

March 1 – March 15

AREA BRIEF

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Area Briefs: 1-15 March, 2019

General Observations

Pakistan

- Notwithstanding Pakistan's March 1 decision to release Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, the Indian pilot who was captured by the Pakistani Army on February 27, 2019, Indian hostilities against Pakistan continued unabated.
- In a related development on March 1, 2019, Pakistan's Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa told the top military personnel of the US, the UK and Australia that Pakistan would "surely respond to any aggression in self-defence."
- On March 4, the Pakistan Navy "successfully" thwarted an Indian submarine's attempt to enter Pakistani waters. Meanwhile Indian Air Force Chief, B.S. Dhanoa said that India would induct French-made Rafale fighter jets into its air force in September 2019. The India Air Force Chief's remarks come amid heightened military tensions with Pakistan. Earlier on March 2, 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had remarked "Today India has felt the shortage of Rafale."
- Prime Minister Imran Khan had ordered the release of the captured Indian pilot as "a gesture of peace." The move helped in de-escalating military confrontation between the two nuclear-armed powers which was triggered after they carried out air strikes against each other. Observers described the freeing of the Indian pilot by Pakistan "A Moral Victory" for the country.
- In another victory for Pakistan's stance on Kashmir, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) adopted a resolution on March 2 which recognised Kashmir as the core dispute between Pakistan and India and its resolution is indispensable for peace in South Asia. The OIC resolution also reaffirmed "unwavering support for the Kashmiri people in their just cause" and condemned the atrocities and human rights violations by Indian troops in Indian Occupied Kashmir. The development came a day after Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj attended the session of the OIC in Abu Dhabi as the guest of honour.
- On March 9, Pakistan's Finance Minister, Asad Umar urged Financial Action Task Force (FATF) President, Marshall Billingslea to remove India as co-chair of the Asia-Pacific Group to ensure "that the FATF process is fair, unbiased and objective".

International

- On March 15, forty-nine people were killed in anti Muslim terrorist attacks at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. A white nationalist extremist who posted a racist manifesto online and also live streamed video of the attacks on Facebook, carried out the terrorist attack.
- Senator Fraser Anning, a member of the conservative Katter's Australian Party, linked the attack to Muslim immigration. He tweeted, "Does anyone still dispute the link between Muslim immigration and violence?" Although he drew criticism for his comments both at home and abroad, Anning's comments reflect the growing Islamophobia in the West, a mindset that has inevitably encouraged the rise in anti- Muslim terrorism. In the immediate aftermath of the attack both authorities in New Zealand and Western media were reluctant to use the word terrorism and choosing instead to use the term mass killing or an act of violence.
- Before the shooting, the gunman posted links to a white nationalist manifesto on Twitter and 8chan, an online forum known for extremist right-wing discussions. The 8chan post included a link to the gunman's Facebook page, where he said he would also broadcast live video of the attack. Meanwhile Tech companies including Facebook have also been severely criticised for providing "a platform to hate."
- March 15 also marked the first veto of the Trump presidency. President Trump termed the congressional rejection of his border national emergency "reckless" and "dangerous." Trump thus issued the veto insisting the situation on the southern frontier amounted to a threat to Americans' safety.
- Earlier on March 14 several developments occurred relating to the various investigations surrounding President Donald Trump and his associates. Both federal and state prosecutors in New York and Democratic investigators in the House of Representatives are aggressively moving forward with various inquiries probing whether Michael Cohen was offered a pardon, charging Paul Manafort for new real estate offences, and grilling former acting Attorney General Matt Whitaker. There may be more major developments from Special Council Mueller's awaited report. In A related development on March 13 Former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort was sentenced to a total of 7.5 years in federal prison for financial crimes stemming from twin cases from the special counsel's office.
- On March 15 North Korea threatened to suspend negotiations with the Trump Administration over the North's nuclear arms programme.

- According to a senior government source on March 15, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is expected to shuffle his cabinet for the third time in as many months. The shuffle is expected to happen on March 18, 2019. Trudeau was forced to make changes to his inner circle after Jane Philpott's resignation on March 4.
- Meanwhile in the UK, Ministers held talks with the Democratic Unionists on March 15 to try to garner support for Theresa May's Brexit deal ahead of a third Commons vote on the package. MPs voted on March 14 to ask the EU to push the date of Brexit back from 29 March to 30 June if the Commons approves a deal by March 20, 2019 allowing time for legislation to go through. However, if a deal is not agreed by then, EU leaders are contemplating a much longer delay.
- In a major setback for the US in Iraq, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's three-day state visit to Iraq that ended on March 13, culminated in a press conference alongside his Iraqi counterpart, meetings with businessmen, visits to important Muslim shrines and talks with tribal leaders. Notwithstanding the fact that Baghdad was being urged to take sides in the US-Iran confrontation, Iran and Iraq signed transportation and trade agreements, including one for the construction of a railroad link between the Iranian city of Shalamcheh and Iraq's oil-hub at Basra. From April 2019 the neighbours will drop visa charges for each other's citizens. The countries are also planning to boost bilateral trade to \$20 billion from the current \$12 billion.
- The Afghan peace process suffered a major blow on March 15 when Afghan leaders accused US Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, of cutting them out of planning for their future. Khalilzad has been blamed of keeping them in the dark about the details of the US-Taliban negotiations, and they suggest his ultimate goal is to sideline the Afghan government so he can achieve a long-cherished ambition to be the country's leader himself.
- On March 4, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree enacting Russia's suspension of the INF treaty. The decree however stated that the INF treaty may be reviewed if the US "eliminates its earlier violations of its obligations".

---Amina Afzal

AMERICAS

Domestic

- On March 15 President Donald Trump vetoed a measure from Congress revoking his declaration of a national emergency at the US-Mexico border.

Lawmakers, including 12 Republicans, had passed the rejection resolution on March 14, 2019 in a surprising rebuke of the President's pledge to build a border wall. Congress will now need a two-thirds majority in both chambers to override him, which is unlikely to happen.

- On March 14, twelve Republican senators joined Senate Democrats to overturn President Trump's declaration of a national emergency at the southwestern border.

Motivated by a bold Democrat-controlled House, the cautious Republican majority in the Senate, has started to reassert its authority. President Trump had gone virtually unchecked during his first two years in office. The Republican Senators argued the president had exceeded his powers in trying to build a border wall over Congress's objections. The 59-to-41 vote on a measure already approved by the House, created the first veto of President Trump's presidency. Although it was not a big enough margin to override his veto but Congress voted for the first time to block a presidential emergency declaration. "Never before has a president asked for funding, Congress has not provided it, and the president then has used the National Emergencies Act of 1976 to spend the money anyway," said Senator Lamar Alexander, Republican of Tennessee. "Our nation's founders gave to Congress the power to approve all spending so that the president would not have too much power. This check on the executive is a crucial source of our freedom."

- On March 14 the US House of Representatives voted 420-0 to demand public release of the Mueller Report.

Republicans joined Democrats to demand that the Justice Department publicly release the full findings of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election and the possible involvement of President Trump's campaign. Though the resolution is non-binding, Democrats who put it on the House floor are trying to build public pressure on Attorney General William P. Barr before the investigation's anticipated conclusion.

- On March 11 President Trump sent Congress a record \$4.75 trillion budget plan calling for increased military spending and sharp cuts to domestic programmes like education and environmental protection for the 2020 fiscal year.

Trump's budget, the largest in federal history, includes a nearly 5% increase in military spending and more than what the pentagon had asked for. It includes an additional \$8.6 billion for the construction of a wall along the border with Mexico. According to the White House it also includes a total of \$1.9 trillion in cost savings from mandatory safety-net programmes, like Medicaid and Medicare. The budget is unlikely to have much effect on actual spending levels, which are controlled by Congress. Democratic leaders in both the House and the Senate pronounced the

budget dead on arrival. Trump's budgets largely failed to gain traction in previous years, when fellow Republicans controlled both chambers.

- On March 7 Michael D. Cohen, the former personal lawyer and fixer for President Trump, sued the Trump Organisation.

Cohen accused the company of breaking a contract when it refused to pay about \$1.9 million in legal costs after he began cooperating with federal prosecutors. The lawsuit said that the Trump Organisation had failed to live up to an agreement to pay for any legal fees or related costs Cohen incurred in his work with the Trump Organisation. Cohen is also seeking reimbursement for an additional \$1.9 million he was ordered to pay in fines, forfeiture and restitution after he pleaded guilty to breaking campaign finance laws, evading taxes and lying to Congress.

- On March 7, former Trump campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, was sentenced to 47 months in prison.

A US court convicted Manafort of bank and tax fraud which was uncovered during the special counsel's investigation into Russian election interference. Critics have argued that Manafort's prison sentence is significantly lower than sentencing guidelines, which called for a 20-year-term prison term. Manafort will also face sentences for other crimes he has plead guilty to.

- On March 6, US Senators raised alarm over Saudi Arabia's poor human rights record and called for John Abizaid, President Trump's nominee for US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia to take a tough line with Saudi Arabia on human rights abuses.

Abizaid testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during his confirmation hearing to be US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia on March 6, 2019. Senators at the hearing criticised Saudi Arabia condemning the kingdom's role in the civil war in Yemen, human rights abuses, and the murder of US-based Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. They demanded Abizaid take a tough line with the kingdom on human rights and other abuses. Abizaid responded by stating, "In the long run, we need a strong and mature partnership with Saudi Arabia," adding, "It is in our interests to make sure that the relationship is sound."

- On March 7, the House of Representatives passed a resolution condemning anti-Semitism and bigotry.

The House of Representatives passed a resolution condemning intolerance and hate, including anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim discrimination in the wake of the controversy stirred by statements made by Representative Ilhan Omar whereby she questioned the allegiance of pro-Israel supporters in congress.

- On March 5, US President Donald Trump called the investigation launched against him by Democrats a "big, fat, fishing expedition."

The House Judiciary Committee launched an investigation of Donald Trump over allegations of public corruption, obstruction of justice and abuse of power. The House judiciary committee on March 4, 2019 requested information from 81 Trump-connected individuals and entities, including his family and close advisor. House Judiciary Committee chairman, Jerrold Nadler stated “over the last several years, President Trump has evaded accountability for his near-daily attacks on our basic legal, ethical and constitutional rules and norms”. Trump responded angrily to the investigation arguing it constituted “the greatest overreach in the history of our country”.

