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Note From Head CS3

Dear All,

The Crisis in Ukraine has escalated into an aggressive war-like situation in Europe after several decades. As the West and Russia maintain their respective areas of influence, in the median areas which should essentially be a neutral zone of peace and stability, the scenario obtained of the massing of troops on one side and threat versus threat response emanating was not unexpected given the legacy of interstate and inter bloc rivalries in Europe. This discourse aims not to take any sides but to envisage the possible impact of the crisis in Ukraine in the Indo Pacific and India.

Geographically the European continent is far separated from the Indo Pacific, but in an increasingly globalized world interlinkages are political, economic, trade, defence and security, thus multi-faceted. This is evident from multiple forays by the European Union and member states as well as the United Kingdom outlining their strategies and following up with deployment of military assets to the Indo Pacific within the last one year or so. This comes about after the United States undertook rebalancing to the Indo Pacific almost a decade ago and has now expanded on an Indo Pacific strategy that integrates many partnerships in the region politically such as the QUAD and militarily through AUKUS both recently activated forums. Russia too has strong linkages in the region and not just the military, nuclear, space and energy partnership with India but also with countries ranging from Pakistan to Bangladesh in what it defines as the Asia Pacific rather than the Indo Pacific.

A point to note is that a war or a conflict in Europe has always drawn the militaries of the Sub Continent with the British Indian Army forming the bulwark of the armed force in the First and the Second World War. Not that India today will be embroiled in a war or conflict in Europe far from it but the historical reminder needs mention. The Indo Pacific shift of the United States and western militaries was seen as a response to a rising threat from China with the underlying theme being the shift of geo-economics from the West to the East, whatever be the actualities of the situation.

For India the choice in the UNSC was between a host of key strategic partners as Russia on one hand and the United States, European members as France and UK on the other. Selection between such close political associates was not possible, but there is a belief in India that there are genuine security concerns of Russia that must be taken into account and not push Moscow.

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ANALYSIS

THE DURAND LINE & THE COMPLICATIONS OF VICTORY

-Maj Gen Jagatbir Singh, VSM (RETD)

In at least two incidents in late December and early January, Afghan Taliban soldiers intervened to block an ongoing Pakistani project to erect border fencing along the shared border between Afghanistan and Pakistan — the demarcation of which prior Afghan governments have never accepted. One of the incidents happened on the very day when representatives of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) gathered in Islamabad to discuss Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis. Despite attempts to resolve the issue diplomatically, and the Taliban's dependence on Pakistan as a bridge to the international community, both sides remain at odds over the fence.

The Taliban have acknowledged tensions with Pakistan and said that the "issues" with Islamabad would be addressed through diplomatic channels. Taking to Twitter, Abdul Qahar Balkhi, the spokesperson of the Afghan Foreign Ministry added, "IEA believing in addressing problems through understanding, talks and good neighbourliness will address this issue through diplomatic channels." Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi acknowledged that there are "some complications" regarding the Pak-Afghan border fencing and the matter was being taken up with the Taliban.

They have also stated that Pakistan has no authority to fence the Durand Line since it causes division among the people of one nation and that they will continue to prevent Pakistan from doing that. The Taliban had also recently stopped Pakistani military personnel from building their outpost in Afghanistan's western Nimroz province. The border clashes have come amid claims from both Taliban and Pakistan that they had resolved the row over border fencing by agreeing that further work on the project that led to a tense situation would be done through consensus.

The reason lies in the fact that the making of this 2640-km long border, known as Durand Line, has been rooted in treachery and deception. That is why most Afghans have not been able to accept it. In fact, Durand Line is a reminder of how Afghans were cheated by the British and an artificial border was created whose legitimacy continues to remain questionable. The Durand Line passes through ten provinces of present-day Afghanistan. In Pakistan, it passes through provinces such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (also called North Western Frontier Province), Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Balochistan. At that time, however, it satisfied colonial aims of defining the British's limits in the 19th century's 'Great Game', with the aim of preventing Czarist Russia from challenging their regional suzerainty by seizing Kabul.

The agreement that created Durand Line was signed on 12 November 1893 between British diplomat Mortimer Durand and Adbur Rahman, the Amir of Afghanistan at that time. The Durand agreement divided Afghanistan's Pashtun population. Forty thousand square miles of the area under Afghanistan where almost half of the Pashtun population lived came under British rule as a result of this agreement. In lieu of this agreement, the annual British grant to Afghanistan was increased from Rupees 12 lakh to Rupees 18 lakh, a very small amount when it was compared to what Afghanistan had lost.

Interestingly, Rajiv Dogra in his superb book on the subject; 'Durands Curse' states that initially, it was agreed that the agreement would be signed in Persian. The Amir knew Persian but didn't know English but Durand had excellent command over both languages. But the agreement was signed in English! The question is how would the Amir have known what was there in the agreement if it was signed in English as the Amir didn't know the language.

He also goes on to mention in his book; "Once the Amir was brought around, the map-making was a casual affair. Durand's was an instant line, drawn on a small copybook-type map and covered nearly 1,600 miles. Mortimer did not have the time to consult anyone, nor did he have the professional help of the kind that is necessary in such a major undertaking. And he consulted neither the historical evidence nor consulted any representative of the affected region. People who were to live on two sides of this line were given no say in the matter."

For decades, people living on either side of the border routinely travelled back and forth using routes without border controls. For many Afghans, especially the predominantly Pashtuns, Pakistan's efforts to formalize the border is a source of outrage. Although it is officially recognized in the United Nations and throughout the international community as Pakistan's western border, the Durand Line nonetheless divides Pashtun lands, tribes, and families and remains one of the sources of the instability which has plagued the region, especially since the creation of the Pakistani state. Incidentally, in 1947, Afghanistan was the only country in the world to oppose Pakistan's membership to the United Nations, on account of its refusal to recognize the Durand Line, and demanded that Pashtuns living on the Pakistani side of the line be given the right to self-determination. President Hamid Karzai continued to challenge the 1893 treaty, saying Afghanistan would 'never recognize' the Durand Line'. What is surprising, however, is that the Taliban has gone a step further than previous Afghan governments and openly confronted Pakistan's fencing plan at a time when the government is heavily dependent on Islamabad for political and diplomatic support.

Pakistan has completed fencing some 90% of the Durand Line under a \$500 million project launched in early 2017, by erecting two sets of chain-link barricades

fitted with surveillance cameras and infra-red detectors to check infiltration. Work on the fencing has continued uninterrupted over nearly five years – even during the pandemic. Pakistan feels that the fencing, manned by armed garrisons, would physically reinforce, and more importantly, demarcate the Durand Line, curbing all calls for Pashtunistan.

