

THE WEEK IN REVIEW

March 23 - March 29, 3 (5), 2015

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I. COUNTRY REVIEWS

A. South Asia

Afghanistan

(March 16-29, 2015)

- Ghani warns against proxy war; Taliban can have place in the Government, Ghani to drum up US support for peace talks, security; ISIS (Daesh) gaining influence in Afghanistan; Kidnappers seek swap deal; Obama to slow US drawdown; New acting Governor for Kabul; Kerry unveils \$800m new development partnership; We will swim, not sink, together; Peace talks possibly in Afghanistan.

President Ashraf Ghani has once again warned against proxy war in the country, saying no one would be allowed to turn Afghanistan into a centre of proxy wars. Addressing a graduation ceremony of over 500 military officers on March 18 at Marshal Fahim National Defence University of Kabul, Ghani stated that war was imposed on the Afghans. "I warn that no one should think this soil is the centre for their proxy wars," Ghani renewed his warning. "If anyone thinks us a good mouthful, they will be destroyed by themselves." Ghani urged the forces to keep obtaining the faith of people and avoid civilian casualties and violation of people's rights. "The army should only focus on their main duties," Ghani said, declaring that the army was not responsible to deal with the contracts. Touching on the abduction of passengers from the highways, Ghani believed it a conspiracy against the unity of Afghan ethnicities.¹

If the Taliban renounce war and violence, they can become part of the government, says Atta Mohammad Noor of northern Balkh province in an unprecedented statement before the Nawroz festival. In a press conference on March 18, the acting governor of Balkh stated that he had no problem if the Taliban were given seats in the government; however, he urged that the group needed to join peace and stop killing the Afghans. "If the Taliban honestly join the peace process, and then if they are given a position, I am not against it," Noor said. "But this position should not be proven costly to our people and government." Supporting the government's initiatives to begin peace talks with the Taliban, Noor urged that the process should be transparent and clear to the people. He once again called on the government to not let the country be sacrificed for the policies of any other country. "Afghanistan should not be sacrificed for the strategic and big plans of any country," Noor warned. Expressing concerns over the activities of newly-emerged Daesh group, Noor warned that conspiracies were underway to replace the Taliban with Daesh.²

¹ "Ghani Once Again Warns Against Proxy War", *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, March 19, 2015 at http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/national_detail.php?post_id=11856

² "Taliban Can Have Place in the Government: Noor", *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, March 19, 2015, at http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/national_detail.php?post_id=11855

At the head of a high-level delegation, President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani is scheduled to visit the United States on March 21, an official said on March 18. A government source told the scribe that the president and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Dr. Abdullah Abdullah would lead the delegation to Washington on March 21. During his six-day trip, Ghani will meet his US counterpart Barak Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry and other administration officials. The president will also address the congress, the Institute of Peace and Atlantic Council. Improved economic and security cooperation between the two countries would be the main topic for discussion, the official added. He will also drum up US support for the renewed peace drive³.

President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani on March 21 acknowledged for the first time that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorist group was gaining influence in Afghanistan. Speaking during a press briefing ahead of his visit to United States, President Ghani said "Daesh's characteristic is that it is man-eating. It swallows its competitors." "Here, it is not physical presence of people from Syria or Iraq. It is the network effect," President Ghani added. The remarks by President Ghani comes as first Vice President Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum warned regarding serious threat of the terrorist group to Afghanistan, saying that the presence of ISIS in Afghanistan poses a serious threat to the country. President Ghani said earlier last month that the global terrorism including al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) stills threatens Afghanistan. The Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon said earlier this week that the former Taliban commanders in Afghanistan have pledged allegiance to the Islamic States and the number of their supporters is on the rise. Concerns regarding the expansion of ISIS activities in Afghanistan further escalated after unknown masked men kidnapped 30 passengers in southern Zabul province last month with reports suggesting that the militants belong to ISIS terrorist group. At least two commanders of the ISIS terrorist group have been killed by the Afghan security forces so far which includes Mulah Abdul Rauf and his successor Hafiz Wahid. Mullah Abdul Rawouf was the first Islamic State commander and recruiter who were killed along with five of his companions in Helmand province last month. Following the killing of Mullah Abdul Rawouf, his nephew Hafiz Wahidi took the command for ISIS who was also killed along with nine of his companions in Afghan National Security Forces operations in Helmand province⁴.

Abductors have given their conditions for release of 31 passengers in their captivity in southern Zabul province. Unidentified gunmen stopped two buses in Shahjoi district of southern Zabul province on gunpoint and kidnapped 31 passengers of the Hazara ethnicity around a month ago. Tokhi said that tribal elders are negotiating release of the kidnapped passengers with the abductors. Thokhi said that he was confident that the kidnapped persons are alive and hoped that they will be released soon. He added that people of Zabul province will spare no efforts to secure safe release of the abducted passengers. This came at a time that the second deputy to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Hajji Muhammad Mohaqiq, the other day said that the government is negotiating release of the passengers with different groups. He said that some of the passengers

³ "Ghani to Drum up US Support for Peace Talks, Security", *Daily Outlook*, March 21, 2015, at http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/national_detail.php?post_id=11853

⁴ "Ghani Acknowledges ISIS (Daesh) Gaining Influence In Afghanistan", *Khaama Press*, March 21, 2015, at <http://www.khaama.com/ghani-acknowledges-isis-daesh-gaining-influence-in-afghanistan-9952>

have been released. However, Abdul Qadir Qalatwal, another MP from Zabul, said that no passenger has been released so far. He added that efforts are on to secure release of the passengers⁵.

President Obama plans to keep most of the 10,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan in the country through 2015 — and keep open two key airfields — as part of an effort to slow the U.S. withdrawal and help prop up Afghan forces, sources told Fox News. In order to avoid a repeat of Iraq, where Islamic State militants have filled a void left by U.S. forces, the Obama administration plans to announce the changes in the coming days as Afghan President Ashraf Ghani visits Washington, D.C., and meets with key leaders. Ghani has urged a slower drawdown, warning about the security environment in his country and even the emergence of ISIS-affiliated fighters. Under the new plan, most of the 10,000 U.S. soldiers in the country will remain through 2015, instead of trimming that force to 5,500 by the end of this year — though troops would continue to rotate in and out of service in Afghanistan. Obama has said that after that, the U.S. would only maintain an embassy-based security force in Kabul of perhaps 1,000 troops. Second, sources say the U.S. will keep open the Kandahar Airfield in southern Afghanistan and Jalalabad Airfield in eastern Afghanistan through 2015, a reversal from prior plans.⁶

Mahboobullah Mohibi has been appointed as the Acting Governor for Kabul province through a decree from President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani. He is replacing Abdul Jabar Taqwa who was the governor for Kabul province for the past three years. It is yet unknown whether Taqwa has resigned from his post or sacked. Mahboobullah Mohibi, previous Deputy Governor, will be the acting governor for Kabul until the appointment of governor. Before working at the governor house, he had worked for the Independent Directorate of Local Governance and Independent Administrative Reform of Civil Service Commission. He has completed his higher education in economics from the University of Kabul⁷.

The Pentagon will seek Congressional approval to fund sustenance of 352,000 Afghan troops through 2017, US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter said on March 23 following talks with the visiting Afghan leaders. “Today we can announce the Defence Department intends to seek funding for Afghan forces to sustain end strength of 352,000 personnel through 2017,” Carter told reporters at a news conference at this presidential retreat. Carter said it was part of unwavering commitment to a strong and enduring strategic partnership with Afghanistan. The issue will be further discussed at the White House with President Obama during talks with Ashraf Ghani. Both Carter and Secretary of State John Kerry refrained from responding to questions on changes in the troop drawdown plans, saying talks on the issue were still on-going and a final decision would be taken by President Obama. “Obama and Ghani have had regular discussions about the transition that is taking place in Afghanistan. Ghani has requested some flexibility in that process, and it’s

⁵ “Bargaining Chip: Kidnappers of 31 Passengers Seek Swap Deal”, *Daily Afghanistan Times*, March 21, 2015, at <http://afghanistantimes.af/bargaining-chip-kidnappers-of-31-passengers-seek-swap-deal/>

⁶ “Obama to Slow US Drawdown in Afghanistan”, *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, March 24, 2015, at http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/national_detail.php?post_id=11861

⁷ “Mahboobullah Mohibi Appointed As Acting Governor For Kabul”, *Bakhtar News*, March 25, 2015, at <http://www.bakhtarnews.com.af/eng/politics/item/16763-mahboobullah-mohibi-appointed-as-acting-governor-for-kabul.html>

our understanding – it's our knowledge that Obama is actively considering that request," Kerry said.⁸

US Secretary of State John Kerry on March 23 announced the launch of a \$800 million New Development Partnership with Afghanistan and re-launch of the Bilateral Commission and the Security Consultative Forum, as part of the effort to give a new direction to the bilateral relationship. A series of announcements aimed at achieving this goal were made by Kerry following day-long discussions with the visiting Afghan delegation led by President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Dr. Abdullah Abdullah at Camp David. "The depth of our discussions today reflects the critical nature of this moment, with Afghanistan's government of national unity now fully responsible for the security of its people and moving ahead on a reform agenda of its own design," Kerry told reporters. At the centre of the bilateral relationship was a shared commitment to security and peace and a desire to promote prosperity and social progress throughout Afghanistan, he said, adding the goals were outlined in the 2012 enduring strategic partnership agreement.⁹

As a result of Pakistan's military operation in the tribal region of North Waziristan, more than 200,000 refugees have crossed the border into Afghanistan, President Ashraf Ghani said on March 26. "This year, Pakistan is going to have its own season of fighting, and that changes the dynamic," the visiting Afghan leader told an audience at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York soon after his arrival from Washington. "We've already had 200,000 refugees flowing into Afghanistan as a result of the military operations. The great network of terrorism that was centred in North and South – from Al Qaida to Chechens, to Uzbeks and others – is being dislocated," Ghani said. "On Pakistan, I'm cautiously optimistic that we began a process of fundamental transformation. We defined the problem – that Pakistan has been in an undeclared state of hostilities with Afghanistan for 13 years. "Fortunately, they've accepted this definition. We are working to end this state of hostilities. So, peace between Afghanistan and Pakistan is the primary piece," the president told a questioner. "We need to be able to deal regionally with a compact for stability in prosperity, otherwise we will all sink. And I'm hopeful that we will have sufficient wisdom not to sink, but swim together," Ghani said.¹⁰

Speaking of an agreement on a general framework for the peace talks, the High Peace Council (HPC) members have declared that the proposed peace talks with the Taliban would likely be held in Afghanistan. The HPC adviser for international affairs, Mohammad Ismail Qasimyar, hoped on March 29 that the Afghan government and the Taliban would come to the negotiation table "without any preconditions." "There has been an agreement over the framework; first that both the sides would lead the talks freely and in a peaceful environment in Afghanistan, and secondly none of them would come for negotiations with any precondition," Qasimyar said. The peace talks with the Taliban were to start in early days of March after the process was stopped

⁸ "Pentagon to Seek Funds for 352,000 Afghan Troops Till 2017", *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, March 25, 2015, at http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/national_detail.php?post_id=11865

⁹ "Kerry Unveils \$800m New Development Partnership", *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, March 25, 2015, at http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/national_detail.php?post_id=11867

¹⁰ "Ghani on Pakistan: We will Swim, not Sink, Together", *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, March 28, 2015, at http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/national_detail.php?post_id=11880

during former president Hamid Karzai's government who opposed Taliban's Qatar office; however, the month of March is coming to an end but still there is no report of development in the process. The Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, however, insisted in an exclusive interview with *TOLOnews* that a woman would also include the panel of negotiators from Afghan government. "It is the demand of people of Afghanistan, and as women make half of the society, they have the right to have a representative in these talks, and this will be an advantage for us," Abdullah emphasized.¹¹

Pakistan

(March 16-29, 2015)

- **Sohail Aman new PAF chief; US, Pakistan to conduct joint military exercise; Jinnah's speech in school curriculum; Bring Altaf back from UK under study; Pakistan facing internal, external challenges; Saudi request to join operation in Yemen; Decision to send Pak troops on hold.**

The new Chief of Air Staff, Air Marshal Sohail Aman took over command of Pakistan Air Force (PAF) at a ceremony held at the Air Headquarters on March 18. Outgoing Air Chief Marshal Tahir Rafique Butt formally handed over the PAF's Sword of Command to Air Marshal Sohail Aman. Both the outgoing and incoming air chiefs were presented guard of honour to formally mark change of the command. Born in 1959 Air Marshal Sohail Aman was commissioned in the GD (P) Branch of Pakistan Air Force in November 1980. Sohail Aman, an accomplished Fighter Pilot is a graduate of Combat Commanders School Air War College and Royal College of Defence Studies (UK).¹²

The US Central Command has said that the United States and Pakistan will conduct a range of joint military exercises starting in autumn this year. According to policy documents, the two countries have more than 100 engagements and exercises planned. The joint drills are expected to begin in October. It will focus on a broad spectrum of military components, including air, land, sea and special operations. The planned engagements between the two countries' militaries include seminars and other forums covering a range of topics that includes counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, civil-military cooperation, intelligence. Earlier this month, Pakistani and US military representatives gathered at the Macdill Air Force Base in Florida for the 24th US-Pakistan Military Consultative Committee, an annual forum for reviewing military-to-military engagements and exercises between the two countries.¹³

The Sindh government on March 23 decided to include Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah's speech of August 11, 1947 in the curriculum of classes eight to 10. The decision to include the speech made by the Father of the Nation in his address to the first Constituent Assembly of Pakistan

¹¹ "Peace Talks Possibly in Afghanistan: HPC", *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, March 30, 2015, at http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/national_detail.php?post_id=11893

¹² "Sohail Aman Takes Over Command as PAF Chief", *The News*, March 19, 2015, at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/article-178643-Sohail-Aman-takes-over-command-as-PAF-chief>

