

AREA BRIEFS

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An Abridgement of Latest Strategic
Developments



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About the Area Briefs

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

About SSII

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AMERICAS

International

- On December 14, the US, for the first time, accused Iran of direct involvement in the “probable death” of former FBI Agent, Bob Levinson, who disappeared 13 years ago in Iran.

FBI Director, Christopher Wray, stated: “The Government of Iran pledged to provide assistance in bringing Bob Levinson home, but it has never followed through”. He added: “The truth is that Iranian intelligence officers with the approval of senior Iranian officials were involved in Bob’s abduction and detention”. The Treasury Department announced that it was imposing sanctions on two Iranians identified as intelligence agents, namely Mohammad Baseri and Ahmad Khazai, stating that they “were involved in the abduction, detention and probable death of Mr Levinson”. Releasing its findings before President-Elect Joe Biden takes office, President Donald Trump’s Administration urged his successor to prioritise the release of at least three Americans in Iranian custody as part of an expected resumption of diplomacy between the two states.

Levinson disappeared in 2007 in Kish, an island that has more lenient visa rules than the rest of Iran. According to US officials at that time, he was investigating cigarette counterfeiting. However, the Washington Post reported, in 2013, that Levinson, who had retired from the FBI, was working for the CIA and had gone on a rogue mission aimed at gathering intelligence on Iran. It stated, at the time, that the CIA paid \$2.5 million to Levinson’s wife, Christine, accepting responsibility for his disappearance. Iranian officials have repeatedly denied having any information on Levinson.

- On December 10, according to US officials, two American bomber aircrafts took off from the US and flew over parts of the Middle East, displaying the country’s strike capabilities against Iran.

According to officials, the flight of the two B-52H Stratofortress bombers over the region - the second such mission in less than a month - was designed to highlight America’s continuing commitment to the Middle East. The Commander of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), General Frank McKenzie, stated: “The ability to fly strategic bombers halfway across the world in a non-stop mission and to rapidly integrate them with multiple regional partners demonstrates our close working relationships and our shared commitment to regional security and stability”.

- On December 7, Secretary of State, Michael Pompeo, announced that the US has designated Pakistan, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Nigeria, North

Korea, Myanmar and Eritrea as “Countries of Particular Concern” (CPC) under its International Religious Freedom Act.

The statement accused these countries of “engaging in or tolerating systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom”. Secretary Pompeo also announced placing the Comoros, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Russia on a special watch list for governments that engage in or tolerate “severe violations of religious freedom”. In its 2020 Report, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), which recommends the designations, noted that religious freedom deteriorated across Pakistan. It stated: “The systematic enforcement of blasphemy and anti Ahmadia laws, and authorities’ failure to address forced conversions of religious minorities including Hindus, Christians, and Sikhs to Islam, severely restricted freedom of religion or belief”. The Report noted that nearly 80 individuals remained imprisoned for blasphemy in Pakistan, with at least half facing a life sentence or death.

Additionally, the US designated Al Shabaab, Al Qaeda, Boko Haram, Hayat Tahrir al Sham, the Houthis, ISIS, ISIS-Greater Sahara, ISIS West Africa, Jamaat Nasr al Islam wal Muslimin, and the Taliban as well. While announcing the list of designated entities, Pompeo stated: “We have not renewed the prior Entity of Particular Concern designations for Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and ISIS Khorasan, due to the total loss of territory formerly controlled by these terrorist organisations”. He also announced removing Sudan and Uzbekistan from the special watch list “based on significant, concrete progress” undertaken by them over the past year. The USCIRF downgraded India to its lowest ranking of CPC in its 2020 Report, issued in April. It placed India alongside China, North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. In the 2019 listing, India was categorised as a “Tier 2 country”. However, the current State Department notification does not list India among Countries of Particular Concern.

- On December 7, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) of the US Department of the Treasury, imposed financial sanctions and a travel ban on 14 Chinese officials over their alleged role in the disqualification of four elected opposition legislators in the semi-autonomous territory of Hong Kong.

In November 2020, Hong Kong’s Beijing-backed Government expelled four opposition members from the legislature after China’s Parliament gave city authorities new powers to curb dissent. The move triggered mass resignations by pro-democracy opposition lawmakers in the territory of Hong Kong. The US sanctions target the Vice-Chairpersons of the National People’s Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC), the top decision-making body of the Chinese legislature. Further, the sanctions prohibit 14 individuals and their immediate family members from travelling to the US. Any assets the officials might have within the US will be blocked and US individuals and companies will be prohibited from dealing with them.

US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, noted in a statement that “Beijing’s unrelenting assault against Hong Kong’s democratic processes has gutted its legislative council, rendering the body

a rubber stamp devoid of meaningful opposition”. He also stated that the NPCSC had effectively “neutered” the ability of people in Hong Kong to choose their elected representatives. Pompeo added that “these actions demonstrate once again Beijing’s complete disregard for its international commitments under the Sino-British Joint Declaration, a UN-registered Treaty”. In August 2020, the Trump Administration had imposed sanctions on Hong Kong Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, and on the territory’s current and former police chiefs, as well as other top officials for their alleged role in curtailing freedoms in a crackdown on the territory’s pro-democracy movement.

- On December 5, a statement from the Pentagon noted that President Donald Trump has ordered the removal of most US military and security personnel from Somalia, where they have been conducting operations against the *Al Shabaab* militant group.

*According to the statement, President Trump “has ordered the Department of Defence (DOD) and the United States Africa Command (US AFRICOM) to reposition the majority of personnel and assets out of Somalia by early 2021”. The DOD stressed that the US was “not withdrawing or disengaging from Africa”, amid concerns of a pullback from various areas in the continent. The statement noted: “We will continue to degrade violent extremist organisations that could threaten our homeland while ensuring we maintain our strategic advantage in great power competition”. The US AFRICOM has maintained some 700 troops and personnel from other US security operations, and private security contractors in Somalia, both conducting attacks on *Al Shabaab* and training Somali forces. After ordering major troop reductions in Iraq and Afghanistan recently, Trump’s new move reflects his drive to disengage US forces from what he calls endless wars abroad.*

- On December 4, the Trump Administration ended five cultural exchange programmes with China, which, according to the US, were being used for Chinese propaganda and were of no benefit to the US.

In his statement, the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, noted that the exchange programmes he ended were fully paid for and operated by the Chinese Government as soft power propaganda tools. According to Pompeo, they provided carefully curated access to Chinese Communist Party officials, not to the Chinese people (who do not enjoy freedoms of speech and assembly). The State Department terminated the Policymakers Educational China Trip Programme, the US-China Friendship Programme, the US-China Leadership Exchange Programme, the US-China Transpacific Exchange Programme and the Hong Kong Educational and Cultural Programme. Each programme allowed US officials to travel in China at Beijing’s expense. Pompeo stated that the US welcomes the reciprocal and fair exchange of cultural programmes with China and that mutually beneficial programmes would continue. The terminations follow new visa restrictions announced by Washington, which limit stays in the US by members of China’s Communist Party and signal further erosion of US relations with Beijing.

- On December 2, in its report, *CNN* quoted an unnamed senior US Administration official as stating that Israel was behind the assassination of Iran's top nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh.

The official declined to disclose details on whether the Trump Administration knew about the attack before it was carried out or whether it provided support in this regard. According to the US official, in the past Israelis have shared information with the US about their targets and covert operations before carrying them out, but he did not mention if Israel did so in this instance. The official added that Fakhrizadeh had been a target for the Israelis for a long time. Iran has blamed Israel for the attack and alleged that the operation bore the hallmarks of Israel's foreign intelligence agency, the Mossad. While Iran has provided no evidence of Israeli involvement, Israel has neither denied nor claimed responsibility for Fakhrizadeh's assassination.

The US official noted that President Donald Trump has given a carte blanche to Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, to continue carrying out the Administration's "maximum pressure" campaign over the next two months. According to the US official, the threat level to Americans in the region has not increased since the attack, particularly because Iran holds Israel responsible for the assassination. The anonymous US Administration official further suggested that the assassination of the top Iranian scientist could hamper efforts by the incoming Administration of President-Elect, Joe Biden, to pursue diplomacy with Tehran.

- On December 2, in an interview to *The New York Times*, US President-Elect, Joe Biden, stated that returning to the 2015 Nuclear Agreement with Iran – the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – is the best way to avoid a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.

President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the Agreement in 2018, and has since imposed a campaign of "maximum pressure" sanctions against Iran. Biden reiterated that the US would re-join the JCPOA if Iran returns to "strict compliance" with the same.

Under the Agreement, Iran had agreed to curtail its nuclear development in exchange for sanctions relief. Biden noted that a return to the Agreement, which would include lifting the sanctions imposed by the Trump Administration, would serve as a "starting point to follow-on negotiations". Biden stated that follow-on negotiations would include seeking to lengthen the nuclear deal's 15-year provision that restricts Iran from enriching uranium to the level needed for a nuclear weapon. That timeline has been at the centre of critics' discontent with the original Agreement.

Meanwhile, Biden also noted that subsequent negotiations would address Iran's backing of militia groups in proxy conflicts in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, and that he would like to see regional neighbours, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, join the original signatories in any new

agreements. He further warned that if Iran acquires nuclear weapons, this would set off an arms race with regional powers, including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt.

- On December 2, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, stated that the Pentagon has approved drawdown plans in Afghanistan. However, the US will still maintain two larger bases in the country.

General Milley noted that US officials are carrying out President Donald Trump's orders to reduce US troop levels in Afghanistan to 2,500 by January 15, 2021. However, he stated that the US will retain two larger bases, as well as "several satellite bases". According to Milley, the US Military will also continue its two core missions: first, aiding Afghan security forces engaged in a conflict with Taliban insurgents; and second, carrying out counterterrorism operations against Daesh and al Qaeda militants. Milley did not disclose which bases in Afghanistan would be shuttered or what capabilities would be lost as the US withdraws 2,000 troops from the country.

Domestic

- On December 14, the US Electoral College confirmed President-Elect Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 Presidential Election.

According to the final results, Biden secured 306 Electoral College votes, while Donald Trump secured 232. During his speech, following the official announcement of the Electoral College results, Biden declared that the "will of the people had prevailed". He stated that it was "time to turn the page" on a Presidential Election that tested the resilience of American democracy. Biden added: "Our democracy – pushed, tested, threatened – proved to be resilient, true and strong". He condemned President Trump's attempts to overturn the result. Confirmation by the Electoral College was one of the steps required for Biden to take office. Under the US system, voters actually cast their ballots for "electors", who in turn formally vote for candidates after the election.

Meanwhile, Republicans also acknowledged that Joe Biden would be the next US President. Several high-profile Republican senators, including Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, John Cornyn of Texas and Chuck Grassley of Iowa, acknowledged, for the first time, that Biden was the US President-Elect. Most Republican lawmakers have been agreeing with Trump, who alleged without evidence, that there was widespread voter fraud during the Presidential Election. However, following the Electoral College voting, several senators told media in Capitol Hill that it was time to accept that Biden would be sworn in as the 46th US President on January 20, 2021.

- On December 12, four people were stabbed and one person shot as rallies supporting President Donald Trump's baseless claims of election fraud led to clashes in major US cities.

Thousands of protesters rallied in Washington's streets to support the President. Violence broke out in many places between protestors and counter-protesters who turned up to criticise President Trump, who lost the Presidential Election to Democrat Joe Biden but is still unwilling to concede. Protesters insisted that there was widespread fraud in the election. According to the Washington State Police, a shooting took place after clashes near the capitol building in Olympia. In the US capital, the DC Fire and EMS Department Communications Chief stated that four people were stabbed and hospitalised 'with serious injuries'. The New York Times reported that 23 people were arrested during the protests.

Similar events took place in Atlanta and St. Paul, Minnesota, as well as in smaller towns in Nebraska and Alabama. Every state has now certified the results, giving Biden 306 votes in the Electoral College against President Trump, who secured 232 votes. Meanwhile, several court cases, filed by Republicans against alleged fraud in the 2020 Elections, have also been decided in Biden's favour due to lack of evidence regarding claims of election fraud.

- On December 8, the US Supreme Court rejected a request by US Congressman Mike Kelly and other Pennsylvania Republicans who filed a lawsuit after the Presidential Election arguing that the state's 2019 expansion of mail-in voting was illegal under state law.

Pennsylvania was one of the pivotal states in the Election, with Biden, a Democrat, defeating Donald Trump by 80,000 votes. Biden received a much higher proportion of the mail-in votes than Trump. There were no noted dissents from any of the Justices on the Court. Ahead of the Election, Trump had urged his supporters not to vote by mail, making groundless claims that mail-in voting was rife with fraud. Trump has falsely claimed that he won the Election, making unfounded claims regarding widespread voting fraud in states, including Pennsylvania. Democrats and other critics have accused Trump of aiming to reduce public confidence in the integrity of US elections and undermine democracy by trying to subvert the will of the voters.

- On December 7, President-elect Joe Biden named Lloyd Austin as the new Secretary of Defence. Lloyd Austin is the former Head of the US Central Command and led US troops into Baghdad in 2003.

Austin is a veteran of conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and a retired four-star Army General. A Senate confirmation is required for Austin to take up the post. He also requires a special waiver from the Senate due to a federal law that requires military officers to wait seven years after retirement before serving as the Pentagon Chief. The rule is rooted in the view that only a civilian should serve as Defence Secretary. Most recently, the waiver was granted for General

Jim Mattis in 2017, President Donald Trump's first Defence Secretary. However, members of the Senate resentfully agreed to the waiver, and several said, at the time, that they wouldn't want to do it again.

- On December 6, during his address to a rally in Georgia, President Donald Trump stated that he had no intention of relinquishing his claims that the November 2020 Presidential Election was stolen from him.

The crowd gathered in Valdosta, Georgia, for a rally in support of two Republican Senate candidates facing a hugely consequential runoff election. The runoff election will decide which party controls the US Senate. During his address, Trump stated: "We're winning this election". He added: "It's rigged. It's a fixed deal". Trump further claimed: "The swing states that we're all fighting over now, I won them all by a lot".

There had been concerns from some Republicans over whether Trump's continuing claims of fraud would drive down voter turnout among Republicans in the coming election. If Democratic challengers, Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff, defeat Republican Senators, Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue, the Senate will be evenly divided at 50-50. This means Democratic Vice President-Elect, Kamala Harris, would cast any deciding votes, as per the Constitution.

- On December 3, US lawmakers unveiled the final version of the annual National Defence Authorisation Act (NDAA) that defies President Donald Trump's plans to withdraw troops from Germany.
- On December 2, Senator Jim Inhofe, the Republican Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, objected to President Donald Trump's threat to veto the annual NDAA.

The NDAA is a \$740 billion annual bill setting policy for the Pentagon. President Trump has threatened to veto the defence bill if it does not repeal legal protections for social media companies, such as Facebook Inc and Twitter Inc. Trump has demanded a measure in the next NDAA eliminating a federal law known as Section 230, which protects such tech companies. Section 230 is part of the Communications Decency Act, a law passed by Congress in 1996. It protects tech companies from liability over content posted by users. While opposing the President's threat of veto, Senator Inhofe stated: "First of all, 230 has nothing to do with the Military. And I agree with his sentiments. We ought to do away with 230, but you can't do it in this bill. That's not a part of the bill". According to US lawmakers, the congressional negotiators had completed the conference report on the fiscal year 2021 NDAA. The final version of the bill is drafted after reaching a compromise between distinct versions of the bill, which were passed earlier in 2020 by the Republican-led Senate and Democratic-majority House of Representatives. If the House and Senate versions differ, a reconciliation of differences is required. This may be accomplished by a conference committee appointed by the leadership of

each chamber. This committee then negotiates a compromise bill that is reported to both houses. Votes on the conference agreement are then taken in both chambers. If passed, it is sent to the President for his consideration and signature.

Congressional aides noted that the final version of the NDAA does not include the Section 230 repeal, as demanded by Trump. The legislation includes a provision that would strip the names of Confederate generals from military facilities, but this has been opposed by Trump. The President had threatened to veto the NDAA if it did not allow the Confederate names to remain in place. White House Spokesperson, Kayleigh McEnany, stated that Trump was serious about his veto threat and wanted to use what leverage he had to repeal the tech protection law. She noted: “The President has made clear the importance of 230”. The NDAA is a major bill as it governs everything from pay raises for service members to how many aircrafts, missiles and ships should be purchased. It also gives policy input on how best to compete with Russia and China.

The bill also expresses support for the continued presence of US forces in Germany and limits the ability of the US Department of Defence to reduce the number of active-duty service members there below 34,500 without an impact assessment. This defies the Pentagon’s announcement, in July 2020, that it would withdraw around 12,000 of 36,000 troops from Germany.

