

# AREA BRIEFS

## SEPT 2020

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An Abridgement of Latest Strategic  
Developments



1-15 SEPTEMBER 2020

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Strategic Studies Institute  
Islamabad



STRATEGIC STUDIES  
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## About the Area Briefs

*SSII's Area Briefs are orderly & structured fortnight updates on international politics and strategic issues. Précis notes, divided under various headers, aims at keeping tabs on nearly all evolving issues related to traditional and non-traditional security. The rundown on events allows decision/policy makers, advisors, researchers and students to stay cognizant of international & regional happenings, and helps in chalking out policies based on informed analysis.*

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## About SSII

*SSII is an independent think tank conducting in-depth research and analysis on issues related to foreign and defence policy. The purpose behind the creation of the SSII was to establish a dedicated academic and research institution for conducting research and trainings on important issues related to Pakistan's security. SSII aim to put knowledge to practice by providing an alternate narrative in critical areas of Strategic Studies, especially Arms Control and Disarmament.*

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## Area Briefs: 1-15, September 2020

### AMERICAS

#### Domestic

- On September 14, Democratic Presidential Nominee, Joe Biden, called President Donald Trump a “climate arsonist” for refusing to acknowledge the role of global warming in deadly wildfires across the western US.

*At least 4.5 million acres (1.8 million hectares) in Oregon, California and Washington have suffered wildfires since August 2020. The fires resulted in the destruction of several small towns and thousands of homes. At least 36 people were also killed as a result of the uncontrollable wildfires. The fires also have filled the region’s air with harmful levels of smoke and soot. Meanwhile, President Trump met with firefighters and officials in California after Democrats criticised him for remaining predominantly silent on the wildfires. While criticising President Trump for not taking the problem of climate change into consideration, Biden remarked: “If we have four more years of Trump’s climate denial, how many suburbs will be burned by wildfires? How many suburban neighbourhoods will have been flooded out?” Trump and his Administration have long sought to blame state officials for large wildfires, arguing that fuel-choked forests and scrub need to be thinned, more firebreaks should be cut and flammable debris cleared from forest floors. According to President Trump, improved forest management was something that could be tackled quickly, whereas climate change would take more time and require international cooperation, which, according to President Trump, is lacking.*

- On September 7, US President Donald Trump publicly accused the leadership of the US military of waging wars to boost the profits of defence manufacturing companies.

*During a news conference at the White House, President Trump stated: “I’m not saying the military is in love with me, the soldiers are, the top people in the Pentagon probably aren’t because they want to do nothing but fight wars so that all of those wonderful companies that make the bombs and make the planes and make everything else stay happy”. Trump’s extraordinary comments emerge amid claims by several defence officials that relations between the President and the Pentagon leadership are becoming increasingly strained. Some analysts expressed concern that the President’s accusations against the military’s top brass could have a corrosive effect on the country.*

- On September 3, seven police officers in Rochester, New York, were suspended over the death by asphyxiation of an African-American man who they had arrested in March 2020.

*In video footage that surfaced, which was recorded by an officer's body camera, a group of officers was seen putting a mesh hood over Daniel Prude's head as he knelt naked and was restrained on a Rochester street, as snow fell around him. The incident has become another flashpoint in violent demonstrations over what activists say is an epidemic of police brutality and racism against African-Americans. After the video was made public, protests broke out in downtown Rochester and at least 400 people demonstrated in Times Square in New York City, demanding both justice for Prude and police reforms.*

- On September 2, a US appeals court declared as illegal the mass surveillance programme which the former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor, Edward Snowden, had exposed.

*The US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit ruled that the warrantless telephone dragnet that secretly collected millions of Americans' telephone records violated the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, and may well have been unconstitutional. Snowden, who fled to Russia in the aftermath of the 2013 disclosures and still faces US espionage charges, tweeted that the ruling was a vindication of his decision to go public with evidence of the National Security Agency's domestic eavesdropping operation. Watchdog groups including the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which helped bring the case to appeal, welcomed the judges' verdict on the NSA's spy programme. The Union stated: "Today's ruling is a victory for our privacy rights. It makes plain that the NSA's bulk collection of Americans' phone records violated the Constitution".*

## **International**

- On September 15, during a morning show 'Fox & Friends', President Donald Trump revealed that he wanted to assassinate Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in 2017, but his then-Secretary of Defence, Jim Mattis, opposed the operation.

*President Trump stated: "I would have rather taken him out. I had him all set. Mattis didn't want to do it. Mattis was a highly overrated general, and I let him go". The revelations support the reports that came out in 2018 when Washington Post journalist Bob Woodward published his book "Fear: Trump in the White House" and which the President had denied at that time. Trump was reportedly mulling assassinating Assad following a chemical attack on Syrian civilians in April 2017. According to Woodward's book, the President was of the view that American forces should "go in" and "kill" Assad. During the morning show, Trump remarked that he did not regret the decision not to target Assad. He noted: "I considered him certainly not a good person, but I had a shot to take him out if I wanted and Mattis was against it".*

- On September 14, during the launch ceremony of the third annual US-Qatar Strategic Dialogue at the State Department, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, pressed for a

solution to the three-year rift between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt.

*Speaking at a State Department meeting with Qatari Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, Pompeo stated that it was important to concentrate on countering Iranian activity in the Middle East. He noted: "To keep our focus on this work and to close the door to increased Iranian meddling, it's past time to find a solution to the Gulf rift". He added: "The Trump Administration is eager to see this dispute resolved and to reopen Qatar's air and land borders currently blocked by other Gulf states. I look forward to progress on this issue". Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt cut diplomatic and trade links with Qatar in June 2017, accusing it of backing terrorism. Qatar denies the charge and has accused its neighbours of seeking to curtail its sovereignty.*

- According to a September 10 Report by *Business Insider*, on Bob Woodward's forthcoming book, President Donald Trump boasted that he protected Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), following Jamal Khashoggi's murder.

*According to the book, during an interview with the author, Trump bragged that he protected the Saudi Crown Prince from consequences in the US following the assassination of Khashoggi in October 2018. Quoting President Trump, an excerpt from the book stated: "I saved the Crown Prince". It added: "I was able to get Congress to leave him alone. I was able to get them to stop". The President told Woodward he did not believe that MBS had ordered Khashoggi's murder, although US and other foreign intelligence services have concluded that MBS directed the killing. After Khashoggi's death culminated in outrage among US legislators from both parties, Trump bypassed Congress to sell roughly \$8bn in precision-guided missiles and other high-tech weapons to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Trump vetoed three resolutions passed by Congress rebuking him for the sale and blocked a War Powers Act resolution to end US military support for the UAE-and-Saudi-led war in Yemen. According to Woodward, he conducted 18 interviews with President Trump for the upcoming book.*

- On September 10, while speaking remotely to Foreign Ministers of the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, urged Southeast Asian countries to stand up to "maritime bullying" by China and to reassess business deals with its State firms.

*Pompeo emphasised that the region should be confident in the US and know it can rely on it's support. He stated: "Today, I say keep going. Don't just speak up but act. Reconsider business dealings with the very state-owned enterprises that bully ASEAN coastal states in the South China Sea. Don't let the Chinese Communist Party walk over us and our people". Meanwhile, the ASEAN maintains it does not want to take sides amid friction over a recent surge in military activities by both China and the US in the South China Sea.*

- On September 9, the US announced a reduction in the number of troops in Iraq, as President Donald Trump seeks to honour his pledge to halt the country's wars overseas.

*According to the announcement, the number of military personnel deployed in Iraq would be reduced from 5,200 troops to just 3,000. According to General Kenneth McKenzie, the Commander of the US Military's Central Command, the decision was "due to our confidence in the Iraqi security forces' increased ability to operate independently". McKenzie noted that the US could continue supporting the Iraqi Military in its fight against the militant Islamic State group (IS). He, however, stressed that the "ultimate goal" was an Iraq where local forces can by themselves prevent the extremists from returning. Trump has already withdrawn forces from Iraq, pulling troops back to US bases in the Gulf region over the past year as they faced rocket attacks by Iran-linked Iraqi armed groups. According to observers, in an attempt to get re-elected against Democrat Joe Biden, President Trump has sought to honour his repeated pledge during the 2016 campaign to end US wars abroad and bring back servicemen.*

- On September 8, the US expanded its sanctions on Lebanon and blacklisted the former Transport and Finance Ministers, accusing them of supporting Hezbollah.

*US Treasury Secretary, Steven Mnuchin, announced sanctions against former Lebanese Government Ministers, Yusuf Finyanus and Ali Hassan Khalil, for their alleged material and financial support to the Iran-backed Hezbollah group. Mnuchin stated: "Corruption has run rampant in Lebanon, and Hezbollah has exploited the political system to spread its malign influence". He added: "the US stands with the people of Lebanon in their calls for reform and will continue to use its authorities to target those who oppress and exploit them". According to the US Department of the Treasury, the sanctions would freeze any US-based assets of the two blacklisted individuals and would generally bar Americans from dealing with them. Those engaged in certain transactions with the former officials are also at risk of being hit with secondary sanctions.*

- On September 4, the US blacklisted four individuals for their help to the Government of Venezuelan President, Nicolas Maduro, in order to prevent free and fair parliamentary elections in Venezuela in December 2020.

*According to a statement from the Treasury Secretary, Steven Mnuchin: "The corrupt Maduro regime is attempting to seize control of the National Assembly of Venezuela through a fraudulent election". Reinaldo Munoz, Maduro's Solicitor General, and former Venezuelan State Governor David de Lima, who were blacklisted, had orchestrated vote-buying operations to sway opposition legislators. Two other people, namely Indira Alfonso and Jose Gutierrez, were also blacklisted. They were appointed earlier in 2020 by the pro-government Supreme Court to oversee the National Electoral Council, which has announced elections for December 2020. According to the Venezuelan opposition and the US, Maduro loyalists dominate the Council,*

*therefore, the Council cannot oversee a fair election. Meanwhile, the main opposition coalition, led by Parliamentary Head, Juan Guaido, has promised to boycott the election.*

- On September 1, the US Department of Defence (DOD) released its 2020 Report on Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China (PRC).

*The congressionally mandated report serves as an authoritative assessment on military and security developments involving the PRC. It highlights the links between China's national strategy and developments within China's Armed Forces. According to the DOD, the report is significant, as it has been released "at a time when the world is witnessing the aggressive assertion of that strategy in the Indo-Pacific and beyond, where China continues to undermine the international rules-based order to advance their own interests". The report has surfaced as the US Secretary of Defence is concluding his trip to Hawaii, Palau and Guam, where he met with senior leaders from across the region to address these issues, and reaffirm the US' commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific.*

*According to the report, China's military power demonstrates that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has surpassed the US military in terms of navy size, land-based missiles and advanced air defence systems. A chapter on Beijing's economic policies notes that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects focus on pipelines and port construction that would "decrease China's reliance on transporting energy resources through strategic choke points, such as the Strait of Malacca". The report highlighting China's military capabilities comes amid increasing tensions between Washington and Beijing over a range of issues, including Chinese military activities in the South China Sea and US support to Taiwan.*

- On September 1, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, announced that the US would lift a 33-year arms embargo on Cyprus and deepen its security cooperation with Nicosia.

*The island was divided in 1974 following a Turkish invasion triggered by a Greek-inspired coup. Turkey recognises the breakaway Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is not recognised by other States. Several peace-building efforts in this regard have been futile. Washington placed restrictions on the transfer of arms to Cyprus in 1987 to encourage reunification efforts and avoid an arms race on the island. Pompeo stated in a tweet: "Cyprus is a key partner in the Eastern Mediterranean. We will waive restrictions on the sale of non-lethal defence articles and services to the Republic of Cyprus for the coming fiscal year". The decision comes amid escalating tensions in the eastern Mediterranean between NATO allies, Turkey and Greece, with respect to claims over the potential hydrocarbon resources present in the eastern Mediterranean. Following his conversation with Pompeo, Cypriot President, Nicos Anastasiades, welcomed the move. Turkey's Foreign Ministry remarked that the decision "disregards the equality and balance" on the island and that Ankara expects its NATO ally to "review" this decision.*

## ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

- On September 14, the US urged the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to dismiss a case brought by Iran, seeking to lift sanctions.

*US Lawyer, Marik String, noted that Iran had wrongly introduced a subject uncovered by a 1955 bilateral pact, i.e. the Treaty of Amity, which Iran cites as the basis for approaching the ICJ. String stated: "The measures Iran challenges remain critical to the United States' efforts to address national security threats posed by Iran including the current threat posed by its nuclear programme". The US lawyer made these comments in response to a September 3, 2020, statement issued by the ICJ noting that the Court will hold public hearings in the case concerning Alleged Violations of the 1955 Treaty of Amity, Economic Relations, and Consular Rights (Islamic Republic of Iran v. United States of America) from September 14, 2020, to September 21, 2020, at the Peace Palace in The Hague.*

*In 2018, Iran filed a case against the US in the ICJ after the US unilaterally withdrew from Iran's July 2015 Nuclear Agreement, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and re-imposed sanctions. Iran argued that the sanctions imposed by the Trump Administration breached the 1955 "Treaty of Amity" between the two countries, signed before the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In October 2018, the ICJ ordered the US to ensure that sanctions against Iran did not affect humanitarian aid or civil aviation safety.*

- On September 13, Iranian Defence Minister, Amir Hatami, expressed his satisfaction over the strength, readiness and capability of Iranian defence forces and their new missile capabilities.
- On September 11, Iran successfully test-fired a coast-to-sea cruise missile, namely Qader.

*While discussing the latest achievements, Amir Hatami stated: "Missile capability and preparedness has always been among the important priorities of the country and the Defence Ministry, and we have always focused on the strengthening and development of this domain". Hatami noted that Iran had inaugurated a surface-to-surface ballistic missile with a range of 1,400 kilometres, named after Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani, who was martyred by the US military in January. He also noted that Iran had developed a new cruise missile, called Martyr Abu Mahdi, which has a range of over 1,000 kilometres. The missile is named after Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, an Iranian ally and Head of the Iraqi Kataib Hezbollah. Both Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and General Soleimani lost their lives in a US drone attack near the Baghdad International Airport on January 3, 2020. Iran had unveiled these two missiles in August 2020.*

*In a related development on September 11, 2020, Iran successfully test-fired a coast-to-sea cruise missile named Qader as a part of its three-day military exercises codenamed 'Zolfaqar-99', conducted from September 10 to 12, 2020. With a strike-range of 250 kilometres, the missile can be launched from coast-to-sea launchers.*

- On September 13, Head of the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI), Ali Akbar Salehi, announced that Iran completed the fourth step of reducing its commitments under its July 2015 Nuclear Agreement, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).
- According to *Reuters* on September 4, Iran allowed International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) inspectors to inspect one of the two sites it agreed earlier to grant access to.
- On September 4, the IAEA's quarterly report titled, "Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in light of United Nations Security Council resolution 2231 (2015)", noted that Iran's low enriched uranium (LEU) stock exceeded by ten-fold the limit set in the JCPOA.

*Ali Akbar Salehi stated: "As per policies of reduction of JCPOA commitments, a sum of 1,044 centrifuges are engaging in enrichment process in Fordo and as executor of these policies were completely fulfilling our duties". Under the JCPOA, Iran had committed that the country would not operate these 1,044 centrifuge devices at Fordow uranium enrichment site.*

*In a related development on September 4, Iran allowed the IAEA inspectors to inspect one of the two sites it agreed earlier to grant access to. While citing an IAEA report, Reuters noted that the IAEA inspectors inspected one of the sites and took environmental samples from there, aimed at detecting traces of nuclear material that may have been present. The report also noted that the Agency's inspectors will visit the other site "later in September 2020 on a date already agreed with Iran, to take environmental samples". Earlier, on August 26, 2020, the IAEA stated that Iran and the Agency agreed to further reinforce their cooperation to facilitate the full implementation of Iran's Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement (CSA) and the Additional Protocol (AP), provisionally applied by Iran since January 16, 2016. After bilateral consultations between Iran and the IAEA, the Agency noted that Iran and the IAEA reached an agreement on the resolution of the safeguards implementation issues. Regarding issues specified by the IAEA, Iran would voluntarily "provide the IAEA with access to the two locations specified by the IAEA and facilitating the IAEA verification activities to resolve these issues".*

*On September 4, 2020, Kazem Gharibabadi, Iran's Permanent Representative to the IAEA, stated that the IAEA's report on access to the two locations envisaged 'positive and constructive' prospects for bilateral cooperation. Gharibabadi stated: "Based on the report, the agency has*

*been granted access to one of the two demanded sites and the access to the second site has been planned for this month”.*

*In a separate IAEA quarterly report, released on September 4, 2020, the Agency noted Iran’s LEU stock exceeded by ten-fold the limit set in the JCPOA. Under the JCPOA, the limit was set at 300 kg of enriched uranium in a particular compound form, which is the equivalent of 202.8 kg of uranium. As of August 25, 2020, Iran’s stockpile stood at over 2,105 kg. However, the report noted that the stockpile remained far below the many tonnes of LEU that Iran had accumulated before the JCPOA. The report also noted that Iran has been enriching fissile material at the rate of 4.5%, which remains above the JCPOA’s 3.67% limit. However, the 4.5% level of enrichment is still short of the 20% level that Iran had achieved before the JCPOA. Following the US’ unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA and re-imposition of sanctions, Iran began reducing its compliance with the JCPOA. However, Iran stressed that the reduction of its compliance with JCPOA was a retaliatory move and that the country would reverse its retaliatory measures as soon as European Member States found practical ways to protect the JCPOA and mutual trade from US sanctions.*

- On September 7, India’s Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) announced that it successfully conducted a flight test of an indigenously developed hypersonic technology demonstrator vehicle (HSTDV).

*The DRDO conducted the flight test of the HSTDV from the Dr Abdul Kalam Island, off the Odisha coast. The DRDO stated: “The hypersonic cruise vehicle was launched using a proven solid rocket motor, which took it to an altitude of 30 kilometres, where the aerodynamic heat shields were separated at hypersonic Mach number”. The Organisation stressed that the scramjet engine was performed in a textbook manner. With this demonstration flight-test, the DRDO noted that it assessed many critical technologies such as “aerodynamic configuration for hypersonic manoeuvres, use of scramjet propulsion for ignition and sustained combustion at hypersonic flow, thermo-structural characterisation of high-temperature materials, separation mechanism at hypersonic velocities”. This test serves as a critical step in the development of hypersonic cruise missiles.*

- On September 3, Fernando Arias, Director-General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), termed the allegation of poisoning of Russian opposition leader, Alexei Navalny, by a Cold War-era nerve agent “a matter of grave concern”.