¹³ "US, Pakistan to Conduct Joint Military Drills in October", *The News*, March 24, 2015, at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/article-179194-US,-Pakistan-to-conduct-joint-military-drills-in-October>

on August 11, 1947 was taken by the provincial senior minister for education and literacy on the direction of former president of Pakistan and PPP co-chairman Asif Ali Zardari. The speech in which the Quaid explicitly spoke of giving equal rights and freedom to the religious minorities of Pakistan will be made a part of the curriculum in its entirety. It was said that the textbooks with the addition would be distributed among schoolchildren free of cost next year.¹⁴

Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan revealed on March 24 that the government was examining legal possibilities of getting MQM chief Altaf Hussain extradited, and said that a decision on the matter might be reached over the next few days. He was answering a question on whether the government was in touch with Interpol over the possibility of bringing Altaf Hussain back to Pakistan. The minister confirmed that he had discussed the FIR registered against Mr Hussain over threats to Rangers personnel, allegedly hurled during an interview with a private TV channel, with British High Commissioner Philip Barton, adding that this was not a secret. He told reporters that he had asked the high commissioner what British law said about threats made by individuals residing in British territory, but denied handing over any documents to Mr Barton, who is currently in the UK. The minister said that the MQM should continue as a political entity, since it had a large number of patriotic voters. Asked to comment on the complicated nature of the government's relationship with the Muttahida, he said that the operation in Karachi had nothing to do with that party and that the action aimed to end crime in the city.¹⁵

Air Chief Marshal Sohail Aman on March 26 said that Pakistan currently faces internal and external challenges. Operation Zarb-e-Azb has broken the backs of the terrorists, he said while speaking to cadets at a passing-out ceremony at the Risalpur academy, where he was invited as the chief guest. 133 GD pilots, 78 students of engineering and 13 graduating in A&SD courses took part in the parade.¹⁶

Pakistan said on March 26 it was examining Saudi Arabia's request to join the Gulf-led operation against Shia Houthi rebels in Yemen. Adviser to Prime Minister on National Security and Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz confirmed that top Saudi officials had contacted the Pakistani leadership requesting it to join the Yemen operation. A decision has not yet been taken, Aziz said. He further said that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has summoned a high-level meeting this evening to consult his close aides over the matter. Aziz added that a decision on whether to comply with the Saudi request will be announced at the conclusion of the meeting. Earlier during the day, Foreign Office spokesperson Tasneem Aslam told reporters at the weekly media briefing in Islamabad that Saudi Arabia had contacted Pakistan on an emergency basis and extended the invitation to join the operation against Houthi rebels in Yemen.¹⁷

¹⁴ "Quaid's Aug 11 Speech To Be Included In School Curriculum", *The Dawn*, March 24, 2015, at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1171436/quaid-aug-11-speech-to-be-included-in-school-curriculum>

¹⁵ "Move To Bring Back Altaf From UK Under Study, Says Nisar", *The Dawn*, March 25, 2015, at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1171735/move-to-bring-back-ataf-from-uk-under-study-says-nisar>

¹⁶ "Pakistan Facing Internal, External Challenges: PAF Chief", *The News*, March 26, 2015, at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/article-179348-Pakistan-facing-internal-external-challenges:-PAF-chief>

¹⁷ "Pakistan Examining Saudi Request To Join Operation in Yemen: FO", *The Dawn*, March 26, 2015, at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1172016/pakistan-examining-saudi-request-to-join-operation-in-yemen-fo>

Pakistan on March 30 held a top-level civil-military meeting to discuss the escalating Yemen crisis, vowing to fully support Saudi Arabia in every eventuality but once again stopping short of a decision to send its troops to join the coalition against rebel fighters. Reports quoted officials as saying that Pakistan would announce a final decision on whether to send troops after its defence delegation's visit to Saudi Arabia. Reiterating Pakistan's commitment to safeguard the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif called upon the United Nations, the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Conference) and the international community to play a constructive role in finding a political solution to the Yemen crisis. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif called the high-level meeting of political and military top brass to undertake a comprehensive review of the fast-deteriorating situation in Yemen and draw Islamabad's future course of action in mitigating the soaring tensions in the Middle East. The meeting was attended by Finance Minister Ishaq Dar, Defence Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif, Adviser to PM on National Security Sartaj Aziz, Army Chief General Raheel Sharif, Air Chief Sohail Aman and Foreign Affairs secretary among other senior officials.¹⁸

B. East Asia

China

(March 23-29, 2015)

- **BRICS countries cooperate to promote judicial cooperation; China signs agreement with Kazakhstan; Chinese President meets the President of Austria; China upset over remarks by the Philippines; China and Indonesia sign new deals; China ready to cooperate with Pakistan; China-India start border talks; China, South Korea, Japan conclude Foreign Ministers talk; Xi Jinping sends condolence on the death of Lee Kuan Yew.**

On March 28, top courts of the BRICS countries signed a statement in order to promote judicial cooperation. According to Zhou Qiang, president and chief justice of the Supreme People's Court, "The statement will play a positive role to promote cooperation among the member of the BRICS and even the larger global community". It was also asserted that the BRICS members want a pragmatic judicial cooperation among the countries.¹⁹

On March 27, China signed a deal with Kazakhstan. This deal is worth 23.6 billion dollars. During the meeting between the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and Kazakhstan Prime Minister Karim Masimov, Li said that, "We sowed the seeds in Kazakhstan in winter, and now the seeds have thrived".²⁰

¹⁸ "Decision to Send Pak Troops On Hold", *The Nation*, March 31, 2015 at, <http://nation.com.pk/national/31-Mar-2015/decision-to-send-pak-troops-on-hold>

¹⁹ Jinran, Zheng, "BRICS Countries Consent To Promote Judicial Cooperation", *China Daily*, March 28, 2015 at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-03/28/content_19939165.htm, accessed on March 30, 2015

²⁰ Yinan, Zhao, "Landmark Agreements Signed with Kazakhstan", *China Daily*, March 28, 2015 at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2015-03/28/content_19934779.htm, accessed on March 30, 2015

The Chinese President Xi Jinping met with the Austrian President Heinz Fischer on March 27 in Beijing. During the meeting the Austrian President said that Austria wanted to join the China led Asian Infrastructure Bank. The Chinese President said that, "Austria expects the bank to help China's cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe".²¹

As a response to the Philippines statement that it was prepared to start repair works to an airstrip on the islands, the Chinese side asserted that it violated Chinese sovereignty and maritime rights. The Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said that, "China was seriously concerned about the remarks by the Philippine side".²²

Chinese President Xi Jinping met with his Indonesian counterpart Joko Widodo on March 26 in Beijing. During the meeting both sides signed a total of eight agreements including cooperation in infrastructure, high-speed railways etc. they also signed a memorandum of understanding on greater cooperation in infrastructure and industry.²³

The Chinese Vice Chairman of China's Central Military Commission Fan Changlong met the Chief of Naval Staff of Pakistan Muhammad Zakaullah in Beijing on March 26. During the meeting the Chinese side stated its willingness to deepen cooperation with Pakistan in the areas of anti-terrorism, military technology and maritime security. During the meeting Fan said that, "China will work with Pakistan to push forward the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor within the framework of China's "Belt and Road" initiatives and build a community of shared destiny".²⁴

Fresh round of border talks started between India and China on March 23. This is the first talk after the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in May 2014. The talks were attended by Chinese State Councillor Yang Jiechi and Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval. During the meeting both sides agreed to properly manage and control disputes. They also asserted that there is a need to maintain peace and tranquillity in the border regions.²⁵

After a three year gap, the Seventh Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Meeting of South Korea, China and Japan was concluded on March 21 in Seoul. After the meeting the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated at a press conference that the cooperation was "back on the track of normalcy".²⁶

²¹ Xiaokun, Li, "Austria Sets Its Sights on the AIIB", *China Daily*, March 28, 2015 at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-03/28/content_19934711.htm, accessed on March 30, 2015

²² "China Urges the Philippines to Withdraw from Illegally Occupied Nansha Islands", *China Daily*, March 27, 2015 at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-03/27/content_19933559.htm, accessed on March 30, 2015

²³ Shengnan, Zhao and Yanzi, Deng, "China, Indonesia Sign Deal to Boost Cooperation", *China Daily*, March 27, 2015 at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-03/27/content_19928376.htm, accessed on March 30, 2015

²⁴ "China Vows Anti-Terror Cooperation with Pakistan", *China Daily*, March 26, 2015 at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015-03/26/content_19919921.htm, accessed on March 30, 2015

²⁵ Shengnan, Zhao, "Fresh Talks Begin on Border Issue", *China Daily*, March 23, 2015 at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-03/24/content_19889843.htm, accessed on March 30, 2015

²⁶ Yunbi, Zhang, "China, S. Korea Remain Cautious", *China Daily*, March 23, 2015 at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-03/23/content_19877870.htm, accessed on March 30, 2015

On March 23, the Chinese President sent a message of condolence to Singapore President Tony Tan Keng Yam over the death of Lee Kuan Yew, former Prime Minister. In the message Xi stated that, "Lee was an old friend of the Chinese people and the founder, pioneer and promoter of China-Singapore relations".²⁷

Japan

(March 23-29, 2015)

- **Japanese PM Abe to address joint session of US Congress; US Defence Secretary praises Japan's move to develop a new national security framework; Japan and Indonesia to deepen bilateral security cooperation.**

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has been invited by US House of Representatives Speaker John Boehner to address a joint session of the US Congress during the former's upcoming visit to the US in April 2015. Abe has already accepted the invitation and he is to deliver the address on April 29. This will be historic in the sense that Abe will be the first Japanese Prime Minister in 54 years to address a joint meeting of the US Congress.²⁸

On March 26, US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter met with Masahiko Komura, Vice President of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), in Washington. During that meeting, he termed the recent initiative by Japan towards introducing a new legal framework for national security as a historic move. Carter reportedly also expressed hope that the new security legislation would be enacted. On the issue of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's upcoming visit to the US on April 26, Carter insisted that it should demonstrate to the world that the US-Japan relationship continues to remain strong.²⁹

Indonesian President Joko Widodo held talks with his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe in Tokyo on March 23. During that meeting, both the leaders reiterated their plan to hold two plus two meeting involving foreign and defence ministers of the two countries. They also agreed to set up a high level forum to deliberate on issues pertaining to maritime domain in order to boost bilateral maritime cooperation. In the meeting, both Abe and Widodo also agreed to bolster the bilateral economic collaboration. It needs to be noted that on March 23 itself, Japanese Defence Minister General Nakatani and his Indonesian counterpart Ryamizard Ryacudu signed a MoU on defence cooperation.³⁰

²⁷ "Xi Offers Condolences to Singapore over Lee's Death", *China Daily*, March 23, 2015 at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015-03/23/content_19883026.htm, accessed on March 30, 2015

²⁸ "Abe to be 1st Japan Premier to Address Joint Session of US Congress", *The Yomiuri Daily*, March 27, 2015 at <http://the-japan-news.com/news/article/0002039574>

²⁹ "US Defence Chief Hails Japan's Security Legislation", *The Yomiuri Daily*, March 27, 2015, at <http://the-japan-news.com/news/article/0002039174>

³⁰ "Japan, Indonesia To Boost Security", *The Yomiuri Daily*, March 24, 2015, at <http://the-japan-news.com/news/article/0002028557>

South Korea

(March 23-29, 2015)

- **South Korea signs FTA with New Zealand; South Korean President calls on North Korea to give-up its provocative behaviour.**

On March 23, South Korea signed an FTA with New Zealand after a summit meeting between South Korean President Park Geun-hye and her New Zealand counterpart John Key. This marks the thirteenth FTA for South Korea. After the signing of the agreement, President Park averred that this move would create an important foundation for both the countries in order to boost bilateral cooperation not only in economy, but also in areas such as culture, security, international exchanges and people-to-people exchanges. Under the said agreement, New Zealand is to remove all tariffs on imports from South Korea over the next seven years. Similarly South Korea is to lift tariffs on more than 96.4 percent of imported products from New Zealand over the next fifteen years.³¹

On March 26, South Korean President Park addressed in a ceremony that marked the fifth anniversary of the sinking of the South Korean naval ship Cheonan due to a North Korean torpedo attack. The ceremony took place at the Daejeon National Cemetery. President Park, in her speech, called on North Korea to abandon its 'reckless provocations'. She further insisted that the sacrifices made by the Cheonan's sailors can be honoured by unifying the two Koreas where both North Koreans as South Koreans would be happy.³²

C. Southeast Asia

ASEAN

(March 16-22, 2015)

- **ASEAN Defence Ministers meet in Langkawi in Malaysia; Inaugural ASEAN Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors meeting (AFMGM) held; ASEAN Navies' South China Sea patrols to be supported by USA; ASEAN on track for Open Skies Policy; ASEAN countries needs to work closer to ensure maritime security, says Defence minister of Malaysia.**

The 9th ASEAN Defence Ministers meeting (ADMM) was held in Langkawi, Malaysia from March 15-March 17. In a press release, the ASEAN Secretariat said that the meeting was chaired by honourable Defence Minister of Malaysia and the defence ministers of ASEAN member states pledged for closer defence cooperation in realisation of the goals of ASEAN Community by 2015.³³ A joint declaration for safeguarding the region from various security threats was signed by the

³¹ "New Zealand FTA is Korea's 13th", *Korea Joongang Daily*, March 24, 2015, at <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/Article.aspx?aid=3002255>

³² "Pre. Park urges N. Korea to Abandon Provocations and Nuclear Programme on Cheonan Anniversary", *Donga Ilbo*, March 27, 2015, at <http://english.donga.com/srv/service.php3?biid=2015032770868>

³³ "ASEAN Defence Cooperation Progresses Towards Realisation of ASEAN Community Post 2015", *ASEAN.ORG*, March 17, 2015 at <https://admm.asean.org/index.php/admm-news.html>

ASEAN Defence Ministers which was the Joint Declaration on Maintaining Regional Security and Stability. Defence minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein said after the signing of Joint Declaration that IS (Islamic State) is a growing threat in the region that would require to be monitored. He commented, "We cannot afford to take this threat lightly... we have agreed that there is a need for greater cooperation to cope with the threat. This is a position that we hold very clear as the ministers responsible for security and stability in our region."³⁴ According to ASEAN Secretariat, the outcome of the meeting would contribute effectively to ASEAN cooperation on disaster relief and humanitarian assistance (HADR) and the ministers added concept papers on ASEAN Militaries Ready Group on HADR and the Establishment of the ASEAN Centre of Military Medicine.³⁵