- On December 1, US Attorney General, William Barr, stated that the Justice Department has found no evidence of widespread voter fraud in the November 2020 Presidential Election.

Barr noted that prosecutors have not found evidence to back up President Donald Trump’s claims that the election had been marred by widespread fraud. Barr stated: “To date, we have not seen fraud on a scale that could have affected a different outcome in the election”. In response, the Trump campaign noted that the Justice Department did not investigate thoroughly enough. Trump’s claims regarding election fraud have been repeatedly rejected by State and Federal officials, and his campaign has had no significant success in court. Meanwhile, on December 1, 2020, Trump’s campaign asked the Wisconsin Supreme Court to consider throwing out 221,000 absentee ballots that allegedly lacked complete voter information. The Wisconsin suit was filed a day after Governor Tony Evers certified Biden’s victory in the state by more than 20,000 votes. Trump had requested a recount in the state’s two largest counties, which reconfirmed Biden’s win. Under state law, a candidate who loses a recount has five days to file a lawsuit to challenge the process.

---Muhammad Shoaib

ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

- On December 15, US President Donald Trump's Administration imposed sanctions on its NATO ally, Turkey, over its purchase of the surface-to-air S-400 system from Rosoboronexport, Russia's main arms exporter.

The US Department of State imposed sanctions on Turkey's military procurement agency, known as the Presidency of Defence Industries (SSB), pursuant to Section 231 of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), for knowingly engaging in a significant transaction with Rosoboronexport. The sanctions include a ban on all US export licenses to the SSB as well as an asset freeze on its President, Ismail Demir, its Vice President, and two employees. The penalties block any assets the four officials may have in US jurisdictions and bar their entry into the US. They also include a ban on most export licences, loans and credits to the agency. US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, stated: "The United States made clear to Turkey at the highest levels and on numerous occasions that its purchase of the S-400 system would endanger the security of US military technology and personnel and provide substantial funds to Russia's defence sector, as well as Russian access to the Turkish armed forces and defence industry".

In response, on December 14, 2020, the Turkish Defence Ministry rejected claims that the S-400 systems will jeopardise NATO air defence systems. The Ministry stated: "President Trump himself has admitted on many instances that Turkey's acquisition was justified". The Ministry also warned that Turkey "will retaliate in a manner and timing it deems appropriate" and urged "the US to reconsider this unfair decision". Meanwhile, Russia also criticised the US for imposing sanctions on Turkey. Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, deemed the sanctions another example of "illegitimate, unilateral coercive measures" by the US.

Earlier, in November 2020, the Turkish Defence Ministry noted that Turkey was ready to discuss compatibility issues between the S-400 systems and F-35 stealth fighter jets. The Ministry also called on the US to form a joint working group on the compatibility of the S-400 systems and F-35 jets. In October 2020, the Turkish Defence Ministry made it clear that Turkey will use S-400 systems as a stand-alone weapon, in the same manner as what Greece is doing with its Russian S-300 systems.

The US has repeatedly expressed concern over Turkey's acquisition of the S-400 systems. The US considers that the S-400 systems are not compatible with NATO air defence systems and pose a threat to the F-35 stealth fighter jets. 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 December 13, US President Donald Trump threatened to veto the US National Defence Authorisation Act (NDAA) 2021.

Both Houses of the US Congress have passed the \$740 billion NDAA with more than the two-thirds majority needed to override a presidential veto. A two-thirds vote is needed in each chamber for the bill to become law without President Trump's signature. On December 11, 2020, the Senate approved the NDAA, with a vote of 84 in favour and 13 against. Earlier, on December 8, 2020, the House of Representatives approved the NDAA with a vote of 335 in favour and 78 against, more than the requisite two-thirds majority. The bill affirms 3% pay raises for US troops and authorizes more than \$740 billion in military programmes and construction. However, Trump criticised the bill, and stated: "The biggest winner of our new defence bill is China! I will veto!" Trump threatened to veto the bill unless it repeals the provision that allows renaming of military bases such as Fort Benning and Fort Hood that honour Confederate leaders. He also threatened a veto to try to force lawmakers to include provisions to punish social media companies he claims were biased against him during the election.

- On December 12, Russia successfully test-fired four submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) in a show of readiness of its nuclear forces.

The Russian Defence Ministry noted that the Vladimir Monomakh submarine of the Pacific Fleet launched four Bulava missiles in quick succession from an underwater position in the Sea of Okhotsk. The Ministry stated: "Today the Pacific Fleet's strategic missile-carrying underwater cruiser Vladimir Monomakh made a salvo launch of four Bulava ballistic missiles as part of planned combat training measures". In its statement, the Ministry indicated that the SLBMs hit their designated targets on the Chiza shooting range in the Arkhangelsk region in Russia, located more than 5,500 kilometres away from the test site. The SLBM launches were part of the military drills for the strategic nuclear forces' command and control, which began in Russia on December 9, 2020. During the exercise, Russia test-launched various ballistic and cruise missiles from submarines and land-based launchers as well as from Tu-160 and Tu-95MS bombers of the Russian Aerospace Forces.

- On December 9, the US Senate rejected two measures to block President Donald Trump's plan to sell, roughly, \$23 billion in weapons to the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

According to media reports, votes to pass the measures failed mostly along party lines. The first vote concerned the drones and munitions and failed with a vote of 46 in favour and 50 against, while the second vote concerned the F-35 fighter air jets, the measure received 47 votes in favour and 49 against. Senate Republican leader, Mitch McConnell, noted that the resolutions

seeking to block the arms sale fell far short of the two-thirds support that is needed to overcome a Presidential veto. McConnell stated: “It’s a little baffling to suggest that, now of all times, a protest gesture with no chance of obtaining a veto-proof majority is a valuable use of the Senate’s time”. Earlier, US President Donald Trump had issued a formal threat to veto Congressional efforts to block the planned weapons transfer, which is tied to the UAE’s normalisation of ties with Israel under the “Abraham Accords”. US lawmakers opposed to the arms sale criticised the UAE for its involvement in the war in Yemen, a conflict considered one of the world’s worst humanitarian disasters.

On November 10, 2020, the US Department of State notified Congress of the approval of the UAE’s proposed purchase of several advanced capabilities worth \$23.37 billion. The proposed weapons sales include nearly 50 F-35 Lightning II aircrafts, valued at \$10.4 billion; 18 MQ-9B Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, valued at \$2.97 billion; and a package of air-to-air and air-to-ground munitions, valued at \$10 billion.

- On December 8, Britain’s Senior Defence Official indicated that if the US refused to fund a new nuclear W93 warhead, there would be “very significant implications” for the future of the UK’s Trident nuclear deterrent.

Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Defence, Sir Stephen Lovegrove, noted that the UK monitored discussions in the US over the development of new W93 warhead. Lovegrove asserted that Democrats in the US House of Representatives had refused to fund a \$53m development programme despite lobbying from both the White House and the UK. The Democrats postponed the programme for the fiscal year that began on October 1, 2020. He observed that the future of the programme depends on a resolution between the appropriations committees of the House and Senate. Regarding the implications of delay in the development of W93 warhead, Lovegrove stated: “There would no doubt be very significant implications were that to be the case”.

Earlier, in April 2020, the UK’s Defence Secretary, Ben Wallace, wrote a letter urging the US Congress to support initial spending on the warhead, the W93. Wallace stated: “Congressional funding in 2021 for the W93 programme will ensure that we continue to deepen the unique nuclear relationship between our two countries, enabling the United Kingdom to provide safe and assured continuous-at-sea deterrence for decades to come”.

- On December 8, French President Emmanuel Macron announced the development of a new nuclear-powered aircraft carrier to replace its Charles de Gaulle carrier by 2038.

Speaking at a nuclear facility in the Burgundy town of Le Creusot, Macron termed France’s nuclear weapons and atomic energy industry “the cornerstone” of France’s “strategic autonomy”. According to French officials, the 11th aircraft carrier in the French Navy’s history will be built by French defence contractor, Naval Group, and be equipped with the new electromagnetic aircraft launch system developed by the US company, General Atomics. The

officials noted that the new French aircraft carrier will weigh around 70,000 tons and be 300 meters long - roughly 1.5 times the size of the Charles de Gaulle. However, the officials did not provide further details on the cost of developing the new aircraft carrier.

- On December 7, France, Germany and Britain expressed their concerns over Iran's announcement of installation of advanced centrifuges at its underground nuclear facility.
- According to *Reuters*, on December 4, a confidential report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) note that Iran planned to install hundreds more advanced uranium-enriching centrifuges at an underground plant in defiance of its July 2015 Nuclear Agreement, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).
- On December 2, US President-Elect Joe Biden noted that the JCPOA was the best way to avoid a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.

In its confidential report, the IAEA noted that Iran planned to install three more cascades, or clusters, of advanced IR-2m centrifuges in the underground plant at its Natanz nuclear facility, in addition to the 5,060 IR-1 centrifuges that have been enriched for years in the plant. The IAEA report stated: "In a letter dated 2 December 2020, Iran informed the Agency that the operator of the Fuel Enrichment Plant (FEP) at Natanz 'intends to start installation of three cascades of IR-2m centrifuge machines' at FEP". Under the JCPOA, Iran can only use first-generation IR-1 centrifuges, which are less efficient than that of IR-2m centrifuges.

In response to Iran's announcement, France, Britain and Germany expressed their concerns. In their joint statement, issued on December 7, 2020, the three countries stated: "Iran's recent announcement to the IAEA that it intends to install an additional three cascades of advanced centrifuges at the Fuel Enrichment Plant in Natanz is contrary to the JCPOA and deeply worrying". They also noted that if Iran was serious about preserving diplomacy, it must not take these steps. The three countries urged Iran to cease its violations of the JCPOA. Iran's installation of new centrifuges is the latest breach of the JCPOA in a series of attempts to reduce compliance with the Agreement, in response to President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA and his re-imposition of economic sanctions in 2018. However, Iran has made it clear that the country can restart implementing the Agreement without any violations, if the US joins the JCPOA.

*In a related development, on December 2, 2020, US President-Elect Joe Biden noted that the JCPOA was the best way to avoid a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. In an interview to the *New York Times*, Biden emphasised that the US would rejoin the JCPOA, if Iran returned to "strict compliance". Biden observed that a return to the JCPOA, which would include lifting the sanctions imposed by the Administration of President Donald Trump, would serve as a "starting point to follow-on negotiations".*

- On December 3, Russia noted that there was still enough time to extend the Russian-US Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms, also known as the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).

Speaking at a video conference organised by the US' Brookings Institution, Russian Ambassador to the US, Anatoly Antonov, noted that the US and Russia had enough time to extend the New START. Regarding negotiations on the extension of the Treaty, Antonov stated: "If anybody can call me now from the State Department or White House, I am ready to come. I am ready to continue such negotiations". Earlier, on December 1, 2020, the Russian Defence Ministry asserted that NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, should urge the US to extend the New START to strengthen strategic stability and arms control. The Ministry stated: "There is no avoiding bewilderment that the NATO Secretary General speaks about the New START termination as something definite although the absolute majority of the Alliance's member nations, if their leaders' statements be trusted, support the idea of the treaty's extension".

The US and Russia signed the New START in 2010, and the Treaty entered into force on February 5, 2011. It was a successful effort to verifiably reduce US and Russian strategic nuclear arsenals. However, the Treaty is scheduled to expire in February 2021, unless extended for five years, or replaced by a new Treaty.

- On December 2, the Iranian Guardian Council approved the "Strategic Action to Lift Sanctions and Protect the Interests of the Iranian Nation" bill, aimed at suspending UN inspections of Iranian nuclear facilities.
- On December 1, the Iranian Parliament approved the "Strategic Action to Lift Sanctions and Protect the Interests of the Iranian Nation" bill.

In a show of defiance against its July 2015 Nuclear Agreement, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Abbas Ali Kadkhodaie, Spokesman of the Guardian Council, stated: "The Guardian Council in this evening's meeting did not consider this plan against the Constitution and approved it". Earlier, on December 1, 2020, the Iranian Parliament approved the bill. Nearly 251 out of 260 lawmakers voted 'yes' on the outline of the draft bill. The bill would require the Iranian Government to suspend inspection of Iran's nuclear programme by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), if Britain, France, Germany, China and Russia did not re-establish Iran's access to world banking and oil markets within a month. The bill also asks the Government to resume enriching uranium to 20%, which is not permitted under the JCPOA. The bill also commissions new centrifuges at nuclear facilities at Natanz and the underground Fordo site.

The bill was first tabled in the Iranian Parliament in August 2020, in response to continued imposition of sanctions by the US. The US unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018, and

began re-imposing sanctions on Iran. In response, Iran reduced its compliance with the provisions of the JCPOA.

- On December 1, India successfully test-fired its anti-ship version of the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile.

The Indian Navy conducted the test as part of a series of planned trials of the weapon. India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) noted that the missile successfully eliminated its sea-based target in the Car Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal. The missile was developed by the DRDO and it has a range of more than 290 kilometres.

Earlier, on November 24, 2020, India successfully test-fired its surface-to-surface supersonic cruise missile, BrahMos. In its statements, the Indian Army disclosed: "The land attack version of BrahMos with capability of cruising at 2.8 Mach speed is the cutting edge of the Indian Army since 2007. The present Block III version of the missile has successfully executed four operational launches in the past. With the upgraded capability, the missile can hit targets at a range of up to 400 kilometres with precision".

- On December 1, the US and Australia announced a joint project, officially known as the Southern Cross Integrated Flight Research Experiment (SCIFiRE), to develop air-launched hypersonic cruise missiles.

The Australian Defence Ministry noted that Australia will invest in "advanced capabilities" to provide its military with "more options to deter aggression" against its interests. While terming the bilateral project with the US a "game-changing capability", Linda Reynolds, the Australian Defence Minister, observed: "Investing in capabilities that deter actions against Australia also benefits our region, our allies and our security partners". Regarding the project SCIFiRE, the US' Acting Under Secretary of Defence, Michael Kratsios, indicated that the project is based on 15 years of collaboration between the US and Australian militaries. The US calls the project the Allied Prototyping Initiative, which is managed by the Directorate of Advanced Capabilities within the Office of the Under Secretary of Defence for Research and Engineering. The US Air Force will execute the programme.

Kratsios stated: "This initiative will be essential to the future of hypersonic research and development, ensuring the US and our allies lead the world in the advancement of this transformational war-fighting capability". According to media reports, the new weapon will be capable of travelling with a speed beyond Mach 5, five times the speed of sound.

--- Moiz Khan

CHINA, EAST ASIA & PACIFIC

China

- On December 14, Chinese State Councilor and Defence Minister, Wei Fenghe, conducted a video conference with Japan's Defence Minister, Nobuo Kishi, and reiterated China's stance on the Diaoyu Islands.

According to China's Defence Ministry, Wei stated that on the issue of the East China Sea and the Diaoyu Islands, China is firmly determined to safeguard its territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests. He added that Both sides should focus on the overall and long-term situation, strengthen consultations and properly handle differences to truly make the East China Sea a sea of peace, cooperation and friendship. Wei emphasized that the two sides should maintain exchanges between high-level officials and conduct pragmatic cooperation. The two sides also vowed to accelerate the establishment of a maritime and air liaison mechanism. Kishi stated during the conference that Japan is willing to maintain communication with China, enhance exchanges over defence affairs and promote the construction of the air-sea liaison hotline to sustain regional peace and stability. China and Japan initiated the maritime and air liaison mechanism in June 2018, to manage a potential crisis in case of conflict between the two states. Although China-US relations face new challenges this year, it is noticeable that Japanese officials, at different levels, emphasise the importance of Japan's relationship with China.

- On December 12, Chinese President, Xi Jinping, virtually addressed the 2020 Climate Ambition Summit and unveiled his country's goals to fight climate change.

Xi pledged that China will greatly reduce carbon dioxide emissions and increase the share of non-fossil fuels and forest stock in the next decade. He stated that China has made important contributions to the adoption of the Paris Agreement on climate change, and has made active efforts in implementing it, and that the country aims to peak carbon emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060. Xi announced further commitments for 2030, including lowering carbon dioxide emissions per unit of GDP by over 65 percent from the 2005 level; increasing the share of non-fossil fuels in primary energy consumption to around 25 percent; increasing the forest stock volume by 6 billion cubic meters from the 2005 level; and bringing its total installed capacity of wind and solar power to over 1.2 billion kilowatts.

- On December 10, China imposed reciprocal sanctions against US officials in response to the latest US sanctions on 14 Chinese deputy state-level officials.

