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AMERICAS

International

- On October 21, US Director of National Intelligence, John Ratcliffe, accused Russia and Iran of trying to interfere with the 2020 US Presidential Election.

Ratcliffe made the announcements during a news conference that also included FBI Director, Chris Wray. He stated: “We have confirmed that some voter registration information has been obtained by Iran, and separately, by Russia”. Most of that voter registration information is public. However, Ratcliffe stated that government officials “have already seen Iran sending spoofed emails designed to intimidate voters, incite social unrest and damage President Trump”. US intelligence agencies previously warned that Iran might interfere to damage Trump’s popularity and that Russia was trying to help him in the election. A spokesman for Iran’s Mission to the United Nations denied the accusations of Iran meddling in the US election. The announcement before the election demonstrated the level of concern among top US officials over foreign actors seeking to undermine the confidence of US voters in the integrity of the vote and spreading misinformation in an attempt to influence its outcome.

- On October 21, the US placed restrictions on six more Chinese media organisations, citing their role as propaganda outlets working for China.

This was the third round of US designations of Chinese outlets as “foreign missions”, which requires them to report details on their US-based staff and real estate transactions to the US State Department. According to Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, the outlets will face no restrictions on their reporting. Referring to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), State Department Spokeswoman, Morgan Ortagus, stated: “While free media around the world are beholden to the truth, PRC media are beholden to the CCP”. She added that the US is “publicly recognising that reality through these designations”. The six organisations newly designated as foreign missions are: Yicai Global, Jiefang Daily, Xinmin Evening News, Social Sciences in China Press, Beijing Review and Economic Daily. Earlier, the State Department enforced rules on nine outlets, including the Xinhua news agency and China Global Television Network. China has denounced the regulations and retaliated by expelling US citizens who work for major news organisations, including The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal.

- In a letter released on October 19, several US politicians called on the Egyptian President, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, to release activists, journalists, lawyers and prisoners of conscience.

According to media reports, 55 congressional Democrats (and one independent) urged el-Sisi to release those “unjustly detained for exercising their fundamental human rights”. The letter is spearheaded by three Democratic lawmakers, namely Ro Khanna, Jim McGovern and Sherrod

Brown. While criticising the Egyptian Government for the unjust detention of activists, McGovern stated: “The unjust detention of Egyptian human rights defenders, peaceful political activists and other prisoners of conscience is in direct opposition to the rights and freedoms enshrined in Egyptian and American law”. The politicians warned that the continued unjust imprisonment might result in their deaths in the face of significant COVID-19 outbreaks in Egyptian prisons. McGovern added: “We are deeply disturbed that in the middle of a pandemic, the Egyptian Government continues to wrongfully hold these political prisoners in overcrowded prisons – places where we know COVID-19 can spread like wildfire and cause severe illness and death”. The letter warned el-Sisi that “the imprisonment of prisoners of conscience and other violations of human rights fundamentally undermines our countries’ mutual interests and values”. Egypt’s Government has waged an unprecedented crackdown on dissent since 2013 when el-Sisi led a military coup that deposed his democratically elected predecessor, Mohamed Morsi of the now-outlawed Muslim Brotherhood movement.

Domestic

- On October 26, Senate Republicans voted to confirm President Donald Trump’s Supreme Court nominee, Judge Amy Coney Barrett.

The Republican-dominated Senate confirmed Barrett to the lifetime appointment on a 52-48 vote, with Democrats unified in opposition. Trump’s appointment of a new Supreme Court Justice is a major victory for the President and his party, giving Republicans a historic opportunity to deliver on the key conservative priority, and campaign promise, of transforming the federal courts through lifetime appointments. Barrett was sworn in as a Supreme Court Justice at a ceremony on the south lawn of the White House. Her confirmation as successor to liberal Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who died in September 2020, creates a 6-3 conservative majority in the Supreme Court. Trump’s other Supreme Court appointees are conservatives, including Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh. Trump has stated that he expects the court to decide the outcome of the election and wants Barrett to participate on any election-related cases that are brought before the Justices.

- On October 25, White House Chief of Staff, Mark Meadows, conceded that the US is “not going to control the COVID-19 pandemic”.

According to Meadows, COVID-19 could only be defeated by “mitigation areas” like vaccines and therapeutics. He stated that control of the virus was not a realistic goal because “it is a contagious virus just like the flu”. His remarks come as COVID cases surge in the US. Democratic presidential challenger, Joe Biden, remarked that the White House was waving “the white flag of defeat”. He added that Meadows’ comments showed that the Trump Administration had “given up on their basic duty to protect the American people”. The US registered 83,757

COVID cases on October 23, 2020. Previously, the highest number of reported infections in a single day was 77,362 in July 2020.

- On October 22, during the final round of presidential debate, US President Donald Trump and Democratic challenger, Joe Biden, offered sharply contrasting views on the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as on several other issues including foreign policy, healthcare, anti-racism protests, climate change and the economy.

Unlike the earlier debate, the two leaders adopted a more restrained tone during the final round. However, the debate still featured plenty of personal attacks between the two contestants. Meanwhile, President Trump levelled unfounded corruption allegations against Biden and his family. Trump repeated his accusations that Biden and his son, Hunter, engaged in unethical practices in China and Ukraine. No evidence has been brought forward to support the allegations, and Biden termed the same false and discredited. Meanwhile, Biden held President Trump responsible for COVID-19 deaths in the country. He also accused Trump of tax avoidance. According to observers, with Biden holding a 10-point lead over Trump in an average of national polls, the final round of the presidential debates is one of the President's last chances to shift the momentum of the contest.

Canada

- On October 30, Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau argued that “free speech” was “not without limits” and should not “arbitrarily and needlessly hurt” certain communities.

While responding to a question about the right to show caricatures deemed blasphemous, as France's Charlie Hebdo magazine did, Trudeau stated: “We will always defend freedom of expression. But freedom of expression is not without limits. We owe it to ourselves to act with respect for others and to seek not to arbitrarily or unnecessarily injure those with whom we are sharing a society and a planet. We do not have the right for example to shout fire in a movie theatre crowded with people, there are always limits”. He distanced himself from the position of French President, Emmanuel Macron, who defended the right to publish the blasphemous cartoons of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) in France. PM Trudeau, instead, pleaded for a careful use of free speech.

- On October 16, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau remarked that he will not tolerate “coercive” diplomacy from China.

Trudeau's remarks come a day after the Chinese Ambassador to Canada, Cong Peiwu, warned that granting asylum to Hong Kong protesters could put Canadians in danger. Peiwu explicitly told Canada not to accept asylum seekers from Hong Kong, calling them “violent criminals”. During an online news conference, Peiwu stated: “If the Canadian side really cares about

stability and prosperity in Hong Kong, and really cares about the good health and safety of those 300,000 Canadian passport holders in Hong Kong and the large number of Canadian companies operating in Hong Kong ... you should support those efforts to fight violent crimes”. Some leading Hong Kong protesters have travelled to the West in recent months after the mainland authorities in Beijing passed a security law that reduces the city’s autonomy and makes it easier to punish pro-democracy protesters. The Chinese Ambassador also threatened vague measures against Canada if the Government were to pass a resolution condemning Beijing’s treatment of Uighurs, a Muslim minority group who live largely in the Xinjiang region of northwest China.

In response, Trudeau emphasised that he would not try and antagonise Beijing, but would not back down from protecting Canadian interests and standing up for human rights around the world. He stated: “We don’t look to escalate but we will continue to make sure Canadians know we stand for our rights and our values”. Relations between the two countries have been strained since 2018, when two Canadians were detained in China over espionage allegations. Trudeau’s Government has faced mounting pressure to repair relations with Beijing following the arrest of Michael Kovrig, a former diplomat, and Michael Spavor, a businessman. Both have been charged with espionage, but many believe the arrests were made in retaliation for the detention of Huawei executive, Meng Wanzhou, in Vancouver, at the request of the US.

Latin America

- On October 16, according to Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, the country’s former Defence Minister, Salvador Cienfuegos, was arrested in the US on suspicion of links with drug trafficking.

Cienfuegos, who was Defence Minister from 2012 to 2018, is reported to have been on a trip with his family when he was detained at Los Angeles airport. Expressing shock at the arrest, President Obrador stated: “It’s a very regrettable fact that a former defence minister is arrested, accused of links with drug trafficking”. He added: “Of course, all this must be proven. We’re facing an unprecedented situation”. Obrador noted that two former Mexican ministers are presently detained in the US on allegations of links to drug cartels. Ex-Public Security Minister, Genaro Garcia Luna, was arrested in Texas in December 2019 on charges of taking huge bribes to allow the notorious Sinaloa cartel to ship drugs into the US. According to US media, Cienfuegos was detained at the request of the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in connection with a corruption investigation. Quoting unnamed sources at the US Department of Justice, the Mexican investigative magazine Proceso, reported that the arrest was the result of a long-standing investigation named “Operation Godfather” into corruption involving drug traffickers.

---Muhammad Shoaib

ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

- On October 30, India successfully test-fired an air-launched version of the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile from a Sukhoi fighter aircraft in the Bay of Bengal.

The Indian Defence Ministry noted the missile hit a sinking ship with accuracy. The Ministry indicated that the missile was fired after the Su-30 MKI aircraft travelled for over three hours covering a “significantly long distance”. The missile provides the IAF a capability to strike from large stand-off ranges on sea or land-based targets with pinpoint accuracy.

In a related development On October 18, 2020, India successfully test-fired a naval version of the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile from an indigenously-built stealth destroyer of the Indian Navy in the Arabian sea. The Defence Ministry noted that the missile hit the target with pinpoint accuracy after performing “extremely complex” manoeuvres.

India has already inducted the BrahMos missile having a strike-range of 290 kilometres with its Army. However, the extended-range version of the missile is currently under trial. It has a strike-range of more than 400 kilometres.

- On October 29, US President Donald Trump’s Administration notified Congress of its intent to sell 50 Lockheed Martin F-35 II joint strike fighter jets to the United Arab Emirates (UAE).
- On October 23, Israel agreed to allow the US to sell “certain weapons” to the UAE, opening the door to the sale of F-35 fighter jets to the country.

According to US Congressman Eliot Engel, Chairman of the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs, the deal would include up to 50 of the Lockheed Martin-made jets for \$10.4 billion. The proposed deal requires approval by Congress. If the sale is approved, the UAE would become only the second country in the Middle East to fly the advanced fighter jets after Israel. Engel stated: “The F-35 Joint Strike Fighter is a game-changing stealth platform boasting advanced strike capability and unique sensor technology. The export of this aircraft requires very careful consideration and Congress must analyse all of the ramifications”.

The sale of F-35 jets to the UAE became possible following the conclusion of an agreement in September 2020 at the White House that normalised relations between the UAE and Israel. Though Israeli officials initially objected to UAE buying the planes, Israel agreed on October 23, 2020, to allow the US to sell “certain weapons” including the F-35 jets to the UAE after Pentagon officials promised to sell Israel more US-made military equipment to maintain its advantage. Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz and US Defence Secretary Mark Esper finalised the Agreement at the Pentagon. Under the Agreement, Israel removed its objection to

the transfer of weapons to the UAE after securing promises that Tel Aviv would be able to upgrade its capabilities and maintain its military edge in the region. An Israeli Defence official noted that the Agreement did not specifically mention the F-35 aircraft sale, but the assumption is that Israel will not object to the F-35 sale because that is the big sale that has been talked about recently.

- On October 27, the US and India signed a military agreement on sharing sensitive satellite data during a two-day long US-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in India.

US Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo and Secretary of Defence Mark T. Esper met Indian Minister of Defence Rajnath Singh and Minister of External Affairs Dr. S. Jaishankar for the third annual US-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in New Delhi, India. During their meeting, the Ministers announced the conclusion of documents including the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), the MOU for Technical Cooperation in Earth Observations and Earth Sciences, and the arrangement extending the duration of the MOU between the US and India concerning cooperation with the Global Centre for Nuclear Energy Partnership in India.

Mark Esper termed the signing of the BECA important as it is the last of the foundational defence agreements between the two countries. Regarding BECA, Esper stated: “This enables greater geospatial information sharing between our two armed forces”. BECA enables Indian to receive high-end equipment as well as real-time intelligence and information, enhancing the country’s Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. Moreover, the precise topographical, nautical and aeronautical data and topographical images from US military satellites could be used by India for improving the accuracy of missiles and armed drones as well. The conclusion of the BECA completes the finalisation of eight key pacts between the US and India since the beginning of their strategic partnership in 2005. The other significant Agreements include the 2002 General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), the 2016 Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), and the 2018 Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA).

In their joint statement, the Ministers welcomed the elevation of the US-India relationship to a Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership and reiterated their commitment to further strengthening the US-India partnership. The US also reaffirmed its continued strong support for India’s permanent membership in a reformed UNSC as well as for India’s early entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

- On October 25, the UN announced that 50 countries have ratified the Treaty on the Prohibition on Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), also known as the Ban Treaty, allowing the Treaty to enter into force after 90 days on January 22, 2020.

- According to the *Associated Press* on October 22, the US urged countries that are signatories to the TPNW, to withdraw their support for the Treaty.

