

February 16 – February 28

AREA BRIEF

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Area Briefs: 15-28 February, 2019
General Observations

Pakistan

- On February 28 PM Imran Khan announced Pakistan's decision to release captured IAF Pilot Abhi Nandan as a gesture of peace. In response Indian officials suggested that Pakistan's move was an empty ploy that ignored the real problem between the two countries. According to New Delhi even if the captured pilot were returned home, there would be no chance "to go back to zero" and easing tensions would be impossible until Pakistan acted against terrorist groups that it has been using as proxies against India.
- Prime Minister Imran Khan reiterated the importance of the Kashmir issue which lies at the roots of all bilateral issues between India and Pakistan. On February 27, 2019, the Indian government summoned the Pakistani Envoy and handed over a demarche demanding the "immediate and safe return" of the captured pilot. The US, China, Britain and other world powers have urged restraint on both sides as tensions continue to escalate between India and Pakistan. Meanwhile, Turkey said that it supports Pakistan's position, and rejected the accusations leveled by India on Pakistan that it was behind the Pulwama attack.
- There is now growing unease within Pakistan that tensions may lead to war given the Modi government's aggressive posturing. Meanwhile India has suffered glaring contradictions during the past few days. The Indian government has been unable to offer any evidence for its claim of downing a Pakistani Air Force plane, nor has it offered proof that its "surgical strike" on Balakot had killed "a very large number" of "terrorists, trainers, senior commanders and groups of jihadis," as its Foreign Secretary had claimed.
- On February 27 Pakistan shot down two Indian Airforce warplanes and captured one pilot. Earlier On February 26 Indian warplanes crossed into Pakistan and conducted airstrikes. According to India's Ministry of External Affairs the airstrikes near Balakot in northern Pakistan had struck "the biggest training camp" of Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM). Pakistan promised a response to the strikes, maintaining that they were a political ploy carried out for "domestic consumption" ahead of the May 2019 Indian elections. Pakistan also dismissed Indian claims that the airstrikes had resulted in "heavy casualties" or struck a militant training camp.
- While the Indian attack was not a "surgical strike" it was an act of aggression against Pakistan. In the wake of the Pulwama attack Pakistan continues to face growing Indian aggression in the form of diplomatic threats and military aggression. Notwithstanding Pakistan's numerous overtures for peace Indian attacks on the LOC also continue as

Indian forces use inhumane weapons against unarmed civilians, including women and children.

- Amid the war frenzy the Indian media continues to beat the drums of war as they label more temperate voices anti national, questioning their patriotism or allegiance. They particularly targeted leftists or peace activists. Numerous high-profile journalists abandoned their objectivity calling for India's retaliatory strike on Pakistan. Segments of Indian civil society, especially the Bollywood also called for, and later supported the Indian move to target Pakistan.
- During the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit to Pakistan on February 17, Saudi Arabia announced investments of \$20 billion in Pakistan. The deals include funding for an \$8 billion oil refinery in Gwadar. Mohammed bin Salman visited Pakistan along with a large Saudi delegation comprising senior government officials and businessmen. Pakistani fighter jets escorted the royal plane to the airport. Upon his arrival, the Crown Prince was welcomed with a 21-gun salute and was greeted by Prime Minister Imran Khan and Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa.

International

- Amid growing tensions in South Asia, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on both India and Pakistan to exercise restraint.
- At a news conference after his summit meeting in Vietnam on February 27 US President Donald Trump said that there was "reasonably decent" news coming from India and Pakistan and "hopefully it's going to be coming to an end." The US government however took a hard line on Pakistan while drawing closer to India.
- Earlier on February 27, the Hanoi summit ended abruptly after US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un failed to reach an agreement. Talks stalled between the two leaders over the removal of sanctions against North Korea. Trump stated, "they (North Korea) wanted sanctions lifted in their entirety and we couldn't do that".
- In another major setback for President Trump on February 27, his personal lawyer, Michael Cohen, testified before Congress and declared Trump to be a 'conman, a cheat and a racist'. Cohen also declared Trump had advance knowledge that WikiLeaks was about to publish damaging emails stolen from Democratic political operatives in the run-up to the 2016 election. Cohen also stated Trump may have been aware about a 2016

meeting between his son, Donald Trump Jr., and a Russian attorney who promised damaging information about Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. In the wake of Cohen's testimony, Speaker Nancy Pelosi has dismissed calls to impeach President Trump as top lawmakers have suggested pursuing multiple intertwined inquiries until the final results of the special counsel's investigation. They believe the inquiries will do more damage to Trump's re-election than a partisan impeachment that would harm the country.

- Earlier on February 26, the US House of Representatives voted to block US President Donald Trump's emergency declaration.
- On February 28, the Israeli Attorney General announced his intention to indict Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust, imperiling Netanyahu's political future 40 days ahead of the election. Netanyahu, who is running for his fourth consecutive term as prime minister, is now entitled to a hearing to challenge the charges. If the case proceeds, he would be the first sitting prime minister to be indicted. Answering a question about whether Prime Minister Netanyahu would be indicted, US President Donald Trump said that the Israeli premier was "tough" and a great leader. Trump said that while he was not familiar with the corruption probes, Netanyahu had "done a great job as prime minister."
- On February 26, UK Prime Minister Theresa May, announced that if MP rejected her no-deal Brexit was rejected in the House of Commons, she may propose delaying the UK's scheduled exit from the European Union on March 29, 2019. Meanwhile the EU also suggested the UK postpone its exit from the EU beyond the March 2019 deadline, arguing it would be a "rational solution" given the political crisis in the UK. Earlier on February 24, Theresa May rescheduled a vote on Brexit to March 12, 2019, a mere two weeks before the country is set to formally leave the EU, sparking criticism both in London and Brussels as the UK's exit plan remains unclear.
- On February 22, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said that Iran was in compliance with its nuclear agreement signed with major world powers, also called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Earlier on February 16, German Chancellor Angela Merkel appreciated European nations' decision to stand by the Iran's nuclear agreement, despite the US' unilateral withdrawal from the agreement.

---Amina Afzal

AMERICAS

Domestic

- On February 27, US President Donald Trump's former personal lawyer, Michael Cohen, testified before Congress and declared Trump to be a 'conman, a cheat and a racist'.

Cohen — who is scheduled to go to jail for three years after pleading guilty to financial crimes and lying to Congress — in addition to calling Trump a 'conman, a cheat and a racist', declared Trump had advance knowledge that WikiLeaks was about to publish damaging emails stolen from Democratic political operatives in the run-up to the 2016 election. Cohen also stated Trump may have been aware about a 2016 meeting between his son, Donald Trump Jr., and a Russian attorney who promised damaging information about Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.

- On February 26, the US House of Representatives voted to block US President Donald Trump's emergency declaration.

In a 245-182 vote, the Democratic-majority House rejected Trump's emergency declaration allowing him to secure and direct additional funding to construct a border wall with Mexico. The bill will now move to the Republican-run Senate, where analysts suggest it may pass as Republicans are divided over Trump's decision to declare an emergency. Trump however, has already vowed to veto the measure. Trump, On February 16, 2019 declared a national emergency to secure funding for his proposed border wall with Mexico after Congress passed a bill that allocated only USD 1.3 billion to constructing Trump's proposed border wall with Mexico- an amount far below the USD 5.7 billion originally sought by Trump.

- On February 20, the Southern Poverty Law Center found a seven percent increase in the number of hate groups in the US when compared to the previous year.

The Southern Poverty Law Centre attributed the surge in hate crimes and hate groups in the US to the rhetoric of US President Donald Trump, stating "President Trump has opened the White House doors to extremism," by "not only consulting with hate groups on policies that erode our country's civil rights protections, but also enabling the infiltration of extremist ideas into the administration's rhetoric and agenda."

- On February 19, House Democrats launched an investigation into accusations that White House officials pushed for a proposal to export nuclear energy technology to Saudi Arabia.

Representative Elijah Cummings, chairman of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform, asked the White House to turn over documents to investigate allegations that the White House was looking to export nuclear energy technology to Saudi Arabia. An initial report by the committee stated "strong private commercial interests have been pressing aggressively" to transfer sensitive technology to Saudi Arabia, adding, "these commercial entities stand to reap billions of dollars through contracts associated with constructing and operating nuclear facilities in Saudi Arabia - - and apparently have been in close and repeated contact with President Trump and his

administration to the present day". The US cannot legally transfer nuclear technology to countries without reaching Section 123 agreements, which ensures nuclear technology is only utilized for civilian energy use. The House Committee has expressed concern that Saudi Arabia could use the technology for making nuclear weapons. A key target of the Committee's inquiry is an effort by IP3 International who has been lobbying to win presidential approval to develop nuclear power plants in Saudi Arabia. It is noted that the Trump administration in its very first weeks tried to approve IP3's bid. Coincidentally, IP3 International's subsidiary listed retired army lieutenant general Michael Flynn as an advisor in 2016. Flynn, who had served briefly as Trump's national security adviser before resigning, has been convicted of lying about secret communications with Russia. In addition, Thomas Barrack, a businessman who organized Trump's inauguration is also seen as key figure pushing for IP3's bid. These glaring conflicts of interest have propelled the House Committee to launch an investigation.

- On February 19, Bernie Sanders announced his bid to run for president in the upcoming election in 2020.

Bernie Sanders is a Democratic Senator from Vermont who was a contender for the 2016 presidential campaign. Sanders' campaign announced that they raised USD 6 million in the first day since his announcement to run for the office of President.

- On February 16, President Donald Trump declared a national emergency to secure funding for his proposed border wall with Mexico.

