

March 16 – March 31

AREA BRIEF

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Area Briefs: 16-31 March, 2019

General Observations

Pakistan

- On March 29 Pakistan criticised the politicisation of the UN's counter terrorism machinery warning it would compromise the integrity of the regime. Speaking during the Security Council debate on "Preventing and Combating the Financing of Terrorism," Ambassador Maleeha Lodhi said that current structures like FATF and the 1267 Sanctions regimes should not be used as political tools by some to advance their geopolitical goals.
- Meanwhile on March 29 the FATF's Asia Pacific Group said once again that Pakistan had been unable to take effective action against eight major outlawed organisations. Amongst the FATF's key concern is the implementation of UN sanctions on proscribed organisations in Pakistan. Notwithstanding the FATF's criticism the government must continue in its efforts to ensure that the space such groups have in Pakistan continues to shrink until it completely ends.
- On March 25, the 4th session of the Pakistan-EU "Strategic Dialogue" was held in Islamabad. The two sides reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening of multilateralism and adherence to the principles and purposes of the UN charter. Meanwhile, speaking at a joint press conference with Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Federica Mogherini said that rising Islamophobia is a threat not only for Muslims but for all of European society.
- On March 21, Malaysian Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, visited Islamabad and met with Pakistan's top leadership, including President Arif Alvi and Prime Minister Imran Khan.
- On March 19, Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi and Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister, Wang Yi held a "Strategic Dialogue" in Beijing.
- On March 20, US President Donald Trump said that relations between the US and Pakistan are "very good," adding, "We'll be meeting with Pakistan." Trump's remarks come in the backdrop of talks between the US and the Afghan government and Taliban for a prospective peace deal to end the conflict in Afghanistan.

Notwithstanding recent improvements in Pak-US ties, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo's continued his usual tirade against Pakistan. Pompeo suggested in a radio

interview that proliferation of Pakistan's nuclear programme is one of the biggest threats to American security. He also accused Pakistan of providing safe havens to terrorists, and commented on the recent Pak-India conflict in Kashmir as being initiated because of cross-border terrorism.

- On March 27, Pakistan's Foreign Office dismissed a dossier handed over by India in the wake of Pulwama attack and sought "further evidence" from New Delhi to "take the process forward." As expected the dossier contained no evidence and only allegations. According to reports the dossier mentions that the banned Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) claimed responsibility for the attack and lists 22 names.
- Earlier on March 26 during an interview with the Financial Times Prime Minister Imran Khan warned about the possibility of more military hostilities with India. Even as Khan vowed to crackdown on terrorist organisations operating in Pakistan he criticised Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi for creating "war hysteria" to win support ahead of the general elections.

International

- In another sign of worsening India Pakistan relations, on March 21, Pakistan criticised the March 20 Indian decision to acquit the alleged perpetrators of the Samjhauta Express train bombing in 2007. 68 people, mostly Pakistanis were killed during the bombing. A special National Intelligence Agency court acquitted all the accused including Swami Aseemanand, the alleged mastermind of the Samjhauta Express train bombing. Ironically the ruling cited lack of evidence for Aseemanand and the other's acquittal. Islamabad summoned India's Ambassador to protest against the acquittal, calling it a "travesty of justice" that reflected an "Indian state policy of promoting and protecting Hindu terrorists".
- On March 28, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Geng Shuang urged the US to act cautiously on the issue of blacklisting Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) chief, Masood Azhar and avoid bypassing the relevant committee of the UN Security Council.
- On March 31, Israeli tanks shelled the Gaza Strip after alleged rocket fire from the blockaded coastal sliver into the occupied territories.
- Emboldened further by the US decision to recognise the occupied Golan Heights as Israeli territory, on March 28, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu said that Tel Aviv is ready to wage a broad military campaign in Gaza if needed.

- On March 27, a majority of UNSC members expressed regret over the US' unilateral move to recognise Israel's sovereignty over the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, and reaffirmed the importance of upholding international law.
- On March 25, US President Donald Trump recognised the occupied Golan Heights as Israeli territory. During a White House visit by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Trump signed a proclamation officially granting US recognition of the Golan Heights as Israeli territory. Earlier on March 21, 2019, Trump tweeted, "After 52 years it is time for the United States to fully recognise Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, which is of critical strategic and security importance to the state of Israel and regional stability." Moscow warned the policy U-turn could spark new conflicts. Syria, Iran and Turkey strongly condemned Trump for the policy shift.
- On March 24, a summary of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's report was submitted to Congress where it concluded President Donald Trump's campaign did not conspire with Russia during the 2016 election.

The report exonerated Trump's campaign for collusion with Russia. It did not however exonerate him from accusations of obstructing justice. Mueller made clear in his report, "while this report does not conclude that the president committed a crime, it also does not exonerate him."

- On March 29, MP's rejected UK Prime Minister Theresa May's Brexit deal for a third time. May announced she would bring the deal back on the table for a fourth vote the following week. May had earlier promised her party lawmakers she would resign if they backed her Brexit deal.
- On March 26, French President Emmanuel Macron met with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Paris to discuss multilateralism and cooperation.
- On March 24, Italy signed 29 deals amounting to 2.5 billion Euros during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Rome.
- On March 29, the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reported that a potential US-Taliban peace deal "will likely" fail to prevent Afghanistan from coping with terrorists and descending into a "narco-state". Earlier on March 20, the Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan (IEC) deferred Afghan presidential

elections for another two months.

- In another setback for global disarmament efforts on March 29, UN-backed talks on preventing an arms race in outer space ended without any conclusion. While the talks were underway India successfully tested an anti-satellite missile (ASAT). According to the UN the India test further reinforced the need for a treaty as it reminded nations "that shooting down an object in space is not expressly prohibited" under current international law. India's actions challenged the narrative "that (the) existing regime is sufficient."
- India's successful test on March 27 of an anti-satellite (ASAT) missile that destroyed an orbiting satellite at an altitude of approximately 300 kilometres, prompted warnings from both the US and the UN. US' Acting Defence Secretary, Patrick Shanahan warned that the testing of ASAT weapons can create a "mess" in space. Shanahan said that he expected the debris from the Indian anti-satellite weapons test to eventually burn up in the atmosphere instead of creating a lasting debris field that could threaten other satellites. In a related development on March 27, 2019, the UN Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) also expressed concerns over the test. In its tweet, the UNIDIR said, "Testing anti-satellite weapons in space can create damaging debris; guidelines on testing these systems can prevent collateral damage and the escalation of tensions in outer space."
- According to Reuters on March 27 US Energy Secretary Rick Perry approved six secret authorisations by companies to sell nuclear power technology and assistance to Saudi Arabia. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the administration was working to ensure any shared technology nuclear power would not present proliferation risks.

---Amina Afzal

AMERICAS

Domestic

- On March 24, a summary of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's report was submitted to Congress where it concluded President Donald Trump's campaign did not conspire with Russia during the 2016 election.

While the report exonerated Trump's campaign for collusion with Russia, it did not however exonerate him from accusations of obstructing justice. Mueller made clear in his report, "while this report does not conclude that the president committed a crime, it also does not exonerate him". The report is the conclusion of a two-year long investigation witnessing Trump's closest former aides prosecuted and, in some cases, imprisoned. Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer stated in a joint statement that the summary "raises as many questions as it answers" and called for access to the full report. White House press secretary Sarah Sanders however described the findings of the report as "a total and complete exoneration of the president".

- On March 19, Homeland Security Chief Kirsten Nielsen cited cybersecurity as a top threat to the US.

Nielsen stated, "On top of my list of threats, that many of you can guess, the word 'cyber' is circled, highlighted and underlined," adding "the cyberdomain is a target, a weapon and a threat vector all at the same time". Maintaining global jihadists and transnational criminals a real threat, Nielsen added "cyberthugs and hackers and resurgent nation-state rivals" as an emerging threat the US. Nielsen stated the threat posed by Russia and the Kremlin and their "concerted effort to undermine our elections and our democratic process using cyberenabled means", while also highlighting the virtual threats to the US from Russia, China, North Korea and Iran. She maintained, "I am more worried about the ability of bad guys to hijack our networks than their ability to hijack our flights" adding, "I am concerned about them holding our infrastructure hostage, stealing our money and secrets, exploiting children online and even hacking our democracy". Nielsen's views are in contrast to the views of Donald Trump who has consistently cited illegal immigration at the southern border as one of the most urgent national security issues threatening the US.

- On March 19, the Trump administration proposed a \$86 Billion spy budget to combat the threat posed by Russia and China.

The proposed budget is a 6 percent increase from the previous one and covers expenses as diverse as spy satellites, cyberweapons and the CIA's network of overseas spies and informants.

- On March 19, Kirsten Gillibrand announced her bid to run for president in the upcoming election in 2020.

Gillibrand, currently serving as junior Democratic Senator from New York formally announced her presidential bid, joining the swelling ranks of Democratic contenders for the office of president in the upcoming election.

International

- On March 30, the US State Department announced the US will be cutting off aid to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras because of their inability to stop the caravan of migrants looking to enter the US.
- On March 29, Donald Trump threatened to close the US border with Mexico if it does not stop migrants at the border.

Donald Trump tweeted, If Mexico doesn't immediately stop ALL illegal immigration coming into the United States through our Southern Border, I will be CLOSING ... the Border, or large sections of the Border, next week". Mexico's foreign minister, Marcelo Ebrard, reacted stating, "Mexico does not act on the basis of threats".

- On March 28, Donald Trump approved a move to transfer nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia.

The Department of Energy has authorized seven companies to share nuclear energy information with Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is currently reviewing bids from international companies to build two nuclear reactors. Trump's move has sparked a strong reaction from Congress with many lawmakers contending Saudi Arabia cannot be trusted with nuclear technology.

- On March 25, Donald Trump signed a declaration recognising Israel's sovereignty over the disputed Golan Heights.

Trump, breaking from longstanding US policy, signed a proclamation officially granting US recognition of the occupied Golan Heights as Israeli territory during Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to Washington. Netanyahu declared, if Israel takes territory "in a defensive war, then it's our" in a controversial and unprecedented statement. Analysts have suggested this move will likely strengthen Netanyahu's position ahead of Israeli elections that are scheduled less than three weeks away. The Golan Heights, were captured by Israel from Syria during the Six-Day War of 1967, and formally annexed in 1981. The annexation has not been recognized by the international community, which has regarded the Golan Heights as occupied territory and Israeli settlements there are deemed illegal under international law.

- On March 23, Donald Trump announced ISIS had lost its last stronghold in Syria and declared the end of the 'Caliphate'.

US backed Syrian Democratic Forces announced their victory after flushing out ISIS militants in the remote village of Baghouz. Trump while announcing the end of the 'Caliphate' declared "We will remain vigilant... until it is finally defeated wherever it operates". Acting US Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan welcomed the "critical milestone," but warned that "our work is far from complete. ISIS militants however retain a presence in eastern Syria's Badia desert and other hideouts in the country.

- On March 22, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo concluded his tour of Kuwait, Israel and Lebanon where he pushed for the Trump administration's anti-Iran policy.