On December 8, 2020, the US imposed sanctions, over Hong Kong affairs, on 14 deputy state-level officials from China's top legislature, including Wang Chen, a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee. Hua Chunying,

spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry stated: “Given the US used the Hong Kong issue to severely interfere in China’s internal affairs, China has decided to impose reciprocal sanctions on US officials from its executive branch, Congress and personnel at NGOs who act egregiously and bear major responsibilities on Hong Kong-related issues as well as their family members”. She added that US officials holding diplomatic passports would be deprived of the visa exemption treatment for visiting Hong Kong and Macao. Officials of the US executive branch are, for the first time, included in China’s sanctions list. China’s response is believed to be the harshest reciprocal retaliation against Washington’s actions thus far.

- On December 9, the Chinese Foreign Ministry slammed the US Government over its accusations that China is wiping out languages, cultures and religions of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.

In an online video posted on the US Department of State’s official website and Twitter account, China was portrayed as a place that punishes Uygur students and other Muslim minorities who speak their mother tongues. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, stated that Xinjiang protects the right of all ethnic groups to use and develop their own spoken and written languages, in accordance with law. He added that the spoken and written languages of Xinjiang’s ethnic minorities are widely used in education, justice, administration, social and public affairs, and that authorities at all levels in Xinjiang use both the spoken and written languages of the state and of ethnic groups in performing their official duties. Zhao also contended that people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang live in peace and contentment, enjoying unprecedented convenience in their life, work and study. He further emphasised: “Some US politicians and officials always accuse China of not respecting minority languages. I suggest that they look at China’s paper currency, which is printed in five languages, namely Chinese, Tibetan, Uygur, Mongolian and Zhuang”. China has been accused by western countries of suppressing the freedom of Uygur Muslims. Beijing, however, denies any such allegations.

- On December 7, the Chinese Defence Ministry announced that China and Pakistan will hold the joint air force training dubbed “Xiongying (Eagle)-IX”, which will last until the end of December 2020.

According to the statement, the joint training is part of the China-Pakistan Military Cooperation Plan for the year 2020. It further noted that the joint exercise will play a positive role in promoting the development of military relations, deepening practical cooperation between the air forces of the two countries and improving the actual combat training level of both country’s forces. The statement did not reveal the number or type of the aircrafts, or the list of the training programs. The first “Xiongying” joint training was held in March 2011 in Pakistan. The last joint exercise was held in Northwest China in August 2019 and lasted for half a month. The training in 2019 involved some 50 aircrafts.

- On December 7, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, stated that China's door for dialogue with the US is open, and that the two countries can work together to formulate three lists on dialogue, communication and dispute management, which will provide a clear roadmap for maintaining and developing bilateral ties.

While virtually addressing the US-China Business Council, Wang noted that China and the US should launch dialogues at all levels. He added that the fundamental reason why the China-US relationship has faced its most severe situation since the establishment of diplomatic ties is that some people in the US adhere to an outdated Cold War mentality and view China-US relations from a zero-sum game perspective. Wang made five suggestions to improve China-US ties, including correcting the strategic recognition of the bilateral relationship; enhancing dialogue and communication; expanding mutual benefits and cooperation; managing divergences while avoiding ideological confrontation; and improving public opinion. He hoped that the US' China-related policy will sooner or later return to objectivity and rationality. Wang concluded that China and the US should support and encourage one another's legislative bodies, localities, business communities, think tanks, media, and youth to strengthen friendly exchanges, deepen mutual understanding, and lay a solid foundation of public opinion for bilateral relations.

- On December 3, the Chinese Foreign Ministry noted, in a statement, that it is China's legitimate right to develop hydropower projects on Yarlung Zangbo River.

Hua Chunying, spokesperson for China's Foreign Ministry noted that China will stay in touch with India and Bangladesh through existing channels and that over the years, China has conducted sound cooperation with India and Bangladesh in flood reporting, flood control, disaster reduction, emergency response and other areas. Hua added that China has always maintained a responsible attitude towards the development and utilisation of cross-border rivers and has implemented a policy of combining development and protection. She further stressed that the project will be scientifically planned and demonstrated, with full consideration for the impact on the lower riparian states. On December 2, 2020, the Chinese Embassy in India released an official announcement regarding Beijing's intentions to initiate the hydropower project, in response to New Delhi's concerns, as the river passes through Southwest China, India and Bangladesh.

- On December 2, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and his Russian counterpart Mikhail Mishustin co-chaired the 25th regular meeting between the Heads of Governments of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, via video link.

Li expressed China's willingness to share development opportunities, expand two-way opening-up, and enhance mutually beneficial cooperation. He added that China is willing to work with Russia in drawing on past achievements and experiences of cooperation to inject new impetus into the sustained and sound development of the China-Russia comprehensive strategic

partnership for a new era. Li emphasised that the two countries must continue to make joint efforts in upholding the international order with the United Nations by championing multilateralism and free trade. He also maintained that China is increasingly ready to align the Belt and Road Initiative with Russia's development strategies and strive for breakthroughs in trade, energy, agriculture, and other areas of cooperation.

Mishustin commended Russia-China relations amid COVID-19 and stated that Russia is willing to work with China to fight the pandemic and enhance cooperation in the research and development of vaccines and medicines. He added that work will be done to get two-way trade and investment back on track towards growth as soon as possible. Both leaders also outlined a joint communique and several bilateral cooperation documents.

Over the years, Beijing and Moscow have increased political, economic and strategic cooperation. Both states have expressed their opposition to the US' unilateral initiatives, including the renaming of Asia Pacific to Indo Pacific and the formation of a US-led four-nation strategic alliance, namely the Quad.

- On December 2, a Chinese probe (Chang'e-5) landed successfully on the surface of the Moon, where it had been sent to bring back lunar samples.

According to the Chinese Space Agency, the mission's aim is to collect and transport lunar rocks and soil to help scientists learn about the Moon's origins, formation and volcanic activity on its surface. If the mission is completed, China will be the third country to have retrieved samples from the Moon, following the United States and the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s.

- On December 1, Chinese State Councilor and Defence Minister, Wei Fenghe, visited Pakistan and met with the country's top officials.

According to the Chinese Defence Ministry, Wei met with Pakistani President Arif Alvi and Prime Minister Imran Khan in Islamabad and discussed a wide range of topics, including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and defence cooperation. During his meeting with PM Khan, Wei hailed the uniqueness of their bilateral "all-weather" strategic partnership and called for deepened cooperation and mutual support on issues of key interest between China and Pakistan.

Wei stated: "China is willing to increase mutual trust and coordination to lift the relationship of the two militaries, face risks and challenges together, and safeguard regional peace and stability together". PM Khan noted that the visit amid the pandemic reflects the Chinese government and military support to Pakistan. Wei also held a meeting with Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa. During their meeting, the two leaders discussed matters of mutual interest, affairs of regional security and enhancement in defence cooperation. They also signed a

new Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for military cooperation.

Before arriving in Pakistan, Wei undertook a day-long trip to Nepal. Observers believe that the visits to key neighbours are of practical meaning to safeguard regional security. According to some experts, India, which has territorial disputes with Pakistan and Nepal, views the move as a confrontation against New Delhi, particularly considering the military standoff between China and India due to border disputes.

Vietnam

- Vietnam's Ministry of Defence reported, on December 9, that the 14th meeting of Defence Ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was held via video link, and that a joint declaration was issued on strengthening defence cooperation within the regional bloc.

According to the joint declaration, the defence ministers have agreed to intensify efforts to enhance ASEAN's cohesion and responsiveness through strengthening defense cooperation within the group, as well as with other partners to tackle traditional and non-traditional security challenges. They also adopted a three-year work program for the period from 2020 to 2022, which outlines the future direction for cooperation. In addition, the ASEAN Defence Ministers meeting emphasised the importance of support for cross-pillar and cross-sectoral activities with a view to advance cooperation amongst the three pillars of the ASEAN Community by focusing on creating a conducive security environment for sustainability in all dimensions. Founded in 1967, the ASEAN comprises Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Vietnam currently holds the rotating annual ASEAN presidency.

---Kashif Hussain

EUROPE

- On December 15, Russian President, Vladimir Putin, congratulated Joe Biden on winning the US Presidential Election, after waiting for weeks to verify Biden's victory.

While wishing success to US President-Elect Joe Biden, Vladimir Putin, expressed confidence that Russia and the US can facilitate resolution of many problems and challenges faced by the world now, despite disagreements. In his message to Biden, Putin stated: "For my part, I am ready to cooperate and maintain contact with you". The Kremlin had emphasised earlier, in November 2020, that the Russian President would wait on congratulating Biden until the winner was officially confirmed. While referring to numerous Republican challenges to the vote count, Putin stated: "We are just waiting for the end of the internal political confrontation".

On December 14, 2020, the US Electoral College confirmed Biden's election victory. The Democrat received 306 votes, while incumbent President Donald Trump secured 232 votes. The Electoral College votes will now be sent to Congress to be counted formally next month. In November 2020, Trump, who rejected his election defeat, stated that he would leave the White House if the Electoral College votes for Biden.

- On December 10, the Russian Navy indicated that it will join a military exercise in 2021 that will become its first joint drill with NATO countries in 10 years.

In its statement, Russia's Southern Military District noted that the country's Navy would participate in the Aman-2021 exercise that is due to take place in February, off the coast of Pakistan. A total of 30 countries will take part in the drills, with 10 countries engaging their fleets in exercise while the remaining countries send their observers. The drills will also involve the NATO member fleets of the UK, the US and Turkey. The Russian Navy previously joined such an exercise with the ships of several NATO members during the 2011 Bold Monarch exercise, off the coast of Spain.

- On December 10, a nuclear reactor at Olkiluoto Nuclear Power Plant in Finland automatically shut down after radiation was detected inside the plant's systems.

Finland's Minister of Social Affairs and Health, Aino-Kaisa Pekonen, stated: "This is a significant and an exceptional incident and we consider it important to spread correct information about it". Tomi Routamo, Deputy Director at the Finnish Radiation and Nuclear Safety Authority (STUK), noted that the incident was a serious event in the facility's history. However, he clarified that readiness protocols had been launched, and that the radiation posed no danger to the public and the environment. Routamo stated that automatic systems detected raised levels of radioactivity in the steam pipes of the reactor's cooling system, however, the cause of the radiation was not yet known and investigations were in progress. According to

STUK, no radiation from the plant entered the environment. Olkiluoto Nuclear Power Plant is located on Olkiluoto Island, around 220 km northwest of Helsinki.

- On December 9, the French Government unveiled draft legislation to further enhance France's measures to effectively deal with radical Islamism.

The French Government noted that the draft legislation is a “law of freedom” necessary for peaceful coexistence, and is aimed at combating extremist ideology. The new draft bill is a project promoted by President Emmanuel Macron to tackle what he earlier termed “the culture of radical separatists”, undermining the nation. Following the approval of the draft legislation by the Cabinet, French Prime Minister, Jean Castex, stated: “This bill is not a text aimed against religions or against the Muslim religion in particular”. Castex added: “It is the reverse — it is a law of freedom, it is a law of protection, it is a law of emancipation against religious fundamentalism”. He observed that the ideology of radical Islamism was an adversary to France, and that this ideology aimed at dividing French people from one another.

The French authorities had earlier deemed the bill an “anti-separatism” law. However, they have now changed its name to “Support Republican Principles”. However, the words “Islamic” or “Islamist” are not found in the text of the bill, in an effort to avoid stigmatising Muslims. The bill will be presented to the lower house of the French Parliament, in January 2021. It also deals with home schools, mosques or associations that promulgate an ideology that runs counter to French values. Among several measures, the bill seeks to make school obligatory from age 3, allowing the option of home schooling in special cases only, and encouraging mosques to register as places of worship, so as to better identify them.

- On December 8, Russia signed an agreement with Sudan to establish a naval base in the country for at least 25 years.

The agreement allows Russia to simultaneously keep up to four of its naval ships, including the nuclear-powered vessels, in Port Sudan on the Red Sea. The Russian naval base will act as a “logistical support centre” where “repairs and resupply operations” can take place. Moreover, Russia also has the right to transport “weapons, ammunition and equipment” via Sudan's ports and airports that are required for the base to function. In exchange for Sudan's permission to set up the base, Russia will provide Sudan with weapons and military equipment. Both Russia and Sudan could also extend the agreement for 10-year periods. The agreement emphasised that the purpose behind the establishment of the Russian base is to maintain peace and stability in the region, and that the base is not directed against any third country.

- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a package of bills into law. One of the bills aims at establishing precedence of the Russian Constitution over international agreements and decisions of international bodies.

According to Andrey Klishas, Chairman of the Russian Federation Council Committee on Constitutional Legislation and State Building, the new law introduced amendments in several Russian codes and 115 Russian laws. Klishas indicated that the Russian legislation would now outlaw implementation of decisions taken by international organisations based on international treaties that run counter to the Russian Constitution. He explained: “In cases when provisions of international law acquire new meanings that differ from those at the moment of ratification as a result of various interpretations, and these interpretations contradict the Russian Constitution, these decisions will be implemented in the Russian legal system in accordance with the Russian legislation”.

- On December 8, the UK began its vaccination programme against COVID-19.
- On December 5, Russia began vaccination of people at high risk of becoming infected with COVID-19 at newly opened clinics across the Moscow.
- On December 2, the UK approved the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for use against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Russia distributed the Sputnik-V vaccine in nearly 70 clinics, marking Russia’s first mass vaccination against the disease. Moscow Mayor, Sergei Sobyenin, indicated that the Russian authorities were introducing the vaccine first in Moscow to people who work in schools, health service providers, and social workers. Moscow is the centre of the pandemic in Russia, recording thousands of cases and dozens of deaths daily. An online registration service allows city residents aged 18-60 years to book free appointments for vaccination against COVID-19 at 70 sites around the city. Sobyenin stated: “Over the first five hours, 5,000 people signed up for the jab – teachers, doctors, social workers, those who are today risking their health and lives the most”. The Sputnik-V vaccine is administered in two injections, with the second dose given 21 days after the first.

Earlier, on August 11, 2020, Russian President, Vladimir Putin, announced the approval of a COVID-19 vaccine for use, claiming it to be the world’s first vaccine developed to treat people suffering from the disease. Gamaleya National Research Centre for Epidemiology and Microbiology of the Russian Health Ministry developed the Sputnik-V vaccine. Russian authorities named the vaccine “Sputnik-V”, after the world’s first satellite launched by the Soviet Union in 1957. In addition to Sputnik V, another COVID-19 vaccine that Russia is developing is called EpiVacCorona, being developed by the Vektor state virology research centre in Siberia.

In a related development, on December 8, 2020, the UK started its vaccination programme against COVID-19. According to media reports, thousands of people in the UK received the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine, following its approval in the UK on December 2, 2020. The UK

became a first Western country to approve the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for use. The Government noted that it accepted the recommendation from the independent Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) to approve Pfizer-BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine for use. UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, emphasised that the vaccination programme will allow people to reclaim their lives and keep economic activities unaffected. According to the British authorities, the Government is planning to administer vaccination against COVID-19, after it received nearly 800,000 doses from Pfizer's manufacturing centre in Belgium. Nearly four million people are expected to be vaccinated by the end of December 2020.

- On December 2, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, noted that NATO must broaden its scope to deal with climate change, future pandemics and "terrorism" while focusing on new security challenges from Russia and China.

A two-day meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs concluded on December 2, 2020. During the meeting, NATO Foreign Ministers discussed key strategic issues, including adaptation of NATO; Russia's military build-up; the rise of China; and Afghanistan. The Ministers discussed the shift in the global balance of power and the rise of China. Jens Stoltenberg noted that China was not an adversary to NATO. However, the country does not share the Alliance's values. He alleged that China continued to undermine human rights and "bullied other countries". He stated: "The challenge posed to our security by the rise of China is also a major reason why NATO must take a more global approach".

The NATO Foreign Ministers also discussed Russia's continued military build-up. They noted that Russia continued its military build-up in Crimea, and increasingly deployed its forces in the Black Sea region. The Minister emphasized that NATO would respond to Russia by strengthening its own military capabilities.

The Ministers also discussed the NATO 2030 Initiative and the continued adaptation of NATO, including a report by an expert group appointed by the Secretary General. An independent group, co-chaired by Dr. Thomas de Maizière and Dr. Wess Mitchell, completed, on November 25, 2020, a report to NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, on how to make NATO an even stronger Alliance. The group's report is one of a number of inputs into the Secretary General's NATO 2030 Initiative. On December 3, 2020, the NATO Secretary-General publically launched the NATO 2030 Expert Group's Report.

Belarus Crisis

- On December 6, nearly thousands of protesters gathered in Minsk as part of a weekly demonstration campaign, and demanded the resignation of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko.

According to media reports, the protestors marched in remote residential areas of Minsk, chanting “long live Belarus”, and waving white flags with a red stripe in the middle, a symbol of the opposition. However, President Lukashenko noted that the protests were sponsored by Western powers against his Government. He showed no signs of willingness to start a dialogue with the opposition.

