

THE WEEK IN REVIEW

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I. COUNTRY REVIEWS

A. South Asia

Afghanistan

(March 2-8 and March 9-15, 2015)

- **15,000 ANA soldiers quit service in single year; India will continue to assist Afghanistan; Taliban did not kidnap passengers; Governor urges government to include former mujahideen leaders in peace process; Karzai criticizes Ghani for seeking Pakistan's help in brokering peace deal with Taliban; Regional support key to success of Afghan-led peace process.**

A new report published by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) based in Washington, D.C. indicates that, over the past year, some 15,000 Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers quit their jobs. According to SIGAR, the loss of 8.5 percent of the ANA's force to attrition has left it with a smaller number of troops than it had at the start of last year. In response to the report, the Afghan Ministry of Defence (MoD) published a press released on March 4 maintaining that the 15,000 figure in fact makes up just 3.5 percent of the military, and includes soldiers who were killed or injured in the line of duty. Yet analysts, including former security officials, have suggested the main factor behind the worrying attrition trend of the ANA that SIGAR hoped to highlight could simply be poor management on the part of the MoD. Some suggested the spike in attrition could be the result of some Taliban strategy. "It could propaganda of the enemy, in some areas enemies put pressure on families to ask their sons quite the ANA," military analyst Atiqullah Amarkhail said. Nevertheless, senior defence officials are considered most responsible. According to the new SIGAR report, from September 2013 to September 2014, up to 40,000 enlistees were deleted from the Ministry of Defence database. But the report did not specify under what conditions those enlistees ended their active duty.¹

Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, Foreign Secretary of India while meeting President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani in the presidential palace renewed his country's commitment for standing side by side with the people of Afghanistan in every stage. Jaishankar while pointing to the historical relationship between Afghanistan and India reiterated that the good relationship between the two nations will continue to improve. He expressed happiness over the recent developments in Afghanistan and hoped the country will go on this direction and become a self-sufficient country. President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani in the meeting with Indian foreign secretary called India a historical friend of Afghanistan and told him that India is among the countries having preference in the foreign policy of Afghanistan. President Ghani valued India's role in the economic development of the region and asked Indian representative for more investment in different sectors

¹ "15,000 ANA Soldiers Quit Service in Single Year: SIGAR", *Out Look Afghanistan*, March 5, 2015 at http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/national_detail.php?post_id=11771

in Afghanistan. President Ghani also requested India's assistance in the rebuilding of heavy snow-hit areas. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar told president Ghani that his country is ready to deliver any type of assistance in regards to the recent natural disaster in Afghanistan. He also invited President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani to visit India at a convenient time.²

Taliban insurgents have rejected hand in kidnapping 30 passengers of two buses in southern Zabul province. A statement issued by Taliban spokesman Qari Yousuf Ahmadi states that the kidnappers are not connected to their group. "We prefer to announce that Mujahideen do not have hand in the kidnapping of our countrymen" states Taliban statement. A group of unidentified gunmen who had their faces covered kidnapped 30 passengers of two buses on gun point about 10 days before on Kabul-Kandahar highway and the fate of who are still unknown. The gunmen reportedly stopped the buses in Shah Joy District of Zabul province and separated the 30 passengers and kidnapped them. The kidnappers have reportedly taken the passengers from Shah Joy District to Khak-i-Afghan District of Zabul province where a large scale military operation has begun to release them. According to the officials, over 100 members of the group responsible for the kidnapping have been killed so far in the operation. But no official statement has come forward to state whether the military has found the where about of the passengers. Before, the military operation kicked off last week, local elders also tried to negotiate the release but their efforts also did not give any result. Ata Jan Haqbayan, chief of the provincial council of Zabul who was part of the group of the local elders formed for releasing the 30 kidnapped passengers said he believed the kidnappers belong to the Islamic State (IS).³

At a function in northern Balkh province on 10 March to commemorate the first death anniversary of former vice president Marshall Fahim, Governor Ata Mohammad Noor said the peace process will not be successful unless all the major political parties and former jihadi leaders are not taken into confidence. A seasoned politician and former Mujahideen commander, Mr. Noor emphasized importance of involving former jihadi leaders in peace negotiations with armed opposition groups. Mr. Noor, who was appointed the governor of Balkh in 2004 by former president Hamid Karzai, has legions of followers in Northern provinces of Afghanistan. When the Taliban seized power in 1996, Mr. Noor served as a commander in the United Front (Northern Alliance) under slain resistance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud. "It is important to consult all stakeholders, including the Islamic Society Party, without which the prospects of peace look bleak," said Mr. Noor, while addressing a large gathering. "The Islamic Society Party and others who fought Soviet forces and Al Qaeda must be consulted by the government on the nature of peace process," he said. Earlier, former jihadi leaders, Ustad Rab Rasoul Sayyaf and Ismail Khan had slammed the national unity government leaders for cold shouldering former jihadi leaders and not including them in the new government.⁴

² "India will Continue To Assist Afghanistan: Foreign Secretary of India", *Khaama Press*, March 5, 2015 at <http://www.khaama.com/india-will-continue-to-assist-afghanistan-foreign-secretary-of-india-29142>

³ "Taliban Reject Hand In Kidnapping 30 Passengers in Zabul," *Khaama Press*, March 7, 2015, at, <http://www.khaama.com/46568-29156>

⁴ "Balkh Governor Urges Government To Include Former Mujahideen Leaders In Peace Process", *Afghan Zariza*, March 11, 2015 at <http://afghanzariza.com/2015/03/11/balkh-governor-urges-government-to-include-former-mujahideen-leaders-in-peace-process>

Joining the deafening chorus against proposed peace negotiations with armed opposition groups apparently brokered by Pakistan, the former president Hamid Karzai believes it will undermine the credibility of Afghan government. In an interview with *The Guardian* newspaper, Mr. Karzai warned the national unity government (NUG) led by President Ashraf Ghani against succumbing to Pakistan's pressure. His remarks come at a time when the new government in Kabul has started a consultative process to evolve consensus over the Afghan-led peace process. Addressing the joint session of parliament last week, President Ghani emphasized the importance of meaningful negotiations with armed opposition groups to pave ground for lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan. In an apparent reference to Pakistan, President Ghani said the regional countries have pledged their support to Afghan-led peace process. Criticizing the government for seeking support of Pakistan in brokering a peace deal with Taliban, Mr. Karzai said it is not in the best national interest. "We want a friendly relationship but not to be under Pakistan's thumb," said Mr. Karzai, who has been critical of Pakistan's interference in Afghanistan.⁵

Regional support is important for the success of Afghan-led peace process and sustainable economic development, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in his quarterly report released on March 10. The report provides an update on the humanitarian, development and human rights efforts of United Nations in Afghanistan, and presents a summary of significant political and security developments in the country. The UN Security Council is scheduled to discuss the report at a meeting in New York on March 16. The report hails the visionary leadership of President Ashraf Ghani, who has placed "considerable emphasis on achieving national reconciliation through a formal Afghan-led process" and even welcomed the potential role of China in support of the Afghan peace process. "Peace remains the fundamental pre-condition to durable and sustained political and economic progress in Afghanistan," says the report. "There must be realism about the timelines for a peace process and commitment to the ultimate goal of peace, while recognizing that the path will not be fast and is unlikely to be smooth. The human cost of conflict-related violence goes far beyond immediate casualties," it adds.⁶

Pakistan

(March 2-8 and March 9-15, 2015)

- **PM Nawaz invited to Saudi Arabia; Chinese President not attending Pakistan Day parade; New US diplomat nominated ambassador; Pakistan tests Shaheen-III missile; Washington rules out trade agreement with Pakistan; Pakistan Rangers delegation to visit India; Indian foreign secretary's visit icebreaker.**

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on March 4 left for Saudi Arabia on the invitation of King Salman Bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud. In his pre-departure statement, the PM said that Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are brotherly countries which are tied in bonds of shared faith and values. He added that

⁵ "Karzai Criticizes Ghani For Seeking Pakistan's Help In Brokering Peace Deal With Taliban", *Afghan Zariza*, March 11, 2015 at <http://afghanzariza.com/2015/03/11/karzai-criticizes-ghani-for-seeking-pakistans-help-in-brokering-peace-deal-with-taliban>

⁶ "Regional Support Key To Success Of Afghan-Led Peace Process: UN Sec-Gen", *Afghan Zariza*, March 12, 2015 at <http://afghanzariza.com/2015/03/11/regional-support-key-to-success-of-afghanled-peace-process-un-secgen>

the relationship between the two countries has grown stronger with the passage of time. The is the premier's first official visit to the Kingdom since King Salman bin Abdul Aziz assumed the throne. The premier will be accompanied by a high-level delegation which includes Finance Minister Ishaq Dar, Chief Minister Punjab Mr. Shahbaz Sharif, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on National Affairs Irfan Siddiqui and Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Syed Tariq Fatemi.⁷

Advisor to Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs and National Security Sartaj Aziz on March 6 revealed that Chinese President Xi Jinping is currently not scheduled to attend the Pakistan Day parade on March 23. Talking to media in Islamabad, the advisor said that while the Chinese president may not visit on March 23, he will be visiting Pakistan soon. Earlier, there were some reports that President Xi may visit Pakistan in March to attend the joint military parade on Pakistan Day. During his recent visit to Pakistan, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on February 12, 2015, confirmed that President Xi would be making his first state visit to Pakistan within the 'next few months.' "That will be his first visit to Pakistan as the head of state of China and that will be the first visit of its kind in nine years," he said. The Chinese president was initially supposed to visit Pakistan in August last year but the visit was postponed due to security reasons.⁸

US President Barack Obama on March 10 nominated veteran diplomat David Hale as the country's new ambassador to Pakistan. Hale, currently ambassador to Lebanon has previously served as the top US diplomat in Jordan and was special envoy for Middle East peace under Obama. Hale will have to be confirmed by lawmakers of the US Senate before taking up his post. He would replace outgoing ambassador Richard Olson, who has held the post since 2012.⁹

Pakistan on March 9 conducted a successful test launch of Shaheen-III Surface to Surface Ballistic Missile, capable of carrying nuclear and conventional warheads to a range of 2,750 KMs. The test launch was aimed at validating various design and technical parameters of the weapon system at maximum range. According to an ISPR press release, the successful launch with its impact point in the Arabian Sea was witnessed by senior officers from Strategic Plans Division, strategic forces, scientists and engineers of strategic organizations. Director General Strategic Plans Division, Lieutenant General Zubair Mahmood Hayat, while congratulating the scientists and engineers on achieving yet another milestone of historic significance, termed it a major step towards strengthening Pakistan's deterrence capability.¹⁰

US Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker finally admitted publicly that the Obama administration no longer has the ability to get legislative approval for any trade agreements with Pakistan, and hence is focusing on getting more US businesses to invest in Pakistan Pritzker urged Pakistan to fix its bureaucracy and address what she described as an "inconsistent and unfair" tax regime,

⁷ "PM Nawaz Sharif Leaves For Saudi Arabia", *The Dawn*, March 4, 2015 at <http://www.dawn.com/news/1167300/pm-nawaz-sharif-leaves-for-saudi-arabia>

