

- On January 26, Mark Carney the Governor of the Bank of England said that a “deeper relationship” with Europe would benefit the UK economy.

Carney’s comments follow Chancellor Phillip Hammond’s statement that the UK and EU economies would only move “very modestly” apart after Brexit. Carney said that while global growth had accelerated, the UK was suffering a “Brexit Effect” in the short term.

- On January 24 European leaders at the World Economic Forum in Davos warned against a return to nationalism, with Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel calling for more global cooperation to harness the forces of globalisation.

The speeches by Merkel, Macron and Italy’s Paolo Gentiloni came ahead of President Donald Trump’s visit to the annual summit in the Swiss Alps to promote his America First policies. Since taking power one year ago, Trump has pulled the United States out of international agreements on trade and climate, and threatened to torpedo a deal to curb Iran’s nuclear programme,

unsettling partners who have looked to Washington to help shape global rules since World War Two. Macron spoke for a full hour, receiving a standing ovation from the crowd of CEOs, bankers and top academics, after he called for a “global compact” to address the economic forces that have led to rising inequality and a surge in populism.

- On January 24, The European Parliament’s Constitutional Affairs Committee voted on a plan for the redistribution of the UK’s current seats.

Britain’s quota in the 751-seat legislature is 73 members. The plan envisions redistributing 27 of these seats to member states, holding 46 on reserve to be elected by a Pan-European constituency, in line with a proposal of French President Macron.

The plan remains thin on detail and is unlikely to be implemented by the forthcoming European elections in 2019. The 27 seats will go to France (5), Spain (5), Italy (3), the Netherlands (3), Ireland (2), Denmark (1), Estonia (1), Croatia (1), Austria (1), Poland (1), Romania (1), Slovakia (1), Finland (1), and Sweden (1).

- On January 22, the European Commission unveiled its first-ever Europewide plan to tackle plastics waste, including waste entering the oceans.

The plan refers to a goal that all plastics packaging used in the region must be recyclable by 2030. The Commission also set a target to recycle 55% of plastics packaging waste, which makes up about two-thirds of all plastics waste generated in the region by then.

- On January 21 the German political deadlock ended when the SPD voted for coalition talks with Chancellor Angela Merkel’s Party.

German leaders took a significant step towards breaking the deadlock that was preventing the formation of a new government since the September 2017 election. At a special party Congress in Bonn, the center-left Social Democrats (SPD) voted to begin formal coalition talks with Chancellor Angela Merkel’s CDU/CSU alliance, a move that brings a new, Merkel-led Administration closer to reality. Although Merkel’s political alliance emerged as the largest group in last September’s elections, its support was dented. Since then, Merkel had been struggling to form a viable coalition. Some 600 SPD delegates debated the motion for several hours before voting to launch official talks that will likely lead to a renewal of the CDU/SPD’s so-called grand coalition of the last four years. Failure to endorse the proposed plan for government would have thrown Europe into further disarray.

- On January 19, Rail services returned to normal in Germany after trees and other debris were cleared from lines hit by a severe storm that killed eight people.
- On January 18 eight people including two firefighters were killed in storm-related accidents as hurricane-strength winds tore across northern Europe.

Three people died earlier in the Netherlands in accidents caused by hurricane-strength winds. Fallen trees and other debris are still blocking many railway lines in Germany. The storm has moved east into Poland. It was the most powerful storm to hit Germany in 11 years. Those killed in Germany included two firefighters and two lorry drivers whose vehicles were blown over.

Facing gusts of up to 140km/h Germany's train operator Deutsche Bahn cancelled all long-distance services for the day.

---Amina Afzal

MIDDLE EAST & WEST ASIA

Egypt

- On January 20, Egyptian President, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi met with US Vice President, Mike Pence in Cairo, who was on a four-day visit to the Middle East.

Vice President Pence's visit to the region followed US President Donald Trump's announcement of his decision to recognise Jerusalem as the Israeli capital. President Sisi identified "the peace issue" as one of the most important issues in their discussions. The meeting focused on security cooperation, economic ties and efforts to fight Daesh. It was the highest-level visit by a US official to the region since December 2017, when Trump defied decades of US policy on Jerusalem. Arab leaders, including President Sisi, strongly opposed the move. During their talks, Pence told Sisi the US would support a two-state solution for Israelis and Palestinians if the two sides agreed to it. According to a statement from the Egyptian Presidency, Sisi noted that only negotiations based on a two-state solution could bring an end to the conflict, "and Egypt would spare no effort to support this." While talking to reporters after the meeting, Pence said, "We heard President el-Sisi out." According to Pence, Sisi described his objection to Trump's decision as a "disagreement between friends." Regarding terrorism in Egypt, Pence said, "We stand shoulder to shoulder with you." According to President Sisi, the two leaders discussed ways to rid the country of the "disease and cancer" of terrorism.

Israel

- On January 29, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu visited Moscow and held talks with Russian President, Vladimir Putin.

Netanyahu was accompanied by Minister Ze'ev Elkin, a member of the security cabinet who is considered to have close ties with Russian officials as well as National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat and outgoing Military Intelligence Chief Maj. Gen. Herzl Halevi. Netanyahu's visit was focussed on Syria, and he reaffirmed Israel's opposition to Iran's growing military presence there and in neighbouring Lebanon. This is the seventh meeting between the two leaders since Russian forces became involved in the Syrian civil war. According to the Jerusalem Post, Netanyahu made clear to Putin that Israel would not tolerate the establishment of a permanent military base for Iran in Syria after the civil war, and would take action to ensure that it doesn't happen. During their meeting, Netanyahu said one lesson of the Holocaust was to "stand up to murderous ideologies" as he expressed his desire for Israel and Russia to work together to "promote security and stability in the region." Putin called the meeting "very symbolic, because these days the entire world is remembering the victims of the Holocaust." He said, "We will take this opportunity to talk about our bilateral relations and to discuss the situation in the region." Netanyahu said that Iran was trying "to turn Lebanon into one big missile site, a site for manufacturing precision missiles against the State of Israel. This is something we are not

prepared to tolerate.” Israeli officials said they retain the right to prevent the smuggling of advanced weaponry to Hezbollah in Lebanon through Syrian territory. The Israeli delegation also inquired how Russia envisions its future involvement in the region, and to gauge how strongly it opposes the American effort to reopen the nuclear deal with Iran.

