

May 16 – May 31

AREA BRIEF

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Area Briefs: 16-31 May, 2019

General Observations

Pakistan

- On May 30, Pakistan Army sentenced retired Lieutenant General, Javed Iqbal to 14 years “rigorous imprisonment” for espionage and leaking “sensitive information to foreign agencies prejudiced to the national security.” Awan joined the ranks of senior military personnel including Lt Gen (R) Asad Durrani, former ISI chief, who faced court martial for writing a book jointly with an ex-RAW chief. Two other senior officers Lt Gen (R) M Afzal and Major General Khalid Zahid Akhtar also faced court martial in NLC scandal involving an investment of over Rs4 billion in the stock market.
- On May 26, at least 3 people were killed and 15 were injured, including 5 soldiers after a check post came under attack by a group of people in North Waziristan. According to ISPR, Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) MNAs, Mohsin Dawar and Ali Wazir were leading the group. The Army said that the group of people attacked the check post and also pressurised troops “to release the suspected terrorists’ facilitator.” Although some of the PTM’s grievances may well be justified, the manner in which they are trying to incite the population against the military is not acceptable as it is harmful for the country.
- Another unfortunate incident occurred in Quetta on May 24, when at least 3 people were killed and 19 injured after a bomb was set off remotely inside a Mosque during Friday prayers.
- On May 30, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi attended the meeting of the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) in Jeddah where he highlighted human rights violations in the Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK). Qureshi also sought the support of OIC member states for constituting a UN Commission of Inquiry to investigate the rights violations and excesses in IOK.
- On May 26, Chinese Vice President, Wang Qishan visited Pakistan and met with Pakistan’s leadership including, President Dr Arif Alvi and Prime Minister Imran Khan.
- During his visit to Islamabad on May 24, Iran’s Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif held talks with Pakistan’s civilian and military leadership. The main focus of the meeting was the regional security situation, particularly the rising US-Iran tensions. PM Khan emphasised that war was “not a solution to any problem” and called upon all sides “to exercise maximum restraint in the current situation.”

- On May 26, 2019, Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan telephoned Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to congratulate him on his victory. Khan also reiterated his desire to work with Modi for “peace, progress and prosperity in South Asia.” The Indian government however decided not to invite Prime Minister Imran Khan to Narendra Modi’s swearing-in ceremony. Meanwhile, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi said a dialogue to find a solution to the Kashmir dispute, Siachen and Sir Creek would be a significant measure instead of attending the swearing-in ceremony. Earlier on May 23, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi held a brief informal meeting with his Indian counterpart Sushma Swaraj on the sidelines of the SCO Council of Foreign Ministers Meeting in Bishkek. Qureshi told Swaraj that Pakistan was looking for “all the issues with India to be resolved through dialogue.”
- According to a May 23 press release by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), Pakistan conducted “successful training launch of medium-range surface to surface ballistic missile Shaheen-II.” The launch was aimed at ensuring operational readiness of Army Strategic Forces Command. With a strike-range of 1,500 kilometres, the missile is capable of carrying both conventional and nuclear warheads. The test came a day after the Indian Ministry of Defence announced successful test-firing of a BrahMos surface-to-surface supersonic cruise missile from Nicobar Island on May 22, 2019.

International

- On May 23, Indian PM Narendra Modi and his BJP swept the Indian Election. PM Modi has been called a political strongman, with an ability to stir huge crowds, setting wildly ambitious goals and putting India in position to play a larger role on the world stage. Notwithstanding his popularity Modi has been widely criticised for pitting religion and social communities against each other to consolidate power. Modi swept the election with a populist agenda favouring India’s Hindu majority and stoking fresh fear in the country’s minority communities, especially Muslims. There are growing fears that Modi’s re-election would give rise to greater religious hatred since a number of BJP’s newly elected members are known for their Hindu nationalist views and encouraging communal hatred.
- On May 27 Chancellor Sebastian Kurz’s caretaker government were ousted from power with a no-confidence vote in the Austrian Parliament. A simple majority of lawmakers stood up in a demonstration of their withdrawal of trust from Kurz, making him the first Austrian leader in more than seven decades to be removed from power by his peers in Parliament. Kurz’s coalition government with the far-right Freedom Party collapsed after the party’s leader, Heinz-Christian Strache resigned as Vice Chancellor on May 18, 2019

when a video emerged that showed him promising government contracts in exchange for financial support from a woman claiming to be a wealthy Russian.

- Meanwhile recent elections in India, Australia and the Philippines have all shown public support for tough leaders. European populists also tried to promote some of the same issues. They opposed immigration, promote nationalism, blame globalisation and promise a return to better, bygone eras. However, on May 27 at least 75% of voters backed parties that support Europe, blocking a major populist victory in the continent. The European Election has been described as a contest between angry, disaffected nationalists against those supporting Europe. While populists managed to increase their share of seats in the European Parliament, they were denied the sort of continent-wide earthquake they were hoping for.
- On May 27 Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu suffered a stunning defeat after he failed to meet a midnight deadline to form a new government. His defeat has cast a cloud over his future as Prime Minister and thrust Israel into the chaos of a new election.
- In a surprising win, Scott Morrison, scored victory in the Australian federal elections on May 18. The conservative victory adds Australia to a growing list of countries that have shifted rightward through the politics of grievance, including Brazil, Hungary and Italy. Morrison's pitch had warned older and rural voters in particular that a government of the left would leave them behind and favour condescending elites.
- Notwithstanding British Prime Minister Theresa May's statement on May 24 announcing her resignation the Brexit problem and its dilemmas are far from being resolved. May plans to step down as the leader of the Conservative Party on June 7, 2019.
- On May 29 Special Counsel, Robert S. Mueller III, declined to clear President Trump of obstruction of justice. Mueller said, "If we had had confidence that the President clearly did not commit a crime, we would have said so." In a clear reference to the Congress's ability to conduct impeachment proceedings, Mueller noted that while Justice Department policy prohibits charging a sitting president with a crime, the Constitution provides for another remedy to formally accuse a president of wrongdoing.
- Earlier on May 22 President Trump walked out of a meeting with Democratic congressional leaders declaring that he could not work with them until they stopped investigating him. He lashed out at Speaker Nancy Pelosi for accusing him of a cover-up. He also demanded that Democrats "get these phony investigations over with." On May 21 a bloc of liberal Democrats demanded for an impeachment inquiry of President Trump. The development highlights deep division within the party and the growing

difficulties that Speaker Nancy Pelosi faces as she tries to chart a more methodical course.

- During a joint press conference with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on May 27, US President Donald Trump announced he was not looking for regime change in Tehran. Trump stated, “We’re not looking for regime change, we’re looking for no nuclear weapons,” adding that he believed they could “make a deal” with Iran.
- Seeking an end to the brewing Iranian crisis, on May 16 President Trump told acting Defence Secretary, Patrick Shanahan, that he did not want to go to war with Iran. The statement prompted senior diplomats to identify ways to defuse the tensions. According to reports the Sultan of Oman and European officials played a role in persuading Iran to defuse tensions. The development also brought to light internal tensions between Trump and his cadre of military advisors including National Security Advisor John Bolton.

---Amina Afzal

AMERICAS

Domestic

- On May 29, Robert Mueller issued his first public statement where he maintained that he was 'not confident' that President Trump did not commit a crime, triggering Democratic lawmakers to call for impeachment proceedings.
- On May 22, US President Donald Trump abruptly ended a meeting with Democratic leaders, stating he would not work with them on an infrastructure plan unless they stop investigating him and threatening to impeach him. Trump's move resulted in fresh calls for impeachment.

In a press conference after Trump walked out of a meeting with Democratic leaders, Trump defended himself stating "There was no collusion, there was no obstruction. This whole thing was a takedown attempt on the President of the United States." The Mueller report however did not fully exonerate Trump, but cited 11 instances of potential obstruction of justice recommending the Congress investigate those further. Trump added, that while he had hoped to discuss infrastructure with House speaker Nancy Pelosi and the Senate minority leader, Chuck Schumer, "you can't do it under these circumstances, so get these phony investigations over with". Schumer dismissed Trump's complaint that investigations into his administration and talks on an infrastructure program cannot run in parallel; and suggested that the real reason Trump was shying from talks on infrastructure was because he could not find funding for it. Schumer stated, "We are interested in doing infrastructure. It's clear the President isn't. He is looking for every excuse, whether it was let's do trade first, or whether it was he's not going to pay for any funding, or whether today that there are investigations going on. Hello? There were investigations going on three weeks ago when we met and he still met with us". He added, "But now that he was forced to actually say how he'd pay for it, he had to run away, and he came up with this pre-planned excuse. It's clear this was not a spontaneous move on the president's part". Tensions between the Trump Administration and Democrats are at an all-time high, with a growing number of Democrats calling to launch impeachment proceedings against Trump. Pelosi stated, on May 23, 2019, the White House was "crying out for impeachment" and expressed her concern for the President's wellbeing stating, "maybe he wants to take a leave of absence." She also called on Trump's family to intervene for the President's wellbeing and "for the good of the country". Pelosi maintained she was not pushing for impeachment despite describing the President's actions as impeachable, stating, "I think impeachment is a very divisive place for us to go in the country".

On May 29, 2019, Mueller issued his first public statement making it clear that he was 'not confident' that Trump did not commit a crime. He added that charging the President was "not an option", not because of a lack of evidence, but rather due to longstanding justice department

policy. His statement reignited scores of Democratic lawmakers to call for Trump's impeachment.

- On May 24, US district Judge Haywood Gilliam Jr blocked US President Donald Trump from building sections of the border wall with Mexico using funds secured under Trump's declaration of a national emergency.

Judge Haywood Gilliam Jr halted the Trump Administration's efforts to redirect military-designated funds for wall construction that Trump secured after declaring a national emergency. Gilliam Jr ruled, "The position that when Congress declines the executive's request to appropriate funds, the executive nonetheless may simply find a way to spend those funds 'without Congress' does not square with fundamental separation of powers principles dating back to the earliest days of our Republic". On February 16, 2019 Trump declared a national emergency to secure funding for his proposed border wall with Mexico after Congress passed a bill that allocated only USD 1.3 billion to constructing Trump's proposed border wall with Mexico- an amount far below the USD 5.7 billion originally sought by Trump.

- On May 24, US President Donald Trump issued a directive to the intelligence community to "quickly and fully cooperate" with Attorney General William Barr's investigation into the origins of the Mueller report.

In a move to 'investigate the investigators', Trump is looking to investigate and undermine the findings of special counsel Robert Mueller's inquiry amid mounting Democratic calls to bring impeachment proceedings. The White House Press Secretary, Sarah Sanders, stated Trump is delegating to Barr the "full and complete authority" to declassify documents relating to the probe.

