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GEO-STRATEGIC SCAN

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U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy Showing Results, Ratner Tells Congress

<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3466082/us-indo-pacific-strategy-showing-results-ratner-tells-congress/>

The Defense Department is clear-eyed about the challenge to the international rules-based order from the People's Republic of China, Ely Ratner, Assistant Secretary of Defence for Indo-Pacific security affairs told the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party on July 20, 2023. Ratner testified before the committee alongside his counterparts from the State and Commerce departments.

COMMENTS

Under the US Secretary of Defence, Lloyd Austin, the US Department of Defence (DoD) has six dedicated Assistant Secretaries looking after major geopolitical issues viz. Defense for Homeland Defense and Hemispheric Affairs; Indo-Pacific Security Affairs; International Security Affairs; Space Policy; Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict; and Strategies, Plans and Capabilities.

Dr. Ely Ratner is the Assistant Secretary of Defence looking after Indo-Pacific Security Affairs. He has earlier served as the Director, DoD China Task Force and as a Senior Advisor to China to the Secretary of DoD. Before DoD, he was the Executive Vice President and Director of Studies at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), dedicated towards managing the agenda and staff.

Considering the potential the importance of potential threat that China has been posing to US dominance on the global on global stage, the US has formed a Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on January 10 this year. The goal of this Committee is to focus on the economic and military challenges posed by the CCP. In view of the fast evolving geo-strategic equations, the US considers China to be a significant challenge. Ratner during the briefing to this Select Committee on July 20, 2023, briefed that the US DOD has put in place strategies, doctrines, policies and resources to counter China and, "these efforts are starting to deliver in meaningful ways."

The US has always been a strong proponent of its vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific. President Joe Biden during the Quad Leaders summit on September 24, 2021 had announced that, "Nations-and indeed the world-depends on a free and open Indo-Pacific enduring and flourishing in the decades ahead." The complete US approach to Indo-Pacific has been encapsulated in its document titled, "Indo-Pacific Strategy' released in February 2022. In close coordination with its allies and partners, the US has decided to steer five major objectives in the Indo-Pacific, viz. advance a free and open Indo-Pacific; build connections within and beyond the region; drive regional prosperity; bolster Indo-Pacific security; and build regional resilience to transnational threats.



Source: Reuters

Enhanced military and diplomatic level engagements of US with its allies in the region, especially in the past two years in the Indo-Pacific indicates a renewed initiative to fine tune deterrence posture by strengthening war fighting capabilities in collaboration with its allies. This also includes sharing of certain critical technologies considered path breaking in the field of war fighting like AI, ML, Quantum technologies, big data analytics and stealth etc.

The region has been witnessing an increase in the number of bilateral and multilateral exercises, prolonged deployment of stand-off combat resources. The ongoing Exercise Malabar (August 11 to 23) is being hosted for the first time by Australia. It is meant to fortify defence and strategic ties between the navies of the US, Japan, Australia and India. Australia has on April 24, 2023 published its Indo Pacific strategy in its Defence Strategic Review- emphasizing on regional engagements between like minded nations. This review also accords significant importance to India in the regional calculus.

Out of the total US Defence Budget of \$ 813 billion, a fair amount of budget is devoted towards missile defence, specifically they have earmarked \$ 6.1 billion for spending in Indo-Pacific on new missile warning and tracking architecture; integrated fire plans, command and control management software suites for information sharing and training among its regional allies; and specific funding for Defense of Guam. The US has been concerned about the vulnerability of Guam of the Guam Island especially during various exercises by China and North Korea. Guam is being equipped with a most potent Air Defence system in the form of Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) battery. There is also a great effort to integrate sensors and interceptors from South Korea, Japan and Australia and Canada. The US at its own end is also accelerating and prioritising research to develop and deploy niche technologies like hypersonic, artificial intelligence, stealth etc.

The Indo-Pacific is emerging as a region of powerplay between the US and China with the US allies UK, Japan, South Korea, Australia, France and other European countries assuming a bigger role in this region's geopolitics. India is emerging as a significant player in the region. It is a good opportunity for India to leverage its geographic location with like minded friendly nations and enhance its operational capabilities through mutual bilateral and multilateral exercises; acquiring certain critical military hardware; long term logistics arrangements; and exchange of technology especially in the niche fields.

Russia-Ukraine Conflict: A Glance

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2. *Newsweek*: <https://www.newsweek.com/ukraine-faces-decades-long-battle-unexploded-russian-mines>, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-missile-attack-black-sea-kalibr-shahed-drones>, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-ukraine-crimea-bridge-damage-storm-shadow-counteroffensive>.
3. *THE REUTERS*: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/moscows-vnukovo-airport-suspends-flights-due-suspected-drone-2023-08-11>
4. *Deccan Herald*: <https://www.deccanherald.com/world/russia-vows-to-punish-ukraine-for-attack-on-civilian-tanker-near-crimean-bridge-1244103.html>
5. *The Wall Street Journal*: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/with-china-attending-ukraine-peace-discussions-inch-forward>
6. *Federation of Defence Democracies*: <https://fdd-new.cmail20.com/t/r-e-tthidkdl-buydheykh-y/>

UKRAINIAN COUNTEROFFENSIVE

Kinetic War. A Russian warship was seriously damaged in an overnight Ukrainian naval drone attack on August 04, 2023, at Russia's Black Sea navy base at Novorossiysk, after Russia said it had fended off the attack. The civilian port temporarily halted all ship movement before resuming normal operations. Russia said on August 05, 2023, that it would punish Ukraine for using a sea drone to attack a civilian tanker near the Kerch Strait. Ukraine fired NATO Storm Shadow missiles at the Chonhar Bridge on August 06, 2023, which links the Russian-controlled Crimean peninsula with Ukraine's contested southern Kherson region. The Ukrainian attack follows heavy Russian missile and drone strikes across Ukraine. On August 13, 2023, the Ukrainian military struck a pair of bridges Russia uses to supply its forces in southern Ukraine. These strikes may cause a more significant disruption to Russian logistics.

Despite not having overwhelming air superiority and firepower, fresh attacks in and around Bakhmut and western Zaporizhia have partially liberated some territory from Russian control. Ukrainian forces claimed to have liberated around 50 percent of the territory occupied by Moscow's troops since February 2022. Anti-personnel and anti-vehicle mines, boobytraps, improved explosive devices (IEDs), and unexploded munitions are among the dangers facing advancing Ukrainian soldiers and emergency workers. The Ukrainian government has identified around 170,000 square kms of potentially contaminated land. Kyiv has set a target to clear 80 percent of contaminated land within ten years.