Earlier, on November 13, 2020, Lukashenko made it clear that he will not hand over power in Belarus to anyone amid ongoing mass protests demanding his resignation. He also condemned his political opponents and those demonstrating against his re-election as President. He emphasised that Belarus should integrate with Russia and Moscow-led organisations to avoid what he called “Colour Revolutions”. He stated: “Any Colour Revolution makes any nation weaker and the people poorer. Nowhere after such mutinies have people started living better. The best remedy for this evil is also well-known, and that is the widening and deepening of our ties, of what is today called integration”. The Colour Revolution refers to the symbolically named series of pro-Western political uprisings in former Soviet Union countries.

On September 23, 2020, Belarus’ President, Alexander Lukashenko, assumed his sixth term in office during an inauguration ceremony. Lukashenko claimed his victory in the country’s August 9, 2020 Presidential Election. Following the announcement of election results on August 10, 2020, large-scale protests broke out in Minsk and other cities, expressing dissatisfaction over polling management and results. The Election Commission of Belarus announced, on August 10, 2020, that Lukashenko received 80.23% of the votes, while his main opposition challenger, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, received only 9.9% of votes. However, on August 10, 2020, Tsikhanouskaya rejected the results of the election. She emphasized that she considered herself the winner, not Lukashenko, and described the election as massively rigged.

Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict

- On December 12, Armenia and Azerbaijan accused one another of breaching the Ceasefire Agreement.

Officials in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region noted that the Azerbaijani military launched an attack on December 11, 2020. The officials indicated that three local ethnic Armenian soldiers wounded in the incident. Armenia’s Defence Ministry also noted that Azerbaijani forces attacked positions held by ethnic Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh in the southern Hadrut

district on December 12, 2020. However, the Armenian authorities did not provide further details.

In response, Azerbaijan's Defence Ministry issued a statement, on December 11, 2020, accusing the Armenian military of staging a "provocation" and insisted that the Ceasefire Agreement was in force. On December 11, 2020, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev asserted that the incident was a "terrorist attack" committed by "either Armenian gunmen or what is left of the Armenian Army" in Nagorno-Karabakh. On December 13, 2020, the Azerbaijani Defence Ministry claimed that Armenian forces killed 4 of Azerbaijan's soldiers.

Meanwhile, on December 12, 2020, Russian peacekeepers, deployed to the region to monitor the implementation of the Ceasefire Agreement, acknowledged violations in the Hadrut district on December 11 and 12, 2020. However, the Russian Defence Ministry did not assign blame.

- On December 10, Azerbaijan held a military parade to celebrate victory over Armenia in a recent six-week war between the two countries over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. The war ended with a Moscow-brokered Ceasefire Agreement that handed back several parts of the region to Baku.

Azerbaijani President, Ilham Aliyev, and Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, attended the parade. The parade is officially described in Azerbaijan as the Victory in the Patriotic War. More than 3,000 troops took part in the military parade. The parade also featured a Turkish commando brigade and Turkish drones. A flyover of helicopters and fighter planes marked the conclusion of the event. Azerbaijani Navy vessels also performed manoeuvres in the nearby Bay of Baku. While appreciating Turkish support in the war, Aliyev stated: "This is an example of our unity, our brotherhood". He asserted that Azerbaijan was able to "restore historical justice" and blamed Armenia for starting the fighting.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reached Azerbaijan on December 9, 2020 for his two-day visit to the country. In his speech, Erdogan reiterated Turkey's continued support to Azerbaijan, stating that "as long as Turkey and Azerbaijan work hand in glove, they will continue to overcome all difficulties and run from one success to the next". Erdogan noted that Azerbaijan's struggle with Armenia was not over, and hoped that Armenia would "take lessons" from its defeat. During the visit, Erdogan and Aliyev also discussed bilateral issues.

- On December 5, protests intensified in Armenia as thousands of protesters gathered in Yerevan demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian over a Ceasefire Agreement concluded with Azerbaijan to bring to an end to the conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

According to media reports, some 20,000 protesters marched to the Prime Minister's official residence in Yerevan, and chanted "Nikol the traitor" and "Armenia without Nikol". While

expressing concern over Pashinian's poor handling of the conflict, the protesters issued an ultimatum that there will be countrywide civil disobedience if the Prime Minister did not step down by December 8, 2020.

Earlier, on December 3, 2020, nearly 17 opposition parties in Armenia nominated Vazgen Manukian, a former Prime Minister and Defence Minister during the early 1990s, to head a "transitional, anti-crisis government" until early parliamentary elections are held. In their statement, the 17 opposition parties announced that they had set up a "pan-Armenian, nonpartisan" movement that would include "representatives of political parties, the intelligentsia, and the general public". Manukian called on the Prime Minister to leave in a "civilized manner", and noted that the new government would abide by the Russian-brokered agreement, because it could not afford a war with Azerbaijan and its ally, Turkey.

Political tensions in Armenia intensified in wake of the Moscow-brokered Ceasefire Agreement signed on November 10, 2020, between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia to end the 44-day war. Armenian opposition parties have been critical of Pashinian for agreeing to the Ceasefire.

- *On December 3, Azerbaijan disclosed, for the first time, that it lost nearly 2,800 soldiers in the 44-day war with Armenian forces over the separatist territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.*

Azerbaijan's Defence Ministry noted that at least 2,783 troops were killed and more than 100 were still missing. The Ministry noted that nearly 1,245 soldiers were admitted in hospitals for medical treatment; and that 94 Azeri civilians were killed, with more than 400 wounded during shelling. Armenia has not yet disclosed the death toll for its military. However, authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh confirmed, on November 14, 2020, that Armenia lost 2,317 soldiers.

- *On December 1, Azerbaijan completed reclamation of territory earlier held by Armenian forces for more than a quarter-century after a Ceasefire Agreement ended the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh.*

While hailing the restoration of control over areas as a "historic victory", Azerbaijani President, Ilham Aliyev, stated: "We won a victory on the battlefield and in the political arena, and that victory opens a new era for our country. It will be an era of development, security and progress". On December 1, 2020, Azerbaijani forces entered the Lachin district, the last of three districts handed back by Armenia as part of the Ceasefire Agreement. The Azerbaijani Defence Ministry also released a video showing a tank flying the Azerbaijani flag and leading a column of trucks along a road at night. The Lachin district lies between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. On November 20 and 25, Azerbaijan took control of the Kalbajar and Agdam districts.

Earlier, on November 9, Armenian Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinian, Russian President, Vladimir Putin, and Azerbaijani President, Ilham Aliyev, signed a new Ceasefire Agreement to

bring to an end hostilities in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The three countries signed the Ceasefire Agreement as Azerbaijani forces made major battlefield gains since the conflict began on September 26, 2020. Under the Agreement, Azerbaijan will hold control over the territory in Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding areas captured during the conflict. Armenia agreed to hand over three districts surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, including Agdam, Kalbajar and Lachin, after nearly three decades of exercising control over the same.

--- Moiz Khan

GLOBAL TERRORISM

- On December 13, at least 25 people were injured in an explosion in Rawalpindi city.

The explosion occurred near the Ganj Mandi Police Station. According to Dawn, initial reports suggested that the explosion was caused by a hand grenade attack. However, a Police Officer stated that it was too soon to ascertain the nature of the blast. This is the second attack near a police station in Rawalpindi in the last 10 days.

- Afghanistan Times reported, on December 11, that two journalists were killed in different cities of Afghanistan during the last week.

Following the assassination of Malalai Maiwand, a female TV anchor in Jalalabad, another TV news anchor, Fardin Amini, was mysteriously killed in Kabul. Responsibility for the December 10, 2020 killing of Malalai was claimed by the notorious terrorist group, Daesh. In the last 20 years, the vast majority of journalists have been killed by extremist groups in Afghanistan.

- On December 4, one person was killed and seven other people were injured in an explosion in Rawalpindi's Pir Wadhai bus station.

According to police officials, the attack was carried out using an improvised explosive device with ball bearings and containing one kilogramme of explosive material. A police officer stated that the possibility of terrorism could not be ruled out and the case has been handed over to the Counter-Terrorism department (CTD). In June 2020, one person was killed while 12 others were injured in an explosion in a busy market of Rawalpindi.

---Kashif Hussain

MIDDLE EAST & WEST ASIA

Bahrain

- On December 6, the 16th edition of the three-day Manama Dialogue concluded in Bahrain. The Dialogue was organised by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).

Ministers, top officials, experts and policy makers from the Middle East, Asia, Europe, North America and some other regions gathered in Manama to discuss the most pressing security challenges in the Middle East. The 2020 session of the Dialogue was conducted in a hybrid format - in addition to delegates attending in person, many participants attended the event virtually. The agenda of the Dialogue included plenary sessions on global governance during the COVID-19 pandemic; Middle East security in a global context; conflict resolution in the Middle East; diplomacy, proliferation and regional security; defence diplomacy and modernisation in the Middle East; and new security partnerships in the Middle East.

During the Dialogue, a Saudi former intelligence chief, Prince Turki al-Faisal, harshly criticised Israel drawing a similar response from the Israeli Foreign Minister, Gabi Ashkenazi. While reiterating strong support for the Palestinian cause, Prince al-Faisal accused Israel of depicting itself as a “small, existentially threatened country, surrounded by bloodthirsty killers who want to eradicate her from existence”. The Prince added: “And yet they profess that they want to be friends with Saudi Arabia”. He described Israel as a “Western colonising power” and outlined a history of forcible eviction of Palestinians and destroyed villages. According to Prince al-Faisal, Palestinians were held “in concentration camps under the flimsiest of security accusations, young and old, women and men, who are rotting there without recourse to justice”. He added that the Israeli authorities are “demolishing homes as they wish, and they assassinate whomever they want”. The Prince also criticised Israel’s undeclared arsenal of nuclear weapons and the practice of Israeli Governments in “unleashing their political minions and their media outlets from other countries to denigrate and demonise Saudi Arabia”.

In response, the Israeli Foreign Minister, Gabi Ashkenazi, stated: “I would like to express my regret on the comments of the Saudi representative. I don’t believe that they reflect the spirit and the changes taking place in the Middle East”. Ashkenazi reiterated Israel’s position that the Palestinians were to be blamed for not reaching a peace deal. He noted: “We have a choice here with the Palestinians whether to solve it or not, or to go to this blame game”.

Meanwhile, during another session of the Dialogue, Germany’s Secretary of State, Miguel Berger, noted that the Iranian nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), would not be enough to address the challenges posed by Tehran. He added: “We have to wait for the ideas of the new US Administration”. Berger maintained that Iran’s ballistic

missiles and its role in the region can only be addressed with “firm reaction such as sanctions, but with a regional security structure”. Bahrain’s Foreign Minister, Abdullatif Al Zayani, emphasised that officials from the region must be consulted on changes to the nuclear pact. He stated: “The JCPOA amendments should address areas of concern to the region including Iran’s missiles programme, interference in domestic affairs, and support for militias”. Meanwhile, Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, emphasised that Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states must play a key role in any talks between the US and Iran to revive the deal to curb Tehran’s nuclear programme. He stated: “Primarily what we expect is that we are fully consulted, that we and our regional friends are fully consulted vis-a-vis the negotiations with Iran. The only way toward reaching an agreement that is sustainable is through such consultation. I think we’ve seen as a result of the after-effects of the JCPOA that not involving regional countries results in a build-up of mistrust and neglect of the issues of real concern and of real effect on regional security.”

The Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Nayef Falah Mubarak Al-Hajraf, stated that any nuclear agreement with Iran must take into consideration the interests of regional countries. According to Al-Hajraf, the GCC called on Iran to fulfil its International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) commitments and to fully cooperate with the organisation’s inspectors. He also stated: “Iran is still using the methods of hostility, violence and creating instability in the region as an approach for it to achieve its political goals”.

Iran

- On December 8, during his meeting with the visiting Syrian Foreign Minister, Faisal Mekdad, in Tehran, Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, praised relations between Iran and Syria as strategic and fraternal. He stressed that both countries share the common goal of countering the Israeli occupation and terrorism.

Rouhani stated that Iran will resolutely and decisively stand by the Syrian people and Government as a strategic ally until their final victory. He pointed to the fight against Israeli occupiers and terrorism as the common goal of Iran and Syria. Rouhani stated: “There is no doubt that we must continue our resistance to the end and finalise destruction of terrorists”. He also condemned US President, Donald Trump, over his recognition of Israel’s annexation of the Golan Heights, which it captured from Syria in 1967 and has occupied ever since. The President called for a fight against the Israeli occupation until all occupied territories are fully liberated.

Rouhani emphasised that Tehran offers unwavering political support to Damascus and seriously follows peace negotiations for Syria within the Astana format as it considers the process useful and capable of preserving Syria’s interests and territorial integrity. He also appreciated the Syrian Government’s efforts for a constitutional reform, hoping that next year’s presidential election would represent wide-ranging views.

The Iranian President denounced US sanctions on Iran and Syria and stated: “We fully understand the situation of Syrian people in the face of sanctions as we have been enduring the worst sanctions over the past three years”. He also condemned the assassinations of Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani, the Commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), and senior Iranian nuclear physicist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. Rouhani stated that General Soleimani was martyred by terrorists as part of their scheme to take revenge on the resistance front, while Fakhrizadeh was assassinated as revenge for Iran’s continued progress on the path of research and science.

Meanwhile, Mekdad praised Tehran-Damascus political relations as very close and condemned the targeted killings of General Soleimani and Fakhrizadeh. He criticised the US Administration’s violations of international agreements, terming Iran’s conclusion of a nuclear deal with world powers as useful. He deemed “constructive” the steps taken by Tehran to oblige other signatories to fulfil their commitments under the deal.

- On December 7, Iran dismissed a call by Saudi Arabia for Gulf States to be consulted on any potential negotiations with Tehran on its nuclear programme.

Earlier, on December 5, 2020, Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, had sought that the Kingdom be “fully consulted” on “what goes on vis-a-vis the negotiations with Iran”. Iran’s Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Saeed Khatibzadeh, rejected the call and stated: “Everyone is free to talk, but it’s better that they do not talk above their level so that they don’t embarrass themselves”. He further added: “Dwelling too much about the place of a mediocre country in the region does not help”. Khatibzadeh also accused Riyadh of funding extremist ideology and being responsible for many of the “troubles” of the Arab and Muslim world, stating that the Saudi people “deserve better”.

- On December 6, the Deputy Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, Rear Admiral Ali Fadavi, stated that a satellite-controlled machine gun with “artificial intelligence” was used in the assassination of top nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, in Iran.

According to Fadavi, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh was driving on a highway outside Tehran with a security detail on November 27, 2020, when the machine gun “zoomed in” on his face and fired 13 rounds. He added that the machine gun was mounted on a Nissan pickup and “focused only on martyr Fakhrizadeh’s face in a way that his wife, despite being only 25 centimetres away, was not shot”. Fadavi noted that the gun was being “controlled online” via a satellite and that it used an “advanced camera and artificial intelligence” to identify and eliminate the target. Fadavi added that Fakhrizadeh’s Head of Security took four bullets “as he threw himself” on the scientist and that there were “no terrorists at the scene”. Iranian authorities have blamed Israel and the exiled opposition group, the People’s Mujahedeen of Iran (MEK), for the assassination. According to State-run Press TV, “Israeli-made weapons” were also found at the scene.

- On December 3, during his virtual address at the 6th edition of the Mediterranean Dialogues Forum, organised by the Italian Foreign Ministry in cooperation with the Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, stated that Iran will return to full compliance with the 2015 Nuclear Agreement only if the US shows goodwill.

Zarif noted: “America can return to the time before its exit from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) ... If the US honours its original commitments, Iran will also show its adherence”. He also stated that Washington is not in a position to set conditions as it has violated a UN Security Council resolution by re-imposing pressure on Iran. Zarif stated: “It needs to respect international regulations first”. He further noted that the US has exited the JCPOA, but not the UN, and still has to meet its commitments under the UNSC Resolution 2231 that endorsed the Agreement. US President-Elect, Joe Biden, has also shown willingness to work with allies “to strengthen and extend” the nuclear deal. Zarif emphasised that the JCPOA was negotiated for two years and will not be renegotiated. He stated: “The timings in JCPOA were subject of negotiation and compromise, and even talk of it is a sign of ill-will”. He added that Iran might engage in talks over issues beyond the deal only when Western countries end their destructive policies in this region.

- On December 3, Iran’s Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, urged US President-Elect, Joe Biden, to abandon Washington’s “rogue” behaviour and lift crippling sanctions against Iran.

Zarif also rejected any prospects of talks on renegotiating the 2015 Iran Nuclear Agreement, called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). He noted that when President Donald Trump withdrew from the landmark Agreement, the US had breached a UN Security Council resolution endorsing the Agreement.

