

MAY 16 – MAY 31

AREA BRIEF

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Area Briefs: 16-31 May 2018

General Observations

Pakistan

- A major political development took place on 24 May with the passage of the 31st Constitutional Amendment Bill in the National Assembly merging the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) with Khyber Pukhtunkhwa (KP) province. Along with FATA, the Provincial Administered Tribal Areas of Balochistan and KP were also merged within their respective provinces. With this move FATA would become a part of mainstream Pakistan once the Bill had passed through all the required processes and been signed by the President. This historic move ended the last vestiges of colonialism remaining within Pakistan.
- A ceasefire along the LoC and the Working Boundary was finally agreed to between Pakistan and India through Hotline contact between the Director Generals of Military Operations (DGMOs) of both countries on 29 May. However, it remains to be seen whether this ceasefire will hold.
- Pakistan-US relations continued on their downward spiral with the US targeting Pakistan on multiple fronts. On 24 May, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated that US diplomats in Pakistan were being “badly treated”. This was an absurd statement given how US diplomats have been breaking all Pakistani laws with impunity including drunken driving and killing of Pakistani citizens. Clearly Pakistan needs to strictly apply the principle of reciprocity in all its diplomatic dealings especially with the US.

Continuing the aggressive approach towards Pakistan, on 29 May, US envoy to the UN, Nikki Haley, while addressing an Indian American Friendship Council in Irving, declared that the US wanted to ensure peace and harmony in the South Asian region and would not tolerate countries like Pakistan that have become “safe havens” for terrorists.

US think tanks continued this negative posturing towards Pakistan, especially targeting the country’s nuclear programme. The Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) put out a report, 30 May, arguing against Pakistan being granted membership to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) because of what it referred to as “its ongoing illicit nuclear procurements abroad and its refusal to split its military and civil nuclear programmes”. The ignorance of the ISIS was evident because Pakistan had separated its civil nuclear facilities from its military programme in 2001 when the Pakistan Nuclear Regulatory Authority (PNRA) was set up to deal with the civil nuclear programme.

- Pakistan once again took up the issue of the Kishanganga Dam which India had completed during the period that both Pakistan and the World Bank had vacillated – the former relying on the World Bank to stop the project and the latter unwilling to do so. On 21 May the World Bank held a meeting in Washington of experts from Pakistan and India after the latest complaint by Pakistan, which was now confronted with a *fait accompli* in India's inauguration of the completed 330-megawatt Kishanganga hydropower station in Indian Occupied Kashmir. Both sides reiterated their earlier positions with Pakistan wanting a court of arbitration to decide the issue and India demanding an international expert. As usual, the World Bank showed little intent to break the deadlock.
- With a view to easing tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, especially in the wake of the Afghan government's statement opposing the FATA merger with KP, a purely internal matter of Pakistan, a high level Afghan delegation visited Islamabad on 27 May to discuss security issues. The Afghan delegation was led by the Afghan National Security Advisor and the delegation held a series of meetings including with Pakistan's National Security Advisor and the COAS. This visit was a follow-up on the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS), which has created a framework for improving mutual trust and increasing bilateral cooperation to resolve issues of concern.

International

- As the death toll in Gaza, as a result of Israeli military attacks against Palestinian protestors, continued to rise, on 18 May the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) passed a resolution calling on Council members to send a team of international war crimes investigators to probe into shootings of Gaza protesters by Israeli forces. This was followed by the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov, on 23 May, urging the UN Security Council to act in order to avoid another war in Gaza and to alleviate the suffering of people living there.
- Earlier, on 18 May, Turkey called an extraordinary Summit meeting of the OIC, which was held in Istanbul, in response to the killing of over 60 Palestinians by Israel on the Gaza border and to condemn the US shifting its embassy to Jerusalem.
- Meanwhile, on 23 May, Nickolay Mladenov, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, gave out that the Palestinian Authority had joined two major United Nations agencies and the global treaty banning the spread of chemical weapons: the

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) and the Convention on the Prohibition, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons (CWC). The US showed its displeasure at the increasing diplomatic profile of the Palestinians and threatened to cut funds to UN Agencies and other organisations if they accept Palestinians.

- India's militarisation continues apace. On 31 May India conducted a successful test of its new indigenously designed surface-to-air missile. Earlier on 21 and 22 May India had tested its BrahMos cruise missile to test its locally designed components.

In a related development, India and Russia concluded negotiations over price for the sale of five regiments of the Russian S-400 Triumph Air Defence Systems to India. The deal itself will be announced during the Modi-Putin Summit in October 2018.

Meanwhile the US revealed its growing strategic partnership with India and its reassertion of interest in the Indian Ocean region by renaming its largest military command, the US Pacific Command as the US Indo-Pacific Command. Defence Secretary Mattis made this announcement on 31 May.

- After exiting from the JCPOA on 8 May, the US, on 21 May, threatened Iran with sanctions – as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo put it “the strongest sanctions in history” – unless Iran acceded to a set of US demands which included inter alia restricting its ballistic missile programme and ending what the US termed Iran's “expansionist behavior” in the region. Clearly the US seeks to impose controls on Iran that go beyond the nuclear capability issue and into the political domain.

As expected Iranian President Rouhani rejected the 12 US demands while Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei put forward a set of conditions for the European states if they wanted to remain in the JCPOA. Amongst the conditionalities are: a commitment that the European states would not ask for new negotiations on Iran's ballistic missile programme, would not make demands on Iran's regional policies, would guarantee Iran's oil sales and that European banks would safeguard trade with Iran. Khamenei stated that if these demands were not met then Iran would resume uranium enrichment. Clearly the Iran nuclear issue has once again been opened up.

- In the face of the growing belligerency of the Trump Administration, on 18 May Russian President Putin announced that the Russian military would soon induct new nuclear weapons into the country's arsenal and these would be far advanced from any other nation's weapon designs.

- Continuing down an aggressive foreign relations path, the Trump Administration imposed tariffs on aluminium and steel in the case of Canada, Mexico and the EU – all of which were earlier exempted.

--- Dr Shireen M Mazari

Director General

AMERICAS

Domestic

- According to Reuters on May 30, the Trump Administration will soon begin fingerprinting parents claiming custody of children who entered the US illegally without an adult relative.

The announcement has prompted criticism that those who fear being identified and deported may abandon children. Currently, most parents are not being fingerprinted in order to get custody of their children. US laws and legal precedent limit the time juveniles can be detained, so those caught crossing the border alone are often released to adult sponsors in the United States. The children are then expected to show up to immigration court to fight their deportation cases.

- On May 25, two people were injured at Noblesville West Middle School in central Indiana.

The Indiana shooting was the 21st incident of 2018 in which someone was injured with a firearm on the campus of a US school. School shootings in the US have become very common. However, politicians and law enforcement officials remain unable to address the issue even as the shootings and continue to increase.

- According to a May 19 probable cause affidavit, Dimitrios Pagourtzis admitted he didn't shoot people he liked and meant to kill only those he did target.
- On May 18, 2018 Dimitrios Pagourtzis, used a shotgun and a revolver to kill ten people and wound 10 others at a Texas high school.

Galveston County Magistrate Mark Henry denied bail for the seventeen year old who is accused of capital murder of multiple people and aggravated assault on a public servant. Students at Santa Fe High School, not far from Houston in southeastern Texas, said they heard shots just after class began. A Pakistani exchange student, Sabika Sheikh was also killed in the attack.

- On May 24, a California jury ordered Samsung to pay Apple \$539 million in financial damages for copying patented design and utility features on the original iPhone in its own phones.

Apple had claimed \$1 billion. Samsung wanted to pay about \$28 million. However, the decision is a big blow to Samsung, which is required to pay about \$533.3 million for infringing on design patents. The jury said Samsung owes Apple an additional \$5.3 million for infringing on utility patents. "Today's decision flies in the face of a unanimous Supreme Court ruling in favour of Samsung on the scope of design patent damages," Samsung said in a statement. "We will consider all options to obtain an outcome that does not hinder creativity and fair competition for all companies and consumers."

- On May 24, a judge of the Washington DC Superior Court ruled that the government withheld evidence that could have potentially cleared defendants in a trial of six Inauguration Day protesters.

Judge Robert Morin agreed with the defence's claim that presenting an edited video as evidence constituted a violation of the Brady rule, which lays out the obligations of the state regarding potentially exculpatory evidence. The defence's lawyers had filed a motion for sanctions on the prosecutor and a dismissal of their clients' charges, which could land the defendants behind bars for several decades. The six defendants are among 59 people still facing several felony charges over their alleged participation in anti-fascist and anti-capitalist rally against President Trump's inauguration on January 20, 2017. During the demonstration, more than 230 people were arrested, and most were given a rioting charge.

- On May 21, the US Department of Justice said it would investigate whether the FBI had spied on President Trump's Presidential Campaign for political motives.

The announcement followed Trump's call for an inquiry. "If anyone did infiltrate or surveil participants in a presidential campaign for inappropriate purposes, we need to know about it and take appropriate action," Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein said. Trump had demanded that the Justice Department investigate possible infiltration or surveillance by the FBI or the Department of Justice itself of his 2016 campaign, stressing that it was essential to probe if someone from his predecessor Barack Obama's Administration had ordered such a request.

- On May 17, Hawaii's Kilauea volcano erupted, "driving a plume of ash and debris 30,000 feet into the air and putting residents on further notice that a bigger blast could still be percolating in the volatile crater."

The state Civil Defence Agency said the plume was drifting northeast and warned residents to shelter in place. Driving conditions may be dangerous due to low visibility, the agency warned. The steam-driven explosion occurred within Halema'uma'u Crater at Kilauea's summit at about 4:17 a.m. local time.

International

- On May 31, the Trump Administration imposed tariffs on some of the nation's closest allies.

The US announced it would no longer exempt Canada, Mexico and the European Union from previously announced levies on steel and aluminum. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross made the announcement in Paris. Canada and Mexico had been exempted from the tariffs announced in March 2017 while negotiations over the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) continued. However, he said those talks were taking longer than "we had hoped." And so the

Administration decided to lift the exemption from the tariffs for those countries. He said trade talks with the EU had also been fruitless.