Source: WBUR

RUSSIAN OFFENSIVE

The night before the bridge strikes, Russia had launched a massive attacks in two days using Kalibr sea-launched cruise missile, Iranian-made Shahed Drone, Kh101 and Kh-555 cruise missiles, three Kinzhal hypersonic missiles over the Caspian Sea, becoming a new focus for both Moscow as well as Kyiv. Russia appeared to have hit a few targets on the Starokonstantinov base, home to Su-24M(R) aircraft that launched Storm Shadow and SCALP-EG missiles. Russian air defences downed a Ukrainian drone as it flew towards an unspecified target in Moscow, the defence ministry said on August 12, 2023, the latest in a flurry of drone attacks on the Russian capital.

Russia's lower house of parliament voted to raise the maximum age of conscription from 27 to 30. The legislation, which would also ban men leaving Russia after being summoned to a conscription office, still needs to be approved by the upper house and Russia's president, Vladimir Putin. Last year, Russia announced plans to increase its armed forces by around a third to 1.5m. Russian drones damaged a Ukrainian port in Izmail, a city on the Danube River near the border with Romania. In July, Russia withdrew from an agreement allowing Ukraine to export grain across the Black Sea. Russia plans to cut oil exports by 3 lakh barrels daily in September.

Peace Talks. Saudi Arabia led peace talks for a durable and fair peace settlement to the war in Ukraine inched forward on August 12, 2023, attended by 42 countries, including the US, China, India, and Ukraine. Russia was not invited for these talks. The Saudi initiative on the peace plan did not gain any success.

COMMENTS

In the initial phase, it has used smaller infantry units to fight the Russian artillery, anti-tank missiles, loitering munitions, and minefields. Ukrainian troops, have incorporated NATO fighting style into their armed forces along with Western equipment, like U.S.-provided tanks and armoured vehicles. Russian forces have made no major headway along the front lines but are entrenched in heavily mined areas they control, making it difficult for Ukrainian troops to move east and south. Up to May 2023, only the territory of Ukraine and the territories seized by Russia were the targets of drone attacks. Now, the next escalation level of the conflict is being felt. The fact that such activity is beginning to spread geographically in Crimea and Moscow shows that Ukraine will employ long-range weaponry to launch more extensive attacks deep into the Russian territory to cut off Russian supply routes. Drone strikes on Moscow and Russian patrol boats in the Black Sea and Storm Shadow / SCALP missiles have been used to strike air bases and ammunition depots to damage the logistics network. The outcome of Ukraine's counteroffensive will significantly impact what happens in Russia in the upcoming months. Only dialogue and diplomacy can halt the current Russia-Ukraine war, which, unlike other previous conflicts, has a global impact in the form of higher food & fuel prices and increased inflation.

Bangladesh Explores to Join RCEP Eyeing Trade in Indo-Pacific Region

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/bangladesh-explores-to-join-rcep-eyeing-trade-in-indo-pacific-region/articleshow/102411302.cms>

India's Eastern neighbour Bangladesh is exploring to join Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), eyeing to be part of the trade bloc in the Indo-Pacific region. The Bangladesh Ministry of Commerce is expected to send by September a formal proposal to the depository and temporary secretariat of the world's largest trade bloc at the ASEAN Headquarters for the country's membership, Financial Express of Bangladesh reported quoting local sources. The decision to join the forum emerged from a workshop on the issue in Dhaka this Tuesday. Participants in the workshop expressed their opinion in favour of signing a Free-Trade Agreement with the RCEP members with an eye to facing post-graduation challenges. They viewed that the commercial and strategic importance of Bangladesh will get a boost in regional and international environment, if Bangladesh joins the bloc. A study conducted last year by Bangladesh Trade and Tariff Commission showed Bangladesh's trade with RCEP member countries mostly concentrated on trade in goods. Bangladesh's export may grow 17 per cent and Gross Domestic Product 0.26 percent, if a free-trade agreement is signed with the bloc members, it mentioned.



Source: South Asian Monitor

COMMENTS

RCEP is a free trade agreement among the Asia-Pacific nations of Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Myanmar, Laos, Malaysia, South Korea, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The 15 member countries account for about 30% of the world's population (2.2 billion people) and 30% of global GDP (\$29.7 trillion), making it the largest trade bloc in history

·Signed in November 2020, RCEP is the first free trade agreement among the largest economies in Asia, including China, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea. Bangladesh currently enjoys preferential market access to many of the RCEP Countries, either through Preferential Trade Agreement or through Generalised System of Preferences facilities. Bangladesh formally joining RCEP Countries will enhance the economic, commercial and strategic relevance of Bangladesh.

Myanmar Junta Extends State of Emergency Forcing Delay to Elections

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/31/myanmar-junta-extends-state-of-emergency-forcing-delay-to-elections>

- Myanmar's military controlled government has extended the state of emergency it imposed when the army seized power from an elected government in 2021, forcing a further delay in elections it promised when it took over. MRTV television said the National Defence and Security Council (NDSC) met on Monday in the capital, Naypyidaw and extended the state of emergency for another six months starting on Tuesday, because time is needed to prepare for the elections. The NDSC is nominally a constitutional government body, but in practice is controlled by the military. The announcement amounted to an admission that the army does not exercise enough control to stage the polls and has failed to subdue widespread opposition to military rule, which includes increasingly challenging armed resistance as well as non violent protests and civil disobedience, despite the army having a huge advantage in manpower and weapons.
- As of Monday, 3,857 people have been killed by the security forces since the takeover, according to a tally kept by the Independent Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. Monday's report did not specify when the polls might be held, saying only that they would occur after the goals of the state of emergency are accomplished.

COMMENTS

Myanmar declared emergency on 01 February 2021, when troops arrested Aung San Suu Kyi and top officials from her government and members of her National League for Democracy Party. The takeover reversed years of progress toward democracy after five decades of military rule in Myanmar. The army takeover has been met with widespread peaceful protests, which Myanmar Security Forces suppressed with lethal force, triggering armed resistance that UN experts have described as a civil war. Myanmar's 2008 Constitution enacted by its Military allows the Military to rule the country under a state of emergency for one year, with two possible six month extensions, if preparations are not yet completed for new polls, according to which the time limit expired on 31 January 2023. However, the NDSC had allowed the military government to extend emergency rule for another six months in February and the announcement on Monday is the fourth extension. The state of emergency allows the military to assume all government functions, giving the head of the ruling military council, legislative, judicial and executive powers. Since there is no commitment by the Myanmar Government when the polls might be held, the prevailing security situation in Myanmar is likely to continue in the times ahead.

At Least 44 Killed In Suicide Attack At Pakistan Rally

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/30/deadly-bomb-blast-at-political-rally-in-northwest-pakistan>

Attack in northwestern Bajaur district kills at least 44 people and wounds nearly 200 others, according to local officials.