In his statement, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stated: “Today, the conditions for the entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons were met further to the deposit with the Secretary-General of the 50th instrument of ratification or accession of the Treaty”. In accordance with its article 15 (1), the Treaty shall enter into force on 22 January 2021. Guterres said the treaty “represents a meaningful commitment towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons, which remains the highest disarmament priority of the United Nations”. On October 24, 2020, Honduras ratified the Ban Treaty as the 50th state, triggering entry into force of the TPNW. Under UNGA Resolution 71/258, the international community adopted the TPNW on July 7, 2017. The Treaty opened for signature on September 20, 2017. It will enter into force 90 days after the deposit of the fiftieth instrument of ratification, acceptance, approval or accession. Meanwhile, 84 countries have signed the TPNW, and 50 have ratified it. The Ban Treaty “prohibits nations from developing, testing, producing, manufacturing, transferring, possessing, stockpiling, using or threatening to use nuclear weapons, or allowing nuclear weapons to be stationed on their territory”.

Earlier, on October 22, 2020, the US urged countries that are signatories to the TPNW, to withdraw their support for the Treaty. The US wrote letters to the signatory states to end support for the Treaty. According to the report, the US letter reads: “Although we recognise your sovereign right to ratify or accede to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), we believe that you have made a strategic error and should withdraw your instrument of ratification or accession”. In its letter, the US observed that the Ban Treaty “turns back the clock on verification and disarmament and is dangerous” to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

Meanwhile, Beatrice Fihn, Executive Director of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, confirmed that countries that have either signed or ratified the Ban Treaty have received letters from the US, requesting their withdrawal. Fihn stated that the letters signified nervousness and panic on the part of the US, and emphasised that the nuclear-armed states “really seem to understand that this is a reality: Nuclear weapons are going to be banned under international law soon”. She also dismissed the US’ assertion that the TPNW interferes with the NPT. She stated: “The Non-Proliferation Treaty is about preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and eliminating nuclear weapons, and this treaty implements that. There’s no way you can undermine the Non-Proliferation Treaty by banning nuclear weapons. It’s the end goal of the Non-Proliferation Treaty”.

- On October 21, the US Department of State approved a potential arms sale to Taiwan, worth \$1.8 billion.

The Defence Security Cooperation Agency stated: “This proposed sale serves US national, economic, and security interests by supporting the recipient’s continuing efforts to modernise its armed forces and to maintain a credible defensive capability”. Meanwhile, a US State Department Official indicated that Taiwan will use its own funds for these weapon purchases. According to the Pentagon, the potential sale of weapon systems include 135 Standoff Land Attack Missile Expanded Response (SLAM-ER) missiles, 11 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) M142 Launchers and 6 MS-110 Recce Pods. Regarding the impact of these weapons, a State Department Official stated: “The proposed sale of these systems will counter modern threats to Taiwan by increasing the operational range and capabilities of its F-16s and enhancing Taiwan’s close, medium, and long range artillery capabilities”.

- According to Reuters on October 16, Turkey test-fired its recently procured Russian S-400 air defence system during drills near the town of Sinop.

Reuters noted that it received a local video showing a narrow column of smoke moving high into the sky. A US official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, also confirmed the test-launch of an interceptor missile. However, the Turkish authorities neither confirmed nor denied the test of the S-400 System. State Department Spokesperson, Morgan Ortagus, stated: “If confirmed, we would condemn in the strongest terms the S-400 test missile launch as incompatible with Turkey’s responsibilities as a NATO Ally and strategic partner of the United States”. The US has repeatedly expressed concern over Turkey’s acquisition of the S-400 systems. As a result, the US suspended Turkey from its F-35 fighter jet development programme in July 2019. Turkey signed the S-400 deal, worth \$2.5 billion, with Russia in 2017. The country began receiving deliveries of the first batch of the S-400 systems from Russia in July 2019. In August 2020, Turkey and Russia signed an agreement for the delivery of the second batch of the S-400 systems.

- On October 16, Russia emphasized that the country will respond to the European Union’s new sanctions on Russian officials for the alleged “attempted assassination” of Russian opposition politician, Alexei Navalny, with a Soviet-style chemical agent in August 2020.

Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov noted that Russia will give a response to the European Union’s new sanctions “that will best serve the interests of the Russian Federation”. Earlier, on October 15, 2020, the UK and the EU imposed sanctions on six senior Russian officials and one entity. The Council of the EU imposed new restrictions under the Council Regulation (EU) 2018/1542 of October 15, 2018, concerning restrictive measures against the proliferation and use of chemical weapons. The targeted individuals are believed to be responsible for poisoning Navalny, while the entity is believed to be involved in the programme that has produced a group of military-grade nerve agents known as Novichok. The restrictions include travel bans and freezing financial assets in European banks. In response to these sanctions, Peskov stated: “Moscow will undoubtedly analyse the situation and will act in compliance with its own interests”.

On August 19, 2020, Navalny's Spokeswoman, Kira Yarmysh, remarked that the plane carrying the Russian opposition politician 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".

Later, on October 6, 2020, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) confirmed the presence of chemical agents from the banned Novichok group in samples taken from Russian opposition leader, Alexey Navalny. The OPCW presented Germany a report to provide requested technical assistance regarding the poisoning of Alexei Navalny, on August 20, 2020. While rejecting the OPCW report on October 6, 2020, Russia accused the OPCW of becoming the West's tool of pressure against Moscow. On October 7, 2020, Dmitry Peskov noted that Russia was not working on developing or upgrading any chemical weapons. Regarding alleged involvement of Russia in poisoning Navalny with Novichok, Peskov stated: "It cannot be carried out owing to the fact that Russia is a member of the corresponding Convention on the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons".

--- Moiz Khan

CHINA, EAST ASIA & PACIFIC

China

- On October 23, Chinese President Xi Jinping warned that China would never allow its sovereignty, security and development interests to be undermined.

In October 1950, Chinese troops crossed the Yalu River to help Pyongyang in its fight against the US-led United Nations and South Korean forces. During his speech, marking 70 years since Chinese troops entered the Korean War, Xi stated that “any act of unilateralism, monopolism and bullying would only lead to a dead end”. He added that the “Chinese people will not create trouble but nor are we afraid”. Xi also emphasised the need for the modernisation of China’s defence and armed forces to create a world-class military. While he did not directly refer to the US, Xi’s speech comes amid China’s increasing tensions with the US. The two countries have clashed over multiple issues, including trade, technological rivalry, human rights and the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- On October 22, China threatened to “make legitimate and necessary responses” after the US approved the potential sale of \$1.8 billion worth of advanced weapons systems to Taiwan.

The weapons sale includes 135 air-to-ground missiles which, according to Taiwan’s Defence Ministry, would build its combat capabilities. According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, by approving the arms sale to Taiwan, the US is in violation of agreements signed in the 1970s which established diplomatic relations between the US and China. China’s Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, noted that the US move is “sending a very wrong signal to separatist forces advocating for Taiwan independence, and seriously damages China-US relations”. He added that China would “make a legitimate and necessary response depending (on) how the situation evolves”. China has ramped up diplomatic and military pressure on Taiwan, since the election of President Tsai Ing-wen, who views Taiwan as a de facto sovereign nation and not part of the “One China” policy.

On October 26, 2020, China threatened to impose sanctions on three US firms, namely Lockheed Martin, Boeing Defence and Raytheon Technologies, involved in arms sales to Taiwan amounting to \$1.8 billion worth of missiles. Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian stated that the sanctions were “to safeguard national interests” and would apply to those who have “behaved badly in the process of arms sales to Taiwan”. He added that China “will continue to take necessary measures to safeguard national sovereignty and security interests”, without sharing further details on the sanctions.

- On October 21, the US tightened rules on six more Chinese media organisations, labelling them as propaganda outlets.

It was the third round of US designations of Chinese outlets as “foreign missions”. US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, noted that the outlets will face no restrictions on their reporting. The six organisations designated as foreign missions are Yicai Global, Jiefang Daily, Xinmin Evening News, Social Sciences in China Press, Beijing Review and Economic Daily. The designation requires the outlets to inform the State Department of their personnel rosters and property holdings. Earlier, the US State Department enforced rules on nine outlets, including the Xinhua news agency and China Global Television Network. China denounced the regulations and retaliated by expelling US citizens working for The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal. According to observers, in the run-up to the November 3, 2020 US Presidential Election, the latest move is aimed at curbing Chinese activity in the US, as President Donald Trump’s key theme underpinning his campaign for a second term is a tough approach towards China. In response on October 22, 2020, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, emphasised that the US moves, targeting Chinese media “are based on Cold-War mindset and ideological bias” and undermine the Chinese media’s reputation. He added that this reveals the “hypocrisy” of the US’ self-proclaimed “freedom of the press” and assured that China will make “legitimate and necessary reactions”. Zhao urged the US to correct mistakes and halt restrictions against Chinese media outlets.

- According to *PLA Daily* on October 21, India returned a Chinese soldier who had strayed across into the disputed area of Ladakh where India and China have been locked in a tense standoff.
- On October 19, China urged India to return “in a timely manner” the soldier who was apprehended by the Indian Army after straying into the disputed area of Ladakh in the Himalayas.

Zhang Shuili, a Spokesperson for the Chinese People’s Liberation Army’s Western Theatre Command, noted that one soldier went missing on October 18, 2020, and that the Chinese border troops notified the Indian side immediately to request help. The Indian side agreed to support and, in this regard, committed to hand over the soldier back to the Chinese side “in a timely manner” after finding him. Zhang expressed hope that India “honours its commitment” in returning the person to China, and works with China “to jointly implement the consensus reached in the seventh round of commander-level talks with China”. The statement came hours after the Indian Army stated that it had apprehended Corporal Wang Ya Long from the People’s Liberation Army in the Demchok area of eastern Ladakh. The Indian side assured that the soldier was provided with medical help and would be released soon after completing formalities.

In September 2020, five Indian citizens from Arunachal Pradesh were apprehended and subsequently released by the Chinese authorities after they accidentally crossed over into the Chinese side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Multiple rounds of military and diplomatic talks have failed to achieve a breakthrough since a deadly clash between the two sides in June 2020. According to Indian media, the eighth round of commander-level talks between China and India are expected to be held this week. In a related development, on October 21, 2020, Corporal Wang Ya Long was returned to the Chinese side.

- On October 17, China passed a new law restricting sensitive exports to protect national security.

The law was passed by the National People's Congress Standing Committee and will take effect on December 1, 2020. Under the new law, China can take reciprocal measures towards countries or regions that abuse export controls and threaten its national security and interests. Export controls, under the law, will apply to civilian, military and nuclear products, as well as goods, technologies and services related to national security. The new law allows China to retaliate against the US, which in recent months has attempted to block Chinese technology firms such as Huawei. Violations of the law, such as exporting items without a permit, could result in fines of \$746,500, or up to 20 times the business value of the illegal transaction.

Japan

- During his visit to Indonesia on October 20, Japanese Prime Minister, Yoshihide Suga, met with Indonesian President, Joko Widodo, and the two leaders agreed to accelerate defence and trade talks between Japan and Indonesia.

During a joint press conference following the meeting, Yoshihide Suga emphasised easing business travel restrictions between the pandemic-hit countries and coordinating defence efforts in the South China Sea. He further added that in order to “advance security and defence cooperation between the two countries”, both sides have agreed to hold a meeting of Foreign and Defence Ministers to “accelerate talks over the transfer of defense equipment and technology”. For his part, Joko emphasised that strengthening of ties between Indonesia and Japan is vital “amid an increasingly glaring rivalry” between the US and China. Japan also offered Indonesia a \$470 million loan for medical supplies and equipment to strengthen Indonesia's pandemic-hit economy. Suga is also scheduled to meet with Indonesians connected to Japanese companies before returning to Tokyo.

- On October 19, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga held talks with Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, during which the two leaders agreed to accelerate the reopening of borders for business travelers.

In July 2020, Vietnam and Japan had reached an agreement to resume business travel for the other's expatriates and long-term residents in each country. During the meeting on October 19, 2020, the leaders agreed to include short-term business travelers and to resume two-way passenger flights. Suga also met with Communist Party Chief, Nguyen Phu Trong, the country's president and de facto top leader. Speaking in Japan on October 16, 2020, Suga noted that he wants his trip to Southeast Asia "to show our nation and the world that Japan will play a leading role in the region's peace and prosperity". After Vietnam, Suga will travel to Indonesia, where he will meet President Joko Widodo on October 20, 2020.

Australia

- On October 20, Australian Minister of Defence, Linda Reynolds, confirmed that Australia will join the annual Malabar naval exercises with Japan, India, and the US.

The exercise will be held in November 2020. This is the first time all members of the regional grouping known as the "Quad" will be engaged militarily. Linda Reynolds stated that the Malabar exercise "showcases the deep trust between four major Indo-Pacific democracies and their shared will to work together on common security interests". The decision to include Australia in the drills comes as China and India are embroiled in their worst border standoff in four decades. In response, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, noted that China believes that "military cooperation between countries should be conducive to regional peace and stability".

Thailand

- On October 17, tens of thousands of Thai pro-democracy protesters rallied across Bangkok, demanding the resignation of Thailand's Prime Minister and reform of the monarchy.

Thai Police had used water cannons against peaceful demonstrators on October 16, 2020, but protestors noted that they were not intimidated by the escalation in tactics. Demonstrations also took place in more than a dozen cities across Thailand. Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha had announced the imposition of an emergency decree banning gatherings of more than four people for at least a month, on October 16, 2020. According to Thai human rights activists, at least 80 protesters have been arrested since October 13, 2020 with 27 still being detained.

