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Pakistan Navy conducts successful anti-ship missile live-fire demonstration



Global war on terror: Positive effects of Pakistan's policy transformation



It is virtually impossible to report from occupied Kashmir



India should be placed on religious freedom blacklist: US panel



Russia's hallmark mobile missiles touted as 'ultimate weapon'



OPEN CONFLICT BETWEEN HINDUTVA AND ISLAM

PAKISTAN'S QUID PRO QUO PLUS: A KEY STRATEGIC DETERMINANT



- The internationalization of the Pakistan Army
- India is now the world's third largest military spender
- The Corona virus pandemic will forever alter the World Order



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Open Conflict between Hindutva and Islam
 Summarized News & Articles
 Pakistan is leading the way with its welfare
 state the world can learn from its innovation
 The internationalization of the Pakistan Army
 ISIS is a threat to South & Central Asian countries
 ISIS & Taliban conflict
 Afghanistan's next war
 US aid bombshell won't bring peace to Afghanistan
 China's strategic assessment of Afghanistan
 China-US relations will no longer be the same
 Pompeo to Afghan leaders Make a deal with the Taliban
 or risk full US troop pullout
 Trump could use 'nuclear option' to make SA pay for oil war
 How Washington's CAATSA threat could backfire
 The US is eager to leave Iraq soon and the
 corona virus pandemic will accelerate it
 Trump's Iran sanctions policy on the turn
 Will they bomb the pandemic to death?
 Covid-19 confronts American exceptionalism
 Inside the Iranian IRGC's secretive drone unit
 Two major Russian arms deals likely next week,
 weaponry worth \$15 bn in Moscow pipeline
 Modi, Trump and the Covid-19 drug
 We desperate Indians also need ventilators, Mr. Trump
 India's nuclear weapons in the control of Hindu Supremacists
 Modi once again under Trump's gun, this time re: corona medicine
 Diplomacy is the key
 Preparation for a genocide under way in India
 India hospital segregates Muslim and Hindu corona virus patients
 Corona virus cannot stop Britain's war in Yemen
 The Corona virus pandemic will forever alter the World Order

Editorial	2
-----	3
Lord Nigel Crisp	17
Kamal Alam	18
Mirza Kashif Baig	20
Interaction Desk	21
Mujib Mashal	22
M K Bhadrakumar	26
Yun Sun	28
Hu Xijin	32
Carol E. Lee, & Dan De Luce	33

Simon Watkins	35
Omar Lamrani	37
Ahmed Aboudouh	39

M. K. Bhadrakumar	41
Darius Shahtahmasebi	42
M. K. Bhadrakumar	44
Seth J. Frantzman	45
Ajai Shukla	47

M. K. Bhadrakumar	48
M. K. Bhadrakumar	49
Dr. Zafar Nawaz Jaspal	51
Bharat Karnad	54
Ashok K Mehta	55
Dr. Gregory Stanton	57
Parth MN	58
Phil Miller	59
Henry A. Kissinger	61

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Editorial

Open Conflict between Hindutva and Islam

The generations that follow will read about this time in their history books and would have trouble believing the blatant hypocrisy of today. Those posing to be defenders of peace and righteousness are the ones openly terrorizing minorities of those weaker than them. It is a difficult time to comprehend, even for the ones who are living it. Racism, sexism, terrorism is deep rooted but on the outside it is shunned by the civilized societies of the west. They preach the rule of the jungle where every act is justified as long as you have the power to evade the consequences.

This hypocrisy is visible in the stance USA and its allies towards India. Western allies led by USA, at one time, wouldn't stop with their 'fight against terrorism' mantra. They vowed to vanquish extremism, attacked and destroyed countries like Afghanistan and Iraq, Syria, Libya and other in pursuance of that mission, sponsored Arab spring to support whom they believed to be oppressed, destabilized countries like Syria in order to overthrow what they believed to be the tyrannical regime. If you look at it, they did everything to spread terrorism, all the while wearing the drape of self-righteousness. If they were really sincere to their claim of countering terrorism and defending the weak their first targets would have been Israel and India.

Israel is ruthlessly suppressing the voice of Palestinians and India is following Israel's example in dealing with people of Kashmir. Indians have, however, taken it one step further and is now preaching its own brand of Nazism in the guise of 'Hindutva'. Much like Nazi's who believed that the German race was superior to all others, followers of Hindutva believe the same for Hindus. Abolishment of Kashmir's special status, and the citizenship amendment bill are all ways to filter out the minorities especially the Muslims. India has left no stone unturned when it comes to torturing and murdering Muslims. The imposed curfew in Kashmir, has now been in effect for quite some months now and no one knows what's happening there. Only few details have leaked from that curfew portraying a horrific picture about the Indian atrocities. Current Indian regime is one which preaches extremism and suppression of minorities especially of Muslims.

Lynching incidents have increased tremendously in India. These lynching mobs are operating freely under the protection of Indian law enforcement agencies. Furthermore, Indian media is spreading irrational and unrealistic reports whereby identifying Muslims as the root cause of the Covid-19 corona virus spread adopting the similar way of Nazis. Media persons are specifically appealing to the Indian people to not buy vegetables and fruits from Muslim vendors as they may carry corona virus and are urging the masses to buy from Hindu vendors instead.