- On January 21, US Vice President, Mike Pence arrived in Israel for a two-day visit. He met with Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem and held talks with Israeli President, Reuven Rivlin. He also addressed the Israeli Parliament (the Knesset).

During his reception meeting with Netanyahu, Pence said that US President Donald Trump believes his decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel’s capital would ultimately provide new momentum to the Middle East peace talks. Pence expressed confidence that Trump’s approach would help resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Prime Minister Netanyahu said, “Mr. Vice President, I’ve had the privilege over the years of standing here with hundreds of world leaders and welcome them, all of them to Israel’s capital, Jerusalem. This is the first time that I’m standing when both leaders can say those three words, ‘Israel’s capital, Jerusalem’.”

Pence also delivered a speech at the Israeli Parliament. Arab Israeli lawmakers were expelled from the chamber after they shouted in protest as Pence began his speech. During his speech, Vice President Pence reiterated the Administration’s recognition of Jerusalem’s new status, referring to it as “the capital of the State of Israel.” Pence, an evangelical Christian, made biblical references in his speech to invoke ties between the Abrahamic faiths and to enforce Israel’s religious claims to the Holy Land. He added that President Donald Trump had instructed the State Department to begin initial preparations to relocate the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, saying it would open by the end of 2019. He also called on the Palestinians to return to the negotiating table, warning that peace could only be achieved through dialogue.

Pence also held talks with Israeli President, Reuven Rivlin. Rivlin called Pence “a dear friend of the Jewish people and the State of Israel” and told Pence that, as a seventh generation Jerusalemite, he deeply appreciated the Vice President’s reaffirmation of America’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Rivlin also said that he had no doubt that Pence’s declaration, that the US Embassy would be moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem by the end of 2019, was essentially a done deal. Rivlin saw this move as a gift for Israel’s 70th anniversary.

Following his meeting with Rivlin, on January 23, 2018, Vice President Mike Pence wrapped his trip to Israel with a visit to Jerusalem’s Western Wall, one of Judaism’s holiest sites. Pence’s visit to the Western Wall was seen by Israelis as a powerful statement, a continuing affirmation of the Trump Administration’s close alignment with the Jewish state. Pence is the second senior US leader in less than a year to make a personal visit to the Western Wall, which is known in Hebrew as the “Kotel.” In May, 2017, President Trump became the first sitting US President to visit the site in the heart of Jerusalem’s Old City. The move further angered the Palestinians. The ancient site is the holiest place where Jews can pray. It is located in the Old City, an area that

falls within East Jerusalem, which was captured by Israel in 1967 and formally annexed in 1980. It is considered to be occupied Palestinian territory by most of the international community.

Palestinian officials boycotted the visit calling for a national strike and public protests. In Gaza, Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas said Pence was “not welcome.” He called on all Palestinian factions to unite and agree on “resistance in all forms.” A top Palestinian official called Pence’s Parliament speech ‘messianic’ and a ‘gift to extremists’, reiterating the view that the White House is incapable of being an even-handed mediator in peace talks. On January 23, 2018, a general strike was observed in the Palestinian territories. During his visit, Pence issued no criticism of Israel’s half-century occupation of the West Bank.

Jordan

- On January 29, Jordan’s King Abdullah II held talks with Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas in Amman.

King Abdullah vowed to stand by the Palestinian cause, calling on the international community to defend the Palestinian nation’s right to Jerusalem al-Quds. Following the meeting, Jordan’s royal court said that the King had “affirmed Jordan’s continued efforts in all international forums to defend the Palestinian cause.” Abdullah also urged the international community “to safeguard the rights of Palestinians, Arabs, Muslims and Christians in the city of Jerusalem al-Quds,” which he said was “the key to achieving peace and stability in the region.” Abbas briefed King Abdullah about his attempts to resolve the challenges to the Palestinian cause and Jerusalem al-Quds. He also appreciated Jordan’s support for Palestine and the protection of the holy places in Jerusalem al-Quds. The two leaders also discussed the need to sustain international support for UNRWA’s services to Palestinians, given that there are 6 million Palestinian refugees registered with the UN.

- On January 21, Jordan’s King Abdullah held talks with US Vice President, Mike Pence in Amman.

During their meeting, King Abdullah told Pence he looked to Washington to rebuild “trust and confidence” in moving towards a two-state solution in Israel after President Donald Trump recognised Jerusalem as the country’s capital. He said Jordan viewed the Israel-Palestinian conflict as a “potential major source of instability”. He also said he had raised his concerns for some time that such a decision on Jerusalem “does not come as a result of a comprehensive settlement to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict”. King Abdullah reiterated that East Jerusalem should be the capital of a future Palestinian state. He said, “We hope that the US will reach out and find the right way to move forward in these challenging circumstances.” During his talk with journalists, Pence said he “agreed to disagree” with King Abdullah on the impact of Trump’s move. King Abdullah’s Hashemite dynasty is the custodian of the Muslim holy sites in the city, making Amman particularly sensitive to any changes of status there. According to

observers, Jordanian officials fear Trump's move has wrecked chances of a resumption of Arab-Israeli peace talks, which King Abdullah had sought to revive. They also worry the move could trigger violence in the Palestinian territories which could spill over into Jordan. Following his meeting with King Abdullah, Pence visited a military facility near the Syrian border to meet with US troops.

Palestine

- On January 31, the Palestinian Hamas movement said the US move to place Ismail Haniyeh on the terror list will not deter its resistance against Israel.