*In his statement, Fernando Arias remarked: “Under the Chemical Weapons Convention, any poisoning of an individual through the use of a nerve agent is considered a use of chemical weapons. Such an allegation is a matter of grave concern”. Arias also stressed that States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) consider the use of chemical weapons by*

*any state under any circumstances as reprehensible and contrary to the legal norms established by the international community.*

*According to media reports, on September 7, 2020, doctors treating Alexei Navalny indicated that he came out of a medically induced coma, and was responding to verbal stimuli. Navalny had been in a state of coma after falling ill during a flight from the town of Tomsk in Siberia to Moscow. Earlier, on August 22, 2020, Navalny was taken to the Charite Hospital Berlin for a medical treatment. The hospital management noted that his medical tests indicated that he was poisoned. On September 2, 2020, Germany's cabinet claimed that German military toxicologists had found traces of a nerve agent of the Novichok family in the body of Navalny.*

*Novichok is the name of a group of seven toxic chemical agents developed by the former Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s. In March 2018, the UK Government accused Russia of using Novichok in the killings of former Russian intelligence officer, Sergei Skripal, and his daughter, Yulia. In April 2018, the OPCW investigating team confirmed the use of toxic agents in the incident. Though the OPCW did not specifically name the substance used, however, the organisation's technical experts confirmed the findings of the UK "relating to the identity of the toxic chemical that was used in the incident". An OPCW expert team was deployed to the UK at the latter's request seeking technical assistance in identifying the nature of the toxic chemical reportedly used.*

- On September 3, Director-General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Rafael Mariano Grossi, noted in his report to the IAEA Board of Governors (BOG) that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) appeared to be enriching uranium, which could potentially be used for the development of nuclear weapons.

*The report stated: "The Agency has not been able to verify the correctness and completeness of the DPRK's declarations under the Agreement between the DPRK and the Agency for the Application of Safeguards in Connection with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)". Though the IAEA noted that its knowledge of the DPRK's nuclear programme was "limited", the Agency has intensified its open-source information collection and expanded its analysis of satellite imagery to monitor the country's nuclear programme. The report noted that "some nuclear facilities of the DPRK continued to operate while others remained shut down". The report noted that there were indications consistent with the production of enriched uranium at the Yongbyon Experimental Nuclear Power Plant 5MW(e). The report also emphasised that the DPRK is continuing internal construction activities at the experimental Light Water Reactor (LWR). While expressing concern over DPRK's nuclear activities, the report noted that the country's nuclear programme was a clear violation of relevant UN Security Council resolutions. Rafael Grossi called upon the DPRK to comply fully with its obligations under relevant UN Security Council resolutions.*

- On September 2, the US test-fired the unarmed Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) from California to a target in the Pacific Ocean.

*In an operational test, the US Air Force Global Strike Command test-launched unarmed Minuteman III ICBM from a silo at Vandenberg Air Force Base, and its re-entry vehicle travelled 6,759 kilometres before hitting its target at the Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands. In its statement, the Air Force Global Strike Command stated: “The test demonstrates that the United States’ nuclear deterrent is safe, secure, reliable and effective to deter twenty-first century threats and reassure U.S. allies”. The statement also noted that the test-launch of the missile was not a response or reaction to world events or regional tensions.*

- On September 2, a senior official at the US Department of Defence noted that the US and Russia have shown willingness to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) if Russia meets the US’ demands laid out earlier by lead US negotiation Marshall Billingslea, the Special Presidential Envoy for Arms Control.

*Robert Soofer, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for Policy for Nuclear and Missile Defence, made these remarks in the context of recent arms control talks between the US and Russia held in June 2020. Following the US-Russia bilateral consultations on arms control and strategic stability in Vienna, on June 22, 2020, the US noted that it would consider an extension if Russia meets three conditions, including Russia’s range of unconstrained nonstrategic nuclear weapons and the implementation of stronger verification measures, as well as the inclusion of China in future talks. In this regard, Soofer stated: “Now we’re waiting to see if Russia has the political will now to come and talk to us about it”. He further remarked that Ambassador Billingsley’s recommendation to the US President to pursue a New START extension would depend on Russian initiatives. She emphasised: “We have given them proposals during these meetings, and now we are waiting to see if Russia has the political will to come to talk to us about it”.*

*The US and Russia had signed the New START on April 8, 2010. The Treaty is set to expire in February 2021, unless it is replaced before this date by a subsequent agreement on the reduction and limitation of strategic offensive arms. It can also be extended for no more than five years, to 2026, by the mutual consent of both parties.*

- On September 1, the 16th meeting of the Joint Commission of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran’s July 2015 Nuclear Agreement, took place in Vienna.

*Secretary-General of the European External Action Service, Helga Schmid, and Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs, Abbas Araqchi, chaired the meeting. Representatives at the level of Deputy Foreign Ministers of China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK and Iran attended the meeting. During the meeting, all participants underscored the significance of preserving the JCPOA, endorsed by United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015).*

*While terming the Nuclear Agreement a key element of the global nuclear non-proliferation architecture, the participants noted that it was crucial for all JCPOA Member States to ensure strict compliance with the terms of the Agreement.*

*Regarding the decision of the UN Security Council on August 25, 2020, aimed at blocking the US' attempt to trigger the "snapback" of all UNSC sanctions on Iran lifted under the JCPOA, the participants of the meeting noted that they could not consider the US as a JCPOA participating State. The officials, therefore, remarked that the US cannot initiate the process of reinstating UN sanctions under UNSC resolution 2231. They also reaffirmed that the US unilaterally announced its cessation of participation in the JCPOA on May 8, 2018 and that it had not participated in any JCPOA-related activities thereafter.*

- On September 1, the US Department of Defence announced the release of its annual report on China's military, titled, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China".

*According to the Department of Defence, the report is congressionally mandated and serves as an authoritative assessment on military and security developments involving China. While it mainly highlighted the links between China's national strategy and developments within China's armed forces, the report noted that China was expected to, at least, double the number of its nuclear warheads over the next decade. In its first such disclosure, the report stated: "The number of warheads on land-based PRC intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) capable of threatening the United States is expected to grow to roughly 200 in the next five years". According to the report, an increase in China's nuclear weapons was based on China's possession of enough fissile material to double its nuclear weapons stockpile without the production of new fissile material. Chad Sbragia, Deputy Assistant Secretary Of Defence for China, stated the US was concerned about the increasing number of China's nuclear warheads. Moreover, the report also discussed China's views on strategic competition, the broader purposes of its Military-Civil Fusion Development Strategy, and its ambitions for the People's Liberation Army as a political entity of the party.*

*In response, on September 2, 2020, China's Foreign Ministry rejected the US report that Beijing was expected to double the number of its nuclear warheads. Hua Chunying, Spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, remarked that the report was heavily biased.*

--- Moiz Khan

## CHINA, EAST ASIA & PACIFIC

### China

- According to *Xinhua* on September 15, Chinese State Councilor and Minister of Public Security, Zhao Kezhi, attended the 15<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Security Council Secretaries via video link.

*During the meeting, Minister of Public Security, Zhao Kezhi, called on all parties to innovate cooperation methods, maintain strategic communication, and exchange views on key issues such as regional security, combating transnational crime, and network security. He emphasised that all parties should oppose external interference, deepen anti-terrorism cooperation and promote cybersecurity.*

- On September 14, Chinese President Xi Jinping co-hosted a China-Germany- European Union (EU) leaders' meeting via video link with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, European Council President Charles Michel, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

*Leaders from China, Germany and the EU agreed to strengthen cooperation between China and the EU, enhance mutual trust, and uphold multilateralism. The leaders announced the official signing of the China-EU Agreement on Geographical Indications (GI); pledged to speed up negotiations of the China-EU Bilateral Investment Treaty; decided to establish a China-EU High Level Environment and Climate Dialogue and a China-EU High Level Digital Cooperation Dialogue; and expressed their commitment to forge China-EU green and digital partnerships. During the meeting, President Xi emphasised the significance of China-EU cooperation in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, and underscored the need to promote stable development of the China-EU comprehensive strategic partnership. He proposed four principles the two sides should adhere to for developing the China-EU relationship: peaceful coexistence; openness and cooperation; multilateralism; and dialogue and consultation. Merkel, Michel and von der Leyen highlighted that China is an important strategic partner and it is imperative for Europe and China to strengthen cooperation, safeguard multilateralism, and respond more effectively to various global challenges.*

- On September 13, China's Defense Ministry expressed its "resolute opposition" to the recently published "China Military Power Report" by the US Department of Defense.

*In an official statement, China's Defense Ministry Spokesperson, Wu Qian, stated that the report "promotes the so-called China threat narrative and defames Chinese military's modernisation". Wu added that "Chinese military advancement was driven by defending national sovereignty",*

*adding that the US report was a display of “hegemony and provocation”. A major concern highlighted in the US report was the build-up of Chinese ground, air and naval forces that could be made available in the event of an armed conflict with Taiwan. China’s Defense Ministry, however, blamed the Taiwanese Government and “foreign forces” for causing trouble in the region.*

- According to the *South China Morning Post* on September 13, China appointed trade specialist, Nong Rong, as its new ambassador to Pakistan.

*The Communist Party Secretary of the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission in the Guangxi Zhuang region, Nong Rong, was named by the Chinese Foreign Ministry on September 11, 2020, as the man to replace Ambassador Yao Jing. One of Nong’s primary roles will be to promote the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). China and Pakistan announced the launch of the CPEC’s second stage in April 2020. The new phase will focus on “industrial cooperation, trade, agriculture, and socio-economic development”.*

- On September 11, China’s Foreign Ministry stated that it will impose “reciprocal restrictions” on all US diplomats in China in response to curbs on its embassy personnel in the US.

*The latest move from China comes days after the US announced new restrictions on staff working for China’s foreign missions, such as a requirement to seek approval for meetings with local officials. According to the statement issued by China’s Foreign Ministry, the unspecified countermeasures will apply to all US embassy and consulate staff, including the consulate-general in Hong Kong. The statement further stressed that these measures are “China’s legitimate and necessary response to the erroneous US moves”, and urged the US to “immediately correct its mistakes” and lift the earlier restrictions. Relations between the US and China have deteriorated in recent months, with both sides exchanging accusations over trade disputes and the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic.*

*In related news, on September 11, 2020, China’s Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, remarked that the US should “better manage” its own affairs and stop meddling in those of other nations. Wang stressed that the US Congress has “frequently introduced various bills on the internal affairs of China”, adding that the “the US has gone too far” interfering in other countries’ affairs.*

*Wang’s comments came after US tech-company, Microsoft, stated, on September 10, 2020, that it had recently detected cyberattacks from China, Russia and Iran that were designed to interfere in the US presidential election scheduled to take place in November 2020. China-US relations*

*have reached the lowest point, with the two countries engaged in a range of bitter disputes including on trade and technology.*

- On September 11, the Foreign Ministries of China and India agreed, in a joint statement, that their troops must quickly disengage from the months-long standoff along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

*Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, met with Indian Foreign Minister, S Jaishankar, on the sidelines of a Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Foreign Ministers' meeting in Moscow, in an attempt to end the dispute at the LAC. According to a joint statement released, the two Foreign Ministers were in agreement that "the current situation in the border areas is not in the interest of either side." The Ministers also agreed that "the border troops of both sides should continue their dialogue, quickly disengage, maintain proper distance and ease tensions". A separate statement issued by China's Foreign Ministry stated that it would maintain communications with India through diplomatic and military channels, and committed itself to "restoring peace and tranquillity" in the disputed area. The statement added that Wang had told Jaishankar, during the Moscow meeting, that the "imperative is to immediately stop provocations such as firing and other dangerous actions that violate the commitments made by the two sides". Wang added that in order to de-escalate the situation, the frontier troops on both sides "must quickly disengage".*

- On September 8, Chinese Minister of Public Security, Zhao Kezhi, vowed to bolster counter-terror cooperation with Pakistan.

*During a telephonic conversation with Pakistan's Minister for Interior, Ijaz Shah, Chinese Minister of Public Security, Zhao Kezhi, reaffirmed China's willingness to work with Pakistan in different areas, including anti-terrorism, security along the CPEC, law enforcement capacity building, and expansion of police exchanges. In his response, Shah maintained that Pakistan was willing to mutually implement the consensus between the leaders of China and Pakistan, and strengthen cooperation in the fields of law enforcement and security.*

- According to BBC on September 8, China accused Indian troops of illegally crossing over the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and firing "provocative" warning shots at patrolling soldiers.

*Without providing details, a Chinese Military Spokesperson stated that Chinese guards were "forced to take countermeasures" in response to Indian troops illegally crossing the LAC. According to the Global Times, Indian troops had "illegally crossed the LAC into the Shengpao mountain region near the south bank of Pangong Tso Lake." A spokesperson of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), Zhang Shuili, also called on the Indian side to "immediately stop*

*dangerous moves, withdraw personnel who crossed the LAC... and punish the personnel who fired the provocative shot.” The confrontation comes a day after India’s military alleged that five Indian civilians were kidnapped by Chinese troops from an area near the LAC. In August, 2020, India had accused China of provoking military tensions twice within one week. Both charges were denied by China, which said that the border standoff was “entirely” India’s fault. Tensions between India and China escalated in June 2020, when 20 Indian soldiers were killed in a skirmish with Chinese forces along the LAC.*

- On September 5, Chinese and Indian Defence Ministers traded blame for rising tensions in their first face-to-face meeting, following a deadly clash along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh in June, 2020.

*China’s Defence Minister, Wei Fenghe, and his Indian counterpart, Rajnath Singh, held a two-hour meeting on the side-lines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation defence ministers’ meeting in Moscow on September 4, 2020. Wei stated that China would not give up “one inch” of territory. He emphasised that the two sides should work to “cool and ease” the tension and to “maintain peace and tranquility”. He expressed hope that India will “abide by the series of agreements” reached between the two sides, refrain from provocations on the LAC, and from “deliberately disseminating negative information”. In response, India’s Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh, “emphasised that the actions of the Chinese troops, including amassing of large number of troops, their aggressive behaviour and attempts to unilaterally alter the status quo were in violation” of agreements between the neighbours.*

- On September 3, China’s Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, attended the G20 Extraordinary Foreign Ministers’ Meeting from Beijing.

*During the meeting, Wang called for renewed commitment to multilateralism, noting that countries need to uphold the international order underpinned by international law and reinforce the UN-centered international system. Wang stressed that while COVID-19 is still raging in many parts of the world, countries are facing the task of restoring global growth. Wang also put forward a number of proposals for G20 cooperation. Wang also expressed China’s willingness to launch initiatives to synergize the existing bilateral and regional arrangements for international movements.*

- On September 3, China’s Ministry of Commerce (MOC) expressed its firm opposition to India’s decision to ban 118 Chinese mobile apps.

*Spokesperson for China’s MOC, Gao Feng, stated that India has “abused the concept of national security and taken discriminatory and restrictive measures against Chinese enterprises”, which is a clear violation of the relevant rules and regulations of the World Trade*

*Organization. On September 2, 2020, India announced a ban on the use of 118 Chinese mobile apps in the country, describing them as “prejudicial to sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of state and public order”. Gao stressed that the Indian Government’s move was hurting not only the legitimate rights of Chinese investors and service providers, but also the interests of Indian consumers and the country’s investment environment as an open economy. Tensions between China and India have increased recently as the two sides engage in a bitter standoff along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).*

- On September 3, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Hua Chunying, urged the US State Department to withdraw its decision to impose tighter limitations on Chinese diplomats.

*Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Hua Chunying, insisted that the US State Department “immediately revoke the wrong move” and stop obstructing exchanges between the people of China and the US. She added that China will make a “justified and necessary response” in light of the situation. Hua’s response comes after the US State Department announced, on September 2, 2020, that senior Chinese diplomats will be required to seek approval to visit US university campuses and meet with local government officials. Hua emphasised that importance of China and the US maintaining a smooth channel of communication at all times, adding that the Chinese embassy and consulates in the US will continue to maintain exchanges with people from the US.*

- On September 2, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Hua Chunying, firmly opposed the 2020 Pentagon Report on China’s Military power.

*In response to the latest report released by the US Department of Defense titled ‘Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020’, Hua stated that China’s strategic intentions are “transparent and consistent”. She highlighted that China has pursued a national defence policy that is defensive in nature adding that the development of China’s military power means growing strength for world peace. Hua urged the US to take an objective view of China’s strategic intentions and “abandon the cold-war mentality and zero-sum game mindset”. The report released by the Pentagon claimed that China intends on doubling its nuclear warheads by 2030, and expanding its nuclear missile arsenal.*

- According to the *South China Morning Post* on September 1, China asked the US to halt its efforts to upgrade US’ unofficial diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

*China’s response comes after the US announced a new economic dialogue with Taiwan. On August 31, 2020, the US Assistant Secretary of State, David Stilwell, stated that the US and Taiwan would establish a new economic dialogue focused on health care, energy and other technology sectors. He added that while the US was updating its engagement with Taiwan, its actions were “still well within the boundaries of our one-China policy” and did not take a*

*position on China's claims of sovereignty over Taiwan. Stilwell's comments were welcomed by Taiwanese President, Tsai Ing-wen, and Taiwan's Foreign Ministry. However, spokesperson for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hua Chunying, described the US' Taiwan Relations Act, which allows for de facto diplomatic relations, as "illegal" and "invalid", adding that it violates the one-China principle.*

- On September 1, Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, stated that China is committed to maintaining stability in eastern Ladakh along the Line of Actual (LAC) and will not be the first to escalate the situation.

*Wang noted that there have been problems between India and China as the boundary between the two States has not yet been demarcated. He stated that China will firmly safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and is ready to resolve all issues through dialogue with India. Earlier on August 29, 2020, an Indian Army spokesperson, in a statement, observed that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops "violated the previous consensus arrived at during military and diplomatic engagements during the ongoing standoff in Eastern Ladakh and carried out provocative military movements to change the status quo". He added that the Indian Army took measures to strengthen its position "and thwart Chinese intentions to unilaterally change facts on the ground". China, however, denied provoking Indian soldiers and remarked that its troops have been "strictly observing the Line of Actual Control (LAC)" and "never crossed the line". Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, also stated that China is in close communication through diplomatic and military channels with India regarding conditions on the ground. India and China have been locked in a bitter standoff along the LAC since April 2020. The tension between the two States escalated following the June 15-16, 2020 Galwan Valley clash in which 20 Indian Army soldiers were killed.*

## **Japan**

- On September 14, Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) elected Yoshihide Suga as the successor to outgoing leader Shinzo Abe.

