

April 16 – April 30

AREA BRIEF

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Area Briefs: 16-30 April, 2019

General Observations

Pakistan

- On April 29, DG ISPR, Major General Asif Ghafoor called on India to resolve unsettled issues with Pakistan, especially the Jammu and Kashmir dispute. He also said the Kashmir issue remains linked to the “ideology of Pakistan” and it was thus the “moral responsibility” of every Pakistani to continue supporting the Kashmiri struggle for the right to self-determination.
- On April 29, US Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad and US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs, Alice Wells visited Islamabad and held talks with Pakistani officials on the Afghan peace process, Pakistan-US bilateral relationship and regional security situation.
- Addressing the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing on April 27, Prime Minister Imran Khan said that Pakistan and China have entered the next phase of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), with greater emphasis on socioeconomic uplift, poverty alleviation and industrial development.
- On April 26, Prime Minister Imran Khan held meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping and his Chinese counterpart Premier Li Keqiang in Beijing. Both sides reiterated their resolve to further strengthen their strategic partnership. The two countries also signed an agreement on the second phase of the China-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement and an MoU on cooperation in the field of Marine Sciences between the Ministry of Natural Resources of China and Pakistan’s Ministry of Science and Technology.
- During his visit to Iran on April 22, Prime Minister Imran Khan met with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and discussed “the entire spectrum of bilateral relations, regional issues and ways to strengthen Pak-Iran relations in diverse fields.” The two countries also agreed to set up a joint border “reaction force” to counter the activities of terrorist groups along the Pak-Iran border.
- On April 20, 2019, Pakistan lodged a strong protest with Iran over its inaction against the group behind the Ormara attack. Earlier on April 17, terrorists killed at least 14 personnel of Pakistan’s Security Forces, including 10 from the Navy, 3 from the Air Force, and 1 from the Coast Guards near Ormara in Gwadar district. According to FM Shah Mehmood Qureshi the training and logistical camps of this alliance were based inside Iran.

- On April 18, DG Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) Major General, Asif Ghafoor expressed hope that India would soon accept the truth on its false claims of a 2016 surgical strike, and shooting down Pakistan's F16.

International

- Citing a US official, the Indian Express reported on April 28 that the US government has declined to share any information with India on the use of F-16 fighter jets by the Pakistan Air Force during an aerial fight between the two countries on February 27, 2019.
- According to a US official, India complained to the US in March, 2019 that Pakistan had violated the end-user agreement on their F-16's by using the jets for offensive operations against India. The US official said that after the Indian complaint, Washington informed New Delhi that it would not share any information on this matter because it was a bilateral matter between the US and Pakistan.
- Addressing a rally in Rajasthan on April 21, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi claimed that India was not afraid of Pakistan's nuclear threat adding India's nuclear weapons are not meant for 'Diwali'. Earlier on April 18, the second phase of India's general elections was held amid a complete lockdown in Srinagar in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK).
- According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)'s April 29 report on world military expenditures, global military spending rose to its highest level in three decades. The report titled, Trends In World Military Expenditure, 2018, noted that overall world military expenditure rose to \$1822 billion in 2018, representing an increase of 2.6% from 2017. According to the report, the "five biggest spenders in 2018 were the US, China, Saudi Arabia, India and France, which together accounted for 60% of global military spending.
- On April 28, Iran warned that it could withdraw from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) against the US intensification of sanctions on the country. Earlier on April 22, the US announced that all countries that continue to import Iranian oil would be subject to US sanctions.
- On April 29 President Trump ordered new restrictions on asylum seekers at the Mexican border including application fees and work permit restraints. Trump also ordered that all cases in immigration courts be settled within 180 days.

- In another major development on April 29 the Islamic State released an 18-minute video of its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi-his first appearance since 2014 when he declared himself the leader of the terrorist group. Baghdadi congratulated the perpetrators of the Easter Sunday suicide bombing attacks - a reminder that IS does not need to control a territory to be a threat. Notwithstanding reports that IS territory in Syria has been reclaimed, cities remain in shambles and still under attack by the group.
- On April 21 coordinated attacks across Sri Lanka left at least 250 people dead. Friday Prayer for Muslims and Sunday services for Roman Catholics have since been cancelled amid fears of large public gatherings. Tensions are rising, and in some areas, a violent backlash against the country's Muslim minority has started. Ironically the decades long Sri Lankan civil war, which ended in 2009, was fought along ethnic lines, not religious ones.
- The April 27 shooting in Poway, California coincided with a significant spike in global hate crimes. The gunman John Earnest's manifesto held the same kind of white supremacist views as the shooters in the attacks in the synagogue in Pittsburgh and on mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. The attack follows mass bombings in Sri Lanka.
- On April 24 North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, met with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The meeting comes after Kim's failed summit with President Trump in Vietnam. Pyongyang is trying to gather international support for an approach to sanctions relief and gradual nuclear disarmament that the Trump administration opposes.
- On April 17, Switzerland announced its decision to become the fourth European country to join China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Switzerland is the fourth Schengen-area state to sign up to the BRI. In March, Italy agreed to officially support cooperation with China despite strong criticism from France, Germany, and the US. In 2018 Portugal and Greece also signed a memorandum on cooperation with China under the Silk Road project.

---Amina Afzal

AMERICAS

Domestic

- On April 29, US Deputy Attorney General, Rod Rosenstein submitted his resignation letter and will step down from his post on May 11, 2019.

Rosenstein had a turbulent two-year relationship with US President Donald Trump who resented his decision to appoint Special Counsel Robert Mueller to investigate possible ties between Trump's presidential campaign and Russia. Rosenstein had made clear last year that he would step down after Mueller's report was released.

- On April 28, the United States Southern Command announced Rear Adm. John C. Ring, the commander of the US prison camp at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, was relieved of his command.

A statement from US Southern Command said the change in leadership was "due to a loss of confidence in his ability to command", and would "not interrupt the safe, humane, legal care and custody provided to the detainee population" at Guantánamo. Earlier this month Ring had expressed frustration with dealing with an ageing population of detainees without proper resources. The prison camp was established at the beginning of 2002, and presently houses 40 prisoners- most of whom have are being held illegally as they have never been charged with a crime.

- On April 25, former US Vice President Joe Biden, announced he will be running for the office of President, adding to the growing list of democratic contenders.

In related news, on April 22, Massachusetts Representative Seth Moulton, announced his bid to enter the 2020 presidential race. Moulton becomes the 19th Democratic candidate to announce his presidential campaign, while Biden became the 20th Democratic candidate.

- On April 22, US President Donald Trump announced he will go to court to block the release of his financial records.

The Democratically-controlled congressional House Oversight Committee subpoenaed Trump's financial records from Mazars - the accounting firm employed by Trump to prepare his financial statements. Trump's lawyers accused House Democrats of being "singularly obsessed with finding something they can use to damage the President politically".

- On April 20, House Judiciary Chairman Jerrold Nadler subpoenaed the Justice Department for a full, unredacted version of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's report while Democrats have called to impeach President Donald Trump.

- On April 18, The US Department of Justice released a redacted version of special counsel Robert Mueller's report into Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election.

Mueller's report was shared with the House and Senate judiciary committees and released to the public on the Justice Department's website. Some sections of the 400-page report were blacked out by Attorney General Bill Barr to protect ongoing investigations and for other reasons. Key findings of the Mueller report found that Trump feared the investigation, believing his presidency would be ruined as a result of it. The report found that Trump on numerous occasions tried to get rid of Mueller, only to be thwarted by his own staff. The report detailed a pattern of lying, changing stories and misleading statements by staff in the Trump administration. Mueller noted in his report that he could not conclusively determine that Trump had committed criminal obstruction of justice noting, "The president's efforts to influence the investigation were mostly unsuccessful, but that is largely because the persons who surrounded the president declined to carry out orders or accede to his requests". While declining to prosecute Trump for obstruction, the special counsel said such a determination could be left to the US Congress. On the matter of whether the Trump campaign had colluded with Russia during the 2016 presidential campaign, Mueller noted, "While the investigation identified numerous links between individuals with ties to the Russian government and individuals associated with the Trump campaign, the evidence was not sufficient to support criminal charges". The report also noted Mueller tried for more than a year to interview Trump, but in the end, Trump refused. Mueller noted, while he believed he had the legal authority to order Trump to testify before a grand jury, he decided against subpoenaing him due to the "substantial delay that such an investigative step would likely produce at a late stage in our investigation".

House Judiciary Chairman Jerrold Nadler subpoenaed the Justice Department for a full, unredacted version of the Mueller report. Democrats, who are in uproar, including Senator Elizabeth Warren, a Democratic contender for the upcoming US elections in 2020, tweeted that the Democrat-led House "should initiate impeachment proceedings". Trump has lashed out calls for impeachment, calling the "the Crazy Mueller Report" written by "Haters" with statements that "are fabricated & totally untrue".

In related news, Trump, on April 23, 2019 announced he was opposed to current and former White House aides providing testimony to Congressional committees. He stated, "There is no reason to go any further, and especially in Congress where it's very partisan – obviously very partisan" Trump added, "I don't want people testifying to a party, because that is what they're doing if they do this".

- On April 16, former Massachusetts governor Bill Weld announced he is officially entering the race for president, making him the first Republican to challenge US President Donald Trump in the upcoming elections in 2020.

International

- On April 29, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad and US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs, Alice Wells arrived in Islamabad and discussed the ongoing Afghan peace process, the Pakistan-US bilateral relationship, and the regional security situation with Pakistani authorities.

Khalilzad praised Pakistan's Prime Minister, Imran Khan stating, "His appeal for reduction of violence and policy against promoting internal conflict in other nations has potential to positively transform the region and give Pakistan a leading role". PM Imran Khan had earlier reaffirmed his commitment to supporting the Afghan peace process and called for a reduction in violence, and an intra-Afghan dialogue.

- On April 26, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad stated any peace agreement with the Afghan Taliban would depend on the declaration of a permanent ceasefire and a commitment to end the country's long war.

Khalilzad stated the Taliban's main demand focused on the withdrawal of US forces from the country. He noted, "Our focus is on terrorism. No agreement will be done if we don't see a permanent ceasefire and a commitment to end the war". Khalilzad arrived in Kabul on April 25, 2019, to meet Afghan President Ashraf Ghani as he commences his multi-country tour ahead of his next meeting with the Taliban in Qatar.