Their Muslim hatred has increased to the extent that they have started targeting Muslims and Islam globally. In the UAE and Qatar Hindutva activists are spewing hate speech against Islam and Muslims. This has given rise to strong resentment among the Arabs who have made it clear that such action will have consequences such as deportation of all Hindus from the UAE and KSA. It is surprising that the

Western powers have taken a back seat in the face of such audacious extreme measures and have disciplined India in the matter.

They continue to do business and defense deals with India while ignoring the cries of the innocent. In such times, Muslim world should realize that the only way of getting justice for their brothers is to form a strong Muslim alliance preferably a joint effort of Pakistan, Turkey and Iran. Presenting a case against India to the world powers is of no use as all their claims of anti-terrorism are lies and they do everything in their power to progress their interests, all in the name of supporting the innocent.

SUMMARIZED NEWS & ARTICLES

Pakistan's quid pro quo plus: a key strategic determinant

It is pertinent to highlight that the 'Quid Pro Quo Plus' (QPQP) is based on an assertion that India would not be allowed to consider Pakistan's nuclear capability as a bluff, and that Pakistan reserves all other options as well to protect its territorial and ideological integrity. In addition to Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD), Pakistan has maintained credible conventional responses, keeping in view India's desire to wage either a limited or low-intensity conflict. Pakistan's tactical missile 'Nasr' for instance, is believed to have been introduced essentially in response to India's limited war doctrines. This provides further assurance that India would be denied the initiation of a low-intensity conflict and escalating the situation which could provoke Pakistan towards a massive retaliation.

Pakistan is already punching well above its weight, and nuclear deterrence along with conventional preparedness would be the only way through which Pakistan can maintain a precise balance of power to preserve its security. This could be further carried out by deterring India with a resort to restraint based on 'quid pro quo plus' policy.

Pak Army's secret book reveals its new tactics for proxy war against India

New Delhi, April 27 (IANS) Shaken by the two significant actions of the Modi government last year -- the air strike on terror camps in Balakot and the nullification of special status of Jammu & Kashmir -- the Pakistan Army has recalibrated its proxy war tactics against India. Pakistan Army has decided to go big on psychological warfare, revive home-grown native terrorism in Kashmir against India and use Indian authors like Arundhati Roy's criticism of India as propaganda material to Islamabad's advantage. All this and more was revealed in the latest edition of the Green Book 2020 published by the general headquarters of the Pakistan Army.

The Green Book is a confidential internal publication of the Pakistan Army which outlines its geo-political understanding, vision and strategies. Apart from Pakistan Army chief's views, it includes essays on policy recommendations written by specialists of defence forces and strategic thinkers of the country.

In the 200-page book, a copy of which was accessed by IANS, Pakistan Army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa has written that the two decisions taken by Prime Minister Narendra Modi last year, the Balakot

strike on February 26 and reorganisation of Jammu & Kashmir state on August 5, will have "lasting imprint on the geopolitics" of the region.

Bajwa described the Balakot strike as a "coercive attempt to carve out space for war under nuclear overhang and enforce compellence." Modi's Kashmir decision, Bajwa said, has "raised the ante for the entire world."

Other authors like Lieutenant General (retired) Raza Muhammad Khan (former corps commander and former President of National Defence University, Islamabad), Senator Mushahid Hussain and Peshawar-based journalist Farzana Shah made several anti-India policy recommendations.

Recognising that India is backed by the US and American efforts to contain China's rise are promoting India, one of the suggestions was to warn Washington that Pakistan will shift its forces from its Western borders, which can adversely affect peace in Afghanistan, if New Delhi was allowed to pursue its Kashmir policy.

The book also contained conspiracy theories like "increased proliferation of WMDs, due to Indo-US nuclear deal and the RSS hold over Indian nuclear weapons and its armed forces" and Indian external intelligence agency RAW "established a special cell at a cost of \$500 million" to sabotage the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

China as a reliable strategic ally was repeatedly emphasised in the book. In one of the essays, Chinese President Xi Jinping's quote -- "No matter how things change in the world and the region, China will firmly support Pakistan in upholding its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity and dignity" - - was highlighted.

The other recommendation was to take Pakistan's proxy war against India into the "non-kinetic domain" like information or cyber or electronic warfare. For this, Pakistan Army has been advised to run propaganda using video clips and pictures about "brutalities of Indian oppressive forces" in Kashmir to alter the perception about India, which it has "built so painstakingly over the years".

"Modi's India is bound to get stuck and sink in the Kashmir quagmire," the essay by Senator Hussain said, while Ambassador Shamshad Ahmad Khan wrote, "Kashmiri youth are dying on the streets, not asking for jobs and employment opportunities. They are holding the Pakistan flag; it is a clear verdict!"

One major suggestion offered to the Pakistani Army was that it should revive "local uprising" in Indian Kashmir and make it difficult for "India to keep selling the terrorism card" in Kashmir.

"Only a native uprising will be just and politically defensible for Pakistan on international forums. Even such an uprising will need support in the information domain," an essay said.

