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(e-Scan 16-31 Dec 2021)

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ENVIRONMENT SCAN: 16-31 DEC 2021

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

Brig RK Bhutani (Retd)

U.S. at Risk of Paying 'Unbearable Price' Over Taiwan - Senior Chinese Diplomat. Wang Yi, China's state councilor and foreign minister, said on 30 December, in an interview with state media, "by encouraging 'Taiwan independence' forces, the United States not only puts Taiwan into an extremely dangerous situation but also exposes the United States to an unbearable price".

China claims democratically governed Taiwan as its own territory and in the past two years have stepped up military and diplomatic pressure to assert its sovereignty claim, fuelling anger in Taipei and concern in Washington. Wang said, "Taiwan has no other way forward other than reunification with the mainland".

Taiwan has emerged as a key factor in strained relations between China and the United States, the island's most important international backer and arms supplier despite the absence of formal diplomatic ties. China regularly describes the island as the most sensitive issue in its ties with the United States.

Comments. While the United States recognises only one China, it is required by law to provide Taiwan with the means to defend itself and has long followed a policy of "strategic ambiguity" on whether it would intervene militarily to protect Taiwan in the event of a Chinese attack. However, the United States is building up public opinion in favour of a military response if the PRC forcibly tries to take over Taiwan. Taiwan will resist all attempts by China for reunification because having seen China's atrocities in Hong Kong, Taiwanese people will not like to lose their freedom under Chinese rule. Taiwan says it is an independent country and vows to defend its freedom and democracy.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us-risk-paying-unbearable-price-over-taiwan-senior-chinese-diplomat-2021-12-30/>

China Punishes People Trying to Flee Covid Controls in Xi'an. China is punishing people trying to evade its latest Covid lockdown in Xi'an as a top official urged "forceful moves" to curb the outbreak in the central city of 13 million people.

Vice Premier Sun Chunlan said local authorities need to adopt more "targeted and forceful" measures and improve quarantine controls, the official Xinhua News Agency reported late 30 December. China reported 166 local confirmed cases for that day, 161 of them in the city.

The situation in Xi'an is severe and complex, she was cited as saying during a visit. Sun, the only woman on the ruling Communist Party's 25-member Politburo, also urged the government to step up tracing efforts.

Local police have had to track down people attempting to duck the tight controls. For instance, a man who hiked 100 kilometers from the airport to a nearby county was also sent to quarantine by police and handed an unspecified punishment.

China locked down Xi'an on Dec. 23 -- it's most dramatic move since the pandemic started in Wuhan and a sign the Chinese leaders are sticking to their zero-tolerance approach to Covid. The city, an emerging tech hub famous for its 2,200-year-old terracotta warriors,

has carried out several rounds of mass virus testing, asked people to remain indoors, banned driving and limited entry from other parts of the nation. Residents had trouble buying groceries earlier this week.

Tech companies Micron Technology Inc. and Samsung Electronics Co. have said that production at factories in the city has been affected under the lockdown. Micron, a chipmaker, said it will be able to meet most of its customer demand but new supply arrangements may cause delays. It added that it is taking "appropriate measures" to minimize the risk of the virus at its plant, including on-site testing, physical distancing and temporarily reducing the "workforce density."

Comments. Cases from Xi'an have so far spread to five other cities including Beijing, according to state media, fuelling fears about how quickly the virus can spread geographically across the vast country. China is on high alert as it prepares to hold the Winter Olympics in February 2022, in the capital Beijing. Reportedly, Omicron variant has entered in to China in spite of its strict controls. Even three doses of Sinovac's vaccine do not produce adequate levels of anti bodies to fight the Omicron variant, researchers from Hong Kong found.

<https://www.livemint.com/news/world/china-punishes-people-trying-to-flee-covid-controls-in-xian-11640932723139.html>

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/china-reports-highest-number-of-coronavirus-cases-in-four-months/articleshow/88489963.cms>

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/hong-kong-says-omicron-has-spread-despite-covid-restrictions/articleshow/88611909.cms>

China Launches New Camera Satellite with High Resolution to Find Resources. China on 26 December launched a new satellite with a camera that can take pictures of the ground with a resolution of five meters, the China National Space Administration (CNSA) said.

The satellite, called "Ziyuan-1 02E" or "five-meter optical satellite 02," was launched by a Long March-4C rocket from the Taiyuan Satellite Launch Centre in north China's Shanxi province.