- On March 4, Majority Leader Mitch McConnell announced he was unable to stop the Republican-led US Senate from overturning President Trump’s national emergency declaration to build a border wall with Mexico.

Earlier, on February 26, 2019, the Democrat controlled US House of Representatives voted to block US President Donald Trump’s emergency declaration to secure funding for his proposed border wall with Mexico. McConnell stated, “I think what is clear in the Senate is there will be enough votes to pass the resolution of disapproval, which will then be vetoed by the president and then, in all likelihood, the veto will be upheld in the House.” Republicans remain divided over Trump’s emergency declaration with at least four Republican Senators announcing they will vote with Democrats to block Trump.

- On March 1, 2019, Jay Inslee announced his bid to run for president in the upcoming election in 2020.

Washington Governor, Jay Inslee announced his presidential bid with a focus on climate change declaring himself the “only candidate who will make defeating climate change our nation’s number one priority”. US President Donald Trump withdrew from the Paris climate accords in in 2017- a move that has created controversy within the US, and abroad. Inslee has joined the swelling ranks of Democratic contenders for the office of president in the upcoming election. In related news, former presidential hopeful, Hillary Clinton, declared that she would not be running for the office of president in the upcoming election.

International

- On March 15 North Korea threatened to suspend negotiations with the Trump Administration over the North’s nuclear arms programme.

According to North Korea, Kim Jong-un, would soon decide whether to resume nuclear and missile tests. Addressing a news conference in Pyongyang, Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui said that personal relations between Kim and Trump were “still good” and “the chemistry was mysteriously wonderful.” she said however that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and national security adviser, John Bolton had created an “atmosphere of hostility and mistrust” that thwarted

the top leaders' negotiations in Hanoi, Vietnam. The Hanoi meeting ended without a deal and led to serious doubts in the North about the merits of continuing negotiations with President Trump.

- On March 8, Joseph Votel, head of the US Central Command stated at a House Armed Services Committee hearing that there was no pressure to withdraw US troops from Syria by a specific date.

Votel stated, "What is driving the withdrawal of course is our mission, which is the defeat of ISIS and so that is our principal focus and that is making sure that we protect our forces, that we don't withdraw in a manner that increases the risk to our forces," adding, "There is no pressure on me to meet a specific date at this particular time". In December 2018, Donald Trump had declared the defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and announced he would be withdrawing all 2,000 US troops in Syria- a move that sparked an outcry from allies and US politicians alike. Trump was later persuaded by advisors to keep 200 US troops to join a commitment of approximately 800 to 1,500 troops from European allies to set up and observe a safe zone being negotiated for northeastern Syria in addition to approximately 200 US troops at the US military outpost of Tanf, near the border with Iraq and Jordan. In addition, Votel applauded Pakistan's efforts in promoting stability in Afghanistan and supporting US talks with the Taliban to achieve long-lasting peace in the war-torn country. He added, terrorist organisations based in Afghanistan conduct attacks inside Pakistan and "continue to threaten Afghan stability as well as stoke tensions between Pakistan and India".

- On March 8, the US demanded North Korea destroy all its nuclear, chemical and biological weapons before receiving any sanctions relief.

The US hardened its position on North Korea demanding North Korea destroy all its nuclear, chemical and biological weapons after talks between Washington and Pyongyang failed at the Hanoi Summit on February 27, 2018. In addition to the failed talks, satellite images showed the North Koreans had rebuilt a space launch site that they had earlier dismantled after the first summit between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un in June 2018- further prompting the US to take a stronger stance on North Korea. The US state department has sought clarification from Pyongyang on the purpose of the launch site, but made it clear that any launch at the site, even for civilian satellites, would be a violation of Kim's commitments to Trump. Trump's national security adviser, John Bolton confirmed the president was receptive to another summit adding that Trump was looking to ensure complete disarmament in return for comprehensive sanctions relief.

- On March 6, President Trump revoked the executive order requiring public reports on civilian deaths in US drone strikes.

The White House National Security Council said the decision would remove "superfluous reporting requirements" that "distract our intelligence professionals from their primary mission". Critics have argued the US administration's decision allows the Pentagon a carte blanche to conduct military engagements without any accountability. With Trump's latest move to

stop reporting on civilian casualties from drone strikes, the concern that the Pentagon may act with full impunity and no accountability is cause for concern for countries like Pakistan who have lost thousands of civilians in US drone strikes.

- On March 5, the US ended its spat with the EU over diplomatic protocol that arose amid rising trans-Atlantic trade tensions.

The dispute between the US and the EU arose in January, 2019 over the apparent downgrading of the EU's diplomatic status. The US had previously treated the EU "as a country would be" on the US diplomatic list, however the EU was downgraded to the status of an 'international organisation'. This change has now been reversed. Commenting on this, the US ambassador, Gordon Sondland, sated the EU was "one of America's most valuable partners in ensuring global security and prosperity". The EU expressed its support of the US decision stating, it was pleased the US had decided to "revert to usual practice".

- On March 4, US President Donald Trump declared he would strip India and Turkey of Special Tarff Status.

The Office of the United States Trade Representative stated that India and Turkey would no longer be eligible for preferential market access to the United States. Trump's decision came after a year of failed efforts by the Trump administration to compel India to lower its trade barriers, including the tariffs it charges on American goods.

- On March 1, the US announced a reward for the capture of Hamza bin Laden claiming he was leading al Qaeda.

Osama bin Laden's son Hamza bin Laden is believed to be leading Al- Qaeda according to the US State Department, who has offered a USD 1 million reward for information on his whereabouts. The State Department has announced Hamza bin Laden released an audio and video message on the Internet calling on his followers to launch attacks against the US and its Western allies in response to the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 by US military forces. According to the State Department, items found in the home of Osama bin Laden indicated the former head of al Qaeda had been grooming his son to take control of the terror organisation. The State Department added UN members states are required to freeze the assets, and comply with a travel ban and arms embargo as the US looks to capture Hamza bin Laden.

Canada

- On March 4, Jane Philpott, who led the treasury board in Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Cabinet, quit in protest over accusations that Trudeau and his aides had tried to influence a criminal case against a multinational Canadian company accused of bribing the Libyan government.

Philpott's unexpected resignation further inflames a growing political crisis that has already cost the Prime Minister his former justice minister and his top aide. "I've been considering the events that have shaken the government in recent weeks and after serious reflection, I have concluded that I must resign as a member of cabinet," said Philpott. With elections only seven months away, Trudeau needs to salvage his reputation as someone who promised an open approach to politics. According to observers he may be in peril of losing control of his position as leader of the Liberal Party, which would end his time as Prime Minister.

- On March 2, the Canadian government announced it would allow the extradition hearing to proceed against Meng Wanzhou, the chief financial officer of Huawei Technologies.

Meng Wanzhou was detained in Canada at the request of US authorities, who are currently looking to extradite her to the US to face charges of conspiring to violate US sanctions on Iran. David Martin, Meng's lawyer, responded to the Canadian decision to allow the extradition hearings stated, "We are disappointed that the Minister of Justice has decided to issue an Authority to Proceed in the face of the political nature of the US charges and where the President of the United States has repeatedly stated that he would interfere in Ms Meng's case if he thought it would assist the US negotiations with China over a trade deal". Analysts fear Canada's move will further strain Canada- China relations. After the detention of Meng Wanzhou, China arrested two Canadians on national security grounds, and a Chinese court sentenced to death a Canadian man who previously only been jailed for drug smuggling.

Latin America

- On March 12 US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo confronted the growing crisis in Venezuela by blaming not only its embattled ruler, but also socialism for the country's woes.

Pompeo's remarks came hours before he pulled American diplomats from Venezuela. Notwithstanding the fact that the far-left ideology of Venezuela's government is partly responsible for the dysfunction that has thrown the country into chaos. His remarks against Nicolás Maduro also obscure the fact that the United States had just about run out of options to achieve a peaceful change of power. Meanwhile, March 11, 2019 was the was the fourth day since Venezuela's power system went down, plunging most of the country, including Caracas, into darkness. The blackout, which has brought the country to the verge of social implosion, is the latest crisis to befall Venezuela. The country has been devastated for years by hyperinflation and a failing economy that has led millions to flee. However, the country has been further torn since January, when opposition political leaders refused to acknowledge as legitimate the re-election of President Nicolás Maduro.

---Amina Afzal

ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

- According to the *Times of India* on March 14, India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) conducted two successful tests of the Anti-Tank guided missile on March 13 and 14, 2019, respectively.
- According to *The Hindu* on March 13, India conducted three successful trials of the Pinaka-guided missile at Pokhran; two trials were conducted on March 11, 2019, and one on March 12, 2019.

The DRDO said that all three trials successfully achieved trial mission objectives. Pinaka is a multiple rocket launcher indigenously produced and developed by the DRDO for the Indian Army. The rocket has a range of around 40 kilometres and is equipped with an advanced navigation system.

The DRDO also conducted two successful tests of the Anti-Tank guided missile on March 13 and 14, 2019, respectively. In its statement, the DRDO said that the test of the indigenously developed, low weight, man portable Anti-Tank Guided missile was conducted in the ranges of Rajasthan deserts. The DRDO stated that the missile successfully hit the designated targets in both tests.

- On March 13, the US assured India of its commitment to strengthen bilateral security and civil nuclear cooperation with the country, including the establishment of six US-designed nuclear power plants in India.

The US and India announced their commitment in a joint statement following the ninth round of the US-India Strategic Security Dialogue in Washington DC. Indian Foreign Secretary, Vijay Gokhale, and US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, Andrea Thompson led their respective delegations. The statement noted, "The two sides exchanged views on a wide range of global security and non-proliferation challenges and reaffirmed their commitment to work together to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems and to deny access to such weapons by terrorists and non-state actors." The two countries are discussing construction of US nuclear power plants for more than a decade but India's liability laws have been a stumbling block for overseas nuclear power plant vendors. In the joint statement, the US also "reaffirmed its strong support of India's early membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG)."

- On March 12, Pakistan Air Force (PAF) successfully test-fired an indigenously developed extended range "smart weapon" from JF-17 multi-role fighter aircraft.

In its statement, the PAF said, "The successful trial has provided JF-17 Thunder a very potent and assured day and night capability to engage variety of targets with pinpoint accuracy." The

statement also noted that Pakistani scientists and engineers have indigenously developed and integrated the weapons system. While lauding the efforts of Pakistani scientists and engineers, Chief of the Air Staff Air Chief Marshal Mujahid Anwar Khan congratulated the PAF on successful achievement of the capability. Air Chief Marshal Khan said, “Pakistan is a peace loving nation but if subjected to aggression by adversary, we would respond with full force.”