*Yoshihide Suga, who serves as Chief Cabinet Secretary in the current administration, won 377 of the 534 valid votes cast by LDP lawmakers and regional representatives on September 14, 2020, and accepted his nomination as the head of LDP. Suga is expected to win a parliamentary vote on September 16, 2020 and become Japan's Prime Minister, succeeding Abe. According to observers, Suga is unlikely to make any major agenda reversals and will ensure a continuation of Abe's policies.*

- On September 10, Japan signed a military pact with India enabling the two countries to exchange supplies and logistical support.

*In a telephonic conversation, Japanese Prime Minister, Abe, and his Indian counterpart, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, agreed on the importance of close security and economic cooperation between their countries. The Agreement allows the Japanese Self-Defense Forces and the Indian Armed Forces to share food, fuel, and ammunition as well as provide transportation to each other's troops.*

## **Vietnam**

- On September 9, the 53<sup>rd</sup> round of ministerial meetings of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) were held via video link, chaired by Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Pham Binh Minh.

*Delivering a speech at the opening ceremony, Vietnamese Prime Minister, Nguyen Xuan Phuc, highlighted the development of the ASEAN, stating that initiatives including the COVID-19 Response Fund, the Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies and an ASEAN comprehensive recovery plan have strengthened ties among ASEAN members. At the meetings with ASEAN's dialogue partners, attendees are expected to deliberate upon issues relating to the future of the forums, and continue to broaden and deepen cooperation within the China-ASEAN and ASEAN Plus Three frameworks. The meetings took place from September 9, 2020 to September 12, 2020.*

*In related news, addressing the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, emphasised that China is willing to work with ASEAN countries in advancing post-COVID-19 cooperation and addressing challenges in this regard. The ASEAN Foreign Ministers reiterated Wang's remarks on the China-ASEAN cooperation, acknowledging that the two sides have become strategic partners with integrated interest. The ASEAN countries also expressed willingness to cooperate with China's proposed global data security initiative to support global cybersecurity. Founded in 1967, the ASEAN group includes Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Vietnam is the ASEAN Chair for the year 2020.*

*In another related development, the 27<sup>th</sup> meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was held via video conference in the framework of the 53<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting on September 12, 2020. The ARF agreed to promote cooperation in order to mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and further strengthen cooperation in disaster relief, the fight against terrorism and transnational crime.*

## **Malaysia**

- On September 7, Malaysian Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin, met with Chinese Defense Minister, Wei Fenghe, whereby the two sides discussed bilateral cooperation between Malaysia and China.

*During the meeting, Muhyiddin congratulated China on its success in containing the COVID-19 outbreak, expressing hope that the two countries would continue cooperation against the pandemic. Muhyiddin also emphasised Malaysia's willingness to work with China to strengthen bilateral cooperation in defense, economy, trade, and education. In response, Wei assured Muhyiddin of China's commitment to reinforce defense cooperation between the two countries and advance military to military ties. In a related development, Wei also held a meeting with Malaysian Defense Minister, Ismail Sabri Yaakob, during which the two sides exchanged views on pertinent issues including the prevailing international and regional situation; relations between the two militaries; and the South China Sea.*

*---Fareeha Shamim*

## EUROPE

- On September 14, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko visited Russia for talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin, seeking reassurances of Russia's support after weeks of protests in Belarus.
- On September 8, Alexander Lukashenko, Belarus' incumbent President, emphasized that he would stand firm against massive protests in Belarus and had no intention of stepping down.

*The two leaders held a “working meeting” at the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi. It was their first face-to-face meeting since a protest movement began across Belarus after the August 9 controversial 2020 Presidential Election. Protesters accused Lukashenko of rigging the election in his favour.*

*While congratulating Lukashenko on his re-election, President Putin stated: “We see Belarus as our closest ally and we will undoubtedly fulfil all our obligations”. Putin noted that Russia would provide a \$1.5 billion loan to Belarus and fulfil all its obligations under a Union Treaty, signed between the two countries in 1999. Putin emphasised that the Belarusians themselves must settle their political situation without any foreign meddling, and commended Lukashenko for his pledge to conduct a constitutional reform. Following the meeting, Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov also reiterated that Russia regards Lukashenko as Belarus' legitimate President. Peskov indicated that President Lukashenko had confirmed his plans to amend the Constitution. Peskov also emphasised that Russia wanted “everything that happens in Belarus not to be in the form of unconstitutional processes but within the framework of the law”.*

*The two Presidents also discussed the “Slavic Brotherhood” joint military drills that began in Belarus on September 14, 2020. Putin noted that Russian paratroopers who were sent to Belarus for joint drills will be leaving the country, following completion of the exercise. Peskov noted that the two leaders did not discuss the possibility of stationing Russian forces in Belarus.*

*Earlier, on September 8, 2020, Lukashenko noted that he had no intention of stepping down. He said that he would stand firm against protestors. Regarding massive protests in Belarus against rigging in elections, Alexander Lukashenko stated: “All of this is very painful and even tragic for me, but it doesn't mean that I'm giving up”. He also warned that his supporters would be “slaughtered” if he quit. To win Russian support, Lukashenko asserted that Belarus could not survive without him and “if Belarus collapses today, Russia will be next”.*

*Lukashenko claimed a victory in the country's August 9, 2020 Presidential Election. Following the announcement of election results on August 10, 2020, large-scale protests broke out in Minsk and other cities of the country to express their dissatisfaction over polling management and*

results. The election commission of Belarus announced, on August 10, 2020, that Lukashenko received 80.23% of the votes, while his main opposition challenger, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, had only 9.9% of votes. However, on August 10, 2020, Tikhonovskaya rejected the results of the election. She stated, “I will believe my own eyes – the majority was for us”. She emphasized that she considered herself the winner, not Lukashenko, and described the election as massively rigged.

- On September 14, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson secured initial backing for his plan to breach the Brexit treaty, agreed upon with the European Union in 2019.

Johnson stated that a planned law designed to override portions of the Brexit withdrawal agreement was needed because the EU might “go to extreme and unreasonable lengths” in its treatment of former member Britain. On September 14, 2020, the Internal Market Bill cleared its first House of Commons vote, with 340 in favour and 263 against. This Bill would give the British Government the power to override the EU’s agreed role in oversight of trade between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. The bill may now face attempts to amend or overturn it during several days of detailed scrutiny by lawmakers before another vote. Johnson told parliament before the vote: “What we cannot do now is tolerate a situation where our EU counterparts seriously believe that they have the power to break up our country”. The Prime Minister also noted that the legislation was a “safety net” against what he claimed were EU threats to impose tariffs on UK internal trade and even stop food supply from mainland Britain to Northern Ireland. Johnson’s Government has acknowledged that the bill breaches the legally binding withdrawal treaty that Britain and the EU have both ratified. The UK formally left the EU on January 31, 2020. However, existing trade rules remain in effect until the end of 2020 under a transition designed to provide time to negotiate a long-term trade agreement.

- On September 14, Germany noted that independent laboratories in France and Sweden confirmed evidence that Russian opposition leader, Alexei Navalny, was poisoned with a nerve agent belonging to the Novichok group.
- On September 6, Germany’s Foreign Ministry warned that the country would discuss possible sanctions on Russia over the alleged poisoning of Alexei Navalny, if the Kremlin did not provide an explanation.
- On September 2, Germany’s cabinet claimed that German military toxicologists had found traces of a nerve agent of the Novichok family in the body of Alexei Navalny.

In its statement on September 14, 2020, the German Government stated: Three laboratories have now independently provided evidence of a nerve agent from the Novichok group as the cause of Mr. Navalny's poisoning. The statement also noted that Germany was in close contact with other European countries on future steps regarding the use of nerve agents. Meanwhile, Germany

*again warned Russia of sanctions and called on Russia to explain what has happened and conduct swift investigations. Earlier, on September 6, 2020, Germany warned Russia of sanctions if Russia failed to provide an explanation. German Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas, stated: “If in the coming days Russia does not help clarify what happened, we will be compelled to discuss a response with our allies”.*

*In response to the German threat of sanctions, on September 11, 2020, Russia noted that it respond effectively if Germany imposed sanctions on the country. Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, remarked: “The principle of reciprocity in international affairs has not been cancelled. We will see what new sanctions will be. We, of course, will react. This cannot be left without reaction”.*

*Earlier, on September 2, 2020, German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, also indicated that there was “unequivocal evidence” that Alexei Navalny may have been poisoned using Soviet-era nerve agent Novichok. Merkel stated that the tests carried out at a military laboratory had “identified unequivocally” the use of a nerve agent. She referred to the case as an “attempted murder” and observed that the findings raised “very difficult questions that only the Russian government can answer, and has to answer”. Meanwhile, on September 3, 2020, the UK's Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, also called the findings “outrageous”, and stated: “The Russian government must now explain what happened to Navalny”.*

*Earlier, on August 19, 2020, Navalny’s Spokeswoman, Kira Yarmysh, remarked that the plane carrying the Russian opposition leader made an emergency landing in Omsk after he suddenly felt unwell mid-flight. According to Yarmysh, Navalny only drank tea in the morning. She claimed that he might have been poisoned. He was taken to the Charite Hospital in Berlin following a medical evacuation flight from the Siberian city of Omsk on August 22, 2020. Later, on August 24, 2020, Berlin’s Charite Hospital, which was treating Navalny, noted that his medical tests indicated that he was poisoned. The hospital management stated that Navalny was suffering from “intoxication by a substance from the group of cholinesterase inhibitors”.*

- On September 13, Greek President Katerina Sakellaropoulou visited a Greek island, Kastellorizo, in the eastern Mediterranean, provoking Turkey as the two countries are involved in a dispute over maritime rights in the Eastern Mediterranean.

*To celebrate the island’s independence from Italian rule, President Katerina Sakellaropoulou visited Kastellorizo in a military helicopter despite Turkey’s reservations. Italy invaded Kastellorizo in 1912 and formally ceded to Greece in the 1947 Paris Peace treaties following World War II. Sakellaropoulou told the island’s residents that “the illegal actions of Turkey have caused tensions never seen before in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean”. She underscored that Greece was “open to dialogue”. However, she cautioned that immediate de-escalation on Turkey’s part was a necessary prerequisite for political discussion.*

*In response, on September 13, Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar criticised President Sakellariopoulou for visiting the island of Kastellorizo, and termed it provocative. Akar stated: “As if there is no other island left for celebration, they come to these. These acts, of course, disturb us”. Meanwhile, Akar visited Turkey’s South-western Kas district, across from the Greek island of Kastellorizo. Akar also visited the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) to observe the Mediterranean Storm-2020 Exercise. On September 6, 2020, Turkey began military exercises in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Vice President of Turkey, Fuat Oktay, noted that the Turkish military began its exercises, namely “Mediterranean Storm”, with the Turkish Cypriot Security Command. Oktay stated: “The security priorities of our country and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus are indispensable, along with diplomatic solutions in the eastern Mediterranean”.*

*In a related development, on September 7, Greece stated that it would bolster its military with new weapons, troops, and the development of its defence industry as a tense standoff with neighbouring Turkey has sparked concerns of open conflict between the two NATO allies. Greek Government Spokesman, Stelios Petsas, observed: “The Turkish leadership is unleashing, on a near-daily basis, threats of war and makes provocative statements against Greece”. Petsas noted that Greece would respond with political, diplomatic and operational readiness to protect its sovereign rights.*

- On September 9, Russian President, Vladimir Putin, held a meeting with the Foreign Ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Member States, and expressed his confidence in the SCO’s ability to respond to new challenges.

*In a video conference, President Vladimir Putin noted that the SCO played a major role in ensuring peace and security, and sustainable development in Eurasia. Putin stated: “Acting on the principles of equality and mutual consideration for everyone’s interests, we strive to conduct a joint search for ways of resolving today’s global challenges and we maintain close foreign policy coordination, including in the UN and other international venues”. While emphasising that the current situation in Eurasia and neighbouring regions required the special attention of the SCO, Putin underscored that terrorism remained a serious threat, while drug trafficking, organised crime and cybercrime were on the rise.*

*Moscow, which holds the SCO’s rotating Presidency for 2019-2020, hosted the two-day SCO’s Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) meeting on September 9 and 10, 2020. The CFM is the highest forum of the SCO after the Council of Heads of State (CHS) and the Council of Heads of Government (CHG). Russian Foreign Affairs Minister, Sergey Lavrov, chaired the meeting. The Ministers discussed the content and organisational support of the upcoming meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO (CHS), including the draft final documents. During their meeting, the ministers approved the draft Statement of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO Member States in connection with the 75th anniversary of the Victory in World War II. It was*

*unanimously “emphasized that the common Victory of the peoples over Nazism, fascism and militarism and the creation of the United Nations as a result of it in 1945 made it possible to form a stable and effective system of international relations, which reliably guaranteed the peaceful development of mankind”.*

*While expressing support to the UN in strengthening international peace and security, the Ministers stated: “The SCO Member States intend to increase their contribution to the formation of a multi-polar world order based on the principles of international law, including the UN Charter, multilateralism, equal and indivisible security, rejection of confrontation and conflicts, and contribute to strengthening global and regional security and stability”.*

*The CFM noted that the SCO Member States, which are States Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), stood for “strict observance of its provisions, comprehensive and balanced promotion of all the goals and principles set forth in it”. The Ministers expressed full support for the strict implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran’s July 2015 Nuclear Agreement, and reaffirmed “the importance of the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction to Ensure Global Security, as well as the need for an early resumption of negotiations on the protocol to the Convention, which, provides for an effective mechanism for verifying compliance with obligations under BTWC”.*

*The SCO is a permanent intergovernmental international organisation, created on June 15, 2001, in Shanghai, China. Its Charter was signed during the St. Petersburg SCO Heads of State meeting in June 2002, and entered into force on September 19, 2003. The SCO currently comprises eight member states: China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and four observer states which include Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia.*

- On September 8, the UK pledged to provide assistance to approximately 55,000 vulnerable people in Pakistan to help them recover from devastating floods.

*Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for South Asia at the UK’s Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, made the announcement during his virtual meeting with Pakistani Government officials. Lord Ahmad observed: “Like everyone in the UK, I have been saddened to see the heart-breaking images of the flooding in Pakistan. The UK stands by Pakistan, ready to help, as entire communities have lost their homes, livelihoods and loved ones”. According to a statement issued by the National Emergency Operations Centre on Polio, the UK Government will provide Pakistan with £800,000 through the National Disaster Consortium (NDC). The aid package is expected to assist in the provision of immediate relief in rural Sindh to the people who have lost their homes.*

- On September 1, Maria Zakharova, Spokesperson of the Russian Foreign Ministry, stated that the EU's stance regarding the situation in Belarus runs counter to the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state.

*Maria Zakharova stated: "The current developments in Belarus were discussed at the meeting of EU Foreign Ministers. Unfortunately, we note that the European Union did not refrain from attempts to influence the situation in this fraternal country". Zakharova remarked that the EU's sanctions threat to Alexander Lukashenko, Belarus' incumbent President, and financial support to opposition leaders, contradicts the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign states. She made these comments in response to the EU's August 28, 2020 decision to "impose sanctions on up to 20 senior Belarus officials suspected of election fraud and the crackdown on protesters". The EU Foreign Ministers' political agreement was aimed at pressuring Lukashenko and his supporters into holding new elections. EU Foreign Policy Chief, Joseph Borrell, noted that the EU's future measures on Belarus would target those accused of being responsible for the fraudulent elections.*

*Lukashenko claimed a victory in the country's August 9, 2020 Presidential Election. Following the announcement of election results on August 10, 2020, large-scale protests broke out in Minsk and other cities of the country to express their dissatisfaction over polling management and results. The election commission of Belarus announced on August 10, 2020 that Lukashenko received 80.23% of the votes, while his main opposition challenger, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, had only 9.9% of votes. However, on August 10, 2020, Tikhanovskaya rejected the results of the election. She stated, "I will believe my own eyes – the majority was for us". She emphasized that she considered herself the winner, not Lukashenko, and described the election as massively rigged.*

- On September 1, French magazine, Charlie Hebdo, announced that it would republish blasphemous cartoons.

*The intended purpose behind republication of the blasphemous cartoons is to mark the start of the trial of alleged accomplices to the January 7, 2015 attack on Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris. The attack, conducted by Said and Cherif Kouachi, left twelve people, including some of the magazine's cartoonists, dead. In total, 17 people were killed during three days of attacks. The Yemen-based Al Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula claimed responsibility for the attack. Police killed the Kouachi brothers in separate standoffs.*

*On September 2, 2020, Pakistan condemned Charlie Hebdo's announcement to republish the blasphemous cartoons. Foreign Office Spokesman, Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri, stated that the decision of the French magazine would amount to undermining the global desire for peaceful co-existence and constitute a threat to social and interfaith harmony.*

*Meanwhile, the trial of the fourteen alleged accomplices of the French Islamists behind the attacks began on September 2, 2020.*

- On September 1, NATO's Allied Air Command accused the Russian military of violating NATO's airspace on August 28, 2020, while it was attempting to intercept a US Air Force B-52 bomber flying near the Danish island of Bornholm.

*While calling the incident a "significant violation of international law", NATO's Allied Air Command stated: "The Russian Su-27, flying from Kaliningrad, followed the B-52 well into Danish airspace over the island, committing a significant violation of airspace of a NATO nation". The statement emphasised that unauthorised intrusion into sovereign airspace constitutes a significant violation of international law. The US B-52 bomber's flight was part of a recent mission to demonstrate alliance solidarity. However, the Russian Defence Ministry denied violating the airspace. The Defence Ministry noted that the Russian Su-27 fighter jet which the country scrambled to intercept the US Air Force B-52 bomber did not violate the Danish airspace and was flying over the neutral waters of the Baltic Sea.*

--- Moiz Khan

## GLOBAL TERRORISM

- According to *Anadolu Agency* on September 14, at least nine people were killed and 43 were injured in a terror blast in north-western Syria.

*The Governor's office of Turkey's southern Hatay province stated that investigation of the attack and identification of perpetrators is still ongoing. No one has claimed responsibility for the attack yet.*

- The OSCE-wide Counter-Terrorism Conference 2020 was held in Vienna from September 14-15, 2020.