But the Taliban by opposing all further work on fencing the border within four months of seizing power, have reignited territorial dilemma of Pashtunistan – other than in Baluchistan. Further, the Taliban's leadership perceives some political benefit by a strong nationalist stance, given widespread perceptions of the Taliban's close relationship with Pakistan, as most analysts believe that they are Pakistan's proxy.

For Afghans, there is powerful symbolism in the Durand Line; it is widely viewed as a historic wrong that must be redressed, however unlikely the prospect. Conversely, Pakistan considers the line fundamental to its territorial integrity.

Though many predicted that tensions would sharpen between the Taliban and Pakistan over the Durand Line, the two countries managed to stabilize the flow of commercial and humanitarian border traffic in relatively quick and efficient manner after the Taliban's swift takeover. While major disruptions to supply chains remain, the two largest border crossings had re-established at least some two-way commercial traffic — and the Taliban have since touted selective statistics suggesting that some exports have even increased to Pakistan since their takeover.

Another issue in the relations between the two governments seems to be the escalation of violence by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) against Pakistan. Operating from bases in Afghanistan, and with a growing presence inside Pakistan, the group mounted an increasing number of attacks against Pakistani security forces — as well as against some critical Chinese interests in Pakistan. The insurgency also showed renewed political strength by bringing in splintered factions and improving internal cohesion. Additionally, Al-Qaeda signalled its continued alliance with the TTP. On 18 January, after an attack by the TTP on the police in Pakistan's capital city of Islamabad, Pakistan's Interior Minister warned that more attacks by the group are likely.

The group, though ideologically aligned to the Afghan Taliban, is a separate entity and has been responsible for some horrific terrorist attacks over the past decade. After taking power in August 2021, the Taliban freed many TTP prisoners from Afghan jails. The TTP, in turn, proclaimed the Taliban to be a model for its war against Pakistan. Fears that fighters would use Afghanistan to launch cross-border attacks, prompted Pakistan to negotiate a one-month ceasefire with the group in November. But the TTP withdrew from the agreement in December, arguing that Pakistan had not honoured conditions such as releasing dozens of prisoners.

Taliban's reluctance in acting against the TTP stems not just from ideological affinity. They are also worried that should they clamp down too much on the TTP, their cadre could cross over to the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), swelling

its ranks. Reports already allege that many existing ISKP members are ex-TTP fighters. Incidentally, Pakistani Taliban chief Noor Wali Mehsud had once stated; "We are hoping to take control of Pakistan's border tribal region and make them independent."

But the question that needs to be examined is whether these are isolated incidents or do they represent something of greater significance in Pakistan's security calculus; namely the 'strategic depth' they hoped to gain in Afghanistan by having a pliable government in place. The stability Pakistan hoped to achieve by a Taliban government in place may not work in the manner perceived as tribal loyalties and traditions can bind people more closely than national identities. There is no doubt that a Pashtun prides himself as such overriding his national identity. Is there a fault line existing in this Western region of Pakistan that can be reignited and exploited; if incidents spiral out of control, Pakistani's will be concerned as there are more than twice the number of Pashtun's in Pakistan ; than in Afghanistan.

Hence has the Taliban's victory emboldened hard line forces on and within Pakistan's borders? Husain Haqqani, the former Pakistani ambassador to the US, has said that "Every time . . . the Taliban have been in power, there has definitely been a spill over of Taliban beliefs and ideas into Pakistan," On 06 January Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, said; "The Durand Line is an issue of the whole nation, not the government. It doesn't belong to the government. We will give the responsibility to the nation, so the nation will make the decision." The definition of 'whole nation' is what will be top most in Pakistan's mind as there is no doubt that it hints at Pashtuns on either side of the line. As the complications in Pakistan's victory in Afghanistan are beginning to reveal itself, the unresolved question of the 2,640-kilometre Durand Line between Afghanistan and Pakistan will remain an enduring source of instability. The challenging operational context seems to endure and Pakistan may soon find itself at the receiving end.

** **Major General Major General Jagatbir Singh** was commissioned into 18 Cavalry in December 1981, a Regiment he has subsequently commanded. He has held various command, staff and instructional appointments and has served in varied terrains. Amongst his command assignments was conversion of an Armoured Brigade to an Arjun profile in the Desert Sector and command of an Armoured Division. He has been an instructor at the Indian Military Academy and served twice both as an Instructor and Senior Instructor and Head of Training Team in Defence Services Staff College. He has been writing articles on security related issues post retirement which have been published in various newspapers and magazines.*

ANALYSIS

IS AFGHANISTAN LEARNING TO LIVE WITH THE TALIBAN?

-Samridhhi Roy

The Taliban's ideology is coming to the fore despite attempts by the group to shape the narrative of a softer image. Taliban claims that Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) referred to so far as the de facto Authority by the UN and others is inclusive and includes members of all ethnic communities. There is no definition of inclusiveness claim acting officials of the government in Kabul and blame the international community for delaying recognition. Similarly, despite clear indications of abduction of women and curtailment of freedoms the Taliban claim that they respect women's rights and will be opening schools in the spring New Year from March 21. Faced with straight faced denials, international community while attempting to engage with the group holding a key conference in Oslo, Norway this month and participating in events organized by the IEA in Kabul on rejuvenating the economy have send a clear signal that there will be no recognition till global standards of inclusiveness and rights are met. On the security front as well while the level of violence has gone down, there is a gradual uptick. In the last week of January for instance, 27 people were killed and 15 others injured in separate incidents in Baghlan, Herat, Helmand, Kunar and Nangarhar provinces as per Pajhwok Afghan News. The incidents include roadside bombs and IEDs, assaults and gun attacks targeting opponents. The IEA is continuing to build up a regular force even including a so called "Suicide" squad battalion while the Taliban have been ruthless in targeting their opponents be it Islamic State of Khorasan, former defence officials or women protesters using extra judicial means.

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) or the Taliban referred to as the de facto Authority in Kabul have been using repetition as a strategy for persuasion of the international community for recognition, release of assets that have been held mainly by the United States and also aircraft and helicopters that were flown out of the country by former Afghan Air Force (AAF) pilots. The Taliban acting officials claim that a responsible regime is governing in Kabul which fulfils the requirements for recognition that have been set as per international parameters and thus should be undertaken immediately.

In a major conference on "Economy of Afghanistan," held on January 19, Prime Minister Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund appealed to Islamic countries to be the first to recognize the Afghan government. The meeting was attended by members of the Islamic Emirate cabinet and UN representatives as well as

representatives of 20 foreign countries. Akhund also urged the US to release the Central Bank's assets. At the same conference, Amir Khan Muttaqi, the acting minister of Foreign Affairs, claimed that Afghanistan already has an independent government. "It is obvious to them that Afghanistan has a government which is responsible, committed and believes in acting in mutual interest," he said. The conference was telecast live on the state-run RTA channel indicating that the Taliban have very quickly adapted to exploitation of international media channels to effect.

