

August 16 – August 31

AREA BRIEF

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## Area Briefs: 16-31 August 2017

### General Observations

#### *Pakistan*

- On August 21, President Donald Trump gave his first formal national security statement on Afghanistan and South Asia. As expected, Trump announced a shifting of the focus in Afghanistan to winning the war and away from nation building. He announced a troop increase but the most significant part of his statement was his tirade against Pakistan – effectively scapegoating it for all the US/NATO failures in Afghanistan. Pakistan was accused of all manner of sins including aiding extremists and abusing the astronomical “aid” given by the US. Trump also targeted Pakistan’s nuclear capability and announced a greater Indian involvement in Afghanistan – a direct threat to regional stability.
- The Trump speech was followed, on 26 August, by NATO commander in Afghanistan, General Nicholson reaffirming Trump’s vitriol against Pakistan and directly accusing Pakistan of harbouring Taliban shuras in Quetta and Peshawar while covertly threatening military action inside Pakistan.
- The Pakistan government rejected the Trump and Nicholson accusations and both Houses of Parliament passed resolutions critiquing Trump and the US attempts to bring India into Afghanistan. The National Assembly passed a strong resolution demanding the government consider suspending NATO ground and air lines of communications (GLOCs and AIRLOCs) as well as suspension of visiting delegations.
- The Trump statement comes as no surprise as the US sees its policy failing in Afghanistan and seeks to find a scapegoat. Moreover, the US-India strategic partnership has been evolving as the US relationship with Pakistan has been deteriorating and the “do more” mantra has once again been gaining coinage in the US. In the nuclear issue area especially the US commitment to aid India’s nuclear development has become increasingly more pronounced. For instance, according to India media reports on 27 August, a White House official admitted the US was seeking to find ways to support Indian membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) more aggressively.
- Interestingly, the Chinese government immediately issued a statement in support of Pakistan and this was followed by Russia expressing similar support soon to be followed by Iran. The KSA stayed silent on the subject despite a quick visit by PM Abbasi to KSA after the Trump statement.
- US support of India was also reflected earlier, on 16 August, when the US designated Hizbul Mujahideen a terrorist organization. Pakistan responded by stating this move was “completely unjustified”.

- Finally, on 31 August, the anti-terrorism court (ATC) announced its verdict in the Benazir Bhutto assassination case. The verdict satisfied no one as only two police officers were sentenced to 17 years imprisonment for “negligence”. Five TTP suspects were acquitted for lack of evidence, while former President Pervez Musharraf was declared an “absconder” in the case and authorities were ordered to confiscate his properties.
- Torrential rains hit many parts of Pakistan and the worst hit was Karachi with parts of the city drowned under rainwater reflecting the lack of preparedness by the civic authorities and the provincial government despite early warnings. Eventually the army had to be called in to assist.

### *International*

- India finally backed off from its confrontation with China at Doklam, Bhutan with India’s Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) announcing on 28 August that it was disengaging its border personnel from Doklam. The Chinese Foreign Ministry confirmed this withdrawal.
- India’s arms acquisitions continued as media reports came in of India investing billions of dollars in the purchase of weapons systems from foreign companies that were prepared to set up production facilities for their weapons in India.
- The sentencing by a court in India of a Hindu religious leader, Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh for raping two of his followers led to riots in the Indian state of Haryana on 25 August and left 32 people dead.
- The situation on the Korean Peninsula became further aggravated in the last fortnight of August with North Korea firing a ballistic missile, which flew over the Japanese island of Hokkaido on 29 August. Hours after this, South Korea released footage of its ballistic missiles’ launch to show its missile capabilities. The US also tested missiles near Hawaii and Japan used the North Korean aggressive posturing to further its own militarisation. The North Korean stand-off remains unresolved with each side hardening its position.
- The Iraqi government continues to achieve successes against Daesh and on 31 August Iraq’s Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi declared Nineveh province liberated from Daesh. Earlier, on 27 August, the Iraqi military had reclaimed Tal Afar from Daesh after a battle lasting 8 days.
- While Daesh is being pushed back in Iraq and Syria, a growing conflict is developing over the Iraqi Kurds announcement of a referendum with Turkey and Iraq objecting to it.

- The Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen admitted to the killing of 14 civilians in an air strike as a “technical mistake”. The airstrike occurred against a civilian target on 25 August.
- Terrorists struck in Barcelona, Spain on 18 August when a van rammed into a crowd in the walking area of Las Ramblas, killing 13.
- In Kabul, a Shia mosque was attacked by Daesh on 25 August killing 20 worshippers. The attacks against Shias are on the increase in Afghanistan.

--- *Dr Shireen M Mazari*  
*Director General*

## AMERICAS

### Domestic

- According to *USA Today* on August 31, Hurricane Irma became a category three in the Atlantic.

*According to forecasts Irma could reach the 'extremely dangerous' category 4 strength. After Hurricane Harvey weakened to a depression, Irma, started in the central Atlantic Ocean. It poses no immediate threat to land and its eventual track remains highly uncertain as is typical for storms this far out to sea.*

- On August 31 the National Hurricane Centre officially downgraded Hurricane Harvey to Tropical Depression Harvey.

*Although heavy rainfall is slowing and wind speeds have dropped, the "catastrophic" and "life-threatening" flooding will take longer to subside. Huge areas of southeastern Texas remain submerged, and flooding has also hit southwestern Louisiana. Floodwaters closed oil refineries along the Texas Gulf Coast. 15 refineries were going off line from Corpus Christi, Texas, to Port Arthur, Texas. The list included the largest refinery in the US the Saudi-owned Motiva plant in Port Arthur. Hurricane Harvey made landfall on the Texas coast on August 25, 2017 with strong winds and rain battering coastal and inland communities. More than 211,000 remained without power on the Texas Gulf Coast. Heavy building damage occurred in Port Aransas and in Rockport. President Trump signed a disaster proclamation, allocating federal funds for state and local relief efforts.*

- According to the US Missile Defense Agency (MDA) on August 30 a US warship successfully shot down a medium-range ballistic missile in a test off Hawaii.

*The USS John Paul Jones detected and tracked a missile launched from the Pacific Missile Range Facility on Kauai with its onboard radar, before intercepting it with SM-6 missiles. It marked the second time an SM-6 missile has successfully intercepted a medium-range ballistic missile in a test.*

- According to *USA Today* on August 29, Defence Secretary Jim Mattis announced that transgender troops would be allowed to continue serving in the military pending the results of a study by experts.

*The announcement follows an order from President Trump declaring that transgender service members would no longer serve in the military. The order also included the Department of Homeland Security, which houses the Coast Guard. "Once the panel reports its recommendations and following my consultation with the Secretary of Homeland Security, I will provide my advice to the President concerning implementation of his policy direction," Mattis said in the statement. "In the interim, current policy with respect to currently serving members will remain in place."*

- On August 27 anti-racist demonstrators took to the streets of San Francisco condemning white supremacy despite rally cancellation by the Patriot Prayer group.

*The protesters gathered at Alamo Square Park despite the cancellation of a rally and press conference by the right-wing Patriot Prayer group. Joey Gibson, the leader of Patriot Prayer cancelled the so-called Freedom Rally over fears of a “huge riot.”*

- According to a report published on August 21, the Secret Service is unable to pay hundreds of agents to protect President Donald Trump and his large family.

*Secret Service Director Randolph “Tex” Alles said more than 1,000 agents had already hit the federally mandated caps for salary and overtime allowances which were meant to last through 2017. “The president has a large family, and our responsibility is required in law,” Alles said. Later Alles said in a statement that the problem isn’t just related to the Trump Administration and has been going on for many years. In the Trump Administration, 42 people require protection, including 18 members of his family. This is an increase from the 31 people who had Secret Service protection during Obama’s tenure as President.*

## **International**

- On August 31, Japanese, South Korean and US warplanes carried out a show of force against North Korea.

*Two US B-1B supersonic bombers from Andersen Air Force Base in Guam and four US F-35 stealth fighter jets from the Marine Corps Air Station in Iwakuni, Japan, joined four South Korean jets and two Japanese warplanes for the exercises. It was a direct response to North Korea’s launch of an intermediate-range ballistic missile over Japan. Meanwhile Russia warned the US that new sanctions against North Korea would be “dangerous.”*

- According to the *NY Times* on August 28, a business associate of President Trump promised in 2015 to engineer a real estate deal with President Putin’s help.