⁸ "Chinese President May Not Attend Pakistan Day Parade: Sartaj Aziz", *The Express Tribune*, March 6, 2015 at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/849090/chinese-president-may-not-attend-pakistan-day-parade-sartaj-aziz/>

⁹ "Veteran US Diplomat Nominated Ambassador to Pakistan", *The News*, March 11, 2015 at

¹⁰ "Pakistan Successfully Tests Shaheen-III Missile", *The News*, March 9, 2015 at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/article-177662-Pakistan-successfully-tests-Shaheen-III-missile->

cautioning that if the government did not remove such impediments to American businesses, US companies may move to other places. Placing the private sector at the heart of US-Pakistan relationship, Pritzker admitted that the Obama administration was no longer in a position to get a US-Pakistan trade agreement approved by the United States Congress, so their entire focus will remain on “business to business connections”. She was speaking at the third US-Pak Business Opportunities Conference and later on talked to a group of journalists at the US Embassy. “No issue is as frustrating to a US business as inconsistent and unfair taxation,” said Pritzker. She said Pakistan’s tax regime was unreliable and the lax commitment to fair and consistent tax collection was creating problems for the foreign investors. Pritzker also pointed to the energy crisis as a severe challenge for foreign investors.¹¹

A high-level delegation of officers of the Pakistan Rangers will visit India later this month for talks with their Indian counterpart Border Security Force (BSF). The Rangers delegation, led by Maj Gen Bilal Akbar (DG Rangers Sindh) and Maj Gen Khan Tahir Javed Khan (DG Rangers Punjab), is expected to travel to India via the Wagah-Attari border on March 25 and will hold talks for five days with their Indian counterparts at the BSF headquarters in New Delhi. “The Pakistan Rangers are arriving in India for the annual DG-level talks for five days from March 25 to March 29. The last time the two sides met was in December 2013 when the BSF travelled to Lahore,” the *Press Trust of India* quoted a top Indian Home Ministry official as saying. The Indian side will be led by BSF Director General D K Pathak. The annual DG-level talks have been pending for over a year after a spate of ceasefire violations and a spell of strained ties between the neighbouring countries. The two sides are expected to take up the matter of ceasefire violations during the DG-level talks.¹²

Rejecting the notion that the Indian foreign secretary’s recent visit to Pakistan was a failure, Foreign Office Spokesperson Tasneem Aslam on March 5 described it as an icebreaker between the neighbouring countries. “We said that it is an icebreaker, taking place in lieu of the August tour. It is a process. The meeting was held in a constructive and positive atmosphere,” Tasneem Aslam told the weekly press briefing. Answering a question, she said New Delhi’s blaming Pakistan for every terrorist attack on others was baseless, adding terrorism had affected all, particularly this region. “We have our concerns and India has its own. Hence, this issue needs to be addressed in a cooperative manner,” Tasneem Aslam asserted. She called for greater cooperation amongst the international community to weed out the scourge of terrorism, adding Pakistan had suffered the most because of terrorism. “It is not a good approach to blame every terrorist attack on others. We expect that first of all investigations should be conducted; only then we can talk about it. We have done more than any other country to counter terrorism. We expect a similar approach from other countries,” the spokesperson said.¹³

¹¹ “Focus On Private Sector: Washington Rules Out Trade Agreement With Islamabad,” *The Express Tribune*, March, 11, 2015 at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/851245/focus-on-private-sector-washington-rules-out-trade-agreement-with-islamabad/t>

¹² “Pakistan Rangers Delegation To Visit India This Month”, *The News*, March, 9, 2015 at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/article-177629-Pakistan-Rangers-delegation-to-visit-India-this-month>

¹³ “Indian Secy’s Visit Icebreaker: FO”, *The Nation*, March 9, 2015 at <http://nation.com.pk/editors-picks/06-Mar-2015/indian-secy-s-visit-icebreaker-fo>

Bangladesh

(March 9-15, 2015)

- **BAPEX found new gas layer; Fresh elections only solution: Khaleda Zia.**

Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration and Production Company Ltd. (Bapex) has found commercially recoverable gas and condensate in a new layer in a well in Koilashtila gas field in Sylhet. Officials said the new layer was found at a depth of 3,127 to 3,133 metres in the gas field's well no-7. Once the test production is completed, Sylhet Gas Fields Ltd. the operating company of the field, will be able to produce at least 10 million cubic feet of gas a day and 80 barrel of condensate from this layer. Condensate can be used to produce high-octane petrol, as well as jet and diesel fuels. Officials of Bapex and SGFL termed the breakthrough a big achievement, as no gas or condensate was found at this depth in all six other wells at the gas field. Bapex drilled the well in the last five months with high hopes of oil and gas discovery with rig Bijoy-10. It, however, did not find any oil as it had been hoping earlier.¹⁴

Appearing before the media for the first time since January 19, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia said the ongoing anti-government movement will continue until it reaches a "logical conclusion". Saying that she is aware of people's sufferings due to blockade and hartal, Khaleda urged the countrymen to put up with this for the time being in the interest of the nation. Reading out a statement to journalists at her Gulshan office on March 13, the BNP chief reiterated that the present political crisis can be overcome only through an election under a non-party caretaker administration.¹⁵

Sri Lanka

(March 9-15, 2015)

- **Modi visits Sri Lanka; Sri Lanka releases 86 Indian fishermen; India objects to Ranil Wickremesinghe's comment; Cabinet approves the 19th amendment draft bill; Sirisena meets Cameroon; US welcomes the release of Tamil activist.**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a two day state visit to Sri Lanka on March 13. This was for the first time a Prime Minister of India made a bilateral visit to the island in 27 years. Addressing the media soon after his official ceremonial welcome in the capital Colombo, Modi said that he was delighted to be in Sri Lanka and was honoured that Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena had chosen India as his first official overseas visit. Speaking on the agreements reached, the Indian Prime Minister said that Lanka IOC and Ceylon Petroleum Corporation had agreed to jointly develop the Upper Tank Farm of the China Bay Installation in the eastern province of Trincomalee on mutually agreed terms. During his bilateral discussions with President Maithripala Sirisena, Modi further said that both nations had decided to grant visas on arrivals for its citizens from

¹⁴ "Koilashtila Gas Field: Bapex Finds Gas in New Layer", *The Daily Star*, March 9, 2015 at <http://bd.thedailystar.net/bapex-finds-gas-in-new-layer-68510>.

¹⁵ "Fresh Election Only Solution", *The Daily Star*, March 14, 2015 at <http://www.thedailystar.net/top-news/fresh-election-only-solution-71531>.

April 14 as the nations wanted to encourage people to people contacts, improve connectivity, and increase tourism. He further said that Air India would soon start direct flights between New Delhi and Colombo. Speaking further, Modi stated that India is privileged to be a development partner for Sri Lanka and it will provide a fresh Line of Credit of up to US\$ 318 million for the island nation's railways sector. "This will be used to procure rolling stock, and to restore and upgrade existing railway track," he said. Speaking further on the agreements reached between the bilateral discussions held between him and President Sirisena, Modi said that the Reserve Bank of India and the Central Bank of Sri Lanka had agreed to enter into a Currency Swap Agreement of US\$ 1.5 billion. He also said that India believed that early and full implementation of the 13th Amendment and going beyond would contribute to the reconciliation process.¹⁶ Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for unity in Sri Lanka as he visited the North on March 14 during his landmark visit to the country. Speaking at the Jaffna Public library, Modi said that there needs to be unity when a country is looking to rebuild after war, and he also assured Indian assistance to develop the country. Modi reached Jaffna after visiting Anuradhapura and Talaimannar. In Jaffna, the Indian Prime Minister had talks with Northern Province Chief Minister C.V. Wigneswaran and also launched another stage of the Indian funded housing project.¹⁷

Modi also flagged off the first train signifying the recommencement of the Talaimannar/Medawachchiya sector of the train service to Colombo, following the rehabilitation work carried out with Indian credit assistance.¹⁸

Sri Lanka set free 86 Indian fishermen on March 13 as a goodwill measure to mark the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.¹⁹

India had "strongly objected" to Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's comments justifying the killing of Indian fishermen by its navy. Making a statement after the issue was raised in the Rajya Sabha, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj said she had taken it up with Wickremesinghe. The minister said she told Wickremesinghe that the Indian fishermen released from Sri Lankan prisons in January – after a new government took office in Colombo – went through the whole legal procedure. "I said that if we justify firing, we will keep firing at each other," she added. Sushma Swaraj said Prime Minister Narendra Modi has suggested that Indian fishermen must go for deep sea fishing. Until then, a solution has to be found through a meeting between Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen.²⁰

¹⁶ "Modi Offers Indian Help To Lanka", *Colombo Gazette*, March 13, 2015 at <http://colombogazette.com/2015/03/13/modi-offers-indian-help-to-lanka/>.

¹⁷ "Indian PM in Jaffna, Wants Unity", *Colombo Gazette*, March 14, 2015 at <http://colombogazette.com/2015/03/14/indian-pm-in-jaffna-wants-unity/>.

¹⁸ "Modi Flags Off Talaimannar Train", *Colombo Gazette*, March 14, 2015 at <http://colombogazette.com/2015/03/14/modi-flags-off-talaimannar-train/>.

¹⁹ "Lanka Frees 86 Indian Fishermen", *Colombo Gazette*, March 13, 2015 at <http://colombogazette.com/2015/03/13/lanka-frees-86-indian-fishermen/>.

²⁰ "India Objects To Ranil's Comment", *Colombo Gazette*, March 9, 2015 at <http://colombogazette.com/2015/03/09/india-objects-to-ranils-comment/>.

The Sri Lankan cabinet, in a special meeting on March 15, approved the draft bill on the 19th Amendment to the constitution. He said that the cabinet could not agree on the electoral system and so the party leaders in the Government will meet again on Tuesday to iron out the differences. Kariyawasam said that the Government has, meanwhile, decided to Gazette the proposed draft bill on the 19th Amendment.²¹

President Maithripala Sirisena and British Prime Minister David Cameron held talks on March 10 in London during the President's official visit to Britain. During the meeting, Cameron had said that the United Kingdom stands ready to provide assistance and aid to achieve Sri Lanka's future development goals in any sector. Prime Minister Cameron congratulated President Maithripala on his presidential election victory and said that he is pleased to see the positive development in post-election Sri Lanka.²²

The United States welcomed the release by Sri Lanka's new government of a rights activist arrested a year ago for demanding information about people who went missing during the country's decades-long civil war. State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said the United States welcomes the March 10th release of eight Sri Lankan detainees, including human rights activist Balendran Jeyakumari, who had been arrested under the previous administration and held without charge.²³

Maldives

(March 9-15, 2015)

- **AP decides not to support the government; The High Court has dismissed the appeal by the former President of the Maldives Mohamed Nasheed; US, India expressed concerns over 13 years of sentence to Nasheed; Maldivian Prosecutor General meets with Russian Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika.**

Adhaalath Party has announced its decision not to support the government, citing constitutional violations and abuse of public confidence by the government. The decision was finalised at a meeting by the party leadership on March 8. Criticising the government the party said that although it supported President Abdulla Yameen in the Presidential Election 2013 and helped him win the election, it has decided to withdraw its support because over the short period the government has been in power, it has been engaged in high levels of corruption and activities which are not in line with the spirit of the constitution.²⁴

²¹ "Cabinet Approves 19-A Draft Bill", *Colombo Gazette*, March 15, 2015 at <http://colombogazette.com/2015/03/15/cabinet-approves-19-a-draft-bill/>.

