

January 1 – January 15

AREA BRIEF

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Area Briefs: 1-15 January, 2019

General Observations

Pakistan

- Amid growing India Pakistan tensions, Pakistani authorities claimed on January 11 that India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) had funded the terrorist attack on the Chinese consulate in Karachi in November 2018. India rejected the Pakistani charge as "fabricated and scurrilous".
- On January 6, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi visited Pakistan and met with Prime Minister Imran Khan. During the visit, the two sides formalised terms and conditions of the \$6.2 billion support package for Pakistan to help address its balance of payments crisis.
- On January 3, Pakistan's Foreign Office spokesman, Dr Mohammad Faisal welcomed US President Donald Trump's remarks about ties with Pakistan and said that the government was looking "forward to positive engagement with the US at the leadership level." The development follows President Donald Trump's comments whereby he expressed a desire to meet "the new leadership in Pakistan" even as he repeated the allegation that Pakistan supports "the US enemy," or the Taliban.

International

- On January 15 the partial US government shut down entered its 25th day. The effects of the partial shutdown are being felt by ordinary Americans every day. There seem to be no visible signs of an end to the stalemate, and there are chances it will drag on much longer. The economic damage from the shutdown could adversely affect President Trump's political future.
- On January 13 senior Pentagon officials voiced deepening fears that national security adviser, John R. Bolton, could precipitate a conflict with Iran at a time when Trump is losing leverage in the Middle East by pulling out American troops.
- Meanwhile the "yellow vests" protests continue to haunt France. Fresh protests emerged on January 12 with several arrests and clashes in Paris and other cities. More than 84,000 demonstrators were recorded nationwide, an increase compared with last week.

- In a sign of worsening EU-US relations the US government on January 8 downgraded the bloc's diplomatic status in Washington.
- On January 8 the European Union froze the assets of an Iranian intelligence unit and two of its staff, as the Netherlands accused Iran of two killings on its soil and joined France and Denmark in alleging Tehran plotted other attacks in Europe.
- On January 8 the Taliban cancelled peace talks with the US over the involvement of Afghan officials. Despite increasing pressure on the Taliban to hold direct talks with Afghan officials, the group refuses to initiate intra-Afghan talks until the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan. The situation prompted Afghanistan's Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah's January 9 statement that the Taliban can only join the peace talks under the umbrella of the Afghan government.
- In a related development on January 3, US President Donald Trump laid emphasis on regional powers' role in Afghanistan and said that Russia and Pakistan should take on a more active role in the country.
- According to *BBC* on January 1, North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un reaffirmed his commitment to denuclearise of the Korean Peninsula during his annual New Year address. However, he also warned that North Korea would change the course of negotiations if the US continues imposing sanctions.
- From January 8 to 14, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Oman in an attempt to reassure Washington's regional allies over President Trump's decision to withdraw US forces from Syria. Pompeo vowed the US and its allies would work diplomatically to expel all Iranian troops from Syria, urging Middle East nations to forge a common stand against Tehran.
- According to a January 8 report published in the *Middle East Eye*, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt are working on a plan with Israel to marginalise Iranian and Turkish influence in the region through restoring ties with Syria and making key changes to their overall policies in Iraq and Afghanistan. The report also said that the officials also agreed that they considered Turkey, rather than Iran, to be their major military rival in the region, and discussed plans to counter Ankara's influence.
- UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay expressed deep regret over the US and Israeli decision on January 1, to quit the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). However, the withdrawal would not affect the

organisation financially, as the organisation has been dealing with US and Israel's funds slash since 2011.

---Amina Afzal

Director General

AMERICAS

Domestic

- On January 14 President Trump said he had rejected a proposal by Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina to temporarily reopen the government in an effort to jump-start talks with Democratic lawmakers on funding a border wall.

“I did reject it,” Trump said of the proposal. He was speaking to reporters outside the White House, en route to delivering a speech in New Orleans. Graham presented the plan during an appearance on Fox News, asking President Trump to agree to a vote by Congress to reopen the government for about three weeks “before he pulls the plug on the legislative option.” If there was no progress made during that time, Graham said, the President could then declare a national emergency as a way to obtain funding for a border wall without congressional action.

- According to the Pentagon on January 14 the deployment of active-duty United States troops at the border with Mexico will most likely be extended through September 2019.

The Pentagon’s border mission had previously been scheduled to end on December 15, 2018 and the Defence Department had later extended the deployment into January 2019.

In a rare use of military force first announced in October 2018 the Trump administration sent about 5,900 active-duty troops to join border patrol agents and National Guard members, as a caravan of Central American migrants made its way toward the country.

- On January 11 President Trump said it was up to Congress to break the impasse that has led to a government shutdown.

Trump has stopped short of declaring a national emergency to pay for a border wall, under pressure from his aides who say using it as a way out of the government shutdown does not justify the precedent it would set and the legal questions it could raise. “If today the national emergency is border security, tomorrow the national emergency might be climate change,” Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, one of the idea’s critics, said this week. Another Republican, Senator Mitt Romney of Utah, said that declaring a national emergency should be reserved for “the most extreme circumstances.”

- On January 10 White House officials said they would consider diverting emergency aid from “storm- and fire-ravaged” Puerto Rico, Florida, Texas and California to build a border wall.

Amid growing unease about the government shutdown, some Senate Republicans came off the sidelines to forge a deal that would reopen the government. Meanwhile the Congress continues to work toward a broader agreement tying wall funds to protection for some undocumented

immigrants and other migrants. However, before those negotiations could gain momentum, they collapsed. The Administration is now looking into using extraordinary emergency powers to get around Congress in funding the wall. Among the options, the White House has directed the Army Corps of Engineers to determine whether it can divert for wall construction \$13.9 billion allocated in 2018 rafter devastating hurricanes and wildfires, according to congressional and Defence Department officials with knowledge of the matter, who insisted on anonymity to discuss the possibility.

- On January 10 President Trump arrived in McAllen, Texas to reinforce his desire for a border wall.

Trump's hardened position has caused a partial shutdown of the federal government. Trump and his supporters reiterated that it all added up to a "crisis," and that building a wall was the only solution. Meanwhile Democrats insist that the Administration faces a large-scale humanitarian problem that is a direct result of Trump's policy. They argue however that a border wall is not the right solution and that Trump has failed to make the case that there is a true security crisis.

- During his televised appeal on January 8 President Trump tried to pressure Congress into paying for the border wall.

Trump said he would do so even at the cost of leaving the government partly closed until lawmakers give in. Trump devoted his first prime-time Oval Office address to his proposed wall, hoping he would be able to enlist public support in "an ideological and political conflict" that has resulted in a partial government shutdown for 18 days. During the nine-minute speech Trump made several misleading assertions. He termed the situation at the Mexican border a "humanitarian crisis" even as he opted against declaring a national emergency to bypass Congress, which he had threatened to do earlier. He criticised Democrats for blocking the wall, accusing them of hypocrisy and exposing the country to criminal immigrants.

- On January 5 the partial government shutdown entered its third week.

Negotiations between Vice President Mike Pence and congressional aides from both parties yielded little progress. The impact on government services and on federal workers continues to deteriorate. "Not much headway made today," President Trump tweeted not long after the vice president's office called the roughly two-hour talks "productive."

- On January 4 Senate majority leader, Mitch McConnell, refused to bring up any legislation that President Trump does not support on the Senate floor.

Meanwhile a few Republicans called for an end to the shutdown. A prolonged government shutdown is the last thing those lawmakers need. some Republicans up for re-election in states won by Trump, like Senator Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, sound uneasy. "A shutdown,

in my view, is a no-win proposition,” Capito said, adding that she heard complaints from Transportation Security Administration workers as she was returning to Washington for the start of the new Congress this week. Capito is the chairwoman of the appropriations subcommittee with jurisdiction over the Department of Homeland Security; the panel has already passed a bill funding the department, including \$1.6 billion for border security including fencing but with no money for Trump’s wall. “It is just a lot of unneeded stress on a lot of people,” she said.

