

February 16 – February 28

AREA BRIEF

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Area Briefs: 16-28 February 2017

General Observations

Pakistan

- After a spate of terrorist attacks across the country within a span of 10 days, killing more than 100 people, the military launched a countrywide “Operation Radd-ul-Fassad” especially in Punjab. Simultaneously, the formal border crossings between Pakistan and Afghanistan were also closed leading to further aggravation of Pak-Afghan relations as well as leading to goods and people being stranded on both sides of the international Pak-Afghan border.
- Following the Lahore suicide attack on 13 February, on 16 February a suicide attack inside the Sufi shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan Sharif, Sindh, killed 75 people and Daesh claimed responsibility. Daesh had also claimed responsibility for the November 2016 bombing at the Shah Noorani shrine in Balochistan in which 52 people were killed. Ironically, the government continues to claim Daesh has no presence in Pakistan.
- On 21 February the lower court in Charsadda was targeted by 3 suicide bombers but an alert police force were able to catch two of them while the third prematurely exploded himself. 8 people died although the tragedy could have been far greater had the police not reacted proactively. Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, a faction of the TTP, claimed responsibility.
- In the wake of these attacks, a list of wanted terrorists by Pakistan was handed over by the COAS to Afghan diplomats who were summoned to GHQ. In response the Afghans not only protested the border closure but also sent their list of terrorists for Pakistan to act upon.
- The government also sought to renew the military courts with another constitutional amendment after the term of the military courts set up after the APS tragedy through the 21st Amendment had reached the end of their term of two years. Although the military courts term had ended in the first week of January, the government took little note till the new wave of terrorism caught the country in its grip in February. Almost all political parties critiques the government over its failure to implement reforms in the criminal judicial system and to implement all the 20 points of the National Action Plan to which the formation of the military courts had been linked.

- The atmosphere of terror in the urban centres was reflected in the chaos that followed a blast in Lahore on 24 February in which 10 people died. Initially claiming it as a bomb blast, the Punjab government later stated it was gas cylinders exploding in an under-construction restaurant. This confusion on the part of the government only resulted in aggravating the atmosphere of fear in the provincial capital.
- Meanwhile, despite repeatedly claiming Indian links to terrorism within Pakistan the Prime Minister, on a visit to Turkey, declared he was ready to have trade with India. This Pakistani PM's statement came at a time when the Indian Prime Minister was once again hurling accusations of terrorism against Pakistan – this time while addressing an election rally in Uttar Pradesh on 24 February. PM Modi declared that Pakistan was responsible for the derailment of a train in Kanpur city in November 2016, which killed 150 people. Clearly, under the present political dispensations in both countries, the leadership is on different pages and Pakistan has yet to form a cohesive India policy.
- However, both Pakistan and India realise the criticality of increasing understanding in the nuclear issue area so as to avoid accidental war. This was reflected in the extension, on 20 February, of the 2007 bilateral agreement on Reducing the Risk from Accidents Relating to Nuclear Weapons, till 2022. This Agreement had been valid until 20 February 2017 and its extension is a welcome development in the field of Nuclear Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs).
- The Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) Summit is being held in Islamabad on 1 March. Preceding it, the Council of Foreign Ministers met in Islamabad on 28 February and there was a consensus on moving towards greater connectivity for improvement of intra-regional trade – especially through the advantage offered to all member states of the CPEC. Apart from the downgraded delegation representing Afghanistan, the leaders of Turkey, Iran and the Central Asian states was a diplomatic boost for Pakistan. China was also invited as a special guest by Pakistan. The Council approved the ECO Vision 2025 document as well as the text of the Islamabad Declaration focusing on connectivity in trade, transport and the energy issue areas.

International

- The level of arms keeps increasing in West and South Asia. On 27 February Iran successfully test-fired new versions of its indigenous coast-to-sea cruise missile, Nasir, and its anti-ship Dehlaviyeh missile. The tests were part of Iran's naval exercises 'Velayat 95' in the Indian Ocean.

- India continued to increase its nuclear arsenal and on 24 February it approved a deal with Israel worth \$2.5 billion to jointly develop surface-to-air missiles for its army to develop missiles with a range of 50-70 kilometres jointly by India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Israel Aircraft Industries.
- Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) released a report, 20 February, showing the rise in global heavy weapons trade to its highest level since the Cold War. According to the report, India was the largest importer of major arms during 2012-16 with a 13% share while Saudi Arabia was second.
- Trump's Presidency has seen an increase in racially motivated crimes. On 25 February a Jewish cemetery was vandalised in Philadelphia and two days earlier, on 23 February a racially motivated shooting in a Kansas City bar left one Indian dead and another injured along with a white man who tried to intervene.
- Trump has also increased his hostility towards the media using a phrase normally linked to dictators – when he termed the media “enemy of the people”. The White House, on 24 February, also chose to prevent some leading media houses like CNN and BBC from attending an off-camera press briefing.

--- Dr Shireen M Mazari

Director General

AMERICAS

Domestic

- On February 28, Education Secretary, Betsy DeVos faced fierce criticism after she called historically black colleges and universities “real pioneers” of school choice.

DeVos then backtracked on her controversial statement and highlighted the institutions’ roots in racism and segregation. DeVos also acknowledged that the schools were not created simply to give African-American students more choices but because black students across the country were not allowed into segregated white schools. The controversy is the latest blunder for DeVos, who has made numerous embarrassing mistakes since assuming charge. She was criticised by a middle school’s administrators for saying their teachers were in “receive mode,” and suffered through the embarrassment of the Education Department misspelling the name of the civil rights icon W.E.B. Du Bois in an official tweet.

- During his first speech to Congress on February 28 President Donald Trump promised a “renewal of the American spirit.”

The President’s address sought to boost his low approval ratings following a difficult start to his presidency. He said a “new surge of optimism is placing impossible dreams firmly within our grasp”, opening a “new chapter of American greatness.” He also condemned the recent vandalism of Jewish cemeteries and a hate crime in Kansas that left an Indian man dead. Trump had come under heavy criticism for not addressing these issues. He also talked about building the wall along “our southern border” although there was no mention of Mexico paying for it.

- In an interview with *Fox News’* programme *Fox and Friends* on February 28, US President Donald Trump accused his predecessor Barack Obama of orchestrating the recent wave of protests against Republican lawmakers, as well as national security leaks.

Talking ahead of his first address to the Congress as US President, Trump said, “I think President Obama’s behind it because his people are certainly behind it”, adding, “I also think it’s just politics.” He offered no evidence for his claims. During the wide-ranging interview Trump also spoke about his budget plans and other issues. Answering a question about how he would fund the 10% increase in military spending he has proposed for 2018, Trump said he would get “more product for our buck” in terms of buying military hardware and would ask for a “form of reimbursement” from countries making use of the US military. He also said his aim was boosting the economy. Critics have however warned that it would be difficult for the President to boost the military while trying to protect welfare.

- *Reuters* reported on February 28 that President Donald Trump sought an increase in defence spending but ran into immediate opposition from Republicans in Congress.

The proposed increase in the Pentagon budget to \$603 billion comes as the United States is withdrawing from major wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Democratic lawmakers criticised the plan saying the proposed cuts for the additional military spending would cripple important domestic programmes such as environmental protection and education.

- On February 27, the Senate confirmed Wilbur Ross as Commerce Secretary.