- On May 23, John Walker Lindh, was freed early from federal prison after serving 17 years. Lindh, who was 20 years old at the time of his capture was fighting for the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001.

Lindh had been sentenced to 20 years after pleading guilty in 2002 to charges of supplying services to the Taliban. Lindh converted to Islam as a teenager and traveled to Yemen to learn Arabic and then to Pakistan to study Islam. A report published in January 2017 by the US government's National Counterterrorism Center stated that as of May 2016, Lindh "continued to advocate for global jihad and to write and translate violent extremist texts". Lawmakers have questioned Lindh's early release with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo calling Lindh's release "unexplainable and unconscionable".

- On May 20, US District Judge Amit Mehta ruled that the firm, Mazars LLP, that handled Donald Trump's finances before he became president must hand over the records under the subpoena issued by the House committee.
- On May 17, US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin defied a House subpoena for Donald Trump's tax returns.

The Chairman of a US Congressional Committee issued subpoenas for six years of US President Donald Trump's tax returns. The White House has consistently refused to hand over Trump's tax returns, as Trump claims he is under audit by the Internal Revenue Services (IRS)- the IRS however has made clear that their audit does not prevent the release of this information. Democrats are currently investigating Trump's past financial dealings, and current business interests and possible conflicts of interest while he is in the post of president. The Treasury Department and the IRS had been given a deadline until May 17, 2019 to hand over the requested documents. Mnuchin said in a letter that the subpoenas from the House ways and means committee chairman, Richard Neal, a Democrat, was "unprecedented" and "lacks a legitimate legislative purpose". In response Neal stated, "We will likely proceed to court as quickly as next week". On May 20, 2019, US District Judge Amit Mehta ruled that Mazars LLP must comply by the subpoena issued by the House and hand over Trump's financial records. Trump announced he would appeal the decision.

- On May 18, Justin Amash, Republican legislator from Michigan, became the first Republican lawmaker to publicly accuse US President Donald Trump of "impeachable conduct."

Amash, became the first politician from his party to call for removing the US President and accused Attorney General William Barr of deliberately misleading the public over Special Counsel Robert Mueller's report on Russian interference in the US election. Amash added, "Contrary to Barr's portrayal, Mueller's report reveals that President Trump engaged in specific actions and a pattern of behaviour that met the threshold for impeachment". Amash's statement was well received by many lawmakers in the Democratic party that have been discussing the possibility of impeaching Trump.

- On May 16, Bill de Blasio, Governor of New York, announced his bid to enter the race for president in the 2020 elections joining the growing ranks of Democratic contenders for the upcoming elections.

International

- On May 30, US President Donald Trump said he would impose a five% tariff on all goods coming to the US from Mexico in response to what he called a "mass incursion" of migrants that were entering the US illegally.

Trump announced that the tariff on Mexican goods would start on June 10, 2019 and increase every month to 25% on October 1, 2019 unless Mexico stops the flow of illegal migrants into the US.

- On May 29, the United States and the UAE announced that a mutual defence cooperation agreement had come into force, amid increasing tensions between Washington and Tehran.

A joint statement was released that said, “The DCA [Defense Cooperation Agreement] will enhance military coordination between the United States and the United Arab Emirates, further advancing an already robust military, political, and economic partnership at a critical time”. The statement added the DCA will promote a “closer collaboration on defence and security matters and supporting efforts by both nations to maintain security in the Gulf region.” The agreement comes at a time when tensions run high between the US and its Middle Eastern allies and Iran.

- On May 27, US President Donald Trump held a joint press conference with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, where he announced he was not looking for regime change in Tehran.

Trump stated, “We’re not looking for regime change, we’re looking for no nuclear weapons,” adding that he believed they could “make a deal” with Iran. Abe offered to broker a dialogue between the two nations amid rising tensions between Washington and Tehran. In related news, on May 28, 2019 Trump announced he expected Japan’s military to reinforce US forces throughout Asia and elsewhere, as Japan upgrades the ability of its forces to operate further from its shores.

- On May 25, the US Department of Defence stated the presence of terrorist groups in Afghanistan was the key issue that would determine the fate of the ongoing talks between the US and the Taliban.

The Pentagon’s report titled, ‘Lead Inspector General for Operation Freedom’s Sentinel’ reviewed the quarter ending on March 31, 2019 and examined the activities of terrorist groups in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The report focused “particularly (on) Al Qaeda and ISIS-K,” noting that those two groups “remain a central focus of the Operation Freedom Sentinel (OFS) mission and has emerged as one of the key concerns in the ongoing peace negotiations”. Operation Freedom’s Sentinel (OFS) is the official name used by the US government for the US-led global war on terrorism. The report noted, “As the peace talks continue, the questions of whether the Taliban can help influence and deny sanctuary to these groups, and the extent to which an ongoing US counter-terrorism presence may be required, have become more prominent”. Both US and Afghan officials claim at least 20 terrorist organisations are operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The report however noted that most of these groups do not have global aspirations or reach. According to the report ISIS-K, Haqqani Network and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan are the three largest groups in the region- with each group having between 3,000 to 5,000 fighters. The report noted that the Islamic Emirate High Council is the fourth largest group with 1,000 fighters, while Al Qaeda has now been reduced to 300 fighters.

- On May 24, US President Donald Trump announced 1,500 troops will be deployed to the Middle East amid rising tensions with Iran.

Trump stated that 1,500 troops would be deployed and would have a “mostly protective” role to counter a growing threat from Iran. In related news, the Pentagon cited concerns that Iran is planning to attack US interests in the region, and for the first time publicly blamed Iran and its proxies for recent tanker bombings near the UAE and a rocket attack in Iraq. V-Adm Michael Gilday told Pentagon reporters that the US had “very high confidence” that Iran’s Revolutionary Guards were responsible for the explosions on four tankers, and that Iranian proxies in Iraq fired rockets into Baghdad. He said Iran also tried to deploy modified small boats that were capable of launching cruise missiles. Gilday announced the US will deploy a squadron of 12 fighter jets, manned and unmanned surveillance aircraft, and a number of military engineers to the region. In related news, on May 29, 2019, US National Security Adviser John Bolton confirmed that Iran was “almost certainly” behind the attacks on ships off the UAE earlier this month.

- On May 24, US President Donald Trump bypassed Congress to sell \$8.1 billion in arms to Saudi Arabia and other Arab allies, citing a threat from Iran.

Citing the growing threat from Iran, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the Administration would circumvent the required review by Congress to approve 22 arms transfers to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Jordan. Pompeo noted the freeze on sales by Congress could affect the Arab allies’ operational abilities. He stated the weapons are meant “to deter Iranian aggression and build partner self-defense capacity”. Senator Robert Menendez, who has been trying to block arms shipments to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, fearing they would contribute to the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, stated, “I am disappointed, but not surprised, that the Trump administration has failed once again to prioritise our long-term national security interests or stand up for human rights, and instead is granting favors to authoritarian countries like Saudi Arabia”. Mendez added, the Trump administration failed to meet the legal definition of an emergency, and vowed to work with lawmakers to counter Trump’s decision. Opposition to the arms sale was not limited to Democrats. Congressman Michael McCaul, the top Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, stated Trump’s decision was “unfortunate,” and “will damage certain future congressional interactions”. Under the Arms Control Act of 1976, Congress requires the president to notify Congress of any pending arms sale. In the case of sales to the Middle East, it would need to be certified that any shipments would not adversely affect Israel’s qualitative military advantage over its regional neighbours. Congress can block any arms sale simply by passing a resolution of disapproval. However, an exemption in the law allows the president to waive the need for congressional approval by declaring a national security emergency. There is a growing divide between Congress and the Trump administration over the handling of the US strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia. The Democratically controlled Congress is unlikely to give approval to any arms sale to Saudi Arabia and has been critical of the Saudi war in Yemen that has resulted in scores of civilian casualties. Furthermore, Congress has strongly condemned the murder of Saudi

writer Jamal Khashoggi, that US intelligence has concluded was ordered by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

- On May 24, Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, was charged with violating the Espionage Act.

The eighteen-count indictment issued by the Department of Justice alleged Assange 'risked serious harm' to the US by publishing hundreds of thousands of secret diplomatic cables and files on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The US is looking to extradite Assange who is currently in London. Assange if found guilty could face up to 175 years in prison.

- On May 21, US State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus announced the US believed the Syrian government may be using chemical weapons.

Ortagus claimed the Syrian government may have used chlorine in an attack on May 19, 2019, that violated a ceasefire that has protected several million civilians in the greater Idlib area. Ortagus stated, "We are still gathering information on [Sunday's] incident, but we repeat our warning that if the Assad regime uses chemical weapons, the United States and our allies will respond quickly and appropriately".

- On May 21, acting US Defence Secretary Patrick Shanahan announced that the alleged threat from Iran has been contained.
- On May 19, US President Donald Trump announced on twitter, "If Iran wants to fight, that will be the official end of Iran. Never threaten the United States again."

Shanahan attributed the US' show of force in the Middle East as the reason for the threat receding. The US had recently deployed an aircraft carrier and its accompanying ships to the Gulf, along with B-52 bombers to Qatar in response to an alleged Iranian threat. Shanahan stated, "Our prudent response, I think, has given the Iranians time to recalculate. I think our response was a measure of our will and our resolve that we will protect our people and our interests in the region".

On May 19, 2019 Trump issued a direct threat to Iran suggesting that the Islamic Republic will be destroyed if it threatens US interests. His statement came days after Trump announced he was prepared for talks with Iran despite rising tensions between the two nations. In related news, Trump had on May 16, 2019 told Shanahan that he does not want to go to war with Iran amid rising tensions between both countries. Tensions between Iran and the US have been rising for months, and increased after the US announced it had received credible threats by Iranian regime forces earlier this month. In addition, the mysterious sabotage attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf, and drone strikes on Saudi oil installations, believed to have been perpetrated by Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen have fueled tensions further.

- On May 20, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) warned US firms against using Chinese-made drones, saying drones give Beijing “unfettered access” to company data.

The DHS warning cited “strong concerns about any technology product that takes American data into the territory of an authoritarian state that permits its intelligence services to have unfettered access to that data or otherwise abuses that access”. The report alleges that Chinese drones can record and store sensitive data and transmit it back to Chinese intelligence agencies. While no specific manufacturers are named in the report, almost 80 percent of all drones used in the US and Canada are made by DJI, a firm located in Shenzhen, China.

- On May 19, a US warship, the destroyer USS Preble, sailed near the disputed Scarborough Shoal claimed by China in the South China Sea.