*The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)-wide conference under the theme, "Effective Partnerships against Terrorism and Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism" took place in Vienna. High-level representatives and practitioners from governments, international organizations, and the public and private sectors participated in the conference to explore ways to strengthen partnerships in the field of counter-terrorism. During his address, Austrian parliamentarian Reinhold Lopatka, who serves as Chair of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's Ad Hoc Committee on Countering Terrorism, stated that COVID-19 has shifted attention from threats such as violent extremism and terrorism. Lopatka emphasised that the pandemic has provided an opportunity for terrorist groups to "boost their online propaganda, call for new attacks, increase recruitment operations, stigmatize minorities, and above all, disseminate false and discriminatory information." He highlighted the need to ensure that counter-terrorism efforts remain a high priority on governments' agendas during the pandemic.*

- According to *Dawn* on September 13, four terrorists, including militant commander Ihsanullah alias Ihsan Sanray, were killed in an intelligence-based operation (IBO), near the inter-district boundary of North and South Waziristan.

*According to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) Director-General Maj Gen Babar Iftikhar, Ihsanullah was the mastermind behind several terrorist activities. He was also involved in the recent terrorist attacks in Shaktu which led to the martyrdom of several soldiers as well as officers, including Lt Nasir and Capt Sabih. In a related development on September 7, 2020, security forces conducted an IBO in Mir Ali where five terrorists, including Waseem Zakaria, were killed and ten were arrested. Waseem Zakaria had been involved in the planning of thirty terrorist attacks.*

- The Seventeenth meeting of the US-India Counter Terrorism Joint Working Group was held virtually from September 9-10, 2020.

*Joint Secretary for Counter Terrorism, Ministry of External Affairs of India, Mahaveer Singhvi, and US State Department Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Ambassador Nathan A. Sales, resolved to continue close coordination and denounced the use of terrorist proxies. Moreover, the two sides exchanged views on threats posed by UN-sanctioned terrorist entities and emphasised the need for action against all terrorist networks, including al-Qaeda, ISIS/Daesh, Lashkar e-Tayyiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), and Hizb-ul Mujahideen. According to a statement issued by the US Department of State, the two sides also shared information about their “priorities and procedures for pursuing sanctions and designations against terrorist groups and individuals, particularly in light of recent legislative changes in India”. The statement added that the two sides underlined the urgent need for Pakistan to take “immediate, sustained, and irreversible action to ensure that no territory under its control is used for terrorist attacks”. The US also reiterated its support for the people and Government of India in the fight against terrorism. Participants also highlighted their efforts to address counter terrorism challenges, including countering the financing and operations of terrorist organisations, countering radicalisation, cross-border movement of terrorists and prosecuting, and reintegrating returning terrorist fighters and family members. In response, Pakistan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs strongly rejected the unwarranted references to Pakistan in the Joint Statement of US–India Counter-Terrorism Joint Working Group and Designations Dialogue. In a statement, Pakistan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasised that “it is important that partner countries take an objective view of the issues of peace and security in South Asia and refrain from endorsing positions that are one-sided and divorced from ground realities.”*

- On September 9, Norwegian anti-terror police arrested a suspect linked to a 1982 attack in a Jewish neighbourhood in Paris in which six people were killed while 22 were injured.

*A spokesperson for the PST (anti-terror police) confirmed that a suspect was arrested in the city of Skien on an arrest warrant issued by the French authorities. PST did not name the man but, for several years, France has requested the extradition of a man, who has lived in Norway since 1991, suspected of being involved in the attack attributed to the Abu Nidal organisation. Norwegian media also reported that the arrest was linked to the 1982 attack. The man, however, has previously denied being involved in the attack.*

- On September 9, a roadside bomb in Kabul targeted First Afghan Vice President, Amrullah Saleh.

*While Saleh was able to escape unharmed, at least four people were killed while 16 others were injured in the blast. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack. Saleh has*

*survived several assassination attempts, including one on his office in 2019. The latest attack comes ahead of the anticipated peace talks between the Afghan Government and the Taliban scheduled to take place in Doha.*

- On September 6, a Tunisian National Guard officer was killed in a terrorist attack in Tunisia.

*According to Tunisia's Military force, attackers stabbed the officer and wounded another. The three assailants were later killed in a cross-fire. The stabbing attack took place in the tourist district of Sousse. The latest incident comes two days after a new Tunisian Government was sworn in. In 2015, Sousse was the scene of one of Tunisia's worst attacks, when 38 people were killed by a gunman. The Islamic State released a statement claiming responsibility for the attack.*

- On September 5, three terrorists from the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) were killed in a gun battle with members of security forces in South Waziristan.

*According to police, TTP militants attacked a military convoy, which initiated the exchange of fire between the two sides. Three militants were killed as a result. This was the first clash between security forces and the TTP after two splinter groups of militants declared the launch of an armed struggle against Pakistan in August 2020. Mohammad Khurasani, central spokesman for the TTP, had announced that Umar Khalid Khurasani, the head of the Jamaatul Ahrar, and Umar Khurasani, the head of his own splinter faction of Hizbul Ahrar, had dissolved their respective groups and had taken an oath of allegiance to TTP Chief, Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud.*

*In related news, one soldier was killed and three others were wounded in an attack on an army patrolling mission near Mirali in North Waziristan on September 5, 2020.*

- On September 3, three soldiers, including an officer, of the Pakistan Army were killed while four were injured in a terrorist attack in North Waziristan.

*According to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), security forces cordoned off the area and a search operation was conducted following the explosion of a roadside improvised explosive device (IED) planted by the terrorists.*

*In a related development, according to Dawn on September 1, 2020, three soldiers were killed and four were injured when militants attacked security forces in South Waziristan. According to officials, troops were patrolling the Kazkai region of Ladha tehsil when terrorists opened fire on them on August 30, 2020. Following the attack, security forces conducted a search operation but*

*no arrests were made. Recently, South Waziristan has witnessed a spike in terrorist attacks on security forces.*

- According to Turkey's Interior Minister, Suleyman Soylu, on September 1, Turkish Police arrested the Daesh terrorist group's top leader in Turkey.

*On Twitter, Soylu stated that "important plans" had been seized along with the terrorist, without giving any further details. Turkey was one of the first countries to declare Daesh as a terrorist group in 2013. The country has since been attacked by the terrorist group on several occasions.*

- According to *Dawn* on September 1, a 'commander' of a banned organisation was shot dead in Mastung district of Balochistan.

*The suspect was said to be involved in a suicide attack and the murder of Nawabzada Siraj Raisani, a leader of the Balochistan Awami Party (BAP). A spokesman for the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) stated that the CTD and other law enforcement agencies conducted a joint operation in Mastung district and cordoned off the commander's hideout. The Commander's accomplices and security forces exchanged fire, which led to the Commander being shot and killed. Arms and ammunition, including explosive material, was also recovered from Commander's hideout. The CTD spokesman identified the deceased as Mohammad Nawaz alias Sindhi and stated that he was the commander of the militant ISIS group.*

*---Fareeha Shamim*

## MIDDLE EAST & WEST ASIA

### Bahrain

- On September 11, in a US-brokered deal, Bahrain agreed to normalise its relations with Israel.

*In a joint statement, the US, Bahrain and Israel stated: “Opening direct dialogue and ties between these two dynamic societies and advanced economies will continue the positive transformation of the Middle East and increase stability, security, and prosperity in the region”. The statement added that Bahrain’s Foreign Minister, Abdullatif al-Zayani, will be signing a “historic Declaration of Peace” with Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. The Bahrain-Israel deal will normalise diplomatic, commercial, security and other relations between the two countries. Bahrain, along with Saudi Arabia, had already lifted the ban on Israeli flights over its airspace. The joint statement noted that Bahrain, Israel and the US will continue efforts “to achieve a just, comprehensive, and enduring resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to enable the Palestinian people to realise their full potential”. Meanwhile, Bahraini opposition groups rejected the normalisation of relations with Israel. Cleric Ayatollah Sheikh Isa Qassim stated that the accords between Israel and the UAE, as well as between Israel and Bahrain, go against the will of the people. He noted: “There is a great divergence between the rulers and the ruled in thought, mind, aims and interests”. Qassim remarked that Governments are experiencing a psychological defeat and want to impose it on the people, and the people have to resist this defeat. A joint statement by a group of Bahraini political and civil society associations, including the Bahrain Bar Association, also rejected the normalisation deal.*

*Following the announcement of the deal, Netanyahu welcomed the agreement and thanked US President Donald Trump. Referring to the 1994 peace treaty with Jordan and the recent agreements between the UAE and Bahrain, Netanyahu stated: “It took us 26 years between the second peace agreement with an Arab country and the third, but only 29 days between the third and the fourth, and there will be more”. Bahrain’s King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa emphasised that the country supports a “fair and comprehensive” peace in the Middle East, and that peace should be based on a two-state solution to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.*

*Meanwhile, the Palestinian leadership condemned the agreement as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause and recalled the Palestinian Ambassador to Bahrain for consultations. In a statement, the Palestinian Authority expressed its rejection of “this step taken by the Kingdom of Bahrain” and called on the country “to immediately retreat from it due to the great harm it causes to the inalienable national rights of the Palestinian people and joint Arab action”. The Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) termed the normalisation “another treacherous stab to the Palestinian cause”. According to Hamas Spokesman, Hazem Qassem, Bahrain’s decision to normalise relations with Israel “represents a grave harm to the Palestinian cause”. Turkey and Iran also condemned the deal between Israel and Bahrain to normalise their relations. Turkey*

*described the US-brokered deal as a “fresh blow” to the Palestinian cause. Meanwhile, Iran accused Bahrain of stirring instability in the region.*

*In a related development on September 13, 2020, Oman welcomed Bahrain’s decision to normalise relations with Israel and hoped that the agreement would contribute to Israeli-Palestinian peace. According to a statement issued by the Government of Oman, it “hopes this new strategic path taken by some Arab countries will contribute to bringing about a peace based on an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and on establishing an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as capital”.*

## **Egypt**

- On September 9, Foreign Ministers from Arab League States held a meeting to discuss Turkish and Iranian “interference” in the region and the Palestinian cause.

*During his address to the meeting, Egypt’s Foreign Minister, Sameh Shoukry, emphasised that Cairo “will not tolerate Turkey’s actions in northern Iraq, Libya and Syria”. He stated that Egypt supported Iraq “against continuous Turkish aggression into its borders”. According to Assistant Arab League Secretary, Hossam Zaki, Iran and Turkey were seeking interference in Arab affairs and looked for opportunities at the expense of Arab States.*

*Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia reiterated its support for all efforts to reach a comprehensive solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. A statement released by the Saudi Foreign Ministry, on remarks made by Foreign Minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud, included no direct mention of a normalisation deal between Israel and the UAE. According to the statement, the Prince stated that Riyadh supported the establishment of a Palestinian State based on the borders before the 1967 Middle East war, with East Jerusalem as its capital.*

*In his comments on the UAE at the Arab League meeting, Palestinian Foreign Minister, Riyad al-Maliki, referred to the accord as a “surprise”, “a normalisation” and an “earthquake” that hit Arab consensus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Maliki strongly criticised Israel referring to its “colonial and racist occupation”, and accused the US of blackmail, pressure and assault against Palestinians and some Arab states. He expressed disappointment at the lack of Arab consensus that prevented an emergency Arab summit that was to be held at the Palestinians’ request following the normalisation of Israel-UAE ties. Maliki called for an immediate rejection of the normalisation agreement.*

*After the meeting, the Palestinian delegation presented a draft resolution, which did not receive the support of the other members. The draft affirmed Palestinian rights and specifically referred to the peace accord between the UAE and Israel, but did not endorse it. An amended draft resolution, focusing on Palestinian rights and the need for a two-state solution, without reference to the peace accord, was also not passed as no consensus was reached in this regard.*

## Israel

- On September 15, the UAE and Bahrain signed agreements for normalising relations with Israel.

*US President Donald Trump hosted the signing ceremony at the White House. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Emirati Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan and Bahrain's Foreign Minister Abdullatif Al Zayani were present during the signing of the agreement. The latest normalisation deals signed by the UAE and Bahrain, make them the third and fourth Arab states to take such steps to normalise ties since Israel signed peace treaties with Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994.*

*During his meeting with Netanyahu earlier in the Oval Office, Trump stated: "We'll have at least five or six countries coming along very quickly" to forge their own accords with Israel. But he did not name any of the nations involved in such talks. Speaking to Fox News before the ceremony, Trump noted that he expected more Arab countries to normalise ties with Israel and predicted the Palestinians would eventually join as well or else be "left out in the cold". During his meeting with the Emirati Foreign Minister prior to the ceremony, Trump thanked the UAE for being first in the Gulf to normalise ties with Israel.*

*During the signing ceremony, President Trump remarked: "We're here this afternoon to change the course of history". He termed the deal "a major stride in which people of all faiths and backgrounds live together in peace and prosperity". Trump added that the three Middle East countries "are going to work together, they are friends". According to observers, bringing Israel, the UAE and Bahrain together reflects their shared concern about Iran's rising influence in the region and its development of ballistic missiles. Meanwhile, Iran remains critical of both deals.*

*According to analysts, although the signing of peace deals with the UAE and Bahrain is a diplomatic win for Netanyahu, the ceremony takes place while he faces criticism at home over his mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic and a corruption trial on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust that have led to frequent street protests. Netanyahu denies any wrongdoing and describes his trial as a leftist, political witch-hunt aimed at unseating a popular right-wing leader. Meanwhile, in Gaza, hundreds of Palestinians gathered to protest against Israel's normalisation deals with the UAE and Bahrain.*

## Lebanon

- On September 6, leaders of Lebanon's Hezbollah movement and the Palestinian group, Hamas, met to discuss normalisation of diplomatic ties between Israel and Arab countries.

*Hamas Political Chief, Ismail Haniyeh, was warmly welcomed at Ain al-Helweh, Lebanon's largest Palestinian refugee camp. According to the Hezbollah-run Al-Manar TV, Hassan Nasrallah, Head of the Iran-backed Hezbollah movement, and Haniyeh emphasised the "stability" of the "axis of resistance" against Israel. During their meeting, the two sides discussed "political and military developments in Palestine, Lebanon and the region" as well as "the dangers to the Palestinian cause" including "Arab plans for normalisation" with Israel. The exact time and location of the meeting were not disclosed. Nasrallah has been living in secret locations since Hezbollah's 2006 war with Israel and makes rare public appearances. The Haniyeh-Nasrallah meeting follows the August 13, 2020 announcement of normalisation of ties between Israel and the UAE.*

- On September 1, protesters in Lebanon clashed with the police and attempted to storm the country's Parliament in Beirut amid a second visit by French President, Emanuel Macron, since a massive explosion at the Beirut port.

*The protesters gathered at the city's Martyrs Square to voice anger over what they believed to be government shortcomings. On August 4, 2020, at least 180 people were killed and almost 6,500 others were injured when 2,700 tons of ammonium nitrate exploded at the Beirut port. The explosion prompted public outrage at the authorities for alleged negligence vis-à-vis storage at the port. Protests were followed by the resignation of the entire Government of the then-Prime Minister Hassan Diab. Soon after the blast, Macron paid a visit to Beirut and pressured the Lebanese authorities to bring changes in the Government in what was denounced as a throwback to Lebanon's colonial past. The French President renewed the visit warning Lebanese politicians that they risked being hit with sanctions "if they fail to set the nation on a new course within three months".*

## **Libya**

- On September 14, an interim government allied with Libya's eastern-based renegade Commander Khalifa Haftar resigned amid protests over power cuts and deteriorating living conditions.

*According to Ezzel-Deen al-Falih, a spokesman for the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR), Prime Minister Abdallah al-Thani tendered the government's resignation to Speaker Aguila Saleh. However, Parliamentary spokesman, Abdallah Abaihig, stated that HoR lawmakers would review the resignation of al-Thani's Government, which is not internationally recognised, in their next meeting. A civil war erupted in Libya following the 2011 uprising that toppled long-time ruler Moammar Gaddafi, who was later killed. The country has since been split between rival east- and west-based administrations, each backed by armed groups and foreign governments. A 14-month offensive by Haftar's forces to wrest control of the capital, Tripoli, from the internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) failed in June 2020. The HoR has accused the Central Bank and the GNA of "plundering" the country*

*and neglecting the east. In recent days, hundreds of people have taken to the streets of Benghazi and other eastern cities to protest against crippling electricity shortages and poor living conditions, setting tyres ablaze and blocking traffic on several major roads.*

## **Palestine**

- On September 4, the head of Hamas' political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, urged all Palestinian factions to end their differences in the face of measures targeting the Palestinian cause by the US, Israel and some Arab States.

*Haniyeh made the remarks in the Lebanese capital, Beirut, where he joined a plenary meeting of his fellow Palestinian leaders. He remarked: "We have come together today to say that the Palestinian nation will stay united whether at home or abroad". Ziyad al-Nakhalah, leader of Islamic Jihad, also joined the meeting. President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, addressed the gathering via video-link from the city of Ramallah. While referring to a fledgling trend of détente between some Arab regimes and Israel, all of the machinations were aimed at "consigning history and geography to oblivion". H asserted that the Palestinians' answer to the schemes was all-inclusive resistance, adding that Israel would remain an enemy and Palestinians would not give up even one inch of their land.*

- On September 1, several Palestinian political factions criticised the first official visit of an Israeli delegation to the UAE to finalise the normalisation agreement between the two countries.

*On September 1, 2020, the first commercial flight from Tel Aviv to Abu Dhabi, carrying officials from Israel and the US, including President Donald Trump's son-in-law and Adviser, Jared Kushner, landed in Abu Dhabi. The El Al flight, numbered LY971 as a gesture to the UAE's international calling code, flew over Saudi Arabia, marking the first time an Israeli commercial plane used the Kingdom's airspace for an overflight. Palestinian officials and resistance groups expressed their outrage at the flight and denounced it as a stab in the nation's back.*

*Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh stated the Palestinians were "deeply pained" to see an Israeli aircraft land in the UAE, adding that the flight was a "clear and blatant violation of the Arab position regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict". Shtayyeh also praised Arab States that have refused to emulate the UAE and normalise ties with the Israeli regime. Meanwhile, Secretary General of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), Saeb Erekat, emphasised that peace could not be reached through denial of the rights of the Palestinian people.*

*Similarly, the Gaza-based Hamas resistance movement stated that the Israeli flight to the UAE represented a "stab in the back of the Palestinian people, a prolonging of the occupation, and a betrayal of the resistance of the (Palestinian) people". Hamas further called on the Arab States to take practical measures to confront the "conspiracy". It stated: "The rulers of Abu Dhabi insist on continuing the sin of normalisation by signing a disgraceful agreement with the Zionist*

entity”. Additionally, the Islamic Jihad movement, which is also headquartered in the Gaza Strip, criticised the Israeli delegation’s visit to the UAE, emphasising that it “reflects a state of political and moral downfall and a setback in the history of the UAE”. In Ramallah, the National and Islamic Forces, an alliance of various Palestinian factions, denounced the visit of the Israeli delegation to the UAE as a “betrayal of the Palestinian cause”. Senior Fatah official, Monir al-Jaghoub, remarked that the Palestinians were very disappointed with the UAE for normalising ties with Israel.

