

**December 16 – December 31**

AREA BRIEF

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**Area Briefs: 16-31 December 2018**  
**General Observations**

**Pakistan**

- Following US President Donald Trump’s decision to withdraw half of the 14,000 US troops deployed in Afghanistan, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi visited Moscow on December 26, 2018 and met with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov. During the visit, the two sides held “detailed talks” on various bilateral and regional issues. The Foreign Minister Qureshi also visited Kabul, Tehran and Beijing as part of the government’s policy of “regional outreach” and taking allies into confidence on the Afghan reconciliation process.
  
- Earlier on December 22 the Foreign Minister welcomed US President Donald Trump’s decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. Qureshi said the decision was good for ongoing peace talks between the Afghan Taliban and the US.
  
- On December 21, the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (ADFD) said that it would deposit \$3 billion in the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) to help ease Pakistan’s balance-of-payment crisis. The development will place the government in a better position to negotiate a bailout agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).
  
- The ongoing blatant human rights abuses in Indian Occupied Kashmir prompted Prime Minister Imran Khan to telephone United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres and demand his intervention for ending human rights violations by the Indian troops in IOK.
  
- In response to Pakistan’s strong reaction over the killing of innocent Kashmiris, India’s Foreign Ministry said that Pakistani leaders should “mind their own business” and take steps to end “terror emanating from their soil.”

**International**

- In a major development on December 21, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited New Delhi and held talks with Indian Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj. Both countries discussed steps to enhance cooperation through academic exchanges and tourism. The Chinese Foreign Minister visited India to attend the first meeting of India-

China High Level Mechanism on Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges. The mechanism is significant because it aims to strengthen bilateral ties. Moreover, the meeting comes at a time when Modi is seeking re-election in 2019. Reaffirming ties with China is a significant move given the deteriorating relations between the two countries during the last year.

- Meanwhile in the US the partial government shutdown reached its second week on December 30. President Trump refuses to yield on his request for \$5 billion in funding for a border wall. Meanwhile negotiations with Democratic leaders have not yielded any results as each side asserts the ball is in the other's court.
- On December 31 US President Donald Trump said the withdrawal of US troops from Syria he announced earlier this month would be carried out "slowly". Earlier on December 19 President Trump ordered a full withdrawal from Syria, announcing the return of 2,000 American troops and declaring that the US had "defeated ISIS" there.
- On December 23 President Donald Trump announced that he was removing Defence Secretary James Mattis from his post by January 1, 2019, two months before the Defence Secretary's scheduled departure following his December 20, 2018 resignation in response to his withdrawal announcement from Syria. Mattis' experience and stability were being seen as a balance to an unpredictable President. In another major setback for President Trump Brett McGurk the top diplomat leading the fight against ISIS resigned from his post on December 22, in response to Trump's policy shift.
- On December 27, the UAE officially reopened its embassy in Damascus. The UAE had closed its embassy soon after the Syrian conflict started in 2011. as the war in Syria comes to a halt, with the Syrian government and military regaining control over almost all major areas previously overtaken by militants, Damascus' former adversaries seem to be changing their calculations. In another development on December 16, 2018, Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir arrived in Damascus in the first such visit by an Arab leader since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011.
- In a separate development on December 20 the Trump Administration announced that roughly half of US troops stationed in Afghanistan will leave in coming months.
- According to *Reuters* on December 30, a statement issued by the Kremlin noted that Russian President Vladimir Putin told US President Donald Trump in a New Year letter

that Russia was ready for dialogue on a “wide-ranging agenda,” including the Intermediate-range Nuclear Force (INF) Treaty.

*---Amina Afzal  
Director General*

## AMERICAS

### Domestic

- On December 31 US Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren announced plans to establish an exploratory committee to consider a presidential run in 2020.

*The move is the first by a high-profile Democrat for 2020. It allows Warren to ramp up her fundraising. In October 2018 she revealed the results of a DNA test she said proved her Native American heritage after President Donald Trump taunted her. It immediately sparked speculation that she would run for the presidency. In a video address posted on social media the Massachusetts senator outlined her vision for a United States that she said would offer opportunities to all Americans.*

- According to the NY Times on December 30, the Los Angeles Times reported an unusual cyber attack that disrupted its printing operations and those at newspapers in San Diego and Florida.

*Although the LA Times said the attack came from outside the United States, it refrained from “accusing a specific foreign government.” Russia has been accused of shutting down power grids in Ukraine and a petrochemical plant in Saudi Arabia, Iran crippled a casino in Las Vegas, and the United States and Israel attacked a nuclear enrichment plant in Iran. This is the first known attack on major newspaper printing operations, and if politically motivated, it would define new territory in recent attacks on the media.*

- On December 30, Texas federal Judge Reed O’ Connor issued a stay in the Affordable Care Act Case meaning that the law will remain in effect while the ruling is appealed.

*According to the ruling the Affordable Care Act is invalid, but the law will remain in effect pending an appeal by a coalition of opposing states. Judge Reed O’Connor of the Federal District Court in Fort Worth in Texas had ruled on December 14, 2018 that the entire Affordable Care Act was invalid. He said however that the ruling should not go into immediate effect “because many everyday Americans would otherwise face great uncertainty” during an appeal. The ruling led to an appeal by California and 15 other states that support the health care law. Judge O’Connor’s original ruling had caused some confusion because it came at a time when many states were finishing up open enrolment for 2019. Though he ruled that the law’s individual mandate was unconstitutional and that the rest of the law was therefore invalid, he did not issue an injunction stopping the law from being enforced.*

- On December 31 US President Donald Trump said the abrupt withdrawal of US troops from Syria he announced earlier this month would be carried out “slowly”.

*“We’re slowly sending our troops back home to be with their families, while at the same time fighting ISIS remnants,” he tweeted. His clarification confirmed remarks by Republican Senator Lindsey Graham. When Trump first announced the move, he had said, “They’re all coming back and they’re coming back now.”*

- On December 30 Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina suggested that the US’ withdrawal from Syria had been slowed and that he felt “a lot better” about it after a lunch with the President.

*Graham is a vocal critic of President Trump’s plan for a 30-day troop withdrawal of American troops from Syria. He said, “I think we’re in a pause situation where we are re-evaluating what’s the best way to achieve the president’s objective of having people pay more and do more.” He did not elaborate on what that meant. But he may have been referring to assurances that the President is said to have given some military officials that they can have more time than 30 days to ensure a proper drawdown of troops.*

- On December 29 President Trump blamed Democrats for the deaths of two migrant children in detention at the southwest border earlier in December 2018 wielding the episodes as justification to fund a border wall.

*The Presidents tweets criticised Democrats as the partial government shutdown approached its eighth day over his demand for funding for the wall. He said, “Any deaths of children or others at the border are strictly the fault of the Democrats and their pathetic immigration policies that allow people to make the long trek thinking they can enter our country illegally.”*

- On December 28 President Trump maintained his demand for border wall funding as the partial government shutdown approached its first full week.

*Trump threatened again to close the southern border and cut off aid to Central America if Congress continued to deny his Administration the money. Trump tweeted, “We will be forced to close the Southern Border entirely if the Obstructionist Democrats do not give us the money to finish the Wall & also change the ridiculous immigration laws that our Country is saddled with.” Some 800,000 federal employees remain in limbo due to the shutdown. The White House sought to play up a divide between Democratic leaders, whose aides said it did not exist, and advisers said Trump was “surprisingly good” with missing a planned 16-day vacation at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida because of the shutdown.*

- On December 28 the Trump Administration proposed major changes to the way the federal government calculates the benefits, in human health and safety, of restricting mercury emissions from coal-burning power plants.

*The Environmental Protection Agency issued a finding declaring that federal rules imposed on mercury by the Obama administration are too costly to justify. It drastically changed the formula*

*the government uses in its required cost-benefit analysis of the regulation by taking into account only certain effects that can be measured in dollars, while ignoring or playing down other health benefits.*

- On December 27 Republican leaders gave up hope of reopening the government before the New Year.

*In doing so, they left the border wall problem to House Democrats as they assume the majority next week. Representative Nancy Pelosi will deal with the issue as her “first major challenge as speaker.” House Democrats are weighing three approaches to getting funds flowing, none of which would include additional money for President Trump’s proposed wall along the southwestern border. Whichever path they choose, party leaders said they would vote promptly on January 3, 2019 hoping to project the image of Democrats as a steadying hand in Washington even as Republicans try to blame Pelosi and her party for the shutdown and lax border control.*

- On December 23 President Donald Trump announced that he was removing Defence Secretary James Mattis from his post by January 1, 2019, two months before the Defence Secretary’s scheduled departure.

*Trump said that Patrick M. Shanahan, Mattis’s deputy and a former Boeing executive, would serve as the acting Defence Secretary, praising him as “very talented” and adding that “he will be great!” Earlier on December 20, 2018 Defence Secretary Jim Mattis handed over his resignation to President Trump. Two hours later the President tweeted announcing that Mattis was retiring “with distinction” at the end of February 2019. According to sources Trump had not read the letter. It became apparent to the President later that Mattis had issued a stinging rebuke of Trump over his neglect of allies and tolerance of authoritarians. The President became angry because he was being criticised by defence analysts on television even as they praised Mattis’ bravery.*

- On December 21 the federal government shut down after congressional and White House officials failed to find a compromise on a spending bill that hinged on President Trump’s demands for \$5.7 billion for a border wall.