COMMENTS

A blast took place, on 30 July 2023, during a political rally of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F) party being conducted outside Khar in Bajaur district of northwestern Pakistan bordering Afghanistan which claimed the lives of 44 people and injured almost 200. The death toll was later reported to have risen to 56. The blast was caused by a suicide bomber triggering of 10 kg of explosives in his vest. The suicide blast claimed the life of the leader of JUI-F, Maulana Ziaullah Jan amongst others. ISIS has claimed the responsibility for the blast. Via its Amaq agency, ISIS issued a statement that the bombing “comes in the natural context of the ongoing war waged by the Islamic State against ‘democracy’ as a regime hostile to true Islam and in conflict with its divine law”.^[1] There has been a sharp rise in the militant activities and attack in areas of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan since the time Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in 2021 and the Pakistan government has time and again accused the Taliban government of inaction against Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) which it claims is responsible for the activities. However, in this case even TTP came out condemning the bombing which as per them was aimed at turning Islamists against each other.

Little-Known Kakar Sworn In As Pakistan's PM To Oversee Elections

<https://www.deccanherald.com/world/little-known-kakar-sworn-in-as-pakistans-pm-to-oversee-elections-2647345>

Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar, a little-known politician who is believed to be close to the military, was sworn in as Pakistan's caretaker prime minister on Monday (14 Aug 2023) to oversee national elections as the country navigates political and economic crises.

COMMENTS

The National Assembly of Pakistan was dissolved by President Arif Alvi on 10 Aug 2023 formally on the recommendation of the outgoing PM Shebaz Sharif. The National Assembly was dissolved three days before the completion of its mandated tenure. Senator Anwaarul-ul-Haq Kakar was subsequently sworn in as the caretaker PM of the country. His name was mutually agreed upon by Shehbaz Sharif and the leader of the opposition party. However, the coalition ally of the PML-N, the Balochistan National Party - Mengal (BNL-M) expressed their reservation over the appointment as they were not consulted in the matter. He will now appoint a cabinet to run the neutral caretaker government till the next elections.

^[1] <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/south-asia/pakistan-bomb-blast-isis-taliban-b2384786.html>

Kakar is an ethnic Pashtun hailing from Balochistan's southwestern province and was a senator in the upper house of the Parliament and member of the Balochistan Awami Party (BAP). However, before swearing-in as the caretaker PM, Kakar resigned as senate member and from the BAP. Kakar is believed to be very close to the country's powerful military establishment and it is possible that his appointment has something to do with the fact. The Pakistani military has always played a huge and powerful role in the politics of the country and this goes on to highlight the fact further despite them not ruling the country directly now.



Source: Deccan Herald

The early dissolution extends the period, within which General Elections are required to be held, from 60 days in case of completion of full tenure of the National Assembly to 90 days. However, it seems very unlikely that the election would be held within this period as the Election Commission of Pakistan needs to rework the boundaries for the many federal and provincial constituencies which is a humongous task. So, in all likelihood, the tenure of the caretaker setup is going to extend beyond 90 days giving more time to the military institution to further strengthen its stranglehold further.

Nawaz Sharif To Be Pak PM If Ruling Party Returns To Power: Shehbaz Sharif

<https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/nawaz-sharif-to-be-pak-pm-if-ruling-party-returns-to-power-shehbaz-sharif-4254965>

Nawaz Sharif, who has been living in self-imposed exile in London since 2019, will return to Pakistan in the next few weeks, said Shehbaz Sharif.

COMMENTS

The outgoing premier of Pakistan, Shehbaz Sharif, has been saying that his brother and the supremo of the Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N), Nawaz Sharif is likely to return to Pakistan in the coming weeks and asserted that Nawaz Sharif will be the next PM of Pakistan if PML-N comes to power again in the coming general elections. In 2018, the Supreme Court of Pakistan gave a verdict in the Panama Papers case which deemed Nawaz Sharif ineligible to hold any public office for life.

He was also given a seven-year jail term in the Al-Azizia Mills corruption case. However, in 2019, Nawaz Sharif proceeded on a four-week bail to London for seeking medical treatment and has been living in self-imposed exile in London ever since. In June this year, the Pakistan National Assembly Sunday passed an amendment to a law [Supreme Court (Review of Judgments and Orders) Act 2023] resulting in putting a limit of maximum five years to the disqualification of parliamentarians. Based on this amendment, Shebaz Sharif says that Nawaz Sharif can now be elected as the PM. However, the Supreme Court has struck down the amendment calling it unconstitutional. This again puts a question mark on Nawaz Sharif's eligibility to serve as the PM of Pakistan for the fourth time.

China And Pakistan Celebrate 10th Anniversary Of CPEC, Laud Benefits

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202307/1295392.shtml>

China and Pakistan are celebrating the 10th anniversary of the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and also the 10th anniversary of the launch of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a BRI flagship project, and analysts said that the CPEC, which has helped with Pakistan's economic and social development, will bring more benefits to local people as the two countries further deepen cooperation.



Source: Pakistan Observer

COMMENTS

CPEC, having been announced in 2013, completed its 10 years and Pakistan and China celebrated the 10th anniversary of the project with a series of celebratory events. The Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng visited Pakistan to mark the occasion. As per the country's analysts, the CPEC, which is a flagship project of the BRI, has helped immensely in the economic as well as social development of Pakistan and has helped develop the vital infrastructure, industrial zones, energy projects and has brought an improvement to Pakistani livelihoods.

As per the Pakistan government, investments worth more than USD 25 billion have taken place in various sectors such as road infrastructure, power and hydel, and public transport and its second phase will see investments in agriculture and IT sectors. China and Pakistan signed six agreements and MOUs on the anniversary which include those on Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) of CPEC, establishment of an Expert Exchange Mechanism within the framework of CPEC, export of dried chillies from Pakistan to China, realignment of the Karakoram Highway Phase II project feasibility study, Industrial Workers' Exchange Programme through diplomatic channels and to promote the strategic ML-1 rail upgradation project.

However, India has objected to the CPEC project because it passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. The BRI is viewed by other countries not involved and interested in the project as a Chinese attempt to extend its influence beyond its borders and to increase its global presence in the form of China funded infrastructure projects. The BRI is also seen as a Chinese way of investing in smaller countries causing them to fall prey to its debt trap and thereby forcing them to give control of some crucial resources or strategic locations to China as has been the case with the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka. In Pakistan too, the people in Balochistan are not happy with the various CPEC projects in Gwadar including the port as they have not benefited from them. It has not resulted in any substantial employment opportunities for the locals and has, moreover, resulted in loss of livelihood to the fishermen and to the boating sector.

