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(e-Scan 01-15 Jan 2022)

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ENVIRONMENT SCAN: 01-15 JAN 2022

CHINA (Geo-Strat, Geo-Politics & Geo-Economics)

No Breakthrough in 13-Hour China Talks, But Next Meeting Soon

(<https://www.msn.com/en-in/news/other/no-breakthrough-in-13-hour-china-talks-but-next-meet-soon/ar-AASL72A>)

There was no breakthrough in the 14th round of talks, led by the Leh-based 14 Corps commander Lt-General Anindya Sengupta and South Xinjiang military district chief Major General Yang Lin. However, they resolved to hold the next meeting at the earliest.

Comments. Unlike the 13th round on October 10, which had ended in a bitter stalemate with accusations hurled at each other, India and China issued a joint statement this time - a positive development. But like previous joint statements, it was restricted to the usual platitudes about the two sides agreeing to “follow the guidance provided by their state leaders” and maintaining dialogue “to work out a mutually-acceptable resolution of the remaining issues at the earliest”. There were indications that China could agree to the disengagement at PP-15 in the 15th round to be held soon”. But there appeared to be no resolution in sight for the much tougher stand-offs at Demchok and Depsang Plains.

The border talks with the Chinese is a long drawn out process. As long as they are in a favourable advantageous position, they will not budge unless it becomes economically and politically costlier for them to maintain their troops / defences along the LAC. We have to be careful about their construction activities in the region and must respond quickly, as they will continue to strengthen their occupied positions.

China steps up Construction along Disputed Bhutan Border, Satellite Images Show

(<https://www.livemint.com/news/world/china-steps-up-construction-along-disputed-bhutan-border-satellite-images-show-11642043947114.html>)

China has accelerated settlement-building along its disputed border with Bhutan, with more than 200 structures, including two-storey buildings, under construction in six locations, according to satellite image analysis. The images and analysis are supplied by U.S. data analytics firm HawkEye 360, which uses satellites to gather intelligence on ground-level activities.

Construction-related activity in some of the locations along Bhutan's western border has been under way since early 2020, with China initially building tracks and clearing out areas. Images show the work speeded up in 2021. Smaller structures were erected - possibly to house equipment and supplies - followed by the laying of foundations and then the construction of buildings. All six settlements appear to be in territory disputed by China and Bhutan - including a contested tract of roughly 110 square kilometres - with little in the way of resources or native population.

The new construction is 9 to 27km from the Doklam area at the junction of the borders of India, Bhutan and China, where Indian and Chinese troops were locked in standoff for more than two months in 2017.

Comments. The settlements would allow China to better control and monitor far-flung areas, and potentially use them to establish security-focused installations. Bhutan has been negotiating with Beijing for almost four decades to settle their 477-km border. In a step towards resolving their boundary disputes, Bhutan and China signed an agreement in October 2021 on a three-Step roadmap to help speed up talks, at a meeting of Foreign Ministers of both countries held via videoconference, a development that New Delhi said it had "noted". Bhutan and China don't have direct diplomatic relations, and liaise via their embassies in Delhi.

At issue for Bhutan is not just territorial integrity, but also concerns over the potential security implications for India, which is the Himalayan kingdom's main ally and economic partner. China's village building across the claimed Bhutan border appears to be designed to force Bhutan to yield to Chinese demands in their border negotiations, now in their 24th round after 37 years.

The construction suggests that China is bent on resolving its border claims by giving its ambitions concrete form. Control over the remote Doklam plateau would potentially give China greater access to the adjoining "Chicken's Neck" area, a strategic strip of land that connects India to its northeastern region.

Five Chinese Military Planes Enter Taiwan's Air Defence Zone

(<https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/5-chinese-military-planes-enter-taiwan-s-air-defence-zone-101641992094510.html#>)

Four People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) Shenyang J-16 fighter jets and one Shaanxi Y-8 anti-submarine warfare plane flew into the southwest corner of the ADIZ, marking the ninth intrusion this month, according to the country's Ministry of National Defense (MND). In response, Taiwan sent aircraft, issued radio warnings, and deployed air defence missile systems to track the planes.

Comments. A total of 35 Chinese planes have been spotted in Taiwan's identification zone so far this month, including 23 fighter jets and 12 spotter planes. On 11 January, single-seater F-16V fighter aircraft of Taiwan Air Force crashed into the sea during a training exercise. The aircraft had only recently been upgraded to the "V" version, with new weapons systems and avionics.

In late 2020, an F-16 vanished shortly after taking off from the Hualien Air Base on Taiwan's east coast on a routine training mission. Last year, two F-5E fighters, which first entered service in Taiwan in the 1970s, crashed into the sea off the southeast coast after they apparently collided in mid-air during a training mission. Despite various conjectures about conspiracy theories linked to PRC, exact reasons about these crashes have not yet been ascertained.

IOR & SCS (MARITIME)

Philippines Buys Brahmos ASHM from India.