Ziyuan-1 02E weighs about 2.5 kilograms and is equipped with infrared, near-infrared and hyperspectral cameras. The cameras can take full-colour panchromatic images of the Earth.

The satellite will work with the five-meter optical satellite 01 and shorten the revisit time of Chinese territory from three days to two days.

Pictures taken by the satellite duo will help engineers survey China's geological environment and search for minerals. People working in other areas like transportation, agriculture and disaster mitigation will also receive help from the pictures, the report said.

It carries payloads such as a small imaging camera, intelligent processing equipment, and equipment for conducting experiments on semiconductor thermoelectric generation, state-run Xinhua news agency reported.

Comments. China is looking for minerals everywhere - Africa, Asia, Latin America and all the under developed or less developed countries linked with BRI. This satellite will greatly

assist China in locating minerals much in advance before striking a business-cum-diplomatic deal with the concerned countries.

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/china-launches-new-camera-satellite-with-high-resolution-to-find-resources/articleshow/88505539.cms>

WEST ASIA

Col Siddhartha Sharma

News / Developments

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said he will travel to Saudi Arabia next month. Both countries haven't had the best relations in past and the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi further deteriorated the relations. This the first visit by a Turkish leader since 2018.

Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah has accused Saudi Arabia of exporting ISIL (ISIS) ideology and transporting explosives for suicide attacks to Iraq. Hezbollah is allegedly backed by Iran. The comments come just a couple of weeks after Lebanon announced deportation of a Shia opposition group Al-Wefaq which has been outlawed in Bahrain since 2016. The group was banned in Bahrain due to allegations of supporting terrorism. Lebanon has been involved in a diplomatic dispute with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. Lebanon accuses them for not supporting Lebanon in the times of crisis.

Comments. Turkey and Saudi Arabia both compete to gain prominence in the Islamic world. With a declining economy, Turkey is engaging again with Saudi Arabia.

Iran requires the JCPOA to go through. The sanctions are crippling its economy which has limited support from a sunni world surrounding Iran. Iran is the only shia dominated country other than Bahrain.

UNITED STATES

Gp Capt GD Sharma, VSM (Retd)

US Appoints New Tibet Coordinator Amid Tensions with China. The Biden administration has announced a new special coordinator for Tibetan issues, saying the office will "promote substantive dialogue" between China and the Dalai Lama and push to protect the human rights and "fundamental freedoms" of the Tibetan people.

Comments. The appointment of the Tibet coordinator is in conformity with US domestic law, "Tibet Policy Act of 2002"¹ which recognises Tibet as part of China but, allows United States to pursue human rights and fundamental freedoms issues of Tibetans with the Chinese Government. This policy does not find favour of the Chinese Government therefore, appointment of Tibet coordinator has irked the Chinese Government and it has called it an interference in the internal affairs of China.

Empowered by the domestic Law on Tibet, US President, Secretary of state and other state departments routinely urge China to enter into negotiations with the Dalai Lama or his representatives as soon as possible and for these they also interact with Dalai Lama

¹<https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rpt/20699.htm>

and his representatives. Recently, acting envoy of the United States to India and Secretary of state, Mr Blinken met Dalai Lama's representative of Tibetan government in Exile (TGIE) at Dharamshala sending a message to China. This issue has provided another tool to America to exert psychological pressure on China especially in view of the current state of their relations.

Tibetan government in exile (TGIE) though formed at Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh is not recognised by any country. Even Dalai lama does not seek full freedom and is agreeable for greater autonomy for Tibet under China but, the Chinese government is not willing for this concession too and there are reports that the Chinese government is trying to change the demography of the region so as to weaken the demand for Tibetans self determination.

As far India is concerned, despite giving political asylum to Dalai Lama and his followers, India recognizes the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) as part of China and does not allow Tibetans to engage in anti-China political activities in India. But while we take note of the Chinese concern, China has consistently violated core concern of One India in respect of POK and supports Pakistani nefarious activities against India and of late India is also a victim of Chinese cartographic aggressions. This Chinese stance has given us to rethink our past relations with Tibet which were independent of China and after independence, India even had maintained Indian mission at Lhasa replacing a British Mission. The Government of India regarded Tibet as a de-facto country and even a few months before India's independence, an Asian Conference was held in New Delhi, to which Tibet was invited. China should be mindful of what India could have done in the past but, have always refrained from actions.