*Felix Sater wrote a series of emails to Trump’s lawyer, Michael Cohen, in which he boasted about his ties to Putin. He predicted that building a Trump Tower in Moscow would highlight Trump’s savvy negotiating skills and be a political boon to his candidacy. “Our boy can become president of the USA and we can engineer it,” Sater wrote in an email. “I will get all of Putin’s team to buy in on this, I will manage this process.”*

- According to *The Guardian* on August 23, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination issued an “early warning” over conditions in the US urging the Trump Administration to “unequivocally and unconditionally” reject discrimination.

*The warning specifically refers to events in Charlottesville, Virginia, where a civil rights activist was killed protesting against a white nationalist rally.*

- On August 21, ten American sailors were reported missing after a Navy warship collided with a commercial tanker east of Singapore.

*The collision is the latest in a series of similar incidents in the Pacific. The latest incident is the fourth time in 2017 that a US warship has been involved in an accident in Asian waters. Following the collision between the USS John S. McCain, a guided-missile destroyer, and the merchant vessel, Defence Secretary James Mattis said he supports the decision by Adm. John Richardson, Chief of Naval Operations, to conduct a “comprehensive review” of recent US Navy collisions. The collision prompted Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson to order a rare worldwide operational pause across the entire US Navy. The pause is a one-day safety stand-down that would be done over the course of a couple weeks and at the discretion of individual commands.*

- On August 21, President Donald Trump addressed the nation from Fort Myer in Arlington Virginia.

*This was Trump’s first prime time broadcast and also his first major national security address as President. Notwithstanding Trump’s dwindling approval ratings, his address was an effort to unite the American public around an important security issue facing his Administration. Following lengthy deliberations that created deep splits within his Administration, Trump announced a potential escalation of the war in Afghanistan. While explaining his administration’s South Asia policy Trump chose to highlight Washington’s “tortured relationship with Pakistan” and criticised Islamabad for “tacitly encouraging extremists.” The much-touted Afghan policy has been compared to old wine in a new bottle and is a U turn on Trump’s original views on the issue. Observers in Pakistan dismissed the strategy. Trump’s suggestion about greater Indian involvement in Afghanistan was also criticised.*

- On August 20, Defence Secretary James Mattis said that President Donald Trump’s address to the nation on August 21, 2017 would focus on the “full South Asia” strategy covering more than just Afghanistan.

*The Administration had been working on a new US strategy in Afghanistan for months. Mattis told the Senate Armed Services Committee in June 2017 that he would be able to present a strategy for victory by mid-July. The deliberations however continued past that deadline. During the strategy review many people including Arizona Republican Sen. John McCain presented their strategies. McCain’s strategy involved an increase in US troops and further airstrikes, while Erik Prince the founder of the security company Blackwater pressed the US to move its strategy largely over to the private sector.*

- According to the *NY Times* on August 17, President Donald Trump lamented an assault on American “culture.”

*Following the terrorist attack in Spain, Trump recalled an event where Gen. John J. “Black Jack” Pershing supposedly killed Muslim rebels in the Philippines by shooting them with bullets dipped in the blood of pigs, which Muslims are forbidden to eat. “Study what General Pershing of the United States did to terrorists when caught,” Trump said in a tweet spreading a mythical story. “There was no more Radical Islamic Terror for 35 years!” He said.*

## Latin America

- According to the US State Department on August 25, at least 16 US government employees associated with the US embassy in Havana have suffered unexplained health problems, including hearing loss.

*The US State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said that reports of the “incidents” had started in autumn 2016 and ended in April this year. Earlier, US officials had said the symptoms appeared to have resulted from a covert sonic device. However neither device nor any perpetrator had yet been found and that Cuba was cooperating with the US investigation.*

- On August 16, the US began renegotiations of the North American Free Trade Agreement with “harsh words.”

*The Trump Administration criticised Canada and Mexico on the failures of the current agreement at a news conference while behind closed doors negotiators began to seek significant concessions from America’s neighbours. “We feel that Nafta has fundamentally failed many, many Americans and needs major improvement,” said Robert Lighthizer, the United States trade representative, who was leading the United States team aiming to overhaul the 25-year-old agreement. The Canadian and Mexican representatives were publicly pleasant, emphasising their commitment to regional trade and the benefits resulting from a regional alliance.*

---Amina Afzal

## ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

- On August 30, the US Missile Defence Agency (MDA) and the US Navy successfully conducted a missile defence test at the Pacific Missile Range Facility off Kauai, Hawaii.

*According to a statement issued by the MDA, the Standard Missile-6, one of the US Navy's most advanced missile interceptors, intercepted a medium-range ballistic missile target at sea in its final seconds of flight. USS John Paul Jones, Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer, detected and tracked a target missile launched from the Pacific Missile Range Facility on Kauai, Hawaii, with its onboard AN/SPY-1 radar, and onboard SM-6 missiles executed the intercept. MDA Director Lt. Gen. Sam Greaves said, "We are working closely with the fleet to develop this important new capability, and this was a key milestone in giving our Aegis Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) ships an enhanced capability to defeat ballistic missiles in their terminal phase." Aegis is the naval component of the US BMD System. MDA and the US Navy cooperatively manage the Aegis BMD programme. The test came in response to North Korea's launch of an intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) that flew over Japan's northern island of Hokkaido and landed in the northern Pacific Ocean on August 29, 2017. The ballistic missile, known as Hwasong-12 or KN-17, travelled a distance of 2,700 km and reached an apogee of 550 km before falling in the Pacific Ocean. The launch was North Korea's first-ever overflight of Japan using a ballistic missile. South Korea also unveiled a video of its ballistic missile launches hours after the North's Hwasong-12 launch. In the clip, believed to have been recorded on August 24, 2017, three missiles with ranges between 500km and 800km were launched and hit targets on ground and at sea. South Korea's Agency for Defence Development said the launches are considered key components of the country's so-called "kill chain" pre-emptive strike capability.*

- On August 29, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres urged all countries to sign and ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

*In his message for the International Day against Nuclear Tests Guterres said, "More than 2,000 nuclear tests have been conducted over the past seven decades – from the South Pacific to North America, from Central Asia to North Africa. They have harmed some of the world's most vulnerable peoples and pristine ecosystems." The CTBT bans nuclear explosions on the Earth's surface, in the atmosphere, underwater and underground. The treaty was opened for signature in September 1996. Since then, 183 countries have signed and 166 countries have ratified the treaty. For its entry into force, 44 states mentioned in Annex 2 of the CTBT have to ratify the treaty. Out of the 44 states, all have signed with the exception of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), India, and Pakistan. Five of the 44 Annex 2 States have signed but not ratified the CTBT. These include China, Egypt, Iran, Israel, and the US. Guterres noted that a global norm has existed against nuclear testing based on voluntarily unilateral moratoriums for almost 20 years. He said that he applauded this restraint, but it was not enough. The International Day against Nuclear Tests is observed annually on August 29, following the*

*declaration of that day in a resolution unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2009.*

- On August 28, South Korean officials said that North Korea might be preparing its sixth nuclear weapon test.
- In an annual report released on August 25, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said North Korea has increased efforts to produce parts for a new nuclear reactor while continuing to operate the main existing nuclear reactor that provides fuel for its nuclear weapons.

*IAEA's report noted, "There were indications in the light-water reactor (LWR) construction yard of an increase in activities consistent with the fabrication of certain reactor components." According to the report, however, the Agency has not observed indications of the delivery or introduction of major reactor components into the reactor containment building. The new reactor is expected to be larger than the current experimental reactor at Yongbyon. The report also said that the country's experimental reactor was operational. In its previous report, the IAEA had indicated that the experimental reactor was refuelled in 2015 and its fuel rods would be removed two years later in 2017. The IAEA does not have access to North Korea and monitors its activities mainly through satellite imagery. In a related development, South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) informed South Korean lawmakers during a closed-door parliamentary session on August 28, 2017, that it has detected signs of North Korea preparing for another nuclear test at its Punggye-ri underground test site. NIS mentioned that North Korea "has completed its preparation to carry out a nuclear test at Tunnel 2 and Tunnel 3 of the Punggye-ri nuclear test site."*

- According to *The Indian Express* on August 27, a top US White House official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, indicated that the US is looking for ways to "more actively support" Indian membership into Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

*While responding to a series of questions on what steps the US has taken regarding India's NSG membership, the official said, "There is a meeting coming up shortly on this issue. The US is considering ways it can to support more actively India's membership in the NSG, because it is something that is very important to the US." He said that this issue was also discussed between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Donald Trump during their meeting at the White House in June 2017. NSG's Plenary Meeting in June 2017 failed to make a decision about India's application for membership. However, the group decided that it would discuss the issue of entry of states that are not party to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) in its informal meeting in November 2017. China, a key member of the NSG, remains opposed to India's NSG candidacy on the basis that the country is not a signatory to the NPT. China's opposition has made India's entry into the group difficult as decisions are made in the group on the principle of consensus.*

- On August 27, Israel's Defence Ministry said the country had finalised an agreement to buy 17 more F-35 stealth fighter jets from Lockheed Martin.