The first ever ASEAN Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors meeting (AFMGM) was held in Kuala Lumpur where the ASEAN member states reiterated their commitment to realize the goals of ASEAN community post 2015.³⁶ The ASEAN Banking Integration Framework (ABIF) was finalized in the meeting, a framework where any two ASEAN member states may enter into bilateral agreements to provide greater access to the banking sector to achieve a more integrated ASEAN Banking Market under leadership of Qualified ASEAN Banks (QABs).³⁷ In this regard, it was also discussed that the AFMGM Working Committee would develop implementation plans for Roadmap for Monetary and financial integration.³⁸ In a joint statement, the ASEAN Finance Ministers vowed to implement appropriate monetary and fiscal policies for the region that would be complemented by macroeconomic policies and the AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) was also endorsed.³⁹

During a meeting with naval officers of ASEAN member states, the Commander of 7th Fleet of US Navy, Vice Admiral Robert Thomas said that the US would back a combined maritime patrol in South China Sea which would bear similarities with patrols in Straits of Malacca. In the panel session, he said, "Perhaps easier said than done, from both a policy and organization perspective, such an initiative could help crystallize the operational objectives in the training events that ASEAN navies want to pursue".⁴⁰

³⁴ "ASEAN Defence Ministers Sign A Joint Declaration On Regional Security", *New Straits Times Online*, March 16, 2015 at <http://www.nst.com.my/node/76781>

³⁵ "ASEAN Defence Cooperation Progresses Towards Realisation of ASEAN Community Post 2015", *ASEAN.ORG*, March 17, 2015 at <https://admm.asean.org/index.php/admm-news.html>

³⁶ "ASEAN Finance Ministers, Central Bank Governors Commit to AEC Goals", *Interaksyon.com*, March 22, 2015 at <http://www.interaksyon.com/business/107458/asean-finance-ministers-central-bank-governors-commit-to-aec-goals>

³⁷ "ASEAN Finance ministers, Central Bank Governors Finalise ABIF", *Bernama.com*, March 21, 2015 at <http://www.bernama.com.my/bernama/v8/bu/newsbusiness.php?id=1119111>

³⁸ "ASEAN Finance Ministers, Central Bank Governors Commit to AEC Goals", *Interaksyon.com*, March 22, 2015 at <http://www.interaksyon.com/business/107458/asean-finance-ministers-central-bank-governors-commit-to-aec-goals>

³⁹ "AFMGM Reaffirms Commitment To Strengthen ASEAN's Economy", *New Straits Times Online*, March 22, 2015 at <http://www.nst.com.my/node/77484>

⁴⁰ "US 7TH Fleet Would Support ASEAN South China Sea Patrols", *USNI News*, March 20, 2015 at <http://news.usni.org/2015/03/20/u-s-7th-fleet-would-support-asean-south-china-sea-patrols>

Transport Minister of Thailand, Liow Tiong Lai, while speaking at the ASEAN Aviation Summit at the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition (LIMA) said that he was optimistic about ASEAN Open Skies Policy despite Philippines not being a signatory to the policy till then.⁴¹ He said, “We’re signing it with the Philip-pines this year. The policy is a step forward and we hope to have harmonised regulations so that the market will see more growth that will bene-fit all the 10 countries under ASEAN. Our purpose is to consolidate our strength in ASEAN.”⁴² In his keynote address to the ‘Chief of Navy Roundtable Talks’ Defence Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein said that ASEAN member states should work close to ensure cooperation among navies and other maritime enforcement agencies. He specifically mentioned that success of Malacca Straits Patrol, (MSP) repeated in other areas in the region, a joint naval and air patrol programme between Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand that has significantly reduced piracy in the straits.⁴³

Southeast Asia

(March 16-22, 2015)

- **Royal Brunei Armed Forces Commander visits New Zealand; US First Lady visits Cambodia for the first time in history; East Timor would not give up dispute on oil and maritime boundary with Australia; Indonesian president to visit Japan; President of Vietnam will visit Laos; Navy chief of Malaysia talks about Malaysia’s defence ambitions being hampered by budget constraints; Myanmar conducts ceasefire negotiations with armed ethnic groups; Philippines Air Force finally receives first C-295 aircraft; Singapore probing false news of death of its founding father; Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand visits Vietnam; Vietnam to hold joint military exercises with Australia.**

Royal Brunei Armed Forces (RBAF) Commander Yang Dimuliakan Pehin Datu Pekerma Jaya Major General Dato Paduka Seri Mohd Tawih bin Abdullah visited New Zealand for a brief visit on March 22 to attend a Strategic Advisory Board Meeting at the invitation of Massey University, where upon his arrival; he was received by the executive committee.⁴⁴

‘US First Lady visited Cambodia from March 20-March 22, as a part of her trip to Japan and Cambodia.⁴⁵ The visit was related to the US Government launched ‘Let Girls Learn’⁴⁶ international

⁴¹ “ASEAN On Track For Open Skies Policy”, *The Nation*, March 12, 2015 at <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/business/Asean-on-track-for-Open-Skies-policy-30256340.html>

⁴² For more information on Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace exhibition(LIMA)2015, see at <http://www.lima.com.my/>

⁴³ “ASEAN Countries Must Work Closer To Ensure Vital Maritime Security”, *New Straits Times Online*, March 17, 2015 at <http://www.nst.com.my/node/76942>

⁴⁴ “RBAF Commander Attends Strategic Advisory Board Meeting”, *Ministry of Defence, Brunei Darussalam press release*, March 22, 2015 at <http://www.mindef.gov.bn/Lists/News/DispForm.aspx?ID=3378>

⁴⁵ For information on US First Lady’s trip to Japan and Cambodia including a personal account of the trip by the First Lady herself, please see the links to the Official Website of the White House at <https://www.whitehouse.gov>.

⁴⁶ For information on ‘Let Girls Learn’ initiative, please see the link at the official website of USAID at <http://www.usaid.gov/letgirlslearn>

girls education initiative, a project launched earlier this month as a community-based programme, to be run by the Peace Corps, was meant to help get 62 million girls around the developing world back into classrooms.⁴⁷ It needs to be noted that Japan was a major donor to the programme while Cambodia was among the major recipients of the aid programme.⁴⁸ During her trip to Cambodia, she urged students of Cambodia to demand greater freedom and greater equality, a speech that was seen as an indirect criticism of the rule of Cambodia for thirty years by the authoritarian Prime Minister Hun Sen.⁴⁹ Deputy Asia Director of human Rights Watch, Phil Robertson said, "Even though Mrs. Obama didn't name names, it's more than we have heard in a long time from a first lady on a foreign trip."⁵⁰ In a speech to Peace Corps in the Cambodian city of Siam Rep, she said, "When girls get educated, when they learn to read and write and think, that gives them the tools to speak up and talk about injustice and demand equal treatment". She added, "It helps them participate in the political life of their country and hold their leaders accountable."⁵¹ Cambodia is currently one of the eleven countries where the program is being laid out by US Government.⁵²

In his interview to *ABC news*, former Prime Minister of East Timor, Xanana Gusmao, said that the island nation of East Timor would not back from a dispute between it and Australia over oil and gas reserves in Timor sea and the two countries are currently in a maritime dispute of boundaries and entitlement to natural resources.⁵³ It was reported that Indonesian president Joko Widodo would visit Japan from March 22 to March 25 where he would be received by the Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe and his entourage.⁵⁴ It is noteworthy that the President would have his first ever state visit to Japan. The itinerary of the President has not been finalized till now and the Deputy Chief of Mission of Japanese Embassy in Indonesia said in that regard, "The discussion is

⁴⁷ "US First Lady in Cambodia to Promote Girls' Education", *The New York Times*, March 20, 2015 at http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/03/20/world/asia/ap-as-cambodia-michelle-obama.html?_r=0

⁴⁸ "Michelle Obama Visits Cambodia, Quietly Urging Better Human Rights", *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 22, 2015 at <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/2015/0322/Michelle-Obama-visits-Cambodia-quietly-urging-better-human-rights>

⁴⁹ "US First Lady Urges Cambodian Students To Seek More Freedoms", *SF Gate.com*, March 21, 2015 at <http://www.sfgate.com/news/politics/article/US-first-lady-urges-Cambodian-students-to-seek-6149448.php>

⁵⁰ "Michelle Obama Visits Cambodia, Quietly Urging Better Human Rights", *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 22, 2015 at <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/2015/0322/Michelle-Obama-visits-Cambodia-quietly-urging-better-human-rights>

⁵¹ "US First Lady Urges Cambodian Girls To Hold Girls Accountable", *The Times of India*, March 21, 2015 at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/rest-of-world/US-First-Lady-urges-Cambodian-girls-to-hold-leaders-accountable/articleshow/46644013.cms>

⁵² "US First Lady in Cambodia to Promote Girls' Education", *The New York Times*, March 20, 2015 at http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/03/20/world/asia/ap-as-cambodia-michelle-obama.html?_r=0

⁵³ "Timor Leste will Not Give Up In Dispute Over Oil And Maritime Boundary: Former leader Xanana Gusmao", *ABC News*, March 17, 2015 at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-17/timor-leste-will-not-give-up-dispute-over-oil-gusmao/6325332>

⁵⁴ "Indonesian President Joko Widodo To Visit Japan", *Antaranews.com*, March 18, 2015 at <http://www.antaranews.com/en/news/98161/indonesian-president-joko-widodo-to-visit-japan>

underway, but President Jokowi will most likely visit major Japanese industries and some ports.”⁵⁵ A non-binding defence agreement between Indonesia and Japan would also be signed in this regard and it was expected by Indonesian officials that the agreement would increase cooperation in military training, technology and peacekeeping operations which boost the military relationship.⁵⁶ It was reported that the President would meet Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko during the visit and following his arrival in Japan, the foreign ministry of Japan said in their release, “It is significant that Japan is Mr. Jokowi’s first foreign travel destination outside the Association of Southeast Asian Nations solely for a bilateral summit since he became president last October”.⁵⁷

According to the foreign ministry of Vietnam, the President of Vietnam would be visiting Laos soon at the invitation of General Secretary of Lao People’s Revolutionary Party *Chummaly Sayasone* from March 23 to March 25⁵⁸. The Navy Chief of Malaysia Admiral Abdul Aziz Jaafar in an interview to *Reuters*, has told about defence spending of the nation being hampered by budget constraints at a time when contestations have increased in South China Sea with increasing manifestation of assertive in part of China. He said, “We have a lot of areas to be concerned about. The Straits of Malacca, the south-western part of the South China Sea and others”.⁵⁹ Starting on March 17, Government of Myanmar started peace talks with leaders of armed ethnic groups which ended on March 22 in the country’s commercial capital of Yangon, which resulted in two sides reaching an agreement on troop deployment and establishment of a joint monitoring committee. Salai Lian Hmong Sakhong, a member of the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT), which represented 16 armed ethnic groups said, “We will set up a joint-monitoring group [and] a committee to discuss union peace, and other committees as needed. If these committees face problems, the ethnic groups which will sign the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement will solve them by holding meetings.”⁶⁰ He also noted that the parties to the negotiation agreed on the five of the seven chapters of nationwide ceasefire agreement. On the side-lines of negotiation, the military officials met with members of Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) and following the meeting, Lt Gen Myint Soe from the office of the commander-in-chief of the defence services issued a press release which said, “Today’s meeting is very significant because our commander-in-chief and delegates from KIO/KIA (Kachin Independence Army) met for the first time in the history. I could say that we were able to build up considerable amount of trust and confidence

⁵⁵ “Jokowi Begins First State Visit To Japan”, *The Jakarta Post*, March 22, 2015 at <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/03/22/jokowi-begins-first-state-visit-japan.html>

⁵⁶ “Indonesia, Japan to Sign A Defence Agreement”, *Voice of America News*, March 20, 2015 at <http://www.voanews.com/content/indonesia-to-sign-a-defense-agreement-with-japan/2688101.html>

⁵⁷ “Indonesian President Jokowi Visits Japan For Summit with Abe”, *The Japan Times*, March 22, 2015 at <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/03/22/national/politics-diplomacy/indonesia-leader-starts-japan-tour-with-defense-infrastructure-on-agenda/#.VRfKXvmUcYM>

⁵⁸ “President Truong Tan Sang To Visit Laos”, *Vietnamnet Bridge*, March 20, 2015 at <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/government/125955/president-truong-tan-sang-to-visit-laos.html>

⁵⁹ “Malaysia’s Budget Constraints Weigh Down Defence Spending Plans”, *Malaymail online*, March 20, 2015 at <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/malaysias-budget-constraints-weigh-down-defence-spending-plans>

⁶⁰ “Myanmar Cease-Fire Talks Chip Away At Key Agenda Challenges”, *Radio Free Asia*, March 20, 2015 at <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/cease-fire-talks-chip-away-at-agenda-challenges-03202015144350.html>

between us. That's why today's meeting is a remarkable one. I believe that based on the trust we have gained, we could convene nationwide ceasefire agreement from today's meeting... We will discuss some cases such as reducing conflicts and some matters that still need to be discussed in this meeting. What I would like to urge those attending the meeting is to be patient and work for a peaceful solution".⁶¹

Philippines Air Force has finally the first among three aircraft at an official ceremony in Seville in Spain. The planes would cost a total of P 5.29 billion and the press release from the government said that C 295 "will play a key role in the modernization of the PAF's transport fleet and will undertake a wide variety of military and humanitarian missions".⁶²

Founding father of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, the country's longest serving prime minister was admitted to hospital in critical condition while false news of death was circulated. The police who was investigating the case said that the case was purportedly done by a teenager who doctored a government website to make the press release, which was carried by international media and few other international organizations.⁶³ The former prime minister had been admitted to hospital since March 5 for severe pneumonia and the Prime Minister's office said that the health of the former PM had worsened.⁶⁴