- On April 26, US President Donald Trump announced the US will withdraw from the UN Arms Trade Treaty (ATT).

Trump announced his decision to stop ratification of the ATT and withdraw from the agreement after calling it "badly misguided" and a threat to American freedoms. He stated, the UN will soon receive a "formal notice that America is rejecting this treaty" adding, "I will sign right now, in front of a lot of witnesses, a message asking the Senate to discontinue the treaty ratification process, and to return the now-rejected treaty to me, to the Oval Office, where I will dispose of it". The ATT is a multilateral arms control agreement that regulates the international weapons trade. It was signed by US President Barack Obama in 2013, but has not been ratified by the Senate to become US law.

- On April 25, the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad expressed regret over findings that US forces were responsible for killing more civilians in Afghanistan than the Taliban.

The UN released a report on April 24, 2019 stating the US was responsible for the deaths of 305 civilians in the first three months of the year. The report noted that the US was responsible for more civilian casualties than the Taliban. Khalilzad stated, "We deeply regret any loss of innocent life during military operations. We never target innocents" adding "War is treacherous,

and unintended consequences are devastating. While we strive to prevent casualties, real solution is a ceasefire or reduced violence as we pursue lasting peace". Khalilzad is looking to resume peace talks with the Taliban in Qatar in an attempt to extricate the US from the war in Afghanistan. The spokesman for US forces in Afghanistan, Colonel Dave Butler, however responded to the UN report by arguing the US pursues "the highest standards of accuracy and accountability" and that troops "reserve the right of self-defense".

- On April 22, the Trump administration announced that all countries that continue to import Iranian oil will be subject to US sanctions.

The White House announced President Donald Trump has decided not to reissue waivers exempting major buyers of Iranian oil imports from sanctions as the waivers are set to expire in May. A statement from the White House claimed, "This decision is intended to bring Iran's oil exports to zero, denying the regime its principal source of revenue". US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated, "the goal remains simple: to deprive the outlaw regime of the funds it had used to destabilize the Middle East for four decades and incentivize Iran to behave like a normal country". He noted that both Saudi Arabia and the UAE had agreed to increase their supply of oil to make up for the loss of Iranian oil in the global market. The Trump administration had earlier in 2018 withdrawn from the Iran nuclear deal, and has adopted a harsh anti Iran policy with the aim of isolating the country.

- On April 19, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced he was "still in charge of the team" negotiating with North Korea over its nuclear program.

Pompeo's statement came after Pyongyang demanded he be removed from the talks accusing him of "talking nonsense" and being "reckless". Pompeo noted, "Nothing has changed," adding he will be heading the team that is looking to work with North Korea in forging an agreement over its nuclear program.

- On April 18, the US envoy for peace in Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad expressed disappointment after the collapse of a planned meeting between the Taliban and the Afghan government in Qatar after the Taliban objected to the size of the Afghan delegation.

The talks scheduled for April 19, 2019 between the Afghan government and Taliban representatives, was considered a significant first step towards finding a negotiated end to the war in Afghanistan and the eventual withdrawal of US troops. US Peace Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad noted he was "disappointed Qatar's intra-Afghan initiative has been delayed" adding, "We're in touch with all parties and encouraged that everyone remains committed to dialogue". He added, "I urge all sides to seize the moment and put things back on track by agreeing to a participant list that speaks for all Afghans". The Taliban had previously refused to hold direct talks with the Afghan government, but have recently agreed to an intra-Afghan dialogue that includes members of the government.

- On April 17, the US announced it would allow lawsuits against firms using property nationalised by the communist government after Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution.

The Trump administration's recent policy shift towards Cuba aims to put pressure on Havana to end support to Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. US secretary of state Mike Pompeo noted, "Cuba's behaviour in the western hemisphere undermines the security and stability of countries throughout the region, which directly threatens United States national security interests. The Cuban regime has for years exported its tactics of intimidation, repression and violence". He added, "They've exported this to Venezuela in direct support of the former Maduro regime. Cuban military intelligence and state security services today keep Maduro in power". Cuban foreign minister, Bruno Rodríguez, responded on twitter stating, "I strongly reject the announcement of State Secretary Pompeo. This is an attack on international law and the sovereignty of Cuba and third states. Aggressive escalation of USA against Cuba will fail." Washington's move has drawn criticism from allies in Canada and Europe. A joint EU-Canada statement said the US move was "regrettable" and will have an "important impact on legitimate EU and Canadian economic operators in Cuba".

US national security adviser, John Bolton, also announced a series of new sanctions against Cuba, including a new cap on remittances that can be sent from the US to Cuba as well as restrictions on "non-family" travel to Cuba.

- On April 16, US President Donald Trump vetoed a bill that would have ended US involvement in the Saudi-UAE war in Yemen.

Members of Congress criticised Trump's decision to veto the bill that would have ended US military support for the Saudi-UAE led war in Yemen, citing it as a "missed opportunity". Both the House and the Senate approved the resolution to withdraw US support to the Yemen war. The four-year-long civil war in Yemen has seen the killing of thousands of people and has been termed a humanitarian crisis with the country on the brink of famine. This move marked the first time in 47 years that Congress invoked its constitutional authority to halt US involvement in a foreign conflict. Trump defended his decision to veto the resolution arguing, "This resolution is an unnecessary, dangerous attempt to weaken my constitutional authorities, endangering the lives of American citizens and brave service members, both today and in the future". Trump argued that US support for the Saudi war in Yemen was crucial to "protect the safety of the more than 80,000 Americans who reside in certain coalition countries" that he claims "have been subject to Houthi attacks from Yemen". He added, the resolution would "harm the foreign policy of the United States" and "harm our bilateral relationships" adding it would "negatively affect our ongoing efforts to prevent civilian casualties and prevent the spread of terrorist organisations such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and ISIS, and embolden Iran's malign activities in Yemen". Analysts have suggested, proponents of the Yemen resolution are likely to now turn their attention to legislation that is currently in the House that would ban additional arms sales to Saudi Arabia, and a bill in the Senate that would also impose financial and travel

sanctions on individual Saudis, in a move to put pressure on the Saudi government. Trump administration faces mounting criticism for his close relationship with Saudi Arabia in an attempt to isolate Iran. In addition, Trump has been criticised for not condemning Saudi Arabia and the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman who investigators have concluded was complicit in the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Latin America

- On April 30, Venezuelan opposition leader, Juan Guaidó, posted a video of himself flanked by soldiers, promising to end the rule of President Nicolás Maduro.
- On April 23, Venezuela's envoy, Gustavo Tarre, addressed the Organization of the American States (OAS) for the first time in two decades.

The OAS recognised Gustavo Tarre- the envoy of Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido- as Venezuela's official delegate to the group earlier this month. Before Tarre delivered his speech at the OAS's Permanent Council, ambassadors from at least four Caribbean countries walked out of the room in protest to the group's decision to recognise Tarre as Venezuela's official envoy. Tarre was appointed by Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido. Guaido has challenged the legitimacy of incumbent President Nicolas Maduro's government, and has declared himself to be interim leader until fresh elections are held. Maduro has accused the opposition of staging a coup against his government with the support of the US.

In related news, on April 30, Guaido called on the people of Venezuela to take to the streets, stating "People of Venezuela, it's necessary that we all go out into the streets, to support democracy and recover our liberty. Organised and united, we should move to the main military installations". He stated on Twitter, "The armed forces have taken the correct decision. They can count on the support of the people of Venezuela, the support of our constitution, the guarantee that they are on the right side of history." Venezuela's Information Minister, Jorge Rodríguez stated the government was confronting a small group of "military traitors" that were looking to promote a coup. Rodríguez accused "the coup-mongering, murderous far right" of being behind the uprising, and called on the nation to stand with Venezuela's armed forces as they sought to "deactivate" it.

---Kiran Mazari

ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

- On April 29, US President Donald Trump and Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan discussed the creation of a joint working group on Turkey's planned procurement of a Russian S-400 missile defence system over a telephonic call.

In its statement, the Turkish Presidency said, "Our Honourable President brought up the proposal to establish a working group regarding the procurement of the S-400 defence system from the Russian Federation." Meanwhile, the White House also confirmed that Trump and Erdogan had discussed Turkey's planned purchase of the S-400 missile defence system. According to a statement by the Turkish Presidency, the suggestion to create a working group is to assess the impact of the S-400 on the US fighter jets. Earlier on April 1, 2019, the US halted delivery of F-35 fighter jet parts to Turkey. The development marks the first US step of blocking delivery of equipment related to F-35 jets to Turkey, a NATO ally, in retaliation to its purchase of Russian S-400 air defence systems.

- On April 29, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) released its new report on world military expenditures, noting that global military spending rose to its highest level in 2018 since 1988.

The report titled, Trends In World Military Expenditure, 2018, noted that overall world military expenditure rose to \$1822 billion in 2018, representing an increase of 2.6% from 2017. According to the report, the "five biggest spenders in 2018 were the US, China, Saudi Arabia, India and France, which together accounted for 60% of global military spending." Dr Nan Tian, a researcher with the SIPRI Arms and Military Expenditure (AMEX) programme, said, "In 2018 the US and China accounted for half of the world's military spending. The higher level of world military expenditure in 2018 is mainly the result of significant increases in spending by these two countries." The report noted that the US military expenditure increased by 4.6%, reaching \$649 billion in 2018, while Chinese military spending grew by 5%, reaching to \$250 billion in 2018. However, the report noted that Russian military spending decreased by 3.5%, reaching to \$61.4 billion. According to the report, India's military spending increased by 3.1% to \$66.5 billion in 2018. However, Pakistan's military expenditure in 2017 and 2018 remained at 11% growth, reaching \$11.4 billion.

- On April 28, Iran warned that it could withdraw from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) against the US intensification of sanctions on the country.
- On April 22, the US announced that all countries that continue to import Iranian oil will be subject to US sanctions.

According to the White House, President Donald Trump has decided not to reissue Significant Reduction Exceptions (SREs) when they expire in early May 2019. The decision is aimed at bringing Iran's oil exports to zero, thereby denying the country its principal source of revenue. The decision would affect countries that were using US waivers to continue buying Iranian oil during a first six-month grace period announced in November 2018, following the reinstatement of sanctions on Iran that were earlier lifted under the Iran nuclear agreement with major world powers. The countries that were given waivers included China, India, Japan, South Korea and Turkey- the largest importers of oil from Iran. Countries that continue to import oil from Iran will be barred from doing any financial activity with US financial institutions or systems.

