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(e-Scan 01-15 Nov 2021)

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ENVIRONMENT SCAN: 01-15 NOV 2021

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

Brig RK Bhutani (Retd)

Danger Grows as Xi Jinping is Enshrined as the 'Chairman of Everything'. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held its 19th sixth plenum from November 8-11, and chairman Xi Jinping used this choreographed political theater to further consolidate his position in the pantheon of Chinese communist leaders.

This is only the third historic resolution in the history of the CCP; the previous two resolutions were tabled in 1945 and 1981 under Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping respectively. This essentially placed Xi amongst the big three. Allied to the resolution was whether Xi would remain in power indefinitely. Of course, there is no mention of Xi being a lifelong leader in the communique, but Central Committee's approval certainly allows Xi to remain in office for an additional five years, if not two, or more.

Support from the committee gives Xi an indefinite extension on the reins of power, which will inevitably result in stubbornness and insular policies. This is not good for relations with the United States, or with anyone else who does not bow to Beijing, for that matter.

The plenum consisted of 197 full members of the Central Committee and 151 alternate members. This year was especially significant as it marked the centenary of the founding of the CCP. This 100-year history was divided into three historical periods: **Mao Zedong** laid the foundations of socialism from 1949-76. **Deng Xiaoping** ushered in an era of reform and openness. **Xi**, meanwhile, introduced Xi Jinping's thinking on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era, paving the way for the "Great Renaissance of the Chinese Nation."

According to a China Neican newsletter, the resolution had three purposes: first, to provide a comprehensive statement of the past and to provide a definitive path to China's future. Second, to strengthen Xi's role in the CCP and enable him to retain his paramount position at next year's Party Congress. And third, to articulate a vision for the future, which includes shared prosperity at the national level and strength at the international level.

In fact, more than half the communique about this resolution is devoted to praising Xi. Thus, "the party has established Comrade Xi Jinping's core position on the Party Central Committee and in the party as a whole". This kind of sycophancy by the Central Committee is frightening. ***Essentially, Xi has been elevated to a position of absolute dominance over China. Xi may well be enshrouded in cocoon that ignores conflicting facts and could easily lead to miscalculations and conflict.***

Xi Jinping's achievements are debatable. Has Xi really improved governance systems and institutions, or has he simply personally assumed all authority? Xi makes all decisions. Xi has already been nicknamed "the Chairman of everything" because he has a finger in every pie.

Some impetuous decisions are already visible, with little or no consultation with others, including preventing Jack Ma from listing Ant Corporation on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange at the end of last year, and banning all private tutorial schools in July, forcing them to become non-profit organizations.

Xi has cracked down on semi-private groups such as Alibaba, Tencent, Byte dance and several real estate corporations. He repeatedly calls for “high-level design” for the economy, and forces foreign companies to share intellectual property with local subsidiaries. In addition, Xi’s injection of state funds in infrastructure and real estate projects has accumulated unprecedented debt for the government, local businesses and citizens.

The state-controlled media has consistently hailed Xi as a sympathetic, just, wise and internationalist. His aura is like God, capable of doing no wrong, it is feeding this basic food to the people through media and propaganda. Strict control over information and an extensive secret police system prevent any retaliatory statements. Historical bigotry (ie, publicly challenging any aspect of the CCP’s history) is a criminal offense, and in February the Supreme Court ruled that blasphemy against heroes and martyrs was punishable.

Xi is rewriting history in his favor, believing that China and he are indispensable to the world.

Regarding Xi’s indefinite leadership, with the support of the resolution, it is very much possible that Xi will serve as CCP general secretary, chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and state president until the 22nd Party Congress in 2032, when he will be 79 years old. After the 22nd party congress, Xi might imitate Xi Deng by remaining CMC chairman – the most powerful position in China – while relinquishing the titles of party general secretary and / or state president. This scenario, however, would end the party convention of successive generational succession set by Deng.

Party members born in the 1960s, called the sixth generation, will have the least chance of success, as those born before 1964 in 2032 would have reached the retirement age of 68 and few would be young enough to serve for two five years terms on the Standing Committee of the Politburo. Thus, the seventh-generation cadre was most likely to succeed Eleven. Are there any potential candidates? At the moment, only a few dozen seventh-generation officials, born in the 1970s, have held the position of deputy minister. Because of their relatively junior positions, none of them The ‘rising stars ’have not yet demonstrated that they have what it takes to reach the Politburo or above.