Pompeo made clear his intention prior to commencing his Middle East tour of Kuwait, Israel and Lebanon where he sought to bolster a united front against the threat posed by Iran. Pompeo commenced his tour in Kuwait where he met with the Emir, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. Pompeo pushed for greater cooperation on defence, cybersecurity and trade while calling for resolution to the ongoing land, sea and air blockade of Qatar instituted by the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt. Pompeo met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on March 20, 2019 where Pompeo described Hezbollah as a risk to Middle East stability. In a meeting with Israeli President, Reuven Rivlin in Jerusalem, Pompeo listed Hezbollah, Palestinian Hamas and Yemen's Houthis as "entities that present risks to Middle East stability and to Israel" adding, "They are determined to wipe this country (Israel) off the face of the planet and we have a moral obligation and a political one to prevent that from happening. You should know that the US is prepared to do that". On March 22, 2019, Pompeo concluded the last leg of his Middle East tour where we met with Lebanese Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil and expressed his concern over Hezbollah accusing the group of "destabilising activities" within Lebanon and across the region. Pompeo urged Beirut to pick a side arguing, "Lebanon and the Lebanese people face a choice: bravely move forward as an independent and proud nation or allow the dark ambitions of Iran and Hezbollah to dictate your future". Bassil however noted, "Hezbollah is a Lebanese party, not a terrorist group, and it enjoys a wide popular base". The US maintains the opinion that Hezbollah is an arm of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps in the region, and alongside Israel and Gulf nations, has declared Hezbollah in its entirety as a "terrorist organisation". US policy in the Middle East under Donald Trump is pursuing a harsh anti-Iran agenda which is aligned with the US' traditional regional allies in Riyadh and Tel Aviv. In related news on March 22, 2019, the US imposed sanctions on 14 people and 17 entities connected to an Iranian research organisation it claimed had played a pivotal role in the country's past nuclear weapons effort and which remains active to date in an attempt to apply further pressure on Iran.

- On March 21, US officials announced that they may halt the delivery of F-35 fighter jets to Turkey.

While no formal decision has been made, US officials have confirmed that Washington was considering halting the delivery of F-35 fighter jets to Turkey. Turkey is simultaneously seeking to purchase Russia's S-400 air defense system, a move that the US has been trying to dissuade Ankara

from making. Washington maintains, Ankara's decision to purchase the Russian air defense system, would compromise the security of the F-35 aircraft. Katie Wheelbarger, Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs commented on this by stating, "The S-400 is a computer. The F-35 is a computer. You don't hook your computer to your adversary's computer and that's basically what we would be doing". Analysts have argued that if Washington removes Ankara from the F-35 program, the move would severely strain ties between the two countries. Similarly, it is suggested that should Ankara go ahead with purchasing the Russian air defense system, they could be subject to US sanctions.

- On March 21, 300 US soldiers arrived in Germany as the US tested its rapid-deployment strategy in Europe

The US soldiers arrived in Germany in the first test of a new American strategy to rapidly deploy US-based troops to Europe. The troops are enroute to Poland for maneuvers with local forces. Deputy Commanding General for the US Army National Guard, Major General John L. Gronski stated, "The purpose is really all about readiness, building readiness, and also inter-operability with our NATO allies such as Germany and Poland, two very essential allies in the NATO alliance".

- On March 19, the US informed Afghan President Ashraf Ghani that it will no longer deal with his National Security Adviser, Hamdullah Mohib.

US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, David Hale, informed Ghani that Mohib would no longer be received in Washington, and that US civilian and military officials would not be dealing with him moving forward. Mohib triggered controversy when he claimed that US special envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad, had intentionally kept the Afghan government out of the peace talks with the Taliban as he wanted to be the next "viceroy" of Afghanistan. Washington has denied Mohib's claim that the US has not shared information on the on-going peace talks in an effort to delegitimise the Afghan government. The US maintains it is seeking to persuade the Taliban to engage in talks with the Afghan government despite the Taliban's refusal.

- On March 16 Secretary of State Mike Pompeo condemned the Senate for passing a resolution to end US involvement in the war in Yemen.

Pompeo argued US military aid to the Saudis was essential in combating what he termed growing Iranian influence. He made clear, "If you truly care about Yemeni lives, you'd support the Saudi-led effort to prevent Yemen from turning into a puppet state of the corrupt, brutish Islamic Republic of Iran". He maintained, "The way to alleviate the Yemeni people's suffering isn't to prolong the conflict by handicapping our partners in the fight, but by giving the Saudi-led coalition the support needed to defeat Iranian-backed rebels and ensure a just peace". The conflict in Yemen, has resulted in the death of thousands of Yemenis, in addition to the approximately 80,000 who have died of famine and malnutrition. Saudi-led coalition forces – armed, trained, and equipped by the US – have bombed hospitals and civilian infrastructure, resulting in a cholera epidemic and a

state that both the UN and Pompeo have described as a humanitarian disaster. The US Senate had earlier passed the Yemen War Powers resolution, barring US forces from any further involvement in the Yemen conflict without approval from Congress.

- On March 21, the US Air Force deployed 6 nuclear-capable B-52 bombers to Europe.

The US deployed the B-52 bombers for “theatre integration and flying training” exercises with regional allies and NATO partners. Analysts have suggested the move is to send a strong message to Russia particularly as Russia is celebrating the five-year anniversary of its military annexation of Crimea. Tensions between the US and Russia have been increasing after Russia seized Ukrainian ships and detained Ukrainian sailors in the Kerch Strait in November 2018; a move which prompted Donald Trump to cancel a scheduled meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin during the G-20 summit in Argentina in 2018. NATO has also lashed out at Russia in the face of what it terms “wide-ranging military buildup in Crimea”.

- On March 20, the US granted Iraq a 90-day waiver exempting it from sanctions to buy Iranian energy.

A State Department official noted that the US had granted Iraq a 90-day waiver allowing Baghdad to keep importing Iranian gas. The last sanctions waiver for Iraq was granted by Washington in December 2018, permitting Iraq to import Iranian gas until the end of March 2019. Iraq is heavily reliant on Iranian gas to feed its power stations. Iraqi leaders fearing an energy shortfall can lead to mass protest and political instability in the country have been pushing back against Washington’s pressure. Trump has actively been looking to ensure all nations comply with US sanctions against Iran after the US withdrew from the deal to limit Tehran’s nuclear program last year.

Latin America

- On March 20, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro met with his US counterpart, Donald Trump, in Washington.

During Bolsonaro’s first official foreign trip, Trump pledged to give more US support to Brazil’s global ambitions. Trump stated “As I told President Bolsonaro, I also intend to designate Brazil as a major non-NATO ally - or, maybe a NATO ally. I’ll have to talk to a lot of people but maybe a NATO ally - which will greatly advance security and cooperation between our countries”. Brazil is looking to strengthen its relationship with NATO powers to facilitate the purchase of US weapons and ease barriers to military and other cooperation with the US. Colombia is currently the only Latin American nation to join NATO as a “global partner” whereby it is not obliged to partake in military action. Trump and Bolsonaro discussed strengthening trade relations between both countries and Trump announced his support of Brazil’s efforts to join the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a club of the world’s advanced economies.

---Kiran Mazari

ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

- On March 29, UN-backed talks on preventing an arms race in outer space ended without any conclusion.
- On March 25, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged artificial intelligence (AI) experts to make efforts to restrict the development of lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWS).

With an aim to prevent outer space arms race, some 25 countries including the US, Russia and China held two-week long negotiations aiming to prevent the deployment of certain types of military hardware in space. Brazil's Ambassador to the Conference on Disarmament (CD), Guilherme de Aguiar Patriota, said that diplomats meeting within the Group of Governmental Experts were not able to reach consensus on a set of recommendations. Patriota said, "We are working on very difficult grounds because of the sensitivities around these issues." According to media reports, though Russia and China "backed treaty language," the US however, rejected the approach "on grounds that it was extremely difficult to verify the military capabilities of hardware deployed in space." During the negotiations, Patriota called India's anti-satellite weapons test not only harmful but an important reason for enacting an agreement for peace in space. He said, India's actions challenged the narrative "that the existing regime is sufficient."

In a related development on March 25, 2019, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged AI experts to make efforts to restrict the development of LAWS. Guterres said, "Machines with the power and discretion to take lives without human involvement are politically unacceptable, morally repugnant and should be prohibited by international law". While welcoming the Group of Governmental Experts' statement in 2018 that "human responsibility for decisions on the use of weapons systems must be retained, since accountability cannot be transferred to machines," he said that no country or armed force was in favour of such "fully autonomous" weapon systems. The Group of Governmental Experts are meeting in Geneva to discuss implications of the development of LAWS under the auspices of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW). The Secretary-General said it was time for the panel "to deliver" on LAWS. According to the UN, the Group's agenda covers technical issues related to the use of lethal autonomous weapon systems, including the challenges the technology poses to international humanitarian law, as well as human interaction in the development, deployment and use of emerging tech in LAWS.

- According to *Reuters* on March 27, 2019, US Energy Secretary Rick Perry allowed six companies to sell nuclear power technology and assistance to Saudi Arabia.

The report noted that it was unclear which US companies have received authorisations. As per the US Federal law, companies are required to obtain clearance from the government before

exporting nuclear technology to or engaging in the production or development of special nuclear material in other countries. The authorisations are called as Part 810s. The companies have the option to request authorisations privately. The report read that the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) said that the companies had requested that the Trump administration keep the approvals secret. The Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress, said that it has accepted a request by Senators Marco Rubio, a Republican and Bob Menendez, a Democrat, to probe the Trump Administration's conduct on a nuclear deal with Saudi.

- On March 28, a Russian Air Force Tu-154M-ON aircraft configured for surveillance flights, conducted a flight over several strategic locations in the western part of the US, as part of a surveillance flight permitted under the 1990 Treaty on Open Skies.

In its first Open Skies flight of 2019, the Russian aircraft flew over a number of strategic points in the western part of the US including the Nellis Test and Training Range (NTTR) a combat aircraft training range in southern Nevada, where the Tonopah Test Range is located; the Creech Air Force Base (AFB) in Nevada which is the control base for worldwide US drone flights; Yucca Flats at the Nevada Test Site where the Device Assembly Facility for nuclear weapons is located; and the Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake where the naval air warfare development and training centre is located. According to media reports, the Russian aircraft was equipped with imaging equipment. In December 2018, the US rejected certification of Russia's new Tu-214ON Open Skies observation aircraft, citing concerns over digital cameras, including ones with infrared capability, and radar imaging equipment. Under the Treaty obligations, surveillance aircraft are inspected before they fly over the country. According to media reports, the US has already conducted three surveillance missions over Russia in 2019.

The Treaty on Open Skies was signed on March 24, 1990, and entered into force on January 1, 2002, establishing the regime of unarmed aerial observation flights over the territories of its 34 state parties.

- On March 28, Russia and Pakistan agreed on the need for preserving multilateralism in the field of international security and disarmament.
- On March 20, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov discussed new problems faced by arms control treaties.

Both Russia and Pakistan met for the 13th meeting of the Pakistan-Russia Consultative Group on Strategic Stability, held in Islamabad. Foreign Secretary Tehmina Janjua and Deputy Foreign Minister of the Russia Sergey Ryabkov led their respective delegations. During their meeting, the two sides discussed a broad range of issues including changing global strategic environment and its impact on the international arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation agenda. Pakistan-Russia Consultative Group on Strategic Stability is a platform for structured dialogue between the two sides and has been meeting since 2003.

