

March 1 – March 15

AREA BRIEF

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**STRATEGIC STUDIES  
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## CONTENTS

<b>Foreword (General Observations).....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Americas.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Arms Control and Disarmament.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>China and East Asia.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Europe.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Middle East &amp; West Asia.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>South Asia (I).....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>South Asia (II).....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>United Nations.....</b>	<b>41</b>

## Area Briefs: 1-15 March 2018

### General Observations

#### *Pakistan*

- DG IAEA paid a three-day visit to Pakistan during the second week of March and met with PM Abbasi on 12 March. Issues relating to Pakistan-IAEA cooperation were discussed with the PM also appreciating the role of the IAEA in promoting the peaceful uses of nuclear technology. DG Amano commended Pakistan's nuclear safety measures citing that Pakistan had the "most advanced safety features' reactors". While speaking at a seminar on The Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy and Pakistan he acknowledged that Pakistan "is an experienced user of peaceful nuclear technology. You have the knowledge; you have the pool of well-trained people to do their job."
- Tensions between Pakistan and India expanded beyond the LoC and Working Boundary attacks by Indian forces as the Indian government and its intelligence agencies started harassing Pakistani diplomats and their families in New Delhi in clear violation of international conventions including the Vienna Conventions. In response, Pakistan recalled its High Commissioner for consultations on 15 March. Earlier, the Indian security forces had also fired at UNMOGIP personnel as they were visiting the LoC.
- In an attempt to ease tensions and tone down the rhetoric emanating from both sides, on 8 March Foreign Secretary Janjua held talks with US officials in Washington DC. Afghanistan was central to these dialogues and both sides not only stressed the need for restarting the reconciliation process in that country but also welcomed President Ashraf Ghani's offer for unconditional dialogue to the Afghan Taliban. Unfortunately, the US's accusatory rhetoric shows no signs of abating.
- A terrorist attack struck Lahore again on 14 March when a suicide bomber targeted a police check post in Raiwind. Eight people, including 5 policemen were killed. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) took responsibility for the attack. Pakistan maintains that the TTP have their hideouts in Afghanistan, which are used for planning attacks against Pakistan.
- On 12 March, a 30-member Iranian delegation led by Foreign Minister Javad Zarif visited Islamabad. The delegation included business sector representatives. While Zarif had meetings with the civil and military leaderships, the visit itself remained low key with very limited media coverage. One of the major issues of contention between Pakistan and Iran is the gas pipeline project on which Pakistan has been dragging its feet

under US pressure. Iran has now threatened to seek international arbitration on the project seeking damages from Pakistan if the latter does not move to complete its side of the undertaking.

### *International*

- The disagreements that had been noticeable between US Secretary of State Tillerson and President Trump on issues like the Iran nuclear deal, North Korea and the steel and aluminium tariffs, came to a head with Tillerson being fired from his post through a Trump tweet on 13 March. Trump replaced Tillerson with CIA Director Pompeo. It is rumoured that McMaster may also be sent home soon by Trump.
- Russia – EU tensions rose after it was discovered that a former Russian double agent, Skripal, settled in the UK died after being subjected to nerve agent Novichok, in Salisbury on 4 March. The UK government claimed he was targeted by Russia and PM May announced a series of measures against Russia including the expulsion of 23 Russian diplomats.

In solidarity, on 15 March, the leaders of France, Germany and the US said there was “no plausible alternative explanation” to Russia having been behind the nerve agent attack in the UK. They termed this as an attack on UK sovereignty.

In response, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov stated Russia would soon expel UK diplomats and the Spokesperson for the Russian Foreign Ministry stated that “London has still not provided the Russian side with any details or information that could shed at least some light on what happened.” Despite some experts claiming that Novichok had only ever been produced at one site in Russia, the Russians informed the UN Security council that Russia had never produced Novichok.

- The Trump Administration also moved for the first time against Russia imposing sanctions, on 15 March, against 19 Russians on charges of interference in the 2016 US presidential elections and alleged cyber attacks.
- After months of negotiations, on 14 March, Angela Merkel was sworn in for a fourth term as German chancellor. But she comes into office this time weakened by compromises made with her coalition partners.
- On 7 March, in response to President Trump’s plan to impose tariffs on steel and

aluminium, the EU threatened to impose duties on US bourbon, peanut butter, cranberries and orange juice. Trump's policies are leading in the direction of some major battles within the WTO.

- On 1 March in the wake of a series of missile tests, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that Russia had developed several new “invincible nuclear weapons.” With President Trump validating tactical nuclear weapons as an integral part of US nuclear strategy, nuclear disarmament as a goal seems to be receding into the background despite the Ban Treaty.
- While on his visit to the US, on 5 March, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu revealed that Saudi Arabia had agreed to allow Air India to use its airspace for flights to and from Israel – thereby cutting considerable travel time. This seems to confirm the view that there is a growing covert interaction between Israel and KSA.
- Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's new strong man Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman went on a diplomatic whirlwind tour of Egypt, the UK and Europe.
- After multiple charges by the US and Europe against the Syrian government's alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria, on 12 March, the Syrian military stated it had discovered a workshop being used by foreign-backed militants to produce chemical weapons in Eastern Ghouta.
- Relations between Turkey and NATO continued to deteriorate over Syria with NATO refusing to support Turkey in the latter's anti-terrorist operations in Syria's Afrin region. On 11 March Turkish President Erdogan criticised NATO and asked whether or not Turkey was “a NATO country”.
- After the US, France has now also signed a defence and security arrangement with India, which will allow both countries to open their naval bases to each other's warships. The agreement was signed during President Macron's visit to India 10 March. The two countries also signed a technical agreement for the construction of 6 nuclear reactors and the final agreement could well be signed before the end of the year. The framework agreement had been signed by the two countries in 2010, but negotiations had stalled for some time over safety issues.

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

## AMERICAS

### Domestic

- According to the *BBC* on March 15, the US Senate passed a bill to rollback banking regulations put in place in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis.

*The bill exempts banks with less than \$250bn in assets from strict oversight under the Dodd-Frank Act of 2010. The draft legislation was approved in a 67-31 vote and has to be approved by the House of Representatives. The Dodd-Frank act was brought in with the aim of avoiding another financial meltdown. Supporters of the Act say it has made the financial system safer by forcing large financial institutions to hold more money to use in the event of a financial shock, increasing protections for consumers, and improving stress tests. Its opponents, including small to mid-sized banks, community banks and other financial institutions, say the regulation has inhibited growth and is overly complex.*

- On March 14, in what is being described as a stunning upset, Democrat Conor Lamb won an incredibly close special election in Pennsylvania's 18th Congressional District.

*Lamb defeated Republican candidate Rick Saccone in a deeply conservative district. The race stretched into midday, when CNN reported Lamb was in the lead with 627 votes, with 100 percent of precincts reporting. State law does not mandate a recount in district-level elections. Trump won the same district by 20 points in 2016. According to observers, for Trump the defeat was personal. It was widely believed that Saccone would do well in a district that overwhelmingly supported President Donald Trump in 2016. In recent weeks, panicked Republicans pumped more than \$9 million into the race. Jack Hanna, the state's Democratic chairman said, "Let it be known that the Blue Wave of 2018 began in Pennsylvania," adding, "And this is only the beginning of the wave." Although Republicans downplayed Lamb's victory in Pennsylvania, political analysts said things look good for Democrats as they try to gain House and Senate majorities from the Republicans.*

- Thousands of students across the United States walked out of class on March 14 to demand stricter gun laws.

*The historic show of political solidarity was part tribute and part protest. Organised by the Women's March youth branch, the National Student Walkout demands three key actions from Congress i.e. ban assault weapons; require universal background checks before gun sales; and pass a gun violence restraining order law that would allow courts to disarm people who display warning signs of violent behavior. The walkout lasted 17 minutes, one minute for each victim of the shooting at Florida's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in February 2018. It began around 10 am in each time zone. Ahead of the National School Walkout in the United States, students in other countries got up from their desks to protest gun violence.*

- On March 14 President Trump nominated CNBC commentator Larry Kudlow to head his National Economic Council.

*The post was vacated when Gary Cohn resigned because of his opposition to the President's steel tariffs. Kudlow has also been a staunch opponent of trade barriers. According to observers, Trump's appointment of his longtime friend and loyalist may say more about Kudlow's evolving views rather than Trump's. "If it comes to that, I would be in favour of targeted tariff and tax increases on China until they play ball and come to the table with us," Kudlow said. "I've known the President a long time. We have a mutual admiration society. He is the President. He has a different role, and I will abide by that."*

- On March 14, Toys R Us informed its employees that it is planning to sell or close all of its US stores.

*During the last seven decades Toys R Us put other toy chains out of business. It outlasted KB Toys, Zany Brainy and Noodle Kidoodle. It bought, and later sold, FAO Schwarz. However, it rested on its success for too long, missing the changes that Amazon was bringing to the retail industry. It ultimately succumbed to the same problems plaguing other traditional retail chains. There were too many stores that were too large and outdated for the digital age, coupled with the more singular problem of a mountain of debt that it struggled to pay back.*

- On March 13 President Trump removed Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and nominated CIA Director Mike Pompeo to head the State Department.

*Tillerson, who said Trump called him hours after he tweeted an announcement about Pompeo's nomination, stated his last day in office would be March 31, 2018 and he pledged an "orderly and smooth transition." Trump said he made the decision on Tillerson, citing disagreements with the Secretary of State that included North Korea diplomacy, steel and aluminum tariffs and the Iran nuclear agreement.*

- On March 12 an Austin teenager was killed and several others injured when two packages left on doorsteps exploded.
- On March 2 Anthony Stephan House was killed by a blast in a home in northern Austin. His death was not initially ruled a homicide because it was an "isolated incident."

*The incidents marked the second and third parcel explosions in the Texas capital in two weeks. Austin Police Chief Brian Manley said the three incidents displayed enough similarities to lead police to investigate them together. Two of the victims were African Americans and one was Hispanic. Investigators are also viewing the attacks as possible hate crimes.*

- On March 9, a gunman and three hostages, who were taken prisoner inside the nation's largest veterans home in California, were found dead following an hours-long standoff in

which dozens of bullets were fired at police outside.