In response, China opposed the US move to impose sanctions on oil imports from Iran. On April 22, 2019, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang said, "China opposes the unilateral sanctions and so-called 'long-arm jurisdictions' imposed by the US."

In a related development on April 28, 2019, Iran warned that it could withdraw from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) in the face of renewed US sanctions. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said, "The Islamic Republic's choices are numerous, and the country's authorities are considering them, and leaving the NPT is one of them." Zarif also warned that there could be negative consequences of barring Iranian oil exports.

- *On April 26, US President Donald Trump said that the US would take its signature back on an international treaty known as the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT).*

While attending the National Rifle Association's (NRA) annual meeting, President Trump announced that he will revoke the status of the Arms Trade Treaty, which the US has signed but is yet to be ratified by the US Senate. He said, "We are taking our signature back." He also indicated that the UN would soon receive a formal notice of the withdrawal. The Treaty was signed in 2013 by the former US President Barack Obama. A number of conservative groups in the US, including the NRA, oppose the Treaty. The NRA argues that the Treaty would undermine domestic gun rights. In response to Trump's announcement, Oxfam America, President Abby Maxman, said, "The US will now lock arms with Iran, North Korea and Syria as non-signatories to this historic treaty whose sole purpose is to protect innocent people from deadly weapons." Amnesty International official Adotei Akwei, said, "With this announcement the Trump Administration will re-open the floodgates for arms sales with weakened human rights criteria."

On April 2, 2013, the UN General Assembly adopted the ATT by a vote of 156-3, with 23 abstentions. The treaty opened for signature on June 3, 2013, and entered into force on December 23, 2014. While regulating international arms trade in conventional weapons, the Treaty seeks to reduce the illicit arms trade by establishing standards against illegal and irresponsible arms transfers, and to improve regional security and stability, as well as to promote accountability and transparency by state parties concerning transfers of conventional arms.

- On April 23, the Pakistan Navy successfully test fired an indigenously developed anti-ship/land-attack cruise missile from a fast attack craft in the North Arabian Sea.

In its statement, the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), the media arm of the Pakistan Armed Forces, said, “The missile accurately hit its target on land signifying the impressive capabilities of the indigenous missile system,” The statement added, “The successful live weapon firing has once again demonstrated the credible fire power of Pakistan Navy and the impeccable level of indigenisation in high tech weaponry achieved by Pakistan’s defence industry.” However, the ISPR did not provide detail on the type of missile used in the test including range, payload, guidance type, or its designation.

- On April 18, Iran unveiled its indigenously developed fighter jets by flying the aircraft over Tehran during a military parade marking National Army Day.

According to media reports, Iranian state-television aired footage of the aircraft during the parade. The aircraft called Kowsar was inaugurated in 2018, when the media televised images of President Hassan Rouhani briefly sitting in the plane’s cockpit inside a hangar before the ceremony. Defence analysts claim that the aircraft is modelled after the US F-5 fighter jet. Besides Kowsar, Iran also showcased another indigenously developed fighter jet Saegheh, or “Thunderbolt.” During the ceremony, Iranian military also paraded Iranian battlefield personnel carriers, machine guns, tanks, transport vehicles and Russian-made S-300 air defence systems. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said, “The Army has always been beside the Iranian nation and the Islamic Revolution, making sacrifice to secure our territorial integrity and ensure Iran’s independence.”

- On April 17, North Korea’s official news agency Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) announced that Pyongyang successful test-fired a new type of “tactical guided weapon.”

In its report, the KCNA did not state exactly what kind of weapon was tested. However, the report suggested that the test did not represent a return to ballistic missile testing. The report noted that a tactical weapon test-fired was “designed to be used on the battlefield, and is typically not a long-range armament.” According to the KCNA, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un praised the test, and said, “The development and completion of this weapons system will be a great historic event in strengthening the combat capability of the People’s Army.” The US Department of Defence also confirmed that the test did not involve a nuclear detonation or a long-range ballistic missile. According to defence analysts, the test may involve a Multiple Launch Rocket System (MRLS) or a coastal defence weapon system, or air defence system. North Korea had last conducted such tactical weapons test in November 2018.

- On April 16, the US State Department approved the sale of a pilot training programme, and maintenance and logistics support for F-16’s to Taiwan, at an estimated cost of \$500 million.

According to media reports, Taiwan has yet to approve and finalise details of the sale with the US companies. The Pentagon's Defence Security Cooperation Agency said, "The proposed sale of this equipment and support will not alter the basic military balance in the region." The Pentagon did not provide additional details on the sale. China remains opposed to military deals between the US and Taiwan since China lays claim to Taiwan, and considers it to be part of its territory.

--- Moiz Khan

CHINA, EAST ASIA & PACIFIC

China

- On April 30, a Chinese court awarded a death sentence to Fan Wei, a Canadian national, for producing and trafficking drugs.

Fan Wei is not the first Canadian national to be sentenced to death on a drugs related charge in China. In January 2019, Robert Lloyd Schellenberg, who is also a Canadian national, was given a death sentence by a Chinese court for his involvement in drug smuggling. Following the verdict in Schellenberg's case, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau accused China for "arbitrarily" applying the death penalty to a Canadian citizen. The two countries have faced increased tensions since December, 2018 when Canadian authorities arrested Meng Wanzhou, a Chinese business executive, on a US extradition request.

- On April 29, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, Geng Shuang criticised the Trump Administration for voicing concerns over the imprisonment of leaders of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement.

Terming Washington's concerns a "gross interference", Geng Shuang urged the US to respect China's sovereignty and stop interfering in Hong Kong's internal affairs. The development came after four members of Umbrella Movement were imprisoned for their role in the protests in Hong Kong in 2014. Following their imprisonment, the US State Department urged the authorities in Hong Kong to respect the rights of residents to freedom of speech and peaceful assembly.

- Addressing the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing on April 26, Chinese President Xi Jinping said that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) had created a new platform to boost international trade and investment.

President Xi Jinping said that China would negotiate Free Trade Agreements with different countries and called for more countries to join China's Belt and Road Initiative. Xi pledged to work more closely with multinational institutions. The Chinese President also vowed to increase imports and strengthen cooperation with the international community on protection over intellectual property rights. Xi Jinping rejected criticism by the US and its Western allies that China, through its BRI projects, is forcing developing countries to take on high debt burdens.

North Korea

- On April 25, the first two-day summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un concluded in Vladivostok.

Both leaders pledged closer ties between their countries. After the conclusion of the summit, the Russian President expressed his support to North Korea and said that North Korea needs

international security guarantees from more countries, before initiating its denuclearisation programme. The Russian President also appreciated Kim's efforts to normalise Pyongyang's relations with Washington. Meanwhile, Kim Jong-un said his meeting with the Russian President was "very meaningful". According to the Russian Presidential spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, Russia believes that the six-party talks on North Korea are the only way of addressing the issue of nuclear weapons in the Korean Peninsula. The six party talks involving China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, and the US were stalled in 2009.

Japan

- According to *Business Insider* on April 30, a US Air Force official denied reports that the crashed Japanese F-35A fighter jet was found over the Pacific Ocean.

A Japanese F-35A crashed on April 9, 2019. The Japanese officials confirmed that some debris from the aircraft was found shortly after the accident. However, the US military says it is still working with the Japanese Air Self-Defence Force to locate the wreckage. The F-35A is a fifth-generation multirole stealth fighter aircraft developed by US defence contractor Lockheed Martin.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

EUROPE

- On April 29, elections concluded in Spain with the Socialist Workers' Party of Spain (PSOE) winning most of the seats in the election, but unable to form a clear majority. It remains to be seen if the POSE will be able to form a coalition government.
- On April 27, Russian President Vladimir Putin called the US treatment of Russian gun lobbyist Maria Butina an ‘outrage’.

Butina was sentenced to 18 months in prison, followed by deportation by a US court. Butina plead guilty to one count of conspiracy to act as an agent of a foreign government without registering. Putin stated, “It's an outrage,” adding “It is, in fact, arbitrary. It's not clear what she was convicted of or what crime she committed”. Butina had earlier expressed remorse for conspiring with a Russian official to infiltrate a gun rights group and influence US conservative activists and Republicans.

- On April 25, the first two-day summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un concluded in Vladivostok.

According to the official Korean Central News Agency, Kim told Putin that the US had adopted a “unilateral attitude in bad faith” at the failed Hanoi summit in February 2019. Kim added, “Peace and security on the Korean peninsula will entirely depend on the US future attitude, and the DPRK will gird itself for every possible situation”. The Hanoi summit, where US President Donald Trump met North Korean leader Kim Jong-un failed to secure a deal after Pyongyang demanded immediate relief from sanctions and both sides disagreed over what North Korea was prepared to give up in return. Putin called for sanctions to be eased on North Korea, and offered to help break the deadlock over North Korea’s nuclear weapons programme. He made clear that like Washington, Moscow supported efforts to reduce tensions and prevent nuclear conflicts. However, he noted, North Korea required “guarantees of its security, the preservation of its sovereignty”. Both leaders promised to forge stronger ties between Russia and North Korea. Kim is looking to strengthen ties between Pyongyang and Moscow at a time where it is facing crippling sanctions and talks between Washington and Pyongyang appear to have stalled.

- On April 25, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon called for a new vote on Scottish independence from the UK, claiming there was overwhelming Scottish support to stay in the EU as Brexit nears.
- On April 21, Ukrainian comedian Volodymyr Zelensky scored a landslide victory in the country's presidential election.

Zelensky, who defeated incumbent president Petro Poroshenko in a landslide victory, announced "I will never let you down". He told reporters he would "reboot" peace talks with Russian-backed separatists fighting Ukrainian forces and volunteers adding, "I think that we will have personnel changes. In any case we will continue in the direction of the Minsk [peace] talks and head towards concluding a ceasefire". Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimea peninsula in March 2014 after a controversial referendum on self-determination. Subsequently, Ukrainian forces have been battling Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine.

- On April 20, violent protest erupted in Paris as the ‘Yellow Vest’ protestors clashed with French police.