On October 15, 2020, protesters had marched on the Prime Minister's office to demand his resignation. Protestors in Thailand have recently staged huge rallies, calling for Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha to step down from his position. Some protesters have also demanded reforms to Thailand's monarchy.

New Zealand

- On October 17, New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern won a landslide victory in New Zealand's general election.

Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party took 64 seats in the 120-member parliament, with 49 per cent of the vote. Ardern campaigned on her Government's success in eliminating community transmission of the virus, which has caused just 25 deaths in a population of five million. The recent election marked the first time any leader won an absolute majority since New Zealand adopted a proportional voting system in 1996.

---Fareeha Shamim

EUROPE

- On October 31, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a new month-long lockdown for England.

After confirmation of nearly 1 million COVID-19 cases on October 30, 2020, Boris Johnson announced new stringent restrictions on business and daily life. The restrictions will take effect on November 5, 2020, and last until December 2, 2020. In a televised news conference, Johnson stated: “Unless we act, we could see deaths in this country running at several thousand a day”. Under the new restrictions, bars and restaurants can only offer take-out, non-essential shops will remain close and people will only be able to leave home for a shortlist of reasons. However, schools, universities, construction sites and manufacturing businesses will stay open.

In a related development on October 28 and 29, 2020, France and Germany also announced new restrictions in response to increasing COVID-19 cases. In a televised address on October 28, 2020, President Emmanuel Macron stated: “As elsewhere in Europe, we are overwhelmed by a second wave that will probably be more difficult and deadly than the first”. In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel also announced a lighter round of lockdown from November 2, 2020, until the end of the month.

- On October 31, French President Emmanuel Macron noted that he understood the feelings of Muslims who were shocked by the display of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).
- On October 31, 2020, a gunman shot dead a Greek Orthodox priest while he was closing his church in the French city of Lyon.
- On October 29, 2020, a knife-wielding Tunisian man killed three people and wounded several others at a church in Nice.
- On October 29, 2020, a Saudi man stabbed and wounded a guard at the French Consulate in Jeddah.
- On October 22, Emmanuel Macron vowed that France will not “give up cartoons” depicting the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).
- On October 16, French authorities shot dead an 18-year-old Russian refugee of Chechen origin, namely Abdoullakh Abouyezidovitch, allegedly responsible for killing a school teacher, Samuel Paty, who had shown caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) to pupils in a lesson on free speech.

In his interview with Al-Jazeera on October 31 2020, Emmanuel Macron said he understood the feelings of Muslims who are shocked by the display of cartoons of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

However, he noted that he was trying to fight “radical Islam”, which is a threat to all people, especially Muslims. Macron stated: “I understand the sentiments being expressed and I respect them. But you must understand my role right now, it’s to do two things: to promote calm and also to protect these rights”. He made these comments amid heightened tensions between the French Government and the Muslim world over the cartoons, which Muslims consider to be blasphemous. Despite the anger from the Muslim world, Macron asserted: “I will always defend in my country the freedom to speak, to write, to think, to draw”.

In his interview, Macron also tried to clarify his earlier statement on October 22 2020 on the issue. On October 22, 2020, he vowed that France will not give up cartoons depicting Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). However, this statement received intense condemnation from the Muslim world. To clarify his position, on October 31 2020, Macron stated: “I think that the reactions came as a result of lies and distortions of my words because people understood that I supported these cartoons”. He added, “The caricatures are not a Governmental project, but emerged from free and independent newspapers that are not affiliated with the Government”. He noted that militants distort Islam and continue to kill others in the name of religion. He emphasised that more than 80% of the victims of terrorism are Muslims, and that this is a problem for all of us. Regarding increased tension in France, he stated: “No one is a winner, and if there are any losers, it will be a lot of the Muslims in Europe. So it is in everyone’s interest if the French President is sincere about contextualising and about backtracking some of the things he said – that he now understands clearly that they were controversial, and he did not mean to criticise Islam as a religion – that should begin to improve the atmosphere between France, Europe, and the Muslim world”.

In a related development, on October 31, 2020, a gunman shot dead a Greek Orthodox priest while he was closing his church in the French city of Lyon. According to French authorities, the attacker was alone and fired from a hunting rifle. Police detained one person who resembled descriptions of the gunman but was unarmed at the time of his arrest. Police noted that investigators are trying to determine his identity.

Meanwhile, on October 29 2020, a knife-wielding Tunisian man killed three people and wounded several others at a church in Nice. The French Government termed the incident as an act of “terrorism”. According to the French authorities, the attacker was wounded by police fire, and was undergoing treatment.

In Saudi Arabia, on October 29, 2020, a Saudi man stabbed and wounded a guard at the French Consulate in Jeddah. The Saudi Police immediately arrested the attacker. Police stated that the attacker was a Saudi national, but it did not give the nationality of the guard, who had allegedly sustained minor injuries.

On October 22, 2020, Emmanuel Macron vowed that France will not give up cartoons depicting Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). In a ceremony dedicated to the memory of teacher Samuel Paty, who was killed, Macron contended that Paty was “killed because Islamists want our future”, and claimed that Paty represented the secular and democratic values of the French Republic. Earlier, on October 16, 2020, a man identified as Abdoullakh Abouyevidovitch killed a schoolteacher in a suburb of Paris. The French National Anti-Terror Prosecutor’s office confirmed that police killed the attacker in the same area. In this regard, Macron noted, on October 16 2020, that the teacher was “killed because he was teaching students freedom of speech, the freedom to believe and not believe”.

In response to the incident, Macron claimed, on October 20 2020, that a “domestic militant Islamist group was directly implicated” in the terrorist act. Meanwhile, the French authorities also launched an investigation and detained sixteen people. According to the authorities, nine people out of sixteen have been released on October 21, 2020. France also ordered the temporary closure of a Mosque for six months in Paris on October 20, 2020. The Grand Mosque of Pantin had shared a video on its Facebook page showing a message from a student’s father calling for mobilisation against the teacher. The father quoted his 13-year-old daughter as saying the teacher had asked Muslims to leave the classroom before showing caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH).

However, Macron’s October 22 2020 statement received a great deal of condemnation from the Muslim World, including Pakistan and Turkey on October 25, 2020. Several Arab trade associations have also announced a boycott of French products.

- On October 20, Russia dismissed the US’ accusations of its involvement in cyber attacks.

Russia’s Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, stated: “The US Administration has once again accused our government structures of malicious activity in the field of information and communication technologies. We strongly dismiss such speculations. Russia’s government agencies have nothing to do with any malicious activity in the Internet, contrary to what Washington tries to assert”. According to the indictments that have been made public, the US Justice Department, on October 19, 2020, charged six Russian intelligence officers for several cyber attacks across the globe targeting 2017 France’s Presidential Election, the 2018 Winter Olympics and US businesses. The Department noted that all six accused are current and former officers in the Russian military intelligence agency, called the Main Intelligence Directorate, also known as the “GRU”. Assistant Attorney General John Demers stated: “No country has weaponised its cyber capabilities as maliciously and irresponsibly as Russia, wantonly causing unprecedented collateral damage to pursue small tactical advantages and fits of spite”.

In response to accusations, Maria Zakharova emphasised that the US did not present any proof. Regarding the nature of allegations and possible US aims, Zakharova stated: “Apparently,

behind this there are time-serving political considerations and intentions of Russophobic forces in the United States to keep afloat the agenda of a Russian threat at a time when the presidential election campaign has reached its peak”.

- On October 19, Britain’s Ministry of Defence announced its new “Science and Technology Strategy 2020”, aimed at competing with potential adversaries by securing and maintaining scientific and technological advantage for the future.

Britain’s Defence Secretary, Ben Wallace, and Chief Scientific Adviser, Professor Dame Angela McLean, unveiled the new Science and Technology Strategy 2020. While noting that Science and Technology have become a new domain of international competition, Ben Wallace stated: “We are in a very real race with our adversaries for technological advantage. What we do today will lay the groundwork for decades to come. Proliferation of new technologies demands our science and technology is threat-driven and better aligned to our needs in the future”. The new strategy will allow Britain to maintain scientific advantage in the future, by measures including prioritising investment, adopting long-term defence aims, building new military concepts, and pursuing development of promising technologies.

Armenia and Azerbaijan Conflict

- On October 31, Armenia and Azerbaijan accused each other of shelling residential areas, a day after the two sides agreed to avoid targeting civilian populations in and around the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Both Armenia and Azerbaijan reported new rounds of shelling hours after their talks in Geneva on October 30, 2020. Armenia and Azerbaijan promised to avoid shelling residential areas amid the fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh. The Minsk Group of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE Minsk Group), which is co-chaired by Russia, the US and France, had sponsored the talks between Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan. These talks were aimed at bringing a halt in fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh after the failure of three previous cease-fire Agreements. A US-brokered cease-fire Agreement was immediately violated by Armenia and Azerbaijan after it took effect on October 26, 2020.

The co-chairs said in a statement issued after the talks that Armenia and Azerbaijan also promised to offer their proposals regarding possible cease-fire verification mechanisms. The statement emphasised: “The Co-Chairs will continue working with the sides intensively to find a peaceful settlement of the conflict”.

- On October 26, a new ceasefire Agreement took effect between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The US Department of State and the Governments of both Armenia and Azerbaijan made a formal announcement of ceasefire in their joint statement, while the hostilities between Baku and

Yerevan continued till October 25, 2020. The US Department of State noted: “Armenian Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan and Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov met with Deputy Secretary of State Stephen E. Biegun on October 24, 2020 and reaffirmed their countries’ commitment to implement and abide by the humanitarian ceasefire agreed in Moscow on October 10, 2020, which were reaffirmed in the statement issued from Paris on October 17, 2020, in accordance with the October 1, 2020 joint statement of United States President Donald J. Trump, French President Emmanuel Macron, and Russian President Vladimir Putin”. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan concluded this third ceasefire Agreement following consultative meetings between US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, and the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan that took place in Washington on October 23, 2020.

Meanwhile, the Co-Chairs of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE Minsk Group), including Igor Popov of the Russian Federation, Stephane Visconti of France, and Andrew Schofer of the US, also met with Mnatsakanyan and Bayramov in Washington on October 24, 2020. During their meeting, the Co-Chairs and Foreign Ministers discussed implementing an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, possible parameters for monitoring the ceasefire, and initiating discussion on the core substantive elements of a comprehensive solution. Regarding the peaceful settlement of the conflict, the Co-Chairs and Foreign Ministers agreed to meet again in Geneva on October 29, 2020 to “discuss and reach agreement on all steps necessary to achieve a peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in accordance with the basic principles accepted by the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia”.

- *On October 20, Armenia and Azerbaijan accused each other of shelling and firing at their positions despite the conclusion of a second cease-fire Agreement.*
- *On October 17, Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to implement a cease-fire after 11 hours of talks in Moscow.*

The two countries announced a cease-fire to bring an end to hostilities that began since September 27, 2020. However, both Armenia and Azerbaijan immediately violated the second agreement almost immediately and the fighting resumed unabated. Azerbaijan accused Armenian forces of firing at its positions in the Azerbaijani regions of Tovuz, Dashkesan and Goygol that lie outside the conflict zone. On the other hand, Armenia accused Azerbaijan of shelling the town of Martuni and several villages in Nagorno-Karabakh. The Nagorno-Karabakh military noted that Azerbaijan resumed shelling in some areas.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijani President, Ilham Aliyev, stated that the Azerbaijan military reclaimed control over multiple towns and villages in the Jabrayil and Fizuli regions, two of the seven Azerbaijani regions outside Nagorno-Karabakh that were seized by Armenian forces during the war in the early 1990s.

--- Moiz Khan

GLOBAL TERRORISM

- On October 29, three people were killed in a knife attack at Notre-Dame Basilica in Nice, France.

French President Emmanuel Macron termed it an “Islamist terrorist attack” and deployed extra 4,000 troops to protect churches and schools. Anti-terror prosecutors have opened an investigation into the attack and France has raised its national security alert to its highest level. According to French anti-terrorist prosecutor Jean-François Ricard the suspect was a 21-year-old Tunisian national who had arrived in France earlier this month. The suspect of the attack was shot and detained by the French police.

- On October 27, five members of the police were killed during an attack on an Afghan police Special Forces base in Khost.

According to Khost Police Chief, Ghulam Daud Tarakhil, three suicide bombers detonated their explosive-laden vehicles targeting the base in Khost, near the Pakistan border. Tarakhil confirmed that seven militants were killed during the exchange of fire between the security forces and militants which lasted for nine hours. Afghanistan’s Interior Ministry Spokesperson Tariq Arian confirmed that 5 policemen were killed while 33 people were injured, including nine civilians. No group has yet claimed responsibility for the attack.

In related news, on October 27, 2020, three people were killed and 10 were injured in a separate attack when a bomb attached to a car exploded near Kabul airport. In recent weeks, violence in Afghanistan has increased despite the Taliban and Afghan Government engaging in peace talks in Qatar.

- On October 27, at least 8 people were killed while more than 110 people were injured in an explosion at the Jamia Zuberia madressah in Peshawar.