According to observers, the appointment would enable President Donald Trump to make progress on a campaign promise to overhaul US trade policy. Ross is expected to help slash trade deficits and bring manufacturing jobs back to America. He will also lead the renegotiation of NAFTA with Mexico and Canada, a job previously being undertaken by the Trade Representative's office. Some experts have suggested that Ross would serve as a counterweight to advisers such as Peter Navarro, who heads the White House National Trade Council. Navarro proposed a controversial 45% across-the-board tariff on imports from China.

- On February 25 a Jewish cemetery was vandalised in Philadelphia.

Between 75 and 100 tombstones were overturned and damaged at the Mt. Carmel Cemetery in Philadelphia's Wissinoming neighborhood. The incident is being classified as institutional vandalism, but investigators have not established a motive yet. Although the cemeteries are located on each corner of the intersection, no vandalism was found at the three Christian cemeteries.

- On February 23, a man was charged with murder in what witnesses described as a racially motivated shooting at a crowded suburban Kansas City bar that left one Indian man dead and two other men hospitalised.

Adam Purinton has been charged with premeditated first-degree murder. According to details Purinton used racial slurs before opening fire. Two of the victims, including the deceased, are Indian.

- On February 24, President Donald Trump signed an executive order to place “regulatory reform” task forces and officers within federal agencies.

The order has been termed “the most far reaching effort” to reduce official red tape in recent decades. Trump signed the directive in the presence of chief executives of major US corporations including Dow Chemical Co, Lockheed Martin Corp and US Steel Corp. Under the order every

federal agency will establish a task force to ensure each has a team to research all regulations. It would deal with regulations deemed burdensome to the economy and designate regulatory reform officers within 60 days who would report on the progress within 90 days.

- On February 23 the Trump Administration cancelled an Obama era guidance to public schools allowing transgender students to use the bathrooms of their choice.

In May 2016 Obama had instructed public schools to allow transgender students to use the bathrooms matching their chosen gender identity. He had threatened to withhold funding for schools that did not comply. Transgender people hailed the step as victory for their civil rights. Observers criticised the Trump Administration's decision saying it would inflame passions in the latest conflict in the country between people adhering to traditional values and social progressives. It could also result in more street protests.

- On February 23, US Vice President Mike Pence and other top White House officials urged conservative activists to set aside differences and unite behind President Donald Trump's agenda stressing tough trade and immigration policies.

Addressing the annual Conservative Political Action Conference, or CPAC, in Maryland, Pence said, "My friends, this is our time. This is the chance we've worked so hard for so long to see. This is the time to prove again that our answers are the right answers for America." Earlier Trump's chief strategist, Steve Bannon, made a rare public appearance to appeal for support for the Republican President.

- On February 24, CNN, BBC and other news outlets were stopped from attending an off-camera White House press briefing.

Reporters representing some other media houses were chosen to attend the briefing. The decision raised an alarm among media organisations and First Amendment watchdogs. Veteran White House journalists said the move was unprecedented and had worsened the fragile relationship between the Trump Administration and the media. The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, Politico, BuzzFeed, and the Guardian were also among those excluded from the meeting held in White House press secretary Sean Spicer's office. The meeting, also known as a gaggle, was held instead of the daily-televised question and answer session in the White House briefing room.

- On February 19, US President Donald Trump launched a fierce diatribe against the media during a "campaign rally for America" event in Florida.

Trump accused the media of not wanting "to report the truth" as they had their own agenda. Defending the achievements of his Presidency, Trump insisted that a spirit of optimism was

sweeping the US. Trump had attacked the media at a press conference on February 16, 2017 amid increasing pressure against his Presidency.

- On February 17 Republican Senator John McCain said that the Trump Administration was in “disarray” and that NATO’s founders would be alarmed by the growing unwillingness to “separate truth from lies”.

McCain’s statement opposed the reassuring message that US officials visiting Germany sought to convey on their debut trip to Europe. They reassured a Munich Security Conference about Micheal Flynn’s resignation and over his contacts with Russia. “I think that the Flynn issue obviously is something that shows that in many respects this Administration is in disarray and they’ve got a lot of work to do,” he said. “The President, I think, makes statements [and] on other occasions contradicts himself. So we’ve learned to watch what the President does as opposed to what he says.”

- On February 21, the Trump Administration issued new guidelines to widen the net for deporting illegal immigrants from the US.

Although the latest memos do not alter existing US immigration law, they take a much tougher approach towards enforcing them. Undocumented immigrants arrested for traffic violations or shoplifting would now be targeted along with those convicted of more serious crimes.

- On February 17, numerous restaurants across the US remained shut expressing solidarity with striking workers participating in a #daywithoutimmigrants protest.

The protest was part of a growing movement of boycotts against the Trump Administration and its policies. Immigrants did not go to work to show their impact on the economy. Some restaurants showed solidarity by shutting down their kitchens, or their entire business. Diners were greeted by locked doors at many of their favorite restaurants along with signs in the window expressing solidarity with immigrants.

International

- On January 27 the US assured the EU that an executive order signed by President Donald Trump to crack down on illegal immigration would not undermine two data transfer agreements between them.
- On January 25 President Trump signed an executive order to toughen enforcement of US immigration law.

The announcement upset the European Union, as it felt Europeans would not be given the same privacy protection as US citizens. According to the order, US agencies would “exclude persons who are not United States citizens or lawful permanent residents from the protections of the Privacy Act regarding personally identifiable information.” The EU-US Privacy Shield was secured only after the US agreed to protect the data from excessive surveillance and misuse.

- According to *The Guardian* on February 25 National Security Adviser HR McMaster told staff at the White House he does not wish to use the term “radical Islamic terrorism” to describe the terrorist threat the US faces.

According to McMaster the terminology castigates ‘an entire religion’ saying he was not on board. According to observers his views are in contrast with the President and many of his key staff members. Some have questioned whether McMaster’s evident disagreements with Trump could mean trouble in the future for the National Security Council.

- On February 19, US President Donald Trump tried to explain why he mentioned a security incident in Sweden on February 17 that did not actually happen.

Addressing a rally on February 18, Trump referred to an incident that occurred in Sweden the previous night while he listed parts of Europe hit by terrorist attacks. No such incident happened in Sweden on February 17, 2017 and the country asked the US Administration for an explanation. Trump tweeted that he had been referring to a TV report broadcast on Fox News. He was probably referring to a Fox News programme on February 17 about refugees and crime in Sweden. Although Trump used the words “happening last night in Sweden”, White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders insisted Trump had been talking about rising crime and recent incidents in general and not referring to a specific issue.

Latin America

- On February 22, Mexico condemned new guidelines issued by the US, under which all illegal immigrants would be subject to deportation.

The new rules include sending undocumented people to Mexico, even if they are not Mexicans. Mexican Foreign Minister Luis Videgaray said his country would not “accept unilateral decisions imposed by one government on another.” Meanwhile Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and the head

of Homeland Security, John Kelly arrived in Mexico to hold talks with President Enrique Pena Nieto, following one of the most serious rifts between the two countries.

---Amina Afzal

ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

- On February 27, Iran successfully test-fired latest versions of its home-made coast-to-sea cruise missile, Nasir, and the anti-ship Dehlaviyeh missile for the first time. The tests were conducted during the country's naval exercises 'Velayat 95' in the Indian Ocean.