*The decision to buy the 17 additional F-35 fighter jets was made in November 2016. However, it took an additional nine months to finalise the deal with the US and Lockheed Martin. This was the second deal for the fighter jets. Initially, Israel ordered 33 F-35 jets. The first delivery of 5 jets was received in December 2016. The delivery of the remaining 29 jets is expected to be completed in 2021. According to the country's Defence Ministry, the delivery of the new batch of 17 jets would be completed by December 2024, which would bring Israel's air force fleet of F-35 jets to 50. In 2011, Israel and the US had signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), under which the US Administration committed to enable Israel to buy 75 F-35 jets. Israel's Defence Ministry did not specify the exact cost of the planes but said that in the recent deal, the price of the jets remained under \$100 million per plane for the first time. The Ministry indicated that due to the lower price, Israel Defence Forces (IDF) could consider buying more planes, expanding the fleet from two squadrons, as currently planned, to three squadrons. Israel receives over \$3 billion annually from the US in military aid. The two countries also agreed on a new aid package in early 2017 that would allow Israel to receive \$3.8 billion per year through 2028, the vast majority of which must be used on purchases from American defence companies.*

- On August 23, Martin Schulz, leader of the Social Democratic Party in Germany, vowed during his election campaign that he would remove US nuclear weapons from the country if he becomes Chancellor.

*Schulz said, "As Chancellor, I would push for the ejection of nuclear weapons stored in Germany." He said that US President Donald Trump's conflict with North Korea shows how urgently the world needs to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons and encourage disarmament. He called for the removal of about 20 nuclear warheads that are believed to be stationed in the western part of the country. Angela Merkel did not immediately comment on Schulz's remarks. However, Juergen Hardt, Merkel's transatlantic policy coordinator, criticised Schulz for overly simplifying a complicated topic in the heat of an election campaign. Hardt said, "I'd advise Martin Schulz against compromising Germany's position in its carefully calibrated international security architecture for a play to the gallery." He added that a credible nuclear deterrent is a pivotal element of NATO's defence posture and Germany will remain a partner to that. Schulz is desperately trying to find an issue, owing to his frustration about the party's inability to narrow the gap against Merkel in the polls to excite voters.*

- On August 23, Nikki Haley, US Ambassador to the United Nations, met with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) officials for what she described as a fact-finding mission as part of the US Administration's review of the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran.

*Haley did not talk to reporters as she arrived for her meeting with IAEA Director-General Yukiya Amano. However, a day earlier Haley said that the talks would help answer US questions*

*about the IAEA's inspections and monitoring. She said, "We have no decision made about whether to scrap the nuclear deal." She added, "What we are doing is trying to find out as much information as we can on the implementation of the nuclear agreement by Iran." Regarding Haley's visit, the IAEA said no public statements or news conference had been planned. In response, the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation, Ali Akbar Salehi, warned that the Islamic Republic could resume its production of highly enriched uranium within five days if the nuclear agreement was revoked. In April 2017, US President Donald Trump ordered a review of the implementation of the nuclear deal by Iran. Under US law, the State Department must notify Congress every 90 days of Iran's compliance with the nuclear deal, which was negotiated under President Barack Obama.*

- On August 22, the US imposed sanctions on Chinese and Russian firms and individuals for supporting North Korea's missile and nuclear weapons programmes.

*The US Treasury Department imposed sanctions against six Chinese-owned entities, one Russian, one North Korean and two other companies based in Singapore. The sanctions also targeted six individuals including four Russians, one Chinese and one North Korean. The Treasury Department said the sanctions targeted those helping already-designated individuals supporting North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes and its energy trade. Treasury Secretary Steven T. Mnuchin said in a statement, "Treasury will continue to increase pressure on North Korea by targeting those who support the advancement of nuclear and ballistic missile programmes and isolating them from the American financial system." In response, China said that the US should "immediately correct its mistake" of imposing unilateral sanctions on Chinese companies and individuals to avoid damaging bilateral cooperation. The US imposed sanctions on 10 companies and 6 individuals after the UN imposed tough sanctions against North Korea on August 5, 2017.*

- According to a report published in *Dawn* on August 20, India is set to invest billions of dollars to buy fighter jets, armoured vehicles, submarines and helicopters from foreign companies on the condition that the companies make their equipment in India.

*The report said that India has announced a new policy of inviting foreign defence manufacturers to set up their companies inside India as minority partners. The policy is aimed at creating jobs and bringing key defence technologies into India. Foreign companies have also shown interest in the opportunity. For example, Europe's Airbus Group has said that if it wins a contract worth several billion dollars, it would make India its global hub for multi-purpose choppers. Lockheed Martin said that if its F-16 fighter jets are selected it would "support the advancement of Indian manufacturing expertise." According to the report, India is following the example of other countries that have created defence sectors by backing a few big players with long-term defence orders. Under its strategic partnership policy, India will line up domestic companies that foreign players would have to choose from to set up local plants.*

- On August 20, Gen Zubair Mahmood Hayat, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, visited the National Engineering and Scientific Commission (Nescom) and praised it for its significant contributions towards developing state-of-the-art strategic missile systems.

*While expressing satisfaction over the development and progress of various strategic systems and capabilities, Gen Hayat reiterated that Pakistan was a peace-loving country but would not remain oblivious to its national security needs. He maintained that Pakistan would pursue a policy of developing credible minimum deterrence to counter threats to its security. Gen Hayat also highlighted the contribution of the Nescom in the development of various conventional weapon systems for the three armed services.*

- According to *Hindustan Times* on August 18, India dismissed reports of the country selling BrahMos anti-ship cruise missile to Vietnam.

*Raveesh Kumar, Spokesman at India's External Affairs Ministry, said that Vietnam's Foreign Ministry has already rejected the report, calling it incorrect. However, Vietnam's Foreign Ministry had not clearly denied the reports. When the spokesperson of Vietnam's Foreign Ministry, Le Thi Thu Hang, was asked regarding the procurement of BrahMos missiles, she said, "The Vietnam-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership has been actively developing in many fields, economics, trade, investment, culture, education, security and defence." She added, "Procurement of defence equipment by Vietnam is consistent with the policy of peace and self-defence and is the normal practice in the national defence." According to NDTV, this statement by Vietnam's government was interpreted by the country's local media as a confirmation of the deal between the two countries. Moreover, Senior Vietnamese journalists indicated that the first batch of missiles might already have arrived. India held negotiations with Vietnam over the procurement of BrahMos missiles in February 2017. Subhash Bhamre, Minister of State for Defence, confirmed the negotiations saying that India had held talks with the South East Asian country on the issue, while replying to a question in the Lok Sabha on whether the government has any plans to sell Akash and BrahMos missile to Vietnam. India's supply of BrahMos missile and its acquisition by Vietnam would negatively affect China's relationship with both the countries, since they are involved in territorial disputes with China.*

---Moiz Khan

## CHINA & EAST ASIA

### China

- During his visit to Beijing on August 16, the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joe Dunford said that peace with North Korea is a ‘possibility,’ but warned the US has ‘credible, viable military options’ for dealing with the errant regime.

*He said that whilst economic and diplomatic pressure is being built on North Korea to bring it to the negotiating table, a military solution to the situation is also under consideration. These statements come in the backdrop of renewed Chinese restrictions on North Korean imports and increased US pressure on Beijing ‘to do more’ about the situation in Pyongyang.*

### North Korea

- On August 29, North Korea fired a ballistic missile that flew over the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido before dropping into the Pacific Ocean about 1,180 km east of Cape Erimo.
- In a related development on August 29, Japan’s Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe warned that the launch of a missile over Japan’s airspace is an, “unprecedented, serious and grave threat” to the country and vowed “increased pressure on North Korea in cooperation with the international community” through the UN Security Council.
- On August 29, South Korea released public footage of its ballistic missiles launch, hours after North Korea’s launch of its own ballistic missile. The display of force came as South Korean President Moon Jae-in ordered his country’s military to demonstrate its “overwhelming” capabilities, should North Korea decide to attack.

