

February 1 – February 15

AREA BRIEF

www.ssii.com.pk



**STRATEGIC STUDIES
INSTITUTE ISLAMABAD**

info@ssii.com.pk

CONTENTS

Foreword (General Observations)	3
Americas	6
Arms Control and Disarmament	12
China and East Asia	16
Europe	18
Global Terrorism	22
Middle East & West Asia	24
South Asia (I)	32
South Asia (II)	37
United Nations	42

Area Briefs: 1-15 February, 2019

General Observations

Pakistan

- On February 12 the Commander-in-Chief of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) and Pakistan's Former Army Chief, General (R) Raheel Sharif met with Prime Minister Imran Khan. The meeting came ahead of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman's visit to the country where at least eight memoranda of understanding would be signed between the two countries.
- According to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) on February 12, naval contingents from 46 countries participated the five-day multinational naval exercise AMAN-2019 in Karachi.
- Earlier on February 10, Prime Minister Imran Khan visited Dubai to participate in the 7th edition of the World Government Summit.
- During the visit, the Premier also met with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.
- In another related development Prime Minister Imran Khan held discussions with Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Christine Lagarde on the sidelines of Summit in Dubai.
- On February 7, Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi dismissed a tweet by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in which he expressed the Afghan government's "serious concerns" about the alleged "violence perpetrated against protestors and civil activists in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces." Qureshi termed the statement "irresponsible" and a "gross interference" in the internal affairs of the country.

International

- Amid deteriorating India Pakistan relations, Pakistan summoned India's deputy head of mission to Islamabad on February 15 after Prime Minister Narendra Modi accused Pakistan of involvement in a suicide attack that killed 44 policemen in Kashmir. Given the "adapting" nature of the insurgency in IOK, observers have questioned how deep the links to Pakistan really run.

- On February 14, at least 44 Indian paramilitary soldiers were killed after their convoy was hit by an explosives-laden vehicle in Pulwama in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK). Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) claimed responsibility for the attack. Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi vowed “a befitting reply” to the perpetrators of the attack. Meanwhile Finance Minister, Arun Jaitley said that there was “incontrovertible evidence” of Pakistan’s involvement in the attack. Jaitley also announced the Indian government’s decision to remove most favoured nation (MFN) trade privileges given to Pakistan. He said that India would take “all possible diplomatic steps to ensure the complete isolation” of Pakistan. Indian Foreign Secretary, Vijay Gokhale summoned Pakistan’s High Commissioner, Sohail Mahmood and demanded action against JeM.
- Notwithstanding the nature of the Pulwama bombing which suggests the insurgency is becoming more homegrown, the White House demanded on February 14 that Pakistan end its support to terrorists, adding that the Pulwama “attack only strengthens our resolve to bolster counterterrorism cooperation and coordination between the United States and India.”
- Earlier on February 3, a complete shutdown was observed in IOK to register protest against Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK). The Indian authorities placed Hurriyat leaders including Syed Ali Geelani and Mirwaiz Umar Farooq under house arrest to prevent them from leading anti-India demonstrations on Modi’s visit.
- On February 13, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled Iran could proceed with its attempt to unfreeze assets in the US, rejecting Washington’s claims the case must be halted because of Tehran’s alleged support for international terrorism. Chief Judge, Abdulgawi Ahmed Yusuf said the UN’s top court “unanimously rejects the preliminary objections to admissibility raised by the United States of America”.
- In another diplomatic victory for Iran on February 1, France, Germany and the UK officially established a non-dollar payment channel with the country. Germany, France and the UK announced they have set up a mechanism to facilitate “legitimate trade” with Iran despite US sanctions

- Although the UK is planning to officially leave the EU on March 29, 2019, the parliament still remains divided on an exit deal. On February 14, UK Prime Minister Theresa May suffered another setback as law makers voted against her latest Brexit plan. The parliament refused to reaffirm support for May's approach to negotiations with the EU. Lawmakers voted 303 to 258 against May's motion.
- On February 14, Russia, Iran and Turkey held the fourth round of talks in Sochi to address the conflict in Syria. Meanwhile the US-led Middle East summit in Warsaw focusing on Iran, commenced on February 13, 2019. Notable absentees from the US led summit- namely Russia, Turkey and Iran- met in Sochi to discuss Syria and the withdrawal of US troops from the country. All three nations declared a political solution was vital for ending the conflict in Syria.
- On February 2, Russian President Vladimir Putin said Russia was suspending its compliance with the 1987 Intermediate Range Nuclear Force (INF) Treaty in response to the US' withdrawal from the Treaty.
- On February 1, the US announced suspension of its compliance with the INF Treaty.

---Amina Afzal

AMERICAS

Domestic

- On February 15, US President Donald Trump vowed to sign the budget approved by Congress. He will however declare a national emergency as a way of securing funding for his proposed border wall with Mexico.
- On February 14, Congress passed a spending and border security bill, averting a new government shutdown.

There have been divisions in Congress on the detention of undocumented migrants in the US, and the funding required for President Trump to build a border wall with Mexico. Lawmakers however, passed a bill, and a total of USD 1.3 billion was allocated to constructing President Trumps proposed border wall- an amount far below the USD 5.7 billion originally sought by Trump. Congress approved the bill in time before the February 22, 2019 deadline, to avoid a government shutdown. On January 25, 2019 Trump agreed to a three-week spending deal to end the record breaking 35-day long government.

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders stated, “President Trump will sign the government funding bill, and as he has stated before, he will also take other executive action — including a national emergency — to ensure we stop the national security and humanitarian crisis at the border”. The House speaker, Nancy Pelosi, and the Senate minority leader, Chuck Schumer, issued a joint statement criticising Trump’s decision which read: “Declaring a national emergency would be a lawless act, a gross abuse of the power of the presidency and a desperate attempt to distract from the fact that President Trump broke his core promise to have Mexico pay for his wall.”

- On February 13, Judge Amy Berman Jackson declared the plea deal offered to Paul Manafort void, saying he ‘intentionally’ lied to the FBI, special counsel Robert Mueller’s office and the grand jury.

Manafort, ex-aide to Donald Trump, was arrested on October 30, 2017 by the FBI after being indicted by a federal grand jury as part of Robert Mueller's investigation into the Trump campaign. On September 14, 2018, Manafort entered into a plea deal with prosecutors and plead guilty to two charges- conspiracy to defraud the United States and witness tampering- and agreed to cooperate fully with the Special Counsel. The Special Counsel's office filed a document with the court listing five areas in which they believe Manafort lied to them, therefore negating the plea deal. Judge Jackson ruled on February 13, 2019 that Manafort had indeed violated his plea deal by repeatedly lying to prosecutors.

- On February 11, Democratic congresswoman Ilhan Omar apologised after she insinuated that US support for Israel was fueled by money from a pro-Israel lobbying group.

- On February 11, Democratic Senator Amy Klobuchar announced she will be running for the office of president in the 2020 US election.

Klobuchar is a former prosecutor from Minnesota, and has been elected to represent Minnesota in the Senate. Klobuchar is one of five female contenders who have entered the race for the presidency- the contenders include Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, Tulsi Gabbard, and Kirsten Gillibrand. Elizabeth Warren formally announced her 2020 presidential bid on February 9, 2019. Warren is a Senior Senator from Massachusetts since 2013, and a prominent scholar specializing in bankruptcy law.

- On February 6, Democrats announced a new investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election and Donald Trump's foreign financial interests.

Chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, Adam Schiff, announced an aggressive investigation will be conducted to determine the "extent of any links and/or coordination" between Russia and Trump's associates, and if foreign actors had sought to hold leverage over Trump or his family and associates. In addition, the investigation would seek determine if anyone had sought to obstruct any of the relevant investigations. Schiff's announcement came one day after Trump's State of the Union address where Trump criticized "ridiculous partisan investigations" and called for unity.

- On February 5, President Donald Trump delivered the State of the Union address and urged unity.

Trump called for unity and declared that "if there is going to be peace and legislation, there cannot be war and investigation," in an apparent reference to the on-going investigation led by Special Counsel Robert Mueller into Russian meddling in the US election. Trump in his address maintained his stance on what he termed a "crisis of immigration" at the US's southern border and reiterated his stance to build a wall to protect US borders. Trump defended his stance on withdrawing US troops from Afghanistan and Syria despite his view being at odds with the US military and intelligence, as well as Republicans in Congress. Trump further stressed his alarm at the rise of "socialism" in the US- analysts suggest this is in response to Democratic presidential candidates increasingly supporting priorities that include a single-payer healthcare plan Medicare-for-All, debt-free college tuition, and universal paid family leave. Trump's address came shortly after a temporary three-week budget was announced ending the longest government shutdown in US history as the White House and Democrats in Congress remain gridlocked over government funding.

- On February 5, the Manhattan District Attorney subpoenaed the Trump inaugural committee to hand over documents relating to how he raised and spent over \$100 million. Prosecutors are focusing their investigations on a Los Angeles based investor, Imaad Zuberi, who was a major Hillary Clinton fundraiser, before he gave President Trump a huge boost.

- On February 2, Virginia Governor Ralph Northam refused to step down amid criticism after a racist photo taken of him in 1984 surfaced. Northam initially apologised, but later retracted his apology, stating that the photograph was in fact not of him.
- On February 1, Cory Booker announced his bid to run for president in the upcoming election in 2020.

Cory Booker is the former mayor of Newark, and current junior Democratic Senator from New Jersey. Booker becomes the fourth Senate Democrat contender in the race for the Democratic presidential nomination.

International

- On February 14, China's Vice Premier Liu He met with US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, to kick off high-level trade talks in Beijing.

The US has given a deadline of March 1, 2019 for reaching a trade agreement with China. If the two countries are unable to reach a deal, US tariffs on \$200 billion worth of Chinese imports are scheduled to increase from 10 percent to 25 percent. It is likely China would retaliate by raising tariffs on \$60 billion worth of US goods. In related news, on February 12, 2019, US President Donald Trump stated, while he would prefer reaching a trade deal with China at the earliest, he would consider extending the March 1, 2019 deadline.

- On February 13, the US House of Representatives approved a resolution forcing the Trump administration to withdraw US support from the war in Yemen.