(<https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/philippines-confirms-purchase-of-brahmos-supersonic-missile-system/>)

The Philippines has officially become the first foreign nation to acquire the potent Indian-Russian BrahMos Supersonic Anti-Ship Missile, strengthening its Navy's ability to safeguard its sovereign claims in the South China Sea. The Philippines Ministry of

Defence issued a notice of award to BrahMos Aerospace Pvt Ltd, accepting its proposal to supply the shore-based Anti-Ship Missile system for the price of \$374 million. The Philippines had long expressed interest in purchasing the BrahMos weapons system, developed by BrahMos Aerospace, a joint venture between India and Russia that was set up in India in 1998.

Comments. The BrahMos is the world's fastest supersonic cruise missile. It can be launched from submarines, ships, aircraft, or land platforms, and flies at nearly three times the speed of sound, making it nearly impossible for targets to evade. The purchase of the BrahMos is a groundbreaking acquisition for the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), as they have frequently struggled to defend the country's large maritime borders against Chinese incursions in regions of the South China Sea. Philippines has now joined a small club of Southeast Asian nations who possess a supersonic Anti-Ship Cruise Missile capability. Indonesia has operated the ship-based Russian-origin Yakhont supersonic anti-ship cruise missile since 2011. The purchase has also marked India's advent as the second player in the Southeast Asian supersonic anti-ship missile game, alongside Russia. Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia have also shown interest in purchasing the BrahMos missile system, with upcoming visits of Defence Minister to Vietnam, a deal with Hanoi is likely too.

Made-in-India Aircraft Carrier Vikrant Sets Sail for Third Sea Trials.

(<https://www.onmanorama.com/news/india/2022/01/17/aircraft-carrier-vikrant-completes-third-sea-trials-returns-to-k.html>)

India's first indigenous aircraft carrier (IAC) Vikrant, the largest warship to be built in the country, set sail for crucial sea trials ahead of its scheduled induction into the Indian Navy this year. The latest trials are the third set of trials since August 2021. The construction of indigenous aircraft carrier Vikrant, which was started in 2009, has propelled India into a select group of countries that have the capability to build aircraft carriers. Designed by the Indian Navy's Directorate of Naval Design (DND), Vikrant has been built at the state-owned Cochin Shipyard Limited (CSL). The warship, with a displacement of 37,500 tonnes, will operate MiG-29K fighter jets, Kamov-31 helicopters, MH-60R multi-role helicopters and the indigenous advanced light helicopters. It has been named after the aircraft carrier INS Vikrant operated by the Indian Navy from 1961 to 1997.

Comments. Vikrant has put India in a select league of nations, only the US, the UK, Russia, France and China have the capability to build Aircraft Carriers. Having gained adequate confidence in the ship's abilities (during the first two trials), IAC sailed to undertake complex manoeuvres to establish specific readings of how the ship performs in various conditions. India currently operates a solitary aircraft carrier, INS Vikramaditya, bought from Russia for \$2.33 billion. In contrast, China operates two aircraft carriers — CV-16 Liaoning and CV-17 Shandong. China is building a third carrier as it expands its footprint in the Indian Ocean Region. Vikrant has an indigenous content of 76%. The construction of the Aircraft Carrier began in 2009. IAC is 262 metres long, has a beam of 62 metres and a height of 59 metres. It has 14 decks, including five in the superstructure, 2,300 compartments, can accommodate a crew of 1,700, including specialised cabins for women officers. This has taken Indian Navy to builders Navy league which is a major step towards growing threat of PLA(Navy) in Indian Ocean Region.

Indian Navy Tests Nuke Capable Rafale-M Jet for INS Vikrant.

(<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-to-test-marine-version-of-rafale-jet-today-101641497076996.html>)

The Rafale-M fighter was pushed through an intensive trial to assess whether it is best suited for IAC-1 at the INS Hansa in Goa, a shore-based test facility. With countdown already begun to commission indigenous aircraft carrier 1 as INS Vikrant in August 2022, the Indian Navy will conduct the flight trials as part of its exercise to identify the best warplane to suit the 40,000 tonne carrier. The Vikrant is likely to be commissioned by August 15, and if the Rafale-M is chosen, India may seek to lease four or five of the aircraft for immediate deployment. The Indian Navy is likely to test the F18s at the same facility in March 2022.

Comments. The Rafale-M aircraft is the F4 equivalent standard Naval version of the Rafale. The marine version of the Rafale jet has a reinforced undercarriage and nose wheel, a bigger arrestor hook, an integrated ladder, and other minor differences from the Rafale currently in use in the Indian Air Force. The Rafale-M is better suited for use on the aircraft carriers than the F18 Hornet fighter from the US for several reasons. It can fit into the lift bay of the Vikramaditya, unlike the F18 which cannot fit the lift of the Vikramaditya even with folded wings. The Rafale-M's dimensions also mean more of them (14) can fit onto the deck of the Vikramaditya as compared to 10 or 11 F18s. There's also the benefit of a common platform across the Navy and the Air Force. Apart from synergies in logistics and maintenance, Indian Navy pilots could be trained on IAF's Rafales for "faster induction". The Rafale-M sent for testing is being the latest version of the fighter with India-specific enhancements, its nuclear-capability, Meteor Air-to-Air missiles, SCALP Air-to-Ground missiles, and Hammer precision guided ammunition makes it an ideal choice for the Indigenous Aircraft Carrier.