However Taliban claims of a responsible and committed government fall flat as explained by Atal Ahmadzai, St. Lawrence University and Faten Ghosn, University of Arizona, writing in the Conversation how the Taliban's promised transformation from Taliban 1.0 to Taliban 2.0 is restricted to a public relations campaigns on mainstream and social media.¹ "As political science professors specializing in conflict and violence², we find that the Taliban's changes are limited to international public relations campaigns on social media and other outlets,"³ "While promoting a moderate face for the world, with promises of living "peacefully" and respecting women's rights, the regime has continued to systematically violate human rights and strengthen its autocratic grip".⁴This is evident from the fact that while Taliban claim that women will be provided equal rights, there are numerous restrictions imposed from ban on travel long distance without a male relative, closure for women and participation in sports activities. Stopping to a ridiculous level, the Taliban have even gone to the extent of beheading mannequins in shops in Herat.

To claim that action is being taken against deviants, officials of the Islamic Emirate from time to time warn their members to uphold personal privacy. These warnings were issued after numerous complaints of citizens over actions of the Islamic Emirate forces that included "phone-searching and home-to-home searching." The Ministry of Vice and Virtue has indicated that, "No one has the right to violate others' privacy. They should not go through phones and other electronic devices. The investigation of residences, stores and hotels should be based on legal documents."⁵ However, blatant violations of this dictate are evident and reported on the social media. The Ministry of Interior of the Taliban has reported that 3000 affiliates have been dismissed from the organization, yet the incidents of violations are continuing. There is a "slip between the cup and the lip," as the saying goes with little impact on the ground and the slip in this case is costing millions of Afghans their life and liberty.

¹ <https://www.security-risks.com/post/taliban-2-0-aren-t-different-from-first-regime-after-all>

² https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=aSG_jtkAAAAJ&hl=en

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/20/technology/afghanistan-taliban-social-media.html>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-show-conciliatory-face-first-kabul-news-conference-2021-08-17/>

⁵ <https://tolonews.com/index.php/node/176290>

Given this reality, the Taliban's strategy of repetition is not likely to earn them international recognition unless there are perceptible changes on the ground.

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NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

This section explores ongoing security issues and perspectives from India's neighbouring countries, including – Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan and Maldives.

AFGHANISTAN

Military and Security

Regrouping and Formation of Regular Force

Attending in graduation of 500 army force members in Herat province, Islamic Emirate Chief of Staff Qari Fasihuddin Fitrat said that Afghanistan has at least 80,000 army members grouped in eight corps across the country. The chief of staff further said that the government will attempt to build an army of 150,000 members. "Everyone who is a volunteer will be recruited in the army and we will recruit professional people as well," said Qari Fasihuddin Fitrat. Interior Ministry of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in a statement on, January 8, 2022, said that a battalion of 200 Special Forces graduated after completing the three-month course in Kabul. The statement reads that the Forces are equipped with Night Vision scopes and Laser mounted weapons and are given rigorous physical, mental and ideological training.

Officials of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan said that they will create a special battalion of suicide attackers to be part of their future army. Deputy Minister of information and culture and spokesperson of the Taliban Zabiullah Mujahid said that the battalion will be part of their special forces and will be active under Defense Ministry. Zabiullah Mujahid said that the battalion will be used during special operations. Interior Ministry of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan on January 19, announced that the interim government led by Mullah Muhammad Hassan Akhund has passed the scheme of uniform for the personnel of the ministry. The new uniform would have some slight differences to the uniform of the former security forces to distinguish from the past but will also enable the people at large to

distinguish between the State security forces and the rag tag armed elements who are roaming on the streets enforcing their own version of the law.

Targeting the Opposition

A UN report which is claimed to be seen by Reuters has stated that the Taliban and its allies are believed to have killed scores of former Afghan officials, security force members and people who worked with the international military contingent since the U.S.-led pull out. The U.N. mission "continues to receive credible allegations of killings, enforced disappearances and other violations" against former officials, security force members and people who worked for the U.S.-led international military contingent despite a general amnesty announced by the Taliban, the Reuters claimed the Report said. 100 ex officials and extra judicial killings of the Islamic state has been reported. With control of the country and the media the campaign targeting former defence officials has only increased even though the Taliban defence minister and other leader have made statements reminding the cadres of the amnesty that has been granted to these by the Supreme Authority of the group Mullah Haibatullah.

Security for TAPI

The Taliban government have announced their plan to deploy a contingent of the Islamist fighters from a special unit to continue working on the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) project, which was suspended last year due to uncertainty and insecurity following the imminent collapse of Kabul. The plan is to deploy a 30,000-member security unit for the security of the TAPI project which would be the first under the current Taliban regime to receive a massive troop deployment to ensure security and safety. The project will involve multi-ministerial cooperation with the Ministry of Defense, the Interior Ministry, and the Intelligence Directorate involved. The TAPI Gas Project is an initiative that Turkmenistan conceived in 2015 to transport natural gas from its Galkynysh gas fields to India by 2019. However, the date has been delayed multiple times. The project estimated to

cost about \$7.5 billion is anticipated to allow pumping about 33 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year to India.

Airport Operations

Operations at 27 civilian and military airports which were halted after the fall of the former government have resumed. "Most of these airports did not have problems, only limited airports such as Khwaja Rawash, Kandahar and Khost airports had problems," said Latifullah Hakimi, head of the military and civil regulatory commission. He added: "We divided the five parts into two parts, one military and the other civilian, because it is no longer necessary, and here is one government, before it used to be like (multiple) governments." According to Hakimi, there are currently three military airports operating: including Bagram in Parwan, Shurab in Helmand and Shindand Airport in Herat.

ISIS K

There is a perception that security in Afghanistan has vastly improved since a 20-year-long armed struggle by the Taliban ended with the group's capture of the capital, Kabul, in August. However, several attacks have been reported each week throughout the country, including some claimed by the regional chapter of ISIL (ISIS), Islamic State in Khorasan Province, ISKP (ISIS-K). ISKP has been accused of regularly targeting the country's Shia Hazara community with deadly attacks, and the area where blast occurred near a bus station is also inhabited by the community. While Taliban claims that the ISIS threat has been neutralized, potential of attacks continues to be high as is evident from the latest incident. Meanwhile, the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) and the Taliban are also locked in ideological differences. ISKP follow Hanafi Islam rather than Hanbali Islam.