General Tanasak Patimapragorn, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand visited Vietnam to attend the 2nd Joint Commission on Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC) between Thailand and Viet Nam on March 19-20, 2015 to explore ways and means of cooperation in all aspects of foreign policy including political-security, economic and socio-cultural cooperation.⁶⁵ Prime minister of Vietnam, Nguyen Tan Dung visited Australia where he met Tony Abbott, prime minister of Australia and during it was decided that defence forces of Vietnam would train alongside defence forces of Australia in joint military exercises. During a press conference, Mr Abbott said, "It is good to see that 120 Vietnamese military personnel will be receiving some training here in Australia and ... Vietnamese military personnel will be involved in joint exercises here in Australia."⁶⁶

⁶¹ "Mixed Results On Ceasefire Talks", *The Nation*, March 22, 2015 at <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/aec/Mixed-results-from-ceasefire-talks-30256498.html>

⁶² "Airbus Hands Over First C295 to Philippines Air Force", *Inquirer.net*, March 19, 2015 at <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/119788/airbus-hands-over-first-c295-to-philippines-air-force/>

⁶³ "Singapore Police Question Student in Lee Kuan Yew Death Hoax", *ABC News*, March 20, 2015 at <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/singapore-police-question-student-lee-kuan-yew-death-29776759>

⁶⁴ "Singapore Police Probe False Announcement of Lee Kuan Yew's Death", *The Wall Street Journal*, March 18, 2015 at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/singapore-police-probe-false-announcement-of-lee-kuan-yews-death-1426734625>

⁶⁵ "Press Releases: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs' Official Visit to Vietnam", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand, March 18, 2015 at <http://www.mfa.go.th/main/en/media-center/14/54585-Deputy-Prime-Minister-and-Minister-of-Foreign-Affa.html>

⁶⁶ "Aust, Vietnam Defence Training Planned", *SBS.com.au*, March 18, 2015 at <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2015/03/18/aust-vietnam-defence-training-planned>

Southeast Asia

(March 23-29, 2015)

- **Remembering Mr. Lee Kuan Yew; President Jokowi visited Japan and China; ASEAN Banking Integration Framework finalised; Developing Asia's economic growth will continue, says ADB Report; Cambodian PM Hun Sen argued for bilateral approach to resolve South China Sea disputes; New LCS opened in Mizoram.**

The founder of independent Singapore and the country's first Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew succumbed to his prolonged illness on March 23, 2015. Mr. Lee Kuan Yew ruled Singapore for three decades (1959-1990) and introduced the modern Singapore to the world. He was best known for his market-friendly policies which transformed Singapore into an international hub for business and a major port for global maritime trade. Mr. Lee Kuan Yew was also known for his population policy, cleanliness drive, making English medium education a tool to enhance Singaporeans' competitiveness at the global level, a much corruption-less government and so on. He was also criticised for restrictions on freedom of expression and media. He was born in 1923 in Singapore, then under the British rule and completed his education from the Cambridge University to come back to Singapore to re-write its history. US President Barack Obama described him as a 'true giant of history'. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi mentioned him as the 'torchbearer of hope' for Asia. World's most leaders attended Mr. Lee Kuan Yew's funeral on March 29, 2015. ASEAN Secretary General Le Luong Minh wrote, "It was his (Lee Kuan Yew's)... distinct vision and commitment that contributed to the birth and rise of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations for which he had left a lasting legacy, for which he will forever be remembered by the people of the ASEAN Community."⁶⁷

Indonesia's President Joko Widodo, who assumed power in October 2014, has, for the first time, taken a stand on South China Sea during his first state visit to Japan on this week. He said that Chinese claims on most of South China Sea have no international legal basis. He also mentioned that peace and stability is important for economic growth and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region. He reiterated the need for the Code of Conduct on South China Sea and dialogue between China and ASEAN to resolve the disputes. President Joko Widodo mentioned that Indonesia is ready to play the role of an 'honest broker' in this issue. During this visit, Indonesia also signed a defence cooperation agreement with Japan to enhance cooperation in search and rescue operations,

⁶⁷ "Lee Kuan Yew, Founding Father Of Modern Singapore, Dies at 91", by Rujun Shen and Lee Rou Urn, *Reuters*, March 23, 2015, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/23/us-singapore-leekuan-yew-idUSKBN0MI08Y20150323>; "Mr Lee's Final Journey", *The Straits Times*, March 29, 2015, at <http://www.straitstimes.com/news/singapore/more-singapore-stories/story/remembering-lee-kuan-yew-carry-forging-racial-harmony-20>; "Lee Kuan Yew 'Was a Torchbearer of Hope', Writes India's Narendra Modi", *The Wall Street Journal*, March 29, 2015, available at <http://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2015/03/29/lee-kuan-yew-was-a-torchbearer-of-hope-writes-indias-narendra-modi/>, accessed on March 30, 2015; 'A Great Leader And Statesman': ASEAN Secretary-General on Lee Kuan Yew, *ChannelNewsAsia*, March 26, 2015, at <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/a-great-leader-and/1742920.html>.

humanitarian assistance and cyber defence.⁶⁸ A high-level maritime security forum was launched to enhance Indonesia's coast guard capabilities as well as infrastructure relating to the country's maritime capacity.

After his visit to Japan, Mr. Widodo visited China to attend Boao Forum in Hainan Province. It was his second visit to China as he attended the APEC Summit last year after assuming the presidential responsibility. The joint statement issued after his meeting with the Chinese President Xi Jinping mentioned that "the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, proposed by President Xi Jinping, and the Strategy of the Global Maritime Fulcrum initiated by President Joko Widodo are complementary".⁶⁹ The statement mentioned about a maritime partnership between China and Indonesia.

The ASEAN Banking Integration Framework (AIBF) has been finalised by the grouping which will allow the banks in ASEAN to enter into joint bilateral agreements with each other. Under this agreement, banks from the ASEAN region can operate in the partner countries on the same terms as enjoyed by the domestic banks. The banking integration will enhance intra-regional trade in a more comprehensive way which is almost over a quarter of total ASEAN external trade now. Central banks of Malaysia and Indonesia have already signed a bilateral agreement under AIBF.⁷⁰

The Asian Development Outlook 2015, released recently, has argued that developing Asia's fast economic growth will continue in 2015 and 2016 thanks to the soft commodity prices and recovery of the major industrial economies. The report mentioned that developing Asia's Gross Domestic Product will experience a growth of 6.3% in 2015 and 2016. The report also mentioned that India and many ASEAN countries will balance the gradual deterioration of the Chinese economy and the credit goes to improving external demand for the region's output. Aggregate growth in Southeast Asia will hover around 4.9 per cent in 2015 and 5.3 per cent in 2016 as Thailand and Indonesia are leading the economy of the region and the region is benefitting from rising exports and slower inflation.⁷¹

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, in a gathering of students at the National Institute of Education in Cambodia, said that South China Sea disputes are not between ASEAN and China; rather, between the claimant states and China. Henceforth, he argued that the territorial disputes need to be resolved bilaterally between the claimant states. He also reiterated the importance of maintaining the Declaration of Conduct (DOC) and implementation of the Code of Conduct (COC).

⁶⁸ "Indonesia's President Says China Has No Legal Claim to South China Sea: Report", *The Times of India*, March 23, 2015, available at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/rest-of-world/Indonesias-president-says-China-has-no-legal-claim-to-South-China-Sea-Report/articleshow/46660601.cms>; "Indonesia Can Be 'Broker' in S. China Sea - Widodo", *Bangkok Post*, March 26, 2015, available at <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/asean/509332/indonesia-can-be-broker-in-s-china-sea-widodo>, accessed on March 30, 2015.

⁶⁹ "Indonesia, China Seal 'Maritime Partnership', Shannon Tiezzi", *The Diplomat*, March 27, 2015, available at <http://thediplomat.com/2015/03/indonesia-china-seal-maritime-partnership/>, accessed on March 30, 2015.

⁷⁰ "ASEAN Finalizes Banking Integration Framework Agreement", *presstv.ir*, March 22, 2015, available at <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2015/03/22/402906/ASEAN-finalizes-banking-agreement>, accessed on March 30, 2015.

⁷¹ "ADB Sees Strong Growth for Developing Asia in 2015 and 2016", *ADB News Release*, March 24, 2015 at <http://www.adb.org/news/adb-sees-strong-growth-developing-asia-2015-and-2016>, accessed on March 30, 2015.

The remarks of Mr. Hun Sen ahead of the 26th ASEAN Summit, scheduled for April 24-27, 2015, are significant as ASEAN is expected to take a uniform position on South China Sea for a long period of time now. Many ASEAN countries are in favour of taking a unified stand as China's assertive behaviour in South China Sea is a warning bell for them. ASEAN, in general, supports multilateral approach which is contrary to China's bilateral approach to solve the disputes.⁷²

Nirmala Sitharaman, India's commerce and industry minister has inaugurated a Land Custom Station (LCS) at Zawkhathar in Champhai district, Mizoram to augment India-Myanmar border trade. During the inauguration ceremony, she said that government has adopted a mission mode approach for Northeast India's connectivity and completion of the pending projects now. She also said that more *border haats* will be set up in Northeast India and the volume of border trade through the region will be increased to USD 3 billion in 2015-2016. She also pledged to open a State Bank of India's branch in Zawkhathar and echoed the urgency to complete the Rhi-Tidim road as soon as possible. The land custom station at Zawkhathar will increase border trade between the Mizo people residing across the borders of the two countries.⁷³

D. Russia

National

(March 23-29, 2015)

- **Unemployment touches the 1 million mark in Russia; Russia's international reserves grow over a full week for the first time in four months; Upto 5,000 Crimean nationals to be drafted into Russian army in 2015; Russia's super-heavy carrier rocket project estimated at US\$ 12 billion; Capital outflow in Russia projected at around US\$ 90 billion in 2015; Russia facing an exodus of scientists; Russia supplies 300 million cubic meters of gas to Donbas; Six major investment projects approved in Russia's Far East; Russian forces to practise use of S-300 and S-400 systems against air and missile strikes.**

Labour Minister Maxim Topilin has said, on March 27, that Russia's officially registered unemployment rate has exceeded the 1 million mark. While terming the development a matter of concern, he also said that the Russian government had made a timely decision to allocate additional funds to regions for anti-crisis measures.⁷⁴

Russia's Central Bank reported that the country's international reserves, mostly comprising gold and foreign currency, grew by US\$ 1.2 billion in the week of March 13-20 to US\$ 352.9 billion. This

⁷² "S. China Sea Dispute Not between ASEAN, China: Cambodian PM", *Want China Times*, March 26, 2015, available at <http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news-subclass-cnt.aspx?id=20150326000176&cid=1101>, accessed on March 30, 2015.

⁷³ "Nirmala Sitharaman Inaugurates Land Customs Station at Indo-Myanmar Border", *The Economic Times*, 25 March 2015, available at http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2015-03-25/news/60474926_1_indo-myanmar-border-border-trade-centre-industry-minister-nirmala-sitharaman, accessed on March 30, 2015.

⁷⁴ "Russia's Officially Registered Unemployment Tops 1 Million — Minister", *Itar-Tass*, March 26, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/785323>

is the first such increase since November 2014. A positive exchange rate and market revaluation have been attributed for this increase. Russia's international reserve assets have decreased by US\$ 35.6 billion since the beginning of 2015. The international reserves are highly liquid foreign assets managed by the Central Bank of Russia. They comprise foreign currency, Special Drawing Rights (SDRs), a reserve position in the International Monetary Fund and monetary gold.⁷⁵

Crimea's Head Sergey Aksyonov has said, on March 25, that up to five thousand people from the Republic will be drafted into the Russian armed forces in 2015. Earlier, the upper house of Russia's parliament had approved a law to establish special rules to be exempted from draft or get a deferment for residents of Crimea and Sevastopol.⁷⁶

The Chairman of the Scientific and Technical Council of the Federal Space Agency (Roscosmos) Yuri Koptev has said, on March 24, that the project of developing a Russian super-heavy carrier rocket with a cargo capacity of 70-80 tons will likely cost 700 billion rubles (US\$ 12 billion).⁷⁷

Finance Minister Anton Siluanov has projected, on March 23, the capital outflow in Russia to be around US\$ 90 billion in 2015. He added that the figure for 2014 stood at US\$ 151.5 billion.⁷⁸

The president of the Russian Academy of Sciences Vladimir Fortov has said, on March 25, that the exodus of Russian scientists has picked up pace during the last 18 months. He attributed the increase in scientists leaving Russia to more lucrative salaries offered abroad, a lure that has become stronger following the roubles recent plummet in value. However, he added that this development has not yet resulted in a shortage of specialists.⁷⁹

Energy Minister Alexander Novak has said, on March 27, that Russia has supplied 300 million cubic meters of natural gas to Ukraine's Donbas region. Gazprom had earlier agreed to discuss gas supplies to Donbas outside the trilateral gas talks between Russia, Ukraine and the EU.⁸⁰

Minister for Russian Far East Development Alexander Galushko has said, on March 30, that six major projects that are due to draw some US\$ 2.19 billion in private investments have been approved for implementation in Russia's Far East, while the state will spend around US\$ 290 million.⁸¹

⁷⁵ "Russia's International Reserves Grow Over Week For First Time In 4 Months — Regulator", *Itar-Tass*, March 26, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/economy/785134>

⁷⁶ "Up to 5,000 Crimean Residents To Be Drafted To Russian Army in 2015 — Crimean Head", *Itar-Tass*, March 26, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/784933>

⁷⁷ "Russia's Super-Heavy Carrier Rocket Project Estimated At \$12 Bln — Space Agency", *Itar-Tass*, March 24, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/non-political/784609>

⁷⁸ "Capital Outflow From Russia Will Stand At \$90 Bln Maximum in 2015 — Finance Minister", *Itar-Tass*, March 23, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/economy/784415>

⁷⁹ "Brain Drain Worsens as Exodus of Russian Scientists Gathers Pace", *The Moscow Times*, March 24, 2015 at <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/exodus-of-russian-scientists-gathers-pace/517985.html>