*The intermediate-range missile, identified as the Hwasong-12, flew over Japan setting off warnings in the northern part of the country urging people to seek shelter. The development is a serious escalation of North Korea’s military posturing and has further intensified tensions in the Asia Pacific region. The UN Security Council, in an emergency meeting strongly condemned North Korea’s act as an “outrageous” threat, reiterating demands that Pyongyang halt its ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programmes. President Donald Trump also warned that all options are on the table for the US to respond to North Korea and added that the world has received North Korea’s latest message “loud and clear.” Meanwhile, China warned that the situation was “now at a tipping point approaching a crisis.” Earlier on August 26, 2017, North Korea also fired three short-range ballistic missiles into the sea off its east coast further prompting tensions with Washington after President Donald Trump said Pyongyang was starting to show some “respect”. The launch came as the US and South Korea are conducting joint military drills on the Korean peninsula.*

## **South Korea**

- On August 21, South Korean and US forces began computer-simulated military exercises.

*South Korean President Moon Jae-in described the 'Ulchi Freedom Guardian,' drill as routine and defensive in nature. The President further added that the exercises were not meant to provoke North Korea, but were rather an annual phenomenon undertaken by the US and South Korean militaries. The joint exercises that will last until August 31, 2017 will employ computer generated simulations to prepare both the armies in the event of a nuclear confrontation with North Korea amid the DPRKs growing nuclear ambition and threats of war to the US and its allies.*

## **Thailand**

- On August 28, *BBC* reported that Thailand's former PM Yingluck Shinawatra fled to Dubai ahead of the verdict in her trial over a rice subsidy scheme.

*The Supreme Court of Thailand issued an arrest warrant for Yingluck Shinawatra. She was impeached in 2015 over the rice scheme which lost between \$8 and \$20 billion in public funds, but helped rice farmers who are the Shinawatras' political support. However, Shinawatra has rejected the allegations. According to media reports, Shinawatra initially travelled to Cambodia before fleeing to Dubai.*

## **Myanmar**

- According to *Aljazeera* on August 26, at least 77 people, including 12 security personnel, were killed as Rohingya militants allegedly attacked border posts in northern Rakhine State in Myanmar.

*The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) claimed responsibility for the attacks accusing the Myanmar Forces of killings and rape. Myanmar's Army is accused of carrying out extrajudicial killings in the country's Rakhine state. The Rohingya community accuses Myanmar's forces of shooting indiscriminately at unarmed Rohingya men, women and children. Authorities in Myanmar said that an estimated 150 fighters from the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) carried out the attack.*

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

## EUROPE

- On August 31 The European Jewish Congress expressed “grave concern” over what it says is a rise in anti-Semitism in Poland and a “deteriorating relationship between the Polish government and the Jewish community.”

*The Brussels-based organisation said no Polish Government Minister met leaders of the Union of Jewish Communities in Poland, the official community, for over a year despite the rise in anti-Semitic incidents. “Across Europe, governments consult with the local official leaders of the community to seek their counsel and coordinate a response to anti-Semitism,” the group’s President, Moshe Kantor, said. “However, Poland stands out as an example of a leadership which appears to have little interest in opening a dialogue with the Jewish community.”*

- On August 31, the UK and EU expressed frustration at the pace of Brexit talks amid disagreement over the size of the UK’s “divorce bill.”

*EU negotiator Michel Barnier said the UK did not feel “legally obliged to honour its obligations” after Brexit. He said “no decisive progress” had been made on key issues, following the third round of talks. Brexit Secretary David Davis said the UK had a duty to its taxpayers to examine the EU’s demands. He also urged the EU to be “more imaginative and flexible” in its approach.*

- According to flash estimates by Eurostat on August 31, Euro zone inflation rose to 1.5% in August 2017, narrowly beating analyst expectations and edging closer to the European Central Bank’s target.

*The European Union’s statistics office projected consumer prices in the euro zone would reach its highest level in four months in August. The estimate is the highest rate since April, when inflation stood at 1.9%, and could raise expectations that the ECB will soon start to wind down its ultra-loose monetary policy.*

- On August 18, thirteen people died and dozens were injured when a van rammed into crowds in Barcelona’s famous Las Ramblas area.

*The vehicle sped along the pedestrian area popular with tourists, mowing down people and sending others fleeing for cover. Spain’s Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy said it was a “jihadist attack.” Two people were arrested, but police say neither was the driver, who fled on foot.*

- Terror attacks in Barcelona and continuing concerns about Donald Trump’s presidency put European stock markets under pressure on August 18.

*European markets opened lower following the overnight lead from Wall Street and Asia. Airline shares were the worst hit on fears these latest attacks could prove another blow to tourism. Meanwhile investors turning away from equities are heading into safer areas including the Japanese yen and gold.*

- On August 21 Spanish authorities shot and killed the suspected driver of the van that

plowed into crowds in Barcelona.

*Younas Abouyaaqoub was killed during an operation in Subirats, west of Barcelona. Police earlier said they had shot a man wearing an explosive belt but did not immediately identify him as Abouyaaqoub. A robot was sent to remove the explosives belt from the body before officers were cleared to approach it and make a positive identification. Police killed Abouyaaqoub in a sparsely populated rural area.*

- On August 26 thousands of people in Barcelona marched against militant Islamists who left 15 people dead in and around the city.

*King Felipe VI joined the demonstrators, alongside Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy. The King is the first Spanish sovereign to join a march since the monarchy was reinstated in the 1970s. Emergency workers and shop staff who helped during the attack at Las Ramblas also took pride of place.*

- Barcelona Mayor Ada Colau said on August 29 that memorial gifts left on Barcelona's Las Ramblas in a tribute to the victims of the Barcelona attacks would be given to the city museum.

*A large number of offerings filled the street, where a van attack killed more than a dozen people on August 18, 2017. Authorities began dismantling these, citing security reasons and a need to restore normality.*

- On August 28, British Prime Minister Theresa May made headlines when she said she wouldn't quit.

*May was speaking during a trip to Japan. She surprised some members of her Conservative Party by suggesting that she wants to remain Prime Minister indefinitely, perhaps even leading the party into the next general election, scheduled for 2022. Echoing former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, May said she was "not a quitter," and dismissed reports that she would step aside in 2019, after her country's planned withdrawal from the European Union.*

- According to the *Guardian* on August 28, campaign groups representing EU citizens seeking to protect their right to remain in the UK after Brexit warned they would reject any deal that gives the Home Office a say in their future.

*Campaign groups across the UK and Europe wrote to EU negotiators to say the Home Office "cannot be trusted" following an incident when the department erroneously sent 100 letters to EU nationals living in the UK ordering them to leave the country or face deportation. "If serious errors like this can be made whilst the UK is still administering a system based on EU freedom of movement rights, what is likely to happen when it is running its own system, having 'taken control again'?" asked the group "British in Europe" – a coalition of 11 citizen campaign groups across the EU and the UK.*

- On August 27 the Labour Party said it wants an extended Brexit transition for the UK.

*The Labour Party called for an indefinite “transition period” of de facto membership in the European Union even after the formal deadline for an exit in early 2019, clarifying for the first time the Party’s advocacy of a gradual and narrow break with the continental bloc. It was the latest in a series of signs that momentum for a clean break with the European Union has ended since the Conservatives lost their parliamentary majority in June 2017.*

- According to British Prime Minister Theresa May on August 23, the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice in the UK will come to an end with Brexit.

*As the government published new details of its position, the PM said the UK would “take back control” of its laws. Critics say it will be impossible to avoid European judges having a role in enforcing new agreements drawn up with the EU. Ministers say the two sides will keep “half an eye” on each other’s rulings.*

- On August 28, leaders from African and European countries met in Paris to try to build a new relationship aimed at cutting migration into Europe from Northern Africa in return for aid.

*France, Germany, Italy and Spain agreed to help Chad and Niger with border control to stem the flow of migrants through Libya and across the Mediterranean. The EU is struggling to agree to a coherent solution to the influx of people fleeing war, poverty and political upheaval in the Middle East and Africa, and the crisis is testing cooperation between member states. French President, Emmanuel Macron, who hosted the meeting, said afterwards that the issue was a “problem that concerns us all and that cannot be solved without us all”.*

- On August 26 a man was shot dead after attacking soldiers with a machete in Brussels.