The protest, marking the 23rd week of protests launched by the ‘Yellow Vests’ against the French government, turned violent as protestors clashed with police in Paris who detained 137 people. Approximately 9,600 protestors took to the streets across France, including 6,700 in the capital according to the French interior ministry. The ‘Yellow Vest’ movement initially started as a protest over rising fuel prices and the high cost of living, but spiraled into a larger movement against French President Emmanuel Macron’s economic policies. In related news, on April 25, 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron promised €5bn worth of cuts to income tax for lower and average earners, and pension rises for the poorest, in a move to inject more “humanity” into his style of governance. However, he maintained he would not make changes to his pro-business programme in the face of the on-going ‘Yellow Vest’ protests.

- On April 18, a group of Labour MP’s urged Jeremy Corbyn not to ‘torpedo’ the prospect of a Brexit deal by calling for a second referendum on Brexit.

The Labour MP’s expressed their reservations with holding a second referendum- arguing doing so would be “divisive but ... not decisive”. They also expressed their concern that insistence on a second referendum will likely stall talks between Labour and the government. The Labour party is divided on whether to hold a second referendum or not.

- On April 18, France rejected Libya’s “completely unfounded” accusation that it has been supporting strongman Khalifa Haftar, whose forces have launched an assault on Tripoli.

The Libyan interior ministry accused France of actively supporting the warlord, Khalifa Haftar, and his self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA). A French foreign ministry official responded stating, “Tripoli’s claim of support and diplomatic cover for Haftar are completely unfounded”. The French presidency released a statement that made clear, “France supports the legitimate government of Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj and the mediation of the UN towards an inclusive political solution in Libya”. According to the UN, at least 174 people have been killed and more than 18,000 have been displaced since Haftar ordered his forces to march on Tripoli on April 4.

- On April 18, Italy's right-wing League has fielded prominent anti-euro campaigners among its candidates for next month's European Parliament elections.

Antonio Rinaldi is one such candidate who has campaigned for years for Italy to "take back the keys to our own house" by leaving the eurozone. Francesca Donato, another candidate is president of Italy's Eureka Association, whose goal is "to leave the euro to relaunch our economy and re-establish democracy". Anti-euro campaigners have long called for Italy to quit the eurozone believing doing so would allow Italy to revive its stagnant economy.

- On April 17, Switzerland announced it will become the fourth European country to join China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The Swiss Finance Ministry announced that President Ueli Maurer will sign a deal with China under the new Silk Road project during his visit to Beijing later this month. The Swiss Finance Ministry stated the potential deal will strengthen trade and economic ties between the countries. Switzerland is the fourth Schengen-area state to sign up to the BRI. In March, Italy agreed to officially support cooperation with China despite strong criticism from France, Germany, and the US. Last year, Portugal and Greece also signed a memorandum on cooperation with China under the Silk Road project.

---Kiran Mazari

GLOBAL TERRORISM

- On April 29, Bangladeshi Police said that it has killed at least two members of a local terrorist group called Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh, which is believed to be behind a cafe attack in Dhaka in 2016.

According to media reports, Police raided a house in Metro Housing area of Basila on the outskirts of Dhaka on an intelligence report. Colonel Jahangir Alam, Additional Director General of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) - Bangladesh's elite police forces, said, "The RAB fired back after gunshots were fired from inside the house." Alam added that the two suspected terrorist blew themselves up in a huge explosion following an exchange of gunshots with RAB. Benazir Ahmed, the Director General of the RAB, said, "The bodies have been blown apart in the explosions. We will have to identify them through DNA profiling." The authorities also arrested four people, including the owner of the house for interrogation. The RAB launched a crackdown after an attack on a café in 2016 in Dhaka, where at least 22 people were killed.

In a related development on April 28, a Bangladeshi court sentenced three Rohingya extremists to 10 years in jail for possessing bomb-making materials. Salahuddin Howlader, a prosecutor at the Metropolitan Special Tribunal in Dhaka, stated the extremists were arrested in 2014 in Dhaka with materials to be used for making improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Howlader said, "They were involved with several international militant outfits including the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO)," a small militant group that was involved in extremist activities in Myanmar's northern Rakhine state in the 1980s and 1990s.

- On April 28, Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe announced that the country's forces killed and arrested most of those linked to the Easter suicide bombings.
- On April 21, some eight coordinated terrorist attacks were carried out in Colombo, Sri Lanka; killing at least 253 people and wounding 500 others.

The terrorist attacks targeted three churches and four hotels in the city. The explosions were carried out in the churches when they were full of worshippers gathered for Easter services. Though, nearly all of the victims were Sri Lankans, some 30 foreigners were believed to have died in the blasts, among them British, Dutch, Chinese, Portuguese and American citizens. Earlier, the Health Ministry had announced 395 people had died in the attacks, however, they later lowered the number to 253. The Ministry said, "Many of the victims were badly mutilated. There was double counting." According to Al-Jazeera, the Sri Lankan government has claimed that there were nine suicide bombers, eight of whom had been identified, and of whom one was a woman. Daesh claimed responsibility for the terrorist attacks. In its statement, Daesh said, "The attackers targeted Christians and the nationals of a (79-state) coalition to fight the Islamic

State.” However, the Sri Lankan government also accused two local Muslim groups, National Thowheed Jamaat (NTJ) and Jammiyathul Millathu Ibrahim of staging the attacks.

In a related development on April 28, 2019, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe announced that Sri Lankan forces killed and arrested most of those linked to the Easter suicide bombings. Wickremesinghe said, “Most of them have been arrested. Some have died.” Sri Lankan Police believe that Zahran Hashim, a leader of the NTJ was the alleged mastermind of the Easter Sunday attacks. On April 26, 2019, Police raided the headquarters of the NTJ’s base in the eastern town of Kattankudy, and killed the father and two brothers of the suspected mastermind. According to media reports, at least 15 people were killed during the gun battle. However, Zahran’s wife, Abdul Cader Fathima Sadia, and his four-year-old daughter, Mohamed Zahran Rusaina, escaped with minor injuries and were being hospitalised under heavy police surveillance. Sadia is also amongst those accused of terrorism.

In a related development on April 29, 2019, Daesh Chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appeared in a propaganda video for the first time in five years, and congratulated the perpetrators of the Easter Sunday suicide bombing attacks. The video was released by Daesh’s Furqan channel, without giving any clue regarding his current whereabouts. Baghdadi discussed the attacks in an audio portion of the video, suggesting the April 21, 2019, attacks came after he was filmed. According to a transcript from the US based SITE Intelligence Group, Baghdadi said, “As for your brothers in Sri Lanka, they have put joy in the hearts of the monotheists with their immersing operations that struck the homes of the crusaders in their Easter.” While praising the attackers, he said the attacks were in revenge for the fall of Baghouz in March 2019 in Syria.

- On April 28, gunmen killed five worshippers and a pastor in an attack on a Protestant church in Burkina Faso.

A Burkina Faso security official said, “Unidentified armed individuals have attacked the Protestant church the small northern town of Silgadji near Djibo,” the capital of Soum province. According to media reports, the attackers were on motorbike. The security officials have claimed that the attackers are affiliated with a number of groups, including Ansarul Islam, the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM), and Daesh. However, no arrests have been made so far.

- On April 24, Saudi Arabia executed 37 of its citizens convicted of terrorism.

According to the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA), the 37 men were executed “for adopting terrorist and extremist thinking and for forming terrorist cells to corrupt and destabilise security.” The Interior Ministry indicated that some of those executed were accused of “inciting sectarian strife.” The Ministry stated that the individuals were found guilty of attacking security installations with explosives, and were also involved in killing a number of security officers and cooperating with enemy organisations against the interests of the country. The Specialised Criminal Court in Riyadh, which specialises in terrorism trials, and the country’s high court, had given orders for the executions.

- On April 18, at least 14 passengers, including 10 from the Navy, 3 from the Air Force, and 1 from the Coast Guards, were forcibly offloaded from their bus and then shot dead by unidentified militants on the Makran Coastal Highway in Ormara, Balochistan.

According to Balochistan's Inspector General of Police (IGP) Mohsin Hassan Butt, 15-20 unidentified armed militants in camouflage were involved in the attack. The militants stopped the bus travelling between Karachi and Gawadar and killed 14 non-Baloch passengers after identifying them by their National Identity Cards (NIC). During the incident, 2 out of the 16 offloaded passengers from the bus managed to escape when the gunmen started firing. The responsibility for the attack was taken by an alliance of three banned militant organisations including the Balochistan Liberation Front, Balochistan Republican Army and Baloch Republican Guard. Balochistan Home Minister Ziaullah Langove said, "We will revenge every drop of blood of our innocent people, take out desperate terrorists from their hideouts and bring them to book." On April 19, 2019, Pakistan Foreign Office also expressed concerns over Indian involvement in the incident. Foreign Office spokesman Dr Mohammad Faisal said, "As far as the incident in Balochistan is concerned, I would like to refer to the arrest of Commander Kulbhushan Jadhav from that very area. Currently, investigation into the tragic incident is under way and we are closely monitoring the situation. If we find any involvement from the Indian side, we will definitely raise the issue with India and take appropriate measures." Meanwhile, the Pakistan Foreign Office also gave Iran a demarche over the attack, accusing the country of not acting on the intelligence shared with it about the presence of Baloch terrorists on its soil in the past. After talking to his counterpart Javad Zarif, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi said that Pakistan shared specific "actionable intelligence" about the involvement of Baloch militant groups, and the presence and location of their "training and logistics camps" on the Iranian side of the 950-km-long porous border between the two countries.

- On April 16, Pakistan's Police and Army conducted a counter-terrorism operation in Peshawar's Hayatabad area; killing five terrorists, while one policeman was martyred and two were injured.

Capital City Police Officer (CCPO) Qazi Jamilur Rehman, who led the operation, said, "One of our officers, Qamar Alam, embraced martyrdom during the operation. Five terrorists were killed during the action jointly carried out by the police and army." According to media reports, the operation started at around 8 pm on April 15, 2019 and concluded around 12 noon on April 16, 2019. The operation was led by the Special Services Group and police personnel. A raid was conducted on a house in a residential building in Phase 7 of the Hayatabad locality. The holdouts were neutralised as security forces breached the walls and stormed the building. Assistant Inspector General of the bomb disposal unit (BDU) Shafqat Malik indicated that 50 kilograms of explosive material was found installed in a bike and parts of the building. The building was demolished with explosives soon after the operation concluded. The explosives were apparently planted as a booby trap to target senior officials and investigators. The

terrorists hiding inside the house were responsible for attacks on an additional inspector general of police and a senior judge.