- On January 3 the 116th Congress was sworn in on the 13th day of the government shutdown as Democrats assumed control of the House and elected Representative Nancy Pelosi of California speaker.

Democrats passed two bills that would open government agencies shut down by an impasse over the President’s insistence on funding for a border wall. However, the Senate will almost certainly shoot down both measures. Pelosi began her day by suggesting that a sitting president could be indicted. Late in the day, Trump made an appearance in the White House briefing room with a demand for a wall on the border with Mexico, drawing criticism from the House Speaker, who said she would give no more than a dollar to fund what she branded “an immorality.”

- On January 2 Congressional leaders, including Representative Nancy Pelosi and Senator Chuck Schumer, met with President Trump to discuss border security.

During the contentious meeting in the Situation Room, the President made his case for a wall on the southwestern border and rejected the Democrats’ proposals for reopening the government. “I would look foolish if I did that,” Trump responded after Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, the Democratic leader, posed the question to him directly. He said that the wall was why he was elected. Democrats were equally adamant and they refused to budge from their offer to devote \$1.3 billion to border security. The Democrats will now put forth legislation to end the shutdown.

- Former Republican Presidential nominee and Utah’s incoming Senator Mitt Romney revived his rivalry with President Trump on January 2 with an op-ed in which he said Trump “has not risen to the mantle of the office.”

Romney issued a pointed critique of the president’s character days before joining a Republican-controlled Senate. “With the nation so divided, resentful and angry, presidential leadership in qualities of character is indispensable,” he wrote ahead of his swearing-in, “And it is in this province where the incumbent’s shortfall has been most glaring.”

- On January 12 Julián Castro announced his decision to run for President.

Castro is one of the most high-profile Latino Democrats to seek the party’s nomination. The former Secretary of Housing and former Mayor of San Antonio would be one of the youngest presidents if elected.

- According to a court filing revealed on January 8, President Trump’s former campaign manager Paul Manafort shared political polling data with a business associate tied to Russian intelligence.

The document provided the clearest evidence to date that the Trump campaign may have tried to coordinate with Russians during the 2016 presidential race. Manafort’s lawyers made the disclosure by accident, through a formatting error in a document filed to respond to charges that he had lied to prosecutors working for the special counsel, Robert S. Mueller III, after agreeing to cooperate with their investigation into Russian interference in the election. The document also revealed that during the campaign, Manafort and his Russian associate, Konstantin V. Kilimnik, discussed a plan for peace in Ukraine. Throughout the campaign and the early days of the Trump Administration, Russia and its allies were pushing various plans for Ukraine in the hope of gaining relief from American-led sanctions imposed after it annexed Crimea from Ukraine.

- According to *NY Times* on January 3 companies issued warnings about the health of their businesses that suggest investors were right to be worried about growth.

Apple reduced its revenue expectations for the first time in 16 years, citing weak iPhone sales in China. Delta Air Lines said its fare revenue, while growing, would fall short of the company’s earlier forecast. The American manufacturing sector has also slowed sharply. A senior White House economics official acknowledged that there could be bad news from corporate America.

- On January 1 Governor Andrew M. Cuomo was sworn in for a third term in a ceremony on Ellis Island.

Cuomo pledged to pursue a “new justice agenda” that would confront a “cancer” of hatred and division that he said threatened the nation. Although Cuomo did not invoke the President by name, he sharply rebuked the federal government that he said “has sought to demonise our differences and make our diversity our greatest weakness rather than our greatest strength.” “America’s only threat is from within: It is the growing division amongst us,” he said. New York, he vowed, would be “the light to lead the way through the darkness.”

International

- On January 13 senior Pentagon officials voiced deepening fears that national security adviser, John R. Bolton, could precipitate a conflict with Iran at a time when Trump is losing leverage in the Middle East by pulling out American troops.

At Bolton’s direction, the National Security Council had asked the Pentagon in 2018 to provide the White House with military options to strike Iran. The request, which alarmed then-Defence Secretary Jim Mattis and other Pentagon officials, came after Iranian-backed militants fired

three mortars or rockets into an empty lot on the grounds of the United States Embassy in Baghdad in September.

- On January 11 the US military started withdrawing some equipment, but not yet troops, from Syria as part of President Trump's order to wind down that battleground against the Islamic State.

According to officials the number of troops could actually increase slightly in Syria, to help protect the final process of pulling out. The operation is expected to take at least four to six months to complete. There are currently about 2,000 troops mostly Army soldiers and Marines in northeast Syria or in the Middle Euphrates River Valley to oust the remaining pockets of Islamic State fighters and secure newly-liberated areas from their return.

- On January 10, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo put forward his vision for the US' role in the Middle East telling a university audience in Cairo that "the age of self-inflicted American shame is over.

Pompeo also said the United States would pursue a more activist policy, despite President Trump's decision to pull troops out of Syria. He blame former President Obama for casting the Middle East into chaos and that it could only be rescued by crushing Iran. He advocated a policy of containment of Iran's power, pressing for allies in the region to isolate the country. Pompeo however failed to offer a concrete plan or identify how he sought to do it.

- On January 8 Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan denounced comments from US National Security Adviser, John R. Bolton, that Turkey must agree to protect Kurds if Americans withdraw from Syria.

President Erdogan said Bolton had made a "grave mistake" in setting that condition for the pullout of troops. "It is not possible for us to swallow the message Bolton gave from Israel," Erdogan said in Parliament, after refusing to meet Bolton. The failure of Bolton's mission, which was intended to reassure allies that the US would pull out of Syria in an orderly fashion, raised new questions about whether it would be able to come to terms with Turkey, a NATO partner, about how to withdraw 2,000 American troops who fought alongside the Kurds against the Islamic State. Bolton was denied a meeting with Erdogan during his visit to Ankara on January 8, 2019.

- The World Bank announced on January 7 that its President Jim Yang Kim would step down from his post in February 2019 to join a private infrastructure investment firm.

Kim's unexpected departure comes nearly three years before the end of his term. According to observers the resignation could prompt a clash between the Trump Administration and other governments over the future of the international body. The United States traditionally selects the President of the World Bank, but Trump has taken a skeptical view about the importance of

multilateral institutions. The World Bank's priorities such as combating climate change and engaging in foreign aid also tend to be at odds with those of the Trump Administration.

- On January 6, National Security Adviser, John R. Bolton, rolled back President Trump's decision to rapidly withdraw from Syria, laying out conditions for a pullout that could leave American forces there for months or even years.

During a visit to Israel Bolton told reporters that American forces would remain in Syria until the last remnants of the Islamic State were defeated and Turkey provided guarantees that it would not strike Kurdish forces allied with the United States. He and other top White House advisers have led a behind-the-scenes effort to slow Trump's order and reassure allies, including Israel.

- On January 1, US border officers sprayed tear gas into Mexico to drive away about 150 migrants trying to cross the border into the country.

According to the Customs and Border Protection agency the migrants tried to climb over and crawl under the border fence near San Diego and Tijuana, Mexico. Rights experts have questioned the legality of firing of tear gas across the border. The number of detained migrant children has soared to the highest and at least two children have died in US custody.

Canada

- China's diplomatic clash with Canada escalated sharply on January 14, when a Chinese court sentenced a Canadian to death for drug smuggling at a one-day re-trial.

The retrial was ordered weeks after a Chinese executive's arrest in Canada. In announcing the death penalty against Robert Lloyd Schellenberg, the court gave no indication that his sentence might be reduced to prison time. Schellenberg's fate could become a volatile factor in diplomacy between Beijing and Ottawa in the aftermath of the arrest by Canadian authorities of a Chinese technology executive in British Columbia in December 2018. Schellenberg had appealed a 15-year prison sentence for smuggling methamphetamines.

Latin America

- According to the BBC on January 15 Former Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto accepted a \$100m bribe from drug cartel kingpin Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán.

Alex Cifuentes, a close associate of Guzmán for years, told a New York City courtroom that he had told authorities of the bribe in 2016. Guzmán is accused of being behind the Sinaloa drug

cartel, which prosecutors say was the largest US drug supplier. Peña Nieto served as the President of Mexico from 2012 to 2018.