A New Ship For Pakistan Navy Launched At Karachi

<https://news360.tv/en/forces/a-new-ship-for-pakistan-navy-launched-at-karachi/>

Karachi, 02 Aug 23: Launching ceremony of PN MILGEM Class Ship PNS TARIQ (Desig) was held at Karachi Shipyard & Engineering Works (KS&EW). Honourable Prime Minister of Islamic Republic of Pakistan Mian Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif graced the occasion as Chief Guest. Vice president Republic of Turkiye H.E Mr. Cevdet Yilmaz also attended the ceremony as Guest of Honour.

COMMENTS

The Ministry of Defence Production, Pakistan and M/s ASFAT (Turkey) signed a contract for construction of four MILGEM class ships for the Pakistan Navy in 2018, two being constructed at Istanbul Naval Shipyard and the other two at Karachi Shipyard & Engineering Works, Karachi. The deliveries are expected to be made at six months interval starting August 2023. The ships are expected to be capable of performing roles such as air defence, anti-submarine warfare, surface-to-surface warfare, surveillance and reconnaissance and add to the combat power of the Pakistan Navy. This also adds to the inhouse ship building capability of Pakistan. Though the exact configuration of the ships is not known, these MILGEM class ships are expected to be propelled by one LM2500 gas turbine in combined diesel and gas turbine configuration with two diesel engines.



Source: Defence Turkey Magazine

They are expected to be fitted with MBDA's Albatross NG air defence system and Harbah anti-ship and land attack missiles. The ship is likely to have a max speed of 31 knots, a range of 3500 nautical miles and an endurance of 15 days at sea. The Pakistan Navy is in the process of capability enhancement having added two frigates of Chinese origin to its fleet last month.

Pakistan Cabinet Approves Signing Of Security Pact With US: Report

https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/pakistan-cabinet-approves-signing-of-security-pact-with-us-report/articleshow/102383630.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

Through a circulation summary, the Cabinet gave its seal of approval to sign the Communication Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement, known as the CIS-MOA, between Pakistan and the US, The Express Tribune newspaper reported.

COMMENTS



Source: Pakistan Daily

Pakistan and the US have signed a new security pact. This means that the defence cooperation between the two countries which had gone dormant as a result of mistrust between the two has revived. This indicates that now Pakistan may find new ways to get military equipment from the United States. No official announcement, however, has been made by either side regarding the pact. The CIS-MOA was first signed between the two countries for 15 years in October 2005, thus having expires in 2020. As has been reported, "The CIS-MOA is a foundational agreement that the US signs with its allies and countries with which it wants to maintain close military and defence ties. It also provides legal cover to the US Department of Defence for ensuring the sale of military equipment and hardware to other countries".[1] A one time close ally of the US, Pakistan had lost much of its significance lately to the US with the changing world order and because of other incidents. The strategic ties between the US and India have been strengthening in view of the growing significance of India in the world in general and in the Global South in particular and also the strategic alignment in the Chinese perspective. However, this development of US and Pakistan signing the agreement does raise concerns for India.

[2]<https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/pakistan-gives-nod-to-security-pact-with-us-report20230804001932/>

China's Top Option For Next Naval Base Is SL, US Uni Report Says

https://www.dailymirror.lk/worldnews/top_story/Chinas-top-option-for-next-naval-base-is-Sri-Lanka-report-says/155-264135

Hambantota port is the most likely spot for a base given the \$2.19 billion China has already invested there.

COMMENTS

The researchers at AidData Lab at the College of William & Mary in Virginia have carried out extensive research and collected data on the various ports that China has invested worldwide. As per the research, China has invested close to USD 30 billion in around 78 ports in 46 different countries in the form of loans and grants for their construction or expansion between 2000 and 2021 with most of the projects being contracted by Chinese construction and engineering companies. If only the number of warships is to be considered, China today operates the largest navy in the world and has plans to expand its maritime capabilities, especially as the rivalry between the US and China continues to grow. Currently, China has only one military base overseas in Djibouti in East Africa and it definitely needs more to meet its aim. The Hambantota port of Sri Lanka appears to be the most likely contender to be the second overseas military base of China. The reasons for this are many. China has invested USD 2.19 billion in Hambantota which is probably the most when compared to any other port, owns a 99-year lease to operate it and controls it directly. Hambantota is also strategically located in the Indian Ocean and is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Additionally, China finds favour with the Sri Lankan elite and the populace as well making it easy to get the Sri Lankan government to agree to making it a military base except for objections by India to which Sri Lanka has shown weak response till now. As per an earlier report by the RAND Corporation, Gwadar was the next likely overseas port for the Chinese, however, present conditions favour Hambantota to be the most likely choice.



Source: Bangkok Post

President Wickremesinghe Asks All Lankan Parties To Submit Proposals On 13A To Enable Parliament To Take ‘Final Decision’

<https://theprint.in/world/president-wickremesinghe-asks-all-lankan-parties-to-submit-proposals-on-13a-to-enable-parliament-to-take-final-decision/1707084/>

Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe on Wednesday (09 Ag 2023) said he would fully implement the 13th Amendment to make the system of provincial councils more meaningful by reducing the central government’s powers to curb their functioning, and asked all political parties to submit their proposals on the issue so that the Parliament could take a “final decision”.

COMMENTS

Sri Lanka, under its 1978 Constitution, had a unitary government wherein all powers were held with the centre. The Northern and Eastern provinces were home to the Tamil minority and who fought for greater autonomy and equal rights. This led to the civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. In 1987, Sri Lanka signed the Indo-Sri Lanka Accords with India that required the constitution to be amended so that some power like agriculture, health, etc could be transferred to the nine provinces of the country.



Source: *The Times of India*

This led to the inclusion of the 13th Amendment to allow devolution of power. This would give greater autonomy to the provinces, the land and police powers remaining with the centre while the provinces being able to legislate on matters such as education, agriculture, health, etc. Since then, the 13th Amendment was only implemented partly in that the regions that it was really meant for never saw any devolution of powers. The situation remains the same as the provincial elections remain pending since 2014. During his visit to India last month, the Sri Lankan President promised the Indian Prime Minister to see that the 13th Amendment is implemented in the Northern and Eastern provinces for the benefit of the ethnic Tamil minority.

