

January 16 – January 31

AREA BRIEF

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Area Briefs: 16-31 January 2019
General Observations

Pakistan

- The Supreme Court of Pakistan upheld the acquittal of Asiya bibi on January 29, after judges dismissed a petition filed by extremist religious-political groups calling for her execution.
- In another significant development on the same day, the government approved recommendations to amend the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) to declare, “enforced disappearances a criminal offence” in order to ensure the rule of law and protection of fundamental rights of citizens guaranteed in the Constitution.
- On January 29, the office of the Deputy Inspector General (DIG) in Loralai Loralai was struck by a terrorist attack that killed at least 9 people, including 3 policemen and injured another 21. It was the second attack on security forces in Loralai in January 2019.
- While reiterating its support for the Kashmir cause on January 31, the Pakistani government rejected Indian objections over Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi’s telephonic discussion with All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) leader, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq.
- Earlier On January 18, Prime Minister Imran Khan and Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi raised the Kashmir dispute with visiting UNGA President Maria Fernanda Espinosa and asked her to set up a commission to probe human rights abuses in the Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK).
- Notwithstanding US efforts to encourage Pakistan to play a greater role in ending the Afghan stalemate, Pakistan came under attack once again on January 29 when US Director of National Intelligence, Daniel Coats noted in a threat assessment report to Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that militant groups “supported by Pakistan will continue to take advantage of their safe haven in the country and to plan and conduct attacks in India and Afghanistan, including against US interests.” The report also claimed that Pakistan has been using some militant groups as “policy tools”. In response Pakistan’s Foreign Office warned that such “controversial statements would be counterproductive and could adversely affect the peace and stability of the region.”
- Earlier on January 20, visiting US Republican Senator, Lindsey Graham termed Pakistan a reliable strategic partner during his meeting with Prime Minister Imran Khan. Graham’s visit came in the aftermath of US Special Envoy for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay

Khalilzad's visit where he met with Prime Minister Khan, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa. on January 20, 2019 General Joseph Votel, Commander of the US CENTCOM, met with Pakistan's Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa and discussed regional security and the Afghanistan reconciliation process.

- On January 22, Prime Minister Imran Khan visited Doha and held a meeting with Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani and Prime Minister Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa Al-Thani.
- On January 24, Pakistan successfully conducted a training launch of short-range surface-to-surface nuclear capable ballistic missile Nasr (Hatf-IX). The ISPR also noted, "This weapon system has augmented Full Spectrum Deterrence posture while remaining within the precincts of the policy of credible minimum deterrence, against prevailing and evolving threat spectrum more effectively, including enemy's ballistic missile defence and other air defence systems."

International

- On the January 24 India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) in cooperation with the Indian Navy successfully test-fired long-range surface-to-air (LR-SAM) Barak-8 missile system. Earlier on January 18, India successfully test-fired a new generation air-to-surface anti-radiation missile called NGARM.
- Meanwhile India's bid for NSG membership suffered a setback on January 30 when China indicated that it would continue to block India's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).
- Amid growing concerns about the effects of the US withdrawal and a resurgent Taliban, on January 30, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani offered US President Donald Trump reduced costs for keeping US troops in the country.
- UK Prime Minister Theresa May survived a critical vote in Parliament that could have delayed Brexit. The vote had the potential to undermine May's Brexit strategy and undercut the country's constitutional protocol. On January 29 British lawmakers failed to approve an amendment giving Parliament the power to instruct PM Theresa May to seek a delay to avoid a disorderly, and possibly chaotic Brexit. However, May lost a vote on a nonbinding amendment that said Britain should not leave the bloc without a deal, a sign of potential troubles ahead.

- On January 29, President Trump accused US Intelligence agencies of being “passive and naïve” about the dangers posed by Iran, a day after the agencies presented their annual assessment of the biggest threats to the country. His comments highlight the growing rift between the bureaucracy and the President. Coats had also asserted that North Korea was unlikely to completely dismantle its nuclear weapons programme. Meanwhile US special counsel Robert Mueller is continuing his investigation into alleged Russian collusion in the 2016 US election.
- On January 25, President Donald Trump signed a temporary three-week budget to end the 35-day government shutdown. Faced with a divided congress, Trump has stated that he might use emergency powers if a “fair deal” on border security funds is not reached.
- US President Donald Trump, Vice President Michael R. Pence and Acting Defence Secretary Patrick M. Shanahan announced the release of the 2019 Missile Defence Review (MDR) on January 16 at the Pentagon. The MDR calls for increased interceptors, layered defence approach to integrate both air and missile defences, cooperation with allies, and new technologies for intercepting advanced threats.

---Amina Afzal

AMERICAS

Domestic

- On January 31, at least eight people died in the US Midwest as the region suffered its worst cold wave in decades.

Hospitals have been treating patients reporting frostbite as life across the region came to a halt. A third of the US population is currently experiencing temperatures below -17C. Some 250 million Americans overall have experienced the “polar vortex” conditions, but southern states such as Florida have escaped the “brutal chill.”

- On January 30, President Donald Trump criticised US’ intelligence officials for being soft on Iran a day after they contradicted his claims of foreign policy success.

On January 29, 2019 the Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats told Senate lawmakers that the US intelligence community does not believe Iran is currently undertaking “key activities” needed to produce a nuclear bomb. His assessment was clearly at odds with longtime administration claims that Iran is an immediate nuclear threat.

- On January 25, President Donald Trump signed a bill to end the partial government shutdown.

Trump signed a temporary three-week budget to end the 35-day government shutdown; the longest in US history, which began on December 22, 2018 and cost the US economy \$11 billion. Trump, faced with a divided congress has stated that he might use emergency powers if a “fair deal” on border security funds is not reached. Earlier On January 23, 2019 Donald Trump vowed to not ‘cave’ despite the persistence of a government shut down for a record 32 days. Trump tweeted “No Cave!” and leveled blame on congressional Democrats for the government shut down while insisting he will not lift the shutdown on federal government funding unless they approve his \$5.7 billion plan for constructing the wall along the US-Mexican border. Trump triggered a partial government shutdown on December 22nd 2018, in an effort to pressure the Democratic majority in the House of Representatives to support his wall project. With both Democrats and Mr. Trump refusing to cede, a deadlock has ensued resulting in some 800,000 federal employees currently furloughed.

- On January 25, Donald Trump ally, Roger Stone was arrested in connection with special counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation and indicted on charges, including witness tampering, obstruction and false statements.

Stone is the sixth Trump associate to be charged in connection with Robert Mueller’s investigation into potential coordination between Russia and the Trump campaign. Others

ensnared include former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn and Trump's former personal lawyer, Michael Cohen.

- On January 21, Kamala Harris announced her bid to run for president in the upcoming election in 2020.

Harris is a junior United States Senator for California since 2017 who officially announced her campaign to run for the Democratic nomination for President of the United States in the 2020 United States presidential election.

- On January 17, President Donald Trump postponed speaker Nancy Pelosi's scheduled travel plans to Brussels and Afghanistan citing the government shutdown and her need to be present in Washington to negotiate a path forward.

Earlier on January 16, 2019, had suggested that President Trump reschedule the State of the Union address because many of the people who help with the security and logistics of it "are either furloughed or victims of the shutdown." In a letter addressed to Trump, Pelosi wrote "Sadly, given the security concerns and unless government reopens this week, I suggest that we work together to determine another suitable date after government has reopened for this address or for you to consider delivering your State of the Union address in writing to the Congress on Jan. 29."

International

- On January 30, US lawmakers sought to block US support for the Saudi-UAE war on Yemen stating the war had never been approved by Congress.

A bipartisan group of US politicians pledged to advance legislation in Congress that would block further US support for the Saudi-UAE war in Yemen. The measure enjoys broad support among Democrats and a number of key Republicans but would face a likely veto by President Trump suggesting delays and high-level negotiations with the White House ahead. Public opinion in the US has turned against the war because of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen as well as the murder of journalist Jamal Kashoggi.

- On January 30, the US accused Russia and China of not fully reporting their nuclear programmes and called for greater transparency.

Washington has accused Russia of violating the INF and has threatened to withdraw from the agreement. Moscow has denied these allegations and maintained its weapons were in compliance with the arms control agreement.

- On January 30, US Director of National Intelligence, Daniel Coats predicted challenges in South Asia would grow in 2019 due to elections in Afghanistan and India, brazen Afghan Taliban attacks and "Pakistan's recalcitrance in dealing with militant groups".

While presenting a threat assessment report highlighting global security threats facing the US Coats stated, “militant groups in Pakistan will continue to take advantage of their safe haven there to plan and conduct attacks in neighbouring countries and possibly beyond”. He accused Pakistan of “using some groups as policy tools and confronting only the militant groups that directly threaten Pakistan” which he contended would “frustrate US counter-terrorism efforts against the Taliban”. The baseless accusations come at a time when Pakistan is actively playing an instrumental role in supporting talks between the Afghan Taliban and Washington to end the 17-year-long war. Pakistan has categorically denied allegations that it provides safe havens to terrorists to engage in cross-border terrorism. Meanwhile the US continues to show its political bias, when expressing concern over Pakistan’s nuclear programme but failing to address India’s fast-growing BMD programme.