The US has put the leader of the Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh on its so-called terror blacklist and imposed sanctions on him. According to a statement from the US State Department, Ismail Haniyeh has close links with Hamas' military wing and has been a proponent of armed resistance against Israel. Haniyeh was also placed on the US Treasury Department's sanctions blacklist, which freezes US-based assets if he holds any and bans American firms and individuals from doing business with him. A Hamas spokesman said, "This Zionist policy supported by the US cannot be confronted unless we ignite a new intifada (uprising). We reject and condemn the decision and we see it as a reflection of the domination by a gang of Zionists of the American decision. The decision is worthless." The US move comes as tension is already high in the occupied Palestinian territories following US President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem al-Quds as the Israeli capital and his plan to relocate the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to the holy city.

- On January 22, The European Union assured Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas it supported his ambition to have East Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state.

During a meeting in Brussels with European High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Federica Mogherini, Abbas repeated his call for East Jerusalem as the capital as he urged EU governments to recognise the state of Palestine immediately, arguing that this would not disrupt negotiations with Israel on a peace settlement for the region. While Abbas made no reference to Trump's move on Jerusalem or US Vice President Mike Pence's visit to the city, his presence at the EU headquarters in Brussels was seized on by European officials as a chance to restate opposition to Trump's decision to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem. Mogherini called on those involved in the process to speak and act 'wisely', with a sense of responsibility. She said, "I want to reassure President Abbas of the firm commitment of the European Union to the two-state solution with Jerusalem as the shared capital of the two states." Deputy German Foreign Minister, Michael Roth told reporters that Trump's decision had made peace talks harder but said all sides needed to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Abbas said, "We are keen on continuing the way of negotiations. We are determined to reunite our people and our land."

Qatar

- According to the *Omani News Agency (ONA)*, on January 28, Qatar signed a memorandum of understanding with Oman to promote investment and trade between the two countries.

The memorandum covers a wide range of cooperation sectors including the production and export of food products from Oman to Qatar. Omani Agriculture Minister Fuad al-Sajwani said the agreement reflected the “solid relationship” between the two nations. For his part, Qatar’s Minister of Municipalities and Environment, Mohammed bin Abdallah al-Rumaihi, who headed the Qatari delegation, hailed his country’s “strategic relations” with the Sultanate. The agreement comes amid an ongoing blockade imposed on Doha by a Saudi-led bloc. Oman, a member of the GCC along with Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, has remained neutral in the current Gulf diplomatic crisis.

Saudi Arabia

- On January 22, Saudi Arabia announced \$1.5 billion in new aid for Yemen.

According to the Kingdom, the coalition it heads in Yemen would also ‘lead the expansion of additional Yemeni ports’ to receive cargo and humanitarian assistance, ensure multiple daily flights of cargo planes carrying aid from Saudi Arabia to Yemen’s Marib province, and establish ‘safe passage corridors’ to ensure transportation of aid to non-governmental organisations operating inside Yemen. Additionally, the Kingdom would make a donation of up to \$2bn in fuel for the transportation of humanitarian aid. The announcement comes amid mounting international criticism of the Saudi-led coalition’s role in the war, particularly civilian deaths caused by airstrikes as well as control of Yemen’s ports, which are a lifeline for imports. The UN has already described the situation in Yemen as the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.

Syria

- On January 31, a two-day Congress of the Syrian National Dialogue, supported by Russia concluded in Sochi.

Almost 1,600 people were invited by Moscow as part of the Russian effort to advance a political solution to end the Syrian conflict. According to the state-run Syrian Arab News Agency, the final statement said the Syrian National Dialogue Congress “affirmed respect and full commitment to the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria.” It stated, “The State is committed to national unity, social peace and comprehensive and balanced development with fair representation at the local administration level. Boosting the work of governmental and public institutions, protecting the infrastructure of private properties and society, and providing

public services to all citizens in accordance with the high standards of management and gender equality.” According to the statement, the participants had agreed on “basic principles” deemed essential for saving Syria after nearly seven years of civil war and endorsed a “democratic” path for the country through elections. A committee was also formed at the Syrian peace talks, to discuss revision of the current Syrian constitution. 150 government loyalists and opposition figures attending the dialogue formed the committee. The final statement did not mention Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The event was boycotted by the main Syrian opposition coalition, while powers such as the US, Britain and France stayed away because of what they said was the Syrian government’s refusal to properly engage in talks. The Syrian National Council and the anti-government Kurds had announced they were boycotting the Sochi talks. One group of opposition representatives, which arrived for the Sochi event from Turkey, refused to leave the airport for the venue, protesting the presence there of Syrian flags and emblems. It threatened to return to Turkey unless the signs were removed. Western countries support a separate UN-mediated peace process. Analysts deem the Russian-sponsored Sochi conference as a supporting political track to the Geneva peace talks, which have so far failed to produce a tangible outcome.

- On January 25, Syria peace talks started in Vienna with an opening meeting between the government delegation and Staffan de Mistura, the UN’s special envoy to Syria.

Syria’s Permanent Representative to the UN, Bashar al-Jaafari, headed the government delegation to the Vienna talks. During their meeting, Jaafari said the fresh round of peace talks comes at a “critical moment.” The fresh round of talks targets constitutional issues in Syria between the warring parties, in preparation for the full implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 seeking UN-supervised elections in Syria. The Vienna talks were marked by anger from the regime over a set of political proposals from the US, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Britain and France that would involve strengthening the role of the Syrian Prime Minister at the expense of Assad’s authority. The proposals also called for appropriate conditions to hold fresh presidential and parliamentary elections. The proposals largely follow policy guidelines set out by US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson. Bashar al-Jaafari told reporters it was “tantamount to a black comedy” that these countries were seeking to shape Syria’s political future as Arabic and English versions of the document circulated online. He said, “All of them have participated in the bloodshed of the Syrian people,”. He criticised the US as the country “that created Daesh” and added that Saudi Arabia was anything but a “beacon of freedom in the East”. Syria’s main opposition group said it would boycott the Russian peace talks in Sochi. The Syrian Negotiation Commission (SNC) accused President Bashar al-Assad’s regime and its Russian backers of continuing to rely on military might and showing no willingness to enter into honest negotiations. As with eight previous rounds of failed UN-backed talks in Geneva, the warring sides did not meet face to face during the latest talks.