Commander Clay Doss, a spokesman for the Seventh Fleet sated, “Preble sailed within 12 nautical miles of Scarborough Reef in order to challenge excessive maritime claims and preserve access to the waterways as governed by international law”. The operation was seen as Washington’s attempt to counter Beijing’s efforts to limit freedom of navigation in the strategic waters, where Chinese, Japanese and some south-east Asian navies operate. China has claimed almost all of the strategic South China Sea, and has strongly condemned the US and its allies from conducting naval operations near the islands it occupies. Analysts fear the US’ move is likely to raise tensions further in the face of an on-going trade war between the US and China.

- On May 18, US diplomatic posts from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) warned that commercial airliners flying over the wider Persian Gulf could face the risk of being “misidentified” amid “heightened military activities and increased political tension” between the US and Iran.

Tensions between the US and Iran flared up after the US ordered warships and bombers to the Gulf to counter an alleged threat from Iran. Washington’s relationship with Tehran has been deteriorating after the US withdrew from the 2015 nuclear accord between Iran and world powers, and imposed wide-reaching sanctions on Iran. In retaliation, Iran announced this month that it would start backing away from terms of the deal earlier this month and has set a 60-day deadline for Europe to come up with new terms, or it would commence enriching uranium closer to weapons-grade levels.

- On May 17, US President Donald Trump terminated the preferential trade agreement which provided Turkey partial tax-free access to US markets.

The US had threatened to end Turkey’s participation in the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) program, more than two months earlier, citing the country is no longer a developing state. Analysts however view this move as Washington retaliating to growing tensions with Turkey; one

key source of tension has been Turkey's refusal to give up the purchase of Russian S-400 missile air-defense systems, which the US views to be a threat.

- On May 16, Hatice Cengiz, the fiancée of murdered Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, appeared before the US House of Representatives and called for a US-sponsored international investigation into Khashoggi's killing.

US legislators, while sympathetic to Cengiz's cause, have been unable to offer concrete assurances that the US will pursue an investigation into the murder of the slain journalist. Cengiz noted, "All members of Congress that we have spoken with so far tell us about their regrets, but if you are asking for a clear answer, there has been no clear confirmation that there will be an investigation". Saudi Arabia has acknowledged it was responsible for Khashoggi's murder, but has blamed "rogue" security agents for the crime. While Saudi Arabia has denied any involvement of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, US intelligence assessments have concluded the prince ordered Khashoggi's murder and the US Senate passed a resolution holding him responsible. However, US President Donald Trump and members of his administration have declined to assign blame to Crown Prince Mohammed.

- On May 16, US President Donald Trump signed an executive order prohibiting the purchase or use of equipment from companies that pose "an unacceptable risk to the national security of the US".

While the White House insisted that no particular country or company was targeted, Chinese telecom giant Huawei is likely to be hit by the move amid concerns that its equipment could be used by Chinese intelligence services. In related news, the US Commerce Department added Huawei to a blacklist that will make it much harder for the firm to use crucial US components in its phones, telecom gear, databases and other electronics. This recent move targeting Chinese telecom giant Huawei comes amid rising tensions between the US and China, after both countries failed to reach a trade deals and increased tariffs on each other's goods earlier this month.

Latin America

- On May 27, a second round of talks were held in Norway between representatives of Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido, and Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro.
- On May 17, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro welcomed the "beginning of talks" with the Venezuelan opposition in Norway, after months of bloody clashes between the two sides.

Maduro stated on May 17, 2019 "The talks have begun nicely to move toward agreements of peace, agreement and harmony, and I ask for the support of all Venezuelan people to advance on

the path of peace". The second round of talks in Norway commenced on May 27, 2019 but ended without an agreement on how to end the ongoing impasse. Currently, the US and 50 other mostly Western countries have recognised opposition leader Juan Guaido as the interim leader of Venezuela while Russia, China, Turkey and Cuba back Maduro.

---Kiran Mazari

ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

- On May 30, Anatoly Antonov, Russia's Ambassador to the US, said that US claims about Russia's alleged involvement in low-level nuclear tests were an attempt to undermine nuclear arms control.

Ambassador Antonov said, "The US allegations look like a well-planned and directed attack not only and not so much on Russia as on the arms control regime, and on the entire architecture for strategic stability." Antonov made these comments in response to the Head of the US' Defence Intelligence Agency, Lieutenant General Robert P. Ashley' allegations that Russia may be conducting low-level nuclear testing that flouts the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) which was negotiated in the 1990s. During his talk at an arms control forum at the Hudson Institute, Ashley said, "We believe they have the capability in the way they are set up" to conduct low-level nuclear tests that exceed the zero-yield limit set in the CTBT. However, the Head of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO), Lassina Zerbo rejected any detection of such tests. Zerbo said, "We are pretty confident that any militarily significant explosive test would not go undetected. So far we have not had any signal to that effect and we are looking for further evidence." He also indicated that media reports have overstated Ashley's comments. He noted, "It was not about Russia conducting any low-yield tests but that Russia may have the capability for doing so."

- On May 29, a White House official indicated that US President Donald Trump would not take any decision on the extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).

Tim Morrison, Director at the National Security Council, said, "Extending the New START Treaty is under discussion within the Administration and a decision the President will make next year." Morrison made these comments at an arms control forum hosted by the Hudson Institute.

The US and Russia signed the New START on April 8, 2010, in Prague, and the Treaty entered into force on February 5, 2011. The New START obligates both the countries to limit their strategic deployed nuclear warheads. On February 5, 2018, the US Department of State and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation announced that they had met their obligation of reducing their deployed strategic nuclear forces under the New START. However, the New START is scheduled to expire in 2021, unless it is replaced before this date by a new agreement, or the existing agreement is extended for an additional five years to 2026 with the mutual consent of both parties.

- On May 25, US National Security Advisor, John Bolton called North Korea's tests of short-range missiles a violation of UN Security Council resolutions.

Advisor John Bolton said, “The UN Security Council resolution prohibits the launch of any ballistic missiles and there is no doubt that North Korea has violated the resolution.” While noting that President Donald Trump still wanted to continue diplomatic relations with the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un, Bolton urged Kim to return to denuclearisation talks. North Korea resumed missile tests following a long pause since 2017. Earlier, on May 4 and 9, 2019, North Korea tested “long-range multiple rocket launchers and tactical guided weapons, and two short-range missiles,” respectively.

- On May 23, Pakistan’s Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) noted in its press release that the country conducted “successful training launch of medium-range surface to surface ballistic missile Shaheen-II.”

According to the ISPR, the training launch of Shaheen-II was aimed at ensuring operational readiness of Army Strategic Forces Command. With a strike-range of 1,500 kilometres, the missile is capable of carrying both conventional and nuclear warheads.

In a related development, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergey Ryabkov said that Pakistan has every right to develop its own missile programme until the country complies with relevant international obligations. Ryabkov noted, “Countries that develop their missile programmes should act in accordance with relevant international obligations. We do not see any obstacles for Pakistan to develop its missile programme.” He made these comments in response to Pakistan’s training launch of Shaheen-II ballistic missile.

- On May 27, India successfully test-fired a new version of the medium-range surface to air Akash MK1S air and missile defence system.
- On May 22, Indian Ministry of Defence announced successful test-firing of a BrahMos surface-to-surface supersonic cruise missile from Car Nicobar Island.

India’s Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) conducted the test of Akash missile with a new indigenously developed seeker. This was the second test of the system. The first test was conducted on May 25, 2018. Akash MK1S is an advanced version of the existing Akash air and missile defence system. The weapon system is capable of targeting advanced aerial targets including fighter jets, cruise missiles and ballistic missiles. The system is developed by the DRDO as a new variant of Akash MK1, Akash-MK2 missile interceptors.

According to the Indian Ministry of Defence on May 22, India carried out successful test-firing of a BrahMos surface-to-surface supersonic cruise missile. The missile was tested during a joint training by the Indian Army, Navy, and Air Force. The Ministry noted, “The combat missile was test fired on a specially designed target chosen at a range of 270 kilometres, thus validating deep penetration capability by the supersonic cruise missile and accurate engagement of targets in depth.” The statement added, “BrahMos missile has by now established itself as a major ‘force multiplier’ in modern day battlefield with impeccable multi role and multi-platform launch

capabilities furthering the confidence amongst our troops.” With a strike-range of 400 kilometres, the missile is capable of reaching speed of up to Mach 3. The missile was inducted into the Army in 2007.

- On May 17, Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif urged China and Russia to save the country’s July 2015 Nuclear agreement, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed with major world powers.

Foreign Minister Javad Zarif said, “If the international community and other JCPOA member countries, and our friends in the JCPOA like China and Russia, want to keep this achievement, it is required that they make sure the Iranian people enjoy the benefits of the JCPOA with concrete actions.” Zarif made these comments during his meeting with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in Beijing. Iranian Foreign Minister’s meeting with Wang was part of a diplomatic effort to protect the nuclear agreement, following the US’ unilateral withdrawal and re-instatement of sanctions. Zarif indicated that steps which could salvage the agreement were normalisation of economic relations and continuity of trade with Iran. During the meeting, Wang noted that he understood the situation, and China condemns the US’ re-imposition of sanctions, and maintained that China has always supported Tehran in safeguarding its legitimate rights.

- On May 25, US President Donald Trump cleared the sale of \$8 billion worth of weapons to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Jordan, despite reservations from Congress.
- On May 17, the US State Department cleared \$1.017 billion in possible weapon sales to its three allies including Canada, South Korea and Japan.

According to Reuters, the Trump Administration informed a congressional committee that it will go ahead with 22 military sales to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Jordan. US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo said, “These sales will support our allies, enhance Middle East stability, and help these nations to deter and defend themselves from the Islamic Republic of Iran.” Pompeo indicated that any delay in sales would create and increase risk for US partners at a time of instability caused by Iran. However, the decision has left members of the Congress infuriated as they were opposed to sales of offensive military equipment to Saudi Arabia and the UAE owing to allegations of huge civilian casualties from their air campaign in Yemen and other human rights violations. According to US Arms Export Control Act, the President has the prerogative to waive the need for congressional approval by declaring a national security emergency. Senator Bob Menendez, who reviews such laws being the ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said, “I am disappointed, but not surprised, that the Trump Administration has failed once again to prioritise our long-term national security interests or stand up for human rights, and instead is granting favours to authoritarian countries like Saudi Arabia.”

In a related development on May 17, 2019, the US State Department issued three notifications clearing purchase of MK 54 lightweight torpedo conversion kits worth \$387 million to Canada,

\$313.9 million worth of SM-2 Block IIIB missiles to South Korea and \$313 million worth of AIM-120C-7 Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missiles to Japan. The notifications indicated that Raytheon is the primary contractor on all three of the potential sales. South Korea's military procurement request cover 94 SM-2 Block IIIB missiles, along with associated equipment and training, including 12 MK 97 MOD 0 guidance sections, while Japan's procurement covers 60 AIM-120C-7 AMRAAMs, one AIM-120C-7 AMRAAM guidance section and associated support. Canada's request covers 425 MK 54 lightweight torpedo conversion kits. These proposed sales are now subject to Congress' approval.