The approved resolution halts US support for the Saudi-led coalition war in Yemen. Lawmakers, both Democrats and Republicans alike are increasingly uneasy over the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Yemen, and are increasingly skeptical of the US partnership with Saudi Arabia, after it was proven Saudi Arabia played a direct role in the killing of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi.

- On February 12, the top US commander on the Korean Peninsula told Senate lawmakers that "despite a reduction" in tensions with North Korea, there has been "little to no verifiable change" in the country's military capabilities since President Donald Trump's first summit with Kim Jong Un last year.
- On February 11, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo commenced his five-country European tour landing in Hungary. He proceeded to Slovakia, Poland, Brussels, concluding his trip in Iceland on February 15, 2019.

Pompeo met with Hungary's right-wing populist Prime Minister, Viktor Orban and stated the US was looking to be more engaged in Central and Eastern Europe in an attempt to reduce the growing influence of Russia and China. The Hungarian Foreign Minister, Peter Szijjarto, while welcoming Pompeo's calls for closer ties and greater defence cooperation, rebuked US criticism of Hungary's close relationship with Russia and China. During his visit to Slovakia on February 12, 2019, Pompeo raised his concerns on the role played by Russian President, Vladimir Putin, and stated he posed a threat to democracies worldwide. He also emphasised "the need to guard against China's economic and other efforts to create dependence and manipulate your political system".

- On February 11, President Donald Trump pushed Iraq to stop purchasing energy from Iran.

Trump applied pressure on Iraq to adhere to US sanctions against Iran and halt all energy purchases from the country. The US gave Iraq until the end of March 2019 to stop all energy purchases from neighboring Iran. Iran is Iraq's sole foreign supplier of energy. Iraqi leaders fearing an energy shortfall can lead to mass protest and political instability in the country have pushed back, straining diplomatic relations between Baghdad and Washington. Trump has actively been looking to ensure all nations comply with US sanctions against Iran after the US withdrew from the deal to limit Tehran's nuclear program last year.

- On February 7, the Wall Street Journal reported that anonymous "current and former" officials have stated US forces will be withdrawn from Syria by the end of April, unless the Trump administration decides otherwise.

According to the Wall street Journal, a 'significant portion' of the US troops currently in Syria will be withdrawn by mid-March and all remaining troops will be withdrawn by April. The Pentagon however did not comment on this. Trump and the Pentagon have been at odds over the timeline for troop withdrawal, with Trump pushing for a quick withdrawal of troops while the Pentagon urging a more cautious and slow withdrawal.

- On February 7, United States Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad clarified the US had not determined a troop withdrawal timetable for Afghanistan.
- On February 6, the US military announced plans to purchase and test Israel's Iron Dome missile defence system.

Israel's Iron Dome missile defence system, developed and produced by Israel's state-run defence firm, Rafael Advanced Defence Systems, uses radar and interceptor missiles to combat incoming threats and has been in use since 2011. Israeli officials claim the system is transportable, has a success rate of up to 90% and is able to work in all weather conditions. The US has already heavily subsidised the system's creation, and some components of the system are supplied by

American firms. US Army Colonel Patrick Seiber stated the system would be "assessed and experimented" with to protect deployed US personnel on a test basis only. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated the sale was a "great achievement for the country" and marked "another manifestation of the deepening of our steadfast alliance with the United States, and an expression of Israel's rising status in the world".

- On February 6, US envoy for North Korea Stephen Biegun arrived in Pyongyang for talks after President Donald Trump confirmed he would be meeting North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, in Vietnam on February 27, 2019.

While Trump contends North Korea is no longer a nuclear threat, the UN has warned otherwise, stating North Korea is continuing its nuclear programme and defying sanctions. The US wants North Korea to make a full declaration of all its nuclear weapons facilities and commit to destroying them under international supervision. Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un had previously met in Singapore in June 2018 to discuss denuclearisation, however no tangible outcomes were achieved from the meeting.

- On February 6, Donald Trump stated that territory held by the Islamic State (IS) group in Syria and Iraq could be "100%" liberated as early as next week.

Trump stated "it should be announced, probably some time next week, that we will have 100% of the caliphate," but cautioned he wanted to "wait for the official word". Trump's views, are at odds with the US military and intelligence officials who contend that IS and other militant outfits are still a very real threat, and they could stage a rapid comeback without sustained US military pressure.

- On February 4, the US Senate approved an amendment critical of President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw troops from Syria and Afghanistan.

The resolution, sponsored by Republican leader of the Senate Mitch McConnell, acknowledged the threat posed by Al-Qaeda, ISIS and their affiliates in Syria and Afghanistan. According to the text, the "precipitous withdrawal of United States forces" from either country "could put at risk hard-won gains and United States national security". The amendment was passed by an overwhelming majority of 70 to 26 - opposed by only three of the 53 Senate Republicans - highlighting a deeply discontent Republican party whose views were at odds with the President's.

- On February 3, President Donald Trump reaffirmed his commitment to pull US troops out of the "endless wars" in Syria and Afghanistan.

Trump's comments come in the face of warnings by US intelligence chiefs that a hasty US withdrawal from Afghanistan and Syria could allow a resurgence by Al-Qaeda and the militant Islamic State group within months if the US did not maintain military pressure on the terror groups. Trump however, stated he would maintain US bases in Iraq in order to watch Iran and

that he would send US troops back to Syria if ISIS regained a foothold in the country. Trump had in December 2018, ordered a “full” and “rapid” withdrawal of US troops from Syria after declaring ISIS had been defeated.

- On February 3, a total of 3,7500 troops were deployed to the US-Mexico to put up an additional 150 miles of razor wire and provide support for Customs and Border Protection to curb illegal migration.
- On February 1, the US declared that it will officially withdraw from the INF treaty in 180 days according to Mike Pompeo.

The US has suspended its obligations under the INF treaty after Moscow failed to destroy missiles that the US believed were in violation of the treaty. President Donald Trump added that NATO allies fully supported the US suspending its obligations under the INF Treaty.

Latin America

- On February 15, Haitian President Jovenel Moise stated he "will not leave the country in the hands of armed gangs and drug traffickers" amid a week of protests that started after the government was accused of misappropriating development loans.
- On February 13, Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó vowed to ensure humanitarian aid blocked by President Nicolás Maduro is brought in to the country.

Earlier, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro in a television interview stated he will block aid to Venezuela as he declared it a ‘charade’. Maduro blamed US sanctions for Venezuela's economic troubles, and argued the US intended to "create a humanitarian crisis in order to justify a military intervention".

Canada

- On February 11, the Canadian Ethics Commissioner announced he will investigate claims that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s government mishandled fraud and bribery charges levelled against an engineering firm and helped them avoid criminal prosecution.

---Kiran Mazari

ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

- On February 14, US Vice President Mike Pence called on Washington's European allies to withdraw from Iran's July 2015 Nuclear Agreement, called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

During his address to a Middle East conference organised by the US in Poland, Pence accused Britain, France and Germany of remaining party to the agreement after the Trump Administration withdrew from it in 2018 and re-imposed tough sanctions on Iran. He said that the three countries were leading "an effort to break American sanctions against Iran's murderous revolutionary regime." Pence's criticism remained focused on a financial mechanism created by the three states and the EU to allow European firms to continue trading with Iran in a way to skirt US sanctions. The Vice President also stated, "The time has come for our European partners to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal."

- According to *Sputnik* on February 12, India successfully tested its indigenously developed high-altitude interceptor missile Prithvi Defence Vehicle (PDV).
- On February 8, India successfully test-fired an air-to-air version of an anti-tank missile.

India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) said, the Prithvi Defence Vehicle (PDV) successfully destroyed a simulated target. The PDV is designed to destroy missiles at exo-atmospheric altitudes of 50-150 kilometres and could be fired from a distance of around 2,000 kilometres. The trials of PDV are aimed at replacing the current Prithvi Air Defence (PAD) exo-atmospheric interceptor in India's multi-layered ballistic missile defence (BMD) system. The system comprises the PAD for high altitude interception and Advanced Air Defence (AAD) Missile for lower altitude interception.

In a related development on February 8, 2019, the Indian Ministry of Defence said India successfully test-fired an indigenously developed helicopter-launched anti-tank guided missile Helina. The missile is an air-to-air version of the Nag anti-tank guided missile. The Ministry said that the weapon system took off smoothly from the launch platform and tracked the target before hitting it with high precision. The missile is guided by an Infrared Imaging Seeker operating in the "Lock on Before Launch" mode, and has a strike-range of 4 to 7 kilometres. The missile was previously tested on July 13, 2015, and on August 19, 2018.

- On February 6, the US agreed to sell two missile defence systems to India for two Boeing-777 aircraft at an estimated cost of \$190 million.

According to the Hindustan Times, the Pentagon said that the sale would support the foreign policy and national security of the US by strengthening the US-Indian strategic partnership. In a notification, the US Defence Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said that the Trump

Administration approved the purchase of the two systems known as Large Aircraft Infrared Countermeasures (LAIRCM) and Self-Protection Suites (SPS). The missile defence systems would be installed in two Boeing 777 Head-of-State aircraft to enhance the security of 'Air India One.'

- On February 8, India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) successfully flight tested the second indigenously developed 'Solid Fuel Ducted Ramjet (SFDR)' propulsion based missile system.

In a statement, the Indian Ministry of Defence said, "Ground booster, separation of ground booster and Nozzle-less-booster performance were found satisfactory. Missile was guided to high altitude to simulate aircraft release conditions and subsequently nozzle-less-booster was ignited. SFDR based missile accelerated to achieve ramjet Mach number successfully." According to the DRDO, the SFDR propulsion technology would help the country in developing long-range air-to-air missiles, including future beyond visual range air-to-air missile. The first test of SFDR based missile was conducted in May 2018.

- On February 7, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) unveiled an underground ballistic missile factory and also a new surface-to-surface ballistic missile.
- On February 2, Iran claimed a successful test of its new surface-to-surface cruise missile Hoveizeh, coinciding with its celebration marking the 40th anniversary of its 1979 Islamic Revolution.