²² "Sirisena and Cameron Hold Talks", *Colombo Gazette*, March 10, 2015 at <http://colombogazette.com/2015/03/10/sirisena-and-cameron-hold-talks/>.

²³ "US Hails Release of Jeyakumari", *Colombo Gazette*, March 13, 2015 at <http://colombogazette.com/2015/03/13/us-hails-release-of-jeyakumari/>.

²⁴ "Adhaalath Party Withdraws Support for Government", *SunOnline*, March 9, 2015 at <http://www.sun.mv/english/28242>.

The High Court has dismissed the appeal by the leader of MDP and the former President of the Maldives Mohamed Nasheed has submitted to High court to overrule the court order by the Criminal Court for his arrest after the former president refused to attend the hearing. The media official of the high court Amin Faisal said the appeal was dismissed within the court laws. The High Court has said that only family members and lawyers of the former president Mohamed Nasheed can attend the hearing. Regarding the former president's refusal to attend the hearing on March 15, Ahmed Abdulla Afeef from his team of lawyers said that President Nasheed requested the appeal to be held at open court and if the hearings are to be held in secret, he cannot attend the hearing. Ahmed Abdulla Afeef said that the former president requested as such because the constitution allows the hearings to be held in open court. High court said that the judges have the power under the Constitution Article 42-C and the Law of Courts Article 71-B to hold part of or all of the hearing in secret.²⁵

America and India expressed concerns after the former president Mohamed Nasheed was sentenced to 13 years in prison. The *Voice of America* said that the American envoy for South East Asia, Nisha Biswal has met with the Maldivian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dunya Maumoon and expressed her concerns. Spokesperson for the State Department Jen Psaki issued a press release calling for the democratic rights of the Maldivian citizens and independence of the judiciary system. The press release also called for the government to provide safety for the former president while he is serving the sentence and continue exercising the freedom of speech in a peaceful manner. The Spokesperson for the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, Syed Akbaruddhin expressed the Indian concerns on *Twitter*.²⁶

Maldivian Prosecutor General Muhthaz Muhsin has met with Russian Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika, as part of his ongoing visit to Russia. The officials agreed during discussions that followed the meeting on March 11, to facilitate training for Maldivian prosecutors in Russia, as well as to have Russian experts visit Maldives to provide training to Maldivian prosecutors. Discussions also took place regarding an extradition agreement, and cooperation in relation to criminal prosecution between the two countries. The meeting was also attended by Deputy Prosecutor General Mahmood Saleem, Legal Affairs Director of the Prosecutor General's Office Mohamed Iyaz, and senior officials of the Russian Prosecutor General's Office.²⁷

B. East Asia

China

(March 9-15, 2015)

- **China concludes the annual session of the National People's Congress; China registers protests and complaint with the government of Myanmar; Xi Jinping asserts increased civil-**

²⁵ "High Court Dismissed Appeal after the Former President Refused to Attend Hearing", *SunOnline*, March 15, 2015 at <http://www.sun.mv/english/28391>.

²⁶ "America and India Raise Concerns after President Nasheed Is Sentenced to Prison", *SunOnline*, March 14, 2015 at <http://www.sun.mv/english/28352>.

²⁷ "PG Muhthaz Meets Russian Counterpart", *SunOnline*, March 12, 2015 at <http://www.sun.mv/english/28332>.

military cooperation; China wants ASEAN to be neutral with regard to the South China Sea issues; Residents from Xinjiang join IS; China and the United States should look towards the future.

On March 15, 2015 the National People's Congress (NPC), the parliamentary body of China concluded its annual session. Zhang Dejiang presided over the closing meeting. A number of things were discussed and approved during the meeting, like the central budget, revision of the Legislation Law, government work report, the national economic and social development plan etc.²⁸

On March 13, 2015, Myanmar warplane hit a sugarcane field in the Chinese border city of Lincang. Around 4 people were killed and 9 were injured during the incident. The Chinese ambassador to Myanmar Yang Houlan, lodged an urgent representation with the Myanmar government on March 14, 2015.²⁹

The Chinese President Xi Jinping on March 12 asserted that there is a need to strengthen the Chinese national defence and also the combativeness of the Chinese armed forces. He said that there is a need for an increased civil-military integration. He further added that, "the armed forces should fully implement the strategic layout of 'Four Comprehensives' and the development strategy of civil-military integration in order to break new grounds in the PLA's capability building".³⁰

As a response to comments made by the ASEAN Secretary General Le Luong Minh's interview to *Manila Times*, with regard to the South China Sea, the Chinese foreign minister spokesperson Hong Lei said that, "Mr. Le Luong Minh has repeatedly made biased comments on the issue of the South China Sea, which were untrue and incompatible with his capacity as ASEAN secretary general".³¹

On March 10, a top official from the Xinjiang region stated that some Xinjiang residents have joined the radical group Islamic State. Zhang Chunxiang said that, "Some Xinjiang residents have crossed the border illegally to join IS".³²

On March 8, the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi asserted that both China and the United States should look at the future and not concentrate only on their problems. While speaking at the NPC, he said that, "China and the United States should not always use a microscope to magnify

²⁸ "China Concludes Annual Parliamentary Session" China Daily, March 15, 2015 at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015twosession/2015-03/15/content_19813461.htm, accessed on March 16, 2015

²⁹ "China Lodges Protest after Myanmar Raid Kills Four" China Daily, March 14, 2015 at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015-03/14/content_19811802.htm, accessed on March 16, 2015

³⁰ "Xi Calls For Closer Civil-Military Integration To Boost Army Combativeness" China Daily, March 13, 2015 at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015twosession/2015-03/13/content_19798476.htm, accessed on March 13, 2015

³¹ "China Urges ASEAN to Stay Neutral on South China Sea Issue" China Daily, March 11, 2015 at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-03/11/content_19784076.htm, accessed on March 13, 2015

³² Jia, Cui, "IS Recruits Xinjiang Residents" China Daily, March 11, 2015 at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015twosession/2015-03/11/content_19770997.htm, accessed on March 13, 2015

their problems, but use a telescope to look into their future and keep their bilateral ties evolving in the right direction".³³

Japan

(March 9-15, 2015)

- **Japan to offer \$4 billion in aid to deal with global disaster control efforts; Japan inks arms deal with France.**

Japan recently hosted a five day long UN conference on disaster risk education. It was held in the city of Sendai. While delivering a speech at the conference on March 14, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced Japan's plan to offer \$4 billion in aid in order to deal with global disaster. Japan will also help train a total of 40,000 experts from all over the world in disaster management over the next four year.³⁴ On March 14, itself, Abe and UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon held talks and agreed to continue Japan's cooperation with the US on matters pertaining to post-2015 Development Agenda and climate change.³⁵

On March 13, Japan signed an arms transfer deal with France with a view to broadening Japan's military role in international arena. The defence and foreign ministers of the two countries reached the agreement aimed at exchanges of defence equipment, services and technology. Japan has already been trying to broaden its military role. France currently is a major international arms exporter. The deal with France is hoped to provide Japan a greater access to the lucrative international defence market.³⁶

South Korea

(March 9-15, 2015)

- **South Korea pressurizes Japan to resolve the issue of sex slavery; The US to deploy THAAD to defend South Korea in contingencies.**

At the recent meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, Gender Equality and Family held on March 9, South Korea put pressure on Japan to resolve the sex slavery issue. The South Korean side urged Japan to face up top history and resolve the issue while keeping in mind

³³ Yang, Li, "China, US Should Look Forward with Sincerity", *China Daily*, March 9, 2015 at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015twosession/2015-03/09/content_19752765.htm, accessed on March 13, 2015

³⁴ "Japan Offers \$4 bil. Aid to Global Disaster-Control Efforts", *Mainichi Daily*, March 15, 2015 at <http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20150315p2a00m0na007000c.html>

³⁵ "Abe, Ban Agree to Cooperate over Development, Climate Change", *Mainichi Daily*, March 14, 2015 at <http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20150314p2g00m0dm063000c.html>

³⁶ "Japan Signs Arms Deal With France To Broaden Military Role", *Mainichi Daily*, March 14, 2015 at <http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20150314p2g00m0dm032000c.html>

the latter's commitment towards tackling violence against women. It was the first time that Seoul brought up the issue at the UN panel.³⁷

Despite the ongoing controversy over the deployment of the US' advanced missile system-the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defence System- THAAD-in South Korea, the US is reportedly to include it as part of Washington's extra forces required to defend the South in times of emergency. Last week the US forces stationed at South Korea informed for the first time regarding the survey it had carried out to study the possible deployment of THAAD.³⁸ South Korea however continues to maintain that it has no intention of buying the THAAD battery to deal with the threat from North Korean missiles.³⁹

North Korea

- **North Korea launches seven short-range missiles.**

On March 12, North Korea launched seven surface-to-air missiles into the East Sea. It was carried out just one day ahead of the end of the South Korea-US joint annual drill-Key Resolve. It needs to be noted that earlier North Korea fired two short-range Scud missiles as the said exercise kicked off on March 2.⁴⁰

C. Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia

(March 9-15, 2015)

- **China expresses dissatisfaction as ASEAN Secretary General spoke against its nine-dash line; Japan's military assistance to Vietnam and Philippines; Delhi Dialogue VII reemphasised connectivity and other issues; Vietnam-Cambodia relations getting better; Laos preparing for more railway projects with China and Thailand; Anwar Ibrahim's jail sentence opposed by US.**

China expressed its dissatisfaction as the Secretary General of ASEAN, Mr. Le Luong Minh commented on China's nine-dash line and territorial disputes over South China Sea islands in a newspaper published from Manila. Mr. Minh commented in *Manila Times* that ASEAN does not recognise China's nine-dash line that is being used to demarcate most of South China Sea as

³⁷ "Korea Ups Pressure On Japan Over Sex Slavery At UN Meet", *The Korea Herald*, March 10, 2015 at <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150315000299>

³⁸ "THAAD to be Stationed On Peninsula In Emergencies", *The Korea Herald*, March 15, 2015 at <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150315000299>

³⁹ "Seoul Says No Plan To Buy Us Missile Defence System", *The Korea herald*, March 9, 2015 at <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150309000802>

⁴⁰ "N. K Fires 7 Short-Range Missiles Into East Sea", *The Korea Herald*, March 13, 2015, at <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150313000909>

China's own territory. In response, China mentioned that China always supports ASEAN's economic integration; however, ASEAN is not a party to the South China Sea disputes and so ASEAN should not interfere or escalate the tension there. China also mentioned that ASEAN needs to maintain its neutrality in matters relating to South China Sea. Besides China, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan have conflicting claims on South China Sea islands and the tension is far away from being resolved. Vietnam's Prime Minister Ngyuen Tan Dung, during his recent visit to Australia, spoke about the tension and said that Vietnam and other concerned parties need to maintain self-restraint in order to avoid intensification of the disputes.⁴¹