According to a senior police official, the blast took place during a Quran class when someone “took a bag inside (with explosives)”. Senior Superintendent of Police (Operations), Mansoor Aman, confirmed the attack and stated that the initial reports suggest that an improvised explosive device (IED) was used in the explosion. No group has yet claimed responsibility for the attack.

- On October 25, Afghan forces killed Abu Muhsin al-Masri, a key Al-Qaeda militant, in Afghanistan’s eastern Ghazni province.

Afghanistan’s intelligence agency confirmed that Abu Muhsin al-Masri, believed to be Al-Qaeda’s top leader in the subcontinent, was targeted in eastern Ghazni province. The National Directorate of Security did not provide further details regarding the operation. Afghanistan’s Interior Minister, Masoud Andarabi, stated that Masri’s killing was an indication of the close relationship between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. In February 2020, the Taliban agreed to not allow Afghan soil to be used by foreign extremists, including Al-Qaeda, in return for the US withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan. Masri, who also goes by the name Husam Abd-al-

Ra'uf, is on the FBI's Most Wanted Terrorists list. According to the FBI, a warrant for his arrest was issued, by the FBI, in December 2018, after he was charged with providing support to a foreign terrorist organisation and plotting to kill US nationals.

- On October 25, three people were killed while 16 were injured in a bomb explosion in the Hazarganji area in Quetta, Balochistan.

According to the police, an improvised explosive device (IED) was planted in a motorcycle parked in front of a shop in the Hazarganji area. When the IED was detonated, three people were killed and sixteen others sustained injuries. No one has yet claimed responsibility for attack.

- On October 24, at least 18 people were killed in a suicide attack near an education centre in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's Interior Ministry Spokesperson, Tareq Arian, confirmed that 18 people were killed and 57 were injured in the terrorist attack. The Islamic State (IS) group claimed responsibility for the attack. Recently, violence in Afghanistan has increased despite the Taliban and the Afghan Government holding peace talks in Qatar.

- On October 21, at least 34 Afghan security forces personnel were killed in an ambush attributed to the Taliban.

According to Jawad Hejri, the Spokesperson for the Governor of Takhar province, security forces were attacked overnight on October 20, 2020. Takhar Provincial Health Director, Abdul Qayoum, confirmed that 34 security personnel were killed, including the Deputy Police Chief of the province. The ambush came despite Taliban assurances to the US that they would reduce bloodshed. The Taliban did not directly take responsibility for the ambush, but stated that their fighters had "engaged the enemy" in Takhar to retaliate against security operations being carried out against them.

- On October 18, at least 12 civilians were killed and more than 100 were injured in a car bomb attack targeting Afghan police headquarters in the western province of Ghor.

Afghanistan's Interior Ministry confirmed that the bomb struck near the entrance of the Provincial Police Chief's office and other nearby Government buildings in Feroz Koh, the capital of Ghor. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the bombing but Afghan officials blame the Taliban for the attack. According to Al-Jazeera, tens and thousands of people have been displaced in recent days after intense fighting between the Taliban and the Afghan Government forces in several districts of Helmand province and Kandahar province.

- On October 17, a soldier of the Pakistan Army was killed and three others were injured in a terrorist attack on a patrolling party of security forces near the Jhaki post in the Turbat area of Balochistan.

The terrorists opened fire on the security forces patrolling in the Turbat area of Balochistan. The attack comes two days after seven soldiers and seven security guards were killed while fighting

off a terrorist attack on a convoy of the Oil and Gas Development Company Limited (OGDCL) in Balochistan. The same day, six army troops were also killed in an improvised explosive device (IED) explosion in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

---Fareeha Shamim

MIDDLE EAST & WEST ASIA

Bahrain

- On October 18, an Israeli delegation, accompanied by the US Treasury Secretary, arrived in Bahrain and signed a joint communique to formalise nascent relations and broaden Gulf cooperation.

Bahrain followed the UAE in normalising ties with Israel. Israel and Bahrain signed a “Declaration of Peace, Cooperation, and Constructive Diplomatic and Friendly Relations” at a White House ceremony on September 15, 2020. US Treasury Secretary, Steve Mnuchin, also accompanied the Israeli delegation, which flew on an El Al Israel Airlines charter flight from Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv. In public remarks to his cabinet, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu noted that the delegations would work on cooperation agreements and “establishing the peace treaty”. Before flying to Bahrain, during a ceremony with Mnuchin, US Middle East envoy, Avi Berkowitz announced that Israel and Bahrain would sign a joint communique “bringing forward tourism and banking and diplomatic relations”. Speaking at an arrival ceremony at Manama airport, Israeli National Security Adviser, Meir Ben-Shabbat, stated: “This is a great day ... We look forward, InshaAllah (God willing), to hosting you in Israel soon”. Bahraini Foreign Minister, Abdullatif Al-Zayani, described the engagement and cooperation as “the most effective, the most sustainable means to bring about a genuine and lasting peace, one which safeguards the rights of the Middle East peoples”. The ceremony also saw the signing of several memoranda of understanding. These cover trade, air services, telecommunications, finance, banking and agriculture. The normalisation agreement has drawn anger from Bahrainis at home and abroad. According to the Government of Bahrain, the deal protects its interests from Iran.

Iran

- On October 25, Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) announced that they have deployed troops along the border with Azerbaijan and Armenia, following stray fire from the fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh.

IRGC’s Commander, Brigadier General Mohammad Pakpour, stated: “Units of (the Guards) ground forces have been dispatched to and stationed in the region. Their mission was to protect national interests and maintain peace and security”. According to Pakpour, Iran respects its neighbours’ territorial integrity but that “any shift in border geopolitics is the Islamic Republic of Iran’s red line”. The Commander also visited the border county of Khoda Afarin, the region in Iran’s East Azerbaijan province which borders territory in Azerbaijan adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh. Khoda Afarin and nearby villages have reportedly been hit by stray cross border mortar fire.

Iraq

- On October 16, supporters of Hashd al-Shaabi, an Iraqi paramilitary network dominated by Iran-backed factions, burned down the main Kurdish party's headquarters in Baghdad after a Kurdish ex-minister criticised the group.

A large number of protestors stormed into the offices of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which runs the Kurdish autonomous region in northern Iraq, and torched them. They burned Kurdish flags while others carried posters of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani and his Iraqi lieutenant, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who were killed in a US drone strike in Baghdad in January 2020. The Hashd paramilitaries were formed in 2014, from mostly-Shia armed groups and volunteers to fight Daesh. Hashd has since been formally integrated into Iraq's Armed Forces and has representation in the Parliament. Earlier in October 2020, Hoshyar Zebari, Iraq's long-time former Foreign Minister and a KDP member, stated that the Government needed to "clean up the Green Zone (in Baghdad) from the presence of Hashd militias". He added that they were operating "outside the law". Vian Sabry, Head of the KDP bloc in the Parliament, condemned the attacks. While blaming "unaccountable factions for being behind such acts", she stated: "This isn't a protest because protests are supposed to be peaceful as per the constitution."

Israel

- On October 23, Sudan agreed to recognise Israel and normalise relations accordingly.

US President Donald Trump announced the agreement between Sudan and Israel moments after he formally moved to end the former's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism. President Trump held a call with Sudan's leadership and Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Following the announcement, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, stated: "This truly changes the region. It changes the lives of our peoples for the better and allows us to focus on the task of building our nations, building our future". Both the US and Israel committed to boosting trade with Sudan. In a three-way statement, Sudan and Israel stated that delegations would meet "in the coming weeks to negotiate agreements of cooperation in several areas including agriculture, aviation and migration".

While criticising the agreement, Deputy Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council, Ahmad Bahar, stated that the normalisation agreement between Tel Aviv and Khartoum is a great betrayal of the principles and culture of the Arab and Islamic nations. He added that the deal poses a threat to the identity of the North African nation and its future.

- On October 21, an Israeli delegation visited Sudan and held talks with President Abdel Fattah al Burhan, for normalisation of ties between the two countries.

Sources in Sudan and Israel confirmed that the visit had taken place for the normalisation of ties. According to a Sudanese Government source: "A joint American-Israeli delegation visited Khartoum and met President Abdel Fattah al Burhan for talks on the normalisation of ties between Sudan and Israel". Earlier, Israeli sources had also confirmed that a delegation had

travelled to Sudan to discuss bilateral ties. The same day, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, expressed hope that Sudan would “quickly” recognise Israel. According to the US State Department, Pompeo held a telephonic conversation with Sudanese Prime Minister, Abdalla Hamdok, during which he “applauded PM Hamdok’s efforts to improve Sudan’s relationship with Israel and expressed hope that they would continue”. Israel’s Yediot Aharonot newspaper reported that Sudan’s transitional joint civilian and military government had internally agreed to normalise ties. Israeli Intelligence Minister, Eli Cohen, was also quoted in local media as stating Israel was “very close to normalising ties with Sudan”. Meanwhile, Foreign Affairs Advisor, Arye Shalimar, also confirmed Cohen’s remarks.

Libya

- On October 30, Libyan Prime Minister, Fayed al-Sarraj reversed his decision to resign and announced that he will remain in office until the ongoing intra-Libyan political dialogue comes to an end.

The announcement by the Libyan Government Spokesman, Galib al-Zaklani came a day after the High Council of State urged al-Sarraj, the Head of the Tripoli-based internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA), to stay until a new presidential council is selected to avoid a political vacuum, which could be detrimental to Libya’s stability. The UN Support Mission in Libya and the Parliament in Tripoli had also called on al-Sarraj to defer his decision, citing “reasons of higher interest”. In September 2020, al-Sarraj had announced his “sincere desire” to hand over duties to the next executive authority no later than the end of October 2020, as part of the landmark deal to end years of conflict with a rival administration dominated by renegade military commander Khalifa Haftar. In a statement, the GNA noted that al-Sarraj received several requests to stay in his post longer to avoid a “political vacuum”, including from “leaders in friendly countries”, UN officials and civil society groups. One request was from Germany’s Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas, who had urged al-Sarraj to remain in his post “in order to guarantee institutional and executive continuity” in the “crucial weeks” ahead.

- On October 23, Libya’s two warring factions signed a “permanent” ceasefire agreement following five days of talks at the UN.

Following the agreement, Stephanie Williams, the UN’s acting envoy to Libya, stated: “Today is a good day for the Libyan people. The two Libyan delegations... signed a complete, country-wide and permanent ceasefire agreement with immediate effect”. According to Williams, the parties agreed that “all military units and armed groups on the front lines shall return to their camps” while “all mercenaries and foreign fighters” must leave within three months. Analysts have warned that further measures are needed to prevent spoilers undermining the deal. Since the overthrow and killing of dictator Moammar Qadhafi, the country has been dominated by armed groups, riven by local conflicts and divided between the two opposing administrations. Tripoli is held by the UN-recognised Government of National Accord, while a parliament based in the

eastern city of Tobruk is backed by General Khalifa Haftar's forces, called the Libyan National Army.

Syria

- On October 27, Syrian opposition groups, allied with Turkey, fired hundreds of missiles and artillery rockets at government posts in northwestern Syria, in retaliation against the attack that killed many of their fighters a day earlier.
- On October 26, at least 78 Turkey-backed rebels were killed in Russian air strikes in northwestern Syria.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, more than 90 others were wounded when Russian warplanes targeted a training camp of the Faylaq al-Sham faction in the Jabal Duwayli area in Idlib province. In early March 2020, a truce brokered between Moscow and Ankara curtailed a Russia-backed military offensive on the country's last major rebel stronghold in Idlib. Head of the Observatory, Rami Abdel Rahman, described the latest strikes near the Turkish border as the "deadliest since the ceasefire came into force". He also noted that these strikes were the bloodiest Russian air raids against rebels in a single day since Moscow's military intervention in Syria in 2015.

The National Liberation Front (NLF), an umbrella group of Ankara-backed rebels based in Idlib that includes Faylaq al-Sham, confirmed that the Russian strikes hit one of its positions and caused casualties. The group, in a statement, announced the death of a "large number" of its fighters, and warned that it would not hesitate to retaliate. NLF spokesman, Sayf Raad, denounced the "Russian aircraft and regime forces' continuous violation of the Turkish-Russian deal in targeting military positions, villages and towns". Abdel Rahman noted that Russian air strikes have, from time to time, targeted military positions in Syria, including those of Turkey-backed groups. According to observers, the latest air strikes are a warning to Ankara over sending its Syrian proxies to fight in the conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and Libya.

- On October 20, according to activists and media sources, Turkish troops in northwestern Syria began evacuating one of their largest military bases in the area, which remained surrounded by Syrian Government troops for months.

Media sources belonging to Syrian opposition reported the evacuation, posting footage and photos of Turkish trucks and equipment driving north of Morek. Turkish TV station Haberturk quoted unnamed officials noting that Turkey is moving the base to an area further north in the northwestern province of Idlib, which is still controlled by Syrian opposition forces backed by Ankara. Youssef Hamoud, a spokesman for the Turkish-backed Syrian opposition group, confirmed that the troops were being redeployed in the north, adding that he was not aware of evacuations of other bases.