*California Highway Patrol chief Chris Childs said the bodies of the gunman and the three women he took hostage had been found in a room where the gunman had holed up with his hostages. According to the Associated Press, the three female victims were employees of the nonprofit organization Pathway Home treatment programme, which is housed on the veterans' home campus.*

- On March 12, Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein offered unqualified support for Special Counsel Robert Mueller.

*“The special counsel is not an unguided missile,” Rosenstein said. “I don't believe there is any justification at this point for terminating the special counsel.” Rosenstein’s remarks are among the first to address Mueller’s status since it was disclosed more than a month ago that President Trump sought to have the special counsel dismissed in 2017. The President relented only when White House counsel Donald McGahn threatened to resign if forced to carry out the directive. The Deputy Attorney General, who is tasked with overseeing the special counsel, appointed Mueller in May 2017 to conduct investigations after Attorney General Jeff Sessions recused himself because of his association with the Trump campaign.*

- On March 7, Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin announced sweeping plans to reorganise the embattled agency from top to bottom.

*The plans involve taking over national headquarters and consolidating oversight of VA medical centers in 12 states. Three regional directors who oversaw 23 hospitals serving nearly 3 million veterans have been ousted, and their offices now will report directly to a new executive in Washington. The moves follow an inspector general report that found local, regional and national VA officials knew for years about severe financial and equipment mismanagement but didn't fix the issues.*

## **International**

- On March 15, the US imposed sanctions on 19 Russians, accusing them of interference in the 2016 US election and alleged cyber attacks.

*The list includes 13 individuals charged in February 2018 by Justice Department Special Counsel Robert Mueller. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin accused the Russians of “destructive cyber-attacks, and intrusions targeting critical infrastructure.” He said the sanctions would target “ongoing nefarious attacks” by Russia. Five groups, including Moscow's intelligence services, are targeted by the measures. The sanctions have been described as the strongest action taken by the Trump Administration thus far against Moscow. The US Treasury Secretary said there would be additional sanctions to hold Russian “officials and oligarchs*

*accountable for their destabilising activities.” Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said Moscow was calm about the new sanctions, and had already begun drawing up retaliatory measures.*

- On March 9, the EU sought clarity from the US about whether the 28-nation bloc would be exempt from President Donald Trump’s steel and aluminum tariffs.

*“We hope that we can get confirmation that the EU is excluded from this,” EU Trade Commissioner Cecilia Malmstroem said. However, she warned that if the issue can’t be resolved bilaterally or through the World Trade Organisation, then “we will have to protect our industry with rebalancing measures.” President Trump announced that he was slapping tariffs of 25 percent on imported steel and 10 percent on aluminum, but he temporarily exempted big steel producers Canada and Mexico provided they agree to renegotiate a North American trade deal to his satisfaction. He said other countries could be spared if they can convince the Administration that their steel and aluminum exports don’t threaten American industry.*

- On March 7, Pakistan’s Foreign Secretary Tehmina Janjua arrived in Washington DC to hold talks with senior officials of the Trump Administration.

*The Foreign Secretary met John Sullivan the Deputy Secretary of State, Alice Wells, the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State. Janjua also had meetings with think tanks and met officials of the National Security Council. “The Foreign Secretary is visiting tomorrow and she will be holding meetings with counterparts and government,” said Wells. She also said the US was not walking away from Pakistan. “There will be very intensive dialogue through both our military and our civilian channels to discuss how we can work together. I mean, Pakistan has an important role to play in helping to stabilise Afghanistan,” Wells said.*

- On March 8 Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu got standing ovations in a packed Washington, D.C. Convention Center hall after he gave a rousing address to pro-Israel Americans.

*Netanyahu spoke about leaps in Israeli technology and diplomacy, and the dangers Israel faces in the Middle East. Netanyahu, who wrapped up his five-day visit to the US on March 10, 2018, is seeking similar approval from his own public back home. Many Israelis are wondering whether he will survive a widening police investigation into suspected corruption. During his visit he met President Trump, UN Ambassador Nikki Haley, US business leaders and pro-Israel Americans from AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. He encouraged President Trump to demand changes to, or walk out of, the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement. Trump faces a May 2018 deadline on whether to renew nuclear sanctions on Iran.*

- On March 8, North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, invited President Trump to meet for negotiations over its nuclear programme.

*The invitation has been termed “an audacious diplomatic overture that would bring together two strong-willed, idiosyncratic leaders who have traded threats of war.” Trump accepted the invitation, and Chung Eui-yong, a South Korean official who conveyed it, told reporters that the meeting would occur within the next two months.*

*White House officials had expected to deliberate for several days over how to respond to North Korea’s proposal for direct talks between the countries, which South Korean officials had first conveyed by telephone this week. White House officials had expected to deliberate for several days over how to respond to North Korea’s proposal for direct talks between the countries, which South Korean officials had first conveyed by telephone this week. High-level negotiations will pose a challenge to the Administration, which has built its North Korea policy around imposing crippling sanctions, backed by the threat of military action.*

- According to the International Energy Agency (IEA) on March 6, oil demand will keep expanding over the next five years, and the United States will dominate the Industry.

*In its latest annual outlook, the IEA forecasted that strong economic growth around the world would continue to support strong oil consumption until at least 2023. Along with surging output from the US, rising production in Canada, Brazil and Norway will be able to meet higher demand through 2020, the energy policy adviser said. However, the IEA warned that oil supply could become tight unless investment in new production rebounds from historic declines in recent years.*

- According to a USA Today/Suffolk University poll on March 1 a majority of the voters looking toward the midterm elections are unhappy with the country’s direction, dissatisfied with its political leadership, and interested in electing a Congress that would confront President Trump.

*Between 58% - 32% of those surveyed say they want to elect a Congress that mostly stands up to the President, not one that mostly cooperates with him. The level of voter unrest is rare at a time of prosperity.*

## **Latin America**

- On March 15, Marielle Franco, a Brazilian politician and an outspoken critic of police violence and the deployment of the army into poor neighbourhoods of Rio de Janeiro was killed in a drive-by shooting.

*Franco was a Rio city councillor for the left wing Socialism and Liberty Party. She was shot dead in Rio when a car pulled up alongside hers and two men opened fire from inside the vehicle. Her killing has caused outrage and protests were being planned.*

- According to *USA Today* on March 8, the US Embassy in Mexico City prohibited US government employees from traveling to popular resort town Playa del Carmen.

*According to an alert issued by the Embassy, the US Consular Agency in Playa del Carmen in the state Quintana Roo would remain closed “until further notice.” The Embassy said it had “received information about a security threat” but it did not specify what the threat was. The move comes after the February 21, 2018 explosion on the ferry that links Playa del Carmen with the town of Cozumel. The incident injured 25 people, including two Americans. On March 1, 2018 Mexican law enforcement discovered undetonated explosive devices on another tourist ferry. Both incidents are still being investigated.*

*---Amina Afzal*

## ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

- On March 14, Qatar signed a \$3.71 billion deal with Italy to procure 28 military helicopters.

*The deal for the NH90 helicopters was announced by Qatar's Defence Ministry at a military hardware conference in Doha. Italian aerospace and defence group Leonardo (LDOF.MI) would act as the main contractor in the deal. Leonardo indicated that Qatar would receive 28 medium sized twin-engine NH90 military helicopters in its two variants for land and naval missions, and for support, maintenance and training services. It also said that a further 12 units could be added to the deal. The first deliveries of the helicopters would begin before June 2022 and would continue through to 2025.*

- On March 14, Nikki Haley, US Ambassador to the UN, claimed at the UNSC that the US believes Russia was responsible for a chemical attack in Britain on a former Russian double agent and his daughter.

*During an emergency UNSC meeting Haley said, "The United States believes that Russia is responsible for the attack on two people in the United Kingdom using a military-grade nerve agent." Presenting the UK case at the UNSC, Jonathan Allen, Britain's Envoy to the UN, also accused Russia saying that the country was "in serious breach of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) through its failure to declare the Novichok programme". However, Russian Ambassador to the UN, Vissaly Nebenzia, rejected the accusations of responsibility and suggested that the British Government might have carried out the attack itself in an effort to "tarnish" Russia. Nebenzia said, "No scientific research or development under the title Novichok were carried out." The emergency session of the UNSC was called by the UK to formally accuse Russia of trying to murder a former Russian spy, Sergei V. Skripal, and his daughter, Yulia, on British soil. Skripal and Yulia were poisoned on March 4, 2018, with what British investigators have identified as Novichok: a highly toxic nerve agent with a slightly different chemical composition than the more commonly known sarin poison gases. Earlier on March 12, 2018, Britain's Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson had called Ahmet Uzumcu, Director-General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), to inform him of the results of investigations regarding the use of Novichok.*

- On March 13, Ambassador Ahmet Uzumcu, Director-General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), congratulated the Government of Iraq on the completion of the destruction of the country's chemical weapons remnants.

*Ambassador Uzumcu said, "I welcome this notable achievement and congratulate Iraq for its efforts in ensuring the proper destruction of these dangerous chemicals and for fulfilling its obligations deriving from the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)." He also presented to the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research of Iraq, Dr Abdulrazzaq Al Jaleel Essa, a certificate recognising the Iraqi Government's complete destruction of its chemical weapons*

*remnants. OPCW's Technical Secretariat had confirmed the complete destruction of the four former chemical weapons production facilities in Iraq in November 2017 and February 2018.*

- On March 12, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) released its new report noting that global transfer of major weapons systems between 2013 and 2017 rose by 10% compared with the five-year period from 2009-2013.

*According to the report, the US is the world's biggest arms exporter. The country increased its sales between those two periods by 25%. It supplied arms to as many as 98 states around the world. The report indicated that nearly half of US arms exports over the past five years have gone to the Middle East. Russia, the world's second biggest exporter, saw a decrease of 7.1% in its overall volume of arms exports. After the US and Russia, France, Germany, China and the UK were among other top arms exporters. Similarly, the report said that India was the world's largest importer of major weapons between 2013 and 2017, and its imports have increased by 24% during the period. India's arms imports accounted for 12% of the arms transfers in the world. Regarding India's arms imports, Siemon Wezeman, senior researcher at SIPRI, said, "The tensions between India, on the one side, and Pakistan and China, on the other, are fuelling India's growing demand for major weapons, which it remains unable to produce itself." After India, Saudi Arabia is the world's second biggest arms importer. According to the report, American weapons constitute 61% of arms imports to Saudi Arabia while British weapons exports constitute 23%. The report also noted that Pakistan is the 9th largest importer of major weapons in the world and the country's arms imports decreased by 36% between 2008-12 and 2013-17. Similarly, China's arms imports also decreased by 19% during the same time period.*

- On March 12, Prime Minister of Pakistan Shahid Khaqan Abbasi said that his country was ready to further strengthen partnership with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and contribute towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals worldwide.