- According to *The News* on April 16, 2019, Boko Haram militants raided a village near the north eastern Nigerian town of Chibok and carried out indiscriminate shootings and set a number of houses on fire.

A Chibok community leader, Ayuba Alamson, indicated that the militants, believed to be from a Boko Haram faction loyal to its leader Abubakar Shekau, burned the whole village after looting a local market and taking away food. The attack came after a huge rally that was attended by hundreds of Chibok residents at the girls boarding school in the nearby town, to commemorate the April 14, 2014 abduction of 276 schoolgirls. According to media reports, since the incident in 2014, some 57 girls escaped shortly after the kidnapping, 107 were released after negotiations and 112 remain in captivity. President Muhammadu Buhari has promised to rescue the remaining girls. Buhari said, “We will not rest until all the remaining girls are back and reunited with their families.”

--- Moiz Khan

MIDDLE EAST & WEST ASIA

Egypt

- According to Egypt's electoral board on April 22, Egyptian voters have overwhelmingly supported constitutional changes that would allow President Abdel Fattah al Sisi's rule extended till 2030.

According to Lashin Ibrahim, Head of National Election Authority, 88.83 % voted 'yes' in a referendum on the amendments, with 11.17 % voting 'no'. Rights groups have criticised the conditions in which the referendum was held, including the suppression of those opposing the changes. Voters were given less than a week to decide on changes to 20 articles, which includes allowing Sisi to run for another six-year term after his current term ends. His term was originally scheduled to end in 2022, but has now been extended to 2024.

Iran

- On April 16, Iran's lawmakers overwhelmingly approved a bill labelling US forces in the Middle East as a terrorist group.

The move came a day after the US's designation of Iran's Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organisation came into effect. Defence Minister, Gen. Amir Hatami introduced the bill authorising the government to act firmly in response to "terrorist actions" by US forces by demanding authorities use "legal, political and diplomatic" measures to neutralise the American move. During his address to lawmakers, Hatami said the US move aims at "thwarting Iran's influence," and shows that America's longstanding sanctions against Iran have become ineffective. During the debate, some hard-line lawmakers demanded listing the entire US Army and security forces as a terrorist organisation.

Iraq

- On April 27, Iraq summoned the envoys of Bahrain and the US to protest their insulting and meddlesome comments about the country's domestic affairs and its relations with Iran.

According to Foreign Ministry spokesman, Ahmad al-Sahaf, Foreign Minister Mohamed Ali al-Hakim issued the order to summon the American chargé d'affaires as well as the Bahraini ambassador to Baghdad. Baghdad expressed its discontent over a tweet recently posted by Bahraini Foreign Minister, Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifah, in which he insulted Iraqi Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. The Foreign Minister of Bahrain criticised Sadr for blaming the political

crisis in the Kingdom on the Al Khalifah rulers, calling the Iraqi politician a “fool” and a “dog” disguised as a man, and claiming that Iran “controls” Iraq. In a statement, the Iraqi Foreign Ministry condemned the “offensive” remarks and called for an official apology from the Manama regime. In a separate development, Iraq called in the American chargé d’affaires after the US Embassy in Baghdad posted messages on its Facebook page criticising Iranian authorities. The Iraqi Foreign Ministry said in a statement that the posts “represented a violation of diplomatic norms and international rules governing the operation of missions in host countries.” It also requested that the US diplomatic mission delete its posts and refrain from releasing messages that run contrary to the Iraqi Constitution and its foreign policy.

Israel

- On April 25, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu said he plans to name a new settlement in the occupied Golan after US President Donald Trump in appreciation of his recognition of Israel’s claim of sovereignty there.

During a video address, Netanyahu said he would present a resolution to the government calling for a new settlement to be named after the US President. He said, “All Israelis were deeply moved when President Trump made his historic decision to recognise Israel’s sovereignty over the Golan Heights.” Trump recognised Israel’s claim of sovereignty over the occupied Golan on March 25, 2019 in a move that violates international law and goes against longstanding international consensus.

Lebanon

- On April 28, Deputy Secretary General of Lebanon’s Hezbollah movement, Sheikh Naim Qassim said that Saudi Arabia is the root cause of instability in the region, and that the Riyadh regime is sponsoring US and Israeli crimes in the region.

According to Qassim, the ruling Saudi family is an example of an “oppressive and dictatorial regime,” which practices all kinds of pressure and injustice under American orders to legitimise Arabs’ normalisation of diplomatic relations with the Israeli regime.

Libya

- On April 23, a number of African heads of state attended a summit in Cairo to discuss the political and security situation in Libya and called on the warring parties to reach a truce and launch negotiations.

Egyptian President, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as well as high-level representatives from Egypt, Rwanda, South Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo attended the summit. The meeting was held under the umbrella of the African Union, which Egypt chairs in 2019. In the summit's closing declaration, Libya's UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) and forces led by commander Khalifa Haftar were urged to stop fighting. The declaration stressed that the chaos created by armed militias had to be ended and only the country's armed forces and official police force should possess weapons. It also said the crisis in Libya affected African countries the most, and they wanted a political solution to resolve the crisis. Egypt's President Sisi called for enabling Libya's national army and institutions to eradicate terrorism in the country.

Palestine

- On April 26, at least 60 Palestinians were injured by Israeli fire along Gaza's border.

According to the Health Ministry in the coastal enclave, "60 people were injured by (Israeli) occupation forces" and of these, 36 were shot by live fire. An Israeli Army spokeswoman said approximately 7,000 "rioters and demonstrators" had gathered in multiple spots along the border and "hurled rocks and a number of explosive devices" towards troops, which prompted forces to respond in "accordance with standard procedures". Palestinians in Gaza have taken part in often violent demonstrations along the Israeli border fence for more than a year, calling on Israel to end its blockade of the territory.

Saudi Arabia

- On April 23, Saudi Arabia executed 37 of its citizens convicted of terrorism.

The latest executions were carried out in Riyadh, the holy cities of Makkah and Madina, the predominantly Sunni province of Qassim, and in the Eastern Province- home to the country's Shia minority. According to the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA), the men were executed "for adopting terrorist and extremist thinking and for forming terrorist cells to corrupt and destabilise security." At least 100 people have been executed in Saudi Arabia since the start of 2019.

Syria

- On April 26, Syria's UN envoy, Bashar al-Ja'afari criticised the US and the EU for waging "economic terrorism" by imposing sanctions against the country.

During a press conference in the Kazakh capital, Nur-Sultan, Ja'afari said, "This is economic terrorism that is escalating through unilateral economic measures." He added that the unilateral

sanctions were illegitimate given that they were not issued by the UN Security Council. He said that the sanctions were on par with the “diplomatic and political terrorism” carried out by the West against Syria. The US and the EU imposed sanctions against Syria during the conflict, targeting Syrian oil imports, trade and financial institutions. The UN envoy also criticised Turkey for its occupation of Syrian territory. He said, “Today the Turkish authorities occupy six thousand square kilometres of Syrian territory in Afrin and other cities, as well as Idlib.”

- On April 26, two-days of talks on Syria supported by Iran, Turkey and Russia concluded in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, without notable progress on forming a constitutional committee to drive a political settlement in the country.

Deputy Foreign Minister of Turkey, Sedat Önal, representative of the Russian President for Syria, Alexander Lavrentyev and assistant to the Foreign Minister of Iran, Ali Asghar Haji represented their countries during the talks. A representative from Jordan also attended the talks as an observer. According to a joint statement released by the three co-sponsors, the meeting had raised the issue of the constitutional committee with the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen. However, further talks in Geneva would be needed. Iran, Russia and Turkey also criticised the US for recognising Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights. The three countries condemned the move as a “rude violation of sovereignty” that would “create a threat to peace and security in the Middle East.”

The joint statement also said Iraq and Lebanon would be invited to the next Syria peace talks in Kazakhstan in July 2019.

- On April 26, Russian air strikes killed at least 10 civilians in the Idlib region.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, two children were among the casualties reported. In September 2018, Russia and Turkey signed a buffer zone deal to prevent a massive offensive on the Idlib region, near the Turkish border. However, the region has come under increasing bombardment since former Al Qaeda affiliate, Hayat Tahrir al Sham, took full control of it in January 2019.

- According to a joint statement from Amnesty International and Airwars on April 25, the US-led military coalition fighting Daesh in Syria, has killed more than 1,600 civilians in the country’s northern city of Raqqa during months of airstrikes.

According to the joint statement, the new figure was obtained after the “most comprehensive investigation into civilian deaths in a modern conflict.” This is while the US-led coalition claimed in March 2019 that only 1,257 civilians were killed in their air strikes against Daesh targets over four years in both Syria and Iraq. The coalition statement said, “We continue to employ thorough and deliberate targeting and strike processes to minimise the impact of our operations on civilian populations and infrastructure.”

- On April 24, at least 17 people were killed in an explosion in the centre of Jisr al Shughour, a rebel held city in northwestern Syria.

The incident took place a day after heavy Russian air strikes in the vicinity. The province and areas around it in northern Syria- the last remaining rebel strongholds- have seen an escalation in attacks by Russian warplanes and the Syrian Army, even though they are protected by a “de-escalation zone” agreement reached in 2018 between Russia, Iran and Turkey. In another development, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights on April 20, 2019, Daesh militants and al Qaeda linked terrorists killed at least 50 soldiers and allied fighters in separate attacks in different parts of Syria. Daesh lost its last territories in Syria in March 2019 after months of fighting with US-backed Kurdish-led fighters in the eastern province of Deir ez-Zor. However, the militants remain active in the desert to the west of Deir ez-Zor, where they have taken refuge, and target government troops and allied militia. The militant group, which once controlled large swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq has kept a network of sleeper cells active in both countries.

Turkey

- According to Turkish Defence Ministry on April 29, at least 14 members of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) were killed in air strikes carried out by Turkish military aircrafts in Iraq’s northern semi-autonomous Kurdistan region.