Professor Tughrul Yamin in his prescription about future wars with India said that as long as Kashmir was unresolved, "there will be plenty of triggers to cause another crisis (for India) in the future."

Yet another writer advised that "Indian masses and liberal intellectuals" should be the recipients of Pakistan's information dissemination campaign on Kashmir.

The only scholarly piece in the book, "Security Competition between US & China and Impact on Regional Strategic Balance of South Asia", was written by Rizwana Karim Abbasi who recommended bilateral dialogues between the US and China and simultaneously between India and Pakistan.

Pakistan Navy conducts successful anti-ship missile live-fire demonstration

By News Desk : April 25, 2020

The Pakistan Navy on Saturday successfully conducted a live-fire demonstration of an anti-ship missile from multiple launch platforms, said the service's spokesperson Rear Admiral Arshid Javed. The spokesperson added that the missiles were fired from surface ships, fixed and rotary-wing aircraft. The Navy did not give further details about the anti-ship missile used.

The target of the live-fire drill was an old decommissioned surface ship.

"The successful demonstration of missile firing is a testament to the Pakistan Navy's operational capability and military readiness," the spokesperson added.

Chief of the Naval Staff (CONS) Admiral Zafar Mahmood Abbasi, who witnessed the demonstrations as the chief guest said, "Pakistan Navy is always ready to thwart any aggression against Pakistan's maritime frontier".

"Pakistan Navy is fully capable to respond to enemy's aggression befittingly," the navy chief added.

(Source: THE EXPRESS TRIBUNE)

RSS-Modi Nationalist ideology and threat of nuclear war between Pakistan and India

The ideology carried by RSS and Modi is not based on rationality and justice rather on killings innocent people of Kashmir, deaths, destruction, humiliation, and other kinds of multiple atrocities. At the time when whole the World is wrapped with pandemic disease named novel Covid-19 and fighting hard against it to eliminate this destructive disease. Policies and actions by PM Modi could compel Pakistan to take stark action that resultantly leave severe impacts on India-Pakistan, region and the world ultimately. This craziness and madness at the hands of PM Modi could cause for the escalation of war between both the nuclear power states which ends with the deaths and destruction of both the nations.

Global war on terror: positive effects of Pakistan's policy transformation

It is mentionable that the US has not taken any practical action to the tune of sanctions against India in response to the continued lockdown in the Indian-occupied Kashmir. Meanwhile, the US, which clearly prefers India over Pakistan, is not favouring Islamabad in connection with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) that has still kept Pakistan on the grey list. Pakistan's gradual transition from a country struggling to fight terrorism and religious militancy to a peaceful and tolerant society with more potential for economic progress in the digital age has been appreciated by the international community. Despite policy changes, Islamabad will continue to have a cordial relationship with Washington. The latter must also show a positive response; taking note of Pakistan's key role in the US-Taliban agreement and its efforts for regional peace.

20,000 Afghans cross Torkham in four days

More than 20,000 stranded Afghans went back to their country via Torkham during the last four days of border reopening. Officials told Dawn that the last day was comparatively calm as only about 1,100 Afghans, mostly men, crossed the border prior to its closure. The total number of returned Afghans during the four days was 20,066, they said. Officials said that the second and third day (April 7 and 8)

were very tough for them as the 'influx' of the stranded Afghan was beyond their expectations. "Cumulatively, almost 18,000 Afghans, including men, women and children, went back home in these two days as the government had relaxed its immigration policy by allowing just all and sundry to cross the border," an official told this scribe on condition of anonymity.

Official figures showed that on Thursday, 485 Afghans with valid visas on their passports, 461 with their Afghan national identity cards and 57 with Proof of Registration Cards (POR) were allowed to go back to their homeland. Pakistan had earlier announced to resume bilateral trade with Afghanistan on a restricted basis with more emphasis on the health screening of both drivers to check transmission of corona virus on any side of the border.

COVID-19 lockdown sparks harvest crises in Pakistan, India

Trees have bent, bearing the load of ripened summer fruits and a bumper crop of wheat in a golden hue is ready for harvest in the fields, spread across the plains of Pakistan and India. But in the absence of labor and means of transportation due to lockdown to stem the spread of COVID-19 or corona virus, millions of farmers are staring at another disaster, watching their produce rotting in their fields. The harvest of famed fruit of the region mango is also just a month away. Experts believe that the phenomenon will have cascading effects on the region's food security.

Around 70% of Pakistan's small farmers rely on traditional farm laborers, who come from the remote or the low-income areas before the harvesting season. They could not make it this time due to weeks-long lockdown. The governments in both the countries have also delayed procurement of crops from farmers, an annual exercise to a full-up buffer stock of food grains, which also acts as an incentive to farmers to ensure a minimum support price.

In India, the central government has asked the farmers to delay harvesting given the situation. Experts fear that the delay in the harvesting of crops, mainly wheat may lead to serious food security issues in the two nuclear neighbors, which together share 1.5 billion of the total world population.