US to Conduct Dual Carrier Strike Exercises in South China Sea.

(<https://www.thestar.com.my/aseanplus/aseanplus-news/2022/01/15/us-piles-on-south-china-sea-pressure-with-dual-carrier-strike-exercises>)

The United States has sent an aircraft carrier strike group and a landing helicopter dock group to the South China Sea where the Chinese aircraft carrier Shandong exercised two weeks ago, adding new tension to the hotpot. The Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson and the Wasp-class USS Essex, as well as their respective escorting vessels, entered the southern waters of the South China Sea on 11 Jan 22. The US Navy has yet to announce its plans but the two major attack groups are expected to join forces and probably operate together. According to the US Navy, the Carl Vinson strike group last week was in the Celebes Sea – between the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia – with nine plane squadrons from Carrier Air Wing 2 on board, including one stealth fighter F-35C and its team. The group includes the Ticonderoga-class guided missile cruiser USS Lake Champlain and the Destroyer Squadron 1, consisting of five Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyers. The USS Essex amphibious ready group (ARG) left its three-and-a-half month mission in the Middle East last week and crossed the Strait of Malacca from the Indian Ocean is on its way to participate in the exercise.

Comments. The exercises of the two US Dual Carrier Strike Group (CSG) exercises took place in the South China Sea in July 2020 and February 2021, while in October last year the Carl Vinson CSG was on a joint exercise with the Japanese helicopter carrier JS Kaga in the region. The latest deployment comes just a few weeks after the PLA Navy held simultaneous drills for its two aircraft carriers, one in the South China Sea. It is also only

three weeks ahead of the Beijing Winter Olympics and the Lunar New Year, when China will be hoping to avoid a build-up of military tensions in its backyard. It's an open show of power by the US over South China Sea post operations of the Chinese Aircraft Carrier Liaoning operating in the Western Pacific Ocean.

WEST ASIA

Turkey – Armenia Talks.

*(Turkey Says First Round of Talks with Armenia to Be Held in Moscow on Jan 14 | Reuters, n.d.)
<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-says-first-round-talks-with-armenia-be-held-moscow-jan-14-2022-01-05/>*

Envoys from Turkey and Armenia will hold the first round of talks aimed at normalising ties in Moscow on 14 Jan 22, in a move Armenia expects will lead to the establishment of diplomatic relations and reopening borders after decades of animosity. The neighbours are at odds about various issues, primarily the 1915 mass killing of 1.5 million Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. During the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Ankara supported Azerbaijan.

Comments. This is a lesson to be learnt that despite differences, countries can come together for better avenues in the future. In case of a rail connectivity between Turkey and Armenia, Russia, Iran and Azerbaijan would also be benefitted. However, the mistrust between the two countries is historical and it would be some time prior to any meaningful relation to develop.

World's First Trial on State Sponsored Torture

(Anwar Raslan: A Syrian Colonel Is Jailed for Life in a First Torture Trial for the Assad Regime - CNN, n.d.) <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/13/europe/syria-assad-regime-trial-intl-cmd/index.html>

Syrian victims and human rights observers were relieved and not necessarily in joy when a German court pronounced verdict of Life Imprisonment in the world's first criminal trial on state-sponsored torture in the war-torn nation. Former Syrian colonel Anwar Raslan, 58, had sought asylum in Germany in 2014, and is the highest-ranking former government official to be tried for atrocities committed in Syria.

Comments. The trial of Syria Col Anwar Raslan is symbolic as this is the first such trial against individual for state sponsored terrorism. More and more such cases are now being received in International Court of Justice with about 30 cases currently underway.

UNITED STATES

India could evade US Curbs on S 400 deal. Signals Biden Aide.

Times of India 14 Jan 22

Comments. Above indication has emanated from the confirmation hearing of Mr James O'Brien, President Biden nominee for US State Department Coordinator for the sanctions policy. Trump administration in 2019 had warned that in event of India inking a deal for purchase of S400 missile systems from Russia, US could invoke sanctions against India under their domestic Law (Countering America's Adversaries through the Sanctions Act (CAATSA)). Despite the threat of sanctions, India went ahead with the purchase primarily because of its utmost defence requirement as S 400 provides a cost effective and potent defence against a Stealth aircraft, Drones and ballistic missiles threats. Moreover, besides

the Chinese threat, due to its long effective range it will weaken and neutralise the Pakistani air offensive capability at ranges up to 400 km.