In a related development on March 13, 2019, Yang Wei, a Chinese legislator and chief designer of the China-Pakistan co-developed fighter jet JF-17 Thunder, indicated that “the development and production of the JF-17 Block 3 are underway.” According to China Aviation News, Wei Dongxu, a Beijing-based military analyst, also stated that “the JF-17 Block 3 was likely to be fitted with an active electronically scanned array radar, which can help in gathering more information in combat, enabling the fighter jet to engage from a farther range and attack multiple targets at the same time. Analysts assert that with new upgrades in the JF-17 Block 3 would match an improved version of the F-16 fighter jet.

- On March 11, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) released its annual report titled ‘Trends in International Arms Transfers-2018,’ indicating that the five largest global arms exporters between 2014 and 2018 were the US, Russia, France, Germany and China.

The report noted that the volume of international transfers of major arms in period 2014–2018 was 7.8% higher than in 2009–2013, and 23% higher than in 2004–2008. The report showed that the US arms exports grew by 29% between 2009–2013 and 2014–2018, while Russian arms exports decreased by 17% during the same period. Dr Aude Fleurant, Director of the SIPRI Arms and Military Expenditure Programme, said, “The USA exported arms to at least 98 countries in the past five years; these deliveries often included advanced weapons such as combat aircraft, short-range cruise and ballistic missiles, and large numbers of guided bombs.” The report indicated that the flow of arms increased to the Middle East between 2009–2013 and 2014–2018, compared to other regions. Arms imports by states in the Middle East increased by 87% between 2009–2013 and 2014–2018 and accounted for 35% of global arms imports in 2014–2018. According to the report, Saudi Arabia became the world’s largest arms importer in 2014–2018, with an increase of 192% compared to 2009–2013, while India became the world’s second largest arms importer in 2014–2018.

- According to NPR on March 8, satellite imagery of a North Korean facility near Pyongyang suggested that the country was preparing to launch a missile or space rocket in future.

In February 2019, DigitalGlobe, an American commercial company for space imagery and geospatial analysis took the images of a site known as Sanumdong content. The images shared with NPR suggested that “rail cars sit in a nearby rail yard, where two cranes are also erected.” Jeffrey Lewis, Director of the East Asia Non-proliferation Project at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, California, said, “When you put all that together, that’s really

what it looks like when the North Koreans are in the process of building a rocket.” This report came days after South Korea’s Yonhap News Agency and two US think tanks reported on March 5, 2019, that North Korea was restoring part of its missile testing site that the country was dismantling. Their reports indicated that work was underway at the Sohae Satellite Launching Station at Tongchang-ri. The facility was partially dismantled after President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un held their first summit in June 2018.

- On March 7, Ukraine’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) announced that Ukraine reserved the right to develop its own missile weapons after both the US and Russia withdrew from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.
- On March 4, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree officially suspending Russia’s participation in the INF Treaty.

The Ukrainian MFA said, “Ukraine retains the right to develop military weapons as necessary for defence capabilities of our country, including the relevant missile weapons.” It added, “The potential military pressure of the Russian Federation on European members of NATO due to the withdrawal from the Treaty, aimed at establishing total control by Moscow over the broader region from Baltic to the Mediterranean Sea, poses a serious threat to the whole European continent.” Signed by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987, the INF Treaty entered into force in June 1988. The Treaty led to the elimination of an entire class of destabilising nuclear weapons that were deployed in Europe and helped bring an end to the Cold War arms race, as it banned ground-launched nuclear and conventional ballistic missiles with ranges between 500 to 5,500 kilometres. However, the US and Russia were not the only members on the INF Treaty, the Treaty’s membership expanded in 1991 to include successor states of the former Soviet Union, including Ukraine. Under the Treaty, Ukraine is able to invoke its right of withdrawal.

In a related development on March 4, 2019 Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree officially suspending Russia’s participation in the INF Treaty. In a statement, the Kremlin noted that Russia’s suspension of compliance with the INF Treaty would continue “until the US ends its violations of the treaty or until it terminates”. President Putin suspended compliance with the INF Treaty in response to the US suspension of its compliance with the Treaty on February 2, 2019, following the expiration of a 60-day US ultimatum to Russia to comply with the Treaty. Russia had also announced that the country would suspend its compliance with the INF Treaty. On October 20, 2018, US President Donald Trump had declared that the US would soon withdraw from the 1987 INF Treaty. The US has been accusing Russia of violating the Treaty since 2014, while Russia rejected the allegations. The US claims that the 9M729 ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM) has a range capability that exceeds the 500 kilometres limit stipulated by the INF Treaty and demanded Russia eliminate all these missiles. However, Russia stressed that the 9M729 missile did not violate the INF Treaty as the range of the missile falls below the INF Treaty limits. Russia also accused the US of violating the agreement. Russia

maintains that the US missile defence interceptor platforms deployed in Eastern Europe could be used for offensive purposes, and therefore, were in violation of the Treaty.

- On March 8, Chief Pentagon spokesman Charles E. Summers Jr. warned Turkey of grave consequences if it proceeds to procure the S-400 anti-aircraft missile system from Russia.

Summers said, “If Turkey goes ahead with plans to purchase the \$2.5 billion Russian system, the United States will withhold F-35 aircraft and Patriot Missile batteries earmarked for Turkey.” He said that the Russian missile defence system was incompatible with NATO, and the procurement represented another Russian effort to disrupt the alliance. Summers’ comments came in response to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s statement on March 6, 2019, whereby Erdogan said that Turkey would not only stick to its S-400 acquisition plans, but it might also seek the more advanced S-500 in the future. He stressed, “There can never be a turning back. This would not be ethical, it would be immoral. Nobody should ask us to lick up what we spat. Later, we may work with S-500s.”

- On March 7, Taiwan formally submitted a request to procure new fighter jets from the US.

Taiwanese Deputy Defence Minister Shen Yi-ming said that Taiwan was procuring fighter jets to “counter current enemy threats,” and to provide pilots with more sophisticated equipment, in part to “demonstrate the country’s determination and ability to defend.” However, Taiwanese officials said they have not mentioned any particular fighter jet model in their official demand. Huang Wen-chi, the Taiwan Defence Ministry’s Director of Strategic Planning, said, “It will depend on what models the US proposes to us, and then we will choose.” Huang said, it could be anything from F-15s, F-18s and F-16s to modern F-35 stealth fighters.

- On March 7, India and Russia signed a \$3 billion lease agreement for a Russian nuclear-powered attack submarine (SSN).

According to Indian media reports, the deal to lease a new submarine, designated Chakra III, purportedly the Russian Navy’s K-322 Kashalot (Akula II-class) SSN, was signed in New Delhi. However, there is no official confirmation about the signing of the deal. Several media reports state that the agreement is for 10 years and Russian submarine would be delivered by 2025.

- On March 4, Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Yukiya Amano reaffirmed Iran’s compliance with its nuclear agreement known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

In his introductory statement to the IAEA Board of Governors, Amano said it was essential that Iran continues to fully implement its commitments under the JCPOA. He also indicated that his report on Verification and monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in light of United Nations Security Council resolution 2231 (2015) covers relevant activities of the Agency in Iran during

the last few months. The DG said the Agency continues to verify the non-diversion of nuclear material declared by Iran under its Safeguards Agreement.

Regarding the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) nuclear programme, Amano said that the IAEA continued to monitor the DPRK's nuclear programme, using open source information and satellite imagery. He indicated that the IAEA has not observed any indications of the operation of the 5MW(e) reactor since early December 2018, including any reprocessing activities at the Radiochemical Laboratory or construction in or around the reactor.

- On March 1, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons' (OPCW) Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) issued its final report on an investigation regarding the April 7, 2018, incident of alleged use of toxic chemicals as a weapon in Douma, in Syria.

The report noted that the FFM's findings and analysis suggest that there were "reasonable grounds that the use of a toxic chemical as a weapon has taken place on April 7, 2018." The findings of the report also indicate that the used toxic chemical contained reactive chlorine. The OPCW Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) was set up in 2014 in response to continued allegations of chemical weapon attacks in Syria. The FFM's mandate was "to establish facts surrounding allegations of the use of toxic chemicals, reportedly chlorine, for hostile purposes in the Syrian Arab Republic."

The FFM's report has been shared with States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and was also transmitted to the UN Security Council through the UN Secretary-General.

--- Moiz Khan

CHINA, EAST ASIA & PACIFIC

China

- According to the *BBC* on March 15, China passed a new foreign investment law in a move widely seen as an effort to improve the country's investment environment.

The measure is also being seen as an effort to facilitate US trade talks and establish equal treatment for foreign and domestic investors. Meanwhile, the American Chamber of Commerce in China welcomed Beijing's "legislative effort" to improve the foreign investment environment. The new law will come into effect on January 1, 2020. It comes as Washington and Beijing work to resolve their trade dispute. Since 2018, both sides have imposed tariffs worth billions of dollars on each other's goods.

- On March 13, the US Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) said that two B-52 bombers conducted "routine training in the vicinity of the South China Sea."

The spokesperson for Pacific Air Forces said that US aircraft "regularly operate" in the South China Sea to support its "allies, partners, and a free and open Indo-Pacific." The development comes despite Beijing's frequent warnings that Washington should respect China's sovereignty in the South China Sea. It was the second time in a month that the US carried out such flights in the area. The bombers, capable of carrying and launching nuclear weapons, also flew over the East and South China Seas in September and November 2018 respectively.

New Zealand

- On March 15, at least 49 people were killed and more than 20 wounded in terrorist attacks at the Al Noor and Linwood mosque in Christchurch. A heavily armed gunman identified as Brenton Tarrant broadcast livestream footage on Facebook when he walked into the Al Noor mosque and opened fire at the worshippers who were offering Friday prayers at the time.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said, "This is one of New Zealand's darkest days." Tarrant, a 28 years-old Australian born citizen, said in an online post that he had carried out the attack to "reduce immigration rates to European lands". Tarrant has been charged with murder. The attack has received strong condemnation from the world leaders including Prime Minister Imran Khan who said he was "shocked" by the attack. He added "This reaffirms what we have always maintained: That terrorism does not have a religion." Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison confirmed that Tarrant was an Australian-born citizen and termed him "an extremist, right-wing, violent terrorist".