- On January 29, the US filed criminal charges against Chinese telecom giant Huawei, derailing efforts by Washington and Beijing to negotiate an end to their on-going trade war.

The US alleged Huawei violated Iran sanctions and attempted to steal trade secrets from US telecom company T-Mobile. On December 1, 2018, Huawei’s Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou was detained in Canada at the request of US authorities, who are currently looking to extradite Ms. Wanzhou to the US. The US has long criticised China for unfair trade practices and theft of intellectual property, and has attributed these factors to the current trade war between the two countries. China reacted strongly to the charges filed against Huawei. Their Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang stated that “strong political motives and manipulation” were behind the charges.

- On January 28, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad said the US and the Afghan Taliban have drafted the framework for a peace deal.

The Taliban’s power in Afghanistan has sharply increased after the presence of foreign combat troops was reduced in Afghanistan in 2014. The US, eagerly looking to extradite itself from the 17-year-old conflict in Afghanistan, has been actively engaged in talks with the Taliban and the Afghan Government. Khalilzad confirmed, “the Taliban have committed, to our satisfaction, to do what is necessary that would prevent Afghanistan from ever becoming a platform for international terrorist groups or individuals,” a key concern for Washington. While progress has been made, key issues including a ceasefire and the withdrawal of US forces remain. Earlier on January 26, 2019 Khalilzad claimed to have made “significant progress” during six days of talks with Afghan Taliban in Qatar.

Latin America

- On January 29, the US imposed sanctions on Venezuela's state-owned oil firm PDVSA, and seized \$7 billion in assets, while urging the Venezuelan military to accept a peaceful transfer of power to US backed opposition leader Juan Guaido.

US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin stated proceeds from the sale of Venezuelan oil would be withheld from the Maduro government. This move is seen as an attempt to financially cripple the Maduro government. Furthermore, Mnuchin added that in order to avoid sanctions, the company would have to officially recognise the leadership of opposition leader Juan Guaido. National Security Advisor John Bolton stated there was "a lot at stake" in Venezuela, specifically citing the country's oil reserves and the economic benefit it could accrue to the US. Bolton stated, "It will make a big difference to the United States economically if we could have American oil companies invest in and produce the oil capabilities in Venezuela".

Canada

- On January 27, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau sacked Canada's Ambassador to China.

John McCallum, Canada's Ambassador to China was asked to step down following controversial comments he made about an extradition case involving Meng Wanzhou, Chief Financial Officer of Chinese telecom giant Huawei. The US had accused Wanzhou of evading sanctions on Iran and requested Canada to detain him. Canada's decision to detain Wanzhou led to rising diplomatic tensions between Canada and China. McCallum publicly argued the flaws of extraditing Wanzhou to the US, but later retracted his statement. On January 25, 2019 he however mentioned it would be "great for Canada" if the US dropped their extradition request.

Latin America

- On January 29, Nicolas Maduro threatened to launch legal action in the US and international courts, after the US announced it would impose sanctions on state-owned oil company PDVSA.

Looking to financially cripple the Maduro government, the US imposed sanctions on state-owned oil firm PDVSA. While the Venezuelan economy is heavily dependent on the US for oil revenue- 41% percent of Venezuelan oil exports are to the US- analysts suggest that China and Russia, key strategic allies of the Maduro government, may be able to provide the government relief. Maduro's statement threatening legal action against the US came shortly after Venezuela devalued its currency to align with the black market in the face of hyperinflation. China strongly condemned the US's decision to impose sanctions against Venezuela and warned Washington of the repercussions of their action. Earlier on January 26, 2019 the EU demanded elections be

held in Venezuela within eight days or they would officially recognise opposition leader Juan Guaido as the President of Venezuela.

- On January 26, Venezuela's Foreign Ministry stated the Maduro Government was suspending the expulsion of US diplomats from Venezuela and would provide a 30-day period for setting up a "US interests office" in Venezuela, and a similar Venezuelan office in the US.

The Maduro government had earlier declared on January 23, 2019 that it was severing diplomatic ties with Washington, giving US diplomats a 72-hour period to leave the country. Suspending their earlier decision, the Maduro Government declared it would allow setting up a 'US interest office' in the country in an effort to diffuse rising tensions with Washington.

- On January 25, opposition leader Juan Guaido says he would consider granting amnesty to Nicolas Maduro and his allies if they ceded power and helped return Venezuela to democracy.
- On January 24, President Nicolas Maduro ordered all Venezuelan diplomats home from the US, and declared it was closing its embassy in Washington.

Meanwhile Turkey, Russia, Iran, and China voiced their support for Nicolas Maduro and condemned US interference in the domestic politics of Venezuela. The UN Secretary General, António Guterres, said talks in Venezuela were required to ensure the political crisis affecting the country not spiral out of control.

- On January 23, the US and major South American nations recognised Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido as the interim leader of Venezuela, while President Nicolas Maduro announced he will sever all diplomatic ties with the US.

Eleven members of the fourteen nation Lima Group including Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay and Peru issued a statement endorsing Juan Guaido as interim president. The three countries from the Lima Group, namely Mexico, Guyana and Saint Lucia maintained a principle of non-intervention. While formally recognising Juan Guaido as interim leader of Venezuela, Donald Trump stated the US was ready to use "all options" if Maduro tried to suppress the opposition, in what was an implied threat of military force.

- On January 23, Juan Guaido declared himself as interim President of Venezuela at a rally in Caracas.
- On January 22, Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro accused The United States of ordering a coup against his government.

Maduro's statement was triggered by comments made by US Vice President Mike Pence, who posted a video on Twitter branding Maduro "a dictator with no legitimate claim to power" and endorsing a rally planned by the opposition leader Juan Guaido. Extending his support for the rally, Pence added "As the good people of Venezuela make your voices heard tomorrow, on behalf of the American people, we say: estamos con ustedes. We are with you."

---Kiran Mazari

ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

- On January 31, Pakistan announced its second successful launch of a short-range surface-to-surface nuclear capable ballistic missile Nasr, as part of the Army Strategic Forces Command training exercise.

According to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the second phase of the exercise involved single shot firing of the missile on January 28 and 31, 2019, aimed at testing the “extreme in-flight manoeuvrability” of the missile. In its statement, the ISPR also said that the missile is capable of “defeating, by assured penetration, any currently available ballistic missile defence (BMD) system in Pakistan’s neighbourhood or any other system under procurement or development.”

- On January 30, China indicated that it would continue to block India’s entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

During a conference on non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang said, “I do not want to mislead you. China’s position has not changed. We call on all members that are not part of the treaty to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a non-nuclear weapon state as soon as possible.” He was responding to a question on India’s candidacy for the NSG. China is hosting a two-day conference from January 30 to 31, 2019, of the five permanent members of the UNSC on non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. Deputy Foreign Ministers or their aides are attending the conference. The previous such meeting was held in Washington in 2016. While indirectly referring to India, Geng, said, “We believe we should conduct wide consultations and look for practical measures by opposing double standards in enforcing the treaty.” China maintains that it would not support India’s entry to the NSG until there is a universal formula to accept applications from all states that are not party to the NPT. The NSG is a 48-nation body, which monitors and controls the export of materials or technology that can be used to create nuclear weapons. India formally applied for the NSG membership in May 2016.

- On January 29, US Director of National Intelligence, Dan Coats said that North Korea was unlikely to completely dismantle its nuclear weapons programme.

While briefing the Senate, Coats said, “we currently assess that North Korea will seek to retain its Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) capabilities and is unlikely to completely give up its nuclear weapons and production capabilities because its leaders ultimately view nuclear weapons as critical to regime survival.” Coats, while presenting a threat assessment report highlighting global security threats facing the US, stated the report maintained that North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un’s support for “complete denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula”

at his June 2018 Singapore summit with President Donald Trump was intrinsically linked to an end to American military deployments and exercises involving nuclear weapons. The report also stressed, “Kim has also sought to align the region against the US-led pressure campaign in order to gain incremental sanctions relief, and North Korean statements have repeatedly indicated that some sanctions relief is necessary for additional diplomacy to occur.” The Director made these comments regarding Pyongyang at a time when the US and North Korea are planning to hold second summit in February 2019 to discuss the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula.

During his briefing, Coats issued warnings against Iran stating that it could look to test the limits of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). He added “while we do not believe Iran currently is undertaking activities we judge necessary to produce a nuclear device, Iranian officials have publicly threatened to push the boundaries of JCPOA restrictions if Iran does not obtain the tangible financial benefits it expected from the deal,” he told the committee. The Director said that both China and Russia were pursuing strategies to attain global superiority and diminish the US’ influence. Coats said China would continue to enhance its military capabilities in order to “expand its footprint and complement its broadening political and economic influence.” Regarding South Asia, Coats noted that US remains concerned regarding Pakistan’s continued development of nuclear weapons. Coats’ report maintains that “continued growth of Pakistan and India’s nuclear weapons programmes increase the risk of a nuclear security incident in South Asia, and the new types of nuclear weapons will introduce new risks for escalation dynamics and security in the region.”

- On January 25, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that senior NATO and Russian officials failed to make a breakthrough in talks on saving the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.
- On January 23, Chief of the Russian Missile and Artillery Force Lieutenant-General Mikhail Matveyevsky said that Russian 9M729 missile of the Iskander tactical weapon system had a range capability of 480 kilometres and, therefore, did not violate the INF Treaty.