Imposition of sanctions on India by United States would be a grave mistake. This is also probably the assessment within the United States state department thus, India may get President's waiver which is provided under CAATSA. It is also appreciated that India's situation is vastly different from Turkey which despite being a NATO ally was sanctioned in 2019 for procuring S 400 from Russia since India's faces compulsion to continue defence transactions with Russia particularly due to its legacy weapons which are of mostly of Russian origin and the new acquisition will only ensure interoperability which is of vital significance in defence operations. Secondly, India unlike Turkey is facing real Chinese threat on its Northern Border. Thirdly, India is a vital ally to US in its competition with China, Imposing sanctions on India will create a wedge in US-India relationship and also weaken the QUAD grouping. It seems that for according waiver from sanctions, United States administration may seek assurance from India for reducing its future dependence on Russian weapons. India could give such an assurance since it already pursuing a drive to achieve self-reliance in defence manufacturing.

Another unspoken fact that may also influence US decision in India's favour is, that even United States realises that Russia despite partnering with China is well aware of its junior status in its relationship with China therefore, sale of S400 to India would surely be a cause of annoyance to the Chinese since ultimately S 400 could be used against the Chinese but, knowingly Russia pursues strategic defence deals with India as it knows that strong India will balance China and dent its monopoly in the region. Ironically, in relationship with India both United States and Russia have China in the focal point. This arrangement suits India too.

US Russia Talks at Vienna end on 06 Jan 22 without any Break Through.

The Organization comprises 57 participating States that span the globe,. OSCE works for stability, peace and democracy

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/rest-of-world/russia-warns-of-cuba-venezuela-deployment-if-tensions-mount/articleshow/88887537.cms>

Comments. Moscow has amassed nearly 100000 troops on the Eastern Ukraine border and has raised a spectre of repeat of Crimea of 2014. Moscow is not withdrawing the forces since it perceives threat from NATO's which will be substantially enhanced if NATO admits Ukraine in its grouping. This practically will move NATO closer to its Russian borders. US to dissuade Russia from its aggressive stance has sought to persuade Moscow to de-escalate its forces from the Ukrainian border and their respective delegations have negotiated at Vienna under the aegis of Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The third meeting between Russian and US delegation concluded on 06 Jan 22 without achieving any results. Thereafter, Polish Foreign Minister, OSCE chairman has warned that the "risk of war in the OSCE area is now greater than ever before in the last 30 years.

Moscow's had mainly sought a guarantee from United States that Ukraine will never be permitted to join NATO and that the alliance rolls back its expansion in Eastern Europe. But U.S. and its NATO allies have refused to accept this.

This development has created an uncertainty about the situation. In fact, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister has even threatened that it Russia may even consider military

deployment at Venezuela/Cuba to deter interference by US/NATO,¹ this if realised would lead to a serious situation and would push the world to the brink of nuclear war and a repeat the Cuban crisis of 1962. Which nearly brought US-Soviet Union to the verge of a nuclear war.

US plans to draw attention of UN security council to the issue but, this is not likely to change the situation as Russia with its Veto will block any coercive action against it.² It will however, expose China which will have to take a position on territorial integrity of Ukraine. India which during the Crimean crisis remained noncommittal due its close relations with Russia will also have voice its opinion since this time, it is heading the Security Council.

While the situation remains volatile, it is hoped that that diplomacy takes the centre stage and situation gets resolved soon. For this, both Russia and United States/NATO have to abandon their hard stands and maintain a flexible approach in the negotiations.

MISSILE TECHNOLOGY

Recent North Korea's Claim of Hypersonic Missile is seen as an Attempt to Boost its 'Bargaining Position'.³

Foreignpolicy.com/2022/01

<https://www.cnbc.com/2022/01/10/north-korea-hypersonic-missile-claim-aims-to-boost-position-analyst.html>

Comments. North Korea on 06 Jan 22 claimed testing of a hypersonic missile. As claimed, the hypersonic gliding warhead after getting detached from missile made 120 Km lateral movement from its initial launch azimuth before precisely hitting the target 700 km away.

Contrary to the North Korean claim, the overall perception about North Korean ability to develop and launch a hypersonic missile is suspect. In fact, South Korean own analysis based on the intelligence from Japan and United states indicates that it actually launched a ballistic missile and its claim of Hypersonic launch is actually aimed to place itself at a stronger negotiating position against United states and South Korea especially as a Hypersonic missile besides possessing the advantage of a ballistic missile, can strike targets accurately at far of ranges matching a cruise missile.

Hypersonic technology is a significant missile technology. Presently, only United States, Russia and China have tested the hypersonic capability. Many other countries including India are working on this capability. While North Korea has developed range of ballistic missiles but, it is hard to believe that it has already perfected this technology. Therefore, it could be ploy as believed by the South Korean analysts. The test if true, would significantly enhance level of threat to the North Korean neighbours, region and to the world at large. For pursuing nuclear and missile proliferation, North Korea is already under substantial UN sanctions since 2006 which were extended and made more stringent in 2013, 2016 and 2017 but, despite the sanctions it has persisted on its destructive path. Therefore, while there are not many options available to the world community to force North Korea to change its behaviour yet, after its claim of Hypersonic missile launch, US has proposed a new set of sanctions against North Korea for consideration of the United Nation Security Council to compel North Korea to stop nuclear and missile proliferation.