*PM Abbasi made his comments while he was speaking to IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano, who is on a three-day visit to Pakistan, at the PM Office. The PM also appreciated the positive role being played by the IAEA in the promotion of peaceful uses of nuclear technology in Pakistan. He briefed Amano on Pakistan's energy development plans. Both the leaders discussed issues related to cooperation between Pakistan and the IAEA. Amano also expressed his appreciation for Pakistan's cooperation with the IAEA. Chairman of the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC), Muhammad Naeem, briefed Amano on the Commission's role in overseeing the increasing use of peaceful nuclear technology to meet the country's development goals. During his visit to Faisalabad, Amano inaugurated the food safety laboratory of the Nuclear Institute for Agriculture and Biology, which uses nuclear and other modern techniques in agriculture and biology to address challenges for crop production and conservation. On March 14, 2018, he visited KANUPP II and III nuclear power plants in Karachi and observed work on the construction of two new reactors and saw the physical protection measures that had*

been implemented. Amano said, "I am very impressed to see that Pakistan has taken all possible nuclear safety and security measures and has most advanced safety features reactors." While addressing a seminar on 'The Peaceful Uses on Nuclear Energy and Pakistan,' he said, "Your country is an experienced user of peaceful nuclear technology. You have the knowledge; you have the pool of well-trained people to do their job."

- On March 11, Russia successfully test-fired its advanced air-to-surface hypersonic missile known as Kinzhal.
- On March 1, Russian President Vladimir Putin unveiled a new set of nuclear weapons capable of evading ballistic missile defence systems and hitting any place around the world.

Putin's remarks on these developments came during his annual address to the Federal Assembly. While referring to the West, Putin said, "They have not succeeded in holding Russia back." He added, "Now they need to take account of a new reality and understand that everything I have said today is not a bluff." The new weapons that Putin unveiled include a new intercontinental ballistic missile "with a practically unlimited range" able to attack via the North and South Poles, a nuclear-powered cruise missile and a nuclear-capable underwater drone, a hypersonic missile and a laser weapon system. However, it is not clear whether these weapons are ready or in development mode. During his speech at a conference hall video footage of the new weapons was being projected behind him. Putin said that US' development and deployment of its ballistic missile defence system had prompted Russia to upgrade its nuclear arsenal. He also accused the US for its withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty in 2002.

In response, Heather Nauert, US State Department spokeswoman, said, "It was certainly unfortunate to have watched the video animation that depicted a nuclear attack on the United States." She added, "We don't regard that as the behaviour of a responsible international player." Meanwhile, Pentagon spokeswoman Dana White downplayed Putin's comments, saying the US military was capable of defending the country from any threats. She added that missile defence systems in Europe are not focused on Russia and are designed instead to defend against Iran, North Korea, and other rogue threats. In a related development on March 11, 2018, Russia successfully launched a hypersonic missile called Kinzhal (Dagger) from a MiG-31 supersonic interceptor jet. Russia's Defence Ministry said, "The launch went according to plan, the hypersonic missile hit its target." The Ministry said that the missile has been deployed in the Southern Military District since December 1, 2017. With a strike range of 2000 kilometres, the missile is capable of carrying a nuclear warhead and can travel with a speed over Mach 10. However, US Defence Secretary James Mattis expressed his doubt about Russia's ability to develop such an advanced weapon and said the test would not affect US policy.

- On March 10, the Pakistan Navy (PN) successfully test-fired a land based anti-ship missile from the coastal region as part of a training exercise.

- On March 5, Pakistan Navy (PN) and Air Force (PAF) jointly conducted long-range anti-ship cruise missile firings in North Arabian Sea.

*The joint PN-PAF firings were conducted on the final day of the exercise RIBAT-18, focused on validating war-fighting concepts under the evolving multi-faceted threats. During the exercise C-802 AK (Air-to-Surface Missile) and C-802 (Surface-to-Surface Missile) were successfully launched by PAF JF-17 Thunder aircraft and by PNS SAIF, a multi-mission F-22P frigate, respectively. Missiles launched from both platforms successfully hit their intended targets, reasserting the efficacy of the weapon systems and manifesting the extended range of Joint PN-PAF Sea-Air operations. In a related development on March 10, 2018, PN successfully launched a land based anti-ship missile. According to a press release issued by the PN, the missile successfully followed its pre-planned trajectory and accurately engaged its target. Vice Admiral Kaleem Shaukat, Vice Chief of Naval Staff, highlighted the emerging security challenges in the Indian Ocean Region and expressed confidence on the efforts being put in by the naval forces to defend sea frontiers of the country.*

- On March 9, the BAE Systems, a British multinational defence, security, and aerospace company, said that Saudi Arabia signed a deal with Britain to procure 48 Eurofighter Typhoon fighter jets.

*BAE Systems said in a statement, “The UK Government has signed a Memorandum of Intent with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to aim to finalise discussions for the purchase of 48 Typhoon Aircraft.” It also indicated that the order would help Saudi Arabia modernise its armed forces under the country’s ‘Vision 2030’ economic plan. The deal was signed during Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s visit to Britain. The Eurofighter Typhoon, a competitor to the Rafale jet manufactured by French arms maker Dassault, has four major customers including Austria, Kuwait, Oman and Saudi.*

- On March 5, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian visited Iran on a mission to reaffirm Europe’s support for Iran’s July 2015 Nuclear Agreement, also known as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

*During his meeting with Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, Le Drian said France would continue discussions with Iran but the country must find a way to restore stability in the region. President Rouhani affirmed that Tehran would not be the first to violate the nuclear agreement. Javad Zarif urged the European leaders to play a constructive role in keeping the nuclear agreement intact. Zarif said, “Supporting the accord verbally is not enough. If the EU is trying to salvage the accord, they should try to keep Iran, not the US in the accord.” However, a day after his visit to Iran, Le Drian said that there remained “much work to do” with Iran. He insisted, “We are not going to be Donald Trump’s envoys or Iran’s defence lawyers. We have our own concerns and will talk to the different sensibilities of the Iranian system to get our point across.” He also said Iran’s missiles with ranges of several*

*thousand kilometres are not in line with UN Security Council resolutions and go beyond what is needed to secure Iran's borders.*

*In response to Le Drian, Ali Shamkhani, Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, said, "Our missile work is in line with our defensive policy, which poses no threat to any country." Masoud Jazayeri, Iranian Armed Forces spokesman, said that Iran's missile programme would continue non-stop and foreign powers have no right to interfere. In a related development on March 7, 2018, Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the Head of the Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) aerospace division, indicated that Iran has increased its missile production threefold. However, he did not provide more details regarding the missile programme.*

- On March 5, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Chief Yukiya Amano said that Iran is implementing its nuclear-related commitments under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

*Addressing the IAEA's 35-member Board of Governors meeting, Amano said, "As of today, I can state that Iran is implementing its nuclear-related commitments." In defence of the JCPOA that is facing a threat of US' withdrawal, Amano indicated that if the nuclear agreement were to fail it would be a great loss for nuclear verification and for multilateralism because the JCPOA represents a significant gain for verification. He affirmed that IAEA inspectors had access to all the sites and locations, which they needed to visit. Regarding inspections in Iran, Amano said, "We have carried out more than 60 complementary accesses and visited more than 190 buildings since JCPOA Implementation Day." The Board of Governors also assessed two key reports including the Nuclear Safety Review and the Nuclear Technology Review (NTR) 2018. The Nuclear Safety Review provides a global overview of nuclear security trends and priorities while the NTR highlights global developments related to nuclear power as well as to a broad range of applications, including agriculture and health care.*

- On March 2, Russia successfully launched a modern Iskander-M operational short-range ballistic missile (SRBM) from the Kapustin Yar range, Astrakhan region.

*Russian Defence officials said that the missile hit its target 100 kilometres away. The modern Iskander missile, currently used by the Russian Army, comes in two variants – the Iskander-M SRBM and the Iskander-K cruise missile. With a strike range of 500 kilometres, the Iskander-M SRBM can carry both conventional and nuclear warheads.*

- According to *The Times of India* on March 1, the Indian Defence Ministry approved capital acquisition proposals worth nearly Rs 9,435 crore including the procurement of 41,000 light machine guns and over 3.5 lakh battle carbines to bolster its military's firepower.

*Indian Defence Ministry officials said, "With the approval of these two proposals, the government has cleared procurement of the entire range of personal weapons for the three*

*services.” The officials also indicated that these weapons are being procured particularly to enhance the firepower of soldiers deployed along India’s borders with Pakistan and China. The proposals were cleared at a meeting of the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC), the Defence Ministry’s highest decision-making body on procurement. Earlier on February 13, the Ministry had also approved acquisition of 7.40 lakh assault rifles, 5,719 sniper rifles and light machine guns worth Rs 15,935 crore.*

*--- Moiz Khan*

## CHINA, EAST ASIA & PACIFIC

### China

- On March 11, the Chinese Parliament passed a constitutional amendment to remove the Presidential term limit, allowing China's incumbent President Xi Jinping to potentially remain in office indefinitely.

*The measure was approved by nearly 3,000 delegates in the National People's Congress with an absolute majority, with just two "no" votes and three abstentions. China's Communist Party (CPC) proposed the amendment to scrap term limits for the presidency and vice-presidency earlier in February 2018.*

- On March 8, Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi said that China had no desire to "replace America" on the global stage, adding that China's path "is totally different than the one that has already been taken by traditional major powers".

*He, however, said that China's development and rejuvenation could not be stopped. Whilst US President, Donald Trump threatens a trade war with China, Wang warned that Beijing is ready to take an "appropriate and necessary response".*

- On March 3, the Communist Party's fourth-ranked leader said that China wants to deepen its friendship with Taiwan.