Japan is fostering closer security ties with countries like Philippines and Vietnam. Japan is supplying maritime patrol boats to these countries and will organise a joint exercise with the Filipino navy in the months to come. Though Japan does not have any territorial claims on South China Sea, it shares a strained relation with China over Senkaku Islands in East China Sea. Henceforth, China is the common troublesome factor both for Japan and Vietnam as well as Philippines. In May, 2014 Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had assured about Japan's assistance in maintaining freedom of navigation on the adjacent waters and followed by that announcement, Japan has started renewing its ties with countries in Southeast Asia. Few days back, Japan has mentioned that it may begin marine patrol in South China Sea, at least partially. Few critics are of the opinion that such approaches by Japan are provocative and Japan is trying to get back its sway over Southeast Asia in an aggressive manner similar to its Second World War trends. The imperialist Japan used to patrol in the Spratly Islands during the World War II and at present day, Spratly is the one of the most disputed South China Sea Island where China is allegedly building artificial islands to station troops.⁴²

The seventh edition of Delhi Dialogue VII was hosted in New Delhi where dignitaries including foreign ministry representatives from ASEAN countries met India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and both sides reiterated their commitments towards augmentation of bilateral trade between India and ASEAN and issues like energy, infrastructure, Northeast India's connectivity, defence cooperation and changing geo-politics of Asia-Pacific were discussed. The Secretary (East) of the Ministry of External Affairs of India, Anil Wadhwa mentioned, "Our collaboration should deepen in the realm of maritime security, humanitarian and disaster relief, anti-piracy and counter-terrorism". Mrs. Sushma Swaraj said, "ASEAN lies at the core of India's 'Act East Policy' and at the centre of our dream of an Asian century. Since the launch of our 'Look East Policy' in the early 1990s, we have matured from being Sectoral Dialogue Partners to being Strategic Partners".⁴³ Delhi Dialogue VII was organised by the Ministry of External Affairs at the

⁴¹ "China Slams ASEAN Chief for South China Sea Comments", *Channel News Asia*, March 11, 2015, available at <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/china-slams-asean-chief-f/1708934.html>, accessed on 20 March 2015.

⁴² Kelly, Tim and Kobo, Nobuhiro "Testing Beijing, Japan Eyes Growing Role In South China Sea Security", *GMA News Online*, March 11, 2015, available at <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/story/450281/news/world/testing-beijing-japan-eyes-growing-role-in-south-china-sea-security>, accessed on 20 march 2015.

⁴³ "Better NE-SE Asia Air Connectivity Stressed", *The Assam Tribune*, March 11, 2015, available at <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=mar1215/at053>, accessed on 20 March 2015; India underlines need for enhanced cooperation with ASEAN, *Zee News*, 12 March 2015, available at http://zeenews.india.com/news/india/india-underlines-need-for-enhanced-cooperation-with-asean_1560623.html, accessed on 20 March 2015.

Obero, New Delhi on March 11 and the academic sessions were hosted by IDSA, New Delhi on March 12.

Vietnam's state-run news agency, *Vietnam News Agency/VNA* reported that so far Vietnam has 128 projects in Cambodia totalling an amount of USD 49.6 million. Vietnamese Minister of Planning and Investment Bui Quang Vinh and his Cambodian counterpart Chhay Than met in Hanoi and later the VNA came up with the latest update. On the contrary, Cambodia has invested in three projects in Vietnam in areas like energy, hydro-power and rubber plantation. Both sides agreed that they should invest more on human resource development to handle statistics and Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle portal should be upgraded. Bilateral relations at the level of the ministers were also discussed.⁴⁴

China and Laos will sign a construction contract to build a high-speed railway to connect these two countries as well as Thailand. The cost of the project is estimated at \$7.2 billion. Laos's officials met their counterparts from Thailand on March 10 to identify the scope of cooperation as the railway line will be extended to Thailand. In August 2014, Laos, Thailand and China discussed the matter of the railway project in Myanmar on the side-lines of the regional forum meeting. The original plan was supposed to be implemented by 2015; however, the Lao Parliament gave its green signal only in 2012. Besides this railway project, Laos is involved in two other railway projects; one aims to connect Laos with Thailand and Vietnam and the other one will connect Laos and Thailand. The landlocked country Laos wants to be connected with all neighbouring countries in the region in order to bring more investments and enhance trade.⁴⁵

The White House has issued a statement which is critical of Anwar Ibrahim's jail sentence in Malaysia. Before the statement from White House was released, *We The People*, an online platform, managed to get signatures from 100,000 people and filed a petition to the White House demanding US' prompt reaction against Anwar Ibrahim's jail term. Anwar Ibrahim's party, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) and opposition coalition Pakatan Rakyat mentioned that they are happy with the statement released by the White House. Anwar Ibrahim was sent to jail in February 2015 on sodomy charges. Shockingly, the online petition was later taken down as many signatures were found to be fraud. The Malaysian government supporters are accusing US for being interfering in Malaysia's internal affairs and trying to create chaos in Malaysia. On the other hand, the opposition party in Malaysia have decided to continue their protest for Anwar's freedom.⁴⁶ They argue that the judiciary in Malaysia has been used by the government as a machinery to unsettle the opposition.

⁴⁴ "Vietnam Has 128 Investment Projects In Cambodia To Date", *Global Times*, March 10, 2014 available at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/911287.shtml>, accessed on 20 March 2015.

⁴⁵ "Laos and China Prepare to Sign Construction Contract for High-Speed Railway Project", March 13, 2015, *Radio Free Asia*, available at <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/laos-china-prepare-to-sign-railway-construction-contract-03132015135705.html>, accessed on 23 March 2015.

⁴⁶ Naidu, Sumisha, "The White House condemns Malaysian opposition leader Anwar's conviction", March 13, 2015, available at <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/white-house-condemns/1714224.html>, accessed on 23 March 2015.

D. Russia

Russia

(March 9-15, 2015)

- **Russia suspends joint consultations on Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe; Russia to explore establishing a single currency for the Eurasian Economic Union; Russia and North Korea seek to boost ties; Moscow to seek binding guarantees on non-use of force at Geneva talks on Transcaucasia; Russia and Abkhazia sign memorandum on coordinated foreign policy; Russia accuses the US of violating NPT by training foreign pilots to use nuclear weapons; Moscow exploring the use of China's payment infrastructure instead of SWIFT; Russia has called upon SCO to counter the IS threat; Chinese investment in the Russian economy to match those from Europe within 2-3 years; Russia has signed a MoU with Iran in the banking sector; Ukrainian President submits draft resolution on special status of districts in Donbas region; China says Crimean issue should be resolved through dialogue.**

The head of the Russian delegation to Vienna talks on military security and arms control Anton Mazur has said that Russia has suspended its participation in meetings of the joint consultative group on the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) from March 11, 2015. He stated that 'for years, the Russian side has been doing its best to maintain viability of the regime of control over conventional arms, it initiated talks on adapting the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, it ratified the agreement on Adapted CFE Treaty. Regrettably, NATO countries have preferred to dodge CFE provisions by means of the alliance's expansion and use any pretexts to prevent the Agreement on Adapted CFE Treaty from coming into effect. This course pursued despite our repeated warning about its harmful impacts on the regime of control over conventional weapons led to the unavoidable result - Russia's suspending the CFE Treaty in 2007'.⁴⁷

Russia will explore the creation of a single currency across the Eurasian Economic Union. According to an order published on the Kremlin's website on March 10, President Putin has requested Russia's government and Central Bank to work with financial regulators in the bloc's member nations to present by September 1 a report 'defining the vector of financial and currency integration within the Eurasian Union and examining the desirability and possible creation of a currency union in the future'.⁴⁸

The Korean Central News Agency has reported that North Korea and Russia have declared 2015 a 'Year of Friendship' and plan to hold numerous joint initiatives in the cultural, political and economic spheres in order to give a boost to their bilateral ties.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ "Russia Suspends Joint Consultations On Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe", *Itar-Tass*, March 14, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/781973>

⁴⁸ "Putin Eyes Single Currency for Eurasian Union Trade Bloc", *The Moscow Times*, March 10, 2015 at <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/putin-eyes-single-currency-for-eurasian-union-trade-bloc/517234.html>

⁴⁹ "North Korea, Russia Seek To Boost Ties As They Declare 2015 a Year of Friendship", *Itar-Tass*, March 14, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/world/782015>

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has said, in Moscow on March 11, that Russia will seek legally binding guarantees on non-use of force at talks on Transcaucasia in Geneva talks and stressed that these discussions on security are 'very useful'.⁵⁰

Russian and Abkhazian Foreign Ministers Sergey Lavrov and Vyacheslav Chirikba have signed a memorandum, in Moscow on March 11, to coordinate their foreign policies 'in conditions of a complex situation in the world'. Moscow will also help Abkhazia strengthen its international profile and train Abkhazian diplomatic personnel at the MGIMO University.⁵¹

The head of Russian Foreign Ministry's non-proliferation department Mikhail Ulyanov has said, in Moscow on March 11, that the US is violating provisions of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) by training pilots of its allied countries to use nuclear weapons. He stated that the US has avoided discussions on this issue, has undermined global strategic stability and made further nuclear disarmament steps problematic. Mr. Ulyanov added that Russia expects the Review Conference to the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) to be held in New York in April – May 2015 to confirm the treaty's feasibility and the commitment of its signatories to fulfilling their obligations.⁵²

VTB Bank Chief Andrey Kostin has said on March 11, that Russia may eventually use China's payment infrastructure instead of international bank message system – SWIFT. *Reuters* had earlier reported that China may launch an international payment system for external settlements in Yuan during September-October 2015.⁵³

Russia has called upon the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) members to counter the threat posed by the Islamic State (IS) group. During the SCO forum meeting held in Khanty-Mansiysk on March 11, Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov had said that the member states will step up cooperation in the fight against terrorism, separatism, extremism, drug trafficking and transnational organized crime with the highest security priority for SCO being the increasingly unsettled situation in Afghanistan.⁵⁴

The CEO of Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) Kirill Dmitriev has said, on March 11, that Chinese investment into Russian economy is likely to match those from Europe within 2-3 years.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ "Moscow To Seek Binding Guarantees On Non-Use Of Force At Geneva Talks On Transcaucasia", *Itar-Tass*, March 14, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/782073>

⁵¹ "Russia, Abkhazia Sign Memorandum On Coordinated Foreign Policy", *Itar-Tass*, March 11, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/782125>

⁵² "US Violates NPT By Training Foreign Pilots To Use Nuclear Weapons – Russian Diplomat", *Itar-Tass*, March 14, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/world/782087>

⁵³ "Russia May Use China's Payment Infrastructure Instead of SWIFT – VTB Bank Head", *Itar-Tass*, March 14, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/economy/782054>

⁵⁴ "Russia Says SCO Must Step Up Efforts To Counter IS Threat", *Itar-Tass*, March 14, 2015 at <http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-russia-shanghai-cooperation-organization/26893659.html>

⁵⁵ "Chinese Investment In Russian Economy To Match Those From Europe Within 2-3 Years – Expert", *Itar-Tass*, March 11, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/economy/782159>

The deputy governors of Iranian and Russian central banks have signed a MOU on supervision of central banks financial operations in Moscow on March 10. The document is expected to simplify and stimulate implementation of agreements signed between the two countries in 2014-2015.⁵⁶