Brief News International

'It is painful to welcome Ramadan without prayers in mosques' King: We must continue to work hard to overcome this difficult time

(April 23, 2020 | Saudi Gazette report) RIYADH Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman greeted Muslims in the Kingdom and the entire world on the advent of the holy month of Ramadan. In an address, delivered on his behalf by Acting Minister of Media Majed Al-Qasabi, the King underscored the need to continue to work hard to overcome this difficult time caused by coronavirus pandemic. The Monarch expressed sorrow over the difficulties caused to the smooth performance of rituals during the month of Ramadan due to the outbreak of the pandemic.

"To tell you the truth, it pains me to welcome the glorious month of Ramadan under circumstances that forbid us from performing congregational prayers and the Ramadan prayers of taraweeh and Qiyamullail in houses of God.

"All this is due to the precautionary measures taken to save human lives and their wellbeing in confronting the coronavirus pandemic," he said while emphasizing that the provisions of the Islamic Shariah made safeguarding human lives an extremely significant thing.

"Ramadan has entered this year while we are living in circumstances that have extreme impact on the entire humanity and we are passing through the difficult and sensitive phase of world history due to the outbreak of the pandemic, despite the measures taken by countries of the world and humanitarian organizations to prevent its spread," he said. He added that the Kingdom is keen to serve the citizens and expatriates as well as to ensure their safety.

Referring to the Kingdom's sublime position in serving the Two Holy Mosques, the King said: "Among the nations, we are bestowed by God with the great honor and dignity to serve His Great House, and His Prophet's Mosque a service that we honor and strive to fulfill it, with hosting the guests of God, including Haj and Umrah pilgrims and visitors, and keeping awake for their comfort. We are also proud of the string of precautionary measures taken by the Kingdom to limit the spread of the coronavirus pandemic," he said.

Ramadan prayers banned at Jerusalem's al-Aqsa mosque due to virus

JERUSALEM (Reuters) - Jerusalem's al-Aqsa mosque compound will be closed to Muslim worshippers throughout the holy fasting month of Ramadan due to the coronavirus epidemic, Muslim clerics at Islam's third-holiest site said. The decision to ban Muslim prayer at the 35-acre complex, revered by Jews as the Temple Mount and site of the Jewish temples of antiquity, extends a March 23 ban on Muslim prayer there.

In a statement, the Jordan-appointed council that oversees Islamic sites on the sacred compound called the decision "painful" but said it was "in line with legal fatwas (clerical opinions) and medical advice".

Muslims should "perform prayers in their homes during the month of Ramadan, to preserve their safety," the council said.

The most famous university, The Harvard University declared the Quran with its divine words.....

The most famous university, The Harvard University declared the Quran with its divine words, the book which is the words of Allah almighty as the best book for seeking Justice in any matter of Human life, either it is crime, dowry, domestic abuses, and others.

Harvard University is one of the best university in the world and as well as in the entire USA, declaration of Quran as the best book for Justice by this reputation and most famous authority of Harvard University is a matter of importance for those who do not believe that the Holy Quran is the final revelation to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) by Allah for whole of the mankind till the doomsday.

As you all know that In Islam, the Muslims are guided by a law known as "The Sharia" law, the Holy Quran provides the basic structure of this sharia law to be enacted in the matters of Muslims to get them to resolve.

The entrance gate of the faculty of Law, Harvard University witnessed an ayah from Surah Nisa, which explains that it is among the best way of seeking justice in the past. Harvard Law school is one of the

most prominent law schools in the entire world and the library of this law school is the biggest academic library in the entire world for the faculty of Law.

The ayah which has been attached at the entranceway of the library of Law school in the Harvard University states " AYAH number 135 from (Surah-Nisa) the women, Human being to stick firmly by justice. (Quran, Surah An-Nisa 4:135) reference

May ALLAH give the Muslims the best in this Dunya and on the day of judgment, and flourish the authority of Muslims in the entire world.

We hope by reading this article many people who do not believe in the Holy Quran, may get inspired and start learning about the Holy Quran, we also wish that this article may lead them to revert into a Muslim.

Reporters without borders says It's virtually impossible to report from occupied Kashmir

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) in its latest World Press Freedom Index report has noted that it has become "virtually impossible" for journalists to report from the Indian occupied Kashmir (IoK) and pushed India two spots down from last year to 142. The report noted India's score in this year's index was heavily affected by the situation in IoK as India has made it "virtually impossible" for reporting after New Delhi revoked the region's autonomy on August 5 of last year.

While noting the difficulties for reporting from the region, the group called Kashmir a "vast open prison" due to shutting down of fixed line and mobile Internet connections by the Narendra Modi-led government.

The RSF also stated that there were constant press freedom violations in the country, including police violence against journalists, ambushes by political activists, and reprisals instigated by criminal groups or corrupt local officials.

"Ever since the general elections in the spring of 2019, won overwhelmingly by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party, pressure on the media to toe the Hindu nationalist government's line has increased," said the report.

The RSF stated that the coordinated hate campaigns launched on social media against journalists who speak or write about subjects that annoy Hindutva followers are alarming. It noted that the campaigns also call for the journalists concerned to be murdered.

