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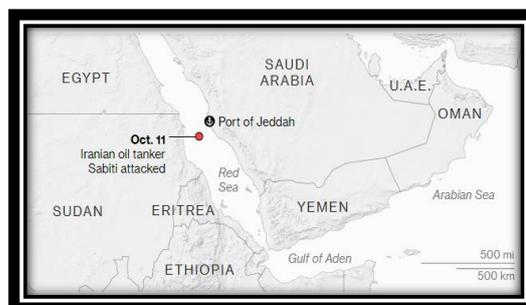
On 9 October 2019, Turkey launched a unilateral military offensive in northeast Syria. Its aim is to create a buffer zone extending up to 30 km deep in Syrian territory for settling some 2 to 3.5 million Syrian refugees who are currently living in Turkey as well as to push back Kurdish Syrian Defence Forces (SDF) from the border. Turkish forces have named the incursion ‘Operation Peace Spring’. But international observers say the offensive has caused a humanitarian crisis, with the United Nations reporting that about 130,000 people have already been forced to leave their homes and up to 400,000 people might be displaced. Turkey has also been charged with attempting ‘demographic engineering’ by planning to implant non-Kurdish refugees as a wedge within a Kurdish-dominated population which lives contiguously across the Syria-Turkey border.

Although the United States has imposed sanctions on Turkish ministries and officials in response to the “incursion”, it is widely believed that President Trump’s sudden decision on 7 August to withdraw US forces from northeast Syria precipitated the crisis as, on that very day, US and Turkish officials announced a deal to establish the so-called “safe zone”. For their part, European Union states have imposed an arms embargo on Turkey, while the Arab League, Russia, Iran, China, Israel, the United Kingdom and India have condemned the ‘offensive’ as an irresponsible destabilizing action.

On 18 October, Turkey agreed with the US to put a five-day halt to its ongoing operation in lieu of America facilitating the withdrawal of SDF fighters from the so-called ‘safe zone’. The move has raised questions on whether the deal amounted to US capitulation to Turkish demands. It is feared that the weakening of SDF could help ISIS resurge in Syria, as the former was deemed the terror group’s nemesis in recent years.

Iranian Oil Tanker Attacked in Red Sea

On 11 October 2019, the oil tanker Sabiti, owned by the National Iranian Tanker Company, was hit by two separate explosions while transiting the Red sea *en route* to Iran. The explosions took place at 0200 and 0220 GMT, about 60 miles from the Saudi Port of Jeddah. Though oil leakage from the tanker was initially reported, the ship has since continued its voyage to Iran.



Media reports have said that the attack was carried out either by a missile or a rocket. A spokesman for the Iranian government described the attack as “cowardly” but refused to elaborate on the incident or apportion blame, saying that the issue is being investigated.



Coincidentally, on 30 April 2019, another Iranian oil tanker *Happiness I*

developed a leak in its engine room leading to loss of control at approximately the same location, 70 miles southwest of Jeddah port. Its 26-man crew was rescued by the Saudi Coast Guard and the ship was brought to Jeddah port’s anchorage for repair. However, due to a dispute over the terms of payment for repairs, the ship was only released on 20 July 2019, after diplomatic intervention by Oman and Switzerland.

Preliminary analysis of the *Sabiti* incident indicates that the ship was transiting back to Iran through the busy shipping route of the Red Sea, after having discharged its crude in Syria. A missile attack seems unlikely considering the minimal extent of damage. This, along with the fact that the ship was underway within a short time, appears to rule out the use of missiles in the attack.



This photo released by the official news agency of the Iranian oil ministry, SHANA, shows the scene of damage caused by two missiles that allegedly struck the Iranian oil tanker Sabiti, at the Red Sea. (AP)

Saudi Arabia May Deploy Anti-Drone System

Consequent to the attacks on two of its key oil processing facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais by drones and cruise missiles on 14 September 2019, Saudi Arabia is in consultation with the United States to deploy anti-drone defences around its oil facilities.

The system being considered for deployment is the Raytheon made ‘Phaser’ system. This is a microwave-based weapon, firing from a disc resembling a giant satellite dish atop a container containing the control electronics. The high-powered microwave cannon emits radio frequencies in a conical beam that disrupts or destroys drone circuits with a burst of overwhelming energy.