Turkey

- On January 30, Turkish fighter jets conducted air strikes on the Syrian border region of Afrin.
- On January 29, civilian casualties were reported following the latest clashes and air strikes in the operation launched by Turkey and Syrian opposition fighters against Kurdish militia in northwestern Syria.

On January 20, Turkey launched its operation 'Olive Branch' seeking to oust the Peoples' Protection Units (YPG) from the Afrin region of northern Syria. According to Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, several villages had already been taken over during the advance. However, a YPG spokesman claimed Turkish forces seeking to enter Afrin had been blocked and that it had hit two Turkish tanks. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, civilians are being killed during the operation. Ankara denied any civilian casualties, with Cavusoglu accusing the YPG of sending out 'nonsense propaganda and baseless lies'. Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed hope the 'operation will be finished in a very short time' and vowed 'we will not take a step back'. Turkish Deputy Prime Minister, Bekir Bozdag ruled out the risk of a clash with American forces, saying they were not present in the Afrin region. According to Turkish Prime Minister, Binali Yildirim, the Turkish Forces aim to create a security zone some 30 kilometres deep inside Syria. According to the Turkish Foreign Ministry, it had informed the Syrian regime through its Istanbul consulate of the operation. However, the Syrian Foreign Ministry strongly denied this and President Bashar al-Assad slammed the offensive blaming it for supporting terrorism. The US has urged Ankara to show restraint.

Despite international concern and strained relations with Washington, Ankara has vowed to carry on and possibly expand the operation against the YPG in Syria. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Turkish Forces also conducted air strikes and artillery fire on northern and western parts of Afrin, which is a predominantly Kurdish region. Since the beginning of the operation, pro-Turkish forces have captured eight areas near the border and at least 67 civilians have been killed. In a related development on January 27, 2018, Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu said it was necessary for the US to immediately withdraw from Manbij, where it has a military presence. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had threatened to expand the offensive against the YPG to Manbij. During a Speech in Istanbul, Erdogan said, "God willing we will crush them (terror groups) like a steam roller. According to the Turkish Presidency on January 26, 2018, during a phone call to Erdogan's Spokesman Ibrahim Kalin, US National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster had confirmed that Washington would no longer give weapons to the YPG. According to observers, the Turkish campaign risks further tensions with Washington, which has supported the YPG in the fight against Daesh.

Yemen

- On January 30, separatists in Yemen, known as the Southern Transitional Council, seized the strategic port city of Aden. They also captured the area around the Presidential Palace.

The separatists are seeking the revival of the independent state of South Yemen, which existed before Yemen was unified in 1990. According to Reuters, separatists seized the last stronghold of Hadi's Presidential Protective Force, engaging in battles using tanks and artillery. The Presidential Palace is home to the internationally recognised government of President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi. According to military sources, a number of ministers fled the city by boat, docking in the district of Brega further west. For weeks, the separatists had urged Hadi to dismiss the government run by Prime Minister Ahmed Obaid bin Daghr, accusing it of corruption and mismanagement. Fighting erupted upon passing of the deadline on January 28, 2018. The Saudi-led coalition has urged both sides to stop fighting and warned that "the coalition will take all the measures it deems necessary to restore stability and security in Aden." The latest clashes in Aden intensify the turmoil and despair in the Yemen conflict, which according to aid agencies is one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.

---Muhammad Shoaib

SOUTH ASIA (I)

Pakistan External

- On January 30, Pakistan's Foreign Office Spokesperson, Dr Mohammad Faisal said that the country had extradited at least 27 suspected Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network militants to Afghanistan in November 2017.

The disclosure came a day before an Afghan delegation comprising Afghan Interior Minister, Wais Ahmad Barmak and National Directorate of Security (NDS) Chief, Masoom Stanekzai, visited Islamabad on January 31, 2018, where they held discussions with Pakistani officials. The visit followed an attack in Kabul on January 27, 2018, in which more than 100 people were killed. The Afghan Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack. Meanwhile, the Afghan authorities have accused Pakistan of supporting the militants behind the latest attack. Media reports claimed that the Afghan delegation would present documentary evidence linking individuals and groups based in Pakistan with the Kabul attacks.

- During his visit to Pakistan on January 26, Indonesian President, Joko Widodo addressed a joint session of Parliament.

He emphasised that Muslims are the biggest victims of terrorism. Joko Widodo also held a meeting with Prime Minister, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and discussed bilateral relations. The two sides agreed to strengthen defence and security cooperation, including bilateral counter-terrorism cooperation. They also signed four agreements on Liquefied Natural Gas imports, trade facilitation, an additional protocol to Preferential Trade Agreement for 20 new tariff lines and an agreement of cooperation between their academic institutions. Both leaders acknowledged that there is considerable untapped potential to expand trade, and agreed to improve the trade imbalance under the existing mechanism of Preferential Trade Agreement between the two countries.

- On January 24, Pakistan condemned a US drone strike targeting an Afghan refugee camp in Kurram Agency and warned that "such unilateral actions" could prove detrimental to "the cooperation between the two countries in the fight against terrorism."

According to the Pakistani Military the drone strike was targeted at an individual who had "morphed into Afghan refugees". The military said it was not an organised terrorist sanctuary. The US dismissed Pakistani claims that the drone strike had targeted an Afghan refugee camp. Furthermore, a media report citing Pakistan's Foreign Ministry officials claimed that US had conveyed it to Pakistan that drone attacks inside Pakistani territory would continue until the US government is satisfied that Pakistan is taking indiscriminate action against all militant groups. US drone strikes in Pakistan have drawn strong criticism from both Pakistani officials and the public. Islamabad views the attack as a violation of its sovereignty. Human rights group say such strikes against terrorists have also killed many innocent people including women and kids.