*The Somali attacker later died in hospital. One of the soldiers suffered a hand injury. Soldiers have become a familiar sight on the streets of the Belgian capital since terror attacks which killed more than 30 people in 2016. The attack took place on Boulevard Emile Jacqmain in the centre of the city. Belgium’s Federal Prosecutor’s office said the attacker had not been “known for terrorist activities” but had shouted “Allahu Akbar” during the assault.*

- According to a report published in the *NY Times* on August 26, Greece is embracing China after being chastised by Europe.

*After struggling for years under austerity imposed by its European partners and a cold response from the United States, Greece has now embraced China. The Chinese offered multiple investments that have begun to pay off, not only economically but also by apparently giving China a political foothold in Greece, and by extension, in Europe. In 2016 Greece helped stop the EU from issuing a unified statement against Chinese aggression in the South China Sea. In June 2017, Athens prevented the bloc from condemning China’s human rights record. Days later it opposed tougher screening of Chinese investments in Europe.*

- On August 25, French President Emmanuel Macron criticised Poland saying Prime

Minister Beata Szydło's opposition to a revamp of EU rules on cheap labour was one of numerous policies marginalising her country.

*Speaking at Bulgaria's Black Sea port of Varna, Macron campaigned to end the "social dumping" that he argued occurs when workers from low-wage countries are hired in other EU nations at their own pay levels for extended periods.*

- On August 24 the Dutch police said they had responded to a terrorist threat against a rock concert in the city of Rotterdam after receiving concrete information from the Spanish authorities.

*Police arrested a 22-year-old suspect in the Brabant region, southeast of Rotterdam, in connection with an investigation into plans for an attack at the Maassilo events site, where Allah-Las, a band from California, was to play. The Rotterdam police called off the concert after receiving the information from Spain about the site and time of the potential attack, and they said that tip had led them to the suspect.*

---Amina Afzal

## MIDDLE EAST & WEST ASIA

### Iraq

- On August 31, Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi announced the liberation of Nineveh province from Daesh.
- On August 27, the Iraqi military fully reclaimed Tal Afar from Daesh, which was the group's last major urban stronghold in the country.

*Earlier, on August 26, 2017, Iraqi Forces announced defeat and ouster of Daesh from the city. The battle for Tal Afar lasted eight days. According to observers, the latest battles would likely determine how future fights against the militant group would be executed. After the liberation of Tal Afar and Nineveh, Daesh is left with control of just a few urban areas and some barren desert in central and western Iraq. The group has suffered a series of territorial losses in recent months. According to senior Iraqi military officers, Daesh has lost the will to fight in the face of a motivated and increasingly more professional Iraqi military. Iraqi forces have called on Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to authorise the launch of simultaneous battles for the remaining major cities under Daesh control. Abadi has, however, opted to reclaim cities one by one.*

- On August 23, Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu visited Baghdad to discuss Turkey-Iraq relations and the referendum announced by Iraqi Kurds.

*Cavusoglu called the upcoming Kurdish independence vote "a mistake" and urged Iraqi and Kurdish leaders to settle their differences "within the borders of Iraq". He also called on Kurdish officials to cancel their independence referendum to be held on September 25, 2017. He stressed that his visit to Baghdad was to underline the importance of Iraq's territorial and political integrity, which in the long run would also be beneficial to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). In June 2017, officials in Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region had decided to hold an independence referendum in the northern territory. On June 7, 2017, Masoud Barzani, the President of the Iraqi KRG, announced the vote on Twitter. The referendum is non-binding; however, it is against the Iraqi Constitution.*

### Israel

- According to Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu on August 28, Israel would not evacuate the settlements built in the occupied West Bank.

*Speaking at an event commemorating the 50th anniversary of Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territory, Netanyahu said, "We are here to stay forever. There will be no more uprooting of settlements." The development followed a visit of the Occupied lands by a US delegation aimed at bringing Israelis and the Palestinians back to the negotiating table.*

*According to Abbas' foreign affairs advisor, Nabil Shaath, the Americans had asked for a three-to-four-month "grace period" in order to prepare and present the so-called peace plan. About 600,000 Israelis live in over 230 settlements built illegally since the 1967 occupation of Palestinian territories.*

## **Jordan**

- During their meeting at the Royal Palace in Amman on August 21, Jordan's King Abdullah II and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called for new 'serious and effective peace talks' between Israel and the Palestinians.

*Both the leaders urged negotiations between Palestine and Israel to end the conflict on the basis of a two-state solution to assure an independent Palestinian state with June 1967 borders and East Jerusalem as the capital. They said that new peace negotiations must take place according to a precise timetable and should be based on international resolutions. They also expressed their 'unequivocal rejection of any attempt to change the legal and historical value of the Al Aqsa Mosque and any unilateral Israeli action threatening the identity of east Jerusalem.' Talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians have stalled since the failure of US mediation in 2014.*

## **Lebanon**

- On August 19, Lebanese troops launched an offensive, 'Dawn of Jurud' against Daesh on the country's eastern border with Syria to eradicate the militants from their stronghold.

*Lebanese Army Chief, General Joseph Aoun announced the launch of the operation. The title of the offensive refers to two mountainous border areas, Jurud Ras Baalbek and Jurud al-Qaa, where Daesh has been active. Militants have long been operating in this mountainous region near the Syrian border. In 2014, militants invaded the border town of Arsal, capturing 30 Lebanese soldiers and police. Since then Security Forces in the region have come under regular attack.*

## **Libya**

- On August 23, at least 11 people were beheaded in an attack on a checkpoint being monitored by forces of Libyan military commander Khalifa Haftar.

*Daesh claimed responsibility for the attack via its 'Amaq' propaganda channel on the Telegram messaging app, saying its fighters had killed or wounded 21 members of Haftar's militia. According to Haftar's spokesman, Colonel Ahmad al-Mesmari, the militants attacked the Al-Jufra region, 500 kms south of Tripoli at dawn beheading at least nine soldiers and two civilians.*

## **Qatar**

- During a press conference with his Russian counterpart on August 30, Qatari Foreign Minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani said that Qatar is willing to negotiate an end to the ongoing Gulf crisis, but Saudi Arabia and other countries imposing sanctions on Doha are not open to mediation.

*Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov was on a visit to Kuwait, UAE and Qatar to support Kuwaiti mediation between the conflicting Gulf countries. However, his visit showed no signs of easing tensions between the Gulf Arab states. Sheikh Mohammad said, "Qatar maintains its position that an end to this crisis can only be achieved through a constructive dialogue ... but the blockading countries are not responding to any efforts being conducted by Kuwait or other friendly countries." He appreciated Russia's efforts to support Kuwaiti mediation. According to Sheikh Mohammad, Qatar plans to bolster trade with Russia, one of the world's biggest gas exporters, and that Qatar could no longer rely on neighbouring states to support its economy or guarantee food security. Lavrov said if face-to-face negotiations started, Russia would be ready to contribute to the mediation and that it was in Russia's interest "for the GCC to be united and strong".*

- On August 24, Qatar restored full diplomatic relations with Iran and vowed to send its ambassador back to Tehran.

*Iran welcomed Doha's decision. Tehran has been sending food to Qatar and has allowed its airplanes to use Iranian airspace. Qatar's decision is against the demands of Arab nations trying to isolate Doha. According to observers, restoring diplomatic ties would anger those opposing Qatar in the regional dispute, including Saudi Arabia. In an attempt to show solidarity with Saudi Arabia, Qatar pulled its ambassador from Tehran in early 2016 after Saudi Arabia's execution of a prominent Shia cleric sparked attacks on two Saudi diplomatic posts in Iran.*

- Dawn reported on August 23 that Chad has announced its decision to shut down Qatar's embassy in the country giving a 10-day deadline to Qatari diplomats to leave the country.

*Chad has accused Qatar of trying to destabilise the country via its northern neighbour Libya. A statement issued by Chad's Foreign Ministry said, "In order to safeguard peace and security in the region, Chad calls on Qatar to cease all actions that could undermine its security as well as those of the countries of the Lake Chad basin and the Sahel." Another African country, Senegal said that it had reinstated its Ambassador to Qatar after having recalled him three months ago, in an attempt to encourage a peaceful resolution to the crisis.*

## **Saudi Arabia**

- During a telephonic conversation with Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz on August 30, US President Donald Trump urged him and all the parties in the Qatar dispute to find a diplomatic solution to the regional standoff.