*It is the third shutdown in two years of unified Republican rule in Washington, and it will stop work at nine federal departments and several other agencies. Hundreds of thousands of government employees are affected.*

- On December 20 President Trump refused to sign a spending deal and sent the government toward a Christmastime shutdown.

*Trump demanded \$5 billion for a wall on the southwestern border, refusing to sign a stopgap measure to keep funds flowing. With Trump unwilling to admit defeat on his signature campaign*

*promise despite a clear lack of votes to get it through Congress, House Republican leaders scrambled for a way out of the problem.*

- On December 21 the Supreme Court refused to allow the Trump Administration to immediately enforce its new policy of denying asylum to migrants who illegally cross the Mexican border.

*The Supreme Court's two-sentence order witnessed a new dynamic with Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. joining the four-member liberal wing in refusing to immediately reinstate the Administration's asylum policy. The Chief Justice, appointed to the court by President George W. Bush in 2005, is now plainly at the court's ideological center, a spot that had long belonged to Justice Anthony M. Kennedy, who retired in July 2018 and was replaced by Justice Brett M. Kavanaugh in October 2018.*

- On December 18 Federal Judge Emmet G. Sullivan expressed “disgust” at former National Security Advisor Micheal T Flynn’s efforts to mislead federal investigators and dismissed suggestions he had been treated unfairly.

*In an extraordinary two-hour session in Federal District Court in Washington, Judge Sullivan left no doubt that he viewed Flynn’s crimes as serious enough to warrant prison time despite a recommendation from prosecutors that he receive a lenient sentence. However, Judge Sullivan gave Flynn the option of postponing his sentencing so he had additional time to prove the value of his cooperation with federal prosecutors. Flynn promptly took up the offer, delaying a decision on his fate at least until March 2019. The hearing underscores the gravity of the inquiry by the special counsel, Robert S. Mueller III, and the enormous consequences for those involved in it.*

## **International**

- On December 26, President Trump visited American military forces in Iraq.

*It was Trump’s his first trip to troops stationed in a combat zone. It comes days after his announcement to withdraw the United States from foreign wars in Syria and Afghanistan.*

*Earlier during the week, Trump infuriated even some of his political allies by announcing plans to withdraw all troops from Syria and half from Afghanistan. His decision on Syria led to Defence Secretary Jim Mattis’ resignation. Speaking to troops at Al Asad Air Base, the President said, “We’re no longer the suckers, folks,” adding, “Our presence in Syria was not open-ended, and it was never intended to be permanent. Eight years ago, we went there for three months, and we never left.”*

- On December 24 a Guatemalan boy died while in United States custody.

*He was moved among at least four crowded facilities at the border over the six days from his apprehension until his death. The incident highlights how stretched the facilities and their staff are in handling the surge of Central American families reaching the southwest border, particularly minors. Kirstjen M. Nielsen, the Secretary of Homeland Security, acknowledged that the “dramatic increase” had pushed the system to “a breaking point.”*

- On December 22 Brett McGurk, the Special Presidential Envoy to the coalition fighting the Islamic State, has accelerated his resignation, telling colleagues that he could not in good conscience carry out President Trump’s newly declared policy of withdrawing American troops from Syria.

*A seasoned diplomat, McGurk was considered by many to be the glue holding together the sprawling international coalition fighting the terrorist group, was supposed to retire in February 2019. According to an email he sent his staff, he decided to move his departure forward to December 31, 2018 after Trump did not heed his own commanders and blindsided America’s allies in the region by abruptly ordering the withdrawal of the 2,000 troops. His decision comes right after the departure of Secretary of Defence Jim Mattis, whose resignation was seen as a rebuke of the President’s actions in the region.*

- On December 20 the Trump Administration ordered the military to start withdrawing roughly 7,000 troops from Afghanistan in the coming months.

*The announcement is being seen as an abrupt shift in the 17-year-old war and a decision that stunned Afghan officials, who said they had not been briefed on the plans. President Trump made the decision to pull the troops; about half the number the United States has in Afghanistan at the same time he decided to pull American forces out of Syria. The announcement came hours after Jim Mattis, the Secretary of Defence, said that he would resign from his position at the end of February 2019 after disagreeing with the President over his approach to policy in the Middle East.*

- On December 19, President Trump ordered the withdrawal of 2,000 American troops from Syria.

*The announcement will suddenly end a military campaign that “largely vanquished the Islamic State but ceding a strategically vital country to Russia and Iran.” In overruling his generals and civilian advisers, Trump fulfilled his frequently expressed desire to bring home American forces from a messy foreign entanglement. But his decision, conveyed via twitter plunges the Administration’s Middle East strategy into disarray, rattling allies like Britain and Israel and forsaking Syria’s ethnic Kurds who have been faithful partners in fighting the Islamic State.*

- Citing two new reports on December 17, the *NY Times* reported that Social media giants including Facebook were sometimes evasive and misrepresented themselves to lawmakers when it came to discussing Russian interference.

*According to a report produced for the Senate Intelligence Committee, the Russian influence campaign on social media in the 2016 election made extraordinary efforts to target African-Americans. It used an array of tactics to try to suppress turnout among Democratic voters and its activity on Instagram exceeded its posts on Facebook. The report adds new details to the Russian effort to sway American opinion and divide the country, which the authors assert continues even today. According to a second report “active and ongoing interference operations remain on several platforms.” The report, produced by New Knowledge a cyber security company based in Austin, Texas along with researchers at Columbia University and Cranfield Research LLC.*

### **Latin America**

- On December 30 Colombia condemned an alleged plot to assassinate its President, saying three Venezuelans had been arrested in connection with the plan.

*Foreign Minister Carlos Holmes Trujillo said there were “credible” plans to target President Iván Duque. Without going into details, Trujillo also said three Venezuelans had been arrested with “weapons of war”. Tensions have increased between the two, with mutual expulsion of officials. Millions have fled Venezuela’s severe economic crisis in recent years, and many of those migrants have crossed into Colombia. Duque was elected in August 2018 promising to isolate the country diplomatically.*

--- Amina Afzal  
Director General

## ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

- According to *Reuters* on December 30, a statement issued by the Kremlin noted that Russian President Vladimir Putin told US President Donald Trump in a New Year letter that Russia was ready for dialogue on a “wide-ranging agenda,” including the Intermediate-range Nuclear Force (INF) Treaty.

*According to the statement, President Putin stressed in his letter that relations between the US and Russia were important for strategic stability and international security. The statement also noted that one of the key issues Russia wanted to discuss with the US was the country’s plans to withdraw from a Cold War era nuclear arms pact, the INF Treaty. On October 20, 2018, US President Donald Trump had declared that the US would soon withdraw from the 1987 INF Treaty. The US has been accusing Russia of violating the Treaty since 2014, while Russia continues to reject the allegations. Russia accuses the US of violating the agreement. Russia maintains that US missile defence interceptor platforms deployed in Eastern Europe could be used for offensive purposes, and therefore, violate the Treaty. Signed by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987, the INF Treaty led to the elimination of an entire class of destabilising nuclear weapons that were deployed in Europe and helped bring an end to the Cold War arms race, as it banned ground-launched nuclear and conventional ballistic missiles with ranges between 500 to 5,500 kilometres.*

- According to *The Diplomat* on December 28, China conducted a successful test of Russian-made air defence system S-400 in November 2018.

*The report said that the S-400 system intercepted a “simulated ballistic target” around 250 kilometres away. The report indicated that China also tested S-400 system’s ability of jamming equipments in an electronic warfare scenario. No further information regarding the test was provided. The S-400 air defence system is capable of engaging up to 36 aerial targets simultaneously including both ballistic and cruise missiles. China had received the first regiment of the S-400 air defence systems in July 2018. It is expected that China would receive the second regiment of the system in coming few months. Both China and Russia had negotiated the procurement of the S-400 systems in 2014.*

*According to another report on December 18, 2018, China conducted a successful flight-test of a next-generation submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), the Julong-3, or JL-3, capable of carrying multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs), in November 2018. The report claimed that the test was closely monitored by US intelligence agencies that detected the launch with missile warning satellites. However, it is difficult to verify the report as no such test was reported from China, and Pentagon spokesmen have also declined to comment on the report.*

- On December 26, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that the Defence Ministry conducted a successful test of the boost-glide hypersonic nuclear-capable weapon system Avangard to verify all of its technical parameters.

*President Putin made the announcement during his address to military officials after watching a live feed of the launch of the Avangard system. He said that the weapon test verified all technical parameters. He also announced that the Avangard would enter into service with the Army in 2019, stressing that this is a new type of strategic weapon. Putin said, "The Avangard is invulnerable to intercept by any existing and prospective missile defence means of the potential adversary." According to the Kremlin, the missile successfully hit a practice target on the Kura shooting range on Kamchatka, 6,000 kilometres away. Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov indicated that the missile flies 27 times faster than the speed of sound, making it impossible to intercept. The Avangard missile is among new type of strategic nuclear weapons that Putin unveiled in March 2018. The weapon system is designed to be carried as multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs) by the Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).*

- On December 23, India successfully test-fired its nuclear-capable surface-to-surface ballistic missile Agni-IV as part of a user trial by the Army.