⁸⁰ "Russia Supplies 300 Million Cubic Meters Of Gas To Ukraine's Donbas — Energy Minister", *Itar-Tass*, March 23, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/world/785462>

⁸¹ "Six Major Investment Projects Approved in Russia's Far East", *Itar-Tass*, March 29, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/economy/785775>

The chief of Eastern Military District's press-service Colonel Alexander Gordeyev has said on March 29 that army units from seven regions in Russia's east, including Buryatia, Trans-Baikalia, Khabarovsk, the Primorye and Kamchatka territories and the Amur and Sakhalin regions, will practice the use of S-300 and S-400 air defence systems for repelling potential enemy's massive missile and air strikes.⁸²

International Affairs

(March 23-29, 2015)

- **Russia does not see Pakistan as part of 'terrorism menace'; Foreign Minister Lavrov undertakes a tour to 4 Latin American countries; SCO to adopt Development Strategy until 2025; Russia says its military drills are not connected to NATO's increased activity; Russia says NATO used methods of hybrid war in Yugoslavia, Iraq and Libya; Russia and Jordan sign agreement on nuclear plant construction; Lukoil confirms plans to increase oil production at Iraq's West Qurna-2 field; Kazakhstan has offered Russia an alternative gas transit route to China; Iran says Moscow and Tehran to jointly fight against terrorism; Russia's arms exports reach US\$ 15 billion in 2014; Russia accuses US of double standards by supporting Yemen's 'fleeing' President; Russia's FSB to assist Brazil in ensuring security at Rio Olympics; Russia not ready to restructure Ukraine's US\$ 3 billion loan; Russia may amend its basic documents over US national security strategy threats; Russia suspects US planning to deploy nuclear capable frontline aviation near its borders; Russia welcomes US decision to put Caucasus Emirate leader on terrorism sanctions list; Roscosmos and NASA agree to create new space station to replace ISS; Moscow to prolong a US\$ 2 billion loan to Belarus; Chinese troops to take part in Victory Day parade in Moscow; Russia warns Denmark from joining NATO's missile defence system; BRICS supreme courts to boost cooperation under Russia's chairmanship.**

Russia's envoy to Pakistan Alexy Dedov has said, on March 25, that Russia does not see Pakistan as a part of terrorism menace but a key player in eradicating it from the world. He added that Moscow fully supports Pakistan's bid to become the full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). On Pak-India relations, the ambassador said that Russia welcomes the dialogue process and initiatives taken by both countries for peace and stability. He was addressing students during a lecture on 'Pakistan-Russia Relations: New Prospects and Challenges' at Khan Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.⁸³

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited four Latin American countries - Cuba, Colombia, Nicaragua and Guatemala during March 24-26. While in Cuba, he discussed prospects of bilateral cooperation in sectors like energy, civil aviation, space exploration and healthcare. Mr. Lavrov

⁸² "Russian Forces To Practise Use Of S-300, S-400 Against Air, Missile Strikes", *Itar-Tass*, March 29, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/785800>

⁸³ "Russia Does Not See Pakistan As Part Of Terrorism Menace: Envoy", *The Economic Times*, March 25, 2015 at http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2015-03-25/news/60475229_1_russian-ambassador-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-key-player

also announced that Russia attaches major importance to the development of dialogue with the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), which brings together 33 countries in the region, including Cuba and Venezuela.⁸⁴ While in Colombia, Russian companies were invited to participate in energy and infrastructure development of the country.⁸⁵ In Guatemala, Mr. Lavrov discussed coordination of positions on the international agenda and expanding cooperation in tackling drug trafficking, educational, cultural, legal and emergency management sectors.⁸⁶ The Honduras Foreign Minister Arturo Corrales after his meeting Mr. Lavrov had said that his country 'is open for all lines of partnership with Russia and its ports are ready to receive Russian ships'.⁸⁷

SCO Secretary General Dmitry Mezentse has said, on March 24, that the next SCO summit meeting scheduled to be held in July in Ufa will likely adopt a programme for the development of the organisation until 2025. He was quoted as saying 'the expected adoption of the SCO Development Strategy in Ufa is not just a document, but in a sense a claim to a new quality influence on the regional and international agenda'. This document will not be a specific plan, but will determine guidelines for the organisation until 2025.⁸⁸

Presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov has said, on March 24, that Russia's recent large scale exercises, stretching from the Arctic, Black and Baltic Sea fleets through western and southern military districts were routine exercises aimed at increasing efficiency and not connected to NATO's increased activity.⁸⁹

Russian Permanent Representative at NATO Alexander Grushko has said, on March 23 in Brussels, that the organisation had used instruments of hybrid warfare in the former Yugoslavia, Iraq and Libya. Mr. Grushko was responding to allegations by NATO's top officials about Russian troop's involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine.⁹⁰

Jordan and Russia have, on March 24, signed an intergovernmental agreement on cooperation in the construction of a nuclear power plant in Jordan. Overall investments in the construction of a nuclear plant in Jordan are estimated at US\$ 10 billion. The two sides are now looking at setting

⁸⁴ "Russia, Cuba Foreign Ministers To Talk On Cooperation Prospects in Havana", *Itar-Tass*, March 24, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/784502>

⁸⁵ "Colombia Invites Russian Companies To Energy, Infrastructure Cooperation", *Itar-Tass*, March 24, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/economy/784741>

⁸⁶ "Lavrov To Discuss Closer Cooperation With Guatemala", *Itar-Tass*, March 26, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/784998>

⁸⁷ "Honduras Ports Ready To Receive Russian Ships – Foreign Minister", *Itar-Tass*, March 26, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/world/785270>

⁸⁸ "Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit To Adopt Development Strategy Until 2025", *Itar-Tass*, March 24, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/world/784557>

⁸⁹ "Russia's Military Drills Not Connected To NATO'S Increased Activity – Putin's Spokesman", *Itar-Tass*, March 24, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/784697>

⁹⁰ "Russian Diplomat Says NATO Used Methods Of Hybrid War in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya", *Itar-Tass*, March 23, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/world/784478>

up a joint venture to implement this project. Jordan is supposed to hold a 51 per cent stake while Rosatom will hold the remaining 49 per cent. The plant is expected to meet Jordan's entire electricity demand and raises the possibility of export of electricity to other countries of the region including Syria and Iraq. It will have two power units with a capacity of 1,000 megawatt each with the first unit to be commissioned in 2024 and the second in 2026.⁹¹

Lukoil's President Vagit Alekperov has confirmed, on March 23 in Baghdad, of the company's plans to increase oil production in the West Qurna-2 Iraqi oil field. Lukoil's cost recovery for this project in 2014 was US\$ 3.62 billion. It began mining for oil at the West-Qurna-2 Iraqi oil field in March 2014. The recoverable reserves at the field are estimated at 13 billion barrels.⁹²

The head of the Kazakh state-owned oil and gas company KazMunayGas Sauat Mynbayev has said, on March 24, that Astana has offered Moscow an alternative route for the supply of natural gas to China via transit through Kazakhstan by utilising the Bukhara-Ural and Bozoi-Shymkent pipelines. At present, Gazprom supplies the southern regions of Kazakhstan through the Bukhara-Ural pipeline and the gas is then pumped into the Bozoi-Shymkent pipeline that is connected with the Central Asia-China main gas pipeline. Beijing receives gas from Turkmenistan through this pipeline.⁹³

Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, during a meeting with Russia's Federation Council's speaker Ilyas Umakhanov held in Moscow on March 25, has said that the two countries maintain practical cooperation in the fight against terrorism while the United States prefers to employ double standards. Mr. Abdollahian also held a meeting with Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov wherein they discussed developments in Egypt, Libya, Palestine, Syria, Iraq and the Islamic state. They also called for a political settlement of the situations in Bahrain and Yemen.⁹⁴

The head of Russia's Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation Dmitry Fomin has said, on March 27, that Russia's weapons exports was more than US\$ 15 billion in 2014. The most successful military contractors were RSK MiG, OSK and Almaz Antey.⁹⁵

On March 27, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has accused the United States of double standards by providing support to Yemen's fleeing president and by denying it to Ukraine's former president Viktor Yanukovich.⁹⁶

⁹¹ "Russia and Jordan Sign Agreement On Nuclear Plant Construction", *Itar-Tass*, March 24, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/economy/784664>

⁹² Russia's Lukoil Confirms Plans To Increase Oil Production At Iraq's West Qurna-2 Field", *Itar-Tass*, March 23, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/economy/784449>

⁹³ "Kazakhstan Offers Russia Alternative Gas Transit Route To China Via Its Territory", *Itar-Tass*, March 23, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/economy/784504>

⁹⁴ "Russia, Iran Work In Earnest To Fight Against Terrorism – Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister", *Itar-Tass*, March 23, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/world/784899>

⁹⁵ "Russia's Arms Exports Top \$15 Bln In 2014 – State Agency", *Itar-Tass*, March 23, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/785292>

⁹⁶ "Lavrov: US Shows Double Standards By Supporting Yemen's Fleeing President", *Itar-Tass*, March 27, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/world/785269>

Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) will give assistance to their Brazilian counterparts in ensuring security at the Summer Olympic Games scheduled to be held in Rio de Janeiro in 2016.⁹⁷

Russia's finance minister Anton Siluanov has said, on March 27, that Russia is not ready for restructuring the US\$ 3 billion loan it had given to Ukraine due to the difficult economic condition of the Russian economy.⁹⁸

Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov has said, on March 26, that Russia may amend its fundamental documents following the results of an analysis of the US national security strategy. He said that an analysis of US national security strategy had found a clear anti-Russian bias from the 2010 version.⁹⁹

Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich has said, on March 26, that Russia remains concerned over reports of US and NATO plans to deploy frontline aviation capable of carrying nuclear weapons on Estonia's border with Russia. He stated that 'the gradual build-up of US combat potential on Russian frontiers as part of NATO plans to increase its military presence and develop infrastructure on the so-called eastern flank, in the wake of decisions adopted at the NATO summit in Wales, are not only provoking tensions in a region, which has been the most stable region in Europe for decades, but is fraught with long-term negative consequences'.¹⁰⁰

Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich has welcomed, on March 26, Washington's decision to put Aliaskhab Kebekov - the leader of the Caucasus Emirate militant Jihadist organization- on the list of specially designated nationals. He added that this American initiative shows the prospects of a Russia-US cooperation on tackling terrorism.¹⁰¹

Russia's space agency Roscosmos and its US counterpart NASA have agreed to build a new space station to replace the current ISS when its life cycle expires.¹⁰²

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev has said, on March 26, that Russia will prolong its state loan worth almost US\$ 2 billion to Belarus. He was quoted as saying that 'we agreed to help them in this uneasy situation and we'll actually prolong the existing loan commitments' adding this decision was based on Russia's understanding of partnership relations.¹⁰³

⁹⁷ "Russia's FSB to Assist Brazil In Ensuring Security at Rio Olympics", *Itar-Tass*, March 26, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/sports/785189>

⁹⁸ "Russia Not Ready To Restructure Ukraine's \$3 Bln Loan – Finance Minister", *Itar-Tass*, March 27, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/economy/785353>

⁹⁹ "Russia May Amend Basic Documents Over Us National Security Strategy Threats – Kremlin", *Itar-Tass*, March 26, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/785049>

¹⁰⁰ "Moscow Suspects US of Planning To Deploy Nuclear-Capable Frontline Aviation Near Russia", *Itar-Tass*, March 26, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/785151>

¹⁰¹ "Russia Hails US Decision To Put Caucasus Emirate Leader On Terrorism Sanctions List", *Itar-Tass*, March 26, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/785141>

¹⁰² "Roscosmos, NASA Agree To Create New Space Station To Replace ISS", *Itar-Tass*, March 28, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/non-political/785556>

¹⁰³ "Russia To Prolong \$2 Bln State Loan To Belarus – Prime Minister", *Itar-Tass*, March 26, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/economy/785083>

Chinese servicemen will take part in the Victory Day parade in Moscow's Red Square on May 9. Meanwhile, Chinese leader Xi Jinping is also expected to attend the Moscow celebrations.¹⁰⁴

Russia's ambassador to Denmark has said, on March 22, that Moscow can send nuclear missiles against ships from the NATO country if it joins the alliance's missile defence system. In August 2014, Denmark had agreed to contribute to NATO's shield with at least one frigate with advanced radar capacity. Russia strongly opposes the missile defence system, with bases planned in Romania and Poland.¹⁰⁵

A Russian Supreme Court judge Vladimir Khamenkov has said, on March 29, that higher judicial bodies of the BRICS member-countries will enhance their interaction after Russia takes over the organization's chairmanship on April 1, 2015.¹⁰⁶

E. Iran, Iraq, Syria and the Gulf

Iran

(March 23-29, 2015)

- **Iran condemns Saudi bombing of Yemen; Iran and world powers come closer to seek the historical nuclear deal.**

Iranian officials and military commanders have condemned the bombing of Yemen by a coalition of countries led by Saudi Arabia against Houthi rebels. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who was in Switzerland for the nuclear negotiations, called for "an immediate halt of Saudi Arabia's military operations in Yemen." He added that the attack "would escalate tensions in the region." Iran's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman also condemned the Saudi attack.¹⁰⁷

Representatives of six world powers are intensifying talks with Iran on its nuclear programme, ahead of a March 31 deadline for a deal. The US secretary of state and German and French foreign ministers have all cancelled their travel plans in a final push for an agreement. Representatives from China, Russia and the UK are also at the negotiations. US officials say all parties have agreed to a "step by step approach" to the deal, but sticking points remain.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ "Chinese Troops To Take Part In Victory Day Parade in Moscow", *Itar-Tass*, March 26, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/785067>

¹⁰⁵ "Danish Minister Calls Out Russia on Nuclear Weapons Threat", *The Moscow Times*, March 22, 2015 at <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/danish-minister-calls-out-russia-on-nuclear-weapons-threat/517835.html>

¹⁰⁶ "BRICS Supreme Courts To Boost Cooperation Under Russia's Chairmanship", *Itar-Tass*, March 26, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/world/785691>