Zarif stated: “The US has been in grave breach of that resolution because the Trump Administration has been a rogue regime. Now if President-Elect, Joe Biden wants to continue to be a rogue regime, then he can continue to be asking for negotiations to implement its commitments”. Zarif emphasised that the US “must cease its violations of international law” and that the US “doesn’t require any negotiations”. Tensions between the US and Iran escalated after President Trump unilaterally withdrew from the Nuclear Agreement in 2018 and reimposed sanctions on Iran that have immensely damaged its economy.

Israel

- On December 12, Israel signed an accord with Bhutan, to formally establish relations between the two countries.

Israel's accord with Bhutan did not appear to be related to its growing ties under US-sponsored accords with Arab and Muslim countries, though Israeli officials sought to portray it as evidence of its growing acceptance abroad. According to the Israeli Foreign Ministry, the agreement follows several years of secret contacts between Israel and Bhutan with the aim of establishing relations. Israeli Foreign Minister, Gabi Ashkenazi, stated: "Israel's circle of recognition is growing and expanding. The establishment of relations between us and the Kingdom of Bhutan will serve as another milestone in deepening Israel's ties in Asia". A joint press release issued at the signing ceremony stated: "The establishment of diplomatic relations (will) create new avenues for cooperation between the two countries in water management, technology, human resource development, agricultural sciences and other areas of mutual benefit". Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, welcomed the agreement, adding that there had been contact with other countries that wanted to establish relations.

- On December 10, Morocco and Israel reached a US-brokered agreement on normalising relations, making Morocco the fourth Arab country to agree to a normalisation deal with Tel Aviv.

Under the agreement, Rabat will establish full diplomatic relations, resume official contact with Tel Aviv and allow the latter to use Moroccan airspace. US President Donald Trump tweeted that "Israel and the Kingdom of Morocco have agreed to full diplomatic relations", claiming that the agreement would be "a massive breakthrough for peace in the Middle East". According to a statement issued by the White House, Trump sealed the agreement in a telephonic conversation with Morocco's King Mohammed VI. The White House quoted the Moroccan King as stating that the agreement aimed to resume "diplomatic relations between Morocco and Israel and expand economic and cultural cooperation to advance regional stability".

As part of the agreement, Trump agreed to recognise Morocco's "sovereignty" over the contested Western Sahara region. Morocco annexed the vast Western Sahara region, a former Spanish colony, in 1975 and has since been embroiled in conflict with the Algeria-backed Polisario Front, a movement that seeks to establish an independent state in the territory and end Morocco's presence there.

Reacting to the new development, Palestinian resistance movement Hamas issued a statement strongly condemning the Tel Aviv-Rabat agreement as a "political sin". Hamas Spokesperson, Hazem Qassem, stated: "It is a political sin that does not serve the Palestinian cause and encourages the occupation to continue to deny the rights of our people". Meanwhile, Islamic Jihad Movement of Palestine also condemned the normalisation of relations between Morocco and Israel, describing it as betrayal of Jerusalem. The Movement added that serial moves taken to normalise ties with Israel are shameful for leaders of Arab countries that are normalising ties with Tel Aviv. The provocative normalisation agreements between Israel and three Arab

countries, including the UAE, Bahrain and Sudan, had already sparked outrage among Palestinians, who view the agreements as a betrayal of their cause.

- On December 2, the Israeli Parliament approved a bill which calls for dissolution of the coalition Government.

The bill was passed with support from the Blue and White party, led by Alternate Prime Minister, Benny Gantz, who is the key partner in the Coalition. The Coalition Government is headed by Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. The opposition-sponsored bill secured 61 votes while 54 votes were against the bill. Gantz, who is also the Defence Minister, accused Netanyahu of focusing only on his political self-interest and depriving the country of a budget during unprecedented economic strife caused by the pandemic. The passing of the bill has raised prospects of a fourth election in Israel in less than two years.

Kuwait

- On December 8, Kuwait's Emir, Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmad Al Sabah, reappointed Sheikh Sabah al-Khalid Al Sabah as the Prime Minister following general elections in the country.

According to state media, the Emir asked Sheikh Sabah to nominate members of a new cabinet for approval. Members of the Al Sabah ruling family, in power for the last 250 years, retain full control over key government and executive posts. According to the results announced by the Electoral Commission, candidates belonging to, or leaning toward, the opposition won 24 seats (16 more than the previous Parliament) in the 50-seat National Assembly. The polls were the first since Sheikh Nawaf was sworn in as the new Emir of Kuwait in September 2020 following the death of his half-brother, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah. Under the Constitution, the Emir has the final say in state matters and can dissolve the legislature on the recommendation of the Government.

- On December 5, in a letter to King Salman bin Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia, the Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, thanked the King for his efforts to resolve regional tensions.

Sheikh Nawaf stated that the Kingdom's representation of the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt reflects its prestigious position and its pioneering role in seeking to support security and stability in the region. The Emir added that it also shows Saudi Arabia's keenness on solidarity and unity in light of the delicate conditions that the world and the region face. He stated that the progress made to end the dispute between Gulf countries "is an achievement that will restore our Gulf entity and our joint Arab action, its unity and cohesion in facing the challenges that plague the whole world". He further stated that this progress "will also enable us to work together in order

to achieve the legitimate hopes and aspirations of our peoples for security, stability, prosperity and well-being". Sheikh Nawaf's comments appeared as Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, stated, during the 2020 Manama Dialogue, that the Kingdom was committed to the "diplomatic resolution of regional tensions".

In a related development, on December 4, 2020, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Kuwait, stated that progress had been made towards resolving the Gulf crisis that has pitted a regional group of nations against Doha.

Kuwait's Foreign Minister, Sheikh Ahmed Nasser al Mohammed Al-Sabah, whose country is leading mediation efforts, stated that all sides had expressed keenness for a "final agreement" during recent "fruitful discussions", which have also included the US. Meanwhile, Qatari and Saudi Foreign Ministers, along with Oman's Foreign Ministry, tweeted similarly worded statements thanking Kuwait and the US for their efforts to resolve the spat but shared no details on the talks. Saudi Arabia and its allies, including the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt, cut ties with Qatar in June 2017, accusing it of backing radical Islamist movements and Iran.

During his address at the 6th session of the Mediterranean Dialogues forum in Rome, Qatar's Foreign Minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, stated: "We have achieved certain progress at a certain point of time more than a year ago, and then things have slowed. Right now, there are some movements that we hope will put an end (to) this crisis. We believe that Gulf unity is very important for the security of the region. This needless crisis needs to end based on mutual respect". Meanwhile, at the same event, Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud, stated that a "final agreement looks in reach. I am somewhat optimistic that we are close to finalising an agreement between all the nations in the dispute to come to a resolution we think will be satisfactory to all".

Lebanon

- On December 11, the Netherlands-based Special Tribunal for Lebanon sentenced a fugitive Hezbollah member to five life imprisonment terms for the 2005 assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafic Hariri, and 21 other people.

Salim Ayyash of Hezbollah was found guilty in absentia of murder and terrorism over the huge suicide bombing that killed Hariri and injured 226 others. In August 2020, following a long trial, Ayyash was convicted of conspiracy to commit a terrorist act, committing a terrorist act using an explosive device, the 'intentional homicide' of Hariri and of 21 other people, and attempted homicide of those injured in the attack. The Court stated that there was not enough evidence to convict three other defendants, who were also on trial in absentia. Ayyash remains on the run and Hassan Nasrallah, the Head of the Hezbollah movement, has been refusing to hand himself over to the authorities. According to Nasrallah, the convictions confirmed Hezbollah's position

that the Hariri assassination “investigation is neither transparent nor scientific”. While announcing the sentence, Chief Judge David Re stated: “Mr. Ayyash participated in an act of terrorism that caused mass murder”. He added: “The trial chamber is satisfied that it should impose the maximum sentence for each of the five crimes of life imprisonment, to be served concurrently”. The Court has issued an international arrest warrant for Ayyash for the “extremely grave” crimes he committed. Rafic Hariri’s son, Saad Hariri, who is the current Prime Minister of Lebanon, called on the Lebanese authorities to help bring Ayyash to justice. He stated: “The sentence issued against Salim Ayyash should be executed and Lebanese judicial and security officials should fulfil their duties in this regard”.

Qatar

- On December 4, Qatar’s Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, stated that there has been movement on resolving Qatar’s diplomatic dispute with its Gulf neighbours, but he could not predict whether a breakthrough was imminent.

Al-Thani stated: “Right now, there is a movement that we hope will put an end to this crisis”. He added: “We believe the end of the crisis is important for the security of the region and for the sake of our people. This crisis needs to end based on mutual respect and the rights of all people of the Gulf”. Al-Thani further stated: “Qatar is not differentiating between any of the countries. We hope things will move in the right direction but we cannot yet predict if it will be imminent and if it will be resolved in one day”.

In June 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt imposed a diplomatic, trade and travel boycott on Qatar, accusing Doha of supporting terrorism and having close ties with Iran. Qatar has repeatedly rejected the accusations as baseless while highlighting its readiness for dialogue. As a condition for lifting the blockade, the four countries set a 13-point ultimatum for Qatar, which included shutting down the Al Jazeera Media Network. Al-Thani noted that “there is no country that is in a position to place demands on the other. There are differences that need to be overcome”. He added: “If there are any disagreements, there must be a discussion to resolve them. We need to build our relationship based on mutual respect of sovereignty”. Earlier, on December 2, 2020, Al Jazeera reported that Qatar and Saudi Arabia are close to striking a preliminary agreement to end the dispute.

Saudi Arabia

- On December 1, Saudi Arabia's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Adel Al-Jubeir, criticised Iran's Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, for implicating Riyadh in the killing of prominent Iranian nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh.

Minister Al-Jubeir stated: "Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif is desperate to blame the Kingdom for anything negative that happens in Iran. Will he blame us for the next earthquake or flood?" The remarks were made in response to comments by Javad Zarif, which suggested that a covert meeting in Saudi Arabia between Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, and Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, contributed to the assassination of Fakhrizadeh. He stated: "(US Secretary of State Mike) Pompeo's hurried trips to the region, the trilateral meeting in Saudi Arabia and Netanyahu's statements all point to this conspiracy that unfortunately emerged in Friday's cowardly terrorist act and the martyrdom of one of the country's top executives". Saudi Arabia has not formally condemned the assassination, unlike the other five Gulf Cooperation Council Member States.

Turkey

- On December 9, Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, accused the EU of never behaving honestly towards Ankara. He stated that Turkey was not concerned by any economic sanctions the EU might impose on it.

Erdogan's comments appeared ahead of an EU summit in which sanctions against Ankara will be considered. Turkey has been at odds with EU members, Greece and Cyprus, over the extent of their Continental Shelves in the eastern Mediterranean. According to the EU, Turkey failed to help end a row with Greece and Cyprus over potential gas resources in the eastern Mediterranean. While criticising the EU for its policies against Turkey, Erdogan stated: "The EU has never acted honestly, it has never kept its promises (towards Turkey). But we have always been patient. We are still being patient". He added: "Any sanctions decision that can be taken against Turkey do not concern us much". While defending Ankara's rights in the eastern Mediterranean, President Erdogan noted: "On the eastern Mediterranean, we will continue to protect whatever our rights there are. It is never possible for us to compromise here. But if Greece really acts honestly as a neighbour, we will continue to be available at the table".

- On December 8, during a joint press conference with his visiting Hungarian counterpart, Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, called on the EU to play the role of an honest broker in the country's standoff with Greece over oil and gas exploration rights in the east Mediterranean Sea.

While emphasising that Turkey sought to improve its relations with the EU, Cavusoglu stated: “They need to be fair and honest on issues that concern Turkey and Greece. If they also think strategically and with common sense, we achieve a positive atmosphere and we can improve our ties. We can only solve our problems with dialogue and diplomacy”. He further reiterated that Ankara intended to join the bloc as a full member and noted that EU statements accusing Ankara of stoking tensions were incorrect. Cavusoglu’s comments came a day after EU Foreign Ministers stated that they were considering sanctions against Turkey over its energy exploration in the disputed waters of the Mediterranean. Earlier, on December 7, 2020, Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, stated that Ankara would not surrender to threats and blackmail over its exploration rights in the waters. He emphasised that Turkey was willing to resolve the dispute “through negotiations based on mutual respect”.

Meanwhile, according to a statement from the Turkish Foreign Ministry, Cavusoglu held a fruitful meeting in Ankara with his Hungarian counterpart, Peter Szijjarto. The statement noted that a successful Joint Economic Commission meeting was held between the two sides.

- *On December 3, during his virtual address at the 6th edition of the Mediterranean Dialogues Forum, organised by the Italian Foreign Ministry in cooperation with the Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, stated that Ankara wants the resources in the Eastern Mediterranean to be developed for the benefit of all.*

Cavusoglu stated: “When hydrocarbon reserves were found in the region, many thought this was an opportunity for cooperation and prosperity for everyone. However, some states acted on the contrary. Currently everyone loses in the Mediterranean”. He further noted that “Greece and the Greek Cypriots tried to form alliances seeking to isolate us and the Turkish Cypriots”. Since the discovery of significant gas reserves in the region a decade ago, countries have been engaged in renewed disputes over maritime borders. The deepening rift between Turkey and Greece surfaced with Turkey’s decision to enhance energy exploration activities in the Eastern Mediterranean and the deal Ankara made with Libya’s official Government in 2019. Cavusoglu also called on the European Union to alter its stance on the issue and abandon threats of sanctions against Turkey. He also urged the EU to respect the rights of Ankara and the Turkish Cypriots.

---Muhammad Shoaib

SOUTH ASIA: I

Pakistan

External

- On December 13, Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) categorically rejected terrorism-related insinuations by the Indian Minister for External Affairs and other political figures.

Earlier, on the 19th anniversary of the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament, India's Minister for External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, in a veiled reference to Pakistan, stated that India continues to face "perennial problems" like cross-border terrorism from its neighbour. The statement from the MOFA noted: "Regurgitating of baseless allegations does not turn them into truth. Nor does it wash away the fact of India's state sponsorship of terrorism against Pakistan and master-minding of anti-Pakistan propaganda globally. The 'dossier' presented by Pakistan to the world community and the EU DisinfoLab's recent report speak for themselves".

The MOFA further stated that "by peddling false narratives, the RSS-inspired BJP regime could neither divert attention from its internal failings, nor hide from the world community its grave human rights violations of the Kashmiri people as well as the persecution of minorities, particularly Muslims, under the pernicious 'Hindutva' agenda". The statement emphasised that "for durable peace and stability in the region, India must eschew the use of terrorism as an instrument of state policy, stop its global smear campaign against Pakistan, and let the Kashmiri people exercise their right to self-determination as enshrined in the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions".

In another development, on December 12, 2020, Pakistan rejected an attempt by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) to deny responsibility for the elaborate and reprehensible global disinformation campaign against Pakistan, exposed by EU DisinfoLab. The latest report issued by the disinformation watchdog illustrates, in graphic detail, the web of more than 750 media outlets across 116 countries; over 550 website domain names registered; resurrection of dead people; impersonation of EU institutions and direct control of more than 10 NGOs accredited to the UN Human Rights Council, being utilised for the purpose of pushing fake news and false Indian propaganda against Pakistan since 2005.

Pakistan's Foreign Office stated: "MEA's tall claims have no legs to stand on: the latest developments and international exposes have clearly shown that India is neither responsible nor a democracy". It further stated that Islamabad has shared extensive and irrefutable evidence of India's active planning, promoting, aiding, abetting, financing and executing of terrorist activities in Pakistan. The Foreign Office noted: "The report by EU DisinfoLab goes to further

corroborate our long-held position about India's incurable obsession with Pakistan and its unrelenting smear campaign against Pakistan".

The Foreign Office urged UN Human Rights machinery, particularly the Human Rights Council (HRC), to take serious notice of the HRC being misused in such a manner against a Member State. The statement emphasised that "the relevant authorities in Switzerland and Belgium must investigate the finances and transparency of the relevant NGOs registered within their jurisdiction". Pakistan also reiterated its call for EU authorities to take full cognisance of this massive disinformation campaign against Pakistan and initiate steps to hold accountable those who misused their procedures and abused the European institutions.

- On December 10, following the disclosure of a disinformation network being run by India for 15 years, Pakistan's Foreign Office advised New Delhi to stop producing false propaganda against its rivals and focus on its internal problems.

In a related development, Prime Minister Imran Khan also stated that the "revelation by Brussels-based EU DisinfoLab group about the widespread Indian network of subversive activities vindicates Pakistan's position and exposed its detractors". He added: "The international community needs to take notice of a rogue Indian regime that now threatens the stability of the global system".