It must be noted that there is opposition to Xi within the CCP, despite his omnipotent position. This is perhaps reflected in the inclusion of a paragraph in the resolution that discussed the policies of former leaders Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, who are rivals of Xi. Many of Jiang and Hu’s followers now hold ministerial-level or higher positions, so the inclusion was a concession to them.

Repression is clearly seen in Hong Kong, where strict national security laws have eliminated all political and popular expressions of dissatisfaction. Many people have tried or are trying to leave the area instead of living in an environment of fear and pressure.

Illustrating his paranoia, Xi is simultaneously drafting legislation to eliminate China’s politico-legal apparatus, which includes the police, secret police, prosecutors and the courts. He wants to eliminate unfaithful people who are taking “illegal and inappropriate” steps against his leadership.

In fact, Xi Jinping relies on the military, police and legal tools to maintain tight control. In the ongoing clean-up of the politico-legal system, a reform campaign trapped 178,431 officials for interrogation and / or execution by February-July 2021 alone. It included the

heads of 1,258 departments, including Deputy Ministers of Public Security Meng Qingfeng, Meng Hongwei and Sun Legion.

Authorities also revealed in September that they had discovered a “conspiracy group” centered on several senior police officers, most of whom were from Jiangsu Province. Such entries are rare, but indicate that not all Xi brands are affected by the Iron Fist rule.

Comments. Xi has come a long way, even though China is becoming increasingly isolated globally due to its bullying and hostile treatment of others. There are occasional indications that this dictatorial leader faces opposition at home. It has become clear that large private companies are being forced to share their wealth with the less privileged. Celebrities and star actors / actresses are also targeted. Protests erupted in various cities over the bankruptcy of the Evergrande Group’s real estate company after nearly 300 billion in debt. The domino effect is feared if this “too big to fail” company is allowed to destroy and destroy the savings of many investors. As social unrest grows so will the anger of Chinese citizens. Xi claims to have eradicated absolute poverty, but the middle and lower classes continue to see the difference in wealth between themselves and the elite. Thus, social stability in China is only for namesake. There is a hidden volcano that is being ruthlessly suppressed by the CCP.

As a classical case of internal turmoil impacting foreign policy, China is likely to let Indo-China border differences simmer. In the normal course, India should not expect any de-escalation or disengagement on the LAC with China in the near future; rather it should be ready for any mishap or miscalculation. Things will take a turn dependent upon China’s handling of Taiwan and its relations with the US both on economic front and in the Indo-Pacific.

<https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/danger-grows-as-xi-is-enshrined-as-the-chairman-of-everything20211115123005/>

China Rebranding BRI to Rival Biden’s B3W with Focus on Green Finance, Inclusive Development. China seems to be rebranding its multi-billion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), bracing for competitors with US President Joe Biden’s Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative, which lays emphasis on transparency and democratic values. When B3W was unveiled by Biden in the course of the G-7 summit in June, with the purpose of making “a values-driven, high-standard and transparent infrastructure partnership” to assist finance initiatives in growing international locations, China performed down any competitors, saying that BRI is open for worldwide cooperation.

China welcomes varied international locations to take part in BRI and stays open to worldwide cooperation conducive to enhancing connectivity and realising frequent development, Han Wenxiu, a senior official with the ruling Communist Party of China for Financial and Economic Affairs informed a media briefing right here on Friday, highlighting the deliberations of the Plenum assembly of the get together, which has cleared the decks for Chinese President Xi Jinping’s report third five-year tenure.

Han mentioned **the commerce quantity between China and BRI companions exceeded USD 9.2 trillion in 2020, whereas direct funding by Chinese corporations in international locations involving the Belt and Road Initiative has practically touched USD 140 billion.**

However, the dearths of transparency of BRI agreements and mounting debt to China by smaller international locations have raised international issues. The 99-year lease of the

Hambantota port in Sri Lanka to China has raised crimson flags in regards to the drawback of the BRI.

The US plan is “not good news for China”. All of the stated goals of the B3W, described as a values-driven, transparent and sustainable infrastructure partnership, are obviously targeting China”.

Highlighting the BRI’s new technique, Han mentioned that they would make sure that BRI adapts to new circumstances and new vitality.