"The campaigns are particularly virulent when the targets are women. Criminal prosecutions are meanwhile often used to gag journalists critical of the authorities, with some prosecutors invoking Section 124a of the penal code, under which "sedition" is punishable by life imprisonment," said the report.

Meanwhile, Pakistan has been ranked at 145 on the index, two spots down from last year. While Norway has topped the index for the fourth year in a row and Finland has been ranked as the runner-up On the other hand, North Korea has taken the last position from Turkmenistan, while Eritrea (178th) continues to be Africa's worst-ranked country. (Source: The News International)

Global hunger could double due to coronavirus pandemic: UN

COVID-19 is likely to leave 130 million people acutely hungry this year, adding to 135 million already in the category.

The number of people facing acute food insecurity could nearly double this year to 265 million due to the economic fallout of COVID-19, according to the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP). The impact of lost tourism revenues, falling remittances and travel and other restrictions linked to the coronavirus pandemic is expected to leave about 130 million more people acutely hungry this year, in addition to 135 million already in that category, the WFP said in a new report on Tuesday 21 April.

"COVID-19 is potentially catastrophic for millions who are already hanging by a thread," said Arif Husain, chief economist and director of research, assessment and monitoring at the WFP. "We all need to come together to deal with this because if we don't the cost will be too high - the global cost will be too high: many lost lives and many, many more lost livelihoods," he told reporters at a virtual briefing in Geneva. Husain said it was critical to act quickly to prevent people already living hand-to-mouth from selling their assets as it could take them years to become self-reliant again. In some cases, such as when farmers sell their ploughs or oxen, it could have knock-on effects for food production for years to come, he added.

"These were the people we were concerned about - those who were OK before COVID and now they are not," he said, adding he was "really worried" about people living in countries with little or no government safety nets.

"Acute food and livelihood crisis" is category three of five UN phases, meaning a "critical lack of food access and above usual malnutrition".

Category 5 means mass starvation. UN officials did not give a geographical breakdown of the growing needs but said that Africa was likely to be hardest hit. The WFP expects to need \$10-\$12bn to fund its assistance programmes this year compared to a record \$8.3bn raised last year, Husain added. It plans to pre-position food stocks over the coming months in anticipation of growing needs. (AL JAZEERA AND NEWS AGENCIES)

Corona virus: UN General Assembly meetings scheduled for next few months postponed

The UN General Assembly meetings scheduled for the next few months have been postponed due to the COVID- 19 pandemic and the Member States are holding discussions on how to proceed with the high-level annual UNGA session in September, a senior official has said. The office of the President of the 74th Session of the General Assembly said that it has been decided to postpone the 14th United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, scheduled to take place in Kyoto, Japan, from April 20 to 27, until further notice.

Israeli TV says US intel warned IDF & NATO of Coronavirus threat in NOVEMBER 2019, doubling down on claims dismissed by... US intel

(17 Apr, 2020) American intelligence passed an early warning about the coronavirus to Tel Aviv and NATO as far back as November, Israel's Channel 12 claims, even after a top US medical intel officer dismissed a similar report just last week.

The broadcaster aired a story on Thursday alleging that the US intelligence community shared classified information about a new viral outbreak in China with the Israeli military and senior NATO officials. With nobody willing to go on record to confirm the report, however, the story is based on murky anonymous sourcing, leaving it a mystery where the claim originated.

“Still in November, the IDF held a first discussion regarding what impact this unknown disease would have were it to reach the Middle East. How would we be affected? How would it affect our neighbors?” the Channel 12 broadcast said, as cited by i24 News.

A similar report from ABC last week stated that the Pentagon's National Center for Medical Intelligence (NCMI) warned that an outbreak in the Chinese city of Wuhan could become a “cataclysmic event” in a document compiled last November. But the story was swiftly shot down by NCMI director Colonel R. Shane Day, who insisted “No such NCMI product exists” and that the report was simply “not correct.”

President Donald Trump who was said to have been alerted to the alleged NCMI document but chose not to act on the intelligence ran a victory lap over ABC after Day's denial, gloating in a tweet that the news outlet “knew they were wrong when they went with this Hoax of a story!”

Much like the ABC report, the Channel 12 story alleges the US government was provided the information, yet “did not deem it of interest,” also stating Israeli health officials were made aware, but still “nothing was done” to prepare for the impending pandemic. With a series of mostly anonymous claims and denials from dueling intelligence sources, as well as purported classified documents nobody in the public has actually laid eyes on, it remains unclear exactly when the American intel community caught wind of China's epidemic.

The latest uncorroborated reports have further fueled the rage of the US president's critics, who say the Trump administration knew of a coming disaster months in advance but did nothing to keep Americans safe, added to a barrage of criticisms in US media constantly slamming the government's response to the crisis as sluggish and inept.

But as speculation swirls in the press, the White House has begun offering its own novel theories on early knowledge of the virus, tacitly encouraging rumors of its lab origins and alleging Beijing “covered-up” the outbreak in Wuhan with help from the World Health Organization, going as far as to freeze US funding to the agency while the administration “reviews” the alleged Chinese conspiracy.