¹⁰⁷ "Iran Condemns Saudi Bombing Of Yemen", *Al-Monitor*, March 26, 2015 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/iran-condemn-saudi-attack-bombing-yemen.html>

¹⁰⁸ "Iran Nuclear Talks: World Powers Seek Deal In Lausanne", *BBC News*, March 29, 2015 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32105158>

Iraq and Syria

(March 23-29, 2015)

- **Syria's Idlib city captured by Islamist insurgents; Islamic State recruits 400 children since January according to Syria monitor.**

Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate and its allies seized the city of Idlib, the second provincial capital lost by the government. "After five days of fighting, "Al-Nusra Front and its allies have captured all of Idlib," the Britain-based Observatory said. Al-Nusra Front, the official Syrian affiliate of Al-Qaeda, announced the capture of the north western city on its *Twitter* accounts. It posted photos showing its fighters in front of the governorate building, the city council, a local prison and a police station in the city. The city's fall comes on the fifth day of fighting between a coalition of Al-Nusra and various Islamist opposition allies and the regime.¹⁰⁹

Islamic State has recruited at least 400 children in Syria in the past three months and given these so-called "Cubs of the Caliphate" military training and hard-line indoctrination, a monitoring group reported. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the children, all aged under 18, were recruited near schools, mosques and in public areas where Islamic State carries out killings and brutal punishments on local people.¹¹⁰

Yemen

(March 23-29, 2015)

- **Saudi led coalition launches military assault "Decisive Storm"; 39 civilians dead in Saudi airstrikes on Yemen; Yemeni's Hadi arrives in Saudi capital after fleeing Aden.**

According to the Saudi's state run Al-Arabia, Saudi Arabia waged early Thursday "Operation Decisive Storm" against the Houthi coup in Yemen and in support of legitimate President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. The Saudi air campaign was launched overnight which has already resulted in the elimination of several Houthi leaders. Yemen air space is currently under full control of the Saudi Royal Air Force. As the operation continues, a coalition of all GCC countries, barring Oman, is taking part in the campaign, including Sudan, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and Pakistan. Saudi Arabia has deployed 100 fighter jets, 150,000 soldiers and other navy units to counter the sudden rise of Shia power in the neighbour.¹¹¹

The officials told that twelve of the 39 victims were killed when Saudi warplanes struck residential areas close to al-Samaa military base, north of the capital city of Sana'a. Eight people were wounded

¹⁰⁹ "Syria's Idlib City Falls To Islamist Insurgents", *Alarabia*, March 28, 2015 <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/28/Islamist-insurgents-seize-parts-of-Syria-s-Idlib-city.html>

¹¹⁰ "Islamic State Recruits 400 Children Since January: Syria Monitor", *Reuters*, March 24, 2015 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/24/us-mideast-crisis-syria-children-idUSKBN0MK0U520150324>

¹¹¹ "Saudi 'Decisive Storm' Waged To Save Yemen", *Alarabia*, March 25, 2015 <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/26/GCC-states-to-repel-Houthi-aggression-in-Yemen-statement-.html>

when an anti-aircraft missile slammed into a market in central Sana'a on March 27. Iran has warned that the Saudi offensive on Yemen will only lead to civilian casualties with no peaceful results.¹¹²

Al-Ekhhbariya TV reported Hadi arrived at a Riyadh airbase and was met by Saudi Defence Minister Prince Mohammed, the son of King Salman. A day earlier, Hadi fled the southern Yemeni city Aden in a boat as Shiite rebels and their allies moved on the city.¹¹³

The Gulf

(March 23-29, 2015)

- **Arab League leaders agree joint military force.**

The Arab League called for the establishment of a voluntary, unified military force that member states can turn to when facing security challenges. The statement, issued in the Egyptian resort city of Sharm el-Sheikh, called for establishing a voluntary Arab military force that can intervene to counter challenges that threaten the safety and security of any member, based on a specific request from that state. Iraq, one of the members of the Arab League, voiced reservations to the proposed military force. The statement also urged Houthis to "immediately withdraw from Sanaa, government institutions, and give their weapons to the legitimate authorities," citing its support for the Saudi-led 'Operation Decisive Storm' in Yemen.¹¹⁴

F. The United State of America

National

(March 23-29, 2015)

- **DoD warns troops, families to be Cyber Crime Smart; Stratcom commander emphasizes need to modernize nuke triad; F-35 aircraft costs drop, report shows; Army charges Bergdahl with desertion; Future readiness requires investment, officials say; Carter calls for 'Full-Court Press' on security challenges; Carter Domestic Trip Focuses on 'Force of the Future'.**

Defence Department employees and their families should be vigilant when guarding personal and work information from expanding cyber-criminal activity, and to know how to recognize scammer tactics, according to DoD's chief information officer. Terry A. Halvorsen issued a DoD-wide memorandum March 18 about the growing threat of cybercrime "phishing" and "spear phishing" in emails, on social media sites and through phone calls. "Cyber criminals continue using phishing and spear-phishing attacks," Halvorsen said in his memo, "and their tactics are

¹¹² "39 Civilians Dead In Saudi Airstrikes on Yemen", *Presstv*, March 27, 2015 <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2015/03/27/403582/Saudi-raids-kill-39-civilians-in-Yemen>

¹¹³ "Yemeni's Hadi Arrives In Saudi Capital After Fleeing Aden", *Today's Zaman*, March 26, 2015 http://www.todayszaman.com/world_yemenis-hadi-arrives-in-saudi-capital-after-fleeing-aden_376394.html

¹¹⁴ "Arab League Leaders Agree Joint Military Force", *Alarabia*, March 29, 2015 <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/29/Arab-League-Summit-.html>

evolving in an increasingly predatory manner.” While military members and DoD civilians are routinely trained in recognizing cyber security red flags, DoD also wants its workforce’s families and parents to be prepared to deal with suspicious email, he added. These cyber criminals also track and mine social media accounts such as Facebook, LinkedIn and others “to interact with people and compromise accounts,” Halvorsen said.¹¹⁵

Stretching from under the sea to satellite orbit to cyberspace, U.S. Strategic Command’s areas of responsibility cover the globe, Stratcom’s commander, Navy Adm. Cecil D. Haney, said on March 24 during a news briefing at the Pentagon. “For 70 years, we have deterred and assured. And while our nation’s nuclear enterprise is safe, secure and effective, we cannot take it for granted any longer,” the admiral told reporters. “For decades, we have sustained while others have modernized their strategic nuclear forces, developing and utilizing counter-space activities, increasing the sophistication and pervasive nature of their cyber capabilities and proliferating these emerging strategic capabilities around the globe,” he said. Russia is modernizing their nuclear triad, which is bombers, missiles and submarine-launched missiles, and associated industrial base, Haney said, and Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to provoke the international community. “China has developed a capable submarine and intercontinental ballistic missile force and has recently demonstrated their counter-space capabilities,” the admiral said. But strategic deterrence is more than nuclear deterrence, the admiral noted. It also includes space — a contested, congested and competitive environment — and cyberspace, where intrusions around the globe are also increasing at an unprecedented and alarming rate, Haney said.¹¹⁶

A recent account of F-35 Lightning II aircraft programme costs shows decreases, the Air Force’s F-35 programme executive officer told reporters in a media roundtable on March 24. Air Force Lt. Gen. Christopher C. Bogdan, citing this year’s selected acquisition report on the aircraft, called the roundtable to clarify cost and performance facts in the latest report, he said. He also acknowledged the programme has been over budget and is six years late. “In 2001, we thought we’d be done a long time before now,” Bogdan said. But that was before various issues arose, ranging from a security breach to a redesign of one of the F-35 models that was 3,000 pounds over its weight standard, he noted.¹¹⁷

U.S. Army Forces Command has thoroughly reviewed the Army investigation surrounding Sgt. Robert Bowdrie Bergdahl’s 2009 disappearance in Afghanistan and formally charged him on March 25 under the Uniform Code of Military Justice with “Desertion with Intent to Shirk Important or Hazardous Duty” and “Misbehaviour Before The Enemy by Endangering the Safety of a Command, Unit or Place,” and has referred the case to an Article 32 preliminary hearing, command officials announced on March 25 in a news release.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Cronk, Terri Moon, “DoD Warns Troops, Families to be Cyber Crime Smart”, *DoD News*, March 23, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128433>

¹¹⁶ Roulo, Claudette, “Stratcom Commander Emphasizes Need to Modernize Nuke Triad”, *DoD News*, March 24, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128442>

¹¹⁷ Cronk, Terri Moon, “F-35 Aircraft Costs Drop, Report Shows”, *DoD News*, March 25, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128448>

¹¹⁸ “Army Charges Bergdahl With Desertion”, *DoD News*, March 25, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128453>

The vice chiefs of staff for the Army, Navy and Air Force and the assistant commandant of the Marine Corps told Congress on March 25 that the return of sequestration-level budgets will seriously damage national security. "With the velocity of instability increasing around the world and the threat of terrorism growing rather than receding, now is not the time to drastically reduce capability and capacity that would occur under prolonged sequestration-level funding," Army Gen. Daniel B. Allyn said in his prepared remarks for the Senate Armed Services Committee's readiness and management support subcommittee. Sequestration is a provision of current budget law that mandates major across-the-board spending cuts in fiscal 2016, which begins October 1.¹¹⁹

Defence Secretary Ash Carter called for a "full-court press" within government to tackle the pressing national security issues of the day. Carter spoke at the State Department's Global Chiefs of Mission Conference on March 26. He is the first defence secretary to address the conference. Carter called on Congress to put money into the effort. "We can't just theorize and strategize," he said. "We have to invest in the whole-of-government way." The secretary said he and other military leaders "have been vocal and specific about the damage that sequestration-level budgets would inflict on the need to restore readiness, on badly needed technological modernization, and on keeping faith with troops and their families."¹²⁰

Secretary of Defence Ash Carter is kicking off a national discussion on building "the force of the future" and what the Department of Defence must do to change and adapt to maintain its superiority well into the 21st century, a Pentagon spokesman announced on March 28. Building the force of the future requires the department to bring in the best technology, the best ideas from industry, and — above all — the best people to defend the nation, said Army Col. Steve Warren, who noted Carter will embark March 30 on a two-day domestic trip that will focus on the future force theme. Warren said the first day of the trip will take Carter back to Philadelphia, where he attended Abington Senior High School. There, Warren said, the secretary will deliver an important speech on his vision for how the department must prepare for the force of the future and continue to attract the best and brightest from all communities.¹²¹

International: Asia

(March 23-29, 2015)

- **Afghan leader thanks U.S. troops, taxpayers for support; Carter, Kerry announce new Afghan initiatives at Camp David; Obama extends U.S. troop levels to boost Afghan security; Coalition forces conduct 17 airstrikes in Tikrit and airstrikes continued to hit ISIL in Syria, Iraq; Central Command region remains volatile, commander says; Dempsey: North Korea 'somewhat predictable' in provocation; Dempsey, South Korean counterpart discuss North Korea threat; In Tokyo, Dempsey reinforces U.S.-Japan alliance; China US Inch Closer on**

¹¹⁹ Roulo, Claudette, "Future Readiness Requires Investment, Officials Say", *DoD News*, March 25, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128454>

¹²⁰ Garamone, Jim, "Carter Calls for 'Full-Court Press' on Security Challenges", *DoD News*, March 26, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128468>

¹²¹ Pellerin, Cheryl, "Carter Domestic Trip Focuses on 'Force of the Future'", *DoD News*, March 28, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128483>

Asia Fund as Deadline Approaches; India, SE Asia could offset slower Chinese economy.

Taking the stage with U.S. leaders early this morning in the Pentagon courtyard, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani thanked U.S. troops and all Americans for their support of his country. Senior officials joining Ghani included Afghan Chief Executive Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, Secretary of State John F. Kerry, Defence Secretary Ash Carter, Deputy Defence Secretary Bob Work, and other senior officials. During his introduction of Ghani, Carter told the audience that the Afghan president is here on behalf of all Afghans “to thank all the Americans whose service has kept the United States secure and given hope and opportunity to his countrymen.” Ghani has deep ties to the United States, the secretary added, naming the Afghan president’s attendance at American University in Beirut and Columbia University in New York, and teaching posts at the University of California-Berkeley and Johns Hopkins University in Maryland. “We are not going to be a burden,” Ghani added. “We do not now ask what the United States can do for us, if I can play on President [John] Kennedy. We want to see what Afghanistan will do for itself and for the world. That means we are going to put our house in order,” he said.¹²²

Defence Secretary Ash Carter and Secretary of State John Kerry announced new funding and initiatives to strengthen a renewed U.S.-Afghanistan partnership after meeting on March 23 with Afghan leaders at the Camp David presidential retreat. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah participated in a series of meetings with President Barack Obama’s national security team to discuss developments in NATO’s train, advise and assist mission, counterterrorism, and Afghanistan’s long-term security objectives. Joining Carter and Kerry at the formally named Naval Support Facility Thurmont in Maryland’s Catoctin Mountain Park were Treasury Secretary Jack Lew, CIA Director John E. Brennan, Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper and others. Today the leaders continued the discussion on progress made and challenges facing Afghan forces as they prepare for the coming fighting season and beyond, Carter said.¹²³

President Barack Obama has extended troop levels in Afghanistan several months beyond the original drawdown plan to help Afghan security forces succeed during the upcoming fighting season. During a news conference on March 24 after meeting with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, Obama took the podium with Ghani and announced several areas in which the United States would continue to support the nation’s strategic partnership with Afghanistan. “First,” Obama said, “we agreed to continue to keep in place our close security cooperation. Afghanistan remains a very dangerous place and insurgents still launch attacks, including cowardly suicide bombings against civilians.” The president said Ghani is pursuing reforms to further strengthen Afghan security forces, including respect for human rights. And as part of the ongoing NATO-led Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan, the United States will continue to train, advise and assist Afghan security forces.¹²⁴

¹²² Pellerin, Cheryl, “Afghan Leader Thanks U.S. Troops, Taxpayers for Support”, *DoD News*, March 23, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128427>

¹²³ Pellerin, Cheryl, “Carter, Kerry Announce New Afghan Initiatives at Camp David”, *DoD News*, March 23, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128434>