On March 20, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov discussed new problems surrounding arms control and disarmament treaties. While addressing the plenary session of the Conference of Disarmament in Geneva, Lavrov noted that the internationally-accepted legal base for disarmament that has maintained security and stability for decades has been destroyed. Talking with respect to problems around the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, he said that the US-Russia bilateral agreements no longer meets the demands of time. The Foreign Minister also expressed concerns about the expected demise of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) which expires in 2021. He said, “The time has come to think seriously about how to make the nuclear arms control process multilateral, acceptable to all involved states.”

Earlier on March 18, 2019, US Assistant Secretary of State Yleem Poblete accused Russia of violating several arms control treaties considered critical for maintaining world peace. Poblete was addressing the UN Conference on Disarmament as the US assumed the rotating presidency of the body. While accusing Russia of developing a ground-launched cruise missile they deemed to be in clear violation of the INF Treaty, she said, “The Russian Federation’s violation of the INF Treaty poses a direct threat to the global security.”

- On March 25, the US conducted the first salvo test of its homeland missile defence system, launching two ground-based missile interceptors in rapid succession against a simulated intercontinental ballistic missile.
- On March 19, the US and Israel successfully completed multiple tests of an advanced missile interception system known as “David’s Sling.”

The US Missile Defence Agency noted that the test successfully met mission objectives. The two interceptors buried in silos in the ground were launched from Vandenberg Air Force Base, California, while the ICBM target was launched from the Reagan Test Site on Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands, which was over 6437 kilometres away from the interceptors. MDA Director Air Force Lt. Gen. Samuel Greaves, said, “This was the first GBI salvo intercept of a complex, threat-representative ICBM target, and it was a critical milestone.” Greaves added, “The Ground-based Midcourse Defence system is vitally important to the defense of our homeland, and this test demonstrates that we have a capable, credible deterrent against a very real threat.”

On March 19, 2019, the US and Israel also completed multiple tests of an advanced missile defence system, called the David’s Sling. Israel’s Defence Ministry said, “The success of the series constitutes an important milestone in the State of Israel’s ability to defend itself against existing and future threats in the arena.” The David’s Sling is jointly developed by the US and Israel. The weapons system employs two-stage Stunner interceptor missiles, capable of destroying large torrents of rockets and short-range ballistic missiles.

- On March 27, India successfully tested an anti-satellite (ASAT) missile destroying an orbiting satellite at an altitude of approximately 300 kilometres.

During the test, India test-fired a three-stage interceptor missile, weighing 18 tonnes, from the Abdul Kalam Island Off the Odisha coast. According to media reports, the missile destroyed a 740 kilogramme satellite in a Low Earth Orbit (LEO). India's Defence Research and Development Organisation Chief, Satheesh Reddy, said that the project to develop ASAT missile received authorisation from the government in 2016. While claiming that all technologies for the mission were developed indigenously, Reddy said, "In the ASAT test, we achieved an accuracy of a few centimetres, meeting all technical parameters and objectives. We have the capability of doing it at much higher altitudes but conducted the test in LEO to ensure the space debris decays and falls back to earth." The DRDO Chief said that the mission was to demonstrate India's capability to protect its space assets. The DRDO led the test as a part of Mission Shakti. During a televised address, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, "A while ago, our scientists shot down a live satellite at a low-earth orbit. I congratulate all scientists who have made this possible and made India a much stronger nation." Modi also claimed that successful ASAT test made India a "space super."

Meanwhile, Pakistan's Foreign Ministry on March 25, 2019 issued a call against military threats in outer space. The Ministry said, "Space is the common heritage of mankind and every nation has the responsibility to avoid actions which can lead to the militarisation of this arena." On March 26, 2019, US' Acting Defence Secretary, Patrick Shanahan warned that the testing of ASAT weapons can create a "mess" in space. While expressing concerns, Shanahan said that he expected the debris from the Indian anti-satellite weapons test to eventually burn up in the atmosphere instead of creating a lasting debris field that could threaten other satellites. He said, "We all live in space. Let's not make it a mess."

In a related development on March 27, 2019, the UN Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) also expressed concerns over the test. In its tweet, the UNIDIR said, "Testing anti-satellite weapons in space can create damaging debris; guidelines on testing these systems can prevent collateral damage and the escalation of tensions in outer space."

- On March 26, Pakistan supported the US' approach of "Creating the Environment for Nuclear Disarmament" (CEND), in the plenary session of the Conference of Disarmament (CD) in Geneva.

Pakistan supported the CEND on grounds that the country believes that progress on arms control and disarmament cannot be delinked from the security challenges and concerns which force States to resort to nuclear deterrence for self-defence. While reaffirming its commitment to the goal of a nuclear-weapons-free world, the Pakistani delegation stressed that the global "nuclear disarmament could only be achieved as a cooperative and universally agreed undertaking, through a consensus-based process involving all the relevant stakeholders, resulting in equal and undiminished, if not increased security for all states."

Meanwhile, the British delegation raised several questions regarding prospects of global nuclear disarmament during the plenary session of the Conference of Disarmament (CD) in Geneva on March 26, 2019. The delegation noted those factors which could guarantee security in the world without nuclear weapons. The UK stressed that mapping out the steps required for the reduction and elimination of nuclear weapons could be possible if a common understanding could be reached on the military and security environment required to maintain peace and stability in a nuclear weapons free-world, with undiminished, and preferably enhanced, security for all.

- According to *The News* on March 25, Pakistan deployed the Chinese-made medium-range air defence system in several cities and military bases to prevent possible new strikes by the Indian Air Force (IAF).

The report noted that the air defence batteries include five LY-80 (HQ-16) surface-to-air missile units and IBIS-150 surveillance radars “capable of tracking and destroying a variety of aerial targets at longer ranges flying at low and medium altitude.” The report also read that Pakistan deployed additional Chinese-made Rainbow CH-4 and CH-5 drones to conduct surveillance.

- On March 22, US State and Treasury Departments imposed new sanctions on Iran, targeting 14 individuals and 17 entities linked to the country’s Organisation of Defensive Innovation of Research, which is known by its Persian acronym SPND.
- On March 16, Iran’s Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI) spokesman Behrouz Kamalvandi announced that Iran would unveil 112 significant achievements in nuclear technology in April 2019.

The Trump Administration accused Iran of keeping top nuclear scientists together as a team in order for them to proceed with building nuclear weapons in the future. According to media reports, a senior Administration official said, “In action after action over the last several years, the Iranian regime is expert at building out these front companies, pretending like they are from somewhere else doing something else and yet taking advantage in many different ways of the international financial system.” The Treasury Department said that many sanctioned individuals used to work in the early 2000’s on the Amad plan- an early alleged nuclear weapons programme- and continue to carry out research and development on dual-use technology that can be employed for energy and medical purposes, as well as potentially to build nuclear weapons. The Trump Administration officials acknowledged that while the individuals and entities were not known to be currently involved in building nuclear weapons, maintaining them as a team was a matter of “grave concern” for the US, because they possess the “type of expertise capable of developing a nuclear weapons programme.” The imposed sanctions aim at restricting the travel of these individuals and restrict them from attending international conferences or conducting research in foreign universities.

Earlier, on March 16, 2019, Iran’s Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI) spokesman Behrouz Kamalvandi announced that Iran would unveil 112 significant achievements in nuclear

technology in April 2019. Kamalvandi said, “The unveiling of these achievements under the country’s current circumstances will convey this message to the US and those enemies of Iran – that the Iranian nation has resisted economic sanctions and has turned threats into opportunities.” According to the AEOI spokesman, the achievements include new breakthroughs in power plant, fuel cycle, laser, exploration and other technologies. On March 18, 2019, Ali Akbar Salehi, Head of the AEOI, indicated that Bushehr-2 and Bushehr-3 nuclear power plants were under construction and the required infrastructure was prepared.

--- Moiz Khan

CHINA, EAST ASIA & PACIFIC

China

- On March 30, Yang Jiechi, a member of China's political bureau denounced as "prejudiced", the critics of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The BRI plan, also known as the One Belt One Road project is viewed by the US and its Western allies as a means of spreading Chinese influence and pressuring countries with unsustainable debt burden. The BRI aims to link China by sea and land with southeast and central Asia, the Middle East, Europe and Africa.

- During his visit to Italy on March 23, Chinese President Xi Jinping held talks with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte.

The two sides witnessed the signing of multiple bilateral cooperation documents, including a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on jointly advancing the construction of the Belt and Road Initiative. Italy has become the first founding EU member state to join China's "Belt and Road Initiative". Calling China and Italy important strategic partners, Xi urged both sides to view and manage the bilateral ties from a strategic long-term perspective. Xi said that both countries must promote high-level exchanges and increase dialogue between various departments and on all levels. After concluding his Italy visit, Chinese President Xi Jinping travelled to Monaco on March 24, 2019 and met with Monaco's Prince, Albert II. Both leaders pledged to expand cooperation in multiple fields including science and technology, innovation, ecological and environmental protection, wildlife conservation, and renewable energy.

In a related development on March 25, 2019, Chinese President Xi Jinping travelled to France and held talks with his French counterpart, Emmanuel Macron. During the visit, both countries signed 15 business deals worth \$63.6 billion, including contracts for renewable energy, shipping and banking, as well as an order of 300 Airbus airplanes.

New Zealand

- On March 21, New Zealand's Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern announced immediate changes to gun laws in the wake of the Christchurch terrorist attack.

According to country's new gun laws, all military-style semi-automatic weapons and assault rifles would be banned in New Zealand. Prime Minister Ardern said that the action is being taken to "make our country a safer place." On March 15, 2019, a 28-year-old Australian white supremacist killed 50 Muslim worshippers at two different Mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, where they had gathered for their Friday prayers. The shooter also filmed the attack through a head-mounted camera, live streaming the incident to Facebook. New Zealand has

charged the attacker of murder and the incident is being viewed as an act of a “lone wolf” with a fascist agenda. However, this attack is the latest example of a fast-growing ideology of white nationalism. The massacre underscores that white nationalism and white supremacist terror are as much of an international threat that the world is facing today, as al-Qaeda and Daesh. According to terrorism experts, such attacks are emanating from a global network of white supremacists that communicate in much of the same way as other global terrorist networks.

Australia

- On March 20, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison summoned Turkish Ambassador, Korhan Karakoc to explain “offensive” comments made by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the wake of the Christchurch terrorist attack.

President Erdogan claimed the Christchurch terrorist attack was part of a wider attack on Turkey and evidence of growing anti-Muslim sentiment. Speaking at a political rally on March 18, 2019, President Erdogan warned that any anti-Islamic extremists from Australia or New Zealand who attempt to attack Turkey would return home “in coffins”. The comments angered the Australian government. Erdogan appeared to be responding to comments made about Turkey in the so-called “manifesto” of Christchurch shooter in which he discussed the 1683 Battle of Vienna which is celebrated by white nationalists as a turning point in history because of the defeat of Ottomans in Europe.