The system is limited to using microwaves to disable Class One and Class Two drones, that is, those that are less than 55 pounds and fly at altitudes of 1,200 to 3,500 feet and at speeds between 100 and 200 knots.

Microwave weapons have traditionally been hampered by the fact that they do not discriminate targets—bathing an area with them could damage friendly hardware along with those of the adversary. But with attacks involving swarms of small UAVs becoming popular, that vice has become a virtue since PHASER can attack multiple targets simultaneously and does not run out of ammunition.

India Signs MoU on Defence with Comoros

During the state visit of Vice President M. Venkaiah Naidu, India and Comoros signed six MoUs, one of which pertained to defence cooperation. In an effort to consolidate maritime cooperation with Comoros and enhance its maritime capabilities, India announced a Line of Credit of USD 20 million as well as a grant of USD 2 million for the former's procurement of interceptor boats. India's cooperation with Comoros is part of a growing outreach in the Indian Ocean Region that includes Mauritius, Seychelles and Madagascar.

India to Establish Coastal Radar Network in Bangladesh

During her visit to New Delhi to participate in the meeting of the World Economic Forum, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina met Prime Minister Narendra Modi and signed several Memoranda of Understanding (MoU). One significant MoU signed by the two leaders related to India establishing a coastal radar system in Bangladesh.

A Coastal Surveillance Radar System (CSRS) is an integrated chain of Automatic Identification System (AIS) sensors and radars that are placed along a country's coast line. The combined feed of all these systems is given to a control room, whose output is an integrated maritime domain awareness (MDA) picture of the near coast. This obviates the need for ships to carry out continuous patrols and instead limit themselves to investigate ships/boats deemed suspicious by the CSRS control centre.

India has installed CSRS networks for Mauritius, Seychelles and an AIS system for Sri Lanka. It is also in the process of completing a CSRS system for Maldives, and will be installing one for Myanmar. The feeds of all these systems are fused at the Information Fusion System - Indian Ocean Region (IFC-OR) at Gurugram to provide comprehensive MDA of the seas around India.

Russia Emerges as New Partner for ASEAN Countries in South China Sea

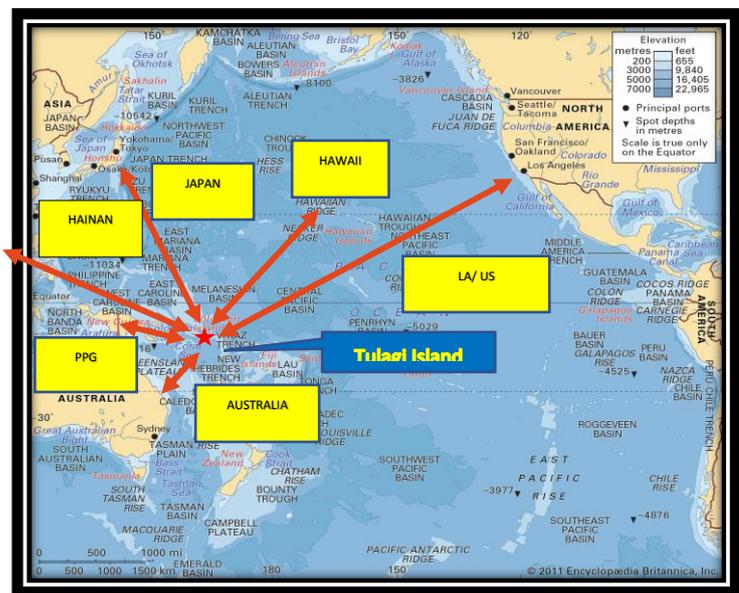
ASEAN countries have found a new partner in Russia. The Philippines has contracted Russia’s Rosneft to explore for oil and gas in the West Philippine Sea, which falls within China’s 9-dash claim line in the South China Sea. Some months ago, Vietnam had agreed to Rosneft conducting explorations for oil and gas in waters it claims but disputed by China. This roping in of Russia appears to have emerged as a tactic to enable oil and gas exploration without at the same time antagonising China.

China to ‘Lease’ Tulagi Island in the Solomons

Reports indicate that state-owned China Sam Group Company has signed a renewable 75-year lease for Tulagi Island with the government of the Solomon Islands. This came a day after China established diplomatic relations with the Solomon Islands on 22 September 2019.

