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NOTE FROM HEAD CS3

Dear All,

The Press release by the Ministry of External Affairs highlighted that the Prime Minister expressed his anguish over the deteriorating situation and humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. He reiterated India's appeal for cessation of hostilities and a return to dialogue and stressed that the contemporary global order was anchored on international law, UN Charter and respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty of all states. The Prime Minister welcomed the talks between the two parties and stressed upon the importance of ensuring free and uninterrupted humanitarian access and smooth movement of all people. Prime Minister also spoke about efforts being made by India to send urgent relief supplies, including medicines, to the affected areas. In the previous statements in the UN Security Council the Indian Ambassador had emphasized on diplomacy and dialogue to resolve the crisis.

Clearly the situation had gone beyond diplomacy and dialogue and thus a change was necessary. Russia's use of lethal force targeting cities in Ukraine is one factor with the death of an Indian medical student in shelling in Ukraine being an outcome of the same. Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke to the father of Naveen Shekharappa Gyanagoudar expressing his sympathies. The use of lethal forces is gross violation of the UN Charter and human rights but also stipulations restricting use of lethal weaponry and munitions against civilians. Thus, it was difficult for India to justify any stance supporting Russia particularly in the UN Human Rights Council where the issue has come up.

Hence, such complexities can only be unboxed through navigating relational and security waves through systematic inquiry. Thus, the endeavour of South Asian Monitor is to unravel some of these issues through analytical articles and journals, written by informed academicians. I am sanguine that this Monitor will generate interest and help you in your future research projects.

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ANALYSIS

IS PAKISTAN'S BALOCH PROBLEM UNDERLINING ITS RELATIONS WITH CHINA?

- MAJ GEN JAGATBIR SINGH, VSM (RETD)

On 02 Feb, the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), a militant separatist group, attacked two posts belonging to the Frontier Corps, in fighting that lasted 70 hours. While the Noshki assault ended in 24 hours, it took three days for the military to secure the Panjgur check post. The BLA claimed it had killed 195 paramilitaries, but the government admitted to losing only nine. There were reports that 13 of the militants were also killed. An earlier attack on another outpost in Balochistan's Kech District near Gwadar Port occurred on 25 Jan and left ten paramilitaries dead with three wounded.

These attacks demonstrate the growing capacity of the Baloch militants to launch high-profile attacks. They seemed better trained and better armed, with highly sophisticated weapons in their armoury. Coordinated assaults on security posts in Balochistan also mark a shift in the strategy of Baloch insurgent groups from hit-and-run operations to frontal attacks. More importantly, the attacks resemble those by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its affiliates. Until now, the Baloch rebel groups' modus operandi was to use improvised explosive devices and hit-and-run attacks.

During his visit to Nushki in Kech District, Prime Minister Imran Khan stated "My government vows to give a befitting response to the terrorists who are trying in vain to hamper the pace of progress, especially in Balochistan. He also said that "No other army has faced such unprecedented challenges due to acts of terrorism in the wake of the war in Afghanistan." As with previous incidents, Baloch militants warned China to get out of Balochistan. A BLA statement to the press after the attacks read: "We also once again warn the Chinese to refrain from aiding Pakistan in looting Baloch resources and occupying our motherland, or else their interests will become our targets." The BLA is the largest and insurgent group in Balochistan and has been active for decades. It, and other groups, have stepped up its activities targeting Chinese interests in the province after CPEC projects began to expand.

In August 2018, a suicide bomber targeted a bus carrying Chinese engineers in Dalbadin, Balochistan, wounding five people, including three Chinese nationals. In November 2018, a Baloch insurgent group claimed responsibility for an attack on the Chinese consulate in southern Karachi city, killing four people. In May 2019, separatists attacked the Pearl Continental hotel in Gwadar, killing five people and injuring six persons. In 2019 a luxury hotel Gwadar was attacked by gunmen from a

Baloch separatist group. In June 2020, armed separatists raided the Pakistan Stock Exchange, where three Chinese companies at the time owned 40% of the stakes.

Pakistani security officials were quoted in local media saying that the attacks were designed to sabotage Prime Minister Imran Khan's talks in Beijing ahead of the Winter Olympics. The attackers wanted doubts raised about the security situation in Pakistan by Chinese leaders during their meetings. There are opinions that feel BLA is getting operational assistance from the Pakistani Taliban to plan and carry out attacks on Pakistani security forces. Pakistan felt that a friendly regime in Afghanistan following the US exit would deny anti-Pakistan elements the space to plan attacks particularly under the Afghan Taliban. But the recent spurt in terror incidents shows that Pakistani authorities may have misread the situation.