Recently, the Chinese Embassy wrote to some Indian parliamentarians who attended a dinner hosted by the Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile (TPIE) in their capacity as members of the All-Party Indian Parliamentary Forum for Tibet and was aimed at promoting cultural ties between India and Tibet. As a democratic country, India unlike China does not interfere in the fundamental rights our citizens including member of parliaments to express their views and opinions freely. The displeasure shown by Chinese embassy on attendance of the TPIE reception is unjustified and infringement of their diplomatic rights.²

PAKISTAN

Col DM Govil

News/ Development

<https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-to-rally-muslim-countries-to-help-afghanistan/6360010.html>

Pakistan to Rally Muslim Countries to Help Afghanistan. Pakistan is rallying Muslim countries to help Afghanistan in the OIC meeting to stave off an economic and humanitarian disaster while also cajoling the neighboring country's new Taliban rulers to soften their image abroad. The new Taliban administration in Kabul has been sanctioned by the international community, reeling from the collapse of the Afghan military and the Western-backed government in the face of the insurgents' takeover in mid-August. In a joint resolution of OIC, the foreign ministers agreed to appoint a special envoy for extending assistance and arrange an institutional mechanism for disbursement of resources along with a trust fund and food security program in which the OIC will work with

² <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/chinese-embassy-s-letter-to-mps-triggers-strong-reaction-101640954647037.html>

the United Nations to deliver aid. The president of the Islamic Development Bank, Mohammed bin Sulaiman Al Jasser, was also among the Saudi foreign minister's entourage. He volunteered to manage trusts for moving money into Afghanistan and creating new business opportunities. According to the resolution, the Afghan government will have to abide by "obligations under international human rights covenants, especially with regards to the rights of women, children, youth, elderly and people with special needs."

Comments. Afghanistan is facing a looming economic meltdown and humanitarian catastrophe in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover. Billions of dollars' worth of the country's assets abroad, mostly in the U.S., have been frozen and international funding to the country has ceased. If Afghans are left without help, militant groups such as al-Qaida and the regional Islamic State affiliate will regroup and flourish amid the chaos. Peace and stability in Afghanistan for security and prosperity of the entire region is more important.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/pakistan-afghanistan-border-fencing-row-resolved-official/article38034310.ece>

Pakistan, Afghanistan Border Fencing Row Resolved. Taliban militants in Afghanistan disrupted the erecting of a security fence by the Pakistani military along the border between the two countries. Besides the erection of a fence, the project also includes the construction of border posts and forts, and the raising of new wings of Frontier Corps, the paramilitary force that guards the border. The Afghans are unhappy and have been opposing the fencing and the fencing has separated people and divided families, as per Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid, who is currently the acting Culture and Information Minister. However, Pakistan and Taliban authorities in Afghanistan have resolved the recent row over border fencing by agreeing that further work on the project that led to a tense situation would be done through consensus.

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. The Taliban did not resolve the issue when they were in power of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. Fencing has been a contentious issue in Pakistan-Afghanistan ties because the Afghans dispute the border demarcation done during the colonial period. We will keep monitoring for future implications.

<https://theprint.in/world/pakistan-approves-citizen-centric-national-security-policy/789216/>

Pakistan Approves 'Citizen-centric' National Security Policy. Pakistan's top security panel approved its National Security Policy for 2022-26, placing "economic security at the core" of the first-of-its kind document to ensure a "citizen-centric approach to security". This is the first time a National Security Policy has been approved in Pakistan. "To ensure this citizen-centric approach to security, the NSP put economic security at the core. A stronger economy would create additional resources that would in turn be judiciously distributed to further bolster military and human security".

Comments. Security of Pakistan rests in the security of its citizens, reposing confidence that Pakistan is well prepared to meet any internal and external threat. NSP's policy must guide all organs of the government to ensure that their efforts are synchronised with the overall direction of the NSP.