## **Qatar**

- On September 2, US President Donald Trump’s son-in-law and adviser, Jared Kushner, visited Doha in an attempt to push other Arab States to follow in the footsteps of the UAE in normalising ties with Israel.

*During his meeting with Kushner, Qatar’s Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani emphasised that Doha supports a two-State solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with East Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian State. Sheikh Tamim stressed that Qatar remained committed to the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, in which Arab States offered Israel normalised ties in return for a statehood deal with the Palestinians and full Israeli withdrawal from territory captured in the 1967 Middle East War. According to the Qatar News Agency, “during the meeting, they reviewed the close strategic relations between the State of Qatar and the US, in addition to discussing a number of issues of common concern, especially the peace process in the Middle East region”.*

*On September 1, 2020, Kushner visited the UAE with an Israeli delegation for normalisation talks before travelling to Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Concluding his visit, Kushner predicted that all other Arab States will gradually follow the UAE in establishing ties with Israel. He stated: “I believe that it is logical for them to do it and I believe it is the right thing to do over time”.*

*During his visit to Bahrain, he met with King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifah. According to the Bahrain News Agency, King Hamad praised what he called “the UAE’s historic and continued efforts to support the interests and causes of Arab and Islamic nations, and their determined endeavours to reach a just and comprehensive solution that guarantees the Palestinian people their legitimate rights and lasting peace in the region”. However, he noted that stability in the region “relied on” Saudi Arabia, hinting that it will not strike a deal with Israel before Riyadh. Meanwhile, according to the Saudi Press Agency (SPA), during their meeting in Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Kushner emphasised the need for the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.*

- The *Middle East Eye* reported on September 1 that public hearings for Qatar’s discrimination case against the UAE began at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague.

*Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE and Egypt cut their ties with Qatar in June 2017, accusing it of backing “extremists” among other allegations that Doha has denied. They imposed wide-ranging punitive measures, including banning Qatari planes from their airspace; closing Qatar’s only land border with Saudi Arabia; and expelling Qatari citizens. The countries justified their moves against Doha, citing their sovereign right to protect their national security.*

*In 2018, Qatar took the UAE to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague, accusing Abu Dhabi of “discriminatory” behaviour, including the expulsion of Qataris, and a maritime and air blockade. Qatar has accused the UAE of creating a “climate of fear” for Qataris living there. In 2019, Abu Dhabi approached the ICJ to seek special measures, including to bring to a halt Doha’s blocking of its own citizens from travelling to or residing in Qatar. It also requested the ICJ to order Doha to withdraw a separate discrimination case that it had lodged against the UAE with the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the monitoring body for the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. The UAE’s request was overwhelmingly rejected by the ICJ judges. Qatar, meanwhile, has won several of its first legal steps.*

*In July 2020, the ICJ backed Qatar in a separate but related case specifically about the air blockade. Its rivals had appealed against a decision by the International Civil Aviation Organisation, in favour of Qatar over sovereign airspace. During the latest hearings, in its opening arguments, the UAE argued that the ICJ lacked jurisdiction to rule on the dispute, referred to the Court by Qatar in 2018, because the diplomatic crisis between the neighbouring countries is based on nationality, not race, and the CERD in this regard does not specify nationality as a criteria. Meanwhile, Qatar maintained before the ICJ that sanctions imposed by the UAE constitute racial discrimination.*

### **Saudi Arabia**

- On September 7, Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz held a telephonic conversation with Russian President, Vladimir Putin, and discussed bilateral relations and oil partnership.

*During their talks, King Salman expressed his desire to strengthen bilateral ties between the two countries, with special emphasis on their partnership within the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC+), an alliance of oil producing countries. OPEC+ is a group of 24 oil-producing nations, comprising 14 members of OPEC and 10 other non-OPEC members, including Russia. The two leaders also discussed the work of the G20 under the Saudi presidency ahead of the summit to be held in November 2020, and Russian advances towards developing a COVID-19 vaccine. According to a statement from the Saudi Press Agency, King Salman expressed “satisfaction over the increasing trade exchange between the two countries, stressing the constructive role of the Russian Federation in OPEC+ in achieving stability and balance in the oil market”. Meanwhile, President Putin highlighted the “fruitful cooperation with Saudi Arabia in the field of energy”.*

- On September 7, in its final ruling, a court in Saudi Arabia overturned five death sentences handed down in journalist Jamal Khashoggi's murder case.

*Eight unnamed defendants were handed jail terms of between seven and twenty years in a verdict that came after Khashoggi's sons 'pardoned' the killers in May 2020, paving the way for a less severe punishment. The eight persons convicted of the murder, which took place in Saudi Arabia's consulate in Turkey, were not identified. Khashoggi went missing on October 2, 2018, while visiting the consulate in Istanbul. Turkish authorities later revealed he was murdered inside the building by a Saudi assassination team. His body has never been found. According to observers, the court ruling underscores Saudi efforts to draw a line under the October 2018 murder as the Kingdom seeks to reboot its international image ahead of November's G20 summit in Riyadh.*

- On September 3, Saudi Arabia opened its airspace to any flights going to and from the UAE to cross over its territory, granting Israel access to the Kingdom's airspace.

*According to the Saudi Press Agency (SPA), the Kingdom's aviation authority had taken the decision in response to a request by the UAE. Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, hailed the Saudi announcement as a "breakthrough" that will help the regime's economy and reduce airfares. Saudi Arabia had previously banned flights to and from the occupied territories from using its airspace, though since 2018 it has permitted Air India to fly over the country to Tel Aviv. In a similar development on September 4, 2020, Bahrain opened its airspace to all UAE flights en route to or from Israel. The country's official Bahrain News Agency reported that "Bahrain will allow all flights coming to and departing from the UAE" to utilise its airspace.*

- On September 1, Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz dismissed two royals, through a royal decree, following a corruption investigation in the Defence Ministry.

*According to the decree, Prince Fahd bin Turki bin Abdulaziz Al Saud will be removed from his post of Commander of Joint Forces in the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen, and his son, Prince Abdulaziz bin Fahd, will be relieved from his post of Deputy Governor of al-Jouf region. The decree stated that the decision was based on Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's letter to the anti-corruption committee to investigate "suspicious financial transactions at the Defence Ministry". After becoming heir to the throne in 2017, Prince Mohammed launched an anti-corruption campaign detaining several royals, ministers and businessmen at Riyadh's Ritz-Carlton hotel. Most were released after reaching undisclosed settlements with the State.*

## **Syria**

- On September 7, Syrian President, Bashar al Assad, met with a high-ranking Russian delegation, headed by Russia's Deputy Prime Minister, Yori Borisov, in Damascus.

*The agenda of the Russian delegation's visit was economic cooperation which was discussed in detail in light of the Western economic sanctions on Syria. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also attended the talks. During the meeting, the two sides discussed ways to expand their mutual ties. During a joint press conference, Syria's Foreign Minister, Walid Muallem, noted that US sanctions on Damascus demonstrate Washington's opposition to Syria's sovereignty. Foreign Minister Lavrov stressed that Syria needs international help to rebuild its economy. He agreed with the Syrian President that the situation in Idlib is calm and called on Syrians to unite. He expressed Syria's determination to eliminate the remaining terrorists in Syria.*

*Head of the Russian delegation, Yori Borisov, emphasised the importance of partnership with Syria, expressing Russia's intention to further develop relations in the political, military and economic fields. He stated that Moscow is trying to help Damascus break through an economic blockade created by Washington's new sanctions under the so-called Caesar Act, which deters any foreign companies and individuals from taking part in the reconstruction of Syria. The cooperation agreement reached between the two countries includes over 40 projects mainly for the reconstruction of the power sector in Syria. Agreement was also reached on the start of oil extraction from the Syrian sea. According to observers, the Russian delegation's visit illustrates Moscow's interest in further expanding its cooperation ties with Damascus in all sectors.*

- On September 4, Russian and Syrian joint coordination committees on the repatriation of Syrian refugees denounced the presence of US troops on Syrian soil, stating that such an illegal military deployment stokes new tensions in the Middle East.

*In a statement, the committees cited the unlawful presence of US forces and militants affiliated with the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as one of the serious matters of concern in northeastern Syria. It criticised the agreement recently signed between a US oil company and the Kurdish-led SDF militants. It emphasized that such illegal accords violate Syria's territorial integrity, and run contrary to the principles of the international law. Since late October 2019, the US has been redeploying troops to the oil fields controlled by Kurdish forces in eastern Syria, contrary to President Donald Trump's earlier order to withdraw all troops from the country.*

- On September 3, during a meeting with UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, stressed the need for a political solution to the conflict in Syria, stating that the settlement of the conflict must be in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and without foreign interference.

*Lavrov stated that Russia, as a guarantor country for Syrian peace talks in the Astana format, supports UN efforts to facilitate the work of the Syrian Constitutional Committee in line with Security Council Resolution 2254. UNSC Resolution 2254 was unanimously adopted on December 18, 2015. It calls for a ceasefire and political settlement in Syria. It calls for the formation of a "credible, inclusive and non-sectarian" government and UN-supervised "free*

*and fair elections”. Lavrov also praised the results of the third round of the Syrian peace talks in Geneva. He stated: “Not everything was resolved, not everything was agreed upon, but in general, we consider the meeting fruitful and meaningful”. The third session of the UN-facilitated Syria peace negotiations convened in Geneva on August 31, 2020. Moscow, Tehran, and Ankara have been mediating peace negotiations between representatives from the Damascus Government and Syrian opposition groups in a series of talks held in Kazakhstan’s capital, Nur-Sultan (formerly called Astana) since January 2017.*

- On September 2, Syrian air defences intercepted an Israeli missile attack against the T4 airbase in central Syria.

*According to a report by the SANA state news agency, Israeli warplanes fired missiles from the direction of al-Tanf in southeastern Syria, targeting the T4 (officially known as Althias) airbase in the Homs province. The report quoted a military source, which remarked that most of the missiles were shot down and the rest caused only material damage. The attack came only two days after an Israeli missile attack against military sites in southern Damascus killed two Syrian soldiers and injured seven others. Israel frequently targets military positions inside Syria, particularly those maintained by Hezbollah, which has played a key role in assisting the Syrian Army in its fight against terrorists.*

## **Turkey**

- On September 8, according to Ankara’s Communications Directorate, Turkey and Iran held the 6<sup>th</sup> High-Level Cooperation Council (HLCC) meeting via video link.

*According to a statement issued by the Directorate, Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and his Iranian counterpart, Hassan Rouhani, co-chaired the meeting. During their meeting, President Erdogan stated: “The dialogue between Turkey and Iran has a decisive role in the solution of many regional problems.” Meanwhile, President Rouhani emphasised that “Turkey and Iran are two allies and two friendly countries”. President Rouhani added: “Our relations have always been established on strong grounds; we have historical relations. Therefore, even though we go through painful periods, our relations are not harmed. The relations of both countries stand on good neighbourly relations, common cultural values, mutual respect and of course, mutual interests”.*

*In a joint declaration following the conference, both States reiterated their determination to enhance good neighbourly relations. They also emphasised closer consultation and cooperation in the fight against COVID-19, to ensure better preparedness in providing citizens with necessary medical services, medicines and equipment for prevention and activities related to the pandemic. Turkey and Iran also renewed their commitment to intensify joint efforts to reverse the decrease in their bilateral trade volume by fully utilising available mechanisms, such as the Joint*

*Economic Commission, Joint Road Transport Committee, as well as devising new avenues of economic cooperation.*

*Furthermore, the two countries also discussed the Syrian civil war. Turkey and Iran emphasised their strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria in line with all agreements in the framework of the Astana format. Turkey, Iran and Russia initiated the Astana process in January 2017 to facilitate the UN-backed Geneva Peace Process and to bring the warring sides in Syria together to find a permanent solution to the war. In their joint declaration, the two States also reaffirmed their conviction in the belief that the Syrian conflict could be resolved through political process, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254.*

*Issues relating to Iraq, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and Afghanistan were also discussed during the conference. Both countries expressed their unwavering support for a lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and reiterated the need for the establishment of an independent and sovereign Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. The previous council meeting was held in 2018 in the capital, Ankara. The Turkish-Iranian HLCC, which was established in 2014, has provided a structured basis to Turkey-Iran relations.*

## **UAE**

- *Gulf News* reported on September 1 that the UAE, the US and Israel held a tripartite meeting in Abu Dhabi and commended the announcement of normalisation of ties between the UAE and Israel.

*The three States issued a tripartite statement during the current visit to the UAE by a top US-Israeli delegation, led by Jared Kushner, Senior Adviser to US President, Donald Trump. The delegation also included US National Security Adviser, Robert O'Brien and Meir Ben-Shabbat, National Security Adviser and Head of the Israeli National Security Council. Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the UAE's National Security Adviser received the joint US-Israeli delegation. According to the joint statement, the UAE, the US and Israel reaffirmed that the accord reached by the three nations on August 13, 2020 is "a courageous step towards a more stable, integrated and prosperous Middle East". The statement emphasised that the Agreement, known as the "Abraham Agreement", will alter the traditional way of thinking about the manner in which the region's problems and challenges are to be addressed, "focusing on pragmatic steps that have tangible, practical outcomes". The statement also focused on establishing "new bridges that will serve to de-escalate existing conflicts and prevent future conflicts". According to the Emirates News Agency (WAM), the meeting also addressed the trajectory of relations between the UAE and Israel, and the avenues available for the enhancement of future collaboration in various fields to the benefit of both States and in support of peace, stability, cooperation and development in the region.*

## Yemen

- On September 10, Yemeni Armed Forces launched missile and drones strikes against a strategic target in the Saudi Capital, Riyadh.

*According to spokesman for the Yemeni Armed Forces, Brigadier General Yahya Saree, a domestically-developed Zofaqar ballistic missile and four Samad-3 drones were used to hit the “important target” in Riyadh. He emphasised that Yemeni forces will keep up their retaliatory raids against sensitive and strategic targets in Saudi Arabia as long as Riyadh and its allies maintain their military campaign and siege against Yemen. Saree stated: “We promise the criminal and aggressor Saudi regime painful operations as long as the aggression and siege continue”. Since early 2015, Riyadh and its coalition States have been engaged in a military campaign against Yemen in an attempt to reinstall a Saudi-friendly government in the country. With the support of the Yemeni Armed Forces and allied popular groups, the Houthi movement has been defending Yemen against the Saudi-led aggression, preventing the Saudi-led Coalition from achieving its goals. The war in Yemen, accompanied by a blockade of the country, has resulted in the deaths of thousands of people. According to the UN, the situation in Yemen is the “world’s worst humanitarian crisis”.*

- On September 9, during a virtual Arab League session, Yemeni Foreign Minister, Mohammed Al-Hadrami, declared the Iranian regime a grave threat to stability and security in the Arab world.

*Al-Hadrami noted that the Iran-backed Houthi militia fuels the worsening humanitarian crisis in Yemen. He stated: “Iran has caused great harm to Yemen and the region, as it uses the wealth of its people to arm and finance a militia outside its territory to blatantly interfere in the internal affairs of Arab countries”. He emphasised that his Government has sought a peaceful solution to end the Houthi coup against the internationally recognised government and the Houthis’ military expansion in Yemen. Yemeni Governments have long accused Iran of arming and financing the Houthi rebellion in Yemen. Following the interception of arms shipments to the Houthis, the Yemeni Government has asked the international community to impose harsher sanctions on the Iranian regime in order to curb its military support to militias in the region, including the Houthis. Regarding the Stockholm Agreement, Al-Hadrami stressed that his government would not allow the Houthis to take advantage of a truce in the western city of Hodeidah under the agreement to escalate military operations in other parts of the country, including Marib and Jouf.*

*On December 13, 2018, parties to the conflict in Yemen came together in Stockholm, Sweden, and agreed to a series of undertakings that raised hopes for a peaceful settlement of the conflict. The undertakings set out in the Stockholm Agreement came in three parts: the Hodeidah Agreement; the Taiz Understanding; and a prisoner exchange agreement. Taken together, these undertakings committed parties to: (1) “a ceasefire in the city of Hodeidah and the ports of*

*Hodeidah, Salif, and Ras Issa, as well as redeployment of forces on both sides;” (2) “an opening of humanitarian corridors for the movement of aid via these ports;” and (3) “a prisoner exchange aiming to release more than 15,000 prisoners and detainees”. Parties also agreed to partake in discussions geared towards creating a humanitarian corridor that would allow humanitarian aid into the Taiz Governorate.*

*---Muhammad Shoaib*

## SOUTH ASIA: I

### Pakistan

#### External

- On September 15, Pakistan strongly rejected the unwarranted references to Pakistan in a joint statement of the US-India Counterterrorism Joint Working Group and Designations Dialogue.

*Earlier, on September 9-10, 2020, the 17<sup>th</sup> meeting of the US-India Counter Terrorism Joint Working Group and the third session of the US-India Designations Dialogue “underlined the urgent need for Pakistan to take immediate, sustained, and irreversible action to ensure that no territory under its control is used for terrorist attacks”. In response, a statement issued by the Foreign Office noted: “It is important that partner countries take an objective view of the issues of peace and security in South Asia and refrain from endorsing positions that are one-sided and divorced from ground realities”. The statement mentioned that Pakistan had conveyed to the US its “serious concerns and rejection of the unacceptable reference to Pakistan in the aforementioned joint statement”. The FO highlighted that the international community was well aware that Pakistan was the most affected country vis-à-vis cross-border terrorism, sponsored and supported by India. Pakistan had repeatedly underlined that peace and stability in South Asia was threatened by the irresponsible policies and actions of the RSS-BJP regime in India, including those towards its minorities, its state-terrorism in Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir, and its belligerence against Pakistan and other countries in the region.*

- On September 15, Pakistan celebrated its diplomatic victory when Russia overruled the Indian objection to displaying of Pakistan’s new political map at an online meeting of National Security Advisers (NSAs) of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

*Indian NSA, Ajit Doval, walked out in protest during a speech at the dialogue by Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on National Security, Moeed Yusuf. While talking to journalists after the meeting, Yusuf described the Indian reaction as “unfortunate”. He stated: “Bizarrely, my Indian counterpart chose to walk out of Pakistan and Russia’s speech”. The office of Special Assistant to the PM stated that India’s “spurious claims were rejected as it faced defeat after its formal objection to Pakistan’s new political map was overruled”. The map remained on display in the background. The row over the display of the new map at the NSAs meeting started during a test call for the conference, where the Indian side noted the map in the background. Later, India protested to Russia, which was hosting the meeting. Moscow conveyed New Delhi’s reservations to Islamabad, but the Foreign Office rejected the Indian position and refused to remove the map. Pakistan’s position is that, contrary to the Indian claim, the map does not claim*

*any part of the Indian territory and is in accordance with UN Security Council resolutions and “sentiments” of the Kashmiris.*

*According to a statement released by the National Security Division (NSD): “Pakistan highlighted that India under international law had no legal rights to claim the internationally recognised disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir as part of India”. Pakistan informed the SCO secretariat that India’s illegal and unilateral actions in Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IOJK) were in grave violation of the UN Charter and UNSC resolutions on the Jammu and Kashmir dispute. The statement added that the SCO agreed to Pakistan’s position. The NSD stressed: “Once again, India’s attempts to make a significant multilateral forum subject to petty bilateral debate failed and Pakistan’s new political map and the aspirations of the Kashmiri people were highlighted during the meeting of NSAs of SCO member states”.*

- On September 14, Pakistan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the Indian charge d’affaires to lodge Pakistan’s serious concern over the Jodhpur incident.