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has submitted, on March 15, a draft resolution to the Parliament (Verkhovna Rada) on granting special status to separate districts, cities, settlements and villages in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions where a special order of self-government will be introduced. This was mandated by the Minsk ceasefire deal.⁵⁷

The premier of the State Council of China Li Keqiang has said that Beijing supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine but the question of Crimea is extremely complicated and should therefore be solved through dialogue and negotiations.⁵⁸

(March 9-15, 2015)

- **Russia to take part in financing the 1st tranche of IMF programme for Ukraine; Gazprom receives gas prepayment from Ukraine's Naftogaz; Russia disappointed by expansion of Swiss sanctions; President Putin submits protocol to treaty on nuclear-free zone in Central Asia for ratification; Russia likely to spend up to US\$ 4.7 billion on new weapons in 2015; Russia's economy to grow 5.5-6 per cent in 2017 while the Central Bank cuts interest rate to 14 per cent; Russia to set up a Federal Nationalities Agency; Russia's foreign trade surplus drops by 20 per cent in January 2015; Unusually warm weather conditions prevail in the White Sea; Russia to create a cyber-security council; Russia's oil exports to increase in 2015; Russia launches large scale artillery and Black Sea Fleet drills; Russian Space Agency plans to develop Angara rocket for Moon flights; Russia plans to develop hypersonic missile by 2020.**

Finance Minister Anton Siluanov has said, in Moscow on March 13 that Russia (as part of its obligation under IMF agreements) will take part in financing the first tranche of the IMF programme for Ukraine worth US\$ 13.7 million.⁵⁹

Gazprom has confirmed receiving gas prepayment worth US\$ 15 million from Ukraine's Naftogaz gas company on March 13. At present Ukraine is importing Russian natural gas in the volume of around 10 billion (bcm) cubic meters a day.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ "Iran Seals Memorandum Of Understanding In Banking Sector With Russia — Fars", *Itar-Tass*, March 14, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/world/782805>

⁵⁷ "Poroshenko Submits Draft Resolution On Special Status Of Districts In Donbas Region", *Itar-Tass*, March 15, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/world/782814>

⁵⁸ "Li Keqiang: Crimean Problem Should Be Solved Through Dialogue", *Itar-Tass*, March 15, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/world/782821>

⁵⁹ "Russia To Take Part In Financing 1st Tranche Of Imf Program For Ukraine — Finance Minister", *Itar-Tass*, March 13, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/economy/782639>

⁶⁰ "Russia's Gazprom Receives Gas Prepayment From Ukraine's Naftogaz", *Itar-Tass*, March 13, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/economy/782671>

Russia's Foreign Ministry has said, on March 11, that Switzerland's decision to expand sanctions against Moscow looks absurd against the background of its efforts to promote the implementation of the Minsk agreements. Earlier, Switzerland had expanded sanctions against Russia, closing its territory to 28 individuals and entities from the EU 'black list' and prohibited Swiss entrepreneurs to have business contacts with them.⁶¹

Russian President Vladimir Putin, has on March 12, submitted a Protocol to the Treaty on a nuclear-free zone in Central Asia to the State Duma. The Treaty on a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Central Asia was signed in Semipalatinsk on September 8, 2006 by representatives of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and came into force on March 21, 2009. All the participants to the Treaty undertake not to develop, manufacture or otherwise acquire, possess or have control over any nuclear weapon, not to allow its stationing or transportation by any means, its testing or use, and also undertake not to allow in their territory any such actions by other states.⁶²

Deputy Defence Minister Yury Borisov has said, on March 12, that Russia is likely to spend US\$ 4.7 billion in 2015 on research and design work to create promising weapons and hardware. He added that the state defence order in 2015 will total 1.8 trillion roubles (around US\$ 29.5 billion).⁶³

Russia's Central Bank expects the country's GDP recovery growth at 5.5-6.3 per cent in 2017. In a monetary policy report published on March 13, the bank stated that 'the period of negative growth rates is expected to be longer than in the crisis of 2008-2009 while recovery will be quicker and will be primarily driven by internal factors'. In the Central Bank's estimates, the economy's recovering growth will be facilitated by an increase in world oil prices in the future to the level reflecting the fundamental ratio of demand and supply on global commodity markets, the development of Russia's import-substitution programmes, the growth of exports including the export of products other than commodities and raw materials, access of Russian companies to Asian capital markets and the gradual easing of borrowing terms on the domestic market. The bank also unveiled a macro-economic forecast for three years, under which the world prices of Russia's Urals crude oil blend are expected at US\$ 50-55 per barrel in 2015, with inflation at 12-14 per cent, the country's GDP contraction by 3.5-4 per cent and capital flight at US\$ 111 billion.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, the Bank has cut interest rates to 14 per cent from the prevailing 15 per cent and stated that it is ready to cut the key interest rate further as inflation risks in Russia are weakening.⁶⁵

⁶¹ "Moscow Disappointed By Expansion Of Swiss Sanctions On Russia – Foreign Ministry", *Itar-Tass*, March 14, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/782151>

⁶² "Putin Submits Protocol To Treaty On Nuclear-Free Zone In Central Asia For Ratification", *Itar-Tass*, March 12, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/782424>

⁶³ "Russian Defence Ministry May Spend Up To \$4.7 Billion On New Weapons in 2015", *Itar-Tass*, March 12, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/782403>

⁶⁴ "Russia's Economy To Grow 5.5-6% In 2017 – Central Bank", *Itar-Tass*, March 14, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/economy/782676>

⁶⁵ "Russia's Central Bank Cuts Key Interest Rate To 14%", *Itar-Tass*, March 13, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/economy/782546>

Russian President Vladimir Putin has instructed Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev to consider and submit by April 15 the proposals to set up the Federal Agency for Nationalities. The Agency will be responsible for implementation of the state policy in the field of inter-ethnic and ethno-confessional relations; the accomplishment of measures aimed at strengthening the unity of the multi-national Russian nation; ensuring inter-ethnic and inter-confessional accord as well as measures aimed at ensuring ethno-cultural development of peoples of Russia.⁶⁶

The Federal Customs Service of Russia has reported, on March 13, that Russia's foreign trade surplus decreased by US\$ 4.1 billion or 20.1 per cent in January 2015 year on year to US\$ 16.3 billion. The foreign trade declined by 33.9 per cent in January 2015 compared to the same month of the previous year to US\$ 39 billion. Russia's fuel and energy exports fell by 30.7 per cent in terms of their value and increased by 17.1 per cent in terms of their volume in the reporting period.⁶⁷

The Russian Northern Department for Hydrometeorology and Environmental Monitoring organisation has said, on March 13, that unusually warm weather conditions have resulted in the complete melting of ice sheets on the White Sea surface two months ahead of the usual date. The last time such an event occurred was in 1967.⁶⁸

Russian Vice-Premier Dmitry Rogozin has ordered the creation of a council for cyber security that will operate under the Military Industrial Commission. It will be 'used as a floor for carrying out an inventory of all laws and legislative acts; harmonize the legislation and get down to working out meaningful rather than declarative legislative acts that will help ensuring legislative regulation in matters of information security'.⁶⁹

Energy Minister Alexander Novak has said, on March 11, that Russia's oil exports are expected to grow in 2015 as volumes are diverted from domestic refineries that are reducing capacity as part of their modernization plans. He added that in accordance with the modernization plans, Russian refineries will switch to produce fewer low-quality products such as fuel oil and more high-quality products such as diesel and gasoline, but in lower volumes. Until now, Russian oil companies have been reducing crude oil exports and supplying much of their output to domestic refineries as this practice offers better margins than selling crude on the market at the current low prices., Russia's crude oil exports are expected to rise by up to 3 million tons in 2015 and to 280 million tons per year by 2035 from 224 million tons in 2014.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ "Putin Instructs Medvedev To Submit Proposals To Set Up Federal Nationalities Agency", *Itar-Tass*, March 13, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/782610>

⁶⁷ "Russia's Foreign Trade Surplus Plummets 20% In January — Customs", *Itar-Tass*, March 13, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/economy/782655>

⁶⁸ "Ice Melting Early In White Sea Amid Extremely Warm Weather, Southern Winds", *Itar-Tass*, March 13, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/non-political/782690>

⁶⁹ "Russian Vice-Premier Orders Creation Of Cyber Security Council", *Itar-Tass*, March 10, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/781949>

⁷⁰ "Russia's Oil Exports To Increase In 2015 — Energy Minister", *Itar-Tass*, March 11, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/economy/782134>

Russia has launched, on March 12, country-wide (comprising of southern, northern Caucasus and Crimean federal districts) manoeuvres of artillery, reconnaissance troops, armour units and the Black Sea Fleet. They involve some 8,000 troops, more than 1,500 units of weapons and military equipment, including 400 artillery weapons, more than 100 volley fire rocket systems, 300 mortars and some 200 anti-tank weapons.⁷¹

The Russian Space Agency will seek to develop a new modification of the Angara carrier rocket in order to launch manned flights to Moon.⁷²

Russia's Perspective Research Foundation (FPI) is creating an integrated system of modelling for the development of hypersonic aircraft.⁷³

E. Iran, Iraq, Syria and the Gulf

Iran

(March 9-15, 2015)

- **World powers holding talks to end UN sanctions on Iran; US and Iran condemn Republican letter to Iran.**

Major world powers have begun talks about a United Nations Security Council resolution to lift UN sanctions on Iran if a nuclear agreement is struck with Tehran, a step that could make it harder for the U.S. Congress to undo a deal. Some eight UN resolutions - four of them imposing sanctions - ban Iran from uranium enrichment and other sensitive atomic work and bar it from buying and selling atomic technology and anything linked to ballistic missiles. There is also a UN arms embargo on Iran.⁷⁴

In an open letter to leaders of Iran on March 9, 47 Republican senators warned that a potential nuclear deal with Tehran would not be acceptable until it is approved by the US Congress. They also said the agreement would be abandoned after Obama leaves office in January 2017. "The next president could revoke such an executive agreement with the stroke of a pen and future Congresses could modify the terms of the agreement at any time." The letter has been condemned by the US and Iranian leadership alike including Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden.⁷⁵

⁷¹ "Large-scale Artillery, Black Sea Fleet Drills Launched In Russia", *Itar-Tass*, March 12, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/782286>

⁷² "Russian Space Agency Plans To Develop Angara Rocket For Moon Flights", *Itar-Tass*, March 12, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/non-political/782408>

⁷³ "Russia Hopes To Have Hypersonic Missile In 2020", *Itar-Tass*, March 13, 2015 at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/782516>

⁷⁴ "Major Nations Hold Talks On Ending UN Sanctions On Iran: Officials", *TehranTimes*, March 13, 2015 <http://www.tehrantimes.com/politics/122539-major-nations-hold-talks-on-ending-un-sanctions-on-iran-officials>

⁷⁵ "Hillary Clinton Condemns Republican Letter To Iran", *Presstv*, March 10, 2015 <http://presstv.ir/Detail/2015/03/10/401250/Clinton-condemns-GOP-letter-to-Iran>

Iraq and Syria

(March 9-15, 2015)

- **Iraqi forces retake most of the areas of Tikrit; Saddams tomb flattened by fighting in Tikrit; Kerry says US willing to negotiate with Assad; Kurdish Government says ISIS used chlorine gas.**