According to Colonel Tamer Zincir, an official with the Turkish Defence Ministry, the fighter jets had conducted airstrikes against a cave in the Zap region of northern Iraq, and “neutralised” 14 PKK terrorists. The Turkish Defence Ministry tweeted that “Turkish fighter jets had hit designated targets in the Haftanin regions of northern Iraq.” The air strikes destroyed shelters and ammunition depots used by PKK terrorists. Kurdish militants regularly fight with Turkish Forces in the Kurdish-dominated southeast of Turkey attached to northern Iraq. Turkey, along with the EU and the US, has declared the PKK a terrorist group and banned it. The group has been seeking an autonomous Kurdish region since 1984.

- On April 28, Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that Turkey will not “surrender to economic terrorism of foreign powers. He vowed to confront “those who are plotting against our people”.

During his address to the members of his ruling AK party, Erdogan said, “Though challenges we face have reminded us that we should never give up on our ambition to build a big and strong Turkey. We have seen once again that we will either live or die. There is no other way.” He reiterated that the Turkish economy has been under attack by foreign powers since the anti-government demonstrations in 2013. Turkey has seen a number of US sanctions since 2018, when Washington imposed heavy tariffs on imports from the country.

- According to *Press Tv* on April 26, Turkish police have arrested 115 soldiers over their suspected links to the movement of US-based cleric Fethullah Gulen, whom Ankara blames for an attempted coup in 2016.

Police arrested 55 suspects in Istanbul. The arrests came after the Istanbul public prosecutor ordered the detention of 210 military personnel suspected of being supporters of Gulen. According to the Istanbul chief prosecutor's office, five colonels, seven lieutenant colonels, 14 majors, and 33 captains were among the 210 suspects from the air, naval, and ground forces, as well as the gendarmerie and coast guard. Ankara accuses Gulen of orchestrating the failed coup attempt. However, Gulen has denounced the "despicable putsch" and said he had no role in it.

- On April 22, Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu criticised the US for "going too far" in pressing other countries to buy oil from its own Persian Gulf Arab allies after ending waivers for the purchase of Iranian crude oil.

According to Cavusoglu, such moves pose a risk to regional stability. He said that it is ethically "wrong" for the US to suggest Saudi Arabia and the UAE as alternative oil sellers because Washington has close ties with them. The comments came hours after the White House threatened the buyers of Iranian oil with sanctions if they fail to stop their purchases by May 1, 2019, ending six months of waivers which allowed Tehran's eight largest customers to continue importing limited volumes. The White House stated, the decision is meant to "bring Iran's oil exports to zero" and deny the Iranian government "its principal source of revenue."

Yemen

- On April 20, the Saudi-led coalition launched an air raid on a cave used by Houthi rebels to stockpile drones in the capital Sanaa.

According to the coalition spokesman, Colonel Turki al-Maliki, the cave near the presidential palace in Houthi-held Sanaa contained drones to be used in "terrorist operations". He said the "military target, a cave used by the terrorist Houthi militia to stockpile drones was destroyed." The coalition said earlier in April 2019, that Saudi air defence intercepted two drones launched by Houthi rebels from Yemen that targeted Khamis Mushait, home to a major airbase in the southwest of the country.

---Muhammad Shoaib

SOUTH ASIA: I

Pakistan

External

- Addressing a media conference on April 29, Director General Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) Major General Asif Ghafoor called on India to resolve unsettled issues with Pakistan, especially the Jammu and Kashmir dispute. He said the Kashmir issue is “linked with the ideology of Pakistan” and it is the “moral responsibility” of every Pakistani to continue supporting the Kashmiri struggle for the right to self-determination.

Major General Ghafoor also warned India that Pakistan’s Army would respond to any Indian aggression with full force saying “Pakistan has the right to use any weapon in its defence.” The DG ISPR also talked about the mainstreaming of religious seminaries, and stressed that the Education Ministry would devise the new curriculum for religious seminaries. On the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM), Major General Ghafoor said “the PTM leaders have received funds from India’s Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) and Afghanistan’s National Directorate of Security (NDS) to stage protests in Pakistan and provoke people against the Army”. He said the Pakistan Army would take lawful action against the PTM.

- On April 29, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad and US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs, Alice Wells visited Islamabad and held talks with Pakistani officials on the Afghan peace process, Pakistan-US bilateral relationship and regional security situation.

Pakistan reiterated its support for intra-Afghan dialogue and emphasised the need for creating a “conducive environment” in Afghanistan, to facilitate the return of Afghan refugees back to their country. During a meeting between US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Alice Wells and Adviser to PM on Finance, Dr Abdul Hafeez Shaikh, both sides underlined the need to deepen the engagements between the two countries in the areas of trade, economy and energy. Alice Wells told Hafeez Shaikh that the US supports all policies of Pakistan’s government which are aimed at bringing economic stability in the country.

- Addressing the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing on April 27, Prime Minister Imran Khan said that Pakistan and China have entered the next phase of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), with greater emphasis on socioeconomic uplift, poverty alleviation and industrial development.

Prime Minister Khan said that China’s Belt and Road Initiative is “a model of partnership, collaboration, connectivity and shared prosperity.” He also held a meeting with the Managing Director of International Monetary Fund (IMF), Christine Lagarde on the sidelines of the Belt and Road Forum. Following the meeting, the two sides agreed on the importance of the IMF programme and to work towards an agreement during an IMF delegation’s visit to Islamabad on

April 29, 2019. Pakistan is seeking approximately \$6 to \$8 billion from the IMF to bail itself out from its current economic challenges.

- In a related development, on April 28, Prime Minister Imran Khan held separate meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang in Beijing.

During the meeting between PM Khan and President Xi, both sides reiterated their resolve to further strengthen their strategic partnership. The two countries also signed an agreement on the second phase of the China-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement and an MoU on cooperation in the field of Marine Sciences between the Ministry of Natural Resources of China and Pakistan's Ministry of Science and Technology.

- On April 25, Prime Minister Imran Khan said that Pakistan would not become “party to any internal conflict in Afghanistan anymore.”

The Prime Minister condemned the latest wave of violence in Afghanistan and warned that it would undermine the peace process. His statement came days after the Afghan Taliban announced their spring offensive and security forces intensified their crackdown on the group; resulting in an escalation in fighting between the two warring sides.

- On April 24, Prime Minister Imran Khan telephoned his Sri Lankan counterpart, Ranil Wickremesinghe to offer condolences over the bombings of churches and hotels across Sri Lanka on April 21, 2019 in which at least 253 people were killed.

PM Khan offered his government's assistance to the Sri Lankan government for countering terrorism. In a related development on April 26, 2019, Wickremesinghe said in an interview to an Indian media outlet that Pakistan had “fully supported Sri Lanka's war on terror” in the past and if required, the Sri Lankan government would “seek their help to trace the terrorists and eliminate them.” The Sri Lankan Premier also said, “the tragic event has further increased cooperation and strengthened the trust that exists between our countries.”

- On April 18, DG Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) Major General, Asif Ghafoor expressed hope that India would soon accept the truth on its false claims of a 2016 surgical strike, and shooting down Pakistan's F16.

Major General Ghafoor also asked India to accept that Pakistan Air Force shot down two Indian jets during an aerial clash on February 27, 2019. DG ISPR's response came immediately after India's External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj during a rally in Ahmadabad said that no Pakistani soldier or citizen died in the Balakot air strike. She claimed the air strike was carried out in “self-defence”. Following the Indian Air Force air raid into Pakistan on February 26, 2019, Indian officials and media had claimed that Indian warplanes targeted a militant training camp in Balakot, killing hundreds of militants. However, Indian claims were thrown into doubt after international observers found little evidence to support their assertion.

- During his visit to Iran on April 22, Prime Minister Imran Khan met with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and discussed “the entire spectrum of bilateral relations, regional issues and ways to strengthen Pak-Iran relations in diverse fields.” Pakistan and Iran agreed to set up a joint border “reaction force” to counter the activities of terrorist groups along the Pak-Iran border.

The Premier also met with Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Speaking at the joint press conference with President Rouhani, the Pakistani Premier said that Pakistan has suffered from terrorism more than any other country and referred to the April 17, 2019 terrorist attack in Ormara, Balochistan in which at least 14 Pakistani Security officials were gunned down by a militant group allegedly operating from Iran. PM Khan also acknowledged that Iran has “suffered from terrorism perpetrated by groups operating from Pakistan.” He said that there is a need for both countries to have “trust in each other that both countries would not allow any terrorist activity from their soil.” Imran Khan’s remarks that terrorists have used Pakistani territory for carrying out attacks in Iran came under intense criticism from Pakistani opposition parties. However, the PM office issued a clarification which noted that the Premier’s remarks was taken “largely out of context”. The PM’s Office stated that Prime Minister Imran Khan was referring to “non-state actors using Pakistani soil under foreign influence to carry out activities in Pakistan or coordinating from Pakistan.” Pakistan and Iran have long witnessed security challenges along their 950km border. On April 20, 2019, Pakistan’s Foreign Ministry lodged a strong protest with Iran regarding its inaction against terror groups believed to be involved in the Ormara attack.

- On April 23, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi visited Japan and held talks with his Japanese counterpart, Taro Kono.

According to Pakistan’s Foreign Ministry, the two sides reviewed bilateral relations and “identified areas for further cooperation in political, economic, trade, investment, education and cultural fields.” The Foreign Minister appreciated Japan’s role as Pakistan’s key development partner over the years and highlighted areas that can deepen mutually beneficial cooperation. Minister Kono appreciated Pakistan’s efforts in promoting peace and stability in the region. Both sides agreed that mutually beneficial areas of cooperation such as human resource development, IT, tourism, automobile, small and medium enterprises and agriculture require further exploration.

Pakistan Internal

- On April 17, at least 14 personnel of Pakistan’s Security Forces, including 10 from the Navy, 3 from the Air Force, and 1 from the Coast Guards were killed by terrorists near Ormara in Gwadar district.

According to officials, around 20 to 25 armed men impersonating as Frontier Corps (FC) personnel, intercepted seven buses on the Makran Coastal Highway in Ormara, and shot at security personnel. The Baloch Raaji Aajoi Sangar (BRAS), an alliance comprising the Balochistan Liberation Front, Balochistan Republican Army and Baloch Republican Guard, claimed responsibility of the attack. Following the attack, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi said that "on the basis of verified information", the training and logistical camps of this alliance were based inside Iran. On April 20, 2019, Pakistan lodged a strong protest with Iran over its inaction against the group behind the Ormara attack. Pakistan's government says it has repeatedly called on Iran to act against the terrorist outfits that are operating in its territory and carrying out attacks inside Pakistan. The Iranian government responded and pledged to cooperate with Pakistan in tracking and punishing the perpetrators of the Ormara attack.