Malabar Exercise 2023 To Take Place Between August 11-22, Quad Navies To Participate

<https://www.wionews.com/world/malabar-exercise-2023-to-take-place-between-august-11-22-quad-navies-to-participate-593578>

The Quad Summit in Sydney has been cancelled, but the powerful Navies of the United States, India, Australia, and Japan will participate in advanced Malabar 2023 exercises off Australia's east coast from August 11 to 22 this year, practising interoperability, sea deterrence, and sea denial in order to ensure freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific. The complex drills will involve both maritime and harbour stages, with senior Quad navies commanders addressing the Indo-Pacific. The Indian Navy will participate in Malabar 2023 with its top-of-the-line destroyers, P 8i anti-submarine warfare planes, and a submarine, owing to a logistical deal with all three Quad partners. Japan was appointed a permanent partner in 2015, and Australia will join the Quad in 2020, as reported by the Hindustan Times. The main focus of the Naval drill, according to authorities cited by the Hindustan Times, would be anti-submarine warfare operations, with the PLA Navy becoming belligerent in the Indo-Pacific after claiming claims to the whole South China Sea, much to the dismay of ASEAN countries like the Philippines and Indonesia in particular.

COMMENTS

India, Japan, the United States and Australia are holding the Malabar Naval Exercise off the coast of Sydney, the first time the war games have taken place in Australia previously they were held in the Indian Ocean. Japanese and Indian Navy units exercised close to Pacific Island countries Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea on the way to Sydney, this could be a way of highlighting the strategic importance of the region at a time of friction between China and the United States. The exercise is mainly aimed at improving the ability of the four forces to work with each other and enhance the interoperability. The deterrence that the four nations provide as they operate together as a Quad is a foundation for all the other nations operating in this region.



Source: WION

There had been large changes in the world since the United States and India held the first Malabar Exercise in 1992 at the end of the Cold War. Australia dropped out of the so-called Quad in 2008 after protests from China over its participation in Malabar. The Quad was revived and Australia rejoined Malabar in 2020, although China continues to criticise the grouping as an attempt to contain it.

Ships from the four nations are joined by Australian F-35 fighter jets, as well as P-8 surveillance aircraft and submarines. The underwater battlespace is seen to be the front line in terms of competition and potential future conflicts. Malabar is being held off the east coast of Australia, instead of the west coast which faces the Indian Ocean, because ships were nearby after the larger Talisman Sabre exercise involving 13 nations. Keeping in mind Beijing's strategic objective to control the far Pacific with its warships and submarines traversing the first and second chain of islands off its eastern coastline. It is important for the participating nations to enhance interoperability and develop a common grid for countering the Chinese expansion plans in the eastern coast of the Pacific. The PLA has also constructed conventional DF-21 missile parks on its eastern coast to dissuade the formidable US Navy from operating in the South China Sea, and has threatened to employ DF-26 missiles to attack US naval and military sites on Guam. This would further make it necessary for the participating Navies to formulate a counter strategy in the area.



Source: Eurasian Times

Japan's MoD Unveils New Image Of ASEV

<https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/07/japans-mod-unveils-new-image-of-asev/>

In its latest defense white paper, the Japanese Ministry of Defense has unveiled a new image of the Aegis system equipped vessel (ASEV), which appears similar to the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF)'s existing Aegis-equipped destroyers in terms of the shape of the ship and the configuration of the main armament.

COMMENTS

If there is one country which has undergone immense shifts in its security policies within a decade and a half, it is Japan. Starting from re-interpreting its article In its latest defense white paper, the Japanese Ministry of Defense has unveiled a new image of the Aegis system equipped vessel (ASEV), which appears similar to the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF)'s existing Aegis-equipped destroyers in terms of the shape of the ship and the configuration of the main armament.

9 which renounces war, passing of the security legislation to spell out the "Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology" to commence the overseas transfer of defense equipment and technology, Japan's security policies are shedding its defensive defence system to adopt an offensive one.

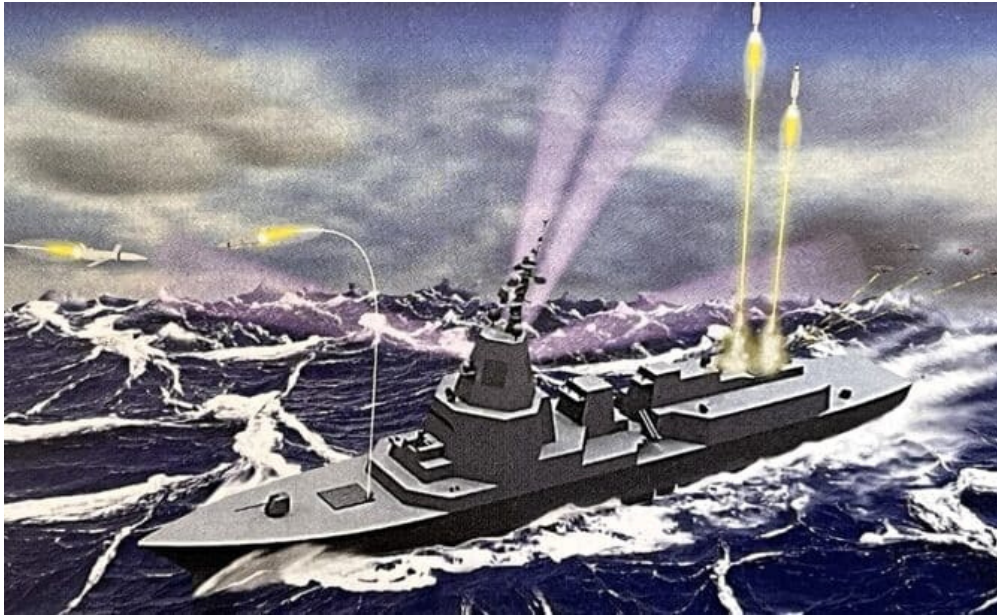
The developments could be seen through increase in its defence budget and acquiring advanced means of warfighting including helicopter carriers, aegis destroyers and advanced submarines.

In its most recent defence white paper, the Japanese Ministry of Defence unveiled a new illustration of the Aegis system equipped vessel (ASEV), which resembles the existing Aegis-equipped destroyers of the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF) in terms of both shape and main armament configuration.

According to a military analyst in Japan, the ASEV mast configuration resembles that of the "Bonifaz-class F110-class frigate" from Spain. He stated:

"Since the F110-class frigate will be outfitted with almost the same SPY-7 system as the ASEV, a decision may have been made to avoid technical adventures as it is difficult to refer to the SPY-1 family of US ships."

Considering these developments in manufacturing of advanced naval vessels, a Japanese defence official stated that the budget request for the succeeding fiscal year 2024 would also make progress.



Source: Naval News

A very significant aspect observed in the manufacturing of the ASEVs is the involvement of Japanese industries like the Mitsubishi Heavy Industries (MHI) and a reduced reliance on the foreign companies. The Ministry of Defence also announced that the second one will be built by the Japan Marine United (JMU). However, the weaponry system will have 128 Vertical Launch System (VLS) cells which will be pre-loaded with SM-3 Block 2A and will be jointly developed by Japan and the US.