Whereas there is another school of thought that feels Balochistan's insurgency is a homegrown problem following decades of marginalization of Baloch people. Though foreign actors might be exploiting the insurgency, but the insurgency does not exist exclusively because of foreign support. Some Pakistani officials have hinted at possible Iranian support for Baloch militants. A provincial government officer in Balochistan, who requested anonymity, said that "preliminary information that Iranian soil was used in this attack and the government is probing this angle." "Pakistani government circles are developing the view that some non-state actors might be supporting Baloch insurgents," said Zulfiqar. He added that so far, the Pakistani government has not been ready to confront Iran directly on the matter.

While the Baloch attacks were happening, social media was also filled with allegations that Iran was using Baloch separatists to sabotage Gwadar Port in Balochistan so that China will use Iran's Chabahar Port instead. However, unlike Gwadar, Chabahar is not a deep-sea port and heavy ships cannot dock there. The CPEC part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) goes through Balochistan, and security has been a major concern. Baloch separatists want to exploit this situation. Many of the Chinese projects are being built in Balochistan, and the separatists say the Pakistani government is exploiting local resources on behalf of Chinese ambition to expand its influence. There is no doubt that Baloch militants will make all investors hesitant, and this includes the Chinese who undoubtedly remain the biggest investors.

China is upgrading energy links and infrastructure as part of CPEC, with both nations wary of security threats to the projects. Stable security in Pakistan is necessary for Chinese investments to bear fruit, and increasing militant attacks could complicate projects. As per Hussain Haqanni, "No investor, including China, wants to deal with constant violence or a long-running insurgency." He further states, "The Baloch might be weak and outnumbered but they have been consistent in their battle with the Pakistani state for years while getting little international support."

The surge in militant activities in Balochistan has coincided with the escalation in terrorist attacks by the TTP that is targeting Pakistani security forces in the former tribal areas. There may not be a direct connection between the two. Yet the increasing violence in two different areas involving groups with completely different agendas has complicated Pakistan's security predicament.

Balochistan is Pakistan's largest province by land area, bordering Iran and Afghanistan, but has the country's lowest population. Despite being rich in minerals, gas and coal it is Pakistan's most impoverished region, resulting in perpetual political turmoil. If the situation in Balochistan is to improve, the province will need to be better integrated into Pakistan's political and economic system. China has its own geostrategic and geo-economic interests in Pakistan. For this the success of CPEC is imperative at all costs. Chinese policymakers also view an overland link across Pakistan to the Arabian Sea as a means of overcoming their nation's Malacca dilemma given that almost 85% of its oil imports traverse through the single choke point. On the other hand, China is extremely concerned about the Baloch militant groups opposing the CPEC project.

In 2016, Pakistan decided to create a dedicated CPEC force of 10,000 security personnel primarily to assuage Chinese concerns about the security of the projects. Clearly, that force remains relatively weak to tackle growing challenges. There is however no doubt that Prime Minister Imran Khan's efforts to maintain good ties with China may have been undermined in the wake of these attacks by militants on security posts. The 'game changer' as CPEC has been visualized is facing increased security challenges that are becoming a major hurdle. China maybe banking on Pakistan to deliver but it is apparent that there are elements outside its control. The cracks in the corridor are beginning to appear.

***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*

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

Afghanistan: Six Months into Transition

The Taliban celebrated the Doha agreement signing anniversary on March 01 even as opinion is divided over its success in bringing peace and stability in Afghanistan. Having completed six months after taking over Kabul on August 15, there have been several critical reviews of functioning of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as the Taliban like to call themselves but are being referred to as the de facto Authority. The ideological variation that replaced the Republic form of government with Sharia based rule has meant that the first challenge is structural. The Emirate format is not novel, but the Taliban have taken the same to the extreme form with the head Mullah Habitullah continuing his reclusive presence presumably in Kandahar. The government under a prime minister and three deputy prime ministers all of which are acting is not inclusive thus only the Pashtuns and a handful of other communities are represented.

The coercive image of the Taliban means that several former government officials including the military have either moved out of the country or are in the hiding, this has resulted in a vacuum in governance. Sanctions have meant an acute economic and financial crisis which has translated quickly into a humanitarian one as the aid flow for a country which has remained dependent on the same has trickled. There is some hope now with humanitarian assistance resumed. On the security front reorganisation of the forces is in the offing while the ungoverned spaces in the country are posing a threat in the short to medium term. Finally, as the Taliban is striving to gain recognition the demands of the international community for an inclusive government, women's and media rights is unlikely to be acceded to in the coming months.