Thailand

- On March 27, seven anti-junta parties formed a coalition in an attempt to seize power from the ruling junta-backed party, which gained power following a 2014 coup.

The anti-junta parties, led by the Pheu Thai Party, said they had formed a “democratic front,” claiming the opposition won a majority in the lower house of parliament. The development came after parliamentary elections were held on March 24, 2019. The official results of the elections have not been released so far.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

EUROPE

- On March 29, Germany extended a ban on the export of weapons to Saudi Arabia for an additional six months.

Germany initially imposed the ban after the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. According to a statement issued by the German government spokesman Steffen Seibert, "The ban will be extended for a further six months to September 30" adding "over this period no new export applications will be approved". Germany's move is drawing criticism from its European allies, including the UK and France that are looking to proceed with the multibillion-euro military orders.

- On March 29, MP's voted against UK Prime Minister Theresa May's Brexit deal.

May's Brexit deal was rejected for the third time by MP's. May stated after the vote, "The implications of the House's decision are grave. The legal default now is that the United Kingdom is due to leave the European Union on 12 April. In just 14 days' time". May announced she would bring the deal back on the table for a fourth vote the following week. May had earlier promised her party lawmakers she would resign if they backed her Brexit deal.

- On March 26, French President Emmanuel Macron met with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Paris to discuss multilateralism and cooperation.

Macron invited German chancellor, Angela Merkel, and the European Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker, to Paris for talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping, where all four leaders expressed their commitment for greater cooperation between the EU and China. Juncker noted that "China and Europe must and can do great things together. We are strategic partners, and yes, rivals, but competition among us is a good thing" while urging Beijing to give EU companies the same access to Chinese markets as Chinese companies enjoy in the EU.

- On March 26, MP's in the UK voted on eight possible Brexit options in a series of votes in the House of Commons with none getting a majority.

The British Parliament remains deeply divided over how to leave the EU. During the Parliamentary session, eight possible Brexit options were presented to but none mustered a majority. In response to the stalemate, Brexit Secretary Stephen Barclay noted the results strengthened the view that May's proposed deal was "the best option". Earlier, on March 25, 2019, UK Prime Minister Theresa May while addressing the House of Commons acknowledged her deal lacked support and announced, "It is with great regret that I have had to conclude that as things stand, there is still not sufficient support in the House to bring back the deal for a third

meaningful vote". British MP's on the same day, voted 329 to 302 in favor of setting up a series of votes for the parliamentary session scheduled on March 26, 2019, to determine what kind of Brexit has the most support among MP's.

- On March 25, Russia sent military officials to Venezuela to support incumbent Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro.

Nearly 100 Russian military officials arrived in Venezuela to discuss equipment, maintenance, training and strategy. Russian support to the Maduro government has come amid growing calls from the international community, particularly the US, calling for Maduro's resignation, and recognizing opposition leader Jaun Guaido as Venezuela's interim president. Venezuela has a long-standing relationship with Russia, and has imported Russian military technology, warplanes, anti-aircraft missiles and other weapons systems.

- On March 24, Italy signed 29 deals amounting to 2.5 billion Euros during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Rome.

On behalf of Italy, Deputy Prime Minister Luigi Di Maio, formally signed an umbrella deal making Italy part of the Economic Silk Road and The Initiative for a Maritime Silk Road for the 21st Century. Ministers also signed deals covering numerous sectors including, energy, finance and agriculture. China's Communication and Construction Company was granted access to the port of Trieste, in addition to China being given the opportunity to support with developing the port of Genoa. The project hailed as a new 'Silk Road', also known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aims to fund major Infrastructure projects around the world in a bid to efficiently increase market access to Chinese goods. The European Commission a week prior to the deal being signed expressed their reservations and stated in a joint statement on the need to "review relations" with China in the wake of "China's growing economic power and political influence".

- On March 24, hundreds and thousands of people protested in front of Parliament in a march organised by the group "Put It To The People", demanding any Brexit deal be put for a public vote.
- On March 21, UK Prime Minister, Theresa May made a direct plea to the EU requesting to postpone Brexit for three months.

May attempted to persuade the 27 EU countries at a summit in Brussels to delay the UK's exit beyond March 29, 2019. German Chancellor, Angela Merkel had stated earlier the EU could support May's request to delay Brexit, if there was a "positive vote" on the withdrawal agreement in the UK Parliament. European Council President Donald Tusk had also earlier

stated the EU would agree to a short extension if May's deal is signed off by MP's. After deliberations, the EU rejected May's three month extension, but offered instead an extension to April 20, 2019 should May's deal be rejected by British MP's or a longer extension to May 22, 2019 should British MP's approve May's deal.

- On March 18, German Finance Minister, Olaf Scholz's budget plan foresees Germany's defence spending rising to 1.37 percent of national income in 2020, but decline to 1.25 by 2023.

Scholz announced that German defence spending will rise next year to 1.37 percent, and then drop to 1.29 percent by 2022, and to 1.25 percent by 2023. The announcement has bristled Washington as US President Donald Trump has been pushing for NATO funding to be increased to two percent of GDP. US Ambassador Richard Grenell stated, "reducing its already unacceptable commitments to military readiness is a worrisome signal to Germany's 28 NATO allies".

- On March 16, the 'Yellow Vests' violently protested on the streets of Paris.

Yellow vest protestors violently took to the streets of Paris vandalising and looting shops in a resurgence of protests that started four months ago in France. French police used water cannon and tear gas to disperse the protesters and arrested more than 120 people. French police estimate 10,000 people took part in the protest in Paris illustrating a marked increase in the volume of people protesting. According to the French Interior Ministry, approximately 32,300 people participated in protests across France. The 'yellow vests' protests in France arose in response to rising fuel prices, but has subsequently grown to a general anger at the high cost of living and President Macron's economic policies. The yellow vests' mass demonstrations began on November 17, 2018.

---Kiran Mazari

GLOBAL TERRORISM

- On March 25, Turkey's Interior Minister, Suleyman Soyly announced that both Turkey and Iran conducted and concluded their first ever joint anti-terror operation targeting the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) terrorist group near the border between March 18 to 23, 2019.
- According to *Dawn* on March 16, Iran and Pakistan reaffirmed their resolve to increase cooperation in counterterrorism and other issues.

Both Turkey and Iran said that their simultaneous and coordinated operation would continue in the future. The two sides stressed that they were determined to continue the counterterrorism fight. The US, the EU and Turkey have declared the PKK a terrorist group. Founded in 1978, the group has been fighting the Turkish state for their own independent state.

According to Dawn on March 16, 2019, Iran and Pakistan also discussed increasing cooperation in counterterrorism during a telephonic conversation between Foreign Secretary Tehmina Janjua and Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi. Though there was no formal statement, Pakistan Foreign Office spokesman Dr Mohammad Faisal tweeted about the telephonic conversation. Dr Faisal tweeted, "FS Tehmina Janjua spoke to Iran's DFM Araghchi. Issues of mutual interest were discussed. The two agreed to strengthen bilateral cooperation in all areas. FS Janjua illustrated Pakistan's continued desire for peace and de-escalation of tensions in the region." Earlier, on March 15, 2019, Iranian Ambassador to Pakistan, Mehdi Honardoost, also suggested that both Iran and Pakistan were required to put counterterrorism cooperation at the top of their bilateral agenda. During his address to a conference organised by the Islamabad Policy Institute (IPI) on 'Pak-Iran Relations: Current scenario and future prospects', Honardoost said, "Iran and Pakistan are victims of terrorism. This concern should be at the top of the agenda of negotiations and consultations between the relevant authorities." He said that the "hand of a third party" was evident in recent terrorism incidents in areas near the Pak-Iran border on February, 2019. He indicated that the third party was the "one that was not easy with brotherly and friendly ties between Pakistan and Iran" and was also involved with patronising "extremism and terrorism."

- On March 23, Somalia's Al Shabaab attacked a government building and detonated a suicide car bomb in Mogadishu.

According to Police, at least 10 people were killed including the country's Deputy Labour Minister, and 20 others were badly injured during the attack. Al Shabaab, a terrorist group which is fighting Somalia's government to establish its own rule, claimed responsibility for the attack. Abdiasis Abu Musab, Al Shabaab's military operation spokesman said that 20 people had been killed. A Police officer Major Ali Abdullahi said, "The government building was secured by

security forces. The four militants who attacked the building were shot dead. Another militant was a suicide car bomber and so he also died.” In a separate incident on March 23, 2019, Al Shabaab exploded a roadside bomb at a security checkpoint in Mogadishu. Police said that two civilians and one soldier were killed by the blast while a local lawmaker from one of Somalia’s federal states was injured.

- On March 19, a consulting office linked to the EU’s executive Commission received a telephone bomb threat, forcing some 40 people to evacuate the building which is located close the EU Commission.

Police spokeswoman Ilse Van de Keere said people were evacuated, parts of the street were sealed off and sniffer dogs were sent to the scene. Police confirmed that the threat was a false alarm, and was only aimed at causing panic.

In a related development on March 21, 2019, five Mosques were vandalised in Birmingham. West Midlands Police reported that counterterrorism officers were investigating attacks on the Mosques in different areas. However, no arrests have been made.

- On March 18, Dutch police arrested a Turkish-born suspect over a possible terror attack on a tram in the city of Utrecht, killing three people and injuring five more.

According to Utrecht police, the 37-year-old suspect Gokmen Tanis, was taken into custody. Utrecht police Chief announced, “We have just heard that the suspect we are looking for has been arrested.” Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said a terror attack “could not be excluded”, vowing that the Netherlands would “never give way to intolerance.” Media reports quoting eyewitnesses noted that the gunman appeared to target one woman and others who tried to help her. The media reports suggested that the suspect Tanis was reportedly in court in a rape case two weeks ago, so the shootout could be linked to this case. However, the Dutch police said that no connection has been found between Tanis and the victims of the attack. Dutch prosecutors investigating the case indicated that there could be terror angle to it. The prosecutors said, “So far a terrorist motive is being seriously taken into account. Among other things a letter found in the getaway car and the nature of the facts give rise to that,” without providing details about the content of the letter.

- On March 16, a district court indicted the Australian-born terrorist Brenton Harrison Tarrant for murder following his terror attack on two Mosques in Christchurch city of New Zealand, killing at least 49 people.

According to media reports, the 28-year-old suspected white supremacist stood silently in the Christchurch district court where he was remanded without a plea. The terrorist was taken into custody until his next court appearance scheduled for April 5, 2019. Following the attack on March 15, 2019, 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. The terrorist had live-streamed one of the attacks online and published a 74-page anti-immigrant manifesto. 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.*

--- Moiz Khan

MIDDLE EAST & WEST ASIA

Iran

- During his address to the UNSC meeting on March 29, Iran's chargé d'affaires to the UN, Es'haq Al-e Habib warned that Israeli occupiers, who are already providing support for terrorists in Syria, may build a coalition with militants if their threat is not dealt with in a proper way.

Al-e Habib said, "If unchecked, terrorists and occupiers will evolve into a coalition. In fact, it has already happened. Israel supports terrorists in Syria in different ways, including healing the wounds of their terrorist sisters and brothers." British newspapers have reported on Daesh terrorists being transferred to Israeli hospitals for treatment since the beginning of war in Syria. According to documents from Israeli hospitals, Israel's Army has paid millions of dollars for the treatment of terrorists injured in Syria.