<https://www.news18.com/news/explainers/explained-paks-acquired-chinese-j-10c-jets-to-counter-rafale-but-how-do-the-fighters-compare-4608227.html>

Pakistan Buys 25 China-made J-10C Jets in Response to India's Rafale Aircraft Acquisition. In response to India's Rafale aircraft purchase, Pakistan has acquired a full squadron of 25 Chinese multirole J-10C fighter jets. The J-10C aircraft were part of the Pak-China joint exercise last year, where experts from Pakistan had the opportunity to have a close look at the fighter jets. Pakistan had a fleet of US-made F-16s, which is considered a good match for Rafale, but it was looking for a new multirole all-weather jet to augment its defence after India purchased Rafale jets from France.

Comments. The Jian 10, or a J-10, is a multi-role fighter indigenously developed in China by the Chengdu Aircraft Industry. The J-10 is a single engine, lightweight multirole fighter that is capable of operating in all weather conditions, with strike mission and air to air warfare being its primary objects. The J-10C is similar to F-16s that forms the mainstay of the Pakistan Air Force. Rafale is heavier than the J-10C, it also packs "far greater" thrust, something that gives it "better agility and higher energy, which is the deciding factor in WVR combat", or dogfights. Also, short-range MICA-IR missile carried by the Rafale is considered to be "generations ahead" of the PL-8/9 missiles used by the J-10C. As to BVR combat, the Rafale again scores with its "technology superior radar with greater detection ranges in excess of 200 km and the tracking mode, prioritization of targets is fully automated". On a long-range missile, too, the Rafale is seen as holding the advantage. Many others features, Rafale is superior to J-10C. Moreso, J-10C has not seen any combats while the Rafale has been tried in battles theaters in Mali, Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq and Syria. But the overall strength of the aircrafts in PAF has increased.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/pakistan-sets-up-first-ever-body-of-hindu-leaders-to-take-care-of-minority-communitys-temples/article38068906.ece>

Pakistan Sets up First-ever Body of Hindu Leaders to Take Care of Minority Community's Temples. Pakistan has set up a first-ever body of Hindu leaders to take care of the minority community's temples in the Muslim-majority country. Pakistan has created history by constituting the committee on the demand of the Hindu community. Prime Minister Imran Khan, efforts were being made for the welfare of the non-Muslim population.

Comments. Hindus form the biggest minority community in Pakistan. Despite religious and cultural diversity, tolerance and acceptance of each other is required in Pakistan. The evil elements, who wants to confront the Pakistan on the basis of religion, sect and linguistics, it will be a big blow to their thoughts process. The new committee will act as a bridge between the non-Muslim population and the State.

SRI LANKA

Col DM Govil

News/ Developments

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/chinese-ambassadors-visit-to-jaffna-sparks-concern-commentary-in-sri-lanka/article38040843.ece>

Chinese Ambassador's Visit to Jaffna Sparks Concern, Commentary in Sri Lanka. A recent visit by the Chinese Ambassador in Colombo to Sri Lanka's Tamil-majority Northern Province has sparked concern and considerable commentary on what is widely seen as a heightening geopolitical contest between India and China, now manifesting in the island nation's north. Chinese Ambassador Qi Zhenhong held meetings with top government officials, including the Governor of the Province, Fisheries Minister, and the Mayor of Jaffna and with military personnel stationed at the northern tip of the Jaffna Peninsula.

China has not comment on Sri Lanka's "internal affairs" (basically ethnic question) ie political aspirations of the Tamil people, or our long-pending demand for a political solution.

Comments. India has helped the war-hit region rebuild in the 12 years since the civil war ended. India has been the main international interlocutor for a political solution in the island nation that is still recovering from a long civil war. India has consistently called for the full implementation of the 13th Amendment and more recently, the early conduct of provincial council elections. Moreso, the people of Sri Lanka's north and east did not want "China to have a footprint" in the provinces.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sri-lanka-to-sign-trincomalee-oil-tank-farm-deal-with-india-in-a-month-says-minister/article38044183.ece>

Sri Lanka to Sign Trincomalee Oil Tank Farm Deal with India in a Month. Sri Lanka will ink the long-dragging deal with India to jointly develop the Trincomalee oil tank farms - a coveted project that has remained controversial for decades. The facility, interestingly located in 'China Bay', has 99 storage tanks with a capacity of 12,000 kilolitres each, spread across the Upper Tank Farm and the Lower Tank Farm, where LIOC currently runs 15 tanks. The new agreement being negotiated pertains to the remaining tanks. Mr. Basil, the youngest brother of President Gotabaya, wanted the "early modernisation" of the Trincomalee oil tank farms and has sought extensive economic assistance from New Delhi to help Sri Lanka tide over its economic crisis compounded by the pandemic.