IRGC Chief Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari said, "Unveiling this missile production city deep in the earth is a response to rants and raves of westerners who believe they can limit us with sanctions and threats and stop us from pursuing big goals." Jafari also said that Iran's missile programme was for defence purposes and, therefore, remains non-negotiable. Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, Head of the IRGC's Aerospace Division, indicated that the new ballistic missile, named Dezful, was an improved version of the Zolfaghar missile that had a range of 700 kilometres. However, the new missile has a range of 1000 kilometres with double explosive power. In response to unveiling of the missile, the US said on February 7, 2019, that it would continue to deter Iran's missile programme. State Department deputy spokesman Robert Palladino said, "The United States will continue to be relentless in building support around the world to confront the Iranian regime's reckless ballistic missile activity, and we will continue to impose sufficient pressure on the regime so that it changes its malign behaviour - including by fully implementing all of our sanctions." Pompeo asserted that Iran's nuclear deal has failed to curb the country's missile programme. The US maintains that Iranian missile programme violates the UNSC Resolution 2231. The UNSC R 2231 calls on the country "not to undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons, including launches using such ballistic missile technology." However, Iran rejects US

allegations and maintains that the UNSC R 2231 did not limit Iran's missile programme, and insists that it is for defensive purposes.

In a related development on February 2, 2019, Iran claimed a successful test launch of a new cruise missile, called Hoveizeh. Defence Minister Amir Hatami said, "The test of the Hoveizeh cruise missile was carried out successfully at a range of 1,200 kilometres and accurately hit the intended target." While describing the missile as the "long arm" of Iran in defending itself, Hatami said, "It can be ready in the shortest possible time and flies at a very low altitude." With a strike range of over 1,350 kilometres, the missile is a part of the Soumar group of cruise missile. The missile was unveiled in an exhibition for Iran's defence related achievements.

- On February 6, a confidential report of the UN Sanctions Monitor noted that North Korea was working to ensure its nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities could not be destroyed by military strikes.

The UN Sanctions Monitor said that it had "found evidence of a consistent trend on the part of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to disperse its assembly, storage and testing locations." The report was submitted to a UNSC sanctions committee. The report also accused North Korea of defying Security Council resolutions through a massive increase in illegal ship-to-ship transfers of petroleum products and coal. The report asserted that these violations render the latest UN sanctions ineffective.

- On February 2, Russian President Vladimir Putin said Russia was suspending its compliance with the 1987 Intermediate Range Nuclear Force (INF) Treaty in response to the US' withdrawal from the Treaty.
- On February 1, the US announced suspension of its compliance with the INF Treaty.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the Administration will provide a formal notice to Russia that the US is withdrawing from the INF Treaty in six months if Russia did not end its violation of the Treaty. In a written statement, US President Donald Trump also confirmed the US' withdrawal from the Treaty. Trump said, "We will move forward with developing our own military response options." The Trump Administration argued that Russia has been violating the treaty since 2014 which puts the US in a disadvantageous position against both Russia and China. On February 1, NATO released a statement in support of the US' decision to suspend its compliance with the Treaty. The statement read that Russia would bear the responsibility for end of the Treaty, unless the country honours its INF Treaty obligations through the verifiable destruction of the missile not compliant with the Treaty.

In response to the US' announcement, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said that Russia reserved the rights to take necessary measures against the US. Zakharova said, "It is not about Russia's guilt of violating this treaty, it is not about China or any other factor of international security. It is about the United States' strategy of waiving international liabilities

in various spheres.” On February 2, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia was suspending its compliance with the INF Treaty during a televised meeting with Foreign and Defence ministers Sergei Lavrov and Sergei Shoigu respectively. Putin said, “Our American partners have announced they are suspending their participation in the deal, and we are also suspending our participation.” He also indicated that Russia would seek to develop medium-range missiles in response to what he said were similar projects in the US. On February 2, China expressed its concerns over the suspension of compliance with the INF Treaty by the US and Russia. While calling on both the countries to engage in a constructive dialogue over the issue, China ruled out the possibility of negotiating a new multilateral pact that would also include Beijing.

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 rejected the allegations. The US claims that the 9M729 ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM) has a range capability that exceeds the 500 kilometres limit stipulated by the INF Treaty and demanded Russia eliminate all these missiles. However, Russia stressed that the 9M729 missile did not violate the INF Treaty as the range of the missile falls below the INF Treaty limits. Moreover, Russia also accused the US of violating the agreement. Russia maintains that the US missile defence interceptor platforms deployed in Eastern Europe could be used for offensive purposes, and therefore, is in violation of 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.

--- Moiz Khan

CHINA, EAST ASIA & PACIFIC

China

- On February 11, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Hua Chunying said that the US is trying to “stir up trouble” by dispatching military vessels in the South China Sea.

She urged the US to cease the “provocative actions.” The reaction came after two US guided-missile destroyers sailed within 12 nautical miles of Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. The US Navy describes the sailing of its warship as “freedom of navigation operations.” Meanwhile, China claims sovereignty over nearly all of the South China Sea and regards such ‘freedom of navigation operation’ as provocative.

- On February 11, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Hua Chunying rejected Turkey’s criticism over China’s treatment of its Muslim ethnic Uighur population.

The statement came after Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman, Hami Aksoy said that China has arbitrarily detained more than a million Uighurs who faced pressure and “systematic assimilation” in China’s Xinjiang region. Turkey called on the international community “to take effective steps to end the human tragedy in Xinjiang region”. Xinjiang is home to approximately 10 million Uighurs who have long accused Chinese authorities of religious discrimination. Beijing rejects these allegations.

- On February 6, Chinese Ambassador to the US, Cui Tiankai called for more cooperation between China and the US and stressed that history has proven that cooperation serves the interest of both countries.

Cui said cooperation is not only essential for both countries but for the world, adding that overcoming “the global financial crisis and finding a political solution to the situation on the Korean Peninsula are two success stories” of the two countries. Acknowledging the differences between China and the US, Cui said both countries “need to properly handle differences.” China and the US are facing multiple challenges including territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas. Moreover, the two countries remain engaged in a tariff war that has lasted months. On February 14, 2019, negotiators from China and the US held high-level trade talks in Beijing. However, no progress was reported following the talks.

South Korea

- According to the US State Department on February 4, South Korea and the US have agreed “in principle” to share the cost of stationing US military personnel in South Korea.

The contract between Washington and Seoul, known as Special Measures Agreement, which outlines cost sharing for US forces in South Korea, expired on December 31, 2018. Since then,

the two sides have faced challenges over US President Donald Trump's request for a 50% increase in South Korea's contribution. Under the new agreement, South Korea would increase its financial contribution to nearly \$1 billion. The now expired deal required South Korea to pay \$848 million a year for the cost of maintaining some 28,500 American troops stationed in the country.

Thailand

- On February 11, the Election Commission disqualified Thailand's Princess Ubolratana Rajakanya as a candidate for Prime Minister in the upcoming election in March 2019.

The country's Election Commission said that the "monarchy must remain above politics." Meanwhile, Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn termed Ubolratana's bid as "inappropriate" and stressed that it was against the spirit of the constitution for royalty to be involved in politics.

Malaysia

- On February 15, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said that China is a valuable trading partner.

The Prime Minister stressed that Malaysia is looking forward to improving bilateral ties with China because it has emerged as an important economic power. Mahathir Mohamad is expected to visit China in April 2019. PM Mahathir has maintained that Malaysia's foreign policy vis-à-vis China remains unchanged. After coming to power in May 2018, Mahathir vowed to renegotiate Chinese projects authorised by the previous government of Najib Razak.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

EUROPE

- On February 15, Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, called a snap general election for April 28, 2019, after his proposed budget was rejected.

The minority government of Pedro Sánchez was relying on the support of the two main Catalan pro-independence parties in approving his budget. The parties however opted to support the centre-right Citizens party and subsequently, Sanchez's budget was defeated by 191 to 158 votes, with one abstention. The Catalan separatist MP's rejected Sanchez's budget after the government refused to discuss the region's right to self-determination. The upcoming election will constitute the third general election in less than four years.

- On February 14, UK Prime Minister Theresa May suffered another setback as law makers voted against her latest Brexit plan.

The UK parliament refused to reaffirm support for May's approach to negotiations with the EU, as the UK looks to leaving the EU. Lawmakers voted 303 to 258 against the May's motion. Opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn stated, "tonight's vote shows there is no majority for the Prime Minister's course of action in dealing with Brexit". The UK is looking to officially leave the EU on March 29, 2019 but parliament still remains divided on an exit deal.

- On February 14, Russia, Iran and Turkey held the fourth round of talks in Sochi to address the conflict in Syria.

While the US-led Middle East summit in Warsaw focusing on Iran, commenced on February 13, 2019, notable absentees from the summit- namely Russia, Turkey and Iran- met in Sochi to discuss Syria and the withdrawal of US troops from the country. All three nations declared a political solution was vital for ending the conflict in Syria.

- On February 14, the EU broadened the list of nations falling short in thwarting financing of terrorism and organised crimes, and adds Saudi Arabia to the list.

The EU added seven countries, including Saudi Arabia, Panama and Nigeria to the list of nations it has identified as a threat due to lax controls on terror financing and money laundering. Inclusion on the list does not trigger sanctions, however it does result in European banks applying more stringent controls on transactions with customers and institutions in those countries. Countries already on the list include Afghanistan, North Korea, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Syria, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia and Yemen.

- On February 11, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto met with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Pompeo stated at a joint address, that "we must not let [Russian President Vladimir] Putin drive a wedge between friends in NATO, adding "that Russia will never be a friend to the freedom and sovereignty of smaller nations". Pompeo also raised concerns about China, stating that "Beijing's handshake comes with strings ... that will leave Hungary indebted both economically and politically". Szijjarto responded strongly to Pompeo's comments by stating "the world is not going to be a better place if some countries spend their time intervening in the internal political affairs of other countries". He maintained that it was possible for Budapest to have transparent relations with Moscow and Beijing and the West, and said it was an "enormous hypocrisy" that Hungary was being singled out for its ties with Moscow. He maintained Hungary could have economic ties with China and Moscow and still fulfill its obligations as a member of NATO.