- On January 1, Jair Bolsonaro was sworn in as Brazil's President steering the country "far to the right."

While addressing a crowd from the presidential palace Bolsonaro proclaimed that Brazilians were "being freed from socialism." The country's flag "would never be red again," he said, alluding to the rival Workers' Party. The Workers' Party had won the last four presidential elections. However, it was defeated in the October 2018 vote after the country slipped into recession, violence increased and corruption scandals involving the country's elite emerged one after the other. It boycotted the swearing-in ceremony, revealing the lingering bitterness of the presidential race that polarised Brazilians like none other in recent history.

---Amina Afzal

ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

- On January 13, Ali Akbar Salehi, Head of the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran, announced that Iran has begun “preliminary activities” to design a modern process for 20% nuclear fuel.
- On January 10, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani reaffirmed that Iran would soon launch two satellites by using indigenously developed rockets, defying US concerns that the launches could help further development of the country’s ballistic missiles programme.

During an interview, Salehi said that Iran was on the threshold of modernising the mechanism of producing modern 20% fuel. He said, “This is distinct from the previous 20% fuel produced, and we can provide fuel to any reactor similar to the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR).” He said that the modern fuel would enhance the productivity of the TRR, which has been operating on older types of fuel.

In a related development on January 10, 2019, President Rouhani said, “Soon, in the coming weeks, we will send two satellites into space using our domestically-made rockets.” However, he did not give further details about the rockets and satellites. On January 9, 2019, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif stressed that Iran would continue with its aerospace programme despite US warnings of more economic and political isolation. Zarif said that satellite launches would not violate any international law. These statements were issued in response to the January 3, 2019, US warnings, stating that the launches would violate the UNSC Resolution 2231 because they use ballistic missile technology. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, “The United States will not stand by and watch the Iranian regime’s destructive policies that place international stability and security at risk.” Pompeo added, “We advise the regime to reconsider these provocative launches and cease all activities related to ballistic missiles in order to avoid deeper economic and diplomatic isolation.” 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.” Iran maintains that the UNSC R 2231 did not limit Iran’s missile programme, and insists that its space-vehicle launches and missile tests do not violate the resolution.

- On January 10, Pakistan’s Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said that the Army Air Defence displayed its fire power capability at Air Defence firing ranges near Karachi.
- In its January 4 press statement, the ISPR said that Pakistan Army has inducted A- 100 Rocket in Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS), of its Corps of Artillery.

According to the statement, air defence system's firing capability test was carried out during the fortnight long Exercise Al Bayza-2019. During the event, the Long Range Air Defence Weapon System LY-80 also displayed its fire power capability for the first time. The Army inducted the LY-80 in 2017. The ISPR said, "Induction of LY-80 has realised the concept of a comprehensive, layered and integrated air defence capability with enhanced lethality." Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Qamar Javed Bajwa and Chief of Air Staff (CAS) Air Chief Marshal Mujahid Anwar Khan witnessed the firepower display. General Bajwa said, "LY-80 has greatly enhanced air defence capability of Army Air Defence while strengthening it at National level along with Pakistan Air Force, the overall custodian of the defence of Pakistan air space." The LY-80 air defence system is capable of destroying aerial targets flying at low and medium altitudes. With a strike range of 40 kilometres, the weapon system is capable of engaging six targets simultaneously at a height of 50,000 feet.

In a related development on January 4, 2019, the ISPR said that Pakistan Army has inducted A-100 Rocket in Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS), of its Corps of Artillery. According to the statement, the indigenously developed A-100 rocket has a strike-range of 100 kilometres, and is "effective and potent for interdiction that can effectively disrupt enemy's mobilisation and assembly."

- According to *The National Interest* on January 8, Chinese state-run arms manufacturing company Norinco successfully tested a massive non-nuclear weapon, similar to the US' GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast Bomb (MOAB or the Mother of All Bombs).

*The state-run China Ordnance Industries Group Corporation Limited, also called Norinco, shared a test footage. According to the footage, a Xian H-6K strategic bomber dropped the Chinese version of the MOAB. According to *The Global Times* report, the bomb weighed several tonnes and is China's biggest non-nuclear bomb. Citing Beijing-based military analyst Wei Dongxu, the report said the weapon is capable of effectively destroying fortified ground-based targets including reinforced buildings, bastions and defence shelters. However, the report did not provide details on the date, location or range of the bomb blast. According to the report, the Chinese version of MOAB is smaller and lighter than the US one, enabling it to be deployed on the H-6K bomber. The GBU-43/B MOAB is the biggest non-nuclear bomb in the US arsenal. The US conducted its first and only use in April 2017 in an attempt to destroy tunnel complexes of Daesh in Afghanistan. Russia also possesses its own version of the weapon, known as FOAB (Father of all bombs), which the country claims to be four times more lethal than that of the US' MOAB.*

- According to *Fars* news agency on January 5, Iran will soon deploy its newest warship to the Atlantic Ocean on a five-month mission.

The report said, "The navy has had a plan to deploy a flotilla to the Atlantic Ocean for a few years and now everything seems prepared to launch the mission." The flotilla would comprise the new guided missile frigate destroyer escort Sahand, launched in December 2018, and the

recently upgraded 33,000-tonne fuel ship Kharg. The Sahand is Iran's most advanced military vessel with radar-evading stealth properties and has a flight deck for helicopters. The vessel could be equipped with torpedo launchers, anti-aircraft and anti-ship guns, surface-to-surface and surface-to-air missiles and is capable of electronic warfare capabilities. Both the Sahand and the Kharg will dock in Venezuela.

- According to *BBC* on January 1, North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un reaffirmed his commitment to denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula during his annual New Year address.

Kim said, "It is my firm willingness to achieve a permanent peace regime and the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula." However, he also warned that North Korea might change the course of negotiations if the US continues imposing its sanctions. Kim stressed, "If the US does not keep its promise made in front of the whole world, we may be left with no choice but to consider a new way to safeguard our sovereignty and interests." Following successful nuclear and missile tests, Kim put the country on unprecedented path of international diplomacy with South Korea and the US in 2018. Both Kim and US President Donald Trump signed an agreement to work towards the "denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula" in Singapore in June 2018. However, no further development has been made since the two sides disagree over the meaning of the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula.

- On January 1, Pakistan and India exchanged lists of their nuclear installations and facilities under the "Agreement on the Prohibition of Attack Against Nuclear Installations and Facilities," signed between the two countries on December 31, 1988.

Article II of the agreement has mandated the exchange of lists. The practice is being implemented since January 1, 1992. The agreement is one of the most effective Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) between the two countries. The agreement calls on both the countries to "refrain from undertaking, encouraging or participating in, directly or indirectly, any action aimed at causing the destruction of, or damage to, any nuclear installation or facility in the other country."

--- Moiz Khan

CHINA, EAST ASIA & PACIFIC

China

- On January 14, a Chinese court sentenced to death a Canadian citizen, Robert Lloyd Schellenberg on charges of drug trafficking.

Schellenberg had originally been sentenced to 15 years in prison in November 2018. However, following an appeal, a high court in Liaoning ruled in December 2018 that the sentence was too lenient. The development could further stain diplomatic ties between the two countries. Canadian Premier Justin Trudeau accused Beijing of “arbitrarily” using capital punishment. The sentence comes almost a month after Canadian authorities detained Meng Wanzhou, a Chinese telecom executive, on a US extradition request related to Iran sanctions violations. In response, 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.”

- Addressing a meeting of the Central Military Commission in Beijing on January 4, Chinese President Xi Jinping ordered the country’s Armed Forces to prepare for a “comprehensive military struggle”.

The President urged the Armed Forces to strengthen their sense of urgency and prepare for battle. Xi has repeatedly pushed the People’s Liberation Army to further boost its combat readiness. The President’s comments come amid rising tensions with the US over territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas.

- On January 2, Chinese President Xi Jinping said that Taiwan’s unification with China is “inevitable.”