In India neighbourhood, China allegedly has developed and deployed the hypersonic missiles. It even displayed the hypersonic glide vehicles in its 2019 military parade and is known to have also carried out hypersonic tests. In particular, its hypersonic test of Jul 21 which though denied by China has drawn the world attention. The Chinese Hypersonic missile is cause of worry for United States but, also for India since these missiles due to their depressed profile, hypersonic speed and unpredictable approach are difficult to detect hence, enable launching of a surprise nuclear attack. S400 missile system acquired by India from Russia though is claimed to be capable of intercepting a hypersonic missile but, missile's unpredictable approach path and high speed will present a challenge till a better defence alternatives are found.

PAKISTAN

Pakistan to Seek Peace, Economic Connectivity under New Security Policy

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/pakistan-to-seek-peace-economic-connectivity-under-new-security-policy/articleshow/88902766.cms>

Pakistan launched its first-ever comprehensive National Security Policy that it said was centred on regional peace and economic connectivity, and stressed that it wanted improved relations with arch-rival neighbouring India. The National Security Policy is meant to act as a comprehensive framework tying together policies in different sectors. Economic security is listed as a top priority. The policy revolves around seeking peace with neighbours and exploring opportunities to make Pakistan a trade and investment hub.

Comments. Appreciating this symbolic relationship between economic, traditional and human security allows the articulation of holistic policy actions that will prepare Pakistan to optimize national security outcomes. It recognizes that a static or reactive outlook in a fluid global environment can have negative consequences and affect not only Pakistan's external relations but also internal security and social harmony. But for Pakistan, where military policy has always trumped other consideration. Aside from three wars with India, Pakistan has been entangled in two wars in neighbouring Afghanistan, and also dealt with violent Islamist militancy and separatist movements. We will keep monitoring for future implications.

Pakistan to Send Doctors, IT Professionals to Afghanistan

<https://www.samaa.tv/news/2022/01/pakistan-to-send-doctors-it-professionals-to-afghanistan/>

Prime Minister Imran Khan has directed his government to export qualified and trained professionals, especially in the field of medicine, information technology, finance and accounting to Afghanistan to help the country avert its humanitarian crisis. The prime minister also asked the authorities to extend cooperation in the fields of railways, mineral exploration, pharmaceuticals and media to help Afghanistan in its rehabilitation and development process.

Comments. Pakistan is concerned over the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Afghanistan and urged the international community and relief agencies to provide aid to help the country avert the economic collapse.

Pakistan Military Says Border Fence with Afghanistan to be Completed

<https://www.samaa.tv/news/2022/01/dg-ispr-major-general-babar-iftikhar-briefing/>

The Pakistan military has said that the border fence with Afghanistan will be completed and will stay in place. "This is a fence for peace," the spokesperson said. The press briefing comes as reports over past two weeks suggested that Afghanistan's Taliban forces had stopped fencing work on the Pakistan Afghanistan border.

Comments. Pakistan has been fencing the 2,600km-long border with Afghanistan since 2017 to end terrorist infiltration and smuggling. Durand Line, is the valid International Border, separating the two countries. Fencing has been a contentious issue in Pakistan-Afghanistan ties because the Afghans dispute the border demarcation done during the colonial period.

BANGLADESH

Thousands of Rohingya Shops Demolished in Bangladesh

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/thousands-of-rohingya-shops-demolished-bangladesh-confirms/articleshow/88692635.cms>

Bangladesh authorities have bulldozed more than 3,000 Rohingya-run shops since last month. About 850,000 members of the stateless Muslim minority are packed into overcrowded displacement camps in Bangladesh in an island, most having fled neighbouring Myanmar after a 2017 military clampdown that prompted an international genocide investigation. Refugees vulnerable to exploitation and worsen conditions in the camps.

Comments. Demolition of shops will lead to tension and frustration. Bangladesh Government must protect the rights and dignity of the Rohingya refugees by involving them in the decisions including their right to earn a living. India has approximately 40,000 Rohingya Refugees in and around Jammu, Hyderabad, Delhi-NCR etc. India has been balancing its diplomatic act between Myanmar and Bangladesh by supporting Myanmar's efforts and understanding Bangladesh burden in the Rohingya refugees problem. We will keep monitoring for future implications.

SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka Launches Luxury Train Service with India's Assistance

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/sri-lanka-launches-luxury-train-service-with-indias-assistance/articleshow/88806831.cms>

Sri Lanka has launched a luxury train service connecting the country's Tamil-dominated Jaffna district to the capital city Colombo with the help of a Line of Credit offered by India, in another significant landmark in bilateral ties. The intercity rail service with all facilities was launched for passengers travelling from Colombo's Mount Lavinia suburb to Jaffna's Kankesanthurai port suburb in the north, covering a distance of approximately 386 km. India's High Commission here termed it "another significant landmark in India-Sri Lanka ties".