Great emphasis is being laid on green belt and road development giving significance to green infrastructure, green vitality and green finance. New railway initiatives being undertaken underneath the BRI guarantee animal passages.

Han mentioned China will lay higher emphasis on the sustainable development of BRI cooperation. He added, “We have published a debt sustainability framework and follow the debt sustainability principle, putting the policy system for debt risk prevention and control and enhancing the quality of the investment”.

“We will support BRI countries in growing the digital economy, closing the digital divide, strengthening cooperation on innovation and sharing experience of a new round of scientific and tech revolution in industrial transformation,” Han added.

Comments. The United States plans to invest in five to 10 large infrastructure projects around the world in January as part of a broader Group of Seven initiative to counter China’s BRI. The US has identified these promising projects in Senegal and Ghana. According to the US official, the G7 B3W initiative is aimed at narrowing the \$40 trillion gap in infrastructure investment that developing countries will need by 2035 and providing an alternative to problematic lending practices by China. Other projects are being identified in South and Latin America and Asia. The US B3W initiative will keep China on its toes and will put cold water on Xi’s flagship BRI initiative. India should partner in US initiative by providing human capital and its technical expertise in building infrastructure.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/china-rebranding-bri-to-rival-bidens-b3w-with-focus-on-green-finance-inclusive-development/articleshow/87687669.cms>

WEST ASIA

Col Siddhartha Sharma

News/Developments

Army Chief General Manoj Mukund Naravane on 14 Nov left for Israel on a five-day official visit to discuss avenues for enhancing bilateral defence relations. His visit comes weeks after the India-Israel joint working group (JWG) on defence cooperation decided to set up a task force to put together a comprehensive 10-year roadmap to identify new areas of collaboration. Israel has been among India’s top three arms suppliers for the last five years, according to a report published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Sipri) in March 2021. Israel accounted for 13% of India’s imports during 2016-20 after Russia (49%) and France (18%).

The US has blacklisted Israeli firm NSO group over the Pegasus scandal which hit across the world a few months earlier.

US President Joe Biden has held talks with Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the sidelines of the G20 meeting in Rome amid tensions over human rights and a request from Turkey for F-16 fighter jets. US has declined the sale of the fighter aircraft over the issue of purchase of S-400 missile defence system by Turkey from Russia.

Turkey and France again came facing each other as Turkey rebuffs France statement to withdraw troops from Libya. Turkey has been in Libya since the coup in 2011.

The United States has approved a \$650m sale of air-to-air missiles to Saudi Arabia, the Pentagon announced, in what would be the Biden administration's first major weapons deal with the Gulf kingdom. The missile sale follows the US approval of a \$500m helicopter maintenance deal for the kingdom in September.

Comments. Israel has been a trusted ally of India and the trip of COAS to Israel is a step to cement the ties. India is also a big importer of military equipment from Israel. Threat of drones and import of technology from Israel to address this threat could be on the agenda.

Despite being a NATO ally, US-Turkey relations are not as warm as it used to be. Meeting in Rome is significant particularly for Turkey as it gives a message that US is still with Turkey. India would watch development of US-Turkey relations very closely. Turkey has issued detrimental statements to India's interests in the past and displayed closeness to Pakistan. Drones made in Turkey are advanced and in case they find way to Pakistan, it would be against India's interests.

Post withdrawal of US Missile Defense System, this is a calculated move by US to keep relations with Saudi warm and also protect its 70,000 citizens in Saudi Arabia safe. US have reduced its military presence in Saudi Arabia over the years.

UNITED STATES

Gp Capt GD Sharma, VSM (Retd)

Deliveries of S-400 Air Defence System have Begun, says Russian Official. Ahead of Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to India early next month, Moscow has started deliveries of S-400 air defence systems to India, a senior Russian official confirmed....., the first division will be delivered by the end of 2021," said Dmitry Shugaev, Director of Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation (FSMTC). The supplies are proceeding on schedule, he added.¹