In the above backdrop, it can be seen that Japan is also following the model of a strong civil military fusion in its weapon manufacturing sector. According to the reports released by the Ministry of Defence, in the future, Japan may consider equipping the ASEV with the "Glide Phase Interceptor (GPI)", which is currently under development in the United States. The Lockheed Martin SPY-7 radar, which was first purchased for Aegis Ashore, would be installed, and the Aegis system's J7.B version has been updated to incorporate the SPY-7 into Baseline 9 (BL9).

These developments in the defence sector of Japan might potentially benefit India under the former's "Three Principles on Transfer of Defense Equipment and Technology". At their meeting outside the Quad summit in 2022, Japanese PM Fumio Kishida and Indian PM Narendra Modi have already committed to expand bilateral military and security cooperation with a focus on defence production. On August 2022, the Japanese Ambassador Satoshi Suzuki has asserted that Japan may participate in Atmanirbhar Bharat's path through co-development, co-design, and co-manufacturing under the "Make in India" initiative. He listed several areas of cooperation between the two countries, including the construction of submarines and naval ships as well as participation in India's Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) programme. These would also include the materials, parts, and components that go into creating the various platforms. Thus, manufacturing of advanced naval vessels like ASEVs can match India's needs in the defence manufacturing sector.

PM Scorns US-Iran Deal Unfreezing Iranian Assets In Exchange For Release Of Prisoners

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/pm-scorns-us-iran-deal-unfreezing-iranian-assets-in-exchange-for-release-of-prisoners/>

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on 12th August 2023, came out against a tentative deal reached by the US and Iran for the latter to release five American detainees in exchange for the release of several billion dollars in frozen Iranian assets.

COMMENTS

1. Reports allude the deal comes as Iran and the United States appear to be observing an informal agreement under which Iran has restricted its nuclear programme and curbed proxy forces in Iraq and Syria to avert heavy American retaliation. US diplomats maintained that ongoing efforts to rescue detained US citizens are not related to diplomatic negotiations about Iran's nuclear programme. Brokered by Qatar, Oman, and Switzerland, surprisingly, Tehran pledged to use dialogues for settling the nuclear disagreements with other nations.
2. Over the last couple of years, Iran has detained dual citizens under fabricated claims of espionage for Europe or America, efficiently employing them to serve as pawns, highlighting Iran's superior intelligence competence, and forcing the opposing side to release Iran's frozen funds.
3. The funds will be handed over to Qatar and maintained under restricted accounts to be solely accessed for humanitarian needs. Ignoring US restrictions, Iran managed to establish identical accounts in countries that are dependent on Iran's oil imports. Tehran has earlier spent funds stored in Turkey, India, and other countries due to available sanction waivers for humanitarian purposes.
4. Allowance of frozen funds has further sparked internal debates and condemnation in Iran, the US and Israel.

(a) Iran's hardliners are staunchly opposed to making any further compromises to the US outside of the current structure established 2015 nuclear deal. The Governor of the Central Bank of Iran announced that funds maintained by South Korean financial institutions have dropped roughly \$1 billion over the last five years owing to the Won's depreciation versus the US dollar.[1]

(b) The Republicans have slammed the new deal, comparing it to paying ransoms which will motivate Iran to carry out detaining more prisoners in future, since incidents of ship seizures across the Middle East have been frequently carried out by Iran or are likely to increase Iran's aid to Russian aggression in Ukraine. A formal agreement between the two nations will probably need authorization from the US Congress, wherein some Democrats remain sceptical of any attempts to grant financial and political relaxation to Iran. An informal one grants some degree of relaxation to the Biden administration.

[1] Sinaee, M. (2023, August 13). Fierce Debate Rages In Iran After Frozen Funds Are Unblocked. Iran International. <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202308121910>

(c) PM Netanyahu stated that these remedies would not completely demolish Tehran's nuclear facilities to stop its nuclear programme but would instead deliver funds to proxy terror outfits backed by Israel.[2] According to Israeli officials[3], the deal demonstrates that the Biden administration intends to pursue a nuclear containment approach against Iran rather than a military deterrent strategy.

5. Iran presently holds 83.7% enriched uranium almost close to weapons-grade[4] and has restricted IAEA from monitoring its nuclear installations along with its perpetual breaches of the JCPOA. Reports allude, Iran has dramatically reduced its accumulation of near-weapons-grade enriched uranium, possibly a signal to the US, ahead of a potential restart of the nuclear deal.[5]

Saudi Arabia Appoints Its First Ever Non-Resident Ambassador To Palestine

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/saudi-arabia-appoints-first-envoy-to-palestine-will-also-serve-as-jerusalem-consul/>

Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Jordan presented his credentials on 12th August 2023 to begin also serving as Riyadh's first-ever non-resident ambassador to Palestine, as well as its first-ever non-resident consul general to Jerusalem.



Source: *The Times of Israel*

COMMENTS

Saudi Arabia has traditionally supported the Palestinian cause while avoiding established relations with Israel. Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen reiterated Israel's steadfast opposition to having a diplomatic representation in Jerusalem, underscoring the holy city continues to be restricted for such purposes.

[2]Berman, L. (2023, August 15). US-Iran deal doesn't mean full nuclear pact is next — but it shows Israel's limits. *Times of Israel*. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-iran-deal-doesnt-mean-full-nuclear-pact-is-next-but-it-shows-israels-limits/>

[3]Fassihi, F., & Shear, M. D. (2023, August 11). U.S. Reaches Deal With Iran to Free Americans for Jailed Iranians and Funds. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/10/us/politics/iran-us-prisoner-swap.html>

[4]Ap. (2023, March 1). UN report: Uranium particles enriched to 83.7 per cent found in Iran. *The Economic Times*. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/un-report-uranium-particles-enriched-to-83-7-per-cent-found-in-iran/articleshow/98320443.cms?from=mdr>

[5] ערוץ 7. (n.d.). <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/375443>

The US appears to be pushing for the normalisation of Israel-Saudi ties implying the possibility of a monumental Middle Eastern collaboration. The Israeli administration's unwillingness to offer compromises to the Palestinians in light of a probable Israel-Saudi Arabia normalisation agreement complicates the issue.

If an agreement is reached, it is believed to comprise a three-way arrangement.

(a) Saudi Arabia appears to be looking for a NATO-style partnership that would bind America to respond if Saudi is attacked, provide assistance towards its civilian nuclear programme, and make room for Saudis to purchase sophisticated arms like Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) antiballistic missile defence system to counter Iran's missile programmes.

(b)The Americans expect Saudi to drastically cut its military and commercial reliance on Russia and China and to strengthen the arrangement that ceased the Yemeni civil war.