- On February 11, UK and Switzerland signed a trade deal to maintain existing trade relations after Brexit.

Switzerland and the UK signed the "continuity agreement" on February 11, 2019 which is based on the EU's existing free trade deal with Switzerland. The UK's International Trade Secretary, Liam Fox, said the deal would "continue the preferential trade that we have". Presently the UK is looking to replicate about 40 EU free trade agreements, covering more than 70 countries as it exists the EU in March 2019.

- On February 10, UK Prime Minister, Theresa May, responded to Jeremy Corbyn's letter which outlined his demands for a Brexit deal.

May responded to a letter from the Labour leader, rejecting his call for the UK to stay in a permanent customs union with the EU, citing such a decision would prevent the UK making its own trade deals. May however was more conciliatory, on issues pertaining to environmental and workers' rights. Whilst rejecting Corbyn's idea of automatically keeping the UK aligned to EU standards, May pushed for the UK to allow parliament to decide if they should align with the EU on changes in these areas. May emphasised the need for dialogue between the Labour and Conservative teams and encouraged talks to resume "as soon as possible".

- On February 7, two days of talks between Afghan opposition leaders and the Taliban concluded in Moscow.

The talks held in Moscow were declared a 'success' by the Taliban despite disagreements over women's rights and the Taliban's demand for an Islamic constitution. While the talks were officially hosted by an Afghan diaspora group, Russia's Foreign Ministry stated that they were

ready to help the US advance negotiations with the Taliban on withdrawing US troops from Afghanistan.

- On February 6, France issued a warning to Italian Deputy Prime Minister Luigi Di Maio to not interfere in the country's politics, after Di Maio met French "yellow-vest" protesters.

In response to Di Maio, who had earlier met two leaders from the 'yellow-vest' movement, the French Foreign Ministry said, "this new provocation is unacceptable between neighbouring countries and partners at the heart of the EU". The 'yellow vests' protests in France arose in response to rising fuel prices, but has subsequently grown to a general anger at the high cost of living and President Macron's economic policies. The yellow vests' mass demonstrations began on November 17, 2018. France also recalled its Ambassador to Italy for talks as the diplomatic row between the countries deepen.

- On February 6, European Council President Donald Tusk lashed out stating there is a "special place in hell" for "those who promoted Brexit without even a sketch of a plan of how to carry it out safely".

Tusk's comments came after he held talks with Irish leader Leo Varadkar in Brussels. The backstop plan - the component of the deal designed to avoid the return of checks at the border of Northern Ireland- has been a source of concern in the Brexit negotiations, with the UK looking to renegotiate the withdrawal agreement, including the backstop, while the EU maintaining it is not looking to renegotiate. Brexit-backing MP's in the UK reacted strongly to Tusk's comments, while Downing Street said such language was not 'helpful'. In related news, Theresa May, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, had earlier met with Northern Ireland's five main political parties to reassure them that she would be able to secure a Brexit deal that avoids the return of customs checkpoints on the Irish border.

- On February 6, NATO states signed an agreement with Macedonia allowing the country to become the military alliance's 30th member.

Greece had previously blocked Macedonia's membership into NATO for nearly a decade because of a dispute between the two countries over the use of the name "Macedonia". Last month the Greek parliament ratified an accord that changed the name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) to the Republic of North Macedonia thereby ending the dispute between the two countries. With the dispute over, Macedonia will now be joining NATO.

- On February 5, the all parties parliamentary group on Pakistan held a conference on Kashmir in the British parliament.

The Kashmir Conference held in the British Parliament, was attended by representatives from Pakistan, the UK, and Kashmir. A resolution was passed urging the international community, including the United Nations, to take immediate and effective measures to address the deplorable human rights abuses in Indian Occupied Kashmir. Speaking at the conference, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi stated the "worst human rights abuses (were) being perpetrated by India just because Kashmiris want right of self-determination". British Kashmiri's and Pakistani's also gathered outside 10 Downing Street to protest the British government's silence over the mass human rights abuses and the genocide of innocent Kashmiris at the hands of Indian occupation forces in Indian Occupied Kashmir.

- On February 2, Russia suspended the INF treaty in a 'mirror response' to the US according to President Vladimir Putin.

President Vladimir Putin declared that Moscow would halt its participation in the INF nuclear agreement after Washington declared it would withdraw from the INF treaty. Putin confirmed that Moscow will now develop missiles previously forbidden under the terms of the INF treaty. He added that if Russia develops short and mid-range missiles, it would not deploy them in Europe unless the US does so first. Moscow has categorically denied that it has previously violated the INF treaty and has added that the US anti-ballistic missile interceptors deployed in Eastern Europe are potentially in violation of the agreement.

- On February 1, the EU agreed to visa-free travel for UK citizens even after a no-deal Brexit.
- On February 1, France, Germany and the UK officially established a non-dollar payment channel with Iran.

Germany, France and the UK announced they have set up a mechanism to facilitate "legitimate trade" with Iran despite US sanctions. The system will initially facilitate trade relations in essential items such as food, pharmaceutical and medical devices but may extend to non-humanitarian goods in the future. Analysts suggest that should trade relations between the nations expand beyond humanitarian goods this move may likely result in friction between the US and the EU.

---Kiran Mazari

GLOBAL TERRORISM

- On February 14, the UNSC strongly condemned a terrorist attack in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan Province.

While calling the attack a “heinous and cowardly” act, the UNSC expressed their deepest sympathy and condolences to the Iranian Government and the families of the victims. According to media reports, a suicide bomber targeted a bus carrying Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) personnel on February 13, 2019. A car filled with explosives reportedly detonated alongside the bus on the Khash-Zahedan road. Iran's official news agency IRNA reported that at least 27 people have been martyred and 20 have been wounded. In a statement, the IRGC said, “In this suicide attack a car filled with explosives blew up beside a bus carrying a unit of the Guards ground forces causing the martyrdom and wounding of a number of the protectors of our Islamic homeland's border.”

- On February 7, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that his country was ready to provide support in counter-terrorism efforts in Syria after withdrawal of the US' troops.

In response to the US' decision to withdraw troops from Syria, Erdogan said, “US withdrawal from Syria should not leave a gap in governance and security in the region. We are ready to undertake the responsibility.” He added, “Turkey is determined to fight against all terrorist groups, particularly Daesh, which poses a great threat to the region and the world.” Moreover, Erdogan also reiterated his call for distinguishing the Kurds from the illegal Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and Democratic Union Party (PYD), saying that identifying those groups with local residents was the “biggest insult” to the Kurds. Though the US, the EU and Turkey have declared the PKK as a terrorist group, Turkey claims that the US continues to support and arm the People's Protection Unit (YPG), which is an offshoot of the banned PKK. Erdogan also added that Kurds seek shelter in neighbouring Turkey in face of persecution from Daesh and PKK/PYD. He also suggested that terror-free zones be established to provide protection for refugees.

- On February 6, US Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo hosted a day of meetings with the Foreign Ministers of the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh in Washington, DC.
- On February 6, a UN Sanctions Monitoring Team's confidential report noted that Daesh had not been defeated in Syria and was posed a terror threat to the country.

During the meeting, the 79-member Coalition comprehensively discussed the impending territorial defeat of Daesh in Iraq and Syria. While highlighting important next steps in degrading the networks of Daesh and its affiliates outside Iraq and Syria, the Coalition also

discussed the next phase of the campaign which would focus on preventing the terrorist group from resurgence. Pompeo reaffirmed the US' commitment of working with the Global Coalition to continue to destroy Daesh remnants and thwart its global ambitions following the withdrawal of US forces from Syria. During the meeting, US President Donald Trump also claimed that the US military, the Coalition partners, and the Syrian Democratic Forces had liberated virtually all of the territory previously held by Daesh in Syria and Iraq, and had eliminated some 60 top leaders of the group. The Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh regularly hold meetings to coordinate and enhance efforts to counter the terrorist group. The last meeting took place in Brussels on July 12, 2018.

In a related development on February 6, 2019, a UN Sanctions Monitoring Team's confidential report was released which stated that Daesh had not been completely eliminated and the group continued to pose as a threat. While contradicting US President Donald Trump's claim that Daesh was almost eradicated from Syria, the report said that the group continued to pose a significant threat, more so than any other terror group. According to the report, there were some 14,000 to 18,000 Daesh terrorists in Syria and in Iraq, along with 3,000 other foreign fighters. The report said that the group "has not yet been defeated in Syria, but it remains under intense military pressure in its residual territory stronghold in the east of the country."

- On February 4, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned against increasing mercenary activities in Africa and called for greater attention towards the issue.

Guterres said that mercenaries were not only participating in wars but were also engaged in transnational terrorism, violent extremism and crimes. He said that their role in active combat was complicating the conflict data and threatening the stability and security of states. While calling for broader support for regional and international conventions against the use of mercenaries, he advocated for international cooperation on border management, and efforts to understand the political, economic, social and psychological factors that give rise to mercenary activities. The Secretary-General indicated that only 35 countries were parties to the 1989 International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries. He urged the UN Member States to ratify the convention without any delay to effectively fight the scourge of mercenary activities.

--- Moiz Khan

MIDDLE EAST & WEST ASIA

Iran

- According to *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)* on February 13, at least 27 people were killed and another 20 wounded in a suicide bomb attack on a Revolutionary Guards bus.

According to the news agency, the suicide attack occurred on the Khash-Zahedan road. The attack took place in the volatile southeastern province of Sistan-Baluchestan which has a large, mainly Sunni Muslim ethnic Baluchi community. A statement from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) confirmed the attack. It said the troops were returning from the border. It further stated, "In this suicide attack a car filled with explosives blew up beside a bus carrying a unit of the Guards ground forces causing the martyrdom and wounding of a number of the protectors of our Islamic homeland's border."

- On February 13, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled Iran can proceed with its attempt to unfreeze assets in the US, rejecting Washington's claims the case must be halted because of Tehran's alleged support for international terrorism.