- *BBC reported on May 31 that Gen Kim Yong-chol a close aide of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un met US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in New York to discuss the June 12, 2018 Summit.*

Gen Kim Yong-chol dined with Pompeo after flying in from China, and the two are due to meet again. He is the most senior North Korean to visit the US in almost two decades. US President Donald Trump had cancelled the Summit, but both sides have since made fresh efforts to hold it as initially planned. The historic meeting between Trump and Kim Jong-un would be the first between sitting US and North Korean leaders.

- *On May 29, US and North Korean officials met in the Korean truce village of Panmunjom for a second day to work out details of a proposed Summit amid media reports that South Korean President Moon Jae-in may attend the historic meeting.*

“The discussions are just getting started, so we are still waiting to see how they come out, but ... Moon could join President Trump and Kim Jong Un in Singapore,” a senior official with Moon’s office said. Aimed at bringing an end to Pyongyang’s nuclear programme, the Summit had been planned for President Trump to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong Un on June 12, 2018 in Singapore. President Trump called it off on May 24, 2018 after public discussions between the two nations developed into angry rhetoric. Trump accused Kim of showing “open hostility” toward Washington, adding US nuclear weapons are far superior to North Korea’s and “so massive and powerful that I pray to God they will never have to be used.” On May 26, 2018 Moon and Kim met again for a second time in less than two months. Quoting Kim, Moon said he looked forward to meeting with Trump and “made clear once again his intentions to completely denuclearise the Korean Peninsula.” In the aftermath of the meeting President Trump began walking back the cancellation, and May 27, 2018 announced US officials were in North Korea making arrangements for the Summit. “I truly believe North Korea has brilliant potential and will be a great economic and financial Nation one day,” Trump tweeted. “Kim Jong Un agrees with me on this. It will happen!”

- *According to the NY Times on May 28, Siegfried S. Hecker, a top federal government adviser who has visited the North’s atomic complex numerous times has warned that the disarmament process could take up to 15 years.*

Hecker is a Former Director of the Los Alamos weapons laboratory in New Mexico, and now a Stanford professor. According to him, the best the United States can hope for is a phased denuclearisation that goes after the most dangerous parts of the North’s programme first. The disarmament steps and timetable are part of a report circulated recently in Washington. Dr Hecker compiled the report with two colleagues at Stanford’s Center for International Security and Cooperation. Dr. Hecker has toured that nation’s secretive labyrinth of nuclear plants four

times and remains the only US scientist to see its facility for enriching uranium. His time frame stands in stark contrast with what the United States initially demanded, on what could be a key sticking point in any Summit meeting between President Trump and Kim Jong-un, the North Korean leader.

- On May 31 the US announced its decision to rename its largest military command to reflect the growing importance of the Indian Ocean in the US strategic thinking.

Defence Secretary James Mattis said the US Pacific Command would now be called the US Indo-Pacific Command. The Command oversees US operations in Asia. It has about 375,000 military and civilian personnel. The name change comes amid tensions with China, which has been expanding its military activity in the region.

- The S&P 500 and the Dow Jones Industrial Average registered their biggest one-day percentage drops in a month on May 29 as political turmoil in Italy sparked concerns about the stability of the euro zone and shares of US banks tumbled.

Italy remains unable to form a coalition government since inconclusive elections in March 2018, which saw the rise of anti-establishment parties that support leaving the euro. The most recent nominee for Prime Minister failed to secure support from the country's major political parties. The political crisis in Rome, and the threat to the euro project it represents, triggered a rush to traditional safe havens like US debt, pulling down US 10-year Treasury yields and in turn spurring losses for US banks. Shares of S&P 500 banks registered their biggest one-day decline in more than two months, ending more than 4% lower.

- According to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on May 24, Diplomats from the United States are being “treated badly” in Pakistan.

Pompeo's remarks came during a US congressional hearing. He also said that Pakistan would continue to receive diminishing US aid. He was testifying before the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs. The remarks come as relations between the two erstwhile allies continue to deteriorate. “My officers, our state department officers, are being treated badly as well, folks working in the embassies and councils and in other places are not being treated well by the Pakistani government either,” Pompeo said, during a debate on the US Department of State's budget for the 2019 fiscal year. In a statement to Al Jazeera, a spokesperson for the US Embassy in Pakistan alleged that “the harassment faced by American and local US Embassy and Consulate personnel in Pakistan restricts their ability to carry out their mission. “We have also documented numerous cases in which ordinary Pakistani citizens participating in our educational, cultural, and development programs have faced harassment by Pakistani government officials.”

- According to a May 18 statement by Dana White, Assistant to the Secretary of Defence for Public Affairs, the United States has expressed hope that Pakistan would be a partner in safeguarding the region and would “do more” to uphold regional peace in South Asia.

The statement came during a regular briefing at the Pentagon. Referring to the security situation in Afghanistan, White said Pakistan had been a victim of terrorism and alleged that Pakistan and Afghanistan have also “sponsored terrorism”.

- According to USA Today on May 29, Hurricane Maria likely killed thousands of people across Puerto Rico in 2017, more than 70 times the official estimate.

Authorities in Puerto Rico placed the death toll at 64 after Maria roared through the island on Sept. 20, 2017, destroying buildings and knocking out power to virtually the entire US territory of more than 3 million people. Researchers at the Harvard University’s T H Chan School of Public Health, however, surveyed more than 3,000 households in Puerto Rico. By extrapolating those findings, researchers determined that at least 4,645 “excess deaths” occurred during the storm and the weeks that followed.

Latin America

- According to US Vice-President Mike Pence on May 27, sanctions will remain on Venezuela despite the release of a US prisoner and his wife on May 26, 2018.

Joshua Holt and his Venezuelan wife Thamy arrived in the US accompanied by Senator Bob Corker, who helped negotiate their release. Holt later met President Donald Trump at the White House. The Holts had been imprisoned in Venezuela for two years on charges of concealing weapons. “Very glad that Josh Holt is now back home with his family - where he has always belonged,” Pence tweeted. “Sanctions continue until democracy returns to Venezuela.” The couple was detained in 2016 at her family’s house in the capital Caracas while waiting for US visas, and accused of hiding weapons. Both were jailed for two years. Corker had held talks with Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. The US senator shared a picture of himself with the couple after their release, adding, “We are on our way home.”

- On May 22 Venezuela’s President Nicolás Maduro faced severe international criticism after winning his second six-year term, in a landslide vote marred by an opposition boycott and claims of vote-rigging.

Fourteen countries including Argentina, Brazil and Canada recalled their ambassadors from Caracas in protest. The US imposed new economic sanctions after the election. US President Donald Trump called for new elections to “end the repression” of Venezuelans. Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated Maduro on his re-election wishing him “success in resolving the social and economic issues facing the country.”

- On May 21, Venezuela’s President Nicolás Maduro won another six-year term.

Due to food shortages stemming from a severe economic crisis turnout was low. The National Electoral Council (CNE) put it at just 46% but the opposition alleges it was even lower. The main opposition candidate, Henri Falcón, rejected the result soon after the polls closed and called for new elections.

---Amina Afzal

ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

- According to *The New India Express* on May 31, India successfully conducted the first test-launch of its new indigenously designed surface-to-air missile developed by the country's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO).

The missile was test-fired from launching complex-III of the Integrated Test Range (ITR) off the Odisha coast. Indian Defence sources said that the missile powered by Solid Fuel Ducted Ramjet (SFDR) is yet to be formally named. It was fired from a static launcher and met all mission objectives. An Indian defence official said, "It was a booster phase test of the missile and the mission was a major milestone for the strategic missile programme. The nozzle-less booster and SFDR were tested successfully. We can now master the technology which will boost several next-generation weapon systems." The official indicated that the new technology would help both surface-to-air and air-to-air missiles perform better and enhance their strike range making the weapons more lethal. Earlier on May 22 and 21, 2018, the DRDO and the Indian Army conducted two tests of the supersonic BrahMos cruise missile. These launches were aimed at testing new locally designed components of the BrahMos developed for some of the missile's subsystems to extend its service life from 10 to 15 years. The BrahMos cruise missile has a maximum strike range of 400 kilometres.

According to reports on May 30, 2018, India and Russia concluded price negotiations for the supply of five regiments of Russian-made S-400 Triumf advanced Air Defence Systems to India. An Indian government official said, "The negotiations for the missile deal have been concluded. The financial component has been finalised." The official said the deal would be announced before an annual summit between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin in October 2018. Indian and Russian officials are now trying to find ways to prevent the US from sanctioning India under its Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) for acquiring Russian weaponry. The US passed the CAATSA against Russia in August 2017 for manipulating the 2016 presidential election process.

- According to *The News* on May 31, Turkish officials have confirmed that Pakistan and Turkey have reached a defence agreement for the sale of 30 T129 attack helicopters to Pakistan.

The confirmation of the agreement was made in the political manifesto that Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Parti) has released ahead of the general election scheduled for June 2018. According to the manifesto, Turkey and Pakistan had recently agreed on the terms for the largest ever defence contract signed between the two countries. However, no further details were provided. The two countries have been negotiating a T129 deal since 2014. This is the first export contract for the helicopter. The T129 helicopters have been developed by the Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI). According to the report, these helicopters are being

tested in Pakistan. During a military parade on March 23, 2018, the T129 helicopters were also showcased in Pakistan.

- A report released by the US-based Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) on May 30 claimed that Pakistan's application to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) should not be granted, mainly because of its ongoing illicit nuclear procurements abroad and its refusal to split its military and civil nuclear programmes.

The report, authored by David Albright, Sarah Burkhard, and Frank Pabian, noted, "Although there are many reasons to refuse its membership, some more obvious reasons include its ongoing illicit nuclear procurements abroad and its refusal to even minimally split its military and civil nuclear programmes." The report alleges that Pakistan has greatly expanded its nuclear complex dedicated to producing nuclear weapons. The report also contains several satellite images saying that Pakistan appears committed to building one or two large uranium enrichment plants. It highlighted that the country was expanding the number of nuclear power plants and the means to make fuel for these new reactors. Based on its findings, the authors said that Pakistan should be called upon by states including the US, China, and major European powers to declare the purpose of its new enrichment plants.