Iranian Defence Minister Brigadier General Hossein Dehghan stated that the cruise missile hit its target successfully with maximum precision. He also noted that the laser-guided anti-ship Dehlaviyeh missile was successful in destroying its target as well. However, Dehghan did not provide any information about the ranges of the two missiles. The final stage of Velayat 95 began on February 26, 2017 in the Strait of Hormuz, the Sea of Oman and north of the Indian Ocean. The wargames started on February 13, 2017 and would end on March 1, 2017.

- On February 27, South Korean retail company, Lotte, agreed to provide land for the deployment of Terminal High-Altitude Area Defence system (THAAD) in South Korea.
- On February 18, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi conveyed to South Korea's Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se China's opposition to the deployment of THAAD during a meeting on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference.

According to a statement by South Korea's Defence Ministry, the country's fifth largest company Lotte had agreed to exchange one of its golf courses, in the southern county of Seongju for a parcel of military-owned land near Seoul for THAAD deployment. A spokeswoman from Lotte did not provide more details on the decision. She said that the defence ministry was handling the matter. Lotte has come under severe pressure by China over the deal. Earlier on February 18, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told his South Korean counterpart that "China understands South Korea's need to protect its security but Seoul still needs to respect Beijing's concerns about the deployment of an advanced US anti-missile system." He said that one country's security requirements should not hamper the security of another country. Yun Fu Ying, chairperson of the foreign affairs committee in the Chinese National People's Congress, told a panel discussion at the Munich conference that THAAD would not add to security of South Korea, therefore, China could not understand the US' decision regarding the deployment of the system. However, Yun Byung-se told the panel that the system would not pose a threat to China and instead would enhance Seoul's existing Patriot missile defence system and guard against North Korea's ballistic missiles. China has always expressed opposition to the deployment of THAAD because it believes that the system's powerful radar can penetrate its territory.

- On February 24, India approved a deal with Israel worth \$2.5 billion to jointly develop surface-to-air missiles for its army.

The deal is aimed at developing the missiles with a range of 50-70 kilometres. The weapons system will be jointly developed in India by Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Israel Aircraft Industries. The system which is based on the older Barak system of Israel is being changed. Five regiments consisting of 40 units and 200 missiles are to be

developed under the deal. The deal was approved during a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security under the chairmanship of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

- On February 24, the UN nuclear watchdog IAEA stated that Iran is complying with the nuclear agreement signed with major world powers in July 2015.

According to the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) report, Iran has not pursued the construction of the existing heavy water research reactor nor has the country enriched uranium above the 3.67% limit imposed on it. The report has also noted that Iran has not surpassed its stockpile of low-enriched uranium above than the agreed amount of 300 kg. Iran's level of heavy water has also not exceeded the permitted limit of 130 tonnes by the nuclear agreement. The report was the fifth quarterly assessment of Iran's nuclear programme since the implementation of the nuclear agreement in January 2016. Under the agreement Iran scaled back its nuclear programme in exchange for relief from sanctions imposed by the UN and the western countries.

- In an interview to *Reuters* on February 23, US President Donald Trump said that his country has fallen behind in its weapons capacity and, therefore, he wants to ensure the US nuclear arsenal remains at the "top of the pack."

While answering a question regarding his December 2016 tweet in which he had said that "United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capacity until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes," Trump explained that he would like to see a world with no nuclear weapons but he also expressed concern regarding the US' nuclear force. He added "if countries are going to have nukes, we're going to be at the top of the pack." In a response to Trump's statement Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association (ACA), argued that the history of the Cold War shows us that no one comes out on the top of the pack of an arms race and nuclear brinkmanship. Nuclear experts have also shown concerns over whether Trump wants to abrogate the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) and whether US would begin deploying other warheads. The New START treaty obligates both Russia and the US to reduce their deployed strategic nuclear warheads to no more than 1,550 by February 2018. Both countries signed the Treaty on April 8, 2010, which entered into force on February 5, 2011. In the interview, Trump called the New START a one-sided deal. He said it is another bad deal like the Iran nuclear deal.

- On February 23, the United Arab Emirates announced that it signed contracts worth \$5 billion to purchase weaponry during its international arms exhibition in Abu Dhabi.

The UAE signed one contract worth more than \$740 million with one of the US' defence contractors, Raytheon, and another with Russian arms exporter Rosoboronexport for anti-tank missiles valued at \$710 million. On the final day of the four-day International Defence Exhibition and Conference (IDEX) UAE secured contracts worth \$930 million, raising the total to \$5.2 billion. IDEX was started on February 19, 2017. It is one of the largest arms fairs in the

Middle East. It is held every two years to showcase the latest in defence technologies and innovations.

- According to *The Independent* on February 22, the US military plane, WC-135 Constant Phoenix, landed at an air base in Surrey, England to monitor radioactivity levels in Europe following the detection of mysterious spikes of radiation across the continent.

The report stated that a man-made radioactive material Iodine-131 was found in Norway in January 2017 and has since been detected in small amounts across Europe. It is not clear where the Iodine-131 is being released from. Iodine-131 is closely associated with atomic bombs, and found after nuclear tests. It is also found alongside other radioactive materials. The WC-135 can detect and identify nuclear explosions from the air and is also used to track radioactivity after nuclear incidents. Two devices on either side of the aircraft collect atmospheric gases and filter them to detect particles from nuclear fallout. A US air force spokesperson said that the aircraft was in Europe “on a pre-planned rotational deployment scheduled far in advance.” The spokesperson added, “anything contrary is completely baseless.” According to the French nuclear security body IRSN there is no imminent threat from the amount of material that is currently being found in Europe.

- On February 20, Pakistan and India agreed to extend their bilateral agreement on Reducing the Risk from Accidents Relating to Nuclear Weapons for the next five years.

The agreement came into force in 2007 and was valid until February 20, 2017. Both India and Pakistan have agreed to extend the agreement up to 2022. The pact stipulates that both countries will notify each other immediately in the event of an accident relating to nuclear weapons, under their respective jurisdiction or control, which could create the risk of a radioactive fallout or a nuclear exchange. The agreement forms a part of the nuclear confidence-building measures agreed to by the two countries and is aimed at promoting stability and security in the South Asian region.

- On February 20, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) released a report stating that the global trade in heavy weapons has increased to its highest level since the Cold War.

According to the report, the five biggest arms exporters including the US, Russia, China, France and Germany accounted for 74% of total arms exports during the period 2012-2016. The report noted that India was the world’s largest importer of major arms during 2012-16, accounting for 13% of the global arms imports while Saudi Arabia was the world’s second largest arms importer for the same period. The report also stated that China was able to substitute arms imports with indigenous products. However, “India remains dependent on weapons technology from foreign suppliers including Russia, the US, European states, Israel and South Korea.” Meanwhile Jane’s Defence Budget indicated that countries around the world had spent \$1.57 trillion on defence purchases in 2016.

- On February 20, Andrey Boginsky, chief executive of state-owned manufacturer Russian Helicopters, stated that Russia would start initial delivery of military helicopters to India in 2018.

An agreement to jointly develop 200 KA-226T helicopters for the Indian Armed Forces was signed by India and Russia in October 2016. Boginsky noted that some 60 helicopters would be initially delivered to India in 2018 while the remaining 140 would be assembled in India. The company has also started producing advanced medium multirole Mi-171A2 helicopter. Boginsky said that the first delivery of 4 Mi-171A2 helicopters for Russia would be done in 2017. Moreover, China has also shown interest in the Mi-171A2 helicopter.