Tulagi, an island 3.4 km by 800 metres), has a population of 1200 and is about 6300 km from China and 5700 km from Hawaii (approximate distances given in map opposite). The island was the South Pacific headquarters for the United Kingdom and a former Japanese naval base during World War II. It has a deep water sheltered anchorage, which could grow over time into a permanent strategic facility.

A Chinese military installation on the island would carry strategic and symbolic significance. Some officials believe that China’s efforts in the region echo the period before and during World War II when Japan wrested control of these islands including Tulagi, which were, subsequently regained by American and Australian troops in bloody fighting waged as part of the Battle of the Guadal



Canal. Such a Chinese move would also potentially negate the geographic remoteness that provides Australia and New Zealand with a valuable defence buffer.

China's Defence Diplomacy in Full Swing

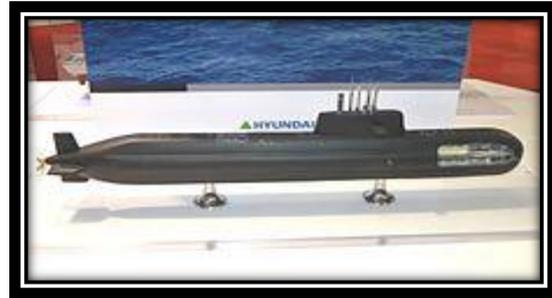
China's defence diplomacy was in full swing during October 2019. From 10 to 20 October, the Chinese Army conducted a 10-day joint training exercise with its Australian counterpart in Hainan. The theme of the exercise, named Panda-Kangaroo 2019, was "cooperation, trust and exchange". A participant from the Chinese side portrayed the exercise as "an opportunity to keep improving the mechanism, expanding the content and raising the level of the training, and further enhancing the quality of practical cooperation" between the two armies. The exercise comes amidst a souring of political relations between China and Australia as well as against the backdrop of intensifying cooperation among the Quad countries. China appears keen to improve its defence relationship with Australia for which purpose it had signed an MoU earlier this year.

Another military exercise that China participated in during the month was the joint counter-terrorism drill with Kazakhstan called Fox Hunt 2019. Held at a training base in Ust-Kamenogorsk, Kazakhstan, the exercise between the Special Forces of the two countries focused on activities such as reconnaissance, night ambush and strike with a view to improving their capabilities in joint counter-terrorism operations. From the Chinese side, the PLA 76th Group Army participated in the drill. China and Kazakhstan are part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and China's counter-terrorism cooperation with SCO members has grown significantly during the past few years.

The third event of note during the month was the International Military Sports Council (IMSC) or *Conseil International Du Sport Militaire* (CISM)'s World Military Games that China organised in Wuhan from 18-to-27 October 2019. Some 109 countries including India are participating in these games, the theme of which is "Military Glory and Peace". Inaugurating the games, President Xi Jinping portrayed the Chinese military as a source of peace and stability with the essential mission of stopping violence. His message comes in the context of China's accelerated military modernisation and increasing concerns about Chinese military power in the neighbourhood. The World Military Games provides China an opportunity to expand military ties and forge cooperation with other countries, thus blunting concerns about Chinese military power.

South Korea Considering Induction of Nuclear Submarines

In a report submitted to South Korea's National Assembly, the Republic of Korea Navy has stated that it has established a task force headed by a commander-level official to examine the procurement of nuclear-powered submarines in the long term. This may be the first time that South Korea has publicly spoken of acquiring nuclear submarines.



KSS III Model

The plan to build nuclear submarines was first mooted in 2003 as part of the long-term military build-up programme. But the project was dropped the very next year following its disclosure in the media. More recently, in 2017, the Ministry of National Defense carried out research on the matter through private entities.

Speculation is rife that South Korea could develop its 3,700-ton *Dosan Changho* (KSS III) class submarine as a nuclear-powered one. Seoul plans to build this indigenous submarine by 2031 at a cost of between US\$ 700 million to \$1 billion each. The South Korean Navy presently operates nine each of the German Type-209 and Type-214 submarines.

The KS III is presently designed to carry the vertically launched, Hyunmoo-3C land attack cruise missile with a range of 1500 km. However, in 2016, South Korean military officials announced that the missile would also be capable of launching submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). A South Korean SLBM is likely to be a derivative of the land-based Hyunmoo-2B or C ballistic missile, which has a range of 800 km and carries a warhead with a weight of between 1,000 and 2,200 pounds.