Comments. During the Second World War, the British built the Trincomalee oil tank farms to serve as a refuelling station, adjacent to the Trincomalee port, an enviable natural harbour. The nearly century-old oil tanks need to be refurbished — at the cost of millions of dollars — if they are to be fit for use again. It will not only mark the culmination of India's 16-month-long negotiation with the ruling Rajapaksa administration but will also give shape to a proposal envisaged 35 years ago, in the Indo-Lanka Accord. It will also assist the Sri Lanka government to mitigate from the current economic crisis.

MYANMAR

News/ Developments

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/myanmar-court-defers-verdicts-in-suu-kyi-trial-to-january-10-source/article38046649.ece>

Myanmar Court Defers Verdicts in Suu Kyi Trial to January 10: Source. A court in military-ruled Myanmar has postponed verdicts it was expected to make in two cases in the trial of ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi to Jan. 10, according to a source familiar with the proceedings. The charges included the possession of unlicensed walkie-talkies, the second of nearly a dozen cases registered against Suu Kyi that carry a combined sentence of more than 100 years in prison. Aung San Suu Kyi is already serving a two-year sentence at an undisclosed location after being found guilty on December 7 on charges of incitement and breaching coronavirus restrictions.

Comments. Ms. Suu Kyi faces three years in jail if found guilty of incitement against the military — just one of the charges that analysts say are aimed at removing the democracy icon from the political arena for good. The junta has steadily added a slew of other indictments, including violating the official secrets act, corruption and electoral fraud.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/un-envoy-calls-for-a-new-year-ceasefire-in-myanmar/article38051058.ece>

UN Envoys Calls for a New Year Ceasefire in Myanmar. The United Nations' special envoy of the secretary-general on Myanmar, MsNoeleenHeyzer is "deeply concerned" over the escalation of violence in the country, and appealed for a nationwide "New Year's ceasefire." In her first statement, NoeleenHeyzer urged all parties to exercise utmost restraint and seek a peaceful solution. Those inflicting suffering on its own people need to silence their guns and protect people in time of great need.

Comments. Myanmar has been in turmoil since the military staged a coup in February, sparking nationwide protests and a deadly crackdown on dissent. Millions of people in Myanmar remain in dire need of humanitarian support. We will keep monitoring for future implications.

MALDIVES

News/ Developments

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/india-out-campaign-in-maldives-intensifies-with-yameens-backing/article37996175.ece>

'India Out' Campaign in Maldives Intensifies with Yameen's Backing. Mr. Yameen's Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) said the leader would travel to the atolls to step up the ongoing campaign resisting "Indian boots on the ground" in the Indian Ocean Archipelago. Mr. Yameen and his supporters, attired in a red t-shirt with 'India Out' printed in bold font, are circulating on social media, along with the 'India Out' hashtag. "Spreading hatred and making false allegations regarding bilateral ties with neighbouring countries not only tarnishes the relations with trusted allies who extends consistent support to the Maldivian people, but also affect the safety and security of their citizens in Maldives, and Maldivians living abroad," the Government's statement said. Following President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's election in September 2018, his Government declared an "India first" foreign policy, resetting ties emphatically.

Comments. India-Maldives relations deteriorated considerably when the Yameen administration was in power from 2013 to 2018. Significantly, tensions rose over Mr. Yameen's ultimatum to New Delhi to withdraw two Indian helicopters from the strategically important Laamu and Addu atolls. Mr. Yameen's perceived China tilt during that time also made New Delhi apprehensive. Moreso, the statement from Mr Yameen came at time because of Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi's will be visiting to Male to celebrate the golden jubilee of the creation of diplomatic ties. Hence, India has to work on perception management in the Maldives and need to earn the good will of the people.

IRAN & AFGHANISTAN

Col Siddhartha Sharma

IRAN

News / Developments

The eighth round of talks for reinstatement of JCPOA started on 27th Dec on a cautiously hopeful note. There is however no direct talk between US and Iran. A new joint document that incorporates key Iranian demands such as guarantees and verification on the lifting of sanctions has been included in the talks.

Meanwhile the aggressive posturing continues. Iran fired missiles of various ranges varying from 350 to 2000 kms during an exercise. It also launched a simultaneous target attack using multiple drones.