The Chinese President also said that Beijing could use force to bring Taiwan under its control, however, it would strive for “peaceful reunification.” Meanwhile, Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen responded that Taiwan would never accept a “one country, two systems” political arrangement with China. Tsai said that Beijing “must use peaceful and equal terms to handle our differences.”

North Korea

- On January 8, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un visited China and held talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) in a report said that Kim visited Beijing along with key diplomats, including Kim Yong Chol, who has been previously involved in negotiations with the

US. According to Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, Lu Kang the two leaders discussed ways to “uphold peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula”. This is Kim’s fourth visit to China since 2018 and comes amid reports of a possible second summit between Kim Jong-un and US President Donald Trump.

Japan

- On January 4, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe expressed his desire to push forward a World War II peace treaty with Russia.

Abe is expected to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin in January 2019 for discussions aimed at ending the disagreement over islands captured by Soviets in the WWII. Abe said that there had been “absolutely no progress” on the issue for more than 70 years.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

EUROPE

- On January 15 Germany's domestic intelligence agency said it would step up monitoring of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party for suspected extremism.

The BfV agency is not yet going as far as using informants or phone taps in its nationwide watch on AfD or the main opposition party. It entered the federal parliament for the first time in 2017, winning 94 seats in the 709-seat lower house (Bundestag). It sees Islam as a threat to German values, urging tough immigration curbs.

- After Prime Minister Theresa May's Brexit plan was rejected by Parliament on January 15, Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the opposition Labour Party, called for a motion of no confidence.

May suffered a humiliating defeat over her Brexit Plan pushing the country into greater chaos. The 432-to-202 vote to reject her proposal was the biggest defeat in the House of Commons for a Prime Minister in recent British history. It highlights how comprehensively May has failed to build consensus behind any single vision of how to exit the EU. Now factions in Parliament will offer their own proposals setting off a new, unpredictable stage in Brexit. Corbyn, promptly made a motion of no confidence in the hope of forcing early parliamentary elections.

- On January 14 the mayor of the Polish city of Gdansk died in hospital, a day after being stabbed at a charity event.

Pawel Adamowicz was attacked on stage in front of hundreds of people on January 13, 2019. According to observers the mayor's murder was not just the result of a perhaps mentally ill man seeking revenge for a perceived injustice. Many are in fact blaming the country's bitter political divisions and widespread online hate speech.

- On January 8 German far-right politician Frank Magnitz was beaten up and severely injured in an attack seen by police as politically motivated.

The leader of Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Bremen was attacked by at least three masked men in the centre of the city. The attackers knocked him unconscious with a piece of wood and kicked him in the head, AfD officials said. The government and politicians across the spectrum condemned the attack.

- On January 15, at least sixty hotel guests in Austria escaped injury when their building was hit by an avalanche overnight.

The avalanche in Ramsau am Dachstein was strong enough to throw vehicles out of its path and burst through windows. Much of Europe has been hit by heavy snowfall, causing travel disruption and resulting in at least two dozen deaths in the past few weeks. Earlier On January 13 three men were killed in an avalanche near the Austrian ski resort of Lech am Arlberg. Meanwhile Bulgarian authorities said two snowboarders died in an avalanche on January 11, 2019. Earlier on January 9, 2019 red warnings and level 5 avalanche alerts remained in force across Austria and southeast Germany. At least 13 people have been killed in weather-related accidents across the continent over the last week, most of them from avalanches. Heavy snow has even fallen as far south as the Greek Islands. Southern Germany and Austria received the greatest amounts of snow.

- On January 12 thousands of demonstrators turned out across France for new “yellow vests” protests, with several arrests and clashes in Paris and other cities.

Police in the capital used water cannon and tear gas as scuffles broke out at the Arc de Triomphe, on the ninth consecutive weekend of protests. More than 84,000 demonstrators were recorded nationwide, an increase compared with last week. The nationwide protests were initially triggered by the rising price of fuel. They have since widened to include anger at the cost of living, with a wide-ranging list of other demands.

- On January 8 French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe announced plans to punish people who hold unsanctioned protests.

His government wants to draft new legislation that would ban troublemakers from protests and clamp down on the wearing of masks at demonstrations. He said 80,000 members of the security forces would be deployed for the next expected wave of protests.

- On January 5, the first Yellow Vest demonstration of the New Year reached a new level of violence as a government ministry building was attacked and the minister evacuated out the back door.

The protest that started two months ago over gas taxes has turned into an attack on the French government. Some 50,000 took part in Yellow Vest demonstrations all over France, up from last weekend’s 29,000. Over 3,000 turned out in Paris. The last such attack on a government building by protesters was in 1999.

- According to the EU on January 8, the US government has changed the bloc’s diplomatic status in Washington, in practice downgrading it.

The Trump Administration did not notify the EU about the change. The EU has asked the US to explain the move. Previously it had been US practice to treat the EU delegation and Ambassador “as a country.” The US ranks the diplomatic status of international organisations lower. The change comes at a time when trade tensions between the two are at an all time high. The EU is trying to dissuade President Donald Trump from imposing a 20% tariff on all imported EU cars. In 2018 the US and EU imposed “tit-for-tat tariffs” on several goods.

- On January 8 the European Union froze the assets of an Iranian intelligence unit and two of its staff, as the Netherlands accused Iran of two killings on its soil and joined France and Denmark in alleging Tehran plotted other attacks in *Europe*.

The move is partly symbolic because one of the accused is in prison in Belgium, marks the first time the EU has enacted sanctions on Iran since lifting a host of curbs on it three years ago following its 2015 nuclear pact with world powers. The decision, which includes designating the unit and the two Iranians as terrorists, follows the 2018 disclosure by Denmark and France that they suspected an Iranian government intelligence service of pursuing assassination plots on their soil. Copenhagen sought an EU-wide response. France has already sanctioned the two men and the ministry unit. It said there was no doubt the Iranian intelligence ministry was behind a failed attack near Paris. The Dutch government also publicly accused Iran of the plots, as well as two killings in 2015 and 2017, sending a letter to parliament to warn of further economic sanctions if Tehran did not cooperate with European investigations.

- On January 5, Germany’s cybersecurity authority defended its handling of a mass data attack on hundreds of politicians, after criticism it did not tell the police about the breach for weeks.

The agency said it was not aware of the full extent of a systematic leak of information. Journalists, celebrities and politicians, including Chancellor Angela Merkel, are among those whose personal data was published online. It is unclear who was responsible.

- According to the EU’s Border Agency on January 4, the number of people caught trying to enter the EU illegally has fallen to its lowest level in five years.

Frontex registered an estimated 150,000 illegal crossings in 2018. This is the lowest since 2013. It highlighted a sharp fall in the numbers crossing the Mediterranean to Italy, where a populist government has refused to allow rescue boats to dock. However, it said that arrivals in Spain had doubled for the second year in a row.

---Amina Afzal

MIDDLE EAST & WEST ASIA

Bahrain

- On January 11, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo visited Bahrain and held talks with King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa and Foreign Minister Sheikh Khaled bin Ahmad Al-Khalifa.

The meeting addressed critical priorities, including counterterrorism, Yemen, and countering the Iranian regime's "dangerous activities". They also agreed on the importance of all parties continuing to work with UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths toward a comprehensive political solution to the conflict in Yemen. Discussions also covered Bahrain's support for religious coexistence and freedom of religion. According to the statement, the meeting also discussed realising the Middle East Strategic Alliance, anchored by a united Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), to stand against the Iranian regime's malign influence and advance the prosperity, security, and stability of the region.