--- Moiz Khan

CHINA, EAST ASIA & PACIFIC

China

- On May 30, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister, Zhang Hanhui accused the US for practicing “naked economic terrorism” by engaging in a trade war with China.

The Vice Foreign Minister said that China is “against the trade war, however, it is not afraid of it.” A trade war was initiated between the US and China in 2018, after US President Donald Trump imposed heavy tariffs on imports from the country. Since then, the two sides have imposed tariffs on more than \$360 billion in two-way trade. Officials from Washington and Beijing have held multiple rounds of trade negotiations to settle the issue. So far, all negotiations have remained unsuccessful.

- On May 27, Chinese Foreign Ministry reaffirmed its opposition to any form of official exchanges between the US and Taiwan.

The response came days after a meeting between Taiwan’s National Security Chief, David Lee and US National Security Advisor John Bolton. China maintains that US adherence to the ‘One China’ policy is the most important factor in determining relations with the country.

- On May 22, Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi criticised the US for using state power against Chinese telecom giant Huawei.

The Chinese Foreign Minister said that the US is “arbitrarily” exerting pressure on a private Chinese company terming it “economic bullying.” He warned that Beijing was ready to “fight to the very end” in its trade war with Washington. The Chinese Foreign Minister comments came after the US placed Huawei on a trade blacklist, banning US companies from doing business with the firm.

North Korea

- On May 29, North Korean Foreign Ministry accused the US of showing bad faith in negotiations and warned that the “use of strength is not at all a monopoly of the United States.”

North Korea’s reaction came soon after the US announced that it conducted a subcritical nuclear test on February 13, 2019, just days before a second summit between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. The Foreign Ministry said that it proves the US seeks “a strength-based solution of the issues,” adding that there is “no change at all in the US evil ambition to conquer North Korea by force.”

- On May 27, North Korean Foreign Ministry criticised US National Security Advisor John Bolton terming him a “war maniac” after he said Pyongyang’s latest missile tests violated UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions.

The North Korean Foreign Ministry said that the missile tests did not target or threaten any neighbouring country. Earlier, on May 4, 2019, North Korea tested multiple rocket launchers and tactical guided weapons into the Sea of Japan. In a related development on May 24, 2019, North Korean Foreign Ministry said that talks over denuclearisation with the US “will never be resumed” unless Washington halts “hostile acts” and demands of “unilateral disarmament.”

Japan

- During his visit to Japan on May 24, US President Donald Trump met with Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo.

The two sides discussed issues related to trade and North Korea. The Japanese Premier noted that both Japan and the US were on the same page vis-à-vis the denuclearisation of North Korea. Donald Trump assured Shinzo Abe that he would work with Tokyo to bring home Japanese citizens who were kidnapped by North Korean agents decades ago. On his part, PM Abe said the abduction issue remained the “most important thing” for his government. The US President also talked about relations with North Korea saying “the country had tremendous economic potential.”

Malaysia

- On May 31, Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad held a bilateral meeting with his Japanese counterpart, Shinzo Abe in Tokyo.

During their meeting, Abe and Mahathir agreed to expand cooperation in achieving a free and open Indo-Pacific region. Dr Mahathir said that Malaysia seeks a strong relationship between the two countries. Meanwhile, PM Abe said that he looks forward to a Japan-Malaysia relationship that suits the new era in various fields and sectors.

Australia

- On May 18, Prime Minister Scott Morrison was declared victorious in the country’s federal elections after Liberal-National coalition defeated the opposition Labour Party.

During his election campaign, Morrison promised tax cuts and strengthening Australia’s economy. Morrison has become the country’s sixth Prime Minister in eight years. Elections are

held in Australia after every three years. However, no Prime Minister has succeeded in serving a full term since 2007 due of political infighting.

The Philippine

- On May 22, President Rodrigo Duterte regained power after his allies won a majority of the 12 Senate seats in midterm elections.

Duterte's win would give him sweeping power to amend the country's constitution. Despite criticism from activists and the opposition over his drug war, Duterte remains hugely popular across the Philippines.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

EUROPE

- On May 29, the EU Commission released a report that argued Turkey was moving 'further away' from the EU.

The EU' executive stated that Turkey's hopes of joining the bloc were fading in the face of deteriorating conditions in courts, prisons and the economy. However, Ankara rejected the criticisms as being "unfair" and "disproportionate" and maintained it was "a part of Europe". Even though Turkey is still considered a security ally, its candidacy to join the EU is currently frozen because of "serious backsliding" on rights, the judiciary and economic policy.

- On May 29, First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon tweeted that her government had "Just published a bill to set the rules for an independence referendum – to allow the Scottish people to choose our own future rather than having a Brexit future imposed on us".

The bill does not cite an exact date for a poll, but marks the ruling SNP's latest bid to make a case for Scottish statehood after the 2014 independence referendum which was narrowly defeated by 55-45%.

- On May 29, Nigel Farage, head of the Brexit party, held talks to join the far-right group in the European parliament as his party is keeping its options open about its future allies.
- On May 28, German Chancellor Angela Merkel met with French President Emmanuel Macron on the sidelines of the European Union leaders summit. The two leaders discussed who should run the EU executive for the next five years after the conclusion of the European Parliament elections.

France and Germany are at loggerheads over who will succeed Jean Claude-Juncker as the head of the European Commission. German Chancellor Angela Merkel said Manfred Weber "naturally" had her support. Weber is the choice of the centre-right European People's Party (EPP), which remains the biggest bloc in the European Parliament, despite losing nearly 40 seats in the recent elections. French President Emmanuel Macron however announced his support for centre-left pick Frans Timmermans, EU Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier and EU Competition Commissioner Margrethe Vestager, as suitable candidates while pointedly omitting Weber from the list.

- On May 24, UK Prime Minister Theresa May announced her resignation after failing to deliver Brexit.

May formally announced she will step down from her role as Prime Minister on June 7, 2019. In related news, on May 25, 2019, British Health Minister Matt Hancock, ex-Brexit Minister Dominic Raab and former House of Commons leader Andrea Leadsom announced their bid to replace May. Former Foreign Minister Boris Johnson, current Foreign Minister Jeremy Hunt, International Development Secretary Rory Stewart and former Work and Pensions Minister Esther McVey had earlier announced they would stand. In related news, on May 27, 2019, British Interior Minister Sajid Javid announced he would stand in the upcoming leadership race. May has failed to pass a Brexit deal through the British parliament on three occasions. This has resulted in the original Brexit date of March 29 to be extended until October 31 to see if any compromise could be reached. All contenders for May's position have stated they could build a consensus or amend May's deal, although the EU has made clear it will not renegotiate the treaty.

- On May 23, European Parliamentary elections were held across the EU with results showing a surge in popularity of the Greens party and right-wing and Eurosceptic parties.

Europe's mainstream parties took a hit in the elections but managed to hold off the surge in populist right-wing parties. The pro-European bloc EPP and the Social-Democratic alliance S&D lost their combined majority however, they still remain the two largest voting blocs in the European Parliament. Populist and nationalist parties fared well in Italy, France and Hungary but did not do as well as expected in Denmark and Germany. In France, Marine Le Pen's National Rally party narrowly beat President Emmanuel Macron's party; dashing his hopes of deeper integration with Europe. In related news, Le Pen called to dissolve the French National Assembly stating, "The President has no other choice but to dissolve the National Assembly and allow for a more democratic voting system in order to better represent this country's majority political opinion". Italy's right-wing League party, led by deputy PM Matteo Salvini, won the EU elections in Italy. The result is a massive gain for the League whose popularity has grown exponentially since 2014. In Britain, Nigel Farage's one issue Brexit Party trounced the main parties and will be sending a large contingent of British eurosceptics to Brussels. Farage's party won 32 percent of the vote, whilst the Conservatives slipped to fifth place with just nine percent. In Germany, the advance of the right was less pronounced and the Green Party gained ground; a trend that was reflected in a "green wave" in many countries. Turnout EU-wide was estimated at 51 percent, the highest in 20 years, suggesting more than 200 million citizens across the 28-nation bloc voted.

- On May 19, tens of thousands of protesters marched across Germany to protest against the rise of right-wing populism and nationalism.

The demonstrations across Germany came days ahead of the upcoming European Parliament vote. There has been a rise in popularity of right-wing populist, nationalist groups throughout Europe, particularly in France and Italy, that are calling to curb immigration, and push for greater authority for national governments. In related news, on May 18, 2019, Italy's populist leader Matteo Salvini gathered various European nationalist parties and their representatives for a unifying rally in Milan. Marine Le Pen of France's National Rally (Rassemblement Nationale), Geert Wilders of the anti-Islam Dutch Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid), and Jorg Meuthen of the anti-migrant Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland or AfD) attended the rally.

- On May 17, talks between the Conservatives and the Labour party collapsed as they failed to reach a compromise on the Brexit plan.

UK Prime Minister Theresa May maintained the sticking point had been Labour splits over a second referendum, while the Labour party said the government had been unwilling to compromise and that May's imminent resignation meant there was no guarantee any promises made would be kept by a successor. The UK remains deeply divided on Brexit and how the UK will eventually leave the EU.

- On May 17, Germany's Bundestag passed a motion labelling the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel as antisemitic.

The non-binding motion passed in the German parliament announced the campaign to boycott Israeli artists and goods was "reminiscent of the most terrible chapter in Germany history" and triggered memories of the Nazis' slogan "Don't buy from Jews". An open letter signed by 60 Israeli academics however, criticised the motion, saying it formed part of an alarming trend of "labelling supporters of Palestinian human rights as antisemitic". The bill was brought to parliament in the face of rising antisemitism in Germany. According to the German Interior Ministry, antisemitic crime and hate crime rose by about 20% in 2018, to 1,800 incidents. The German parliament has become the first parliament in Europe to pass such a motion.

- On May 16, Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte held talks with Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar in Rome.

Conte noted, "We want a ceasefire and we feel that the political path is the only solution". Haftar, looking to unseat UN-backed premier Fayez al-Serraj and take control of the Libyan capital Tripoli, has reached a military and political impasse after a month of fighting.

- On May 16, Boris Johnson confirmed that he is interested in running for the office of Prime Minister after current UK Prime Minister, Theresa May tenders her resignation.

- On May 16, UK Prime Minister, Theresa May agreed to set her resignation date after the vote on the Brexit bill scheduled for early June.