Foreign Office spokesperson, Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri, condemned India for its systematic tactic of a mass propaganda campaign to malign Pakistan and international institutions. Chaudhri denounced India's actions, outlined in the EU DisinfoLab report as "mischievous" and noted that these reflected a "pre-occupation with maligning Pakistan". He emphasized that all such attempts were "doomed to fail because Pakistan has already put forth irrefutable evidence, extensively documenting India's active planning, promoting, aiding, abetting, financing and executing terrorist activities in Pakistan".

The spokesperson further stated that "by spreading such falsehoods, India can neither cast a shadow on the international stature of Pakistan nor can it divert attention of the international community from India's horrendous human rights record". He added: "Instead of wasting more time in peddling falsehoods and fake news, India would be well-advised to put its house in order and take care of its own issues of poverty, grave human rights violations, exploitation of minority rights and rising radicalism".

Chaudhri noted that the revelation of the Indian disinformation campaign, by EU DisinfoLab, required global attention as India's subversive activities against Pakistan had been ignored for too long. Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, also condemned India's disinformation campaign and stated that Indian actions were powered by "fascist ideals" that the same "even put Goebbels to shame".

- On December 8, Pakistan's Foreign Office (FO) rejected the US' designation of Pakistan among "Countries of Particular Concern" (CPC) under its International Religious Freedom Act. The FO termed it an "arbitrary and selective assessment".
- On December 8, US Secretary of State, Michael Pompeo, issued a Presidential waiver for Pakistan, exempting it from sanctions that follow a country's designation as a violator of religious freedom.

Earlier, on December 7, Secretary Pompeo had designated Pakistan and nine other countries as Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) for alleged continuous violations of religious freedom during 2019-20. Pakistan rejected the designation as an "arbitrary and selective assessment", which was "completely against the realities on the ground and raises serious doubts about the credibility of the exercise". The designations, slapped under the US International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, automatically lead to strict economic sanctions against the alleged violator.

During a press talk in Washington, America's Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, Samuel D. Brownback, noted that some of the designated countries have been exempted from these sanctions. He stated: "For Pakistan, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, the Secretary issued a waiver for the Presidential action requirement, determining that there were important national interests of the US requiring the exercise of the waiver authority". The US Commission on International Religious Freedom, which recommends the designations, had suggested also placing India on the violators' list. However, the list issued did not include India.

Pakistan pointed out that "the glaring omission of India, where the RSS-BJP regime and their leaders openly disregard religious freedom and discriminate against minorities communities in an institutional manner, is unfortunate and puts the credibility of the US report into question". During the press conference, Ambassador Brownback stated: "We watch the situation in India very closely. The Secretary (Pompeo) travelled there, multiple times and is well aware of a lot of the communal violence that's happening in India". He added that Secretary Pompeo "was also aware of the statute enacted by, and the issues associated with, the Modi Government". The US Envoy for Religious Freedom noted that not designating India as a CPC did not mean that India did not have these problems. He stated: "The violence (in India) is a problem. We will continue to raise those issues".

- On December 8, the 8th round of Bilateral Political Consultations between Pakistan and the Netherlands was virtually held.

Special Secretary (Europe), Dr. Aman Rashid, led the Pakistani delegation during the talks, while Director-General for Political Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, Thijs Van Der Plas, led the Dutch side. According to a statement from the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs, the two sides discussed the whole spectrum of bilateral relations, including political, economic, trade and investment, climate change, cooperation on multilateral issues and developments in their respective regions. While expressing satisfaction at the steady growth in bilateral ties, it was reiterated that high-level interactions were necessary for further strengthening relations. The two sides expressed satisfaction at the level of cooperation at international fora, including at the UN and agreed to continue supporting one another.

The Dutch side was briefed on the COVID-19 situation in Pakistan and the steps being taken by the Government to save lives and livelihoods. Dr. Rashid noted that the Netherlands was a major trade partner of Pakistan in the EU and encouraged the Dutch side to take advantage of the investment opportunities created by business-friendly policies of the Government, especially in areas like agriculture, renewable energy, and tourism. He appreciated Dutch support for Pakistan's GSP Plus scheme and reiterated Pakistan's commitment to the implementation of the 27 international conventions.

The two sides also exchanged views on important global and regional issues. Dr. Rashid conveyed Pakistan's concerns vis-à-vis the rise of xenophobia, particularly Islamophobia, in different parts of the world and emphasized the need to further promote inter-faith harmony. He briefed the Dutch side on the Indian Government's discriminatory policies against minorities, and its illegal and unilateral actions in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK). Dr. Rashid urged the Netherlands to impress upon India the need to lift the military siege; bring to an end the ongoing gross violations of human rights in IIOJK; allow independent international organisations to carry out an inquiry; and take steps towards peaceful resolution of the Jammu & Kashmir dispute in accordance with the relevant UN Security Council resolutions.

- On December 8, the Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan, Nong Rong, called on the Chairman Senate, Muhammad Sadiq Sanjrani, and discussed bilateral relations and issues of mutual interest between the two countries.

During the meeting, Sanjrani stated that the exemplary friendship between China and Pakistan would significantly contribute towards the social and economic development of the region. He added: "Pakistan is proud of its ever-lasting friendship with China". Sanjrani noted that parliamentary diplomacy would play an effective role in strengthening bilateral relations. He emphasized the need to strengthen institutional relationships between the two countries. The Chairman Senate further noted that the economic partnership would be strengthened with the deepening of people-to-people contacts. He stated: "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Project reflects the joint vision of regional development and it would bring prosperity in the area".

- On December 8, Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, stated that Muslims are being butchered in India. He also held a meeting with the Organisation of

Islamic Cooperation (OIC) envoys based in Islamabad to thank them for the OIC's strong and unequivocal support during the 47th OIC Foreign Ministers Session in Niamey.

In a statement, Qureshi noted that all minorities, including Muslims, Dalits, Sikhs and Christians are unsafe in India. He added that India had introduced controversial legislation, including the Citizens Amendment Act and the National Register of Citizens, to crush minorities. Qureshi stated: "The whole world is witness to the Delhi riots in which several Muslims were killed and properties on large scale were ransacked. The construction of temple at the site of the Babri Mosque reflects the Hindutva mindset".

A statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted: "During his meeting with the OIC envoys, Qureshi emphasised that the unanimous adoption of a strong and comprehensive Resolution on the Jammu and Kashmir dispute, explicit reiteration of the OIC's principled position in the Niamey Declaration, and presentation of the Report on the visit of the Secretary General's Special Envoy for Jammu and Kashmir to Pakistan and Azad Jammu Kashmir reaffirmed the centrality of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute for the OIC and Muslim Ummah". The Foreign Minister also thanked OIC States for their support in the adoption of other resolutions that are of importance to Pakistan. These included resolutions on "Safeguarding the Rights of Muslim Minorities in non-OIC States" and "Destruction of Babri Masjid and Protection of Islamic Holy Places".

- On December 6, in its statement, Pakistan's Foreign Office urged the Indian Government to ensure safety, security and protection of minorities, particularly Muslims and their places of worship, and fulfil its responsibilities under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international instruments, including the recommendations of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

The statement noted: "Today is a sad reminder of the demolition of the historic Babri Masjid in India. On this day, 28 years ago, Hindu zealots of the RSS-inspired BJP, backed by the state apparatus, demolished the centuries-old mosque in Ayodhya in an abominable act of anti-Muslim frenzy and blatant violation of religious and international norms". Pakistan also called upon the international community, the UN and relevant international organisations to play their role in preserving the Islamic heritage sites in India from the extremist 'Hindutva' regime and ensure protection of minorities in India. According to the Foreign Office, painful scenes of the demolition of the Babri Mosque in 1992 still remained fresh in the minds of not only Muslims but all conscionable persons around the world. The statement noted: "The new illegitimate structure, which the Hindutva-driven BJP has campaigned for and is bent upon constructing as part of its agenda of converting India into a 'HinduRashtra', is a scar on the face of the so-called "largest democracy in the world".

The Foreign Office emphasised that the flawed judgment of the Indian Supreme Court in the Babri Mosque case, in November 2019, not only reflected the preponderance of faith over justice

but also the growing majoritarianism in today's India, where minorities, particularly Muslims and their places of worship, were increasingly under attack.

The Foreign Office noted that the extreme "haste in starting construction of a temple at the Babri Mosque site amidst the growing COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act, the looming National Register of Citizens to disenfranchise Muslims, the targeted killings of Muslims in Delhi with state complicity in February 2020, and other anti-Muslim measures pointed to the fact how Muslims in India were being systematically demonised, dispossessed, marginalised and subjected to targeted violence". Pakistan further highlighted that "recently, at the 47th session of the Council of Foreign Ministers held at Niamey, the OIC called upon the Indian Government to take immediate steps to implement its commitment to reconstruct the Babri Mosque on its original site and to punish those responsible for its demolition, prevent the construction of temple on its site, take immediate steps to ensure the protection of the other 3,000 Mosques, and ensure the safety and protection of the Muslims and Islamic holy sites throughout India".

- On December 5, Pakistan's Foreign Office rejected as "fake news" the reports in Indian media claiming transfer of foreign militants from Syria to Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) for allegedly reinforcing the ranks of freedom fighters.

The Foreign Office stated: "Pakistan completely rejects concoctions based on 'fake news', in a section of the Indian media, alleging transfer of foreign fighters to IIOJK". The statement added that such "fabrications" were part of Indian propaganda against the indigenous freedom movement of the Kashmiris. Indian media had quoted the leader of a Turkish militant group, which has been fighting in Syria, stating that militants are to be sent to IIOJK. Indian media alleged that Turkish officers were registering officers for this purpose from Azaz, Jarablus, Al-Bab, Afrin and Idlib. Pakistan's Foreign Office noted: "Such Indian ploys are doomed to fail again". It added: "By spreading such falsehoods, India can neither cast a shadow on the legitimate struggle of the Kashmiri people for freedom from illegal and inhuman Indian occupation nor can it escape censure by the international community for the gross and systematic violations of human rights being perpetrated by the Indian occupation forces in IIOJK".

- On December 4, Pakistan rejected as "incorrect" and "misleading" the assertions made by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) regarding the legal proceedings currently taking place in the case of Indian naval commander, Kulbhushan Jadhav.

The Foreign Office Spokesperson noted: "It is evident that by casting aspersions on the Indian High Commission's own legal counsel, the Indian Government is looking for an escape from the legal proceedings in Commander Jadhav case". He reminded the Government of India that in pursuance of the judgment of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), Pakistan had invited the Indian High Commission to meet Commander Jadhav and appoint a lawyer on his behalf so that

proceedings to review and reconsider Commander Jadhav's conviction could commence. However, during the course of diplomatic exchanges, the Indian High Commission refused to instruct a lawyer as, in their view, this would amount to a waiver of India's sovereign immunity. Resultantly, the Government of Pakistan was constrained to initiate proceedings for appointment of a state counsel for Commander Jadhav.

To show the discrepancy in the Indian position, the Attorney General for Pakistan, during the course of the proceedings, cited the case of Mohammad Ismail, an Indian national currently in Pakistani custody, where the Indian High Commission had engaged Shahnawaz Noon as its lawyer. The Foreign Office noted that contrary to the false statement by the Indian MEA, no attempt was made to link the cases of Commander Jadhav with another Indian prisoner, Ismail. The Foreign Office stated: "The two cases are and remain entirely distinct. Reference to Mr. Ismail's case was only for the purpose of showing the 'discrepancy' and 'inconsistency' in the Indian position".

Earlier, on December 3, 2020, during a weekly media briefing, spokesperson for the MEA claimed that in "routine consular practice", Shahnawaz Noon was "selected" by the Indian High Commission in Islamabad to appear in the case pertaining to release and repatriation of the Indian prisoner, Mohammad Ismail, who has completed his sentence but continues to be confined in jail.

In line with the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) judgment, Pakistan has already provided consular access to the Indian High Commission twice and has taken all necessary steps for effective review and reconsideration in the Jadhav case. According to the Foreign Office: "the offer of a third consular access is still there. The Indian side is once again urged to desist from the use of its usual diversionary and dilatory tactics and instead take practical steps so that legal proceedings could be duly concluded and full effect could be given to the judgment of ICJ". The statement came a day after India blamed Pakistan for linking the Kulbhushan Jadhav case with another prisoner's case.

- On December 3, Pakistan's Foreign Office stated that the recent assassination of Iranian nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrazadeh, is a violation of international law.

Foreign Office Spokesperson, Zahid Chaudhri, stated: "Such acts not only run contrary to all norms of interstate relations and International Law but also threaten the peace and stability of an already fragile region". He urged all sides to exercise maximum restraint and avoid further escalation of tensions in the region. He added: "We believe that reduction in tensions is essential for regional peace and security". Recalling Pakistan's role in reducing tensions in the Middle East in the past, Chaudhri noted that Islamabad would continue to play any role that leads to de-escalation of tensions in the region. He also reiterated Pakistan's support for the Iran Nuclear Agreement, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Chaudhri highlighted that the Accord represented a good example of mutually agreed and negotiated

settlement of complex issues through diplomatic engagement at the international level. He urged all parties to the JCPOA to adhere to their respective commitments.

Meanwhile, condemning the increasing Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian territory, Chaudhri stated that Pakistan is concerned over the initiation of the bidding process for construction of new settlements. He noted: “Pakistan condemns the Israeli decision which is illegal under international law and the relevant UN resolutions”. He further emphasised that “Pakistan steadfastly supports the Palestinian people’s inalienable right to self-determination and reiterates its consistent, clear and unambiguous position for just and lasting peace in the Middle East”. He added: “It is imperative to have a two-state solution in accordance with the relevant UN and OIC resolutions, with the pre-1967 borders, and Al-Quds Al-Sharif as the capital of a viable, independent and contiguous Palestinian State.

While speaking on Pak-US relations, Chaudhri maintained that following US President-elect, Joe Biden’s ascension to the office on January 20, 2021, Pakistan desires resumption of activities under its structured dialogue with the US. He added that Pakistan was working with the new Administration to further strengthen bilateral ties and continue the partnership to achieve peace, stability and prosperity in the region. He stated: “We expect that the new US Administration would also take notice of the ongoing grave humanitarian situation and wilful defiance of international law, democratic norms and human rights obligations by India in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir”.

- On December 3, Pakistan’s Prime Minister, Imran Khan, presented a 10-point agenda before the UN General Assembly for urgent action. The agenda focuses on measures the international community should adopt to defeat the COVID-19 pandemic.

The UN General Assembly held a special session on the COVID-19 pandemic, as proposed by President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan, who is also the Chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement. Addressing the session, PM Khan described the COVID-19 pandemic as “the most serious global crisis since the Second World War”.

The first item on Imran Khan’s list is a request for debt suspension till the end of the pandemic for low-income and most affected countries. Second, he suggested a “cancellation of debt of least developed countries” that are no longer in a position to repay their loans. Other items on the agenda include: restructuring of public sector debt of other developing countries under an agreed inclusive multilateral framework; a general allocation of special drawing rights of \$500 billion; expanded concessional financing to lower income countries through multilateral development banks; and creation of a new “liquidity and sustainability facility”, which should provide short-term loans at lower costs. The agenda also includes a reminder to rich nations to fulfil 0.7 percent of their official development assistance commitments and mobilising the required \$1.5 trillion annual investment in sustainable infrastructure.

PM Khan also urged the international community to help meet the agreed target of mobilising \$100 billion per year for climate action in developing countries. He also called for immediate action to stop the massive illicit financial outflows from developing countries to rich countries and to offshore tax havens. The Prime Minister also suggested immediate return of assets stolen by corrupt politicians and criminals back to these countries.

- On December 3, during an interview with *Global Village Space*, the Director General of the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), Major General Babar Iftikhar, stated that the dossier presented by Pakistan would be flagged at all global forums to highlight Indian state-sponsored terrorism on Pakistan's territory.

According to General Iftikhar, the dossier brought forward proof of India as a State sponsor of terrorism, vindicating what Pakistan has been saying for a long time. During the interview, he expanded upon diverse security and defence-related issues linked with regional peace and stability, including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Afghan peace process and the situation in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK). According to the DG ISPR, the world has taken note of the dossier and started discussing it. He noted: "Despite a lot of Indian efforts, an objective analysis of the dossier has been started by the global community and that objectivity was a major plus".

While talking about the CPEC, General Iftikhar stated that security issues around the CPEC project were increasing. He noted that Indian-sponsored terrorists were targeting Chinese manpower and locals working on the project. Regarding terrorist attacks from across the Afghan border on Pakistani soil, the DG ISPR stated that Pakistan was in regular contact with the Afghan Government on the matter. According to Major General Babar Iftikhar, India was linking the Kashmir freedom movement with terrorism and blaming Pakistan for the so-called infiltration into IIOJK. However, the UN military observer missions and the global missions taken to the Line of Control (by Pakistan) ruled out any possibility of Pakistan's infiltration into the region.