(c) Israelis have traditionally expressed concerns about the likelihood of repurposing civilian nuclear facilities for military purposes. Israel's FM Cohen views the likelihood [6] of a possible defence pact as a unified move jointly moderate Sunni countries and Israel could serve as a successful deterrent to the Islamic Republic's increasing nuclear ambitions promoting stability, security and peace in the region.

Following US President Joe Biden's Middle East visit in 2022, the Saudi aviation administration declared an allowance for Israeli flights to operate in Saudi airspace. Yet, the royal family subsequently asserted that the use of airspace did not cede towards normalising relations with Israel. Saudi Arabia maintained adhering to the Arab League's decades-old policy of not developing diplomatic relationships with Israel unless the Palestinian crisis is settled. Israel on the other hand, ruled out future physical diplomatic missions from Saudi in Jerusalem, supporting Palestine's objective of establishing an independent nation with a portion of Jerusalem as its capital. Netanyahu's recent tough measures concerning West Bank have suggested little optimism in improving relations between both nations.

[6]Staff, T. (2023, August 9). FM: Saudi deal with US defense pact would make Gulf nuclear ambitions 'unnecessary' Times of Israel. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/fm-saudi-deal-with-us-defense-pact-would-make-gulf-nuclear-ambitions-unnecessary/>

Russia's Defence Minister Inspects Military Preparedness In The Arctic

<https://www.wionews.com/world/russias-defence-minister-inspects-military-preparedness-in-the-arctic-624854>

Russian Defence Ministry said on August 12 that Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu inspected Russian troop and military preparedness in the Arctic "to defend especially important installations" in this strategic zone. The statement from the ministry said that Shoigu was accompanied by Alexey Likhachev, who is the head of state nuclear company Rosatom. Shoigu visited Novaya Zemlya which is in Russia's extreme north. The defence minister also inspected a testing site for nuclear weapons used during the Soviet era, where "advanced tests for military weapons and equipment" were taking place, the defence ministry said, without giving details.

COMMENTS

This preparedness comes right after the western sanctions on Russia and following a joint exercise near Alaska's Aleutian Islands and Bering sea on August 4.[1] Although the 11 Russian and Chinese ships that were involved in the exercise are now moving away . The presence of these vessels led to the deployment of US warships and aircraft to monitor the situation.[2] Furthermore, Russian strategic bombers have conducted normal flights over international Arctic waters, stated the Russian defense ministry on August 14. Russia routinely flies its Tu-160 and Tu-95MS long-range bombers over international waters, both of which are capable of carrying nuclear cruise missiles.[3]

Recent Russian rehabilitation of Soviet-era sites and placing its arsenal and anti-aerial S-400 systems in the area is due to global warming and melting glaciers . The region has significant hydrocarbon deposits and might serve as a vital maritime route between Europe and Asia.[4] The melting sea ice in the Arctic has created a potentially more profitable route, the Arctic Northern Sea Route (NSR), which Russia is reportedly exploring by testing the transportation of crude oil across the Arctic Ocean.[5]

Recently on July 26 China also sent its 13th Arctic Ocean Scientific Expedition Team which successfully conducted the exploration of Chukchi sea which comes right on the edge of the Arctic circle and in between Russia and Alaska[6].

[1] News, A. (2001, August 13). Nearly a dozen Russian and Chinese ships now moving away from Alaska, officials say. ABC News. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/dozen-russian-chinese-ships-now-moving-alaska-officials/story?id=102074925>

[2] Russia's Shoigu inspects Northern Fleet, warships sent to Arctic. (2023, August 12). Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/russias-shoigu-inspects-northern-fleet-warships-sent-arctic-2023-08-12/>

[3] Russian Bombers Fly Over International Waters in Arctic. (2023, August 14). US News & World Report. <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2023-08-14/russian-bombers-fly-over-international-waters-in-arctic>

[4] Western sanctions and distrust draw China, Russia closer in the Arctic. (2023, July 25). South China Morning Post. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3228477/western-sanctions-and-distrust-draw-china-russia-closer-arctic>

[5] News, A. (2001, August 13). Russian and Chinese ships patrolled "near Alaska" but were not "a threat," US officials say. ABC News. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/russian-chinese-ships-patrolled-alaska-threat-us-officials/story?id=102058344>

[6] Pdf View - CENJOWS. (n.d.). Pdf View - CENJOWS. https://cenjows.in/pdf-view/?pID=20843&url=2023/08/Geo_Strategic_Scan_16-31_July_2023.pdf



Source: The Defence Post

The NSR has the potential to provide major advantages by lowering marine distance and freight costs between Europe and northeast Asia. If the endeavour is successful, it will shorten the marine distance between Russia and East Asia by 30% [7] when compared to the Suez route, as well as drastically lower freight costs.

"We see cooperation with Chinese partners in developing the transit potential of the northern sea route as promising," Russian President Vladimir Putin stated in March this year during a meeting with China's leader Xi Jinping in context to the NSR.[8]

Increased commercial conflict from western nations due to uncertain demand for hydrocarbons as the globe turns to green technology, as well as the risk of future Western sanctions has brought the two communist actors together. And these combined Russian and Chinese military activity in the Arctic have direct linkage to the construction of the NSR along Russia's Arctic coastline would allow the Kremlin to expand its energy strategy by ultimately connecting the Russian Arctic to Asian markets, lessening the country's reliance and expanding its trade. Whereas China, which aspires to be a "polar great power" by 2030, has been developing a footing in the region in recent years through scientific research and business relations with Arctic governments, notably Russia. The opening of this passage offers new opportunities for maritime trade and resource exploitation in the region and increased trade between Russia and China.

[7] Ibid

[8] Funairole, Brian Hart, Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., Aidan Powers-Riggs, M. P. (2023, April 18). Frozen Frontiers: China's Great Power Ambitions in the Polar Regions. Frozen Frontiers: China's Great Power Ambitions in the Polar Regions. <https://features.csis.org/hiddenreach/china-polar-research-facility>

India & China To Hold Border Talks Tomorrow Ahead Of Modi-Xi Meet

<https://theprint.in/world/at-brics-nsa-meet-nsa-doval-calls-terrorism-one-of-key-threats-to-national-peace/1686068/>

China and India started a fresh round of military-level border talks on August 14, 2023, only a week before Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi meet in South Africa for the annual BRICS summit, and Xi is slated to visit Delhi for the G20 conference next month. Despite 18 rounds of discussions and four rounds of disengagement, both India and China maintain substantial forces and equipment in eastern Ladakh. The 19th session of military negotiations is part of ongoing efforts to end a three-year standoff along the "Line of Actual Control" (LAC) that began in May 2020 with a fatal confrontation in June 2020. At least 20 Indians and four Chinese were killed in the clash in Galwan Valley, in the eastern Ladakh region along the LAC, in what was their worst border encounter in decades.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval have already met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who took over for Qin Gang last month. Wang has mediated previous border standoffs with India, from Chumar to Doklam, and has been the main negotiator for India-China diplomatic cabinet level negotiations on the current border impasse since 2020. In July, Doval informed Wang that the situation along the LAC had "eroded strategic trust and the public and political basis of the relationship" since 2020.