North Korea

- On March 15, North Korean Vice Foreign Minister, Choe Son-hui threatened to suspend denuclearisation talks with the US.

The Vice Foreign Minister said that North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un would soon decide whether to resume nuclear and missile tests. She stressed that North Korea had no plans to yield to the US demands in any form and accused the US of taking a “gangster-like” stance. In February 2019, US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un met in Hanoi for negotiations on the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula. However, no breakthrough was reached. Talks failed between the countries after President Trump did not accept North Korea’s demand to have all sanctions against the North dropped.

South Korea

- During a meeting in Seoul on March 8, South Korean Foreign Minister, Kang Kyung-wha and US Ambassador to South Korea, Harry Harris signed an agreement to increase South Korea’s financial contributions for the deployment of US troops in the country.

Under the new agreement, South Korea would pay \$924 million in 2019 for the US military deployment. In 2018, South Korea paid \$830 million. Kang called the agreement the result of “hard work that the alliance can build upon to become stronger and greater.” The Trump Administration had frequently called on South Korea to bear greater costs for the deployment of US military personnel in South Korea.

The Philippines

- During his visit to Manila on March 1, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo assured the Philippines that the US would come to its defence if it came under attack in the South China Sea.

Pompeo said that the US would adhere to a 1951 Philippine-US Mutual Defence Treaty in the event of a military showdown. The Treaty was signed five years after the Philippines gained independence from the US in 1946, under which they should come to each other’s aid in case of an “armed attack in the Pacific area” on either party. However, President Rodrigo Duterte has questioned the US commitment to the deal.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

EUROPE

- On March 14 British lawmakers voted to postpone the UK's departure from the European Union.

In what is being described as a rare victory for Prime Minister Theresa May, however, the vote narrowly failed to wrest control of the Brexit process from her government. Following days of turmoil, May was able to escape albeit narrowly a remarkable power grab by lawmakers frustrated at months of political deadlock that has left the country in limbo with just 15 days to go before its scheduled departure from the bloc. They later voted by 412 to 202 for a motion that means that Britain will almost certainly not leave the European Union as scheduled on March 29, 2019 as May had promised it would. It remains unclear how long the delay will be. May now plans to hold a third vote on her unpopular plan for withdrawal, despite have suffered two staggering defeats on it already.

- On March 12 the British Parliament, rejected Prime Minister Theresa May's plan to quit the European Union for the second time.

May had hoped that last-minute concessions from the EU would swing the vote in her favour, but many lawmakers dismissed those changes as ineffectual or cosmetic and voted against the deal, 391 to 242. After the vote, the prime minister defended her agreement as the "best outcome" for the United Kingdom and showed her frustration in addressing the lawmakers, who are scheduled to vote later this week on whether to seek an extension to leave the bloc. "Let me be clear that voting against leaving without a deal and for an extension does not solve the problems we face," May said. "The EU will want to know what use we mean to make of such an extension, and the House will have to answer that question."

- On March 9, the UK revoked the citizenship of two sisters who left the UK to join the Islamic State group in Syria.

Reema Iqbal, 30, and her sister Zara, 28, left London for Syria in 2013 to join the Islamic State in Syria. Currently both women have five children between them under the age of eight and are looking to return to the UK. The UK government however has declared they have revoked their citizenship. As IS is increasingly being pushed out of Syria, western allies are facing the issue of what to do with citizens who had chosen to join IS ranks. European countries are increasingly opting to strip citizenship as a means of tackling the issue. In a similar case, on February 20, 2019, the UK Home Office opted to strip the citizenship of teenage 'IS bride' Shamima Begum.

- On March 7, Germany extended a ban on the export of weapons to Saudi Arabia until the end of March citing concern over the Saudi role in the Yemen war.

Germany has extended a temporary ban on arms exports to Saudi Arabia until the end of March. The ban had been initially imposed after concerns were raised about the kingdom's role in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The embargo was due to expire on March 9, 2019 however,

Germany's foreign minister stated the ban will be extended until they are able to adequately evaluate Saudi Arabia's military involvement in Yemen.

- On March 7, Russian President Vladimir Putin accused foreign intelligence services of increasing their activities in Russia.

Putin announced that Russian authorities had caught almost 600 spies, a number that had increased from the previous year. Russian spies themselves stand accused of several plots including the poisoning of former agent Sergei Skipal in the UK, along with Dutch, Czech and Swedish intelligence agencies reporting that they have foiled Russian attacks.

- On March 6, the commander of NATO forces in Europe, US General Curtis Scaparrotti asked to bolster Ukraine's defences amid 'Russian aggression' in Ukraine.

Moscow still arms, trains and fights alongside anti-government forces in Ukraine, said NATO commander Scaparrotti. Scaparrotti told the US Congress that even though the US had already provided anti-tank missiles to Ukraine, other systems, snipers systems, and ammunition were still required. He also suggested boosting Kiev's naval defences in the Black Sea after Russian forces shot at and seized three Ukrainian ships in 2018. He argued that Moscow's activities violated the 2015 agreement designed to end the conflict. The conflict in Ukraine began in 2014 when Russian-backed rebels seized parts of the country's eastern regions, protesting the removal of Ukraine's pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich and declared their independence from Kiev. In 2015, an agreement was reached, whereby war was averted however skirmishes between rebels and government forces continue. Russia however, has denied the presence of its soldiers in Ukraine or supplying rebels with weapons.

- On March 6, Russia confirmed North Korean leader Kim Jong Un will visit Moscow.

No details of the visit, including the date or the agenda have been shared. This announcement comes after talks failed between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in Vietnam on February 27, 2019.

- On March 5, French President Emmanuel Macron in a column published across the EU pushed for reforming the EU to ensure the future of the bloc, while appealing to voters to reject populist parties and politicians in the upcoming European Parliament elections.

Macron stated, "Retreating into nationalism offers nothing; it is rejection without an alternative," adding, "and this is the trap that threatens the whole of Europe: the anger mongers, backed by fake news, promise anything and everything". Macron pushed for the creation of an agency tasked to protect EU member states from cyber-attacks and manipulation, a ban on the funding of European political parties by foreign powers and a common asylum office, while also urging Europe to take the lead to combat climate change. The European Commission, the EU executive, and the German vice chancellor applauded Macron's call.

- On March 5, Scotland Yard announced suspicious packages containing “small improvised explosive devices” were found at three locations in London

British counter terrorism officers have launched an investigation after the devices believed capable of starting small fires were found at an office block next to Heathrow Airport, the post room at Waterloo station and at offices near London City Airport.

- On March 4, Germany announced its plans to strip dual nationals who fight for a foreign militant group of their German citizenship.

German Interior Ministry spokeswoman Eleonore Petermann stated “There are plans to introduce a legal amendment, for Germans with multiple nationalities who fight for a terror militia, to lose their German citizenship”.

- On March 4, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree enacting Russia’s suspension of the INF treaty.

In response to the US’ decision to formally withdraw from the INF treaty in February 2019, over allegations that Russia was violating the terms of the treaty, Putin formally signed a decree suspending the INF treaty. The decree however stated that the INF treaty may be reviewed if the US “eliminates its earlier violations of its obligations”. Both sides have blamed each other of violating the agreement. The INF treaty, signed in 1988 banned both the US and the former Soviet Union from developing and deploying land-based cruise and ballistic missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 km.

---Amina Afzal

GLOBAL TERRORISM

- On March 15, a gunman opened fire on worshippers at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand killing 49 people and injuring another 20.

In a press conference, New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern called the incident a terrorist attack, saying the suspects held "extremist views" that have no place in New Zealand or the world. Ardern said, "This is, and will be, one of New Zealand's darkest days." According to media reports, forty-one people were killed at the al Noor mosque on Deans Avenue, while seven people were killed at the Linwood mosque on Linwood Avenue. Both mosques are in Christchurch's city centre and police have placed the two locations under lockdown. According to Sam Clarke, a reporter with TVNZ, a gunman who was dressed in black with a helmet carrying a machine gun entered through the back of the mosque and started firing on people praying inside the mosques. According to media reports, the gunman live streamed one of the attacks online and published a 74-page anti-immigrant manifesto. The man identified himself as Brenton Tarrant, a 28-year-old Australian. The 74-page document, called The Great Replacement, outlines his motivations, espousing far-right and anti-immigrant ideology and suggesting various aims, including the creation of "an atmosphere of fear" against Muslims. New Zealand Police Commissioner Mike Bush said that a 28-year-old man has been charged with murder in connection with an unprecedented attack on two mosques. Bush said that the man was expected to appear in a Christchurch court on March 16, 2019.

- On March 13, two armed men attacked the State School Raul Brasil in the town of Suzano in Brazil and killed five students and two school officials.

Suzano police indicated that nine other people were also injured in the incident. Police confirmed that the two attackers committed suicide following the attack. Before entering the school, the gunmen shot a man who was working at a car wash in front of the school. Brazilian authorities identified the attackers as 17-year-old Guilherme Tauci Monteiro and 25-year-old Henrique de Castro.

- On March 11, India and Saudi Arabia agreed to set up a "strategic partnership council" to increase cooperation on combating terrorism.

During his brief visit to India, Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel bin Ahmed al-Jubeir met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj to discuss joint counter-terrorism efforts between the two countries. Swaraj said, "An immediate irreversible and verifiable action to dismantle terror infrastructure is essential to fight the menace of terrorism." The Indian External Affairs Ministry did not provide further details regarding the development.

- On March 11, Under-Secretary-General Vladimir Voronkov, Head of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), said that every counter-terrorism strategy, policy, and programme needs to consider gender perspectives in preventing and countering violence perpetrated by extremist groups that exploit gender dynamics in advancing their objectives.

During a side-event on the occasion of the 63rd Commission on the Status of Women on March 11, 2019, Voronkov discussed rehabilitation, and reintegration of women formerly associated with terrorist groups. While expressing concerns regarding the status of women who are recruited or associated with terrorist organisations including Daesh, Boko Haram and Al Shabab, he said that a large number of women were trapped in camps or being detained in Iraq and Syria following the territorial collapse of Daesh. Likewise, Boko Haram and Al Shabab have destroyed entire communities, kidnapping women and girls and recruiting them into their ranks. He stressed, “Are these women victims or perpetrators? Are they guilty or innocent? The reality is rarely, if ever, that simple.” Voronkov indicated that a considerable number of women were subjugated and coerced into joining, many have been subject to violence and are left stigmatised, rejected by their own communities. He suggested that counter-terrorism policies must ensure individualised screening to identify victims and possible perpetrators; and support repatriation of those who wish to return to the countries of their origin, in compliance with the non-refoulement principle. He said, “The UNOCT will continue mainstreaming gender in its activities and advocating for this to be addressed by Member States, including through the development of national plans of action to prevent and counter violent extremism conducive to terrorism.”