Following a NATO-Russia Council (NRC) meeting in Brussels, Stoltenberg said, “All members of the NATO-Russia Council agree that the Treaty has been crucial to Euro-Atlantic security. But the Treaty is now in jeopardy. And unfortunately, we have not seen any signs of a breakthrough.” He accused Russia of violating the Treaty by deploying and developing cruise missiles banned under it, and also said that Russia did not indicate any change in its position. He said, “These new missiles are hard to detect, they are mobile, they are nuclear-capable, they can reach European cities and they reduce the warning time and therefore the threshold for any potential use of nuclear weapons.” The NATO officials have also rejected Russian claims that the 9M729 ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM) does not violate the INF Treaty.

Earlier on January 23, 2019, Russia arranged a news briefing for military attaches, Russian and foreign media outlets on the 9M729 cruise missile, the system that the US considers is not compliant with the Treaty. The media briefing was arranged to share specifications of the missile and provide evidence to reject the US' allegations. During the meeting, Chief of the Russian Missile and Artillery Force Lieutenant-General Mikhail Matveyevsky said that Russian 9M729 missile of the Iskander tactical weapon system had a range capability of 480 kilometres and, therefore, did not violate the INF Treaty. Matveyevsky said that the weight of the 9M729 missiles was increased by extending its length, as a result the flight range of the missile is reduced by 10 kilometres. The US claims that the 9M729 missile has a range capability that exceeds the 500 kilometres limit stipulated by the INF Treaty and demands that Russia eliminate all these missiles.

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.

- On January 25, Iranian Foreign Ministry accused France of being a destabilising force in the Middle East owing to its huge sale of offensive weapon systems in the region.

In its statement, the Foreign Ministry said, "Iran considers the mass sales of sophisticated and offensive weapons by France as a factor in destabilising the balance of the region." Iranian statement came in response to France's warning that the country was ready to impose new sanctions on Tehran if talks on its missile programme and its regional influence fail to make progress. On January 25, 2019, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said, "We have begun a difficult dialogue with Iran and unless progress is made we are ready to apply sanctions, firmly, and they know it." However, Iran responded by saying that the country's missile programme was not negotiable, and warned that any new sanction by European countries would lead to a review of Iranian relations with France.

- On January 24, Pakistan successfully conducted a training launch of short-range surface-to-surface nuclear capable ballistic missile Nasr (Hatf-IX).

The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said that the training exercise involved "launching of quad salvo for desired effects," aimed at enhancing the operational efficiency of Army Strategic Forces Command and re-validating technical parameters. The ISPR also noted, "This weapon system has augmented Full Spectrum Deterrence posture while remaining within the precincts of the policy of credible minimum deterrence, against prevailing and evolving threat spectrum

more effectively, including enemy's ballistic missile defence and other air defence systems." With a capability of in-flight manoeuvrability, Nasr is a high-precision nuclear capable shoot and scoot weapon system. In its July 2017 flight test, the strike-range of the missile was extended from 60 kilometres to 70 kilometres.

- On January 24, India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) in cooperation with the Indian Navy successfully test-fired long-range surface-to-air (LR-SAM) Barak-8 missile system.

The test of Barak-8 missile system was conducted from a naval warship INS Chennai off the coast of Odisha against an aerial target. Indian Defence Ministry said, "India achieves a significant milestone with successful flight test of LR-SAM on board INS Chennai. The missile directly hit a low flying aerial target." The Ministry also said that test cleared all the mission objectives. Jointly designed and developed by the DRDO and Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) for the Indian Navy, the Barak-8 is claimed to be capable of intercepting any type of airborne threat including aircraft, helicopters, anti-ship missiles, UAVs, ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and combat jets. With a strike-range of 70 to 100 kilometres and maximum speed of Mach 2, the missile has active seekers for terminal guidance.

- According to *Global Times* on January 22, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Rocket Force of China conducted a simulated intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) strike mission from an underground bunker.

State-run China Central Television (CCTV) reported a second-strike training exercise, however, it did not provide details on the location and time of the exercise. Song Zhongping, a missile expert and former officer with the PLA's Second Artillery Force, said that China's strategic missiles are usually placed in deep and protective bunkers. Song said that the basic purpose of the exercise was the evaluation of upgrades in the country's second-strike capability. He also stressed that underground bunkers are of very high importance in protecting Chinese missiles from being destroyed, as the country's nuclear doctrine is based on No First Use (NFU) of nuclear weapons.

- On January 22, Israel successfully conducted a training launch of its advanced missile defence system Arrow-3 capable of defending against long-range ballistic missile threats.

Israel's Defence Ministry said, "The successful test of the Arrow-3 interceptor is a major milestone in Israel's ability to defend itself against current and future threats in the region." The Arrow-3 anti-missile system is designed to intercept ballistic missiles outside the atmosphere. The weapon system is a part of Israel's multi layered anti-missile systems that the country is developing to defend against short and medium-range ballistic and cruise missiles.

- On January 18, India successfully test-fired a new generation air-to-surface anti-radiation missile called NGARM.

According to the Indian Defence Ministry officials, the missile was test-fired from a Sukhoi-30MKI at the integrated test range at Balasore, and it hit the designated target with a high degree of accuracy. Jointly developed by the DRDO and Russia, the missile is designed to destroy a variety of surveillance and radar targets. It has a strike-range of 100 kilometres.

- On January 17, US President Donald Trump, Vice President Michael R. Pence and Acting Defence Secretary Patrick M. Shanahan announced the release of the 2019 Missile Defence Review (MDR) at the Pentagon.

In his address, President Trump vowed to reinvigorate and reinvent the US' missile defences. He said, "Our goal is simple: to ensure that we can detect and destroy any missile launched against the US anywhere, anytime, anyplace." He added, "Our strategy is grounded in one overriding objective: to detect and destroy every type of missile attack against any American target, whether before or after launch." In his speech, President Trump did not mention Russia or China as nuclear adversaries, and never talked about threat from North Korean ballistic missiles. However, his speech primarily remained focused on Iranian ballistic missiles. He said that Iranian efforts to test a "space launch vehicle" would provide the country with critical information to pursue intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capability, and the capability of reaching the US mainland. He stressed, "We're not going to have that happen."

The 2019 MDR is one of the four strategic guidance documents that Trump directed the national security establishment to create for better guidance on critical defence policy issues. The new MDR marks the first update to anti-missile policy since a 2010 review by the Obama administration. The 2019 MDR is based on examination of efforts to protect the US from missile threats, and singles out concerns about growing and advancing capabilities of North Korea, Iran, Russia and China. The MDR calls for increased interceptors, layered defence approach to integrate both air and missile defences, cooperation with allies, and new technologies for intercepting advanced threats. The review also called for pursuing advanced technologies and innovative concepts including space-based sensors to track missile threats and counter hypersonic technology and intercept missiles in the boost phase. Regarding cooperation on missile defences with allies in South Asia, the MDR noted, "The United States has discussed potential missile defence cooperation with India. This is a natural outgrowth of India's status as a Major Defence Partner and key element of our Indo-Pacific Strategy."

According to Newsweek on January 18, 2019, both Chinese and Russian officials warned of an increased arms race owing to the new anti-missile policy. While stressing that the policy would undermine the strategic balance and stability in the world, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said, "The American report is full of outdated Cold War and zero-sum game concepts. The document exaggerates the geopolitical confrontation and rivalry of powers, and speaks unreasonably of a threat from China." Meanwhile, Russia also opposed and expressed its extreme discontent on the policy. In its statement, the Russian Foreign Ministry warned that "the strategy actually gives the green light to the prospect of basing missile strike capabilities in

space.” The statement asserted that implementation of the policy would initiate an arms race in space which would adversely affect international security and stability.

--- Moiz Khan

CHINA, EAST ASIA & PACIFIC

China

- On January 31, Chinese Vice Premier, Liu He and US Trade Representative, Robert Lighthizer held trade talks in Washington.

In December 2018, US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping agreed to temporarily suspend new trade tariffs. The Trump administration has imposed punitive tariffs on \$250 billion worth of Chinese imports. Beijing retaliated with its own tariff increases on \$110 billion of US exports.

- On January 29, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, Geng Shuang said that the US' legal measures against Huawei Technologies are prompted by "political manipulations."

The statement came after the US Department of Justice filed a series of criminal charges against Huawei Technologies and its Chief Financial Officer, Meng Wanzhou for violating US sanctions on Iran. Geng Shuang urged the US to "stop unreasonable suppression of Chinese companies" and warned that China would defend the legitimate rights of Chinese enterprises. Wanzhou, who is also the daughter of the Huawei Technologies founder Ren Zhengfei, was arrested in Vancouver on December 1, 2018 over allegedly violating the US sanctions against Iran. However, Wanzhou was later released on bail by the Canadian court. In reaction, Chinese authorities have 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."

- On January 25, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Hua Chunying asked the US to abide by its "one China" principle.

The warning came after US Navy dispatched two warships through the Taiwan Strait. Chunying said that Chinese forces were closely monitoring the passage of US warships through the strait. However, US Pacific Fleet spokesman, Tim Gorman said that the ships' transit through the Taiwan Strait was "in accordance with international law," and demonstrates the US commitment "to a free and open Indo-Pacific."