Internal Security

Taliban has claimed that the CCTV network in the country has been activated and criminals will be controlled. The Islamic Emirate reiterated its orders to members to uphold people's personal privacy. This followed numerous complaints of citizens over actions of the Islamic Emirate forces that included "phone-searching and home-to-home searching." The Ministry of Vice and Virtue said in a statement that the violation of people's personal privacy without a warrant is forbidden. The statement was comprised of five points: "No one has the right to violate others' privacy. They should not go through phones and other electronic devices. The investigation of residences, stores and hotels should be based on legal documents," said Mohammad Sadiq Akif, spokesman for the ministry.

Acting Minister of Interior Sirajuddin Haqqani ordered Kabul police districts to avoid launching unauthorized operations and to not detain suspects or search people's houses without consulting the ministry. Haqqani in a meeting with officials of the Kabul police districts urged all security officials to behave well with the people and address their problems. He also ordered the release of people who are imprisoned in Kabul police districts who have not committed crimes. "Whenever you receive a report that someone has committed an illegal act, give me a report about what to do with this person. In my absence, contact the Mol's deputy minister and head of my office. You are only allowed to take steps in emergencies," said Sirajuddin Haqqani.

The acting Minister of Defense Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob Mujahid threatened to suppress those who are "creating unrest" in the country. "If an individual in the east or west, anyone, anywhere... anyone belonging to any (ethnic group) stands against the government, he is our opponent and we will consider him our opponent," he said. There are some groups trying to create insecurity in the country, Mullah Yaqoob said, without naming them. "If anyone, who belongs to any ethnic group, or any zone or any province, seeks to divide the country, he is our enemy, he is the enemy of our country," he said as per the Tolonews.

The chief of army staff, Qari Fasihuddin Fitrat, said they will not allow anyone to create disunity among the forces of the Islamic Emirate. "Don't allow the enemy of

the country, the enemies of Islam, to take root among you and break your command through propaganda,” he said. A statement of the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan said that they have found two caches of ammunitions that belong to the former prominent commander of the Hazara people, Commander Alipoor. Alipoor claimed that he is a commander of the Hizb-e-Wahdat-e-Islami Afghanistan (the Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan) faction of Abdul Ali Mazari. Head of Purification Commission of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Latifullah Hakimi said that they have so far dissociated 2,840 Taliban members accused of abusive practices across Afghanistan.

Afghan Aircraft Abroad

The United States Department of Defence or Pentagon said that no final decision has been made about the Afghan aircraft parked in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, but it is likely that these aircraft will not be returned to Afghanistan. Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby at a press briefing, in response to a question on the fate of the aircraft, said "it is safe to assume" that the aircraft will not be sent back to Afghanistan. "I don't have any update on it for you or any decision about how they will be handled. But it is safe to assume that they will not be sent into Afghanistan to be used by the Taliban," he said. He said the US is still working toward a decision about the aircraft. Kirby's remarks follow remarks by acting Defense Minister Mawlawi Mohammad Yaqoob who on January 11 2022 at a ceremony in Kabul called on Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to return Afghan aircraft. "Our aircraft that are in Tajikistan or Uzbekistan should be returned. We will not allow these aircraft to remain abroad or to be used by those countries," he said.

During the Taliban takeover of the country on August 15, US-trained Afghan air force pilots flew themselves and their families to Uzbekistan aboard more than 40 aircraft, including A-29 light attack planes and Black Hawk helicopters. In early September, Uzbek officials said that hundreds of Afghan pilots and their families had been deported for illegally flying into the country aboard military planes. According to reports, the Afghan citizens were relocated to a US military facility in the United Arab Emirates as part of a deal Washington struck with Uzbekistan to relocate more than 450 Afghans. Technically and legally speaking as the aircraft were provided for and

maintained with the assistance of the United States there is no obligation for return of these to the Islamic Emirate.

Border Security

The Islamic Emirate security forces are clashing on the borders with neighbours ranging from Pakistan to Iran and Uzbekistan. There have been multiple clashes on the Pakistan Afghanistan border – the Durand Line which is now being fenced. On the Iran border there have been clashes with farmers who had crossed the border wall for farming purpose and were attacked by the Taliban and now reports on the northern borders are emerging possibly due to high level of security established by the border guarding forces to prevent infiltration of radicals from Afghanistan.

What Led to Fall of Kabul?

Hamdullah Mohib, the former National Security Advisor (NSA) for the Afghan Republic government, in an interview with Foreign Policy recounted multiple factors which, according to him, led to the collapse of the republican system on August 15, 2021. Political differences, a split in the security hierarchy and the ultimatum of the US decision to pull out of the country in April by President Joe Biden is seen by the former National Security Adviser of the Republican Government the main causes for the rapid fall of Kabul to the Taliban. While these issues are expected to be debated with the US having set up a commission to seek more answers for what is considered as a major setback to American power, there are also concerns that the deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan may not have occurred had the rapid fall being avoided and a transition worked out for which talks between the Taliban and the Republic leaders were necessary. President Biden and his team were perhaps of the view that the political history of Afghanistan meant that unity in the political class will remain an illusion that was unachievable.

Development and Humanitarian Assistance

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan organized a conference called “Economy of Afghanistan” in the Afghan capital Kabul. This is the first time the IEA is

addressing the important issue after they recaptured power on August 15 last year. The conference was headed by the acting Prime Minister of the IEA Mullah Muhammad Hassan Akhund and second Deputy PM Abdul Salaam Hanafi and first Deputy PM Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar also participated in the same thereby indicating the importance been given to the issue in the country. The conference comes as Afghanistan is potentially on the brink of economic collapse and the country is going through the worst humanitarian crisis on earth.

The United Nations launched a Transitional Engagement Framework (TEF) for Afghanistan to save lives and help the people of Afghanistan in 2022 through sustaining essential services and preserving essential community systems. The TEF is the overarching strategic planning document for the UN system's assistance in 2022. It provides strategic direction and coherence; ensures UN coordination, collaboration, and complementarity of action; and provides a basis for joint risk-sharing and accountability. This should facilitate the humanitarian crisis in the country to ease. The August 2021 power shift in Afghanistan has created the need for a transitional strategy for the UN to address the deepening political and social-economic instability. The UN appreciates that Afghanistan is confronting an unprecedented humanitarian crisis with a very real risk of systemic collapse and human catastrophe that threatens to cancel many of the development gains of the last twenty years. In 2022, 24.4 million people in Afghanistan are projected to be in humanitarian need. Almost 23 million people are projected to face acute food insecurity, and over one million children risk dying from severe acute malnutrition. Poverty may become nearly universal affecting 95-97 percent of the population. The TEF hopes to prevent the same.