*The test was conducted from the Integrated Test Range (ITR) at Dr Abdul Kalam Island. Indian Defence Ministry said the test met all mission objectives. This was the 7th trial of Agni-IV missile. The last trial conducted by the Strategic Force Command (SFC) of the Indian Army from the same base on January 2, 2018, was also successful. With a strike range of 4000 kilometres, the Agni-IV is a two-stage solid propellant missile capable of carrying payloads of up to 800 kilogrammes.*

- North Korean official news agency Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported on December 20, that North Korea would not denuclearise unilaterally unless the US removes what Pyongyang called a nuclear threat.

*The report said, "It must be clearly understood that the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula means the removal of all nuclear threats, not only those from the North and the South but those aiming at the Korean Peninsula from surrounding areas as well." The statement added, "The United States must now recognise the accurate meaning of the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula, and especially, must study geography." The report has also called for lifting of US sanctions on North Korea. This statement is the latest amid the US and North Korean struggle to normalise their bilateral relations and to find a pathway for the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula. Both the US and North Korea agreed for the complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula during the meeting between North's leader Kim Jong-Un and US President Donald Trump on June 12, 2018, in Singapore.*

- On December 18, US President Donald Trump ordered the creation of the “Space Command” within the Pentagon which would serve as a new organisational structure to have overall control of military space operations.

*In a memo to Defence Secretary James Mattis, Trump said, “I direct the establishment, consistent with United States law, of United States Space Command as a functional unified combatant command.” Regarding further details on the Space Command, US Vice President Mike Pence indicated that Space Command would integrate space capabilities across all branches of the military. Pence said, “It will develop the space doctrine, tactics, techniques and procedures that will enable our war fighters to defend our nation in this new era.” The Space Command would be the Pentagon’s 11th combatant command, which would require establishment of a new headquarter, as well as a commander and deputy commander who will need Senate approval. This new setup of a Space Command is different from Trump’s goal to build an entirely new branch of the military called “Space Force.” However, the US Congress has not yet approved the establishment of the Space Force. In June 2018, Trump announced that the US would build a “Space Force”, which would be a sixth and entirely new branch of the military alongside the Navy, Marine Corps, Army, Air Force and Coast Guard.*

*On December 19, 2018, China raised its concerns in response to the creation of the Space Command. Hua Chunying, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, said, “China has consistently proposed the peaceful usage of space, and opposes the weaponisation of space and a space arms race.”*

- On December 18, the US State Department approved a \$3.5 billion sale of Patriot missiles to Turkey.

*The US Defence Security Cooperation Agency stated that the deal would cover the procurement of 80 Patriot MIM-104E Guidance Enhanced and 60 PAC-3 Missile Segment Enhancement missiles, as well as associated equipment. The announcement comes amid tense relations between the US and Turkey on a range of issues, including Turkey’s 2017 deal with Russia to procure Russian-made S-400 air defence system. However, the deal has raised concerns of NATO allies who say that Turkey should invest in technology that is compatible with theirs. The State Department’s approval is an attempt to get Turkey to give up its plans to purchase the S-400 missile system.*

*In his response on December 24, 2018, Turkish Presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said that Turkey’s possible purchase of Patriot missile systems from the US would not affect a deal with Russia to procure S-400 missile systems. Kalin said, “We are not closing the door to the Patriot; it all depends on the price, the possibility of technology transfer, joint production and other four or five important points. We have received the best offers from Russia. If the United States provides us with good conditions, we will also evaluate them.” He also said that the purchase of US missiles worth \$3.5 billion was not an alternative to the S-400 systems. On December 19, 2018, Russia also rejected links between sale of Patriot missile system and S-400 system. Dmitry*

*Peskov, Kremlin spokesman, said, “These are not connected processes. In this case, we are fulfilling agreements that we have with our Turkish colleagues. You know that the contract is being fulfilled. This will be continued.”*

- According to *The News* on December 16, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif said that US renewed sanctions had no effect on Iran’s policies both at home or abroad.

*During an interview with Al-Jazeera Zarif said, “It is obvious that we are facing pressure by the US sanctions. But will that lead to a change in policy? I can assure you it will not.” Regarding Iran’s missile programme, Zarif stressed that it was for defensive purposes and Iran would not negotiate on it. He said, “First of all, Iran’s missiles are for defence and we need them for deterrence. We use resources for military expenses far less than any country in the region and that is why we have announced from the very beginning that our missiles are non-negotiable.” The Foreign Minister made these comments in response to a question about US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s allegation on December 1, 2018, that Iranian test of a medium-range missile was in violation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231. The UNSC R 2231, which also endorses Iran’s nuclear agreement, calls on the country “not to undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons, including launches using such ballistic missile technology.” Javad Zarif dismissed the US’ allegations that Iran has violated the UNSC R 2231. He said that the UNSC R 2231 did not limit Iran’s missile programme. Iran maintains that its ballistic missiles are not designed to carry nuclear weapons, that is why the country is not in violation of the resolution.*

--- Moiz Khan

## CHINA, EAST ASIA & PACIFIC

### China

- On December 29, Chinese President Xi Jinping held a telephonic conversation with his US counterpart, Donald Trump.

*According to Chinese media, Xi Jinping expressed hope of taking forward a Sino-US relationship that is “coordinated, cooperative and stable.” Meanwhile, President Donald Trump said that the trade talks and consultations with China were achieving “big progress”. Following the talks between two leaders, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang said that Sino-US ties now “stand at a historic new starting point” and that the two sides should respect each other’s sovereignty, security and development interests. The US and China remained engaged in a trade war for months.*

- On December 20, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Hua Chunying announced the detention of a Canadian citizen, Sarah McIver for illegally working in the country.

*McIver’s detention came days after the Chinese authorities detained two Canadian citizens, businessman Michael Spavor and former diplomat Michael Kovrig on suspicion of “engaging in activities that endanger the national security of China.”*

- According to US officials on December 20, the US Justice Department indicted two Chinese nationals, Zhu Hua and Zhang Shilong for working on behalf of the Chinese intelligence agency.

*Zhu Hua and Zhang Shilong are described in the indictment as members of the hacking group known as Advanced Persistent Threat 10 (APT 10). Hua and Shilong are accused of breaking into American networks and stealing trade secrets, data from military service members, government agencies and private companies.*

- On December 18, Chinese President Xi Jinping warned that no one could “dictate” China’s economic development path.

*Xi vowed for further economic reforms and said that China was walking closer to the world’s centre stage and was now “an internationally recognised” builder of world peace. The Chinese President said that China would stick to its own chosen path, namely socialism with Chinese characteristics.*

### North Korea

- In a December 30 letter to President Moon Jae-in, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un pledged to “frequently” meet the South Korean leader in 2019 to discuss denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula.

*Kim said that he wished to pursue peace between the countries and “solve the issue of denuclearising the peninsula together”. Moon welcomed the message from the North Korean leader, saying Kim had also expressed “active intention to carry out agreements” made in his previous summits with the US and South Korea.*

- On December 23, North Korea criticised the United Nations resolution that condemned the country’s human rights record.

*The resolution was passed by consensus without a vote at the UN General Assembly on December 17, 2018. North Korea condemned the development as a “serious political provocation against the country. North Korea also criticised South Korea for supporting the UN resolution saying, the move would be “tarnishing the atmosphere of improving the North-South ties.”*

- According to a commentary published by *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)* on December 20, North Korea would not unilaterally denuclearise unless the United States removes its “nuclear threat”.

*The two countries are facing challenges in negotiations over how Pyongyang will denuclearise in return for the easing of sanctions. The commentary further noted that the major obstacle in negotiations could be US military assets based in South Korea and the US nuclear umbrella for South Korea.*

*---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer*

## EUROPE

- In his new year's message to the country on December 31, Labour Leader Jeremy Corbyn said that Brexit was a "complete mess" and the country could not "go on like this."

*Corbyn said Theresa May had let down both Leave and Remain voters by trying to "drive a bad deal" through Parliament over the UK's exit. Meanwhile, Lib Dem leader Sir Vince Cable has urged those seeking another referendum to continue fighting. No 10 said there was "still work to do" on building support for the PM's deal. Downing Street said the Prime Minister had spoken to European leaders over the festive period as she seeks to address the concerns of many Tory MPs about the withdrawal agreement.*

- According to UK Home Secretary Sajid Javid on December 31, the issue of increasing numbers of migrants trying to cross the Channel in small boats to reach the UK has "no easy answers."

*Javid was chairing talks in London after agreeing a joint action plan with the French interior minister. Earlier, Border Force Officers were summoned to Greatstone, Kent, after a group of 12 migrants were spotted. Since November 2019 a total of 239 people have reached the UK by boat.*

- Woody Johnson, the US Ambassador to the UK warned on December 31 that Donald Trump's offer of a "quick, massive, bilateral trade deal" would not be possible if Theresa May's EU withdrawal agreement is approved.

*President Trump had previously said her Brexit proposal sounded like a great deal for the EU. Johnson said the UK was "in need of leadership" over Brexit. Johnson recently said the UK was "the perfect trading partner for the US".*

- On December 31 Russia's FSB State Security Agency said it has arrested a US citizen "caught spying" in Moscow.