- On February 16, Pakistan inducted 16 new indigenously manufactured JF-17 Thunder aircraft into its No. 14 Air Superiority Squadron.

The JF-17 Thunder jets were handed over to the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) during a ceremony at the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex (PAC), Kamra. Federal Minister for Defence Khwaja Mohammed Asif was the chief guest at the ceremony. Chief of Air Staff Air Chief Marshal Sohail Aman also attended the ceremony and congratulated PAC for manufacturing 16 new jets during the year 2016. He said that JF-17 Thunder was an excellent fighter aircraft which can be easily compared with the 4th generation aircraft of the world.

--- Moiz Khan

CHINA & EAST ASIA

China

- According to *China Daily* on February 28, China's State Councillor, Yang Jiechi met with US President Donald Trump in Washington.

In their meeting, President Trump said that China and the US need to strengthen high-level contacts, enhance collaboration in various fields and increase cooperation and coordination in international affairs. During his two-day visit, Yang Jiechi also discussed security matters with the new US national security adviser, HR McMaster.

- According to *Reuters* on February 28, North Korean Vice Foreign Minister, Ri Kil Song visited Beijing for talks with senior Chinese officials.

China and North Korea have yet to announce the purpose of the Deputy Foreign Minister's visit, but the development comes after North Korea criticised China for halting coal imports. Earlier on February 19, 2017, China announced the suspension of all imports of coal from North Korea under UN sanctions for its development of nuclear and missile technologies.

- On February 27, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, Geng Shuang warned the US and South Korea of 'consequences' over their decision to deploy the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system on the Korean Peninsula.

Huang also warned that the move will "jeopardise the strategic security interests of relevant countries in this region including China." Beijing's warning came immediately after the South Korean Lotte Group announced that it had approved a land swap with Seoul that would allow South Korea to deploy the THAAD missile system. China maintains that the US THAAD system could pose a threat to Chinese security.

North Korea

- According to *BBC* on February 24, Kim Jong-nam, the half-brother of North Korea's leader, was killed by a toxic nerve agent in Malaysia.

Kim Jong-nam was living in exile in Macau. According to Malaysian authorities two women, one Indonesian and one Vietnamese attacked Kim Jong Nam with VX nerve agent at Kuala Lumpur airport on February 13, 2017. VX nerve agent is classified as a weapon of mass destruction by the UN. South Korean and US officials have said they believe North Korean agents assassinated Kim Jong Nam. However, North Korea has denied any role in the attack.

- According to *CNN* on February 27, informal talks scheduled in March 2017, between a North Korean delegation and a team of former US officials were cancelled after the Trump administration withdrew its initial approval of the North Koreans' visas.

This would have been the first contact between US officials and North Korean representatives since 2011. US President, Donald Trump had said during his election campaign that he was open to political talks with North Korea.

Philippine

- On February 28, Philippine's President, Rodrigo Duterte, apologised to Germany for failing to save a German hostage who was beheaded by the armed Abu Sayyaf group.

The German hostage was killed by Abu Sayyaf group after a deadline to pay his ransom lapsed. The President, however, explained that the government has ruled out any ransom payment in exchange for the release of hostages because it would only increase criminal activity. Abu Sayyaf group is known for kidnapping of foreigners and locals in Philippine for ransom.

Myanmar

- According to *Reuters* on February 28, Myanmar's military defended its crackdown on the Rohingya Muslim minority as a lawful counterinsurgency operation and stressed that it was necessary to defend the country.

The development follows accusations of human rights abuses by Myanmar's military against members of the Muslim Rohingya minority. Myanmar launched a military operation after nine policemen were killed in attacks on security posts near the Bangladesh border in October, 2016. Following the military crackdown, the UN estimates that more than 70,000 Rohingya have fled the country.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

EUROPE

- On February 27, Gael Nofri a former aide to the French far-right presidential candidate, Marine Le Pen, accused her of fraud.

According to Nofri, in 2012 the National Front (FN) had recruited him into Le Pen's presidential campaign team, using a fictitious European Parliament contract. The FN wanted to avoid declaring campaign spending. It is already being investigated for alleged misuse of EP funds. Polls suggest that Le Pen is on course to win the first round of the presidential election in April 2017, but centrist candidate Emmanuel Macron is gaining ground and would likely beat her in the May 2017 election.

- *The Guardian* reported on February 26 that permanent residency applications of more than a quarter of EU citizens in the UK were rejected since the UK voted to leave the EU.

During the last two quarters of 2016, more than 12,800 EU citizens had their permanent residency requests refused with a further 5,500 declared invalid, a rejection rate of around 28%.

- On February 26, press freedom organisations raised concerns about censorship after members of the European Parliament approved extraordinary measures to combat hate speech.

The Parliament granted its president the authority to end live broadcasts of parliamentary debate in cases of racist speech and to remove offending video or audio material from the online system. Critics have warned that the rules are vaguely worded and could be manipulated or used as a tool of censorship.

- According to a senior ally of German Chancellor Angela Merkel on February 25, Europe should impose punitive tariffs on imports from the US if President Donald Trump tries to shield US industries from foreign competitors.

Trump has formally withdrawn the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal, distancing America from its Asian allies, and vowed to renegotiate the US free-trade deal with Canada and Mexico. He also threatened German carmakers with a 35% border tax on vehicles imported into the US market, saying such a levy would help create more jobs on American soil.

- On February 24, the White House confirmed it asked an FBI official to discredit reports that President Trump's campaign aides were in touch with Russian intelligence.

The White House acknowledged its Chief of Staff Reince Priebus asked the FBI's deputy director to dispute a New York Times article alleging Moscow links. According to CNN the FBI refused, citing an ongoing inquiry into claims of contacts between Trump aides and Russia. Meanwhile President Trump responded on Twitter by criticising the FBI "leakers."

- On February 22, the police in Sweden launched an investigation after a riot erupted in a predominantly immigrant suburb of the capital, Stockholm.

The unrest in the Rinkeby suburb on February 21 came after police tried to arrest a suspect on drugs charges. It also happened in the aftermath of US President Donald Trump's reference to Sweden in a speech on immigration problems. Sweden has a population of about 9.5 million. The country witnessed a sharp increase in asylum seekers in 2015 with more than 162,000 people applying for asylum. With the influx, tensions also increased. Isolated attacks on immigrants, as well as pro- and anti-migrant demonstrations were reported. Sweden initially offered permanent residence to all Syrian refugees but the high number of arrivals prompted a change in the rules. The number of asylum applications dropped to 29,000 in 2016 after Sweden introduced new border checks incurring longer processing times, as well as financial incentives for migrants who voluntarily returned to their country of origin.

- On February 22, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker warned the UK it faces a "very hefty" bill for Brexit.

Juncker vowed two years of "tough negotiation" once discussions begin on exit terms between the UK and the EU. It will not come "at a discount or at zero cost", he said while addressing the Belgian Federal Parliament. According to reports the UK could have to pay the EU up to 60 billion euros after Brexit talks start. Juncker's comments came as the House of Lords held a second day of discussion of the UK government's European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill.

- On February 19 a bipartisan delegation of US senators urged President Trump to punish Moscow over its alleged interference in the US election and warned that Russia's next targets would be the French and German elections.