Comments. It is undisputed that S400 ranks amongst the best air defence system which is effective against all known airborne threats namely, drones, aircraft, cruise and ballistic missiles from short range to nearly 380- 400 km. The overall performance is presently unmatched by any other defence system in use in the world. On conclusion of India Russia agreement for sale of S 400 system, **US tried to dissuade India from the purchase and offered Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and Patriot Advance Capability (PAC-3) missile defence systems to India in as an alternative to Russian S-400s.** But India remained steadfast and refused to budge from the deal. The analysts assess that even the combined performance of THAAD and Patriot system is lower than S400. Besides, the performance, the high cost of THAAD alone (\$3 billion per unit ie \$15 billion for five units) is far too much than the S 400(\$5.4 billion for five

¹<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/russia-starts-delivery-of-s-400-missile-systems-to-india-says-russian-official/article37487108.ece>

regt).The cost of Patriot systems in addition to the THAAD makes the US systems unaffordable.

Pursuing this defence deal with Russia, India could however, face economic sanctions under CAATSA United States federal law. **CAATSA has been designed as punitive measure to target Iran, Russia and North Korea but, the countries which transact with these nations too gets inadvertently affected.** The Act imposed sanctions on Russia for interference in the 2016 US elections and its involvement in Ukraine and Syria.

Now the question whether US will apply sanctions on India, its strategic partner for concluding a major defence transaction with Russia under their federal law, remains to be seen. India could escape its application if a waiver is granted by the congress and the US President which is permissible under the special circumstances which are to be considered by the US congress.

Turkey, the NATO ally, in the similar situation i.e. on purchasing S400 from Russia has been sanctioned under the American federal law. In that, United States has not been dissuaded by the NATO relationship then would it bother for a Strategic partner?

In case of India, there is a view that waiver could be granted, Firstly, because **US relies heavily on India to balance China** which has challenged US hegemony in the Indo- Pacific region in particular and in the world at large. The Quadrilateral Dialogue (QUAD) grouping created to counter China could become dysfunctional if India is targeted by CAATSA as India then will have no incentive continue in the grouping. Moreover, **at present, no other country in the region has the capacity to replace India in the Indo- Pacific region.** No doubt, AUKUS grouping too has come in being but, it no ways replaces QUAD and will take several years to fructify. In any case, **it is impractical to depend on Australia alone to counter China although it will add weight to QUAD with its SSN attack submarines.** India's importance and its position in QUAD will thus remain unassailable for long time. **The TINA factor and the US strategic compulsion tilt the balance in favour of India getting waiver from application of CAATSA. This arrangement benefits India too. We are aware that while US may not come directly to help/ intervene in case of India – China conflict but, its support deters China who otherwise could turn more aggressive.** These conditions did not exist between the US-Turkey relationships.

We have concluded several foundational agreements which oblige US and India to co-operate in the strategic realm. US congress and citizens look at India favourably because of India being a largest democracy hence, a natural partner and also due to our commonality of views on various international issues. Already, **congress is considering an amendment moved by three congressmen to US National Defense Authorization Act FY 2022 (annual defence budget bill) which will make it harder the U.S. government to impose sanctions on members of the Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue (Quad) for buying Russian arms.** The proposed legislation, "Circumspectly Reducing Unintended Consequences Impairing Alliances and Leadership (CRUCIAL) Act of 2021" requires the President U.S. President to certify that a U.S. Quad partner country (India, Australia, Japan) is not cooperating on security matters critical to the United States strategic interests prior to applying CAATSA sanctions on entities from that country. This means that US will have to junk the QUAD which is unlikely because it would be against the US national interest.

Finally, India does not as such come under the provision of the act as while India did sign the agreement for S400year after in year 2018, after CAATSA became

operative in 2017 but, in reality the sale was agreed between Indian PM Modi and Russian President Putin in 2016 itself in the BRICS conference at Goa much before the CAATSA promulgation.

We in any case, have crossed the threshold of persuasion to junk the deal as the supply of S400 has already commenced. Besides, with collusive threat of China and Pakistan junking the deal will have security implications. At the same time, **we cannot junk deal with Russia our old defence partner on an impulse. Our relations with US and Russia have to be guided by our national interests.** This issue may be discussed in the forthcoming 2+2 strategic dialogue between India and United States next month.

PAKISTAN

Col DM Govil

News/ Development.