- On March 29, Iran's Foreign Ministry stated that lasting peace in the region could only be achieved through the end of Palestine's occupation,

The Ministry issued the statement on the occasion of the Palestinian Land Day, an annual event to mark the killing of six Palestinians by Israeli forces during mass protests against Israel's seizure of their land in 1976. The statement said, "The Islamic Republic of Iran believes that the establishment of sustainable and fair peace in the region will only be possible through the continuation of resistance until complete end of Palestine's occupation, the return of all (Palestinian) refugees to their homeland, determination of Palestine's next system based on (holding) a referendum in the presence of all its main residents and finally the formation of a united Palestinian government with East Jerusalem al-Quds as its capital." It added that the US government's moves were in support of the Israeli regime but were in violation of the UNSC, and against international law underscoring the "futility of efforts by some Arab countries in the region to normalise ties" with the Tel Aviv regime.

- On March 24, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman, Bahram Qassemi rejected the latest remarks made by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo against the Lebanese resistance movement Hezbollah as "provocative, meddling, and undiplomatic".

In a statement, Bahram Qassemi pointed to Pompeo's comments against Hezbollah, and criticised him for making such "rude and unwise" remarks and raising "baseless, false, hackneyed, and futile" claims and accusations against a major political player, operating legally in Lebanon. During his trip to Beirut on March 22, 2019, at a joint news conference with his Lebanese counterpart Gebran Bassil, Pompeo expressed concern over the role of Hezbollah in Lebanon, saying that the Lebanese nation must pick a side. He said, "Lebanon and the Lebanese people face a choice: bravely move forward as an independent and proud nation or allow the

dark ambitions of Iran and Hezbollah to dictate your future.” Bassil, however, rejected Pompeo’s comments, saying that “Hezbollah is a Lebanese party, not a terrorist group, and it enjoys a wide popular base.” According to Qassemi, Hezbollah enjoys the popular backing of the majority of the Lebanese nation, and holds major seats in the country’s government and parliament. He further said that such remarks and stances stem from the failure of Washington’s destructive policies in the region.

Iraq

- According to Iraq’s Foreign Ministry on March 22, the capsizing of a Tigris River ferry, packed with families celebrating Kurdish New Year in Mosul, left at least 100 people dead, mostly women and children.

Residents of Mosul demanded justice as Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi decreed three days of national mourning following the accident. The residents had resumed the annual festivities this year for the first time since Iraqi Forces ousted Daesh following years of militant rule. The overcrowded vessel ran into trouble as it headed to a popular picnic site across the River Tigris. Mosul security officials blamed the accident on high water levels and overcrowding on the boat.

Israel

- On March 31, Israeli tanks shelled the Gaza Strip after alleged rocket fire from the blockaded coastal sliver into the occupied territories.

According to the Israeli Army, its tanks hit “a number of positions” belonging to the Hamas resistance movement in Gaza. The shelling, it claimed, came hours after five rockets were fired at the southern occupied lands from Gaza and triggered sirens in Eshkol regional council. A spokesperson for the council claimed that the rockets had landed in open territory and no casualties or damage was reported.

In a related development on March 30, 2019, Israeli Forces killed three Palestinians and injured more than 200 others as people of Gaza gathered to mark the anniversary of the Great March of Return and the Palestinian Land Day. The rallies have been held every week since March 30, 2018. Palestinians want an end to the Israeli occupation of their lands. They also demand the return of the Palestinian refugees to their homeland.

- On March 28, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu said that Tel Aviv is ready to wage a broad military campaign in Gaza if needed.
- On March 25, Israel launched strikes on Hamas targets in Gaza after a rocket from the Palestinian enclave hit a house near Tel Aviv and wounded seven people.

Earlier, a rocket from Gaza hit a house in Israel in a rare long-distance strike. According to the Israeli Army, Hamas fired the rocket from the Rafah area. A Hamas official denied the group was behind the rocket attack. The retaliatory strikes began at the same time as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with US President Donald Trump in Washington. In comments from the White House, Netanyahu said, "Israel is responding forcefully to this wanton aggression", while Trump spoke of Israel's "right to defend itself." The escalation comes at a sensitive time for Israel, where elections are scheduled to take place on April 9, 2019. According to sources in Gaza, there had been a series of strikes in various locations across the enclave. One strike destroyed a building in Gaza City that Israel alleged was a secret headquarter for Hamas security and intelligence. Hamas's interior security office in Gaza City was also hit during the strikes. Hamas leader Ismail Haniya said that "if there is any violation of the red lines by the occupation, our people will not surrender and the resistance is able to deter it." Israel warned of a firm response and announced it was sending two additional brigades to reinforce the Gaza area. Following his visit to the Gaza frontier after a two-day flareup of cross-border fighting, Netanyahu said, "All Israelis should know that if a comprehensive campaign is required, we will enter it strong and safe, and after we have exhausted all of the other possibilities."

Lebanon

- Citing a London-based Saudi-owned *Asharq al-Awsat* newspaper, *Press TV* reported on March 30 that the US's controversial decision to recognise Israeli "sovereignty" over the occupied Golan Heights has raised concerns among Lebanese officials about the fate of Shebaa Farms which remain under occupation by the Tel Aviv regime.

Israel occupied Shebaa Farms, a small strip of land at the intersection of the Lebanese-Syrian border and the Golan Heights, during the 1967 war. Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon in 2000, but it kept control of Shebaa Farms under the pretext that the region's ownership was undecided between Lebanon and Syria. Tel Aviv considers Shebaa Farms part of the occupied Golan while both Damascus and Beirut claim the area is Lebanese. Lebanese officials fear the US could also recognise Israel's claim to Shebaa Farms. According to Riad Kahwaji, head of the Dubai-based INEGMA defence consultancy, as long as Israel considers Shebaa Farms part of Golan, the US's recent decision also covers the Lebanese region.

- On March 26, the Lebanese resistance movement Hamas' Secretary General, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, warned that that the US could next choose to recognise Israel's "sovereignty" over the Tel Aviv-occupied West Bank unless the Arab world takes action.

While criticising the US over its recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Golan, Nasrallah said, "When the entire world allows Trump to declare al-Quds as Israel's eternal capital, and especially the Arab world remains silent, this opens the way for all US violations."

He added, “We must expect Trump to recognise Israeli sovereignty over the West Bank.” He also said such a potential move “is part of the deal of the century,” referring to Washington’s proposal for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which reportedly includes outrageous violations against Palestinians’ historical demands. Nasrallah urged the Arab world to resort to what “conscience” it had left by preventing these prospects. He proposed that the Arab League should use its upcoming summit in Tunisia to withdraw the so-called Arab peace initiative, proposed by Saudi Arabia in 2002, and instead press for more negotiation.

Oman

- According to *Oman News Agency* on March 24, Oman signed an agreement with the US that would allow American ships and warplanes to take advantage of its ports and airports.

According to the news agency, the “framework agreement” was aimed at bolstering “Omani-American military relations”. It further stated, “It will allow the US forces to take advantage from the facilities offered at some of the Sultanate’s ports and airports during visits of the US military vessels and aircraft, particularly in the port of Duqm.” The US embassy in Oman said in a statement that the agreement governed US access to facilities and ports in Duqm as well as in Salalah and “reaffirms the commitment of both countries to promoting mutual security goals”. Duqm port is located in southern Oman on the Arabian Sea and about 500 kilometres from the Strait of Hormuz. According to US officials, the deal will allow the US military better access to the Gulf region and reduce the need to send ships through the Strait of Hormuz. At the mouth of the Gulf, the strait is crucial to global energy supplies, with about a third of the world’s seaborne oil passing through it every day. Iran has repeatedly threatened to block the strait due to tensions with Sunni-ruled Gulf nations, including its main regional rival Saudi Arabia.

Syria

- On March 27, Syria’s Ambassador to the UN, Bashar Jaafari strongly criticised US President Donald Trump’s recognition of “Israeli sovereignty” over the occupied Golan Heights, describing the move as part of a “criminal project” aimed at prolonging chaos and destruction in the region.
- On March 25, US President Donald Trump recognised the occupied Golan Heights as Israeli territory. During a White House visit by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Trump signed a proclamation officially granting US recognition of the Golan Heights as Israeli territory.

On March 21, 2019, Trump broke with decades of US Middle East policy, and longstanding international consensus, when he posted a Tweet that said, “After 52 years it is time for the United States to fully recognise Israel’s sovereignty over the Golan Heights, which is of critical strategic and security importance to the state of Israel and regional stability.” His abrupt tweet triggered delight in Israel, but outrage from other countries in the region as well as Russia. Moscow warned the policy U-turn could spark new conflicts. Syria, Iran and Turkey strongly condemned Trump for the policy shift.

The Syrian government said Trump’s comments disregarded international law. According to a source from the Syrian Foreign Ministry, the “American position towards Syria’s occupied Golan Heights clearly reflects the United States’ contempt for international legitimacy and its flagrant violation of international law”. It further stated, “Trump’s comments showed the extent of his Administration’s blind bias towards Israel. The Golan was and will remain Arab and Syrian.” The Foreign Ministry sent a letter to UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, urging him to reiterate the UN’s rejection of Israeli claims over the Golan. Turkey said the change risked plunging the region into a “new crisis”. Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan said, “We will never allow the occupation of Golan Heights to be made legitimate.” Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif tweeted he was “shocked by Trump continuing to try to give what is not his to racist Israel.”

Five European countries including Belgium, Britain, France, Germany and Poland also rejected President Trump’s decision and insisted that the European position had not changed where the Golan Heights remained Israeli-occupied Syrian territory, in line with international law enshrined in UN resolutions. In a related development on March 23, 2019, the Druze community in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights took to the streets in protest at US President Donald Trump’s pledge to recognise Israel’s sovereignty there. Thousands of Syrians fled or were expelled when Israel seized part of the Golan during the 1967 Six-Day War, subsequently annexing it in 1981. Some remained, however, and today around 23,000 Druze, an offshoot of Shia Islam, reside in the Israeli-controlled sector, alongside 25,000 Israeli settlers. The vast majority of these Druze see themselves as Syrians, refusing to take Israeli nationality.

- On March 23, Kurdish-led and US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announced the end of Daesh’s ‘caliphate’ after establishing control over the group’s last stronghold in eastern Syria.

SDF fighters raised their yellow flag in Baghouz, the remote riverside village which was held by Daesh militants. The SDF’s victory capped a six-month-long operation against the final remnants of the ‘caliphate’ which once stretched across vast swathes of Iraq and Syria. World leaders hailed the victory as a major landmark in the fight against Daesh and its ideology, but warned that the group might resurface in the future. SDF’s spokesman, Mustafa Bali said, “Syrian Democratic Forces declare total elimination of so-called caliphate and 100 % territorial defeat of ISIS.” The state proclaimed in mid-2014 by Daesh leader Abu Bakr al-

Baghdadi started collapsing in 2017 when parallel offensives in Iraq and Syria wrested back its main strongholds in Mosul and Raqqa. The territory administered Daesh continued to shrink and in September 2018, the SDF launched a final offensive on the last areas of the 'caliphate' in its Euphrates Valley strongholds.