Trump declared the emergency after Congress passed a bill that allocated only USD 1.3 billion to constructing Trump's proposed border wall with Mexico- an amount far below the USD 5.7 billion originally sought by Trump. Trump declared in addition to the USD 1.3 billion allocated to constructing the wall by Congress, he will secure an additional USD 600 million from the Treasury Department, USD 2.5 billion from the military fund for drug interdiction, and USD 3.6 billion from the military construction fund- giving Trump a total of USD 8 billion for constructing the wall- an amount that is considerably more than what he had initially requested for. More than 250 rallies, attended by thousands of protesters, were organised across the US on February 18, 2019 protesting Trump's decision. In addition, a coalition of 16 US states filed a lawsuit against trump which read "contrary to the will of Congress, the President has used the pretext of a manufactured 'crisis' of unlawful immigration to declare a national emergency and redirect federal dollars appropriate for drug interdiction, military construction, and law enforcement initiatives toward building a wall on the United States – Mexico border".

International

- On February 27, the two-day long Hanoi summit concluded earlier than expected after US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un failed to reach an agreement.

White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders stated, “The two leaders discussed various ways to advance denuclearisation and economic driven concepts,” but maintained “No agreement was reached at this time, but their respective teams look forward to meeting in the future”. During the summit, Kim Jong-un made clear that he would be willing to denuclearise but did not go into any further detail, but added that he would welcome a US liaison office in Pyongyang. The summit ended earlier than expected as talks stalled between the two leaders over the removal of sanctions against North Korea. Trump stated, “they (North Korea) wanted sanctions lifted in their entirety and we couldn’t do that”.

- On February 27, The US Trade Representative's office stated it would move to formally suspend a scheduled tariff increase on Chinese goods "until further notice" after US President Donald Trump extended the deadline for securing a US-China trade deal.

The US had initially given a deadline of March 1, 2019 for reaching a trade agreement with China. However, as talks between the two countries are progressing, Trump agreed to extend the original deadline. 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.

- On February 26, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo spoke separately with the Foreign Ministers of India and Pakistan and urged “India and Pakistan to exercise restraint, and avoid escalation at any cost” after Indian fighter jets violated the Line of Control.

Pompeo stated “following Indian counter-terrorism actions on February 26, I spoke with Indian Minister of External Affairs Swaraj to emphasise our close security partnership and shared goal of maintaining peace and security in the region”. Pompeo erroneously termed the incident as “counter-terrorism actions” rather than the declaring it an overt act of aggression on the part of India. Pakistan’s Foreign Office stated Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi made clear to Pompeo that Indian aggression was worthy of condemnation and added India’s aggression can adversely impact the joint peace efforts in Afghanistan.

- On February 25, Zalmay Khalilzad, Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, met with Taliban leaders in Qatar.

Khalilzad met with the Taliban’s senior leadership, including Mullah Baradar, one of the Taliban's co-founders. Baradar who led the Taliban delegation was released last year from a Pakistani jail after he was arrested in 2010. Khalilzad praised Pakistan’s efforts in supporting the peace talks and by facilitating the travel of the Taliban leadership to Doha. The US, eagerly looking to extricate itself from the 17-year-old conflict in Afghanistan, has been actively engaged in talks with the Taliban and the Afghan Government.

- On February 21, the White House announced that 200 US troops will remain in Syria.

Despite US President Donald Trump’s earlier declaration in December 2018, of a “full” and “rapid” withdrawal of US troops from Syria, Washington has decided to keep around 200 US troops as a peacekeeping force. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham supported Trump’s decision

stating, “will help to ensure that ISIS won’t come back, Iran won’t move to fill the vacuum and there won’t be a conflict between Turkey and Kurdish forces... this will prevent the debacle that occurred in Iraq to happen to Syria”. US intelligence chiefs had been voicing their concern over a precipitous withdrawal of US troop from Syria, arguing military pressure was required to stop the resurgence of ISIS. Coalition countries including France and Britain had earlier announced they would withdraw their forces unless some American forces remained. Analysts predict Washington’s new approach to troop withdrawal will ensure the US’s European allies retain their troops in Syria as well.

- On February 21, Trump declared he would not allow US citizen, Hoda Muthana, to return to the US after she joined the Islamic State in 2014.

Hoda Muthana, currently living in a Syrian refugee camp with her son, had run away from her home in the US to marry an Islamic State fighter. Muthana, “deeply, deeply regrets” her decision and wishes to return to her family home in Alabama. Trump, however declared he would not allow her to return to the US, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that Muthana was no longer a US citizen. This news coincidentally comes at a time when Trump has been demanding European allies repatriate and prosecute hundreds of its citizens taken prisoner by the US in Syria. Muthana’s father responded filing a lawsuit against the US government, seeking injunctive relief preventing the US government from unconstitutionally robbing his daughter and her son of their US citizenship.

- On February 20, the US urged Islamabad to punish those responsible for Pulwama attacks on February 14, 2019 in occupied Kashmir.

US State Department Deputy Spokesperson Robert Palladino stated, “we have been in close communication with the government of India to express not only our condolences but our strong support for India as it confronts this terrorism,” adding “we urge Pakistan to fully cooperate with the investigation into the attack and to punish anyone responsible”. The US State Department’s comments come a day after Prime Minister Imran Khan made clear to India that Islamabad had no involvement in the attack, but was willing to act upon ‘actionable intelligence’. PM Khan stated, “I would like to make the Indian government an offer, if you have actionable evidence, share it with us. We will take action. Not because we are under pressure, but because it is our policy”.

- On February 20, Trump Signs Order to Begin Creation of Space Force

US President Donald Trump signed the Space Policy Directive-4, which orders the Pentagon to draft legislation establishing the Space Force within the Air Force. The Trump administration has yet to submit a legislative proposal to Congress in order to approve funding and authorise, officially, establishing this new military branch. Trump stated, “America must be fully equipped to defend our vital interests,” arguing “our adversaries are training forces and developing technology to undermine our security in space, and they’re working very hard at that”. Critics are concerned that such a stance raises the danger of militarizing space.

- On February 16, US Vice President Mike Pence called on European allies at the Munich conference to adopt a tough stance on Iran and Venezuela.

Pence leveled criticism at the EU arguing it was too soft on Iran and called on it to "stop undermining" US sanctions against Iran, adding "the time has come for our European partners to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal and join with us as we bring the economic diplomatic pressure necessary to give the Iranian people, the region, and the world the peace, security and freedom they deserve". The US, in May 2018 had walked away from the Iran-nuclear deal that was struck in 2015, whereby sanctions were lifted in return for Tehran limiting their nuclear programme. Pence also called on his European allies to recognise Venezuelan congressional leader Juan Guaido as president, declaring incumbent President Nicolas Maduro a dictator. Spain's Foreign Minister Josep Borrell responded, stating the EU could only acknowledge Guaido as interim president until fresh elections were held, keeping in line with the Venezuelan constitution. Pence also warned of the role played by China, urging EU governments to stay away from Chinese telecoms companies as they build the latest generation of mobile networks, while highlighting US claims of Chinese espionage. These demands were not well received by European diplomats and officials. According to one senior French diplomat, "US pressure has a tendency to make us do the opposite. US pressure is counterproductive. It's best that they don't try and pressure us". Republican Senator Lindsey Graham who was also in attendance stated the US would be asking allies to contribute forces to help stabilise areas liberated from ISIS in Syria. Responding to Graham, one French diplomat stated unequivocally, "Once the Americans leave, we'll be forced to leave. We aren't going to be the patsy for the Americans."

Former US Vice President Joe Biden, in stark contrast to Pence, won a standing ovation from delegates as he made clear the Trump administration undermined America's ability to claim moral leadership, while pledging his full support to NATO and the EU adding "we (America) will be back". The Munich conference clearly illustrated the growing strain in transatlantic relations, with the US's policy and approach at odds with its European counterparts.

- On February 17, Donald Trump demanded Britain, France, Germany and other allies prosecute more than 800 ISIS prisoners taken into US custody in Syria.

Trump while declaring the "Caliphate is ready to fall", called on European allies to prosecute its citizens who joined ISIS and had been captured by US troops in Syria. Stating if they failed to prosecute them, the US would release the prisoners. Trump's statements come after he ordered a "full" and "rapid" withdrawal of US troops from Syria after declaring ISIS had been defeated in December 2018. Deep divisions exist between the Trump administration and US intelligence chiefs over the withdrawal of US troops from Syria. The latter have warned a hasty US withdrawal would allow a resurgence of ISIS, whom they contend still pose a serious threat, within months if the US did not maintain military pressure on the terror group.

Latin America

- On February 23, Venezuelan President Nicholas Maduro declared he would cut off diplomatic ties with Colombia to halt all aid coming into the country, as the US continues to back Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's interim president.

---Kiran Mazari

ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

- On February 16, German Chancellor Angela Merkel appreciated European nations' decision to stand by the Iran's nuclear agreement, despite the US' unilateral withdrawal from the agreement.

While addressing nations at the Munich Security Conference 2019- an annual gathering of top global defence and foreign policy officials- Chancellor Merkel said that she shared the US' concerns about Iranian efforts to increase its power in the region. However, on withdrawing from the Iran nuclear agreement she argued "The only question that stands between us on this issue is, do we help our common cause, our common aim of containing the damaging or difficult development of Iran, by withdrawing from the one remaining agreement? Or do we help it more by keeping the small anchor we have in order maybe to exert pressure in other areas?" Regarding nuclear disarmament, Chancellor Merkel said that China must be involved in international disarmament efforts. She said, "Disarmament is something that concerns us all and we would, of course, be glad if such talks were held not just between the United States, Europe and Russia but also with China." She said that the US' withdrawal from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty was "inevitable" because of Russian violations. She made these comments amid Russian and US concerns over China's rising ballistic missile capabilities. In response, Yang Jiechi, a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, expressed China's unwillingness to sign the INF Treaty, and said that China was opposed to the multilateralisation of the Treaty. He said, "China develops its capabilities strictly according to its defensive needs and does not pose a threat to anybody else."