Johnson quit as foreign minister last year over the government's Brexit strategy, and has been an outspoken critic of the Brexit deal May struck with Brussels last November. Many of May's ministers and senior lawmakers are vying for the position of Prime Minister after her resignation. At a meeting of senior members of her Conservative party, May resisted growing demands to set out a detailed plan for her departure. However, Graham Brady, the Chairman of the 1922 Committee of Conservative MPs, said May agreed to resign after a parliamentary vote scheduled in early June on her Brexit bill. He stated, "We have agreed that she and I will meet following the second reading (first vote) of the bill to agree a timetable for the election of a new leader of the Conservative and Unionist Party".

---Kiran Mazari

GLOBAL TERRORISM

- On May 30, police prevented a possible terrorist attack on an Imambargah in Quetta, and killed a potential suicide bomber at its gate.
- On May 17, security forces killed at least three suspected militants, including a ‘commander’ of a banned organisation, during an operation carried out in Kalat district, Pakistan.
- On May 16, at least nine suspected militants were killed and four security personnel injured in an operation conducted by security forces against members of banned militant during in Qabo-Koh-i-Mehran area of Mastung district, Pakistan.

Police noted that the suspected terrorist was wearing a burqa and tried to enter the Imambargah. The terrorist attacked police officers posted at the gate when they stopped him. One policeman was injured in the explosion. Deputy Inspector General of Quetta, Abdul Razzaq Cheema confirmed the incident and said a police constable was injured in the botched attack. DIG Cheema said, “The suicide bomber, wearing a burqa, tried to barge into the Imambargah and tried to detonate his explosives-laden jacket, but failed.”

Earlier on May 17, security forces killed at least three suspected militants, including a ‘commander’ of a banned organisation in an counter-terrorism operation. According to media reports, intelligence agencies, along with security forces, had launched an operation in the Dashat-i-Gorran area, some 50 kilometres away from Kalat town. Security officials indicated that an important commander of the banned Baloch Liberation Army, Shams Qalandrni, was killed in the operation.

In a related development on May 16, 2019, security forces killed nine suspected militants in an operation in Qabo-Koh-i-Mehran area of Mastung district. Security officials indicated that the Counter-Terrorism Department of the police force, along with other law enforcement agencies, conducted the operation after receiving information about the presence of militants hiding out in the mountainous area. Following a heavy exchange of fire, nine terrorists were killed, and a huge cache of arms and ammunitions were recovered. Security officials said that the terrorists belonged to different banned organisations that were involved in terror attacks in Quetta and other areas of Balochistan.

- On May 28, Turkey announced that the country launched a counter-terrorism operation in Iraq’s Hakurk region to neutralise terrorists and destroy their shelters.

Turkey’s Defence Ministry noted that the military launched an operation in Iraq’s northern Hakurk region against the bases of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). The Ministry said that the terror group in the area has been posing a national security threat to Turkey for decades.

The operation commenced on May 27, 2019, with artillery shelling and continued with air strikes and commando operations. The Ministry noted that the military operation successfully destroyed weapons positions, shelters, caves and ammunition depots used by the terrorists. The PKK has been designated as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the US and the EU.

- On May 24, a bomb blast during Friday prayers inside Rehmania Mosque in Quetta's Pashtoonabad area killed at least four people and wounded 17 others.

While confirming the casualties, Deputy Inspector General (DIG) Quetta, Abdul Razzaq Cheema said that the attack was carried out through an improvised explosive device (IED). Balochistan Chief Minister, Jam Kamal Khan Alyani condemned the blast and summoned a report on the incident. Chief Minister Alyani said, "Those who make innocent people the target of terrorism in this blessed month and on this blessed day deserve a severe punishment." According to the DIG, out of 618, only 100 Mosques have been provided with security and some 1,500 police officials have been posted across the city. No group has yet claimed responsibility for the attack. Police said that the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) had registered an FIR against unknown terrorists.

- On May 19, a bomb blast targeted a tourist bus near Egypt's famed Giza pyramids wounding 17 people.

According to security officials, the bomb blast hit a bus carrying 25 people from South Africa and a private car carrying four Egyptians. The explosion wounded 17 people, and there were no fatalities reported. Ndivhuwo Mabaya, spokesman for South Africa's department of international relations, said, "There might be South Africans involved." However, no one has yet taken the responsibility for the attack. This incident preceded a similar attack several months earlier when a roadside bomb detonated killing three Vietnamese holidaymakers travelling in a bus and their Egyptian driver near the Giza pyramids outside Cairo in December 2018.

--- Moiz Khan

MIDDLE EAST & WEST ASIA

Egypt

- According to Egypt's Interior Ministry on May 21, Egyptian Security Forces killed 16 suspected militants in North Sinai.

According to the statement, the militants were killed during police raids on their hideouts in the provincial capital El-Arish. The militants had weapons and explosives in their possession. Based on intelligence from the national security department, the Ministry alleged the militants had been planning attacks on "important and vital facilities" as well as prominent figures in the city. For years, Egypt has been fighting an insurgency in North Sinai, which escalated following the 2013 military ouster of Islamist president Mohamed Morsi. Since then, hundreds of police officers and soldiers have been killed in militant attacks. Earlier, on May 19, 2019, at least 17 people, including South African tourists, were injured when a bomb blast hit a tourist bus near Giza pyramids.

Iran

- On May 25, the US said it was deploying 1,500 additional troops to the Middle East to counter "credible threats" from Iran.
- On May 25, Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif visited Iraq and held talks with Iraqi President Barham Salih, Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi and Foreign Minister Mohammed Ali al-Hakim.

During a joint news conference with his Iraqi counterpart, Zarif said, "We are currently repelling all the efforts of war against Iran, whether economic or military. We will face them with strength and we will resist." For his part, Hakim said, "We stand by our neighbour Iran, and economic sanctions are unnecessary and cause great suffering to the Iranian people." During his meeting with Zarif, Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi warned of the "danger of a war". He pleaded for the "stability of the region and the upholding of the nuclear deal." According to the President's office, Barham Salih discussed with Zarif "the need to prevent all war or escalation". Zarif called the deployment of extra US troops to the region "very dangerous and a threat to international peace and security." It follows a US decision in early May 2019 to send an aircraft carrier strike force and B-52 bombers in a show of force against what Washington believed was an imminent Iranian plan to attack US assets. Washington says the latest reinforcements are in response to a "campaign" of recent attacks including a rocket launched into the Green Zone in Baghdad, explosive devices that damaged four tankers near the entrance to the Gulf, and drone strikes by Yemeni rebels on a key Saudi oil pipeline. Iran has denied any involvement in these incidents.

- During his visit to Pakistan on May 24, Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif said Pakistan was convinced that the pressure being exerted on Iran by the US was unjustified.

Zarif was on a two-day visit to Pakistan for consultation with Pakistani leaders on the escalation in tensions between Iran and the US and its Arab allies. During a press talk following his meetings, Zarif said that Iran was happy that “Pakistan understands our position ... and considers US pressure on Iran as unjustified.” He described his discussions with Pakistani leaders as “useful” and “constructive”. He found that his Pakistani hosts shared his views on the destabilising role of “imperialist forces”. Minister Zarif also said that economic sanctions against Iran were “economic terrorism”. On border security, he urged cooperation against terrorism and groups active in the border regions. According to the Iranian Foreign Minister, Iran and Pakistan could enhance border cooperation through implementation of agreements between the two countries.

- On May 20, Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif said that the “genocidal taunts” of US President Donald Trump would not “end Iran”.

Minister Zarif wrote this tweet following a warning by Trump, who suggested that Iran would be destroyed if it attacked US interests. The tweet noted, “Iranians have stood tall for millennia while aggressors all gone. Economic terrorism and genocidal taunts won’t ‘end Iran’.” He added, “Never threaten an Iranian. Try respect — it works!” On May 19, 2019, US President Donald Trump had tweeted: “If Iran wants to fight, that will be the official end of Iran. Never threaten the United States again.” Earlier, on May 17, during his visit to China, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif urged China and Russia to take “concrete actions” to safeguard the 2015 nuclear deal as he warned of a “dangerous” situation amid escalating tensions with the US. Before ending his China visit, Zarif dismissed the possibility of war erupting in the region, saying Tehran did not want a conflict and that no country had the “illusion it can confront Iran”.

Tensions between Washington and Tehran have increased in recent days, raising concerns about a potential US-Iran conflict. The US has also pulled some diplomatic staff from its Baghdad Embassy following attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf. President Donald Trump has bolstered economic sanctions and built up US military presence in the region, accusing Iran of threats to US troops and interests. Tehran has described those steps as “psychological warfare” and a “political game”.

Iraq

- On May 28, Iraqi Kurdish lawmakers elected Nechirvan Barzani as President of the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region.

Barzani had been serving as regional prime minister since 2006. He has won 68 votes from the 81 lawmakers present in the 111-seat chamber. Members of the parliament's second biggest party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and two smaller parties boycotted the vote. Barzani is the deputy leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the nephew of the previous and only other holder of the office, Masoud Barzani. The post has been vacant since November 2017, when the former president resigned after Kurdistan held a controversial independence referendum.

- On May 26, an Iraqi court sentenced three French citizens to death for joining the militant Islamic State group, the first Daesh members from France to be handed capital punishment.

Kevin Gonot, Leonard Lopez and Salim Machou were captured in Syria by the US-backed force fighting the militants, and were transferred to Iraq for trial. Iraq has taken custody of thousands of militants repatriated from neighbouring Syria, where they were caught by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces during their battle against Daesh. In early May 2019, the Iraqi judiciary said that it has tried and sentenced more than 500 suspected foreign members of Daesh since the start of the year. Iraqi courts have condemned many to life in prison and others to death, although no foreign Daesh members have yet been executed. The trials have been criticised by human rights groups, which say they often rely on evidence obtained through torture. They have also raised the question of whether suspected Daesh militants should be tried in the region or repatriated to their countries of origin.

Israel

- On May 30, after failing to form a coalition, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu opted to hold a second election.

The decision came just over five months after an April 2019 election that saw Netanyahu and his right-wing and religious allies win a majority. Midnight of May 29, 2019 was the deadline to form a coalition, but Netanyahu remained unable to convince ex-defence minister Avigdor Lieberman to abandon a key demand and join the government. As a result, Netanyahu opted to move forward with his 'plan B' and hold a parliamentary vote on new elections, which was approved just after the deadline. According to analysts, Netanyahu's inability to form a coalition is a sign of his weakening politics as his rivals eye his downfall in the not-so-distant future over corruption allegations.