Speaking at the Munich Security Conference, Republican senator Lindsey Graham, member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, expressed confidence that Congress will pass sanctions against Russia. Intelligence agencies in the US claim the Kremlin ordered a hacking of the Democratic National Committee before the presidential elections.

- On February 17, European leaders resisted US President Donald Trump's ultimatum that they increase defence spending or risk America scaling back its commitment to transatlantic protection.

German chancellor Angela Merkel, said her country would not change existing plans to increase the military budget by 2024 despite a demand by the US that countries increase spending by the end of 2017. Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission also said countries must not succumb to US demands.

- On February 17, EU Member States agreed to the Commission's proposal to invest €444 million in key European energy infrastructure projects.

The projects will contribute towards achieving the EU's energy goals by connecting European energy networks, increasing security of energy supply, and contributing to the sustainable development by integrating renewable energy sources across the EU. A low-carbon, secure and competitive economy is central to the EU's energy strategy. Moreover, interconnected electricity lines and gas pipelines form the backbone of an integrated European energy market.

---Amina Afzal

MIDDLE EAST & WEST ASIA

Egypt

- During a meeting in Cairo on February 21, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and King Abdullah II of Jordan said there could be no concessions on the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

According to a statement by Egypt's presidential spokesman, the two leaders "discussed ways to push the stagnant Middle East peace process, especially in light of US President Donald Trump's Administration coming to power." King Abdullah and Sisi also vowed to defend the rights of the Palestinian nation, and stressed the need for the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in order to restore peace and stability in the region.

Iran

- On February 20, Iran summoned Turkey's ambassador over comments made by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan accusing Tehran of destabilising the region.

In a speech at the Munich Security Conference, on February 19, Cavusoglu said that Iran wanted to turn Syria and Iraq into Shia states. He also said Turkey was against any sectarianism in the Middle East and had called on Iran to stop threatening the region's stability and security. Tehran and Ankara support opposite sides in the conflict in Syria. Iran backs the government of President Bashar al Assad while Turkey has backed elements of the Syrian opposition. In Iraq, commanders of the predominantly Shia Popular Mobilisation Units, many of whom are trained and funded by Iran, remain highly critical of Turkey's military presence there.

Iraq

- *The Daily Telegraph* reported on February 26 that a mass grave believed to contain the bodies of thousands of Iraqi security personnel killed at the hands of Daesh militants has been discovered close to the strategic city of Mosul.

The Khasfa sinkhole lies eight kilometres outside Mosul, located some 400 kilometres north of the capital Baghdad. It is considered to be the biggest mass grave in Iraq as it is the resting place of an estimated 4,000 victims. According to reports, most of the victims were Iraqi policemen shot and dumped into the natural depression just off the Baghdad-Mosul highway, while others lost their lives in vehicles driven over the edge of the pit. The sinkhole is said to be roughly 400 meters deep but contained so many bodies they began to be visible from its periphery. According to a researcher from Human Rights Watch, some 2,000 policemen and soldiers were murdered by Daesh in a single day. The body count at Khasfa mass grave

outnumbers any other known sites in Iraq, especially the murder of about 1,700 Iraqi Air Force cadets in a June 2014 attack on Camp Speicher military base near Tikrit.

- On February 24, US-backed Iraqi forces pushed into western Mosul after retaking the city's airport from Daesh.

Iraqi fighter jets also dropped bombs on Daesh positions inside Syria. It was the first time the Iraqi government publicly acknowledged striking militant targets inside Syria. The new offensive comes after government forces and their allies finished clearing Daesh from eastern Mosul, confining the insurgents to the western sector of the city. Commanders expect the battle in western Mosul to be more difficult, in part because tanks and armoured vehicles cannot pass through the narrow alleyways that crisscross ancient districts there. The International Rescue Committee said the most dangerous phase of the battle was about to begin for the 750,000 civilians believed to be trapped inside Mosul. The UN has warned up to 400,000 civilians could be displaced by the new offensive amid food and fuel shortages.

- On February 25, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir held talks in Baghdad with Iraq's leadership. It was the first visit by a high-ranking Saudi official since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Both sides discussed cooperation in various fields, including the fight against Daesh. The Saudi foreign minister also met his Iraqi counterpart Ibrahim al-Jaafari, who said in a statement the visit was 'the first by a Saudi foreign minister since 2003.' Jaafari has been considered an outspoken critic of Saudi Arabia and has issued several strongly-worded statements against the Kingdom over what he called Riyadh's "unacceptable interference" in Iraq. According to a statement from the Iraqi prime minister's office, Jubeir also "congratulated Iraq on the victories achieved against Daesh and pledged Saudi Arabia's support to Iraq in fighting terrorism." The statement also said that the visit was to re-establish relations in a more stable way. According to reports, Iraq has asked Saudi Arabia to break its silence on the presence of Turkish troops on its soil. Jaafari said his country sought "best" Saudi ties geared towards confronting common threats, normalisation of trade relations, facilitation of trips to Saudi Arabia by Iraqi nationals, and establishment of direct flights between the two capitals. Jubeir insisted on the need for bilateral visits, and said there were many elements, promoting the betterment of bilateral ties. He also claimed that Riyadh treated all Iraqi sects alike and was in favour of unity and calm in the country. Iraq and Saudi Arabia have tried to improve strained ties after relations were cut following ex-dictator Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. Iraq has often accused Saudi Arabia of nurturing extremist groups, including Daesh, with material and ideological support.

Israel

- During a meeting with his Australian counterpart, Malcolm Turnbull, on February 23 in Sydney, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the Tel Aviv regime would never end its decades-long occupation of Syria's Golan Heights.
- On February 23, Malcolm Turnbull expressed strong support for the Israeli regime and criticised a recent UNSC resolution demanding an end to the illegal construction of Israeli settlements on occupied Palestinian land.

Turnbull's all-out support for the Tel Aviv regime came as he hosted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on his first visit to Australia as part of a publicised effort to expand Israeli ties with Asian governments. Turnbull also published an opinion piece in The Australian newspaper, in which he condemned anti-Israeli action. He said, "My government will not support one-sided resolutions criticising Israel of the kind recently adopted by the UNSC and we deplore the boycott campaigns designed to delegitimise Israel." Netanyahu's remarks regarding the Golan Heights came on the same day that about 1,000 protesters gathered at Sydney's Town Hall, to express their outrage at the Australian government's warm reception of Netanyahu. In November 2016, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling on Israel to withdraw from the Golan Heights, which it has occupied since 1967. The resolution also condemned Israel's non-compliance with UNSC Resolution 497 since 1981, describing as null and void Tel Aviv's decision issued on December 14, 1981 to impose its control over the occupied Golan Heights. According to local press reports, Turnbull and Netanyahu also signed agreements on technology and air services after discussing the expansion of cooperation in the areas of cybersecurity, military, economy, and innovation and science.

- Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* reported on February 19 that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met secretly with Arab leaders in February 2016 to hear the then US Secretary of State John Kerry pitch a regional peace plan.