On February 16, 2019, US Vice President Mike Pence also addressed the conference. During his speech, Pence urged the EU to end their involvement in the Iranian nuclear deal, calling Iran "the leading state sponsor of terrorism in the world." He said, "The time has come for our European partners to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal."

- On February 26, India test-fired its Quick Reaction Surface-to-Air Missile (QRSAM) twice off the Odisha coast.

According to media reports, two missiles were fired from a test facility at Chandipur. The missiles were fired from a canister mounted on a rotatable truck-based launch unit. The test was conducted as a part of armed forces preparedness trials. This qualifies as the fifth test of the missile. With a strike-range of 30 kilometres, the missile is capable of tracking and destroying enemy aircraft.

- On February 25, Australia and France signed a framework agreement worth \$35.5 billion to procure 12 attack submarines from the French company Naval Group.

Australia's state-owned shipyard Australian Submarine Corporation (ASC) and French state-owned submarine builder Naval Group signed a framework agreement to procure 12 Short-fin Barracuda Block 1A diesel-electric submarines (SSK), under the Royal Australian Navy's SEA 1000 Future Submarine Programme. Prime Minister Scott Morrison said, "This means we are ensuring we are at the front of the pack when it comes to the latest naval vessels and firepower." In a statement, Australia's Minister for Defence Christopher Pyne said, "The Framework Agreement includes workforce development such as training apprentices, occupational health and safety training and services, as well as helping Naval Group tap into ASC's existing supply chain." The submarines would be constructed in a new shipyard in South Australia. Both countries have agreed that the first batch of submarines would be delivered to the Australian navy in the early 2030's, and the project is set to be completed in the 2050's. Though the design of new Short-fin Barracuda submarines would be based on Naval Group's nuclear Barracuda model, they would be conventionally powered, using a combination of electric and diesel engines.

- According to Fars News Agency on February 24, Iran test-fired several cruise missiles during the country's three-day naval drills.

The Iranian Navy started its three-day drill, codenamed "Velayat 97," in the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman on February 22, 2019. According to the report, the war game was composed of four separate phases, including naval parades, simulation of a real naval war, maritime and land offenses to practice recapturing enemy occupied territories, and the display of the Navy's power by launching various types of missiles and torpedoes. During the first day, Iran launched its latest indigenously developed submarine named Fateh. The launch ceremony, led by President Hassan Rouhani, took place in the southern port city of Bandar Abbas. President Rouhani said, "Today, the Islamic Republic of Iran is fully self-reliant on land, air and sea. Our defensive power is meant to defend our interests and we have never sought to attack any country." According to Iranian Defence Minister Brigadier General Amir Hatami, Fateh is Iran's first semi-heavy submarine which enjoys sonar systems, an electric propulsion system, combined warfare capability, subsurface-to-surface missile guiding system, capable of launching cruise missiles and is also fitted with a torpedoe firing system. During the second day of the naval drills, Iranian Naqdi destroyer and Tabarzin missile-launching frigate fired two indigenously developed Qader and Qadir cruise missiles at the targets. The strike-range of Qader and Qadir missiles are 250 kilometres and 300 kilometres, respectively. While demonstrating its naval fire-power, Iranian Qadir-class submarine also test-fired an anti-ship cruise missile at hypothetical enemy targets during the third day of the drills. Commander of the Iranian Navy Rear Admiral Hossein Khanzadi indicated that Iran's newly launched Fateh submarine also had the capability of launching anti-ship cruise missiles. However, Khanzadi did not provide more details regarding the cruise missile.

- On February 22, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said that Iran was in compliance with its nuclear agreement signed with major world powers, also called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

In its annual quarterly report, the IAEA indicated that Iran had stayed within the accord's uranium-enrichment limits and complied with limitations on its stock of enriched uranium. The report also stressed that the IAEA inspectors did not find any irregularities related to Iran's Arak nuclear research reactor. Iran has not withdrawn from the JCPOA despite the US unilaterally withdrawing from it and re-imposing sanctions on Iran. Despite the US' stance, other signatories to the agreement including China, Russia, Germany, France and Britain are trying to keep the agreement intact and resisting US pressure to abandon the nuclear agreement.

- On February 19, US President Donald Trump signed a fourth Space Policy Directive to begin the lengthy process of creating a US Space Force.

According to the new policy directive, the Space Force would be an armed branch of the military and "include both combat and combat support functions to enable prompt and sustained offensive and defensive space operations." Under the policy directive, the Space Force would be developed as a sixth branch within the US Air Force, rather than a "separate but equal" military branch to the other military services, which President Trump had proposed earlier in 2018. According to media reports, if the US Congress proves the policy directive, the space force would act under the air force, just as the US Marine Corps is part of the navy. It would not have its own bureaucracy, including a civilian secretary. It would instead have a Senate-confirmed undersecretary for space within the air force.

- On February 17, Saudi Arabia signed defence deals with France and the UAE as part of its efforts to develop domestic manufacturing capabilities.

Saudi Arab's state defence company Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI) signed one deal with the French company Naval Group and another deal with the UAE based Mubadala Investment Company. The two deals were announced on the sidelines of International Defence Exhibition, Idex 2019 which began on February 17, 2019. SAMI Chief Executive Andreas Schwer said that the preliminary deal between the SAMI and France's Naval Group includes building warships, frigates, corvettes and related items in Saudi Arabia through a majority SAMI-owned joint venture with the French firm. Schwer said, "Through design, construction, and maintenance activities the joint venture will contribute significantly to further enhance the capabilities and readiness of the Royal Saudi Naval Forces." While in another agreement, SAMI and Mubadala Investment Company agreed to collaborate across areas of aerospace, defence manufacturing, maintenance, repair and overhaul, research and development (R&D) and engineering. Badr Al Olama, Director of Aerospace and Defence, Mubadala, said, "Through our strategic collaboration, we have identified a number of areas for potential partnership in the

manufacturing, and R&D that can utilise the deep experience of the UAE in growing international partnerships and establishing a regional ecosystem.”

--- Moiz Khan

CHINA, EAST ASIA & PACIFIC

China

- On February 22, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman visited Beijing and met with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Vice Premier Han Zheng.

Following the visit, Saudi Arabia and China signed 35 economic cooperation agreements worth \$28 billion. Aramco, a Saudi Arabian national petroleum company, agreed to form a joint venture with Chinese defence conglomerate Norinco to develop a refining and petrochemical complex in the Chinese city of Panjin. The project is worth more than \$10 billion. The Crown Prince said Saudi Arabia's relationship with China dated back "a very long time in the past". In addition, the Chinese President told the Crown Prince that both countries must strengthen international cooperation on de-radicalisation to "prevent the infiltration and spread of extremist thinking".

Japan

- On February 25, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said that Tokyo would proceed with a plan to relocate a US air base in Okinawa.

Abe's statement came a day after Okinawa residents voted against the Japanese government's plan to relocate the US Marine Corps Futenma Air Station, currently located in the densely-populated part of the island, to the coastal region of Henoko. Shinzo Abe has emphasised that he was taking the results seriously, however, the central government's decision to move the base could not be deferred. The Japanese government wants to relocate the US base because of national security and safety concerns.

North Korea

- According to Agence France-Presse on February 28, the US-North Korea Nuclear Summit held in Hanoi ended abruptly without a deal.

US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un met in Hanoi for negotiations on the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula. However, there was no breakthrough between the two sides. Talks failed between the countries after Trump did not accept North Korea's demand to have all sanctions against them dropped. According to White House Press Secretary, Sarah Sanders the two leaders discussed "various ways to advance denuclearisation and economic driven concepts." She said that "no agreement was reached...but their respective teams look forward to meeting in the future."

Vietnam

- During his visit to Hanoi on February 27, US President Donald Trump appreciated Vietnam for ordering more than \$20 billion of Boeing jets and US technology.

US President Donald Trump also met his Vietnamese counterpart Nguyen Phu Trong. Media reports claimed that Vietnam is buying 100 Boeing 737-Max jets and 215 GE/CFM joint venture engines. Meanwhile, Vietnam Airlines is also buying \$100 million in services and technology from Sabre Corp.

South Korea

- On February 22, US President Donald Trump ruled out any plans for reducing the number of US troops stationed in South Korea as part of a deal to be discussed during his scheduled summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un are scheduled to meet in Hanoi on February 27, 2019. According to senior US officials, the two sides would not discuss withdrawing US troops from the Korean Peninsula. The talks would instead focus on seeking a common understanding about denuclearisation.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

EUROPE

- On February 27, British Home Secretary Sajid Javid declared Hezbollah is to be subject to a blanket ban under the UK's anti-terror laws.

The UK government declared that while Hezbollah's military wing is already outlawed, its political arm shall also be banned. Sajid Javid stated, "Hezbollah is continuing in its attempts to destabilise the fragile situation in the Middle East - and we are no longer able to distinguish between their already banned military wing and the political party. Because of this, I have taken the decision to proscribe the group in its entirety". The UK government has refrained from proscribing the organisation in its entirety, citing Hezbollah provides social and political functions in Lebanon and has also formed part of the country's government. Under the UK's Terrorism Act 2000, the Home Secretary has the power to proscribe an organisation if he believes it is "concerned in terrorism".