India

- Citing a US official, *the Indian Express* reported on April 28 that the US government has declined to share any information with India on the use of F-16 fighter jets by the Pakistan Air Force during an aerial fight between the two countries on February 27, 2019.

According to a US official, India complained to the US in March, 2019 that Pakistan had violated the end-user agreement on their F-16's by using the jets for offensive operations against India. The US official said that after the Indian complaint, Washington informed New Delhi that it would not share any information on this matter because it was a bilateral matter between the US and Pakistan.

- Addressing a rally in Rajasthan on April 21, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi claimed that India was not afraid of Pakistan's nuclear threat adding India's nuclear weapons are not meant for 'Diwali'.

Pakistan's Foreign Ministry termed the Indian Prime Minister's remarks as "highly unfortunate and irresponsible." Meanwhile, the Congress lodged a complaint to the Election Commission regarding Narendra Modi's "brazen violation" of the poll code by repeatedly invoking the armed forces during his election campaigns.

- On April 18, the second phase of India's general elections was held amid a complete lockdown in Srinagar in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK).

Srinagar is one of 97 constituencies across 13 Indian states where voting was held. India's seven-phase elections are scheduled to conclude on May 19, 2019, and the results are scheduled to be announced on May 23, 2019. Meanwhile, in a related development, Narendra Modi's Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) fielded Pragya Singh Thakur, a suspected terrorist, in the ongoing election as a candidate from Bhopal. Indian authorities described her as key player in plotting

the bombing of a mosque in Malegaon, Maharashtra, in 2008 that killed 6 people and injured 100 others. Thakur is currently out on the bail.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

SOUTH ASIA II

Afghanistan

- On April 29, Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani inaugurated the Grand Consultative Jirga on Peace aimed at reaching a consensus in a future dialogue with the Taliban.

At least 3,200 delegates and 300 guests have been attending the 4-day event. Ghani said that the Jirga will seek ways to end war and violence in the country. He added that the families of both sides – the Afghan government and the Taliban – have paid the price for war, and that he sees himself responsible to end the suffering. While appreciating Afghan women for their participation in the Jirga, Ghani stated that the nation has expectations from the Jirga delegates in achieving permanent peace in Afghanistan. He also appreciated the international community's support to Afghanistan. At the end of his speech, Ghani announced that former Jihadi leader, Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf will chair the Jirga. Non-participation on the part of many prominent Afghan leaders, including the country's Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah, puts into question intra-governmental consensus on the approach to Afghan peace, and the success of the Grand Consultative Jirga.

- On April 29, Russia criticised the Afghan government for cancelling the intra-Afghan meeting in Doha.

The meeting between members of Afghan society and the Taliban was scheduled for April 19-21, 2019. On April 18, 2019, the Afghan government said the meeting was canceled due to disagreements on the list of the 250-member delegation. A spokesperson for Russia's Foreign Ministry said, "We consider the reason for the disruption of the Doha meeting to be the unconstructive position of the current leaders of Afghanistan, which sent a delegation to Qatar that a priori did not fit in the format of the event and caused discontent among many participants, including the main opponents, the Taliban". The statement added that dictating the terms of holding the intra-Afghan meeting does not correspond to the statements by the current Afghan Government about its intention to launch a constructive conversation for the sake of the future of Afghanistan. In February 2019, Russia arranged a summit in Moscow among all the local and regional stakeholders to the Afghan conflict. Afghan opposition leaders and the Taliban attended the summit, while the Afghan government did not send a delegation.

- On April 29, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad arrived in Islamabad and discussed the ongoing Afghan peace process with Pakistani authorities.

US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Alice Wells accompanied Khalilzad during the trip. According to the Pakistani Foreign Office, "The two sides reviewed recent developments regarding the Afghan peace process. It was underlined that this was a historic opportunity to end the prolonged Afghan conflict for which all Afghan

stakeholders as well as Afghanistan's neighbours had an important role to play". Earlier, Pakistani Prime Minister, Imran Khan pledged neutrality in the Afghan conflict and denounced both the Taliban's spring offensive and intensified security operations by Afghan forces. Khalilzad appreciated PM Imran Khan's stance, and stated, "His appeal for reduction of violence and policy against promoting internal conflict in other nations has potential to positively transform the region and give Pakistan a leading role".

Pressure has been mounting on the Taliban to undertake intra-Afghan talks and outline a timeline for the cessation of fighting. Before undertaking his Pakistan visit, Khalilzad in an interview to Tolo News, stated that the US is seeking peace and a political settlement in Afghanistan, and that the withdrawal of foreign forces will be conditions-based. He stressed, "The US's presence and its withdrawal are depended on conditions. If conditions are provided earlier, we will not insist on remaining in Afghanistan forever. This depends on conditions". He also noted that if the Taliban insist on going back to the system they used to have (from 1996-2001), it would lead to the continuation of war not peace.

- On April 28, Pakistan's Prime Minister, Imran Khan said that Afghanistan needs peace after almost four decades of war.

PM Khan said that peace in Afghanistan has a huge impact on Pakistan and Central Asian countries. He added that Pakistan has been facilitating the peace process in Afghanistan and has supported dialogue with the Taliban. Earlier on April 22, 2019, PM Khan said at a joint press conference with Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, that peace in Afghanistan is beneficial for both Iran and Pakistan, and that the two countries are ready to help efforts for a political settlement in Afghanistan.

- On April 26, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said he will remain as President of Afghanistan until the upcoming presidential elections.

Ghani's remarks came during the inauguration ceremony of the 17th legislative term of the Afghan parliament. He reiterated that the current challenges in Afghanistan are due to the war in the country, which has been fueled by "direct foreign support" of the Taliban. Ghani added the 'Al-Fatha' offensive launched by the Taliban has been a failed attempt. He also stated that Afghanistan is no longer dependent on one country in terms of trade and transit and that the Afghan government is in favour of connectivity. The legal tenure of Ghani's presidency ends on May 22, 2019, and Afghan presidential elections are scheduled for September 28, 2019. However, on April 21, 2019, the Supreme Court of Afghanistan approved the extension of President Ashraf Ghani's tenure until the upcoming presidential elections. A number of presidential candidates have described the court's decision as a move against the spirit of the law and have accused the president of suppressing democracy. Previously, Ghani repeatedly reiterated that he will not remain in the post of president for a single day beyond his legal tenure.

- On April 25, special representatives of the US, China and Russia held a meeting on the Afghan peace process in Moscow.

The meeting marked the second trilateral consultation on Afghanistan, where US Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad, Chinese Special Envoy Deng Xijun, and Russian Presidential Representative Zamir Kabulov discussed the current situation in Afghanistan and the ongoing peace process. According to the joint statement, the three sides agreed on the following matters: the three sides respect the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Afghanistan as well as its right to choose its development path. The three sides prioritise the interests of the Afghan people in promoting a peace process. All three agree to support an inclusive Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process and are ready to provide necessary assistance. The three sides encourage the Afghan Taliban to participate in peace talks with an Afghan delegation that includes the government as soon as possible. All three agree to support the Afghan government's efforts to combat international terrorism and extremist organisations in Afghanistan. They take note of the Afghan Taliban's commitment to fight Daesh and cut ties with Al-Qaeda, ETIM, and other international terrorist groups; ensure the areas they control will not be used to threaten any other country; and call on them to prevent terrorist recruiting, training, and fundraising, and expel any known terrorists. The three sides recognise the Afghan people's strong desire for a comprehensive ceasefire. The three sides stress the importance of fighting illegal drug production and trafficking, and call on the Afghan government and the Taliban to take all the necessary steps to eliminate the drug threat in Afghanistan. The three sides call for an orderly and responsible withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan as part of the overall peace process. The three sides call for regional countries to support this trilateral consensus. The three sides also agreed on a phased expansion of their consultations before the next trilateral meeting in Beijing.

- On April 25, John Sopko, the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) said that it is getting harder for the public to track the US military's progress in Afghanistan.

The SIGAR has been installed to issue quarterly reports which are mandated by the US Congress and are intended to be public documents. The report tracks waste, fraud and abuse in US reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. In January 2019, US President Donald Trump questioned why the reports are made public, arguing that they provided useful battlefield intelligence to the enemy. Sopko argued, "I don't think it makes sense. The Afghan people know which districts are controlled by the Taliban. The Taliban obviously know which districts they control. Our military knows it. Everybody in Afghanistan knows it. The only people who don't know what's going on are those paying for all of this, the American taxpayer". He also noted that the Kabul government, which provides some of the information to the US Defense Department, insists that certain data not be made public. He added that while peace remained a common goal, there are concerns that the push for a deal will overshadow critical planning needed for any agreement to have a lasting impact. He said, "We have spent close to \$1 trillion in Afghanistan. All of that is

at risk if we screw up on the day after a peace agreement.” Since 2008, the Office of the SIGAR has probed over \$100 billion in relief and reconstruction funds spent in Afghanistan. In November 2018, SIGAR had said that the Afghan government’s control over the country was at its lowest point since 2015.

- Dawn reported on April 24 that Afghanistan demanded its trucks be allowed to pass through the Wagah-Attari border as a pre-condition to the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan Trade and Transit Agreement (PATTTA).

The World Bank had facilitated a meeting of the finance ministers of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan to push for the finalisation of the transit agreement. The meeting was also aimed at designing similar projects, including roads and border facilities of the three countries for regional connectivity under the umbrella of Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation. The World Bank had been pushing the Khyber Pass Economic Corridor (KPEC) as part of a long-discussed PATTTA. The Afghan finance minister took a strong position during the meeting and said that regional connectivity did not mean anything to his country unless its trucks carrying goods to and from India were allowed to pass through the Wagah-Attari border. Because of the Afghan insistence on access to India through the Pak-India border, Islamabad dropped the approximately \$500 million World Bank-funded KPEC project. The KPEC project envisaged a four-lane 50km expressway from Peshawar to Torkham to improve trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan and onwards to Central Asian Republics, particularly Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Pakistan and Afghanistan have not been able to implement the Afghan Transit Trade Agreement (ATTA) of 2010 as both sides have blamed each other for its failure before the Afghan president announced in 2017 that the ATTA had expired.