Washington had argued that Iran's "unclean hands"- a reference to Tehran's suspected backing of terror groups- should disqualify its lawsuit to recover \$2 billion in assets frozen by the US Supreme Court in 2016. However, the ICJ rejected the US challenges, and said that it had the right to hold full hearings at a later date as to whether Tehran will get the money back. Chief Judge, Abdulgawi Ahmed Yusuf said the UN's top court "unanimously rejects the preliminary objections to admissibility raised by the United States of America". Tehran maintains its stance that the US had illegally seized Iranian financial assets and those of Iranian companies. According to Iran, resolving the case remains crucial as the country's clerical regime is facing economic difficulties after sanctions and the devaluation of its currency.

- On February 5, the Iranian Foreign Ministry ruled out linkages between a new EU mechanism to trade with Tehran bypassing US sanctions and an anti-money laundering bill.

The Ministry stated, "Linking implementation of this mechanism with the requirements of institutions such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is unacceptable." Iran is on an FATF blacklist drawn up to counter money laundering and the financing of terrorist groups. EU leaders welcomed the bloc's new mechanism to trade with Iran but warned Tehran over its ballistic missile programme and regional policies while calling for it to implement reforms to comply with FATF demands. Britain, France and Germany have created the system to allow firms to trade with Iran, without defying US sanctions. Iran's Foreign Ministry welcomed the EU's "positive stances" but also criticised the bloc's warnings on its missile programme and its

regional policies. The statement said, “Iran’s defence activities are merely defensive, deterrent and a domestic matter that has never been on the agenda of our negotiations with other countries. Raising such issues under current regional circumstances and clear threats against the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran is not constructive.” It urged European countries “to take a realistic look at regional incidents and issues and not to be influenced” by the US. Brussels, for its part, hopes the special payment mechanism for trade with Iran registered under the name INSTEX will help save the 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and major powers. Iran has welcomed INSTEX as a “first step” while US officials have said it would not affect its efforts to exert economic pressure on Tehran.

Iraq

- On February 4, Iraq’s President, Bahram Salih criticised his US counterpart Donald Trump for saying US troops should stay in Iraq to keep an eye on Iran.

During an interview with CBS News, President Trump had said that the US base in Iraq is “perfectly situated” for looking over all different parts of the troubled Middle East. He said the US has an “incredible base” in Iraq that he intends to keep, because he “wants to be able to watch Iran.” President Trump was referring to the Al-Asad air base in western Iraq, where he paid a brief visit to US forces in December 2018. The base hosts American troops but belongs to the Iraqi Army. While condemning these remarks, President Salih said, “We find these comments strange.” Salih said US troops were in Iraq as part of an agreement between the two countries and with a specific mission of assisting in the fight against Daesh and combatting terrorism. He said the Iraqi constitution forbids the use of Iraq as a base to threaten the interests or security of neighbouring countries. He said, “Don’t overburden Iraq with your own issues.” Trump’s comments appear to have further inflamed tensions in Iraq over the continued presence of US troops after the defeat of Daesh.

Israel

- On February 3, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu announced the construction of border barrier along the Gaza Strip.

Israel said that work to strengthen its border with the Gaza Strip had entered a new phase, with construction commencing on a massive new barrier along the frontier. Before a weekly cabinet meeting, Netanyahu told journalists that Israel has already “started building the aboveground barrier along the Gaza border.” According to Netanyahu, the barrier, set to stand six metres off the ground, “will prevent terrorists from Gaza from penetrating into our territory on the ground.” The barrier is set to follow the 65-kilometre course of an underground barrier also under construction, which is meant to neutralise the threat of cross-border tunnels built by Gaza

militants. At its western end, the above-ground barrier would join a fortified sea wall extending out into the Mediterranean, aimed at blocking Palestinian attacks by water.

Lebanon

- On February 6, Lebanon's new Interior Minister, Raya El Hassan assumed her post making her the country's and Arab world's first female Interior Minister.

During the handover ceremony, Raya El Hassan welcomed the challenge, saying Lebanese Prime Minister, Saad Hariri put his trust in her and gave her "this big responsibility". She said, "As the first female Minister of Interior, I have to prove the woman's ability to assume an exceptional portfolio." Lebanon has been making an effort to improve representation of women in politics. El Hassan is a member of Hariri's Future Movement Party, and one of four women in the 30-member cabinet, a record for female political representation in Lebanon. As Lebanon's Interior Minister, she will be in charge of multiple, often competing security agencies, and of maintaining stability in a country that has grappled with militant groups and the spill over of conflict resulting from the war in Syria.

Palestine

- On February 13, a US-led two-day conference on "peace and security" in the Middle East commenced in Warsaw, Poland.

The US and Poland sponsored the conference, which they say is aimed at promoting peace and security in the Mideast but appears to be mainly focused on isolating Iran. Iran denounced the gathering as an American anti-Iran "circus" aimed at "demonising" it. Palestine also condemned the conference, with Nabil Shaath, adviser to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, saying the conference lacked credibility and aimed to "normalise" the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory. Lebanon also boycotted the conference. US Vice President, Mike Pence attended the conference along with representatives from numerous Arab countries. France and Germany did not send their Cabinet-ranked officials, and the European Union foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini was also absent from the event. Russia and China did not attend the conference either.

The US tried to broaden the scope of what was initially called as an Iran-centric meeting to include the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the fight against Daesh, and the conflicts in Syria and Yemen. At the opening dinner of the summit, Netanyahu said he was delighted to be addressing high delegations from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain- the three key Arab allies who refuse to recognise Israel officially, but maintain covert ties with the regime nonetheless. Bahraini Foreign Minister, Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifah told Israeli media on the sidelines of the meeting that his country would "eventually" establish diplomatic ties with Israel.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called Iran the top threat in the Middle East, and said confronting the country is key to reaching peace in the entire region. Pompeo met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu before the opening session at the conference. He said “pushing back” against Iran was central to dealing with all the region’s other problems. The Israeli PM lauded the participation of high-profile Arab dignitaries at the conference, saying it marked a “historical turning point” that signalled a shift in regional priorities. During his address to the summit, US President Donald Trump’s senior Middle East adviser and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, said that the Trump Administration would unveil its Mideast “Deal of the Century” after Israeli elections on April 9, 2019.

Saudi Arabia

- During a February 13 interview with an Israeli television network, former Saudi intelligence chief, Prince Turki bin Faisal al-Saud said Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu should accept terms that Saudi Arabia has put forward for a lasting peace.

Prince Turki criticised Israeli officials for ignoring Riyadh’s peace initiatives and said Saudi Arabia and Israel have the money and political means to forge a powerful alliance provided they reach peace first. He said, “with Israeli money and Saudi brains, we can go far. Yes, if there is peace. Unfortunately, Israel chooses to ignore all the efforts of Saudi Arabia to make peace, and expects Saudi Arabia to put its hand in its (Israel’s) hand and go forward on technology, on water desalination, on issues like that. It’s not going to happen.” The prince said the Arab Peace Initiative, first offered by late Saudi King Abdullah in 2002, raised the chances of public and official ties between Arab regimes and Israel.

- On February 12, Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz held talks with Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, in Riyadh.

During their meeting, President Abbas warned Saudi rulers about the nature of a so-called peace plan in the works at the White House on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, describing the yet-to-be unveiled proposal as a “conspiracy” against the Palestinian nation. He also said, “The United States would seek to impose the plan on the Palestinians and force them to back down on many of their demands in favour of Israel.” Abbas called for the revival of a previously-proposed plan, known as the “Arab Peace Initiative,” to counter the US scheme. King Salman told Abbas that the Kingdom was committed to an independent Palestinian state with East al-Quds as its capital. He also said that Saudi Arabia “permanently stands by Palestine and its people’s right to an independent state with East Jerusalem as its capital.”

Syria

- On February 14, Iranian, Turkish and Russian delegates attended a tripartite summit on Syria in the Russian resort city of Sochi.

The Sochi summit was aimed at solidifying the three countries' cooperation towards returning peace and stability to Syria. Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani as well as his Turkish and Russian counterparts, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin, respectively attended the summit. The three countries, known as the 'guarantor states' of a ceasefire regime in Syria, have been mediating peace negotiations between representatives from the Damascus government and opposition groups in a series of talks held in the Kazakh capital of Astana and other places since January 2017.

At the end of the Sochi meeting, the three leaders issued a joint statement, stressing strong commitment to sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria. They highlighted that these principles should be universally respected and that no actions, regardless of who undertakes them, should undermine them. They also rejected all attempts to create new realities on the ground under the pretext of combating terrorism and expressed their determination to stand against any effort aimed at undermining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria as well as the national security of neighbouring countries. The statement added that the US decision for the withdrawal of its forces from Syria, if implemented, would help strengthen stability and security in the country in compliance with the above-mentioned principles. The three Presidents also denounced and expressed serious concern about the efforts by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham terrorists to increase their control over the Idlib de-escalation area, and agreed to effectively counter such attempts. They reiterated that there could be no military solution to the Syrian conflict and that it could only be resolved through the Syrian-led and Syrian-owned, UN-facilitated political process in line with the UN Security Council Resolution 2254. They also highlighted the importance of creating conditions for the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally-displaced persons (IDPs) to their original places of residence in Syria.

- On February 11, at least 16 civilians, including seven children were killed in US-led coalition air strikes on the remaining militant areas in eastern Syria.

According to Rami Abdel Rahman, the head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, eight women and one elderly man were also among the civilians killed while trying to flee towards the Iraqi border. The coalition did not comment, but has repeatedly said it does its utmost to avoid civilian casualties. Earlier, on February 9, 2019, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announced its final operation to expel hundreds of militants from their last patch of territory in eastern Syria along the Iraq border. The SDF estimates that up to 600 Daesh fighters, mostly foreigners, still remain inside.

Tunisia

- On February 9, a Tunisian court sentenced seven Daesh terrorists to life in prison over attacks at a museum and on a beach in 2015 that killed 60 tourists.