The Iraqi security forces recaptured the presidential palace's complex, the industrial neighbourhood as well as general and military hospitals in Tikrit. Reports also said that the Iraqi air force pounded several ISIL hideouts in the centre of the strategic city. Earlier this month, some 30,000 Iraqi troops started large-scale operations to recapture Tikrit, which is the birthplace of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. The volunteer forces, which include both Shia and Sunni members, have also joined the operation.⁷⁶

The tomb of Iraq's late ruler Saddam Hussein has suffered extensive damage in clashes between fighters from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant group (ISIL) and Iraqi security forces in a fight for control of the city of Tikrit. Poster-sized pictures of the late ruler, which once covered the mausoleum, are now nowhere to be seen amid the mountains of concrete rubble. Instead, Shia militia flags and photos of militia leaders mark the predominantly Sunni village, including that of Major Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the powerful Iranian general advising Iraqi Shia militias on the battlefield.⁷⁷

In an interview broadcast on *CBS News* US Secretary of State John Kerry said that the United States will have to negotiate with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for a political transition in Syria and explore ways to pressure him into agreeing to talks. Kerry said the US and other countries, which he did not name, were exploring ways to reignite the diplomatic process to end the conflict in Syria which is now in its fifth year.⁷⁸

Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government said that it has evidence the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) used chlorine gas as a chemical weapon against Kurdish peshmerga forces. The Kurdish region's Security Council said in a statement that a laboratory analysis of soil and clothing samples from a January suicide car bombing it said ISIS conducted in northern Iraq found "the samples contained levels of chlorine that suggested the substance was used in weaponries form."⁷⁹

⁷⁶ "Iraqi Forces Retake Control Of Several Areas In Tikrit" , *Presstv*, March 13, 2015 at <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2015/03/13/401589/Iraq-forces-liberate-areas-in-Tikrit>

⁷⁷ "Saddam's Tomb Heavily Damaged In Iraq Fighting" *Aljazeera*, March 16 , 2015 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2015/03/saddam-tomb-heavily-damaged-iraq-fighting-tikrit-150315234928038.html>

⁷⁸ "Kerry Says US Willing To Negotiate With Syria's Assad" , *Aljazeera*, March 16, 2015 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/03/kerry-admits-negotiate-assad-150315133208807.html>

⁷⁹ "Kurdish Govt: ISIS 'Used Chlorine Gas' In Iraq" , *Alarabia* , March 14 , 2015 <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/14/Kurdish-govt-says-ISIS-used-chlorine-as-weapon-in-Iraq.html>

The Gulf

(March 9-15, 2015)

- **Saudi Arabia says Iran nuclear deal could start nuclear fuel race; US shuts missions in Saudi Arabia over security concerns; Gulf States plan to hold Yemen talks in Riyadh.**

Prince Turki al-Faisal told *the BBC* that Saudi Arabia would then seek the same right, as would other nations. "I've always said whatever comes out of these talks, we will want the same," said the prince, Saudi Arabia's former intelligence chief. "So if Iran has the ability to enrich uranium to whatever level, it's not just Saudi Arabia that's going to ask for that."⁸⁰

Operations at the US Embassy in Riyadh and its consulates in Jeddah and Dhahran have been halted in the wake of "heightened security concerns". Wight, spokesperson for US embassy in Saudi also forewarned all US citizens to be aware of their surroundings and to take extra precautions when traveling throughout the country.⁸¹

Saudi Arabia has said the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) had agreed to host talks in Riyadh to end the Yemen crisis. The announcement by the Saudi king's office came on March 9, following a request from Yemen's President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, but it was not clear who would take part in the talks. Yemen, a neighbour of Saudi Arabia and a global security hotspot because of a strong al-Qaeda presence, is caught in a standoff between Hadi and the Shia Houthi, now the country's *de facto* rulers who are supported by Iran.⁸²

F. The United State of America

National

(March 9-15, 2015)

- **Sea Services release revised maritime strategy; Navy, Marine Corps officials warn of sequestration's impact; McHugh: America's army facing sequestration 'enemy' at home; Northcom chief discusses threats to homeland; Defence department approves JIEDDO reorganization; Carter: Cyber domain presents profound challenges.**

On March 13, 2015, the sea services released a new maritime strategy, a plan that describes how the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard will design, organize, and employ naval forces in support of national security interests and homeland security objectives. The new strategy, titled,

⁸⁰ Ushaer, Barbara Pellet, "Iran Deal Could Start Nuclear Fuel Race - Saudi Arabia" *BBC*, March 16, 2015 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31901961>

⁸¹ "Security Fears: US Shuts Diplomatic Missions", *Arabnews*, March 17, 2015 <http://www.arabnews.com/featured/news/718911>

⁸² "Gulf States Seek To Host Yemen Talks In Riyadh", *Aljazeera*, March 10, 2015 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2015/03/saudis-offer-host-gcc-talks-yemen-crisis-150310053725405.html>

"A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower: Forward, Engaged, Ready," accounts for changes in the global security environment, new strategic guidance, and a changed fiscal environment. The essential functions of the maritime strategy released in 2007 were adjusted to include a new function called "all domain access" which underscores the challenges forces face in accessing and operating in contested environments. The new strategy emphasizes operating forward and engaging partners across the globe, especially in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region.⁸³

The Navy and Marine Corps will be challenged to carry out their parts of the national defence strategy if billions of dollars in sequester-related budget cuts take effect October 1, senior service officials told legislators on Capitol Hill on March 10. In prepared testimony, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Jonathan W. Greenert told the Senate Armed Services Committee the service is still recovering from a \$9 billion shortfall triggered in 2013 by the mandatory across-the-board budget cuts known as sequestration. Further reductions, he added, would put U.S. sailors' and Marines' lives at increased risk, and negatively impact military readiness and national security.⁸⁴

Not only does the U.S. Army face rapid, unpredictable changes in the geopolitical landscape, but also the uncertainty of an adversary – sequestration – at home, Army Secretary John M. McHugh said in Washington on March 11. Testifying before the Senate Appropriations Committee's defence subcommittee, McHugh, joined by Army Chief of Staff Gen. Ray Odierno, discussed the Army's fiscal year 2016 budget request and challenges imposed by sequestration's return as demand for the Army grows. "It is amazing how much can change in a year," McHugh said. "Over the last 12 months, we've seen the geopolitical landscape morph, really, at an astonishing pace." From renewed aggression by Russia and increased threats from North Korea to gains by radical terrorists in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, to the fight against Ebola, he said, "the demand for your Army to tackle contingencies around the world have grown at an alarming rate."⁸⁵

The most dangerous threats to the U.S. homeland include transnational criminal networks, home-grown violent extremists and cyberattacks, Navy Adm. William E. Gortney told a Senate panel on March 12. The commander of U.S. Northern Command and of North American Aerospace Defence Command, or NORAD, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Northcom's fiscal year 2016 budget request. The likeliest threat, the admiral said, is a transnational criminal network that operates by using what he calls seams between Northcom, U.S. Southern Command and U.S. Pacific Command; seams between U.S. interagency partners and the combatant commands; seams between the United States and its partner nations; and seams within those countries themselves.⁸⁶

⁸³ "Sea Services Release Revised Maritime Strategy", U.S. Navy Chief of Information Office, *DoD News*, March 13, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128368>

⁸⁴ Simeone, Nick, "Navy, Marine Corps Officials Warn of Sequestration's Impact", *DoD News*, March 10, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128331>

⁸⁵ Marshall, Tyrone C. Jr., "McHugh: America's Army Facing Sequestration 'Enemy' at Home", *DoD News*, March 11, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128342>

⁸⁶ Pellerin, Cheryl, "Northcom Chief Discusses Threats to Homeland", *DoD News*, March 12, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128355>

The Defence Department has approved a realignment of the Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization, or JIEDDO, with the goal of improving oversight and accountability, a Pentagon spokesman announced on March 13. Deputy Defence Secretary Robert Work approved an organizational realignment of JIEDDO, Army Col. Steve Warren told reporters. The change will see it transition from a jointly manned activity to a combat support agency under the authority, direction and control of the undersecretary of defence for acquisition, technology and logistics, he said.⁸⁷

Defence Secretary Ash Carter gave his first domestic troop talk as secretary to the cyber warriors assigned to U.S. Cyber Command at Fort Meade, Maryland, on March 13. The mission of Cybercom is vital to the economic and physical security of not just the nation, but to Americans in their individual lives, Carter said. "With all that's going on in the world, from Iraq to Ukraine, to the Asia-Pacific, the domain that you protect — cyberspace — is presenting us with some of the most profound challenges, both from a security perspective and from an economic perspective," he told the troops. National leaders at every level are "seized with the need to get on top of this problem," the defence secretary said.⁸⁸

International: Asia

(March 9-15, 2015)

- **Anti-ISIL Fighters Retake Key Terrain; Force authorization suited to anti-ISIL campaign, Dempsey says; Peshmerga fighters take key ISIL ridgeline in northern Iraq; Winnefeld: DMZ provides reminder why military defends freedoms; Eagle Resolve 2015 multilateral exercise kicks off in Kuwait; U.S., China conduct Asia-Pacific Security dialogue.**

Forces opposing the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, supported by coalition airstrikes, seized key terrain late last week in northeastern Syria near Tal Hamis, Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve officials reported on March 10. These forces overcame ISIL resistance in that section of Syria and denied the terrorist group its freedom of maneuver in the area, officials said. The two-week operation, which ended March 7, also denied ISIL access to primary travel routes historically used to move its personnel and materials into Iraq — namely Tal Afar and Mosul.⁸⁹

The draft authorization for the use of military force against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant is suitable for the current campaign against the terrorist group, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on March 11. The authorization covers American efforts to forge a coalition against ISIL and gives officials flexibility to institute changes as the enemy morphs and adapts, Army Gen. Martin E. Dempsey said. Dempsey testified alongside

⁸⁷ Simeone, Nick, "Defence Department Approves JIEDDO Reorganization", *DoD News*, March 13, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128361>

⁸⁸ Roulo, Claudette, "Carter: Cyber Domain Presents Profound Challenges", *DoD News*, March 13, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128365>

⁸⁹ "Anti-ISIL Fighters Retake Key Terrain", From a Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve News Release, *DoD News*, March 10, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128332>

Defence Secretary Ash Carter and Secretary of State John F. Kerry. “Bipartisan support for an AUMF would send an important signal of national support to those who are serving in harm’s way conducting this mission,” the general said. More than 60 nations are involved in the fight against ISIL, the chairman said.⁹⁰

Peshmerga fighters, supported by Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve airstrikes, seized a key ridgeline west of Kirkuk in northern Iraq, task force officials reported on March 11. The peshmerga forces overcame ISIL resistance in this section of Iraq and denied the terrorist group its freedom of maneuver in the area, officials said. The March 9 operation also pushed ISIL further away from the Kirkuk oilfields. During the operation, peshmerga forces seized critical portions of Route 80 in Iraq, according to officials. In addition, the peshmerga forces pushed ISIL 2 to 3 miles back over a wide front, liberating about 30 square miles of terrain formerly held by ISIL.⁹¹

The vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff visited Korea’s demilitarized zone on March 8, where soldiers from North Korea and South Korea have stared each other down for more than six decades after an armistice ended hostilities of the Korean War. Navy Adm. James A. Winnefeld Jr. said the tour is a powerful reminder of just why American service men and women give so much to defend the freedom of the nation. Winnefeld is leading a USO delegation of celebrities who are circumnavigating the globe in just over a week to bring cheer to deployed troops. After visiting in Europe and making their way through Bahrain, Afghanistan and the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia, South Korea was their last foreign call before heading for their final show in Hawaii.⁹²

U.S. forces, Gulf Cooperation Council nations and international partners are participating in the multilateral Eagle Resolve exercise held in Kuwait, according to U.S. Central Command officials. Eagle Resolve 2015 kicked off March 8 and the exercise concludes March 31, officials said. Exercise events are being held in Kuwait and its territorial waters, officials added. Eagle Resolve will consist of a weeklong series of “injects,” simulated events designed to exercise participants’ ability to respond as a multinational headquarters staff, followed by a series of tactical demonstrations of land, maritime and air forces from several nations, officials said. About 3,000 U.S. military personnel representing U.S. Central Command headquarters and its components along with military representatives from more than a dozen other nations will support the exercise, officials said. This is the Kuwaiti government’s first time hosting this exercise, officials said.⁹³

⁹⁰ Garamone, Jim, “Force Authorization Suited to Anti-ISIL Campaign, Dempsey Says”, *DoD News*, March 11, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128341>

⁹¹ “Peshmerga Fighters Take Key ISIL Ridgeline in Northern Iraq”, From a Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve News Release, *DoD News*, March 11, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128347>

⁹² Ferdinando, Lisa, “Winnefeld: DMZ Provides Reminder Why Military Defends Freedoms”, *DoD News*, March 9, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128319>

⁹³ “Eagle Resolve 2015 Multilateral Exercise Kicks Off in Kuwait”, by U.S. Central Command, *DoD News*, *DoD News*, March 9, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128324>

Officials from the U.S. Defence Department and China's Defence Ministry held the inaugural Asia-Pacific Security Dialogue in Washington on March 10. The meeting was first announced by then-Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel during his April visit to Beijing, Pentagon officials said. Ambassador David B. Shear, assistant secretary of defence for Asian and Pacific security affairs, led the U.S. delegation, and Rear Adm. Guan Youfei, director of the Defence Ministry's foreign affairs office, led the Chinese delegation. During the full-day dialogue, Shear and Guan discussed security interests of mutual concern, officials said.⁹⁴

Indo-US Relations

(March 9-15, 2015)

- **Congressman Ed Royce leads bipartisan delegation to India; California hires H1-B visa holders from India to process unemployment claims; Indo-US relationship not directed at China; Ambassador Verma; Understanding culture, the key to better bilateral relations; Indo-US relations have reached a new pinnacle: Ed Royce.**

House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Ed Royce (R-CA) is leading a bipartisan congressional delegation to India, from March 7 to March 10. In New Delhi, Royce will seek to further strengthen the U.S.-India partnership, including encouraging stronger trade ties and counterterrorism cooperation. In meetings with senior Indian officials, he will advocate for continued progress in U.S.-India civilian nuclear cooperation and stress the need for greater economic cooperation through the implementation of a Bilateral Investment Treaty. Royce was instrumental in the passage of the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Agreement of 2006, managing the bill on the House Floor. He has also been a strong proponent for enhancing U.S.-India security ties, and has long spoken out against the threat of radical extremism originating from Pakistani Deobandi schools.⁹⁵

It was reported that while California's unemployment rate continues to hover at a full percentage point higher than the national average, the state has taken the controversial and somewhat ironic step of hiring Indian nationals to process its unemployment claims. According to ABC's Sacramento affiliate, News10, "with the exception of two managers, everyone inside the office is from outside of the U.S. They are employed by Deloitte, a major U.S. IT company hired by the state to create and manage its Unemployment Insurance Modernization project. The mostly Indian nationals are allowed to work here under a visa program called H-1B." Right wing pundits are rallying against the move and using it as ammo against President Obama's immigration reform, and H-1-B visas in particular.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ "U.S., China Conduct Asia-Pacific Security Dialogue", *DoD News*, March 11, 2015 at <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=128335>

⁹⁵ "Congressman Ed Royce Leads Bipartisan Delegation to India", *The American Bazar*, March 9, 2015 at <http://www.americanbazaaronline.com/2015/03/09/congressman-ed-royce-leads-bipartisan-delegation-to-india/>

⁹⁶ Karerat, Raif, "California Hires H1-B Visa Holders From India To Process Unemployment Claims", March 9, 2015 at <http://www.americanbazaaronline.com/2015/03/09/california-hires-h1-b-visa-holders-from-india-to-process-unemployment-claims/>

Describing the Sino-Indian and Indo-US relations as complex and comprehensive, US ambassador Richard Verma asserted on Wednesday that strong ties between New Delhi and Washington were in the interest of the world. Addressing a two-day seminar on 'Building Pan Asian Connectivity', Verma lamented South Asia's negligible intra-regional commerce and called upon India to address the economic anomaly for better connectivity for the "least connected" region on earth. "India and China and the US and China, both are very complicated and comprehensive relationships. There are elements of competition and cooperation in our relationships. We have our economic interests, but when we have security concerns or human rights concerns we raise them," said Verma.⁹⁷

Even as Indo-US relations looks at its best following the visit of US President Barack Obama, a prevalent cultural gap often sours it for Western businesses wanting to set up shop in Chennai, India. According to Ford India's founding president, John Parker, it is one of the reasons for Ford's initial partnership with Mahindra to go South. "Good management recognises intercultural understanding and doesn't allow for bad culture to thrive," he says. Perhaps to plug this divide, a new book giving insights on business intriguingly titled – Make it in India, and compiled by Ranjini Manian and Joanne Grady Huskey, two entrepreneurs and cross cultural trainers, was launched in the city recently. Manian and Huskey, who are co-founders of Global Adjustments Services Pvt Ltd., a company that provides services for the expatriate community, said that understanding culture was the key for developing friendship between the nations.⁹⁸

The relationship between India and the US has reached a new pinnacle, Congressman Ed Royce has said and pledged to work further on boosting bilateral ties. During the visit, Royce and the delegation met with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar, National Security Advisor Ajit Kumar Doval, and Home Minister Rajnath Singh. "Meeting with Prime Minister Modi, we discussed deepening our counterterrorism ties through more high-level exchanges and greater information sharing," he said. Our two countries share the common threat of terrorism, "fuelled by hundreds of Deobandi schools throughout Pakistan", he said. Royce said, we also discussed ways to "deepen economic ties".⁹⁹

⁹⁷ "Indo-US Relationship Not Directed at China: US Envoy", *IANS*, March 11, 2015 at http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/indo-us-relationship-not-directed-at-china-us-envoy-115031100470_1.html

⁹⁸ 'Understanding Culture, the Key to Better Bilateral Relations', by Express News Service, *The New Indian Express*, March 12, 2015 at <http://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/chennai/Understanding-Culture-the-Key-to-Better-Bilateral-Relations/2015/03/12/article2708773.ece>

⁹⁹ "Indo-US Relations Have Reached A New Pinnacle: Ed Royce", *PTI*, March 12, 2015 at http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2015-03-12/news/60048154_1_economic-ties-bilateral-ties-congressman-ed-royce

II. DEFENCE REVIEWS

National

(March 9-15, 2015)

- **Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Indian Army and HDFC Bank on the Defence Salary Package; Army tops the list in suicide cases in 2014.**

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Indian Army and HDFC Bank on the Defence Salary Package on March 13, 2015. The first MoU between HDFC Bank and the Indian Army was signed in 2011 and was valid for a period of three years. The revised MoU is tailor made to suit the requirements of serving soldiers, pensioners and families. The revised MoU has a number of additional facilities. The basic features of the MoU are free drafts, free cheque books, free funds transfers to any bank in India through RTGS / NEFT and free ATM cards. Some features which have been improved from before are enhancement of Personal Accident Insurance (PAI) cover and its applicability both on Account and Debit Card, Air Accident Insurance of Rs 25 Lakhs, Interest concession on auto loan and 50 per cent waiver on processing fees for auto and house loan. One major addition has been the overdraft facility to pensioners. The MoU also has a provision for yearly review of specific features and requests.¹⁰⁰

The Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar informed the Rajya Sabha on March 10 about the number of suicides in the Indian Armed Forces during the last one year. Army saw the maximum number of suicides with 84 soldiers committing suicide. Air Force witnessed 24 suicides, whereas Navy did not report any such incident. Reasons for such incident include occupational hazards (long tenures of continuous deployment), family issues / domestic problems, perceived grievances, personal issues, mental built, financial problems and inability to withstand stress. The defence minister enumerated the various measures taken to prevent such incidents. Some of these measures include improvement in living and working conditions through provision of better infrastructure and facilities, additional family accommodation, liberalized leave policy, establishing a grievance redressal mechanism, provision of psychological counselling by psychological counsellors and conduct of yoga and meditation as part of unit routine.¹⁰¹

International

(March 9-15, 2015)

- **Philippines to buy three new transport planes from Spain to strengthen its poorly equipped military; Chinese fighter jets to patrol its border with Myanmar amid ethnic unrest in Myanmar.**

¹⁰⁰ "MoU between Indian Army and HDFC Bank," *PIB*, March 13, 2015, at <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=117011>

¹⁰¹ "Suicides in the Armed Forces," *PIB*, March 10, 2015, at <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=116707>

Reports say that Philippines will buy three new transport planes from Spain to strengthen its poorly equipped military in handling external threats and natural disasters. The first of the three C295 planes will be delivered this month in a deal costing a total of 5.29 billion pesos (\$119 million. This ship will meet the requirements of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, military transport and other uses. The C295 is a twin-turboprop aircraft capable of carrying up to nine tons or 71 soldiers, using short, unprepared airstrips according to the website of the manufacturer, the Airbus Defence and Space arm. The Philippines, which has one of the region's weakest militaries, has been trying to modernize its armed forces amid growing tensions with China over disputed territory in the South China Sea. Last year it signed an agreement to buy 12 South Korean-made FA-50 jets for about \$421.12 million. The country also suffers from frequent natural disasters.¹⁰²

Meanwhile, according to reports, China sent fighter jets to patrol its border with Myanmar after a bomb dropped by a Myanmar warplane killed four Chinese in southwestern Yunnan province. The bomb hit a sugarcane field in Lincang city on March 13, killing four Chinese workers and injuring nine others. The People's Liberation Army Air Force on March 13 sent several fighter jets to track, monitor, warn and chase away Myanmar military planes flying close to China's border. More than 30,000 people have fled from Myanmar into Yunnan province, according to China's official news agency Xinhua.¹⁰³

III. INTERNAL SECURITY REVIEWS

Jammu & Kashmir

(March 2-8, 2015)

- **J&K CM Mufti remarks spark controversy; Mufti government releases Hurriyat hardliner Masarat Alam; Infiltration has come down in J&K: DGP.**