- On February 26, Ukraine started the process of impeaching Ukrainian President Poroshenko, after he was accused of having knowledge of top officials of the defense industry receiving kickbacks for obtaining contraband military vehicle parts at inflated prices.
- On February 26, UK Prime Minister Theresa May, announced that if her deal, or a no-deal Brexit, is rejected by MP's in the House of Commons, she may propose delaying the UK's scheduled exit from the European Union on March 29, 2019.
- On February 26, the European Union suggested the UK postpone its exit from the EU beyond the March deadline, arguing it would be a "rational solution" given the political crisis in the UK.

European Council President Donald Tusk said he had discussed the "legal and procedural context of a potential extension" with UK Prime Minister, Theresa May, on the sidelines of an EU-Arab summit in Sharm el-Sheikh. The UK is looking to officially leave the EU on March 29, 2019 but parliament still remains deeply divided on an exit deal. To this, Tusk added, "the less time there is until 29 of March, the greater the likelihood of an extension.

- On February 25, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled Britain should give up control of the Chagos archipelago, and return the territory to Mauritius.

The chief judge, Abdulqawi Ahmed Yusuf, stated "the United Kingdom is under an obligation to bring an end to its administration of the Chagos Archipelago as rapidly as possible, thereby allowing Mauritius to complete the decolonisation of its territory". The Chagos archipelago, and the Indian Ocean islands including Diego Garcia that houses a US airbase, have been a source

of conflict between Mauritius and the UK. The US airbase at Diego Garcia has been the staging ground for US bombing campaigns against Afghanistan and Iraq. Mauritius has claimed the territory as its own, and has argued against the UK's presence. While the ICJ's judgment is not binding, it does however carry symbolic importance as it had been tasked by the United Nations General Assembly to give its view on the row between London and Port Louis.

- On February 25, Jeremy Corbyn, head of the UK Labour party, announced his party would support a second Brexit referendum.
- On February 24, 2019 UK Prime Minister, Theresa May rescheduled a “meaningful” vote on Brexit to March 12, 2019, a mere two weeks before the UK is set to formally leave the EU, sparking criticism both in London and Brussels as the UK's exit plan remains unclear.
- On February 21, President Vladimir Putin warned the US against deploying new missiles in Europe and stated that Moscow would retaliate by targeting Western capitals with its own weaponry if the US did not take heed to their warnings.

Putin stated, “I'm saying this clearly and openly, Russia will be forced to deploy weapons that can be used... against the decision-making centres that are behind the missile systems which threaten us”. Putin claimed the US walked away from the INF treaty to build new missiles but unjustly laid blame on Russia for violating the terms of the INF treaty- a claim that is denied by Moscow. Although Putin issued a tough warning to the US, he maintained he was open to dialogue and talks on arms control. The US State Department responded and made clear that Washington was not developing "exotic new nuclear weapons delivery systems" and reiterated that Russia violated the INF. NATO deputy spokesman, Piers Cazalet added "Russian statements threatening to target Allies are unacceptable. We call on Russia to focus on returning to compliance with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty".

- On February 20, Germany declined the UK's call to resume arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

Jeremy Hunt, UK Foreign Secretary met with German Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas, in Berlin. In a joint press conference, Maas made clear that Germany would not resume arms sales to Saudi Arabia and any future decision would be “dependent on developments in the Yemen conflict and whether what was agreed in the Stockholm peace talks are implemented”. Hunt was looking to persuade Germany into resuming the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia, arguing failure to do so would affect the credibility of Europe and impact the British and European defence industry.

- On February 20, the UK Home Office declared that it would stripping the citizenship of teenage 'ISIL bride' Shamima Begum.

Shamima Begum, now 19 years old, left London in 2015 to join ISIL in Syria. She has declared her intent of returning home, however, UK authorities plan to revoke her citizenship. British Home Secretary, Sajid Javid declared, "we must remember that those who left Britain to join Daesh [Islamic State] were full of hate for our country".

- On February 19, European Parliament's sub-committee on human rights hosted an official exchange of views on the condition of human rights in Indian-occupied Kashmir.

The gross human rights violations perpetrated against innocent Kashmiri civilians was highlighted during the session, and India was called on to immediately halt the atrocities it was committing in Indian occupied Kashmir. The event was seen as a major diplomatic success for Pakistan as it is the first time in more than a decade that the EU is discussing the mass human rights violations taking place under Indian occupation, while making calls to find a peaceful resolution to the longest unresolved issue on the agenda of the United Nations.

- On February 20, three pro-EU Conservative MPs announced their resignations from the party to join forces with eight ex-Labour politicians in the newly-formed 'Independent Group'.

Prime Minister Theresa May has been dealt a severe blow after three MP's from her party resigned. Heidi Allen, Sarah Wollaston, and Anna Soubry have quit the Tory Party and will now sit on the opposition benches along with eight ex-Labour politicians that resigned on February 18, 2019. The three MP's accused May of not standing up to the hardline Brexiteers within her party, adding "Brexit has re-defined the Conservative party – undoing all the efforts to modernise it".

- On February 18, a diplomatic row between Poland and Israel led to the cancellation of an international summit in Jerusalem.

A summit that was due to be hosted in Jerusalem on February 19, 2019 was cancelled after Poland declined to attend. Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, withdrew his country's involvement in the summit after Yisrael Katz, acting Israeli Foreign Minister, accused all Polish people of harbouring "innate" antisemitism. Morawiecki accused Israel's foreign minister of racism as tensions escalated between the two countries over a row over the Holocaust.

- On February 18, the three-day long Munich Security Conference concluded, highlighting deepening transatlantic tensions.

The main theme of the Munich Security Conference was defense cooperation between Europe and its allies. Wolfgang Ischinger, president of the Munich Security Conference, raised his

concern over current global security developments and escalating security issues on the first day of the conference. Highlighting Russian aggression, he noted, “when Vladimir Putin annexed the Crimea in 2014 and started the bloody conflict in eastern Ukraine, many saw in him the great uncertainty”. Ischinger also identified US leadership as a source of concern stating “No one could have guessed that just a few years later (after 2014), the U.S. president would question everything that was established. Donald Trump questions free trade just like he questions the Western set of values or NATO. This has massive consequences — not just for us Europeans”. At the conference, German Chancellor Angela Merkel strongly defended Germany’s policies while touching upon the growing tensions between Europe and the US, adding, "I see the Europeans on one side and the Americans on the other side". Merkel also declared the Iran Nuclear deal represented "another bone of contention dividing" Europe and the United States. She ridiculed the Trump administration’s trade declaration that German cars represent a ‘national-security threat’ to the US, drawing laughter from the attendees. Merkel and Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the EU Commission, clashed with US Vice President Mike Pence, who rolled out a list of Washington's demands to the EU particularly on adopting a tougher stance on Iran. Pence asked the EU to "stop undermining" US sanctions against Iran and urged them to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal- a deal that the US had walked away from in May 2018. Merkel made clear her stance on not withdrawing from the Iran Nuclear deal arguing, canceling the only agreement made with Iran was not the solution to containing Iran, rather, a place from which pressure can be applied to Iran to address other pressing issues. Merkel also raised concerns of US policy arguing Washington’s precipitous withdrawal of troops from Syria would in reality create a vacuum that would empower Iran- a view that was echoed by French Foreign Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian. The German Defence Minister responded to US insistence that European countries increase NATO funding, by stating NATO was not just about “cash, capabilities and contributions” but also “about dignity, decency and dependability”. Responding to the US’s suggestion of its European allies contributing forces to stabilise areas liberated from ISIS in Syria in the face of US troop withdrawal, one French diplomat stated unequivocally, “Once the Americans leave, we’ll be forced to leave. We aren’t going to be the patsy for the Americans”. The Munich conference clearly illustrated the growing strain in transatlantic relations, with US’s policy and approach at complete odds with its European counterparts.

---Kiran Mazari

GLOBAL TERRORISM

- On February 26, Indonesia and Egypt signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on fighting terrorism.

The MoU was signed between the Indonesian Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) Chief Suardi Alius and the Egyptian Minister of Interior Mahmoud Tawfik in Cairo. Suhardi said that radical terrorist networks in Indonesia were increasingly influenced by the dynamics and developments of global terrorist networks, particularly those in the Middle East. He indicated that Indonesian terrorist networks have joined forces with Daesh, which is an alarming situation for the country. Daesh's influence has grown in Southeast Asian countries including Indonesia, Philippines, and Malaysia. Helmy Fauzi, Indonesian Ambassador to Egypt, stressed that the MoU signed between the countries would help in learning from each other's experience to improve counterterrorism efforts.

- On February 23, officials from the Counter Terrorism Policing North East in the UK arrested a man in Leeds on suspicion of preparing for acts of terrorism in an 'intelligence-led' operation.

A spokesperson for Counter Terrorism Policing North East said, "This is a pre-planned, intelligence-led arrest as part of an investigation into suspected extreme right-wing activity." He indicated that the 33-years old man, an alleged right-wing extremist, has been taken to a police station in West Yorkshire for questioning. This arrest came following the head of UK counter-terror police's warning of an increase in far-right terror activities. Metropolitan Police Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu said, "We are dealing with a record number of operations and the potential of a growing extreme threat from the extreme far-right community for all kinds of reasons, not just because of the Islamist threat but things like Brexit, and some of the far-right political rhetoric which has not helped." According to a counter-extremism group Hope Not Hate, far-right terror activities are expected from terrorist organisations including Daesh and the National Action as well as from lone actors who get radicalised on the internet. The National Action is a Neo-Nazi group, and the first right-wing group which was banned in Britain in 2016.