Egypt

- On January 10, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo visited Cairo and held talks with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El Sisi, Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry and Chief of General Intelligence Directorate Abbas Kamel

The two sides discussed recent regional developments including the future of the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations. According to Presidency spokesman, Bassam Radi, President Sisi stressed Egypt's keenness to strengthen bilateral cooperation and strategic partnership between the two countries. He also expressed aspiration to enhance coordination with the US on various political and security issues of mutual concern. Sisi affirmed the determination of the Egyptian government and people to continue their efforts to combat terrorism and eliminate the security and intellectual threats it poses. He stressed the importance of continuing coordination with the US to support Egypt's counter-terrorism efforts. The meeting between Pompeo and Sisi discussed a number of regional issues, especially developments in Libya, Syria and Yemen, and the efforts to reach a political settlement to these crises. Pompeo vowed the US and its allies would work diplomatically to expel all Iranian troops from Syria, urging Middle Eastern nations to forge a common stand against Tehran. The two officials also reviewed the latest updates on the Palestinian issue and means to revive the peace process. In this regard, Sisi affirmed Egypt's firm stance represented in seeking a just and comprehensive solution that guarantees the rights of the Palestinian people, and establishes an independent state according to the international references.

Iran

- On January 14, Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif visited Iraq and held talks with Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi and Foreign Minister Mohammad al-Hakim.

Javad Zarif met with his Iraqi counterpart in Baghdad for talks on a wide range of matters, including US sanctions against Iran. During a joint press conference with his Iranian counterpart, Hakim said the Baghdad government supports the restoration of Syria's membership to the Arab League. He said, "We discussed solutions to eliminate terrorism in Syria and support the Syrian government, its territorial integrity and sovereignty. We also discussed supporting Iraq's efforts to restore Syria's membership to the Arab League." He also mentioned he had discussed the economic sanctions with his counterpart. He said, "We discussed the unilateral economic measures taken by the US and are working with our neighbour on them." Zarif criticised Washington's role in the region. He said, "These failures have continued for the past 40 years and my proposal to countries in the region is to not bet on a losing horse." Javad Zarif also met with Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi, who said in a statement, "Iraq's policy is built on seeking the best ties with all of its neighbours."

Iraq

- On January 14, Jordan's King Abdullah II visited Iraq and held talks with Iraqi President, Ibrahim Saleh.

The Media was not given details of the meetings. The two countries have been cooperating on border security to see the reopening of the Karameh crossing and also signed an agreement to develop a major bilateral industrial zone that could provide some 50,000 jobs and boost bilateral trade. The two countries have also discussed plans for Iraq to import 300 megawatts of electricity from Jordan to cope with widespread power shortages. In 2018, Jordan approved a framework to revive a 1,700-kilometer pipeline linking Iraq's oil-rich Basra province to Jordan's Aqaba port that was ceased after Daesh began a terror campaign in Iraq in 2014. The King's visit is the latest in a series of high-profile visits in recent weeks after a surprise Christmas visit by US President Donald Trump and then an unannounced appearance by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

In another development on January 14, 2019, French Foreign Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian also arrived in Iraq and met with Iraqi Premier Adel Abdel-Mahdi. According to Fanar Haddad, an Iraq expert at the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute, the rush of visits showcased Iraq's "major advantage". He said, "From Iran to the United States, Saudi Arabia to Turkey, Syria to Qatar, Iraq can speak to everyone in a region that is otherwise deeply fractured by several strategic fissures."

- On January 10, Iranian Minister of Petroleum, Bijan Zangeneh visited Iraq and met with Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi and President Barham Salih.

Several top officials also accompanied Zangeneh during his visit to Iraq. According to the Prime Minister's office, Mahdi "confirmed the deep relations between the two countries, the two neighbouring peoples and the importance of strengthening them in areas that serve the interests of the two peoples, foremost of which is cooperation in the fields of oil and gas." The Premier's office also said the Iranian Oil Minister "expressed his country's pride in the level of relations with Iraq and the aspiration to develop them, and hoped to achieve more cooperation and to meet the needs of Iraq's gas." During his meeting with Zangeneh, President Barham Salih said promotion of ties between Tehran and Baghdad would serve the stability and security of the entire Middle East. The talks were held after Pompeo's meeting with Abdul-Mahdi, where the two discussed "US support for Iraq's energy independence" from Iran.

- On January 9, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo visited Iraq and met with Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul al-Mahdi, President Barham Salih, Foreign Minister Mohamed Ali al-Hakim and Speaker of the Council of Representatives Mohamed al-Halbousi. He also travelled to Erbil and met with members of the Iraqi Kurdistan government.

Pompeo and Abdul-Mahdi discussed plans to support Iraq's stability and security as well as its future economic prospects. He arrived in Iraq as part of his Middle East tour to reassure regional allies of the US' commitment to security and stability in the Middle East amid a shifting Syria strategy. He spoke with Iraqi leaders about how the US could support Iraqi Security Forces "to ensure ISIS' lasting defeat." Before leaving for Erbil, Pompeo told reporters, "We certainly talked about the President's decision to withdraw from Syria, but we focused more importantly on the enormous important impact of the Iraqi government formation process. Real progress has been made since the elections in Iraq which I think will put this country and this region in a far better place." He also said that Washington and Baghdad share a common understanding about the fight against Daesh and the importance of countering Iran. Pompeo told Kurdish leaders in Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdistan region that Syria's Kurds will be protected from Turkish military threats.

Israel

- According to the Israeli Justice Ministry on January 10, former Israeli energy minister Gonen Segev admitted to spying for Iran.

Segev made the confession in a plea deal in exchange for an 11-year prison sentence. He was indicted in June 2018 and at that time the Shin Bet internal security service had said that he had been recruited by Iranian intelligence while living in Nigeria and had "served as an agent". Investigators found that Segev made contact with officials at the Iranian embassy in Nigeria in 2012 and that he visited Iran twice for meetings with his handlers. He received an encrypted

communications system from Iranian agents and supplied Iran with “information related to the energy sector, security sites in Israel and officials in political and security institutions.”

Jordan

- During his visit to Jordan on January 8, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo held talks with King Abdullah II and Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi.

The two sides discussed opportunities to expand cooperation in all fields. King Abdullah expressed Jordan’s appreciation for the support provided by the US to several development programmes, enabling the Kingdom to face the economic challenges resulting from regional crises. Regarding Palestine, he reaffirmed the importance of reaching a just and lasting peace that would end the Palestinian-Israeli conflict based on the two-state solution, noting the key role of the US in pushing the peace process forward. The King also stressed the need to end Israeli escalations in Jerusalem and violations in the Al Aqsa Mosque. During a joint press conference with Pompeo, Foreign Minister Safadi welcomed him to Jordan in what he described as a “timely visit”, adding that the two had “a thorough discussion on a host of very important regional issues that are key to our common objective of achieving Middle East stability, peace and prosperity”. The Minister added that the US has been “a true friend and ally to the Kingdom”. He also said that Israel must respect international law and leave the occupied Golan Heights. Pompeo urged Middle East allies to confront “significant threats” posed by Iran. He said, “The most significant threats to the region are Daesh and the Islamic revolution. The counter Iran revolution is a coalition as effective today as it was yesterday and I’m very hopeful that it will continue to be effective and even more effective tomorrow.” Pompeo’s trip comes after Trump announced that the US would quickly pull its 2,000 soldiers out of Syria, declaring that Daesh had been defeated. Sustaining a regional coalition to counter Iran is a major focus of Pompeo’s tour of eight Arab countries.

Saudi Arabia

- On January 14, Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman met with visiting US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Riyadh.

According to the Saudi Press Agency (SPA), King Salman and Pompeo discussed the latest developments in the Middle East. The two sides discussed a number of issues including the conflicts in Syria and Yemen as well as threats from Iran and the Saudi response to the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. During his meeting with the Crown Prince, Pompeo reaffirmed the two nations’ shared goal of opposing Iranian policies in the Middle East. Pompeo told the Crown Prince that his Middle East journey, which has taken him to Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Bahrain and the UAE, had been “good” so far. Prince Mohammed said, “We’ll try to add more positivity

to your trip, as much as we can. And we'll try to cooperate more." He also said, "We are strong and old allies. We face our challenges together." According to Al Jazeera, Pompeo and Crown Prince Mohammed have agreed on the importance of de-escalation in military operations in Yemen amid United Nations' peace efforts to end the conflict. According to the US State Department, Pompeo also made clear the importance of a credible investigation into Khashoggi's killing at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. The Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs, Adel Al-Jubeir also held talks with Pompeo. According to the US State Department, "The Secretary and the Foreign Minister agreed on the importance of a thorough, transparent, and timely investigation."