- On March 18, Iran and Syria called upon the US to withdraw its troops from Syria, and the Damascus government threatened to defeat Washington's Kurdish allies by force if they did not submit to the return of state authority.

The Iranian and Syrian military chiefs were speaking after a meeting in Damascus that also included their Iraqi counterpart, who announced the Syrian border would soon be reopened. During a live media appearance alongside his Iraqi and Syrian counterparts, Iran's Armed Forces Chief of Staff, Major General Mohammad Bageri said the three countries were "united against terrorism" and coordinating at a high level. According to observers, the remarks from Iran and Syria point to the risks of a new escalation in Syria after the defeat of Daesh with President Bashar al Assad seeking to retake all the major territories outside his control, and the US working to curb Iranian influence.

UAE

- On March 28, UAE's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Anwar Gargash called on the Arab nations to change their decades-long strategy of having no diplomatic relations with Israel.

According to Gargash, the Arab world needed a "strategic shift" in its ties with the regime in Tel Aviv. During an interview to the UAE-based news website 'The National', he said, "Many, many years ago, when there was an Arab decision not to have contact with Israel, that was a very, very wrong decision, looking back." He further said, "The strategic shift needs actually for us to progress on the peace front." Among the Arab countries, the governments of Egypt and Jordan are the only ones having formal diplomatic ties with Israel. The call for open ties with Israel comes after US President Donald Trump's decision to recognise Syria's occupied Golan Heights as Israeli territories. The UAE, along with Saudi Arabia, are known to have covertly developed expansive ties with Tel Aviv over the past years.

Yemen

- On March 30, Chairman of the Supreme Revolutionary Committee of Yemen, Mohammed Ali al-Houthi criticised British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt for supporting continued exports of lethal weapons to Saudi Arabia, saying that London cannot be a peace-broker in Yemen while it is still arming the invaders.

While criticising Hunt for pressing Germany to relax its arms sales ban on Saudi Arabia, al-Houthi said, “Britain sending aid does not change the tragic reality of its arms sales. Jeremy Hunt cannot promote peace while at the same time acting as an arms salesman.” He also said, “Mr. Hunt has gone beyond defending British arms sales, by attempting to pressure other European countries, such as Germany, to sell arms.”

Earlier in March 2019, Germany extended a ban on arms exports to Saudi Arabia imposed over the Kingdom’s deadly campaign against Yemen and the murder of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The decision drew criticism from European partners, including France and Britain, due to the fact that the move impacted joint defence projects. Al-Houthi also blamed the joint British, US, Saudi, and UAE naval forces for the “critical” level of famine and the “tragic humanitarian situation” in Yemen.

- On March 25, leader of Yemen’s Houthi movement, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi said that the Saudi regime has failed in its deadly campaign against Yemen to achieve its objectives despite having support provided by Washington and other allies.

During a televised address on the fourth anniversary of the Yemeni nation’s resistance against Riyadh’s aggression, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi said that Saudi Arabia’s “unprecedented oppression” is aimed at dividing the Yemeni people and controlling them in order to serve the aggressors’ interests. He added that the campaign is also aimed at occupying Yemen and looting its oil resources. The Houthi leader said it was a religious and national duty to keep confronting Saudi Arabia’s aggressive behaviour. He also condemned the stance of traitors and those irresponsible people who act in support of Riyadh. Referring to Yemen’s former President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, Houthi said no one has the right to sell his country and to waste the blood of his people.

--- Muhammad Shoaib

SOUTH ASIA: I

Pakistan

External

- Quoting officials, *Dawn* reported on March 29 that the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) expressed dissatisfaction over Pakistan's inadequate compliance with global commitments against terror financing.

The FATF has pointed out poor coordination among stakeholders to curb money laundering and terror financing. The development came after officials of the Asia-Pacific Group (APG), a regional affiliate of the FATF, visited Islamabad for talks with Pakistani authorities. However, no official statement was issued by the government or FATF. Meanwhile, speaking at a debate on "Preventing and Combating the Financing of Terrorism" in UN Security Council, Pakistan's Permanent Representative to the UN, Maleeha Lodhi warned that sanctions regimes should not be used as political tools to advance geo-political goals.

- On March 28, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Geng Shuang urged the US to act cautiously on the issue of blacklisting Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) chief, Masood Azhar and avoid bypassing the relevant committee of the UN Security Council.

The comment came a day after the US bypassed the 1267 Sanctions Committee and directly filed a draft resolution with the UNSC to designate the JeM leader as global terrorist. Geng Shuang said that such actions would "only lead to further complication of the issue" and urged the US to "exercise prudence and refrain from forceful actions". On March 13, 2019, China put on hold a request by Britain, France and the US to add Masood Azhar to the UN sanctions blacklist. China told the UNSC that more consultations were required for "a responsible solution" to such a listing, while also calling on the international community to focus on the Kashmir dispute as well. India has been pushing the UNSC members to name Masood Azhar, who India believes was behind the Pulwama attack, as a UN-designated terrorist.

- On March 27, Pakistan's Foreign Office dismissed a dossier handed over by India in the wake of Pulwama attack and sought "further evidence" from New Delhi to "take the process forward."

Pakistan's Foreign Secretary, Tehmina Janjua called on Indian High Commissioner, Ajay Bisaria and shared with him the "preliminary findings" on the Pulwama incident after examining the dossier which India handed over on 27 February, 2019. According to Pakistan's Foreign Office, the government had constituted "an investigation team, detained a number of persons for investigations and initiated work on the technical aspects of social media content". The Foreign Office also briefed foreign diplomats regarding the issue. Pakistan made clear that while the investigation continues, preliminary findings reveal that there is no linkage of Pakistan with the Pulwama incident. In reaction, India's Ministry of External Affairs said it was

“disappointed at Pakistan’s response to our detailed dossier” which it said “contained evidence of the Jaish-e-Mohammed’s complicity” in the Pulwama attack.

- On March 27, Pakistan’s Foreign Secretary, Tehmina Janjua said that emerging Pakistan-Russia partnership has “tremendous scope.”

Alexey Dedov, Russia’s envoy to Pakistan, said that the high-level political dialogue was contributing towards the growth of bilateral ties. The Foreign Secretary and the Russian Envoy were speaking at an International Conference on Pakistan-Russia Strategic Relations organised by the Strategic Vision Institute (SVI) in Islamabad.

- In an interview with the *Financial Times* on March 26, Prime Minister Imran Khan warned that there is a possibility of more military hostilities with India.

The Prime Minister said that he is “apprehensive” that “something could happen” before the Indian elections scheduled in May 2019. He said that after the Pulwama attack, “we knew the Modi government would use this incident to create war hysteria.” The Premier reiterated that both countries possess nuclear weapons, and that if the Pak-India conflict “had gone further...then God knows where it would have got to.” Tensions between Pakistan and India reached a dangerous level in February 2019, after Indian warplanes crossed the Line of Control (LoC) and claimed to have carried out a “pre-emptive strike on militant’s training camp” in Balakot, Pakistan. On the following day, Pakistan’s Air Force retaliated and shot down two Indian fighter jets, resulting in the capture of Indian pilot, Abhinandan Varthaman, who was later released by Pakistan as a “peace gesture”.

Meanwhile, quoting Pakistani, US and Indian government sources, Reuters reported on March 17, 2019, that “at one stage, India threatened to fire at least six missiles at Pakistan, and Pakistan said it would respond with its own missile strikes three times over”. The report also claimed that interventions by US officials, including National Security Advisor John Bolton prevented a bigger conflict.

- On March 25, the 4th session of the Pakistan-EU “Strategic Dialogue” was held in Islamabad.

Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi led the Pakistan delegation while Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy headed the European Union delegation. Both sides discussed a wide range of areas of bilateral cooperation, as well as regional and global challenges. The two sides reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening of multilateralism and adherence to the principles and purposes of the UN charter. Meanwhile, speaking at a joint press conference with Pakistan’s Foreign Minister, Federica Mogherini said that rising Islamophobia is a threat not only for Muslims but for all of European society.

- On March 21, Prime Minister Imran Khan telephoned New Zealand’s Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern and condemned the Christchurch terrorist attacks by a white supremacist terrorist.

During the conversation, Imran Khan appreciated the respect shown by Jacinda Ardern for Muslims. At least 9 people of Pakistani origin were killed in the attack. Following the incident, Turkey called an emergency meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) which was attended by various leaders including, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi. The Foreign Minister expressed concerns that rising Islamophobia is not being addressed in the way that it should have been addressed.

- On March 21, Malaysian Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, accompanied by a high-level delegation, visited Islamabad and met with Pakistan’s top leadership, including President Arif Alvi and Prime Minister Imran Khan.

The two countries signed agreements and Memoranda of Understanding in the fields of investment and cooperation, particularly in the telecommunication sector. The two countries also pledged to strengthen bilateral economic ties, expand trade and investment, and create favourable conditions for commerce and business in both countries. According to a joint statement, Malaysia expressed hope that Pakistan would continue to import “more Malaysian palm oil and palm oil-based products, as well as, remove any non-tariff barriers on Malaysian goods and products.” Prime Minister Imran Khan and PM Mahathir Mohamad also witnessed the ground-breaking ceremony of the Malaysian based Proton Automobile Industry in Pakistan. The two leaders vowed to strengthen the solidarity of the Muslim Ummah and stressed that terrorism cannot be associated with any religion or belief.

In a related development on March 23, 2019, Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad attended the Pakistan Day Parade as the Guest of Honour. Dr Mahathir was also given a detailed briefing on JF-17 Thunder fighter jets. JF-17 is a multi-role combat aircraft developed jointly by the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex and the Chengdu Aircraft Corporation of China. According to Pakistan’s Finance Minister Asad Umar, Malaysia has shown interest in purchasing JF-17 Thunder jets from Pakistan.

- Addressing the Pakistan Day military parade in Islamabad on March 23, President Dr Arif Alvi said that Pakistan “does not believe in war and wants to solve problems with India through dialogue.”

The President said that Pakistanis are a peaceful nation but warned that “we will never be oblivious of our defence.” Meanwhile, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi sent a message to Prime Minister Imran Khan on Pakistan Day calling for peace and regional cooperation. In response PM Khan said, “it is time to begin a bilateral comprehensive dialogue to resolve all issues, especially the core issue of Kashmir.” Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad attended the Pakistan Day parade as the chief guest. Pakistan’s top civil-military leadership,

Azerbaijan's Defence Minister, Colonel General Zakir Hasanov and Commander National Guard of Bahrain, Sheikh Mohamed Bin Isa Bin Salman Al-Khalifa were also present at the occasion.

- On March 20, US President Donald Trump said that relations between the US and Pakistan are “very good,” adding, “we’ll be meeting with Pakistan.”

The brief remarks came as the US remains engaged in talks with the Afghan government and Taliban for a prospective peace deal to end the conflict in Afghanistan. Pak-US relations have seen improvements in recent months as the US views Pakistan's role as “critical” in bringing the Afghan conflict to an end. However, despite the positive trajectory in Pak-US ties, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo's series of baseless comments were not well received in Pakistan after he suggested in a radio interview that proliferation of Pakistan's nuclear programme is one of the biggest threats to the American security. He also accused Pakistan of providing safe havens to terrorists, and commented on the recent Pak-India conflict in Kashmir as being initiated because of cross-border terrorism.