- According to *Radio Pakistan* on January 25, Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi said that his engagement with business leaders at the World Economic Forum (WEF) would help “generate billions of dollars’ worth business potential in Pakistan.

Prime Minister Khaqan Abbasi told the media in Davos that infrastructure building for key projects of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative had benefitted Pakistan as well as regional countries. Abbasi introduced the two core concepts of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), namely, financial sustainability and environmental conservation.

- *Washington Post* reported on January 25 that the Trump Administration designated as global terrorists, six individuals accused of supporting the Taliban and Haqqani network in Afghanistan, and also highlighted their links to Pakistan.

The individuals include senior members of the former Taliban government in Afghanistan, including former Central Bank Governor, Abdul Samad Sani, and others said to have been part of Taliban leadership councils in Pakistan who provided financing and weapons for militants involved in attacks on US-led coalition forces.

- On January 25, the Monitoring Team of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) 1267 Sanctions Committee visited Pakistan to monitor measures taken by the government against organisations listed on the UN’s terror watch list.

The UN Sanctions Committee was briefed about steps being taken by Pakistan in compliance with the UN sanctions. According to Pakistan’s Foreign Office, the team’s visit was a routine matter. However, in recent months, the US has mounted pressure on Pakistan to prosecute Hafiz Saeed, the chief of Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD). Media reports claimed that the UN team most likely pressured Pakistan to act against Saeed. Earlier in January 2018, the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP), “prohibited all companies from donating cash to the entities and individuals listed under the UNSC sanctions committee’s consolidated list.”

- During an interview to *Reuters* on January 22, Prime Minister, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi warned the US not to weaken Pakistan. He also said, “Any constraints put on Pakistan, actually only serve to degrade our capability to fight the war against terror.”

Referring to the suspension of aid by the US, the Premier said that much of the suspended aid was from the Coalition Support Fund (CSF). The US reimburses allies for supporting counter-terrorist operations from the CSF. Whilst referring to the US President’s recent tweet about “foolishly” giving billions of dollars in aid to Pakistan, the Premier said, “If somebody wants to start quantifying expenses and aid,” then also “put on table” the discussion with regards to charging Washington for using Pakistani roads and air corridors to resupply its troops in Afghanistan. The Prime Minister also revealed his government’s plans to seize control of charities being run by Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) Chief, Hafiz Saeed. Earlier on January 18, 2018, the State Department reiterated the US demand for Pakistan to arrest and prosecute Hafiz Saeed to the “fullest extent of the law”. In a related development, during a January 26, 2018 interview to an American media outlet Prime Minister Abbasi said that Pakistan would continue to provide the US with air and ground logistics for Afghanistan without any contract or payment. However,

the Premier warned that Afghanistan could become another Vietnam for the US if it opted to resolve the conflict through only military means.

- On January 17, Nikki Haley, US Ambassador to the UN, stressed, “the Afghan government wants world powers to step up pressure on Pakistan to come to the table and change their behaviour.”

Haley’s remarks followed her visit to Afghanistan where she held discussions with Afghan officials. The US and Afghanistan have long accused Pakistan of supporting the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan does not accept the allegations. In a separate development on January 19, 2018, the US Deputy Secretary of State, John Sullivan said during a meeting of the UN Security Council that Washington could not work with Islamabad if it “continued to give sanctuary to terrorist organisations”. Maleeha Lodhi, Pakistan’s Ambassador to the UN, said the Taliban do not need any outside support to sustain themselves when their safe havens are inside Afghanistan. She reiterated that 40 % of Afghan territory was under Taliban control.

- On January 18, Pakistan’s Foreign Office spokesperson, Dr. Muhammad Faisal said that Pakistan has taken a serious note against the ‘Free Karachi’ advertising campaign in Washington and New York, insisting that the US has assured that it fully respects Pakistan’s territorial integrity.

The development came after a US newspaper, The Washington Times advertised the demand for a “Free Karachi”. The advertisement was also displayed on billboards and cabs in both New York and Washington. Previously similar advertisements demanding a free Balochistan had appeared in London and Geneva.

- On January 17, Foreign Secretary, Tehmina Janjua informed the Senate’s Foreign Affairs Committee that the US would continue funding the aid components that support their national interest, including the International Military Education and Training (IMET) part.

Under the IMET programme, Pakistan Army officers have been trained in the US at a cost of \$52 million over the past 15 years and an allocation of another \$4 million has been made for 2018. In a separate development on January 18, 2018, Foreign Office spokesman, Dr Muhammad Faisal said that Pakistan and the United States remain engaged in negotiations, which are “ongoing and outside public domain” and that cooperation with the US remains unaffected despite recent differences in Pak-US relations.

Pakistan Internal

- On January 30, at least eight people, including three women and a child were killed in an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) explosion in Kurram Agency.

No one has claimed responsibility for the explosion yet. Kurram Agency remains a frequent target for militant groups.

- On January 18, at least 2 women were killed after Indian forces shelled mortar from across the Working Boundary (WB) in Sialkot.
- On January 19, at least 4 civilians were killed and 20 others injured in Sialkot border villages and Bhimber district of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) after Indian troops fired and shelled from across the Working Boundary (WB) and the Line of Control (LoC).
- On January 20, at least 6 civilians were killed and 25 others were injured following unprovoked firing and shelling by Indian troops from across the Working Boundary in Sialkot's border villages and the Line of Control (LoC) in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK).

Indian Deputy High Commissioner, J. P. Singh was summoned to the Pakistani Foreign Office for four consecutive days on January, 18, 19, 20 and 21, 2018 to condemn the “unprovoked ceasefire violations” across the LoC and Working Boundary by Indian forces. According to the Foreign Office, India had committed more than 100 ceasefire violations in January 2018. Media reports claim that Indian troops had targeted women and children living in villages along the LoC and WB causing tens of thousands of residents to flee from their border homes. The Pakistan military claims that Indians troops have used artillery, heavy mortars, rockets, sniper guns and heavy automatics. In the wake of increased incidents of ceasefire violations, UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres urged both Pakistan and India to resolve the issue through dialogue.