In a related development on May 29, 2018, US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley indicated that India's nuclear power was not a matter of concern for other countries, including the US. While speaking at a luncheon hosted by the Indian American Friendship Council in Irving, Haley said both Washington and New Delhi enjoy strong economic, cultural and military cooperation. She also said that the US wanted to ensure peace and harmony in the South Asian region and would not tolerate countries like Pakistan that have become safe-havens for terrorists.

- According to *Dawn* on May 29, Pakistan's Heavy Industries Taxila (HIT) signed a contract with Bahrain National Guards to export locally manufactured light armoured vehicles.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between HIT's Chief Lt Gen Muhammad Naeem Ashraf and Commander of the National Guard of the Kingdom of Bahrain Lt Gen Mohammed Bin Isa Al Khalifa. The Interceptor vehicles are jointly developed by the HIT and Pakistan Cavalier Group. Both the HIT and Pakistan Cavalier Group had showcased two military armoured vehicles at the Bahrain International Defence Exhibition in 2017. The two vehicles were the Hamza 6×6 MRAP Armoured Vehicle and the 4×4 Interceptor. According to media reports, the contract for the sale of six "interceptors" could result in a series of contracts for 50 or more vehicles being exported to Bahrain.

- On May 28, Syria assumed the rotating presidency of the United Nations-backed Conference on Disarmament (CD).

After taking the Presidency of the CD, Syrian Ambassador Hussam Edin Aala opened the conference's latest round on May 29, 2018. However, Syria's assumption of the Presidency was

met with opposition from the US and several European countries. The Syrian Government under Bashar al-Assad has been accused of using chemical weapons, barrel bombs and torture against its own people during the country's seven-year civil war. Leading the protest, US Ambassador Robert Wood said, "Syria's presence here is a travesty, and it is just unacceptable for them to be leading this body." Wood said that the US along with other European countries would attend the sessions of the CD to ensure that Syria is not able to advance initiatives that run counter to the interests of the US. A number of ambassadors from other countries, including Britain, Australia, and France also opposed Syria's presidency. Matthew Rowland, British Ambassador to the CD, said it "deplores the fact that Syria will assume the presidency of the Conference on Disarmament, given the regime's consistent and flagrant disregard of international non-proliferation and disarmament norms and agreements."

- On May 24, Human Rights Watch (HRW) called on the US to cancel its planned arms sales to Bahrain in light of the country's "dismal human rights record."

The HRW accused Bahrain of unjustified crackdown on activists, lawyers, and journalists. The organisation said, "Bahrain has arbitrarily revoked a record number of citizenships of nationals, carried out unfair trials of civilians in military courts, and harassed, intimidated, imprisoned, and prosecuted rights defenders and their family members." Referring to the planned sale of attack helicopters and 3,000 bombs worth around \$1 billion in total, Sarah Margon, HRW's US based Director, urged the US to cancel the procurement of weapons to the country that continues to violate basic human rights. Margon said that these two weapons sales make it clear that the US intends nothing short of a free pass on human rights for Bahrain.

- On May 24, a US Senate committee passed a \$716 billion defence policy bill, including measures to prevent Turkey from purchasing Lockheed Martin F-35 Joint Strike Fighter jets.

The new measures in the bill would remove Turkey from the F-35 programme over its S-400 missile defence system's purchase from Russia as well as imprisonment of an American Christian pastor Andrew Brunson in Turkey on spying and terrorism charges. Brunson has been in pre-trial detention since 2016 and has denied terrorism and spying charges in a Turkish court earlier in May 2018. Democratic Senator Jeanne Shaheen said that Turkey's intention to purchase the Russian missile defence system is sanctionable under US law. Turkey plans to buy more than 100 of the F-35 jets and is also in negotiations with the US for the purchase of Patriot missiles. The country is also in talks with Russia for the purchase of S-400 which Turkey believes would boost its defence capabilities in the face of threats from Kurdish and Daesh-linked militants as well as conflicts across its borders in neighbouring Syria and Iraq. In response to the bill, Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu warned on May 30, 2018, that his country would buy jets elsewhere if the US stops it from buying Lockheed Martin's F-35 jets. Cavusoglu said that it was unlikely that the US would be able to abandon the deal because the pre-payments for this project have already been made.

- On May 24, North Korea announced that it has completely dismantled its Punggye-ri nuclear test site.

North Korea's state news agency KCNA said the process would "ensure the transparency of discontinuance of nuclear tests". According to the report, the explosions deep in the mountains aimed at destroying the test site were conducted in the presence of foreign journalists. The explosions were conducted on three tunnels leading into the underground site and a number of observation towers in the surrounding area. The process of dismantling of the site started on May 16, 2018. Reporters from South Korea, China and other foreign media outlets visited North Korea for covering the event. Some two-dozen journalists were invited into the country to observe the apparent destruction of the site. However, no weapons inspectors or non-proliferation experts were invited to witness the event, and it was unclear whether the explosions rendered the tunnels inoperable, or only caused limited damage. Before the explosions, the journalists were invited to look inside three of the four tunnels. After the completion of the demolition process, journalists were allowed closer to inspect the damage. Each tunnel was caved in, with rubble blocking the entrance. Punggye-ri has been the site for all six of North Korea's nuclear tests, including its latest and most powerful test in September 2017, which Pyongyang called a Hydrogen-bomb test. Although there were four tunnels at the site, the journalists only witnessed the destruction of three including the newly built western and southern tunnels that remained unused and the northern tunnel that was used for five tests. North Korean officials said that the eastern tunnel that was used for one nuclear test in 2006 had already been abandoned due to contamination.

- On May 24, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres announced a new vision for global disarmament to help eliminate nuclear arsenals and other deadly weapons from the world.

Unveiling his new agenda, entitled, "Securing Our Common Future," at the University of Geneva, in Switzerland, Guterres said, "The United Nations was created with the goal of eliminating war as an instrument of foreign policy." The new Agenda is based on three priorities including the elimination of weapons of mass destruction, conventional weapons, and new battlefield technologies. Explaining the three priorities, Guterres said that disarmament of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons as a first priority could help "save humanity." He said that the second priority which focuses on disarmament of conventional weapons, which include small arms, light weapons and landmines, could "save lives," in particular those of civilians who continue to bear the brunt of armed conflict. He termed the elimination of new weapons technologies a third priority, which would help avert a new arms race that could endanger future generations. He said disarmament was "an essential tool to secure our world and our future." Guterres urged Russia and the US to resolve their dispute over the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty; to extend the New START treaty on strategic offensive arms, which is due to expire in coming three years; and to take new steps towards reducing nuclear stockpiles.

- On May 21, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo threatened to impose the “strongest sanctions in history” against Iran if the country did not accept US demands.

A few days after the US withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive plan of Action (JCPOA), on May 8, 2018, Mike Pompeo threatened the imposition of the strongest sanctions on Iran if it did not accept a series of US demands, including effectively giving up its nuclear ambitions, curtailing its ballistic missile programme and ending its “expansionist behaviour” in the region. He said that the US’ demands were not unreasonable. Pompeo also called on Iran for the negotiations on a new deal that would go far beyond the single focus of the 2015 agreement and would have the status of a formal treaty. He laid out 12 demands for Iran and said relief from economic sanctions would only come after a tangible shift in Iranian policies. The demands require Iran to stop uranium enrichment, never to pursue plutonium reprocessing, to close its heavy water reactor, allow nuclear inspectors unqualified access to all sites throughout the country, release missing US citizens in Iran, and to end support for Houthi rebels in Yemen, withdraw all forces from Syria, halt support for its ally Hezbollah and stop threatening Israel.

In response, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani described Pompeo’s speech as unacceptable. Rouhani said that Pompeo’s demands were not acceptable under any circumstances. European Union Foreign Policy Chief Federica Mogherini said that there was no alternative to the JCPOA. She said that Pompeo has not demonstrated how abandoning the JCPOA would resolve Iran’s non-nuclear activities in the region.

In a related development on May 23, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei issued a series of conditions for European powers if they want Iran to remain in the nuclear deal after the US withdrawal. Khamenei said that European powers must promise they would not seek new negotiations on Iran’s ballistic missile programme and regional activities in the Middle East. He said Europe should fully guarantee Iran’s oil sales and the European banks should safeguard trade with Iran. He also warned that if the Europeans did not meet these demands, Iran would resume its uranium enrichment.

- On May 18, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that the Russian military would soon receive new nuclear weapons, far advanced than any foreign designs.

Speaking at a meeting in Sochi, President Putin said the delivery of the new Avangard Hypersonic Vehicle would begin in 2019. He also indicated that the new Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) would enter into service in 2020. The Avangard and the Sarmat are among a list of new nuclear weapons that President Putin unveiled in a March 2018 speech. Putin indicated that the Avangard has an intercontinental range and can fly in the atmosphere at a speed 20 times the speed of sound. According to Moscow, the weapon is also invulnerable to any air and missile defence systems as it can change both its course and its altitude during its flight towards a target. Referring to Sarmat ICBM, Putin said that the missile has an unlimited range that allows it to fly over the North or the South Poles and strike targets anywhere in the

world. He indicated that Sarmat would replace the Soviet-designed Voyevoda, the world's heaviest ICBM, also known as "Satan."

- On May 16, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) said that deadly chlorine gas was used in an attack that took place in a Syrian town in rebel-held Idlib in February 2018.

The Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) of the OPCW confirmed in its report released on May 15, 2018, that chlorine was likely used as a chemical weapon on February 4, 2018 in Saraqib, Idlib Governorate, Syrian Arab Republic. The FFM indicated that chlorine was released from cylinders by mechanical impact in the Al Talil neighbourhood of Saraqib. The findings of the report were based on the presence of two cylinders, containing the banned gas, together with samples that showed chlorine was unusually present in the local environment. OPCW Director-General Ahmet Uzumcu, said, "I strongly condemn the continued use of toxic chemicals as weapons by anyone, for any reason, and in any circumstances."

--- Moiz Khan

CHINA, EAST ASIA & PACIFIC

China

- On May 24, China's Defence Ministry expressed disappointment after the US withdrew an invitation to China to attend a major US-hosted naval drill known as the Rim of the Pacific exercise (RIMPAC).