- On March 5, the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) and the NATO signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) aimed at launching a joint pilot project to prevent and counter chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) terrorism in Jordan.

The project would support and enhance Jordan’s CBRN preparedness and response capabilities. It is being undertaken in accordance with the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, which calls for improved coordination in planning a response to a terrorist attack using CBRN weapons or materials. According to UNOCT, the main objectives of the project include increasing awareness of the capability gaps, enhancing knowledge and understanding of response and improving capacity to address the identified gaps. The project also includes the development of a National Response Plan and a field exercise. Sima Bahous, Permanent Representative of Jordan to the UN, said, “This trilateral project sets a good example of cooperation between States and International and Regional Organisations, and it also reflects the urgency to raise the level of preparedness and response for the worst possible terrorist attacks whether it’s a Chemical, Biological, Radiological or Nuclear.” Under-Secretary-General Vladimir Voronkov, Head of the UNOCT and Executive Director of the UN Office Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT), said, “The possibility of non-state actors, including terrorists,

acquiring lethal technologies and weapons is a challenge for international peace and security. My Office is committed to help Member States build and strengthen their capabilities with respect to this serious threat.”

--- Moiz Khan

MIDDLE EAST & WEST ASIA

Iran

- On March 12, Foreign Ministry Spokesman, Bahram Qassemi criticised the US for sticking to its interventionist policies after an American official sought to cast doubt on the motives of the Iranian president's visit to Iraq.

Qassemi said, "Iran and Iraq are two independent countries, whose governments have been elected by the votes of the two countries' people and undoubtedly these two nations do not need a country with a black record of aggression and warmongering and destruction to make decisions on their behalf from thousands of kilometres away." He made the remarks in reaction to claims by US Special Representative Brian Hook about Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's visit to Iraq. During an interview with Alhurrha TV, Hook questioned Rouhani's "motives" regarding Iraq and said when the Iranian government does "prioritise his own people so why on earth he would prioritise the welfare of the Iraqi people." Qassemi said, "this American official's anger is not surprising because it seems that his country has failed to gain a proper position among regional nations despite spending billions of dollars in the Middle East." He emphasised that Washington's aggressive policies, militarism and interventionism are the main reasons behind its lack of success.

- On March 11, Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani visited Iraq and held talks with his Iraqi counterpart Barham Saleh.

A political and economic delegation also accompanied Rouhani during the visit to Baghdad. Rouhani criticised the US for pressuring Iraq to limit its ties with Iran. It has been under pressure from Washington not to get too close to Iran, particularly following the US withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and subsequent sanctions against Iran. Baghdad was given limited waivers to continue buying electricity and natural gas from Iran, but Washington has urged Iraq to partner with US companies to become energy independent. During a joint press conference with Rouhani, Iraq's President Barham Saleh, thanked Iran for its "support" and said he was "lucky" to have it as a neighbour. Meanwhile, President Rouhani said relations between the two countries should be further "reinforced and developed". The Iranian President also met Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi, and highlighted the political, trade and energy links between the two countries. In a joint statement following Rouhani's visit, the two countries said they discussed regional issues, common challenges, the fight against terrorism and ways to promote security, stability and economic cooperation in the region in line with the interests of the two nations. According to the statement, the two sides emphasised the need for the establishment of security in the Middle East as a contributing factor to the region's economic growth and development. It added that Iran and Iraq also expressed their firm determination to battle terrorism and organised crimes, which pose a threat to regional security and peace,

calling for collective cooperation to uproot terrorism in all political, intellectual and financial aspects.

- On March 4, the Iranian government released a 2018 closed-door speech by Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, voicing doubt about the Iranian government's diplomatic overtures to Europe.

Khamenei's address in mid-2018 appeared to forecast European difficulties in honouring pledges to protect trade with Iran from new US sanctions after Washington's withdrawal from 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran. The publication of Khamenei's speech showed that while President Hassan Rouhani was trying to save the nuclear deal with European powers, who remained committed despite the US exit, Khamenei was not optimistic. According to Khamenei's official website, "The Europeans would naturally say they are protecting Iranian interests with their package but the Iranian government should not make this a main issue." He said the nuclear deal did not resolve any of the economic problems of Iran. He predicted that a mechanism proposed by the EU to shield business with Iran against the US sanctions would also be no panacea for Iran's economic hardship. His speech, made in a meeting with the cabinet, was published a week after Rouhani rejected the resignation of Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. According to observers, Khamenei's comments cast doubt on the efficiency of Zarif's past and present efforts to keep the agreement alive.

Iraq

- On March 12, spokesman for the Iraqi Defence Ministry, Major General Tahseen al-Khafaji condemned a recent statement by US President Donald Trump that American forces must remain in Iraq so Washington can keep a close eye on neighbouring Iran.

Khafaji stressed that his country would never allow outsiders to use its territory for military action against any neighbour. He said, "Baghdad government will not allow anyone to work inside Iraq against any country around us. We have good relations with all of our neighbours. He further noted that American troops in Iraq, excluding combat forces, are solely training and advising Iraqi government soldiers in the fight against Daesh, and providing them with required logistics. Khafaji then stressed that the Iraqi Army is capable of controlling the country by itself. He also appreciated Iran's role in defeating Daesh.

Israel

- On March 14, at least two rockets, launched from the Gaza Strip, bypassed the Iron Dome missile system and landed in Tel Aviv.

The Iron Dome missile system was activated but apparently failed to intercept any of the missiles. Initial reports suggest that the rockets caused no damages or injuries. According to Military spokesman Ronen Manelis, nobody in Tel Aviv expected Palestinian rockets to travel this far. Following the attack, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who also acts as the regime's Minister for Military Affairs, called an emergency meeting at the Army Headquarters. The Israeli Military said it was "attacking terror targets in Gaza." Palestinian sources reported Israeli attacks near the Khan Yunis port, in southern Gaza. According to eyewitnesses, Israeli warplanes carried out airstrikes across the enclave.

- On March 13, a large number of Israeli settlers, under the protection of security forces, stormed the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound.

According to locals, Israeli settlers continuously "raid" the sacred compound via the Moroccan Gate, tour the site and leave through the Chain Gate.

In a related development on March 12, following several weeks of unrest, the Israeli police shut off access to the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound. Police said they evacuated the compound, known to Jews as the Temple Mount, after a Molotov cocktail damaged a police post. Residents said police were also restricting Palestinian access to Jerusalem's Old City, where the site is located. Jordan, the custodian of the site, condemned its closure as "unacceptable". According to Abdul Nasser Abul al-Basal, Jordanian Minister of Islamic Affairs, the closure was an "attack on religious freedom". The compound is the third-holiest site in Islam and a focus of Palestinian aspirations for statehood. It is also the location of Judaism's most sacred spot, revered as the site of the two biblical-era Jewish temples.

- On March 4, the Israeli Military killed two Palestinians after a Palestinian vehicle allegedly targeted Israeli soldiers on a highway in the West Bank.

According to the Israeli Military, an Israeli officer and border policeman were injured when the Palestinian car rammed into a group of Israeli troops, running them over on a road outside a village near the city of Ramallah. The officer was seriously injured and hospitalised. A third Palestinian inside the car was wounded and taken into custody. Another military statement said an initial inquiry "indicates that the incident was a terror attack" adding that earlier the Palestinian suspects had also "thrown firebombs" at a nearby highway. However, a Palestinian official disputed that account. Khaldoun al-Deek, the Mayor of the Palestinian village of Nima said that the incident took place at a sharp curve in the road, leading him to "believe it was a road accident, not a ramming attack". Since 2015, Palestinians have killed over 50 Israelis in stabbings, shootings and car-ramming attacks, and Israeli forces have killed more than 260 Palestinians.

- On March 3, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu said that Israel and Russia will work together on securing an exit of foreign forces from Syria.

Netanyahu gave this statement after visiting Moscow to advocate against the Iranian presence in Syria. As Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is moving towards victory in the conflict, Israel worries that his reinforcements from Iran and the Tehran-backed Lebanese militia Hezbollah will stay on to form a new front against it. Israel has carried out hundreds of strikes against suspected Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria. These operations have been largely ignored by Russia, which intervened militarily on Assad's behalf in 2015. Netanyahu said that during his visit to Moscow, he had made it "unequivocally clear" that such strikes would continue, with an Israeli-Russian military hotline continuing to prevent accidental clashes between the countries. Netanyahu further said, "President Putin and I also agreed on a shared goal the removal from Syria of the foreign forces that came in after the civil war erupted. We agreed to set up a joint task force which, together with others, will work to advance toward this goal."

Palestine

- On March 13, Palestine severely criticised the US for omitting the term "occupation" in a report describing the Israeli-occupied Palestinian and Syrian territories.

In an annual global "human rights" report, the State Department ceased to refer to the West Bank, Gaza Strip and the Syrian Golan Heights as "occupied" and called the latter territory "Israeli-controlled." Reacting to the report, Nabil Abu Rudeineh, spokesman for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, said that "these American titles will not change the fact that the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967 and the occupied Arab Golan are territories under Israeli occupation in accordance with UN resolutions and international law." He also said that Washington's latest move is "a continuation of the hostile approach of the American administration toward our Palestinian people and is contrary to all UN resolutions." Rudeineh further reiterated, "But regardless of the attempts and conspiracies, our Palestinian people led by the Palestine Liberation Organisation and by President Mahmoud Abbas will remain steadfast and adhering to the national constants."

- On March 10, President Mahmoud Abbas chose a long-time adviser, Mohammed Ishtayeh as his new prime minister.