*The statement came a day after Chinese state media warned that China could go to war over Taiwan if a US bill urging closer ties with the island becomes law. The proposed US bill, which still requires President Donald Trump's signature to become law, states that the US policy should allow officials at all levels to visit Taiwan and meet their Taiwanese counterparts, permit high-level Taiwanese officials to enter the US "under respectful conditions" and meet with US officials. Taiwan welcomed the proposed legislation in the US. However, China has warned Taiwan that it would only get burnt if it sought to rely on foreigners.*

### North Korea

- On March 6, the South Korean President's office said that North Korea was willing to talk to the United States about giving up its nuclear weapons if, "military threats to North Korea decrease and regime safety is guaranteed."

*The development came after a South Korean delegation held a first-ever meeting with North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un in Pyongyang. Furthermore, the South Korean President's office said that Moon Jae-in would meet North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un in late April 2018. The US President welcomed the development and said "the statements coming out of South Korea and North Korea have been very positive", but also said it might be a "false hope". In May 2018, the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un and US President Donald Trump are also scheduled to hold negotiations over North Korea's nuclear programme. The development came after the North*

*Korean leader invited President Trump for talks which the White House said Trump had accepted. The US has resisted overtures by Pyongyang on the subject of talks and has maintained that North Korea must denuclearise. Meanwhile North Korea has vowed to never give up what it calls an essential deterrent against US hostility. However, in recent days, there has been a dramatic easing of tensions between North Korea and the US.*

## **Vietnam**

- On March 5, a US aircraft carrier, the USS Carl Vinson arrived in Vietnam for the first time since the end of the Vietnam War.

*The visit by the Carl Vinson and its contingent of 5,000 sailors and aviators is viewed as an opportunity to enhance ties between the two former foes. US military ties with Vietnam have deepened since 2016, when former President Barack Obama lifted the embargo on US arms sales to the country.*

## **The Philippines**

- On March 14, President Rodrigo Duterte announced that the Philippines would withdraw from the International Criminal Court (ICC) after the court launched crimes against humanity investigation into Duterte's war on drugs.

*President Rodrigo Duterte has repeatedly dared the ICC to indict him and said he was willing to face trial to defend a war on drugs. Human rights groups have long accused Duterte of extra judicial killings and other rights abuses in his anti-drug campaign. Duterte, however, reject accusations and insists that the drug issue is one for domestic law enforcement.*

*---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer*

## EUROPE

- On March 15, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov said Russia would soon expel UK diplomats over the Skripal case.

*According to Maria Zakharova, Spokeswoman for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “London has still not provided the Russian side with any details or information that could shed at least some light on what happened” and further, “We plan to introduce reciprocal steps. They are currently being worked on and will be adopted in the near future,” According to experts, novichok, the nerve agent used on Skripal, has only ever been produced at a single site in Russia. However, Russia told the UN Security Council that it has never made novichok.*

- On March 15, the leaders of France, Germany, the US and UK said there was “no plausible alternative explanation” to Russia having been behind the nerve agent attack in the UK.

*They condemned the “first offensive use of a nerve agent in Europe since the Second World War”, and termed it an attack on UK sovereignty. The UK expelled 23 Russian diplomats in the aftermath. PM Theresa May also visited the site of the attack in Wiltshire. “We do hold Russia culpable for this brazen, brazen act and despicable act,” she said. Russia has denied any involvement in the attack and has promised a swift response to the expulsion of its diplomats.*

- According to the *NY Times* on March 14, Britain’s tough response in holding Russia responsible for a poisoning attack on its soil has increased the pressure on President Trump to take action.

*Trump has been reluctant to retaliate against Moscow’s intervention in the 2016 election in the United States. He has not personally addressed the attack since London assigned blame to Russia and left it instead to aides to express public solidarity with Prime Minister Theresa May after she expelled 23 Russian diplomats, canceled high-level contacts and vowed to impose more sanctions. “This latest action by Russia fits into a pattern of behavior in which Russia disregards the international rules-based order, undermines the sovereignty and security of countries worldwide, and attempts to subvert and discredit Western democratic institutions and processes,” the White House said in a written statement. “The United States is working together with our allies and partners to ensure that this kind of abhorrent attack does not happen again.”*

- On March 12, British Prime Minister Theresa May said it was “highly likely” that Moscow was to blame for the March 4, 2018 poisoning of a former Russian spy attacked with a nerve agent in Salisbury.

*May also warned of possible reprisals. The remarks were delivered during an address to Parliament and were an unusually direct condemnation of the country that Britain has*

*previously, “been loath to blame for attacks on its soil.” According to observers, British authorities took only modest countermeasures after Russian agents poisoned a former MI6 informant in 2006 with the rare isotope polonium 210. The Prime Minister, who was Home Secretary back then had resisted an open inquiry into Russia’s role in that case, but is under pressure to show more resolve this time. The March 4, 2018 nerve agent attack on Sergei V. Skripal, once an informant for Britain’s foreign intelligence service, and his daughter, Yulia, exposed an untold numbers of bystanders to risk in the city of Salisbury. Traces of the poison were found at a pub and a pizza parlor that the Skripals visited.*

- On March 15 Airbus warned it would be “practically impossible” to give new business to engineering giant GKN if it was bought by turnaround specialist Melrose.

*GKN makes wing components and other key aircraft parts for Airbus, which is its biggest customer. However, it is fighting off a hostile bid from Melrose, saying it fundamentally undervalues the firm. GKN employs more than 59,000 people, with 6,000 in the UK. Tom Williams, Airbus’ chief operating officer at its commercial aircraft division, said, “The nature of our industry is one that requires a commitment to long-term investment and strategic vision” and also, “The industry does not lend itself to shorter term financial investment which naturally reduces R&D budgets and limits vital innovation... It would be practically impossible for us to give any new work to GKN under such ownership model when we don't know who will be the long-term investor.”*

- On March 15, Unilever said it would make Rotterdam and not London its headquarters.

*The Anglo-Dutch firm said it would now be one legal entity in the Netherlands in a bid to become “more agile”. Unilever's dual-headed structure has existed since 1930, when Dutch margarine firm Unie merged with British soap maker Lever Brothers. The company said the decision over its HQ was “not about Brexit”.*

- On March 14, Angela Merkel was sworn in for a fourth term as German chancellor.

*Merkel was sworn in after months of political wrangling that left her weakened. Germany's parliament earlier approved her re-election by 364 votes to 315. Merkel has vowed to get to work quickly after the longest period of coalition building in post-war Germany. It is nearly six months since the election. Merkel's conservative CDU/CSU bloc had its worst result in almost 70 years. But she finally secured a coalition deal with the Social Democrats (SPD) earlier this month following a painful stretch of political deadlock. It cost her several key posts - including finance and foreign minister - in Germany’s new cabinet.*

- During a March 10 meeting at the European Commission in Brussels, EU Commissioner for Trade Cecilia Malmström met with Minister for Economy and Industry of Japan Hiroshige Seko and US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer.

*The meeting was a continuation of the cooperation between the three parties launched at the sidelines of the World Trade Organisation Ministerial in December of last year, to address issues such as trade-distortive practices that lead to severe global overcapacity in sectors like steel. At the meeting, the three agreed on further steps to take in this ongoing cooperation, such as the development of stronger rules on industrial subsidies, strengthening of notification requirements in the WTO, and intensifying information sharing on trade-distortive practices.*

- On March 9, leaders of the two largest parties to emerge from the March 4, 2018 General Election in Italy promised tax cuts in a bid to win support.

*Matteo Salvini of the anti-illegal migrant League promised to defy Brussels by cutting taxes and Luigi Di Maio of the anti-establishment Five Star Movement also mooted tax cuts. President Sergio Mattarella has called for “a sense of responsibility.” Formal talks on creating a new government will only begin after March 23, 2018 and the new parliament picks speakers for the upper and lower houses. Luigi Di Maio said his party, which won 32% of the vote, was drawing up new economic proposals to be included in the outgoing government’s multi-year economic plan. “We want to move quickly,” Di Maio said. “If the other parties want to propose other measures that will help people then we are ready to discuss them.” Commentators are talking about a possible coalition between Five Star and the centre-left Democratic Party (PD), which leads the outgoing government. Di Maio said he would be open to talks with “all the parties, with no exception”. However, acting Justice Minister Andrea Orlando of the PD said a tie-up with Five Star would be “impossible”. According to analysts a far worse result would be an alliance between the Five Star Movement and the anti-immigrant League. For EU leaders and global investors, it would be a nightmare possibility that could shake the Italian economy, already buckling under enormous public debt, and send Europe back into crisis. Both parties gained popularity on the xenophobia, which became the central theme of the election campaign an indication that the migrant issue would continue to haunt the continent making it less welcoming. Although the center-left government made huge progress in recent months in reducing the number of migrants, voters’ fears and anger over the millions of arrivals from Africa and elsewhere in recent years have “metastasized.”*

- On March 7, the EU threatened to impose duties on US bourbon, peanut butter, cranberries and orange juice if President Donald Trump imposes tariffs on steel and aluminum.

*EU Trade Commissioner Cecilia Malmstrom also said Brussels would take the case to the World Trade Organisation and coordinate with other trade partners against the proposed US tariffs. She confirmed that the EU has prepared a provisional list of US products that would see higher tariffs in Europe if Trump moves ahead with the tariffs. According to media reports, the EU’s tariffs could amount to 2.83 billion euros.*

- On March 1, large parts of Europe endured another night of freezing conditions as a Siberian weather system caused blizzards and heavy snowfall.

*The weather resulted in closed roads, rail services and schools and forced the cancellation of numerous flights. The unusually cold spell is being felt as far south as the Mediterranean. The number of weather-related deaths rose to 55. It also triggered a warning from the World Health Organisation that the poor, the homeless and migrants would be hardest hit by the big freeze. According to the WHO, “Those most at risk of cold-related illness include elderly people, children, and people who have chronic diseases or physical or mental limitations.”*

- Russian President Vladimir Putin announced on March 1 that his country has developed several new “invincible nuclear weapons.”

*Putin made the claims while announcing his key policies for a fourth presidential term, ahead of the upcoming elections. The weapons included a cruise missile that he said could “reach anywhere in the world”. He warned the West, “They need to take account of a new reality and understand ... [this]... is not a bluff.” During his annual state of the nation speech, Putin used video presentations to showcase the development of two new nuclear delivery systems that he said could evade detection. A video graphic appeared to show missiles raining down on the US state of Florida.*

---Amina Afzal

## MIDDLE EAST & WEST ASIA

### Egypt

- *Khaleej Times* reported on March 9 that according to a Palestinian Authority (PA) official, top Israeli and Saudi officials held a series of secret Egypt-brokered meetings in Cairo in March 2018.