- On February, 22, the Singapore Police Force (SPF) announced that it conducted a joint counter-terrorism exercise with Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) aimed at training their personnel in dealing with threats involving explosives, gunmen and hostage situations.

The police said that the exercise was conducted on February 19, 2019, to test and validate Singapore's multi-agency response plan in the event of a terror attack. According to a statement released by the police, the two teams responded to various scenarios during the exercise including, instances of active shooting, hostage situation, neutralising improvised explosive device (IED) threats and handling medical emergencies. The statement read that both the SPF

and SAF conduct regular joint-training sessions and exercises to enhance operational readiness in homeland security operations.

--- Moiz Khan

MIDDLE EAST & WEST ASIA

Egypt

- On February 24, leaders from the European Union and the Arab League countries participated in an EU-Arab Summit in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt.

Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz also attended the meeting. Europe's migration challenge remained the focal point during the two-day meeting, held under the slogan "Investing in Stability." Egyptian President, Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi opened the talks with a speech celebrating what he described as historic cooperation between the two organisations. The participants pledged to boost cooperation in the fight against terrorism and to tackle unauthorised migration. The EU wants Sisi to order the Egyptian coast guard to pick up migrants leaving Libya and take them back to the African mainland, ensuring they do not become Europe's responsibility. Sisi, in turn for his support, would receive high-profile European recognition, promotion of Sharm el-Sheikh and a muting of international criticism levelled at his government over their poor human rights record. President Sisi also called for a broad plan to combat terrorism that would deprive extremists of funding and "include a strict security offensive to counter the terrorist organisations and other elements of terrorism", he added "there should also be an effective ideological offensive against their ideological platforms."

Iran

- On February 27, Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani held talks with visiting Armenian Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan in Tehran.

PM Pashinyan, accompanied by a high-ranking delegation, was on a two-day visit to Iran. The visit intended to further bolster ties between the two countries. The officials of Iran and Armenia signed an MoU to increase bilateral cooperation between the Institute of Standards and Industrial Research of Iran and Armenian Ministry of Economic Development and Investments in Tehran. They also signed an MoU to promote cooperation between the Supreme Council of Free Trade, Industrial and Special Economic Zones of Iran and Armenian Ministry of Economic Development and Investments. In addition, the two sides discussed ways of expanding mutual ties in different fields, especially in the banking, energy, transportation, and business sectors.

- On February 25, Syrian President, Bashar al Assad visited Tehran and held talks with Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

During the meeting, Assad expressed his gratitude to Iran for all that it has done for Syria during the conflict. According to the Syrian Presidency, the leaders "reviewed the fraternal and strong relations between their two peoples, which have been the main factor in maintaining

Syria and Iran in the face of plots by enemy countries.” Khamenei told Assad that “Iran considers helping the government and nation of Syria to be helping the resistance movement and is proud of it from the bottom of its heart”. During his visit, Assad also held talks with his Iranian counterpart, Hassan Rouhani. According to Iranian government’s official website, Rouhani said, “the Islamic Republic of Iran as before will be alongside the people and government of Syria.” During the Syrian conflict, Iran and Russia have remained the key allies supporting the Syrian regime in its fight to maintain control over Syria.

- On February 19, senior commander of Iran’s elite Revolutionary Guards, Brigadier General Mohammad Pakpour said that the suicide bomber, who carried out an attack on the Revolutionary Guards killing 27 of its members, was a Pakistani national.

Earlier, on February 18, 2019, Iran’s elite Revolutionary Guards said it had arrested three terrorists involved in the February 13, 2019 suicide bomb attack in a region near Pakistan. According to Pakpour, one other member of the militant cell that planned the attack was also a Pakistani citizen. Iran has repeatedly blamed Pakistan for sheltering militants connected with attacks in the border area however this is the first time Tehran has claimed Pakistani citizens were directly involved in an attack. Iran also accuses regional rival, Saudi Arabia, of promoting violence among members of Iran’s Sunni Muslim minority. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia deny any role in attacks in Iran. Three Iranians from Sistan and Baluchistan province in southeast Iran were also part of the cell, and two of them have been arrested according to Pakpour. The Sunni group Jaish al Adl (Army of Justice), which says it seeks greater rights and better living conditions for the ethnic minority Baluchis in eastern Iran, claimed responsibility for the attack.

Israel

- On February 27, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu held talks with Russian President, Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

During his talks with Putin, Netanyahu renewed his call for an end to Iran’s anti-terrorism advisory mission in Syria, threatening that the Tel Aviv regime would continue to take action against what he called Iran-related targets in Syria. He said, “We will do everything that depends on us to prevent what Iran is saying, which is threatening to destroy us, and we will continue to act accordingly.” Both Iran and Russia have been supporting Syrian President Bashar al Assad’s government in its fight against Daesh. Israel views Iran’s advisors in Syria as a threat and has openly pledged to target them until they leave the country. Tel Aviv has repeatedly asked Moscow to have Iran withdraw its military advisors from Syria. However, Russia praises Iran’s crucial role in counter-terrorism efforts in Syria, saying Tehran’s presence in the country is legal under international law and thus it cannot be forced out.

- On February 17, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu announced he was relinquishing the role of Foreign Minister and handing it to Israel Katz, a right-wing rival from within his Likud party.

Netanyahu's decision to appoint Katz as acting foreign minister came after an advocacy group, the Movement for Quality Government, went to court to press the Prime Minister to stop serving as Foreign Minister as well. Katz is currently the Transportation and Intelligence Minister and it remains unclear whether he would give those positions up. He holds right-wing views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and has said conditions are not in place now for a two-state solution. Katz also promotes a plan for a railway linking Gulf states to the Mediterranean via Israel, as part of an attempt to normalise relations with regional Arab countries. According to analysts, Netanyahu's appointment of Katz is seen as 'political manoeuvring' ahead of the April 9, 2019 elections.

Qatar

- During an interview with *The Guardian* on February 26, Qatari Foreign Minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani called on international powers, including the US, to be more inclusive in their approach towards the Middle East.

Al Thani said that one-sided initiatives that exclude either the Iranians or Palestinians do not work, adding that the Middle East's polarised and repressive politics will lead to even more instability in the region unless countries take steps to reform and calm tensions. He also voiced support for the 2015 multilateral Iran nuclear deal, called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which the US unilaterally abandoned in 2018. He stressed that Qatar's support for the JCPOA did not mean Doha had now formed a new axis with Iran and Turkey. Al Thani further said that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) needs to reach an understanding with Iran.

Saudi Arabia

- On February 26, Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman held talks with US President Donald Trump's senior advisor, Jared Kushner in Riyadh.

US Middle East envoy, Jason Greenblatt and special representative for Iran, Brian Hook also attended the talks. According to the White House, the two sides discussed American-Saudi cooperation, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and economic investment in the region. Kushner has been touring the Middle East in an attempt to gather support for President Trump's yet-to-be unveiled plan on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which Trump himself has called the "deal of the

century.” Kushner also visited the UAE, Bahrain, Oman and Turkey as part of his Middle East tour.

- Following his meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping on February 22 in China, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman signed several multi-billion-dollar deals with the country.

The Saudi delegation also included top executives from state-owned oil company Saudi Aramco. According to the Saudi state news agency SPA, Saudi Arabia signed 35 economic cooperation agreements with China worth a total of \$28 billion at a joint investment forum. During his visit to China, the Crown Prince said, “The Silk Road initiative and China’s strategic orientation are very much in line with the Kingdom’s Vision 2030.” Aramco agreed to form a joint venture with Chinese defence conglomerate Norinco to develop a refining and petrochemical complex in the north-eastern Chinese city of Panjin, saying the project was worth more than \$10 billion. The partners would form a company called Huajin Aramco Petrochemical Co as part of a project that would include a 300,000-barrels per day refinery with a 1.5-million-metric tonnes per year ethylene cracker. Aramco will supply up to 70 % of the crude feedstock for the complex, which is expected to start its operations in 2024.

- On February 20, Saudi Arabia urged India and Pakistan to deescalate their tensions as it threatens world peace, and encouraged both nations to talk out their differences, including their problems with terrorism.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was on a visit to India following a two-day visit to Pakistan. Prince Mohammed and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi appeared before the media and denounced terrorism in general terms. Meanwhile, Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Adel al-Jubeir told NDTV in an interview that the issue of the Pulwama attack was raised by the Indian side at the official talks. He said the Indian account of the incident was in direct contradiction to with what the Saudi delegation had heard from the Pakistani side in Islamabad. Following his departure from India, the Crown Prince sent a letter of thanks to Prime Minister Modi. In the letter, he expressed “gratitude and appreciation” for Modi’s hospitality during his visit with the Saudi delegation. The letter stated, “The talks we had confirmed the strength of the strategic relations between our countries, and the importance of improving cooperation in all fields, in a way that would serve the best interests of our states and nations”.

Syria

- On February 27, Damascus and Moscow jointly called on Washington to end its military presence in Syria and let Syrian government forces and allied Russian troops evacuate civilians from a refugee camp near Jordan.

A joint statement released by the Russian Defence Ministry urged “the United States, whose military units are on Syrian territory illegally, to leave the country.” It also demanded that the American Forces allow the evacuation of the people based in the Rukban refugee camp in southeastern Syria near Jordan’s border. The statement noted that Russian and Syrian Forces have prepared buses to relocate the refugees in Rukban and would guarantee them safe passage. The US maintains a military base in the nearby al-Tanf area at the intersection of the Syrian, Iraqi, and Jordanian borders. Damascus objects to Washington’s military presence in the country and has repeatedly questioned its stated goal, amid reports of the US-led coalition’s attempts to help relocate terrorists around and out of Syria.