Earlier on May 27, 2019, Israeli lawmakers approved the first reading of a bill to dissolve the parliament (Knesset) and hold new general elections. The measure, drafted by Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party, was passed with 66 votes in favour, 44 against and five abstentions. A special Knesset committee, which has been set up to prepare the potential Israeli elections, said the polls would take place on September 17, 2019.

Jordan

- On May 29, Jordan's King Abdullah II met with a visiting US delegation headed by US President Donald Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner, along with Middle East Envoy Jason Greenblatt, in Amman.

During the meeting, King Abdullah called for the formation of an independent Palestinian state along the 1967 boundaries with East Jerusalem as its capital. He also expressed his commitment to the so-called two-state solution. According to a statement from the Royal Hashemite Court, Jordan's king had "stressed the need to step up all efforts to achieve comprehensive and lasting peace on the basis of the two-state solution, guaranteeing the establishment of an independent Palestinian state on the 4 June 1967 lines, with East Jerusalem (al-Quds) as its capital ... in accordance with international law and relevant UN resolutions". Meanwhile, Jordan's official Petra news agency reported that the two sides had exchanged views on "regional developments, especially efforts to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict." The US delegation is meeting with top officials in Morocco, Jordan and Israel this week before it unveils the economic portion of the so-called "deal of the century" during a conference in Manama, Bahrain, on June 25-26, 2019.

Palestine

- On May 28, Palestinian Prime Minister, Mohammad Shtayyeh urged Britain to implement its parliament's recognition of the Palestinian state on the ground.

Following his meeting with a British parliamentary delegation in the occupied West Bank city of Ramallah, Shtayyeh said the British move "will be so important in light of Israel's intention to annex parts of the West Bank." He also urged Britain to send a technical team to Palestine to investigate the Israeli deduction of Palestinian tax revenue dues. In October 2014, the British Parliament had voted in favour of the government recognising Palestine as a state. According to some senior British lawmakers, recognising Palestine would be a right move and in Britain's national interest.

- On May 26, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) called on the international community to boycott a forthcoming US conference in Bahrain.

Washington has announced it would co-host the June 25-26, 2019 meeting in Bahrain's capital city of Manama, purportedly to encourage investment in the occupied West Bank and the besieged Gaza Strip. However, Palestinian officials say the real aim is to pave the ground for the Trump Administration to unveil its much-hyped "deal of the century" which they have already rejected as a non-starter. A statement from the executive committee of the PLO said, "The PLO affirms its final opposition to the conference and it hasn't authorised any party to negotiate on

behalf of the Palestinian people. The goal pursued by the US for the workshop is to start implementing the deal of the century and link it to economy after it takes steps in implementing the political parts of the deal.” PLO Secretary General, Saeb Erekat also called on all countries to boycott the conference, saying it “will surely fail without Palestinian participation.” Erekat said the Arab nations which have agreed to join the workshop in Manama “at the expense of the Palestinian people” should “reconsider their participation.” Saudi Arabia and the UAE have announced that they will participate in the conference. Israel’s Finance Minister, Moshe Kahlon also intends to attend the event.

In a related development on May 27, 2019, China’s Ambassador to Palestine, Guo Wei informed Nabil Shaath, the foreign policy adviser to the Palestinian Authority’s President Mahmoud Abbas, that Beijing and Moscow had made an agreement to boycott the Manama event. According to Wafa news agency, Wei said, “Boycotting the Bahrain conference comes within the framework of a bilateral Russian-Chinese agreement not to participate in it.” Wei stressed Beijing’s position “in support of the Palestinian cause and people, including their right to self-determination and the establishment of an independent state of Palestine within the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital.”

Saudi Arabia

- On May 30, Iraq opposed the final statement of the emergency meeting in Saudi Arabia, which condemned what it called Iran’s “interference” in countries of the Middle East region.
- On May 19, Saudi Arabia called for emergency regional talks to discuss increasing Gulf tensions, saying that it does not want war with Iran but is ready to defend itself.

According to Saudi official SPA news agency, King Salman invited Gulf leaders and Arab League member states to two emergency summits in Makkah on May 30, 2019 to discuss recent “aggressions and their consequences”. The move came days after mysterious sabotage attacks on several tankers in Gulf waters and drone strikes on a Saudi crude pipeline by Yemen’s Houthi rebels who Riyadh claimed were acting on Iranian orders. The US has also deployed an aircraft carrier and bombers to the Gulf over alleged threats from Iran. Saudi Arabia’s Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Adel al-Jubeir, said his country did not want to go to war with Iran but would defend itself. He said, “Saudi Arabia does not want a war, is not looking for it and will do everything to prevent it. But at the same time, if the other side chooses war, the Kingdom will respond with strength and determination to defend itself and its interests”.

A statement by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the communiqué issued after the summit both underlined the rights of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to defend themselves against Tehran. The statements mainly cited concerns about the recent sabotage attacks against several

ships off the UAE. Iraq objected to the communiqué, which required “non-interference in other countries” as a pre-condition for cooperation with Tehran. Iraqi President, Barham Salih asked the gathering to support his country’s stability, arguing that rising tensions with Iran could cause war. He voiced hope that Iran’s security would not be targeted.

During a second meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation OIC, Arab and Muslim heads of states denounced Iranian actions in the Gulf as a destabilising factor for regional security and urged the international community to take “strict measures” against the Iranian regime. The participating nations issued a final communiqué demanding the Iranian regime to stop its funding to terrorists and Houthi militias, and abide by the commitments it has made. They asked the international community to stop Iran from obtaining nuclear capabilities. The final communiqué also denounced Iranian intervention in the Syrian crisis and its impact on Syria’s unity; condemned the launching of Iranian-made ballistic missiles from Yemen toward Saudi Arabia; condemned Iran’s interference in the affairs of Bahrain, and its support of terrorist groups there; and condemned Iran’s occupation of three islands belonging to the UAE.

During these two consecutive meetings, King Salman noted, “The absence of a firm deterrent stance against Iranian behaviour is what led to the escalation we see today.” He also pointed to Iran’s ballistic missile and nuclear programmes as sources of concern, and expressed concern about what he described as Iran’s threats to cripple global oil supplies by closing down the Strait of Hormuz in case the US seeks to completely ban Iran’s oil exports.

Syria

- On May 28, at least 21 civilians were killed in air strikes carried out by the Syrian regime against the last militant stronghold of Idlib.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, nine children were also among those killed. During the two days of intensified aerial bombardment, a total of 31 civilians were killed. Idlib and parts of the neighbouring provinces of Aleppo, Hama and Latakia are under the control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a militant group led by Syria’s former Al Qaeda affiliate. According to the September 2019 buffer zone deal, the region is supposed to be protected from a massive government offensive. However, since late April 2019, the area has come under increasing Syrian and Russian air strikes.

In another development on May 25, 2019, Syrian opposition revealed that Turkey has supplied fresh weapons to an array of mainstream Syrian rebels to help them try to repel a major Russian-backed assault. Russia is backing the Syrian Army’s large aerial and ground assault as it seeks to gain control of the last big stretch of rebel-held territory in the northwest of the country. According to two unnamed senior opposition figures, Ankara has stepped up supplies in recent days after failing to persuade Russia in recent meetings of a joint working group that it should end its escalation to avert a major influx of refugees pouring into Turkey.

Turkey

- On May 28, Turkey said it has launched a military operation against Kurdish militants in a mountainous area of northern Iraq.

According to a statement from the Turkish Defence Ministry, the campaign, dubbed “Operation Claw,” kicked off in Iraq’s Hakurk region on May 27, 2019. The Ministry also stated, “This operation aims to demolish the caves and shelters that are being used by terrorist groups and to eliminate terrorists. The operation, with the support of our attack helicopters, is continuing as planned.” According to the statement, artillery fire and airstrikes targeted shelters and ammunition depots belonging to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), and the bombardment was followed by the deployment of Turkish commando brigades, T-129 ATAK helicopters, and drones. Defence Minister, Hulusi Akar and senior military officials directed the military campaign at the Command and Operation Centre at the Turkish General Staff headquarters in Ankara.

Yemen

- On May 16, the Saudi-led military coalition carried out several air strikes on the Houthi-held capital Sanaa after the Iranian-aligned movement claimed responsibility for drone attacks on Saudi oil installations.

The Sanaa strikes targeted nine military sites in and around the city, Houthi-run Masirah television quoted the Houthi health ministry as saying six civilians, including four children, had been killed and 60 wounded, including two Russian women working in the health sector. According to Al Arabiya TV, a coalition statement said the Sunni Muslim alliance struck military bases and facilities and weapons storage sites with the aim of “neutralising the ability of the Houthi militia to carry out acts of aggression”. It also said, “The sorties achieved its goals with full precision.” Saudi Arabia’s Deputy Defence Minister had accused Iran of ordering an armed drone attack on two oil pumping stations in the Kingdom. The head of the Houthis’ Supreme Revolutionary Committee denied that Iran directed the strike and said the movement manufactures its drones locally. Tehran also denies providing arms to the Houthis.

---Muhammad Shoaib

SOUTH ASIA: I

Pakistan External

- On May 30, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi attended the meeting of the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) in Jeddah.

Speaking at the occasion, the Foreign Minister highlighted human rights violations in the Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK). He also talked about India's occupation of Kashmir and lamented that the Kashmiris right to self-determination continues to be denied. Foreign Minister Qureshi also sought support of the OIC member states for constituting a UN Commission of Inquiry to investigate the rights violations and excesses in IOK. The Foreign Minister "strongly condemned" the Israeli atrocities against Palestinians. Pakistan has maintained that it supports the Kashmiris and Palestinians in their "fight for liberation from alien occupation." Moreover, Pakistan called for the establishment of an "independent and contiguous state of Palestine on the basis of internationally agreed parameters, pre-1967 borders, and with Al Quds Al-Sharif as its capital."

In a related development on the same day, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Qureshi held bilateral talks with Saudi Foreign Minister Ibrahim Al Assaf on the sidelines of the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) meeting. During the meeting, the Saudi Foreign Minister termed the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relationship as both "historic and strategic". Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Qureshi thanked the Saudi leadership for "their steadfast support to Pakistan on a range of key issues."

- On May 29, a special flight brought back 320 Pakistanis who were stranded in Malaysia due to the closure of Pakistan's eastern airspace following rising tensions with India that commenced in February 2019.

There are more than 320 Pakistani nationals in Malaysian jails who have completed their sentence term and were unable to be repatriated. Most of these nationals were imprisoned due to expiry of visa or residence permits.

- On May 26, Chinese Vice President, Wang Qishan visited Pakistan and met with Pakistan's leadership including, President Dr Arif Alvi and Prime Minister Imran Khan.