*It named him as Paul Whelan, saying he was arrested in Moscow on December 28, 2018 and charged with "espionage". The FSB gave no further details. The US state department says it has requested consular access for the man held in Moscow. The US has not confirmed his name, but says it has been officially notified about the arrest. If guilty, he could face 10-20 years in jail. Spying accusations have been a constant feature of Russia's relations with the US and UK in 2018.*

- On December 31 French President Emmanuel Macron used his traditional New Year's Eve speech to warn the extreme elements among anti-government protesters.

*Macron promised to keep order “without complacency” and decried self-appointed “spokespeople for a hateful mob”. At least six people died and 1,400 were injured since the so called yellow vest protests erupted in November 2018. Earlier, in her annual address, Angela Merkel said Germany would play a greater international role in 2019. Alluding to strained US-German relations, Merkel said that old certainties about international co-operation had “come under pressure”, and that Germany must “take on more responsibility”.*

- According to CNBC on December 31 European stocks closed higher on the final day of 2018 but marked the year as its worst in a decade.

*According to observers market focus is largely dependent on the progress of the US-China trade standoff. The stocks closed higher after hints emerged when President Donald Trump said he had a “very good call” with Chinese President Xi Jinping to discuss trade. He also claimed that progress was being made on this front. His statements have brought optimism to stocks worldwide that have been under pressure throughout 2018.*

- On December 29 the Italian Parliament approved a revised budget for 2019, amid opposition complaints that the EU was dictating it.

*The country’s populist government had originally vowed to push through costly campaign promises including a universal basic income. However, in October 2018 the European Commission raised concerns about the impact of such spending on Italy’s debt levels. Rome was told to revise its budget or face the consequences.*

- On December 19, after months of being embroiled in a high-profile diplomatic row, Italy agreed to a deal on its budget with the European Commission.

*The Commission had demanded changes to Italy’s budget plans because of the country’s high debt. Italy initially stood its ground, leading EU officials to threaten disciplinary action and potentially expensive fines. Under the new deal, Italy has agreed to lower its planned budget deficit from 2.4% to 2.04% - not so much of a reduction as European officials had hoped for. The value of Italy’s concessions is understood to be a little more than €10bn.*

- On December 28 Russia finished building a high-tech security fence along the annexed Crimean border with mainland Ukraine.

*The fence, more than 60km long, is topped with barbed wire and has hundreds of sensors. Russian forces annexed Ukraine’s Crimea peninsula in March 2014. Crimea has a Russian-speaking majority. Russia’s FSB security agency says the fence is necessary to prevent “infiltration attempts by saboteurs”.*

- On December 27, the German Defence Chief said employing EU citizens is “an option” to fill expert posts.

*Army General Inspector Eberhard Zorn said the forces had to “look in all directions in times of a lack of qualified personnel”, such as doctors and IT specialists. The armed forces have been beset by years of under-investment. Germany scrapped conscription seven years ago. The country now aims to increase its military by 21,000 personnel by 2025. It has also pledged to raise its defence budget from 1.2% to to 1.5% of its gross domestic product by 2024, in the face of criticism from President Donald Trump that it does not meet the NATO target of 2% of GDP.*

- On December 21 Belgian King Philippe accepted Prime Minister Charles Michel’s resignation and requested his government to stay on in a caretaker capacity for the coming months after his coalition split following an argument over migration.

*After three days of consultations with party leaders, the palace said in a statement that the king had established a willingness to guarantee the country was managed until the next election, due in May 2019.*

- On December 19 Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel offered his resignation just days after one of his main coalition partners quit in a row over migration.

*Michel lost the backing of the nationalist New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) over his support for a UN migration deal signed in Marrakesh last week. He announced his intention to resign after opposition parties refused to support his minority government. He informed King Philippe of his decision. The king has yet to announce whether he will accept the resignation. Belgians were due to go to the polls in May 2019 and the king will meet party leaders to decide whether there is any support for early elections.*

- On December 16 thousands of demonstrators in Brussels marched against a UN migration pact, adopted in Marrakesh last week.

*Flemish right-wing parties called the march, which took place near major EU institutions, amid fears the pact could lead to an increase in immigration. Police deployed tear gas and water cannon as clashes broke out. About 5,500 protesters took part. A counter-protest organised by left-wing groups and charities in the city centre drew about 1,000 people.*

- On December 19 the European Commission said it has started to implement its preparations for a no-deal Brexit in case the UK leaves the EU without a plan.

*The Commission announced temporary measures to try to reduce the impact, but says it cannot counter all the problems it expects. As PM Theresa May’s proposed exit plan flounders in Parliament, both sides are preparing for the worst-case situation. The UK has allocated \$2.5bn in funding to government departments. The Commission’s measures are aimed at limiting disruptions in key areas including finance and transport, if Brexit goes ahead in March 2019 without a deal.*

- According to the *NY Times* on December 18 hackers infiltrated the EU's diplomatic communications network for years.

*They downloaded thousands of cables revealing concerns about an unpredictable Trump Administration and struggles to deal with Russia and China and the risk that Iran would revive its nuclear programme. In one cable, European diplomats described a meeting between President Trump and President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia in Helsinki, Finland, as "successful (at least for Putin)." Another cable, written after a July 16, 2018 meeting, relayed a detailed report and analysis of a discussion between European officials and President Xi Jinping of China, who was quoted comparing Trump's "bullying" of Beijing to a "no-rules freestyle boxing match."*

- According to the British Government on December 18 it would ramp up contingency plans for a disorderly or chaotic departure, including measures to put 3,500 troops on standby.

*With 100 days remaining until Brexit, there are no signs yet of the British Parliament agreeing to an exit deal. The government says it still expects to secure an agreement on withdrawal which would allow for a 20-month transition period during which little would change. But fear of a more brutal rupture that could clog ports, starve factories and disrupt supplies of food and medicines is growing as the March 29, 2018 deadline for departure creeps ever closer. It was evident that the government's deliberations were being advertised more openly than in past months, when it discussed almost everything in secrecy. That led to speculation that the decision might be a ploy to persuade a truculent Parliament to endorse the unpopular exit deal struck by Prime Minister Theresa May, ahead of a critical vote on the plan now expected during the week of Jan. 14, 2019.*

- On December 17 about 10,000 people rallied in Budapest against new labour laws, which have been labelled "slave" legislation by opponents.

*The crowds marched towards parliament and the state TV headquarters, in what was the fourth and largest protest since the laws were passed last week. Police fired tear gas to disperse protesters near the TV station. New rules mean companies can demand up to 400 hours of overtime a year and delay payment for it for three years. The government of Prime Minister Viktor Orban says the labour reform will benefit workers as well as companies who need to fill a labour shortage.*

---Amina Afzal  
Director General

## MIDDLE EAST & WEST ASIA

### Arab League

- On December 18, the Arab League adopted a resolution calling on Australia and Brazil to “abide by international law” regarding the status of Jerusalem.

*Brazil’s president-elect Jair Bolsonaro announced in November 2018 that he intends to move his country’s Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. On December 15, 2018, Australia announced its recognition of west Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said Canberra formally recognises West Jerusalem as Israel’s capital but reaffirmed his country’s support for a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem under a two-state peace deal. Israel’s Foreign Ministry called the Australian move “a step in the right direction”. However, Israel signalled displeasure with Australia’s recognition of West Jerusalem as its capital, with a confidant of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu saying it was a mistake to gainsay Israeli control over the whole city. Tzachi Hanegbi, the Israeli Minister for Regional Cooperation said, “To our regret, within this positive news they made a mistake. There is no division between the east of the city and west of the city. Jerusalem is one whole, united. Israel’s control over it is eternal.” The Arab League decided to dispatch a “high-ranking delegation” to Brazil and Australia to inform officials there on the need to “abide by international law” concerning Jerusalem. The decision was taken at an extraordinary meeting at the League’s Cairo headquarters attended by delegates from member countries.*

### Egypt

- According to Egypt’s Interior Ministry on December 29, Egyptian Security Forces killed 40 suspected militants in three separate incidents in North Sinai and Giza, a day after a bombing on a Vietnamese tourist bus in Giza killed four people.

*On December 28, 2018, three Vietnamese tourists and an Egyptian guide were killed and at least 10 others injured when the roadside bomb hit their tour bus. The bombing is the first deadly attack against foreign tourists in Egypt in more than a year and comes as the tourism sector, a vital source of foreign currency, is recovering from a sharp drop in numbers since the 2011 uprising. According to the Ministry, Egyptian Security Forces killed 30 people during raids on their hideouts in Giza where it said “terrorist elements” were planning a series of attacks targeting state institutions and the tourism industry. Security Forces also killed 10 suspected militants in North Sinai, where the country is fighting an insurgency led by Daesh.*

## Iran

- On December 31, during his meeting with Ziad al-Nakhala, Secretary General of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad resistance movement, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said that Iran would never back away from supporting Palestine despite the heavy pressure from the world's arrogant powers.

*Khamenei said, "These forces will never make us abandon our divine, sacred and rational responsibility." He commended the Palestinian resistance against Israeli occupation forces as the main reason behind Palestine's constant victories against the Tel Aviv regime over the past years and the key to more victories in future. Khamenei also said, "As long as there is resistance, the Zionist regime's downfall and demise will continue. The main victory is that Palestinian people and resistance groups were able to bring the Zionist regime to its knees, a feat that Arab armies could never accomplish."*

- On December 22, Iran's Revolutionary Guards launched war games in the Gulf after a US aircraft carrier entered the waterway amid rising tension with Washington over re-imposed US sanctions.