- On March 19, Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi and Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister, Wang Yi held a “Strategic Dialogue” in Beijing.

During the dialogue, the two sides held “in-depth discussions on all aspects of bilateral relations, including China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), trade, investment and economic cooperation.” The two sides reaffirmed their commitment to CPEC and agreed to ensure the smooth implementation of CPEC projects. Foreign Minister Wang Yi stressed the need for de-escalation of tensions in South Asia and underscored the need to resolving all outstanding disputes through dialogue and peaceful means. During his visit, Pakistan's Foreign Minister also met Chinese Vice President, Wang Qishan and briefed him on recent developments in the region. The Foreign Minister also appreciated China for playing an “important role” in the easing of tensions between Pakistan and India.

Pakistan

Internal

- On March 27, Prime Minister Imran Khan formed expert working groups to ensure coordination and implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP).

The Premier also chaired the first-ever meeting of the National Internal Security Committee in Islamabad. During the meeting, the Prime Minister reiterated that implementation of NAP was the foremost priority of his government. He said that Pakistan was firmly committed to preventing militant groups from using its territory for any attacks within or outside the country. High level civilian and military officials, including Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi,

Finance Minister Asad Umar and DG Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Lt- General Asim Munir, also attended the meeting.

- On March 26, the Islamabad High Court ordered protection for two Hindu girls after the government launched a probe to ascertain if they were abducted, forcibly converted to Islam and married.

On March 20, 2019, two girls, Raveena and Reena, were allegedly abducted by a group of men from their home in Ghotki, Sindh and were forced to embrace Islam before being subjected to underage marriages. The incident sparked a nationwide outrage; however, the government and the judiciary have shown a strong commitment to find resolve to this issue.

- On March 20, at least six personnel of the Balochistan Levies Force were killed in a terrorist attack on a check-post in Ziarat district.

The Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claimed responsibility for the attack. In recent years, Pakistan has seen a considerable drop in overall terrorism related incidents. However, the security situation in Balochistan remains poor due to continued attacks on police and law enforcement agencies.

India

- According to *The Economic Times* on March 29 the investigators have found that an Indian air defence missile was fired shortly before the crash of a Mi17 V5 helicopter in Indian Occupied Kashmir on February 27, 2019 which resulted in the deaths of six air force personnel on the ground.

According to the report, the investigators are examining the sequence of events which preceded the crash. The incident happened on the same day Pakistan Air Force (PAF) fighter jets shot down two Indian aircraft and captured an Indian pilot.

- On March 20, a special National Intelligence Agency (NIA) court acquitted all accused including Swami Aseemanand, the alleged mastermind of the Samjhauta Express train bombing in 2007 in which 68 people, mostly Pakistanis were killed.
- On March 21, Pakistan's government termed the ruling as "historic injustice".

The NIA Special Court in its ruling said "the investigating agency has failed to prove the conspiracy charge and ruled that accused deserve a benefit of doubt." Following the ruling, Pakistan's Foreign Office summoned Indian Deputy High Commissioner in Islamabad and registered "a strong demarche" with the Indian government against the acquittal. The victims in the Samjhauta Express blast included 43 Pakistani citizens. According to NIA which probed the case, the attack was carried out by a Hindu far-right group.

- On March 21, a Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) trooper shot dead three of his comrades in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK).

According to Indian authorities, the paramilitary trooper opened fire on his colleagues with his service rifle at a camp in Udhampur. The trooper also shot himself afterwards and remains in “a critical condition.” According to a rights group, at least 20 Indian armed forces personnel killed themselves in 2018.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

SOUTH ASIA (II)

Afghanistan

- *Tolo News* reported on March 30 that Afghanistan's First Vice President, Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum's convoy was ambushed by the Taliban on his way from Balkh to Jawzjan province in the north of Afghanistan.

Dostum appeared at a gathering in Balkh and said that he will "eliminate" the Taliban from the north within six months if he is given the chance. The Taliban, in a statement, claimed responsibility of the attack and said four guards were killed and six others wounded. Dostum has joined Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah's election team for the upcoming presidential contest.

- On March 29, the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reported that a potential US-Taliban peace deal "will likely" fail to prevent Afghanistan from coping with terrorists and descending into a "narco-state".

The High-Risk List report identified serious threats to America's \$132 billion reconstruction effort, including widespread insecurity, underdeveloped civil policing capabilities, endemic corruption, sluggish economic growth, the illicit narcotics trade, threats to women's right, the challenge of reintegrating about 60,000 Taliban fighters into society and the country's US-backed Security Forces. The report noted, "With or without a peace settlement, Afghanistan will likely continue to grapple with multiple violent-extremist organisations, who threaten Afghanistan and the international community ... With or without a peace agreement, Afghanistan runs the risk of becoming a 'narco-state' and has already been described as such by former officials from the US government and international organisations". According to the Pentagon, Afghanistan is still home to the "highest regional concentration of terrorist groups in the world". SIGAR cast doubt on whether or not the Taliban and Afghanistan as a whole will ever end its involvement in the opium trade, which serves as a major source of funding. Analysts fear the report may adversely affect the already stalled Afghan peace process, where the US is looking to broker a peace deal since October 2018.

- On March 28, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo said Washington is trying to convince all parties involved in the conflict in Afghanistan to come together and see if there is an agreement to overcome violence in the country.

While testifying before the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, Pompeo reiterated that the issue of troop reduction in Afghanistan is depended on the outcome of peace talks between the United States and the Taliban. He added, "we are trying to convince all the parties, the government of national unity, including President Ghani, other Afghan actors and the Taliban to come together to see if we can find a way to reduce the violence. When we do that, we will be able to reduce not only the American Forces there, but importantly the NATO Forces that are located inside and working together alongside us inside of Afghanistan". The pressure

is mounting on the Trump Administration to broker a deal with the Taliban in order to convince them to initiate an intra-Afghan dialogue. The insurgent group's main demand of foreign troop withdrawal for initiation of intra-Afghan talks has been opposed by the Pentagon and the National Unity Government of Afghanistan, leaving the State Department and the peace process in a stalemate.

- On March 27, Afghanistan's Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah said that it is only the Afghan people who will determine the future of their country.

Abdullah's remarks were in reaction to a recent statement by Pakistan's Prime Minister, Imran Khan, who proposed establishing an interim government in Afghanistan. Abdullah said, "We welcome all efforts towards peace in Afghanistan, but will never allow any country to subvert the right of self-determination of our people or undermine our sovereignty under the pretext of facilitating peace negotiations". He added that Afghanistan does not expect any neighbouring country to influence Afghanistan. On March 25, 2019, Express Tribune reported that PM Khan proposed an Interim government in Afghanistan as a possible solution to the stalled peace process. According to the report, Khan said that the Afghan peace process can only be successful if there is a neutral interim government, which can hold free and transparent elections to be participated in by all the stakeholders. The report also stated that PM Khan had cancelled a scheduled meeting with Taliban leadership due to objections raised by the Afghan government. According to the report, Khan also noted that the US had acknowledged and appreciated Pakistan's role for bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan. According to Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PM Khan's comments on Afghanistan were reported out of context by the media. The statement added, "In his comments, the PM had referred to Pakistan's model where elections are held under an interim government. The comments should not be misinterpreted to imply interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs". Meanwhile, Afghan Presidential candidate and former National Security Advisor, Mohammad Haneef Atmar claimed that Afghan government is hindering the peace talks with the Taliban. He also stated that the term of the National Unity Government (NUG) led by President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah will not have legitimacy after May 22, 2019. Atmar also suggested establishing an interim government to undertake the peace process and upcoming presidential elections. He also raised the issue of high casualties among Afghan National Defence and Security Force members and said the government had failed to ensure the people's safety. Although pressure has been mounting on the NUG to establish an interim government, they however remain inflexible on the issue.

- On March 27, Russian Ambassador to Kabul, Alexander Mantytskiy recommended the establishment of an interim government in Afghanistan.

Mantytskiy, while recommending establishing an interim government in Afghanistan also stressed the importance of having Afghan voices determine their own fate, particularly in regards to the integration of the Taliban into the political process. He stated, "If (you) allow

Taliban to enter this political system, it seems that something should be done. But you should decide yourselves, Afghan people, Afghan political parties and prominent figures”. Talking about the Afghan peace process, Mantytskiy said Moscow was not worried about the US-Taliban talks which are being held behind closed doors, but is worried an agreement has not been reached as yet.

- On March 26, Federica Maria Mogherini, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, visited Afghanistan and met with the country’s Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah.

Mogherini said the EU strongly supports an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process and that the past achievements of Afghanistan should be preserved in this process. She also stated that the European Union would support the upcoming Presidential elections in Afghanistan. Abdullah Abdullah responded and thanked the European Union for its support. Mogherini had earlier visited Pakistan before her trip to Kabul.

- On March 25, US Special Representative on Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad embarked on his sixth trip to the region.

According to the US State Department, Khalilzad will travel to Afghanistan, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Jordan and Qatar from March 25 to April 10, 2019, as part of the overall effort to facilitate a peace process that brings all Afghan parties together in inclusive intra-Afghan negotiations. The statement added, “in Kabul, the Special Representative will consult with the Afghan government and other Afghans about the status of US talks with the Taliban, encourage efforts to form an inclusive negotiating team, and discuss next steps in intra-Afghan discussions and negotiations”. The statement added that the Special Representative will meet with the allies and partners on the status of peace talks and coordinate a sustained commitment by the international community to peace and development in Afghanistan. After the conclusion of the fifth round of talks with the Taliban, Khalilzad said the talks were productive and they agreed to a draft on withdrawal of US forces and counterterrorism assurances.

- Reuters reported on March 25 that 13 civilians, including 10 children, were killed in a US air strike on Kunduz province.

The air strike was part of a battle between the Taliban and combined Afghan and US forces that lasted for 30 hours. The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan verified that all 13 civilian casualties occurred around the time of the air strike. Spokesperson for the NATO-led Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan confirmed that US forces carried out the air strike. The UN said in a February 2019 report that a record number of Afghan civilians were killed in 2018 as aerial attacks and suicide bombings increased. In early March 2019, at least 13 civilians were killed in US airstrikes in eastern Nangarhar province.

- On March 25, at least 14 border police personnel were killed in a Taliban assault in the Nad Ali district of Helmand province.

Fierce fighting continues between the insurgents and the government forces across the country. On March 24, 2019, at least 32 Security Forces were killed and another 37 wounded after Taliban fighters attacked their posts in the Sangin district of Helmand province. On March 22, 2019, two US soldiers were also killed in a combat in northern Kunduz province. The deaths underscore the difficulties in bringing peace to the country. In another incident, local officials claimed that at least 10 Taliban insurgents were killed in Zanakhan district of southern Ghazni province while the Taliban said that the victims were civilians.

- On March 21, Daesh attacked a large gathering celebrating Nowruz (Persian New Year) and killed at least 6 people and wounded 23 others in Kabul city.