The Philippine

- On January 27, at least 21 people were killed and 81 injured when two bombs exploded outside a Roman Catholic cathedral in Mindanao.

A spokesman for the Philippines' President, Rodrigo Duterte said that the authorities would soon hunt down the attackers. There was no immediate claim of responsibility but police suspect the bombings were carried out by Abu Sayyaf, a militant group linked to Daesh.

Malaysia

- According to the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) on January 27, Malaysia “was stripped of the right to host the 2019 World Para Swimming Championships.”

The decision was taken after Malaysian government refused to provide the necessary guarantees that Israeli Para swimmers could participate safely in the Championships. Malaysia banned the athletes because of what Kuala Lumpur sees as Israel’s poor treatment of Palestinians. The Israeli Foreign Ministry condemned the decision, saying it is opposed to the “Olympic spirit.”

Myanmar

- According to *Reuters* on January 29, National League for Democracy (NLD), Myanmar’s ruling party, clashed with military lawmakers for proposing steps towards changing the constitution.

The proposal could ratchet up tensions between the Army and Aung San Suu Kyi’s government, which is making efforts to bring reforms to the constitution since the party won the election in 2015.

Japan

- On January 22, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

During the meeting the two sides held a discussion over a group of islands in the Pacific, claimed by both countries. However, the two leaders failed to make progress on the issue. Abe and Putin vowed to continue negotiations. The islands were annexed by the Soviet Union in World War II and were later incorporated into Russia. Japan however continues to stake claim on the islands.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

EUROPE

- On January 30, Theresa May is looking to continue talks with the EU after MPs backed a plan to renegotiate the Brexit deal.

MPs voted 317 to 301 in favour of changing the backstop plan - the component of the deal designed to avoid the return of checks at the border of Northern Ireland on January 29, 2019. The EU Negotiator on the Brexit deal, Michel Barnier however responded to May by stating "the EU institutions remain united and we stand by the agreement we have negotiated with the UK". European Council President, Donald Tusk added "the backstop is part of the withdrawal agreement, and the withdrawal agreement is not open for renegotiation."

- On January 28, a group calling itself the 'red scarves' held a march in Paris to protest the violent demonstrations of the 'yellow vests'.

The 'yellow vests' movement arose in response to rising fuel prices in France, but has subsequently grown to a general anger at the high cost of living and President Macron's economic policies. The 'red scarves' marched to protest the violence and the disruption caused by the yellow vests' mass demonstrations that began on 17 November, 2018.

- On January 25, The Greek parliament ratified an accord that changes the name of neighbouring Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) to the Republic of North Macedonia.

The UN brokered agreement marks the end of a 28-year row between the two nations over the use of the term "Macedonia". The disagreement has resulted in Athens blocking Skopje on multiple attempts to join NATO and the European Union.

- On January 23, Russia unveiled their 9M729 ground-based missile system that the US claims is in violation the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty (INF).

Washington had earlier issued an ultimatum to Moscow giving a 60-day deadline — expiring on February 2 — to dismantle the 9M729 missile system as they stated it violates the INF. Washington contended, failure to do so, would result in initiating the process of the US formally withdrawing from the INF. While Moscow has repeatedly denied these accusations, and in their attempt to keep the INF alive, Mikhail Matveevsky, Russia's chief of artillery and missile troops, stated Moscow was presenting the missile system and providing information on it in the interest of "voluntary transparency". He insisted the range of the missile system was allowed under the agreement.

- On January 23, Russia and Japan failed to reach an agreement over the disputed island chain in the Sea of Okhotsk but have agreed to continue to work together to forge a solution.
- On January 22, France and Germany signed a new treaty formalizing their existing co-operation.

As a result of the treaty, France and Germany agree to establish common positions and issue joint statements on major EU issues and act as a joint force at the United Nations. The two nations have committed to deepening their economic integration with a Franco-German "economic zone", and enhancing Europe's military capabilities and capacity through investment in and strengthening of the EU and NATO. In addition, there may be the possibility of joint military deployments, as well as the establishment of a Franco-German defence and security council

NATO's Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, gave his approval on the treaty. Italy's Interior Minister Matteo Salvini however was critical and announced "It is time to oppose the Franco-German axis with an Italian-Polish axis" while on a visit to Poland.

- On January 22, the EU imposed sanctions on senior officials from the Russian military intelligence agency, the GRU, over the Salisbury poisonings.

Sanctions have been imposed on four people, including the head and deputy head of the GRU along with the two agents that are alleged to have carried out a toxic nerve agent attack in the UK. In March 2018, the intended victim of the attack, Sergei Skripal, survived the attempt despite being severely poisoned. After the EU announced the sanctions, Russia's Foreign Ministry threatened retaliation "against this unfriendly action". They further stated that the EU was circumventing the United Nations Security Council and taking unilateral action.

- On January 16, UK Prime Minister Theresa May wins a no-confidence vote by 325 to 306, after MPs rejected her proposed Brexit plan by a huge margin.

In a statement after the results, May told MP's she would "continue to work to deliver on the solemn promise to the people of this country to deliver on the result of the referendum and leave the European Union". Jeremy Corbyn, who tabled the no-confidence motion, said in order for any positive discussions to commence "the government must remove clearly, once and for all, the prospect of the catastrophe of a no-deal exit from the EU and all the chaos that would come as a result of that,".

---Kiran Mazari

GLOBAL TERRORISM

- On January 29, a group calling itself a New Irish Republican Army (IRA) claimed responsibility for the car bombing in the Northern Irish city of Londonderry on January 19, 2019.

In its statement provided to a local paper the Derry Journal, the group said it was responsible for placing a car bomb which detonated in Bishop Street. The statement said, "We also caution those who collaborate with the British that they are to desist immediately as no more warnings will be given." Earlier on January 20, 2019, the Northern Irish police had also claimed that the New IRA was responsible for the attack. Police said that its main focus of the investigation was on the New IRA which is one of a small number of groups opposed to a 1998 peace deal that ended three decades of violence in the British-run province. No injuries were reported in the attack.

- According to *Arab News* on January 28, Saudi Arabia's new legislation to combat terrorism and its funding came into effect.

The Saudi Press Agency (SPA) published the new anti-terrorism law in the national gazette Um Al Qura. The legislation based on 26 articles would help the country in protecting itself from terror attacks. According to the report, the legislation would help Saudi Arabia to target entities that attempt to create shadow organisations funding terrorism under the guise of a charity, private banking or lending organisation. The new law would also allow the country to look into the suspicious activities of foreign exchange offices and those working in remittances. Dimah Al-Sharif, a legal consultant and member of the International Association of Lawyers, said that the new anti-terrorism law has succeeded in covering most of the aspects that fuel terrorism; from spreading ideas to the funding of terrorist organisations.

- On January 23, Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre (JTIC) released its annual Global Attack Index indicating 33% reduction in global terror attacks in 2018.

Matthew Henman, Head of JTIC, said, "Over the course of 2018, JTIC recorded a worldwide total of 15,321 attacks by non-state armed groups, which resulted in a total of 13,483 non-militant fatalities." Henman also noted that the annual civilian toll from terror attacks is the lowest since JTIC began collecting "comprehensive event data" in 2009. According to the report, the decrease in violence in Syria and increased government control over the country were the central reasons for the decrease in incidents and fatalities. The report noted that Daesh's attacks have decreased by almost three-quarters, yet the terror group was still the deadliest in the world. The report has claimed that Afghanistan had become the deadliest country worldwide in 2018 in terms of non-militant fatalities.

- On January 21, the Afghan-Taliban carried out a coordinated attack on a military base in the central province of Maidan Wardak in Afghanistan, killing scores of security personnel.

During the attack at least four insurgent gunmen stormed the base following the detonation of two armed vehicles into a training centre of the National Directorate for Security in Maidan Wardak. Immediately after the attack, a senior official in the Defence Ministry in Kabul indicated that some 126 people have been killed in the explosion inside the military training centre. However, no official confirmation of the casualty toll has been provided. According to media reports, at least 12 members of the Afghan military were killed and another 28 injured. All three militants were killed in the incident. Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid claimed responsibility for the attack. The attack was conducted on the same day when Zalmay Khalilzad, US special envoy for peace in Afghanistan, met Taliban representatives in Qatar.

- On January 20, at least 10 UN peacekeepers from the United Nations Stabilisation Mission In Mali (MINUSMA) were killed and 25 others wounded in an attack on a United Nations camp in Aguelhok, in the Kidal region.

The UN peacekeepers belonged to Chad. According to the Mauritanian Al-Akhbar news agency, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) claimed responsibility for the attack, terming it a reaction to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to Chad. UN spokesperson Ivan Dujarric said, "MINUSMA forces responded robustly and a number of assailants were killed." UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the UN envoy for Mali, Mahamat Saleh Annadif, strongly condemned the attack. Guterres also conveyed his "heartfelt condolences to the Government of Chad, and the families of the deceased. He said the attacks may constitute war crimes under international law, and urged the Malian authorities to "spare no effort" in identifying the perpetrators of this attack so that they can be brought to justice.