Chinese Defence Ministry said, "closing the door would not promote mutual trust and cooperation." It added that the US had "ignored the facts and hyped up the so-called 'militarisation' of the South China Sea," using it as an excuse to take back invite to China. The Pentagon said that it had made the decision in the wake of "strong evidence" that Beijing had deployed anti-ship missiles, surface-to-air missile systems and electronic jammers to the Spratly Islands, claimed by several nations.

- During his visit to Beijing on May 26, Burkina Faso's Foreign Minister, Alpha Barry held talks with China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi. Following the talks, both countries signed an agreement to establish diplomatic ties.

The development came days after Burkina Faso broke off ties with Taiwan, which is considered by Beijing as part of the Chinese territory. Beijing has raised the pressure on Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen, whose government refuses to acknowledge that Taiwan is part of "one China." Burkina Faso was the fourth country to cut ties with Taipei since Tsai took office in May, 2016.

North Korea

- During his visit to Pyongyang on May 31, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov met with North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un and the country's Foreign Minister, Ri Yong Ho.

During the visit, Lavrov told Kim that Moscow supports peace and progress on the Korean peninsula and called for the lifting of sanctions on the North. On the issue of denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, Russia has so far remained on the sidelines amid the latest spell of diplomacy between North and South Korea, US, Japan and China.

- According to the *New York Times* on May 27, technical and diplomatic experts from the US visited North Korea to meet their North Korean counterparts and held behind-the-scenes efforts to resurrect a Summit meeting between US President, Donald Trump and North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un by June 12, 2018.

On May 24, 2018, US President Donald Trump cancelled a scheduled Summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore on June 12, 2018, blaming "tremendous anger and open hostility" from North Korea in recent public statements. Pyongyang said the "unilateral" decision was "extremely regrettable". However, within hours Trump reversed course saying the planned Summit could still go ahead. North Korea also destroyed its underground nuclear testing site hours before Trump cancelled the Summit. Meanwhile, South Korean President Moon Jae-in met with Kim Jong-un in Panmunjom truce village on May 26, 2018 and discussed ways

to implement the Panmunjom Declaration and to revive a summit between the US and North Korea.

South Korea

- On May 22, South Korean President, Moon Jae-in visited Washington and held talks with US President Donald Trump.

President Moon told Trump that there was no reason to doubt North Korea's will to hold a Summit with the US. Meanwhile, Trump praised Moon as an "extremely competent" leader despite some concerns voiced by US officials that Moon might be too willing to reach a compromise with the North.

The Philippines

- On May 29, the Philippines Foreign Secretary, Alan Peter Cayetano warned that his government would declare war if Beijing crossed "red lines" and started to claim natural resources in the disputed South China Sea.

Peter Cayetano said that his country is ready to protect its rights in the South China Sea. Cayetano said that Manila's red lines include any Chinese construction at the Scarborough Shoal or any attempts to remove a dilapidated Philippine warship, the BRP Sierra Madre, from Second Thomas Shoal in the disputed Spratly Islands. Cayetano remarks contradict Duterte's policy of avoiding any confrontation with China. The Philippines' announcement comes at a time of heightened tensions over the disputed South China Sea islands. In a related development on May 27, 2018, China dispatched warships and scrambled fighter jets to ward off two US-guided-missile destroyers, which sailed close to the disputed region.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

EUROPE

- On May 31 the European Commission reacted strongly to US restrictions on steel and aluminium affecting the EU.

The US announced its decision to impose additional duties of 25 % and 10 % respectively on imports of steel and aluminium from the EU starting on June 1, 2018. The EU will launch legal proceedings against the US at the WTO. The decision followed a meeting of the College of Commissioners on May 29, 2018. Member States were consulted on the same day. The US measures are intended to protect the US domestic industry from import competition, clearly against WTO rules. In addition to the WTO dispute settlement the European Commission will launch further measures against the US.

- On May 30 British Prime Minister Theresa May welcomed representatives from the European Roundtable of Industrialists (ERT) to Downing Street and set out her Government's desire to hear views from businesses in the UK and across Europe as the country prepares to leave the EU.

May spoke about the need to ensure the UK's future economic partnership with the EU. During the meeting, EU Exit Secretary David Davis provided an update on progress in the negotiations. On customs, the Prime Minister explained the work that was underway on the two customs models and underlined the importance of ensuring that the UK's future trading arrangements with the EU are trouble free, delivering on the commitments to avoid a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and allowing the UK to pursue an independent trade policy.

- On May 30, Financier Bill Browder, a high-profile critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin was briefly arrested in Spain on a Russian arrest warrant.

After an hour in custody he was released because the warrant's validity expired. Browder had earlier tweeted that he had been arrested on a Russian Interpol arrest warrant. Interpol rejected the claim, saying, "There is not, and never has been, a Red Notice for Mr Bill Browder." The agency said in a statement, "Mr Browder is not wanted via Interpol channels." Multiple accounts have emerged about how the confusion arose, and why Browder was detained.

- BBC reported on May 30 that Benjamin Herman, the man who shot dead two police officers and a civilian in Liège had killed someone the night before the attacks.
- On May 29, a man shot dead two female police officers and a civilian in the Eastern Belgian city of Liège.

The gunman also took a female cleaner hostage at a school before being killed by police. Four other police officers were also injured. Police sources quoted in local media said the man was heard shouting “Allahu Akbar.” The gunman was released from prison on temporary release on May 28, 2018 where he had been serving time on drug offences. It is being said that he might have been radicalised while in jail. Interior Minister Jan Jambon said the gunman, Benjamin Herman, had murdered a former prisoner he met while in jail. According to reports the victim was Michael Wilmet, a convicted drug dealer who was hit repeatedly with a hammer. Prosecutors say they are treating the attacks as “terrorist murder”. The Islamic State, which has claimed previous attacks in Belgium, said it was behind the shootings, but has not offered any evidence to support this.

- According to reports on May 30, Italy may be headed toward snap elections as early as July 2018 after the latest attempt to form a government saw Premier-designate Carlo Cottarelli leave a meeting with the President without an agreement on a cabinet team.

Cottarelli’s failure to form a cabinet, could force Sergio Mattarella, the President, to dissolve parliament, leading to elections within 60 to 70 days. Earlier on May 23, the populist parties that won Italy’s elections two months ago were granted the go-ahead to form a government. The decision had worried European leaders considerably. The populist leaders won by demonising both the political establishment and the EU. They also referred to illegal migrants in vulgar terms. According to critics, “the rapid ascent of populists in Italy the birthplace of Fascism, a founding member of the EU and the bloc’s fourth-largest economy shattered the nation’s decades-old party system.”

- Fresh talks to overcome the brewing political turmoil in Italy began on May 30.

According to reports PM-designate Carlo Cottarelli may be stepping back from forming a technocratic government. However, there are also reports a snap election might be called, or that two populist parties could try again to form an Administration. However, they seem to disagree on whether an election or a new government now is the best option.

- On May 31, Ukrainian Authorities were severely criticised for faking the murder of a Russian dissident journalist in Kiev.

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) said Ukraine was spreading “false information”. Reporters Without Borders said it was “part of an information war”. Relations between Kiev and Moscow have been tense since Moscow annexed Crimea in 2014 and was accused of covertly backing rebels in the bloody conflict in eastern Ukraine.

- On May 30, Ukraine staged the murder of a Russian dissident journalist in Kiev in what is being called a sting operation to foil a Russian assassination plot.

Arkady Babchenko shocked the world when he arrived at a news conference less than 24 hours after he was reported dead. According to Vasyl Hrytsak, the head of Ukraine’s Security Services

the elaborate sting was set up to catch hitmen being paid by Russian forces. Babchenko's wife had said on May 29, 2018 that she had found her husband at the entrance to their apartment block with bullet wounds in his back. Babchenko was reported to have died in an ambulance on his way to hospital. The story was widely reported by media around the world, until the "sudden and extraordinary development" on May 30, 2018. Meanwhile Russia's Foreign Ministry condemned the staged assassination, calling it "obviously yet another anti-Russian provocation". Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said in a statement that the operation was propaganda. She added that Russia was happy that Babchenko was alive, saying, "I wish it were always like that."

- According to the *BBC* on May 30, Italy has offered the highest returns in four years to sell government debt amid political uncertainty.

Investors demanded a higher return to take on Italian debt, with the return on 10-year government bonds rising to about 3%, the highest since 2014. However, there was healthy demand for the bonds and the Italian government raised €5.6bn. Meanwhile, global stock markets recovered and the euro also rose after a turbulent session on May 29, 2018. The Milan market closed 2% higher. In Frankfurt, the Dax ended 1% up and London's FTSE 100 was 0.75% ahead. Paris fell 0.2% after a sell-off in shares in French banks amid concerns about their exposure to Italy. Wall Street also opened higher, with the Dow and S&P rising about 0.5% respectively.

- On May 29, the EU passed a law requiring firms to comply with local standards when posting workers temporarily to another EU country.

The revised rules adopted by the European Parliament mean posted workers would now be entitled to the same level of pay as their local counterparts. There have been complaints of unfair competition from cheaper Eastern European labour, said to undercut locals in France, the UK and Germany. This was also an issue for the Brexit lobby. Brexit campaigners argued that EU freedom of movement was undermining British workers in sectors such as construction and food processing, with some firms cutting costs by importing workers from the newer EU states, including Poland and Romania. Many firms, however, argue that they hire foreign workers for jobs that Britons cannot fill owing to a lack of the necessary skills.

- On May 22, Facebook Chief Executive Mark Zuckerberg's meeting with European lawmakers in Brussels was criticised by lawmakers for being too short and providing "no answers."