Earlier on January 15, 2018, at least four Pakistan Army soldiers were killed by Indian shelling from across the LoC in AJK's Jandrot sector. The Pakistani troops were conducting maintenance on communication lines when they came under attack. This prompted reciprocal response from the Pakistani side. However, India does not report its troops casualties. Meanwhile, Pakistan Army has claimed that unlike India it is a professional force which own its “casualties”.

India

- The leaders from the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) attended India's 69th Republic Day on January 26.

All 10 ASEAN heads of states, including Malaysia's Prime Minister, Najib Razak, Indonesia's President, Joko Widodo, Myanmar's State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi, Philippine President, Rodrigo Duterte and Singaporean Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong were the chief guests at the Republic day. This is the first time that leaders from a bloc were invited as India usually invites the head of state of one country as the chief guest of its Republic Day celebration. Analysts have

termed the move unprecedented. India's outreach to ASEAN comes as it remains wary about the rise of China, a major trading partner of the ASEAN nations.

On January 25, 2018, ASEAN and India also held a summit in New Delhi to mark 25 years of ties. Defence and maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region dominated the discussions. Meanwhile, speaking to a business forum in New Delhi, The Philippine's President, Rodrigo Duterte said that he told Myanmar's leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, to ignore the complaints of human rights activists during his meeting with her.

- Addressing the World Economic Forum's Annual Meeting 2018, on January 23, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that climate change, terrorism and the backlash against globalisation are the three most significant challenges to civilisation.

A big government and business delegation accompanied Narendra Modi. Modi criticised the rise of protectionism and stressed that globalisation was losing its appeal. He further said, "India has never tried to capture anybody's land" and has only "worked with nations to bring prosperity." The Prime Minister stressed that the 3Ds, democracy, demography and dynamism, were changing the destiny of the Indian people. India ranked 62nd among 77 emerging economies on an Inclusive Development Index by the World Economic Forum. China and Pakistan were ranked at 26th and 47th place respectively.

- On January 19, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Lu Kang asserted that China was entitled to build infrastructure in Doklam saying "China is exercising its sovereignty in its own territory. It's legitimate and justified."

In response, India's Ministry of External Affairs said that "the status quo at the face-off site has not been altered", adding that "any suggestion to the contrary is inaccurate and mischievous." Doklam lies at the junction between China, India, and Bhutan and is one of the worst border disputes between India and China for more than 30 years.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

South Asia: II

Afghanistan

- On January 29, Indonesian President, Joko Widodo met his Afghan counterpart President Ashraf Ghani in Afghanistan.

This was the first time an Indonesian president had visited Afghanistan since President Sukarno's visit in 1962. The joint press conference with the visiting Indonesian President was Ghani's first public appearance after the deadly terrorist attack on January 27, 2018. Ghani said the Taliban were carrying out attacks in Afghanistan on the orders of their masters. He said, "We appreciate the sympathies extended by our international partner nations. Thank you for standing with us. Afghans expect our partners to condemn and take all possible action against state-sponsor of terrorism". Widodo said that his government would establish an Islamic centre in Afghanistan and continue to stand by the country. Indonesia has offered to undertake various projects in Afghanistan. During his trip to Islamabad two days ago, Widodo told Pakistani President, Mamnoon Hussain that his country could play a key role in the Afghan peace process.

- On January 27, the Taliban conducted a massive suicide attack in PD5 district of Kabul city leaving 103 people dead and another 235 wounded.

The explosion occurred when an explosive-laden ambulance was detonated in a busy area. Most of the people killed in the attack were policemen. Following the attack, Afghan Interior Minister, Wais Ahmad Barmak, Defence Minister Tariq Shah Bahrami and the National Directorate of Security (NDS) Chief, Masoom Stanekzai held a joint press conference. Stanekzai blamed Pakistan for the attack. However, Pakistan strongly condemned the terrorist attack. US President, Donald Trump said that the United States would no longer talk to the Taliban following the recent attacks. He said, "...So we do not want to talk with the Taliban. There may be a time but it's going to be a long time". US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson also insisted that there would be no tolerance for those who support or offer sanctuaries to terrorist groups. The US' decision to send more troops to Afghanistan and an increase in airstrikes, under its new Afghan-centric South Asia strategy seems to have backfired. With mounting resistance from the Taliban and deteriorating cooperation with Pakistan, prospects for peace appear grim.

In a related development on January 30, 2018 Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani refused to take Pakistani Prime Minister, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi's phone call. Abbasi had called Ghani to offer his condolences for the recent attacks in Afghanistan. Instead Ghani chose to send a delegation including Masoom Stanekzai, the Chief of the National Directorate of Security, and Interior Minister, Wais Ahmad Barmak to Pakistan to handover evidence relating to the recent attacks in Kabul.

- On January 24, Daesh's attack on *Save the Children* in Jalalabad city left six people dead.

The coordinated offensive was followed by a battle between the insurgents and Afghan Special Forces, lasting 10 hours. The attack drew widespread condemnation from various governments and other aid agencies. The Afghan government is under immense pressure due to increasing attacks on “protected places” following the announcement of the US’ Afghanistan strategy. In a related incident on January 29, 2018 Daesh conducted another attack on Marshal Fahim Military University in Kabul which left 11 soldiers dead and 15 others wounded.

- On January 20, the Taliban attacked Kabul’s Intercontinental Hotel leaving 43 people dead.

There were 5 militants in army uniforms who besieged hotel for 17 hours before they were killed by Afghan Special Forces. The dead included hotel staff and guests as well as some security personnel. A number of Afghan politicians and warlords were quick to blame Pakistan for the attack. However, Pakistan strongly condemned the terrorist attack calling for a credible investigation into it. US Ambassador to Afghanistan John R. Bass and the Commander of US Forces in Afghanistan also condemned the attack as the work of the enemies of Afghanistan. Renouncing the attack, Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani said that the terrorist attack calls on all to jointly act against terrorism without considering any kind of differentiation. The attack signifies the failure of peace talks held between representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban in Pakistan on January 18, 2018. In a related development on January 23, 2018 Afghanistan’s National Directorate of security (NDS) announced that the explosives used by Taliban insurgents in the attack on the Intercontinental Hotel came from Pakistan.