*Amphibious forces landed on Iran's Gulf island of Qeshm. Naval vessels, helicopters, drones, rocket launchers and commando units took part in the exercises. Guards Chief Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari said, "Hopefully, with these exercises, our enemies will realise more than ever how devastating our response would be to any move by them." Qeshm, the largest island in the Gulf, is located near the Strait of Hormuz through which a third of the world's seaborne oil passes. On December 21, 2018 the US aircraft carrier John C. Stennis entered the Gulf and was shadowed by Revolutionary Guards speedboats.*

## Iraq

- On December 30, Iraqi Prime Minister, Adel Abdul-Mahdi said that Iraq would play a bigger role in Syria to fight Daesh after the withdrawal of the US forces.

*Adel Abdul-Mahdi stressed that Iraq seeks to move beyond its current arrangement with Syria. He also said that top security officials from Baghdad met Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus in an attempt to "gain the initiative against Daesh."*

- On December 25, Farhan al-Duleimi, a member of Anbar's provisional council told the Anadolu News Agency that the US Army has set up two new military bases in Iraq's western province of Anbar, days after Washington announced the pull-out of American Forces from Syria.

*Al-Duleimi said, "The US Army has established two new military facilities in uninhabited parts of the province." He also told the press that the first base had been established in the northern*

*Rumana sub-district in al-Qaim district, in the vicinity of the Syrian border, some 360 kilometres west of the provincial capital Ramadi. The second base had been set up east of the city of al-Rutbah, about 310 kilometres west of Ramadi and less than 100 kilometres from the Syrian border. The official added that the American bases were purportedly intended to assist Iraqi Forces “secure the country’s borders and prevent infiltrations by Daesh.”*

- On December 25, at two people were killed and 11 injured in a car bomb attack in the northern Iraqi city of Tal Afar.

*Daesh has claimed responsibility for the attack. Tal Afar is a former stronghold of Daesh and located about 80 km west of Mosul. The city experienced sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shias after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. It came under the Daesh control when the militant group overran swathes of territory in the country’s north in 2014. In August 2017, it fell to Iraqi Security Forces, backed by the US-led coalition, the last area to be retaken in the north before fighting moved to the Syrian border.*

## **Israel**

- During his visit to Rio de Janeiro on December 30, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that Brazil will move its Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, with only the date of the transfer to be decided.

*Netanyahu held talks with Brazil’s far-right President-elect Jair Bolsonaro, who is to be sworn-in in a ceremony in Brasilia on January 1, 2019, with Netanyahu among the foreign dignitaries attending. While addressing the Jewish community in Rio de Janeiro, Netanyahu said, “It’s not a question of ‘if’ but of ‘when’.” The issue of the embassy has been hovering over Netanyahu’s visit to Brazil, the first-ever by an Israeli Prime Minister. In November 2018, Bolsonaro had said he intended to follow the lead of US President Donald Trump in moving his country’s embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. But then he backtracked, saying “it hasn’t been decided yet.” Palestinians, view east Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state. Israel asserts all of Jerusalem is its capital and is keen to see embassies move there to bolster that claim. During their talks, Bolsonaro told Netanyahu that he would follow suit.*

- On December 26, Israeli lawmakers voted to dissolve the parliament, known as the Knesset, in order to hold early elections in April 2019.

*The MPs unanimously approved the bill to dissolve the 20th Knesset with 102 votes in favour and only two opposing votes. Earlier, on December 24, 2018, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that his coalition had decided to dissolve the parliament and hold early elections in April 2019. The decision came after the ruling coalition appeared to come up short on votes needed to pass a contentious piece of court-ordered legislation. Netanyahu said his coalition “unanimously” agreed to disband the government and hold a new election. He also*

*expressed hope that his current religious, nationalistic coalition would be the “core” of the next one as well. He said, “We will ask the voters for a clear mandate to continue leading the state of Israel our way.” Netanyahu’s coalition has been weakened by internal divisions. In November 2018, Avigdor Lieberman resigned as defence minister to protest what he perceived to be the government’s weak response to rocket attacks from Gaza.*

## **Kuwait**

- On December 31, Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled al-Jarallah said that Kuwait expects more Arab countries to reopen diplomatic missions in Damascus in “coming days”.

*According to Al-Jarallah, Kuwait remains committed to the Arab League’s decision, and would reopen its embassy in the Syrian capital once the regional organisation consents to it. He said that he expected a “thaw in relations between Syria and Arab states of the Persian Gulf in the coming days as more nations look to reopen their embassies in Damascus.”*

## **Libya**

- On December 25, at least three people, including a senior civil servant, were killed in a suicide terrorist attack on the Libyan Foreign Ministry in Tripoli.

*At least 21 people were injured in the attack. According to Special Forces spokesman, Tarak al-Dawass, a car bomb exploded near the Ministry. A suicide bomber then blew himself up on the second floor of the building while a second attacker died when the suitcase, he was carrying exploded. A third assailant, who was unarmed and wearing a bulletproof vest, was killed by security forces outside. Al-Dawass has accused Daesh for the attack. According to Foreign Minister Tahar Siala, one among the killed was senior diplomat Ibrahim al-Shaibi who headed a department in his Ministry. Interior Minister Fathi Bash Agha admitted during a news conference that “security chaos” reigned in Libya and was “out of our control”. Two competing administrations, rival militias, tribes and jihadists have been competing for control of territory and the country’s vast oil wealth. Power struggles and insecurity has allowed militants to carry out terrorist activities in the country.*

## **Saudi Arabia**

- On December 28, new Saudi Foreign Minister, Ibrahim al-Assaf said that the Kingdom is not going through a crisis in the aftermath of the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

*Minister Assaf said, “The issue of Jamal Khashoggi really saddened us, all of us. But all in all, we are not going through a crisis, we are going through a transformation. He was referring to social and economic reforms spearheaded by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.*

- On December 27, Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir was demoted in a government reshuffle by King Salman bin Abdulaziz.

*Jubeir will become minister of state for foreign affairs, with Ibrahim al-Assaf taking over as foreign minister. King Salman also issued a royal decree to restructure the Political and Security Affairs Council, headed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.*

*In another development on December 20, 2018, Saudi Arabia announced the creation of three new government bodies aimed at improving the country’s intelligence operations in the wake of the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. King Salman ordered a restructuring of the intelligence service in October 2018 after the authorities, following initial denials, acknowledged that Khashoggi had been killed inside the Kingdom’s Istanbul consulate by a team of Saudi intelligence and security agents. According to the Saudi Press Agency (SPA), the new government departments for strategy and development, legal affairs, and performance evaluation and internal review are meant to ensure that intelligence operations align with national security policy, international law and human rights treaties.*

## **Syria**

- On December 31, Iraqi military aircraft targeted a strategic Daesh position in Syria’s eastern province of Deir ez-Zor.
- On December 30, Syrian President Bashar al Assad authorised Iraqi Forces to attack Daesh inside Syria without waiting for permission from authorities in Damascus.

*On December 29, 2018, Assad received a letter from Iraqi Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi calling for both countries’ coordination in “fighting terrorism”. Iraqi warplanes and artillery have, in the past, pounded Daesh positions inside Syria after getting the green light from Syrian authorities. The militants have been defeated in Iraq but still hold a small area in Syria close to the Iraqi border. Following the announcement, the media bureau of Iraq’s Joint Operations Command said that Iraqi F-16 fighter jets destroyed a two-story building on the outskirts of the village of Sousa, killing 30 Daesh commanders as they were holding a meeting. The latest announcement highlights close relations between the two countries that are both allied with Iran.*

- On December 28, Syrian troops were deployed in support of Kurdish forces around the strategic city of Manbij, following an alliance formation between the two sides.

*The shifting of alliances follows the announcement of US military withdrawal from Syria. The move marked another key step in President Bashar al Assad’s drive to reassert control over the*

country. The Syrian Army announced that it had raised the flag in Manbij, a strategic city close to the Turkish border where Kurdish forces have been deployed since 2016 and where US-led coalition forces are also stationed. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, more than 300 government forces are deployed in the Manbij area. Deputy head of the Manbij local authority, Nura al-Hamed, said that the regime deployment was the result of Russian-sponsored negotiations. She said, “The regime forces will not enter the city of Manbij itself but will deploy on the demarcation line with Turkish-backed Syrian groups.” She also said that US and French coalition forces remained at their positions and continued to conduct patrols. Their deployment creates a regime buffer arching across northern Syria that fully separates the Turkish Army and its proxies from the Kurds. The Kurds issued a statement welcoming the regime advance. The statement from YPG said, “We invite the Syrian government forces to assert control over the areas our forces have withdrawn from, particularly in Manbij, and to protect these areas against a Turkish invasion.”

- On December 26, Syria strongly condemned Israel’s missile strike near Damascus as a blatant violation of a United Nations resolution, adding that Tel Aviv would not have been able to carry out such attacks without support from the US.
- On December 25, Syrian air defence systems intercepted several missiles fired by Israeli warplanes.