<https://www.msn.com/en-in/news/world/pak-s-alliance-with-china-may-invite-wrath-of-us-allies>

Pak's Alliance with China may Invite Wrath of US, Allies. The members of the Pakistan Parliament were told that the country was manoeuvring to maintain a "balance" in ties with the US and China. The country's relationship with the US, Pakistan's traditional ally, is confronted with further perils in the wake of recent developments, particularly the chaotic exit of the US from Afghanistan, on another hand, China is matching the US on all front. There have been visible signs of what observers see as a 'new cold war'. On one hand, Beijing has stood by Islamabad in difficult times and has emerged as a major investor but on the other, Islamabad also has to take into account Washington's huge leverage over international financial and other institutions.

Comments. The US could tighten the screws on Pakistan through the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and other means. The US could also resort to putting curbs on Pakistani exports. The policymakers fear that the US Congress could move new legislations penalizing Pakistan for its role in Afghanistan.

<https://www.news18.com/news/world/exclusive-end-of-road-for-imran-khan-as-govt-vs-army-tug-of-war-intensifies-pak-pm-has-2-options-4444163.html>

As Govt Vs Army Tug-of-War Intensifies, Pak PM Has Two Options. After tensions between the PTI government and Pakistani Army fueled by the appointment of a new chief for the country's spy agency ISI, militarily is plotting to remove PM Imran Khan from his post. The two options have been presented : that he either resigns on his own before Nov 20, or the opposition brings an in-house change in the Parliament.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/pak-opposition-is-fighting-for-countrys-survival-fazlur-rehman-rips-into-imran-khan-govt/articleshow/87694029.cms>

Pak Opposition is Fighting for Country's Survival. Pakistan Opposition Alliance ie Pakistan Democratic Movement and JUI-F chief, Fazlur Rehman said in a rally, against the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan for its "anti-people policies" and the rising inflation in Pakistan.

Comments. Imran Khan's reluctance to notify Lt Gen Anjum appointment has strained the relationship of between Pakistan's civilian and military leadership. Moreover, Imran Khan's political space is also in danger due to the poor state of the country's economy and

stretched out protests by the TLP group, whose demands the PM was forced to accept, in order to end the violent demonstrations across the key stations.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/8/pakistan-government-banned-group-ttp-reach-ceasefire-agreement>

Pakistan Government and the Banned TTP Group Reach Ceasefire Agreement.

Government spokesman Fawad Chaudhry said the Taliban government in Afghanistan helped facilitate the ceasefire between the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan and the banned outfit. The minister also said the focus of the talks was on “state sovereignty, national security, peace, social and economic stability in the areas concerned”.

Pakistan Lifts Ban on Far-Right TLP Behind Anti-France Protests. The development follows an agreement reached last week between the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan and Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) that the party would halt its march to Islamabad. The march was called to demand the closure of the French embassy in the Pakistani capital. The protest march on Islamabad, which started on October 22, was also meant to demand the release of the party’s leader, Saad Rizvi, who was arrested a year ago. TLP was outlawed a year ago amid violent rallies over the publication of the caricatures of Islam’s Prophet Muhammad in France.

Comments. Freeing the prisoners will boost ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan and it will have strategic implications on India. Moreover, it will allow Pakistan Army to focus on India.

<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/908346-imran-calls-upon-world-to-help-avert-afghan-crisis>

PM Imran Khan Calls Upon World to Help Avert Afghan Crisis. Prime Minister Imran Khan emphasized the importance for the international community to have a pragmatic approach and constructive engagement with Afghanistan to address the mutual concerns and promote common interests of Troika Plus countries. He was talking to the Special Representatives/Envoys of Troika Plus (China, Russia, United States and Pakistan) for Afghanistan. In the changed environment, Imran underscored the importance of inclusivity, respect of human rights, and resolute counter-terrorism actions. He laid a strong emphasis on provision of urgent humanitarian assistance and economic support to Afghanistan to avert the twin challenges of humanitarian crisis and economic collapse.

Comments. Peace and stability in Afghanistan for security and prosperity of the entire region is more important.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/pakistan-has-long-played-active-disruptive-role-in-afghan-affairs-crs-report/articleshow/87657782.cms>

Pakistan has Long Played Active, Disruptive Role in Afghan Affairs: Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report. Pakistan has long played an active and, by many accounts, disruptive and de-stabilising role in Afghan affairs, including through the provision of support to the Taliban. Many observers see the Taliban's takeover (of Afghanistan) as a substantive triumph for Pakistan, bolstering its influence in Afghanistan and advancing its decades-long efforts to limit Indian influence there.