*The official said the meetings were a “significant development” in the slowly warming ties between Tel Aviv and Riyadh. The talks between Israeli and Saudi officials took place at a luxury hotel in Cairo, with Egyptian officials present, dealing with the economic interests of Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, particularly in the Red Sea region. He also warned that the Israel-Saudi détente was harming the Palestinians.*

### Iran

- On March 12, Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif held talks with his Pakistani counterpart, Khawaja Asif in Islamabad.

*Zarif was accompanied by a 30-member delegation, including representatives from the business sector. During his speech at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI), he said, “Our relations with India, just like Pakistan’s relations with Saudi Arabia, are not against Islamabad as we understand Pakistan’s relations with Saudi Arabia are not against Iran.” He invited Pakistan to participate in the Chabahar Port project that connects India to Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eastern Europe. He said, “We offered to participate in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). We have also offered Pakistan and China to participate in Chabahar.” Zarif accused the US of supporting Daesh in Afghanistan to fuel regional terrorism and threaten neighbouring countries.*

*During his three-day visit, Zarif also attended the joint business forum to explore areas of mutual economic cooperation between the two countries. According to IRNA, the main goals of the Iranian delegation’s visit to Pakistan were creating necessary conditions for the expansion of bilateral economic ties and facilitating trade, especially between the two sides’ private sectors. During the business forum, Foreign Minister Asif, who co-chaired the forum with his Iranian counterpart, welcomed Zarif’s suggestion for bolstering mutual trade relations. Zarif noted that Iran is ready to fulfil Pakistan’s energy needs including oil, gas and electricity. He said, “There are lots of areas for mutual cooperation among which energy can be mentioned.” He also expressed hope that the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project in which Iran has invested \$2 billion would come to an ideal conclusion.*

## **Iraq**

- On March 5, NATO Chief Jens Stoltenberg said the Western Military Alliance would stay in Iraq for “as long as necessary” at the government’s request.

*During a surprise visit to Iraq, Stoltenberg said, “We are here because Iraq wants us to be here, we are not here without the consent and without an invitation from Iraq.” He said the Alliance had received a “written request” from Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to keep its troops on Iraqi soil. He further said, “We should not stay longer than necessary, we will train the trainers as long as necessary to make sure Daesh does not re-emerge.” Earlier, on March 1, 2018, the Iraqi Parliament had issued a statement, calling on the government “to draw up a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops.” Iraqi Foreign Minister, Ibrahim al-Jaafari said the country would under no circumstances permit the US to build permanent military bases on its soil. Currently, both the coalition and NATO forces, including some 9,000 Americans, retain their presence in Iraq.*

## **Israel**

- On March 7, Israel’s Parliament (the Knesset) passed the “breach of loyalty” law allowing the Interior Minister to revoke the permanent residency status of Palestinians living in East Jerusalem al-Quds who are deemed to be a threat to the Tel Aviv regime.

*The law enables Israel to deport anyone whose residency status is withdrawn. The Israeli Supreme Court cannot challenge rulings by the Interior Minister. It also applies to all permanent residents, whether they are recent immigrants or long-time residents of East Jerusalem al-Quds. Qatar has called the law unethical, saying the legislature had completely disregarded international rules, humanitarian law and UN conventions. The Qatari Foreign Ministry urged the international community to shoulder its responsibility and stop repeated Israeli violations of Palestinian rights, stressing that such moves would undermine international efforts towards the so-called two-state solution. The Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) also called the Israeli law “deeply racist”. A statement from the Turkish Foreign Ministry condemned the Israeli legislation, saying the permanent residency of thousands of al-Quds Palestinians had been revoked since the Israeli occupation in 1967.*

- During his visit to the US on March 5, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu said Saudi Arabia has agreed to allow Air India to use its airspace for flights to and from Israel.

*Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had announced the new Israel-India route during his July 2017 visit to Israel. In January 2018, Netanyahu said the route could pass over Saudi Arabia, which would significantly shorten flight time. According to observers it would be a public indication of warming of ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Both countries have no official*

*diplomatic ties. Riyadh has refrained from commenting on Israeli hints of covert ties with the Kingdom.*

## **Qatar**

- On March 7, Qatar signed a security pact with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), enabling the alliance forces to enter and transit the Persian Gulf state and use its al-Ubeid Air Base.

*The agreement was signed at the Alliance's headquarters in Brussels during a meeting between Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. The two sides discussed the security situation in the Persian Gulf region, which has been hit by an unprecedented diplomatic crisis involving Qatar and a Saudi-led quartet of states. The deal is expected to facilitate NATO missions and operations in the region, including the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, a follow-on mission for the US-led forces who formally ended their combat mission in Afghanistan in 2014. Al-Ubeid Air Base, located around 30 kilometres southwest of Doha, hosts some 11,000 military forces. Qatar is one of four countries, along with Bahrain, Kuwait and the UAE, participating in NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI). The four ICI partner countries have now signed individual security agreements with the Western Military Alliance. The ICI was launched in 2004 and aims to contribute to long-term global and regional security by offering practical bilateral security cooperation between countries of the broader Middle East region and NATO. On March 7, 2018, Qatari Emir also met with EU Foreign Policy Chief Federica Mogherini, who signed a cooperation arrangement on private sector development, and research and innovation with Qatar's Foreign Minister Mohammad bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani.*

## **Saudi Arabia**

- During an interview to CBS News on March 15, Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman warned that if Tehran acquires a nuclear weapon, Saudi Arabia would follow suit.

*Prince Mohammad said, "Saudi Arabia does not want to acquire any nuclear bomb, but without a doubt, if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible." He also referred to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as "the new Hitler" because according to Mohammad, Khamenei "wants to expand". He said, "He wants to create his own project in the Middle East very much like Hitler who wanted to expand at the time." Earlier in March 2018, high-level Saudi and US officials resumed talks for the construction of 16 nuclear reactors in the Kingdom over the next 20 to 25 years at a cost of more than \$80 billion. The talks were frozen under the former Obama Administration due to Riyadh's refusal to accept Washington's non-proliferation "gold standard" for civil nuclear cooperation deals. The standard prohibits the recipient of the nuclear technology from enriching uranium and*

*reprocessing plutonium, which could be used to produce fuel for nuclear weapons. However, according to observers, the Trump Administration is willing to bypass the standard on Riyadh's insistence in order to prevent potential contractors from rival countries, including Russia and China, from winning the profitable deal.*

- On March 13, Saudi Arabia's Cabinet approved a national atomic energy policy.

*The policy stipulates that Saudi nuclear facilities would only be used for peaceful purposes while ensuring maximum safety. It also attempts to address another major area of concern by recommending safer ways to manage radioactive waste, which can be used to develop nuclear weapons. The document, drafted by Khalid Al-Falih, Energy Minister and Chairman of the King Abdullah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy (KACARE), called on all relevant parties to uphold transparency in organisational and operational matters and follow safety and security measures through an independent monitoring system. The policy announcement comes ahead of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's scheduled trip to the US, which is expected to revolve around nuclear cooperation with Washington.*

- On March 7, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman arrived in the UK for a three-day visit and held meetings with Queen Elizabeth and British Prime Minister Theresa May.

*The two countries signed trade deals worth billions of dollars, including multi-billion-pound arms deals. During Prince Mohammad's visit, the two countries launched the UK-Saudi Arabia Strategic Partnership Council with a broad understanding for a £65 billion (\$90 billion) mutual trade and investment target, which would include direct investment in Britain and new Saudi public procurement from British companies. This would be spread across sectors including finance, education, health care, renewable energy and defence. The Crown Prince discussed strategic cooperation with UK Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson, and also discussed the latest developments in the Middle East, the global fight against extremism and the war on terror. During their meeting, the Crown Prince and Defence Secretary signed two memorandums to improve Saudi defence capabilities and to increase cooperation and partnership in the fields such as knowledge transfer, manufacturing partnership, training, research and technical support, as detailed by Vision 2030. Addressing a business conference in London, Saudi Energy Minister, Kalid al-Falih said that Britain should turn to Saudi Arabia as its "gateway to Africa, one of the next frontiers" and an alternative to lost European markets after Brexit. Prior to and during Prince Mohammad's arrival in the UK, there were massive protests in London against Riyadh's human rights violations and its war on Yemen.*

- On March 4, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman visited Egypt and held talks with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

*According to the Presidency Spokesman, Bassam Radi, Mohammad's visit to Egypt was about "economic and investment cooperation". Both countries agreed to \$10 billion investment for a*

*futuristic mega city project. In 2017, Prince Mohammad unveiled the \$500 billion NEOM mega city, a biotech and digital hub spread over 26,500 square kilometres (10,000 square miles) in an area near Jordan and Egypt. The countries also signed agreements on common investment funds and environmental protection. During their talks, Prince Mohammad and Sisi agreed to bolster economic ties and launch joint projects, particularly in the tourism sector in the Red Sea area. The leaders also travelled through one of the new tunnels being built under the Suez Canal. Egypt has sought investment from oil-rich Saudi Arabia to help develop the area, where Cairo wants to establish an international transport, logistics and production hub.*

*During an interview to a newspaper in Cairo, Prince Mohammad also said that Turkey and Iran, along with extremist groups, have formed a “triangle of evil” in the region. He said, “The contemporary triangle of evil comprises Iran, Turkey and extremist religious groups.” Prince Mohammad also met with Egypt’s Coptic Pope Tawadros II. It is the first such visit by a Saudi official to the spiritual centre of the country’s Orthodox Christian community.*

## **Syria**

- On March 12, the Syrian military discovered a workshop being used by foreign-backed militants to produce chemical weapons.

*The workshop was discovered in a recently liberated area in Eastern Ghouta where Syrian troops are fighting militants. The militants in Eastern Ghouta have been firing rockets towards Damascus, killing and injuring many civilians. The US and its Western and regional allies have often pointed their fingers at the Syrian government for chemical attacks, which Damascus has consistently denied. The US, along with Britain and France, has threatened military action against the Syrian government if allegations of chemical attacks are proven. Earlier, on March 11, 2018, US Defence Secretary James Mattis warned the Syrian government that it would be “very unwise” for it to use chemical weapons in Eastern Ghouta or elsewhere. According to a Russian General, Moscow would respond to a US strike on Syria, targeting any missiles and launchers involved in such an attack, if the lives of Russian servicemen are threatened.*

- On March 6, heavy air strikes and clashes continued in the Syrian rebel enclave of Eastern Ghouta, as France and Britain called for an emergency UN Security Council meeting on the escalating violence.