*On August 9, 2020, at least 11 Pakistani Hindus, including children, were found dead under mysterious circumstances in the Lodta Haridasot village of Jodhpur district in Rajasthan. It was emphasised that since the victims of the Jodhpur incident were Pakistani nationals, it was incumbent upon the Government of Pakistan to be fully aware of the circumstances under which its nationals died in India. According to the Foreign Office spokesperson, India has been urged to carry out a comprehensive investigation into the matter, providing access to the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi to the surviving member of the bereaved family. Further, India has been requested to share copies of the FIR (first information report) and the initial investigation report, and facilitate the presence of the High Commission for Pakistan’s representatives during the post-mortem of the deceased persons without further delay. It was highlighted that despite repeated requests by the High Commission for Pakistan in New Delhi, the Indian Government continued to evade the issue and failed to share any substantive details regarding the cause and circumstances of the deaths.*

- On September 12, Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, attended the opening ceremony of the intra-Afghan talks in Doha through video link and proposed a four-point strategy for the way forward on the Afghan peace process.

*The proposed strategy envisages continued support to the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process, while respecting consensus emerging from the intra-Afghan talks. It also calls for ensuring a non-violent environment in the country with no space for terrorist outfits to operate from Afghan soil. FM Qureshi proposed the following four-pronged strategy: 1) “To continue to support the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process while respecting the consensus that emerges from intra-Afghan negotiations”; 2) “To ensure that Afghanistan neither witnesses the violent days of the past nor becomes a space for elements who would harm others beyond its borders”; 3) “To deepen and sustain economic engagement with Afghanistan for its*

*reconstruction and economic development”; 4) “To ensure a well-resourced, time-bound return of Afghan refugees to their homeland with dignity and honour”.*

*During his address at the event, FM Qureshi expressed his optimism vis-à-vis the peace talks, hoping that a long phase of tribulation would end. Highlighting Pakistan’s role, Qureshi remarked that Islamabad had walked alongside Afghanistan in every possible way, by encouraging reduction in violence and by urging dialogue and negotiations. He stated that Pakistan and Prime Minister Imran Khan had long maintained that there was no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan. A political solution is the only way forward. He remarked: “We are gratified that our perspective is now widely shared across the international community... we are also gratified that we have fulfilled our part of the responsibility”. Foreign Minister Qureshi stressed that the upcoming negotiations were for the Afghans to decide their future and “the Afghans alone must be the masters of their destiny, without outside influence or interference”. He assured the participants that Pakistan “will always support a peaceful, stable, united, democratic, prosperous and sovereign Afghanistan, at peace with itself and with its neighbours”.*

- On September 12, during his virtual participation in the 27<sup>th</sup> Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF), Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi voiced Pakistan’s support for China on resumption of ‘Code of Conduct’ (CoC) negotiations in the South China Sea.

*FM Qureshi reaffirmed “Pakistan’s support for the ongoing negotiations of CoC and underlined that the concerned parties may find solution through consensus”. He announced that Pakistan will be co-hosting the 24<sup>th</sup> ARF Heads of Defence Universities/ Colleges/Institutions Meeting with Malaysia in 2021. The CoC, which is being negotiated between China and the 10-member ASEAN, aims at managing the actions of countries within the South China Sea, many of whom have distinct territorial claims. The CoC was to provide for dispute management and stability building in the South China Sea.*

- On September 10, during his address to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation’s (SCO) meeting of its Council of Foreign Ministers in Moscow, Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, stated that the SCO was a vital platform for forging synergy with regional partners and realising benefits of emerging confluence between the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Eurasian Economic Union.
- On September 10, Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, held separate meetings with his Chinese and Russian counterparts, Wang Yi and Sergei Lavrov, respectively, on the sidelines of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation’s (SCO) meeting of Council of Foreign Ministers.

*According to a press release issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, bilateral, regional and international issues of mutual interest were discussed during the meetings. During his meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister, Yi, Qureshi reiterated that Pakistan remained committed to the “One China” policy and stood firmly behind China on core issues of its national interest. He emphasised that a peaceful and stable Afghanistan was important for peace and stability in the region and beyond, and that an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation process was critical in restoring regional peace and stability. Foreign Minister Qureshi emphasised that India’s expansionist and unilateral actions, particularly since August 5, 2019, had been imperilling regional peace and security.*

*During the meeting with Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, the two sides discussed matters of mutual interest, including the COVID-19 situation, prospects of enhanced bilateral cooperation, regional issues and cooperation at multilateral fora. They also exchanged views on further strengthening trade and economic cooperation, including in the field of energy. Foreign Minister Lavrov welcomed Pakistan’s likely participation in the forthcoming Kavkaz military exercise scheduled to take place in Russia later in September 2020. Foreign Minister Qureshi stated that Pakistan considered Russia an important partner, and wanted to forge a long-term and multi-dimensional partnership with the country. The two Ministers also discussed the situation in Afghanistan in the context of recent positive developments. On the issue of Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IOJK), Qureshi shared deep concerns over the grave human rights and humanitarian situation as well as the Indian attempts to change the demographic composition of the occupied territory. He underlined the urgent necessity of addressing the grave situation in IOJK.*

*Meanwhile, during his address to the SCO meeting in Moscow, Foreign Minister Qureshi reiterated that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) supplemented the SCO’s vision of regional connectivity and economic integration. He stated, “We should not view development projects, including BRI and CPEC, through myopic geopolitical angles and should give them our full support”. Qureshi called for pooling scientific and technical resources of SCO members to carry out joint research in diverse fields, particularly with a view to finding an effective vaccine for COVID-19. He also called for collective work to project the SCO as an effective forum for regional development and a new kind of international organisation based on the ideals of the Shanghai spirit. Foreign Minister Qureshi called for countering the pandemic’s negative economic impact through the Global Initiative for Debt Relief for developing countries, as proposed by Prime Minister Imran Khan. During his address to the meeting, Qureshi emphasised that the world today was becoming increasingly multi-polar with the competition between the old and emerging powers reshaping the contours of contemporary international relations. He stated: “It is our firm belief that in this uncertain and brutally competitive environment that is full of zero-sum prophecies, cooperation and not confrontation should be the driving force in international politics”. Qureshi reaffirmed Pakistan’s position that the reform of*

*the UN Security Council should be achieved through consensus for a more representative, democratic, effective and accountable council.*

- On September 7, Pakistan's Defence Minister, Pervez Khattak, held a meeting with Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Pakistan, Nawaf bin Saeed Al-Maliki, and emphasised that Pakistan values its ties with Saudi Arabia and is looking to diversify the cooperation between the two countries.

*During their meeting, Minister Khattak stated: "We consider Saudi Arabia as a confident and a trust-worthy friend and we would like to continue with the same pace and momentum". He added: "The scope and scale of cooperation between the two countries was very huge, therefore, we should further diversify our relations". Meanwhile, Al-Maliki noted that Saudi Arabia's relations with Pakistan were based on mutual trust. He expressed the Kingdom's deep commitment towards working with Pakistan and its people to further expand bilateral ties. The Saudi Envoy has visited several key Government figures since Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi's criticism of the Saudi-led Organisation of Islamic Cooperation created a perception of rift in ties.*

- On September 6, Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (CJCSC), General Nadeem Raza, held a meeting with Chinese Defence Minister, General Wei Fenghe, on the side-lines of the Defence and Security Cooperation Conference at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Forum.

*According to a statement issued by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), "changing geostrategic environment and further strengthening of security and defence cooperation between the two countries were discussed during the meeting". The statement added that both sides "reaffirmed their commitment to 'iron brotherhood' and 'all-weather' friendship with continued efforts to forge deeper strategic ties for a shared future and security vision".*

*On September 5, 2020, General Nadeem also held talks with General Valery V Gerasimov, Russian Chief of General Staff. During the meeting, matters of bilateral military cooperation and regional security dynamics between the two countries were discussed.*

- On September 4, Pakistan's Permanent Representative to the UN, Ambassador Munir Akram, reminded India that Kashmir cannot be removed from the agenda of the UN Security Council (UNSC), which is committed to resolving the issue according to the wishes of the Kashmiri people.

*Earlier, India had asked the UNSC to remove Kashmir from its agenda to prevent Pakistan from raising it at the 75<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly to be held in September 2020. In its statement on the Report of the Security Council for 2019, India complained that Pakistan "keeps pushing for discussions on an outdated agenda item in the council which needs to be removed from the council's agenda permanently". While commenting on the Indian move, Ambassador*

*Akram noted: “Indian representatives are either deluding themselves, or deluding their public, by asserting that they will remove Kashmir from the Security Council’s agenda. It will not happen”. Akram argued that the Security Council’s agenda was set in accordance with the established rules and procedures and could be changed only through a consensus decision of the Council.*

*Since August 5, 2019, when India illegally annexed the disputed territory, Pakistan has raised the Kashmir issue three times within the Council, with China’s support. India, however, argues that the annexation, although illegal, has ended the disputed nature of Kashmir and therefore it should be removed from the Council’s agenda. The UNSC does not recognise the Indian claim and not only treats Kashmir as an unresolved dispute but also maintains military observers on both sides of the Line of Control (LoC). Every year, the Council places Kashmir on its agenda as “The India-Pakistan Question”, reaffirming that it sees the Kashmir dispute as a dispute over territory between the two countries.*

- On September 4, Pakistan regretted the politicisation of the UN sanctions regime after five UN Security Council members blocked its attempt to designate two Indians accused of terrorism to the sanctions list.

*Foreign Office Spokesman, Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri, stated: “We regret the decision by some members of the UNSC Sanctions Committee to block the designation of two Indian nationals, Gobinda Patnaik and Angara Appaji, to the sanctions list on September 2, 2020”. Pakistan had proposed designation of the Indian nationals under the UN Security Council’s Islamic State of Iraq and Levant and Al Qaeda Sanctions list in 2019. According to media reports, the US, UK, France, Germany and Belgium blocked the request to list the two Indian nationals as global terrorists under the UN Security Council 1267 Sanctions Committee on the pretext that evidence was not provided.*

- On September 1, during an informal meeting on the UN Security Council’s Plenary Annual Report, Pakistan’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Munir Akram, complained that the Council had done little to restrain Hindutva extremist groups which were terrorising Muslims across India, particularly in Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IOJK).

*Ambassador Akram urged the international community to prevent India from implementing the so-called ‘final solution’ in IOJK by turning its Muslim majority into a minority. He stated: “The BJP-RSS government is putting in place what they have themselves called the ‘final solution’ in IOJK”. He further cautioned: “Demographic flooding by settler communities is meant to disempower and disenfranchise the Kashmiri people and to obliterate their Muslim identity”. The Pakistani envoy reminded the Council that its own resolutions on Kashmir have remained unimplemented for more than 70 years now. Ambassador Akram noted that the UN General Assembly’s annual report on the Security Council failed to highlight the Council’s*

*decision-making and measures taken on the UN's behalf. He emphasised the need for refocusing of the Council's efforts to combat terrorism, fascism and colonialism.*

## **Pakistan**

### **Internal**

- On September 9, during the Corps Commanders' Conference held at the General Headquarters (GHQ), Chief of Army Staff (COAS), Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa, emphasized the need for improved troop readiness in view of the regional security environment and closer 'synchronisation' with government policies for winning the fifth-generation war.

*According to a statement issued by the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), "the COAS stressed upon the need to enhance combat readiness levels in the wake of evolving strategic and regional milieu". Gen Bajwa chaired the meeting, which is held every month at the GHQ for reviewing the operational matters and the security situation. Principal Staff Officers posted at the Headquarters and the Corps Commanders attended the meeting. The ISPR statement referred to the worsening situation in Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir, intensified ceasefire violations and the situation in Afghanistan among the developments taking place in the region. The ISPR stated: "Increased ceasefire violations (CFVs) along LoC targeting civil population by Indian Military and blatant human rights violations (HRVs) in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJ&K) were noted as major cause of concern for regional peace and stability". On September 9, 2020, the Army reported martyrdom of a soldier in ceasefire violation in Bedori sector along the LoC. Havaldar Liaqat, resident of Chakwal district, embraced martyrdom during exchange of intense fire.*

*According to the ISPR, the situation in Afghanistan, where a surge in violence is being witnessed ahead of the expected intra-Afghan dialogue in Doha, is another cause for concern as this impacts Pakistan's security dynamics. The ISPR further noted that "the COAS appreciated high state of morale in the Army and directed commanders to ensure welfare of troops during prolonged/extensive operational and internal security deployments". The other major concern noted by the Commanders was the fifth-generation warfare being "imposed on the country by inimical forces".*

- On September 9, an accountability court declared former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif a proclaimed offender in the Toshakhana vehicles reference. The court also initiated the process to confiscate his properties and it directed the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) to arrest Sharif through Interpol.

*Meanwhile, the counsel for the ex-premier, who has been in London on medical grounds for the past one year, submitted his fresh medical report before the Islamabad High Court, along with*

*an application seeking extension in his bail. When the court resumed proceedings in the NAB reference, the investigation officer recorded the statement regarding execution of proclamation issued for Sharif. The court order stated: "Statement of the investigation officer clearly established that accused namely Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif is intentionally avoiding, absconding and concealing himself from the process of law. Hence, this case is hereby separated...and he is declared as a proclaimed offender".*

*Khawaja Haris Ahmed and Barrister Munawar Iqbal Duggal, the counsels for Nawaz Sharif, submitted his fresh medical report along with an application explaining the reason for the delay in his return from the UK. The Islamabad High Court had earlier directed Sharif to surrender or face consequences while hearing the appeals against his conviction in Avenfield properties and Al-Azizia Steel Mills references. While separating Sharif's case, Judge Mohammad Azam Khan of the Accountability Court of Islamabad also indicted former President, Asif Ali Zardari, and former Prime Minister, Syed Yousaf Raza Gillani, and other accused persons in the Toshakhana reference.*

- The Pakistan Air Force observed September 7 as Martyrs' Day at all their bases across the country in commemoration of the martyrs of the 1965 and 1971 wars.

*While addressing a ceremony at the Air Headquarters in Islamabad, Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Mujahid Anwar Khan, paid tribute to "all PAF heroes who stood against enemy aggression and reduced its nefarious intentions to dust". He stated: "I salute our martyrs and veterans for their determination, courage and spirit of sacrifice as we renew our pledge that we will never allow any harm to our sacred homeland". He noted that Pakistan's valiant Armed Forces were well-versed in protecting borders and people and were fully capable of defeating the enemy. Highlighting the current situation in Kashmir, the Air Chief stated: "We also express our solidarity with our Kashmiri brothers and sisters who have been fighting against oppression and tyranny for seven decades".*

- During his address at the Defence Day celebration ceremony held at the General Headquarters on September 6, Chief of the Army Staff (COAS), Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa, warned against efforts being made to discredit the country and its Armed Forces and stated that the Army, with the cooperation of the nation, will win the "fifth generation or hybrid war".

*During his address, General Bajwa noted: "We are facing the challenge that has been imposed on us in the form of the fifth generation or hybrid war. Its purpose is to discredit the country and its Armed Forces and spread chaos. We are well aware of this danger. We will surely succeed in winning this war with the cooperation of the nation, by the will of Almighty Allah". On the occasion, he conferred awards on military personnel for acts of gallantry during various operations. The Army Chief also warned against war. He remarked: "I want to send a message to my nation and the world that Pakistan is a peace-loving country. But if war is imposed on us,*

*we will befittingly respond to every aggression. We are always ready to defeat nefarious intentions of the enemy”. During his remarks on the Afghan peace process, General Bajwa noted: “Pakistan’s key role in peace efforts in Afghanistan is a testament to that, but our neighbour India has, as always, taken an irresponsible stance”. On Kashmir, the COAS maintained that India by illegally abrogating the special status of Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir had once again threatened regional peace. He emphasised that there was no doubt that Kashmir was recognised as a disputed territory and that Pakistan does not accept any unilateral decision in this regard.*

- On September 4, the National Assembly Standing Committee on Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan asked the UN to take notice of the crimes against humanity being perpetrated in Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IOJK).

*A meeting of the committee unanimously adopted a resolution condemning atrocities being perpetrated by Indian occupation forces against innocent Kashmiris, as well as flagrant violations of human rights in the valley. The resolution urged the UN Security Council, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, human rights organisations and other international forums to play their role against India’s illegal occupation of Kashmir and in implementing UN resolutions on Kashmir.*

- *The Nation* reported on September 1 that Foreign Minister, Shah, Mehmood Qureshi, held talks with Saudi Ambassador Nawaf bin Said Al-Malki in Islamabad and remarked that the two countries stand together as brothers.

*According to an official statement, the two sides discussed matters pertaining to the bilateral relationship and mutual interest. Speaking to the Saudi Ambassador, FM Qureshi emphasised that Pakistan and Saudi Arabia enjoyed a deep-rooted and historic relationship. He stated: “Sanctity of the Holy Mosques in the Kingdom is dear to every Muslim and part of their religious beliefs”. Qureshi added that “Pakistan will stand shoulder to shoulder with Saudi Arabia for its regional solidarity”. The FM also condemned the frequent attacks carried out by the Houthis against the Kingdom. The two States agreed upon continuation of efforts toward the strengthening of the bond between them. In August 2020, Pakistan’s ties with the Kingdom had become strained after Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi criticised Saudi Arabia for not coming out strongly in supporting Pakistan’s stance on Kashmir.*

## **India**

- On September 8, the Indian Army accused the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) troops of firing at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Ladakh sector.