Comments. The eight rounds of talks are possibly the last rounds of talks towards reinstatement of the talks. Very soon the progress of the talks would be known. All the sides involved have taken aggressive stance particularly Israel, Iran and US. US has also engaged with Israel to arrive at a workable option for the nuclear deal.

AFGHANISTAN

News / Development.

News on expected lines emerge from Afghanistan. There are more impositions on women, free media is almost nonexistent and Taliban has now dissolved the election panel quoting it was not required. All when there is a serious humanitarian crisis looming with people struggling for food.

Meanwhile, the United Nations Security Council has unanimously adopted a resolution proposed by the United States that facilitates humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, while keeping funds out of the Taliban hands. The resolution passed states that “payment of funds, other financial assets or economic resources, and the provision of goods and services necessary to ensure the timely delivery of such assistance or to support such activities is permitted”. Pakistan also hosted delegations from OIC to discuss modalities of transferring humanitarian aid to Afghanistan without strengthening Taliban.

Comments. The Taliban led rule in Afghanistan is now more than three months old. There has been no concrete assurance from Taliban that they are different from their previous version and face isolation from the world for engaging. The world is also struggling to keep up humanitarian aid to Afghanistan without empowering Taliban.

The current state of Afghani populace is dependent on foreign aid. If it continues the current way Afghanistan would face a civil war like situation which would create a refugee nightmare for the world and in particular Pakistan. India too would be affected by the same.

ASEAN

Gp Capt Puneet Bhalla

INDONESIA

U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken took his maiden tour of Asia, commencing 13 December. He visiting Indonesia and Malaysia, before cutting short his visit on 15 December (cancelling his visit to Thailand) owing to a member of his delegation testing positive to Covid-19. During his visit to Jakarta, Indonesia, while reiterating Biden administration’s commitment to deepening its ties with Indonesia, he also laid out his vision for America’s future role in the Indo-Pacific region. He discussed economic aspects, including funding for infrastructure projects.

Addressing an audience at University of Indonesia to lay out his vision for America’s Indo-Pacific policy, he reiterated the importance of rules based international order criticizing China’s expansive South China Sea maritime claims as being inconsistent with international law, noting it threatened more than \$3 trillion in annual trade and is a cause

of growing concern. Blinken also criticized China's other aggressive actions noting, "That's why there is so much concern – from Northeast Asia to Southeast Asia and from the Mekong River to the Pacific Islands – about Beijing's aggressive actions." "Claiming open seas as their own. Distorting open markets through subsidies to its state-run companies. Denying the exports or revoking deals for countries whose policies it does not agree with."

He informed of the U.S. aim to reinvigorate treaty alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand. He also highlighted deepening cooperation between allies in the region, in forums such as the U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral relationship, the AUKUS security pact with Australia and the United Kingdom, and the Quad, which involves Japan, India, and Australia, in order to preserve a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

On the economic front, Blinken noted that the Biden administration is putting together a Comprehensive Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, a patchwork of policy initiatives that will include trade, the digital economy, resilient supply chains, technology, decarbonization and clean energy, as well as infrastructure. He assured that the "Biden administration's ASEAN Centrality policy will include the U.S. government becoming more involved in commerce by identifying opportunities American companies aren't finding on their own and make it easier for them to bring their expertise and capital to new places and new sectors." Before cancelling meetings in Thailand, he voiced concerns about the worsening situation in Myanmar, even hinting at sanctions against the country.

There have been unconfirmed reports about a planned U.S.-ASEAN leaders' summit at the White House, planned for end January.

Comments. The U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's visit to the region has followed those by U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and U.S. State Department Counsellor Derek Chollett. It reflects Southeast Asia's importance to the Indo-Pacific region, and the critical role that ASEAN plays in determining the region's future. It has been meant to emphasise the important role of alliances and partnerships in maintaining a U.S.-led security order in Asia, as the Biden administration renews its focus on the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. is also making attempts at gaining an economic influence in the region, which is seen as an important shift from its traditional security-centric U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia.

The visit can be seen as another move in the intensifying U.S. – China competition, as Indo-Pacific and South China Sea become global hotspots. The Secretary's hinted remarks against China are important indicators to current U.S.-China relations and their near-future trajectory.

ASEAN countries are looking at more peaceful competition between the two major powers and at benefiting from healthy competition between the U.S. and China in terms of infrastructure and investment.