Beijing and the WHO have rejected Washington's claims as baseless, insisting they provided timely and transparent information about the virus as soon as it was available both even creating timelines detailing their response step-by-step while the United Nations and much of the world have warned all sides to not politicize the pandemic. (Source: RT News)

US military wants to build mobile micro reactor in Idaho

The U.S. Department of Defense wants to build a prototype advanced mobile nuclear micro reactor at the Idaho National Laboratory in eastern Idaho, saying they are needed to ensure the military's energy supply. The micro reactor would be capable of producing one to 10 megawatts. A megawatt can power from about 400 to 900 homes, depending on energy consumption that is dependent on such things as air conditioning. The department says it wants to reduce reliance on local electric grids, which are highly vulnerable to prolonged outages from a variety of threats.

The department is considering building the micro reactor at the U.S. Department of Energy's Idaho National Laboratory. The Oak Ridge National Laboratory in eastern Tennessee would also take part. The Defense Department said the specific design of the prototype micro reactor won't be known while preparing an environmental review, so impacts from a variety of designs will be considered. The department said the prototype is expected to be a small advanced gas reactor using enriched uranium for fuel and would be air-cooled. The type of enriched uranium to be used would be encapsulated and can withstand high temperature, allowing for a safe prototype reactor.

Two US warships in South China Sea amid China-Malaysia standoff

USS America and USS Bunker Hill sailed near a Chinese research ship spotted close to a Petronas exploration vessel.

(21 April 2020) The US Navy has confirmed that two US warships are operating in the South China Sea, with three regional security sources saying they were near an area of a standoff between China and Malaysia.

The Haiyang Dizhi 8, a Chinese government research ship, was spotted last week conducting a survey close to an exploration vessel operated by Malaysia's state oil company Petronas, months after it undertook a similar patrol off Vietnam. The incident prompted the US to call on China to stop its "bullying behaviour" in the disputed waters, citing concern over Beijing's provocative actions towards offshore oil and gas developments there.

The US State Department has said China was taking advantage of the region's focus on the coronavirus pandemic to "coerce its neighbours". The USS America amphibious assault ship and the USS Bunker Hill, a guided-missile cruiser, have been deployed and were operating in the South China Sea, US Indo-Pacific Command spokeswoman Nicole Schwegman said.

"Through our continued operational presence in the South China Sea, we are working ... to promote freedom of navigation and overflight, and the international principles that underpin security and prosperity for the Indo-Pacific," Schwegman said in an emailed statement to Reuters.

"The US supports the efforts of our allies and partners to determine their own economic interests."

Rear Admiral Fred Kacher, commander of the USS America Expeditionary Strike Group, told Reuters that his forces had interacted with Chinese naval forces in the South China Sea this week.

"All our interactions continue to be safe and professional with them," Kacher said in a telephone interview from the USS America. (Source: Al Jazeera News Agency)

Trump instructs US Navy to shoot down and destroy all Iranian gunboats if they 'harass our ships at sea'

(22 Apr, 2020) President Donald Trump has ordered the US Navy to "shoot down and destroy" Iranian gunboats, should they harass American vessels at sea. His declaration comes after a confrontation in the Persian Gulf. "I have instructed the United States Navy to shoot down and destroy any and all Iranian gunboats if they harass our ships at sea," the president.

A week earlier, the US Navy accused the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) of "dangerous and provocative" actions, claiming that nearly a dozen Iranian vessels buzzed a group of American ships in

the Persian Gulf. The US Fifth Fleet later published video footage of the encounter, which showed the gunboats circling a larger US ship.

Tehran brushed off the accusations, disputing the "Hollywood" scenario portrayed by the US. The Iranian government considers US naval activity in the gulf highly provocative, and condemned the patrol as "adventurism."

The US and Iran almost came to war at the beginning of the year, when the US assassinated General Qassem Soleimani with a drone strike at an airport in Baghdad, apparently in retribution for a series of Iranian-sponsored attacks on US bases in Iraq. However, tension in the Persian Gulf has been high since last summer, when the US and its Western allies blamed Iran for a series of sabotage attacks on oil infrastructure in the region.

US-led naval patrols were stepped up, and American troops and air defense systems were sent to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Based in nearby Bahrain, the US Fifth Fleet has been active in the gulf both before and since the flareup last year. The US insists patrols are essential to protect shipping routes against Iran's "malign behavior."(RT NEWS)

US oil price below zero for first time in history Collapse in demand leaves traders trying to clear unwanted crude

David Sheppard, Myles McCormick, Anjali Raval and Derek Brower in London and Hudson Lockett in Hong Kong