Jammu & Kashmir Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed started his tenure on a controversial note by crediting Pakistan, separatists and militants for the peaceful conduct of polls in the state. "I want to say this on record and I have told this to the Prime Minister (also) that we must credit Hurriyat, Pakistan, militant outfits for the conduct of assembly elections," Sayeed said at his maiden news conference as CM on March 1. "People from across the border made the atmosphere

¹⁰² "Philippines To Buy 3 New Spanish Transport Planes," *Defence News*, March 15, 2015, at <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/international/asia-pacific/2015/03/15/philippines-buy-three-new-spanish-transport-planes/24809007/>

¹⁰³ "China Sends Fighter Jets to Myanmar Border After Bomb Kills Four," *Defence News*, March 14, 2015, at <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/2015/03/14/china-sends-fighter-jets-to-myanmar-border-after-bomb-kills-four/24760827/>

conducive,” added Sayeed. Mufti Sayeed’s statement drew very strong response from the opposition parties in the state.¹⁰⁴

Hardline Hurriyat Conference leader Masarat Alam, who organised the anti-India protests of 2010 in the Valley that saw the death of 112 people, was freed from a Baramulla jail on March 7. This came two days after Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed asked the state police chief to initiate the process of releasing political prisoners against whom there were no criminal charges. Masarat, who was in detention under the Public Safety Act (PSA) since October 2010, is the first top separatist leader to be released by the new government. It came despite voices of protest in main coalition partner.¹⁰⁵ Reacting strongly to the release of Masarat Alam, the BJP said the decision was anti-national, unacceptable and detrimental to the coalition.¹⁰⁶

A “robust” counter-infiltration grid along the Indo-Pak border has helped in bringing down intrusion into the country significantly, state’s Director General of Police (DGP) K Rajendra Kumar said on March 7. “And this year also, we have seen a good amount of successes so far. People are coming forward with actionable intelligence and as a result of this, there hasn’t been any collateral damage,” Kumar claimed. On the concern about the youth joining militant groups, the DGP said, “We are identifying all the causes that lead our youth to take the wrong path and we will ensure that they get blocked”.¹⁰⁷

Northeast India

(March 2-8, 2015)

- **Centre seeks detail report from Assam over encroachment on the reserved forests; Two injured in Meghalaya bomb attack; Security forces busted NSCN (IM) camp in Assam; Nagaland: Mob drags out alleged rape accused from Dimapur jail, thrashes him to death.**

Concerned over the reports of encroachment on the reserve forests posing a threat to the law and order situation in Assam, the Centre has sought a detailed report from the State Government on the issue. The Centre has also expressed concern over the encroachment on the tribal belts and blocks in the State. Highly placed sources in the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) told *The Assam Tribune* that large-scale encroachment on the reserved forests of the State has become a matter of serious concern as the militant groups have taken advantage of the situation. The sources said

¹⁰⁴ Hussain, Masood, “Mufti Mohammad Sayeed Praises Pakistan On Day One as J&K CM; Omar Abdullah asks BJP to explain”, *The Economic Times*, March 2, 2015 at <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/mufti-mohammad-sayeed-praises-pakistan-on-day-one-as-jk-cm-omar-abdullah-asks-bjp-to-explain/articleshow/46424733.cms>

¹⁰⁵ Sharma, Arun and Masood, Bashaarat, “After Mufti Sayeed Nudge, Hurriyat Hardliner Masarat Alam, Who Organised 2010 Unrest Freed From Jail”, *The Indian Express*, March 8, 2015 at <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/mufti-govt-starts-process-for-hurriyat-hardliner-masarat-alam-release-from-jail/>

¹⁰⁶ Rafiq, Zahid, “Separatist Leader Masarat Alam Freed From J&K prison”, *The Hindu*, March 8, 2015 at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/separatist-leader-masarat-alam-freed-from-jk-prison/article6969677.ece>

¹⁰⁷ ““Cross-Border Infiltration Has Come Down In J&K””, *Kashmir Images*, March 8, 2015 at <http://www.dailykashmirimages.com/news-%E2%80%98cross-border-infiltration-has-come-down-in-jk-74036.aspx>

that the Home Ministry has already sought a detailed report on it from the State Government. The future course of action would be decided only after receiving the report. The Centre may also go for a thorough probe into the encroachments.¹⁰⁸

Suspected militants hurled a crude bomb at a remote petrol pump station in Shallang, West Khasi Hills district on March 2 injuring two persons. SP, West Khasi Hills, Sylvester Nongtynger said that although no militant group has claimed responsibility for the attack it is suspected that it is the handiwork of either Garo National Liberation Army or A'chik Matgrik Elite.¹⁰⁹

Troops of Assam Rifles on March 3 busted an NSCN (IM) camp at Bamsikilwa in Peren district of Assam. According to a defence release, troops of 18 Assam Rifles conducted the search operation on February 27 and detected a temporary camp of the outfit deep inside a reserve forest in general area on the Barail Mountain Range. Some incriminating documents revealing important information have also been recovered during the operation. "It becomes palpable that the insurgent group continues to conduct movement and activities in complete violation of the Ceasefire Ground Rules," the release stated.¹¹⁰

A 4,000-strong mob thrashed a 35-year-old alleged rapist to death after dragging him out of a high security jail in Nagaland's Dimapur town on March 5. The slain, Syed Farid Khan, was suspected to be an illegal Bangladeshi migrant. He was paraded naked before he was beaten to death. Khan, a second-hand car dealer, had allegedly raped a 20-year-old Naga woman on February 23. He was arrested two days later and sent in judicial custody. The mob torched at least 10 vehicles, forcing authorities to clamp curfew in Dimapur. District magistrate Wezope Kenye said police resorted to aerial firing and tear gas shelling to disperse the mob, but they managed to pull Khan out from jail.¹¹¹

Left-wing Extremism

(March 2-8, 2015)

- **Candidates with 'Maoist links' sweep Bastar polls; Govt's Welfare Measures Take a Toll on Maoists; Saranda template for 10 Maoist strongholds; Security forces nab Maoist sub-zonal commander; 9 Maoists Give up Arms in Koraput.**

Voters in Bastar villages have elected their representatives-Maoist-supported panch and sarpanch. Of 22,416 panch elected by the villagers recently in seven districts of Bastar region, nearly 50 per

¹⁰⁸ Choudhury, R Dutta, "Centre Seeks Detailed Report From State", *The Assam Tribune*, March 2, 2015 at <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=mar0215/at050>

¹⁰⁹ "2 Injured In Meghalaya Bomb Attack", *The Assam Tribune*, March 3, 2015 at <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=mar0315/oth056>

¹¹⁰ "NSCN (IM) Camp In Peren Busted", *The Assam Tribune*, March 4, 2015 at <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=mar0415/oth054>

¹¹¹ "Mob Drags Alleged Rapist Out Of Jail In Nagaland, Thrashes Him To Death", *The Times of India*, March 6, 2015 at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Mob-drags-alleged-rapist-out-of-jail-in-Nagaland-thrashes-him-to-death/articleshow/46471326.cms>

cent or 11,098 candidates won unopposed. Besides, 212 sarpanch also won unopposed. At least 90 per cent of them, the Chhattisgarh police said, either have links with Maoists or were supported by the rebels. Several among 1,628 gram panchayats in Bastar would now witness these panch directing and monitoring various government schemes costing at least Rs 1,000 crore annually. Maoists have always acknowledged receiving funds through commissions from such schemes in Bastar.¹¹²

Rattled by the positive impact of government's welfare measures including subsidized ration, MNREGA, land reforms, rural banks and construction of roads, the Maoist leadership has asked the various state committees to carry out a field survey to assess the impact of welfare programmes on the ground. "In this regard, Eastern Regional Bureau of CPI (Maoist), which supervises activities in Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Assam, Eastern Uttar Pradesh and North Chhattisgarh, has asked various state committees to carry out a detailed field study in villages and circulated a 19-column Performa to be filled during the survey," a recent Intelligence Bureau (IB) report to the PMO said. For the field survey, the ultras have asked the cadre to study how the welfare schemes are affecting the 'revolution' and accordingly the group is planning a suitable modification of its tactics. "Lamenting the lack of maturity on the part of some its senior leaders, who could not sense the changing ground realities, the outfit asserted that the need of the hour is a comprehensive survey of the situation in the rural areas from a Marxist perspective," the IB dossier further stated.¹¹³

The Saranda model of development will be replicated in 10 other Naxalite strongholds in the BJP-led Jharkhand state. Reportedly, Chief secretary Rajiv Gauba, who had recently been to Saranda in West Singhbhum, which was once the so-called eastern regional headquarters of the CPI (Maoist), has already held meetings with top CRPF officers to replicate the Saranda Development Plan (SDP) in specifically chosen vulnerable areas. A brainchild of former Union rural development minister Jairam Ramesh, the Rs 249-crore, multi-pronged SDP gave equal weight to security and development in rebel and "cleansed" areas.¹¹⁴

In a joint raid, East Champaran police and CRPF arrested CPI (Maoist) sub-zonal commander of north Bihar Munchun Sah from his hideout at Nakardewa village under Rajepur police station area on March 7. East Champaran ASP (operations) Rajiv Kumar said the police recovered a pistol, live cartridges, four cell phones, letters for levy and Maoist literatures from his possession. He has admitted his involvement in torching of four diesel tankers of a goods train near Pipra station in East Champaran in 2012 besides other incidents of firings, arson and loot in Saran, Muzaffarpur, Sheohar, Sitamarhi and East and West Champaran districts. According to police sources, Munchun is an expert in bomb making and arm operation in his organization. Munchun was also involved

¹¹² Bhardwaj, Ashutosh, "Rs 1,000 Cr In Hands Of 'Naxal-Backed' Panch, Officials Fear Misuse", *The Indian Express*, March 2, 2015 at <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/rs-1000-cr-in-hands-of-naxal-backed-panch-officials-fear-misuse/>

¹¹³ Yadav, Yatish, "Govt's Welfare Measures Take a Toll on Maoists", *The New Indian Express*, March 7, 2015 at <http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/Govt%E2%80%99s-Welfare-Measures-Take-a-Toll-on-Maoists/2015/03/07/article2701855.ece>

¹¹⁴ Gupta, Amit, "Saranda Template For 10 Maoist Hubs", *The Telegraph*, March 5, 2014 at http://www.telegraphindia.com/1150305/jsp/frontpage/story_7025.jsp#.VQhgENKUewg

in arson and loot at petrol pump at Aurai in Muzaffarpur, attack and firing at base camps of road construction companies at Motipur and Madhopur-Hazari in Muzaffarpur.¹¹⁵

At least nine armed Maoists of the Koraput division of Andhra-Odisha Border Special Zonal Committee surrendered before the police at the district headquarters office on March 7. Police said the ultras decided to give up arms because they were disillusioned with the ideologies of left wing extremists. Prior to joining the CPI (Maoist) outfit, they were members of the Chasi Mulia Adivasi Sangh at Narayanpatna.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Pandey, Chandra Bhusan, "Maoist Sub-Zonal Commander Held", *The Times of India*, March 8, 2015 at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/Maoist-sub-zonal-commander-held/articleshow/46495734.cms>

¹¹⁶ "9 Maoists Give Up Arms", *The New Indian Express*, March 8, 2015 at <http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/odisha/9-Maoists-Give-up-Arms/2015/03/08/article2703535.ece>