*In a further escalation of military tension between India and China, both States have accused each other of aerial firing during a new confrontation in Ladakh. Indian and Chinese troops are deployed along the LAC, which saw another clash erupt in June 2020 that resulted in the death of 20 Indian soldiers during hand-to-hand fighting. Both sides have observed a long-established protocol to avoid using firearms on the sensitive, un-demarcated frontier. According to a statement from the Indian Army: “Troops of the PLA attempted to close in on a forward Indian position at the LAC, and when dissuaded by own (Indian troops), PLA troops fired a few rounds in the air in an attempt to intimidate own troops”. The statement added that the Indian side acted with restraint. It stated: “At no stage has the Indian Army transgressed across the LAC or resorted to use of any aggressive means, including firing”. However, China accused the Indian Army of breaching the LAC through the southern bank of the Pangong Tso lake, where tensions have been high for more than a week now.*

- On September 7, increasing COVID infections in India made it second in the list of countries with the highest number of infections. Meanwhile, the Indian Government began lifting restrictions in an attempt to restore the economy.

*Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Government is facing a surge in the number of COVID infections across the country. According to Indian media, the Government has decided to end most curbs in an attempt to resuscitate the economy which was severely impacted following a strict lockdown in the country. The country registered more than 90,000 cases, taking the total number of infections past 4.2 million. According to analysts, at current rates, India could exceed the US figure of 6.2m by October 2020 as the disease spreads from the big cities of Delhi and Mumbai to the vast hinterland, where two-thirds of India’s 1.3 billion people live. India’s death toll, however, stands at 71,642 far behind the nearly 193,000 in the US and 126,000 in Brazil. According to the Indian Government, the high recovery rates show its strategy of testing, tracing and treatment is working. Fighting the virus is straining medical facilities across the country. According to some of the largest private COVID-19 facilities in the country, the medical facilities are exhausted and there are staff shortages after nearly six months of relentless work.*

- On September 4, Indian Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh, held a meeting with his Chinese counterpart, General Wei Fenghe, on the side-lines of the Defence and Security Cooperation Conference at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Forum in Moscow.

*This was the first ever meeting at the Defence Minister level between the two countries since the Sino-Indian border issue flared up in May 2020 in Ladakh. According to Minister Singh, they had “frank” discussions on the dispute and the relations between the two countries. According to Indian media, Singh conveyed to General Wei that China must respect the Line of Actual Control (LAC) without making attempts to change the status quo unilaterally. He also remarked that the PLA troops should work with the Indian side for complete disengagement at the earliest*

*from all friction areas, including Pangong Lake and de-escalation in border areas. Defence Minister Singh noted: “Amassing of a large number of troops, their aggressive behaviour and attempts to unilaterally alter the status quo were in violation of the bilateral agreements and not in keeping with the understandings reached between the two Special Representatives (National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi who discussed the boundary dispute)”. The two Ministers agreed that both sides should scrupulously implement the consensus reached between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping in continuing to solve the issues through dialogue and consultation, in accordance with various bilateral pacts.*

- On September 4, India’s Army Chief, General Manoj Mukund Naravane, visited Leh in Ladakh to review the ongoing border tension with China and remarked that the situation along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) is “serious”.

*Naravane added that the precautionary steps taken by the Indian Army will help in containing the situation. He arrived in Ladakh and noted that the morale of the jawans is high and that they are ready to face any challenge. Meanwhile, on September 3, 2020, Chief of Defence Staff, General Bipin Rawat, remarked that the Indian Armed Forces are capable of “suitably dealing with China’s aggressive actions” along the Line of Actual Control. He also warned Pakistan against trying to take advantage of the ongoing troop confrontation in eastern Ladakh. Also, on September 3, 2020, Indian Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh, refrained from committing himself to a meeting sought by his Chinese counterpart, General Wei Fenghe, on the sidelines of the meeting of Defence Ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in Moscow. Meanwhile, confirming that he would meet his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, in Moscow, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar suggested that the solution to the current India-China crisis “has to be found in the domain of diplomacy”.*

*According to Indian media, the Indian Army has captured the Pangong North Finger 4 Ridge area of the Pangong lake along the LAC in eastern Ladakh, and established its positions in the region. This is the first time since early June 2020 that the Indian Army and Special Frontier Force (SFF) mounted a rapid mission to take position at Finger 4 heights. The Finger 4 features on the north bank of Pangong Tso lake and is located close to Chinese posts, which are just few hundred meters from Indian positions. Indian media reported that amid escalating tensions on the border with China, Indian troops captured this post after allegedly foiling an attempt by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to occupy Indian territory in the disputed border region of Ladakh. Earlier, on September 1, 2020, the two States held a Brigade Commander-level flag meeting in Chushul on the Indian side of the LAC to resolve the issue, but this ended in a stalemate.*

- On September 3, the Union Health Ministry data demonstrated a record spike of 83,883 cases in a single day in India.

- On September 1, the World Health Organisation (WHO) stated that India reported the largest number of new COVID-19 cases globally.

*According to the WHO: “India has reported nearly 500,000 new cases in the past seven days, a nine percent increase compared to the previous seven days and the highest numbers of new cases globally”. On September 3, 2020, the highest single-day increase in COVID infections was reported since the beginning of the pandemic. The total number of infections in the country has reached 38,53,406. Meanwhile, the death count has risen to 67,376 with 1,043 more fatalities in 24 hours.*

*---Muhammad Shoaib*

## SOUTH ASIA II

### Afghanistan

- On September 14, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, visited Islamabad and thanked Pakistani authorities for the country's role in advancing the Afghan peace process.

*According to a statement from the US Embassy in Pakistan, Khalilzad expressed appreciation on behalf of the US, especially vis-a-vis the important role that Prime Minister Imran Khan and Chief of Army Staff, Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa, played in facilitating the commencement of the Afghanistan Peace Negotiations in Doha on September 12, 2020. He also emphasised the need for ongoing regional and international support to ensure the success of this historic opportunity for peace. According to Pakistan's Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), matters of mutual interest, regional security and ongoing Afghan Reconciliation Process were discussed during the meeting between the US and Pakistani delegations headed by Ambassador Khalilzad and Gen. Bajwa respectively. Using its clout over the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan has played a crucial role in facilitating the Afghan peace process. In December 2018, Pakistan arranged rare direct talks between Washington and the Taliban, paving the way for the February 29, 2020 US-Taliban Peace Agreement. Pakistan also facilitated the landmark first round of direct talks between the Afghan Government and the Taliban, which took place in Islamabad in July 2015. The process broke down after the Taliban announced the death of their long-time leader, Mullah Omar, triggering a bitter internal power struggle.*

- On September 12, Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie, Commander of the US Central Command, met with Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, in Kabul and discussed the commencement of intra-Afghan talks.
- On September 12, the opening ceremony of the intra-Afghan talks, between the Taliban and the Afghan Government, was held in Doha in the presence of a number of representatives of the international community and international organisations.

*Afghanistan's Head of the High Council for National Reconciliation, Abdullah Abdullah, the Taliban Deputy Chief Negotiator, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, and Qatari Foreign Minister, Mohammad bin Abdul Rahman al-Thani, addressed the opening ceremony of the negotiations. Additionally, the Foreign Ministers of 14 countries, including Pakistan, Iran, China, India and Turkey, virtually addressed the session. The UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and Secretary General OIC also talked to the ceremony. All the representatives emphasised the need to seize this historic opportunity to secure peace. While Abdullah called for a dignified and lasting peace by reaching a humanitarian ceasefire, Baradar repeated his group's demand for the country to adopt an*

*Islamic system. Pompeo informed the Afghan representatives that “the choice of your future political system is, of course, yours to make”. Meanwhile, Al-Thani emphasised both parties to rise above all forms of division by reaching an agreement on the basis of “no victor and no vanquished”. Pakistan’s Foreign Minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, presented a four-point agenda on the way forward in support of an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace process ensuring a peaceful and stable Afghanistan offering economic activity and a dignified repatriation of refugees. Further, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, emphasised that no external forces should exploit the process for their selfish interests. The Afghan representatives are expected to tackle a range of issues, including the terms of a permanent ceasefire; the rights of women and minorities; and the disarming of tens of thousands of Taliban fighters and militias loyal to warlords, some of them aligned with the Government. They are also expected to discuss constitutional changes and power-sharing arrangements. On September 13, 2020, the contact groups from the Afghan Government and Taliban negotiating teams held their first meeting and discussed the agenda, guidelines, scheduling and other issues relating directly to the peace negotiations.*

*According to the Afghan Presidential Palace, Gen. McKenzie, during his meeting with Ghani, stated that his goal of visiting Afghanistan on this important and historic day is to once again reiterate the US’ support for the Afghan Government, people and Defense and Security forces. He emphasised that all decisions will be made in consultation with the Government of Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the Afghan Ministry of Defence reported that the Taliban staged attacks on Afghan security forces in 18 provinces. At least 12 militants were killed as fighter jets struck a Taliban gathering outside Takhar province’s capital city of Taluqan. According to a provincial government spokesman, the airstrikes took place after the Taliban attacked a police patrol team in the area, leaving two dead and injuring six others. There is a dire need to reach a comprehensive ceasefire at the earliest in order to ensure the success of the ongoing efforts vis-a-vis negotiations under the peace process.*

- On September 11, France opposed the release of two Taliban prisoners, who had killed two of its citizens, by Afghan authorities.

*Australia has also protested against the release of a Taliban prisoner convicted of killing its citizen. However, these prisoners were part of the Taliban list of 5000 prisoners given to the Afghan Government following the February 29, 2020 US-Taliban Peace Agreement. As per the Agreement, the Kabul Administration was bound to release 5000 Taliban inmates against release of 1000 of its security forces prisoners as a confidence building measure to kick off the intra-Afghan talks. The intra-Afghan talks were hinged on the release of a handful of hardcore Taliban prisoners. On September 10, 2020, those six hardcore Taliban prisoners were released and the insurgent group confirmed its participation in the long-awaited peace talks with Afghan government authorities.*

- On September 10, Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani stated that the collapse of the political system in the country will not be part of the peace plan.

*Ghani stated, during the graduation ceremony at Marshal Fahim National Defense University in Kabul, that Afghanistan has experienced the collapse of the political system before, but this time the Afghan people and the Government will not allow this to happen. Meanwhile, the Qatari Government confirmed that the intra-Afghan talks would begin on September 12, 2020. The Taliban and the Afghan Government have also confirmed that their respective negotiating teams will take part in the talks. The nature of the future system of governance in Afghanistan will be the main issue of debate as the Afghan Government has been insisting on the continuation of the Republic, while the Taliban have been struggling to revert back to the Islamic Emirate.*

- On September 9, Russian President, Vladimir Putin, stated during a meeting with the Foreign Ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Member States that “the situation in Afghanistan remains tense”.

*Putin observed: “... The situation in Afghanistan remains tense, and conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa continue unabated. Terrorism poses a serious threat, and drug trafficking, organised crime and cybercrime are on the rise”. He also stated that the SCO plays a major role in ensuring peace and security, as well as sustainable development in Eurasia. Putin further noted that by acting on the principles of equality and mutual consideration for everyone’s interests, the SCO strives to conduct a joint search for ways of resolving today’s global challenges and maintains close foreign policy coordination among Member States, including in the UN and other international venues. Being at the center of all Member States of the SCO, the situation in Afghanistan poses an imminent and mutual challenge. Elimination of the al-Qaeda and Daesh related terror threat from Afghanistan is crucial to stop the spread of terrorism to neighbouring SCO Member States. This would also lead to a stable Afghanistan, offering trade and transit opportunities. Russia has not only established joint anti-terror mechanisms with regional countries but also revealed its intention to merge its mega geo-economic plan of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) with China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).*

- On September 9, at least 10 people were killed and 16 wounded in a blast targeting the convoy of First Vice President, Amrullah Saleh in Kabul.

*Saleh, in a video message, confirmed that his convoy was attacked, his security guards were injured, and that he suffered minor wounds on his hand and face. The Taliban issued a statement denying involvement in the blast. The Pakistani Foreign Office strongly condemned the attack and extended heartfelt sympathies and condolences to bereaved families. Saleh, a former chief of the Afghan intelligence agency, remains a big critic of Pakistan.*

- On September 8, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, held a meeting with the Chief Taliban Negotiator, Mawlawi Abdul Hakim Haqqani, in Doha.

*Qatari Foreign Minister, Mohammad bin Abdul Rahman al-Thani, was also present in the meeting. According to a Taliban spokesman, issues related to the prisoners' release and immediate commencement of the intra-Afghan talks were discussed. Meanwhile, the Taliban stated that at least 100 prisoners of the group whose names were on the list given to the Afghan Government have not been released and that the intra-Afghan negotiations will begin only after these inmates are freed. However, the Afghan Government stated that all the prisoners on the Taliban list have been released except the six hardcore prisoners who will be sent to Doha after they are released by the Government. Khalilzad has travelled to Doha with the expectation of initiating intra-Afghan talks. According to the February 29, 2020 US-Taliban Peace Agreement, the intra-Afghan talks will begin after the completion of the prisoners' exchange deal between the Taliban and the Afghan Government, whereby the latter is required to free 5000 Taliban captives in exchange for the release of 1000 Government forces' prisoners.*

- On September 6, a planned trip of the Afghan Government's negotiating team to Doha to attend the intra-Afghan negotiations faced a delay.

*The State Ministry for Peace Affairs remarked that the negotiating team is waiting for Qatar to finish preparations to host the talks. According to the US State Department, Zalmay Khalilzad, the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, has also travelled to Doha for initiating intra-Afghan talks. The Taliban delegation has also reached Doha after concluding its trip to Pakistan. Moreover, the insurgent group has further improved the structure of its negotiating team by appointing Mawlawi Abdul Hakim Haqqani, the Chief Justice of the group, as head of their 21-member team. The former Chief Negotiator, Abbas Stanekzai will now be serving as Deputy Chief. The intra-Afghan talks seem set to begin in Doha. However, clashes between the Taliban and the US-led Afghan Government forces continue across the country. Afghan Defence Minister, Asadullah Khalid, stated that the Taliban have intensified violence to gain privileges in the intra-Afghan negotiations, and that the order to intensify violence to the Taliban has been given from the other side of the Durand Line. Meanwhile, in an interview with a local news channel, Afghanistan's First Vice President, Amarullah Saleh, stated that the Afghan Government was not in favour of the way the US conducted talks with the Taliban, and that the US' refusal to leave Afghanistan is premised on its own geo-strategic interests.*

- According to Afghanistan's Ministry of Defence, at least 25 Taliban fighters were killed and eight others wounded on September 5 in clashes in the Pashtun Zarghun district of Herat province.

*One of the Taliban's leading commanders for the area was also killed in the clash. In a related development on September 6, 2020, at least 10 Taliban were killed by Afghan security forces in southern Kandahar province. Meanwhile, the Herat-Badghis highway in the west of the country was cleared of the Taliban in an operation by security forces. At least 15 militants were killed in the operation. The rising clashes and high casualty rates have enhanced the demand for peace. On September 4, 2020, Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation, Abdullah Abdullah, stated that a lasting ceasefire will be the first issue that the Afghan delegation would negotiate with the Taliban once the intra-Afghan talks commence.*

- On September 5, an Iranian delegation, led by Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Mohammad Ebrahim Taherian, visited Kabul and met with President Ashraf Ghani, Abdullah Abdullah, Head of the High Council for National Reconciliation, and other politicians.

*Iran, with key interests in Afghanistan, has been very active during the ongoing Afghan peace process. By virtue of its good ties with all Afghan factions, Tehran also remained instrumental in resolving the recent leadership crisis between Ghani and Abdullah. Moreover, the Taliban have also visited Tehran a number of times during the past 18 months.*

- *Tolo News* reported on September 4 that one member of the Afghan Border Force was killed and three others were wounded in a clash with Pakistani forces along the Pak-Afghan international border in Mohmand Dara district in the eastern province of Nangarhar.

*There have been frequent clashes between the border forces of the two countries during the last few months. In May 2020, at least four Afghan border force members were killed in clashes with Pakistani forces in Spin Boldak district in the southern province of Kandahar. According to the Afghan Defense Ministry, another clash on July 31, 2020 left at least nine people dead in Spin Boldak district. Pakistan's fencing of the Pak-Afghan border has been viewed critically by the Ghani Administration which does not recognise the border. As a result, Pakistani forces working on border fencing are under frequent attacks from the Afghan side. On August 16, 2020, the Afghan Army conducted a military exercise in Spin Boldak district. Afghanistan's Chief of Army Staff, Gen. Yasin Zia attended the exercise. On August 14, 2020, a similar military exercise was conducted in Goshta district, Nangarhar, near the international border.*

- On September 3, during his interview with *Al Jazeera*, Pakistani Prime Minister, Imran Khan, stated that Pakistan has tried its best to get the Taliban and the Afghan Government to sit together for negotiations.

*PM Khan cautioned that the 19 year long war has created a complicated situation in Afghanistan, and the longer this war persists, the more the rivalries, hatred and divisions will cement, thereby making it even more difficult to engage in talks. He reiterated that his position*

*has always been that there is no military solution to the Afghan issue, and had the warring parties listened to him earlier, less complications may have been encountered today. While cautioning against the spoiler role India may play in this regard, PM Khan seemed optimistic that the warring parties in the Afghan conflict are going to start negotiations soon. He also emphasised that after Afghanistan, Pakistan too has stakes in the peace process. The prolonged Afghan war also ravaged Pakistan by expanding into the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas. Since 2014, Pakistan has adopted a prudent policy whereby the country has not only been cracking down on almost the entire spectrum of extremist organisations but also fencing its border with Afghanistan and playing a positive role in the ongoing Afghan peace process. Moreover, the incumbent Pakistani Government remains welcoming towards all Afghan factions.*

- On September 3, the National Security Council of Afghanistan (NSC) confirmed the completion of the Taliban prisoner release, except for seven prisoners in relation to whom some international partners have expressed their reservations.

*A spokesman for the NSC also confirmed that the Government has received 20 Afghan Army commandos held hostage by the Taliban after the release of the 400 remaining Taliban prisoners. France and Australia have asked the Afghan Government not to include Taliban fighters convicted of killing their citizens in the prisoner release deal. On August 31, 2020, Sher Abbas Stanekzai, the Taliban's Chief Negotiator, called on Australia and France to refrain from interfering in Afghanistan's internal affairs. Tolo News reported that the Afghan Government is still in talks with the Australian and French authorities in connection with the release of seven high profile Taliban prisoners. The completion of the prisoners exchange deal between the Afghan Government and the Taliban would pave the way for initiation of the intra-Afghan talks.*

- On September 1, US National Security Adviser, Robert O'Brien, held a telephonic conversation with Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, and called for a swift start to the intra-Afghan talks.

