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# WEST ASIA DIGEST

*Monthly Compilation of News Items from West Asia*

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## **Iran and China sign 25-year cooperation agreement**

Iran and China signed a 25-year cooperation agreement to further deepen their engagements during the visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Tehran. Details of the deal were not disclosed but it is reported that the agreement focuses on cooperation in areas such as energy, trade, banking, telecommunication, infrastructure, and military as well as maritime projects – further boosting Iran’s role in China’s Belt and Road initiative. The agreement is likely to strengthen Iran-China relations as it will attract more Chinese investments to Iran. Strategically, China and Iran strengthening cooperation in key areas sends a clear message to the US at a time when the latter is mulling over options to engaging Iran over the nuclear deal.

## **Russian Foreign Minister visits Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar**

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar. In Riyadh Lavrov met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and discussed the areas of joint cooperation and ways to further develop them in various fields. The two countries also discussed efforts to enhance security and stability in a number of regional and international developments while focusing on the issues of common concern. During his visit to the UAE, Lavrov told his counterpart that it was an opportune time for both countries to enhance their cooperation in the economic, high-tech and security levels. He emphasised that Iran issue needs to be dealt separately and other issues of concern should not be clubbed irrespective of their gravity. Lavrov stated that Russia welcomes the US drive towards rejoining

2015 nuclear accord with Tehran. He also said that Russia is willing to work with the UAE to help solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In Doha, Lavrov met with the Qatari Amir Sheikh Tamim and discussed ways to enhance bilateral ties in economy, investment, industry and energy. Both the leaders also focused on the prominent regional and international developments.

## **UN, US, Russia and EU met virtually to discuss Israel-Palestine peace talks**

To discuss ways to bring the long-stalled Israel-Palestinian peace talks on track, the UN, US, Russia and the European Union met virtually on March 23, 2021. During the meeting, all the four mediators, known as the Quartet, were of the opinion that meaningful negotiations should be initiated to reach a two-state solution. The meeting also discussed various substantial steps to advance “freedom, security and prosperity for Palestinians and Israelis”. India appreciated the efforts of the Quartet and other countries to resume the direct negotiations between Israel and Palestine and has expressed willingness to contribute constructively towards long-lasting peace between the two parties.

## **No clear mandate in 24th Knesset elections in Israel**

Israel’s 24<sup>th</sup> Knesset elections has ended with inconclusive results. To be able to form the government any party with or without its allies should secure 61 seats in the Knesset. While Benjamin Netanyahu led Likud secured the highest number of seats in this election, pro-Netanyahu coalition won 52 seats. On the other hand, the Anti-Netanyahu coalition secured 57 Seats, thus rendering the small parties such as Yamina and Ra’am important in forming a government as a coalition. Furthermore, the dissatisfaction of the Israeli populace

with Netanyahu resulted in Likud securing 30 seats this time as against 36 in the last election. The emergence of Gideon Sa'ar's New Hope Party, a breakaway of Likud, has also led to a decline in Likud's seats.

### **Libya's eastern government hands power to the new national interim government**

The eastern government in Libya based in Tobruk that has been controlling eastern Libya during the country's civil war has handed power over to the new interim national unity government called as Government of National Unity (GNU) led by Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah. The new interim government has now been tasked with steering the country through an election in December 2021.

### **Iran reveals underground missile city**

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) unveiled a 'missile city' armed with cruise and ballistic weapons. Inside the underground facility, IRGC has stored advanced munitions including scores of missiles lined up along concrete walls. The IRGC officials stated that the missile city hosts electronic warfare equipment including radar, monitoring devices, simulation and disruption systems. IRGC claims that the new missiles and launch equipment had been designed and manufactured by Iran's defense ministry, military companies and IRGC naval research organisation.

### **Jordan signs defence agreement with US**

Jordan has signed a defence agreement with the US that permits free entry to US forces, aircrafts and military vehicles in the kingdom's territory. Jordanian Foreign Minister, Ayman Safadi stated in the parliament that the agreement was "the fruit

of long negotiations". At the same time, he clarified that the agreement does not permit the US forces to carry out combat actions within the kingdom, but limits it to training and counter-terror cooperation and does not affect the kingdom's sovereignty in any form. He further underlined that "the agreement aims to frame defence cooperation and reinforce US' support for defence programs and the kingdom's security and stability through military training and equipment".

### **Strategic defence agreement signed between EDGE and IAI**

EDGE, the UAE's advanced technology group for defence and Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI), the Israel's major aerospace and aviation manufacturer agreed on an MoU to develop an advanced Counter-Unmanned Aircraft System (C-UAS) tailored to the UAE market. EDGE is leveraging its subsidiary, SIGN4L, a leading provider of electronic warfare services and solutions for national security, to collaborate with the IAI. IAI's proven C-UAS solutions are applied around the world to detect, identify and intercept a broad range of threats. It comprises advanced 3D radar, COMINT (communications intelligence), and Electro-Optic technologies that are integrated into a unified command and the control system, and is fully autonomous requiring no human intervention. It applies a series of countermeasures, ranging from soft-kill solutions such as spoofing and jamming, to hard-kill capabilities such as lasers and electromagnetic pulses, based on the level of threat and targeted operating environment. The agreement is in line with the Abraham Accords and the UAE's newly-established cooperation with Israel and serves as a stepping-stone for further business and strategic alliances between the two countries.

### **Saudi Arabia proposes ceasefire on Yemen conflict**

Saudi Arabia has proposed a new peace initiative to end the war in Yemen. The proposal includes, among others, a comprehensive nation-wide ceasefire under the UN supervision, to reopen Sanaa International Airport and to resume the process of political consultation between the government and the Houthis to reach a political solution to the conflict. Riyadh appeals the Hadi government and the Houthis to accept the initiative as it will be monitored and implemented under the supervision of the UN. The Hadi government has welcomed the Saudi peace initiative, while the Houthis have rejected the proposal.

### **Indian Air Force participated in Exercise Desert Flag VI**

Indian Air Force participated for the first time in the Exercise Desert Flag VI – a large force employment warfare exercise hosted by the UAE Air Force. France, the US, UAE, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Bahrain also participated in the Exercise held at the Al Dhafra airbase in UAE. IAF participated with six Su-30 MKI, two C-17 and one IL-78 tanker aircraft. The military transport aircraft C-17 Globemaster provided support for the induction and de-induction of the IAF contingent. The Exercise was aimed at providing operational exposure to the participating forces while training them to undertake simulated air combat operations in a controlled environment.

### **Kuwait Foreign Minister visits India**

Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs of Kuwait, Sheikh Ahmed Nasser Al Mohammad Al Sabah, visited India and met with External Affairs

Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar. Both sides reviewed all aspects of India-Kuwait bilateral relationship explored means to impart dynamism in the traditional and friendly ties between the two countries, discussed the regional developments and agreed to coordinate closely on issues of mutual interest in multilateral forums. India and Kuwait issued a joint statement announcing the establishment of Joint Ministerial Commission that will act as an umbrella for all bilateral institutional engagements. The two countries envisaged establishing joint working groups on trade, investments, defence and security in addition to the existing ones on hydrocarbons, manpower mobility and healthcare. India is one of the largest trading partners of Kuwait and India invites investments from Kuwait in the fields such as energy, infrastructure, food security, healthcare and education.