Comments. India had also provided AC Diesel Multiple Units (AC DMUs) under the loan facility. This train service will facilitate people-to-people exchange and will lay emphasis on mutually beneficial cooperation between the two countries. Modernisation of railways and creation of new railway infrastructure have been important sectors of focus under the Indian government's development portfolio in Sri Lanka, in line with the priority of the government and people of Sri Lanka.

No 'Third Party' should Interfere in China's Sri Lanka Ties

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/no-third-party-should-interfere-in-chinas-sri-lanka-ties-wang-yi/article38217745.ece>

No “third party” should interfere in China-Sri Lanka ties, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. “It does not target any third party and should not be interfered with by any third party. The all-round cooperation and strategic mutual trust between the two countries have injected positive energy into regional peace and stability”. Colombo based Chinese Embassy tweeted about a Chinese company shifting its solar energy project from Northern Sri Lanka to the Maldives, in the wake of “security concerns from a third party. Sri Lanka to “tap the opportunities” of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and China’s “vast market” and restart talks on a free-trade agreement “to send more positive signals to the world and contribute to Sri Lanka’s economic recovery and development” said Mr Wang Yi. Sri Lanka's President asks China to restructure debt repayments.

Comments. Sri Lanka is battling a severe economic crisis of a persisting dollar crunch, soaring living costs and a shortage of essentials in the import-reliant island nation. Chinese were clearly alluding to India that objected to the Chinese project in three islands off Jaffna peninsula. We need to watch any regional forum with interest, amid its our efforts. Last year, a Secretariat for Trilateral National Security Advisers (NSA) on Maritime Security Cooperation among India, Maldives and Sri Lanka was set up in Colombo.

India's Economic Package has Given Sri Lanka Breathing Space, Need to Seek Bailout from IMF

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/indias-economic-package-has-given-sri-lanka-breathing-space-need-to-seek-bailout-from-imf-says-top-lankan-economist/articleshow/88918851.cms>

India announced a USD 900 million loan to Sri Lanka to build up its depleted foreign reserves and for food imports, amid a shortage of almost all essential commodities in the island nation. India's financial package has prevented Sri Lanka from spiralling into a major economic tailspin for the time being. Top economist WA Wijewardena warned that the Gotabaya Rajapaksa regime would need to seek an immediate bailout from the IMF to tide over the foreign exchange shortage grappling the country.

Comments. These include deferment of Asian Clearing Union settlement of over USD 509 million and currency swap of USD 400 million. India has always stood with Sri Lanka, and will continue to support that country in all possible ways for overcoming the economic and other challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. As close friends and maritime neighbours, both India and Sri Lanka stand to gain from closer economic inter linkages. The island nation is also facing a severe foreign exchange crisis after the pandemic hit the nation's earnings from tourism and remittances.

MYANMAR

Myanmar Court Sentences Ousted Leader Aung San Suu Kyi to 4 More Years in Prison

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/legal-official-myanmar-court-sentences-ousted-leader-aung-san-suu-kyi-to-4-more-years-in-prison/article38213455.ece>

A court in Myanmar sentenced ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi to four more years in prison after finding her guilty of illegally importing and possessing walkie-talkies and violating coronavirus restrictions. She was sentenced to two years in prison under the Export-Import Law for importing the walkie-talkies and one year under the

Telecommunications Law for possessing them. The sentences are to be served concurrently. She also received a two-year sentence under the Natural Disaster Management Law for allegedly violating coronavirus rules while campaigning.

Myanmar Junta Hits Suu Kyi with Five New Charges over Helicopter Purchase

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/myanmar-junta-hits-suu-kyi-with-five-new-charges-over-helicopter-purchase/articleshow/88915338.cms>

A Myanmar junta court has hit ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi with five new corruption charges related to the the alleged hiring and purchase of a helicopter.

Comments. Myanmar is in turmoil since the coup against Ms Suu Kyi democratically elected government led to widespread protests and signaled the end of 10 years of tentative political reforms that followed decades of strict military rule. Charges against her are contrived to legitimize the military's seizure of power and prevent her from returning to politics.

IRAN & AFGHANISTAN

IRAN

Iran not Recognising Taliban

Iran is still some time away from officially recognizing the Taliban as the government of neighboring Afghanistan, its foreign ministry says, after a meeting with the group in Tehran on 10 Jan 22.

(Iran Says Won't Officially Recognise Taliban after Tehran Talks | Taliban News | Al Jazeera, n.d.)
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/10/iran-says-wont-officially-recognise-taliban-after-tehran-talks>

Comments. Iran is a big player in Afghanistan and is concerned about the situation spilling over into Iran. The Taliban action in Iran could be ruthless considering Iran is a Shia dominated country. However, Taliban is very well aware that a stable Iran border for them also assists in securing them particularly when the fighters are not being paid as of now.