US oil prices crashed into negative territory for the first time in history as the evaporation of demand caused by the coronavirus pandemic left the world awash with oil and not enough storage capacity meaning producers are paying buyers to take it off their hands. West Texas Intermediate, the US benchmark, traded as low as -\$40.32 a barrel in a day of chaos in oil markets. The settlement price on Monday 13 April, was -\$37.63, compared to \$18.27 on Friday 17 April. Traders capitulated in the face of limited access to storage capacity across the US, including the country's main delivery point of Cushing, Oklahoma. The collapse will be a blow to Donald Trump, who has gone to great lengths to protect the oil sector, including backing moves by Opec and Russia to cut production and pledging support for the industry. After the price drop, Mr Trump reiterated plans for the US to open the federally-controlled strategic petroleum reserve to store excess oil that cannot find a home in commercial storage facilities. Congress refused to fund federal purchases of crude oil when the White House first proposed the idea several weeks ago, but the Department of Energy has also considered the possibility of leasing capacity to producers. "We're filling up our national petroleum reserves, the strategic reserves, and we're looking to put as much as 75m barrels into the reserves themselves that would top it out," Mr Trump said at his daily news conference. "We're going to either ask for permission to buy it, or we'll store it, one way or the other, it will be full."(Source: Financial Times)

First public map reveals military bases with corona virus cases as pentagon secrecy draws backlash

Than 150 military bases in 41 states have been hit with corona virus, according to new information exclusively obtained by Newsweek. The Pentagon on Tuesday also said that the armed forces had surpassed 3,000 cases, more than doubling their number of people tested positive for corona virus in less than a week's time. The scope of geographic spread among the military in the United States mirrors the civilian world and also shows few signs of abating. The continued spread of corona virus throughout the military, both in the United States and at overseas bases, has halted all non-essential movement, interrupted recruiting and basic training, and led to a virtual standstill in large scale activity. It has also led to draconian secrecy, justified as necessary to preserve operational security. But that policy of secrecy is now getting strong pushback, both from the communities around military bases as well as from lawmakers.

The latest Defense Department data show that 2,120 men and women in uniform have tested positive for the COVID-19 virus. The hardest hit service is the U.S. Navy, followed closely by the Army, Air Force, and finally the Marine Corps. Civilians working for the department make up the second largest overall group after those in uniform, followed by military dependents, and then by private contractors working at military facilities. In the 41 states where the Defense Department reports corona virus, nine states show over 100 cases in the larger military communities. Some of the hardest hit are the naval base complexes of San Diego, Norfolk, Virginia; and Jacksonville, Florida; the San Antonio, Texas area bases; and the naval bases of Washington state. A large number of cases are also being handled at Andrews air force base in Maryland and reflect medical support for military workers assigned throughout the Washington, DC area. Training facilities where recruits receive their basic training in San Antonio and San Diego; and at the Army's Ft. Jackson, South Carolina are also other hotspots.

Chinese arms to help Nigeria combat terrorists

China and Nigeria are strengthening their military-technical cooperation: 17 Chinese armoured vehicles have been unloaded at the port of Lagos under a new contract signed in 2019. The contract, worth \$152 million, was signed following a tender that was won by the China Ordnance Industries Group Corporation, known as Norinco. The first batch of armoured vehicles delivered to Nigeria includes VT-4 tanks, a new generation of battle tanks with a range of over 500 kilometres, wheeled new generation self-propelled ST1 lightweight tanks, and 122mm SH2 self-propelled howitzers. Nigeria previously received the first set of spare parts and supplies for this equipment, which was delivered in 15 40-foot shipping containers.

There are several reasons why China is chosen as a partner in military-technical cooperation in Africa. First of all, China offers an excellent price-quality ratio for its weaponry. For example, the VT-4 third-generation battle tank has high manoeuvrability, good protection and powerful weapons. These vehicles were exported to Thailand and were highly appreciated by the Royal Court. It can be said that they have good quality and moderate price. According to the surveys, 70 percent of Nigerians have friendly feelings towards China and appreciate Sino- Nigerian cooperation. Nigeria has the largest Chinese language newspaper in Africa. The domestic market is dominated by Chinese goods, and for Nigerians, China is the most popular tourist destination. Cooperation between the two sides is mutually beneficial and extremely useful.

Russia's hallmark mobile missiles touted as 'ultimate weapon'

By US national security outlet

The Russian military's hallmark feature - road-mobile missile carriers - can be observed both on Red Square during Russia's Victory Day parades on 9 May and in service with a number of post-Soviet militaries, boasting mobility advantages over silo-based counterparts. Russia, a major power in the development of missiles of all kinds, currently boasts a broad inventory of ballistic and cruise missiles, having inherited a substantive arsenal from Soviet times only to greatly enhance and expand on it through a multitude of modernization programmes, writes The National Interest publication.

Citing the Center for International and Strategic Studies, Caleb Larson, defense writer for the outlet, singles out road-mobile missile carriers as the country's hallmark feature, prided for their mobility advantage over silo-based missiles, albeit not as protected as their silo-based counterparts. Noting the great strides made by Russia towards producing new variants of weapons with significantly enhanced capabilities, the publication states that major advancements are also observed in the field of precision guided cruise missiles. There are a number of versions of the Scarab/Tochka missile system, first designed and fielded in 1975, in Russian military service, writes the publication. Designed to give battlefield commanders a range of flexible options on the battlefield, besides the standard high-explosive, the Scarab/Tochka missile can be equipped with anti-tank, anti-personnel, anti-runway, and anti-radar warheads, with a tactical nuclear warhead version also existing, suggests the author, with a believed adjustable nuclear yield of 10 - 100 kilotons.