[Sources used for compilation Tolonews, Khaama Press, Pajhwok News, Afghan Presidential Office, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Indian MEA and Press Information Bureau of India]

SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka: Momentous Challenges Ahead

Key Trends

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa delivering government's policy statement on January 18th in the Parliament called on all Government and Opposition parties to unite to overcome the challenge faced by the country. The message for unity was in order as given multiple challenges faced by the country from foreign exchange to food and energy security and an Omicron wave that has barely commenced - national unity is essential. However, many see the government agenda as divisive thus creating more ethnic and religious discord which is not conducive to unity. On the economic front, Sri Lanka continued a 1.5 percent negative economic growth rate for the third quarter of 2021, as per Department of Census and Statistics (DCS). The overall debt burden also remains high, and with low economic growth, there would be a challenge in internal accruals; thus looking for external assistance would continue. India confirmed a \$400 million currency swap with Sri Lanka while deferring another \$500 million due for settlement to the Asian Clearing Union (ACU). The Public Utilities Commission of Sri Lanka (PUCSL), the electricity sector regulator, has decided that there is no need for a power interruption from 27th January until 31st January 2022 but urged the public and institutions to use electricity sparingly. The arrest of a former intelligence operative of the Liberation Tamil Tigers Eelam (LTTE) Satkunam alias Sabesan (47) is reported to have had close links with Sri Lankan don Angoda Lokka and his aides.

Sri Lanka: Gearing up for UNHRC meeting

In a well-orchestrated move, spearheaded by Sri Lanka's foreign minister Prof GL Peiris, Sri Lanka launched its PR exercise to highlight the progress it has made in fulfilling its commitment to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) with a diplomatic briefing of the consular corps in Colombo on January 26, 2022.

How much the briefing will impact the members at the UNHRC's 48th Regular Session to be held from February 28 to April 1, 2022 is an open question because President Gotabaya Rajapaksa had disowned the commitment made by the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, which had co-sponsored the UNHRC Resolution 30/1 co-sponsored by the Sirisena government and adopted in 2015. The Resolution 30/1 had called for wide ranging reforms in the accountability process with international involvement. It wanted Sri Lanka to establish a credible judicial process, with the participation of Commonwealth and other foreign judges, defence lawyers and authorized prosecutors and investigators to investigate alleged rights abuses.

President Rajapaksa speaking at the opening of the 8th Parliament on January 3, 2020, was explicit about the difficulties in reconciling his vision to the UNHRC's way of "promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka." The President's vision included respecting the aspirations of the majority of the people because "only then sovereignty of the people will be safeguarded." He said he will defend the unitary status of our country and protect and nurture Buddha Sasana, "whilst safeguarding the right of all citizens to practice a religion of their choice."

This triggered a core group of UNHRC members led by Britain to adopt the Resolution 46/1 at the UNHRC's 46th Regular Session on February 22, 2021 to advance accountability for past rights violations and war crimes committed in Sri Lanka. The resolution also called upon the Sri Lanka government to revise the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which rights groups have warned was being used as a weapon of targeting dissidents and minorities in the country.

The 42-year old PTA was enacted in parliament in 1979, to arm the law enforcing agencies and security forces to combat the LTTE separatist insurgents. However, civil society groups at home and abroad have time and again, pointed out

how state agencies have continued to grossly misuse the provisions of PTA even after the LTTE insurgency was crushed in May 2009. The Act was also used to target Muslims after the Easter Sunday attack carried out by Islamist jihadi terrorists on churches and luxury hotels in Colombo on April 21, 2019. A prominent Muslim lawyer Hejaaz Hizbullah arrested on April 14, 2020 along with six others has continued to languish in custody. Similarly, concern has been raised about the continued detention of Ahnaf Jazeeem, poet from Mannar. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, after a two-week visit to Sri Lanka in December 2017 had called for the immediate repeal of the PTA, referring to it as “one of the key enablers of arbitrary detention for over four decades.”

A few examples of PTA’s draconian provisions are given below:

- Where a statement made by a suspect, orally or in writing, in the course of an investigation, or not, may be proved against such person.
- A statement made at an identification parade by a person, who is dead or who cannot be found, against a suspect shall be admissible in evidence.
- Any document found in the custody, control or possession of a person accused of any offence or an agent or representative of such person may be produced in court as evidence against such person without the marker.
- A police sub inspector, authorized in writing by him, may without warrant (a) arrest any person, (b) enter and search any premises, (c) stop and search any individual or any vehicle, vessel, train or aircraft and (d) seize any document or thing connected with or concerned in or reasonably suspected of being connected with or concerned in any unlawful activity [unlawful activity not defined in the Act]. A police superintendent may order that such person be remanded until the conclusion of the trial.
- Every person who commits an offence under this Act shall be triable without a preliminary inquiry, on an indictment before a high court judge sitting alone without a jury or before the high court at Bar by three judges without a jury as decided by the Chief Justice.

Perhaps the worst provision under the Act is that a suspect can be detained for 18 months. A day after the foreign minister's briefing, a Bill to amend the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act No 48 of 1979 was gazetted. It seeks to amend some of the salient features of existing PTA including the reduction of the period of detention of a person from 18 months to 12 months. Already, the amendments in the Bill are being debated in the media and by political leaders. It will be debated in parliament before its final form is approved. Counter terrorism laws are perhaps a requirement in countries the world over as terrorism threat has become universal. However, what matters more is the spirit with which it is applied. This is what is lacking in the present dispensation in Sri Lanka.

Speaking to the diplomatic corps, Prof Peiris touched upon the progress made by Sri Lanka since the last UNHRC meeting. These included the payment SL Rs 100 millions as reparations to persons affected by war in Northern Province through mobile programmes; interviews carried out by Presidential Commission of Inquiry to review the findings of the Commissions and Committees on violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. At length he dwelt upon access to judicial systems and expounded on how the present government led by President Rajapaksa and PM Mahinda Rajapaksa regard this whole country as one. "We don't truncate it. We don't think in terms of North and South, East and West. Whatever programmes we devise are for the wellbeing of all our people without any distinction as to religion, ethnicity or caste." These are fine statements. As the cliché goes, the proof of the pudding is in eating it. And it is high time the Sri Lanka government lived up to its own orations, to convince the people.

After the 25th session of the UNHRC, in March 2014 India's External Affairs Minister while talking to Sri Lanka media representatives listed out a few things for Sri Lanka to ponder in its approach to the ethnic reconciliation process and the war crimes allegations. According to Sri Lankan media of that period, these were:

- No isolation: Sri Lanka should not isolate itself from the world and find ways to communicate its 'compulsions and limitations' and find a greater understanding with the world. He stressed that accountability and justice are

now more pervasive in the world than before as the world is increasingly interconnected and open.