Although Netanyahu has refused to comment on the matter, anonymous officials from the Obama Administration confirmed that the meeting took place. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi also attended the talks hosted by King Abdullah II in the Jordanian city of Aqaba. According to US officials Kerry wanted the sides to endorse six principles, which he laid out publicly in a December speech. They included a call for Israel to vacate territory it occupied during the 1967 Six-Day War, subject to land swaps agreed to between the two sides. Since 1967, Israel has pulled out of Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip but annexed east Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. It continues to occupy the West Bank, where hundreds of thousands of Israelis live in settlements seen as illegal by the international community. Kerry's parameters envisioned a Palestinian state, with Palestinians recognising Israel as a 'Jewish state'. Both would share Jerusalem as the 'internationally recognised capital of the two states'. The newspaper claimed that Netanyahu rejected the offer saying he would not be able to garner support in his right-wing ruling coalition to give up any land in the West Bank or Golan Heights. The move went against

the prime minister's stated goal of involving Arab countries in resolving the conflict. Many observers, including Israeli opposition leader Isaac Herzog, regretted the "magnitude of the missed opportunity," to create lasting peace. Meeting on February 15, 2017 at the White House, Netanyahu and President Donald Trump each spoke of prospects of a regional Middle East understanding to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Netanyahu told Trump, "For the first time in the life of my country, Arab countries in the region do not see Israel as an enemy, but increasingly as an ally".

Palestine

- On February 27, President of Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas warned all foreign countries against relocating their respective embassies in Israel from Tel Aviv to East Jerusalem al-Quds.

President Abbas made the remarks in an address to the 34th session of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva. During his election campaign, US President Donald Trump vowed to move the American Embassy to East al-Quds in a sign of recognition of the city as the capital of an Israeli "state." Palestinians want the West Bank, which Israel has occupied since 1967, as part of a future Palestinian state, with East al-Quds as its capital. Abbas also criticised the recent land grab law adopted by Israel. He said, "This is a dangerous precedent, which we reject. The international community rejects it as well. This is a situation that does not allow our people to establish their own state. This is an act, which leads to hatred and violence." He asserted that Tel Aviv was thus moving towards the creation of an "apartheid solution" to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

- On February 22, the UN and the EU called on the Israeli regime to stop its plans to tear down an internationally-funded makeshift hospital and dozens of Palestinian residential buildings in the central part of the occupied West Bank.

The Coordinator for Humanitarian Aid and UN Development Activities for the Palestinian territories, Robert Piper, and the Director of UN Relief and Works Agency Scott Anderson made the call during a visit to the West Bank village of Khan al-Ahmar. The visit came days after Tel Aviv began bureaucratic proceedings to demolish the entire village. There are some 35 families living in temporary facilities in al-Khan al-Ahmar. There are 140 structures in the area. Piper said, "Thousands of families live in fear of demolitions at any moment, and entire communities exist in chronic instability. When schools are demolished, the right to education of Palestinian children is also threatened. This creates a coercive environment that forces certain Palestinian communities to move elsewhere." He further urged the international community to help protect the vulnerable Palestinian communities and make sure "international law is respected." Meanwhile, the EU's mission in Jerusalem al-Quds and Ramallah has also denounced Israel's pending plans to demolish Palestinian structures in Khan al-Ahmar. It said the Israeli military has razed 135 Palestinian structures in Area C of the West Bank so far in 2017, displacing 218

Palestinians. The Israeli army demolished 872 structures in Area C in 2016, leaving 6,088 Palestinians homeless. Among those affected, there were 1,663 children.

- On February 16, the UN envoy for the Middle East peace process Nickolay Mladenov told the UNSC that the two-state solution remains ‘the only way’ to meet the aspirations of the Palestinians and Israelis.

The UNSC met to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a day after President Donald Trump stepped back from the US commitment to a two-state solution as part of a final peace deal. Mladenov also urged Israeli and Palestinian leaders to ‘carefully contemplate the future’, which he warned could be one ‘built on perpetual conflict, rising extremism and occupation.’ In a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu on February 15, 2017, Trump had announced that the US would not insist on a two-state solution to the conflict. He said, “I’m looking at two-state and one-state, and I like the one that both parties like.” Trump’s comments were welcomed by Israel’s right-wing government but the Palestinians reacted with alarm. Britain, France and Sweden reaffirmed their support for a two-state solution.

Syria

- On February 28, Russia and China vetoed a UN resolution that would have imposed sanctions on Syria over chemical weapons use.

The Security Council resolution drafted by Britain, France and the US won nine votes in favour while three countries opposed it - China, Russia and Bolivia. Kazakhstan, Ethiopia and Egypt abstained. UN resolutions require nine positive votes and no veto to be adopted. It was the seventh time that Russia has used its veto power to protect Syria. Russian President Vladimir Putin had warned earlier that imposing sanctions on Syria was “completely inappropriate” while talks were ongoing in Geneva on ending the war. The resolution would have put 11 Syrians, mainly military commanders, and 10 entities linked to chemical attacks in 2014 and 2015 on a UN sanctions blacklist. It included a ban on the sale of helicopters and of chemical agents to the Syrian armed forces or the government. In October 2016, a UN-led investigation concluded that the Syrian air force had dropped chlorine barrel-bombs from helicopters on three opposition-held villages in 2014 and 2015.

- *PressTv* reported on February 27 that Russian President Vladimir Putin praised the latest rounds of Syria peace talks in Kazakhstan and said they created a “mechanism” to control the truce holding across the country.

Putin also said that the recent talks helped revive the UN-backed negotiations being held in Geneva. Since the beginning of 2017, Astana has hosted two rounds of discussions between the Damascus government and opposition groups, mediated by Iran, Russia, and Turkey. The Astana talks focused on bolstering the Syria-wide ceasefire between militants and the Syrian government that has been in place since December 30, 2016. According to observers, the Astana discussions served as a warm-up for the UN-led Geneva negotiations, which resumed between Syria’s

warring sides on February 23, 2017. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov called for the formation of a joint opposition delegation to the Geneva talks. He said representatives of Syria's Kurdish population should also be included in the talks. The Damascus delegation is headed by Syrian Ambassador to the UN Bashar al-Jaafari. However, the opposition side has several groups based in different countries attending the talks. This situation has complicated the ongoing talks in Geneva.

- *PressTv* reported on February 24 that US CENTCOM Chief General Joseph Votel secretly visited Northern Syria to meet US-backed militant groups.

The timing of Votel's trip is significant as on February 22, 2017 he said that more US troops might be needed in Syria to boost the US-backed militants' mobility and firepower. Votel oversees the US-led military operations against Daesh targets in Iraq and Syria. He visited the frontline cities of Kobani and Raqqa and met with commanders of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an alliance of Kurdish and Arab militants. According to Talal Sello, a spokesman for the SDF, Votel discussed the militant group's Raqqa offensive and the possible ways to expand coordination and support. The SDF launched its campaign to capture Raqqa in November 2016 and took control of some areas up the Euphrates Valley. The group receives air support from the US-led coalition, which has been conducting airstrikes in Syria since 2014. Votel also discussed the situation in Raqqa with Turkish officials, who are unhappy with Washington's ties with the SDF. Nearly two-thirds of the 30,000 SDF militants belong to the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which Ankara considers a terrorist group.

- On February 24, at least 51 people were killed in a suicide bomb attack targeting Turkey-backed rebels outside the Syrian town of Al Bab.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the bomber blew up a vehicle outside a rebel command centre in the village of Susian, eight kilometres northeast of Al Bab. There was no immediate claim for the attack, but rebels blamed it on Daesh, which had put up fierce resistance in Al Bab for weeks. According to field commander Abu Jaafar of the Mutasem Brigades, Turkish soldiers and civilians from Al Bab had called a meeting in Susian to organise a security apparatus and set a plan for rebuilding Al Bab. This information reached Daesh sleeper cells, which prepared a car bomb. He said that suicide bombers of Daesh have started to take revenge as they could not bear their recent loss in Al Bab.