It was not immediately clear whether the withdrawal is part of a deal to reposition Turkish observation points inside the opposition-held enclave or whether it is aimed at reducing Turkey's military presence in the area. As part of an earlier ceasefire deal, Turkey deployed troops to man 12 observation points in the northwest to separate Government forces and Syrian opposition fighters, and monitor the truce negotiated with Russia. However, the ceasefire failed to curtail government advances, including the one that encircled the Turkish base in Morek. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the evacuation from Morek is likely to be followed by the evacuation of other bases. The evacuation angered many residents of opposition-held northwestern Syria, who viewed the Turkish military presence as preventive step against further government advances and a possible way to return to their homes in areas recently captured by Syrian troops.

Turkey

- On October 28, Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned that Western countries mocking Islam wanted to “relaunch the Crusades”.
- On October 25, following French President Emmanuel Macron’s comments on Islam, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan strongly criticised his remarks and urged him to get a medical check-up.

Speaking after teacher Samuel Paty was beheaded for showing sketches of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to pupils in a lesson on free speech, Macron vowed France would “not give up cartoons” and argued that Paty “was killed because Islamists want our future”. President Erdogan urged Macron to have “mental checks” for treating “millions of members from different faith groups this way”. Erdogan’s comments prompted Paris to recall its envoy to Ankara. Relations between Macron and Erdogan have become increasingly strained over geopolitical issues ranging from a Greek-Turkish maritime dispute to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

UAE

- On October 20, Israel and the UAE agreed to visa-free travel, an unprecedented arrangement between Israel and an Arab state, signed after the first official UAE delegation visited Tel Aviv.

The visit came after Israel and the UAE agreed to normalise ties in a deal reached at the White House in September 2020. Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, appreciated the visit as a “glorious day for peace”. After greeting the UAE delegation at Ben Gurion airport near Tel Aviv, Netanyahu vowed that visa-free travel will “offer a huge boost for business (and) tourism”. The head of the Emirati delegation at the Tel Aviv meeting, Minister of State for Financial Affairs, Obaid al-Tayer, noted that the UAE was committed to being a “regional leader in terms

of economic reform, international trade, political stability and peace making”. According to observers, with their economies affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the UAE and Israel are hoping for rapid economic benefits from the normalisation deal. The two countries also signed accords on investment protection, science and technology, and a civil aviation deal authorising 28 flights a week between the two countries. According to the Israeli Foreign Ministry, during the talks, the UAE formally requested permission to establish an embassy in Tel Aviv. According to a statement from the US Embassy, during their talks, Israel, the UAE and the US announced the launch of a \$3-billion “Abraham Fund”, which aims at mobilising “private sector-led investment and development initiatives to promote regional economic cooperation”. The UAE and Bahrain have faced criticism from within the Arab and Muslim world over their decision to normalise ties with Israel. While criticising the normalisation of ties between the two countries, senior member of the Palestine Liberation Organisation Wassel Abu Youssef remarked that the Emirati visit to Israel was “another stab in the back” of the Palestinian cause.

---Muhammad Shoaib

SOUTH ASIA: I

Pakistan (External)

- On October 31, during an interview with German weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel*, Prime Minister Imran Khan stated that Pakistan wants “even-handed treatment” from the US with respect to India, especially on the Kashmir issue.

PM Khan warned that the region was a hotspot and could flare up at any time. He stated: “That’s why we expect the US, as the strongest country in the world, to be even-handed, whoever becomes president. The US thinks India will contain China, which is a completely flawed premise”. He added: “India is a threat to its neighbours, to China, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and to us. It has the most extremist, racist government on the subcontinent. It is a fascist state, inspired by the Nazis in the 1920s and 30s”. The Premier’s comments followed the recent signing of the defence pact between India and the US, which will allow sharing of sensitive satellite and map data.

Regarding the conflict in Yemen, PM Khan called it a “colossal human rights disaster”, and told the interviewer that he had immediately offered to mediate after coming into power. Commenting on a possible war between Riyadh and Tehran, he argued: “It would be a disaster. It would be devastating for countries all over the world, especially the poor, and the price of oil would shoot up”. Discussing the normalisation of ties between Israel and several countries in the Middle East, the Premier reiterated that Pakistan would not recognise Israel until the Palestinian conflict is settled.

- On October 28, in a letter to leaders of the Muslim states, Prime Minister Imran Khan urged the Muslim world to exhibit unity against Islamophobia and warned the West that attacks on Islam and against Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) will provide space to radical and far-right groups to exploit the situation.

In his letter, PM Khan stated: “Blasphemy against any Prophet of Islam, Christianity or Judaism was unacceptable in our faith and the time has come for leaders of the Muslim world to take this message with clarity and unity to the rest of the world, especially the Western world so an end is put to Islamophobia and attacks on Islam and our Prophet PBUH”. He noted that recent statements from certain leadership and incidents of desecration of the Holy Quran were a reflection of increasing Islamophobia in European countries where sizeable Muslim populations resided. The letter further stated: “In this environment, it is incumbent on us as leaders of the Muslim world to collectively take the lead in breaking this cycle of hate and extremism, which nurtures violence and even death”. The Prime Minister added: “It is time to reach out to ‘the other’ and end cycles of violence bred of ignorance and hate”.

In a related development, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, held a telephonic conversation with his Turkish counterpart, Mevlut Cavusoglu, and discussed with him the issue of growing Islamophobia in the West. According to a statement from the Foreign Office: “The Foreign Ministers agreed to remain in touch on issues of concern to the Muslim Ummah, including the rising Islamophobia”. It added that the Turkish Foreign Minister “appreciated the stance taken by the Prime Minister on the subject”. Regarding discussions on regional issues, the Foreign Office stated that “the two Foreign Ministers expressed satisfaction at mutual collaboration between Pakistan and Turkey at multilateral fora” and that “Foreign Minister Qureshi reiterated appreciation for the principled stance taken by Turkey on the Jammu and Kashmir dispute and Turkey’s steadfast support in this regard”.

- On October 27, speaking on the occasion of Kashmir Black Day, Prime Minister Imran Khan reiterated a conditional offer of peace to India, linking it with alleviating the suffering of the Kashmiris and settlement of the dispute.

Kashmir Black Day is observed to remember the day Indian forces invaded Kashmir, in 1947, and occupied it. In his video statement, PM Khan noted: “We are ready for peace. But, for that India will have to end military siege of Kashmir and give right of self-determination to the Kashmiris in accordance with UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions”. Emphasising the need for peace, the PM noted that the subcontinent needed it the most because it was a pre-requisite for prosperity. He recalled that soon after assuming office in 2018, he had offered India peace and told the Indian leadership that if they took one step towards peace, Pakistan would take two. However, Khan regretted that India, instead of moving towards peace, annexed occupied Kashmir on August 5, 2019, and began a new chapter of injustice in the valley. He recalled that the right to self-determination had been promised to the Kashmiris by the UNSC and committed to continue fighting for this right of the Kashmiri people.

The Prime Minister emphasised that India’s state terrorism in occupied Kashmir was obvious, where mass graves had been discovered, extra-judicial killings had taken place and a media gag had been imposed. According to PM Khan, “state terrorism” being perpetrated by India in Pakistan would also be exposed before the world by his Government. Meanwhile, the Indian Ambassador was also summoned to the Foreign Office to register protest on the occasion of Kashmir Black Day. According to a statement from the Foreign Office, it was demanded that “the Indian Government give the Kashmiris their legitimate right to self-determination in accordance with the relevant UNSC resolutions which call for a free and impartial plebiscite under UN auspices”. The Foreign Office also demanded that “India rescind its illegal and unilateral actions of August 5, 2019; immediately lift its military siege of Occupied Jammu and Kashmir; and reverse its illegal measures to change the demographic structure of the occupied territory”. Pakistan’s Foreign office stated that India was further asked to end extrajudicial killings of Kashmiri youth in fake encounters and so-called cordon-and-search operations and release the illegally detained Kashmiri youth and political leadership. Removal of restrictions on

the media, internet and mobile communications in Occupied Kashmir and access of independent observers, human rights organisations and international media to the occupied territory were also demanded.

- On October 26, Chief of the Army Staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, held a meeting with Turkey's Minister for National Defence, Retired General Hulusi Akar, in Rawalpindi.

During their meeting, the two sides exchanged views on issues of mutual interest, including regional stability, as well as defence and security cooperation. The Army Chief noted that both countries shared a history of brotherly relations, which is being transformed into an enduring partnership. The Turkish Minister commended the role of Pakistan in regional peace and stability, especially the efforts of the Pakistan Army in the fight against terrorism.

- On October 26, Pakistan's Foreign Office summoned the French Ambassador to Pakistan, Marc Baréty, over republication of caricatures of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in France and President Emmanuel Macron's anti-Islam comments.

In its statement, the Foreign Office noted: "The Ambassador of France to Pakistan was called to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs today to convey the deep concerns over the recent systematic resurgence of blasphemous acts of republication of caricatures of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and desecration of the Holy Quran by certain irresponsible elements". According to the statement, the envoy was told that republication of caricatures was "illegal and Islamophobic", and that the same hurts the sentiments of Muslims across the world, including those in Pakistan. It was emphasised that such actions could not be justified in the name of freedom of expression.

The Foreign Office told Ambassador Baréty that equating Islam with terrorism for "narrow electoral and political gains" was condemnable and that such "provocative statements and actions were fanning inter-religious hatred, hostility and confrontation, thereby imperilling efforts of peace and harmony among various segments of society". The statement added that such actions and statements "would further divide peoples and civilisations and undermine the global aspirations for peaceful coexistence as well as social and interfaith harmony". The Foreign Office suggested that harmony among people and communities should be promoted instead of reinforcing stereotypes and alienating people, especially at a time when racism, intolerance and populism are on the rise.

- On October 25, Prime Minister Imran Khan denounced French President Emmanuel Macron's remarks on blasphemous caricatures, calling them "encouragement of Islamophobia".

He was referring to comments made by President Macron in which he criticised Islamists and vowed not to "give up cartoons" depicting Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). The French President also contended that Samuel Paty, a teacher who was beheaded recently for

showing the blasphemous sketches, was “killed because Islamists want our future”. In response, PM Khan stated: “This is a time when President Macron could have put a healing touch and denied space to extremists rather than creating further polarisation and marginalisation that inevitably leads to radicalisation”. Khan regretted that the French President had instead chosen to encourage Islamophobia by “attacking Islam rather than the terrorists who carry out violence, be it Muslims, White Supremacists or Nazi ideologists”. He added: “By attacking Islam, clearly without having any understanding of it, President Macron has attacked and hurt the sentiments of millions of Muslims in Europe and across the world”, and that “the last thing the world wants or needs is further polarisation”.

In another development, Prime Minister Khan asked Facebook to place a ban on Islamophobia and hate against Islam just as it had placed on Holocaust denial. In a letter to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, PM Khan stated: “I am writing to draw your attention to the growing Islamophobia that is encouraging hate, extremism and violence across the world and especially through the use of social media platforms including Facebook. I appreciate your taking the step to rightly ban any posting that criticises or questions the Holocaust, which was the culmination of the Nazi pogrom of the Jews in Germany and across Europe as Nazis spread across Europe”. He mentioned that today “we were seeing a similar pogrom against Muslims in different parts of the world”. PM Khan added: “Given the rampant abuse and vilification of Muslims on social media platforms, I would ask you to place a similar ban on Islamophobia and hate against Islam for Facebook that you have put in place for the Holocaust”.

Meanwhile, the Foreign Office also issued a statement noting that Pakistan condemned, in the strongest manner, the systematic resurgence of blasphemous acts of republication of caricatures of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and desecration of the Holy Quran by certain irresponsible elements in some developed countries. The Foreign Office added that Pakistan had always supported, and continued to lead, international efforts for combating intolerance, discrimination and violence on the basis of religion or belief.

- On October 22, Pakistan’s Foreign Office categorically rejected as false and baseless a report circulating in the media claiming that Saudi Arabia had voted against Pakistan at a meeting of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

Foreign Office Spokesperson, Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri, stated: “Pakistan and Saudi Arabia enjoy strong fraternal ties and the two countries have always cooperated with each other on all matters of bilateral, regional and international importance. Pakistan greatly values its relations with the brotherly Saudi Arabia and firmly rejects such malicious propaganda”. According to Chaudhri, “FATF will announce its assessment of Pakistan’s progress on the action plan and the future course of action after conclusion of its plenary meeting”.

During the Foreign Office weekly briefing, the Spokesperson also rejected fake news carried by Indian media about “civil war in Karachi” arguing that it was done at the behest of the Indian

Government. He stated: “Such attempts by the Indian media at the behest of the Pakistan-obsessed BJP-RSS regime are reflective of a particular, though familiar, mindset. Needless to say that Indian media continues to hit new lows”. Chaudhri advised the Indian Government and media to focus on the protests and unrest currently underway in India over the BJP regime’s discriminatory policies deliberately targeted towards minorities.

- On October 20, during the eighth meeting of the Pakistan-Iran Joint Border Trade Committee, the two sides agreed on removing hurdles in order to achieve bilateral trade targets jointly set by Iran and Pakistan. The Governor of Balochistan, Amanullah Khan Yasinzai underlined the need for boosting economic cooperation between the two countries.

Presiding over the concluding session of the meeting, Yasinzai noted that people of both countries were enjoying cordial and close relations, adding that the decisions taken by the Committee would be implemented vis-à-vis enhancing bilateral trade. According to the Governor, the present Government was giving special attention to strengthening economic relations with all neighbouring countries.