Lt Gen Rashim Bali, 14 Corps Commander, will lead the Indian delegation. The most recent round of negotiations took place on April 23, just before the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Defence Ministers' meeting. Legacy tension sites along the LAC in eastern Ladakh were discussed, as well as strategies to overcome the trust deficit between the two militaries. Officials stated that confidence-building measures, such as guaranteeing adherence to border regulations, exchanging patrol information to avoid conflicts between forces, and ensuring appropriate communication between ground troops — both along the LAC and in buffer zones — will be examined.



Source: India Posts English

COMMENTS

When Indian and Chinese forces clashed at Doklam in 2017, the two sides terminated the two-and-a-half-month-long impasse only days before Modi and Xi were to meet for the BRICS meeting in Xiamen (China). Despite successive disengagement agreements since 2020, both sides have strengthened their relative footholds along the border, bringing in new combined-arms units and constructing new infrastructure. China, in particular, has prioritised infrastructure development along the LAC. China's legislature established a land borders law in 2021, requiring the government to "promote coordination between border defence and social, economic development in border areas." China has built considerable civilian and military facilities along the border in accordance with this mission.

However, seven months after Modi met Xi at the G20 summit in Bali last November in their first in-person encounter since the impasse began in May 2020, India announced for the first time that the two leaders addressed the "need to stabilise bilateral relations." While no substantive report of their November meeting was provided, Indian authorities said that "Prime Minister and President Xi Jinping, who were both attending the G20 dinner hosted by the Indonesian President, exchanged courtesies at the conclusion of the dinner." The Chinese Foreign Ministry cited the "significant consensus" reached by Xi and Modi at the Bali summit after Doval met with Premier Wang in South Africa on the eve of the BRICS NSAs meeting in July recently. Ministers and officials from both sides have met several times since Bali, but no conclusion to the impasse that began in May 2020 is in sight. Following lengthy political and military discussions, the two sides were able to complete partial withdrawals, while 50,000-60,000 troops remain on both sides of the India-China border.

On September 9 and 10, this year, Chinese President Xi is expected to visit India for the G20 conference. This also opens up a window of opportunity for progress on the border standoff. The fact that the talks are taking place nearly four months after the Foreign Ministers and National Security Advisors of India and China met indicates a sense of urgency. For various reasons, India and China should prioritise settling their continuing border dispute. For starters, it would assist to prevent any escalation of tensions that may lead to armed conflict. Second, resolving the dispute would strengthen economic and commercial links between the two countries, benefiting both countries and the region as a whole. Furthermore, peaceful resolution would strengthen diplomatic relations, allowing them to collaborate more effectively on global challenges. Finally, it would contribute to regional stability and security, creating an atmosphere conducive to growth and development for all parties concerned. However, as reiterated by Jaishankar, India's Foreign Minister, relations can normalise only if China honours 3 Mutuals-Respect, Interests and Sensitivities, and restoration of status-quo ante of April-May 2020 in Eastern Ladakh.

Turkmenistan: Party Of Three

<https://eurasianet.org/turkmenistan-party-of-three>

With little advance warning, the presidents of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan held a summit in Ashgabat on August 4. No explicit explanation has been provided by any of the governments on why these three partners would be forming a united front in this format. The highlights of the joint declaration offered some clues, though.

COMMENTS

Taliban Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Ghani Baradar launched the construction of the Qosh Tapa Canal on the Amu Darya River on March 22. The Amu Darya flows through Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan in its upper course. The proposed dam project, upon completion, will take away 17 billion cubic metres of water from the river basin; therefore, the dam construction for Afghanistan's water utility only increases concerns for the other three states, which rely significantly on it. In defence of Afghanistan, the desperate bid to build a dam on the Amu Darya is attributed to their arid northern plains, which are largely responsible for country's increasing food insecurity and dependence on foreign aid. According to The Economist, the Taliban have devoted over 4,000 workers[i] and numerous capital assets to the project which is expected to convert 550,000 hectares of barren land into farmland[ii]. Also, it is interesting to note that Afghanistan is not a part of any water treaties with Central Asia, whereas all the other Central Asian Republics (CAR) share the river water in accordance with the Almaty Agreement of 1992. The Presidents of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan held a summit in Ashgabat on August 4, 2023, to address this water issue. The official statement, without forwardly mentioning Afghanistan, talks about the increased pressure on the water resources of the Amu Darya. A Turkmenistan-based hydrologist speaking in March to RFE/RL's Turkmen Service on condition of anonymity called the project "not a problem, but a disaster[iii]." The Qosh Tapa project has already created water scarcity for these countries, and to add to the stress levels, The World Resources Institute in 2019 ranked Turkmenistan as one of 17 countries in the world with "extremely high" water stress. A Presidential proclamation in Uzbekistan imposed steps to boost water efficiency on April 1, 2023, citing estimates that water supplies in the country will be depleted by 15-20% [iv]. It is rather high time for the CAR governments to hold practical talks with the Taliban regime about the water allocation, otherwise the ramifications for the livelihoods of ordinary people who rely on Amu Darya's water supplies will be severe.

[i] Newsroom, BNN. "Ripple Effects: How the Taliban's Qosh Tapa Canal Construction Impacts Central Asia's Water Management - BNN Breaking." BNN Breaking, July 26, 2023. <https://bnn.network/breaking-news/foreign-affairs/ripple-effects-how-the-talibans-qosh-tepa-canal-construction-impacts-central-asias-water-management/>.

[ii] Qosh Tapa Canal - Wikipedia. "Qosh Tapa Canal - Wikipedia," March 26, 2023. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qosh_Tapa_Canal#:~:text=Construction%20on%20the%20canal%20is,adverse%20effect%20on%20its%20agriculture.

[iii] Rickleton, Chris. "'Not A Problem But A Disaster': Afghan Canal A Test For Taliban Ties In Water-Stressed Central Asia." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, April 5, 2023. <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-canal-water-central-asia/32350996.html>.

[iv] The Third Pole. "'A Lot of Work for Diplomats' in Central Asia as the Taliban Build Huge Canal," May 18, 2023. <https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/regional-cooperation/a-lot-of-work-for-diplomats-as-taliban-build-qosh-tepa-canal/>.