- On February 23, in a meeting with officers returning from combat in Syria, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Russia has no plans to interfere in Syria's internal affairs and its aim is to stabilise the legitimate government in Syria which is battling terrorists.

Putin also expressed hope for the success of a political settlement in Syria, saying it will help defeat the "terrorist malaise." He hailed the role played by the Russian naval forces in combating terrorism, singling out the Northern Fleet, which includes Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier group, and was deployed to the Mediterranean off the Syrian coast. In January 2017, Moscow withdrew its naval force from Syrian waters, including the Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft

carrier, as part of a reduction of its military role in Syria. Putin said that Moscow's military deployment to Syria has contributed directly to Russia's security, warning of an "enormous risk" posed to Russia by the foreign members of Daesh. According to Russian intelligence services, some 4,000 Russian citizens and 5,000 citizens from the former Soviet Union are fighting within Daesh ranks in Syria.

- Turkish-backed Syrian rebels announced on February 22 that they had fully captured the town of Al-Bab from Daesh, marking a defeat for the militants after weeks of heavy fighting.

Al-Bab, just 25 kilometres south of the Turkish border, was the last Daesh stronghold in the northern Syrian province of Aleppo. According to Turkish Defence Minister Fikri Isik, rebels had "near complete control" of Al-Bab. Isik also reaffirmed that Turkey was now ready to join any operation by international coalition forces to take the Syrian city of Raqqa, which is the de facto capital of Daesh. Turkey sent troops into Syria in August 2016 in an operation it said targeted not only Daesh but also US-backed Kurdish fighters whom it regards as terrorists. Persistent violence and deadlock over Syria's political future are clouding the start of 'Geneva 4', the fourth round of UN-sponsored talks on the conflict. The ground both in terms of territory and diplomacy has shifted since the last UN-sponsored talks ended in April 2016, and the rebels are now in a significantly weaker position. The Syrian army has recaptured the rebel bastion of eastern Aleppo and the US has said it is reassessing every aspect of its Syria policy under President Donald Trump.

---Muhammad Shoaib

SOUTH ASIA

Pakistan

External

- During the meeting of Council of Foreign Ministers of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) in Islamabad on February 28, Pakistan's Foreign Affairs Adviser, Sartaj Aziz called for greater connectivity among the member states to boost intra-region trade.

Addressing the meeting, Sartaj Aziz also called for joint efforts to transform ECO into a formidable economic block. He further stressed that the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) would increase trade opportunities within the region. Aziz also highlighted Pakistan's progress in combating terrorism and extremism through a comprehensive strategy and targeted military operations. Meanwhile, Iranian Foreign Minister, Muhammad Javad Zarif said that Iran is committed to supporting the ECO, but he emphasised that ECO needs to be restructured to increase its efficiency. Iranian Foreign Minister, Zarif after arriving in Islamabad also hailed the increasing relations between Tehran and Islamabad. The Council also approved the ECO Vision 2025 and text of Islamabad Declaration that contains the main points of cooperation among the members of ECO in connectivity, trade, transport and energy fields. The meeting preceded the 13th ECO summit to be held in Islamabad on March 1, 2017. The member states of the ECO include Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan and the Central Asian States.

- On February 23, Pakistan's Foreign Office spokesman, Nafees Zakaria said that Pakistan is ready to work with Afghanistan on all issues, but added "decision on the reopening of Pak-Afghan border will be taken in due course."

Zakaria's comments came after Afghan Ambassador in Islamabad, Omar Zakhilwal urged Pakistani authorities to reopen the Pak-Afghan border. Pakistan closed its border with Afghanistan on February 16, 2017 following a terrorist attack at the Lal Shahbaz Qalandar shrine in Sehwan that killed 75 people. Pakistan claims that the Sehwan attack was coordinated and plotted in Afghanistan. Earlier on February 21, Pakistan's Finance minister, Ishaq Dar informed the Senate that the army had been told to act against terrorists across the border. Pakistan has also demanded from Afghanistan the handing over of more than 75 terrorists who are allegedly involved in planning terrorist attacks in Pakistan. In response, Afghanistan has demanded the handover of 85 leaders of Taliban, Haqqani network and other terrorist groups and action against 32 alleged terrorist training centres in Pakistan.

- On February 18, the Afghan government summoned the Pakistani Ambassador in Kabul, Abrar Hussain to protest shelling by Pakistani forces into Afghanistan's eastern provinces.

During the meeting, Afghan authorities also urged Pakistan to take strict action against terrorist hideouts in Pakistan. Moreover, Afghan officials also expressed concerns over the recent arrests of more than 100 Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Islamabad's decision to shut down the border

between the two countries “to prevent terrorists’ cross-border activities.” In response, Ambassador Hussain said that the recent military action along the Pak-Afghan border was aimed at curbing terrorist activities. The Pakistan army has reportedly targeted four training camps of Jamaat-ul-Ahrar in Afghanistan following a series of attacks in Pakistan that killed more than 100 people. Following the attacks, Pakistan’s army chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa also called General John Nicholson, commander of the US’s Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, to protest continued acts of terrorism in Pakistan perpetrated from Afghanistan, saying they were “testing” Pakistan’s policy of cross-border restraint.

- On February 23, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Turkish counterpart Binali Yildirim co-chaired the 5th session of the Pakistan-Turkey High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council in Ankara.

During the meetings between the two leaders, Ankara and Islamabad signed 10 agreements and Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for cooperation in different fields. The two sides also reaffirmed their commitment to continue transforming their special relationship into a strong strategic partnership. Meanwhile Pakistan’s Foreign Office spokesperson, Nafees Zakaria said that there is a possibility of joint defence production between the two countries in future. The two prime ministers also expressed their resolve to take strict action against terrorism and extremism in their countries. The Pakistani premier also appreciated Turkey for expressing support on the Kashmir issue and Pakistan’s inclusion in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). The Pakistani premier said that external involvement in terrorist activities in Pakistan could not be ruled out adding that Afghan territory was being used against Pakistan.

Pakistan Internal

- On February 24, the Punjab Government said that the explosion that killed 10 people in Lahore was “not an act of terrorism” but was caused by gas cylinders leakage.

This explosion occurred on February 23 and at least 10 people were killed and 35 were injured at an under-construction building in Lahore. Following the blast, government authorities initially stated that the explosion was caused by a “planted device”. Contradictory statements created confusion in the country. Pakistani authorities later confirmed that no traces of explosive material were found from the site.

- On February 21, at least 8 people including a lawyer were killed when three suicide bombers attacked a lower court in Charsadda.

Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, a faction of the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claimed responsibility for the attack. Jamaat-ul-Ahrar has carried out a series of attacks within this month including a bomb blast in Lahore on February 13 which killed 14 people. The same group is responsible for the March 2016 suicide attack in the local court in Charsadda that killed 17 people.

- On February 23, the Supreme Court of Pakistan reserved its verdict in the Panama Leaks case, stating that the decision would be announced later.