Dozens of defendants faced two separate trials over the closely linked shootings, which occurred just months apart in Tunis and Sousse, but many were acquitted. According to prosecution spokesman, Sofiene Sliti, four were sentenced to life in prison for the shooting rampage at a Sousse tourist resort in June 2015, which killed 38 people, mostly British tourists. Five other defendants in the Sousse case were handed jail terms ranging from six months to six years, while 17 were acquitted. Three were given life sentences for the earlier attack in March 2015 at the capital's Bardo National Museum, in which two gunmen killed 21 foreign tourists and a Tunisian security guard. Others found guilty of links to the Bardo attack were sentenced to prison terms ranging from one to 16 years, and a dozen defendants were acquitted.

Turkey

- On February 9, the Turkish Foreign Ministry released a statement severely criticising China's mass detentions of its Turkic-speaking Uighurs.

The statement also claimed that poet Abdurehim Heyit had died serving an eight-year Chinese prison sentence imposed as punishment over "one of his songs". However, China rejected the claims and released a video showing a man who identified himself as Heyit and saying that he was alive and well. Turkey called on China to close its internment camps for Muslims, saying China's treatment of Uighurs was "a great embarrassment for humanity". A UN panel of experts has said that nearly one million Uighurs and other Turkic-speaking minorities had been herded into "re-education camps" in China's northwestern Xinjiang region, where most of the country's more than 10 million Uighurs live. The Muslim world has been quiet on the Uighur issue, possibly to avoid Chinese diplomatic or economic retaliation. The situation of China's Uighurs is closely followed in Turkey due to shared linguistic, cultural and religious links and the presence of tens of thousands of ethnic Uighurs there.

- On February 6, Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan held talks with visiting Greek Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras.

During their meeting at the Presidential Palace, Tsipras and Erdogan agreed to resolve disputes between the two countries through dialogue, with the Turkish president saying a "politician's job is not to win enemies but friends". During a joint press conference with Tsipras, Erdogan said, "We, as Turkey, believe all the problems with Greece could be resolved peacefully. We believe every problem could be resolved through dialogue."

Tsipras arrived in Ankara for a two-day trip aimed at easing tensions between the two neighbours over a number of bilateral issues, including the tussle over energy exploration off the

coast of Cyprus. The two leaders discussed a migrant deal and economic cooperation, in addition to the issue of Greece providing sanctuary to Turkish Army officers who fled the failed Turkish coup attempt in 2016. Tsipras said that his government was happy to hold an “open” dialogue with Turkey. He also said that Greece and Turkey have agreed to de-escalate any tensions in the Aegean Sea and proceed with confidence-building measures, while any differences with Turkey “can and must be solved with dialogue”. Erdogan said he expected more cooperation from Greece in the extradition of eight soldiers who fled to Greece following the failed July 2016 coup. In a sign of détente, Tsipras also visited the disputed landmarks of Hagia Sophia and a now-closed seminary in Turkey.

- On February 1, Turkey strongly condemned Israel’s decision not to renew the mandate of an international monitoring group in the occupied West Bank city of Hebron.

In a statement, the Turkish Foreign Ministry said, “We strongly condemn Israel’s unilateral termination of the mandate of the ‘Temporary International Presence in Hebron’ (TIPH) and expect this political decision to be reversed.” The TIPH was established after a massacre of Palestinians in 1994. Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu said he would not extend its mandate, accusing it of bias. Ankara, however, dismissed the Israeli claim. Omer Celik, spokesman for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), severely criticised the Israeli move as a “new step to cover up illegalities” and said it must be condemned. He said, “We decisively reject the allegation that the TIPH has been working against Israel, which is presented by Israel as a justification for its decision. This Israeli step shows new aggressions are in the planning.” He urged the world “to be more careful” about the situation in Hebron. Turkey has observers in the Norway-led team tasked with promoting security for Palestinians in Hebron, which is holy to both Muslims and Jews and has been a flashpoint in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Palestinian and European officials have also expressed concern and regret over the Israeli decision.

Yemen

- On February 5, Yemen’s Saudi-backed government held a new round of UN-brokered talks with Houthi rebels in Jordan.

In December 2018, a prisoner exchange was agreed on between the two sides; a move that is now seen as a crucial confidence-building measure in the UN-led attempts to bring the warring sides to negotiations. Both sides have repeatedly said that they remain committed to the agreement that could see thousands of prisoners released by each side. During the January 2019 talks in Amman, they had submitted lists of the detainees they want to see freed. However, deep distrust prevented them coming up with a final list of names for the exchange. At the end of January 2019, the rebels had released a captured Saudi soldier while Riyadh had set free seven

Houthi prisoners. They are the only detainees exchanged under the deal so far. UN envoy Martin Griffiths said he hoped the two sides would be more successful this time.

--- Muhammad Shoaib

SOUTH ASIA: I

Pakistan External

- During his visit to Pakistan on February 12, Commander-in-Chief of Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) and Pakistan's Former Army Chief, General (r) Raheel Sharif met with Prime Minister Imran Khan.

A delegation of the IMCTC accompanied General (r) Raheel Sharif during his visit. PM Khan and General (r) Sharif discussed issues related to national and international security as well as the counter-terrorism measures taken by the IMCTC. A day earlier, General (r) Raheel Sharif also met Pakistan's Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa at General Headquarters (GHQ) in Rawalpindi. The two discussed matters related to regional peace and stability. General (r) Sharif is considered to be close to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman and his visit to Pakistan is being viewed as quite significant as it comes just a few days before Crown Prince Salman's visit to Islamabad. There are reports that Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are likely to sign trade and investment deals worth \$20 billion during the Crown Prince's visit. Meanwhile, addressing the media on February 13, 2019, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi said that during Mohammad bin Salman's visit, at least 8 memoranda of understanding (MoUs) will be signed between Islamabad and Riyadh.

- On February 12, the five-day multinational naval exercise AMAN-2019 was concluded in Karachi.

According to Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), naval contingents from 46 countries participated in the war exercise. Addressing the concluding ceremony, President Arif Alvi reaffirmed Pakistan's resolve for regional peace and security and emphasised that AMAN-19 would pave the way for making the region more peaceful and secure with combined efforts by all stakeholders.

- On February 10, Prime Minister Imran Khan visited Dubai to participate in the 7th edition of the World Government Summit.

Addressing the World Government Summit, PM Khan told foreign investors to invest in Pakistan as the country "is going on the upswing." During the visit, the Premier also met with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and discussed matters of mutual interest. In a related development on February 10, 2018, Prime Minister Imran Khan held discussions with Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Christine Lagarde on the sidelines of Summit in Dubai. According to the IMF representative, "prospects for Pakistan in the context of ongoing discussions toward an IMF-supported programme" were discussed during the meeting.

- According to *Dawn* on February 8, Commander of US Central Command (CENTCOM), General Joseph Votel said that “some military cooperation activities” between the US and Pakistan have continued even though the Trump Administration has suspended security assistance to the country.

General Votel also said that the US’ “posture with Pakistan involves supporting our colleagues at the Department of State as they pursue a diplomatic solution with Islamabad to end the conflict in Afghanistan.” General Votel also said that Pakistan would always be a country of importance to the US, not only because of its critical role in resolving the Afghan conflict, but also because it possesses nuclear weapons and sits at the nexus of Russian, Chinese, Indian, Iranian, and US geopolitical interests.

- On February 7, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi rejected the tweet by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in which he expressed the Afghan government’s “serious concerns” about the alleged “violence perpetrated against protestors and civil activists in Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces.”

Shah Mehmood Qureshi termed Ghani’s statement as “irresponsible” and a “gross interference” in the internal affairs of Pakistan and asked the Afghan leadership to focus on the “long-standing serious grievances of the Afghan people.” In an apparent reference to the ongoing protest by Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) in parts of Pakistan, President Ghani tweeted that every government should support “civil activities that take a stand against the terrorism and extremism that plagues and threatens our region and collective security.” President Ghani’s comments come at a time when he is pushed to the sidelines in the peace negotiations between the US and the Afghan Taliban on the Afghan reconciliation process.

- On February 5, President Arif Alvi vowed Pakistan’s “political, diplomatic and moral support” for the people of Kashmir in their “just struggle for the right of self-determination.” He also asked India to stop massive human rights violations in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK).

President Alvi was addressing the Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) Legislative Assembly in Muzaffarabad on “Kashmir solidarity day”. Pakistan’s President urged the UN to send a “fact-finding mission” to IOK and fulfil its pledge to the Kashmiris regarding a UN-sponsored plebiscite. He also warned India not to “justify its act of terrorism by killing innocent Kashmiris” and then labelling them “as militants”. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Imran Khan in his message on Kashmir solidarity day said that Kashmiris’ struggle for freedom has been “gaining strength”.

- During his visit to London on February 4, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi addressed the International Seminar on “Human Rights Violations in IOK” in the UK Parliament.

Speaking at the conference, Pakistan's Foreign Minister called upon Indian authorities to ban the use of pellet guns against unarmed protesters in IOK and initiate an inquiry into the "human rights violations" against Kashmiris. The event was organised by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Pakistan (APPG-Pakistan) at the House of Commons, and was attended by British dignitaries, parliamentarians, and Kashmiri leaders. On January 31, 2019, India had asked the UK government not to host the Kashmir solidarity conference in the British parliament. However, India could not succeed in stopping the event, as the UK government said "Britain's Members of Parliament are independent of government and it is for individual members to decide who they meet and for what purpose."

- In a televised interview on February 6, 2019, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi reiterated the demand for a plebiscite in Jammu and Kashmir saying "that is a commitment by India as part of the UN agenda...Give the people the right to self-determination." Pakistan's Foreign Minister also called upon India to come to the negotiating table for resolving issues.
- On February 1, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Maria Zhakharova rejected the remarks made by Russia's Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs, Igor Zubov as a "slip of the tongue". Zubov had erroneously claimed that Daesh fighters were transferred via unidentified helicopters from the Pakistani border to the Tajikistani border "in the direction of the southern borders of Russia".

Zhakharova dismissed the comments made by Zubov and added that Russia and Pakistan share common concerns regarding the growing presence of Daesh militants at the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border area. She added that Moscow was closely cooperating with Islamabad in the fight against terrorism and advancing the peace process in Afghanistan.

- According to *Dawn* on February 1, a team of Pakistani experts led by Commissioner for Indus Waters, Syed Mehr Ali Shah inspected four hydropower projects at Chenab basin in India, including 1,000MW Pakal Dul, 48MW Lower Kalnai, 850MW Ratlay and 900MW Baglihar dam.