Zuckerberg's appearance in the European Parliament was facilitated by the Parliament's President, Antonio Tajani, and consisted of around an hour of questions and less than 10 minutes of answers. "I was really not satisfied with the hearing yesterday because Zuckerberg gave no answers whatsoever," Ska Keller, co-head of the Greens-European Free Alliance group in the European Parliament said. Zuckerberg had agreed to appear before the European Parliament on May 16, 2018. Zuckerberg apologised to EU lawmakers for the company's role in the Cambridge Analytica scandal and for allowing fake news to proliferate on its platform. Some MEPs at the

meeting felt he had dodged their questions. According to Damian Collins, Chair of the UK Parliament's Digital Culture Media and Sport Committee the session at the European Parliament had been a “missed opportunity.” He said, “Unfortunately the format of questioning allowed Mr. Zuckerberg to cherry-pick his responses and not respond to each individual point.” The format was very different from that of Zuckerberg’s testimony to US lawmakers in April 2018.

- The EU-Western Balkans Summit took place in Sofia, Bulgaria, on May 17.

The Summit adopted a declaration on the ‘Sofia Agenda’ or specific EU support initiatives in the fields of the rule of law, security and migration, interconnectivity in energy, transport, and in the digital area; promoting people-to-people contacts and improving the mutual relations between the Western Balkan countries.

---Amina Afzal

MIDDLE EAST & WEST ASIA

Bahrain

- On May 27, Bahraini Foreign Minister, Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifah said there is no solution in sight for the diplomatic crisis with Doha.

Sheikh Khalid said, “The information in our hands today does not indicate any glimmer of hope for a solution now, as the matter does not happen suddenly. We were expecting from the beginning of the crisis with Qatar that the Emir of Qatar would go to Saudi Arabia but this did not happen.” He also accused Qatar of prolonging the dispute by taking its case to Western allies rather than the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). In a related development on May 26, 2018, Qatar’s Ministry of Economy and Commerce ordered shops to strip shelves of products imported from the four boycotting countries. The order came after UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Anwar Gargash accused Qatar of seeking “to target the security of its neighbours” and supporting “extremism and terrorism in the region.”

Iran

- On May 28, acting United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon, Pernille Dahler Kardel visited Tehran and held meetings with senior Iranian officials, including Foreign Minister Javad Zarif.

The talks came as part of regular regional consultations focusing on the significance of preserving Lebanon’s stability, security and sovereignty, and shielding the country from regional conflicts. According to Fars News Agency, during her visit to Tehran, the UN coordinator met Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, the Iranian Parliament Speaker’s Special Adviser on International Affairs. According to the report, Kardel told the former Deputy Foreign Minister that her mission in Lebanon is to help establish and maintain the country’s stability. She also emphasised the significance of keeping Lebanon out of any regional crisis, saying that regional countries should collaborate to achieve it. She also talked about the Lebanese parliamentary elections held on May 6, 2018 describing them as an achievement for Lebanon. In his remarks, Amir-Abdollahian expressed relief over the success of the general elections in Lebanon. He said, “Luckily and through the wisdom of Lebanese officials, we are witnessing a phase of calm, stability and agreement among the political movements in the country.” He also expressed Iran’s readiness to expand economic ties with Lebanon, while stressing the significant role that the resistance plays in enhancing the country’s defence capabilities.

Israel

- On May 30, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu threatened that Israel would hit Iranian targets “anywhere in Syria,” where Iranian military advisors have been giving effective assistance to the National Army in its battles against terrorist groups.

Netanyahu said, “We will continue to act against Tehran’s intention to establish a military presence in Syria across from us, not just across from the Golan Heights but anywhere in Syria.” Iran has been offering advisory military support to Syria against terrorists at the request of the Damascus government. Israel has frequently attacked military targets inside Syria in what is widely viewed as an attempt to strengthen the terrorist groups that have been suffering heavy defeats at the hands of Syrian soldiers. Netanyahu also announced that he would travel to Germany, France and Britain to meet with European leaders on Iran’s presence in Syria and the 2015 nuclear deal.

- According to a report released by Human Rights Watch (HRW) on May 29, Israeli banks are financing the regime’s “unlawful” settlement construction activities in the occupied territories, contributing to serious human rights violations and war crimes against Palestinians.

According to the report, entitled “Bankrolling Abuse: Israeli Banks in West Bank Settlements,” Israel’s seven largest banks provide services to settlements and facilitate their expansion, thus abetting unlawful population transfers. The report stressed that in addition to construction projects, Israeli banks provide loans to settlement authorities and buyers and operate bank branches there. The report also warned that the Israeli settlements contribute to “a discriminatory regime in which Israeli authorities restrict Palestinian economic development.” The HRW called on Israeli banks to cease doing business in or with Israeli settlements. Responding to the report, Saeb Erekat, Secretary General of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), said that the Palestinian Authority would take necessary measures against Israeli banks for abusing the Palestinian people’s rights. He said that the HRW report had clarified the banks’ role in “the Israeli colonial-settlement enterprise” in the occupied Palestinian lands. Erekat also said that the Palestinians “would take all necessary legal and political measures against those who contribute to the systematic denial of our rights.”

Jordan

- On May 25, Chairman of the Jordan Atomic Energy Commission (JAEC), Khaled Toukan announced that Jordan would abandon a \$10 billion deal with Russia to build a nuclear power plant, and that the two sides had collaborated to construct a small modular reactor (SMR) instead.

The deal signed in March 2015 set the basis for building the country's first nuclear power plant with a total capacity of 2,000 megawatts. However, Toukan indicated that the plan was unfeasible. He said, "Jordan is now focusing on small modular reactors because the large reactors place financial burden on the country and in light of the current fiscal conditions, we believe it is best to focus on smaller reactors." Jordan imports almost 98 % of its energy from oil products and crude and is struggling to meet electricity demand which is growing by more than 7 % annually due to population and industrial expansion. Toukan also said, "Today, a potential project to construct SMR-type NPP (nuclear power plant) seems more relevant and more needed, so we would like to focus on it."

Lebanon

- On May 24, the office of Lebanon's President Michel Aoun said a majority of lawmakers in the Parliament endorsed Sa'ad al-Hariri, designating him as Prime Minister for a third time.

The office of Michel Aoun said that Hariri had won the backing of 111 out of 128 members of Lebanon's new Parliament during official consultations with the President. In Lebanon, the post of Prime Minister is reserved for a Sunni Muslim politician. Despite losing more than a third of his MPs during May 6, 2018 election, Hariri was still the leading Sunni figure and a clear frontrunner for the post. Local media said Hariri would swiftly launch negotiations with other parties on forming a coalition government. The Lebanese Hezbollah movement did not give any nomination for the post. However, following his meeting with Aoun, Head of Hezbollah's parliamentary bloc, Mohammed Raad said that the movement would cooperate "positively" with whoever was designated. Hezbollah as well as groups and individuals affiliated to it won 70 seats in the 128-member legislature. An anti-Hezbollah alliance led by Hariri and supported by Saudi Arabia had won a majority in the Lebanese Parliament in 2009, but it has since disintegrated.

Palestine

- On May 29, the Israeli military targeted a large number of bases belonging to Palestinian resistance movements, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, inside the Gaza Strip.

As the Tel Aviv regime continued its aggression, Palestinians also said they were responding to the attacks by shelling Israeli-occupied towns. Israeli Army Spokesman Jonathan Conricus said that the Israeli military "just concluded a significant aerial strike where we struck more than 30 different military targets." He said the attacks came in response to a barrage of rockets and mortar shells against southern Israel from Gaza. He described the confrontation between the two sides as the most extensive since the 2014 war on Gaza. The mortar attacks from Gaza came a

day after Israeli tank fire killed a young Palestinian man and injured another in the southern part of the Gaza Strip as the Tel Aviv regime presses ahead with its acts of aggression against the coastal sliver. Hamas defended mortar attacks on Israel, saying, “What the resistance carried out this morning comes within the framework of the natural right to defend our people.”

Saudi Arabia

- According to a report published by *Al Jazeera* on May 29, more than 1,000 Saudi troops have been killed since early 2015, when the Saudi regime and a coalition of its allies launched a campaign against Yemen.

According to Saudi state media outlets, the death toll was registered after more than a dozen Saudi forces were killed during recent cross-border operations against Yemen. This is a rare admission of the Saudi military casualties. The Kingdom has a policy of withholding information on the casualties it has suffered during the war. Meanwhile, figures released by the Yemeni Ministry of Human Rights suggested that over 600,000 people have been killed or injured in the Saudi-led campaign, which is meant to crush Yemen’s Houthi Ansarullah movement and reinstall its former Riyadh-friendly officials.

- According to German magazine *Der Spiegel*, on May 25, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman ordered that no more government contracts be awarded to German companies, in a sign of continued irritation over Berlin’s foreign policy in the Middle East.

The magazine said the move was likely to hit major companies such as Siemens, Bayer and Boehringer Ingelheim as well as carmaker Daimler. Relations between Germany and Saudi Arabia have been strained, and Saudi Arabia in 2017 summoned its ambassador in Germany for consultations over comments by then-Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel about the political crisis in Lebanon. According to Germany’s statistics office, Saudi Arabia is a significant trade partner for Germany, generating 2017 exports worth 6.6 billion euros (\$7.7 billion).

Syria

- During an interview to the *RT Television Network* on May 31, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said the US “is losing its cards” in Syria and the Americans “should leave” Syrian soil.

According to President Assad, the militant groups that are being supported by the US have lost significant ground on the battlefield against the Syrian Army. He said, “The main card was al-Nusra that was called ‘moderate’. But when the scandal started leaking, that they are not moderate, they are al-Qaeda, they (the Americans) looked for another card. This card is the SDF

now.” Assad was referring to the Washington-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish-dominated alliance of militants operating near the Turkish border. He also said that the Syrian government can either go for negotiations with the SDF, as they are Syrians and they do not like to be puppets to any foreigners, or the Syrian Army can use force to liberate the areas under SDF’s control. Assad said, “This is our land, it’s our right, and it’s our duty to liberate it, and the Americans should leave, somehow they’re going to leave.”

- According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights on May 25, Israeli strikes hit Dabaa Air Base, controlled by Hezbollah, in central Homs Province.

The Base is located near the border with Lebanon and Hezbollah captured it from rebels in 2013. According to SANA news agency, the Syrian Air Defences responded to the Israeli strikes. The Israeli military is believed to be behind dozens of air strikes in recent years against Hezbollah, Iran, and Syrian military positions. The US and Israeli governments have viewed Iran’s role in Syria as a threat to Israel and have threatened action.