- According to the *Saudi Press Agency (SPA)* on January 10, Saudi Arabia's secret service said that six suspects wanted over unrest in the Kingdom's Shia minority stronghold of Qatif were killed during a police raid.

According to the statement, the authorities carried out a "pre-emptive" raid on "terrorists" and foiled a planned attack on infrastructure development in the Eastern Province including Qatif. The Kingdom's Eastern Province has seen rounds of unrest since 2011 when protesters emboldened by the Arab Spring took to the streets demanding an end to what they say is discrimination by the Sunni-dominated government.

- According to the *Saudi Press Agency (SPA)* on January 3, the Criminal Court of Riyadh held a first hearing on the murder case of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The Saudi Arabian prosecutor is seeking death penalty for five of the 11 detained suspects.

Saudi Arabia said it also sent new letters to the Turkish public prosecutor asking for any evidence connected to this case. The prosecutor's office said it was seeking death penalty for five individuals among the 11 indicted. Ten other suspects are still under investigation. Without naming them, the prosecutor said that in November 2018, the five individuals were charged with ordering and committing the crime. The SPA added that the defendants' lawyers attended the hearing and the court approved a request from the 11 for more time to prepare their defence.

Syria

- On January 14, Syria's Assistant Foreign Minister, Ayman Sousan said that the Syrian government has welcomed talks with Kurdish groups aimed at maintaining the country's unity after the Kurds called for a Russian-mediated deal with Damascus.

Syrian Kurdish leaders have sought a Russian-mediated deal with President Bashar al-Assad's government after US President Donald Trump decided to withdraw American troops from the country. Sousan said, "We hope for the intensification of the dialogue. Many of the Kurdish statements were positive regarding their concern for the unity of Syria. We are confident that

through dialogue we can deal with some of the demands ... and this dialogue guarantees that, as long as it is based on a commitment to Syria's unity."

- According to a January 8 report from the *Middle East Eye*, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt are working on a plan with Israel to marginalise Iranian and Turkish influence in the region through restoring ties with Syria and making key changes to their overall policies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

According to the report, Yossi Cohen, the head of Israel's Mossad spying agency, was among a number of Israeli officials who attended a secret meeting with representatives of the three Arab countries in December 2018 to discuss the new initiative. The plot includes accepting Damascus back into the Arab League, accelerating US troop withdrawals from Syria and Afghanistan, defending Syrian Kurds against Turkish attacks and rolling back Ankara's political standing in Iraq. The report said that the officials also agreed during the meeting that they considered Turkey, rather than Iran, to be their major military rival in the region, and discussed plans to counter Ankara's influence. The Israelis told the meeting that Iran could be contained militarily, but that Turkey had a far greater capability. In the meeting Cohen is reported to have said, "Iranian power is fragile. The real threat comes from Turkey." To tackle these issues, those present at the meeting agreed four measures including talks with the Taliban, path back to the Arab League for Assad and support for Kurds against Turkey.

- According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights on January 8, in an attempt to defend their last positions in Eastern Syria, Daesh militants launched a counter-attack against the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Militants launched deadly counterattacks in three different directions against the SDF, including in the villages of Sousa and Al-Shaafa. The Observatory said Daesh was unable to hold on to the positions they attacked but the assault killed 23 members of the SDF and also left nine militants dead. Daesh took advantage of bad weather and poor visibility to unleash suicide attackers on SDF forces along the front line in the Euphrates valley. The SDF launched its final offensive against Daesh with air and ground support from coalition forces. The alliance has deployed some 17,000 fighters for an operation aimed at flushing out militants from the last parts of their captured territories.

Turkey

- On January 14, Turkey's Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu said that Turkey will not be intimidated by US President Donald Trump's threat to "devastate" its economy if Ankara attacked Kurdish militants in Syria.

Cavusoglu said, "We have said repeatedly we are not scared of and will not be intimidated by any threats. Economic threats against Turkey will get nowhere." His remarks came a day after

US President Donald Trump threatened to “devastate Turkey economically” if it attacks US-backed Kurdish militants in Syria after the US withdrawal. According to Turkish Presidency, President Trump and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan discussed Syria over a phone call on January 14, 2019. They spoke about the need to create a “security zone” in northern Syria. President Trump stressed that Turkey should not “mistreat the Kurds and other Syrian Democratic Forces with whom we have fought to defeat.” US Forces and the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) have fought in northern Syria against Daesh. Turkey regards the YPG as terrorists. US support for Kurdish militants has raised tensions between Washington and Ankara.

In another development on January 11, 2019, Turkish Defence Minister, Hulusi Akar said that the Turkish Military continues to prepare for a military operation against US-backed YPG in northern Syria. He said, “When the time and place comes, the terrorists here will be buried in the ditches they have dug, as was done in previous operations.” He further noted that plans for the operation have already been completed, but necessary preparations continue. Akar pointed out that Turkey’s only target in Syria were terrorists since Ankara had no problems with ethnic Kurds.

- On January 9, Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu called for joint control with Russia and Iran of US troops’ withdrawal from Syria.

Cavusoglu said, “The US has been facing certain difficulties with the process of the troops’ withdrawal from Syria. We want to coordinate this process with Russia and Iran, with which we had arranged work in the framework of the Astana process.” He also said that the US was facing challenges as it attempted to end involvement with the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) militant group because it was too engaged. He said, “After being so intertwined and engaged with a terrorist organisation, it is not that easy to leave that terrorist organisation.” According to Cavusoglu, the withdrawal should be coordinated with Iran and Russia to prevent terrorists from taking up the vacated regions.

- On January 8, Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan condemned comments by US National Security Adviser John Bolton over the future of a US-allied Syrian Kurdish militia.

During his visit to Israel on January 6, 2019, Bolton had suggested the retreat of US troops was also conditional on the safety of US-backed Kurdish fighters. During an address to his party’s lawmakers in the parliament, Erdogan said, “John Bolton has made a grave mistake on this issue.” His comments came shortly after US National Security Adviser John Bolton held talks with Erdogan’s adviser Ibrahim Kalin, in a key meeting focusing on the surprise US decision to withdraw its troops from Syria. Washington has said that the troop pull-out would be gradual. Erdogan has appreciated the announcement as the “right call”. The US has also raised concerns that Kurdish fighters would be exposed to the threat of a cross-border operation by

Turkey. Turkey considers the Kurdish militia (the YPG) terrorists and President Erdogan has made it clear that Ankara would not soften its stance against the YPG.

Yemen

- On January 13, Brigadier General Yahya Saree, spokesman for the Yemeni Armed Forces, said army troopers and allied fighters from Popular Committees have a large number of domestically-developed combat drones and ballistic missiles in their inventory.

Speaking during a press conference in Sana'a, Saree said the Yemeni Military Industry has made great leaps in the production of home grown unmanned aerial vehicles, stressing that 2019 will be the year of Yemeni drones. He also said that Yemeni forces have manufactured several state-of-the-art combat drones and ballistic missiles, which will be put on display in the near future. Earlier, on January 10, 2019 Saree said that Yemeni soldiers and their allies had attacked Saudi mercenaries at al-Anad Air Base with a Qasef K2 (Striker K2) drone. He added that the new drone could strike its designated targets from 20 meters away, and that it could carry a large payload of explosive materials.

---Muhammad Shoaib

SOUTH ASIA: I

Pakistan

External

- On January 13, Indian authorities briefly detained an official of the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi.

The official was released after Pakistan's Foreign Office raised the matter with the Indian government. The Foreign Office termed the detention a "violation of the Vienna convention on diplomatic relations" and said it "reserves the right to respond." According to the Indian media the official was arrested following a quarrel with an Indian citizen in New Delhi.

- According to *Dawn* on January 14, Republican Congressman Andy Biggs introduced a bill in the Congress to terminate the designation of Pakistan as a major non-NATO ally.

The resolution asks the US President to certify that Pakistan has shown progress in arresting and prosecuting members of the Haqqani Network. The bill was sent to the House Foreign Affairs Committee for necessary action. However, the bill cannot be passed without a strong support from the Trump Administration and Democrats.