The team also inspected the Baglihar dam. After concluding his visit, Pakistan's Commissioner for Indus Waters appreciated the Indian authorities for cooperating with the Pakistani team in carrying out the inspection of these projects. However, Mehr Ali Shah said that he would make public the concerns noted by the Pakistani experts after conveying them to India formally. Meanwhile, Pakistan's Water Resources Secretary, Khawaja Shumail termed the Pakistani teams' visit to India as "successful".

Pakistan Internal

- On February 14, at least 44 Indian paramilitary soldiers were killed after their convoy was hit by an explosives-laden vehicle in Pulwama in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK).

Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) claimed responsibility for the attack. Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi vowed “a befitting reply” to the perpetrators of the attack. India’s Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), which takes decisions on matters of security and strategic affairs, met in New Delhi to discuss the deteriorating security situation in IOK. Following the CCS meeting, Finance Minister, Arun Jaitley said that there was “incontrovertible evidence” of Pakistan’s involvement in the attack. Jaitley also announced the Indian government’s decision to remove most favoured nation (MFN) trade privileges given to Pakistan. He said that India would take “all possible diplomatic steps to ensure the complete isolation” of Pakistan. Indian Foreign Secretary, Vijay Gokhale summoned Pakistan’s High Commissioner, Sohail Mahmood and demanded action against JeM. Meanwhile, Pakistan’s Foreign Ministry strongly rejected any attempts “to link the attack to Pakistan without investigations.” India has been battling an armed conflict in IOK where more than 500 people including, civilians, fighters and Indian troops were killed in 2018.

- On February 13, Indian troops killed two Kashmiri civilians in Budgam district of Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK).

The killings occurred during a cordon and search operation by Indian troops in Budgam district. The killings triggered anti-India protests in the region, with hundreds of residents demanding an end to India’s illegal occupation.

- According to *Dawn* on February 5, at least 20 members of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) were arrested in Islamabad.

The development follows PTM’s demonstrations in different cities after a PTM member, Arman Loni was killed during a police crackdown in Loralai. Balochistan’s Chief Minister, Jam Kamal Khan ordered an inquiry into the killing. Meanwhile, authorities claimed that Loni had died of a heart attack following clashes between protesters and police.

- On February 3, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK).

During Modi’s visit, a complete shutdown was observed in IOK to register protest against Indian Prime Minister’s visit to the territory. The Indian authorities placed Hurriyat leaders including Syed Ali Geelani and Mirwaiz Umar Farooq under house arrest to prevent them from leading anti-India demonstrations on Modi’s visit. The Indian Prime Minister also visited Ladakh region, where he inaugurated the construction of a tunnel connecting Ladakh with the Kashmir Valley.

India

- On February 9, India's Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson, Raveesh Kumar said that Arunachal Pradesh was "an integral and inalienable part of India."

The response came after China raised strong objections to PM Narendra Modi's visit to a disputed border region aimed at gaining support for Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ahead of Indian elections in May 2019. China claims Arunachal Pradesh as part of southern Tibet and has frequently called on India "to refrain from any actions that intensify disputes and complicate the border issue."

- According to *Reuters* on February 8, India could lose a vital US trade concession under which it enjoys zero tariffs on \$5.6 billion of exports to the US.

A move to withdraw the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) from India would be the strongest action against India since Donald Trump came to power. Trump had vowed to reduce the US trade deficit with other countries and has frequently criticised India for its high tariffs.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

SOUTH ASIA (II)

Afghanistan

- On February 15, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad met with Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference, where they discussed recent developments on the Afghan peace process.

Following their meeting, Khalilzad tweeted, “we discussed next steps on consultative Loya Jirga and the urgent necessity of an intra-Afghan dialogue, as well as key regional developments. We are united in our pursuit of peace”. Meanwhile, the Afghan Presidential Palace said in a statement that Ghani and Khalilzad discussed next steps in the peace process, including the consultative Loya Jirga aimed at reestablishing consensus among Afghans on the peace process. A number of prominent Afghan politicians, former government officials and heads of political parties welcomed the proposed Jirga by Ghani. The US special envoy commenced what is now his fifth trip, to seek resolution on the Afghan peace process, on February 10, 2019. He will head an interagency delegation from February 10-28, 2019, during visits to Belgium, Germany, Turkey, Qatar, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

- *Deutsche Welle* reported on February 14 that Germany has extended its military mission in Afghanistan for another year.

The report added that a leaked document showed the government had doubts about the prospect of peace in Afghanistan. Furthermore, an internal strategy paper showed Germany had offered to host another peace conference and would have extended an invitation to the Taliban to engage in the dialogue. Germany currently has around 1,200 soldiers stationed in Afghanistan as part of NATO’s Resolute Support mission. In a related development on February 12, 2019, NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg said that no decision has been taken about any withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. However, he reiterated that the aim is not to be in Afghanistan forever, but to fight terrorism and to train, assist and advise Afghan National Army and Security Forces so they can stabilise their own country. Stoltenberg also emphasised the need for intra-Afghan negotiations and said, “it is important that we have, as part of the peace process, an Afghan reconciliation process and of course the Afghan government has to be part of that”. It appears that US’ European partners are not in support of the idea of an abrupt troop withdrawal from Afghanistan- a view supported by US President Donald Trump.

- *The New York Times* reported on February 11 that the US intensified attacks on insurgents in Afghanistan to gain leverage in peace talks.

Reports also suggest that American airstrikes in southern Afghanistan left at least 10 civilians dead and several others wounded. With thousands already killed during the ongoing war in Afghanistan, such tactics could prove to be detrimental for the peace process, as fierce fighting

continues between the Taliban and government forces. On February 13, 2019, at least 12 Taliban fighters were killed by Afghan Security Forces in Takhar province. Previously, on February 4, 2019, at least 28 Afghan Security personnel were killed in a Taliban attack in Kunduz province. Officials from Kunduz provincial council confirmed the clashes and death of several Afghan Security Forces. During the first week of February 2019, the Taliban conducted several attacks in the provinces of Bhaglan, Farah, Sar-i-Pul and Nimroz which left at least 37 Security personnel dead and many others injured. In retaliation, Afghan Security Forces killed at least 25 Taliban insurgents in Helmand's Sangin district. The Afghan Defence Ministry also confirmed the killing of at least 18 more Taliban fighters during raids across Kandahar, Khost and Kunduz.

- On February 11, Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani approved amendments to the election law.

Discussions over the draft amendment started in February 2019 and was unanimously endorsed by all groups, before being approved by Ghani's cabinet. The election law has 109 articles and 17 chapters and according to sources, a number of these articles have been amended. All commissioners from the two electoral commissions – the Independent Election Commission (IEC) and the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission (IECC) – were dismissed from their posts, including the two chiefs, after Ghani signed off on an amendment to the electoral law. This move came amid ongoing criticism leveled at the commissioners who have still not released the final results of the parliamentary elections held in 15 provinces in October 2018.

- On February 11, US Acting Secretary of Defense, Pat Shanahan, paid an unannounced visit to Afghanistan and met with US Commanders and Afghan leaders.

While emphasising the importance of an intra-Afghan dialogue process, Shanahan reiterated that the US is exploring all possibilities to end the war in Afghanistan. Interestingly, Shanahan also stated that he had not received orders from the White House regarding the withdrawal of troops. Foreign troop withdrawal remains the top Taliban demand for initiating an intra-Afghan dialogue to bring the conflict to an end. However, the White House and Pentagon seem to be at odds regarding the decision of total troop withdrawal, as Shanahan added, “the US Military has strong security interests in the region. (The) presence will evolve out of those discussions”.

- On February 10, the Taliban deliberated on a number of issues related to present situation in Afghanistan, including the role of Pakistan.

During an interview with a Pakistani media outlet, Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid said that if the Taliban end up having a say in the Afghan polity, they will approach Pakistan as a brother based on mutual respect. However, on a question regarding Pakistan's role in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table, Mujahid stated, “there is no role being played by any outside country. This has always been our own initiative and policy”. Moreover, he refused the current Afghan constitution and recommended major amendments to it. Mujahid also deliberated

on the establishment of an interim government and said that they had neither held any discussions regarding an interim government nor had they proposed such an idea. Explaining their refusal to talk to Kabul, Mujahid said doing so would signal acceptance of the 'stooge regime' as a legitimate government. Mujahid added that as long as Afghanistan is occupied, ceasefires and intra-Afghan talks would not amount to much.

- On February 9, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad said that the Trump Administration is seeking a peace agreement, not a deal on troop withdrawal.

Khalilzad said, "We are after a peace agreement, not a withdrawal agreement. A peace agreement can allow withdrawal". He added that the US is hoping Afghanistan can strike a peace agreement with the Taliban before the presidential elections scheduled for July 2019. Khalilzad also stated that a future presence of US troops in the country would be conditions-based and ruled out an abrupt withdrawal of troops. Khalilzad held talks with Taliban representatives four times during the last four months. He expressed "cautious optimism" about the prospect of a deal, and even announced a draft framework, however, he stressed nothing had been finalised.

- On February 6, a nine-point approach to promote an intra-Afghan dialogue was outlined during Moscow talks for Afghan peace and reconciliation.

The talks in the Russian capital were held between the Taliban and leaders of various political parties excluding the National Unity Government of Afghanistan. All parties agreed that the complete withdrawal of foreign forces from the country is necessary to attain lasting peace in the country. Moreover, cooperation of regional countries, non-interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs, assurance to the international community that Afghanistan will not be used against any other nation, and protection of social, economic, political and educational rights of Afghan women in line with Islamic principles were also deemed essential for a lasting peace in the country. Meanwhile, Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani said that the Afghan politicians attending the Moscow Talks had no executive authorities and were not officially representing Afghanistan. Moreover, the Afghan government has lodged a complaint with the UN over the Taliban trip to Moscow. The Afghan government said that Russia allowed members of the Taliban to enter the country despite them being on the UN's blacklist. The growing disagreements and discord among Afghan political and religious leadership will inhibit advancing the ongoing peace process.