- According to a February 27 report by the official *Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)*, the US and Daesh have reached a deal whereby Washington is set to receive massive amounts of gold in exchange for providing safe passage to the group’s members in Syria.

Citing local sources, SANA reported that the deal gave the US “tons of gold that the terror organisation had stolen.” In return, US Forces would allow the terrorists and their leaders to escape their hideouts in the eastern province of Deir ez-Zor. According to eyewitnesses, the gold has been carried away from the province’s al-Baghouz area on board helicopters. The helicopters transported large boxloads of Daesh “spoils” from the al-Dashisha area in the countryside of Hasaka in northeastern Syria. The report added that Daesh’s last hideouts in Deir ez-Zor also contain millions of dollars in funds plundered by the group from across Syria and neighbouring Iraq.

- During a UN Security Council meeting on February 26, Syria’s Ambassador to the UN, Bashar al-Ja’afari said that a number of countries, some of them UN Security Council members, are conducting a campaign of economic terrorism against Syria.

Ja’afari argued that while some of these countries claim to be working to improve the humanitarian situation in Syria, they simultaneously support terrorism, illegitimately deploy their troops to Syria, and launch acts of aggression against it. He added that French Colonel Francois-Regis Legrier has acknowledged that the US-led coalition, purportedly fighting Daesh militants, has largely destroyed infrastructure in Syria, leaving thousands of civilians dead and injured. Ja’afari urged the UN Security Council to prevent the exploitation of humanitarian issues as a means to destabilise states and interfere in their domestic affairs.

- According to *SANA* on February 24, at least 20 people were killed in a Daesh land-mine attack on a van in eastern Syria.

The explosion near the central town of Salamiyeh was caused by explosives left behind by the militants when they controlled the area. According to the news agency, the workers hit by the explosion were on their way to pick desert truffles. Daesh has been driven out of virtually all the territory it once held in Syria and neighbouring Iraq, but the extremists left behind countless

bombs and booby traps covering large areas that are yet to be cleared. Daesh militants are now cornered by US-backed Syrian Forces in a small area near the Iraqi border.

- On February 21, at least 20 people were killed in a car bomb attack in eastern Syria.

According to a spokesman of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the attack killed mostly oil workers, as well as fighters in the village of Shheel close to an oil field acting as a base for the anti-Daesh force. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, claimed the SDF fighters were escorting the workers in vehicles from the Omar oil field. The SDF are working towards evacuating all remaining civilians in the last few holdouts in eastern Syria, so they can retake the remaining pockets under Daesh control.

- On February 19, Adnan Afrin, spokesman of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), said that several militants and dozens of civilians, including foreigners, have quit the last Daesh-held pocket in eastern Syria.

The militant group Daesh, which in 2014 declared a cross-border “caliphate” in Syria and Iraq, has been expelled from all the land it held except for a patch of Baghouz village. Supported by air strikes by the US-led coalition, the SDF have already retaken most of the village. According to Afrin, a convoy of trucks entered Baghouz to transfer jihadists and their relatives out to SDF-held territory. He said, “Dozens of civilians and some fighters have handed themselves over to the SDF.” He said some foreigners were also leaving, but that they did not specify their nationalities nor make clear if they were civilians or fighters. He said, “This is the first time civilians will make it out in four days.” Thousands of people, mostly women and children related to Daesh members, have been evacuated from Daesh-held areas in recent weeks, but no civilians had emerged so far. Afrin said some diehard militants were still refusing to surrender and “many civilians remain” in the last Daesh pocket of less than half a square kilometre.

- On February 18, at least 17 people, including four children, were killed in a double bomb attack in Syria’s militant-held city of Idlib.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the first blast was caused by a bomb planted under a car in the main city of the Idlib region. After ambulances arrived at the site, a motorcycle bomb then detonated. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack. Idlib, the last major part of Syria still outside the control of President Bashar al Assad’s regime, is held by an alliance led by Syria’s former Al Qaeda affiliate, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). In January 2019, the group had taken administrative control of the entire region. Daesh militants also have sleeper cells in the area.

- On February 17, Syrian President, Bashar al Assad warned Syria’s Kurds that their ally, the US, would not protect them against any Turkish offensive as Washington plans to withdraw its troops.

The US is set to pull out its soldiers from Syria after allied Kurdish-led forces captured Daesh's last holdout in the area. Any withdrawal risks leaving the Kurds exposed to a long-threatened attack by neighbouring Turkey, which views Kurdish fighters as terrorists. During a televised speech, President Assad said, "We tell those groups who are betting on the Americans that the Americans will not protect you. The Americans do not hold you in their heart. They will put you in their pocket so you can be a bargaining chip." The announcement of a US withdrawal from Syria has pushed the Kurds to rebuild ties with the Damascus regime, but talks so far have not succeeded. President Assad also said, "If you don't prepare yourselves to defend your country and resist, you will be nothing but a slave to the Ottomans. No one will protect you except your state. No one will defend you except the Syrian Arab Army."

--- Muhammad Shoaib

SOUTH ASIA: I

Pakistan

External

- On February 27, Pakistan Air Force jets undertook a strike in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK) from Pakistani airspace. The Pakistan Air Force also shot down two Indian fighter jets. One of the aircrafts fell inside Azad Kashmir and the other fell inside IOK. One Indian Air Force pilot, identified as Wing Commander Abhi Nandan, was captured by the Pakistani Army on the ground.
- Pakistan said “it struck non-military targets, avoiding human loss and collateral damage” during a strike in IOK and the “sole purpose” of this action was “to demonstrate our right, will and capability for self-defence.”
- In a televised address to the nation, and India, on February 27, Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan, said the two countries could not afford any miscalculation because of the weapons both countries possess. He reiterated his message of peace and recommended dialogue as a way of moving forward, while assuring India of Pakistan’s cooperation. However, the Prime Minister maintained the “sole purpose of our action was to convey that if you can come into our country, we can do the same” while referring to the PAF airstrike in Indian Occupied Kashmir.
- On February 26, the Indian Air Force crossed the Line of Control, entering 3-4 nautical miles into Pakistani airspace but flew back, dropping payload into a forest near Balakot, after Pakistani fighter jets intercepted them. No casualties or damage was reported.

The situation between Pakistan and India became highly tense after Indian aircrafts intruded into Pakistani airspace from Muzafarabad sector on February 26, 2019. Pakistan Air Force intercepted the intruding planes. Following the air space violation by Indian jets, Indian Foreign Secretary, Vijay Gokhale claimed that the Indian Air Force carried an air strike on what it said was a “militant training base of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM)”. He said the action was taken in response to the killing of 40 Indian paramilitary soldiers on February 14, 2019 in Pulwama in IOK. He further claimed that a “large number” of militants, including JeM commanders were killed in the strike. Gokhale said “a pre-emptive strike became absolutely necessary because there was credible intelligence that JeM was planning more suicide attacks in India.

Pakistan rejected the Indian Foreign Secretary’s claims, and maintained no casualties or damage to infrastructure occurred as a result of the strike, stating firmly that the Indian aircrafts dropped their payload in an “empty area.” Pakistan, however, made clear that India committed “uncalled aggression” when it violated Pakistani airspace and warned that it would “respond at the time and place of its choosing”. On the following day, Pakistan’s Air Force undertook a

strike in IOK from Pakistani airspace and shot down two Indian fighter jets. One Indian pilot identified as Wing Commander, Abhi Nandan was captured by the Pakistani Army. Hours after the incident, India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) confirmed that India had indeed lost one jet- a MiG 21. However, the MEA also claimed that India had shot down a Pakistani fighter jet, but gave no evidence of this claim. Pakistan responded to the Indian claim by categorically denying that any of its planes had been shot down by India. As a result of rising tensions between the two nations, Pakistan decided to close its airspace. This event constitutes the first time the two nuclear-armed powers have launched air strikes against each other since the Pakistan-India war of 1971. The confrontation has raised the possibility of military escalation between the two arch rivals whose relations have remained hostile due to the Kashmir Dispute.

Analysts have suggested, India's aggressive posturing is likely attributed to the upcoming Indian election, where Modi and the BJP are eagerly looking to garner public support. This argument was further strengthened when former Karnataka Chief Minister and BJP state chief, BS Yeddyurappa, said on February 27, 2019, the air strikes conducted by India would guarantee the BJP would win more than 22 seats in Karnataka in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

- Addressing the joint session of Parliament, Prime Minister Imran Khan announced on February 28 that Pakistan would release the captured Indian pilot, Abhi Nandan as “a gesture of peace.”

Prime Minister Imran Khan also reminded India that talks over Kashmir are important as “this issue is because of Kashmir.” On February 27, 2019, the Indian government summoned the Pakistani Envoy and handed over a demarche demanding the “immediate and safe return” of the captured pilot. The US, China, Britain and other world powers have urged restraint from Pakistan and India as tensions continue to escalate. Meanwhile, Turkey said that it supports Pakistan's position, and rejected the accusations levelled by India on Pakistan that it was behind the Pulwama attack.

- On February 21, the UN Security Council (UNSC) urged all states to “cooperate actively” with India in bringing to justice all those responsible for the Pulwama attack in which 40 paramilitary Indian soldiers were killed on February 14, 2019.

India, despite its best efforts, was unable to succeed in pushing the UN Security Council members to implicate Pakistan for the Pulwama attack.

- In a televised address to the nation and India on February 19, Prime Minister Imran Khan said that Pakistan was ready to cooperate with India in its investigation of the Pulwama attack in IOK. However, the Pakistani Premier vowed retaliation if attacked.