- Show commitment first: “For India to help Sri Lanka in Geneva, Sri Lanka should address local concerns so that India would be able to lobby on behalf of Sri Lanka. For us to help, you should be doing things that we would be able to tell the world.”
- Ego: He advised that ego should not be allowed to get in the way: He advocated a much saner approach “in contrast to the local proclivity to slander the visiting UN and US officials.
- Sensitivity: Sri Lanka should not be too sensitive and the world should not be over-reactive. He referred to the government orchestrated demonstrations against the US and the UN in Colombo when the resolution was brought before the UNHRC earlier. Rights activists and journalists were subjected to character assassination.

These suggestions may come in handy for President Rajapaksa, who claims Sri Lanka’s “humanitarian war” liberated the people from three decades of LTTE tyranny. He has to recognize the UN forum is asking him to account for alleged violation of universal humanitarian laws. He has to seriously introspect on the present approach to UNHRC’s allegations of human right violations.

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NEPAL

Key Trends

After much prevarication the three-party ruling alliance has proposed to hold the local elections in mid-June. After consulting Election Commission officials, the government has now decided to call local elections on May 18. This comes after examination of varied proposals by the Election Commission as well as one by the CPN Maoist Chairperson Pushpa Kamal Dahal who had proposed to hold provincial and national assembly polls in April-May. Millennium Challenge Corporation-Nepal Compact has taken centre stage again with differences arising between the ruling alliance as Prime Minister Sher Bahadur is keen that the same be ratified in the House of Representatives. On finalization of the programme of local elections, the government will also have to decide on the next phase of holding provincial and house of representative elections by end of the Year. The issue of Kalapani has cropped up again impacting India-Nepal boundary relations, while non implementation of trade with China has emerged as a concern for Nepali traders, even as the economy is facing the challenge of stagflation. Nepal's population has reached 29,192,480, the Central Bureau of Statistics said.

Onward to Local Elections

After consulting Election Commission officials, the government is all set to call local elections on May 18. The ruling coalition has recommended local elections be held by mid-June. This is around more than a month later than the Election Commission-proposed date(s). The commission had recommended that the

government declare local level elections for April 27, if they were to be held in a single phase, and on April 27 and May 5, if they were to be held in two phases. “Today’s meeting of the five-party high-level political coordination committee suggested, via the prime minister, that local level polls be held within mid-June by making necessary arrangements of the legal provisions,” said Minister for Communications and Information Technology Gyanendra Bahadur Karki after the meeting. “The alliance has also suggested that the government make necessary preparations if the laws contradicting the constitution need to be amended.” According to Karki, the government will soon declare the local poll date after consulting with the Election Commission. This comes after President Bidya Devi Bhandari asked Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba to ensure timely local level elections.

Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal earlier this month raised political temperatures by proposing federal polls in April-May instead of local level elections at that time. Dahal’s proposal came on the heels of the Election Commission’s recommendation that the government hold local elections in April-May. Nepal conducted its last parliamentary and provincial elections on November 26 and December 7, 2017. This means the general elections must be held by November-December this year. Similarly, the same year, the country held its first local elections in 20 years in three phases—May 14, June 28 and September 18. The Election Commission argued that since the local elections (first phase) were held on May 14, 2017, there should be a new set of elected representatives (mayor/chair, deputy mayor/deputy chair, ward chairs, two women ward members and two other ward members in each local unit) by May 29, 2022.

The government recommendation may require some constitutional amendment as there are varied interpretations of the date by which new ward members have to take office.

CPN UML Continues as Largest Party in National Assembly

The ruling alliance secured victory in 18 of the 19 seats in the elections held for the members of National Assembly (NA) however the opposition CPN-UML continues to be the largest party and currently has 24 seats in the upper house. Even after the loss of seven seats in the election, the UML continues to be the first largest party in the upper house. While the CPN (Maoist Center) has 14 members, the Nepali Congress and CPN (Unified Socialist) each have 7 members. Similarly, Janata Samajbadi Party and Loktantrik Samajbadi Party have 2 and 1 members, respectively.

India Nepal Relations

Power Trading

India had authorized the Nepal Electricity Authority to sell power in India's power exchange market in early November last year. After receiving approval from the Indian authorities, the authority had sold power generated from the 24MW Trishuli Hydropower Project and 15MW Devighat Hydropower Project to the India Energy Exchange Limited (IEX).

But its effort to sell electricity from other Upper Tamakoshi, Upper Bhotekoshi and Marshyangdi whose combined installed capacity stands at 582.1MW failed with Indian authority pointing out the involvement of Chinese contractor particularly in the case of Upper Tamakoshi Project, according to a senior official of the authority.

The Procedure for Approval and Facilitating Import/Export (Cross Border of Electricity) by the Designated Authority introduced by Central Electricity Authority under the India's Power Ministry has imposed restrictions on power trading if there is investment from a country generating electricity with which India shares land border and the third country sharing land border with India, which does not have a bilateral agreement on power sector cooperation.

Nepal's water resources endowments are extraordinary. It endows approximately 6,000 rivers with a total length of 45,000 kilometres (km). Average water runoff from these rivers is about 220 billion cubic meters annually. Based on the water resources availability, Nepal's technical potential for hydropower has been estimated to be 83 gigawatts (GW). Usually all the technically potential water

resources will not be developed due to other constraints. Hence, about 42 GW is considered economically viable. The major river basins are Saptakoshi, Karnali, Sapt Gandaki, Mahakali, and the Southern rivers. The main and the most viable market for export of energy will remain India but with New Delhi now placing a rider that electricity from projects which are capitalized by the Chinese will not be sought Nepal will be placed in a dilemma.

Kalapani Dispute

The Nepal government said that Lipulekh is an integral part of Nepal. “The government is firm and clear about the fact that the Lipulekh, Limpiyadhura and Kalapani region east of the Mahakali river is an integral part of Nepal,” said Ministry for Communications and Information Technology Gyanendra Bahadur Karki, also the government spokesperson. “The Nepal government has been requesting the Indian government to stop unilateral construction/expansion of any road that goes via Nepali territory.” Karki was speaking to journalists to make public the Cabinet decisions.

“Nepal government is committed to resolving the border issues on the basis of historical treaties and agreements, facts, maps and evidence through diplomatic channels as per the spirit of friendly relations between the two countries,” said Karki. This was in response to a statement by the Indian embassy in Kathmandu said: “The government of India’s position on the India-Nepal boundary is well known, consistent and unambiguous”. “It has been communicated to the government of Nepal,” the embassy said. The boundary row between Nepal and India vis-a-vis Lipulekh resurfaced after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a statement regarding road expansion via that region at an election rally in Haldwani of Uttarakhand on December 30.