¹²⁴ Pellerin, Cheryl, “Obama Extends U.S. Troop Levels to Boost Afghan Security”, *DoD News*, March 25, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128449>

Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve operations in support of Iraqi security forces in Tikrit, Iraq, began on March 25th night after a request from the Iraqi government of Iraq, Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve officials said. Coalition fighter, bomber and remotely piloted aircraft conducted 17 airstrikes against Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant terrorists, officials said, noting that the Iraqi Defence Ministry approved the strikes.¹²⁵ U.S. and coalition military forces have continued to attack Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant terrorists in Syria and Iraq, Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve officials reported on March 29.¹²⁶

Meanwhile, U.S. Central Command's area of responsibility is more volatile and chaotic than ever, Army Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, Centcom commander, told Congress on March 26. Speaking to the Senate Armed Services Committee, Austin said the stakes in the region have never been higher. Forces of evil thrive in the region's poorly governed areas, the general said. "It is essential that we are present and engaged, and that we cultivate strong partnerships and continue to do our part to address emerging threats and to move the region in the direction of greater stability and security," he said. "And we must be properly resourced to do what is required to effectively protect and promote our interests," Austin added. Centcom forces are doing all they can to prevent problems while shaping future outcomes, and they concurrently manage real-world crises, the general said.¹²⁷

North Korea is "somewhat predictable" in its provocation during the annual military exercises held between the United States and South Korea, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said on March 24. Army Gen. Martin E. Dempsey said the exercises are very important to ensure there is a "credible deterrent against provocation" by North Korea. "Besides the deterrent, [the exercises ensure] that we're also prepared with our military capabilities should [North Korea] do more than just provoke," Dempsey said. Dempsey, who spoke in an interview aboard his aircraft as he travelled to Japan and South Korea, said the "exercises are a critical part of our relationship and we do them with a very steady drumbeat, the same time every year." The joint operations are defensive in nature, and each year North Korea reacts, he said. The exercises are held to "rekindle" tactics, techniques and procedures, to ensure the United States can operate collaboratively with its own joint force and with its South Korean allies, the general noted.¹²⁸

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said he had "important and very productive conversations" with South Korean military officials in Seoul on March 27 on topics including integrated air and missile defence to deter North Korean aggression. Army Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, in a meeting with his counterpart, Adm. Choi Yun-hee, praised the ties between their militaries, saying the

¹²⁵ "Coalition Forces Conduct 17 Airstrikes in Tikrit", From a Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve News Release, *DoD News*, March 26, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128458>

¹²⁶ "Airstrikes Hit ISIL in Syria, Iraq", From a Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve News Release, *DoD News*, March 29, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128485>

¹²⁷ Roulo, Claudette, "Central Command Region Remains Volatile, Commander Says", *DoD News*, March 26, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128463>

¹²⁸ Ferdinando, Lisa, "Dempsey: North Korea 'Somewhat Predictable' in Provocation", *DoD News*, March 24, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128437>

relationship is stronger than it has ever been. "Our alliance, which is really more like a friendship than an alliance, certainly will outlive anyone of us, because of the way we have lived and worked together over the past 60 years," Dempsey said in a roundtable meeting that included senior staff members from both nations. Choi thanked the chairman for his commitment to peace and security on the Korean Peninsula, noting the alliance has maintained stability in the face of North Korean aggression.¹²⁹

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on March 25 underscored the importance of the U.S.-Japanese alliance as he met in Tokyo with Japan's senior military and political leaders. Army Gen. Martin E. Dempsey thanked Japan for its strong partnership with the United States, as well as its contributions to global security and commitment in the fight against terrorism. Dempsey met at the Ministry of Defence with his counterpart, Adm. Katsutoshi Kawano, and Defense Minister Gen Nakatani. He paid a visit later in the day to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. "The kizuna between us has never been stronger," the chairman said, using the Japanese word for bonds or connections between people. He said he looks forward to working with Japan under the new defence guidelines that Japan and the United States are developing to define their bilateral defence relationship. The prime minister, who is to meet with President Barack Obama in Washington next month, said the alliance between the United States and Japan has contributed to the peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region.¹³⁰

China has set the end of March as a deadline for countries to become founding members of a new multi-billion dollar Beijing-led development bank. As the date approaches, a growing number of U.S. allies in Europe and Asia have jumped on board or are considering signing up. Even Washington, which has discouraged countries from joining, is talking more about cooperation. The international community has long urged China to play a bigger role in global affairs, but when Beijing announced last year it was establishing the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank or AIIB, the United States was sceptical. It urged countries to flesh out details about how the new fund's standards would address environmental and social safeguard concerns before joining.¹³¹

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) says the outlook for emerging Asian economies is upbeat into 2016 with economic growth in India and South East Asia offsetting a slowing Chinese economy. The ADB also sees risks ahead. In its annual outlook released Tuesday, the Asian Development Bank is positive about Asia's economies despite China's growth slowing to a rate not seen in almost 25 years. But China's moderating economy will be offset by economic gains in India and South East Asia, a U.S. economic recovery and by low world oil prices, the bank said. Speaking at a Hong Kong news briefing broadcast live on the internet, ADB Chief Economist Shang-Jin Wei said the outlook was generally upbeat over the next two years. "Developing Asia's growth is

¹²⁹ Ferdinando, Lisa, "Dempsey, South Korean Counterpart Discuss North Korea Threat", *DoD News*, March 27, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128475>

¹³⁰ Ferdinando, Lisa, "In Tokyo, Dempsey Reinforces U.S.-Japan Alliance", *DoD News*, March 25, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128447>

¹³¹ Ide, William and Lovett, Colin, "China US Inch Closer on Asia Fund as Deadline Approaches", *VOA News*, March 25, 2015 at <http://www.voanews.com/content/china-us-inch-closer-on-aisa-fund-as-deadline-approaches/2693812.html>

holding steady [and] forecast to be 6.3 percent for this year and next year. That's a consequence of India, Indonesia doing better than the recent past, offsetting the moderation in growth rates in the PRC [People's Republic of China], Shang-Jin Wei stated.¹³²

Indo-US Relations

(March 23-29, 2015)

- **L-1B visas to become easier to get: Barack Obama; Resurging India under Modi's leadership driving energy across South Asia: US official; U.S. envoy criticises India's U.N. anti-gay vote; US supports India's aspiration to become a Leading Global Power; US on pathway to become India's best partner: Ambassador Richard Verma.**

President Barack Obama has announced plans to streamline the L-1B visa application process easier for corporate executives — a manoeuvre that would undoubtedly make it easier for companies to hire from abroad and bolster the influx of Indian information technology professionals immigrating to the United States. At the Select USA Summit in Washington DC, the president stated his belief the L-1B action will attract larger foreign investment and that there has never been a more exciting time to do business in the U.S. "My administration is going to reform the L-1B visa category, which allows corporations to temporarily move workers from a foreign office to a U.S. office in a faster, simpler way," President Obama said during his address at the investment-oriented summit. "And this could benefit hundreds of thousands of non-immigrant workers and their employers, that in turn, will benefit our entire economy and spur additional investment."¹³³

The US has said India's resurgence under the new leadership was driving energy and optimism across South Asia and the two countries were now "indispensable partners" in promoting peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. "If there is one overarching positive trend that is driving the energy and optimism across South Asia, it is the resurgence of India as evidenced by their vibrant election last year, which was the largest such democratic exercise in history," Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Nisha Desai Biswal told US lawmakers during a Congressional hearing. "Less than a year after the election of Prime Minister Modi, our relations with India are stronger than ever," she said. Biswal said India needed to be strong at home to become a strong partner in the region and around the world. She counted the agreements reached between Obama and Modi to strengthen the India-US partnership on economy, women empowerment, human rights and governance fronts.¹³⁴

¹³² "Corben, Ron, "India, SE Asia Could Offset Slower Chinese Economy", *VOA News*, March 24, 2015 at <http://www.voanews.com/content/india-se-asia-could-offset-slower-chinese-economy/2692159.html>

¹³³ Karerat, Raif, "L-1B Visas To Become Easier To Get: Barack Obama", *The American Bazar*, March 24, 2015 at <http://www.americanbazaaronline.com/2015/03/24/l-1b-visas-to-become-easier-to-get-barack-obama/>

¹³⁴ "Resurging India Under Modi's Leadership Driving Energy Across South Asia: US", *Press Trust of India*, March 25, 2015 at <http://www.firstpost.com/world/resurging-india-modis-leadership-driving-energy-across-south-asia-us-2171965.html>

American ambassador Richard Verma has called India's vote this week against equal benefits for gay and heterosexual United Nations officials "disappointing", and said his country will back the rights of same-sex couples criminalised in India. Verma was speaking about India-US relations at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington. "We were disappointed, for example, by India's support this week for the attempt to strip benefits from UN staff in same-sex relationships," Verma said, speaking about occasions when India and the US differ. "We will continue to support the rights of LGBT individuals in India, in international institutions and around the world." India had voted - alongside Russia, Syria, China, Nigeria and 40 other nations - against a proposal piloted by UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon to extend equal benefits to the spouses and partners of heterosexual and same-sex diplomats. LGBT refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals.¹³⁵

However, ambassador Verma said that America welcomes India's constructive leadership on global challenges and supports its aspiration to become a leading power. He said, "As India's strategic plus partner, we support India's aspiration to become a leading power". And, "We also welcome India's constructive leadership on global challenges. We support greater Indian participation in multilateral institutions, including its candidacy for permanent membership on a reformed UN Security Council and its eventual membership in all four multilateral export control regimes. We support its robust engagement with ASEAN and leadership role in the Indian Ocean Rim Association," he said.¹³⁶ Mr. Verma also reflected on the significant contributions of Indian-Americans to the deepening bilateral partnership, and exhorted successful professional Indian-Americans to do more to support the less fortunate in their community. Touching upon economic cooperation and the civil nuclear agreement, Mr. Verma underscored the importance of the contact group, led by himself and Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar, in taking forward the significant progress achieved during the time of Mr. Obama's visit.¹³⁷

With two back-to-back historic visits by the Indian and American leadership in less than six months, the US is on "pathway" to become India's "best partner" as the two countries have agreed on a robust agenda to strengthen their strategic ties. It is rare to have the top leadership of two countries to come together in a five-month period and agree on a "robust agenda", US Ambassador to India Richard Rahul Verma has said. "I believe we are on a pathway to become India's best partner. Of course we are natural partners and our values are aligned, we want to be India's best partner," Verma, who is the first Indian-American to head this top diplomatic position in New Delhi, told *PTI* in an interview. In Washington DC for a few days this week to attend the Global Chiefs of Mission Conference, Verma said the September visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the US and the January India visit by Obama has resulted in an "elevated level" of relationship and a "higher degree" of partnership than the two nations had in the past.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ "US Envoy Laments India's Gay Vote", *The Telegraph*, March 29 at http://www.telegraphindia.com/1150329/jsp/nation/story_11452.jsp#.VRkqpvyUfSY

¹³⁶ "US Supports India's Aspiration To Become a Leading Global Power", *Defence News*, March 28, 2015 at <http://www.defencenews.in/defence-news-internal.aspx?id=kbZOFP7gT8A=>

¹³⁷ "U.S. Envoy Criticises India's U.N. Anti-Gay Vote", *The Hindu*, March 29, 2015 at <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-international/us-envoy-criticises-indias-un-antigay-vote/article7044471.ece>

¹³⁸ Jha, Lalit, "US on Pathway to Become India's Best Partner: Richard Verma", *The Outlook*, India, March 29, 2015 at <http://www.outlookindia.com/news/article/US-on-Pathway-to-Become-Indias-Best-Partner-Richard-Verma/888562>

II. DEFENCE REVIEWS

National

(March 23-29, 2015)

- **India's quest for self-reliance in sophisticated shipbuilding receives a boost with the launch of fourth LCU for Indian Navy; Indian Navy Dornier aircraft crashes into the Arabian Sea off the coast of Goa.**

India's quest for self-reliance in sophisticated shipbuilding received a boost with the launch of the fourth ship in the series of eight Landing Craft Utility (LCU) Mk IV project - Yard 2095 - for the Indian Navy. The ship was launched at Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers Ltd (GRSE), Kolkata on March 23, 2015. Two LCUs were earlier launched on March 12 and September 23, 2014. The third LCU was launched on January 16, this year. These ships will play significant role in transportation of main battle tanks, armoured vehicles and troops of the Indian Army during amphibious operations. The ship can be deployed for maritime roles like maritime security, beaching and un-beaching operations, humanitarian relief operations and evacuation from distant islands, search and rescue operations besides peacekeeping missions.¹³⁹

A Dornier aircraft of the Indian Navy on a routine night training sortie ditched at sea about 20 nautical miles South West of Goa on the night of March 24, 2015. The Naval Air Station at Goa lost radar contact with the aircraft at 10:08 PM on March 24, 2015. The aircraft is feared to have ditched soon thereafter. The aircrew on board the aircraft comprised three officers. One Survivor, Commander Nikhil Kuldip Joshi, was picked up by a passing fishing boat. Eight Naval ships and four aircraft were immediately deployed to search the area to locate the remaining two officers. Meanwhile, a Board of Inquiry has been ordered to establish the cause of the accident. This is the first Dornier to crash since the planes were inducted in the navy in the early 1990s.¹⁴⁰

International

(March 23-29, 2015)

- **Government report exposes Turkey's defence industry's weaknesses; Italy deploys ships to monitor the Libyan coast against IS attacks.**

Reports say that a recent report released by Turkey's procurement authorities has exposed fundamental weaknesses in the country's local defence industry. The study by Turkey's procurement agency, the Under secretariat for Defence Industries (SSM), said the local industry is dominated by companies owned by the Turkish Armed Forces Foundation, a government-owned

¹³⁹ "Fourth LCU for Indian Navy Launched at GRSE," *PIB*, March 23, 2015, at <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=117612>