- In his State of the Union speech on February 6, US President, Donald Trump said that the US is holding constructive talks with stakeholders in Afghanistan, including the Taliban, and that it was now time to try for peace.

President Trump said that as negotiations with the Taliban continue, the United States would be able to withdraw American troops from Afghanistan and focus on counterterrorism efforts. He added, "We do not know whether we will achieve an agreement but we do know that after two

decades of war the hour has come to at least try for peace. And the other side would like to do the same thing. It is time". However, the Republican-led US Senate backed a symbolic legislation that broke with President Trump's stance, by opposing plans for any abrupt withdrawal of troops from Syria and Afghanistan. The Senate voted 70-26 in favour of a non-binding amendment, drafted by Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, saying it was the view of the Senate that Islamist militant groups in both countries still pose a "serious threat" to the United States.

- On February 5, Pakistan's Ambassador to Afghanistan, Zahid Nasrullah Khan said that Islamabad strongly supported the peace process under the leadership of the Afghans and called for intra-Afghan dialogue.

Khan added that peace in Afghanistan was essential to both Pakistan and the region, and that Pakistan wants the process to be an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led process. He also stated that Pakistan will always strive to support talks with the Taliban.

- On February 3, US President, Donald Trump reaffirmed his commitment to draw down forces from Afghanistan by leaving behind 'intelligence'.

During an interview with CBS News, Trump said that the US has been engaged in Afghanistan for 18 years, and has spent billions of dollars on the war. When asked whether he will keep a smaller number of troops in Afghanistan, Trump said, "Yes. And I shall leave intelligence there and if I see nests forming, I shall do something about it. But for us to be spending 51 billion dollars, like last year, or if you average the cost, I mean you're talking about numbers that nobody's ever heard of before". Reports emerged in January 2019 that the Afghan President sent a letter to Trump and asked him to slow down the troop withdrawal and suggested cutting costs for the US where possible.

- On February 1, the Taliban said that President Trump is serious about the troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Earlier, the US said that talks with the insurgents were on the right path. Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid said that they are hopeful of establishing an "Islamic system" comprising all Afghans under a peace deal. He added that such a system would be based on the principle of shura or council with Islamic experts, representatives of people and scholars. The Taliban statement has prompted concerns that foreign troops could withdraw before a lasting peace deal is reached between insurgents and the government in Kabul. Umer Daudzai, Afghan President's Special Representative on Regional Affairs for Consensus on Peace said that a rapid US troop withdrawal would increase violence in Afghanistan. The statement from the Taliban has also reduced hopes among Afghans that the insurgents would agree to participate in the existing democratic system built in 2001. Under the Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001, the rights of religious minorities and women were seriously curtailed. Girls' education was banned and women were prohibited from workplaces. However, Mujahid pledged that they will try to provide

a safe environment that will support girls' access to education and facilitate women working adding, "whatever is permissible for women in Islamic Sharia will be allowed".

--- Kashif Hussain

UNITED NATIONS

- On February 14, UN General Assembly President Maria Espinosa termed year 2019 a critical year, and the “last chance” for the international community to take effective action on climate change.

While announcing the UN roadmap to climate change, Espinosa said two-thirds of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development depends on climate and environment goals. She urged the world to show concrete commitments in order to meet the targets set at the landmark 2015 Paris Agreement on dealing with greenhouse gas emissions mitigation, adaptation and finance, which is due to come into force in 2020. Regarding the UN roadmap, she indicated that the UNGA would hold a high-level meeting on Climate and Sustainable Development for All, intending to build on the success of COP24- the 2018 climate conference in Katowice, Poland. In June and July, 2019, another set of meetings would take place to review progress made in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 13: “urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.” The 2019 Climate Conference COP25 in Chile would wrap up multiple high-level meetings during the year.

- On February 13, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that it has jurisdiction to hear a part of the case brought by Iran against the US, where Iran is looking to unfreeze \$2 billion worth of Iranian assets.

The ICJ delivered its judgment on the preliminary objections raised by the US in the case concerning “Certain Iranian Assets (Islamic Republic of Iran v. United States of America).” The Court ruled that the Iranian application was admissible and it had jurisdiction to entertain a part of the application. The ruling came in response to a motion by the US to not entertain Iran’s case because the country has links to terrorist networks. On June 14, 2016, Iran filed a case against the US with regard to a dispute concerning alleged violations by the US of the 1955 Treaty of Amity, Economic Relations, and Consular Rights. The case revolved around assets seized from the Iranian national bank, Bank Markazi, which were taken by the US to compensate victims of a 1983 suicide bombing of a Marine Corps base in Beirut, Lebanon, which the US blamed on Tehran. However, Iran denies involvement in the attack and claims that US’ decision of seizing assets violate the 1955 Treaty of Amity with the US.

- On February 13, Israel blocked a planned UNSC visit to occupied Palestinian territories.
- On February 2, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres expressed his gratitude to the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH), and hoped that a new agreement could be reached to protect Palestinians in the occupied West Bank.

Israel refused to allow the UN Security Council (UNSC) to visit the occupied West Bank for a close-up look at the situation on the ground following its decision to expel an international observer mission tasked with safeguarding Palestinians in Hebron. On February 6, 2019, Kuwait and Indonesia urged the UN Security Council to call for protection of Palestinians and visit the West Bank. However, Israel rejected the proposal. Kuwait's UN Ambassador Mansour al-Otaibi expressed regret over the Israeli opposition to the visit which "has been raised many times by the council" adding, "we want an official trip. This is what we asked for, not to go illegally or not to be invited as tourists.

In a related development on February 2, 2019, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres expressed his gratitude to the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH). Guterres said that he was grateful to the five countries including Italy, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey that contributed to conflict prevention and the protection of Palestinians under the TIPH for the past 22 years. He also conveyed to the TIPH his hopes that a new agreement could be reached to preserve the TIPH's long-standing and valuable contribution to protect Palestinians in Hebron. He made these comments following an Israeli announcement that the country would suspend the mandate of the TIPH. On January 28, 2019, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that he would not extend the agreement for the monitoring mission. While calling the TIPH an international force acting against Israel, Netanyahu stressed that he was taking the decision as a result of the TIPH's alleged bias. The TIPH was established pursuant to the provisions of the 1995 Interim Agreement, known as the Oslo II Accord, between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation after a massacre of Palestinians in 1994. The team, comprised of 64 observers, was tasked with promoting security for Palestinians in Hebron by carrying out daily patrols and documenting rights abuses. The TIPH's mandate is renewed every six months. Its latest mandate ended on January 31, 2019.

- On February 7, Agnes Callamard, the UN Special Rapporteur on extra-judicial, summary or arbitrary executions, said that initial examination of the evidence collected in Turkey show that "a brutal and premeditated murder of a Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Consulate in Turkey was planned and perpetrated by officials of the State of Saudi Arabia."

Agnes Callamard is investigating the murder of Khashoggi. During her visit to Turkey from January 28 to February 3, 2019, she headed an independent international inquiry into the killing of the journalist and inspected the crime scene accompanied by three forensic experts. Following her visit, Callamard said, "Woefully inadequate time and access was granted to Turkish investigators to conduct a professional and effective crime-scene examination and search required by international standards for investigation." She stressed that Khashoggi's murder violated both international law and core rules of international relations, including the requirements for lawful use of diplomatic missions. She also termed "the circumstances of the killing and the response by State representatives in its aftermath as immunity for impunity." Though the investigations are ongoing, Callamard's report would be made public in May 2019

for the June session of the UN Human Rights Council. The 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.

- On February 6, the largest UN humanitarian convoy reached the settlement of Rukban in Syria to deliver life-saving assistance to more than 40,000 displaced people.
- On February 1, the UN warned that thousands of people were still fleeing conflict in Hajin in eastern Deir-ez-Zor governorate in Syria and called for “unhindered humanitarian access to the displaced people.”

In a joint operation with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, the convoy of 133 trucks delivered food, health and nutritional supplies, as well as hygiene materials, education items and children’s recreational kits. UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator Sajjad Malik said, “This large-scale delivery of essential humanitarian supplies to the extremely vulnerable in Rukban could not have happened a moment too soon.” However, he also indicated that long-term humanitarian aid for tens of thousands of people in Rukban was still urgently needed. During the last three years, tens of thousands of civilians have fled to Rukban from Daesh terrorist-controlled areas of Syria. Ruban’s camps for displaced people lies inside a “deconfliction zone” set up by US-backed coalition, Russian and Syrian Government forces.

In a related development on February 1, 2019, Andrej Mahecic, spokesman for the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) warned of escalated fighting in Hajin, which forced more than 23,000 people to flee to Al Hol camp, effectively tripling its population. Mahecic said, “Humanitarian actors have collectively requested forces in control of the area to designate a transit site en route for Al-Hol where life-saving assistance can be provided.” He added, “We have also appealed to those fighting and those with influence over those involved in the fighting to do their utmost to grant safety for the civilians fleeing and to allow humanitarian access in the areas where we need.” He stressed that humanitarian access was vital to deliver life-saving assistance to the displaced people. The Al Hol area is under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces, backed by a US-led coalition, who are battling the last groups of Daesh terrorists near the town of Hajin.

- On February 6, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres welcomed the signing of a peace agreement between the Government of the Central African Republic (CAR) and 14 non-state armed groups active in the country, and encouraged all stakeholders to “live up to their commitments.”

While congratulating the stakeholders for the successful conclusion of the talks, Secretary-General Guterres reiterated the UN’s commitment to assist the CAR at this critical stage, and called “on neighbouring countries, regional organisations and all international partners to support the courageous steps that Central Africans have made to bring lasting peace and stability in their country.” Guterres also announced that Mankeur Ndiaye of Senegal would be

his new Special Representative to the country, mandated to head the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission (MINUSCA). The peace talks between the CAR and non-state armed groups began on January 24, 2019, in Khartoum, Sudan, under the auspices of the African Initiative for Peace and Reconciliation in CAR, led by the African Union (AU) with the support of the UN. The deal was formally-signed on February 6, 2019, in CAR's capital, Bangui.

--- Moiz Khan