Prime Minister Imran Khan said Islamabad will take action if India shares any actionable evidence concerning Pulwama's attack.

- On February 22, DG Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), Major General Asif Ghafoor said that Pakistan and Iran were considering fencing the common border in order to avoid any sabotage activity by “the third party.”

Ghafoor’s statement came days after 27 soldiers of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) were killed on February 13, 2019 after their bus was hit by an explosive laden vehicle in Sistan and Baluchestan. The attack was claimed by Jaish ul-Adl, which according to Iranian authorities operates from Pakistan. Following the attack, Iranian officials accused Pakistan of backing “terrorist” groups. IRGC Chief, Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari asked Pakistan to act against Jaish ul-Adl instead of sheltering the terrorists. Meanwhile, Iran’s Speaker, Ali Larijani said that Pakistan “should be held accountable for this act.” Pakistan rejected allegations by Iranian officials that it is harbouring Jaish al-Adl. Pakistan also sent a high-level delegation to Tehran to assure Iran of cooperation in hunting down the culprits. The development came at a time when India and Pakistan are facing increased tensions following the Pulwama attack in Indian occupied Kashmir where 40 Indian paramilitary soldiers were killed.

- According to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on February 21, the public hearings in the Kulbhushan Jadhav case were concluded and the “court would now begin its deliberation.”

During the hearings, which started on February 18, 2019 at The Hague, India requested the ICJ to adjudge and declare that Pakistan acted in “egregious breach” of Article 36 of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations 1963, as it failed to inform Jadhav of his rights and declined consular access to him. India had also questioned the functioning of Pakistan’s military courts and urged the ICJ to annul Jadhav’s death sentence. Pakistan has maintained that the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations does not apply to spies.

Representing Pakistan’s case at the ICJ, Pakistan’s counsel Khawar Qureshi called upon the ICJ to dismiss India’s claim for relief on the grounds of its “unfair and unrealistic approach.” Pakistan’s counsel argued that India has demonstrated “abject failure to respond to evidences of espionage” against its serving Navy Commander, Kulbhushan Jadhav. On India’s criticism of Pakistan’s judicial system, the counsel said that Pakistan had a very robust judicial review and reconsideration system through various levels of the court system. Khawar Qureshi also stressed that the Indian version that Jhadav was kidnapped from Iran is baseless and maintained the “Indian spy” was apprehended from Balochistan. Khawar Qureshi said Kulbhushan Jadhav was issued a passport by the Indian government in 2003 in the name Hussain Mubarak Patel. Qureshi questioned how India issued a passport to its citizen on a fake identity and how he was then permitted to travel on travel document... The ICJ is expected to deliver its verdict in the Jadhav case in late 2019. Jadhav, an Indian Navy Commander, was sentenced to death by a Pakistani military court in 2017 for his involvement in espionage and subversive activities in Pakistan. The ICJ had stayed Jadhav’s execution in 2018 pending the final verdict by the ICJ.

- During the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s visit to Pakistan on February 17, Saudi Arabia announced investments of \$20 billion in Pakistan. The deals include funding for an \$8 billion oil refinery in Gwadar.

Mohammed bin Salman visited Pakistan along with a large Saudi delegation comprising senior government officials and businessmen. Pakistani fighter jets escorted the royal plane to the airport. Upon his arrival, the Crown Prince was welcomed with a 21-gun salute and was greeted by Prime Minister Imran Khan and Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa. Soon after his arrival, the Crown Prince held a meeting with PM Imran Khan in which he highlighted the importance of the bilateral relationship saying, “I chose Pakistan on my first ever trip to Asia since becoming the crown prince.” He added “Pakistan is going to be a very, very important country in the future and we want to be sure that we are part of that.” Following the meeting, the two countries signed a range of bilateral agreements and MoU’s in several areas of cooperation including in the energy, petrochemicals and mining sectors. Moreover, the Saudi Crown Prince, at the request of Imran Khan, ordered the release of 2,107 Pakistani prisoners held in jails in Saudi Arabia. Pakistan also bestowed its highest civilian honour on the Saudi Crown Prince.

According to the joint statement, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia applauded the growing momentum in bilateral ties in all areas. Both sides strongly condemned the atrocities and human rights violations committed against Muslims around the world. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister briefed the Crown Prince on the human rights violations by the Indian troops in Indian Occupied Kashmir and the need for resolution of the Kashmir dispute in accordance with UNSC resolutions. The Saudi Crown Prince’s visit to Pakistan is being regarded as the biggest state visit since Chinese President Xi Jinping came to Pakistan in 2015 and launched the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor projects worth \$40 billion.

Pakistan Internal

- On February 27, Pakistan’s Foreign Office summoned Indian Acting High Commissioner, Gaurav Ahluwalia and condemned the unprovoked ceasefire violations by Indian troops along the Line of Control on 26 February 2019, in Nikial and Khairatta Sectors.

At least 4 civilians were killed and 6 were injured in the latest ceasefire violation perpetrated by India, coming hours after Indian Airforce jets violated Pakistani airspace.

- On February 18, at least 4 Indian troops including a Major, and 4 Kashmiris were killed during a clash in Pulwama in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK).

Indian forces have launched a massive crackdown in IOK since an explosives-laden van struck a convoy of Indian troops in Pulwama on February 14, 2019, killing at least 40 paramilitary troops.

- On February 17, at least 4 personnel of Frontier Corps (FC) were killed in a terrorist attack in Panjgur.

No group claimed responsibility for the attack. This is the second attack on the FC in Balochistan within two days. On February 16, 2019 two FC personnel were killed in an attack in Loralai.

India

- According to *BBC* on February 22, India's Supreme Court ordered the government to protect Kashmiris after reports emerged from different cities that they were being harassed and assaulted in the wake of Pulwama attack.

The attack in Pulwama has triggered massive anger and anti-Pakistan protests across India. There have been reports of violence against Kashmiris who are studying or doing business in different parts of India. According to media reports, the Kashmiris are also facing evictions from rented accommodations.

- On February 20, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman visited New Delhi and met with Indian leadership, including President Ram Nath Kovind and Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The Saudi Crown Prince travelled from Riyadh to India a day after his visit to Pakistan. During the visit, New Delhi and Riyadh signed multiple agreements on infrastructure, investment, tourism, housing and establishing a "strategic partnership council." Saudi Arabia would also invest \$11 billion in the first joint venture with West Coast Refinery and Petrochemical Project. Following a meeting with PM Narendra Modi, the Saudi Crown Prince ordered the release of 850 Indian prisoners being held in Saudi Arabia's jails. The Crown Prince's India visit coincided with rising hostilities between New Delhi and Islamabad over the Pulwama attack, in which at least 40 Indian paramilitary personnel were killed. India has falsely accused Pakistan of perpetrating the attack. The Indian Prime Minister referred to the attack during a joint press conference with the Crown Prince and claimed there is an agreement with Riyadh "to put pressure on all countries supporting terrorism." Meanwhile, Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Adel al-Jubeir said during a televised interview to an Indian channel that Saudi Arabia cannot blame Pakistan for Pulwama because there is no evidence. Pakistani Prime Minister, Imran Khan, has unequivocally denied Pakistan's involvement in the Pulwama attack and has maintained that Pakistan will take action if New Delhi shares any actionable evidence.

- On February 18, Argentina's President Mauricio Macri visited India and met with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

During the visit, India and Argentina signed 10 agreements in several sectors, including defence, tourism and agriculture. During the joint press conference, Macri condemned the killing of 40 Indian troops in Pulwama attack. Macri also emphasised the need for joint action against terrorism.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

SOUTH ASIA II

Afghanistan

- On February 26, The US delegation led by Special Representative on Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban representatives conducted another round of talks in Doha.

According to reports, the talks were centered on the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and a pledge on the part of the Taliban to not allow Afghan soil to be used to stage attacks by foreign militants. A spokesman for Taliban's political office in Qatar said, "when the foreign occupation is ended, there is a full withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan and there is an Afghan-inclusive Islamic government in the country, there will be a sustainable peace in the country and all the military people and our people will be included in a national army". He added that direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban is an internal issue that should be discussed between the Afghans. He added, that they were discussing external issues, which include the withdrawal of foreign forces and assuring the US that Afghanistan will no longer pose as a threat to them. Meanwhile, Khalilzad tweeted, "meetings were productive. We continue to take slow, steady steps toward understanding and eventually peace". These talks are the fifth round of US-Taliban talks, aimed at attaining some kind of agreement to start an intra-Afghan dialogue to mainstream the insurgent group and bring an end to the conflict.

- On February 23, Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani reacted to reports on a plan to establish an interim government in the country as part of a peace plan, stating that the plan had been outlined outside the country and that it was not applicable in Afghanistan.

Ghani added that, "Afghans are selecting the president of Afghanistan," and that "Islamabad, Tehran and Moscow do not hold the right to elect (Afghanistan's president)". Ghani's statement came a day after Afghan Second Vice President, Mohammad Sarwar Danish said that countries in the region should not impose another proxy war on Afghanistan under the pretext of Afghan peace, rather, regional powers should play a constructive role in the peace process. Pakistan, Iran and Russia bear direct consequences of an unstable Afghanistan. The three regional powers have historically been involved in the Afghan quagmire and hold a direct stake in ensuring the conflict in Afghanistan is resolved to maintain stability within their respective countries.

- On February 23, Afghan Acting Defence Minister, Asadullah Khalil arrived in New-Delhi and met with Indian Minister for External Affairs, Sushma Swaraj.