The visit and the promises have been received positively but also with some skepticism, based on the U.S.' previous records on delivery in this region and its recent inconsistencies in foreign policy.

PHILLIPINES

India and Philippines are close to finalising a deal for Indian export of Brahmos to the SE Asian country. The “government-to-government deal” had earlier suffered a setback due to Covid related budgetary limitations in Philippines. The country has now set aside funds for the planned acquisition of the shore-based, anti-ship missile system.

Comments. India has been increasing its strategic presence within ASEAN and the deal is an important step to bolster these measures through defence dealings. This defence hardware procurement follows the India-Philippines joint naval exercise in the South China Sea in August 2021. These are important measures for the Philippines, which has been making efforts at enhancing its naval capability through purchases and collaborations in response to its territorial dispute with China over the South China Sea.

EURASIA

Air Cmde T Chand (Retd)

India-Central Asia Dialogue: Third Meeting. India-Central Asian Republics (CARs) relations seem to be on the upswing. At the time when Pakistan was hurriedly conducting the meeting of the OIC Representatives, Central Asian Republics’ Foreign Minister chose to participate in the India- Central Asia Dialogue Meeting held in New Delhi³. Foreign Ministers of all the five CARs (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) attended the meeting held on 19 December 2021. The meeting was chaired by the Indian Foreign Minister⁴. Indian External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar met all five of his counterparts bilaterally and jointly and highlighted the need to work on 4cs-commerce, capacity enhancement, connectivity, and contact⁵. All the Foreign Ministers called on the PM of India expressing satisfaction about the issues discussed.

Main Issues of discussion were Afghanistan situation, terrorism in the region and need for improved connectivity.

While discussing the current situation in Afghanistan and its impact on the region, the Ministers reiterated strong support for a peaceful, secure and stable Afghanistan while emphasizing the respect for sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity and non-interference in its internal affairs. The Ministers reaffirmed the importance of UNSC Resolution 2593 (2021) which unequivocally demands that Afghan territory not be used for sheltering, training, planning or financing terrorist acts and called for concerted action against all terrorist groups. While taking note of the outcome document of the Delhi Regional Security Dialogue of 10 November 2021, Ministers noted that there is a broad ‘regional consensus’ on the issues related to Afghanistan, which includes formation of a truly representative and inclusive government, combating terrorism and drug trafficking, central role of the UN, providing immediate humanitarian assistance for the Afghan people and preserving the rights of women, children and other national ethnic groups⁶.

³ “When Islamabad tried to misuse OIC meet, New Delhi used Central Asia meet for collective efforts in Afghanistan” 22 December 2021. IGMP- Times Now. <https://www.theigmp.org/2021/12/when-islamabad-tried-to-misuse-oic-meet-new-delhi-used-central-asia-meet-for-collective-efforts-in-afghanistan.html>. 30 December 2021.

⁴ Ministry of External Affairs Govt of India, “Joint Statement of the 3rd meeting of the India-Central Asia Dialogue” 19 December 2021, Media Centre, http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34705/Joint_Statement_of_the_3rd_meeting_of_the_IndiaCentral_Asia_Dialogue. 30 December 2021.

⁵ “Third India-Central Asia Dialogue 2021”, 31 December 2021, *Diplomacy and Beyond*, <https://diplomacybeyond.com/third-india-central-asia-dialogue-2021/>. 31 December 2021.

⁶ *ibid*

The Ministers condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and reiterated that providing safe haven, using terrorist proxies for cross-border terrorism, terror financing, arms and drugs trafficking, dissemination of a radical ideology and abuse of cyber space to spread disinformation and incite violence, goes against the basic principles of humanity and international relations. They stressed that perpetrators, organizers, financiers and sponsors of terrorist acts must be held accountable. They called on the international community to strengthen UN-led global counter-terrorism cooperation and fully implement the relevant UNSC resolutions, Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and FATF standards⁷. The Ministers also emphasized that interaction in the fields of defence and security constitutes an important element of India- Central Asia cooperation. In this regard, they noted the importance of holding regular consultations among the National Security Councils of India and the Central Asian countries in the fight against terrorism and other emerging challenges in the region.