The Collector of Pakistan Customs (Appeasement and Facilitation) at Quetta, Abdul Waheed Marwat, led the Pakistani delegation while Deputy Governor of Sistan-Balochistan for Economic Affairs, Mandana Zanganih, led the Iranian team during the meeting. The Iranian Consul General in Quetta, Hassan Darvish, and Pakistani Consul General in Zahedan, Mohammad Rafi, and the Presidents of Quetta and Zahedan Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Abdul Samad Musakhail and Abdul Rahim Regi respectively, also attended the meeting. Measures aimed at strengthening trade ties were discussed between the two countries. The participants agreed to set up special committees to increase mutual cooperation for promoting barter trade and improving transport service between Pakistan and Iran. In a joint communique, the two sides stated: “Bilateral trade between the two neighbouring countries would boost regional trade and close trade ties are in the larger interest of both the countries”.

- On October 19, General Sir Nicholas Patrick Carter, Chief of Defence Staff of the UK, called on Pakistan’s Chief of Army Staff (COAS), General Qamar Javed Bajwa, and discussed matters of mutual interest.

According to the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), General Carter acknowledged the Pakistan Army’s continued efforts for regional peace and stability, and achievements in the fight against terrorism as well as Pakistan’s efforts for the Afghan peace process. Matters including strengthening of bilateral security and defence cooperation between the two armies were discussed during the meeting.

The Ambassador of Switzerland to Pakistan and Afghanistan, Benedict de Cerjat, also called on the COAS and acknowledged Pakistan’s contribution to conflict prevention in the region.

According to the ISPR, during the meeting, matters of mutual interest and the regional security situation came under discussion.

- On October 17, Pakistan's Foreign Office rejected as baseless Armenian Prime Minister's allegations about involvement of Pakistani Special Forces alongside the Azerbaijani Army in the ongoing conflict.
- On October 17, Pakistan's Foreign Office rejected comments by the Indian Minister for External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, in which the latter had accused Pakistan of justifying terror as a policy and for the frail relations between the two countries.

The Foreign Office stated that Pakistan "completely rejects these unwarranted and tendentious comments". During a recent online think-tank event, Jaishankar claimed that the Pakistani Government justified using terrorism as a policy, making it very hard to maintain relations. Rejecting these comments, the Foreign Office noted that instead of focusing on its human rights violations in Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IOJK), India was resorting to "fabrications and baseless allegations against Pakistan". Foreign Office Spokesman, Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri, regretted that rather than reflecting on its own egregious behaviour, marked by illegal and unilateral actions in IOJK, India resorted to fabrications and baseless allegations against Pakistan. He noted that India has been engaged in gross and systematic violations of human rights of unarmed and innocent Kashmiris, unabashed antiminority policies and actions, incessantly bellicose statements against Pakistan and aggressive steps in the shape of intensified violations of ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC). Chaudhri stated that "it was the RSS-BJP regime's dangerous policies of 'Hindutva' and 'Akhand Bharat' that continued to victimise the Kashmiris and squeeze the space for the minorities in India on the one hand, and create problems with nearly all of India's neighbours on the other". He added: "Obviously, 'normal' relations with its neighbours remained contingent upon India beginning to act normally".

Meanwhile, rejecting the Armenian Prime Minister's accusations against Pakistan, Spokesperson Chaudhri stated: "We categorically reject these baseless and unwarranted comments by the Armenian Prime Minister. President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan has also clarified his stance on the matter stating that Azerbaijani forces are strong enough to defend their homeland and do not need the help of foreign forces".

According to Chaudhri, it was regrettable that the leadership of Armenia, to cover up its illegal actions against Azerbaijan, was resorting to irresponsible propaganda. He stated: "For our part, we wish to make clear that Pakistan has consistently extended diplomatic, moral and political support to Azerbaijan. Pakistan will continue to stand by the brotherly nation of Azerbaijan and support its right of self-defence against any aggression". The Spokesperson added: "We believe that long-term peace and normalisation of relations between the two parties

would depend on the complete and comprehensive implementation of the UN Security Council resolutions and withdrawal of Armenian forces from Azerbaijani territories”.

- On October 17, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister (SAPM) on National Security, Dr. Moeed Yusuf, emphasised that Pakistan needs to share with the world its narrative on promoting economic security, regional connectivity and peace.

Speaking at the ‘Meet The Press’ programme of the Lahore Press Club, Yusuf urged the media to represent state confidence in reporting. He noted that Pakistan is making efforts toward regional peace, partnerships and an economic corridor; these steps prove that Pakistan is a forward-looking country. According to Dr Yusuf, Islamabad was asking the world, including China and the US, to invest in Pakistan and become partners. Regretting that Pakistan should not call itself a “small market”, he emphasized that the country must strengthen its confidence and start telling the world it was the sixth largest country in terms of population.

Pakistan (Internal)

- On October 25, Pakistan’s Federal Minister for Industries and Production, Hammad Azhar, who is also the Government’s point man on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), stated that Pakistan was focusing on the implementation of all recently enacted laws to come out of the FATF grey list.
- On October 23, the FATF announced that Pakistan would continue to remain on its grey list till February 2021 for six out of 27 unmet action plan targets on anti-money laundering (AML) and combating the financing of terrorism (CFT).

In its statement, the FATF noted: “To date, Pakistan has made progress across all action plan items and has now largely addressed 21 of the 27 action items. As all action plan deadlines have expired, the FATF strongly urges Pakistan to swiftly complete its full action plan by February 2021. The FATF takes note of the significant progress made on a number of action plan items”. Azhar termed the FATF’s “consensus decision” a “diplomatic victory” for the Government, and stated that the watchdog appreciated Pakistan’s legal efforts as a “role model” for other countries to follow. He noted that the Parliament had passed the laws not only for the recent evaluation in the FATF’s three-day plenary, but also for the next year’s evaluation. Azhar observed that one of the two action plans given to Pakistan by the FATF was the “most challenging” and “comprehensive ever given to any country”.

- On October 21, Chief of the Army Staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, visited forward areas at Chamb Sector along the Line of Control (LoC).

According to the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), the Army Chief was briefed on the latest operational situation, including Indian ceasefire violations deliberately targeting local residents living near the LoC. During his interaction with officers, General Bajwa appreciated them for continued vigilance and remarkable operational preparedness. He emphasised upon troops to extend all-out support to local populations affected by unprovoked Indian ceasefire violations. He stated: “Remain steadfast, discharge your duties with utmost sincerity and devotion”.

- On October 21, the National Assembly’s Standing Committee on Law and Justice approved the bill titled: “the International Court of Justice (Review and Reconsideration) Ordinance”, that seeks a review of conviction of Indian spy, Commander Kulbushan Jadhav, who was sentenced to death by a military court for espionage and terrorism.

Opposing the bill, the Committee’s members from the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI-F) termed the bill an NRO for the Indian spy. The term ‘NRO’ stands for the National Reconciliation Ordinance, which former military dictator General Pervez Musharraf offered to the-then exiled political leadership and under which accountability cases against certain politicians had been dropped. Federal Minister for Law and Justice, Farogh Naseem, rejected the opposition’s criticism of the bill and noted that it had been introduced in compliance with directives of the International Court of Justice (ICJ). He further warned that in case the bill was not adopted by the Parliament, Pakistan could face sanctions for not complying with the ICJ’s verdict.

- On October 18, the 11-party anti-government Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) alliance held a massive rally in Karachi.

The rally was the second in a series of rallies, as the PDM had staged its maiden power show in Gujranwala on October 16, 2020. On October 17, 2020, Prime Minister Imran Khan warned that he would get “tougher” with opposition parties and declared that all efforts would be made to bring former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif back to Pakistan. The leaders of the opposition parties vowed that their struggle would continue till the fall of Imran Khan’s government. However, during the rally in Karachi, Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) leader Maryam Nawaz maintained that their campaign was not against Imran Khan and he should stay away from the “fight between big guns”. Meanwhile, Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari urged the Prime Minister to take heed from “past dictators”. During his speech, Jamiat-Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) Chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman criticised the Prime Minister and urged the Army Chief to maintain a distance from “foolish friends”.

In a related development, on October 18, 2020, while talking to media, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, remarked that Pakistan’s relations with Saudi Arabia are long-lasting and friendly. He stated: “Bilawal Bhutto in a speech mentioned me while saying that the relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia lacks warmth. Bilawal has misconceptions in this regard as the relations between both countries are on strong footing.

Bilawal should avoid creating misunderstandings in this regard". FM Qureshi argued that the PDM was an untimely, unnatural and non-ideological alliance and the people of Gujranwala had rejected it. He noted that the anti-army agenda adopted during the Gujranwala public gathering could not be the agenda of any Pakistani and the people were fully aware of the services of the Army. Qureshi argued that PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari was promoting the agenda of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and that he was not aware of the facts on the Kashmir issue. Analysts warn that any continued momentum of the PDM protests may create a crisis-like situation in the country.

- On October 16, Balochistan Home Minister, Mir Ziaullah Langove, claimed that India is spending \$500 million annually to promote terrorism in Balochistan with the help of anti-state elements who have claimed responsibility for the attack on an Oil and Gas Development Company convoy in Ormara.

Langove condemned the Ormara attack, in which 20 security personnel were martyred, and noted that they had sacrificed their lives in the line of duty. According to the Minister, India was directly involved in a conspiracy to destroy peace in Balochistan and to implement its nefarious designs. In this regard, the Minister alleged that India was providing financial support to the militants to spread anarchy in the country. However, he noted that despite Indian conspiracies, the Government, with the help of security forces and the people, had succeeded in reducing the threat of terrorism and restoring peace in Balochistan during the last two and half years.

India

- On October 27, during the third US-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, Minister of External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, and Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh, held talks with US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, and Defence Secretary, Mark Esper, in New Delhi.

Pompeo and Esper also held talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval. During the 2+2 dialogue, the two countries welcomed the elevation of the US-India Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership. The two sides held discussions on a number of bilateral and multilateral issues, including cooperation in handling the COVID-19 pandemic, defence and security, trade, economy, energy, counter terrorism, telecommunications, space technology and enhancing people to people contact between the two States.

During the talks, India and the US signed a landmark defence agreement that will allow sharing of high-end military technology, classified satellite data and critical information between the two countries. The signing of the long-negotiated Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) during the third edition of the 2+2 dialogue between the two countries also signals further boosting of bilateral defence and military ties and it comes in the backdrop of India's tense border standoff with China in eastern Ladakh. During the 2+2 dialogue, the two sides

deliberated on a host of critical issues including ways to further expand the relationship between the militaries of the two countries, as well as on broader issues of mutual interest in the Indo-Pacific region.

This is the eighth agreement signed between the US and India since they embarked on a strategic partnership in 2005. Pakistani strategists believe that the agreement will increase Pakistan's strategic dilemma, even though it is being presented as part of efforts to contain China.

Pakistan's Foreign Office, in its reaction to the signing of the agreement, stated: "Pakistan has taken note of the signing of the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement. Pakistan has been consistently highlighting the threats posed to strategic stability in South Asia as a result of provision of advanced military hardware, technologies and knowledge to India". The statement added: "India's massive acquisition of armaments and expansion of its nuclear forces, including introduction of new destabilising weapon systems, are developments with serious repercussions for peace and stability in South Asia". Meanwhile, the US State Department appreciated the increasing cooperation with India, stating that it was "critical to the security and prosperity of both countries, the Indo-Pacific region, and the world".

- On October 27, the Indian Government amended several laws paving the way for people from outside occupied Kashmir to buy land there.

The Ministry of Home Affairs notified the Union Territory (UT) of "Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation (Adaptation of Central Laws) Third Order, 2020". The Centre has repealed or substituted 26 state laws. In the third order, out of 26, the Ministry of Home Affairs has repealed 12 state laws as a whole and adapted others with changes or substitutes. Laws which are repealed as a whole include The Jammu and Kashmir Alienation of Land Act, Jammu and Kashmir Big Landed Estates Abolition Act, Jammu and Kashmir Common Lands (Regulation) Act 1956, Jammu and Kashmir Consolidation of Holdings Act 1962, Jammu and Kashmir Right of Prior Purchase Act, Jammu and Kashmir Utilisation of Lands Act. In a gazette notification, the Ministry omitted the phrase "permanent resident of the state" from the Jammu and Kashmir Development Act, which deals with disposal of land in Indian Occupied Kashmir. Before repeal of Article 370 and Article 35-A in August 2019, non-residents were not allowed to buy any immovable property in Kashmir. However, these fresh changes have paved the way for non-residents to acquire land in Kashmir.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's Foreign Office categorically rejected the Indian Government's illegal amendments to land ownership laws in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK). According to the Foreign Office: "highly condemnable Indian action is yet another clear violation of the UN Security Council resolutions, bilateral agreements between Pakistan and India and international law".

- On October 23, Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) Uttar Pradesh Chief, Swatantra Dev Singh, told a meeting of party functionaries that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has set a date for war with Pakistan and China.

Singh made these remarks amid tensions at the Line of Actual Control between India and China. According to the report, quoted by several news outfits, including NDTV and Indian Express, the BJP leader linked his claim to the beginning of the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya following a Supreme Court judgment, and the abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status safeguarded under Article 370 of the Indian constitution. Singh stated: "Like the decisions on Ram Mandir and Article 370, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has decided when there would be war with Pakistan and China".