*According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 800 civilians including at least 177 children have been killed since Russia-backed regime forces launched an assault on the enclave. Despite a month-long ceasefire demanded by the UNSC, clashes and bombardment continue in Eastern Ghouta. France and Britain have requested an emergency meeting of the UNSC to discuss the ceasefire’s failure.*

- On March 4, Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad said the operations in Eastern Ghouta would continue, stressing that they are part of the country's fight against terrorism.

*During an interview to a TV channel, Assad said, "We will continue fighting terrorism... and the Ghouta operation is a continuation of fighting terrorism. There is no contradiction between a truce and combat operations. The progress achieved yesterday and the day before in Ghouta by the Syrian Arab Army was made during this truce." He also dismissed Western claims concerning the humanitarian situation in eastern Ghouta as ridiculous and false accusations. He said, "The humanitarian situation which the West speaks of from time to time, is a very ridiculous lie, as ridiculous as the western officials who repeat it." President Assad also condemned accusations by the West over Damascus using chemical weapons, adding that such claims were only an excuse to attack the Syrian Army.*

## **Turkey**

- On March 11, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan criticised NATO over its refusal to aid Ankara in its anti-terror operations in Syria's Afrin region.

*According to RT, Erdogan said, "Hey NATO, where are you? We're fighting so much. NATO, Turkey is not a NATO country? Where are you?" He also said that NATO would even go up against Operation Olive Branch if it had the courage to. He said, "In fact, they would openly oppose Turkey in Syria if they could. But seeing Turkey's adamant position, they did not find the resolve to do so." Erdogan also stressed that Turkey's only goal in Syria was the "fight against terrorism" and that it would withdraw its troops after this goal had been obtained. Turkey has been waging "Operation Olive Branch" against Syria's Afrin region since January 20, 2018 in an attempt to eliminate the Kurdish militants.*

*In another development on March 11, 2018, the Wall Street Journal reported that the US military has cut down its combat operations at Turkey's Incirlik air base and is contemplating permanent cutbacks there amid rising tensions between the two countries over Washington's support for the Kurdish militants in Syria. The number of military family members living on the Turkish base has also seen a gradual decline. According to a Turkish official the cutback did not stem from new restrictions by Ankara, rather "a shift in American priorities from Syria to Afghanistan."*

- On March 3, Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan concluded his five-day visit to Africa.

*Erdogan wrapped up his tour of the African countries of Algeria, Mauritania, Senegal and Mali with a large business delegation and a diplomatic entourage. According to Turkey's official Presidential page, Erdogan said, "We want to walk with Africa while a new world order is being established. According to Erdogan, he held "productive" talks and made contacts in the four*

*African countries. He said, "We love Africa and our African brothers without any bias."  
According to observers, Ankara has been seeking to expand its influence in Africa in the face of  
tensions with Egypt, where there is a growing demand for a public boycott of Turkish goods.*

*---Muhammad Shoib*

## SOUTH ASIA I

### **Pakistan External**

- According to Pakistan's Foreign Office on March 15, Pakistan called back Pakistan's High Commissioner to New Delhi "for consultations" following the incidents of harassment of officials of the Pakistani High Commission and their family members in New Delhi.

*Earlier on March 13, 2018, Pakistan's Foreign Office also summoned India's Deputy High Commissioner, J. P. Singh to register a protest over the incidents. Foreign Office emphasised that under the Vienna Convention, the safety and the security of Pakistani diplomats and their families was the responsibility of the Indian government. According to the Foreign Office, the officers, staff and the families and children of the Pakistani diplomats in India continue to face "intense harassment, intimidation and violence from Indian state agencies". The Pakistan High Commission also released a video, showing a Pakistani diplomat's car being blocked by unidentified persons in New Delhi. India, however, alleged that its diplomats posted in Islamabad have been facing similar harassment and claimed that members of Pakistan's intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) had raided the Indian residential compound in Islamabad earlier in February, 2018. Meanwhile, Indian High Commissioner in Pakistan, Ujay Basaria also raised concern with Pakistani authorities over not getting approval of his application for membership of the Islamabad Club.*

- On March 14, a Russian delegation led by Security Council of the Russian Federation (SCRF) Deputy Secretary, Mikhail Popov held talks with Pakistan's Foreign Secretary, Tehmina Janjua in Islamabad.

*The two sides discussed defence and security relations and expressed satisfaction on the ongoing cooperation between Pakistan and Russia. Both sides also recognised "the need for joint efforts for peace, security and stability in the region." In recent months Pakistan and Russia have witnessed increasing cooperation in multiple fields, particularly military to military ties. Earlier on March 2, 2018, the 12th Meeting of Pakistan-Russia Consultative Group on Strategic Stability was held in Islamabad. Following discussions, Pakistan and Russia agreed to, "further capitalise on the positive trajectory of the overall bilateral relations by exploring avenues for mutually beneficial bilateral cooperation." In February, 2018, the two sides had announced the setting up of a commission for promoting military cooperation to counter the Daesh threat in the region.*

- During his visit to Islamabad on March 12, Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif held consultations with Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Khawaja Asif on bilateral relations and regional peace and security.

*During his visit, Iranian Foreign Minister offered "Pakistan and China to participate in Chabahar port." The two sides also reiterated their support for the peaceful struggle of Palestinians and Kashmiris for self-determination. Both sides expressed concerns about the*

*growing presence of the Daesh in Afghanistan. Javad Zarif also said that Iran's relations with India were not aimed against Pakistan. He assured that Iran's territory would not be used against Pakistan. Pakistan's Foreign Ministry said Zarif's visit was "part of regular bilateral political consultations held between both sides." Javad Zarif also held talks with Pakistan's Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa. General Bajwa told the Iranian Foreign Minister that regional peace was "dependent upon wider cooperation within West Asia."*

- Speaking at the 37th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Switzerland on March 9, Pakistan's Deputy Permanent Representative, Tahir Andrabi called on India to stop killing Kashmiri civilians and allow access to the UN fact-finding team to investigate human rights violations in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK).

*Andrabi said that at the heart of the Kashmir problem was the right to self-determination which was conceded by "the first Prime Minister of India" and by the UN Security Council through a plebiscite. Responding to Pakistan's concern, Mini Devi Kumam, Second Secretary at India's UN Mission in Geneva termed Pakistan a "failed state" and demanded that Pakistan bring the perpetrators of the Mumbai, Pathankot and Uri attacks to justice. Kumam also said that Pakistan continues to refer to UNSC Resolutions on Jammu and Kashmir. She stressed that Pakistan "very conveniently forgets its own obligation under these resolutions to first vacate the occupation of Jammu and Kashmir."*

- On March 8, Pakistan's Foreign Secretary, Tehmina Janjua visited Washington and held talks with US civil and military officials.

*Following talks, both sides stressed the need for restarting the reconciliation process in Afghanistan. Both sides also welcomed Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's peace offer to the Taliban. Alice Wells, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia assured Pakistan of continued US support against insurgency and underlined the need for similar actions from Islamabad. Meanwhile, Pakistan's Foreign Secretary, Tehmina Janjua highlighted Pakistan's concern over border management and the existence of safe havens in Afghanistan being used by terrorists against Pakistan. The US side was led by US Deputy National Security Adviser, Nadia Schadlow, and included General Joseph Votel, head of the US Central Command, and Lisa Curtis, Senior Director for South and Central Asia at the National Security Council. Meanwhile, the US Department of Justice announced head money of \$5 million on the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) leader, Mullah Fazlullah. The talks between the two sides came amid Trump Administration's increasing pressure on Pakistan to do more. However, despite increased differences between Islamabad and Washington, both countries are trying not to let relations deteriorate to the point of no return. Earlier on March 2, 2018, Alice Wells said the US was not thinking of cutting ties with Pakistan.*

*In a separate development on March 9, 2018, Alice Wells said that US firmly supports Pakistan's territorial integrity and opposes Baloch insurgents and other groups that threatens the country. She was speaking at the US Institute of Peace in Washington.*

- On March 5, Prime Minister, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi visited Nepal and met his Nepalese counterpart, Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli. Following discussions, the two sides agreed to enhance cooperation in areas of economy, defence and culture.

*Abbasi said Pakistan fully supported Nepal's unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity. The two leaders stressed the need for activating the Pakistan-Nepal Joint Economic Commission and the Joint Business Council to increase bilateral trade. Both leaders also expressed their satisfaction over the cooperation between the two countries at international fora. Meanwhile Indian analysts say Delhi has been closely watching the visit as Nepalese Prime Minister Oli does not enjoy good relations with India. Oli blames India for playing an important role in his government's fall in August 2016.*

- On March 1, 2018, Pentagon Chief Spokesperson Dana W. White said Pakistan must make use of new opportunities to combat terrorists as the war against terrorism has reached an inflection point in South Asia.

*She also noted that the US continues to consult New Delhi, not only about "India's very important role" in Afghanistan but also on other issues that go beyond the South Asian region. Pakistan remains suspicious about India's increasing involvement in Afghanistan. Pakistani officials accuse Delhi of supporting terrorist organisations in Afghanistan who attack Pakistan.*

## **Pakistan Internal**

- On March 14, at least eight persons, including five policemen, were killed and 20 others were injured in a suicide attack which targeted a police check post in Raiwind in Lahore.

*Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claimed responsibility for the attack. Islamabad has alleged that the TTP have hideouts in Afghanistan from where they plan and execute terrorist attacks inside Pakistan.*

- On March 5, protests involving stone-pelting erupted across Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK) after Indian troops killed six Kashmiri civilians in the Shopian district of IOK.

*Indian Security Forces claimed that all those killed were 'militants' or their associates. However, both locals and the Joint Resistance Group (JRL) allege that they were non-combatants. IOK Chief Minister, Mehbooba Mufti said she was "deeply distressed" by the civilian deaths. In a separate incident on March 1, 2018, two people were killed by Indian shelling in Azad Jammu and Kashmir(AJK). Clashes between India and Pakistan on the LoC continue to increase. According to the Pakistan Army on March 6, 2018, it shot down an Indian unmanned aerial vehicle that had intruded into Azad Kashmir from across the LoC on a spy mission.*

- On March 3, Senate elections were held in Pakistan as provincial and federal lawmakers voted to elect 52 Senators who would serve six-year terms.