- On May 23, at least 35 people, including 9 Russian fighters, were killed in a wave of attacks by Daesh in Deir ez-Zor.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, “35 pro-government forces were killed, including at least nine Russians. Some of those Russian nationals were government troops, but not all of them. The remaining 26 were all Syrian forces.” Following the collapse of its so-called caliphate in 2017, Daesh now only holds tiny pockets of Syria, mainly in the vast desert stretching to its eastern border. Recently, the militants have intensified their guerrilla warfare against regime positions in Syria. Earlier, on May 22, 2018, at least 26 regime forces were killed in a surprise Daesh attack in desert areas of the neighbouring province of Homs.

- On May 22, Syria’s Deputy Foreign Minister, Faisal Mekdad praised Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah resistance movement’s assistance to Damascus in its counter-terrorism efforts, saying their withdrawal from Syria is not up for discussion.

Mekdad also said that those who demanded the pull out of the Iranian military advisers and Hezbollah forces from Syria “are considering the possibility of intervention in all parts of Syria, including the support of terrorists in Syria and elsewhere in the region.” Iran offers Syria advisory military support in its fight against terrorism. Hezbollah forces have also been aiding the Syrian government in clearing terrorist groups from areas bordering Lebanon.

On May 21, 2018, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo threatened Iran with the “strongest sanctions in history” if it does not comply with a list of 12 US demands, including the withdrawal of “all forces under Iranian command throughout the entirety of Syria.” On May 17, 2018, Russian President Vladimir Putin told Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that the foreign forces in Syria had to leave Syria because the Syrian government had succeeded in its fight against terrorism. Russia also has military advisers in Syria. It also runs a number of military bases and has been carrying out an aerial bombardment campaign on behalf of the Syrian

government. Mekdad said he “highly appreciates” the help of Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah in Syria’s battle against terrorism.

Turkey

- During a telephonic conversation on May 29, Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin underlined the importance of Syria’s sovereignty and achievements gained in the Astana peace negotiations for a political solution in the country.

According to Turkey’s official Anadolu news agency, the two leaders discussed developments in Syria. Since January 2017, nine rounds of crisis resolution talks between the Syrian government and the foreign-backed opposition, mediated by Iran, Russia and Turkey, have been held in the Kazakh capital Astana. The three states act as guarantors of the truce. Erdogan and Putin emphasised the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria, stressing that both Damascus and the so-called opposition groups should act constructively for a steady progress of the peace process within the UN framework. The Astana peace process has significantly helped reduce the violence in Syria through the formation of four de-escalation zones in the country.

- On May 25, Turkish Foreign Ministry Spokesman, Hami Aksoy said that Ankara would take every initiative to protect its firms against fresh US sanctions.

Aksoy’s comments came a day after the US imposed new sanctions against nine Iranian and Turkish individuals and companies as well as a number of aircraft providing goods and services to four Iranian airlines. The Treasury Department claimed that Caspian Airlines and Pouya Air had ferried weapons, troops and money to Iran’s allies in Syria and Lebanon and threatened to levy sanctions against the entities which grant landing rights and provide services to their aircraft. The latest anti-Iran sanctions came after US President Donald Trump announced on May 8, 2018 that Washington was walking away from the nuclear agreement (JCPOA) that was reached between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.

- On May 21, a Turkish court gave life sentences to 104 suspects over their involvement in the July 2016 coup attempt against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

According to Anadolu News Agency, the former military personnel were given ‘aggravated life sentences’ by a court in the western province of Izmir. Such jail sentences, which replaced the death penalty in Turkey, carry harsher conditions than normal life sentences. In total, 280 military personals are on trial over the failed coup. Former Air Force Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Hasan Huseyin Demiraslan and ex-Aegean Army Command Chief of Staff, Major General Memduh Hakbilen are among the suspects receiving life sentences. The court also gave 21 suspects a 20-year jail sentence for assisting the assassination attempt of the President while 31 were given sentences between seven years and six months and 10 years and six months for

being a member of an armed terror group. Following the attempted coup, more than 50,000 people have been arrested and 140,000 public workers have been suspended over alleged links to Gulen or Kurdish militants. Turkey has come under heavy criticism from its Western allies and activists over the scale of the crackdown and repeated calls for the emergency to come to an end. According to the UN human rights office, since the coup attempt authorities have detained 160,000 people and dismissed nearly the same number of civil servants. More than 50,000 have been formally charged and kept in jail pending trial. The scale of the crackdown has alarmed rights groups and Turkey's Western allies, who fear the country is sliding further into authoritarianism under Erdogan and accuse the President of using the failed coup as an excuse to crush dissent.

- On May 18, an extraordinary meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) was held in Istanbul after Israeli forces killed more than 60 Palestinians on the Gaza border.

Turkey had called the extraordinary Summit to show solidarity with the Palestinian people and to denounce the relocation of the US Embassy to Jerusalem, as well as the Israeli attacks that killed over 60 civilians in protests. Representatives from more than 40 countries, including presidents, prime ministers and other high-level officials took part in the event. Pakistan's Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and Foreign Minister Khurram Dastgir also attended the Summit. Member states of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) condemned "savage crimes" committed by Israel against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and called the international community to provide protection to the Palestinian people. According to the final communique, the leaders from Islamic countries called on the UN Security Council, the UN General Assembly, the UN Secretary General, UN Human Rights Council, the special rapporteurs and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to take "necessary actions to form an international investigation committee into the recent atrocities in the Gaza Strip." The Summit also reaffirmed the importance of the Palestinian cause and the status of Jerusalem to the Muslim world and once again rejected the US decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. It also declared its "determination to take the appropriate political, economic and other measures" against countries which follow the US' suit in recognising the holy city as the Israeli capital and move their embassies from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. During his speech at the beginning of the Summit, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan urged the Muslim world to unite against Israeli attacks on Palestinians. He said, "I will say openly and clearly that what Israel is doing is banditry, brutality and state terror. There is no difference between the atrocity faced by the Jewish people in Europe 75 years ago and the brutality that our Gaza brothers are subjected to. Muslims will not take even one step back from their claims on East Jerusalem."

Yemen

- According to Yemeni officials on May 27, heavy fighting between pro-government forces and Shia rebels killed more than 150 people during a period of four days.

Government forces have been trying to capture rebel-held areas along the western coast, while an allied Saudi-led coalition has been targeting the rebels with airstrikes in the northwestern Saada province which is a rebel stronghold. Ground troops are waging the offensive with sophisticated weapons and air cover from the coalition. According to Amnesty International in March 2018, fighting along Yemen's west coast displaced 100,000 people during a short period of time. Most of the people were displaced from the Red Seaport city of Hodeida. The port is a vital lifeline from which most of the Yemeni population's food and medicine comes. The coalition accuses the Houthis of using Hodeida and other ports to receive weapons and ammunition from Iran, which denies arming the rebels.

---Muhammad Shoaib

SOUTH ASIA: I

Pakistan External

- On May 29, the US Department of State released a report by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom which noted that the government of Pakistan failed to protect religious minorities in the country from continued “attacks and discrimination” by “extremist groups and society at large”.

The Report called upon the government to implement the religious freedom recommendations it accepted from its 2017 Universal Periodic Review by the UN Human Rights Council. The Report also urged the government to repeal its blasphemy and anti-Ahmadi laws noting, “until repeal can be accomplished, enact reforms to make blasphemy a bailable offense, require evidence by accusers, and allow investigatory authorities to dismiss unfounded accusations.” Earlier, on January 4, 2018, the US State Department had placed Pakistan on a “Special Watch List” for “severe violations of religious freedom. Meanwhile, the Report also criticised abuses in India under the Modi government noting that India “often did not prosecute violence by vigilantes against persons, mostly Muslims”. It noted that under Modi’s government, “religious minorities felt increasingly vulnerable due to Hindu nationalist groups engaging in violence against non-Hindu individuals and their places of worship.”

- On May 25, Pakistan’s Foreign Office spokesman, Dr Mohammad Faisal rejected US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s allegations regarding US diplomats being “mistreated” in Pakistan and noted that the Foreign Office had not received any specific complaint about it.

During a briefing to US Congress on May 24, 2018, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had said that US officials were being treated badly in Pakistan. He also said that Washington had released “far fewer funds” to Pakistan in 2018 and might give even less in 2019.

- According to *Dawn* on May 24, an Anti-Terrorism Court (ATC) asked the government to take a final decision about bringing 27 Indian citizens to Pakistan by June 27, 2018, for recording their testimony against Pakistani suspects in the Mumbai attacks case.

Pakistan insists that prosecution has been affected due to India’s lack of cooperation. In January 2016, Pakistan had asked the Indian Government to send the twenty-four witnesses to Pakistan to testify against the seven suspects. However, India was reluctant to send witnesses to Pakistan to testify. Pakistan had said that material evidence and cross examination of prosecution witnesses was necessary for further proceedings in the trial.

- On May 23, Pakistan’s Consul General in Houston, Aisha Farooqui rejected rumours about Pakistani neuroscientist, Dr Aafia Siddiqui’s death as being baseless and false, adding that she had met Siddiqui at a US federal facility in Texas.

The Consul General said that this was her fourth meeting with Dr Aafia in 14 months. Siddiqui was convicted by a US court in 2010 on charges of attempted murder and assault on US officials in Afghanistan and was sentenced to 86 years in prison. Siddiqui has denied the charges.

- On May 21, the World Bank convened a meeting in Washington of experts from Pakistan and India following Pakistan's complaint to the World Bank regarding India's inauguration of the 330-megawatt Kishanganga hydropower station in Indian Occupied Kashmir.

The talks cover key points including the height of the dam built on the Kishanganga river, Pakistan's demand for setting up a court of arbitration to settle the dispute and India's counter-demand for an international expert. Quoting the World Bank, Pakistani media reports claimed, however, that the talks with the Pakistani delegation did not lead to an agreement on the way forward. On May 19, 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited IOK to inaugurate the Kishanganga hydroelectric power station. According to Pakistani officials India had completed the Kishanganga project during the period the World Bank "paused" the construction of the hydropower project for either appointing a Court of Arbitration (COA) as requested by Pakistan or a neutral expert requested by India. Pakistani officials also claim that the Kishanganga hydro-power project would disrupt water supply to Pakistan and affect agricultural production.