- On October 15, two days after Prime Minister Imran Khan's Adviser on National Security and Strategic Policy Planning, Moeed Yusuf, revealed Indian feelers for bilateral talks, New Delhi described the claim as fictitious.

During an interview with Karan Thapar for The Wire, Moeed Yusuf claimed that Pakistan had received messages in the "past year" about a "desire of conversation" from India. Yusuf had, however, refused to offer any more details on this message that had allegedly been conveyed by India, or possibly by someone on India's behalf. While refuting these claims, Indian Foreign Ministry Spokesman, Anurag Srivastava, stated: "The statements made by him are contrary to facts on the ground, misleading and fictitious. As regards the purported message that was referred to, let me make it clear that no such message was sent from our side". Srivastava asserted that Dr. Yusuf's remarks were part of "Pakistan's efforts to divert attention from domestic failures of the present Government and mislead its domestic constituents by pulling India into headlines on a daily basis". He further advised the Pakistani official "to restrict his advice to the establishment and not comment on India's domestic policies".

- The Press Trust of India reported, on October 16, that India's Minister for External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, termed the talks between China and India on the border standoff as confidential between the two sides.

According to The Press Trust of India, Jaishankar was asked specifically about the outcome of the ongoing talks. In response, the Minister replied that the "discussions are going on and it is a work in progress". He also stated: "Discussions are on; what is going on is something confidential between us and the Chinese. There is not very much that I am in a position to say in public. I certainly do not want to prejudge it". Jaishankar also noted that there had been a troop build-up along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), and in many ways, it has no precedence in the recent past. India and China are locked in a military standoff in Ladakh for over five months. According to the Minister, relations between India and China improved following the signing of a series of agreements, since 1993, on maintaining peace and tranquillity along the border.

---Muhammad Shoaib

SOUTH ASIA II

Afghanistan

- On October 31, during his interview with *Der Spiegel*, a German news magazine, Pakistan's Prime Minister, Imran Khan stated that Pakistan has no favourites in Afghanistan and Pakistan's only interest in Afghanistan is that the future government in Kabul does not allow India to operate from there against Pakistan.
- On October 26, terming Afghanistan a 'natural trade partner' of Pakistan, Prime Minister, Imran Khan, stated that his dream is to have an 'open trade border' with the neighbouring country to fully capitalise the scope of bilateral ties.

PM Khan was addressing the Pakistan-Afghanistan Trade and Investment Forum 2020, held in Islamabad. The event was also attended by the visiting 17-member Afghan parliamentary delegation, led by Wolesi Jirga Speaker Mir Rahman Rahmani. PM Khan reiterated that his government will make the utmost efforts to ensure that there is a reduction in violence and a ceasefire in Afghanistan. He noted that stability in Afghanistan will benefit Pakistan as it wants to connect to Central Asia economically through Afghanistan. PM Khan mentioned that lessons should be learned from the past and that the two countries should look to the future and move forward from the past. He also stated that Pakistan would continue to cooperate and strengthen its ties with Kabul regardless of who takes office. However, he also expressed apprehensions about the negative role India could play in tarnishing the growing relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Rahmani appreciated the efforts of the Pakistani Government in supporting Afghanistan. He added that both countries could progress and develop together through mutual cooperation. Rahmani also appreciated steps taken by the Government of Pakistan to facilitate Afghan transit trade. Further, candid discussions were held vis-a-vis removal of barriers and overcoming hurdles impeding bilateral trade. Some solid recommendations, in this regard, were also floated by both sides during the discussions. The Afghan parliamentary delegation's visit after the recent visit by Abdullah Abdullah, Chairman of Afghanistan's High Council for National Reconciliation, reflect improving government to government relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. PM Khan is also expected to visit Kabul in the near future.

- Amidst constant delays in the start of direct peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan Government negotiating teams, *Tolo News* reported on October 31 that violence has expanded to 28 out of 34 Afghan provinces in "the last 24 hours".
- Afghanistan's Ministry of Interior reported, on October 20, that 180 civilians were killed and 375 were wounded over the last month as a result of increasing clashes between warring parties.

The violence has escalated since the commencement of intra-Afghan talks on September 12, 2020, in Doha. Tolo News reported, on October 21, 2020, that Thakar province's Police Chief, along with 27 other policemen, were killed and dozens went missing after a clash with Taliban fighters. In a related incident, on October 20, 2020, at least 12 police force members, including the district Police Chief, were killed in two explosions in Kang district of Nimroz province. On October 19, 2020, District Governor of Zazai Maidan, situated in eastern Khost province, was killed in an ambush by gunmen in central Logar province. Meanwhile, fierce clashes are underway between the Taliban and Government forces in Lashkargah city of Helmand provinces.

- On October 30, a coordinator of the UN's Islamic State, al-Qaeda and Taliban Monitoring Team, stated the Taliban and al-Qaeda are still conducting joint military training in Afghanistan and that their ties are still strong and remained unchanged.
- On October 24, al-Qaeda mastermind, Mohsen al-Misri, was killed in an operation conducted by Afghan forces in the Andar district of Ghazni province.

According to Tolo News, Almisri was operating as the terrorist group's key member for the Indian subcontinent. In reaction to the killing of al-Misri, the Afghan Army's Chief of Staff, Gen. Yasin Zia, stated that the Taliban have yet to cut their ties with al-Qaeda and other terrorist organisations. Zia also blamed Pakistan for supporting and aiding the Taliban in the Helmand offensive. Earlier, the NDS stated that Almisri had succumbed to his injuries during the arrest; later, it corrected its information and announced that Almisri was killed during the operation. The Long War Journal noted, in a report, that it is not clear whether the Taliban-linked individuals had a role in recognising al-Misri's hideout, but mentioned that it is a clear violation of the US-Taliban deal. A Taliban spokesman stated that the killing of the al-Qaeda member in a conflict zone requires an investigation.

- On October 28, Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa stated that Pakistan always desired peace in Afghanistan and would spare no effort to restore peace and stability in that country.

While speaking during his visit to the Lady Reading Hospital to inquire after the health of those who suffered injuries in the bomb blast at Dir Colony madressah on October 27, 2020, Gen. Bajwa stressed that Pakistan and Afghanistan could not afford the risk of lawlessness and chaos as such a situation would have catastrophic consequences for both countries. He noted that Afghan refugees in Pakistan should exercise caution about inimical forces so that they were not wittingly or unwittingly used in terrorist activities. Gen. Bajwa further mentioned that Pakistan and Afghanistan had faced terrorism for the past two decades, and Pakistan had opened its arms and doors for its Afghan refugee brethren. He also highlighted that Pak-Afghan border fence was a fence of peace and it had been set up to stop illegal cross-border movement of terrorists.

Gen. Bajwa concluded his discussion with the remarks that Pakistan's security forces would not rest till the elimination of all terrorists and their facilitators.

- On October 26, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that the continued presence of US troops in Afghanistan is beneficial for overall security.

Putin stated: "Initially, we backed US forces' presence in Afghanistan and earlier voted in favour of a respective UN Security Council resolution. I still believe that US presence in Afghanistan does not run counter to our external interests. On the contrary, when it was announced that the Americans are preparing to withdraw their military contingent, our official position is that maybe this creates additional conditions for a kind of Afghan reconciliation, but I personally think that this creates many risks". Meanwhile, NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, stated that the talks in Doha are "fragile" and that the presence of international forces in the country is condition-based. However, US President Donald Trump recently reiterated that withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan should be completed by Christmas. It has been observed that NATO, the US establishment and almost all regional countries (excluding Iran) are against the complete drawdown of US troops from Afghanistan. An abrupt withdrawal of foreign troops increases the likelihood of intensification of the ongoing civil war in Afghanistan. On the other hand, extended presence of these troops provides justifications for militant activity and terrorism.

- On October 24, at least 30 students were killed and over 70 were wounded in a Daesh-sponsored attack outside an educational center in the western part of Kabul city.

The attack targeted a Shia Muslim neighbourhood in the Pul-e-Khoshk area of Dasht-e-Barchi. The attack drew widespread condemnation from Afghan and international leadership. Despite Daesh claiming responsibility for the attack, the Afghan Interior Ministry and Second Vice President, Mohammad Sarwar Danish, attributed responsibility for the attack to the Taliban. A similar explosion occurred in the west of Kabul in 2018, which left 48 students dead.

- On October 21, NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, stated that current troop levels in Afghanistan are at around 12,000 troops, and any further adjustments remain condition-based.

Speaking ahead of the Alliance's defence ministers' meeting, Stoltenberg reiterated that the Taliban must live up to their commitments, significantly reduce the levels of violence, and pave the way for a ceasefire. He also stated that the Taliban must break all ties with al-Qaeda and other international terrorist groups, and negotiate in good faith. Stoltenberg added that Afghans must preserve the gains made at such a high price over the last two decades, including for women and girls. He also mentioned that NATO remains committed to Afghanistan's long-term security and that allies and partners had renewed their commitment to provide financial support to the Afghan forces through 2024.

- On October 21, Leader of the Hizb-i-Islami party and former Prime Minister of Afghanistan, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, concluded his three-day visit to Pakistan where he met with Pakistani leadership and discussed the Afghan peace process.

Hekmatyar held meetings with Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan, President Arif Alvi, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, Chairman Senate Sadiq Sanjrani and many other politicians. He also interacted with academics and practitioners at a local think tank. Pakistani leadership ensured Hekmatyar of Pakistan's full support for an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace process to achieve a permanent ceasefire and a viable peace. All Pakistani politicians cautioned Hekmatyar about the role internal and external spoilers could play in derailing the peace process. During his meeting, PM Khan also referred to the enormous potential in bilateral trade, transit and connectivity between the two countries. He assured Pakistan's full support for Afghanistan on the path of reconstruction and economic development and dignified return of Afghan refugees. PM Khan reiterated that Pakistan would continue to facilitate people-to-people exchanges, promote Afghan investments, and enhance programmes for human resource development and capacity-building of Afghans, especially in the education and health sectors. Hekmatyar appreciated Pakistan's positive role in facilitating the Afghan peace process. He also thanked Pakistan for its long-standing contribution to the socio-economic development of Afghanistan and for hosting millions of Afghan refugees for more than four decades. Speaking at a local think tank, Hekmatyar stated that the only durable solution for peace in Afghanistan is withdrawal of US troops and formation of a non-aligned, independent and sovereign government by Afghans, in light of their beliefs and traditions without outside interference. Otherwise, he warned, the country would plunge into another civil war. He expressed the hope that Americans would not repeat the mistake of the Soviets who had established their puppet government in Kabul before leaving Afghanistan. He noted that a majority of political parties were not supporting the Afghan Government's stance on the peace process and the current Government in Kabul was not ready to enter into negotiations with all political parties. Hekmatyar also mentioned that talks would commence soon, between Hizb-i-Islami and Taliban, with the aim of ensuring durable peace. Hekmatyar was one of the Mujahideen leaders who fought against the Soviets during the 1980s. He was aided and supported by the US, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

- On October 21, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan's Reconstruction (SIGAR) reported that \$19 billion were lost in more than a decade of war in Afghanistan to fraud, waste and abuse.

As of December 2019, the US Congress appropriated nearly \$134 billion, since the Fiscal Year 2002, for Afghanistan reconstruction. Of that amount, SIGAR reviewed approximately \$63 billion and found that nearly \$19 billion of the amount reviewed was lost to waste, fraud, and abuse. SIGAR identified approximately \$1.8 billion in waste, fraud, and abuse between January 201, and December 2019 in its 111 audits, inspections and special projects reports, and in 55 closed investigations. Most of the losses were attributed to failed counternarcotics and

stabilisation programs. The US Congress created the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) in 2008, with the aim of providing independent and objective oversight of Afghanistan reconstruction projects and activities.

- On October 21, a stampede outside the Pakistan Consulate in Jalalabad left at least 15 people dead and many others injured.

The incident occurred at a stadium near the Pakistan Consulate, where an estimated 3,000 people had congregated, and were waiting to collect tokens needed to apply for a visa. Mansoor Ahmad Khan, Pakistan's Ambassador to Afghanistan, stated in a tweet: "Deeply saddened at the reports of casualties at a stadium in Jalalabad 5km from Pakistani Consulate where visa applicants were being organized by Afghan provincial authorities. We sympathize with the families of victims". On October 13, 2020, Pakistan announced a new visa policy for Afghans whereby long term multiple visas are being issued to Afghan nationals for visiting Pakistan for medical treatment, family matters, business, education and other purposes. On October 16, 2020, Pakistan's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Mohammad Sadiq, stated in a tweet: "... almost 19,000 multiple entry visas were issued in the last 5 working days. Pakistan alone is now issuing more visas to Afghan citizens than the total visas issued to them by some 45 countries represented in Kabul".

- On October 19, Abdullah Abdullah, the Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation, met with Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, in Tehran and discussed the Afghan peace process.