*The ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) won 12 seats, becoming the largest party in the Senate whereas Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) won 12 and 6 seats respectively.*

## **India**

- During his visit to India on March 10, French President, Emmanuel Macron said, “Defence cooperation with India now has a new significance” after the two nations signed a key security accord for the Indian Ocean.

*Under the deal, India and France would open their naval bases to each other’s warships. France and India also signed 14 key agreements in the strategic areas of security, nuclear energy, and protection of classified information, as companies from the two countries signed contracts worth \$16 billion. Narendra Modi termed France as one of India’s most reliable defence partners. The Indian PM also hailed France’s commitment to making defence and security equipment in India and contributing to his “Make in India” plan to boost local manufacturing. President Macron and PM Modi also inaugurated Uttar Pradesh’s biggest solar power plant in Mirzapur. Moreover, an “Industrial Way Forward Agreement”, a technical agreement was also signed between the two countries for the construction of six nuclear reactors at Jaitapur. According to media reports, the final agreement could be signed before the end of 2018. The framework agreement for six nuclear reactors was signed between India and France in 2010. However, negotiations over the construction of nuclear reactors in India have been stalled for years amid fears about the safety of nuclear power plants.*

- On March 3, election results of India’s three northeast states of Tripura, Nagaland and Meghalaya were announced in which the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) held majority votes in Tripura and also consolidated its position in the two other states.

*Elections in Nagaland and Meghalaya were held on February 27, 2018 whereas, Tripura went to the polls on February 18, 2018. The BJP won a majority to form a government in Tripura’s state legislature, replacing the Communist Party of India (Marxist) after 25 years. In Nagaland, Neiphiu Rio’s Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP), which had partnered with the BJP, won a total of 29 seats. Previously, the Naga People’s Front (NPF) in an alliance with the BJP was in power in Nagaland. However, the NPF and the BJP did not contest on the same side this time. The BJP instead chose to form an alliance with the newly formed NDPP. In Meghalaya a five-party alliance with support of the BJP and led by the NPP came to power, defeating the Congress. The outcome has increased the prospects for Modi’s BJP when it seeks a second term in national elections in May 2019. BJP is currently governing 19 of India’s 29 states, compared to the Congress party’s five.*

- According to the *Indian Express* on March 2, in a note sent to its “senior leaders” and “government functionaries” the Indian government asked to not attend the events planned for March, 2018 and April, 2018 by the “Tibetan leadership in India” to mark the 60 years in exile of the Dalai Lama.

*A note elaborated that it was a “very sensitive time” for bilateral relations with China thus “not desirable” to participate in the events of the Tibetan leadership in exile. China calls the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of the Tibetans, a “splittist” and a “dangerous separatist”. The directive was perceived as a departure from Delhi’s position on the Tibetans-in-exile. However, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said, “India’s position on the Dalai Lama is clear and consistent...He is a revered religious leader and is accorded all freedom to carry out his religious activities in India.”*

- According to *Dawn* on March 2, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) expressed concerns over Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s ‘no talks’ policy with Pakistan and called for an early resumption of dialogue with Islamabad.

*The CPI-M said that “The Modi government’s policy towards Pakistan has reached a dead end.” It also said that “Despite all its bluster and nationalistic posturing on Kashmir, the Modi government must realise that a dialogue with Pakistan is an essential part of arriving at a political settlement on the Jammu & Kashmir issue.” There is a complete stalemate between India and Pakistan since August 2015, when the Indian government called off the dialogue with Pakistan, insisting that there could be no talks until alleged cross-border terrorism stops. Pakistan maintains that whenever there will be talks, Kashmir would top the agenda.*

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

## SOUTH ASIA II

### Afghanistan

- On March 14, US Ambassador to Kabul, John Bass denied his country's involvement in transporting Daesh fighters in Afghanistan.

*Bass said in response to Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif's claims of US support for Daesh in Afghanistan that these are laughable and false. He also claimed that US Forces have removed more than 1000 Daesh fighters from Afghan soil. Zarif, during a trip to Pakistan, claimed that US helicopters have been transporting Daesh fighters from Haska Meena district in Nangarhar to unknown locations. In February 2018, Russia and Pakistan also specified that the US not only seems reluctant to confront Daesh but also suspected the country's covert support to the terrorist group.*

- On March 13, US Secretary of Defence, James Mattis arrived in Afghanistan and held talks with Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah.

*Mattis defined victory in Afghanistan as a political settlement between the Taliban and the government and an Afghan military that is capable of securing the country largely on its own. He also said that some Taliban groups had expressed an interest in talks. Meanwhile, Ghani discussed the peace offer that has been made to the Taliban and the offer of comprehensive talks to Pakistan. He added that these offers had been made possible because of the Trump Administration's South Asia strategy. It was expected that Mattis would extend the US' offer of direct talks to main factions of the Taliban which would ultimately lead to a political settlement. Ghani's peace offer seems unacceptable to the Taliban as fighting continues across the country.*

- On March 9, at least 10 people were killed and 22 others were wounded in a suicide bomb blast in Kabul's PD6 area.

*The explosion occurred close to a ceremony marking the death anniversary of Abdul Ali Mazari, slain leader of the Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan. In a related development, at least 16 Afghan Security Force members were killed after Taliban militants attacked their check posts in Khwaja Ghar District in Takhar Province. On March 10, 2018 at least 24 members of the Afghan Security Forces were killed in another attack on the Western Province of Farah. The Police Chief of Farah's Anar Dara District was also killed during the attack and Taliban occupied the District Police Headquarters. It appears that the Taliban have not accepted the peace offer which was recently extended by Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani during the second Kabul Process meeting. The insurgent group has time and again insisted on direct talks with US rather than Afghan officials.*

- On March 7, a US drone strike killed 21 members of the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Afghanistan's Kunar Province.

*The strike targeted a compound frequented by Mullah Fazlullah, the leader of TTP who is believed to be hiding in Afghanistan. Fazlullah was not there at the time of the strike; however,*

*his son was reported to be killed. For years Islamabad has asked Washington and Kabul to take action against Fazlullah and other Pakistani Taliban believed to be hiding in neighboring Afghanistan and cross the porous Pak-Afghan border to launch attacks inside Pakistan.*

- On March 5, at least 42 Daesh and Taliban militants were killed during air raids conducted by Afghan Forces in different parts of the country.

*Seven Taliban members were killed and six wounded during airstrikes on Garmsir, Grishk and Nad Ali Districts of Helmand Province. Two bases and two vehicles were also destroyed. In another airstrike on Khas Uruzgan District of Uruzgan Province at least 15 insurgents were killed, 16 wounded and weapons and vehicles were destroyed. In addition, 20 Daesh militants were killed during a separate airstrike on Darzab District of Jowzjan Province and their vehicles and weapons were also destroyed. Earlier on March 2, 2018 a car bomb explosion in Kabul killed 3 people and wounded another 22. The explosion occurred after the Afghan government hosted the second Kabul Process conference on February 28, 2018 in which a peace offer was extended to the Taliban. The air raids following the car bomb explosion not only reflect government's reaction to the attack, they also put the peace offer in jeopardy.*

- On March 5, the US urged the Taliban to consider Afghanistan's offer for peace talks.

*Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani had extended a peace offer to the Taliban at the Kabul Process meeting on February 28, 2018 including eventually recognising them as a political party. In return, Ghani said the militants should officially recognise the Afghan Government and constitution, a perennial sticking point during past attempts to initiate talks. Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid has maligned the Kabul Process, tweeting that the conference sought the Taliban's surrender. Alice Wells, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for the US State Department's Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs insisted that this is not surrender but a dignified process for reaching a political framework. She also encouraged the Taliban to take the offer seriously. In February 2018, the Taliban said they were prepared to enter direct talks with the US to find a peaceful solution to the conflict.*

- On March 5, the Afghan Ministry of Defence reported that President Ashraf Ghani ordered the formation of a territorial army, which would recruit 36,000 people in three phases.

*The Ministry of Defence added that a commission has been established and work is being done to draw up the structure of the new force. The new force would be similar to the Afghan Local Police (ALP) which was established in 2010. Presently, over 190,000 soldiers serve in the Afghan National Army. With the formation of the new force, the total strength of the Afghan National Security Forces would increase to 390,000.*

- On March 1, India announced its decision to invest in the Shahtoot Dam project in Chahar Asiab district of Kabul province.

*According to Tolo News, Vijay Keshav Gokhale, the Foreign Secretary of India, confirmed his country's willingness to invest in the project during a meeting with Afghan officials. The feasibility study of the project was completed in 2012. According to the Afghan Ministry of Energy and Water, the construction of the dam would cost \$236 million USD. The project would provide irrigation and drinking water to at least 4,000 hectares of land in Chahar Asiab and Khairabad districts in Kabul. Encouraged and supported by the US, India continues to invest in economic and defence sectors of Afghanistan.*

- On March 1, Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani attended a ceremony to mark the National Day of Afghan Defence and Security Forces in Kabul.

*Ghani praised the sacrifices made by Afghan forces in the war on terror. He also bestowed medals and ranks on officers and generals of all security agencies. Afghan Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah, Defence Minister Tariq Shah Bahrami, Interior Minister Wais Ahmad Barmak and NDS Chief Masoom Stanekzai also attended the event. Abdullah called on security agencies to carry on with their activities while keeping a distance from political issues. Afghan Security Forces have suffered numerous casualties with 5000 members being killed and another 15000 wounded in 2017. A rapid surge in fatalities has been recorded especially after the announcement of the US' new South Asia Strategy in August 2017.*

## **Bangladesh**

- On March 12, Bangladeshi Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina visited Singapore and met with her counterpart Prime Minister Lee Hsien.

*Bangladesh and Singapore signed two MoUs specified on Public Private Partnership and Air Service. Hasina requested Hsien to provide a decent work atmosphere for Bangladeshi workers. She also congratulated Singapore on its assumption of ASEAN Chair in 2018. Bangladesh and Singapore have been enjoying friendly ties since the establishment of diplomatic relations in February 1972.*

- On March 12, Bangladesh National Party Chairperson and former Prime Minister, Khaleda Zia secured four-month bail in the Zia Orphanage Trust corruption case, in which she was found guilty and handed five years in prison.