- On December 1, *Dawn* reported that the Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Andleeb Abbas, represented Pakistan at the 19th Meeting of the Council of Heads of Government of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCOCHG), hosted by India via video conference.

During the Meeting, Abbas highlighted the importance of the SCO for Pakistan in achieving regional peace and stability, as well as with respect to the development of closer ties with regional partners through multi-faceted linkages and connectivity. She highlighted the importance of creating a safe and secure neighbourhood. While condemning terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, including state terrorism inflicted upon people living under foreign occupation in disputed territories, Abbas cautioned against the recent rise in extremist and racist incidents, inspired by neo-Nazism and Islamophobia. She also emphasised the need for

cooperation, collaboration and sharing of knowledge and expertise to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. The Parliamentary Secretary stated that Pakistan valued the SCO region as a pivotal link for regional connectivity and integration. India became the Chair of the SCO Council of Heads of Government on November 2, 2019. The Member States of the SCO hold the position of Chair for a period of one year on a rotation basis.

- On December 1, China's Minister of National Defence, General Wei Fenghe, held talks with Prime Minister Imran Khan and President Arif Alvi in Islamabad.
- On December 1, *The Express Tribune* reported that the Chief of Army Staff (COAS), General Qamar Javed Bajwa, held a meeting with China's Minister of National Defence, General Wei Fenghe, at the GHQ.

Following the meeting, Pakistan and China signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for enhancement of defence cooperation between the armies of the two countries. The MoU emerges against the backdrop of a regional security situation. Pakistan and China are already engaged in a strategic partnership and recent changes in the region further prompted close cooperation between the two countries.

According to the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), matters of mutual interest, regional security and enhanced bilateral defence collaboration were discussed during the meeting. The visiting dignitary appreciated the efforts of the Pakistan Army for regional peace and provision of a secure environment for projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). General Bajwa thanked the Minister of National Defence for China's support to Pakistan on all key issues at regional and international forums. The COAS noted that the Pakistan Army greatly valued the country's brotherly relations with China. He stated: "We have been standing together all along and our relations will be no different in view of future challenges".

During Fenghe's meetings with Pakistan's civilian leadership, both sides vowed to deepen their cooperation for tackling threats to regional security which emanate from India's hegemonic designs. PM Khan recalled India's "unilateral and illegal actions of August 5, 2019", through which it annexed Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir. The Prime Minister noted that the ruling BJP's "belligerent actions, discriminatory measures against Indian minorities", and curbs on freedoms constituted a threat to regional peace. He called for deepening bilateral "strategic communication and coordination" to deal with the emerging challenges and threats. Meanwhile, President Alvi emphasised that one of Pakistan's major considerations for cementing ties with China was to address challenges for regional peace. He recalled that ties with Beijing were the "cornerstone" of Pakistan's foreign policy. A statement from the Presidency noted: "The President expressed concern over the Indian hegemonic designs that posed a threat to regional peace and stability. He also highlighted India's state-sponsorship of terrorism against Pakistan".

Pakistan Internal

- On December 14, during his visit to the Naval Headquarters, Prime Minister Imran Khan vowed to provide all resources to the Pakistan Navy for dealing with imminent challenges.

According to a statement from the Pakistan Navy's Directorate General Public Relations, "the Prime Minister greatly appreciated the professionalism and operational readiness of the Pakistan Navy". The statement added: "The PM reposed complete confidence in the preparedness of the Pakistan Navy in safeguarding country's sea frontiers". In his remarks, PM Khan also mentioned the Navy's contribution to securing the country's coast, Gwadar Port and CPEC projects. According to the statement, PM Khan acknowledged the "Pakistan Navy's contribution towards regional maritime security by contributing in international efforts and taking its own initiatives". The Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Muhammad Amjad Khan Niazi, thanked PM Khan for reposing confidence in the Navy and assured that it would continue to defend the country's sea frontiers and maritime interests both during peace and war.

- On December 10, quoting unnamed officials, *Dawn* reported that the Pakistan Army has been put on high alert amidst a possible threat of another attempt by India to conduct a surgical strike inside Pakistan's territory.

According to Dawn, the officials noted that after facing a humiliating defeat in Ladakh and Doklam, India was preparing to launch another attack on the Line of Control (LoC) and across the Working Boundary at Pulwama, posing a threat to regional peace and stability. An official stated that a "false flag operation" was being planned by India to divert the world's attention from several of its internal issues, including the ongoing farmers' protest, its treatment of minorities, atrocities committed by Indian forces in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) and criticism of its policies by international institutions and media.

In a related development, on December 9, 2020, Indian forces initiated ceasefire violations, martyring two Pakistan Army soldiers and injuring a civilian woman in different areas of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) identified the martyred soldiers as Lance Naik Tariq and Sepoy Zarooof. The ISPR added that Pakistani forces responded befittingly to the ceasefire violations.

According to the sources quoted by Dawn, India had committed 9215 ceasefire violations between 2014 and 2019, involving 1,403 casualties. During the year 2020, India has so far committed 2,830 ceasefire violations, with the number of civilian casualties totalling 271 persons. The officials noted that the decision to put the Army on high alert comes after the Indian Government approved, on December 3, 2020, the creation of a new post of Deputy Chief of Army Staff (Strategy) at the Army Headquarters. The creation of the new post was per a plan

envisaged during the Doklam crisis with China in 2017. Further, the Indian Government also created the position of Director General Information Warfare, tasked with dealing with media affairs.

- On December 1, Pakistan started loading fuel to the 1,100 MW nuclear power plant in Karachi for testing, in a run-up to its commercial operations in April 2021.

Director General of the Strategic Plans Division, Lt Gen Nadeem Zaki Manj, Chairman of the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC), Mohammad Naeem, and senior Chinese and Pakistani officials attended the fuel loading event.

According to a spokesperson for the PAEC, fuel loading for the newly built Karachi Nuclear Power Plant Unit-2 (K-2) was started after obtaining a fuel load permit from the Pakistan Nuclear Regulatory Authority (PNRA). K-2 is a pressurised water reactor based on the Chinese HPR-1000 technology and a third-generation plant equipped with advanced safety features. The construction of K-2 plant started in August 2015 and its commercial operation will begin in April 2021 after undergoing several operational and safety tests. K-2 is one of two 1100 MW nuclear power plants being constructed in Karachi. The other plant, K-3, is expected to become operational by the end of 2021.

In another development, on December 1, 2020, the Government of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) and a Chinese firm, China Gezhouba Group, and its local partner, Laraib Group, signed the Implementation Agreement and Water Use Charges Agreement for the construction of Azad Pattan Hydropower Project, as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). While speaking on the occasion, AJK Prime Minister, Raja Farooq Haider Khan, noted that with an investment of over \$1.35 billion, the 700.7 MW project would involve no fuel import and enable the country to move towards cheaper and greener power generation.

India

- On December 9, the Brussels-based ‘EU DisinfoLab’ uncovered an Indian disinformation network operating since 2005 to discredit nations in conflict with Delhi, particularly Pakistan.

In 2019, the EU DisinfoLab uncovered a vast network of 265 coordinated fake local media outlets in 65 countries serving Indian interests, as well as multiple dubious think tanks and NGOs. This network was active in Brussels and Geneva in producing and amplifying content designed to primarily undermine Pakistan. In a new investigation, titled “Indian Chronicles”, the group has exposed another Indian network that aims to reinforce pro-Indian and anti-Pakistan (and anti-Chinese) feelings in India. Internationally, the network is working to consolidate India’s power and improve its image, while damaging the reputation of rival countries so that ultimately India may benefit from more support from international institutions, such as the European Union and the United Nations. To do so, the network used fake personas of

dead human rights activist and journalists, and also tried to impersonate regular media and press agencies such as the EU Observer, the Economist and Voice of America.

The network also used the letterhead of the European Parliament, registered websites under avatars with fake phone numbers, provided fake addresses to the UN and created publishing companies to print books of the think tanks they owned. Overall, an entire network of over 500 fake local media outlets in 95 countries helped reproduce negative iterations about Pakistan (or China). In total, the operation has covered 116 countries and 9 regions.

The report found that articles from the small fake European media outlet, EU Chronicle, were used as a base by the Indian news agency ANI to create news reports. It noted that the Indian press agency covers the lobbying efforts taking place under the cover of fake NGOs, with dubious practices. The researchers at the EU DisinfoLab emphasised that the findings should serve as a call to action for decision-makers to put in place a relevant framework to sanction actors engaging in disinformation and abusing international institutions.

- On December 8, following inconclusive talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Government, farmers' protests against new laws liberalising agricultural markets spread across India, as farm organisations called for a nationwide strike.

The reforms enacted in September 2020 relaxed rules around the sale, pricing and storage of farm produce that have protected farmers from an unregulated free market for decades. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has stated that the reforms would not hurt farmers' incomes. The farmers, however, contend that the laws threaten their livelihoods due to which they launched protests and strikes against the same.

Several rounds of talks between the Government and farmers have failed to yield any outcome and farm organisations have called for a nationwide strike. As many as 15 opposition parties across India have extended support to the call by the farmers to protest against the three contentious ordinances. The farmers, mainly from Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh, have already been protesting at Singhu border, near Delhi, for the last 12 days. Indian farmers have been struggling for years due to low crop prices and rising costs, demonetisation and widespread droughts despite government subsidies and income tax exemptions. Many farmers have fallen into debt, leading to a rise in farmer suicide rates in recent years.

---Muhammad Shoaib

SOUTH ASIA II

Afghanistan

- On December 14, the Afghan Ministry of Defence reported that at least 83 Taliban insurgents were killed and 18 others were wounded during the crackdowns conducted by the Afghan security forces in Southern Kandahar and Ghazni provinces in the past 24 hours.
- On December 14, local residents in Arghandab district in the southern province of Kandahar claimed that at least 11 civilians were killed in airstrikes in the district.

The airstrikes hit civilian houses, and women and children were among those killed in the incident. The Afghan Ministry of Defence, while stating that it is aware of the reports of civilian casualties and that it will investigate the matter, attributed blame on the Taliban for using civilian houses as shields. Former Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, in a tweet, strongly condemned the foreign airstrikes. The Afghanistan Human Rights Commission also condemned the airstrikes and called the same a clear violation of human rights. Civilians have been a victim of the rising conflict in Afghanistan. Despite calls for a comprehensive ceasefire and the ongoing peace talks, fierce clashes between the Taliban and the US-led Afghan Government forces continue across the country.

- On December 14, US Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, and Commander Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, Gen. Austin Scott Miller, called on Pakistan's Chief of the Army Staff, Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa.

During their meeting, matters of mutual interest, including the overall regional security situation, with particular reference to the ongoing Afghan reconciliation process, were discussed. Gen Bajwa appreciated the role of the Resolute Support Mission for peace and stability in Afghanistan and assured that Pakistan will continue to play its positive role for peace and stability in the region. The visiting dignitaries appreciated Pakistan's untiring efforts for facilitating the process towards the mutual objective of peace in the region. The statement from the top Pakistani General, appreciating the role of foreign forces for stability in Afghanistan, reflects Pakistan's call for a steady and responsible withdrawal, especially at a time when the outgoing US Administration has been pushing for a hasty drawdown.

The visit highlights the central role Pakistan has been playing in the ongoing Afghan peace process. Using its clout over the Taliban leadership, Pakistan has played a key role in bringing the warring factions to the negotiating table. Over the years, Pakistan has improved its ties with all Afghan factions, and maintained a stance that the country has no favourites in Afghanistan. Pakistan's improved policies have led the US, Afghan factions and regional states to build more trust on the country.

- On December 14, during his trip to Kabul, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, Seyed Abbas Araghchi, discussed bilateral relations and the peace process with Afghan authorities.

According to Afghanistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Araghchi, in a meeting with Afghan Foreign Minister, Hanif Atmar, discussed the "comprehensive document for long-term cooperation" between the two countries and the preparations for forming a joint economic commission between Afghanistan and Iran. Atmar stated, during the meeting, that cooperation between Kabul and Tehran is important to achieve lasting peace, security and economic development in the region. He added that the Afghan Government has the will to strengthen relations between the two governments. Atmar also spoke in detail about the significance of bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the field of investment in macroeconomic projects aimed at connecting Afghanistan and Iran to the countries of Central Asia and the region. He also noted that the opening of the Khaf-Herat Railway has enhanced the spirit of hope and confidence to strengthen regional cooperation and connectivity. Araghchi, meanwhile, briefed Atmar about the progress made in setting up a joint economic commission between Afghanistan and Iran. He assured Atmar of his country's support for the success of the Afghan peace process and the preservation of the achievements of the last 19 years. According to a statement by Afghanistan's National Security Council, Araghchi also met with National Security Adviser, Hamdullah Mohib, and discussed bilateral relations, the peace process and other relevant topics.

- On December 13, Commander Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, Gen. Scott Miller stated that he has orders to reduce the US military presence to 2,500 troops, and that part of this is in line with the US-Taliban Peace Agreement.

Gen. Miller stated: "... We still have a force that's capable of providing the necessary support to the Afghan security forces. In some cases, it's a direct combat support. We still have our train, advice and assist mission that takes place and we certainly have the ability to protect our force as well as meet our counterterrorism commitments". While criticising the high level of violence by the Taliban, he reiterated that the troop reduction will be done in accordance with conditions on ground. The Trump Administration has announced that the number of US forces in Afghanistan will be reduced from roughly 4,000 troops to 2,500 troops by mid-January, 2021. However, the National Defence Authorisation Act, approved overwhelmingly by the US Congress on December 11, 2020, limits Trump's authority to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan. The defence bill requires the Trump Administration to submit a detailed report to Congress before withdrawing US troops in Afghanistan as agreed with the Taliban, and submit its February 29 Peace Agreement with the Taliban to Congress for review and oversight. The bill stipulates that the incoming Biden Administration must also report back on the Taliban's compliance with the deal. Moreover, lawmakers also authorised \$4bn in US assistance to the Afghan National Security Forces and an extension of a special visa programme for Afghan nationals who assist US forces in the country.

- On December 12, negotiators of the intra-Afghan talks in Doha exchanged their lists about the agenda of the peace negotiations, and announced that the next phase of the talks will begin on January 5, 2021.

Taliban spokesperson, Mohammad Naeem, stated: “Both sides of intra-Afghan negotiations exchanged their preliminary list about the agenda of the talks. They also held preliminary discussions about this issue. In order to conduct more consultations, the two sides agreed to take a break from December 14, 2020 to January 5, 2021”. On December 2, 2020, the negotiating teams agreed on procedural rules for the talks. Following their agreement, they held three meetings on the agenda of the negotiations.

- On December 10, Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani and his Iranian counterpart, Hassan Rouhani, virtually spoke at the inaugural ceremony of the Herat-Khawaf Railway Line Project, a joint infrastructural project between Afghanistan and Iran.

President Ghani deemed the Herat-Khawaf railway a vital and important Project, not only for Afghanistan and Iran but also for the region and beyond. Meanwhile, President Rouhani stated that the Project will strengthen relations between Afghanistan and Iran. The Khawaf-Herat Railway Line is 130 km long, with 70 km in Iran and 60 km in Afghanistan. On December 9, 2020, Iran’s Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, hailed the joint railway Project linking eastern Iran to western Afghanistan as a boost to regional trade and travel. Afghanistan can now benefit from a railway that, for the first time, connects Turkey and Europe with Iranian ports in the Persian Gulf.

- On December 9, NATO urged the parties involved in the intra-Afghan talks in Doha to negotiate a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire and political roadmap.

A statement from NATO provided: “After four decades of conflict and suffering, a negotiated political settlement offers the only hope for a lasting peace. Violence, especially driven by Taliban attacks, continues to undermine the peace process and must end”. The statement added that NATO expects that negotiations will lead to an enduring and comprehensive Afghan peace agreement that brings the violence to an end, builds on the progress of the last 19 years, safeguards the human rights of all Afghans, particularly women, children, and minorities, upholds the rule of law, and ensures that Afghanistan never again serves as a safe haven for terrorists. It was also noted that NATO and its partners reaffirmed their commitment to Afghanistan, the Afghan people, and Afghanistan’s security forces.

While the Trump administration has been pushing for an abrupt troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, the US’ European partners urge a more cautious and conservative strategy. It appears that NATO finds it unwise to abandon Afghanistan without establishing a permanent base after almost two decades of hard-fought battles. NATO’s core interests in Afghanistan are to assure the continuation of the republic system; preserve the rights of minorities and women;

and safeguard a free media. Strategically, NATO remains concerned with the prevalence of terrorism, and has been seeking to check Russia's influence in the war torn country.