The official Wafa news agency made the announcement, saying "President Abbas has given Mohammed Ishtayeh a mandate to form a government." Ishtayeh succeeds Rami Hamdallah, who had overseen a unity government formed nearly five years ago with the goal of reaching a conciliation deal with Hamas. Those attempts failed when Hamdallah's motorcade was targeted by a roadside bomb in Gaza. Hamdallah announced his resignation in January 2019 after years of failure in reconciliation efforts. Ishtayeh, a British-educated economist, is a top official in Abbas' Fatah movement and a veteran of past rounds of peace talks with Israel. According to observers, Ishtayeh is a strong proponent of peace talks with Israel, and a fierce critic of Hamas, which has controlled the Gaza Strip since 2007. Hamas seized control of Gaza from Fatah forces

in 2007, leaving the Palestinians torn between rival governments. Hamas continues to rule Gaza, while Abbas' internationally recognised Palestinian Authority administers autonomous areas of the West Bank.

- On March 4, the US lowered the flag at the Jerusalem consulate that had served as its diplomatic channel to the Palestinians, merging the mission with the new US Embassy in Israel.

Previously the consulate reported on Palestinian matters directly to Washington. Its staff have now been repurposed in the embassy as a "Palestinian Affairs Unit" under David Friedman, the US Ambassador to Israel. According to the US State Department, the merger was driven by operational efficiency and did not signal any change in policy.

Syria

- On March 13, Russian fighter jets targeted a weapons depot in the terrorist-held Idlib province, as part of the Syrian government's ongoing fight to retake the remaining territories under militant groups.

According to Russia's Ministry of Defence, the warehouse belonged to the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) terrorist group. The statement noted that the HTS had been using the building to store drones and other weapons in anticipation of a planned attack on the Russian air base at Hmeimim, in the western province of Latakia. According to a Ministry official, Moscow ordered the air strike after receiving intelligence reports about the delivery of a large number of drones to the depot.

- On March 10, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad held talks with the visiting Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister, Chen Xiaodon, along with the accompanying delegation.

During the meeting, Assad said some hostile powers were waging the new war against Syria by resorting to such methods as "boycotts, withdrawal of ambassadors, economic siege, and the use of terrorism." He underlined the importance of international efforts to counter terrorism and find a political solution to the ongoing crisis in Syria. The two sides affirmed the need to bolster coordination between Beijing and Damascus in "political, military, economic, cultural, and technological" fields. Chen hailed the resistance by the Syrian nation and voiced China's readiness to keep standing by Syria and providing it with all forms of support. In a separate meeting with Chen, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem also suggested that China play a role in rebuilding Syria.

- On March 7, several people were killed when US warplanes bombed the town of Baghouz in eastern Deir ez-Zor province with internationally-banned white phosphorus munitions.

The latest bombing marks the third reported US attack with white phosphorus bombs after the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announced it had resumed operations following a break in the fighting to facilitate civilian evacuation. The US and its allies have been conducting airstrikes against what they call Daesh targets inside Syria since September 2014. Damascus has repeatedly denounced the US military presence in the country and its aerial assaults which have repeatedly targeted civilians and its critical infrastructure.

- According to US-backed Syrian Forces on March 4, around 150 Daesh militants surrendered following a battle over their remaining territory in eastern Syria.

According to military sources, an unknown number of militants are still holding out. Daesh faces defeat in Baghouz on the banks of the Euphrates, but it still holds pockets of land in remote areas further west and has launched guerrilla attacks in other areas where it has lost control. Baghouz, a collection of small settlements and farmland near the border with Iraq, is the last patch of populated territory Daesh still holds in the area. According to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), they had slowed their assault because more civilians, previously thought to have completely evacuated, were trapped in the enclave. The SDF have vowed they would soon capture the remaining areas.

- On March 3, at least 33 pro-regime fighters were killed in militant attacks near Idlib province.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 27 fighters were killed in two attacks by Ansar al-Tawhid militants, who carried out the attacks against regime positions in Masasna, a village in Hama province. Ansar al-Tawhid has ties to the larger Hurras al-Deen group, which is also active in the area of northwest Syria. Both are considered semi-official franchises of Al Qaeda in Syria. The area of Idlib and small parts of the adjacent provinces of Hama and Aleppo are mostly controlled by the rival Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) organisation, which is led by fighters who formerly belonged to Al Qaeda's ex-affiliate in Syria.

Turkey

- According to the Turkish Defence Ministry on March 8, Turkish and Russian patrols began in Syria's northwestern Idlib region as part of a 2018 deal.

Turkish Defence Minister, Hulusi Akar said, "Today Russian patrols start outside of Idlib in the border region (and) Turkish Armed Forces' patrols begin in the demilitarised zone." The militant-controlled Idlib province has been protected from a major offensive by the Syrian regime following the September 2018 agreement between Russia and rebel supporter Turkey, which included setting up a demilitarised zone around the region. Idlib is the last major region held by rebels in Syria and is controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a group led by Syria's

former Al Qaeda affiliate. HTS took administrative control of the whole of the Idlib region in January 2019.

Yemen

- On March 10, at least 20 women and a child were killed in the latest round of Saudi air strikes on Yemen.

According to local sources, Saudi warplanes bombarded residential buildings in the Talan village of Kushar district in Yemen's northwestern province of Hajjah. According to reports Saudi warplanes also targeted ambulances, preventing doctors and paramedics from reaching the area. Leader of Yemen's Houthi movement, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi recently said Yemeni women and children are being brutally killed by the US and Western-made munitions being used in the campaign.

---Muhammad Shoaib

SOUTH ASIA: I

Pakistan

External

- On March 4, Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi said that Pakistan foiled potential missile attacks by India at more than five sites inside the country as the military was on full alert.

Tensions between Pakistan and India reached a dangerous level after Indian warplanes crossed the Line of Control (LoC) and entered into Pakistani airspace on February 26, 2019. The Indian jets were forced to retreat after Pakistani fighter jets intercepted them. India said it was a response to February 14 Pulwama attack and claimed that its Air Force had carried out a "pre-emptive strike on militant's training camp" in Balakot in Pakistan. Pakistan rejected India's claim by saying the Indian jets hit "an empty area" and that no casualties or damage to infrastructure occurred. International observers also found little evidence to support Indian claims. In less than 24 hours, Pakistan Air Force, in a swift retaliatory attack, shot down two Indian fighter jets and captured an Indian pilot, Abhinandan Varthaman, who was later released by Pakistan as a "peace gesture".

- Quoting "a highly placed government source," *Dawn* reported on March 5 that India at the peak of its standoff with Pakistan in February 2019, had planned a "dangerous attack" in Pakistan with Israeli backing.

The news report claimed that India had planned to attack Pakistan from its Rajasthan airbase, which is located about a 100km from the international border with Pakistan. However, through "timely intelligence and backdoor messaging", Pakistan conveyed to India that "a befitting response" would be given if it carried out the planned attack and warned that it could "take the two countries to a point of no return". Neither India nor Israel commented on these claims.

- In a related development on March 1, 2019, Pakistan's Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa told the top military personnel of the US, the UK and Australia that Pakistan would "surely respond to any aggression in self-defence."
- On March 4, the Pakistan Navy "successfully" thwarted an Indian submarine's attempt to enter Pakistani waters.

The Pakistan Navy detected the Indian submarine and "used its specialised skills to ward off the Indian submarine, successfully keeping it from entering Pakistani waters." The Navy said its forces did not target the submarine due to a government policy of maintaining "restraint." This is the second time since 2016 that Pakistan Navy has detected an Indian submarine trying to enter into Pakistani waters. The development came days after a dogfight between Pakistani and Indian warplanes over the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir.

- On March 1, Pakistan released an Indian pilot who was captured by the Pakistani Army on February 27, 2019, after his MiG-21 jet was shot down by Pakistan Air Force during a dogfight over the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir.

The Indian Pilot, identified as Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, was handed over to Indian authorities at the Wagah border crossing. Prime Minister Imran Khan had ordered the release of the captured Indian pilot as “a gesture of peace.” The move helped in de-escalating military confrontation between the two nuclear-armed powers which was triggered after they carried out air strikes against each other. In this action, the Pakistan Air Force also shot down two Indian fighter jets. Many around the world described the freeing of an Indian pilot by Pakistan “A Moral Victory” for the country. In a televised address to the nation, and India, on February 27, 2019, Prime Minister Imran Khan said the two countries could not afford any miscalculation because of the weapons both countries possess. The Premier said, “If this conflict escalates, things will no longer be in my control or in Modi’s.”

- On March 2, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) adopted a resolution which said that Kashmir remains the core dispute between Pakistan and India and its resolution is indispensable for peace in South Asia.

The OIC resolution also reaffirmed “unwavering support for the Kashmiri people in their just cause” and condemned the atrocities and human rights violations by Indian troops in Indian Occupied Kashmir. The development came a day after Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj attended the session of the OIC in Abu Dhabi as the guest of honour. Meanwhile, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi did not attend the session due to Swaraj’s participation in the event. In response, India’s Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson, Raveesh Kumar said, “As regards the resolutions on Jammu and Kashmir, our stand is consistent and well known. We reaffirm that Jammu and Kashmir is an integral part of India and is a matter strictly internal to India.”

- On March 10, Indian Minister for Water Resources, Arjun Mehrgwal said that India has decided to stop the flow of three eastern rivers to Pakistan.

Mehrgwal said, “0.53 million acre-feet water has been stopped from going to Pakistan.” He added, “the water has been stored and whenever Rajasthan or Punjab needs it, they can use it for drinking and irrigation purposes.” Media reports citing Pakistani experts claimed that India’s decision to stop water flow of eastern rivers into Pakistan would not affect the country as the Indus Waters Treaty already gives India right to use water from the Eastern rivers (the Ravi, the Beas and the Sutlej).

- On March 14, Pakistan and India held “constructive discussions” for the facilitation of Sikh pilgrims to visit Gurudwara Kartarpur Sahib using the Kartarpur Corridor.

The meeting was held at Attari in India. The Pakistani delegation was led by DG (South Asia & SAARC) at Foreign Ministry, Dr. Mohammad Faisal while the Indian side was led by S.C.L.

Das, Joint Secretary at Ministry of Home Affairs. Pakistan's Foreign Office said that both sides held detailed discussions on various aspects and provisions of the draft agreement for facilitation of pilgrims. Pakistan and India also agreed to work towards "expeditiously operationalising" the Kartarpur Corridor.

- On March 9, Prime Minister Imran Khan held a telephonic conversation with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. During the discussion, President Rouhani asked Pakistan to take action against militants which attack Iran.