Iran Sanctions More US Officials

In a symbolic gesture, Iran has imposed sanctions on 51 US officials in connection with the assassination of general, Qassem Soleimani, including Ex President Donald Trump and his Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

"Iran Sanctions More US Officials over Soleimani Assassination | Soleimani Assassination News | Al Jazeera," accessed January 21, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/8/iran-sanctions-more-us-officials-over-soleimani-assassination>

Comments. Symbolic gesture to show to the world that Iran is not backing down under western pressure.

Iran Says it has Begun Paying Families of Downed Ukrainian Plane

(Iran Says It Has Begun Paying Families over Downed Ukraine Plane | Politics News | Al Jazeera, n.d.) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/7/two-years-on-no-resolution-over-downing-of-flight-ps752>

(Families Seek Justice for Iran Plane Crash Victims - BBC News, n.d.) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-59833120>

Iran has said it is ready to hold bilateral talks with all the countries whose citizens were among the 176 victims when an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) air defense battery shot down Ukraine International Airlines Flight PS752 on January 8, 2020. The Iranian foreign ministry said in a statement on Friday that Iran has begun the process of paying the \$150,000 compensation its government promised to victims' families at the end of 2020, and will continue to hold court sessions with families present to bring to account the 10 unnamed people it has indicted.

Comments. Iran is indulging in a series of symbolic gesture portraying that it is a responsible country which would not play down to western pressure.

Talks in Vienna Continue

Meanwhile talks in Vienna continued with Russia making a statement that an agreement is possible. US also made a statement on 10 Jan that modest progress was made in the ongoing talks.

(Reaching Agreement in Vienna Talks on JCPOA Possible: Russia - Nuclear News - Tasnim News Agency, n.d.) <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2022/01/11/2642325/reaching-agreement-in-vienna-talks-on-jcpoa-possible-russia>

(Iran Says Nuclear Agreement Can Be Reached If US Sanctions Lifted | News | Al Jazeera, n.d.) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/6/iran-fm-says-vienna-deal-can-be-reached-if-us-sanctions-lifted>

Comments. Though Iran is in desperate need of sanctions being lifted from them, they are not backing down. The coming few days would intimate progress on JCPOA, which would be beneficial for all parties involved including US.

AFGHANISTAN

Pakistan – Taliban Clash at Durand Line

"Pakistan Vows to Continue Fencing Afghan Border, Downplays Taliban Disruptive Acts." Accessed January 21, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-vows-to-continue-fencing-afghan-border-downplays-taliban-disruptive-acts-/6379947.html>.

Late last year and early this year, news of two clashes between Pakistan and Afghanistan appeared on the Durand line. Reports of Taliban not permitting Pakistan to construct check posts and also damaging the fence came up. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan acknowledged that there was a problem but downplayed the issue.

Comments. The border dispute with Pakistan is the initial indications to Pakistan that Afghani Taliban can be controlled upto a point. Despite the Pakistani hand in formulation of interim government, Taliban would listen upto a point. Durand line has not been accepted by Afghanistan and they have clearly stated so once again.

ASEAN

RCEP AGREEMENT ENTERS INTO FORCE

<https://asean.org/rcep-agreement-enters-into-force/>

The RCEP came into force on 01 January 2022. It is a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) among the ten members of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) – Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei, Singapore, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar –and five of ASEAN's major FTA partners: China, South Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. These 15 member countries account for about 30% of the world's population (2.2 billion people) and 30% of global GDP (\$26.2 trillion), making it the largest trade bloc in history. India had taken part in the initial negotiations but decided to opt out later.

China was the first to ratify RCEP, while Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines have yet to do so, though they are expected to ratify it soon. Myanmar, whose government was ousted by the military on February 1, ratified it but that is pending acceptance by other members.

Comments. The idea of RCEP was originally proposed by the ASEAN countries in 2011 as a way of bringing ASEAN's key FTA partners into one overarching agreement. The composition of the trade group is interesting as most ASEAN nations are challenging China's increased assertiveness in the region and US is trying to re-engage with South East Asia. Also, Australia and Japan are part of the QUAD, which is seen by China as a geostrategic alliance against it. Both nations have also seen some adverse manoeuvres across various sectors with China in recent times. India, while part of the initial negotiations on RCEP, decided to opt out due to a variety of reasons. Developments on RCEP would be interesting to follow to see if trade would trump other geopolitical and geostrategic considerations.

LAOS

China-Laos Railway Forms New Logistical Channel From China To Asean

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202201/1243991.shtml?id=11>

<https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/China-s-pan-Asian-railway-sputters-to-a-halt-in-Thailand>

China-Laos Railway has been operational for a month, forming a new logistical channel from China to ASEAN. According to official reports, the railway transported 670,000 passengers and 170,000 tons of goods in the first month. The railway has also shortened shipping time and costs between Kunming in Yunnan and Vientiane in Laos. With the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership taking effect from January 1, the freight volume of the China-Laos Railway is expected to grow steadily.