- On January 11, Pakistani authorities claimed that India's intelligence agency, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) funded the terrorist attack on the Chinese consulate in Karachi in November 2018.

The authorities further claimed that the attack was planned in Afghanistan. The revelation came after Law Enforcement Agencies arrested five suspected militants linked to the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), for their involvement in the Chinese consulate attack. However, the Indian government termed the charges "scurrilous".

- On January 11, India allowed Pakistani experts to inspect its hydropower projects at the Chenab basin, 1,000MW Pakal Dul and 48MW Lower Kalnai, from January 28 to 31, 2019.

In August 2018, the meeting of the Permanent Commission for Indus Waters (PCIW) was held in Lahore during which India allowed Pakistani experts to inspect the projects at the Chenab basin. However, it postponed the inspection after tensions ratcheted up between the two rivals in September 2018, after India backtracked from holding a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York.

- On January 6, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi visited Pakistan and met with Prime Minister Imran Khan.

During the visit, the two sides formalised terms and conditions of the \$6.2 billion support package for Pakistan to help address its balance of payments crisis. According to Pakistan's

government, the UAE had formalised a \$3 billion loan on 2.8 % interest rate and \$3.2 billion for supply of oil on deferred payment. The UAE government had announced the bailout package during Prime Minister Khan's visit to Dubai in November 2018.

- During his visit to Turkey on January 4, Prime Minister Imran Khan held talks with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The two leaders pledged to further strengthen bilateral ties and agreed “to adopt unified positions in areas of foreign relations and regional security”. They underscored the need for a resolution of the issue of Jammu and Kashmir through dialogue and in accordance with the relevant UN Security Council resolutions. Both countries also reiterated their resolve to “fight against the Fethullah Gulen Terrorist Organisation (FETO).” Prime Minister Khan expressed Pakistan's full support for Turkey's fight against Daesh in Syria. Meanwhile, President Erdogan said that Turkey would host the leaders of Pakistan and Afghanistan for a meeting aimed at bringing peace in Afghanistan.

- On January 3, Pakistan's Foreign Office spokesman, Dr Mohammad Faisal welcomed US President Donald Trump's remarks on ties with Pakistan and said that the government was looking forward to positive engagement with the US at the leadership level.

The development follows President Donald Trump's comments about Pakistan in which he expressed his desire to meet “the new leadership in Pakistan”. However, Donald Trump repeated the allegation against Pakistan that it supports “the US enemy,” a reference to the Afghan Taliban.

- On January 5, Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi rejected Indian media's claims that Pakistan was planning a “surgical strike” against India.

The Foreign Minister also warned that irresponsible statements by the Indian leadership could damage regional peace. Earlier in January 2019, Indian media reports claimed that Pakistan Army and Lashkar-i-Taiba (LeT) fighters were planning to carry out a surgical strike against Indian posts along the Line of Control (LoC). The reports follow Prime Minister Narendra Modi's televised interview in which he said “it would take time to make Pakistan mend its ways.”

Pakistan Internal

- On January 7, at least 1 civilian was killed after Indian troops resorted to “unprovoked firing in Baghsar sector along the Line of Control (LoC).”

Pakistan's Foreign Office summoned Indian Deputy High Commissioner J.P. Singh and condemned the unprovoked ceasefire violations by the Indian troops along the LoC. The Foreign

Office warned that “the ceasefire violations by India are a threat to regional peace and security and may lead to a strategic miscalculation.”

India

- During the India-Central Asia Dialogue in Uzbekistan on January 13, India and the five Central Asia nations backed an inclusive peace process in Afghanistan that is Afghan-owned and Afghan-led.

The Dialogue was chaired by India’s External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and her Uzbek counterpart Abdulaziz Kamilov. The Foreign Ministers of Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan and the First Deputy Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan also attended the dialogue. Following the meeting, Sushma Swaraj reiterated India’s commitment to the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan. According to a joint statement, India and the Central Asian countries, along with Afghanistan, “condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.” The countries also “reaffirmed their willingness for cooperation and mutual support on relevant issues.”

- On January 3, India rejected US President Donald Trump’s comments about Narendra Modi in which he said “the Indian PM constantly emphasised that he built a library in Afghanistan,” adding that “it’s like five hours of what US spend in Afghanistan.”

The Indian government said that New Delhi has provided \$3 billion in development assistance to Afghanistan and has played “a significant role as a development partner in Afghanistan.” Indian officials say that being the “largest donor in the region”, New Delhi has helped with infrastructure projects, humanitarian assistance and economic development in Afghanistan.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

SOUTH ASIA: II

Afghanistan

- On January 14, a Taliban attack near a foreign compound left at least 4 people dead and hundreds injured in Kabul city.
- On January 10, the Taliban killed at least 32 Afghan Security personnel in a series of attacks across four provinces.
- On January 7, Afghan Security Forces claimed the killing of at least 145 Taliban insurgents in Faryab and Kandahar.
- On January 1, the Taliban killed at least 23 Afghan soldiers in Sar-e-Pul.

The Taliban attacked Security outposts in Sayyad district and on the outskirts of Sar-e-Pul city. The insurgent group also suffered some casualties. In a related development on January 4, 2019 at least 16 Taliban insurgents and 18 Afghan soldiers were dead in a clash in Kandahar's Spin Boldak district. In another incident, at least 5 Afghan Security Forces personnel were killed in Maiwand district of southern Kandahar province. No one claimed responsibility for the attack. Fighting continues in Afghanistan amid efforts for holding peace talks between the Taliban and the US.

- On January 13, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad arrived in Beijing to consult for Afghan peace process.

Khalilzad's China visit was part of a larger two-week tour. Before reaching China, Khalilzad visited India to facilitate a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Afghanistan. The US State Department stated that Khalilzad continues to coordinate his efforts with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah and other Afghan stakeholders to ensure an intra-Afghan peace process. This was Khalilzad's fourth trip to the region since he has been installed in September 2018. During his previous visits, he also conducted talks with the Taliban. However, this time Taliban's refusal to engage the US Envoy has put a major setback to the otherwise successful peace process.

- According to the Russian Foreign Ministry on January 11 the Afghan Presidential Election had been postponed due to pressure from the US.

The Afghan Presidential Election was scheduled for April 20, 2019. However, in December 2018, the Independent Election Commission said that the polls have been postponed to July 20, 2019. The statement added that although Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani and the Election Commission wanted the elections should be held on time, the decision was imposed on them. Russian Foreign Ministry also said that the ongoing Afghan peace process is another

issue that caused the election to be postponed. Meanwhile, the US Embassy in Afghanistan rejected Russia's accusations and said that the decision to delay the presidential election was made by the Afghan Election Commission for technical reasons. The statement also highlights that the US is trying to create some Afghan anti-terror units which would operate for the US interests after the proposed troops' withdrawal.

- On January 10, Afghanistan's National Security Advisor, Hamdullah Mohib arrived in Beijing and met with Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi.

Both the leaders discussed issues of mutual interest including an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process, security and stability in the region and strengthening bilateral ties. On January 4, 2019, Mohib visited India and met with his Indian counterpart, Ajit Doval. Mohib thanked India for its participation in Afghanistan's infrastructure projects and providing trainings for Afghan Security and Defence Forces. He also said that India would provide Afghanistan with four more attack helicopters in 2019. Meanwhile, Doval reiterated that India would continue its cooperation with Afghanistan, especially in areas including joint counterterrorism efforts, regional and economic cooperation as well as big infrastructural projects.

- On January 10, Indian Army Chief, General Bipin Rawat said that India should directly engage with the Taliban.

Rawat's comments come at a time when the Afghan peace process to reconcile with the Taliban is at its peak and every regional country is trying to play its role to facilitate the process. He reiterated that if a number of countries are talking to the Taliban, then we cannot be out of the bandwagon. If we have interests in Afghanistan, then we should join the bandwagon. Rawat also said that talks with the Taliban should be unconditional. Interestingly, Rawat's statement contrasts with that of India's Ministry of External Affairs, which had reiterated on several occasions that New Delhi backs the official Afghan led and Afghan owned peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan. India's top General's statement comes a few days after Afghanistan's National Security Advisor, Hamdullah Mohib concluded his three-day visit to New-Delhi.