--- Moiz Khan

MIDDLE EAST & WEST ASIA

Arab League

- On January 27, Arab League Chief, Ahmed Abul Gheit held talks with UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen in Cairo, Egypt.

The two sides discussed the prospects of Syria's readmission to the Arab League. The League had suspended Syria's membership in November 2011. Several Arab states including Lebanon and Tunisia have recently called for Syria's return to the Arab League. Abul Gheit also pointed to the importance of "reaching a peaceful solution" to the Syrian crisis. The two sides also underlined the need for measures to stop regional and international meddling in Syria, saying such interventions have had negative repercussions on the course of the conflict settlement.

Iraq

- On January 27, at least four Iraqi policemen were killed in two bomb blasts north of Baghdad.

Daesh claimed responsibility for the attack. The police officers were taking up their post at the southern entrance of Al-Shargat when the bomb went off killing two officers and wounding eight others. An hour and a half later, as reinforcements arrived, a second bomb went off killing two more officers. Al-Shargat was one of the last areas recaptured by the government, which announced several months later that it had ousted Daesh from Iraq. However, hit-and-run attacks by Daesh sleeper cells continue, especially assassinations and kidnappings of local officials.

Israel

- On January 23, following warnings from Syria, the Israeli military deployed the "Iron Dome" missile systems in Tel Aviv and other parts of the occupied territories.
- On January 21, Israel struck what it said were Iranian targets in Syria in response to missile strikes allegedly carried out by Iran.

Israel conducted the strikes against facilities it said belonged to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force. It said the strikes were in response to a medium-range, surface-to-surface missile the Quds Force fired from Syria at the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights on January 20, 2019, and was intercepted by Israeli air defences. Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu said, "The Air Force struck a strong blow against Iranian targets in Syria after Iran fired a

missile from there toward Israel. We do not allow such acts of aggression to pass by. We are acting against Iran and against the Syrian Forces who are tools of Iranian aggression.” In reaction, Syria’s UN Ambassador Bashar al-Ja’afari delivered a strong warning to the Israeli regime. Speaking at the UN Security Council meeting on the Middle East, Ja’afari criticised the US, France and Britain for providing “unlimited support” to their allies in Tel Aviv and thus emboldening them to act freely in Syria. He further warned that his country could use its right to respond in self-defence to the Israeli air raids against the Damascus International Airport by striking Tel Aviv’s Ben Gurion airport if the Security Council failed to shoulder its responsibilities and act against the regime’s aggression.

Lebanon

- According to *Qatar News Agency* on January 21, during the two-day Arab Economic and Social Development Summit in Beirut, Qatar announced investment worth \$500 million in Lebanese government bonds.

Qatari Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani said that Qatar “will purchase Lebanese government bonds worth \$500 million.” During his address to the summit, the Foreign Minister said, “Qatar has always been committed to supporting Lebanese people in light of the great challenges they face, this move stems from the profound fraternal ties between the two brotherly countries.” Doha’s decision followed a meeting between the Emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and Lebanese President, Michel Aoun on the sidelines of the conference. Qatar made the announcement amid its continued regional rivalry with Saudi Arabia, which broke off its diplomatic ties with Doha in June 2017. The Beirut summit ended with the attending delegations agreeing on a list of economic priorities. The final statement also encouraged the safe return of Syrian refugees to their homeland.

Palestine

- According to Palestine’s official news agency *Wafa* on January 29, Palestinian Prime Minister, Rami al-Hamdallah has officially submitted his resignation and that of his unity government to President Mahmoud Abbas.

President Abbas has accepted the resignation of the Palestinian cabinet and begun consultations to form a new government consisting of Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) factions, dominated by his Fatah organisation, to prepare for a parliamentary election in 2019. Over the past few weeks, President Abbas has been facing pressure from his ruling Fatah movement to remove Hamdallah from power, and establish a new government comprised of representatives from the PLO factions in addition to independent figures. Fatah leaders said there was no point

in keeping the present government in power in the wake of the continued crisis between their faction and Hamas. Hamdallah headed the Palestinian National Consensus Government, which was formed after Fatah and Hamas reached an agreement in 2014. Hamdallah expressed hope that consultations to establish a new government will bear fruit as soon as possible. An unnamed Hamas official condemned the move as an attempt to marginalise and exclude the resistance group from Palestinian politics.

- On January 22, senior Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erekat said that the Palestinian Authority (PA) will refuse American aid in its entirety after Washington cut humanitarian funds to Palestinians.

According to Erekat, the Authority “sent an official letter to the US Administration requesting it to stop all aid to the PA, including assistance to the Palestinian security services.” He also said that accepting such help could carry unwelcome legal consequences for the Ramallah-based administration. US President Donald Trump has already pledged to cut almost all humanitarian aid to Palestinians. American-funded projects are being phased out gradually. Erekat further said the decision was made due to concerns over the so-called Anti-Terrorism Clarification Act (ATCA), approved by President Donald Trump in October 2018, which makes it possible for US citizens to sue foreign entities that receive US aid.

- On January 21, Palestinian resistance movement Hamas denounced Chad’s normalisation of relations with Israel and called on the country’s government to reconsider the move.

On January 20, 2019, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu travelled to Chad, where he and Chadian President Idriss Deby Itno announced the renewal of diplomatic relations between the two countries. In a statement, Hamas condemned Chad’s involvement in a “dangerous wave of normalisation with the Israeli occupation.” The Palestinian movement further criticised Chad’s policy shift “as a stab in the back of the Palestinian people and their just cause” against the Israeli occupation of their homeland.

Qatar

- On January 27, Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and South Korean President Moon Jae-in held a summit in Seoul on ways to bolster bilateral cooperation, with a particular focus on strengthening economic ties between the two nations.

On the first leg of his three-nation Asian tour, Sheikh Tamim arrived in Seoul for two days of talks with senior officials in South Korea. During the summit, the two leaders explored ways for increasing South Korea’s role in various fields in Qatar, including transportation, infrastructure and health care besides energy and construction sectors. Moon stressed friendly relations between South Korea and Qatar and welcomed the idea of enhancing the volume of bilateral trade exchanges. Sheikh Tamim hailed solid ties between Seoul and Doha, expressing hope that

his visit can boost their friendship. The two leaders also signed seven memorandums of understanding (MoUs) on cooperation in different spheres.

- On January 26, Qatar's Ambassador to the Gaza Strip, Mohammed al-Emadi said that Qatar will no longer fund salaries of Hamas employees in Gaza but will still give aid to poor families.

According to an informal deal between Israel and Hamas in November 2018, Qatar had agreed to send \$90 million through six monthly payments to Gaza, in exchange for relative calm along the Israeli border. The first two monthly payments of \$15 million were disbursed and went mainly to paying salaries of around 40,000 Hamas civil servants, while around a third of each monthly payment helped poor people. But the deal became a major cause of political contention in Israel, whose territory is used for delivery of the funds. According to Emadi, "The tension was very high on Hamas internally and on the Israeli government the tension also was very high from the opposition."

- On January 23, Qatar's Emir, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani held talks with Sudan's President, Omar Al-Bashir in Doha.

President Omar al-Bashir was on his first foreign visit proceeding more than a month of protests in Sudan. People are protesting against inflation and food shortages calling for an end to President Omar's 30-year rule. According to a statement from the court of Qatar's Emir, "President Bashir briefed the Emir on the latest updates regarding the situation and challenges facing the country. The Emir affirmed Qatar's firm stance on Sudan's unity and stability, and they discussed the latest developments in the Darfur peace process." According to observers, President Bashir's trip is an opportunity to gain financial assistance from Qatar to shore up Sudan's dwindling reserves.

Saudi Arabia

- According to *Dawn* on January 26, the European Commission has added Saudi Arabia to an EU draft list of countries that pose a threat to the bloc due to weak controls against terrorism financing and money laundering.

The EU's list currently consists of 16 countries, including Iran, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen and North Korea. The list is mostly based on criteria used by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), a global body composed of wealthy nations seeking to combat money laundering and terrorism financing. The list however, has been updated using new criteria developed by the EU Commission since 2017. Saudi Arabia is one of the countries added to the updated list. Saudi authorities did not immediately comment on this development.

The move comes amid heightened international pressure on Saudi Arabia following the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. It is a setback for Riyadh at a time when it is striving to

bolster its international reputation in order to encourage foreign investors to participate in a huge transformation plan and improve financial ties for its banks.

Syria

- On January 30, at least eight civilians were killed in a series of US-led airstrikes in the province of Deir ez-Zor.

According to Syria's official news agency SANA, the aerial attacks hit al-Baghoz town in the Abu Kamal district of the province, leaving three women and five children dead and several others injured. The sources noted that the death toll is expected to rise as some people have been critically wounded in the airstrikes. Syria has on numerous occasions condemned air strikes by the US-led coalition, asking the UN to force Washington and its allies to put an end to their military intervention in the country.

- On January 30, the 14th conference of Muslim Scholars opened in Damascus with hundreds of attendees expected to exchange views on the latest developments in the Muslim world.