BANGLADESH

Bangladesh: A New Election Commission

After extensive demand by political parties and civil society, Bangladesh Jatiya Sansad or parliament passed a bill for appointing Election Commission through a search committee finally approved by the President. The first panel was approved in February wherein Kazi Habibul Awal a former law and defence secretary has been nominated as the Chief Election Commissioner with four others based on the recommendations by the Search Committee. Elections in Bangladesh have the disrepute of bias towards the ruling party and also high level of violence. The new election commission has been generally welcomed. Meanwhile US Bangladesh relations will come up for a review with a partnership dialogue in March.

The new chief election commissioner (CEC) and election commissioners were appointed from among the names on the proposed list submitted to the search committee. President M Abdul Hamid appointed the CEC and other commissioners, according to a notification from the Cabinet Division. The list of 322 people included retired district and sessions Judge Begum Rashida Sultana, at number 261; retired Brigadier General Ahsan Habib Khan, at number 236; retired senior secretary Alamgir at number 154; and retired senior secretary Anisur Rahman, at number 144. The newly appointed Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Habibul Awal was at number 49 in the list, he is a former defence secretary. The five-member Election Commission, led by Habibul Awal, also a former law secretary, has been formed for a five-year term. Habibul Awal went into retirement in 2017 from the position of defence secretary. Later, he joined BRAC University as a law professor.¹

According to the BRAC University website, Habibul Awal joined the Ministry of Defence as secretary in March 2014. Then he was appointed as senior secretary in the same ministry in December 2014. He retired on 20 January 2015. Habibul Awal was reappointed as senior secretary in the defence ministry in January 2015. The inclusion of a retired judge at the lower level, a former military officer who has also served in the civil services has raised many questions by the main opposition party that the panel appears to be biased towards the Awami League. A day after the formation of the new Election Commission, major political parties and experts have come up with their response to the newly formed EC. In a statement released, Awami League General Secretary and Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader said, "We are satisfied that the EC has been formed as per the constitution and in line with the new law." In his statement, Obaidul Quader also said, "We have confidence in the new EC. We hope that the next election under this EC will be free, fair and acceptable to all."

The reaction to the nomination of the new election Commission in Bangladesh has been on expected lines. The ruling party the Awami League has welcomed the

¹ <https://thediomat.com/2022/03/new-election-commission-takes-charge-in-bangladesh/>

nominations and it is believed that many of those who are presently in the election Commission are aligned to the parties' views if not the Party itself. On the other hand, the opposition has clearly come out and stated that the new election commission is biased towards the Awami League. Under the circumstances it is not clear as to how a free and fair election can take place and be accepted by all in Bangladesh in the next few years the reputation of the country as a free and Democratic Republic has come down several notches in the last few years primarily because impartiality of the election Commission has not been accepted by not just the opposition but by many other neutral stakeholders. More over polls have been violent with many killed during the Union Parishad polls held in the past six months. Will a former Defence Secretary be able to curb violence in elections in Bangladesh remains to be seen?

Sensitivity of the government to comments from abroad was evident as Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen said, Bangladesh wants to draw a line between showing interest in Dhaka's affairs and giving lectures as the country sees comments from diplomats on election issues, he added. "Naturally, since they're all our development partners, they might have interest," the Foreign Secretary said, noting that having interest and giving lectures is not the same thing. "If you keep seeking comments from foreigners on our own elections, they'll feel encouraged to make comments," said the foreign secretary.

BHUTAN

The New Year for Bhutan began with a lot of hope and expectations even as the world was seeing an upsurge in Covid-19 cases because of the Omicron variant. His Majesty, The King of Bhutan is once again on Royal tours to visit areas affected by the pandemic and lockdown as the country is seen an unprecedented spike in COVID 19 cases due to the Omicron wave in February. Bhutan had the strictest and highest standards of Covid-19 measures in place so far and had adopted the Zero COVID 19 strategy. Prime Minister Lyonchhen Dr Lotay Tshering said, "Following His Majesty's concern and the instructions, we have the highest standards of interventions, testing and vaccines," he said. "No stone has been left unturned."

He however cautioned against the concept of living with COVID 19. "A slightest indication of pulling out of this pandemic and living with the virus will not be in keeping with the standard of our measures," he said This comes about as US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) added Bhutan to its growing list of highest-risk destinations for travel. With this, the CDC places more than 140 nations to the Level four: COVID-19 Very High-Risk list. The CDC places a destination at level four when countries register more than 500 cases per 100,000 in the past 28 days. The CDC's highest-level shows that these places have a lot of community transmission of COVID-19 and there is a higher chance of contracting the virus.²

² https://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2022/02/22/CDC-COVID-travel-advisory/6021645588870/

MYANMAR

ASEAN Firm on Myanmar

The Cambodian and Malaysian prime ministers called for the “timely and effective implementation” of ASEAN’s Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar during a meeting in Phnom Penh, the two countries said in a joint statement. According to the statement, the two leaders “underscored the critical importance of ensuring the effective and timely implementation of the Five-Point Consensus,” which was reached at a summit of ASEAN leaders in April last year. “Malaysia expressed full support for the work of the ASEAN Chair’s Special Envoy on Myanmar and looks forward to the first visit” to Myanmar by the envoy, a post currently held by Cambodian Foreign Minister PrakSokhonn.