- Addressing the 7th Extraordinary Summit of the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC), in Istanbul on May 18, Prime Minister, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi reiterated Pakistan's solidarity with the Palestinian people and condemned the human rights violations committed against Palestinians by the occupying Israeli force.

The Premier called for an independent and transparent investigation of violence in Gaza. He also rejected "double standards in the enforcement of UNSC resolutions" concerning Palestine. Turkish President, Tayyip Erdogan hosted Muslim leaders for an OIC summit after 60 Palestinians protesters were killed by the Israeli forces at the Gaza border on May 15, 2018.

- On May 17, Vice Chairman of the Chinese Central Military Commission (CMC), General Zhang Youxia visited Pakistan and held talks with Prime Minister, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa.

During the meeting, matters of mutual interest, regional security and enhanced bilateral defence cooperation were discussed. Both sides also signed different memorandums of understanding for bilateral defence cooperation. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi conveyed to General, Zhang Youxia that Pakistan is determined to strengthen strategic cooperation and practical exchange in all areas with China to ensure the smooth development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

- During a hotline contact between the Director Generals of Military Operations (DGMO) of Pakistan and India on May 29, Pakistan and India agreed to restore ceasefire on the Line of Control (LoC) and Working Boundary.

Earlier on May 18, 2018, at least 6 civilians were killed after Indian Border Security Force (BSF) shelling and firing on border villages along the Working Boundary (WB) in Sialkot.

Pakistan's Foreign Office summoned Ajay Bisaria, the Indian High Commissioner and condemned unprovoked ceasefire violations by the Indian forces. In a related development on May 21, 2018, a soldier of the Punjab Rangers was killed after the BSF opened fire on the Punjab Rangers' Post in Charwah Sector, along the Working Boundary.

Pakistan Internal

- On May 28, Pakistan's Army summoned the former head of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Lieutenant General (r) Asad Durrani to General Headquarters (GHQ) to "explain his position on views attributed to him" in the book which he co-authored with former Chief of Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), A.S. Dulat.

Pakistan Army also ordered to set up a 'court of inquiry' to investigate the matter in detail. The book titled "The Spy Chronicles: RAW, ISI and the Illusion of Peace" has stirred controversy on a range of issues. Durrani wrote, "it is quite possible that the ISI did not know about the location of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, but it was more probable that they knew and he was handed over to the US according to a mutually agreed process." This contradicts Pakistan's official stance that it only knew of the US raid on May 2, 2011, after the US stealth helicopters left its territory after targeting the compound of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad. Durrani also noted in the book that "the denial of Pakistan's role was because cooperating with the US to eliminate a person regarded by many in Pakistan as a "hero" could have embarrassed the government."

- On May 28, Former Chief Justice of Pakistan, Nasirul Mulk was nominated as the caretaker Prime Minister of Pakistan.

Mulk, is scheduled to be sworn in on June 1, 2018, after the ruling Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz's government completes its term on May 31, 2018.

- On May 27, Pakistan's Foreign Office rejected India's protest against the Gilgit-Baltistan Order 2018 and India's claim that Indian Occupied Kashmir is its "integral part".

Reiterating that the entire state of Jammu & Kashmir is a "disputed" territory, Pakistan reminded India that the final status of Jammu & Kashmir would be determined through "the democratic method of a free and impartial plebiscite administered by the United Nations." The Foreign Office demanded that India should take steps to vacate its illegal occupation and create conditions for the implementation of the UNSC resolutions. The Foreign Office also stressed that Pakistan has always taken steps consistent with UNSC resolutions on the Kashmir dispute. These statements came after India summoned Pakistan's Deputy High Commissioner in New Delhi, Syed Haider Shah and lodged a strong protest over Islamabad's move to approve the Gilgit-Baltistan Order 2018, which gives the Pakistani Prime Minister an overriding authority to deal with the affairs of the region. India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) conveyed to Shah that the entire state of Jammu and Kashmir, which also includes the "Gilgit-Baltistan" areas, is an integral part of India by virtue of its accession in 1947. It further said that any action to alter the status of any part of the territory has no legal basis.

- On May 24, the National Assembly passed a Constitutional Amendment bill merging the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province.

The bill was opposed by the PMLN government's allies - Jamiat-e-Ulema-Islam (JUI-F) and Pashtoonkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP). The Amendment would also bring an end to colonial-era laws governing the FATA region and the Provincial Administered Tribal Areas (PATA) in KP and Balochistan provinces.

- According to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), on May 17, Pakistani Security forces intercepted and killed a 'high-value target' of the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) believed to be involved in the killing of over 100 members of the Hazara community as well as police personnel.

The ISPR also stated that Colonel Sohail Abid of the Military Intelligence was killed during the operation.

India

- On May 30, the Trump Administration renamed the US Pacific Command as the US Indo-Pacific Command. The announcement was made by the US Secretary of Defence, James Mattis.

US Pacific Command is the largest military command of the US and is responsible for all US military activity in the Pacific region. The move signals the growing importance of India in the US's strategic thinking.

- During his visit to Indonesia on May 30, Prime Minister, Narendra Modi held talks with Indonesian President, Joko Widodo. Following the talks, Indonesia and India agreed to boost cooperation in a broad range of areas, particularly in defence and trade.

Joko Widodo said that both leaders reached agreement to advance maritime cooperation, particularly in the context of the Indo-Pacific strategy. The two countries also unveiled plans to develop a strategic Indonesian naval port in the Indian Ocean. After concluding his visit to Indonesia on May 31, 2018, PM Modi travelled to Malaysia, where he held talks with Malaysian Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. Both leaders discussed ways, "to boost economic and cultural relations between India and Malaysia." Following his visit to Malaysia, PM Modi visited Singapore and met with PM Lee Hsien Loong. Narendra Modi's three-nation visit to Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore is aimed at renewing engagements between India and Southeast Asian countries which are aiming more business collaborations in Indian markets.

- On May 28, India's External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj held talks with her Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Javad Zarif in New Delhi and discussed bilateral relations.

Ahead of a meeting with Javad Zarif, Swaraj said that India would keep trading with Iran and Venezuela despite the threat of fallout from US sanctions against the two countries. Swaraj said that India only honour UN sanctions and not sanctions imposed by individual countries and

added “We don’t make our foreign policy under pressure from other countries.” Earlier in May, 2018, US President Donald Trump withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal and ordered the re-imposition of sanctions suspended under the Iran deal.

- On May 27, Indian diplomat, Madhuri Gupta was jailed for three years after she was convicted by an Indian court for passing state secrets to Pakistan’s Intelligence Services.

The court said that Gupta was involved in “spying and wrongful communication of information” while posted to the Indian Embassy in Islamabad. She was arrested in 2010.

- On May 22, at least 12 demonstrators were killed in Tamil Nadu after Indian police opened fire on thousands of people demanding the closure of a British-owned copper plant due to pollution concerns.

The violence has sparked outrage from India’s opposition parties, with Rahul Gandhi, leader of the Indian National Congress party, calling the incident “state sponsored terrorism.”

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

SOUTH ASIA: II

Afghanistan

- On May 30, the second meeting of the Joint India-Afghanistan Security Commission was held in Kabul.

The Indian delegation was led by Deputy National Security Advisor, Rajinder Khanna, while Afghan National Security Advisor, Hanif Atmar led the Afghan side. Both sides discussed security threats in the region. India reaffirmed its commitment to strengthen Afghan Security Forces and provide more equipment and support to Afghan Air Force (AAF). India also assured its cooperation for the treatment of injured Security Forces personnel and the provision of support to Afghan military hospitals. The Joint Commission was formed following the agreement of National Security Advisors (NSAs) from both countries during the 2017 visit of India's NSA to Afghanistan. The purpose of the Joint Commission is to discuss and analyse the security and military situation in the region.

- On May 30, Afghan Security Forces foiled an attack on the Ministry of Interior in Kabul city and killed the perpetrators.
- *Tolo News* reported on May 30 that a US rocket artillery strike on a Taliban gathering in Musa Qala district of Helmand province killed at least 50 insurgent leaders.

A spokesman for the US-led coalition in Afghanistan said that a weapon system known as the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) capable of firing GPS-guided rockets had destroyed a command-and-control position that was a known meeting place for high-level Taliban leaders. In a related development, on May 27, 2018 at least 60 insurgents were killed in various operations conducted by Afghan Security Forces across the country. According to Afghan Defence Ministry, 82 special operations were conducted in Faryab, Jawzjan, Baghlan, Badghis, Uruzgan, Helmand, Nangarhar, Farah and Ghazni provinces. In another development on May 26, 2018 at least 15 Taliban insurgents were killed during an operation in Farah province. Earlier on May 24, 2018, a National Directorate of Security (NDS) Special Forces operation left 11 Taliban dead in Bala Blook district of Farah province. The conflict has intensified after the commencement of the Taliban's Spring Offensive in April 2018 with both warring parties inflicting heavy damage on each other. On May 28, 2018 the Taliban captured at least 10 villages including 17 security check posts and left several security personnel dead in northeastern Takhar province.

- On May 29, Afghanistan's Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah said that poppy cultivation and drug production in the country had increased by over 90%.

Abdullah also mentioned that poppy cultivation and drug production has increased by at least 400% in northern Afghanistan. He called on regional and foreign countries to help Afghanistan

with its counter narcotic efforts. Meanwhile, Afghanistan's Minister of Counter Narcotics, Salamat Azimi stressed the need for a consensus to fight drugs in the region and in the world. Over 80% of poppy related drugs in the world emanate in Afghanistan. Poppy production also accounts for over 60% of the income in Afghanistan.

- On May 27, a high level Afghan delegation arrived in Islamabad to discuss various security related matters.