The executive secretary of the conference, Hojjatoleslam Khodayar Nasseri, said that more than 500 clerics from different Muslim countries, including Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain, Iraq and Yemen, attended the event. Speaking at the opening ceremony of the conference, the Leader of the Islamic Revolution's special representative to Syria, Ayatollah Seyyed Abolfazl Tabatabai Ashkezari hailed the Syrian government and nation's resistance against terrorists and foreign interference. Syrian Minister of Endowments, Mohammad Abdelsattar al-Sayyed also addressed the conference, and said the resistance front was to clinch a big victory.

- On January 29, during a meeting with Iran's first Vice President, Eshaq Jahangiri in Damascus, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said that Iran and Syria should work together in face of 'Western economic war'.

On January 28, 2019, the Iranian Vice President arrived in Damascus heading a 40-member delegation to hold talks with senior officials of the country. The two countries signed key economic agreements in the presence of Jahangiri and Syrian Prime Minister Imad Khamis. While giving details of the agreements, the Iranian Vice President said the two sides had come to "very important agreements on banking cooperation." The Syrian Prime Minister also announced that the countries have signed a "unique" agreement enabling long-term economic cooperation. During his meeting with Jahangiri, President Assad said the signing of several agreements between Iran and Syria "will pave the way for the two countries to boost their steadfastness in the face of an economic war being waged against them by certain Western countries". He also said Iran and Syria should make more joint efforts to thwart the plots of those countries, which are aimed at weakening the two countries, hindering their independent

decision-making and breaking the will of their people. The Iranian Vice President commended the Syrian government and nation for the great achievements they have made in their counter-terrorism battles.

- On January 26, the Syrian Foreign Ministry condemned Turkey's military presence in northern Syria as a violation of a 1998 protocol, the Adana pact, between the two countries.

Turkey and its Syrian rebel proxies control part of northern Syria, and Ankara has repeatedly threatened another military operation against Kurdish fighters on its southern border. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has insisted the Adana Protocol gives Turkey the right to intervene militarily in the neighbouring country. The Foreign Ministry has accused Ankara of repeatedly breaching the Adana deal throughout Syria's civil war. According to the Ministry, "Since 2011, the Turkish regime has violated and continues to violate this agreement." It also accused Turkey of "supporting terrorists".

- On January 23, Kurdish-led fighters took control of the village of Baghouz. It was the last village held by Daesh.

The latest victory for Kurdish-led fighters is the result of a broad offensive launched by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in September 2018 with the support of the US-led coalition. The offensive has reduced the militant's last enclave on the north bank of the Euphrates valley. The remaining Daesh fighters now remain scattered on the north bank of the River Euphrates.

- On January 21, at least five members of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were killed in a suicide car bomb attack on a military convoy in the Hasakeh province.

Daesh claimed responsibility for the attack. US soldiers were also accompanying the SDF members however they remained safe during the attack. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "a suicide attacker driving a bomb-laden car targeted a convoy of American forces accompanied by the SDF on the Hasakeh-Shadadi road." According to coalition spokesman Sean Ryan, "a combined US and Syrian partner force convoy was involved in an apparent vehicle-borne improvised explosive device VBIED."

- On January 18, at least 11 people were killed in an explosion outside an office belonging to an Al Qaeda-linked group on the southern edge of the rebel-held city of Idlib.

The blast comes a week after members of the Al Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Arabic for Levant Liberation Committee, or HTS, took control of wide parts of Idlib province and the surrounding countryside after forcing rival insurgents to accept a deal for a civil administration run by HTS in their areas. Earlier, on January 16, 2019, a suicide attack killed four US personnel in northern Syria. Daesh claimed responsibility for the attack. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, two Americans soldiers, nine Syrian civilians, and five US-backed fighters were killed in the attack on a restaurant in the northern city of Manbij.

According to Pentagon, the blast was the deadliest attack on US coalition forces in Syria since they were deployed in 2014.

- According to *Al-Watan* on January 16, new special UN envoy to Syria, Geir Pedersen visited Damascus and held talks with senior Syrian officials, including Foreign Minister Walid Muallem.

Pedersen, who replaces Staffan de Mistura, is the fourth negotiator to have been appointed UN special envoy to Syria since the civil war broke out in 2011. His visit comes at a time of heightened tension between the top foreign brokers of the conflict. Turkey and the US have proposed the creation of a so-called “security zone” in northeastern Syria, a move that the Kurdish militia sees as nothing short of a military occupation. According to the Syrian Foreign Ministry, during his meeting with Pedersen, Muallem expressed Syria’s “readiness to cooperate with him in his mission to facilitate Syrian-Syrian dialogue with the objective of reaching a political solution to the Syrian crisis.”

Turkey

- On January 23, Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan held talks on Syria with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

The two sides agreed to take steps towards stabilising the situation in Syria’s northwestern province of Idlib. Erdogan said that Turkey would focus on its so-called “security zone” in northern Syria. He also said, “our solidarity makes a weighty contribution to the security of the region”. Russia and Turkey have agreed to coordinate ground operations in Syria following US President Donald Trump’s announcement of withdrawal of American troops from Syria. Meanwhile, President Putin said that the two countries should “work on issues of regional security and actively cooperate on Syria”.

- On January 19, Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met with visiting US Republican Senator Lindsey Graham and discussed the situation in Syria.

Graham is a prominent voice on foreign affairs in the US. His talks with Erdogan included a proposal for the creation of a “safe zone” in northeast Syria. Graham said he is concerned that US President Donald Trump’s troop withdrawal announcement had emboldened Daesh militants and created dangerous uncertainty for American allies. Speaking to reporters in Ankara, the Republican senator said a plan to withdraw from Syria should ensure that Daesh is defeated, that Iran is contained and that Turkey is protected from threats from Kurdish rebels. He said the goal of destroying Daesh militants in Syria has not yet been accomplished.

---Muhammad Shoaib

SOUTH ASIA: I

Pakistan

External

- On January 31, Pakistan's government reiterated its support for the Kashmir cause and rejected India's objections over Pakistan Foreign Minister's telephonic discussion with All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) leader, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq.

On January 29, 2019 Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi held a telephonic conversation with Umar Farooq and informed him about Pakistan's efforts to highlight India's human rights violations in Indian Occupied Kashmir. Pakistan's outreach to Hurriyat leader angered India which summoned Pakistan's High Commissioner Sohail Mahmood and conveyed to him that Pakistan Foreign Minister's action was "a brazen attempt to subvert India's unity and to violate its territorial integrity." A day after Pakistan's Foreign Office summoned India's High Commissioner, Ajay Bisaria and rejected India's objection saying, "Kashmir is an unresolved issue between Pakistan and India". Pakistan also asked India to refrain from projecting the legitimate struggle of the Kashmiri people for self-determination as "terrorism".

- On January 30, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi visited Muscat and held a meeting with his Omani counterpart, Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah.

The two sides discussed matters of mutual interest and regional security. According to the Foreign Office, a 12-member delegation of Technical Experts representing different sectors of bilateral cooperation also accompanied Qureshi during his visit.

- On January 29, US Director of National Intelligence, Daniel Coats noted in a threat assessment report to Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that militant groups "supported by Pakistan will continue to take advantage of their safe haven in the country and to plan and conduct attacks in India and Afghanistan, including against US interests."

The report also noted that Pakistan's "narrow approach" towards combatting terrorism would frustrate US counterterrorism efforts against the Taliban. The report claimed that Pakistan has been using some militant groups as "policy tools". Pakistan's Foreign Office spokesman, Dr Muhammad Faisal warned that such "controversial statements would be counterproductive and could adversely affect the peace and stability of the region." Pakistan has maintained that there are no terrorists' safe havens in Pakistan.

- On January 29, Russian Special Representative on Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov visited Islamabad and met with Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi.

Pakistan's Foreign Office said that the two sides held "in-depth consultations on regional political situation and Afghan peace process." Foreign Minister Qureshi underscored the importance of peace and stability in Afghanistan and stated that Pakistan has been facilitating

the ongoing talks between the US and the Taliban as “a shared responsibility and in good faith.” Both sides agreed to continue regular consultations on Afghan peace process.

- On January 24, Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) Director General, Major General Asif Ghafoor rejected a report by *Hindustan Times* which claimed that Pakistan’s Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa had approached his Indian counterpart General Bipin Rawat for talks.

Pakistan’s Army also rejected the Indian newspaper’s claim in the same report that General Bajwa and Indian Army Chief General Bipin Rawat had served together in Congo. According to DG ISPR, the decision for talks was the “prerogative of both the governments.” Meanwhile, Pakistan’s Foreign Office said on January 21, 2019 that Pakistan has shared the draft agreement with India for further negotiations over the agreement on the planned Kartarpur Corridor.

- On January 24, Foreign Office spokesman, Dr Mohammad Faisal said that Pakistan’s position on its ties with Israel “remained unchanged.”

The statement follows media reports that the government allowed a Pakistani Jew to travel to Jerusalem on a Pakistani passport. Pakistan does not recognise Israel and therefore its passport is not valid for Israel. Pakistan has maintained that there could be no change in its stance toward Israel unless the Palestinian dispute is resolved. In October 2018, President Arif Alvi reiterated this position and stressed that Pakistan would not establish ties with Israel due to its occupation of Palestinian territory and “continued oppression against Palestinians.”

- On January 20, US Republican Senator, Lindsey Graham visited Islamabad and met with Prime Minister Imran Khan.