The attack was carried out through a remote-controlled bomb. Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani tweeted, “We lost peaceful citizens to a coward enemy that knows no bounds”. More than 30 people were killed in a suicide attack during the Nowruz festival in 2018. Nowruz is deemed un-Islamic by many ultra-conservative Muslims.

- The *Middle East Eye* reported on March 21 that Mohammed bin Zayed, the United Arab Emirate’s (UAE) crown prince, proposed to set up an assassination programme targeting top Taliban leaders during a meeting with the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

According to the report, Zayed made the offer during Pompeo’s visit to the UAE on January 12, 2019, amid disagreements over the progress of peace talks between the US and the Taliban. Zayed told Pompeo that Washington risked allowing Afghanistan to fall back into the hands of the “backward, bearded bad guys” and proposed hiring mercenaries to kill Taliban leaders to weaken the group’s negotiating position. Pompeo was visibly taken aback by the offer, but did not comment. The UAE has supported US efforts to broker a peace deal with the Taliban and hosted the first round of negotiations between the two sides in Abu Dhabi. However, according to Al-Jazeera, Zayed was believed to be frustrated after subsequent rounds of negotiations were moved to Qatar’s capital, Doha, at the insistence of the Taliban. The report also stated that Zayed warned Pompeo that the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan would risk taking Afghanistan back to the state it was in in 2001.

- On March 20, the Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan (IEC) deferred Afghan presidential elections for another two months.

Based on the previous timeline, the elections were supposed to be held on July 20, 2019. IEC Chairperson, Hawa Alam Nuristani said that the elections would be held on September 28, 2019, if the stakeholders, especially the Afghan government and international community, provide the budget required. She noted that the new amendments to the election law and some other issues were behind the decision to postpone the elections. The presidential elections, provincial council

elections, district council elections and Ghazni parliamentary elections would be held simultaneously on September 28, 2019. Nuristani also stated that Afghanistan's October 20, 2018 parliamentary elections were "the worst elections in the last 15 years". Analysts have suggested another reason for postponing the elections could be due to the ongoing US-Taliban peace talks. They have suggested, if the US remains unable to reach an agreement with the insurgent group ahead of the presidential elections, the Taliban might abandon the peace process altogether.

- On March 20, the Taliban released 58 soldiers who were captured in Bala Murghab district in northwestern Badghis province.

The decision to release the soldiers appears to be a good will gesture from the Taliban leadership in the face of on-going peace talks. In a related incident on March 19, 2019, members of the Afghan Border Police, who crossed the border into Turkmenistan amid heavy fighting with Taliban militants, returned home. The forces came under attack by the Taliban in Bala Murghab district, which shares border with Turkmenistan, in the northwest of Afghanistan. According to the Ministry of Defence, the battle continued for two weeks.

- On March 18, Representatives of Afghanistan's mainstream political parties said that protection of the republic system should be a red line in the peace talks with the Taliban and that they would "never" endorse any change in the system of governance which defies the country's Constitution.

A member of the Leadership Council of Jamiat-e-Islami Party of Afghanistan said, "our Defence Ministry should remain with its current power, our security should remain as it is, as well as education, higher education and other sectors should remain unchanged. We do not accept any early change in this respect". Another senior member of Hizb-e-Islami said, "Hizb-e-Islami is urging the restoration of peace and the protection of the Islamic republic system and the elections. Free and transparent elections help to create a sustainable and lasting system in the country". Member of Hizb-e-Wahdat-e-Milli (People's Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan), led by Second Deputy Chief Executive Mohammad Mohaqiq, said that democratic values and the people's rights should not be compromised in the peace process. Deputy Head of the National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan led by First Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum said, "the political parties are not endorsing Islamic emirate under any condition". The mainstream political parties made clear their stance against the Islamic Emirate system of governance proposed by the Taliban. The insurgent group, however, has repeatedly refused to compromise on its system of governance.

- On March 16, The Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned a senior official from the Pakistani Embassy in Kabul over "new government" remarks by Pakistan's Prime

Minister Imran Khan.

PM Khan said, “negotiations have been initiated with the Taliban. God willing, our brothers in Afghanistan would live together in peace in coming days. A good government will be established in Afghanistan, a government where all Afghans will be represented. The war will end and peace will be established there”. The Afghan government termed Khan’s remarks as “interference in internal affairs of Afghanistan”. Kabul has expressed its reservations with Pakistan vis-à-vis the country’s involvement in the peace process. Islamabad has consistently offered its full support in bringing peace to the war-torn country at the behest of the US. The US has on numerous occasions, acknowledged and applauded the role played by Islamabad in brokering peace, despite the NUG’s misplaced criticism.

Maldives

- On March 17, India’s Minister for External Affairs, Sushma Swaraj paid an official visit to the Maldives and held talks with her Maldivian counterpart Abdulla Shahid.

A delegation of senior officers accompanied Swaraj during her visit. During the talks, Abdulla Shahid reiterated his Government’s “India-First Policy” and said that his Government looks forward to working closely with the Government of India on all issues and that the Government of Maldives would remain sensitive towards India’s security and strategic concerns. Meanwhile, Swaraj stated that India attaches the “highest importance to its relationship with Maldives, which is marked by trust, transparency, mutual understanding, and sensitivity”. She also said that in line with Government of India’s neighbourhood First policy, India stands ready to fully support the Government of Maldives in its socio-economic development. The Foreign Ministers agreed on the importance of maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean Region, and to strengthen coordination in enhancing regional maritime security. The Finance Ministry of Maldives and India’s Export-Import Bank also signed an agreement for a USD 800 million line of credit to finance Maldives’ infrastructure projects.

---Kashif Hussain

UNITED NATIONS

- On March 28, Agnes Callamard, Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), said that Saudi Arabia's "closed-door trials of those it accuses of assassinating the dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul, have fallen short of international standards."

Callamard is leading an independent human rights inquiry into the October 2018 killing of Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. While calling the murder "an extrajudicial killing committed in a consulate office on foreign territory," she said that there was nothing internal or domestic about the case and the trials should have been public. The Special Rapporteur said, "The Saudi Government is grievously mistaken if it believes that the current proceedings will satisfy the international community either in terms of procedural fairness under international standards or in terms of the validity of their conclusions." She added, "The investigation and subsequent prosecution should comply with international legal standards, and that demands the highest levels of transparency and impartiality." She also indicated the Saudi Government had not disclosed "publicly the identities of the accused; their roles in relation to the government or the details of the charges they face." According to media report, Saudi Arabia has detained 21 people to investigate Khashoggi's murder case, and 11 of them are facing trials.

- On March 27, a majority of UNSC members expressed regret over the US' unilateral move to recognise Israel's sovereignty over the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, and reaffirmed the importance of upholding international law.

While reiterating the views of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peace-building Affairs, Rosemary DiCarlo, stressed that "the status of the Golan has not changed" in light of the US decision. DiCarlo said, "We hope that the recent developments will not be used as an excuse by anyone to pursue actions that could undermine the relative stability of the situation on Golan and beyond." On March 25, 2019, US President Donald Trump recognised the occupied Golan Heights as Israeli territory. According to the UN, Israel took over the Golan Heights on its northern border with Syria and annexed it in 1981, following the 1967 war, which the UNSC declared an illegal act. During the UNSC hearings, France's Deputy Ambassador, Anne Guegen, said the "EU had affirmed earlier in the day that its Member States did not recognise Israel's sovereignty, and that any efforts to override Council resolutions over the land, were doomed to failure". The UK's representative also noted that the UK's position also remained unchanged. However, Rodney Hunter, the US' representative to the UN, insisted that the decision by his country's Government did not affect the 1974 Disengagement Agreement. Hunter stressed that the Golan Heights were critical for security and strategic importance to Israel. He also assured the UNSC that the US decision on the Golan

Heights, would not impact the safety or deployment of the UN peacekeeping force deployed to the Golan, known as UNDOF, which monitors the ceasefire between Israel and Syria.

On March 31, 2019, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that any resolution to the Syrian conflict must guarantee the territorial integrity of Syria, including the occupied Golan Heights. Addressing the Arab League summit in Tunis, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres recognised the critical importance of the region on the international stage and called for even stronger cooperation between the UN and the Arab States.

- On March 27, the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) released its new report indicating that the increasing number of natural disasters and dangers were linked to climate change.

Speaking at the launch of the report titled: “State of the Global Climate”, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called the report “another strong wake-up call” to the world against natural disasters which must be countered by finding sustainable solutions. Guterres said that the report proved what the UN had been saying that climate change was moving faster than efforts to address it. While calling on Heads of State to attend the September 23, 2019 climate action summit in New York, aimed at achieving positive results, the Secretary-General said, “Do not come with a speech, come with a plan.” While outlining the report’s key findings, WMO Secretary-General, Petteri Taalas warned of record greenhouse gas concentrations, which is responsible for the increase in global temperatures to dangerous levels. According to the report, “carbon dioxide levels were at 357 parts per million (ppm) in 1994, rising to 405.5 ppm in 2017.” President of the General Assembly, Maria Fernanda Espinosa, said that numbers and data on carbon dioxide emissions were extremely worrisome. Espinosa urged the UN Member States to act against climate change collectively and to push back on global warming.

- On March 25, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres expressed serious concerns over the firing of a rocket from Gaza into Israel, and the Israeli response of multiple airstrikes on Gaza.

While briefing correspondents at UN Headquarters, UN Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric, said that the rocket attack was “a serious and unacceptable violation.” He also indicated that the UN Secretary-General was concerned about Israeli retaliatory airstrikes in Gaza. According to media reports, Israeli Forces said they had carried out strikes against what were described as Hamas targets. Regarding risk of escalation, Dujarric said, “We continue to work with Egypt and all concerned parties to try to de-escalate the situation and again, encourage restraint.”

- On March 25, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reported that an airstrike conducted by international military forces in Kunduz in support of pro-Government forces on the ground killed 13 civilians and injured three more on March 22 and 23, 2019.

- On March 24, the UNAMA condemned an attack carried out during celebrations around Nowruz in the southern town of Lashkar Gah, Helmand province on March 23, 2019.

According to the UNAMA, the incident occurred in the Telawka neighbourhood close to Kunduz city during operations conducted by pro-government forces against Taliban in the area. The initial findings of the mission indicated that there were 10 children among those who were killed, and investigations would continue until all civilian casualties were identified. While expressing serious concerns over the incident, the UNAMA called upon all parties to the conflict to uphold their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect civilians from harm.

In a related development, the UNAMA condemned a staged blast in Lashkar Gah as people marked Farmers' Day as part of Persian New Year celebrations, attended by nearly 1,000 people. The UNAMA's findings suggest that at least three civilians were killed and dozens were injured in the attack. Afghanistan's local news media TOLO reported that the provincial economic chief in Helmand, Mohammad Khan Nusrat, was killed in the attack. The UNAMA indicated that "the Taliban had issued statement to the media in which they claimed responsibility for the bombing, as well as assertions that they had not harmed any civilians in the attack, despite acknowledging that government officials had suffered casualties." The UNAMA reiterates that under the principle of distinction parties to the conflict are obligated to distinguish between combatants and civilians at all times.

--- Moiz Khan