*According to a White House statement, Trump told the Saudi King that a diplomatic resolution was necessary in order to fulfil a commitment Washington and its regional allies had made to stay united while fighting terror. According to analysts, the crisis is the fallout of President Trump's June 2017 visit to Riyadh. President Trump himself pointed this out in a tweet during the conflict's early days. On June 6, 2017, President Trump had tweeted, "During my recent trip to the Middle East I stated that there can no longer be funding of Radical Ideology. Leaders pointed to Qatar — look!"*

## **Syria**

- On August 26, Syrian Kurdish authorities laid the groundwork for the first local elections in the federal system they are establishing in the country's north.

*On the sidelines of a summit in the Kurdish-majority city of Qamishli, co-chair of the federal system's Constituent Assembly, Hadiya Youssef said three rounds of elections would be held starting in September 2017. Kurdish, Arab, Syriac and other parties participated in the meeting to discuss how each of the three electoral phases would be managed. According to Youssef, the first round on September 22, 2017, would include voting for representatives on the neighbourhood level. Elections for executive councils for towns and regions are planned for November 3, 2017. Then, on January 19, 2018, they would elect Legislative Councils for each of the three cantons, as well as a single joint Legislative Assembly. Legislative Assemblies would have four-year terms, but local delegates and executive councils would have two-year terms. In 2013, following the Syrian Army's withdrawal from the northern territory, Kurdish authorities declared three autonomous cantons in the area. In 2016, leading Kurdish parties announced they would establish a federal system across the cantons. The decision was criticised by the Syrian regime, the opposition, and local rivals. Youssef defended the plan, saying it was not aimed at breaking Syria apart.*

- According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights on August 22, dozens of civilians were killed during two days of intense US-led strikes on Raqqa.

*The coalition acknowledged heavy bombing in support of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) alliance with more than 250 air strikes over a period of one week. According to monitors, the SDF has so far captured just under 60 % of Raqqa. Earlier, on August 21, 2017, US-led air*

*strikes killed at least 42 civilians in several neighbourhoods in Raqqa. According to the Observatory, nineteen children and 12 women were among the dead. Speaking during a visit to Baghdad, US Defence Secretary, James Mattis insisted Daesh tactics were to blame for placing civilians in danger. He said, "We are the good guys and the innocent people on the battlefield; know the difference." According to the US-led coalition, which operates in both Syria and Iraq, 624 civilians have been killed in both the countries in its strikes since 2014. However, the rights groups suggest the toll is much higher. An activist group, 'Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently' (RBSS), also reported heavy bombing during August 2017. Hussam Essa of RBSS said, "Unfortunately, civilians have no way to protect themselves. All they can do is try to hide in whatever shelter they can and avoid going out into the street as much as possible."*

## **Turkey**

- During his meeting with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Ankara on August 28, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Israel must stop its occupation of Palestinian territories, which undermines the two-state solution to the conflict.

*Erdogan described the two-state solution as the "historical responsibility of the international community to the Palestinian people." He also expressed Ankara's readiness to support efforts aimed at reviving the so-called peace process. He said, "The key to success here is protecting the rights of the Palestinians." Erdogan said Turkey believed that the path to permanent peace was the realisation of a sovereign Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. President Abbas reiterated the Palestinians' right to "live with dignity and sovereignty in an independent state with East Jerusalem [al-Quds] as its capital." He also thanked Erdogan and the Turkish nation for their firm "stance against the Israeli measures in the Al-Aqsa Mosque and their provocations of Muslims."*

- On August 24, Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of Turkey's Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), warned that the Iraqi Kurds' plans for an independence referendum could provide a reason for Ankara to launch a war on the autonomous Iraqi region.

*According to Bahçeli, Ankara should oppose plans by the leader of Iraq's Kurdistan region, Masoud Barzani, to hold the referendum in September 2017, adding that the move could ignite turbulence in Turkey's southeast, which is populated by millions of Kurds. The central government in Baghdad is also opposed to the vote and countries including Iran and Turkey have expressed concerns about the planned referendum, arguing it could create further instability in the region.*

- On August 23, Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan met US Secretary of Defence, James Mattis in Ankara to discuss the Syrian crisis and other developments in the region.

- During a speech on August 22, Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Turkey would thwart any attempt by Kurdish militia to carve out a Kurdish state in northern Syria.

*Erdogan said, "We do not and will never allow a so-called state to be established by the Kurdish Democratic Party (PYD) and People's Protection Units (YPG) in Northern Syria. They want to establish a terror corridor in northern Syria reaching the Mediterranean." During their meeting, Erdogan told Mattis that the ongoing military cooperation between the US and the Kurdish YPG made him feel "uneasy". Turkey considers the YPG as the Syrian affiliate of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Turkey, the US and the EU condemn the PKK as a terrorist organisation. Ankara also regards the Kurdish YPG and the PYD as terror groups. However, the US is closely allied with the groups in the battle against militants in Syria. According to observers, Ankara may extend an operation against the YPG to clear it from the town of Afrin, where Erdogan has said its presence is a threat to the Turkish state. During their meetings, Mattis and Turkish officials agreed on respecting the territorial integrity of both Syria and Iraq, amid moves by the administration of Iraq's northern semi-autonomous Kurdish region to hold an independence referendum.*

- On August 16, Iranian Chief of Staff and Military Commander of Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), General Mohammad Bageri held talks with his Turkish counterpart, General Hulusi Akar and Defence Minister, Nurettin Canikli in Ankara over cooperation in the Syrian conflict and counter-terrorism.

*General Bageri became the first Iranian Military Commander to visit Turkey since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Accompanied by intelligence officers, Bageri was also received by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and also met with other top government officials. According to General Bageri, Ankara and Tehran have agreed on sharing intelligence and "cooperating operationally" in the fight against terrorism. Turkey's ties with Washington have been strained due to the latter's support for Kurdish fighters in Syria, and according to observers, the rare visit by the Iranian General is a sign that Ankara is increasing cooperation with other powers including Iran and Russia. Turkey and Iran have supported opposite sides in the Syrian conflict, with Iran-backed fighters helping President Bashar al-Assad to drive back rebels, including some supported by Ankara. In May 2017, Turkey, Iran and Russia had agreed to set up 'de-escalation zones' in Syria in an attempt to stop the fighting in some parts of the country.*

## **Yemen**

- On August 26, the Saudi-led Arab military coalition admitted responsibility for the August 25, 2017 air strike in Sanaa that killed 14 civilians. The coalition described the air strike as a 'technical mistake'.

*The attack was the latest in a series of deadly raids on residential areas of Yemen. There has been strong condemnation of the raids that the coalition has been blamed for. The coalition said in a review of the strike investigators had found 'that a technical mistake was behind the accident'. Witnesses and medics in Sanaa said several children were among 14 people killed in the air strike that destroyed residential blocks in Sanaa. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) condemned the raid as 'outrageous'. Amnesty International's Middle East Research Director, Lynn Maalouf, said the coalition "rained down bombs on civilians while they slept". She called on the UN to take action against Saudi Arabia over the list of civilian facilities struck in deadly air raids over the past two years. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), nearly 8,400 civilians have been killed and 47,800 wounded since the Saudi-led alliance intervened in Yemen. The Saudi-led alliance has increased the number of air strikes against the Houthi rebels and their allies in and around Sanaa.*

*---Muhammad Shoaib*

## SOUTH ASIA

### Pakistan

#### External

- On August 21, US President Donald Trump announced his new strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia and accused Pakistan of harbouring “safe havens for terrorist organisations, the Taliban and other groups that pose a threat to the region and beyond.” President Trump also called for “more” support from India in Afghanistan.
- On August 26, General John Nicholson, the NATO commander in Afghanistan, claimed that the US was aware of Afghan Taliban leadership’s presence in Peshawar and Quetta, and warned that the military would continue to put pressure on Taliban sanctuaries inside and outside Afghanistan.
- On August 24, Pakistan’s National Security Committee (NSC) “out rightly rejected US President Donald Trump’s allegations and insinuations made against Pakistan.” According to the NSC, scapegoating Pakistan would not help stabilise Afghanistan. The NSC instead called on the US to carry out “effective and immediate military efforts” to eliminate terrorist sanctuaries, specifically in eastern Afghanistan which are responsible for fomenting terrorism in Pakistan.
- On August 30, the National Assembly of Pakistan passed a unanimous resolution rejecting “hostile” remarks against Pakistan made by US President and top US commander in Afghanistan. The resolution called on the government to consider suspending supply lines to the US-led NATO mission in neighbouring Afghanistan. It also condemned the Trump Administration’s efforts to provide more space to India in Afghanistan and termed it, “highly detrimental to regional stability.” The resolution also rejected the US claims of giving Pakistan billions of dollars in aid, noting that Pakistan’s economy has suffered a loss of more than \$ 123 billion in the war against terrorism.