Both sides discussed bilateral cooperation, with India pledging support to the Kabul government. Swaraj reiterated her country's continued support to Afghan Security Forces and emphasised India's military assistance to the war-torn country. The Ghani Administration has been closely consulting with Indian authorities on the developments of the ongoing Afghan peace process. In January 2019, Afghan National Security Advisor, Hamdullah Mohib visited India where New-Delhi sanctioned four additional attack helicopters to the Kabul government. Against

the wishes of President Trump and other regional powers, Ghani and India want NATO forces to prolong their presence in Afghanistan and intensify fighting against the insurgents.

- On February 22, the Afghan government in a letter to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) raised the issue of “consistent violations of Afghanistan’s territory” by Pakistani forces and called on the UN to initiate “necessary measures to address the matter at hand in an effective manner.

According to Afghanistan’s Permanent Representative to the UN, “the nature of these violations mainly includes persistent shelling of Afghan territory, particularly in districts and villages of Kunar and Nangarhar provinces; violation of Afghan air space by Pakistani military aircrafts, as well as construction of military posts, barbwire fence and barriers inside Afghanistan’s territory, most recently in Spin Boldak district of Kandahar”. This is Afghanistan’s second letter to the United Nations in a week. The first letter was about a planned meeting between Pakistan’s Prime Minister, Imran Khan, and the Taliban’s representatives in Islamabad. The Ghani Administrations’ anti-Pakistan campaign has intensified, and Pakistan has been incorrectly criticised for its role in the resolution of the Afghan conflict- a role that is necessary for Pakistan to undertake to ensure peace in Afghanistan and stability within Pakistan. Afghanistan cannot boast the accomplishments achieved by Pakistan vis-à-vis curbing extremism at home, through the fencing of the rugged Durand Line and mainstreaming the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Pakistan has achieved this at the expense of unprecedented sacrifices and the country must ensure these gains are maintained.

- On February 20, Afghanistan’s Foreign Ministry summoned the Pakistani Ambassador over his remarks that the Afghan peace talks could be affected if India resorted to violence in retaliation to the attack on their paramilitary police in occupied Kashmir- an incident that they have falsely blamed Pakistan for.

Earlier, Pakistan’s Ambassador to Afghanistan, Zahid Nasrullah khan said that any attack by India would “affect the stability of the entire region and impact the momentum” of the Afghan peace effort. The Afghan statement said the government “once again calls on Pakistan to act upon its commitments with regards to Afghanistan, particularly those in relation to peace and refrain from making irrelevant statements that do not help solve any problem”.

- On February 18, US Special Representative on Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad arrived in Afghanistan and held meetings with the local authorities.

During his meeting with Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, Khalilzad discussed a range of issues around the peace process. Members of the Peace Consultative Board, representatives of political parties, members of civil society, a female delegation, representatives of the private sector and high-ranking government officials also attended the meeting. Ghani said the government has agreed on a new framework with Khalilzad. However, no information related to the new framework was shared. Meanwhile, Khalilzad said that they are pursuing the peace process

through this new plan. Ghani also highlighted Pakistan-Taliban relations during the meeting and said, “we want the Taliban to clarify their relationship with Pakistan and (we want) Pakistan (clarify) its relationship with the Taliban and explain what this is based on; (and what is) the Taliban’s connection with terrorist networks and their connection with economic crimes”. Khalilzad also said that Pakistan needs to take practical steps in the peace process. He also added that Saudi Arabia has an important role in Pakistan’s engagement in the Afghan peace process, “...in my discussions with Saudi crown prince, we encouraged the Saudi officials to provide assistance to Pakistan on condition that Pakistan helps in ending the war in Afghanistan...”. He also mentioned that his trip to Pakistan had been cancelled due to logistical and political reasons. Khalilzad also stressed on the need for a unified negotiating team comprising all local stakeholders for a future intra-Afghan dialogue. Khalilzad was on his fifth trip to the region in the hopes of convincing the Taliban to initiate negotiations with local Afghan stakeholders for a political settlement.

- On February 18, Afghan Defence Ministry claimed the killing of five Taliban commanders in eastern Laghman province.

Among the dead were Maulavi Lal Mohammad, Maulavi Fazilullah, Abdul Ahmad, Maulavi Nasir and Abdullah who had served as a judge. A local commander was also wounded during the airstrikes. The fighting comes at a time when the US has been pushing for a comprehensive ceasefire with the Taliban, while the Kabul government has intensified their crackdown against the insurgents thereby making the prospect of a ceasefire seem unlikely.

- On February 17, the Taliban cancelled their planned meeting with Pakistani and US officials in Islamabad.

According to the Taliban spokesman, the meeting was cancelled due to the UN sponsored travel ban imposed on the Taliban leadership. In addition, analysts suspect the meeting may have also been cancelled because Kabul had earlier approached the UN Security Council and raised objections to Pakistan’s engagements with the Taliban. An Afghan Foreign Ministry spokesman claimed that Kabul was not consulted on the planned meeting.

---Kashif Hussain

UNITED NATIONS

- On February 27, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres expressed concerns on increasing tensions between India and Pakistan and called on both countries to exercise restraint.

Stephane Dujarric, Spokesman for the UN Secretary-General, said that the Secretary-General was closely following the situation. He said that Antonio Guterres, in his both public and private messages, had urged both India and Pakistan to “urgently take steps to lower tensions through meaningful, mutual engagement and meet their responsibilities to maintain peace and security in the region.” He also indicated that the Secretary-General was holding meetings at different levels with different parties to get a complete picture of the situation. Dujarric made these comments following India’s violation of the Line of Control (LoC) and its intrusion into Pakistan’s territory.

- On February 25, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) welcomed Pakistan’s Prime Minister’s decision to allow registered Afghan refugees to operate bank accounts across the country.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said, “I commend Prime Minister Imran Khan, the government and the people of Pakistan for taking this important step in support of Afghan refugees; a forward-looking, generous gesture of solidarity of global significance.” While appreciating the decision, UNHCR Director for Asia and the Pacific Indrika Rawatte and UNHCR Representative in Pakistan Ruvendrini Menikdiwela also applauded Pakistan’s efforts in generously hosting millions of Afghan refugees for decades. Rawatte said, “This is a bold demonstration of humanitarian leadership in a world that is not inclusive.” On February 25, 2019, PM Imran Khan issued instructions for registered Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan to be allowed to open bank accounts in the country. Allowing Afghan refugees access to formal banking channels would not only allow them to participate in the formal economy of the country, but would also enable their family members living abroad to send remittances through formal banking channels, thereby increasing the foreign exchange reserves in Pakistan.

- On February 20, Nickolay Mladenov, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, said that the increasing levels of violence and radicalism in the Occupied Palestinian Territory were fading the prospect of peace in the region.

Briefing the UNSC, Mladenov said that the hope of a peaceful two-state solution was slim as the risks of war kept on increasing. He said that extremist narratives were on rise and there was an acute challenge of preventing an economic and humanitarian implosion in the West Bank and Gaza. He also indicated that there were a range of issues including “ongoing violence, the lack of progress towards peace, financial pressures and unilateral measures by the Government of Israel” that were “exerting a heavy toll” on those living in Gaza and the West Bank. The Special Coordinator also stressed that the US’ decision to halt funding to the UN Relief and Works

Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) and Israel's withholding of some \$140 million in Palestinian tax revenue transfers were major factors causing instability in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

- On February 20, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the UN Human Rights Council released their joint report claiming over 3,800 civilian women, children and men were killed in 2018.

According to the report, violence in Afghanistan claimed exactly 3,804 civilian lives in 2018, including 927 of whom were children. In addition, 7,189 people were injured in 2018. The numbers represent an 11% increase in killings and a 5% increase in the number of people injured when compared to 2017. The report stressed that two thirds of casualties were caused by violence perpetrated by the Taliban and Daesh and other violent groups, while another one quarter of the reported casualties were collateral victims of pro-Government forces (including the Afghan military and international forces). Tadamichi Yamamoto, the UN's Special Representative for Afghanistan said, "The report's rigorously researched findings show that the level of harm and suffering inflicted on civilians in Afghanistan is deeply disturbing and wholly unacceptable." The report is the UN's tenth annual report documenting civilian casualties in the Afghan conflict. According to these reports, more than 32,000 civilians have been killed and around 60,000 have been injured in the last decade. Yamamoto said, "It is time to put an end to this human misery and tragedy. The best way to halt the killings and maiming of civilians is to stop the fighting. That is why there is all the more need now to use all our efforts to bring about peace. I urge all parties to seize every opportunity to do so."

- On February 20, UN General-Secretary Antonio Guterres urged India and Pakistan to take steps to defuse tensions in the wake of an attack in the Pulwama district of Indian-held Kashmir (IHK) on February 14, 2019 leaving dozens of Indian security forces dead.

UN Spokesman Stephane Dujarric said in a statement that the Secretary-General was following with great concern the situation in South Asia. The statement read that Guterres reiterated his "strong condemnation of the attack" and stressed that it was "essential that there be accountability under international law." The Secretary-General also urgently called on the Governments of both India and Pakistan to exercise maximum restraint to ensure the situation does not further deteriorate amid rising tensions following the attack in the disputed territory.

In a related development, Pakistan's Ambassador to the United Nations Maleeha Lodhi briefed the UN top leaders on the escalating tensions between Pakistan and India following the Pulwama incident. After her separate meetings with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres and the Security Council President Anatolio Ndong Mba, Lodhi said, "I told them that the Pulwama incident reinforces the need to address the root cause of violence in occupied Jammu and Kashmir and to find a peaceful solution to the longstanding dispute in accordance with several UN Security Council resolutions." She also reaffirmed Pakistan's willingness to engaged in a constructive and meaningful dialogue with India over all disputed issues.

--- Moiz Khan