During the meeting, the two sides discussed bilateral ties and the regional security situation. Terming Pakistan a “reliable strategic partner,” Graham said that he would request US President Donald Trump to meet Prime Minister Khan “sooner or later and push a joint agenda for peaceful resolution of Afghan conflict.” Graham came to Islamabad soon after US Special Envoy for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad visited Pakistan where he met with Prime Minister Khan, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa. Khalilzad’s visit was part of US efforts to encourage Pakistan to play its role in ending the stalemate between the Afghan government and Taliban over the Afghan reconciliation process. In a related development on January 20, 2019 General Joseph Votel, Commander of the US CENTCOM, met with Pakistan’s Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa and discussed regional security and the Afghanistan reconciliation process.

- On January 22, Prime Minister Imran Khan visited Doha and held a meeting with Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani and Prime Minister Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa Al-Thani.

The two sides discussed bilateral ties and regional and international matters of mutual interest. High-level officials including Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and Finance Minister Asad Umar accompanied PM Khan during his visit. According to media reports, Pakistan has requested the Qatari government to reduce the prices of liquefied natural gas (LNG).

- During her visit to Pakistan on January 18, United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) President, Maria Fernanda Espinosa held talks with Prime Minister Imran Khan and Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi.

During the meeting, Pakistan's leadership raised the Kashmir dispute with UNGA President and asked her to set up a commission to probe human rights abuses in the Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK). Pakistan also underscored the need for the UN to ensure implementation of the relevant Security Council resolutions on Kashmir. On her part, Espinosa said that "dialogue" is the only way to resolve conflict between Pakistan and India.

Pakistan Internal

- On January 29, the Supreme Court of Pakistan upheld the acquittal of Asiya bibi, a Christian woman who was sentenced to death for blasphemy in 2010, after judges dismissed a petition filed by extremist religious-political groups calling for her execution.

In October 2018, the Supreme Court ruled that the evidence against Asiya Bibi was "fabricated and insufficient" and acquitted her of the blasphemy charge. This led to nationwide demonstrations by members of some extremist religious-political groups including Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP).

- On January 29, at least 9 people, including 3 policemen were killed and 21 others injured in a terrorist attack on the office of the Deputy Inspector General (DIG) in Loralai.

Three terrorists were also killed in the attack. It was the second attack on security forces in Loralai in January 2019. On January 1, 2019, terrorists attacked a training centre of the Frontier Corps in Loralai in which four security personnel were killed. In a related development on January 29, 2019, Counterterrorism Department (CTD) claimed that UAE authorities had arrested a key suspect of the November 2018 terrorist attack on the Chinese Consulate in Karachi.

- During a meeting on human rights at the Prime Minister Office on January 29, the government approved the recommendations to amend the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) to declare "enforced disappearances a criminal offence".

Human Rights Minister, Dr Shireen Mazari said on January 28, 2019 that the government is committed to ensure the rule of law and protection of fundamental rights of citizens guaranteed in Pakistan's Constitution.

- Quoting the DG Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), Major General Asif Ghafoor, *Radio Pakistan* reported on January 28 that work on almost 900-kilometre fence along the Pak-Afghan border was completed.

According to DG ISPR, the full project, which other than fencing includes gadgets and surveillance equipment to stop illicit movement from Afghanistan, would be completed in 2020.

- On January 20, Prime Minister Imran Khan said that the government would give “exemplary punishment” to those guilty in Sahiwal shooting case in which Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) officials opened fire on a car which according to them was being used by a “Daesh militant.”

On January 19, 2019, the CTD officials opened fire on a car near Sahiwal killing its driver, Zeeshan Javed and three members of a family including a 13-year-old girl. The incident sparked outrage across the country. Initially the CTD officials described the shooting as an “encounter with terrorists” and alleged that they were carrying weapons and explosives. However, these claims were refuted by the Joint Investigation Team (JIT) which, in its preliminary report blamed the CTD officials for killing the members of an innocent family. Murder charges were registered against the CTD officials involved in the encounter.

- On January 18, Justice Asif Saeed Khosa took oath as the 26th Chief Justice of Pakistan.

The oath was administered by President Arif Alvi. Chief Justice Khosa would serve as the country’s top judge until December 21, 2019.

India

- On January 20, Indian Army Chief General Bipin Rawat stressed the need to focus on incorporating Artificial Intelligence and big data computing into the Armed Forces’ system.

General Bipin said that China has been spending huge amounts of money on Artificial Intelligence and cyber warfare. General Rawat said that India should also focus on Artificial Intelligence and on Big Data Analytics.

- *Reuters* reported on January 29 that the Indian government had asked the Supreme Court to allow it to hand over land to a Hindu trust that wants to build a temple in Ayodhya.

The development came as India approaches general elections scheduled to be held in May 2019. BJP remains under pressure as its Hindu base is demanding the construction of a temple in Ayodhya. Some have even asked the government to bring an ordinance to build the temple.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

SOUTH ASIA: II

Afghanistan

- *Associated Press* reported on January 31 that the Taliban stated they are not seeking a monopoly on power in the future administration in Afghanistan but are looking for ways to co-exist with Afghan institutions.

The conciliatory statement was issued by the insurgent group as heightened efforts for peace are underway. The statement appears to be aimed at easing fears among those who were opposing the idea of a transitional government on an interim basis that could include the Taliban. The statement also reflects that the insurgent group might accept the current constitution of Afghanistan by compromising on its particular governance system of Islamic Emirate.

- On January 30, while addressing a huge youth gathering in Kabul, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said that the key to peace is in Afghanistan and the key to war is in Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Quetta.
- On January 24, Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani said that peace in Afghanistan would be the greatest asset for Pakistan's prosperity if Islamabad changes its attitude towards Kabul and addresses the common issue of terrorism.

Ghani added that their fundamental problem with Pakistan was the latter's inaction in removing what he termed a 'shadow of violence'. He stated Afghanistan would be the greatest asset for Pakistan in terms of energy if Islamabad addresses the joint issue of terrorism. Ghani's highly irresponsible remarks came at a time when Pakistan has been employing its resources towards brokering an agreement between the US and the Taliban. No country has proved to be more successful and made more sacrifices than Pakistan in curbing terrorism. While Afghanistan remains unable to curb terrorism and the trafficking of drugs and weapons, Pakistan has had to restore to the further fencing along the Durand Line as a result. Ultimately, from a Geostrategic perspective, Afghanistan a landlocked nation, is and will remain dependent on Pakistan. Ghani's remarks also seem to be a result of his National Security Advisor's recent India visit where New-Delhi pledged to provide Afghan government with two more attack helicopters to intensify fighting against the Taliban at a time when the US and other regional powers have been struggling to broker a ceasefire agreement to attain peace in Afghanistan.

- On January 29, Russia's Special Representative on Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov visited Pakistan to consult on the ongoing Afghan peace process.

Kabulov held a meeting with Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi where both the leaders agreed to continue coordinating their positions on efforts for peace in Afghanistan. Kabulov noted that Russia and Pakistan were important stakeholders in peace and stability in Afghanistan and it was in their shared interest to support all efforts for peace and stability through their close coordination. The two sides agreed to continue regular consultations on the

Afghan peace process and support regional initiatives to bring lasting peace in Afghanistan and the region. In November 2018, Russia arranged the Moscow Summit for Afghan peace where almost all stakeholders to the conflict including the Taliban, the US, Afghan officials and representatives from regional countries participated. In February 2018, Pakistan and Russia established a joint anti-terror military commission to counter the common threat of Daesh from Afghanistan.

- On January 28, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad briefed Afghan media in Kabul about progress made with the Taliban during the six-day talks in Qatar.

According to Khalilzad, significant progress has been made on vital issues with the Taliban, however, he also reiterated that there is a lot more work to be done. Khalilzad said that he encouraged the Taliban to engage in direct talks with the Afghan government. He added, “Afghan security and stability is a big concern for the US and to that end we are working together to get to a comprehensive ceasefire”. On the question of establishing an interim government, Khalilzad said that it had not been discussed. In a separate interview with The New York Times, Khalilzad announced that the US and Taliban had successfully drafted a framework for a peace deal. The Afghan Taliban guaranteed that Afghan territory would not be used by Al-Qaeda and Daesh militants- a point stressed by Washington as necessary for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan. Additional concessions requested from the Taliban included the Taliban’s agreement to a cease-fire and to engage in direct talks with the Afghan government. Acting US Defence Secretary, Patrick Shanahan described the talks as “encouraging”. However, there is still no consensus on a timetable for a US withdrawal or a ceasefire. Earlier on January 27, 2019, Taliban spokesman said that until the issue of withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan is agreed upon, progress on other issues is impossible and rejected reports about a possible “agreement on a ceasefire”. Some media reports quoting a senior Taliban leader also suggested that the insurgent group is in favour of establishing an interim government in case a deal is reached with the US. However, the authorities in Kabul have strongly opposed this idea. While addressing his nation after being briefed by Khalilzad, Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani said, “we want peace quickly, we want it soon, but we want it with prudence”. He also assured the people that their rights would not be compromised in the name of peace and that the country’s sovereignty will be upheld. He added that the Taliban has two choices at the moment - to either stand with the people of Afghanistan or be used as a tool by other countries. He said the foreign troops in the country would leave at some point, but this would be done in accordance with an orderly plan. Although, the White House and the western media seem quite optimistic regarding the progress made with the Taliban in the ongoing peace process, keeping in view major disagreements particularly centering on US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan and a ceasefire, along with disagreements between authorities in Kabul and the insurgent group, the task of reaching an agreement and proceeding to the next phase of an intra-Afghan dialogue still appears to be riddled with challenges.