- On April 22, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad embarked on a multi-nation trip to further the Afghan peace process.

According to the US Department of State, Khalilzad will visit Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Qatar, Russia and the UK from April 21 to May 11, 2019. The US State Department issued a statement that stated, “In Kabul, Special Representative Khalilzad will consult with the Afghan government and other Afghans to encourage all parties to work towards intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations to determine a final peace settlement. In London, Moscow, Islamabad, and New Delhi, he will work to build international support for the Afghan peace process to help ensure that any peace settlement reached will be sustainable. In Doha, he will continue to press forward on negotiations with the Taliban to reach a consensus on core national security issues, and urge their participation in an inclusive intra-Afghan dialogue”. Khalilzad’s last meeting with the Taliban was held in Qatar in mid-March, 2019, which concluded after 16 days of talks where the two sides agreed to a draft agreement on the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan and counterterrorism assurances.

- On April 22, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) reported an increase in civilian deaths during the period from March 2018 to March 2019.

According to the report at least 11,000 civilians were killed and wounded in Afghanistan during this period. The figures show a 19% increase in civilian fatalities. From the total number of 11,000 casualties, 3,032 people were killed, while the remaining 8,180 others wounded. The report also stated that casualties among Afghan women had also increased during this period by 16%. The report noted that the Taliban were responsible for 53% of the casualties, Daesh was responsible for 12% while the Afghan security forces and their foreign counterparts were responsible for 11.5% of the fatalities. The report added that a truce between the warring factions can have a significant impact on reducing the number of casualties in the country.

- On April 20, a coordinated attack on the Afghan Ministry of Telecommunication and Information Technology building left 7 people dead and 8 others wounded in Kabul.

Among the dead were three Afghan Security personnel. The Security Forces killed all five militants who carried out the attack. No group claimed responsibility for the attack. The Taliban however, issued a statement denying any involvement in the attack.

- *Tolo News* reported on April 19 that the scheduled talks in Doha between the Afghan government delegation and the Taliban were called off.

The much-anticipated peace talks between Afghan politicians, civil society members and other representatives of Afghan society and the Taliban were scheduled for April 20-21, 2019. The Afghan Presidential Palace said in a statement that the Doha meeting was canceled as the government of Qatar did not accept the Afghan delegation's list, and instead suggested a new list which was not acceptable to the Afghan government. The statement added that the government, and the people of Afghanistan, are committed to achieving a dignified peace deal and will continue their sincere efforts in securing it. Meanwhile, the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad said in a tweet that he is "disappointed" that Qatar's intra-Afghan initiative has been delayed. Previously, on April 17, 2019, Ghani said the Taliban have no other options except to hold direct talks with Afghan government.

- On April 17, Russian President, Vladimir Putin met with his Tajik counterpart Emomali Rahmon and discussed security issues in Central Asia, including 'threats' coming from Afghanistan.

Putin stated, "We thoroughly discussed the security situation in Central Asia, including threats and challenges coming from Afghanistan". Meanwhile, Rahmon noted that "Tajikistan is a buffer zone preventing the spread of security threats coming from that region". He added that Dushanbe called for resolving Afghanistan's problems peacefully. Putin said that the parties had agreed to continue boosting defense cooperation and cooperation in the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking at the bilateral level and within the Collective Security Treaty Organisation

(CSTO). Since 2014, Russia has been increasingly concerned about the spread of extremism through Central Asia and into its mainland, particularly after the rise of the terrorist group Daesh, in Afghanistan.

Sri Lanka

- On April 20, a series of coordinated suicide attacks on three churches and four hotels left at least 253 people dead and many others wounded in Sri Lanka.

Initially, the Sri Lankan Health Ministry reported a higher number of casualties, but lowered the death toll by more than 100 saying the difficulty in identifying body parts at blast scenes led to the earlier inaccurate number. The government said there were nine suicide bombers, eight of whom had been identified- one of whom was a woman. More than 70 people, including several foreigners, have been arrested. Hemasiri Fernando, the country's Defence Secretary, resigned over the failure to prevent the attacks. World leaders from across the globe and the leaders of international organisations condemned the terror attacks. Sri Lankan Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe warned of more possible attacks in the country. Authorities suspect two local Muslim groups, National Thowheed Jamaat and Jammiyathul Millathu Ibrahim of carrying out the attacks. Although, Daesh provided no evidence to back its claim that it was behind the attack, the terrorist organisation's chief, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi purportedly appeared for the first time in five years in a propaganda video and praised the attacks. In a related development on April 27, 2017, a fierce gun battle between Sri Lankan Security Forces and suspected militants left at least 15 people dead. While Wickremesinghe called for tighter anti-terrorism laws, the country's president, Maithripala Sirisena blamed Wickremesinghe's government for weakening the intelligence system by focusing on prosecuting military officers over alleged war crimes during a decade-long civil war with Tamil separatists that ended in 2009. Sirisena fired Wickremesinghe in October 2018, over political differences, but reinstated him weeks later under pressure from the Supreme Court.

---Kashif Hussain

UNITED NATIONS

- On April 29, Rosemary DiCarlo, Head of UN Political and Peace-building Affairs (DPPA), said that the UN's efforts to "address the humanitarian, economic and political crisis in the Occupied Palestinian Territory" were being undermined by the lack of any political progress towards a two-State solution.

While briefing the UNSC on the latest situation in the Middle East, DiCarlo said, "Hopes for two States living side by side in peace continue to be replaced by the rising fears of future annexation. The possibility of establishing a viable and contiguous Palestinian State continues to be eroded by facts on the ground." She warned that if the situation left unmanaged, there could be more radicalisation, destruction and increase in the intensity of the conflict.

- On April 24, the UN observed the first official "International Day of Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace", aimed at preserving the values of multilateralism and international cooperation, which are fundamental in promoting and supporting the three pillars of the UN – namely development, human rights and peace and security.

In his message on the International Day of Multilateralism and Diplomacy, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said, "For nearly 75 years, the multilateral arrangements established after the Second World War have saved lives, expanded economic and social progress, upheld human rights and, not least, helped to prevent a third descent into global conflagration." He stressed, however, multilateralism was under pressure from "unresolved conflicts, climate change, widening inequalities and other threats". The Secretary-General noted that increasing "deficit of trust" in governments, political establishments and international organisations, along with nationalist and populist voices that "demonize and divide," unresolved conflicts and new technologies responsible for disruptions to job markets and social cohesion were representing multipronged challenges to multilateralism and world peace. To deal with the challenges, Guterres said, "We need a networked multilateralism, with close cooperation among international and regional organisations, rooted in partnerships with the business community, civil society, parliaments, the academic and philanthropic communities and other stakeholders, in particular young people."

- On April 24, that the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) released its report on civilian casualties in Afghanistan noting that "civilian deaths attributed to Pro-Government Forces surpassed those attributed to Anti-Government Elements during the first quarter of 2019."
- On April 16, the UN Security Council condemned the Taliban's announcement of its Spring Offensive in Afghanistan, and noted that armed attacks would result in more "unnecessary suffering and destruction for the Afghan people."

In its report titled Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict Quarterly Report, the UNAMA noted that 1,773 civilian casualties (581 deaths and 1,192 injured), including 582 child casualties (150 deaths and 432 injured) occurred from January 1 to March 31, 2019. The report documented that the number of civilian casualties represented a 23% decrease in overall civilian casualties as compared to the same period in 2018, and is the lowest for a first quarter since 2013. However, the report expressed concerns over the rise in civilian casualties resulting from the use of non-suicide improvised explosive devices (IED) by Anti-Government Elements, as well as the rise in civilian casualties from aerial and search operations.

In a related development on April 16, 2019, the UNSC condemned the Taliban's announcement of its Spring Offensive in Afghanistan. While recognising the Afghan people's strong desire for sustainable peace in Afghanistan, the UNSC emphasised that an increase in fighting would not allow for developing a conducive environment for peace dialogues. The UNSC's condemnation came following its decision of easing a travel ban on Taliban leaders on April 6, 2019. The Council decided that the travel ban imposed under Resolution 2255 (2015) would not apply to certain leaders in order to allow them to participate in peace talks being hosted across different countries during a nine-month time period. The nine-month period will begin on April 1, 2019, and end on December 31, 2019. The UNSC noted that both the Afghan government and the Taliban need to seize the opportunity to begin an inclusive intra-Afghan dialogue and commence negotiations that can result in a political settlement. The UNSC members also reiterated that the UNAMA and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General stand ready to support the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process, if requested by the Afghan Government.

- On April 20, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned a bomb attack on the UN peacekeeping convoy in Mali, and stressed that it may constitute a war crime.

According to the UN, one Egyptian peacekeeper was killed, and four others were wounded in the attack. The convoy of vehicles were en route between Douentza and Boni, in the Mopti region. UN Secretary-General spokesperson, Stéphane Dujarric, said, "The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) peacekeepers responded, killing an assailant and apprehending eight others." While terming attacks against the UN peacekeepers a war crime under international law, Guterres called on Malian authorities to take "swift action to identify the perpetrators of this attack and bring them to justice." The UNSC established the MINUSMA in April 2013 to support political processes in Mali and carry out numerous security-related tasks. The MINUSMA was deployed following armed attacks by extremist militant groups in the country against the government, and their taking control of northern Mali in 2012.

- According to Dawn on April 16, UN Envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths announced that the Yemeni Government and Houthi rebels have reached an agreement on the military plan for the withdrawal of forces from the key port city of Hodeida.

Martin Griffiths indicated that no timetable was announced for the withdrawal. He said, “When, and I hope it is when and not if, these redeployments happen they will be the first voluntary withdrawals of forces in this long conflict.” He also noted that agreement on the first phase of withdrawals was reached in negotiations between the warring parties and Lt. Gen. Michael Lollesgaard, who heads the UN operation that is monitoring a broader cease-fire and redeployment agreement reached in Sweden in December, 2018. The UN had first announced the withdrawal of forces from Hodeida city and its ports in February 2019. However, both parties failed to workout redeployment owing to renewed clashes in and outside Hodeida.

--- Moiz Khan