The Ministers emphasized the importance of use of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) as well as Ashgabat Agreement on International Transport and Transit Corridor to enhance connectivity between India and the Central Asian countries stressing that connectivity initiatives should be based on the principles of transparency, broad participation, local priorities, financial sustainability and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries. They welcomed the proposal to include Chabahar Port within the framework of INSTC. India welcomed the interest of Central Asian countries to utilize the services of Indian developed Terminal at Chabahar Port for facilitating their trade with India and beyond⁸.

Other important issues discussed were:-

- While discussing the ongoing Central Asia-India cooperation in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic, the Foreign Ministers of Central Asian countries appreciated India's assistance in supply of vaccines and essential medicines during their fight against Covid-19.
- Important role of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme in capacity building and human resource development of CARs, especially in Information Technology and Communication Skills in the English language was discussed. India offered to increase the number of ITEC slots as per the requirements of the Central Asian countries and also organize customized training programmes in India for the professionals from the Central Asian countries in the fields of counter-terrorism, cyber security, space and energy.
- Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan stressed on the importance of TAPI gas pipeline project.
- The Foreign Minister of Kyrgyz Republic sought support of other Ministers for their proposal to declare 2022 as the International Year of Sustainable Mountain Development.
- The Ministers underlined that the SCO plays a constructive role in securing peace and sustainable development, advancing regional cooperation and mutual trust.

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ *ibid*

- The Ministers expressed appreciation for support to each other in the UN and other multilateral fora including SCO and CICA. India highlighted the role of International Solar Alliance (ISA) initiative in collective, rapid and massive deployment of solar energy.
- The Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Central Asian countries reiterated support of their countries for permanent membership of India in an expanded and reformed UN Security Council. They welcomed the ongoing non-permanent tenure of India in the UNSC and its priorities.

At a time when CARs are being paid extra attention by countries like China, Russia, Turkey and Iran, the outcomes of the third meeting of the India-CARs Dialogue are significant and noteworthy. CARs are also under heavy Chinese debt and are looking for alternative sources of partnership. Complementarity of interest between India and the CARs is likely to be addressed further with the connectivity facilitation through several Indian initiatives which are now beginning to show positive results.

SPACE

Gp Capt GD Sharma, VSM (Retd)

China filed a complaint to the United Nations, saying Chinese astronauts aboard the country's space station had to take emergency action earlier this year to avoid colliding with satellites launched by SpaceX, the company founded by billionaire Elon Musk.

The two Star link satellites had come close to the space station in July and October, Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said Tuesday in Beijing. At the time, Chinese astronauts were conducting missions on the station, which had to adopt emergency measures to avoid collisions, he said.⁹

Comments. At present, a crew of two men and one woman are located on the Chinese space station Tiangong for a six-month mission. It possibly had a near miss with Starlink satellites of Ellen Musk who it is stated would launch 2000 satellites in the near earth orbit to provide high speed internet across the world particularly targeting the un-served areas. Many private entities across the world including China are trying to reap the economic benefit of the space by providing services on demand. According to one recent report, Chinese entities themselves will launch in near future a mega-constellation of nearly 13000 satellites, the project it seems would be used as a tool for soft power, as part of the Belt and Road Initiative or diplomacy efforts in nearby regions.¹⁰ Already Star link, Web 1 and Amazon are planning large number of satellite launches, in time to come other space faring nations too would jump the band wagon to earn from the economic opportunity which has opened up by the space. All this would contribute to heavy traffic in already congested near-earth orbits. So while space has opened a new horizon which can be exploited for the benefit of the mankind by providing plethora of services at the competitive rates to the subscribers, The increased traffic has also enhanced the threats to the safety of the satellites and may be what one would experience accidents just like one sees on the earth if left to go on unregulated.

The main reason for this predicament that unlike the Geostationary orbits, no allocation of the slot is done by ITU for orbits at lower orbits which are managed at the national

⁹<https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-lodges-complaint-after-alleged-near-miss-with-elon-musks-spacex-satellites-11640704035>

¹⁰<https://spacenews.com/china-is-developing-plans-for-a-13000-satellite-communications-megaconstellation/>

level by the National space control centres with just an intimation to the United Nation. This is because that. Geostationary slots are a rare resource and are assigned to countries by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) since they are mainly used for communications and broadcasting, and need de-confliction both in frequency allocation (to reduce interference) and in collision avoidance. It is thus desirable to have international regulatory frame work for safe exploitation of the space at all altitudes.