The border dispute between India and Nepal has now turned into a permanent political irritant between both countries. The status quo privileges India, which is in comfortable control of the territory. India may choose to stall and brush the issue under the carpet again, but not without significant damage to its interests and influence in Nepal. But the sooner India settles this dispute with Nepal, the

lesser the chances for China to get involved. Beijing has chosen to remain quiet this time, but its future calculation may change. The historical, technical and cartographic claims from both sides will probably lead to a dead-end, with never-ending, clashing interpretations about river alignments and other contentious criteria. Activating the mechanism of Foreign Secretary of ministerial level at the earliest seems the way ahead, but India has not shown much enthusiasm for the same given that it is in actual possession of the area and there are vital communication links that pass through the same.

India-China Trade

While admitting that there have been difficulties to ensure a smooth flow of goods from China to Nepal in recent months due to the COVID-19 pandemic, China has said that it is willing to work together with the Nepali authorities to overcome the present difficulties. Spokesperson for the Embassy of China in Kathmandu, Wang Xiaolong said that the fluctuating pandemic at present has caused difficulty in personnel and material exchange among countries around the world including Nepal and China. "The top priority for all countries is to unite to fight against the pandemic and jointly defeat it," he said, "We look forward to working with the Nepali side to overcome the present difficulties and make efforts to restore the economy and normal personnel exchanges."

In May 2016, KP Sharma Oli, who was appointed prime minister in October 2015 following the promulgation of the constitution, signed a landmark Transit and Transportation Agreement with China. The deal came on the heels of a months-long border blockade imposed by New Delhi in response to the adoption of the constitution by Nepal. The hardships created by the Indian border blockade pushed Nepal to find ways to diversify its trade and transit options with other countries. In April, 2019, a little over a year after Oli returned to power, Nepal and China signed the protocol on implementing the Trade and Transit Agreement, which meant Nepal could use seven Chinese sea and land ports for third-country trade. Oli received accolades for turning north to break Nepal's near-complete dependency on the southern neighbour for third-country trade. It's more than five years since the agreement was signed and over two years since the protocol was signed, \ Nepal and China have yet to develop even the standard operating procedure (SOP) on

implementing the transit agreement. Meanwhile COVID 19 is another dampener which has resulted in lack of effective implementation of the protocol of transit.

Briefs

India's Union Cabinet, chaired by the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, has approved the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between India and Nepal for construction of bridge over Mahakali River at Dharchula (India)- Dharchula (Nepal).

Briefs – Economic Developments

Nepal's trade deficit reached Rs 880.49 billion in the first half of the current fiscal year, which was 46.64 percent more than the value during the same period last year. Private sector has requested the government to provide subsidies to raise interest rates on the remittance earnings to facilitate migrant workers to send money they earned through banking channels. According to the data on the country's macroeconomic situation released by Nepal Rastra Bank, the central monetary authority of Nepal, the consumer price inflation (CPI) during the first five months of the current fiscal year stood at 7.11 percent. Compared to 2.93 percent last year, exceeding the target of containing it at 6.5 percent as set by the Bank's monetary policy for the current fiscal year.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has approved a \$395.9 million (around Rs 47 billion) extended credit facility for Nepal for Covid-19 response in mitigating the pandemic's impact on health and economic activity, protecting vulnerable groups, preserving macroeconomic and financial stability, and supporting sustained growth and poverty reduction.

BANGLADESH

Bangladesh: Managing Rohingya Bulge

Key Trends

Bangladesh Jatiya Sansad passed the law for establishing a six member search committee for selection of the Election Commission thus implementing one of the major demands of a number of political parties. There is however scepticism on impact of the law in selection of a Commission that is free of political bias. This comes even as conduct of elections in Bangladesh remains a challenging exercise with widespread violence including during the ongoing Union Parishad elections. Bangladesh United States relations are undergoing a period of trough after the U.S. sanctioned Dhaka's main counter terrorism force the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), how and when or if a reset happens remains to be seen? Multiple concerns have emerged over management of the Rohingya bulge even as the first meeting with Myanmar's authorities was held in January where the issue of early verification was raised by Bangladesh.

Political Developments

EC formation law takes effect

The Bangladesh parliament approved a new law for the formation of the Election Commission, which includes a provision regarding a search panel for appointments. As per the law, a six-member search committee, headed by a judge of the Supreme Court's Appellate Division, will recommend the names. The judge will be nominated by the chief justice. The search committee will make the recommendations in 15 working days following its formation. The committee can propose two names to the president for the post of Chief Election Commission (CEC). It can also recommend two persons against each of the commissioner's post. The president will then make the appointments upon the recommendations. That the President will select the CEC and members has raised concerns of a fair and impartial process given that the august authority is bound to advise on the recommendations of the government and cannot independently take such decisions. Thus the government's attempt to legitimize the ongoing process of forming a loyal and incompetent Election Commission in the interest of the ruling party will produce

the same result as in the past claimed Nazrul Islam Khan, BNP senior leader. "This time, it's possibly going to be even worse than in previous elections," said BNP senior leader Nazrul Islam Khan.

Briefs – Political Developments

The sixth phase of the union parishad polls was held on January 30 with the use of Electronic Voting Machines. Tension was running high in many unions over the possibility of violence during elections to 218 union parishads. In the fourth phase of the polls, Awami League-backed chairman nominees were cornered by rebel and independent candidates, losing the battle in around 50% of electoral areas as per the Dhaka Tribune. Awami League leaders claimed that candidate recommendations from the grassroots were ignored.

In the first four phases of the Union Parishad (UP) polls in 2021, Bangladesh witnessed at least 113 deaths and 7,201 injuries in 672 incidents of violence, as noted in an Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) report. At least 10 other people were killed in polls related violence centering on the fifth phase of the union parishad polls held on January 5 as per the Dhaka Tribune.

A Buddhist monk was hacked to death in Khagrachhari town. The deceased was identified as 52-year-old Bishuddha Mohather. He was the principal of Dharmasukh Buddhist monastery of the town. Bangladesh scored 26 out of 100 in the latest edition of the Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, which is more or less the same as in the past decade -- a development that raises questions about the 12-year-old government's actions in snuffing out the social ill. In terms of ranking, Bangladesh stood 147th among 180 countries, a notch lower than in the previous edition of the Berlin-based global corruption watchdog's annual study.

Rohingya Repatriation and Security Riddle

Bangladesh expressed concern over Myanmar's slow pace verification of the Rohingya and offered the later all cooperation under three bilateral instruments to expeditiously complete the verification process. The dismay was communicated at

the first ever meeting of the newly formed technical level "Ad-Hoc Task Force for Verification of the Displaced Persons from Rakhine". Shah Rizwan Hayat, refugee relief and repatriation commissioner (RRRC), led Bangladesh side while Ye Tun Oo, deputy director general of the Ministry of Immigration and Population led Myanmar side. According to foreign ministry officials, Bangladesh had handed over names of 8.4 lakh Rohingyas to Myanmar but so far only about 42,000 were verified.