China has been planning a pan-Asian high-speed rail line transiting the Indochina region. For this purpose, it has planned high-speed rail projects in Laos, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. However, its rail project in Thailand has made slow progress, with some reports also indicating that it has been stalled. Earlier, Chinese plan to construct the Kra Canal through the south of Thailand was put on hold by Thailand for economic and internal security considerations.

Comments. China continues to make investments in ASEAN as part of its BRI, but reactions to its projects has been mixed. India needs to continue to watch these individual developments for its own interests in the region.

EURASIA

Unrest in Kazakhstan

*<https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/kazakhstan/behind-unrest-kazakhstan>
<https://www.khon2.com/international/former-anti-terror-chief-arrested-over-kazakhstan-protests>
<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-01-15/after-kazakhstan-china-and-russia-have-a-central-asia-problem>*

Kazakhstan a landlocked country underwent a short period of civil unrest in the early part of the January 2022. The protests in the Central Asian nation were the most widespread since Kazakhstan's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. On 02 January, protesters came out into the streets of the petroleum-producing city of Zhanaozen in western Kazakhstan, protesting against a sharp rise in prices for liquefied petroleum gas that is widely used as vehicle fuel. They were agitated because the government had removed a price cap, leading to doubled fuel prices which the government stated was due to marketisation, semi-nationalised monopolies which controlled both supplies and prices. The protests spread rapidly across the country, first to other oil- and mineral-producing regions and then to most districts of Kazakhstan. The protests spread to the country's largest city, Almaty, where demonstrators seized and burned government buildings. Groups stated to be from outside the country managed to incite people to the extent of large scale arsons, burning and destruction of government properties and raised a worldwide concern about the beginning of yet another colour revolution in the relatively protected and insulated region of Central Asia. The former head of Kazakhstan's counterintelligence and anti-terror agency, Karim Masimov, was arrested on charges of attempted government overthrow in the wake of violent protests that the President blamed on foreign-backed terrorists and later he was removed by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev.

Comments. At Tokayev's request, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Russia-led military alliance of six former Soviet states, authorized sending just under 4000 mostly Russian troops to Kazakhstan as peacekeepers– the first such action in the alliance's nearly 30-year history. Russia stood up to its commitments of the CSTO and sent in its troops very quickly to dispel the miscreants. Even then a fairly large number of lives were lost and equally large number injured. Russia seems to have grown ever more cautious about protests in neighbouring countries, such as those that resulted in the ouster of Ukraine's former President Victor Yanukovich in 2014 and those that have demanded the removal of Belarus' Oleksandr Lukashenka since 2020. There were talks of Russian troops staying in Kazakhstan for a long time but Russia announced a quick withdrawal plan and quieted all the critics. China expressed satisfaction on restoration of peace amidst concern raised by the Western countries.

Subsequently, Tokayev retracted some of his initial claims about the cause of the unrest – such as his reference to 20,000 foreign terrorists. He blamed journalists, rights activists and bloggers for fueling terrorist actions and militants from Afghanistan and the Middle East for a coordinated coup attempt. Kazakhstan is a mineral and gas rich large country of the Central Asia. Its long border with Russia and equally large Russian population in that country were serious concern of Russia. Another Ukraine type situation next door was the main worry of the Russian Government. A timely intervention brought the situation under

control. The uncertainty however remains over inequality concerns of many Kazakhs and if left unresolved could ignite the flame again.

Internal politics of the Kazakhstan is also reported to be responsible for the unrest but recent announcements by the different power centres seem to be taking note and initiate reconciliatory measures. Former President Nazarbayev, who was given the title “ebasy,” or leader of the nation, retained substantial power as head of the National Security Council. But Tokayev removed him as council head amid this week’s unrest, possibly aiming to meet the demands of the protesters.

The newly reshuffled Tokaev government likely also hopes that relieving Nazarbaev and some of his more prominent relatives and allies of official duties will alleviate the public’s anger with the country’s leadership. On 11 January, Tokaev’s new administration promised to end the legal monopoly associated with Nazarbaev’s youngest daughter that collected hug eco-fees on car sales. He also announced plans to set up a People of Kazakhstan wealth fund that would collect donations from large corporations that thrived under Nazarbaev to pay for social services. Tokaev also promised that major political changes would be announced later in September this year.

After the turmoil in Kazakhstan, the premise that Russia remains the primary security guarantor, while China is content to exercise its influence through investment is being questioned by many. The Eurasian Economic Union, Russia’s effort at integration, works alongside China’s more expansive Belt-and-Road initiative. Kazakhstan is an important friend and trading partner of India. India imports Uranium from Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan President along with other Central Asian Leaders are proposed to be the guests of India during Republic Day celebrations this year. Indian government would do everything for continued peace and stability in Kazakhstan and strengthening India-Kazakhstan relations.