During the meeting with President Alvi, Wang said that China would always stand by Pakistan's "core interests". He said the development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has made concrete achievements and has become an important hallmark for China-Pakistan cooperation in the new era. On his part, President Arif Alvi vowed to deepen cooperation with China in areas including agriculture, tourism and trade. While meeting with Prime Minister Imran Khan, Wang expressed hope that Pakistan would take effective measures to provide security guarantees for the cooperation and exchanges between the two countries. Meanwhile.

PM Khan told the Chinese Vice President that Pakistan aims to learn from China in terms of state governance and enhance cooperation with China in the sectors of agricultural technology, development of special economic zone and anti-corruption. The two countries also signed bilateral cooperation agreements relating to agriculture and disaster relief.

- During his visit to Islamabad on May 24, Iran's Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif held talks with Pakistan's civilian and military leadership, including Prime Minister Imran Khan, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa.

During the meeting between Prime Minister and the Iranian Foreign Minister, issues related to bilateral relations came under discussion. However, the main focus of the meeting was regional security situation, particularly the rising US-Iran tensions. PM Khan emphasised that war is "not a solution to any problem" and called upon all sides "to exercise maximum restraint in the current situation." The Premier noted that Pakistan is "prepared to use its friendly relations in the region" to promote peace and stability. The Iranian Foreign Minister's visit to Pakistan came days after the US sent an aircraft carrier and B-52 bombers to the region after citing a "credible threat" from the Iranian forces.

- On May 23, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi visited Bishkek to participate in the Council of Foreign Ministers Meeting of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

Addressing the Plenary, Foreign Minister Qureshi shared Pakistan's vision of a "prosperous neighbourhood underpinned by win-win partnerships". In this context, he underscored the significant role of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, especially for landlocked Central Asian states. On the sidelines of the meeting, the Foreign Minister held bilateral talks with the Foreign Ministers of China, Russia, Kyrgyz Republic and Kazakhstan. Minister Qureshi also held a brief informal meeting with his Indian counterpart Sushma Swaraj on the sidelines of the SCO. The Foreign Minister told Swaraj that Pakistan is looking for "all the issues with India to be resolved through dialogue."

- On May 18, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi visited Kuwait and met with the Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

During the meeting, the Amir of Kuwait expressed deep affection for the leadership and people of Pakistan. The Foreign Minister also held delegation-level talks with Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al Ahmad Al Sabah. Acknowledging Kuwait's efforts for regional peace, Foreign Minister Qureshi proposed close cooperation between the two countries for promoting regional peace and stability. Shah Mehmood Qureshi also met with top Kuwaiti businessmen and investors and encouraged them to invest in all sectors of Pakistan's economy, including energy, petroleum and petrochemicals, agricultural research, food processing, culture, tourism, education and infrastructure development.

Pakistan Internal

- According to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) on May 30, Pakistan Army sentenced retired Lieutenant General, Javed Iqbal to 14 years “rigorous imprisonment” for espionage and leaking “sensitive information to foreign agencies prejudiced to the national security.”

Pakistan Army also awarded a death sentence to retired Brigadier, Raja Rizwan and Doctor Wasim Akram, an employee of a “sensitive organisation” on the same charges. The officers were tried under “Pakistan Army Act (PAA) and Official Secret Act by separate Field General Court Marshal (FGCM).” Pakistan Army had announced the arrests of these officers in February 2019.

- According to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) on May 26, at least 3 people were killed and 15 were injured, including 5 soldiers after a check post came under attack by a group of people in North Waziristan.

According to ISPR, Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement’s (PTM) leaders, Mohsin Dawar and Ali Wazir were leading the group. The Army said that the group of people attacked the check post and pressurised the troops “to release the suspected terrorists’ facilitator.” ISPR said that after “direct firing on the post” by the group, five Army soldiers were injured. In the exchange of fire, three individuals who attacked the post were killed. According to media reports, Ali Wazir along with 8 individuals have been arrested.

- On May 24, at least 3 people were killed and 19 were injured after a bomb was set off remotely inside a Mosque during Friday prayers in Quetta.

No group claimed responsibility for the attack. Balochistan is witnessing a serious law and order situation due to series of terrorist attacks across the province that have killed dozens of people.

- On May 20, the Jammu-Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society and Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) released a detailed report on human rights abuses in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK) and called upon the UN to establish a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the use of torture by Indian forces in the region.

The prominent rights groups in IOK said that India is using torture as a “matter of policy” and “instrument of control” in Kashmir. According to the report, the detainees are electrocuted, stripped naked, hanged from a ceiling. The report also noted that during the torture, detainees’ head are often dunked in water mixed with chili powder. The bodies of some victims have been burned with iron rods and heaters. The report also featured 12 cases of women who have been raped by Indian forces. India has deployed more than seven million troops in IOK to suppress resistance against its rule.

India

- On May 30, Narendra Modi was sworn in as Prime Minister of India.
- On May 23, Narendra Modi secured another five-year term after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the seven phase general elections.

The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) won 352 seats out of 542 seats in the Lok Sabha- the lower house of Parliament. Meanwhile, the main opposition party, Indian National Congress, accepted defeat after it secured only 52 seats in the Lok Sabha. There are fears that Hindu nationalist Narendra Modi's re-election in India would give rise to religious hatred against the country's Muslim minority; particularly as a number of BJP's newly elected members have been known for their Hindu nationalist views and stoking communal hatred. Under BJP's rule, communal violence has seen a marked increase across the country.

Narendra Modi's election campaign was mainly focused on national security and stoking anti-Pakistan rhetoric. However, on May 26, 2019, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan telephoned Narendra Modi and reiterated his desire to work with him for "peace, progress and prosperity in South Asia." In a separate development, the Indian government decided not to invite Prime Minister Imran Khan to Narendra Modi's swearing-in ceremony. Meanwhile, Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi said a dialogue to find a solution to the Kashmir dispute, Siachen and Sir Creek would be a significant measure instead of attending the swearing-in ceremony.

---Muhammad Abdul Qadeer

SOUTH ASIA II

Afghanistan

- On May 31, the Taliban recaptured the strategically located Bala Murghab district in the northwestern Badghis province.

At least 10 Afghan Security personnel were killed and 11 others wounded as the Taliban captured the district police headquarters, the main bazaar of Bala Murghab and the building of the district governor in Bala Murghab district. In related news, the National Directorate of Security (NDS) said in a statement that at least 62 fighters of the Taliban's 'red division' were killed in Security Forces' operations in central Maidan Wardak province. In a related development on May 30, 2019, at least six people were killed and 16 others were wounded in a suicide attack close to Marshal Fahim National Defence University in Kabul. The suicide bomber detonated his explosives among the cadets who were leaving the university. No group claimed responsibility for the attack. In another suicide attack on May 31, 2019, at least four people were killed and another 5 wounded in Kabul. US-Forces in Afghanistan confirmed that at least four US service members were wounded in the explosion.

- On May 29, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford said that Washington's campaign against terror groups in Afghanistan would continue notwithstanding the Taliban demands for a full US withdrawal from the country.

Dunford said, "America's continued military presence in Afghanistan is not up for debate, despite during a sharp escalation of both US and Russian peace talks seeking a political settlement with the Islamist Taliban forces. No one has suggested the US is going to leave Afghanistan until our counterterrorism interests are addressed. ... That is non-negotiable". The Taliban, on the other hand, rejected another call for the cessation of fighting made by a delegate of Afghan opposition leaders during a summit in Moscow.

- On May 28, the Taliban attacked two Afghan security posts and killed at least 23 members of the forces.

18 Afghan policemen and pro-government militiamen were killed and seven were wounded in western Ghor province. In eastern Logar province the insurgents overran an army checkpoint in the district of Baraki Barak, killing five soldiers. Many soldiers were wounded and the Taliban captured four soldiers. In a related incident on May 27, 2019, a blast targeted a bus carrying employees of the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs in Kabul city, which left at least 10 people wounded. Meanwhile, Afghan Security Forces retook the control of Deh Yak district of Ghazni province. The district remained under Taliban influence for two years.

- On May 28, an Afghan delegation led by National Security Advisor, Hamdullah Mohib arrived in Pakistan and held talks with Pakistani authorities on security cooperation and the Afghan peace process.

Afghan Interior Minister, Massoud Andarabi and senior security and military officials were part of the Afghan delegation. The talks were held in Rawalpindi with Army Chief, Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa leading the Pakistani side. Foreign Secretary, Sohail Mahmood also attended the meeting. Afghan Ambassador to Pakistan, Atif Mashal earlier said that the Pakistan Army Chief had extended an invitation to the Afghan side. The two sides met last in November 2018 in Islamabad to discuss the repatriation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan. Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani is expected to visit Pakistan in June 2019.

- On May 28, a group of Afghan opposition leaders and Taliban representatives attended a ceremony in Moscow.

The event was held to mark 100 years of Afghanistan-Russia diplomatic relations. Former President, Hamid Karzai led Afghan politicians while the Taliban delegation was headed by the deputy leader of the group, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. Addressing the ceremony, Baradar said, “The Islamic Emirate is firmly committed to peace, but to determine peace, first we need to address the barriers on the way of peace and that means the end of the occupation of Afghanistan”. Meanwhile, Karzai appreciated Russia’s efforts for hosting talks on the Afghan peace process and said, “Afghanistan expects that the Russian Federation act independently and help Afghanistan towards peace alongside support from the United States, China and other countries involved in the issue such as Germany to play an effective role in this sphere”. Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov reiterated, “The war in Afghanistan has no military solution. The only solution is to rely on diplomacy and politics. We believe that all foreign forces should evacuate Afghanistan. The Afghan society should get together for a settlement in a way that all ethnic groups live together with peace”. A joint statement after the meeting read, “Both sides have made some progress on a number of issues but no agreement was made because reaching agreements needed more discussions”. Russia has been actively pursuing the Afghan reconciliation process to broker a peace deal between the Taliban and the Afghan political leadership. However, the lack of participation on the part of the US-led National Unity Government of Afghanistan poses a big challenge to Russia’s peace efforts.

- On May 27, Afghanistan’s Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah reacted to recent appointments by President Ashraf Ghani and said he was not informed about the appointment of ministers, and that it was a political move.

Ghani appointed three acting ministers for Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, Ministry of Energy and Water and Ministry of Higher Education. Abdullah reacted to Ghani’s move and said, “Any change in ministers recently is only considered a political decision, not another move”. In response to the appointments, the Council of Presidential

Candidates accused Ghani of “bullying and violating the laws of the country”. Earlier on May 19, 2019, members of three mainstream political parties said the Afghan government is not willing to form a negotiating team and that it has “no intention” for peace. Rifts seem to be growing within the National Unity Government of Afghanistan, and between the opposition and the government on key issues.

- On May 22, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad briefed the US Senate on Afghan peace.