¹⁴⁰ "Navy Dornier Ditches During a Night Training Sortie off Goa," *PIB*, March 25, 2015, at <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=117686>

foundation that is a majority shareholder in Turkey's top defence companies. It highlights that 13 of the 25 biggest companies are headquartered in Ankara. SSM's report said the fundamental weaknesses observed in the sector before 2012 still persisted. In 2013, the report said, Turkey's top 25 companies reported US \$4.1 billion in sales, accounting for 82 percent of \$5 billion total business in defence and aerospace. In the same year, the industry invested \$608 million in research and development activity.¹⁴¹

Meanwhile, according to reports, as fighters from the Islamic State group build beachheads in lawless Libya, Italy is sending a naval fleet to monitor the Libyan coast and protect Italian shipping and oil rigs from jihadi attacks. The mission, dubbed Mare Sicuro, or Safe Seas, is likely to involve a landing helicopter dock vessel, two FREMM-class frigates, a patrol vessel and Predator UAVs. A contingent of marines will join the mission, and use high-speed craft to intercept and board suspicious shipping. The assets would also be used for the surveillance of IS activities.¹⁴²

III. INTERNAL SECURITY REVIEWS

Jammu & Kashmir

(March 16-22, 2015)

- **J&K Governor promises dialogue with all groups including Hurriyat; Militants storm Kathua's police station, kill 4; Two terrorists killed as Army repulsed attack on camp in Samba; J&K Assembly passes resolution, condemns twin terror attacks in Jammu; Parliamentary panel calls for White Paper on Jammu and Kashmir militancy.**

Jammu and Kashmir Governor N N Vohra on March 18 said the state government would initiate a "meaningful dialogue" with all political groups, including the Hurriyat Conference, irrespective of their ideological views and predilections. On withdrawal of controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), Vohra said the final decision on the continuation of the Act in the state would be taken by the Centre.¹⁴³

In the first terror attack in Jammu since the PDP-BJP government came to power, two heavily armed terrorists in Army uniform stormed a police station on the Jammu-Pathankote highway in Kathua on March 20, killing five people, before being gunned down by state police and security forces. The gun-battle, which lasted almost five hours, claimed the lives of two CRPF personnel,

¹⁴¹ "Report Exposes Turk Defence Industry's Weaknesses," *Defence News*, March 29, 2015, at <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/policy-budget/industry/2015/03/29/report-exposes-turk-defense-industrys-weaknesses/70444268/>

¹⁴² "Italy Deploys Ships To Monitor Libyan Coast," *Defence News*, March 28, 2015, at <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/international/europe/2015/03/28/italy-libya-islamic-state-navy-shipping-oil-rigs-mare-sicuro-fremm/70515116/>

¹⁴³ Majid, Zulfikar, "J&K to Start Talks With Separatists, Says Guv", *Deccan Herald*, March 19, 2015 at <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/466488/jampk-start-talks-separatists-says.html>

a state police constable and a civilian. Another civilian was killed by the terrorists near the International Border (IB). J&K Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed said in the Assembly that “non-state actors” appeared to be responsible for the attack on Rajbagh police station. He also added that Pakistan, too, was facing a similar problem.¹⁴⁴

In yet another terror attack in Jammu and Kashmir, the second in two days, two militants attacked an Army camp in Samba on March 21. In the six-hour gunfight, the militants were killed and three Army personnel and a civilian were injured. The Army said the two militants, in paramilitary fatigues, tried to barge into the Mesar camp of the Army’s 81 Armoured Unit on the Jammu-Pathankot highway around 5.45 a.m.¹⁴⁵ The defence spokesman said two AK 47 Rifles, one UGBL, 12 magazines of AK 47, 13 hand grenades, two UGBL grenades, two tiffin boxes, two syringe needles, one mobile cord, etc. were recovered from the slain militants.¹⁴⁶

While terming the terror attacks in Kathua and Samba as a “conspiracy” to derail the peace process, Jammu and Kashmir chief minister Mufti Sayeed on March 22 said Pakistan should control terrorism if it wants peace and reconciliation. Condemning the terror attacks, he said the people of the state have a strong resolve and some terrorist attacks will not deter them. “If they (Pakistan) wants peace, reconciliation, Pakistan PM Nawaz Sharif, its establishment must control them (terrorism),” he told the Jammu and Kashmir assembly after opposition created a ruckus demanding adjournment of the question hour.¹⁴⁷ The clamour in JK Assembly triggered by militant attacks at Kathua and Samba forced the House to pass a resolution against the twin attacks on March 22. The 87 member house urged the Centre to take up the issue with Pakistan.¹⁴⁸

A parliamentary panel has called for documentation of militancy in Jammu and Kashmir in the form of a White Paper even as it dismissed the J & K state government’s objections to the suggestion as being “orthodox”. The panel also rapped the J-K government for halting the registration of Kashmiri Pandit families who had fled the Valley with the onset of militancy in the early 1990s. It said that several migrants’ associations have complained that there are a large number of migrant families who remain unregistered.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ Sharma, Arun, “First Attack In New J&K Govt: 2 Militants Among 7 Killed”, *The Indian Express*, March 21, 2015 at <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/crpf-jawan-killed-as-terrorists-storm-kathua-police-station/>

¹⁴⁵ Rafiq, Zahid, “Militants Attack Samba Army Camp”, *The Hindu*, March 22, 2015 at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/militants-attack-army-camp-in-jks-samba-district/article7018265.ece>

¹⁴⁶ Wani, Fayaz, “Bid to Overrun J and K Army Camp Thwarted”, *The New Indian Express*, March 22, 2015 at <http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/Bid-to-Overrun-J-and-K-Army-Camp-Thwarted/2015/03/22/article2724632.ece>

¹⁴⁷ “J-K CM Mufti Sayeed Asks Pakistan To Control Terrorism”, *Hindustan Times*, March 22, 2015 at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/j-k-cm-mufti-sayeed-asks-pakistan-to-control-terrorism/article1-1329229.aspx>

¹⁴⁸ “JK Assembly Passes Resolution Against Jammu Twin Attacks”, *Kashmir Life*, March 22, 2015 at <http://www.kashmirilife.net/jk-assembly-passes-resolution-against-jammu-twin-attacks-75173/>

¹⁴⁹ “Parliamentary Panel Calls For White Paper On Jammu And Kashmir Militancy”, *The Economic Times*, March 22, 2015 at <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/parliamentary-panel-calls-for-white-paper-on-jammu-and-kashmir-militancy/articleshow/46652694.cms>

Northeast India

(March 16-22, 2015)

- **Centre plans to launch 'Make in North-East' drive; Union Government decides to complete talks with NSCN-IM this year; JCILPS calls 18-hour strike in Manipur; 26 ethnic bodies arrives at a consensus on 'Assamese'; Dimapur lynching: 56 arrested, Case to be handed over to CBI.**

Taking a leaf out of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's book, the Ministry of DoNER is planning to launch a 'Make in North-East' initiative. Addressing the first meeting of the Parliamentary Consultative Committee attached to his Ministry on March 15, DoNER Minister Dr Jitendra Singh informed the members that the ministry will take up the 'Make in North-East' project in the lines of the 'Make in India' campaign announced by the Prime Minister. The consultative committee discussed the issues of promotion of tourism, development of connectivity and other infrastructure projects in the region. The meeting was attended by Union Ministers of State, Sarbananda Sonowal and Kiren Rijiju.¹⁵⁰

The Government of India has decided to complete the process of talks with the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (I-M) within this year, and the leadership of the militant outfit has also agreed to the Government's decision. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), contrary to what has been reported in a section of the media, has not decided to withdraw the ceasefire agreement with the Khaplang faction of the NSCN. Highly placed sources in the ministry told *The Assam Tribune* that after the chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), RN Ravi was appointed as the Government's interlocutor for the Naga talks, the format of the talks has been changed. Instead of holding formal rounds of talks, now series of meetings are being held between the leaders of the NSCN (I-M) and the Centre's interlocutor. The leaders of the NSCN (I-M) can now meet the Centre's interlocutor any time to discuss any issue and that resulted in speeding up the process of talks.¹⁵¹

Demanding inclusion of their five point charter of demands in the government Bill to regulate influx of illegal migrants into Manipur, the Joint Committee on Inner Line Permit System (JCILPS) has called an 18-hour general strike in the State from March 15 midnight. JCILPS leaders alleged that the Bill introduced in the State Assembly on March 13 was not in the interest of the indigenous people of the State but to save outsiders. They demanded withdrawal of the MRVT & MW Bill before discussing the same in the House on March 16 as it has failed to fulfil four out of the five point demands of the committee. The demands of JCILPS include issuance of pass or permit to migrants, cut-off base year of 1951, ban on land ownership rights to non-indigenous people, strengthening of Labour department for registration and regulation of inter-State migrant labourers, and detection and deportation of illegal migrants.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ "Centre To Launch 'Make in NE' Drive", *The Assam Tribune*, March 16, 2015 at <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=mar1615/at052>

¹⁵¹ Choudhury, R Dutta, "Govt To Complete Talks With NSCN (I-M) This Year", *The Assam Tribune*, March 16, 2015 at <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=mar1615/at050>

¹⁵² "JCILPS Calls 18-Hour Strike In Manipur", *The Assam Tribune*, March 16, 2015 at <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=mar1615/oth053>

The All Assam Students' Union and 25 other ethnic bodies, mostly student organisations, arrived at a consensus on March 17 that there should be Constitutional safeguard and 100 per cent seat reservation in local bodies, State Assembly and the Parliament for 'Indigenous and Indigenous Assamese' people. The student body claimed that this terminology would resolve all sorts of confrontations and foil the State government's attempt to create mutual distrust among the ethnic communities. The AASU alleged that a simple issue was complicated by the State government, which lacked political will to implement Clause Six of the Assam Accord.¹⁵³

A total of 56 persons have been arrested in connection with the March 5 mob violence in Dimapur, Nagaland that led to the lynching of "rape accused" Syed Farid Khan.¹⁵⁴ Meanwhile, an emergency Cabinet meeting chaired by Nagaland Chief Minister TR Zeliang has decided to hand over the investigation of police case relating to lynching to the CBI.¹⁵⁵

Left-wing Extremism

(March 16-22, 2015)

- **CRPF to conduct SWOT matrix of anti-Maoist operations in Jharkhand; Maoist movement traversing a rough patch: Ganapathy; Security forces seize rich haul of arms, ammunition in Bihar; Two commandos killed in encounter with Maoists in Gadchiroli.**

The Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) will conduct SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunities and threats) analysis of anti-Maoist operations in Jharkhand that will help them devise a fool proof strategy against the rebels' guerrilla tactics. The CRPF's elite CoBRA battalions' officers from Jharkhand, West Bengal and Bihar will participate in the evaluation process at the CRPF establishment in Ranchi on March 16. Through the analysis, CRPF will harness the officers' experience to prepare an effective contingency plan to prepare the forces to deal with the extremists during challenging circumstances.¹⁵⁶

In a rare interview, CPI (Maoist) general secretary Muppala Lakshman alias Ganapathy has admitted that his party's stock was dwindling across the country and conceded that their movement was facing a 'difficult situation'. In an interview given to the Maoist Information Bulletin (MIB) on the occasion of the party's 10th anniversary celebrations- Ganapathy said the party had lost a number of leaders at all levels from the central committee to the village level and felt the biggest challenge before them was to retain and protect the remaining. For this, he said, the Maoists must adopt secret and appropriate methods of functioning, rectify mistakes and firmly implement

¹⁵³ "26 Ethnic Bodies Reach Consensus On 'Assamese'", *The Assam Tribune*, March 18, 2015 at <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=mar1815/at050>

¹⁵⁴ "56 Arrested In Dimapur Mob Violence Case", *The Assam Tribune*, March 18, 2015 at <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=mar1815/oth050>

¹⁵⁵ "Dimapur Case To Be Handed Over To CBI", *The Assam Tribune*, March 20, 2015 at <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=mar2015/oth053>

¹⁵⁶ Mishra, Alok K N, "SWOT Matrix To Help CRPF Draw War Plan", *The Times of India*, March 16, 2015 at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ranchi/SWOT-matrix-to-help-CRPF-draw-war-plan/articleshow/46575328.cms>

lessons learnt, besides grooming a new leadership and raising awareness about the need for a strong party.¹⁵⁷

A three-day joint operation launched by the CRPF, its CoBRA battalion and STF unit of the Bihar police deep inside the forest in Jamui district resulted in recovery of huge cache of arms and ammunition collected by the banned CPI (Maoist) members. Giving details of the operation, CRPF IG (Bihar sector) Arun Kumar, said the security forces reached three villages — Kumratari, Gumraha and Bichlitola — in Jamui simultaneously on the night of March 18-19. The operations continued till early morning on March 21. The Maoists escaped on seeing the forces, leaving their arms and ammunition hidden beneath mound of earth. The seizures included over 50 cylinder bombs and five socket bombs (explosives kept underground in water pipe). Besides, 36 rounds of 8 mm cartridges, one carbine, several rounds of .303 bore cartridges, 19 detonators, one carbine magazine, 60kg of explosives and wires were seized.¹⁵⁸

Two police commandos were killed while another was injured in a gun battle with Maoists in the forests of Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra on March 22. The incident occurred near Gatta-Jarabandi forest area, bordering Chhattisgarh, when jawans of C-60, an elite anti-Maoist squad were returning after a joint combat operation, along with Chhattisgarh police.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ “Maoist Movement Traversing a Rough Patch, Says Ganapathy”, *The New Indian Express*, March 16, 2015 at <http://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/hyderabad/Maoist-Movement-Traversing-a-Rough-Patch-Says-Ganapathy/2015/03/16/article2715759.ece>

¹⁵⁸ Prakash, Gyan, “Forces Reap Rich Haul Of Arms, Ammo in Jamui”, *The Times of India*, March 21, 2015 at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/Forces-reap-rich-haul-of-arms-ammo-in-Jamui/articleshow/46647850.cms>

¹⁵⁹ Maitra, Pradip Kumar, “Two Jawans Killed, One Injured In Encounter with Maoists in Gadchiroli”, *Hindustan Times*, March 22, 2014 at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/two-police-commandos-killed-in-encounter-with-maoists-in-gadchiroli/article1-1329403.aspx>