- On January 9, Afghanistan's Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah said that the Taliban can only join the peace talks under the umbrella of the Afghan government.

Abdullah's remarks came a day after the Taliban cancelled peace talks with the US over the involvement of Afghan officials. He reiterated that undertaking peace talks from multiple locations was not compliant with the national interests of Afghanistan and that the Taliban must endorse the constitution and hold talks within the framework of the Afghan government. Interestingly, during his interview with Dawn, Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi also said that the Afghans should sit together to sort out their problems. The pressure seems to be mounting on the Taliban to hold direct talks with Afghan officials yet the group refuses to initiate intra-Afghan talks until the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan.

- Reuters reported on January 8 that the Taliban called off peace talks with the US.

According to the report the insurgent group cancelled the peace talks due to an “agenda disagreement” especially over the involvement of Afghan officials as well as a possible ceasefire and prisoner exchange. The two-day peace talks were set to start on January 9, 2018 in Qatar but the Taliban refused to allow “puppet” Afghan officials to join. Meanwhile, US Special Representative on Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad embarked on his fourth trip to the region. However, without engaging the Taliban, Khalilzad’s trip would lose relevance.

- On January 8, Afghan President’s Special Envoy for Regional Affairs on Consensus around Peace, Mohammad Umer Daudzai met with Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi in Islamabad.

The two sides discussed the Afghan peace process and strengthening of bilateral relations between the two countries. While praising Pakistan’s role in the ongoing peace process, Daudzai admitted that the country’s attitude with regards to Afghanistan had changed recently. He also acknowledged the fact that Qureshi’s visits to Kabul thrice within a span of four months were clear proof of Pakistan’s strong support for Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Qureshi assured the Afghan envoy that Pakistan would do everything it can to help the people of Afghanistan see an end to bloodshed and enter a new phase of peace and prosperity.

- On January 3, Chief of Staff of the US Army, General Mark Milley visited Kabul and held talks with Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani.

Commander of the US Forces in Afghanistan, General Scott Miller as well as Afghan Interior and Defence Ministers were also present during the meeting. The two sides discussed the US’ strategy in Afghanistan and support for an Afghan-led peace process with the Taliban. Milley’s visit comes at a time when the US’ decision to withdraw half of its troops from Afghanistan to facilitate the peace process became controversial after Gen. Miller called it “rumours by newspapers”. Kabul called Washington for clarification regarding its policies.

- On January 3, US President, Donald Trump said that Russia and Pakistan should take on a more active role in Afghanistan.

During a cabinet meeting Trump emphasised the importance of regional power’s role in Afghanistan and said that Russia and Pakistan should be fighting in Afghanistan, not the United States. The remarks come amid reports on a possible withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. In December 2017, Russian President, Vladimir Putin had offered support for anti-terrorism efforts in Afghanistan. In February 2018, Pakistan and Russia established a joint anti-terrorism military commission. The rise of Daesh in Afghanistan is the most imminent threat for both Russia and Pakistan.

---Kashif Hussain

UNITED NATIONS

- On January 14, Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said that some UN Member States have failed to provide a better future to children who continue to fall victim to poverty, slavery and trafficking.

In her opening address to the 80th session of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, in Geneva, Bachelet said that 2019 marked the 30th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. She expressed concern that majority of state parties to the convention have failed to ensure survival and development of all children everywhere, despite almost universal recognition of the Convention. She also expressed concern over the poor progress on the 2030 Agenda, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which world leaders adopted in September 2015. She said that countries were not yet on track to deliver on their promises. While regretting the failure to uplift the lives of children, the High Commissioner termed the situation a major calamity. She said, “Tragically, there is still much to be done before we realise the four core principles of the Convention: non-discrimination, the child’s best interests; right to life, survival and development and right to be heard.”

- On January 9, UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, urged the UNSC to support the implementation of the ceasefire agreed to in and around the port city of Hudaydah, reached during talks between Yemen’s warring parties in Sweden on December 18, 2018.

Briefing the UNSC, Griffiths said that both President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi and Abdelmalik Al-Houthi, leader of Houthi opposition movement Ansar Allah, were adhering to the ceasefire agreement which they consider an important step towards a comprehensive resolution of the conflict. He indicated that fighting was now very limited compared to the hostilities before the ceasefire agreement. He stressed, “This relative calm, I believe, indicates the tangible benefit of the Stockholm Agreement for the Yemeni people and the continued commitment of the parties to making the agreement work.” On prisoner exchange agreement, the Special Envoy said that the UN was finalising the lists of prisoners exchanged during the meetings in Sweden. Regarding opening of the Sana airport, Griffiths lamented that no consensus had been reached on it.

On January 9, 2019, UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock, also briefed the UNSC on the humanitarian situation in Yemen. He told the UNSC that the Stockholm Agreement was having a positive impact at Hudaydah. However, the wider humanitarian situation in Yemen remained catastrophic. Despite the shortcomings, he indicated, the World Food Programme (WFP) provided a record 9.5 million people with emergency food assistance, and other humanitarian agencies were improving living conditions of people and were working to mitigate hunger and malnutrition for 240,000 people facing catastrophic levels of food insecurity.

- On January 4, Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, called the criminal trials of alleged individuals involved in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi not up to the standards meeting the requirements of an independent and international probe requested by the UN.

Ravina Shamdasani, spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said, "We, as you know, have been pressing for justice in the Khashoggi case for months now. We have been calling for an investigation, an independent investigation, with international involvement, and this has not happened yet." Shamdasani confirmed that the High Commissioner's office had spoken "several times" to the Saudi authorities about the Khashoggi case. According to the OHCHR, some 11 defendants were on trial in Saudi Arabia.

- On January 3, the UN called on Bangladesh to investigate and hold accountable those responsible for alleged human rights violations before, during and after the December 30, 2018, elections.

Ravina Shamdasani, spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said, "There are credible reports of fatalities and numerous injuries on polling day alone." Shamdasani added, "There are worrying indications that reprisals have continued to take place, notably against the political opposition, including physical attacks and ill-treatment, arbitrary arrests, harassment, disappearances and filing of criminal cases." She also indicated that there were reports that the Awami League had carried out disproportionate violent attacks, in some cases, with the involvement of law enforcement officials.

- On January 2, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned attacks on the UN compound in Mogadishu, Somalia, on January 1, 2019, saying that intentionally attacking UN personnel may constitute "a violation of international humanitarian law."

During the attack several mortars landed inside the compound, injuring two UN staff members and one contractor. However, no injuries resulted in death. Guterres said, "Such acts will not diminish the strong resolve of the United Nations to continue supporting the people and Government of Somalia in their efforts to build peace and stability in the country." According to media reports, Al-Shabaab has claimed responsibility for the attack. Meanwhile, Nicholas Haysom, UN Special Representative in Somalia, also condemned the attacks and called them insignificant for serving any political agenda through targeting staff members of international organisations who are supporting the consolidation of peace and the strengthening of governing institutions in Somalia. However, hours after the statement, Somali Government declared Haysom "persona non-grata" and asked him to leave the country, accusing him of violating the international diplomatic norms by interfering in the State's national sovereignty.

- On January 1, the US and Israel officially quit the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

The US and Israel had filed their notices of withdrawal from the UNESCO in October 2017. Both the countries have accused the organisation of its biased position towards Israel. Israel has criticised the organisation over its condemnation of Israel's occupation of East Jerusalem and UNESCO's decision to grant full membership to Palestine in 2011. The US has also cited the "anti-Israel bias" of the organisation a fundamental reason for its withdrawal. UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay has expressed deep regret over the US and Israeli withdrawal. However, the UNESCO officials are of the view that the withdrawal would not affect the organisation financially, as the organisation has been dealing with US and Israel's funds slash since 2011.

--- Moiz Khan