*O'Brien reiterated US support for a sovereign, democratic, and unified Afghanistan that never again serves as a source of international terrorism. He also stated that the US stands with the Afghan security forces who have made tremendous sacrifices for the Afghan people. A spokesman for the Afghan President stated that the prisoner release process was discussed, and the two sides emphasised the need for a swift start of the intra-Afghan talks. Following O'Brien's call, the Afghan Presidential Palace remarked, in a statement, that the Government has released another batch of the remaining Taliban prisoners. The initiation of intra-Afghan talks hinges on the completion of the prisoners' exchange deal between the Taliban and the Afghan Government. As per the February 29, 2020 US-Taliban Peace Agreement, the Afghan Government is required to release 5000 Taliban prisoners against 1000 government forces' captives as a confidence building measure to initiate intra-Afghan talks. The Kabul Administration has held the release of some 400 hardcore Taliban prisoners. Whereas, the Taliban are yet to release 20 commandos of*

*the Afghan Army. Some media reports suggest that more than 200 of the 400 Taliban captives have been released by the Government in the past three days.*

- On September 1, the Afghan Ministry of Defence claimed that at least 13 Taliban were killed and 12 wounded during operations by security forces' in Shah Wali Kot district of Kandahar province.

*In a related development, at least three security force members were killed and five wounded after gunmen stormed an Afghan military compound in Gardez city, which is the capital of Paktia province. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack. The tug of war for greater influence between the Taliban and US-led Afghan Government forces continues across Afghanistan amid efforts to initiate intra-Afghan talks.*

- Dawn reported on September 1 that representatives from Pakistan and Afghanistan held discussions in Kabul under the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS).

*Pakistani Foreign Secretary, Sohail Mahmood, led the Pakistani delegation, and held separate meetings with Afghan Foreign Minister, Hanif Atmar and Deputy Foreign Minister, Mirwais Nab. According to the Foreign Ministry of Afghanistan, Atmar emphasised the strong will of the Afghan Government to expand bilateral relations with Pakistan in various fields. The two sides also discussed expanding military and security cooperation between the two countries. He also underlined the need for cessation of rocket attacks into different parts of Afghanistan along the international border with Pakistan. Furthermore, the Afghan Foreign Minister called on the Pakistani side to stop the arbitrary construction of facilities along the international border and to keep the crossings open. Atmar also shared his views with the Pakistani delegation on regional connectivity, trade and transport development, and extension of the Hairatan-Kabul-Peshawar and Hairatan-Herat-Kandahar-Quetta railways. Moreover, he expressed his gratitude to Pakistan for hosting Afghan refugees, stating that the Afghan Government is working on long-term plans to facilitate the voluntary and dignified return of the refugees to their homeland. Meanwhile, Mahmood reiterated the will of Pakistani leadership to strengthen and expand bilateral relations, and declared his country's full support for the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process and the immediate commencement of peace talks. The second meeting assessed the commitments of the previous meeting of the Action Plan, which was held in Pakistan in June 2019. Speaking at a press conference after the meeting, Mirwais stated: "We agreed to expand relations of the two countries not only at the bilateral level but with trilateral and multilateral mechanisms". The APAPPS was established in 2018 to provide a comprehensive and structured mechanism for institutional engagement between the two States. The framework comprises five working groups dealing with politico-diplomatic exchanges, military-to-military ties, intelligence sharing, economic cooperation and refugee issues.*

- On September 1, Abdullah Abdullah, Head of the High Council for National Reconciliation, opposed President Ashraf Ghani's decree officially listing members of the High Council for National Reconciliation.

*Abdullah argued that according to the May 17, 2020 power sharing agreement, which resolved a long and protracted leadership crisis, it is the authority of the Head of the Council to appoint its members. Abdullah further stated that the Head of the High Council of National Reconciliation forms the Council in consultation with the President, political leaders, speakers of the houses of parliament and civil society. On August 30, 2020, Ghani appointed 46 members to the High Council for National Reconciliation, including high-ranking government officials, prominent politicians, women and former mujahideen leaders. Despite reaching a power sharing agreement, rifts and disagreements persist between Ghani and Abdullah.*

## **Bangladesh**

- On September 14, Bangladesh summoned Myanmar's envoy and handed over a note of protest after Myanmar mobilised its troops near its border with Bangladesh.

*Dhaka also asked the Myanmar authorities to halt any provocative activities and called for talks to resolve any issues between the two countries. Myanmar deployed military troops along its border after it launched a crackdown on Rohingya Muslims in the northwest Rakhine State in 2017, forcing over 730,000 people to flee to Bangladesh.*

- On September 5, at least 26 people died from burn injuries sustained during a gas explosion which took place at a Mosque in Narayanganj district near Dhaka.

*More than 13 people were critically injured. A probe committee was formed by the district administration to investigate the incident. Investigators suspected a spark from an air conditioner which resulted after a power cut. Moreover, Bangladesh's Energy Minister, Nasrul Hamid, has ordered a probe into the committee's allegations. In Bangladesh, safety regulations are often flouted. Hundreds are killed each year in fires in the nation of 168 million people.*

## **Maldives**

- On September 11, the Maldives and the US concluded a defence agreement.

*US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for South and Southeast Asia, Reed Werner, and Maldivian Minister of Defence, Mariya Didi, signed the "Framework for US Department of Defense-Maldives Defence Ministry Defence and Security Relationship". The Framework sets forth both countries' intent to deepen engagement and cooperation in support of maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean, and marks an important step forward in the defense partnership. Werner and Didi also discussed the US support for the Maldives' response to*

*COVID-19 and areas for future cooperation, and agreed to work toward scheduling the first Defence and Security Dialogue. Moreover, both States reiterated their commitment to a free and open “Indo-Pacific” region that promotes the security and prosperity of all nations in the region. The Maldives holds a significant position in the Indian Ocean.*

*---Kashif Hussain*

## UNITED NATIONS

- On September 15, the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) began at the UN Headquarters in New York, in a virtual format, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Volkan Bozkir, Turkey's former Chief Negotiator for Accession to the European Union, is presiding over the 75th session, centred on the theme "The Future We Want, the UN We Need: Reaffirming our Collective Commitment to Multilateralism". The high-level events will include the SDG Moment, commemoration of UN's 75th anniversary, the Summit on Biodiversity, a high-level meeting on the 25th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and several partner events taking place virtually. The high-level General Debate will begin on September 22, 2020. Pakistan's Prime Minister, Imran Khan, will address the UN General Assembly via video-link on September 25, 2020. Pakistan's Ambassador to the UN, Munir Akram, stated: "Imran Khan is expected once again to project the just cause of the Kashmiri people and call for action by the international community to halt India's massive violations of human rights, rescind the unilateral measures imposed in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu & Kashmir since August 5, 2019, and promote a solution in accordance with the Security Council resolutions and the will of the Kashmiri people".*

- On September 12, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres welcomed the first direct negotiations between the Afghan Government representatives and the Taliban, which began in Doha on September 12, 2020.

*In his video message, Antonio Guterres appreciated the Qatari hosts for facilitating the negotiations. While emphasising that Afghans themselves must determine the content and nature of the negotiations", Guterres stated: "An inclusive peace process, in which women, youth and victims of conflict are meaningfully represented, offers the best hope of a sustainable solution". The Secretary-General also urged both the Afghan Government and the Taliban to intensify their efforts to protect civilians and to deescalate the conflict, to save lives and to create a conducive environment for the talks. The initiation of these first-ever negotiations between the Afghan Government and the Taliban follows a security agreement concluded between the US and Taliban representatives in February 2020.*

*Earlier, on September 11, 2020, Head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Deborah Lyons, noted that the UN will offer complete support for the negotiations. Lyons stated: "The UN joins the country's brave and resilient people in urging all Afghan leaders and*

*negotiators to seize this historic opportunity to end the fighting and usher in a new era of peace and prosperity”.*

- On September 10, the UN condemned the attack in Kabul targeting the official convoy of Afghanistan’s First Vice President, Amrullah Saleh.

*Stephane Dujarric, Spokesman for the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, noted that the Secretary-General condemned the attack and expressed his deepest sympathy and condolences to the families of the victims. Dujarric stated: “The Secretary-General reiterates the urgency of achieving a peaceful settlement to the conflict in the country and reaffirms the United Nations commitment to supporting the people and Government of Afghanistan in this important endeavour”.*

*According to media reports, Amrullah Saleh survived an attack on September 9, 2020. Tariq Arian, Afghanistan’s Interior Ministry Spokesman, noted that at least 15 civilians lost their lives, and 15 others had been wounded. Media reports suggested that the Taliban denied responsibility for the attack. This attack comes as Afghanistan prepares for the launch of direct peace negotiations.*

- On September 8, Agnes Callamard, the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Executions, expressed concern over the verdict of Saudi Arabia’s prosecutor in the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Turkey.

*On October 2, 2018, Jamal Khashoggi, the US-based columnist for the Washington Post, went to the Saudi consulate in Turkey to pick up paperwork for his upcoming wedding. However, he was murdered and dismembered at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. In December 2019, a Court in Saudi Arabia sentenced five people to death for “committing and directly participating” in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. The Court had also sentenced three other people to a collective total of 24 years in prison for their “role in covering up” the killing.*

*However, on September 7, 2020, Saudi Arabia’s Court overturned five death sentences against unnamed defendants for the journalist’s murder. A spokesperson for Saudi Arabia’s public prosecution bureau announced that the Court handed five people a sentence of 20 years in prison, another person received a 10-year sentence, and the two remaining people were ordered to serve seven years in prison. The Court did not identify these eight people convicted of the murder. This verdict follows a statement by Khashoggi’s sons, noting in May 2020 that they had “pardoned” the killers.*

*In response, on September 8, 2020, Agnes Callamard observed that the Khashoggi trial lacked transparency and fell short of assigning accountability for the crime. While terming the verdict a “parody of justice”, Callamard said that the trial failed to address “the responsibility of*

*Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman”. While reacting disparagingly to the verdict, Callamard tweeted: “The five hitmen are sentenced to 20 years imprisonment, but the high-level officials who organized and embraced the execution of Jamal Khashoggi have walked free from the start – barely touched by the investigation and trial”. Earlier, in June 2019, Callamard released a report concluding that there was “credible evidence” that Khashoggi was “the victim of a premeditated extrajudicial execution for which the state of Saudi Arabia is responsible”.*

*Meanwhile, Rupert Colville, Spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, (OHCHR), also stated: “This is a case where there has not been proper transparency in the justice process and clearly those responsible should be prosecuted, and, and given sentences commensurate with the crime”. Regarding the UN’s position against the death penalty, he said that in such cases, “very lengthy jail sentences” would be appropriate.*

- On September 8, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, urged Russia to carry out, or cooperate with, a rapid and transparent criminal investigation into the poisoning of opposition leader, Alexei Navalny.

*While citing numerous cases of poisoning and “targeted assassination” of Russian citizens in the past 20 years, Michelle Bachelet expressed regret over failure in both holding perpetrators accountable and providing justice for the victims and their families. Regarding Germany’s claim that it has “unequivocal proof” that Alexei Navalny was poisoned with a Novichok nerve agent., she stated: “Why use substances like these? Who is using them? How did they acquire them?” The High Commissioner also indicated that the Russian authorities, or unknown assailants, had repeatedly harassed, arrested and assaulted Navalny. While noting that it was inappropriate to deny Navalny was poisoned, and deny the need for a thorough, independent, impartial and transparent investigation, Bachelet underscored that it was mandatory on the Russian authorities to fully investigate who was responsible for this crime.*

- On September 4, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNWRA) warned of an increase in Corona Virus (COVID-19) cases across the occupied Palestinian territory.

*Keeping in view the health and socio-economic emergency prevalent in the occupied Palestinian territory, the UNWRA indicated that the Agency needed approximately \$95 million to cover the emergency needs of 5.6 million registered Palestinian refugees in the Middle East, until the end of December 2020. The UNWRA noted that the funds would mainly focus on health, cash assistance and education. According to the UNWRA, COVID-19 cases increased from 200 to nearly 4,000 between July and September 2020. Tamara Alrifai, Spokesperson of the UNWRA, stated: “This funding is crucial for controlling the spread of the pandemic in Palestinian refugee camps and to help prevent a major outbreak”.*

- On September 4, independent UN human rights experts called upon the Government of Pakistan to end the secret detention of human rights activist, Idris Khattak, who has worked on several reports on disappearances in Pakistan’s former Federally Administered Tribal Areas.

*While expressing concern for the life of Idris Khattak, the human rights experts stated: “The mere acknowledgment that he is in custody does not absolve Pakistan of its human rights obligations. Pakistani authorities must produce him and guarantee him a fair trial”. On June 16, 2020, Pakistani law enforcement authorities acknowledged, for the first time, that Khattak has been in their custody. According to the expert, Khattak has had no contact with the outside world since he was taken into custody on November 13, 2019. As he is reportedly facing charges under the Official Secrets Act and Army Act as a civilian, the experts noted that “the Official Secrets Act was yet another means of silencing dissent from human rights defenders including those working on minority issues in Pakistan”. While noting that the authorities violated his human rights, the experts stated: “We urge authorities to conduct an independent and thorough investigation into the institutional and criminal responsibilities for Mr. Khattak’s disappearance and arbitrary detention with a view to end impunity”.*

- On September 3, Deborah Lyons, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), warned that increasing violence in Afghanistan was creating an atmosphere of mistrust that could derail peace negotiations between the Government and the Taliban.

*Deborah Lyons stated: “The level of violence on the battlefield remains deeply worrying. The last few weeks have seen near-record numbers of security incidents, including egregious attacks by spoilers targeting civilians involved in the peace process”. Lyons indicated that conflict continues to kill and injure hundreds of Afghans every week. She warned that increased violence could create an atmosphere of mistrust thus risking derailing negotiations. As a formal launch of intra-Afghan negotiations is expected in the coming days, she indicated that the UN has initiated a dialogue with the Afghan Government and the Taliban on the “inclusion of victims’ voices in the peace talks and mechanisms for incorporating victim-centred justice”. The Head of the UNAMA observed that women’s rights were also emerging as among the most difficult issues confronting the parties as they enter negotiations. In this regard, she stated: “This issue will be more central in the Afghan peace process than we have ever seen in any other peace negotiation in recent memory”. However, she also expressed hope that the Afghan Government’s announcement, in August 2020, of the formation of its cabinet, as well as appointments to the High Council of National Reconciliation, could help in removing mistrust between the Government and the Taliban.*

- On September 3, UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, expressed concern over the US' imposition of sanctions against the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and another senior official.

*US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, announced imposition of sanctions on two ICC officials including Chief Prosecutor of the ICC and the Head of the Jurisdiction Complementary and Cooperation Division on September 2, 2020. The sanctions are imposed under the June 2020 US' Executive Order on Blocking Property of Certain Persons Associated with the ICC. In June 2020, the Trump Administration authorised the imposition of economic sanctions against foreign persons directly engaged in ICC efforts to investigate US or allied personnel (including US troops) for their involvement in alleged war crimes committed in the conflict in Afghanistan.*

*While imposing sanctions on the ICC officials, Pompeo also announced that the State Department restricted the issuance of visas for certain individuals involved in the ICC's efforts to investigate US personnel. He warned that individual entities that continue to materially support those individuals risk exposure to sanctions as well. While terming the ICC a thoroughly broken and corrupted institution, the US has never ratified the Rome Statute, which created the Court, and asserted that it will not tolerate the ICC's allegedly illegitimate attempts to subject Americans to its jurisdiction.*

*In response to the US' sanctions, Stephane Dujarric, Spokesperson to the UN Secretary-General, noted that the UN continues to closely follow developments on this matter. While indicating that cooperation between the UN and the ICC was founded on their Relationship Agreement, which was approved by the General Assembly on 13 September 2004, Dujarric stated: "We will be analyzing any possible implications that this development may have with respect to the implementation of the Agreement". On September 2, 2020, the ICC also condemned the sanctions imposed by the US. In its statement, the ICC stated: "The new measures are another attempt to interfere with the Court's judicial and prosecutorial independence and crucial work to address grave crimes of concern to the international community as mandated under the ICC Rome Statute".*

- On September 2, United Nations Independent Human Rights Experts called on Belarus to stop torturing detainees and bring to justice police officers who have reportedly humiliated and beaten protestors in their custody.

*The UN Human Rights Experts urged the Belarusian authorities to comply with fundamental safeguards including immediate registration, judicial oversight of detention and notification to family members. The experts have received reports of 450 documented cases of torture and ill treatment of people following the disputed Presidential Election on August 9, 2020, that led to mass protests and arrests. Media reports have also noted that the Belarus Police have detained nearly 6,700 people, including journalists and passers-by in recent weeks. The experts stated:*

*“There can be no justice without the State’s unequivocal commitment to accountability and redress for violations of human rights”. They also called on the Belarusian authorities to conduct impartial investigations, hold perpetrators to account and ensure compensation for the victims and their families.*

*--- Moiz Khan*

## About the Authors



**Muhammad Shoaib** is a Senior Research Fellow at the Strategic Studies Institute Islamabad. Prior to joining the SSII, he served as Associate Research Strategist at a private think tank: The Aleph Institute Islamabad. He has also remained an intern at the Inter Services Public Relations Directorate (ISPR). His areas of interest include Cyber-Security, Politics of Middle East & West Asia and Arms control & disarmament



**Moiz Khan** is a Research Fellow at Strategic Studies Institute Islamabad. Prior to joining the SSII, he worked as an intern at the Arms Control and Disarmament Affairs Directorate in the Strategic Plans Division, Pakistan. His area of research focuses on Arms Control & Disarmament and Nuclear Strategy.



**Kashif Hussain** is a Research Associate at Strategic Studies Institute Islamabad (SSII). He has previously worked as an intern at Center for International Strategic Studies Islamabad (CISS). He was one of Pakistan's youth ambassadors to Turkey under Turkey-Pakistan Youth Bridge Programme in March 2015. He has keen interest in geopolitics of South Asia.



**Fareeha Shamim** is a Research Associate at the Strategic Studies Institute Islamabad (SSII). Prior to joining SSII, Fareeha was working with the AJK government as a Research and Liaison officer. She has previously worked as an intern at Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) and the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD) in Washington, D.C. Her research focuses on religion and politics in Asia, ethics of war and peace, and the Kashmir dispute.