*A large part of President Trump’s speech in which he outlined his new South Asia strategy was focused on Pakistan. He accused Pakistan of receiving billions of dollars in US aid even as it continues to house the terrorists that the US is fighting against. In a direct reference to Pakistan’s nuclear weapons, President Trump said, “We must prevent nuclear weapons and materials from coming into the hands of terrorists and being used against the US.” He also called on Pakistan’s arch enemy India to “help us more with Afghanistan, especially in the area of economic assistant and development.” Pakistan’s National Security Committee completely rejected the proposition that India could play a constructive role in Afghanistan and made it clear that India cannot be a “net security provider in the South Asia region when it has conflictual relationships with all its neighbours and is pursuing a policy of destabilising Pakistan.” Policy makers in Pakistan have suggested that continuous efforts by the US to push India to play a broader role inside Afghanistan could imply an end to the Washington-Islamabad*

*cooperation in Afghanistan. President Trump has jeopardised US-Pak relations and there is now increasing rhetoric in Pakistan to choke the NATO supply route into Afghanistan.*

*Reinforcing US President Donald Trump's warning, US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson also warned Pakistan on August 22, 2017, that the US could end its status as a major non-NATO ally if Islamabad fails to crack down on the Taliban and other extremist groups. However, he also called on India to "take some steps of rapprochement" for improving ties with Pakistan. President Trump's allegations against Pakistan drew immediate response from Beijing where Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Hua Chunying said that Pakistan was on the front line in the struggle against terrorism and had made "great sacrifices" and "important contributions" in the fight. She also called on the international community to recognise Pakistan's anti-terrorism efforts.*

*On Afghanistan, Trump warned there would be no "blank check" for American engagement in the country and pledged to end a strategy of "nation-building" and instead pursue a policy aimed at killing terrorists. He signalled the US would increase troop levels in Afghanistan, but offered no indication of how many more US soldiers would be deployed. Meanwhile, Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov termed the new US strategy for Afghanistan "a dead end."*

- Quoting the United States Embassy spokesperson, Richard Snesire on August 28, *The Nation* reported that Pakistan postponed the official visit of Alice Wells, the US Acting Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia to Islamabad.

*According to media reports, Alice Wells was scheduled to visit Islamabad on August 28, 2017 for a meeting with the country's civilian and military leadership. However, the visit was postponed on the request of the government of Pakistan following President Trump's speech in which he outlined new US policy for Afghanistan and South Asia and accused Pakistan of harbouring terrorists. Pakistan strongly rejected allegations that there were sanctuaries for terrorists in Pakistan. Moreover, Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Khawaja Asif, who was due to visit the US for bilateral talks with his counterpart Rex Tillerson, also delayed his visit to the US. It was decided at a meeting of the National Security Committee on August 24, 2017, that Foreign Minister, Asif would now visit China, Russia and Turkey to discuss the new US policy for Afghanistan and South Asia. Quoting the Foreign Minister, media reports said that Pakistan is set to reach out to China, Russia and other countries of the region to get a "regional consensus and a solution" on Afghanistan. On August 28, 2017, Pakistan's Foreign Secretary, Tehmina Janjua held a meeting with China's special envoy on Afghan affairs and discussed the Afghan crisis. There is now increased frustration in Pakistan over the Trump Administration's repeated accusations against Pakistan.*

- According to *The News* on August 30, Former President, Pervez Musharraf claimed that George Tenet, former director of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), showed him photographic evidence of Pakistani nuclear scientist, Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan's involvement in the proliferation of nuclear material outside Pakistan.

*Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan rejected the claims made by former President Musharraf and called him a "liar and traitor". In 2004, US intelligence reports suggested that an underground network of*

*suppliers of nuclear technology led by Pakistani nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan, shared equipment with Iran, North Korea and Libya. The Pakistani government denied it authorised any transfers of weapons technology, but said individuals may have done so for their own profit. The proliferation issue is being raised at a time when North Korea's nuclear threat has intensified.*

- On August 29, Foreign Minister, Khawaja Asif said that India is not fulfilling its commitments regarding the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) and urged the World Bank to play its role in ensuring the implementation of the Accord.

*The Foreign Minister was speaking at a seminar on IWT organised by the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad (ISSI). He stressed that Pakistan would not accept any unilateral plan by India to modify the terms of the Treaty. Khawaja Asif further said that Pakistan has conveyed its concerns regarding construction of hydroelectric and storage projects by India.*

- Speaking at a meeting of the Quadrilateral Counter Terrorism Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) in Dushanbe on August 27, Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa said that terrorism can only be defeated through intelligence sharing and coordinated and effective border management.

*The Army Chief highlighted Pakistan's achievements in the fight against terrorism for eliminating terrorists' safe havens from its soil. The meeting was attended by senior military leadership of member countries, including China, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. General Bajwa also met Afghan Chief of General Staff, General Sharif Yaftali on the sidelines of the QCCM meeting and discussed the prevailing situation in Afghanistan. During the discussion, General Bajwa stressed that his country cannot bring the Afghan war into Pakistan and said that Pakistan has already started unilateral border security measures, including fencing the border along the Pak-Afghan border area. In April 2016, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan agreed to establish the "quadrilateral mechanism" to coordinate with and support each other in a range of areas, including intelligence sharing, anti-terrorist capability building, joint anti-terrorist training and personnel training, and agreed that the coordination and cooperation would be exclusive to the four countries.*

- During his visit to Saudi Arabia on August 23, Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi held a meeting with Saudi Crown Prince, Muhammad bin Salman Al Saud and discussed bilateral ties and the regional situation.

*The two leaders also discussed global issues of mutual concern and issues facing the Muslim Ummah. The Crown Prince acknowledged Pakistan's efforts and sacrifices in its resolute fight against terrorism. Meanwhile, PM Abbasi reaffirmed Pakistan's continued support for the Kingdom's sovereignty. This was the first foreign visit of Abbasi as the Prime Minister of Pakistan.*

- During his visit to Pakistan on August 18, US Central Command Chief, General Joseph Votel, held talks with Pakistan's civilian and military leadership and emphasised the need for the two countries to work together to ensure "greater regional security and stability."

*Following the meeting between General Votel and Pakistan's Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, the Pakistan Army reaffirmed its commitment to cooperating with US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan and the Afghan Security Forces for peace in the region. According to a statement issued by the US Embassy on August 19, 2017, the general said, "Military cooperation, and even stronger cooperation with Pakistan, is very important." General Votel also visited North Waziristan, where he was briefed about the Army's operations in the region and Pak-Afghan border security mechanism through enhanced surveillance measures. General Votel's visit to Pakistan comes at a time when the Trump Administration is set to announce its new war strategy in Afghanistan.*

- According to Pakistan's Foreign Office on August 16, Foreign Secretary, Tehmina Janjua visited Kabul for bilateral political consultations with her Afghan Counterpart Deputy Foreign Minister, Hekmat Khalil Karzai.

*The two sides called for an increase in the level of mutual trust and agreed that peace and stability in Afghanistan was critical for the region. During her visit, Foreign Secretary Janjua also called on Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and discussed bilateral relations and the geo strategic situation in the region. Janjua emphasised that there was no military solution to the Afghan conflict and stressed the importance of a credible political settlement. She also underlined the need for strengthening border management and early humane repatriation of Afghan refugees. On his part, President Ashraf Ghani raised the issue of "cross-border shelling and asked the visiting official to share his concerns with her country's new leadership". In a related development on August 16, 2017, a meeting of the National Security Committee was held in Islamabad following which Pakistan reiterated its resolve to work at all levels with the people and government of Afghanistan.*

- On August 16, the United States designated Hizbul Mujahideen as a terrorist organisation led by an internationally recognised terrorist.
- In a related development on August 17, Pakistan's Foreign Office spokesman, Nafees Zakaria said the designation of Kashmiri group Hizbul Mujahideen as a terrorist organisation is "completely unjustified."

*Zakaria reiterated Pakistan's "moral, diplomatic and political support to Kashmiri people's struggle" and said the US decision did not take into account "the 70-year struggle of Kashmiris." He said it is India which is responsible for human rights violations in Kashmir and stressed that the primary issue in Pakistan-India relations is that of Kashmir "which has to be resolved through dialogue". Hizbul Mujahideen, formed in 1989, is an indigenous Kashmiri group fighting in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK), against Indian rule.*

## **Pakistan Internal**

- On August 31, an anti-terrorism court (ATC) announced the verdict in the Benazir Bhutto assassination case, sentencing two senior police officers, Saud Aziz and Khurram Shahzad to 17 years imprisonment for being “negligent”. The court also declared former President Pervez Musharraf an “absconder” in the case and ordered authorities to confiscate his properties.