Khalilzad said that he hopes to broker a roadmap for Afghanistan and that all talks would take place in accordance with the principle that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed”. The Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Republican Jim Risch of Idaho, said that he believes Khalilzad is making progress. However, he added, “the issue always is how much progress, and can you get to the finish line?” Democratic Sen. Bob Menendez said, “We want to bring our troops home as soon as we can, but how we ultimately achieve that is critically important”. Khalilzad’s Senate hearing was the second high-level Afghanistan briefing, after intelligence officials gave lawmakers their assessment. Menendez, who attended both briefings, remarked on the “deep conflict between the intelligence community’s views on this question (of the prospects for peace) and Khalilzad’s optimism. Republican Sen. Todd Young called for more transparency from the White House. The conflict in Afghanistan has cost more than 2,300 American lives and hundreds of billions in taxpayer dollars. As the war approaches its 18th year, 14,000 US troops are still in Afghanistan.

- On May 21, US and NATO Forces Commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Scott Miller said that there are some indications about the movements of Al-Qaeda elements in some parts of the country.

Gen. Miller gave no details about the nature of these movements and said, “We have seen al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Yes, in different parts of Afghanistan. In different parts of Afghanistan, we can find them, so it’s not one particular region, it’s across the country”. He added that the US will continue its cooperation and partnership with the Afghan forces and the Afghan citizens. The US has been struggling to announce a timeline for the withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan due to apparent disagreements between the State Department and the Pentagon. This is also the main stumbling block in the ongoing peace process with the Taliban. Lately, Washington has conditioned the withdrawal of foreign troops with counter-terrorism assurances from the Taliban i.e. to disallow Al-Qaeda and Daesh to operate from Afghanistan. This statement from the Pentagon’s top representative in Afghanistan also indicates that the US military brass does not intend to wind up in the near future.

- On May 20, China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that the Afghan people have never been so close to peace as they are today despite that uncertainties that still exist in the country.

Wang gave these remarks during his meeting with Tajikistan's President, Emomali Rahmon. He added that as neighbours of Afghanistan, China and Tajikistan have a coordinated stance on how to promote reconciliation and reconstruction in the country. He urged all parties and factions in Afghanistan to reach extensive political consensus through inclusive dialogue and facilitate the 'Afghan-led, Afghan-owned' political process. Wang also reiterated that China has never interfered in Afghanistan's internal affairs, adding that China is willing to continue to play a constructive role for peace in Afghanistan and make contributions to its reconstruction.

- On May 19, a drone strike left at least six Taliban insurgents dead or wounded in Paktika province.

The attack was carried out on a vehicle. In a related development, at least three policemen were killed and three others wounded in a Taliban attack in Kabul. Fighting between the insurgents and US led Afghan government forces continues across Afghanistan despite efforts for peace.

- On May 19, German Special Representative for Afghanistan, Markus Potzel met with the Taliban's deputy leader and co-founder, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in Doha.

According to a Taliban spokesman, the two representatives discussed various aspects of finding a peaceful solution to the Afghan conflict, and highlighted Germany's effort in this regard. Potzel also stressed the need to maintain regular contact with the Taliban's Doha office. This was the second time Potzel held meeting with Baradar. The first meeting between the two representatives took place on May 1, 2019, where both sides discussed finding a peaceful solution to the Afghan conflict, the ongoing talks between the United States and the Taliban and ways of preventing civilian casualties. Germany has actively been taking part in Afghan affairs. In February 2019, the German government announced an extension to its mission in Afghanistan for an additional year. Germany had also offered to host a peace conference on Afghanistan, where they extended an invitation to the Taliban.

- On May 18, the Taliban blamed the US for derailing the peace process.

Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid tweeted, "So long as you occupy our country through forces, no true Afghan will seek peace but will want to force you out". He was responding to reported remarks by US Military spokesman, Col. Dave Butler who tweeted, "The Taliban is choosing to ignore the will of the people and bring harm to this country. Peace is the right way". Butler's comments prompted Mujahid in a subsequent tweet to question the US Military spokesman if in fact American forces were not "forcefully" based in Afghanistan having dropped "countless bombs" and imprisoned thousands of Afghans. Butler responded again in tweet and said, "The people you claim you're fighting for want peace. You know the truth. You are not even in this country but sending Afghan sons to die while you attack the pride of the people — the Afghan Security Forces. You claim to fight us but only attack Afghans". The spar between the two adversaries via Twitter comes as the two sides are engaged in a peace dialogue since October 2018, to try to bring an end to the Afghan war. However, the talks failed to convince the

Taliban for ceasing or reducing battlefield hostilities. Deadly battles between Taliban insurgents and US-backed Afghan Security Forces in recent days have killed and wounded hundreds of people, including scores of civilians.

- On May 17, at least 17 Afghan policemen including a colonel were killed in a friendly fire airstrike in Helmand.

Foreign forces, who were asked by their Afghan counterparts to help them in their clash with the Taliban, carried out the airstrike. The Ministry of Interior said that a probe has been launched into the incident to find out the reason behind the casualties. In a related incident on May 20, 2019, at least five civilians were killed in an airstrike in Nahre Saraj district in Helmand. At least 10 other civilians were also wounded in the airstrike. The area where the airstrike was conducted has been under Taliban control for the past three years. This comes after a February 2019 UN report which revealed that more civilians were killed in the Afghan conflict in 2018 than any period since they started documenting casualties. The report documented 3,804 civilian deaths, including 927 children, in 2018.

- On May 16, Afghan President's Special Envoy, Umer Daudzai visited India and discussed the Afghan peace process and other issues of mutual concern with Indian authorities.

Daudzai held separate meetings with Indian External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj and National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval. Daudzai briefed Swaraj on the outcome of the recently held Consultative Loya Jirga for Peace. Both sides also discussed India's role in regional peace consensus with regards to Afghanistan, progress in peace talks and bilateral relations. In his meeting with Doval, Daudzai stressed the need for India's role in the Afghan peace process. Meanwhile, Doval said that the conflict in Afghanistan should be solved through direct talks, led and owned by the Afghan government. In a related development, the Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan, Vinay Kumar handed over two Mi-24 attack helicopters to the Afghan Defence Minister, Asadullah Khalid in Kabul. New-Delhi is expected to give two more attack helicopters to Kabul in the coming months. These attack choppers play a key role in fight against the Taliban.

Sri Lanka

- On May 22, Sri Lankan President, Maithripala Sirisena extended the state of emergency for another month.

The state of emergency was imposed in the wake of the deadly Easter Sunday bombings that killed nearly 260 people on April 21, 2019. The emergency law gives police and the military extensive powers to arrest, detain and interrogate suspects without court orders. Sri Lanka

initially imposed the emergency on April 23, 2019 to crack down on the nine suspected suicide bombers. Sri Lanka faced condemnation for the communal violence that erupted as a backlash to the deadly attacks. The country's police claimed to arrest over 80 suspects in connection with the attack.

---Kashif Hussain

UNITED NATIONS

- On May 29, the UN assured Pakistan of its help in determining the source of the recent HIV outbreak in the country, and pledged to work with local authorities in curbing it.

UN Secretary General's Deputy Spokesman, Farhan Haq said, "The WHO team will try to ascertain the source of the outbreak and control it, as well as provide its expertise in the areas of HIV testing, paediatric HIV treatment and family counselling." On April 25, 2019, the recent outbreak of new HIV cases was reported in Sindh, where more than 600 cases have been identified so far. The World Health Organisation (WHO) said it was also ensuring adequate supplies of rapid diagnostic tests and antiretroviral medicines for both adults and children in Pakistan. According to media reports, a team of experts from the WHO has arrived in Pakistan.

- On May 26, UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) expressed "grave concern" over "credible accounts" that Taliban militants have been mistreating prisoners, which in some cases "may amount to torture."

The UNAMA said, "Detainees said they were held in sub-zero temperatures during winter and were fed beans and bread twice a day, with no medical aid apart from some painkillers and antiseptic for wounds." The Mission also noted that prisoners were kept in over-crowded rooms and were forced to work for seven hours a day. Tadamichi Yamamoto, Head of the UNAMA, said, "I am gravely concerned about these serious allegations of ill-treatment, torture and unlawful killing of civilians and security personnel, as well as the deplorable conditions of detention." According to the UNAMA, its preliminary findings are based on face-to-face interviews with 13 detainees who were freed from a Taliban detention facility by Special Forces troops from the Afghan Army on April 25, 2019. The mission is mandated by the UNSC to monitor detention facilities in order to promote accountability throughout the country.

In a related development on May 24, 2019, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) expressed concerns over the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, and called it "one of the worst disasters on earth." UNICEF spokesperson, Christophe Boulierac said, "There are two million children in the country which suffer from acute malnutrition." He also indicated that the situation may become worse if the UNICEF remains unable to receive adequate funds. The UNICEF is the only source in Afghanistan that provides treatment for severe acute malnutrition. According to the UN, UNICEF needs \$26 million to meet nutrition requirements in 2019, but it has so far only received half of this amount.

- On May 24, Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, Head of the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), urged the UNSC that Iraq's democratic transition needed more support and to recognise that, the ongoing political infighting was a costly obstacle.

While briefing the UNSC, Hennis-Plasschaert said, “Political parties have not yet shown themselves willing to compromise. It should be understood, however, that political compromise is not a sign of weakness. In fact, it is a sign of political maturity and a requisite for resilience.” She also noted that tangible action was required in the country to fight the scourge of corruption, to revive healthy economic activity and to revive public trust which is essential for further development of Iraq’s democracy. During her briefing, she called for continued, wide-based international support to ensure democratic progress and prevent Daesh from gaining a strong foothold in Iraq. On May 24, 2019, the UNSC also unanimously adopted a resolution in which it decided to extend the mandate of UNAMI until May 31, 2020. Under the UNSC mandate, the UNAMI provides advice, support and assistance to the Government and people of Iraq “to promote inclusive political dialogue and reconciliation at the national and local levels”.

- On May 17, Jens Laerke, spokesperson for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), condemned airstrikes on Yemen’s capital Sana’a that reportedly killed five children and left dozens injured on May 16, 2019.

Laerke noted that he had not yet received the exact location of attacks. He noted that “preliminary reports indicate that five children had died and 16 more were wounded. Additional casualties including health workers have been recorded.” According to media reports, Saudi Arabia and the UAE coalition conducted airstrikes in Sana’a on residential areas and Houthi rebel’s military targets. The coalition carried out 11 attacks on the capital in all, out of a total of 19 across rebel-held territory on May 16, 2019. Meanwhile, Andrej Mahecic, spokesperson for UN Refugee Agency, urged combatants to respect the protection of civilians and respect their obligations under international humanitarian law.

---Moiz Khan