Despite the government's assertions to the contrary, the recent arrest of an ARSA chief's brother from a Rohingya camp in Cox's Bazar hints at the insurgent group's presence inside the refugee camps. The arrest of Mohammad Shah Ali, also an alleged operative of Myanmar's banned organization Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on January 16 is an indication of a volatile situation in the camp would create more uncertainty around the repatriation of the Rohingyas. The murder of popular Rohingya leader Mohib Ullah last year brought the likely presence of the ARSA in the camps first to notice. However, the government and law enforcers alike maintain this group does not exist in Bangladesh and that some criminals might have falsely identified themselves as ARSA operatives to intimidate the refugees.

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal said, "We heard there is ARSA in the Rohingya camps but we did not find any identified ARSA member in the camps." He, however, said it was not an issue as to who is an ARSA or Arakan Army member. "Whoever engages in criminal activities will be brought to book," the minister told The Daily Star. On its verified twitter handle, ARSA claimed, "Shah Ali, a former low-key member of ARSA, was diagnosed with heart disease and suspected of suffering from cancer as well. He was thus relieved of all scopes of duties indefinitely since two and a half years ago on the ground of incapability."

Around 6,000 Rohingyas should be evacuated from two camps in Cox's Bazar to avert casualties as they are living on hilly slopes that are vulnerable to landslides, said a government report. The Department of Environment (DoE) report said the hillocks of the camps, which have been razed by 75 to 90 degrees, are at risk of landslides, especially during the heavy rain expected in the coming monsoon. The report, prepared after a field visit on December 21, said around 6,000 people of

1,267 families are living on the slopes of hillocks at Camps 21 and 22 in Teknaf and should be evacuated from there before the next monsoon.

Bangladesh US Relations – Rising Differences

Outgoing US Ambassador Earl R Miller wants Dhaka and Washington DC to have honest and direct conversations on democracy, human rights, and rule of law as partnership of the two nations is indispensable not only for future prosperity and security but also for addressing global challenges. "My suggestion would be that our governments continue to have honest and direct conversations on these issues," Miller said in an exclusive interview with The Daily Star, a day before leaving Bangladesh after completing his assignment here. The sanctions imposed by the United States administration on the Rapid Action Battalion of Bangladesh and the elite force's six current and former top officials have brought to surface the dormant diplomatic tensions between the two countries. The Bangladesh authorities believe that the US sanctions are part of geopolitics while the US version is that its national security interests have been threatened by the Rapid Action Battalion undermining the rule of law, human rights, fundamental freedoms and economic prosperity of the people of Bangladesh.

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen said that it is the United States that trained Rab on their rules of engagement, how to behave with people and how to interrogate. "They've been trained by the US. The US has taught them the rules of engagement, how to behave with people and how to interrogate," he told journalists after attending a number of programmes, recalling the role of the US and the UK in training the Rab. Nevertheless, no "gunfight" took place in the country between law enforcers and criminals since December 10 last when the United States imposed human rights-related sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion and seven of its top officials. Before December 10, killing of people in "shootouts" had become a regular occurrence, data of human rights organization and media reports show.

Importantly defence cooperation between Bangladesh and US armed forces has continued apace. A Maneuver Advisor Team with Force Package 22-1, 5th Security Force Assistance Brigade of the US Army participated in Bijôy Dibôsh, or the Victory Day Parade, Dec. 16, 2021 in Dhaka, Bangladesh celebrating

Bangladesh's 50 years of Independence. A three-day seminar ahead of the joint military exercise "Tiger Lightning-3," by the Bangladesh and the United States Army was held at the Bangladesh Institute of Peace Support Operation Training (BIPSOT) in Rajendrapur. The seminar was attended by 11 delegates from the US Army Pacific Command and senior military officials of the Bangladesh Army, and BIPSOT. The Exercise will be held in February.

Briefs - International and Regional Relations

Foreign Minister Dr AK Abdul Momen urged the new Omani envoy in Bangladesh to undertake new and emerging areas of cooperation including environment and climate change, agriculture and food security, blue economy and enhanced trade between Bangladesh and Oman. Bangladesh is looking are expanding relations with countries as Oman based on engagement through Blue Economy. The concept of the blue economy in Bangladesh come after the adjustment of maritime boundary demarcation debate with Myanmar (2012) and India (2014). Geographically, Bangladesh has a water area of 18,290 square kilometers which is 6% of its total area. Bangladesh has 12 nautical miles of local sea area, 18 nautical miles adjoining zone, and 200 nautical miles of the economic zone. Foreign Minister Dr AK Abdul Momen has urged the British government and its parliament to keep up pressure on Myanmar for the "safe, dignified and voluntary" repatriation of the Rohingyas soon. He reiterated the call at a meeting with the British Parliamentary delegation on the eve of the latter's visit to the Rohingya camps in Kutupalong and Bhasan Char.

Bangladesh signed a memorandum of understanding with Turkey on counter-terrorism, security cooperation and prevention of drug trafficking. It was signed at a meeting between the visiting delegation led by Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soyly and Bangladesh Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan at the Secretariat. Japan will contribute \$2 million in emergency grant aid for supporting the Rohingyas living on Bhasan Char. This contribution includes \$1 million to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and \$1 million to World Food Programme, according to the Embassy of Japan in Dhaka. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has said that Bangladesh looks forward to elevating existing relations of Bangladesh and Australia

to a new height for the benefit of the people and economies as well as to securing a peaceful and prosperous Indian Ocean region in the days to come. The Bangladesh rail authorities have dropped the Trans Asian Railway (TAR) from its priority as bilateral relations with Myanmar remain under strains and cooperation from the neighbouring country is close to zero.

Link Fest

Label	Tags	Type	Link	Author
Asia briefing	Asia, Terrosim, Comba	Podacst	https://podcasts.apple.com/in/podcast/asia-briefing/id1449957309	South China Morning post
Asia Geopoltics	Episode: AUKUS and Indo Pacific	Podcast	https://podcasts.apple.com/in/podcast/aukus-and-the-indo-pacific-geopolitics/id852773346?i=1000536869586	The Diplomat
South Asia Chat	Episode 108: Sri Lanka's New Strategy In India	Podcast		National University of Singapore (NUS)
The Asia Review	Episode: Jagjeet Lally, "India and the Silk Roads: The History of a Trading World" (Oxford UP, 2021)	Newsletter	https://www.globaltimes.cn/opinion/asian-review/	Jagjeet Lally
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