Comments. The international community is still sceptical about the hardline Islamists, especially on issues like terrorism emanating from the war-torn country and their promises to respect human rights.

BANGLADESH

Col DM Govil

News/ Developments

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/president-kovind-to-visit-bangladesh-on-december-16-to-attend-victory-day-celebrations-reports/articleshow/87709524.cms>

President Kovind to Visit Bangladesh on December 16 to Attend Victory Day Celebrations. President Kovind is visiting the neighbouring country on December 16 and 17 on the invitation of his Bangladesh counterpart Abdul Hamid. Bangladesh and India are working together eyeing two mega events next month – Maitri Diwas and Victory Day of Bangladesh - on December 6 and December 16 respectively with exchange of high-level visits.

Comments. It is important for India and Bangladesh to leverage the current upswing in ties to make them irreversible. Democratic and Pluralistic Society in Bangladesh is in India's interest. India wants to establish an inclusive partnership with Bangladesh by taking every section of Bangladesh society into confidence.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/sheikh-hasina-calls-on-world-leaders-to-act-seriously-for-rohingyas-repatriation-to-myanmar/articleshow/87680327.cms>

Sheikh Hasina calls on World Leaders to 'act seriously' for Rohingyas Repatriation to Myanmar. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has called on world leaders to "act seriously" to ensure the repatriation of forcibly displaced Rohingya refugees to Myanmar. PM said "The world must act seriously to make sure these people are back to Myanmar soon. Otherwise, the security risks from the crisis will not just remain confined within our borders. We already see the signs of that". The complex Rohingya refugee crisis erupted in August 2017, following attacks on remote police outposts in western Myanmar by armed groups alleged to be from within the community. This Rohingya refugee crisis is among the largest, fastest movements of people in recent history.

Comments. 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

News/ Developments

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/china-sri-lanka-in-rare-diplomatic-tussle-over-fertiliser-consignment-101636815747623.html>

China, Sri Lanka in Rare Diplomatic Tussle over Fertiliser Consignment. China and Sri Lanka have been involved in a rare diplomatic tussle over a shipment of organic fertiliser that Colombo refused to accept citing quality issues. "The unscientific detection method and conclusion of National Plant Quarantine Service (NPQ) in Sri Lanka obviously do not comply with international animal and plant quarantine convention," the Chinese company said. While experts are unsure of how long Colombo can resist pressure from Beijing due to its "debt trap" diplomacy.

Comments. No direct impact on India due to this.

MYANMAR

News/ Developments

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/11/1105642>

Security Council Appeals for End to Violence in Myanmar. The UN Security Council has called for an immediate cessation of violence across Myanmar, and efforts to ensure the safety of civilians, following reports of more clashes between the armed forces and militant groups. Council expressed deep concern over the violence, noting that “recent developments pose particular serious challenges for the voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable return of Rohingya refugees and internally displaced persons.”

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/02/1083622>

Security Council Unity ‘Crucial’ to Support Democracy in Myanmar. Christine Schraner Burgener addressed ambassadors during a closed meeting held the day after Myanmar’s military seized power and detained top political leaders and activists, including State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint.

Comments. The Members of the Security Council reaffirmed their support for the people of Myanmar and the country’s democratic transition, and their strong commitment to the sovereignty, political independence, territorial integrity and unity of Myanmar.

IRAN & AFGHANISTAN

Col Siddhartha Sharma

IRAN

News / Development.

Iran has said it will resume multilateral talks on November 29 in Austria’s capital, Vienna, aimed at reviving the country’s nuclear deal with world powers. Six rounds of talks with the remaining parties to the deal – China, Russia, Germany, France and the United Kingdom – in Vienna, with the US participating indirectly, concluded in late June to allow the administration of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to take form. The talks aim at return to JCPOA agreement.

The United States, Bahrain, Israel and the United Arab Emirates have begun a joint naval training in the Red Sea. The same comes alongside Iran holding a large scale military exercise incorporating Sea, Land and Air based resources. The exercise comes post confrontation of Iran and US in Sea of Oman regarding an Oil tanker.