- *Pajhowk Afghan News* reported on January 23 that US airstrikes killed 63 Taliban insurgents in southeastern Paktika province.
- In a related development on January 22, at least 60 Taliban militants were killed and another 32 wounded during a security operation in northern Kunduz province.
- On January 17, seven Taliban insurgents and two Afghan policemen were killed in a clash in Ghazni province.

The massive crackdowns against the Taliban in Kunduz and Paktika were seemingly a reaction to the attack on Kabul’s Intercontinental Hotel on January 20, 2018. However, Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid denied the high degree of Taliban casualties in those operations. In separate incidents on January 20, 2018, eight people were killed by a roadside bomb in the western province of Herat and 18 members of local militia forces were killed at a checkpoint in the northern province of Balkh. Various incidents across Afghanistan expose the shortcomings of the Afghan government’s security policy in particular and President Trump’s Afghanistan strategy in general.

- On January 24, Mohammad Arif Shahjahan, Farah’s provincial governor, resigned following protests over deteriorating security.

His resignation came in the aftermath of a shooting during a demonstration outside the governor's residence in which at least six people were wounded. The angry crowd was trying to enter the governor's house when police fired on them. The security situation is deteriorating in Farah province with a sharp increase in fatalities among Security Force members. Furthermore, the Taliban has positioned itself on the outskirts of Farah city.

- On January 18, the Defence Minister of Spain, María Dolores de Cospedal, met Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani in Kabul where they discussed Afghanistan's security situation and relations between the two countries.

María said that her country would continue its cooperation and support to Afghan Special Force under the Resolute Support Mission. She also announced an increase in the number of Spanish troops in Afghanistan who would focus on training and building the capacity of Afghan National Defence and Security Force members. Meanwhile, Ghani appreciated Spain's assistance in different sectors, particularly in the military sector. He said that the Afghan government would continue to boost its relations with Spain. Afghan Defence Minister, Tariq Shah Bahrami and the Army Chief of Staff Brigadier General Mohammad Sharif Yaftali also attended the meeting. Spain has so far sent in 29,861 troops to Afghanistan since January 2002. It has also been the longest military operation of Spain's modern armed forces, with 102 casualties.

- *Pajhowk Afghan News* reported on January 18 that Russia has offered talks between Afghan government and the Taliban.

Over the years, Russia has been a staunch supporter of the idea of convincing the Taliban for political negotiations and encouraging peace talks. Contrary to the US, Russia sees Daesh as a greater threat to the region. The US and some Afghan authorities have also blamed Russia for supporting the Taliban with money and weapons. In a related development, a three-member Taliban delegation from Qatar visited Pakistan with the aim of restarting peace negotiations. They met representatives of Afghan politician Syed Hamid Gilani, Chairman of Mahaz-e-Milli Party. Although, Taliban leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada approved of the meeting it was unclear if any progress was made in the talks.

- On January 17, Nikki Haley, US Ambassador to the United Nations, said that the Trump Administration's policy in Afghanistan was working and talks between the government and the Taliban are closer than ever before.

Haley said, "We really are going to continue to work towards a peace process with the goal being that we do not want Afghanistan to be a safe haven for terrorism anymore. And so we continue to go down that path". US President Donald Trump's Afghan plan involves shifting from a 'time-based' approach to fighting America's longest war in order to link US assistance to concrete results and cooperation from the Afghan government. However, with worsening US-Pak cooperation over Afghanistan and a surge in clashes between the Taliban and Afghan Security personnel, Trump's Afghan policy seems to be struggling. Contrary to Haley's rhetoric, the US seems largely uninterested in bringing the Taliban to the table.

- On January 17, Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani said that the Afghan National Army would not last more than six months without US support.

Responding to a query during an interview to CBS 60 Minutes, Ghani said, “From the resource perspective, they are absolutely right. We will not be able to support our army for six months without US support, and US capabilities”. He also acknowledged the threatening presence of 21 international terrorist groups in his country, adding that dozens of suicide bombers were also being sent to Afghanistan. Unlike Ghani, Gen Nicholson, the Commander of US forces in Afghanistan, appeared confident that he could still win the war. Asked if he had everything he required, the general said “Yeah, with the new policy I do... this is the end game. This is a policy that can deliver a win”. The US contributes around 90 % of Afghanistan’s defence budget.

- On January 16, The Military Committee of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) met in Brussels where the alliance’s Chiefs of Defence discussed the strategic and operational situation in Afghanistan.

The Chiefs of Defence reviewed the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan. They received political, strategic and operational situation briefs from General Nicholson, the Commander of the Resolute Support Mission and NATO Senior Civilian Representative Ambassador, Zimmermann respectively, and provided further recommendations for 2018 and beyond. General Petr Pavel, Chairman of the NATO Military Committee said, “The effectiveness of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) is essential to the stability of Afghanistan, and to the assurance of the Afghan society”. There are at least 15,000 US troops and almost 6,000 NATO forces in Afghanistan. Reports indicate that at least 3,000 NATO troops would be added to the number within the next four months. Meanwhile, an additional 1,000 US troops would be added to the number in the near future.

Bangladesh

- On January 28, Indonesian President, Joko Widodo visited Bangladesh and met with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and President Abdul Hamid.

PM Hasina reiterated her government’s keen interest to intensify trade, economic and regional peace and security partnerships with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and sought support to that end. Widodo welcomed Bangladesh’s desire for institutionalising relations with ASEAN and encouraged Bangladesh’s efforts for greater engagement. The two leaders agreed to work together to counter the threat of terrorism, violent extremism and radicalisation in both countries and beyond. Both countries have signed five MoUs to boost cooperation in different sectors, including trade, diplomacy, fishing and energy.

