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# Strategic Digest

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## Dubai Air Show 2019

The biennial Dubai Air Show 2019, which had humble beginnings in 1986, was held at the Dubai International Airport from 17 to 21 November. 1288 companies participated including all aviation majors and 100 new exhibitors. 160 civil and military aircraft were displayed at the show in both flying and static displays. Commercial deals worth US\$ 54.5 billion were concluded during the show, with the most noteworthy being by the United Arab Emirates for buying more SAAB GlobalEye ISR aircraft and upgrading its Mirage-2000s and F-16s.



Among the aircraft on display were the Boeing KC-46 mid-air refueller, the Kazan Mi-38 and VRT-500 twin rotor light helicopters (civil), Chengdu Aircraft Corporation's J-10C (export variant revealed for the first time), and the C-390 Millennium by Brazil's Embraer. Latest

civil and military aviation technologies were also at display including drones, counter-drone systems, air traffic systems, etc.

With the rapid spread of aviation globally and rapid advancement in related technologies, air shows have become attractive events for both technology developers and customers. Indian aviation majors, industry and military need to be much more involved in these to take advantage of the best of advances in aviation.

## Turkey Completes Construction of Military Base in Qatar

On 25 November, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Doha to co-chair the fifth meeting of the Turkey-Qatar High Strategic Committee. Addressing the media, Erdoğan announced the completion of the Turkish military base in Doha, which has been named after the early Islamic commander Khalid Bin Walid, and its expected inauguration in the autumn of 2020.



Source: The Peninsula (Qatar)

The Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) first deployed soldiers in Qatar in late 2015 under a bilateral agreement signed in December 2014. Turkey and Qatar decided to increase the number of Turkish troops in the aftermath of the June 2017 boycott of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain. In December 2017, the unit was named Qatar-Turkey Combined Joint Force Command (CJFC). With a strength of nearly 5,000 troops, the

command is currently located in Tariq Bin Ziyad Military Base in Doha.

Turkish media sources had reported in October 2019 that the command will be expanded to include an air base and a Special Forces unit. Turkey has also emerged as a leading defence supplier to Qatar after signing a number of deals in 2018 worth around US\$ 800 million including for tanks, drones, combat vehicles, naval training ships, armoured vehicles etc. Cooperation between the Turkish and Qatari militaries has also intensified since late 2017 including through joint naval training, live-fire field exercises, border security exercises and joint air force drills that saw the participation of Turkish F-16s fighter aircraft. These developments would be discomfiting to Saudi Arabia, which Qatar has defied during the last few years on the question of backing Islamist groups. Turkey's cultivation of Qatar is driven by its competition with Saudi Arabia for leadership in the Islamic world.

### **European Union to Operate Gulf Maritime Security Mission from French Base in Abu Dhabi**

The European Union will be opening its Maritime Security Mission Headquarters for the Gulf at the French Base known as 'Peace Camp' in Abu Dhabi from early 2020. To be run by 10 to 15 personnel, the mission, according to French Defence Minister Florence Parly, is to "contribute to making maritime navigation in the Gulf as safe as possible".

The initiative comes in the wake of a number of attacks on oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz during the past year. With the US looking at gradual disengagement from the region, France has been stepping up its commitment by setting up three bases in the UAE and sending radar equipment to Saudi Arabia after the September 2019 attacks on the latter's oil facilities.



Source: [marinebuzz.com](http://marinebuzz.com)

Paris anticipates that around 10 European partners will join the initiative. European interests in the Gulf region are presently at variance with those of America's over the Trump administration's policy of exerting maximum pressure on Iran. The envisaged European-led naval mission will, therefore, operate independently of the US-led naval mission in the region, although it will coordinate closely with the latter.

### **NATO Recognises Space as an Operational Domain in Warfare**

As per the London Declaration issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in London on 3-4 December 2019, NATO has formally recognised space as the fifth operational domain in warfare (others are land, sea, air, and cyberspace).



Source: The Telegraph, United Kingdom

The Alliance considers strategic investments in the space domain as important to keep members safe, enable NATO to tackle various other security challenges, and uphold international law. There is also a view that this move would help other alliance members to assure the United States that NATO can serve as a key ally in deterring a militarily assertive China, which, along with Russia, has been investing in the development of counter-space capabilities. China, as indicated in its 2015 Defence White Paper, views outer space as a zone of strategic competition. It has not, however, elevated space into a separate domain of warfare, with the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) continuing to be responsible for space.

NATO thinking on space warfare needs to be viewed against the backdrop of recent US policy pronouncements on outer space. In March 2018, President Donald Trump had announced that the new US national strategy for space recognizes that space is a warfighting domain that needs to be guarded by a separate Space Force. Because of lack of congressional support, progress has been slow. On 29 August 2019, Trump had unveiled a new Space Command (SPACECOM), the Department of Defence's 11th unified combatant command. SPACECOM is viewed as a precursor to the emergence of a Space Force as the sixth branch of the US military.

### Russia Returns to the Indian Ocean

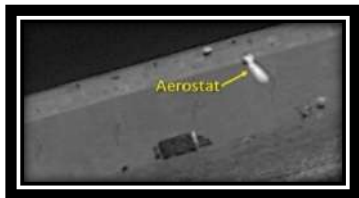
Russia, marginal to the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean after the collapse of the Soviet Union, is re-joining the major power scrum in the contested littoral. Three recent events highlight Russia's growing strategic interest in the Indian Ocean.