Comments. The resumption of talks if they occur is a positive sign for peace and stability in the region. US with reduced presence in the area and Iran with a new government and crippling sanctions should both be interested in reaching an agreement. JCPOA would also be in interest of India as it can then resume oil supply from Iran without antagonizing US. Oil from Iran can play a big part in Indians energy security.

The muscle flexing between US and Iran shall continue till the time JCPOA is finalized. Such exercises also calm local powers averse to Iran’s dominance increase in power.

AFGHANISTAN

News / Development.

ISIL continued to target Shia community as another blast took place this time in Kabul in a Shia dominated area. The attack on 13 Nov is a part of many such blasts aiming the minority Islamic community. This attack came shortly after an ISIL attack on Kabul Military Hospital where 19 were killed on 02 Nov.

Iran is deporting Afghanistan refugees. Amidst reports of about 5000 refugees entering Iran daily, Iran is not welcoming them rather deporting them back. This is likely to increase pressure of Afghani refugees into Europe.

India hosted senior security officials from Russia, Iran and five Central Asian countries to discuss the situation in Afghanistan, but no Afghan representative attended. China and Pakistan too boycotted the meeting. Pakistan too held a meeting on Afghanistan with US, Russia and China.

The supreme leader of the Taliban, Haibatullah Akhunzada, made a rare appearance and warned the group that there may be “unknown” entities among their ranks who are “working against the will of the government”.

Comments. Afghanistan government is facing the ISIL crisis. Currently they are unable to handle it. They require much more infrastructure and resources to address the issue. Similar limitation is applicable on ISIL also. However, they require fewer resources as they are dependent on suicide bombers. In case stability doesn't come into Afghanistan governance, this violence is here to stay in Afghanistan.

The meeting in Delhi was a way to show India's interests in Afghanistan. Pakistan too is trying to gain local dominance over Afghanistan.

The symbolic appearance of Taliban religious head is of great significance to the Taliban as they have quelled rumours of their leaders being dead at least for the time being. This is despite Mullah Baradar not making a public appearance for some time.

EURASIA

Air Cmde T Chand (Retd)

Central Asia-Arctic Ocean Transport Corridor: A likely Competitor for Chinese BRI in Central Asia. The Global Warming resulting into melting of the ice in Arctic region has opened up possibilities of further development of Northern Sea Route (NSR) and linked corridors. Possibility of connecting Central Asian Region to Western Europe through the NSR at viable commercial scale exists and is likely to be developed in future. The Ob-Irtysch river system penetrates deep into the heart of Eurasia, offering Kazakhstan and Central Asian states an avenue for directly accessing ocean trade lines. India, being an observer in the Arctic Council, has legitimate interests in the region and has created its own Arctic policy. India's Arctic Policy (IAP), notified as a draft document in early January 2021, continues along the lines of the country's science diplomacy². India's draft policy has anticipated many exciting developments and is partnering research for exploitation of likely future opportunities in the region. Many similarities exist between Arctic and

²KM Seethi. *The Contours of India's Arctic Policy, 03 August 2021, The Arctic Institute.* <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/contours-indias-arctic-policy/>, 11 November 2021.

Himalayan region and India would benefit from its Arctic research for development of Himalayan region as well.

An increase in NSR traffic offers a development possibility for opening Eurasian inland river transport to connect to the Arctic region with less frozen-river time and more navigation days per year. Kazakhstan has over 4,000 km, less developed navigable inland waterways, comparable with Germany and France³. The developing geo-economic competition in Eurasia between China, Russia and Central Asian states means that inland river transport also has a geo-economic security aspect. China's Belt and Road transport policies in the Central Asian economies have come with media hype on the supposed benefits of the shorter transit times offered by the China Rail Express intercontinental rail corridors connecting China and Europe via either Russia or the Black Sea. However, for the Central Asian economies on the East-West facing Eurasian rail network: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, transit time is far less important than transport cost. Maritime trade is vastly cheaper than rail or road transit and almost universally preferable unless cold-chain storage or just-in-time inventory supply chain management are important. A Northern Corridor, as a North-South axial multimodal transport corridor reaching Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan towards northern Siberia at the Kara Sea connecting to the NSR, could link the region to global ocean trade.