The Iranian President said that the two countries should not allow "terrorists, who are tools in the hands of other countries" to affect their decades-long ties. He said that both countries should not allow any third party to impact Iran-Pakistan relations. Prime Minister Iman Khan said his government would not allow terrorists to use Pakistan's soil against neighbouring countries, particularly Iran. He told the Iranian President that Pakistan would soon give "good news" to Iran in this regard. On February 13, 2019, at least 27 members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) were killed in Iran after their bus was hit by an explosives-laden car. Jaish ul-Adl claimed responsibility for the attack.

- On March 9, Pakistan's Finance Minister, Asad Umar urged Financial Action Task Force (FATF) President, Marshall Billingslea to remove India as co-chair of the Asia-Pacific Group to ensure "that the FATF process is fair, unbiased and objective".

Finance Minister Umar asked the FATF to appoint any other member as co-chair of the Asia-Pacific's Joint Group instead of India due to its "animosity towards Pakistan". The demand was made ahead of the scheduled visit of a delegation of the Asia-Pacific Group (APG) to Islamabad on March 24, 2019. According to media reports, India was lobbying with other members of APG to get Pakistan blacklisted.

- On March 7, Saudi State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Adel al-Jubeir visited Pakistan and met with Prime Minister Imran Khan, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa.

The Pakistani leadership and the Saudi Minister discussed Pak-India tensions and matters of regional and bilateral interest. During his meeting with PM Khan, Minister Al-Jubeir expressed "deep appreciation for Pakistan's peace overtures to normalise the situation between Pakistan and India" and "acknowledged the role played by Pakistan for regional peace." Adel al-Jubeir assured Pakistan of Saudi Arabia's support to seek peaceful settlement of "all outstanding disputes" between Pakistan and India.

- On March 5, Minister of State for Interior, Shehryar Afridi said that at least 44 activists of proscribed organisations, including two close relatives of the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) Chief Masood Azhar, have been taken into "protective custody" after the government launched a massive crackdown against the proscribed outfits.

The Minister stated that those among the detained included Abdul Rauf and Hammad Azhar, brother and son of the JeM Chief. Afridi said the decision to detain members of banned outfits was taken under the country's National Action Plan.

Pakistan

Internal

- According to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) on March 2, at least 2 soldiers were killed in Nakiyal sector following an exchange of fire with Indian troops from across the Line of Control (LoC).

Heavy clashes between Pakistani and Indian troops were reported after Pakistan handed over a captured Indian pilot in a gesture aimed at de-escalating Pakistan-India tensions. In a separate development, two civilians were killed after Indian troops shelled mortars in the Tatta Pani and Jandrot sector near the LoC.

- On March 5, Pakistan's government sacked Punjab's Culture and Information Minister, Fayyaz ul Hassan Chohan for making derogatory remarks about the Hindu community.

The Minister's derogatory statement was condemned by several members of the political parties including the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Chohan's statement was also seen as hurtful to Pakistan's four million Hindu minority. Chohan, however, clarified that his comments were aimed at Indian government and not Pakistani Hindus. The development came amid increased tensions between Pakistan and India.

India

- On March 13, China put on hold a request by Britain, France and the US to add Masood Azhar, the Chief of Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), to the UN sanctions blacklist.

China told the UNSC that more consultations were required for "a responsible solution" to such a listing. It urged the international community to focus on the Kashmir dispute as well. India said it was "disappointed by this outcome." India has been pushing the UNSC members to name Masood Azhar, the founder of JeM which India believes was behind the Pulwama attack, as a UN-designated terrorist. This is not the first time that the UNSC has considered a request to put Masood Azhar on the UN sanctions blacklist, which would subject him to assets freeze and travel ban. In 2016 and 2017, China vetoed India's bid to impose sanctions on the JeM Chief on "technical grounds."

- On March 4, the Indian government said that US President Donald Trump's decision to end special trade agreements would only affect a small portion of India's total exports to the US.

India's response came after US President Donald Trump told congressional leaders that he wanted to end India's preferential trade treatment under a programme that allows New Delhi to export \$5.6 billion worth of goods duty free to the US.

- On March 4, Indian Air Force Chief, B.S. Dhanoa said that India would induct French-made Rafale fighter jets into its air force in September 2019.

India is set to get the first batch of Rafale fighter jets in September 2019. India had ordered 36 Rafale fighter planes from the Dassault Aviation of France in 2016. The India Air Force Chief's remarks come amid heightened military tensions with Pakistan, which saw the downing of two Indian warplanes by the Pakistan Air Force in February 2019. On March 2, 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said "Today India has felt the shortage of Rafale."

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

SOUTH ASIA (II)

Afghanistan

- On March 14, Afghanistan's Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah said that any peace deal made in the absence of the Afghan people would be unacceptable for the people and government of Afghanistan.

Addressing a ceremony in Parwan province, Adullah stressed that "the environment is not an environment to make a deal in the absence of the people of Afghanistan or say it is implementable in Afghanistan." He added that the Taliban still do not have a commitment towards peace. Former Vice President, Mohammad Yunus Qanooni also addressed the event and said that Afghans are still unaware of the details surrounding the latest round of US-Taliban talks. The remarks come amid reports of progress in the recent round of US-Taliban talks in Qatar.

- On March 14, the Afghan Defence Ministry said that at least 31 Al-Qaeda militants were killed in an airstrike on Ghazni province.

Thirty-one terrorists, including nine suicide bombers were being transferred in several cars when they were targeted. According to the Ghazni governor's spokesman, US forces carried out the strikes. He also said that some fighters from the Taliban-affiliated Haqqani network were also present at the time of attack. Although, Al-Qaeda has not been able to carry out any major offensives inside or from Afghanistan since 9/11, the group is considered a threat to the international community. Disallowing the terrorist group from carrying out its activities from Afghanistan remains the top demand of the US government during ongoing peace talks with the Taliban

- On March 14, the US government summoned Afghan National Security Advisor (NSA), Hamdullah Mohib for criticising Washington's approach to reconciliation.

US Under Secretary for Political Affairs, David Hale summoned Mohib after he criticised US Special Envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad for bypassing the elected government of Afghanistan in their direct peace talks with the Taliban. Mohib, at various public forums described the US' talks with the Taliban as surrender discussions. He criticised Khalilzad for keeping the "duly elected" Afghan government in the dark and that in the latest round of talks in Doha they were humiliated and made to wait in a hotel lobby. He also alleged that Khalilzad has personal ambition in Afghanistan. Mohib also stated that while the democratically elected Afghan government has been kept out of the peace talks, Islamabad was well aware of the developments happening at the talks in Doha. A spokesman for the US State Department said that the US was displeased with Mohib's remarks. It is rare that a visiting NSA is summoned by the US State Department in this manner.

- On March 14, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, deputy leader of the Taliban and head of the group's Qatar office said that significant progress was made during the fifth round of the US-Taliban talks in Doha and that more developments would come in the future.

Baradar said that the future system in Afghanistan would not harm anyone and that Afghanistan wants relations with other countries similar to the rest of the world. His comments followed assertions by the US Department of State claiming the talks in Qatar had made meaningful progress. Meanwhile, Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid rejected a report on human rights violation released by the US State Department, saying that it is "in conflict with reality". Mujahid said, "The truth of the matter is that the US is an occupier country directly involved in crimes against humanity. According to her own admission, the US has dropped over 7,000 bombs on the oppressed Afghan people over the course of the previous year, with most of its victims being civilians, especially women and children". He questioned the legitimacy of human rights concerns being raised by "such a criminal state" and termed them "preposterous and comical". He also advised the US to "restrain her own criminal generals instead of advising others about respecting human rights".

- On March 12, the fifth round of talks between the US and Taliban ended in Doha after 16 days of engagement.

Both sides agreed to a draft on counter-terrorism assurances and foreign troop withdrawal. Zalmay Khalilzad, the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, said that peace requires agreement on four issues, "counterterrorism assurances, troop withdrawal, intra-Afghan dialogue, and a comprehensive ceasefire". "In January 2019 talks we agreed in principle on these four elements. We now agreed in draft on the first two". He added that when the agreement is finalised, the Taliban and other Afghans, including the government, would begin intra-Afghan negotiations on a political settlement and comprehensive ceasefire. Meanwhile, a Taliban statement said that the Taliban and US had deep discussions on two issues agreed to in January 2019. The group also said that no deal has been signed by the negotiating teams and that they would meet again after consulting their respective leadership about the current developments. The contradictions in statements and continuation of fighting on ground also indicate that peace remains elusive. Earlier, on March 7, 2019, Gen. Joseph Votel, Commander of the US Central Command, said that politically Afghanistan is not ready for the complete withdrawal of foreign troops and that Pentagon has not received any order for troop withdrawal. Meanwhile, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has said that the achievements of the past one and half decade gained following the collapse of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, should not be sacrificed during peace talks. A New York Times report published on March 1, 2019, hinted that the US would pull all of the roughly 14,000 troops from Afghanistan within three to five years, along with other international troops in the region. Even

as President Trump and the Taliban want a complete withdrawal, the Pentagon along with the NATO Chief seem to be lobbying for a longer stay of troops in Afghanistan. This difference in approach consequently proves to be the main stumbling block in the peace process.

- On March 11, senior officials from Afghanistan, China and Pakistan gathered in Kabul to improve t cooperation in various spheres including trust-building measures between Kabul and Islamabad, economic cooperation and the fight against terrorism.

Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister, Edris Zaman, Chinese Ambassador to Afghanistan, Liu Jinsong and Pakistan’s Ambassador to Afghanistan, Zahid Nasrullah Khan were leading their respective delegations at the meeting. Edris warned that even if a potential peace agreement was possible, threats emerging from the insurgency in Afghanistan would not be entirely eliminated. He also stressed on the need for collective efforts to fight terror groups without any distinction. Meanwhile, Liu said Afghanistan should not be a battleground for major powers; rather it should be a place for regional connectivity. Zahid said that the regional countries and Pakistan remain cautiously optimistic about Doha talks. They also agreed to promote China-Afghanistan-Pakistan trilateral cooperation under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative and reiterated their strong resolve to fight terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, and without any distinction.

- On March 11, Afghanistan’s Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah said an absolute majority of Afghans were demanding the continuation of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, referring to concerns of the people about a comeback of the Taliban and their emirate.

Abdullah reiterated that the principle of the republic system had been defined by the Constitution and there would be no compromise in this respect. He stressed there would be no solution if we ignore the republic system and the right of voting. Peace would not be a reality if issues are ignored. He also stressed the need for government and political groups’ coordination in the peace talks. He added that Afghan people are hopeful, but they are concerned as well regarding the ongoing peace talks between the US and Taliban.