Abdullah appreciated Iran's principled stance in supporting the Afghan peace efforts and called for the continuation of support. He also reiterated his support for the effort to implement economic plans between the two countries and emphasised that such developments could provide the foundation for peace and further regional cooperation. Meanwhile, Rouhani hoped that the peace efforts would work in Afghanistan's favour, and insisted on the implementation of joint economic plans between the two countries. Rouhani also stated that the US intervention and presence, as an aggressor in Afghanistan, was not in line with the will and opinion of the people of Afghanistan, and that the US government, which has failed in its policies in the region and the world, seeks its own electoral interest from peace talks in Afghanistan. While stressing on the development and deepening of Tehran-Kabul relations Rouhani stated: "Long-term agreement between the two countries can develop and deepen relations in all areas". Earlier, talking to Iranian media, Abdullah stated that the continuation of war in Afghanistan serves nobody's interest. The war is not only a great cause of suffering for the people of Afghanistan but it is also affecting the regional countries economically. Abdullah also expressed his opposition to the establishment of an interim government in the country. On October 18, 2020, Abdullah held a meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, where similar topics were discussed.

Abdullah has been visiting regional countries to ensure a consensus over the Afghan peace process. Previously, he visited Pakistan and India respectively.

- On October 19, NATO reiterated its commitment to provide financial support to the Afghan security forces through 2024.

The commitment was made by NATO Allies and partners during a meeting of the Afghan National Army Trust Fund Board in Brussels. NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, stated during the meeting: “Today’s commitments help underpin the confidence that our financial support to the Afghan security forces will continue to be strong beyond 2020. International funding support to the Afghan forces is a key pillar of our commitment to Afghan security. As of 5 October 2020, the total cumulative contributions made to the Trust Fund since its establishment amount to over US\$ 3.2 billion”. The NATO-run Afghan National Army Trust Fund was created in 2007. It has played a vital role in enhancing the effectiveness and sustainment of the Afghan security forces by funding activities ranging from installation of donated equipment to training, literacy courses, professional military education, and capacity building.

- On October 18, the Taliban blamed US forces in Afghanistan for violating the February 29, 2020 Peace Agreement.

The Taliban mentioned, in a statement, that US forces, in contravention of the peace deal, have bombed non-conflict zones in Helmand, Farah and a few other provinces. The group also warned that the consequences of such bombings will be faced by the US. US forces spokesman in Afghanistan, Col. Sonny Leggett, categorically rejected the Taliban’s claim and stated that the US airstrikes in Helmand and Farah have been, and continue to be, solely in defence of the Afghan security forces as they are being attacked by the Taliban. He added that these strikes are consistent with both the US-Taliban Agreement and the Joint Declaration between the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the US. US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, also stated, in a tweet, that the recent Taliban remarks on violations of the Doha Agreement are unfounded, and that such inflammatory rhetoric does not advance peace. He added: “Instead, we should pursue strict adherence to all articles of the US-Taliban Agreement and US-Afghanistan Joint Declaration. The belief that says violence must escalate to win concessions at the negotiating table is very risky. Such an approach can undermine the peace process and repeats past miscalculations by Afghan leaders”. On October 12, 2020, US forces in Afghanistan confirmed that they had conducted airstrikes in Helmand to support their Afghan partners in the fight against the Taliban, who attacked different parts of the province. According to the Directorate of Refugees and Repatriation in Helmand, the recent attacks have left more than 5,000 families displaced, and resulted in the closure of 40 schools. The deadlock in the talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government team in Doha seems to be the cause of a surge in conflict in Afghanistan. On

October 17, 2020, at least eight local police and public uprising forces members were killed in a Taliban attack in northern Kunduz province. In a related incident, at least 12 civilians were killed and more than 100 wounded in a car bomb blast close to police Headquarters in Firozkoh, the capital of Ghor province. No group, including the Taliban, has yet claimed responsibility for the blast.

Sri Lanka

- On October 28, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo arrived in Colombo and called on President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, where the two leaders exchanged views on a number of issues of bilateral and regional importance.

Rajapaksa stressed that he was not ready to compromise the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the nation in maintaining foreign relations whatever the circumstances may be. He also noted that China assisted in the development of the country's infrastructure since the end of the separatist war. Rajapaksa reiterated that Sri Lanka was not caught in a debt trap as a result. He added: "what Sri Lanka wants is not obtaining loans continually, but to achieve a high level of economic growth by attracting more foreign investments". Meanwhile, Pompeo stated that his country is ready to continually engage with Sri Lanka in its strive to achieve economic development goals. His country expects to further develop the already existing strong bilateral relations between the two countries. While talking to the media after his engagement with Rajapaksa, Pompeo stated that the US' approach is quite in contrast to what China seeks. He even called the Communist Party of China (CPC) a predator. In response, Chinese Embassy in Sri Lanka tweeted: "We are busy promoting China-Sri Lanka friendship and cooperation, not interested in your Alien vs Predator game invitation. The US can play two roles at the same time as always". The US is wary of growing Chinese influence in Sri Lanka. China provided vital assistance to the Sri Lankan Government during the country's civil war with Tamil militants. Beijieng has invested heavily in the Island country recently. Sri Lanka with its vital geostrategic location on the Indian Ocean, holds a crucial position within China's Belt and Road Initiative and String of Pearls Strategy.

- On October 26, Sri Lankan Prime Minister, Mahinda Rajapaksa, and his Indian counterpart, Narendra Modi, held a virtual meeting under the India-Sri Lanka Virtual Bilateral Summit.

Calling on the newly elected Sri Lankan Government to fully implement the 13th Constitutional Amendment, Modi highlighted India's concerns over the rights of the Tamil minority. The 13th Amendment was passed in 1987, and mandates a certain degree of devolution of power to the provincial councils established to govern the island's nine provinces. Modi promised a \$15 million grant for the promotion of Buddhist cultural exchanges, but demurred from a decision on Colombo's twin requests relating to a deferment of its debt repayment and currency swap.

Meanwhile, Rajapaksa expressed confidence that Sri Lanka will work towards realizing the expectations of all ethnic groups, including Tamils, by achieving reconciliation nurtured as per the mandate of the people of Sri Lanka and implementation of the Constitutional provision. Both sides also discussed cooperation on a number of infrastructure and energy projects, including two projects India is keen to pursue in Trincomalee, and the Colombo East Container Terminal Project. India has yet to respond to a request made personally by Rajapaksa during his visit to Delhi in February 2020, for a three-year moratorium on Sri Lanka's \$960 million debt owed to India, and for a \$1.1 billion currency swap arrangement, in addition to the \$400 million currency swap. Relations between India and Sri Lanka have never been smooth. India remained involved in supporting the terrorist group of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which fought Asia's longest Civil War with Colombo from the mid 1970s to 2009.

- On October 22, the 20th Amendment to Sri Lanka's Constitution was passed by the Parliament with a two-thirds majority. The Amendment envisages expansive powers and greater immunity for the Executive President.

As many as 156 MPs in the 225-member House voted in favour of the Amendment, while 65 legislators voted against the same. The 20th Amendment rolls back Sri Lanka's 19th Amendment, a legislative instrument from 2015 that sought to clip presidential powers, while strengthening Parliament. The new legislation reduces the Prime Minister's role to a ceremonial one.

- On October 21, India and Sri Lanka concluded the latest iteration of their three-day naval exercise (SLINEX-20), off the coast of Trincomalee, Sri Lanka.

According to the Indian Defence Ministry, Sri Lanka fielded an offshore patrol vessel and a training ship, while India brought two indigenously built corvettes, namely INS Kamorta and Kiltan, along with onboard helicopters, and a Dornier 228 short-range maritime reconnaissance aircraft, to the exercise. The statement went on to add that SLINEX-20 aims to enhance interoperability, improve mutual understanding and exchange best practices and procedures for multi-faceted maritime operations between both navies. Sri Lanka holds a significant strategic position in the Indian Ocean. India's push for greater military to military cooperation seems to be aimed at countering growing Chinese influence in the Island country.

---Kashif Hussain

UNITED NATIONS

- On October 29, the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO), noted that La Nina returned back in the central and eastern equatorial Pacific Ocean. The La Nina is the ocean-warming phenomenon that affects global weather patterns.

Dr. Maxx Dilley, Deputy Director in charge of the Climate Services Department at WMO, noted that the La Nina would result in sea surface temperatures between two and three degrees Celsius cooler than average. Dilley stated: “These coolings of these large ocean areas have a significant effect on the circulation of the atmosphere that is flowing over them. And the changes in the atmosphere in turn affect precipitation patterns around the world”. The WHO indicated that effects of La Nina vary around the globe, and indications show that the Horn of Africa will see below average rainfall. The WHO emphasised that it was increasing its support and advice for international humanitarian agencies to try to reduce the impacts of La Nina among the most vulnerable regions.

- On October 28, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres termed the Republic of Korea’s pledge towards achieving carbon neutrality by 2050 as “a very positive step in the right direction”.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in announced South Korea’s commitment to get to net zero emissions by 2050 on October 28, 2020. Moon made his announcement in a speech to the National Assembly to “actively respond” to climate change, in line with a \$35 billion New Green Deal, announced in July 2020, on ending investment in coal. While hailing the announcement, Antonio Guterres stated: “With this announcement the Republic of Korea, the world’s 11th largest economy and sixth largest exporter, joins a growing group of major economies committed to lead by example in building a sustainable, carbon neutral and climate resilient world by 2050”.

On October 28, 2020, Guterres also welcomed Japan’s announcement that it will get to net-zero emissions by 2050. Japan announced its pledge on October 26, 2020. Meanwhile, the UN Secretary-General also urged world countries to adopt policies to reduce emissions, as required under the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change.

- On October 27, the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) condemned a bombing incident at a Madrasah, a religious school, in the suburbs of Peshawar, Pakistan.

In the incident, at least 8 people lost their lives, and 130 were wounded. According to media reports, classes were underway when the bombing took place at the Jamia Zuberia Madrasa. However, no group claimed responsibility for the attack.

While offering condolences to the victims and their families, Aida Girma, UNICEF's Representative in Pakistan stated: "We are appalled by this attack on children while they were in a place of prayer and learning". Girma underscored that schools must remain safe learning environments at all times to protect the growth of children.

- On October 26, representatives from the international community reaffirmed their commitment to promote global peace and progress through cooperation during the official ceremony to commemorate UN Day.

During the official ceremony to commemorate UN Day, the UN Member States observed a moment of silence. The UN Day is observed annually on October 24, marking the anniversary of the entry into force of the UN Charter. While addressing ambassadors, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stated: "At its birth, the United Nations was a symbol of global unity. Today it is the epicentre. Our mission is more important than ever". Guterres emphasised that international cooperation was the only way to defeat the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate emergency, rising inequality, the spreading of hatred and other ambitions including preventing conflict, promoting sustainable development, upholding human rights and protecting the planet. During the ceremony, President of the UN General Assembly, Volkan Bozkir, said the UN Day was an opportunity to recognise the value of the UN and its people.

- On October 27, three UN Agencies appealed to the international community for a global push towards "open science", citing the value of cooperation in responses to COVID-19.

Michelle Bachelet, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Audrey Azoulay, the Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), and Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organisation (WHO), noted, in their joint appeal, that it was time to ensure the benefits of science could be shared by all. Tedros warned that the best health technologies and discoveries could not be preserved only for a few. He stated: "An open research process also promotes transparency and helps to safeguard against misuse and allows others to validate the research process. So I warmly welcome today's call for open science, a call for inclusiveness and solidarity". Regarding continued COVID-19 infections, Azoulay emphasised the need for universal access to science and cooperation to fight the pandemic. While referring to sharing scientific advances and benefits contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet termed knowledge sharing and cooperation a matter of human rights. Bachelet stated: "The basic principle of public health is the need for full and honest engagement with the public. Use of force

will not mitigate or end this pandemic, but the use of science and fully-informed public consent and compliance will”.

- On October 22, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) co-hosted a joint conference with the US, the UK and the EU to enhance support for Myanmar’s displaced Rohingya minority.

While pledging to continue engaging with concerned countries towards finding a long-term solution to the plight of Rohingyas, the co-hosts, in their joint statement, observed: “We will continue to work together to maintain international attention on the Rohingya crisis and to shift from short-term critical interventions to a more sustained and stable support”. The statement added: “The voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable return of Rohingya refugees and others internally displaced to their places of origin or of their own choosing in Myanmar, is the comprehensive solution that we seek along with Rohingya people themselves”. According to the UN, there are currently 860,000 mainly Muslim Rohingya refugees in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, who fled their homes owing to orchestrated violence by Myanmar authorities in the country’s Rakhine state. Meanwhile, Malaysia, India, Indonesia and other countries in the region are also hosting nearly 150,000 Rohingya refugees.

During the conference, the co-chairs announced new pledges of around \$600 million in humanitarian funding, which significantly expands the nearly \$636 million in assistance already committed so far in 2020 under the Bangladesh Joint Response Plan and the Myanmar Humanitarian Response Plan.

- On October 20, UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, urged the UNSC and regional countries to reflect on how they could “work in unison to promote peace and security” in the Persian Gulf region.

While expressing concerns over the situation in Yemen, Antonio Guterres noted that the security situation in the country remained fragile. According to the UN, the conflict in Yemen has escalated in Al Jawf, Ma’rib and Hudaydah governorates. Regarding the complex and multifaceted challenges in the Persian Gulf region, the UN Secretary-General highlighted numerous security incidents since May 2019 that have increased tensions to “new levels” in the region. Antonio Guterres urged the Gulf countries to move beyond destructive rivalries to “create a climate of trust and improve the prospects for regional dialogue”.

--- Moiz Khan