*The Israeli missiles were launched from the Lebanese airspace and most of them were downed before reaching their targets. Israeli officials argue that Iran’s presence in Syria, which is part of an advisory mission requested by the Damascus government, poses a threat to the Tel Aviv regime’s security. In two separate letters addressed to the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres and the head of the UN Security Council, the Syrian Foreign Ministry condemned the attack as a violation of UN Security Council Resolution 350, which called for a ceasefire between Israel and Syria in the wake of the Yom Kippur War. The Foreign Ministry accused Israel of seeking to prolong the crisis in Syria, noting that such strikes are tantamount to what Daesh and other terrorist groups are doing in Syria. The Ministry also asked the Security Council to fulfil its responsibilities in keeping international peace and security and adopting firm measures to prevent the repetition of the Israeli attacks. Meanwhile, Lebanon’s Foreign Ministry also condemned the airstrike and affirmed Syria’s right to defend its sovereignty.*

- Following a meeting with UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura on December 18, the Foreign Ministers of Russia, Iran and Turkey said that a new Syrian Constitutional Committee should convene in early 2019, beginning a viable political peace process.

*In a joint statement read out by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the Foreign Ministers said that the work of the new body “should be governed by a sense of compromise and constructive engagement”. UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura said that “there is an extra*

*mile to go” in the “marathon effort” to ensure a credible, balanced and inclusive constitutional committee for Syria. Sergey Lavrov said the Foreign Ministers of Russia, Iran and Turkey have agreed to facilitate convening the first session of a committee to draft a new Syrian constitution in early 2019. He also said that the three leaders hope the steps will lead to the launch of a “viable and lasting Syrian-led, Syrian-owned and UN-facilitated political process.”*

- On December 16, at least eight people, including four civilians, were killed in a car bomb blast near a pro-Turkey rebel post in the northern Syrian city of Afrin.

*According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, it was not clear who was behind the blast. The explosion comes after the Turkish President threatened to launch a new offensive against the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) in Syria. In March 2018, the city of Afrin was captured from the YPG by Turkish Armed Forces and Syrian rebels backed by Ankara.*

## **Turkey**

- On December 29, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Turkey and Russia have agreed to coordinate ground operations in Syria following the withdrawal of US troops.

*Following talks with his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu in Moscow, Lavrov said, “Of course we paid special attention to new circumstances which appeared in connection with the announced US military pull-out. An understanding was reached on how military representatives of Russia and Turkey would continue to coordinate their steps on the ground under new conditions with a view to finally rooting out terrorist threats in Syria.” Cavusoglu confirmed the two countries would coordinate Syria operations, adding they also discussed plans to help refugees to return home. He said, “We will continue active work and coordination with our Russian colleagues and colleagues from Iran to speed up the arrival of a political settlement in the Syrian Republic. We have the common desire to cleanse Syrian territory of any terrorist organisation.” Russian and Turkish Defence Ministers Sergei Shoigu and Hulusi Akar, respectively also attended the talks.*

- On December 25, Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu warned France against protecting US-backed Kurdish militia in Syria and said Ankara’s military power was enough to defeat Daesh following the withdrawal of US troops.

*Washington has decided to pull out all 2,000 ground forces from Syria. US President Donald Trump has ordered the withdrawal of US ground forces deployed in Syria to provide training to the People’s Protection Units (YPG) under the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) alliance battling Daesh. The decision has shocked most allies, including France, but was greeted with approval by Turkey. Minister Cavusoglu said, “If France is staying to contribute to Syria’s future, great, but if they are doing this to protect the militia, this will bring no benefit to*

*anyone.” He also said that Ankara has “the power to neutralise Daesh alone” amid fears that a US pull-out will undermine the fight against the militant group. Earlier, on December 21, 2018, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that Turkey would take over the fight against Daesh in Syria following pull-out of US troops from the country. Ankara believes its forces supporting Syrian opposition fighters will now have a freer rein to target Kurdish fighters from the US-backed YPG.*

## **UAE**

- On December 27, the UAE officially reopened its embassy in Damascus.

*The UAE had closed its embassy soon after the Syrian conflict started in 2011. According to observers, as the war in Syria comes to a halt, with the Syrian government and military regaining control over almost all major areas previously overtaken by militants, Damascus’ former adversaries seem to be changing their calculations.*

*In another development on December 16, 2018, Sudan’s President Omar al-Bashir arrived in Damascus in the first such visit by an Arab leader since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011.*

*--- Muhammad Shoaib*

## SOUTH ASIA: I

### **Pakistan External**

- On December 28, Prime Minister Imran Khan constituted an Advisory Council on Foreign Affairs that would work under Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi.

*According to the Foreign Office, the Advisory Council comprises “highly experienced former diplomats and Ambassadors alongside academicians from the country’s renowned universities.” The Council has been tasked with formulating recommendations related to Pakistan’s Foreign Policy.*

- On December 30, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi visited Doha and met with Qatar’s top officials including Prime Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa Al Thani.

*During the visit, Foreign Minister Qureshi discussed the Afghan situation with the Qatari leadership. Qatar appreciated Pakistan’s positive role in Afghanistan. Both countries agreed to further speed up progress in economic, trade and investment sectors.*

- On December 26, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi visited Moscow and met with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov. During the visit, the two sides held “detailed talks” on various bilateral and regional issues.

*Both leaders expressed satisfaction on the upward trajectory of bilateral relations. The Ministers noted that being “the most important stakeholders,” Pakistan and Russia had mutual interest in Afghanistan and the “common goal” of supporting efforts to restore peace and stability in the country. Foreign Minister Qureshi also visited Kabul, Tehran and Beijing as part of the government’s policy of “regional outreach” and taking allies into confidence on the Afghan reconciliation process. The visits followed reports that President Trump has asked the Pentagon to withdraw half of the 14,000 troops deployed in Afghanistan.*

- On December 25, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi visited Beijing and met with Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

*The two sides held discussion on the entire spectrum of bilateral relations and regional matters. Foreign Minister Qureshi highlighted that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has added an important dimension to bilateral ties. Before traveling to Beijing, Qureshi visited Tehran on December 24, 2018 and held talks with Foreign Minister Javad Zarif. It was Qureshi’s first visit to Iran. The Pakistani Foreign Minister pledged to further strengthen ties with Iran by increasing cooperation between the two countries. On his part, Foreign Minister Zarif reaffirmed Iran’s commitment to deepening its relations with Pakistan in trade, investment, connectivity and border management.*

- In a related development on December 24, 2018, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi visited Kabul and met with President Ashraf Ghani and Foreign Minister

Salahuddin Rabbani. During the visit, Foreign Minister Qureshi apprised the Afghan leadership on Pakistan's "efforts for bringing synergy among other regional and international stakeholders to facilitate an intra-Afghan dialogue." Foreign Minister Qureshi also assured them of Pakistan's support for an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace process.

- On December 22, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi welcomed US President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw half the US's troops from Afghanistan.

*Foreign Minister Qureshi said that the decision is good for ongoing peace talks between the Afghan Taliban and the US. The US and the Taliban concluded Pakistan orchestrated peace talks in the United Arab Emirates. The talks involved officials from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The Foreign Minister said that Pakistan has released some members of the Taliban to help facilitate the talks. On December 19, 2018, US Special Envoy for Afghan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad visited Pakistan and met with Pakistan's Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa. According to the US Embassy in Pakistan, Khalilzad expressed "his appreciation for Pakistan's efforts to encourage the Taliban to negotiate directly with the Afghan government to reach a political settlement that ends the war in Afghanistan." Another rounds of peace talks are scheduled in Saudi Arabia in January 2019. However, the Taliban has refused to meet directly with the representatives of Afghan government.*

- On December 21, the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (ADFD) said that it would deposit Dh11 billion (\$3 billion) in the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) that would help ease Pakistan's balance-of-payment crisis.

*Prime Minister Imran Khan thanked the UAE government for supporting Pakistan "so generously in testing times." The development has placed Pakistan government in a better position to negotiate a bailout agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).*

- On December 18, Indian citizen Hamid Nehal Ansari, who illegally entered Pakistan and was involved in "anti-state crimes and forging documents" was repatriated to India.

*Ansari was handed over to Indian officials at Wagah border after he was released after serving three-year sentence for espionage in Pakistan. In a related development on December 26, 2018, India released two Pakistani citizens, Abdullah Shah and Mohammed Imran Qureshi Warsi as a goodwill gesture. Indian authorities had detained Abdullah Shah for illegally crossing the border in 2017 and Mohammed Imran Qureshi Warsi on charges of "forgery and spying" in 2004.*

## **Pakistan Internal**

- On December 16, Pakistan's Foreign Office "strongly condemned" the killing of at least 14 Kashmiris and more than 200 civilians injured by Indian troops in Indian Occupied Kashmir.

- On December 22, Indian troops killed at least 6 Kashmiri fighters in Indian Occupied Kashmir.
- In a related development on December 20, Prime Minister Imran Khan telephoned United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres and demanded his intervention for ending the human rights violations by the Indian troops in IOK.

*Prime Minister reminded Guterres that the Kashmir dispute “is not a bilateral issue between Pakistan and India but an internationally recognised dispute and an outstanding agenda item in the UN Security Council.” The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has also expressed serious concern over India’s human rights violations in Kashmir. In response to Pakistan’s strong reaction over the killing of Kashmiris, India’s Foreign Ministry said that Pakistani leaders should “mind their own business” and take steps to end “terror emanating from their soil.”*

- On December 25, Former Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) leader Syed Ali Raza Abidi was killed after two unidentified assailants opened fire on his car in Karachi.