*On February 8, 2018, Zia and five others, including her son Tarique Rahman, were found guilty of embezzling Tk2.1 crore received in charity for an orphanage. The interim bail is expected to pave the way for her release from the jail and also enable her to contest the upcoming national election scheduled for December 2018.*

- On March 5, Vietnamese President, Tran Dai Quang visited Bangladesh and met with Bangladeshi Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina and discussed various issues including the Rohingya crisis.

*Sheikh Hasina sought Vietnam's support for a peaceful solution to the Rohingya crisis. President Quang expressed his support for a viable and long term solution to the problem. To this end, he*

welcomed recent agreements between Bangladesh and Myanmar on the issue. Sheikh Hasina also sought Vietnam's support in favour of Bangladesh's desire to become a Sectoral Dialogue Partner of ASEAN. President Quang agreed to give due consideration to the requests. The two sides agreed to strengthen cooperation in security and defence areas through the exchange of goodwill visits and delegations and participation in training in each other's countries. They also agreed to continue cooperation in countering transnational crimes and terrorism. The two sides also signed 3 MOUs on cooperation in the fields of fisheries, livestock and machinery manufacturing cooperation.

- The *Dhaka Tribune* reported on March 5 that the Myanmar Army had taken positions along the Tambru border with Bangladesh, creating panic among the Rohingyas who had taken shelter in the no man's land.

Earlier on March 3, 2018 the Myanmar Army agreed to withdraw from Tambru border following a flag meeting with Bangladeshi Border Guards. However, after two days of the agreement the Myanmar Army took back its positions. Around 6,500 Rohingyas are stuck in the no man's land since August 2017. The Myanmar Army has been issuing warnings and asking refugees to leave the no man's land and cross over into Bangladesh. Both Bangladeshi and Myanmar troops are installing barbed-wire fences, digging bunkers, and setting up advanced technological surveillance equipment on their respective sides of the border, making conditions more difficult for the trapped refugees. More than 700,000 Rohingya refugees have crossed into Bangladesh since a military crackdown began in late August 2017 following an insurgent attack on Rakhine.

## **Sri Lanka**

- On March 12, Sri Lankan President, Maithripala Sirisena arrived in Japan after concluding his 2-day visit to India.

Sirisena's India visit was primarily aimed at attending the Founding Conference of the International Solar Alliance. The Conference was co-chaired by Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi and French President, Emmanuel Macron. Sirisena called on Indian President, Ram Nath Kovind and Prime Minister, Modi on the sidelines of the Conference. India announced US\$ 100 million concessional financing for solar projects in Sri Lanka. While in Japan, Sirisena met Japanese Emperor, Akihito and Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe and discussed ways to further strengthen the trade and cultural ties between the two countries. Sirisena also expressed enthusiasm for Japan's plans to build quality infrastructure in his country in an effort to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific region. Since assuming office in January 2015, Sirisena has chosen to review the previous government's pro-China policies. Sri Lanka has a strategically important location in the Indian Ocean. China has provided the country with massive infrastructure investment as part of its Belt and Road initiative.

- On March 6, the Sri Lankan government declared a nationwide state of emergency for 10 days following Buddhist - Muslim clashes in the central district of Kandy.

*The unrest began after the funeral of a truck driver from the majority Sinhalese Buddhist community. The deceased man was involved in an altercation with four Muslims. After the funeral a Sinhalese mob attacked Muslim shops and the body of a Muslim youth was found in a burnt-out house. As a result, riots erupted between the two communities and curfew was imposed in Kandy. Tensions have been growing between the two communities in Sri Lanka over the past year, with some hard-line Buddhist groups accusing Muslims of forcing people to convert to Islam and vandalising Buddhist archaeological sites. Muslims make up about 9% of Sri Lanka's 21 million people. Buddhists make up about 70% and ethnic Tamils, most of whom are Hindus, about 13%.*

## **Nepal**

- On March 13, Bidya Devi Bhandari was re-elected as the President of Nepal.

*The country's main opposition party Nepali Congress had fielded former lawmaker Kumari Laxmi Rai against incumbent President, Bhandari in the run for the post. Bhandari had been endorsed by the left-alliance. She would be serving another 5 years in the office.*

--- Kashif Hussain

## UNITED NATIONS

- On March 12, Yanghee Lee, UN special rapporteur to Myanmar, warned that the crackdown on “Myanmar’s Rohingya minority bears the hallmarks of genocide.”
- On March 6, 2018, Andrew Gilmour, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, said that Myanmar is continuing its “ethnic cleansing” of the Rohingya with a “campaign of terror and forced starvation” in Rakhine state.

*Lee insisted that the government leaders who did nothing to intervene, stop or condemn these crimes must also be held accountable. She said, “The quest for accountability must be aimed at individuals who gave the orders and carried out violations against individuals and entire ethnic and religious groups.” She called for the creation of a new body tasked with preparing criminal indictments over atrocities committed in Myanmar. On March 6, 2018, Andrew Gilmour also condemned the indiscriminate crackdown on Rohingya Muslim community. He said, “The ethnic cleansing of Rohingya from Myanmar continues. I don’t think we can draw any other conclusion from what I have seen and heard in Cox’s Bazar.” His remarks came after speaking to recently arrived Rohingya in Bangladesh’s refugee camps on his four-day visit to Cox’s Bazar district. He indicated that the nature of violence had changed from ‘the frenzied bloodletting and mass rape’ in 2017 to ‘a lower-intensity campaign of terror and forced starvation’ aimed at driving the remaining Rohingya from their homes and into Bangladesh. He said that safe and dignified return of Rohingya to Myanmar was inconceivable under current circumstances.*

- On March 12, United Nations High Commissioner (UNHC) for Human Rights, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, declared the situation in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK) a matter of grave concern at the 37th session of UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva.

*Zeid’s comments came during a meeting with over 500 representatives of civil society from all over the globe. He also announced that the UN would be launching a major report on the situation in Kashmir in June 2018 when the UNHRC would hold its next session. During the meeting Syed Faiz Naqshbandi, a Kashmiri leader, also expressed his concerns over violations of human rights in IOK and addressed Zeid on the situation. Naqshbandi also thanked Zeid for bringing Kashmir to the top of the international agenda and ending UN silence on the 70-year-old conflict. Meanwhile, Pakistan too raised the issue of grave human rights violations by India in IOK during the session. Tahir Andrabi, Deputy Permanent Representative of Pakistan at the UN, said, “India needs to end the impunity enjoyed by its security forces and allow unfettered access to UN Fact-Finding Team to investigate Human Rights violation in IOK,” It was for the first time in decades that Jammu and Kashmir has become a top agenda item in the policy statement of the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights. Earlier in 2016, Zeid added Jammu and Kashmir to a formal list of urgent humanitarian crises, along with conflicts like Syria and Myanmar, in his policy statement following the extrajudicial murder of Kashmiri youth activist Burhan Wani.*

- On March 11, Jeffrey Feltman, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs condemned anti-Muslim violence that has targeted mosques and businesses in Sri Lanka and urged the government to bring the perpetrators of the violence and hate speech to justice.

*Feltman was on a three-day visit to Sri Lanka. During his visit he met with Muslim leaders to express his solidarity. On March 6, 2018, Sinhalese mobs attacked 11 mosques and at least 200 Muslim-owned businesses, prompting the Sri Lankan government to declare a state of emergency. Three people have been killed and 20 wounded in the anti-Muslim attacks. Feltman urged the government to take measures to prevent the recurrence of such crimes, and to enforce non-discriminatory rule of law. Muslims make up 10% of Sri Lanka's 21 million people. The majority are Sinhalese, a largely Buddhist ethnic group.*

- On March 8, the UNSC renewed the mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) for another year to continue providing assistance to the Afghan Government.

*The UNSC voted unanimously to extend the UNAMA's mandate until March 17, 2019. While addressing the UNSC, Tadamichi Yamamoto, the Secretary-General's Special Representative and Head of the UNAMA said that the Mission would focus on the peace process, the upcoming elections and the Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan which the UN would host with the Afghan Government in Geneva on November 28, 2018. On Afghanistan's political affairs, Yamamoto said that Afghan President Ashraf Ghani had offered peace to the Taliban without preconditions and laid out a path for negotiations with a series of concrete proposals to create space for the opening of talks. He said that the Taliban should now come forward with an offer of their own and start direct talks with the Government.*

*In a related development on March 8, 2018, Pakistan's Permanent Representative at the United Nations, Dr. Maleeha Lodhi and her counterpart Ambassador Gholam-Ali Khoshrou supported the peace talks in Afghanistan. Lodhi urged the Afghan government and Taliban to come to the negotiating table to ensure peace in the region.*

- On March 2, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, warned that the perpetrators of war crimes that are being committed in Eastern Ghouta and elsewhere in Syria would be held accountable.

*Zeid said, "The perpetrators of these crimes must know they are being identified; that dossiers are being built up with a view to their prosecution; and that they will be held accountable for what they have done." His comments came during an urgent meeting on the situation in Eastern Ghouta at the Geneva-based Human Rights Council. He said that the Human Rights Council could have a real impact in ensuring that there would be justice for the suffering that has been inflicted on the Syrian people. He also urged the Council to renew the mandate of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria. Meanwhile, on March 2, 2018, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) called on warring parties*

*inside Syria to stop the war on children. Geert Cappelaere, UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa, said that the children of Syria have been waiting for justice for too long but UNICEF's calls have fallen once again on deaf ears.*

- According to *The News* on March 1, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that detention of a Pakistani man Ammar al Baluchi by the US at Guantanamo Bay was arbitrary and a breach of international human rights law.

*While urging the US to permit it to visit the Guantanamo detention centre, the UN Working Group expressed concerns regarding its continued operation and called for its closure on priority basis. The group stated, "Mr al Baluchi has been subject to prolonged detention on discriminatory grounds and has not been afforded equality of arms in terms of having adequate facilities for the preparation of his defence under the same conditions as the prosecution." According to Human Rights experts, Baluchi has also suffered psychological and physical trauma resulting from torture he had suffered prior to his transfer to Guantanamo Bay. Baluchi's case was considered by the Working Group during its meeting in Geneva from 20-24 November 2017.*

*--- Moiz Khan*