- On January 23, Afghanistan's Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah said that the US has assured that any troop pullout would not affect the combat abilities of remaining forces.

Withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan remains the top condition cited by the Taliban for initiation of an intra-Afghan dialogue to end the decades long war in the country. The US and the Taliban have been in direct talks for the last five months in order to agree upon a timeline for the withdrawal of US troops. Abdullah mentioned that the US officials had stated no final decision had been made regarding the withdrawal of troops and that Washington remained committed to supporting Afghan Defence and Security institutions. While criticising the Taliban he said that a wider segment of society were not in support of the Taliban's perception of governance (Islamic Emirate). Abdullah, an ethnic Tajik and former senior member of the Northern Alliance, leads the National Coalition of Afghanistan and is considered to be a favored candidate in the upcoming July 2019's Presidential election.

- On January 21, a Taliban coordinated attack on a National Directorate of Security (NDS) center left at least 65 people dead in Wardak province.

A suicide attacker detonated a vehicle full of explosives close to the NDS center while four other attackers clashed with the Security Forces. Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani condemned the attack and called it a terrorist act. The US and Pakistan also denounced the attack. In a related incident, the Taliban targeted a convoy of Logar's governor and intelligence chief and killed seven security guards. However, both high ranking officials escaped unhurt. Earlier on January 17, 2019, Afghan Security Forces claimed killing at least 39 Taliban fighters in Badghis province. Fighting continues in Afghanistan amid efforts for holding peace talks between the US and the Taliban.

- On January 18, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad arrived in Pakistan and met with the country's leadership to revive the stalled Afghan peace process.

The Afghan peace process which was initiated after the appointment of Khalilzad in September 2018 seems to be stuck after the Taliban refused to engage with the US envoy. Khalilzad was able to engage the insurgent group during his previous trips to the region. Before reaching Pakistan where he held meetings with Pakistan's Prime Minister, Imran Khan and Foreign Minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Khalilzad had consulted with the leadership of India, China and Afghanistan. While Khalilzad praised Islamabad's role in facilitating the Afghan peace process, PM Khan assured Pakistan's full support to achieve peace in the neighbouring country. Some media reports suggest that Islamabad would be holding the next US-Taliban meeting. However, the Taliban warned the US not to put "tactical pressure" through regional powers and said that all talks would be directed through their political office in Qatar.

- On January 17, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad addressed Afghan media in Kabul.

Khalilzad who arrived in Kabul after concluding his visits to New-Delhi and Beijing reiterated that the road to peace would require the Taliban to sit with other Afghans, including the government, and there is consensus among all the regional partners on this point. He added that the US hopes the Taliban make peace but if they do not choose to come to the table and continue fighting, the US would stand with the Afghan people and the Afghan government and support them. Accordingly, the US, as part of the coalition, has extended ample support to Afghan Security Forces during this period. Khalilzad also stated that the US does not seek to maintain permanent military bases in Afghanistan.

Sri Lanka

- On January 28, India pledged US \$ 1.3 billion for development of the Sri Lankan railway.

Funds allocated by India will be directed to the restoration of arterial railway lines connecting the North and the South of the country. India has committed a line of credit worth approximately US \$ 1.3 billion to support enhancing the Sri Lankan Rail system by procuring approximately 160 passenger coaches, establishing a railway workshop and providing upgrades to railway tracks and signal and telecommunication systems.

---Kashif Hussain

UNITED NATIONS

- On January 29, Agnes Callamard, the UN Special Rapporteur on extra-judicial, summary or arbitrary executions, said that she would provide her investigation report on the murder of a Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Consulate in Turkey by the end of May 2019.

Tasked by the UN to investigate the murder of the journalist in October 2018, Callamard said that her report would be made public in May 2019 for the June session of the UN Human Rights Council. Her report would be based on the evaluation of the circumstances of the crime and on the nature and extent of involvement of states and individuals in the killing of the journalist. She is on her five-day visit to Turkey from January 28 to February 3, 2019. During her course of the visit she would head an independent international inquiry into the killing and would also inspect the crime site accompanied by three forensic experts.

- On January 24, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres addressed the World Economic Forum (WEF) and appealed to world governments and other UN parties to recommit to international cooperation in order to respond to people's grievances.

In his address, Guterres comprehensively discussed current global risks and challenges and expressed hope for potential conflict resolution in the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Yemen and Syria. While highlighting the "paralysis" of the UN Security Council on certain issues, and a dysfunctional state of relations among the world's three powers including China, Russia and the US, Guterres noted that greater solidarity and greater involvement in multilateral organisations was needed to counter numerous challenges facing the world. While highlighting the "added value" of the UN for diplomacy, he pointed to the recent meetings on Climate Change in Katowice, Poland, where Member States agreed on the basis to move forward on the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change. He also highlighted the UN's role in peace efforts in Yemen, where a ceasefire accord was signed in Sweden in December 2018.

- On January 24, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres termed education as the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development because it gives people across the world the skills needed to realise all 17 global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Marking the first-ever International Day of Education, Guterres said, "Education transforms lives as it serves as a basis for achieving the other goals, including reducing inequalities; improving health; achieving gender equality; fighting hate speech, xenophobia and intolerance; protecting the planet's resources and nurturing global citizenship." However, he deplored that at least 262 million children, adolescents and youth are out of school. He stressed that the world could not afford a generation of youth who lack the necessary skills to compete in the 21st century. Meanwhile, Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), also termed education as a human right, a public good and a

public responsibility. Azoulay termed the International Day of Education an occasion to “reaffirm fundamental principles.”

- On January 22, Nickolay Mladenov, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, said that the hopes of establishing a “viable, contiguous Palestinian state” has been “systematically eroded by facts on the ground.”
- According to *Associated Press of Pakistan (APP)* on January 16, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres welcomed “the historic leadership of the state of Palestine” as the new Chair of the Group of 77 (G77).

The Foreign Ministers of the G77’s member states elected Palestine as 2019 Chair of the G77 in September 2018, and the UN General Assembly approved a resolution in October 2018 that provided Palestine additional privileges and rights of participation in international conferences held under its auspices, for the duration of its role as G77 Chair. Previously, Egypt was the chair of the G77. While emphasising the importance of the G77 and China’s continued support, Guterres said, “The Group of 77 and China has demonstrated strong leadership throughout 2018 and proved once again to be a central force in demonstrating that multilateralism is the only way to address our shared challenges.” Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said Palestine would use its chairmanship to preserve the multilateral international order and strengthen ties with its UN partners.

In a related development on January 22, 2019, Nickolay Mladenov, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, said that the possibility of establishing a Palestinian state was marred by the Israeli violations of international law. While briefing the UN Security Council, Mladenov provided his detailed assessment on the extent, and growth of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank. He said that Israeli illegal settlements were not only violation under international law but were also hindering peace efforts. He indicated that Israel was planning for over 3,000 housing units in West Bank settlements, and to legalise several illegal outposts in the region. Meanwhile, Israel also demolished and seized Palestinian-owned structures across the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. He stressed that Israeli occupation and illegal settlements in the West Bank threatens the very foundation of a future Palestinian state as the gap between Gaza and the West Bank widens.

- On January 18, Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, called on the Myanmar Government to “immediately reverse its decision not to allow access to all humanitarian organisations.”

In her statement, Lee said that restricting humanitarian access was a violation of international law, as the assistance remains vital to reach those who have fled violence in the region. On escalating violence in northern and central Rakhine and Chin states in Myanmar, she urged all sides, including the State, military and ethnic armed groups, to show restraint and protect civilians. On January 10, 2019, the Myanmar Government wrote a letter to the UN and

international humanitarian agencies with instructions, apart from the UN World Food Programme (WFP) and the International Committee of the Red Cross, to suspend their activities in the five townships in northern Rakhine that are affected by the conflict, including Ponnagyun, Kyauktaw, Rathedaung, Buthidaung and Maungdaw. In a new round of clashes, the Arakan Army separatists and the Myanmar military have been engaged in heavy fighting since November 2018, which has resulted in deaths and injuries of civilians, and the displacement of 5,000 people from their homes.

- On January 18, UN General Assembly President Maria Fernanda Espinosa visited Pakistan, marking her first visit to an Asian country since she assumed office in September 2018.

During her five-day trip to the country, Espinosa visited Centre for International Peace & Stability (CIPS) at National University of Sciences & Technology (NUST) on January 21, 2019, and praised the sacrifices rendered by Pakistani peacekeepers. While acknowledging Pakistan's contributions to the UN peacekeeping missions, she termed the country one of the largest to have contributed to peace initiatives in areas suffering through insecurity and unrest. She also lauded NUST's role in providing training to both local and foreign troops. On January 22, 2019, Espinosa also met with Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa at the General Headquarters. During her meeting she applauded Pakistan's role in combating terrorism and its efforts to resolve regional issues.

--- Moiz Khan