However, Myanmar’s Foreign Ministry issued a statement on February 20th rejecting the request by the ASEAN Special Envoy to meet with the members of a National Unity Government dominated by lawmakers from Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s ousted party. because they were “perpetrating violence and pursuing (a) total destructive path”. The ministry said the suggestion was “contrary to the principles of the ASEAN charter but also undermines ASEAN’s counterterrorism efforts”. “The ministry again urges the two members not to use ASEAN platforms to make such comments and encourages [them] to condemn the terrorist acts,” the statement said.³

In May last year the junta declared the NUG “terrorists”. It has jailed several high-ranking members of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s party. Quite evidently there has not been “any significant progress” in implementation of the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar since its adoption last year. The five points were immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar with all parties to exercise restraint, constructive dialogue among all parties concerned to seek a peaceful solution in the interests of the people, a special envoy of the ASEAN chair to facilitate mediation of the dialogue process, with the assistance of the secretary-general of ASEAN, ASEAN to provide humanitarian assistance through the AHA Centre and special envoy and delegation shall visit Myanmar to meet with all parties concerned. For the second year in a row Myanmar will not observe the Cobra Gold joint military exercise, which has kicked off in Thailand with military personnel from the US, China, India, Indonesia, South Korea and Australia taking part. The exercise will last until March 5.⁴

³ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-19/why-no-major-world-power-wants-asean-to-split-up-over-myanmar>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/us-invite-non-political-myanmar-representative-summit-with-asean-2022-03-03/>

NEPAL

In the beginning of February, Nepal was facing multitude political challenges, the main one was ratification of the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Nepal Compact, the deadline for which was 28 of the months. Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba extended considerable political capital in ensuring passage of the MCC ratification despite stiff opposition from the main constituents of the ruling coalition – Maoist Communist Centre and the CPN Unified Socialist. While at one time there were concerns of collapse of the coalition over ratification of the MCC, Deuba's political skills ensured that while ratification was achieved the government retained status. The ratification also possibly ends Nepal's strategic dilemma of balancing the US and China with both powers attempting to influence the decision. Now the country will go in for local elections on May 13, though there is a petition lying in the Supreme Court. Another contentious issue is impeachment of the Supreme Court Chief Justice which has been proposed by the ruling coalition. The Government of Nepal has issued its reaction to the tension in east.

Europe after Russian President Vladimir Putin authorised a military operation stating that disputes between nations should be resolved through dialogue.

PAKISTAN

The political situation in Pakistan remains uncertain even as parties are jockeying to position themselves for the national and provincial assembly elections to be held most likely in July 2023. The opposition parties are hoping to dislodge Prime Minister Imran Khan who is seen as the prop by the Army holding the strings of a government that appears to be increasingly unpopular on the streets. Thus, the opposition is preparing for a no confidence motion in the National Assembly and also planned a long march to the national capital on March 23, Pakistan's National Day.⁵ There is much speculation if the no confidence motion succeed and what next. If the opposition pushes ahead with its plans for a no-confidence move, chances are that the PML Q and Jahangir Tareen faction of the PTI will be the deciding votes. Meanwhile decision by the Election Commission on foreign funding of PM Imran Khan's campaign could be the deciding factor. The PTI or a future government in Pakistan will face the daunting challenge of managing the massive debt and conditions set by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) which finally provided a tranche of \$ 1 Billion. Meanwhile terrorist attacks have spiked in the country a negative dividend of the ungoverned spaces in Afghanistan.⁶

⁵ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1680050/pml-n-tareen-group-agree-on-cm-buzdar-ouster>

⁶ <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2347794/assemblies-to-complete-terms-pml-q>

SRI LANKA

Just as the Sri Lankan government succeeded in managing the Omicron wave which plateaued around 20,000 active cases at the peak in February, the Ukraine crisis has posed a major challenge to the Rajapaksa government. The government is groping in the dark to manage the foreign exchange crisis, finds one of the main sources of tourism Russia and Ukraine likely to see a steep decline in the wake of the ongoing war that has broken out between the two. Sanctions by the US and overall global economic impact of the crisis in Europe will be felt by Sri Lanka facing economy and food crisis in the wake of dwindling foreign exchange reserves. No concrete plan is evident so far thus a muddle through approach may see more economic pain for the people at large with political consequences.⁷

⁷ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/sri-lanka-inflation-hits-record-14-per-cent-as-food-crisis-worsens/articleshow/89055155.cms?from=mdr>

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