*No one claimed responsibility for the attack. Prime Minister Imran Khan and several other politicians condemned the incident.*

- On December 24, the Accountability Court awarded former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif 7 years in jail in the Al-Azizia Steel Mills corruption reference.

*The court said that Nawaz Sharif had failed to justify the source of the funds provided to set up Al-Azizia Steel Mills. The court also fined him 1.5 billion rupees. Sharif was, however, acquitted in a second reference related to Flagship Investments. Following the verdict, Nawaz Sharif was arrested and shifted to Kot Lakhpat Central Jail in Lahore.*

## **India**

- On December 21, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited New Delhi and held talks with Indian Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj.

*Both countries discussed steps to enhance cooperation through academic exchanges and tourism. The Chinese Foreign Minister visited India to attend the first meeting of India-China High Level Mechanism on Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges. The new mechanism was launched after an informal summit between the two countries in Wuhan in April 2018. External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Raveesh Kumar said the new mechanism is aimed at building synergies in people-to-people ties. During a meeting on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in November 2018, PM Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping said that the two sides have seen “improvement” in bilateral ties after the Wuhan summit.*

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

## SOUTH ASIA: II

### Afghanistan

- On December 31, a District Police Chief was killed in a bomb blast in Takhar province.
- On December 24, militants attacked a government building in Kabul and killed at least 43 people.

*Although the Taliban rejected their involvement in the attack, Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah outrightly blamed the insurgent group. Ghani said that the Taliban by not accepting the responsibility for the attack cannot escape from the crime they have committed. Meanwhile, Abdullah said that any country which has given sanctuaries to the Taliban are supporting them and are behind the attack. At a time when the US and the regional powers are trying to convince the Taliban for intra-Afghan peace talks to end the war in the country, such highly irresponsible remarks from top Afghan leadership show their ill-intention towards peace. Not only does the Afghan government has intensified military operations against the insurgent group but Ghani has replaced the country's Defence Minister, Tariq Shah Bahrami and Minister of Interior, Wais Ahmad Barmak with more staunch anti-Taliban Asadullah Khalid and Amarullah Saleh. Both new ministers have served as heads of Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS).*

- According to the Iranian Foreign Ministry on December 30, Taliban representatives held talks with Iranian authorities in Tehran.

*A Taliban delegation from Afghanistan held comprehensive talks related to the peace process with the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister. The development came after the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani visited Kabul on December 28, 2018 where he said that Iranian officials met with the Taliban and details were shared with the Afghan government. The meeting seems to be a part of the ongoing Afghan peace process aimed at mainstreaming the Taliban.*

- On December 27, the Commander of US Forces and the Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan, Gen. Scott Miller met with Pakistan Army Chief, Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa in Rawalpindi.

*Issues of mutual interest with particular reference to regional security and ongoing Afghan reconciliation process were discussed during the meeting. Both the commanders expressed unanimity of views on importance of political resolution of Afghan situation and underlined that only an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned inclusive process can lead to peace in Afghanistan. They also reaffirmed the need for continuing harmonised efforts against terrorists and for effective border management. The visit came amid an increasing effort by the Afghan government and the international community, US and Pakistan on the top, to find a political settlement in Afghanistan.*

- On December 27, the Commander of US Forces and the Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan, Gen. Scott Miller said that the war in the country would continue until a political settlement.

*Miller said that these are two sides that are fighting against one another and neither one of them would achieve a military victory at this stage. Meanwhile, the US Ambassador to Afghanistan, John Bass concurred with Miller's assessment, cautioning that the US and Afghan officials would face a complicated diplomatic situation given the Taliban's aggressive rejection of the current administration in Kabul. The remarks from top US officials in Afghanistan came when Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani said a day earlier that Afghanistan is at a critical stage of the war and that now is the time that the Afghan Security Forces would come up with more strength and decisiveness on the battlefields. Ghani has also replaced the country's Defence and Interior ministers with more staunch anti-Taliban ones. Currently, tools for both war and diplomacy seem to be at full swing. Although the Taliban previously rejected to talk with the Afghan government delegation during the meetings in Abu Dhabi, Kabul is keen to send a peace delegation for upcoming round of negotiations to Jeddah.*

- On December 26, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov said that Russia and Pakistan have common interest in helping Afghan peace.

*During his meeting with Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi in Moscow, Lavrov said that we have a common interest in creating conditions for the start of the political process as soon as possible, the process by which Afghani people would lead themselves and which would take into consideration the interests of all neighbouring countries. He added that we try not to impose anything on anyone, but I think that Russia, Pakistan, and other members of the so-called Moscow format have found a quite efficient framework where it is comfortable for Afghani sides to work with. Before reaching Moscow, Qureshi held a meeting with Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani and Foreign Minister, Salahudin Rabbani in Kabul where Rabbani appreciated Pakistan's role in the Afghan peace process. On the one hand Afghan Foreign Ministry praised Pakistan while on the other hand the country's Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah blamed Islamabad for providing sanctuaries for militants who conducted December 24, 2018's Kabul attack. There seems to be a lack of harmony within various ministries of Afghan government which could be detrimental for Afghan peace process.*

- Dawn reported on December 26 that the master mind of the recent attack on Chinese Consulate in Karachi and banned Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) leader, Aslam Baloch was killed in Kandahar.

*The suicide attack was carried out at a house in the Aino Maina area where the BLA leaders had gathered for a meeting. A spokesman for the BLA confirmed the killing of Aslam along with five other leaders of the militant organisation. In 2017, Aslam was injured during an operation launched by Pakistani Security Forces in the Bolan area of Balochistan.*

- The *New York Times* reported on December 20 that Trump Administration has ordered the US military to start withdrawing up to 7,000 troops from Afghanistan in the coming months.

*US official said that the reduction of forces in Afghanistan is an effort to make Afghan Forces more reliant on their own troops and not Western support. The US troops in Afghanistan are divided between training and advising Afghan forces and a counter-terrorism mission. According to the report, those who are part of the 7,000-troop withdrawal would be a mixture of forces from both of those missions. However, US Defence Department in its annual report to the Congress advised against the force reduction in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, this came amid increasing efforts to reach a political settlement for ending the war in Afghanistan. The withdrawal of foreign troops remains the top condition of the Taliban for initiation of intra-Afghan negotiations.*

- On December 19, US Special Representative on Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad reached Kabul after meeting with Taliban and Pakistani leadership in Abu Dhabi and Islamabad.

*For the first time members from Haqqani Network were part of the Taliban team during negotiations. In their meeting with representatives from US, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the Taliban once again called for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan. The Afghan government's peace delegation was also in Abu Dhabi but the Taliban refused to engage them. A three month cease fire and exchange of prisoners were discussed during the meeting. While addressing the press in Kabul, Khalilzad said that Taliban have reached a point where they cannot win through warfare, and that political options should be sought for putting an end to the current situation. He added that he would like to see a roadmap agreement reached before Afghan presidential elections, scheduled for April 2019. He also praised Pakistan for its efforts in the peace talks. On his return from Abu Dhabi, Khalilzad met with Pakistani leaders in Islamabad and then arrived in Kabul where he met with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, Chief Executive Officer, Abdullah Abdullah and National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib. In the meantime, a number of Afghan politicians and former Jihadi leaders also met with Khalilzad in former President, Hamid Karzai's house in Kabul. Since been appointed in September 2018, Khalilzad has met on several occasions with all sides to try to start direct peace negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government aimed at ending the US' longest war.*

## **Bangladesh**

- On December 31, Awami League (AL) won Bangladesh's parliamentary elections with overwhelming majority amid violence and chaos.

*The ruling party's (AL) chairperson, Sheikh Hasina won her third straight term as the country's Prime Minister. According to the Dhaka Tribune, the grand alliance led by AL outclassed the ballot by securing 82% of votes. However, the main opposition led by Bangladesh National Party (BNP) termed the election a 'farce' and demanded fresh polls. At least 15 people were*

*killed across the country in election related incidents. Hasina has been crushing the dissent since she assumed office during her first term. Not only has the government arrested BNP's Chairperson, Khalida Zia on corruption charges but numerous other leaders of the main opposition party have been either sentenced to death or life imprisonment. Thousands of opposition activists were arrested recently during election campaigns. On December 25, 2018 at least 10 journalists covering national election were injured as ruling party activists allegedly attacked a motel. Harrasment and bullying seem to be the main tools of the ruling party to maintain the democratic values of Bangladesh.*

## **Bhutan**

- On December 28, Bhutanese Prime Minister, Lotay Tshering arrived in India and met with his Indian counterpart, Narendra Modi.

*Discussion between the two leaders was focused on a host of key issues to strengthen bilateral ties. Modi announced INR 450 million in assistance for Bhutan. Tshering also held a separate meeting with India Minister for External Affairs, Shushma Swaraj. Bhutan is a strategically located land locked state considered to be an Indian protectorate.*

## **Maldives**

- On December 16, the newly elected President of Maldives, Ibrahim Solih visited India and met with Indian Prime Minister, Naredra Modi.