Justice Asif Saeed Khosa, who was heading the five-judge bench, observed that the court would consider all aspects of the case and give the judgment in accordance with the law and Constitution. The case involves investments allegedly made by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and members of his family through Mossack Fonseca a Panamanian legal firm dealing with offshore companies. Prime Minister Sharif has denied any wrongdoing.

- On February 22, Pakistan’s military launched a countrywide ‘Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad’ (elimination of discord) aimed at “indiscriminately eliminating residual and latent threat of terrorism, consolidating gains of operations made thus far and further ensuring security of the borders.”

The decision was taken after more than 100 people were killed across Pakistan in a span of ten days in various terrorist attacks. The operation will also focus on a countrywide de-weaponisation campaign. Radd-ul Fasaad will also include counter-terrorism operations by Rangers in Punjab. After an upsurge in violence, Pakistan’s military said it had killed more than 100 terrorists across the country. According to media reports, Pakistani forces have also bombed suspected terrorist hideouts in Afghanistan’s eastern Nangarhar province.

- On February 16, at least 75 people were killed and over 150 others injured after a suicide bomber attacked the Lal Shahbaz Qalandar shrine in Sehwan.

Daesh militant group claimed responsibility for the attack. Following the attack, Pakistan immediately lodged a formal complaint with the Afghan government, alleging that the militants linked to Daesh were operating from sanctuaries inside Afghanistan. Daesh was also behind the November, 2016 bombing at the Shah Noorani shrine in Balochistan in which at least 52 people were killed.

India

- On February 26, India’s Union Information and Broadcasting Minister, Venkaiah Naidu demanded the ‘strongest action’ from the US government after an Indian expatriate was killed and another wounded in a suspected hate crime in Kansas.

Naidu also expressed concerns over series of incidents of alleged racial discrimination and emphasised that it was the responsibility of the US government to stop such crimes. According to media reports, the shooter, before opening fire on two Indian citizens yelled, “get out of my country”. The shooter was arrested later by the US authorities.

- Addressing a gathering in Uttar Pradesh on February 24, Prime Minister, Narendra Modi said that “conspirators from across the border,” were responsible for the derailment of a train in Kanpur city that killed 150 people in November 2016.

Media reports in India have claimed that PM Modi was referring to Pakistan for the incident. Also reports in the Indian media claimed citing Nepalese authorities that a Nepalese national Shamshul Hoda was arrested in connection with the train incident in Kathmandu on February 7, 2017 after being deported from Dubai. Reports alleged that Hoda may have acted on the directions from Pakistan's intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). However, there was no official response from Islamabad about Prime Minister Modi's apparent reference towards Pakistan. Some have criticised PM Modi for his repeated anti-Pakistan rhetoric in his election campaigns. Earlier in November 2016, while addressing a rally in Punjab, PM Modi said that he is "determined to stop the flow of water into Pakistan," and will instead give it "to the farmers of Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir".

- According to Xinhua on February 21, Chinese State Councillor Yang Jiechi met with Indian Foreign Secretary, Subramanyam Jaishankar. Following the discussions, the two sides called for stronger ties between the two neighbours.

The development came after Indian Foreign Secretary, Jaishankar visited Beijing for the China-India strategic dialogue. According to Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, Geng Shuang, the dialogue between the two sides reached the expected goal. Geng, however, made no reference to the differences between the two countries over India's admission into the NSG and its efforts to designate Jaish e Mohammad (JeM) chief, Masood Azhar as a global terrorist. Secretary Jaishankar, however, reiterated India's concerns over the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and termed it a "sovereignty" issue. Reacting on India's concerns, Chinese state media asked New Delhi to take an objective and more pragmatic view of China's OBOR initiative.

- On February 16, Indian army chief, General Bipin Rawat warned that those who were creating "hurdles" in Kashmir during the security operations would face tough action. General Rawat's statement came soon after four Indian soldiers were killed in two separate encounters in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK). However, some opposition parties in India have criticised General Rawat's comments saying it would increase the hostility among the Kashmiri population.

Afghanistan

- On February 18, US Vice President, Mike Pence assured Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani of continued US support.

The development comes after the two leaders met in Munich on the sidelines of an international security conference. According to the White House, both leaders also affirmed the continued importance of the strategic partnership between the two countries. Moreover, Vice President Pence also expressed support for the Afghan National Unity Government.

- On February 16, at least 18 Afghan soldiers were killed after an attack on an Afghan army post in the eastern border province of Nangarhar.

Daesh militant group claimed responsibility for the attack. According to media reports, Nangarhar is the only Afghan province where Daesh has established its stronghold.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

UNITED NATIONS

- On February 27, Yanghee Lee, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar, urged the Myanmar government to take immediate measures to end the suffering of the Rohingya population in the country.

She said, “The magnitude of violence that these families have witnessed and experienced is far more extensive than I had originally speculated.” She was speaking on the conclusion of a four-day visit to Bangladesh where she met with members of Myanmar’s Rohingya community who had fled the continued violence in their country. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has also issued a report noting various incidents of killings, including of babies and young children, brutal beatings, disappearances and other serious human rights violations committed by the country’s security forces.

- On February 20, the UN Mission in Colombia indicated that some 300 members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People’s Army (FARC-EP) arrived in central Colombia’s Agua Bonita zone, bringing the number close to 6,900, to lay down their arms under UN verification, in order to begin a transition to social, economic and political life.

Major General Javier Pérez Aquino, Chief of the UN Mission in Colombia, called the FARC-EP’s decision to move into the zones, notwithstanding limited logistics, very positive and historic. He said that the decision of laying down arms would possibly reduce the chances of armed conflicts in future. FARC-EP and Government members, along with 350 UN observers, are working together in Colombia’s capital, Bogotá, as well as at eight regional and 26 local sites to verify the parties’ commitments towards the ceasefire and cessation of hostilities. Both FARC-EP and the Government signed the new peace agreement in November 2016 that led to a cessation of hostilities and agreements on key issues such as political participation, land rights, illicit drugs and victims’ rights and transitional justice. The peace agreement came into force on December 1, 2016.

- During the 53rd Munich Security Conference in Germany on February 18, UN General-Secretary António Guterres, highlighted the complex and interlinked challenges confronting the global community and called for a boost in preventive diplomacy and strategy to address the root causes of those challenges.

Guterres said that sustainable and inclusive development with the sustaining peace agenda play an important role in preventing conflicts around the world. He also emphasised the importance of the need to address the fragility of states, institutions and civil societies in order to make them stronger and more resilient. On climate change and strain on resources, the Secretary General called on the international community to strongly stand behind the Paris Agreement and to focus attention on population growth, especially in Africa. He stated that the UN has been engaged in reforming its peace and security strategy, operational setup and architecture; its development system; and its management for properly dealing with the continued conflicts and challenges.

- On February 17, the United Nations meteorological agency said that the temperatures on the Arctic Pole are alarming and that ice melting in the region has become more intense.

David Carlson, Director of the World Climate Research Programme, said that sea ice extent was at the lowest on the satellite record for the month of January, 2017, both at the Arctic and Antarctic. He explained that the recovery period for the Arctic sea ice is normally in the winter, when it gains both in volume and extent. However, the recovery remained fragile and there were some days when temperatures were actually above melting point during December 2016 and January 2017. The ice levels at the Antarctic are also at record low level. Carlson warned that this situation will not only have serious implications for the Arctic ice extent but also for the global climate system.

--- Moiz Khan