*The court acquitted the five suspects belonging to Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) citing a lack of evidence. Benazir Bhutto was assassinated in a gun and bomb attack at Liaquat Bagh in Rawalpindi on December 27, 2007. Her murder trial began in February 2008. At the time, Musharraf’s government accused TTP chief, Baitullah Mehsud for the assassination who denied any involvement. Mehsud was killed in a US drone attack in South Waziristan in 2009.*

- On August 25, *Dawn* reported that the Council of Common Interest (CCI) approved provisional results of the sixth census that put the country’s population at 207.77 million with an annual growth rate of 2.4 per cent.

*The provisional summary of census results showed an increase of 57% in the country’s population since 1998. The Council of Common Interest began Pakistan’s sixth population census in March 2017.*

- On August 27, two civilians were killed in Azad Jammu and Kashmir after shelling by Indian forces from across the Line of Control (LoC).

*According to Pakistan’s Foreign Office, thus far India has committed more than 580 ceasefire violations in 2017.*

- According to *Dawn* on August 23, the government revealed its plans to amend constitutional provisions dealing with the qualifications and disqualifications for members of parliament.

*The Law and Justice Minister, Zahid Hamid made the announcement in the National Assembly. The development follows the Supreme Court’s decision to disqualify the former PM Nawaz Sharif in the Panama case under Article 62 (1) (f). In a separate development on August 21, 2017, former premier Sharif has also refused to appear before the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) until a verdict is passed on the review petitions submitted by his family in the Supreme Court.*

- On August 16, US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson alleged that religious freedom was under attack in Pakistan, where more than two dozen people were on death row or serving life imprisonment for blasphemy.

*Announcing the contents of the 2016 US report on religious freedom, Tillerson said that he hoped the new PM of Pakistan, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, would take action to reduce the imminent threat to the ostracised Ahmadiya community which is denied status of ‘Muslim’ under the country’s*

laws. He also urged the PM to take steps to protect other religious minorities. The report also mentioned the attacks on Muslims by cow vigilantes in India, the human rights violations by USA's Gulf ally, Saudi Arabia and also condemned Israel's recent actions in Jerusalem.

## **India**

- On August 28, India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) announced that "expeditious disengagement of border personnel at the face-off site at Doklam has been agreed to and is ongoing."

*Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Hua Chunying said that Indian troops had withdrawn from the Doklam region and added, "China will continue to exercise sovereignty rights to protect territorial sovereignty in accordance with the rules of the historical boundary." However, it is unclear whether Beijing had offered any concessions to New Delhi, for instance agreeing to stop the construction of the road. Tensions between China and India intensified in June 2017 when China began building a road in Doklam, which New Delhi claims is Bhutanese territory. Bhutan asked India, which backs Bhutan's territorial claims, for assistance. India in return deployed its troops across the border. China denounced the Indian move as a direct infringement of its sovereignty and demanded an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of its forces from the area. China has maintained that the Dong Lang area is on its side of the border under the 1890 "Convention Between Great Britain and China Concerning Sikkim and Tibet."*

- On August 25, at least 32 people were killed when clashes broke out in the Indian state of Haryana after a court convicted a controversial religious leader, Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh of raping two of his followers.

*The violence occurred as followers of Singh clashed with the government authorities. Singh is the spiritual leader of Dera Sacha Sauda, a spiritual sect founded in 1948. The group campaigns for vegetarianism and against drug addiction and has followers worldwide.*

## **Afghanistan**

- On August 25, at least 20 worshippers were killed following a suicide bomb and gun attack at the Imam Zaman mosque in Kabul.

*The Daesh militant group claimed the attack. The attack took place when Shia Muslims had gathered at the mosque for Friday prayers. The attack is the latest to target Afghanistan's Shiite community. Whilst the Daesh militant group seeks to strengthen its foothold in Afghanistan, there has been a marked increase in attacks against Shia Muslim living in the country. Earlier in July 2017, at least 32 people were killed when Daesh militants attacked a Shia mosque in the province of Herat.*

- On August 27, at least 13 people were killed after a Taliban suicide bomber attacked a convoy of Afghan soldiers in southern Helmand province.

*It was the latest in a series of blows to Afghanistan's security forces highlighting insecurity in Afghanistan.*

- On August 22, General John Nicholson, NATO Commander in Afghanistan welcomed the launch of the Afghan Army's new special operations corps.

*General Nicholson said the beginning of the corps would further bolster Afghan security forces' capabilities against the militants. According to NATO's Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, the Special Forces division, which currently consists of two special operations brigades will add two more brigades under its command and control. Afghanistan has announced a four-year security plan to improve its security forces in the next few years.*

- On August 22, the Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid warned "If America doesn't withdraw its troops, soon Afghanistan will become another graveyard for this superpower in the 21st century."

*The warning follows after US President Donald Trump's announcement of sending thousands more American troops to Afghanistan. Mujahid added that America should think of an exit strategy "instead of continuing the war."*

*---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer*

## UNITED NATIONS

- On August 29, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres reiterated his call for a political solution to the Middle East conflict that would end Israel's occupation of Palestinian land and help create an independent Palestinian state.

*After meeting with Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah in Ramallah, Guterres said, "It is my deep belief that it is essential to restart a serious and credible political process of negotiation aiming at that objective – the two-state solution – as it is also important to create conditions on the ground to improve the situation of Palestinian populations." He mentioned that it was Israel's settlement activity that represents a major obstacle to the implementation of the two-state solution. The UN Chief also expressed a concern about the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, and pledged to support the effort towards creating conditions for a unified Palestinian leadership both in West Bank and Gaza.*

- On August 23, the United Nations body monitoring implementation of the global convention on prohibiting racial discrimination called on the US and its leadership to "unequivocally and unconditionally" reject and condemn racist hate speech and crimes in Charlottesville and throughout the country.

*Anastasia Crickley, Chairperson of UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), said, "We are alarmed by the racist demonstrations, with overtly racist slogans, chants and salutes by white nationalists, neo-Nazis, and the Ku Klux Klan, promoting white supremacy and inciting racial discrimination and hatred." In a decision issued under its 'early warning and urgent action' procedure, the UN Committee, monitoring the implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, stated that there should be no place in the world for racist white supremacist ideas or any similar ideologies that reject the core human rights principles of human dignity and equality. The UN experts asked the US authorities to undertake concrete measures to address the root causes of the proliferation of such racist manifestations. CERD warned that a failure to address the situation could fuel the spread of racist discourse and incidents in the US. US President Donald Trump has been under constant condemnation after he blamed both white supremacists and anti-fascist protesters for violence that broke out at a rally in Charlottesville in early August 2017.*

- On August 17, the United Nations refugee agency called for urgent additional support as the number of refugees from South Sudan in Uganda passed one million.

*The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said in a statement that an average of 1,800 South Sudanese have been arriving in Uganda every day over the past 12 months. Apart from Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Central African Republic are also hosting South Sudanese refugees. The UNHCR indicated that more than 85% of the refugees who have arrived in Uganda are women and children below the age of 18 years. The UNHCR underscored that \$674 million is needed for the support of South*

*Sudanese refugees in Uganda in 2017, but so far only 21% of this amount has been received. The funding shortfall in Uganda is now significantly impacting the ability to deliver life-saving aid and key basic services, the UNHCR elaborated. According to the UN Agency, more than two million South Sudanese have fled to neighbouring countries, while another two million people are estimated to be internally displaced since the eruption of South Sudan's crisis in Juba in 2013.*

- On August 16, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) announced that a global convention on mercury aimed at protecting millions of children and infants from possible neurological and health damage has entered into force.

*The Minamata Convention commits state parties to specific measures including banning new mercury mines, phasing-out existing ones, regulating artisanal and small-scale gold mining, and reducing emissions and mercury use. The convention also stipulates conditions for interim storage and disposal of mercury waste since the element is indestructible. The UNEP said, "Governments that are party to the Convention are now legally bound to take a range of measures to protect human health and the environment by addressing mercury throughout its lifecycle." The Convention entered into force 90 days after the fiftieth party ratified it on May 18, 2017. There are 74 parties to the Convention and 128 countries have signed it. Pakistan is a signatory to the convention. The country signed the Convention on October 10, 2013 but has yet to ratify it.*

--- Moiz Khan