*After their meeting, Modi announced US\$ 1.4 billion assistance to Maldives. The funds were pledged as budget support, currency swap agreements and concessional lines of credit. An agreement on visa arrangements and Memoranda of Understanding on cultural cooperation and improving ecosystems for agribusiness were also exchanged. During his speech, Solih said that India is Maldives' closest neighbour and our people have ties of friendship and cultural affinity and within those close links trade and commerce have flourished. He added that an important aspect of our discussions was our mutual aspiration and need for regional stability and that the two sides agreed to strengthen maritime security cooperation in the Indian Ocean region through coordinated patrolling, aerial surveillance and exchange of information. This was Solih's first visit to a foreign country since assuming office in November 2018. The relations between the two countries were strained under former president Abdulla Yameen, who forged a partnership with China and secured financing for flagship infrastructure projects, stoking fears in New-Delhi of loss of influence.*

## **Sri Lanka**

- On December 16, Ranil Wickremesinghe took oath as the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka bringing an end to the Constitutional and political uncertainty in the country.

*Wickremesinghe was removed from the Premiership by the country's President, Maithripala Sirisena on October 26, 2018 and replaced him with former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. Sirisena also dissolved the legislature and called snap elections, however, the Supreme Court overturned presidential decree. As a result, Parliament passed two resolutions of No Confidence Motions against Rajapaksa and both were rejected by Sirisena. Meanwhile, Sirisena issued a gazette notification and dissolved Parliament with January 5, 2019, as the day of the election. On November 12, 2018, Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) filed petitions in the Supreme Court challenging the dissolution. On December 14, 2018, a seven-judge bench of the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that the dissolution of Parliament was unconstitutional. Consequently, Rajapaksa resigned paving the way for Sirisena to reinstate Wickremesinghe as the country's Prime Minister.*

*---Kashif Hussain*

## UNITED NATIONS

- On December 29, a US official indicated that Houthi rebels have begun their withdrawal from the port of Hudaydah under the ceasefire agreement.
- On December 24, General (R) Patrick Cammaert, Head of the UN-led Redeployment Coordination Committee (RCC), tasked with overseeing the ceasefire around a number of critical Yemeni ports, undertook “a familiarisation visit” to the crucial port city of Hudaydah, and had his first face-to-face meeting with authorities there.

*On December 19, 2018, the RCC began planning operations with a conference call to discuss the general outlines of its work, including an agreement on the code of conduct. The RCC members are drawn from military and security representatives of the Yemeni Government and the Houthi militia, with General Cammaert in the role of Chair. On December 24, 2018, General Cammaert and his team visited Hudaydah. During the visit, the team took note of the “current boundaries and related access roads, particularly eastern and southern access roads into and out of the city.” The team also welcomed returning of internally-displaced civilians who had fled the city before the ceasefire agreement. Following days of consultations, a ceasefire agreement in and around the port city of Hudaydah was reached between the warring parties of Yemen on December 13, 2018.*

*According to the UN on December 28, 2018, Yemen’s warring parties have begun the process of implementing a comprehensive ceasefire agreement across the key rebel-held port city of Hudaydah. The formal start of the ceasefire began on December 25, 2018, and the first phase of the agreement’s implementation is based on three priority areas including maintaining the ceasefire, confidence-building measures to deliver humanitarian assistance, and redeployment of fighters. The UN reported that both warring parties have reiterated their commitment to implement the agreement.*

- On December 19, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) confirmed the existence of at least two tunnels crossing the “Blue Line,” the border demarcation between Lebanon and Israel, with no exit points leading to the surface on Israeli territory.
- On December 18, Nikolay Mladenov, UN Special Coordinator for Middle East, called continued violence and rising tensions in the West Bank catastrophic for the resolution of Israeli-Palestinian issue, as the situation fuels a climate of hatred and fear, “driving both Israelis and Palestinians further away.”

*While briefing the UNSC, Mladenov stressed that there can be “no justification” for brutal acts, such as death of an Israeli baby in early December 2018; or the killing of a Palestinian woman in October 2018, who was reportedly stoned to death, while driving. Regarding continuing*

*instances of inflammatory rhetoric and provocation, he said, “Such rhetoric, particularly if it denies the right of existence of one of the sides, or their right to statehood, or glorifies terror, is dangerous and plays into the hands of extremists beyond Israel and Palestine.” On the deteriorating situation in Gaza, the Special Envoy told the UNSC that “the only way to ensure long-term peace in the enclave was through the reunification of Hamas-controlled Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, under a single, legitimate and democratic Authority, as well as through the end of Israeli occupation.” Mladenov also expressed his concerns over the “absence of collective efforts” to achieve an end to the occupation and the realisation, of a negotiated two-State resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in line with relevant United Nations resolutions and previous agreements.*

*According to the UN, over 150 Palestinians have reportedly been killed, and more than 10,000 injured, by Israeli forces in connection with the demonstrations since March 2018.*

*In a related development on December 19, 2018, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) confirmed the existence of at least two tunnels crossing the “Blue Line” but also noted that they “do not appear thus far” to have exit points leading to the surface on Israeli territory. Briefing the Security Council, Jean-Pierre Lacroix, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, said, “While the tunnels do not appear thus far to have exit points on the Israeli side, they are a serious violation of UNSC Resolution 1701 (2006).” Lacroix also called the situation of a great concern and requested calm on both part of the countries. The UNSC unanimously approved the Resolution 1701 on August 11, 2006, to resolve the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict. The resolution banned all unauthorised weapons between the Litani River and the UN-monitored border between Israel and Lebanon. Under the resolution Lebanon’s Army is responsible for security on its side of the border in a zone from which any other armed force, including Hezbollah, is banned. Amal Mudallali, Permanent Representative of Lebanon, told the UNSC that Lebanon was taking the discovery of the tunnels very seriously and assured the Council that the country was not responsible for any violations. However, Danny Danon, the Permanent Representative of Israel, alleged Hezbollah for digging the tunnels, and urged the UNSC to denounce Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation, as well as rebuke it for serious violations of resolution 1701. While concluding his remarks, Lacroix told the UNSC that the “UNIFIL is acting judiciously to complete its investigations of the tunnels, with technical teams on the ground, and to work with both parties to ensure that any tunnels that are in violation of the resolution are disabled decisively and safely.”*

- *The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs released its 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan for the occupied Palestinian territory on December 17, requesting a total of \$350 million in funds to assist 1.4 million people.*

*Jamie McGoldrick, UN Humanitarian Coordinator for the occupied Palestinian territory, said “Our plan for 2019 prioritises assistance for people assessed as being most in need of protection, food, health care, shelter, water and sanitation.” He added, “It enables us to*

*maximise limited funding. But much more is needed, and we stand ready to do more, if funding and operational space are improved.” Overall, the 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan for the occupied Palestinian territory has requested for \$1.4 million, as compared to \$1.9 million in 2018. This lower number in requested funding does not reflect a reduction in the level of humanitarian need. However, it is because of a serious deterioration in the humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territory, particularly in Gaza. McGoldrick also described year 2018 as challenging for UN agencies and aid workers in the region, particularly in Gaza owing to recurrent outbreaks of violence and a significant rise in casualties. In addition to the rising needs, humanitarian actors have faced record low funding levels in 2018, following the decision by the US to cut its financial support for humanitarian assistance to the occupied Palestinian territory.*

- According to *Dawn* on December 17, the two-week long 24th conference (COP24) of the parties of the United Nations Climate Change Convention (UNFCCC), in Katowice, Poland, concluded on December 15, 2018, and adopted a robust “rulebook” for the landmark 2015 Paris Agreement implementation.

*Following several rounds of deliberations, almost 200 countries gathered in Katowice adopted a robust set of guidelines, called the rulebook, for the implementation of the Paris Agreement. Under the agreement, all countries have committed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in order to limit the global average rise in temperature to well below 2°C, and as close as possible to 1.5°C. Speaking on behalf of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, Patricia Espinosa, head of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) secretariat, said “Katowice has shown once more the resilience of the Paris Agreement – our solid roadmap for climate action.” The rulebook aims at encouraging greater climate action ambition. Amongst the main components of the guidelines is a detailed transparency framework, regarding how countries will provide information about their national action plans, including the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, as well as mitigation and adaptation measures. Besides other important achievements, an agreement was also reached on how member-states would uniformly count greenhouse gas emissions and if poorer countries feel they cannot meet the standards set. However, on number of issues, the COP24 negotiations failed to reach consensus. It also failed to commit finances for the implementation of the Paris Agreement. It failed to build on the urgency of action recommended by the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change’s (IPCC) Special Report on 1.5 degrees Celsius. These issues would be discussed at the next UN climate change conference, COP25, set to take place in Chile.*

- On December 17, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) approved a Pakistan-sponsored resolution reaffirming people’s right to self-determination.

*The resolution, co-sponsored by almost 83 countries, called on countries to immediately cease their foreign military intervention in and occupation of foreign countries and territories, as well as acts of repression and discrimination. The resolution also requested the UN Human Rights*

*Council to pay special attention to the violation of human rights, especially the right to self-determination, resulting from foreign military intervention, aggression or occupation. Pakistan's Ambassador to the UN, Dr Maleeha Lodhi, said, "The resolution reaffirms the inviolability of the right to self-determination for all peoples without exception, including, of course, the people of occupied Jammu and Kashmir and Palestine."*

*--- Moiz Khan*