- On December 6, Afghanistan's Ministry of Defence stated that at least 21 provinces in the country have witnessed clashes between security forces and the Taliban over the last 24 hours.
- On December 4, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, stated that violence in Afghanistan is unacceptably high.

Pompeo stated, during his virtual address to an annual security conference, that Washington has asked the warring parties in Afghanistan to "stand back and indeed stand down". He added that he met with the negotiating teams during a November 2020 visit to Doha and asked both sides to reduce violence. Pompeo also mentioned that he hopes that the parties could begin to address some of the front end issues, including a nationwide ceasefire. Meanwhile, Taliban spokesperson, Mohammad Naeem, stated that a ceasefire will be on the agenda among other topics in the negotiations with the Afghan Government team.

On December 2, 2020, the two negotiating teams finalised procedural rules for intra-Afghan talks. On December 5, 2020, their working committees held their first meeting to discuss the agenda of the talks. It is expected that a reduction in violence leading to a comprehensive ceasefire agreement would be sorted out soon.

- On December 5, Afghan political leadership attended the first meeting of the High Council for National Reconciliation, where they emphasised the need for unity and consensus among political leaders to move the peace efforts forward.

Addressing the meeting, Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, stated that the peace negotiations have entered the second phase where the need for more consultations and consensus among Afghan leadership is more crucial. Abdullah Abdullah, the Head of High Council for National Reconciliation stressed that peace requires unity, and that the Afghan leadership is ready to fully engage with the Taliban to discuss all issues. Former Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, stated that the meeting is a good step for peace, which is the demand of every Afghan. He added that peace efforts will succeed when there is unity among Afghans and that it is an obligation for Afghans to end the bloodshed. Former Jihadi Leader, Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf, stated that peace is a responsibility and that Afghans want peace with dignity in which the country's national sovereignty is preserved. The Council has been established to oversee the political negotiations with the Taliban.

- On December 3, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark Milley stated that after two decades of consistent effort, the US has achieved a modicum of success in Afghanistan.

Gen. Milley stated: “We went to Afghanistan ... to ensure that Afghanistan never again became a platform for terrorists to strike the United States”. He added that US troops will continue training Afghan combat forces after the partial US withdrawal ordered by President Donald Trump last month. President Trump has ordered a major reduction in US troops in Afghanistan and Iraq by January 15, 2021. Gen. Milley also noted: “...America will reduce its footprint to a couple of larger bases with several satellite bases that provide the capability to continue our train, advise and assist mission and our counterterrorism mission”. A hasty foreign troop withdrawal from Afghanistan has been opposed by the US’ NATO allies, the Afghan Government and regional countries.

- On December 2, the Taliban and the Afghan Government negotiating teams agreed on procedural rules for direct talks.

The opening ceremony of intra-Afghan negotiations was held on September 12, 2020, in Doha. The negotiating teams had formed small groups called “contact groups”, which have held five meetings to discuss rules and regulations, as well as the agenda of the negotiations. However, due to their inability to finalise procedural rules, there has not been a single round of direct talks between them. The Taliban had been demanding recognition of the US-Taliban Peace Agreement as the ‘mother deal’ underpinning Afghan peace negotiations, and recognition of the Hanafi Fiqh as the sole religious legal guidelines for the talks. The Government’s team, on the other hand, has proposed that if a religious issue arises it can be resolved based on Hanafi Fiqh by default, however, the Shia Personal Status Law must be respected, and the choice of religious jurisprudence should be given to other minority groups as well.

According to Afghan media, both sides have agreed on a three-page document setting the rules and procedures for negotiations between them, though the precise details have not been reported. Government team negotiator, Fawzia Koofi, informed the media that the guidelines for direct talks cover 21 articles. Some of the rules for the talks include the start of sessions with the recitation of the Holy Quran, breaks in sessions for prayers, seeking direction from the Sunnah and the Quran when disputes are encountered, and prayers at the end of each session. The Taliban stated that the US-Taliban deal, UN decisions on peace, and the demands of the negotiation teams have been accepted as the guidelines for talks.

The finalisation of guiding principles for intra-Afghan talks has widely been welcomed by the international community. There are high expectations that the development would pave the way for a reduction in violence in Afghanistan and secure a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire between the Taliban and US led Afghan Government forces.

- On December 1, NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, stated that the military alliance faces a difficult dilemma in Afghanistan, i.e. whether to leave, and risk

Afghanistan once again becoming a safe haven for international terrorists; or to stay, and risk a longer mission, with renewed violence.

By deliberating upon the main issue that the US-Taliban Agreement mandates all international troops, including NATO troops, exit Afghanistan by May 1, 2021, Stoltenberg stated: “That’s the reason why we are now faced with a very clear decision, a very difficult choice to be made, which actually represents a dilemma for all of us. And that is either to stay, because we assess that Taliban have not been living up to their part of the agreement, not delivering on their promises, but then, of course, risk continued fighting, long-term continued military involvement in Afghanistan; or to leave, but then risk jeopardising the gains we have made in fighting international terrorism and preventing Afghanistan from being a platform for launching attacks against our countries”. He also mentioned that in his phone call with US President-elect, Joe Biden, he emphasised the importance of Afghanistan and highlighted the “dilemma NATO faces”.

Stoltenberg also noted that the NATO Training Mission in Afghanistan will continue in its current configuration, meaning that it will maintain the different bases, including the German-led base in Mazar-e-Sharif, and the Italian-led base in Herat. He maintained that NATO, together with the new Biden Administration, will make an assessment of whether conditions are in place to a degree that makes it possible for NATO to leave or whether it is required to stay in Afghanistan. The debate of troop withdrawal has come to the limelight after US Acting Secretary of Defence, Christopher Miller, announced, on November 17, 2020, that the US would be decreasing the presence of troops in Afghanistan to 2500 by mid-January, 2021.

Bangladesh

- On December 5, Bangladesh began sending a first group of more than 1,500 Rohingya refugees to an isolated island despite calls by human rights groups for a halt to this process.

Located 21 miles (34 kilometers) from the mainland, the island surfaced only 20 years ago and was never inhabited. The island was once regularly submerged by monsoon rains but now has flood protection embankments, houses, hospitals and mosques built at a cost of more than \$112 million by the Bangladesh Navy. The United Nations (UN) has also voiced concern that refugees be allowed to make a free and informed decision about whether to relocate to the island in the Bay of Bengal. The island’s facilities are built to accommodate 100,000 people, just a fraction of the million Rohingya Muslims who have fled waves of violent persecution in their native Myanmar and are currently living in crowded, squalid refugee camps. About 700,000 Rohingyas fled to the camps in Cox’s Bazar after August 2017, when the military in Buddhist-majority Myanmar began a harsh crackdown against the Muslim group, following an attack by insurgents. The crackdown included rapes, killings and the torching of thousands of homes. It

was termed ethnic cleansing by global rights groups and the UN. International aid agencies and the UN have vehemently opposed the relocation since it was first proposed in 2015, expressing fear that a big storm could overwhelm the island and endanger thousands of lives.

- *Dawn reported on December 4 that Bangladesh's Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, held a meeting with Pakistan's High Commissioner to Bangladesh, Imran Ahmed Siddiqui, and called for strengthening ties with Pakistan.*

During the meeting, the two sides agreed to further strengthen existing fraternal relations between them. PM Hasina emphasised the need for strengthening bilateral ties. She also wished the people of Pakistan well and assured the High Commissioner of her full support in discharging his official duties. Meanwhile, Siddiqui informed PM Hasina that the government and the people of Pakistan held the Bangladeshi leadership and people in high esteem and affection. In July 2020, Pakistani Prime Minister, Imran Khan, held a telephonic conversation with PM Hasina and expressed his government's desire to deepen fraternal relations on the basis of mutual trust, mutual respect and sovereign equality. The incumbent Pakistani Government has been pushing to improve its relations with all regional states.

Bhutan

- *On December 12, Bhutan and Israel established formal diplomatic relations.*

The Notes Verbale on the establishment of diplomatic relations were exchanged between the Ambassador of Bhutan to India, Major General Vetsop Namgyel, and the Ambassador of Israel to India, Dr. Ron Malka, at the Embassy of Israel in New Delhi. The two Ambassadors recognized the growing engagements between Bhutan and Israel and welcomed the establishment of diplomatic relations. They reiterated the shared desire of the two countries to further strengthen bilateral cooperation to the benefit of both peoples. In addition to deepening cooperation in areas, including economic, technological and agriculture development, the two Ambassadors highlighted that the ties between the peoples through cultural exchanges and tourism would also be further enhanced. India's smooth ties with both Israel and Bhutan and the arrangement of the signing ceremony in New-Delhi signify that India has played a key role in the establishment of diplomatic relations between Tel Aviv and Thimphu.

---Kashif Hussain

UNITED NATIONS

- On December 12, UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, warned that the world was moving towards a catastrophic temperature rise of more than 3 degrees this century.

While addressing the Climate Ambition Summit 2020, Antonio Guterres noted that the world was not moving in the right direction to limit the temperature rise, even after the conclusion of the Paris Agreement in 2015. Guterres stated: “Today, we are 1.2 degrees hotter than before the industrial revolution. If we don’t change course, we may be headed for a catastrophic temperature rise of more than 3 degrees this century”.

On December 12, the UN, the United Kingdom and France co-hosted the Climate Ambition Summit 2020, marking five years of the Paris Agreement. The Paris Agreement is a legally binding international treaty on climate change. It was adopted by 196 Parties at COP 21 in Paris, on December 12, 2015 and entered into force on November 4, 2016. Its goal is to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, compared to pre-industrial levels. During the Summit, some 70 Heads of State debated new measures, policies and plans, aimed at limiting the greenhouse gas emissions, and ensuring that the warming of the planet is limited to 1.5 degrees.

The UK announced that it would cut emissions by 68%, compared to 1990 levels, within the next five years, while the European Union bloc committed to a 55% cut over the same time period. Pakistan announced that the country would scrap plans for new coal power plants. China noted that it would increase the share of non-fossil fuel in primary energy consumption to around 25% by 2030. India announced a new target of increasing its capacity of renewable energy by 2030.

The UK also announced that it would host the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26), with its partner, Italy, in Glasgow from November 1 to 12, 2021. The COP26 summit will bring parties together to accelerate action towards achievement of the goals under the Paris Agreement and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

- On December 7, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a resolution urging the Russian Federation to withdraw from Crimea.
- On December 7, the UNGA adopted a resolution declaring December 27 an “International Day of Epidemic Preparedness”.

The UNGA adopted Resolution A/75/L.38/Rev.1, titled “Problem of the militarisation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, Ukraine, as well as parts of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov”, by a vote of 63 in favour, 17 against, and 62 abstentions. The

Resolution urged Russia to “immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw its military forces from Crimea and end its temporary occupation of the territory of Ukraine without delay”. While introducing the text of the Resolution, Ukraine’s Permanent Representative to the UN asserted that Russia was violating international law and the UN Charter by occupying Crimea and turning it into a powerful military outpost. In response, however, Russian’s Permanent Representative to the UN termed the text of the resolution “politicised”, and noted that the UNGA was distracted by a text put forth by Ukraine. The Russian Representative emphasised that the people of Crimea had already decided to join Russia through a referendum held in 2014.

Meanwhile, the UNGA also adopted Resolution A/75/L.8, declaring December 27 an International Day of Epidemic Preparedness. The Resolution aims to highlight the importance of the prevention of, preparedness for, and partnerships against epidemics. Vietnam had introduced the draft resolution. The Permanent Representative of Vietnam noted that observing an International Day on Epidemic Preparedness could help in reminding the world of the impacts of past epidemics and the need to adopt a permanent approach of epidemic prevention.

- On December 4, UN General-Secretary Antonio Guterres appreciated the continued implementation of the Ceasefire Agreement in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh region, signed between Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia on November 10, 2020.

Antonio Guterres urged all States Parties to the Ceasefire Agreement to continue implementing their obligations. Guterres also underscored that the UN was “prepared to respond to the humanitarian needs in all areas affected by the conflict, and to scale up ongoing assistance in Armenia and Azerbaijan, as required”. While encouraging both Armenia and Azerbaijan to begin dialogue to foster regional peace and stability, the UN Secretary-General urged the two countries “to resume negotiations under the auspices of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s (OSCE) Minsk Group Co-Chairs to reach a lasting peaceful settlement”. The OSCE Minsk Group for Nagorno-Karabakh was created in 1992 for promoting settlement of the conflict. Its Co-Chairs are Russia, France and the US. Originally, it was responsible for making preparations for conferences. Since June 1993, it has brokered all conflict settlement efforts and has been directly involved in talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

- On December 3, UN experts called upon the UN Security Council to bring to an end human rights violations ongoing in Yemen.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), more than 131,000 civilians died in Yemen owing to indirect causes, such as lack of food, health services and infrastructure. The OCHA also noted that over 3,000 children have been killed, and 1,500 civilian casualties have been reported in the first nine months of 2020. In this regard, Kamel Jendoubi, Chairperson of the UN Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on

Yemen, stated: “Our investigations this year have confirmed rampant levels of serious violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, many of which may amount to war crimes”. Jendoubi observed that the warring parties in Yemen continue to demonstrate complete disregard towards international human rights norms and international humanitarian law. The Group emphasised that there are no clean hands in the war and that all parties to the conflict bear responsibility. The Group also called on the UNSC to end impunity, expand sanctions and refer the situation to the International Criminal Court (ICC).

- On December 2, a new UN-backed report noted that the international community must decrease production of fossil fuels by 6% per year, between 2020 and 2030, in order to avert a "catastrophic" global temperature rise.
- On December 2, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres declared the fight against climate change a top priority in the 21st century.

The Report titled “Production Gap Report” was jointly produced by several research institutions, including the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), the Overseas Development Institute, and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP). The Report has measured the “gap” between aspirations of the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change and countries’ planned production of coal, oil, and gas. In this regard, the Report noted that the “production gap” remained large as the world countries planned to produce more than double the amount of fossil fuels in 2030 than what would be consistent with a 1.5-degree Celsius temperature limit. The Report emphasised that the production and use of fossil needs to decrease quickly if the world is to achieve the 2015 Paris Agreement goals. Inger Andersen, Executive Director of UNEP, stated: “Governments must seize the opportunity to direct their economies and energy systems away from fossil fuels, and build back better towards a more just, sustainable, and resilient future”.

Meanwhile, on December 2, 2020, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres declared the fight against climate change a top priority in the 21st century. In his speech at Columbia University, in New York, Guterres noted that the world was facing major issues, including the COVID-19 pandemic, global warming, and ecological degradation. He emphasised that 2020 was on track to be one of the warmest years on record globally, with continued increases in carbon dioxide levels reaching 148% of pre-industrial levels. The UN Secretary-General noted that human activities were responsible for climate change and, accordingly, only human action could resolve the same by making efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius, above pre-industrial levels, and to decrease fossil fuel production.

- On December 1, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) adopted 5 resolutions on Palestine and the Middle East, including one calling upon UN Member States not to recognise any changes on the status of Jerusalem.

The UNGA adopted a Resolution A/74/L.15, titled “Peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine”, by a recorded vote of 147 in favour, 7 against, and 13 abstentions. The Resolution called on Member States to ensure that agreements with Israel do not imply recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the territories it occupied in 1967. It also called on Israel to comply strictly with international law, cease actions aimed at altering the demographic composition of the territory, and immediately halt all settlement activities. In order to achieve long lasting peace in the Middle East, the Resolution called for an end to the Israeli occupation.

In another Resolution A/74/L.9, titled “The Syrian Golan”, the UNGA declared Israeli imposition of its laws, jurisdiction and administration on the occupied Syrian Golan as null and void. The Resolution demanded Israel withdraw from the territory. The UNGA adopted this Resolution by a recorded vote of 91 in favour, 9 against, and 65 abstentions.

The UNGA also adopted, by record vote, three other Resolutions, namely A/74/L.14, A/74/L.16, and A/74/L.17, respectively titled “Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People”; “Division for Palestinian Rights of the Secretariat”; and, “Special information programme on the question of Palestine of the Department of Global Communications of the Secretariat”. These resolutions deal with the UN system’s own provision of support to the Palestinian people, their right to self-determination, and support for bringing to an end the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. The Representative of Israel opposed adoption of the five resolutions.

While appreciating international support for the Palestinian people, the Permanent Observer for the State of Palestine asserted that the continued disregard towards holding Israel accountable for its crimes led Israel to believe it is a State above the law. The Israeli representative noted that the international community has fully embraced the Palestinian perspective and thereby stands in the way of ending the conflict by encouraging Palestinians to refuse any proposed solution. Meanwhile, the Representative of the US reiterated Israel’s sentiment that the resolutions were biased against Israel. The US Representative noted that these resolutions were one-sided in their approach, and that they could undermine international trust in the UN.

--- Moiz Khan

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