On 19 November, *Perekop*, a training vessel of the Russian Navy, arrived at Hambantota port in Sri Lanka. In October 2019, two Russian long-distance "Black Jack" nuclear bombers flew to South Africa, the first time these aircraft have been deployed to Africa. Third, the Russian and Chinese navies conducted a trilateral naval exercise with South Africa from 25 to 30 November in the strategic waters off the Cape of Good Hope. Termed *Mosi*, this is the first joint exercise by the three countries, which are India's partners in BRICS along with Brazil. The exercise reflects the growing weight of China and Russia in South Africa's security calculus and Pretoria's yawning political distance from the West. Meanwhile, Iran has said that it plans to hold joint naval drills with Russia and China in the turbulent waters of the Persian Gulf. Taken together, these developments have a bearing on India's regional strategy. A

China-Russia tandem in the Indian Ocean is not in India's interests. India should have been the natural first choice as partner for Russia and South Africa in the Indian Ocean, not China.

### The Emerging China-Vietnam-United States Triangle



China has reportedly deployed a Zeppelin-like airship to Mischief Reef in the South China Sea. The aircraft, technically known as an aerostat, appears to be intended to boost China's reconnaissance capabilities in the disputed Spratly Islands. The use of aerostats provides China with continuous situational awareness in this resource-rich region. Further, the aerostat adds to ground- and ship-based radar and reconnaissance flights by China to monitor and seek to control military activity in the area by other countries, especially the United States.



US Defense Secretary Mark Esper disclosed that the United States will provide Vietnam with a second Hamilton class coast guard cutter. The US supplied the first cutter of the same class two years ago. Earlier this year, in April 2019, the US delivered six patrol boats to Vietnam's Coast Guard. These were in addition to another 12 "Metal Shark" patrol boats that it had provided to Vietnam in the last two years. The US aim is to boost Vietnam's ability to patrol the South China Sea, assert its sovereignty and deter China amid contending maritime claims and resulting tensions with China.

Vietnam appears to be exploring the option of initiating legal action in its maritime dispute with China in the South China Sea. To recall, the Philippines had approached the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague which ruled in July 2016 that China had no legal basis to claim "historic rights" to resources in the waters of the South China Sea falling within its nine-dash line. Although China had dismissed the Court's ruling as "null and void" without "binding force", another such ruling would further undermine the legitimacy of China's extraordinary maritime claims and military actions aimed at asserting such claims.

### Vietnam's 2019 Defence White Paper

Vietnam has published its latest Defence White Paper, the fourth since 1998, which re-emphasises Vietnam's continued adherence to its traditional Three Nos policy. The three Nos are: Vietnam will not compromise on its national sovereignty, nor join a military alliance with another country or allow military bases on its soil, nor take sides against another. In addition to these traditional Nos, the latest edition of the Defence White Paper specifies a fourth 'No' as well, namely, Vietnam will not use force or the threat of force in its international

interactions. This policy reflects Vietnam's adherence to international norms of conduct and policy process during peace times. This clearly means that Vietnam will not take sides against China in the emerging dynamics of the Indo-Pacific, perhaps on account of its own complex economic ties and historical friction with China. It seeks to increase its own national capacities to defend its sovereignty.

### **The Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act Becomes US Law**

On 27 November 2019, President Donald Trump signed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, which unambiguously supports the cause of democracy in Hong Kong.



Source: rfi.fr

The legislation, earlier passed by an overwhelming majority in the House of Representatives and Senate, has significant implications for Sino-US relations. Under the terms of the Act, the United States is committed to supporting the pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong and impose sanctions on Chinese and Hong Kong officials responsible for human rights abuses in the

territory. Further, the Act requires the State Department to review every year the special autonomous status granted to Hong Kong for the conduct of trading relations. China's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office (HKMAO) has castigated the Act as interference in internal Chinese affairs and a violation of international law and norms. In retaliation, China has banned US military visits to Hong Kong, and imposed sanctions on several American NGOs such as the National Endowment for Democracy which it accuses of instigating and sustaining the protests in Hong Kong by providing financial, logistic, organisational and training support.

In a further escalation of the human rights issue, the US House of Representatives passed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act on 3 December 2019 in the wake of China's alleged detention of up to two million Uyghurs in "re-education" camps in Xinjiang. It proposes, among other measures, sanctions on senior Chinese officials responsible for human rights violations in Xinjiang and restrictions on export of certain items. China has criticised this Act. China claims that the key issue in Xinjiang is terrorism and separatism.

Another piece of legislation that may roil China-US relations is the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act of 2019. After passing the bill on 31 October 2019, the Senate had referred it to the Committee on Foreign Affairs for finalisation before sending it to the president for enactment into law. The Act requires the United States to support Taiwan in strengthening its diplomatic ties and official partnerships with countries in the Indo-Pacific and

elsewhere, increase American economic, security and diplomatic engagement with countries strengthening relations with Taiwan, and decrease such engagement with states downgrading their ties with, and thereby undermining, Taiwan. If signed into law by the US President, this Act will introduce qualitative changes to US-Taiwan relations and to the US interpretation of its One China policy. Instead of allowing China and Taiwan to find a mutually acceptable solution, the law will compel the United States to work with Taiwan in dealing with China. Together, the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act, and the TAIPEI Act, highlight the fundamental correction being made to the Nixon-Kissinger understanding on China that shaped US-China relations since the 1970s.