(Inland waterway from Kazakhstan to the Northern Sea Route; Tristan Kenderdine)

Central Asian economies are traditionally considered as landlocked, however, the combination of inland water transport on the Ob-Irtysh river system and a thawing Arctic Ocean, making the Northern Sea Route viable, opens the possibility for increased maritime transport directly from Kazakhstan to both Europe and East Asia. The Northern Sea Route connects Russia's Sabetta port with the Northeast Asian shipping lines centered on Dalian, Qingdao, Zhou Shan, Yokohama, Busan, and Kaohsiung and with the North European ports, Rotterdam, Hamburg, Bremerhaven, Antwerp, Zeebrugge, and Le Havre⁴. For Central Asian economies to have access to these shipping lanes at costs comparable to those enjoyed by European inland economies would be a huge economic advantage.

³Tristan Kenderdine, *Northern Corridor for Central Asia-Arctic Ocean Transport Access*, 09 November 2021, *The Arctic Institute*; <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/northern-corridor-central-asia-arctic-ocean-transport-access/>, 12 November 2021.

⁴ ibid

Despite the hype surrounding Belt and Road investment in Eurasian rail transport, the European Union provides more assistance to Central Asian transport development than China, and United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) offers a cleaner model of multilateral transport integration and standardisation⁵. Multiple second-tier transport alternatives such as the Northern Corridor can become economic vectors for Central Asian economies, connecting across both the Arctic Ocean and the Caspian Sea. Any investment in transport development in Central Asia's Arctic vector should prioritise the economic benefit of the people of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyz Republic and Kazakhstan. However, these investments should be measured in increases in speed and tonnage; and decreases in freight prices. Development of transport corridors should not depend on the grand geo-economic plans of either Russia or China. For Central Asian trade and logistics development, the Northern Corridor provides both an economic and a geo-economic alternative to either the dependency of land-locked economic development or the false promise of the Belt and Road⁶.

China has in recent years pressed for a greater role in Arctic affairs, becoming one of the observer states of the Arctic Council in 2013. In 2018, China released an official white paper entitled "China's Arctic Policy" - a step that in and of itself signals the country's intent to play a larger role in the region - in which it outlines its priorities in the Arctic and describes itself as a "near-Arctic state. In 2017, China introduced the Polar Silk Road, a component of its global Belt and Road Initiative, as a framework to collaborate with other parties to jointly develop Arctic shipping routes.

The interests and concerns of the Arctic states are vast and varied. India is one among the thirteen Countries holding Observer status in the Arctic Council and India renewed its membership in 2019 for another five-year period. Scientists from the ESSO-National Centre for Antarctic and Ocean Research (NCAOR) and the ESSO-National Institute of Ocean Technology (NIOT) have set up a facility at Kongsfjorden (which is part of the Svalbard archipelago in the Arctic Ocean). The facility is India's first multi-sensor moored observatory called 'IndArc' which is to undertake studies and collect real-time data on the Arctic climate and its impact on the monsoon. The successful deployment of this facility is seen as a model of Indo-Norwegian scientific and technical cooperation in addressing global climate change⁷. Another atmospheric laboratory was established in 2016 at Gruvebadet in Ny-Alesund with the aim of initiating studies on clouds, precipitation, long-range pollutants, and other background atmospheric parameters. The draft IAP itself highlights that "there are several synergies between polar studies and the study of the Himalayas. Arctic research will help India's scientific community to study melting rates of the third pole—the Himalayan glaciers, which are endowed with the largest freshwater reserves in the world outside the geographic poles⁸. The IAP is enunciated with five major areas of engagements which includes Transportation and Connectivity. It is clear that the IAP, apart from underlining the significance of science and research, sees the Arctic region as a potential area of engagement in diverse areas of human development and commercial activities⁹.

In the realm of transportation and connectivity, India has vital stakes. According to IAP, "India ranks third in the list of seafarers supplying nations catering to almost ten per cent of global demand. India's maritime human resources could contribute towards meeting the

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ **KM Seethi. *The Contours of India's Arctic Policy*, 03 August 2021, *The Arctic Institute*. <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/contours-indias-arctic-policy/>, 11 November 2021.**

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ *ibid*

growing requirements of the Arctic¹⁰. The draft policy also seeks to explore the possibility of linking the International North South Transport Corridor with the Unified Deep-Water System and its further extension to the Arctic. India expects that the North-South connectivity will result in lowering shipping costs and overall development of the hinterland and of indigenous communities more than East-West connectivity¹¹.

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ *ibid*