The delegation led by Afghan National Security Advisor, Hanif Atmar, Interior Minister Waris Barmak and head of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) Masum Stankzai held meetings with Pakistani Army Chief, Qamer Javed Bajwa and National Security Advisor, Nasir Khan Janjua. During the meetings both parties agreed to resume efforts for peace negotiations in Afghanistan and to speed up the process of implementing the joint action plan for peace and solidarity. The visit of the Afghan delegation comes against the backdrop of an agreement reached between the two countries earlier in April 2018 to operationalise the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS). The APAPPS provides a framework to strengthen mutual trust and deepen interaction in all spheres of bilateral engagements. It is also a mechanism for finding solutions to bilateral areas of concern.

- On May 26, Afghanistan criticised Pakistan's decision on merging the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

Pakistan's Foreign Office condemned Afghanistan's criticism as interference in its internal issues. The unacceptable Afghan criticism is coming from a government that hardly controls 50% of its own territory.

- On May 23, Russia's Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu said it was extremely important to train the military to protect the state in case terrorists move from Afghanistan to Central Asian states.

Shoigu's remarks came during a meeting with his Uzbek counterpart Abdusalom Azizov. Shoigu added that the situation in Afghanistan is not getting stable, making it possible for terrorist groups to move to neighboring countries. He also noted that it was not possible to ignore the growing threat of international terrorism that has been moving from Syria to Afghanistan and then to other countries, including Uzbekistan. Earlier on May 20, 2018 Russia's special Envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov said that the US would have to talk directly with the Taliban on the eventual pullout of American troops from Afghanistan or face a grinding and bloody war for years to come. He added that the US' refusal to talk to the group was the reason for the dead-end. In December 2017, Russian President Vladimir Putin had also expressed concerns about the growing Daesh numbers in Afghanistan and offered the United States and Afghan government Russia's support to confront the threat. However, this proposal seems to have fallen

on deaf ears. Russia wants political mainstreaming of the Taliban and to focus the efforts to fight the growing threat of Daesh.

- On April 22, a vehicle packed with explosives exploded in Kandahar City's PD14 area and killed at least 16 people.

Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani condemned the attack on the civilians. No group claimed responsibility for the attack. In a related development on May 19, 2018 at least eight people were killed following three back to back explosions at a stadium in Jalalabad City. The explosions occurred where a large crowd had gathered to watch a cricket match. Chaos continues across Afghanistan as a result of the disastrous US' strategy and poor security plans on the part of the Afghan government and security officials.

- On May 21, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that Iran's support to the Taliban in the form of weapons and funding is leading to further violence and hinders peace and stability of the Afghan people.

Pompeo also blamed Iran for harbouring senior al-Qaeda leaders. However, the Afghan Ministry of Defence has said that there is no evidence so far to prove that Iran was supporting the Taliban.

- On May 20, the Taliban claimed that they have taken control of the strategically located Ajristan district of Ghazni province.

The Afghan government dismissed the claims. The Afghan Ministry of Defence said that the government has deployed commandoes and operation was proceeding. Meanwhile, battles also continued in Andar and Khawjah Omari districts of the province. A number of Security Forces' personnel were reportedly killed during the offensives. In a related development on April 16, 2018 at least 2000 Taliban insurgents attacked Farah city but the Security Forces managed to push them back. At least 25 Security Forces' personnel were killed during the attack. The Ministry of Defence admitted that the cities of Farah, Faizabad, Trinkot, Kunduz, Maimana and Pul-e-Khumri are under pressure from the Taliban. The Taliban are on their Spring Offensive drive after efforts for peace and reconciliation failed as a result of the US' refusal to talk directly with the insurgent group.

Maldives

- On May 23, Indian Naval Chief, Admiral Sunil Lanba said that the Maldives is a challenge for India as its current government is more inclined towards China, indicating that ties between New Delhi and Male are yet to reach a level of normalcy.

On May 12, 2018 Indian Navy vessel INS Sumedha entered Maldivian territorial waters for a joint surveillance exercise. Indian media speculated that the joint exercise signals a thaw in bilateral relations which became strained after a state of emergency was declared in Maldives in

February 2018. The Maldives criticised New Delhi for expressing deep dismay about the parliament's extension of emergency rule. More recently, Indian officials told the media that proposed joint monitoring exercises between Maldives and Pakistan would be a red line for New Delhi following the visit of Pakistan's Army Chief to the Maldives in April 2018.

Nepal

- On May 17, the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML) and the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist Centre were dissolved to form a unified Nepal Communist Party (NCP), giving the country a majority government after decades.

The NCP has two co-chairpersons, KP Sharma Oli and Pushpa Kamal Dahal. It has a nine-member secretariat, a 45-member standing committee and a 441-member central committee. With the unification, the central government and provincial governments in six provinces are no longer coalition governments. The NCP now has 174 members in the 275-member House of Representatives, 42 members in the 59-member National Assembly, and has majority in six of the seven provincial assemblies.

- On May 16, Nepal's Army Chief, Gen Rajendra Chhetri visited Pakistan and met with his Pakistani counterpart Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa at Army Headquarters in Rawalpindi.

During the meeting, matters of mutual interest including military to military relations, regional security situation and measures to improve bilateral relations were discussed. Gen Chhetri acknowledged and appreciated Pakistan Army's sincere efforts and sacrifices in the war against terrorism and for stability in the region. Earlier in March 2018, Pakistani Prime Minister, Shahid Khakan Abbasi paid a two-day rare visit to Kathmandu. Abbasi was the first high-level foreign dignitary to visit Nepal after the formation of the new left leaning government. Pakistan-Nepal relations are experiencing new highs after a pro-China government came to power in Katmandu.

---Kashif Hussain

UNITED NATIONS

- On May 30, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said that a law meant to protect Afghan women from violence is being undermined by authorities in Afghanistan.

The Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law, passed in 2009, was an effort to improve protection for Afghan women, who suffer widespread violence in the country. Zeid said that the effectiveness of the law is being undermined by authorities who routinely refer even serious criminal cases to traditional mediation councils that fail to protect victims. He said that using mediation for offences including domestic violence, genital mutilation and honour killings is at its core a human rights violation by Afghanistan. The UN also issued a report on women's issues in Afghanistan, entitled "Injustice and Impunity: Mediation of Criminal Offences against Women". The report noted that the continued reliance on mediation by local elders to resolve violent crime against women reduces the effectiveness of EVAW law in the country.

- On May 24, Mark Lowcock, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, said that the escalation in fighting in Yemen has hindered aid delivery and created food and fuel shortages.

While calling on parties to the conflict in Yemen, Lowcock said that more than 22 million people are dependent on humanitarian assistance, of whom around 8.4 million are severely food insecure and at risk of starvation. He warned that if conditions do not improve, 10 million more people would be affected by the end of 2018. He indicated that humanitarian agencies are also facing increasing restrictions on their work in the country. He said, "Humanitarian staff are being detained and intimidated and visas are being delayed and denied." He stressed that all parties involved in the conflict should engage meaningfully with the UN, without preconditions, to achieve a lasting, negotiated settlement towards sustainable peace.

- On May 23, Nickolay Mladenov, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, indicated that the Palestinian Authority had joined two major United Nations agencies and a global treaty banning the spread of chemical weapons.

In his address to the UNSC, Mladenov said that the Palestinians' membership in the three organisations had been finalised on May 15, 2018. He said that Palestine acceded to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation and the Convention on the Prohibition, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons (CWC). However, the US has opposed increasing diplomatic profile of the Palestinians through such memberships. The country has also threatened that it would cut funds to certain UN Agencies and other organisations if they accept Palestinians.

- On May 23, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov urged the UNSC to take action to avoid another war in Gaza and to alleviate the suffering of people within the enclave.

- On May 18, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) approved a resolution calling on Council Members to send a team of international war crimes investigators to probe into shootings of Gaza protesters by Israeli forces.

The UNHRC voted on a resolution calling on the Council to urgently dispatch an independent, international commission of inquiry. The resolution received 29 votes in favour and 2 against from the US and Australia, while 14 others, including Britain, Switzerland and Germany abstained out of the Council's 47 members. The text of the resolution noted, "The team should investigate all alleged violations and abuses in the context of the military assaults on large scale civilian protests that began on March 30, 2018." While opening the session, UN Human Rights Chief Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein condemned the "wholly disproportionate" use of force by Israeli troops and backed the call for an international probe. However, Israeli Ambassador to the UN in Geneva Aviva Raz Shechter called the resolution "shameful" and "biased." She said that Hamas was the aggressor and she blamed it for committing war crimes.

In a related development on May 23, 2018, Nickolay Mladenov, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, reiterated his call for the UNSC to condemn "in the strongest possible terms" the actions that have cost so many lives in Gaza, especially the deaths and injuries caused by live fire from Israeli forces along the border fence. He stressed that Israel had a responsibility not to use lethal force "except as a last resort" and to "investigate every incident that has led to a loss of human life." To address the situation, Mladenov gave four proposals including prioritising agreed-upon infrastructure projects via an established liaison committee; the adoption of a fast-track approach to speed up implementation; coordinate with the Palestinian Authority, Israel and Egypt to overcome blockages; and upholding of the 2014 ceasefire. He said that the implementation of these proposals would strengthen "the unification of Gaza and the West Bank under a single, democratic and legitimate Palestinian authority in line with the Quartet Principles; and an end to the occupation and resolution of the wider Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

- On May 23, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on all government leaders to fight the scourge of corruption while marking the 15th anniversary of the UN Convention Against Corruption.

Guterres said, "It all begins with setting an example. By tackling corruption, Governments can show they mean business." He added, "Society cannot function equitably and efficiently when public officials – from doctors to police, judges and politicians – enrich themselves rather than perform their duties with integrity." While describing the Convention Against Corruption as one of the most effective tools the world has to achieve the common goals of good governance, Guterres said the UN would continue to support Member States in their fight against corruption. The Convention Against Corruption was adopted in 2003. It is the only legally binding universal instrument, drawn up to fight corruption in all its forms.

- On May 18, the United Nations and the World Bank Group signed an agreement to work together to help countries implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and achieve measurable results.

The Agreement, called the Strategic Partnership Framework (SPF), was signed by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim in Washington. The SPF will build on past collaborations between the two organisations and will foster a new partnership. According to the UN, the two organisations would cooperate in finding financial and other necessary resources to help countries achieve their Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by UN Member States in 2015. The Agenda has 17 goals, which are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity.

--- Moiz Khan