- On January 22, Bangladesh announced a delay in the repatriation of the Rohingya refugees to Myanmar.

Myanmar and Bangladesh had agreed earlier to complete the voluntary repatriation of the refugees within two years, which had to start on January 16, 2018. However, Bangladesh's Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Commissioner Abul Kalam said, "There are many things remaining. The list of people to be sent back is yet to be prepared, their verification and setting up of transit camps is remaining". Filippo Grandi, the head of the UNHCR, said that more time was needed to prepare the return of the Rohingya refugees to Rakhine, and urged the two governments to resolve the refugee crisis. The International Organisation for Migration says the number of Rohingyas who fled to Bangladesh now stands at 688,000. The exodus began when the Myanmar military launched a crackdown following insurgent raids on Security Forces on August 25, 2017.

In a related development on January 25, 2018 veteran US diplomat, Bill Richardson resigned from an international panel set up by Myanmar to advise on the Rohingya crisis, saying it was conducting a 'whitewash' and accusing the country's leader Aung San Suu Kyi of lacking 'moral leadership'. On January 28, 2018 The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) accused the Myanmar government of not being interested in genuine Rohingya repatriation and playing games with the international community, including Bangladesh. ARSA termed the Myanmar government and the army as 'terrorists.'

Sri Lanka

- On January 25, Indonesian President, Joko Widodo met with Sri Lankan President, Maithripala Sirisena and discussed the enhancement of defence cooperation between the two countries.

Widodo was on a state visit to Sri Lanka. The two presidents discussed the possibility of conducting workshops related to the defence field and cadet exchange programmes. Sirisena also talked about the possibility of providing an opportunity for the Special Forces of Indonesian Navy to participate in military course held in Trincomalee. Meanwhile, Widodo said that his country wanted to enhance cooperation with Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean region. Following bilateral discussions, three agreements on Prevention of Illegal Drug Trafficking, Higher Education, Research and Technology Cooperation and Search and Rescue Missions were signed to enhance cooperation.

---Kashif Hussain

UNITED NATIONS

- On January 31, the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) said that some 60,000 children face potential starvation in North Korea, where international sanctions are exacerbating the situation by slowing aid deliveries.

Omar Abdi, UNICEF Deputy Executive Director, said that humanitarian supplies or operations are exempt from sanctions under United Nations Security Council resolutions. He also said that sanctions on fuel have been tightened, making it more scarce and expensive. Manuel Fontaine, Director of UNICEF emergency programmes worldwide, stressed, “We are projecting that at some point during the year 2018 some 60,000 children will become severely malnourished. This is the malnutrition that potentially can lead to death.” He said that UNICEF is seeking \$16.5 million this year to provide nutrition, health and water to North Koreans but faces operational challenges due to the tense political situation and unintended consequences of sanctions. UNICEF is one of only a few aid agencies with access to North Korea, which suffered famine in the mid-1990s that killed up to three million people.

- On January 25, Nickolay Mladenov, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, said that the UN, the Security Council and the wider international community all have fallen into a pattern of “managing, rather than resolving” the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

During his briefing at the UNSC, Mladenov said, “Twenty-five years after the Oslo Accords, we are at a critical point in the peace process.” He was referring to a set of agreements, the first of which was signed in 1993, establishing a timetable for achieving peace between the two sides. He warned that the uncertainty and volatility of the current environment was hardening positions and sharpening the rhetoric on all sides of the conflict. He stressed, “We must also reaffirm the international consensus that the Two-State solution remains the only viable option for a just and sustainable end to the conflict.” The Two-State solution means having Israel and Palestine as two separate States living side by side in peace, security and mutual recognition. Mladenov urged that the international community must continue to build the conditions necessary for a resumption of talks.

- On January 22, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) launched a global fundraising campaign to sustain resources for its education, health and other assistance programmes.
- On January 17, officials from US President Donald Trump’s Administration indicated that it had decided to withhold \$65 million from the UN body for Palestinian refugees, the UNRWA.

Pierre Krahenbuhl, the Commissioner-General of UNRWA, said, “I wish to confirm to all Palestine refugees that UNRWA schools will remain open and health care, and other services

will also be provided.” The UNRWA held its campaign in response to the announcement by the US to withhold more than half its funding commitment to the Agency. Krahenbuhl said, the reduction in US funding could have a significant impact on the daily lives of millions of vulnerable Palestinian refugees. On January 17, 2018, Trump Administration officials said it appears that President Trump would likely send only \$60m out of the planned \$125m as the first instalment to the UNRWA. The officials also stated that future contributions would require the Agency to demonstrate significant changes in its operations. They also suggested that the Palestinians should re-enter into peace talks with Israel. In response, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said the world body would have to find other sources to fill the financial gap created by the US decision. Earlier on January 7, 2018, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had called for the closure of the UNRWA. Netanyahu said that while millions of other refugees around the world were being cared for by the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Palestinians have their own body, which also treats great-grandchildren of refugees, who are not refugees. He also called UNRWA an organisation that perpetuates the Palestinian refugee problem. In response, UNRWA spokesman Chris Gunness had rejected Netanyahu’s claim and said Palestinian refugee problem perpetuates owing to the failure of parties dealing with the issue.

- On January 21, the United Nations launched the 2018 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan and appealed for nearly \$3 billion in humanitarian relief aid for Yemen.

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the \$2.96 billion would be used to respond to an ever-broadening crisis in Yemen. Jamie McGoldrick, Humanitarian Coordinator in Yemen, said “A strategic priority for the 2018 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan is to work with national institutions that provide essential services to prevent their collapse,” He added, “Today, humanitarian partners appeal to the international community to support this critical lifeline.” The 2018 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan is the largest consolidated humanitarian appeal for Yemen where over two years of relentless conflict has left three quarters of the population in need of humanitarian assistance, including 11.3 million in acute need of assistance to survive. In 2017, international donors provided \$1.65 billion of the \$2.34 billion requested by the United Nations and humanitarian partners in Yemen.

--- Moiz Khan