- On March 11, the Afghan government rejected a report asserting that Mullah Omar, the Taliban’s founding leader, had lived near a US base in Afghanistan before he died.

The report quoted Dutch journalist, Bette Dam’s book “Searching for an Enemy”. The US and Afghan leaders had believed that the Taliban leader fled to and eventually died in Pakistan. However, the new book says Omar was living just three miles from a major US Forward Operating Base in Zabul province, where he died in 2013. Rejecting the claim, President Ghani’s Spokesman tweeted, “we strongly reject this delusional claim and we see it as an effort to create and build an identity for the Taliban and their foreign backers. We have sufficient

evidence which shows he (Mullah Omar) lived and died in Pakistan,” The Taliban, however, confirmed in a statement that their founding leader lived in Afghanistan before he died.

- On March 10, German Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas arrived in Afghanistan and assured his country’s continuous support for peace and reconstruction during his meetings with Afghan authorities.

Heiko held separate meetings with Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani and Foreign Minister, Salahudin Rabbani. Heiko said, “With the trip to Afghanistan and Pakistan, we want to send a clear message: Germany is committed to the responsibility we have assumed as the second largest donor and contributor of troops in Afghanistan”. He added that peace is possible in Afghanistan and said the upcoming presidential elections were a sign of progress. In February 2019, the German government decided to extend the military mission in Afghanistan, and offered to host a peace conference including the Taliban. Germany is part of the NATO Resolute Support mission to train Afghan Security Forces and has a force of about 1,200 soldiers stationed in the country.

- *The New York Times* reported on March 10 that at least 13 civilians were killed in US airstrikes in eastern Nangarhar province that were carried out in support of Afghan Forces operations against the Taliban.

The Governor of Nangarhar said that a prominent Taliban leader was also killed in the airstrike and that the number of civilians killed was unclear. Meanwhile, a spokesman for the US-led mission in Afghanistan confirmed the airstrikes. He, however, did not directly address the reports of civilian casualties, saying only that the coalition was looking into the matter. The UN assistance mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) said 3,804 civilians were killed in 2018, the highest toll since it began compiling figures in 2009. Another 7,189 were wounded.

In a related incident on March 12, 2019, “friendly fire” between Afghan and US troops led to an airstrike which killed five Afghan soldiers and left another 10 wounded on the outskirts of Tarin Kot, the capital of Uruzgan province. Large parts of Uruzgan province remain under Taliban control. In recent years the insurgents have also made repeated incursions into the provincial capital.

- On March 8, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi called on the international community to provide firm support to the “Afghan-led, Afghan-owned” reconciliation process.

Wang said, “Afghanistan is at a critical moment; the country will see potential dawn of peace, while facing the buildup of risks and challenges. We call on the international community to give firm support for the Afghan-led, Afghan-owned reconciliation process, and play a constructive role from the sidelines to build a momentum for dialogue. Afghanistan should not again become an arena of great power rivalry, nor should it be subject to incessant conflicts or wars. As

Afghanistan's neighbour and friend, China will respect its people's wishes and needs and continue to do its best for pushing forward reconciliation and reconstruction in Afghanistan". China is the largest investor in Afghanistan and the country has also been trying to establish a smooth mechanism between Islamabad and Kabul to help improve their relations.

- On March 7, Daesh attacked a huge political gathering in Kabul which left at least 4 people dead and many others wounded.

The coordinated attack occurred when several prominent politicians including Afghanistan's Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah were attending the death anniversary of Abdul Ali Mazari, the leader of the Hizb-e-Wadhat Party. However, all political leaders escaped the incident unhurt. Although, the Presidential palace condemned the attack, the second Deputy Chief Executive, Mohammad Mohaqiq alleged that the government was collaborating with such circles to use them as a tool against its political rivals in view of the current situation. In February 2019, Ghani dismissed Mohaqiq from his post after he joined the former National Security Advisor Mohammad Haneef Atmar's team for the upcoming presidential elections. However, he continued to serve in his position. The Presidential Palace described the statement as an insult to the Afghan Security Forces and the entire system.

In a related incident on March 6, 2019, at least 21 people were killed and another nine wounded in a coordinated attack on a construction company building near Jalalabad city airport. Among the dead were five attackers and 16 company workers. No group claimed responsibility for the attack. However, the nature of attack hints that Daesh could be behind this offensive as well. The presence of Daesh in Afghanistan has been increasing since 2014. According to some estimates, there are approximately ten thousand Daesh fighters in Afghanistan.

- On March 2, a Taliban attack on an Afghan Military base left at least 50 soldiers dead and another 40 wounded in Helmand province.

According to reports, at least 20 Taliban fighters launched the attack which lasted some thirty eight hours. In retaliation, on March 6, 2019, Afghan Security Forces killed at least 27 Taliban fighters in northern Kunduz province. In another attack on March 11, 2019, the Taliban killed at least 20 Afghan Security personnel and captured another 28 in Badghis province. The perplexing state of Afghan affairs continues where on the one hand the US and the Taliban are engaged in a concentrated dialogue process to broker a peace deal while on the other hand Afghan government forces and the insurgents are locked in an intense fighting.

Bangladesh

- On March 11, Bangladeshi Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, and her Indian counterpart, Narendra Modi, inaugurated four projects via videoconference from their respective capitals.

The projects include the supply of double-decker, single-decker, AC and non-AC buses and trucks to the Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation, under a second line of credit. The projects would also establish a total of 36 community clinics in five districts i.e. Jamalpur, Sherpur, Habiganj, Sunamganj, and Brahmanbaria with the grant financing by the Indian government. The remaining two projects include setting up 11 water treatment plants at in Pirojpur with grant financing from India. Relations between India and Bangladesh have improved manifold under the current leadership in both countries. Bangladesh is India's largest trading partner in South Asia.

---Kashif Hussain

UNITED NATIONS

- On March 11, the 63rd session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) on gender equality and women's rights began at the United Nations Headquarters in New York.
- On March 8, the UN celebrated International Women's Day to recognise and honour unsung women from across the world, and encourage innovation to transform lives.

The UN celebrated the 2019 International Women's Day under the theme "Think Equal, Build Smart, Innovate for Change." While opening the event, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that "gender equality and women's rights are fundamental" for addressing the world's collective challenges, "from climate change to the weakening of commitment to multilateralism." He said, "Gender equality is fundamentally a question of power," and that a still male-dominated world has "ignored, silenced and oppressed women for centuries – even millennia." Indicating the UN has reached gender parity among its leaders around the world, he said that increase in the number of women decision-makers was essential to deal with emerging new challenges. Meanwhile, General Assembly President María Fernanda Espinosa Garces also regretted that women were still being discriminated against notwithstanding the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the landmark Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. During the event, Chair of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, Geraldine Byrne Nason, said, "Women are not simply consumers of prescribed solutions, they also design solutions for whole societies and they are equipped to address the issues that affect their lives."

In a related development on March 11, 2019, the 63rd session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) on gender equality and women's rights began at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. While opening the session, Secretary-General Guterres said the Commission on the Status of Women could equally be called the "Commission on the Status of Power." He said, "Because that is the crux of the issue. Gender equality is fundamentally a question of power." During the event, both Muniba Mazari and Mary Fatiya, from Pakistan and South Sudan respectively, asked for basic social protections to be extended to women and girls around the world, based on need, and in line with their inalienable human rights. Mazari is Pakistan's Goodwill Ambassador for UN Women. The 63rd session of the UN CSW would conclude on March 22, 2019. The session is bringing several thousand activists, diplomats, and academics to the UN to discuss challenges to women's equality and rights. This year's theme is "social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls."

- On March 11, Yanghee Lee, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, presented her report to the Human Rights Council highlighting grave abuses linked to the mass exodus of some 700,000 Rohingya Muslims from Rakhine in August 2017.

Lee said that a humanitarian crisis fuelled by the suppression of basic human rights was continuing across Myanmar's Rakhine state. She indicated that according to a report she had received, some 24 Rohingya houses in the town of Buthidaung in Rakhine, had been burned down. She also stressed that conditions in Myanmar were not conducive for repatriation of Bangladesh based Rohingya refugees as it was promised under the 2018 UN led agreement between Myanmar and Bangladesh. In the agreement, Myanmar agreed to create conditions conducive to the voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable repatriation of Rohingya refugees. The Special Rapporteur urged the UNSC to refer alleged atrocities against Rohingya Muslims to the International Criminal Court (ICC). She said, "I still firmly believe that the situation in Myanmar must be referred to the ICC by the Security Council. Victims must not be forced to wait in the purgatory of international inaction."

- On March 10, UN Secretary-General said that he was "deeply saddened at the tragic loss of lives" in an Ethiopian Airlines flight which crashed shortly after taking off from the capital Addis Ababa on March 10, 2019.

According to the UN, more than 150 people on board, including 19 UN staff, died in the incident. The UN Department of Safety and Security in Kenya indicated that "the World Food Programme (WFP) lost seven staff, the Office of the High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) lost two, as did the International Telecommunications Union (ITU). The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in Sudan, World Bank and UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) each lost one staff member. Six staff from the UN Office in Nairobi (UNON) also tragically died." The report noted that the cause of crash was not yet known. The Secretary-General said that the UN was in contact with the Ethiopian authorities and "working closely with them to establish the details."

- On March 5, Michael Lynk, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian Territory occupied since 1967, called Israeli security forces' response to protests along Gaza's border fence "a recipe for more bloodshed."

Lynk said that Israeli security forces have responded to protests along Gaza's border fence with tear gas, rubber coated bullets and live ammunition since the beginning of 2019, that have caused death, injury and fear. He indicated that live ammunition killed boys aged 14 and 17 during a protest on February 8, 2019, and another 14-year-old boy was killed by live ammunition on February 22, 2019. He stressed, "This is a grave violation of their right to life and it abrogates their guaranteed freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association." The Special Rapporteur also supported the Commission of Inquiry's call for accountability for

“those who drafted and approved the rules of engagement which permitted illegal use of lethal fire.” The Commission of Inquiry, mandated by the Human Rights Council in May 2018, presented its findings and recommendations on February 28, 2019, to investigate all alleged violations and abuses of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Lynk asserted that Commission of Inquiry’s report has “found reasonable grounds to believe that, in all but two of the 189 fatalities investigated, the use of live ammunition by Israeli security forces against demonstrators was unlawful.”

--- Moiz Khan