Gradually replacing the Scarab/Tochka missile platform is the Iskander missile, continues the author, suggesting that its slightly improved range and larger warhead are just some of its enhanced features. The missile trajectory of the Iskander is more depressed than the Scarab/Tochka system, with its guidance relying on a mix of GLONASS, inertial, and terrain-following radar. The SS-N-26 Yakhont is available in air-sea-and land-based variants, writes Caleb Larson for the outlet, adding that land-based Yakhont has successfully been exported to Indonesia and Vietnam.

Iran launches its first military satellite Iran satellite launch 'sends a message' on failed US pressure

(22 April 2020) Iran has announced it successfully launched the country's first military reconnaissance satellite after months of failures, a programme the United States alleges is a cover for missile development. "The first satellite of the Islamic Republic of Iran has been successfully launched into orbit by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps [IRGC]," said the elite forces' official website on Wednesday 22 April 2020.

It said the satellite - dubbed the Nour - was deployed from the Qassed two-stage launcher from the Markazi desert, a vast expanse in Iran's central plateau. The satellite "orbited the Earth at 425km [264 miles]", said the website. "This action will be a great success and a new development in the field of space for Islamic Iran."

The IRGC called it the first military satellite ever launched by Tehran. It used a Ghased, or "Messenger", satellite carrier to put the device into space, a previously unheard-of system. As the world grapples with

the coronavirus pandemic and historically low oil prices, the missile launch may signal a new willingness to take risks by Iran. "This raises a lot of red flags," said Fabian Hinz, a researcher at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies in Monterey, California. "Now that you have the [US] maximum pressure campaign, Iran doesn't have that much to lose any more."

Hinz said, based on state media images, the launch appeared to have happened at a previously unnamed IRGC base near Shahroud, Iran, some 330km (205 miles) northeast of Tehran. The base is in Semnan province, which hosts the Imam Khomeini Spaceport, from which Iran's civilian space programme operates. (Source: Al Jazeera)

IRAN SAYS ITS MISSILES CAN HIT SHIPS MORE THAN 400 MILES AWAY, HAS BOATS THREE TIMES FASTER THAN U.S. NAVY

BY TOM O'CONNOR | 21 Apr. 2020

Iran's elite Revolutionary Guard announced enhanced capabilities for its naval fleet, including extended anti-ship missile range and faster vessels capable of outpacing its top rival, the United States.

Iranian Revolutionary Guard Navy commander Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri said Monday that his forces now "have a variety of surface-to-surface missiles with a range of 700 km [more than 430 miles] produced domestically." He also touted the production of new warships, such as the 55-meter catamaran-style helicopter carrier inaugurated in 2016, along with other vessels that are said to be capable of reading speeds of up to 90 knots, or "three times faster than American vessels."

"Wherever the Americans have been present, insecurity has arisen, and we do not know where the presence of the United States has led to security," Tangsiri said.

He referenced the recent encounter in which up to 11 armed Revolutionary Guard fast-attack craft appeared to approach and circle ships of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet in the Persian Gulf, arguing that "contrary to international regulations, the Americans blocked the way for our vessels and refused to respond to the radio, which was met with a powerful confrontation by our forces."

Iran has two seaborne forces deployed to the Persian Gulf, that of the Revolutionary Guard and that of the country's conventional armed forces. Rear Admiral Hossein Khanzadi, commander of Iran's regular navy, also praised the country's domestic defense industry on Friday and discussed plans to develop a nuclear-powered submarine to challenge U.S. forces that already uses such technology in the Persian Gulf.

Tangsiri warned that any incident involving nuclear ships could contaminate the waters of the Persian Gulf, proving disastrous not only for international shipping but the water resources of Arab states relying on desalination plants.

Iran's Revolutionary Guard had announced anti-ship capabilities ranging up to only 300 kilometers, or about 186 miles. A report published by the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency mentioned models such as the Khalij Fars, Hormuz 1 and Hormuz 2, which are based on the Fateh-110 short-range ballistic missile and could pose a major threat if combined with Iran's militarized speedboat fleet and other Iranian military assets.

"Its swarms of small boats, large inventory of naval mines, and arsenal of antiship missiles can severely disrupt maritime traffic in the Strait of Hormuz—a strategic chokepoint critical to global trade," DIA Director Robert P. Ashley Jr. said of Iran's military in a preface to the November report. "Each of these forces are becoming increasingly survivable, precise, and responsive."(Source: Newsweek)

Iran says they have 400 US targets picked out if US moves against them

A top Iranian general on Friday 24 April, revealed the nation's plan to attack 400 U.S. targets if the U.S. military responded to Iran's attack on Al-Assad Air Base in January. "The day, we attacked on Ain al-Asad, we thought the US forces would respond after 20 minutes, so we were ready to attack 400 American targets," Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Force Brig. Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh told Iranian state media Mehr News.

"Our plan was to attack 400 US targets if they responded," he added, though he did not reveal any specific targets.

Iran had launched more than a dozen ballistic missiles against U.S. troops at Al-Assad and Irbil air bases in Iraq on January 7.

At the time, Iran confirmed they were behind the attacks, which they described as revenge for the U.S. airstrike that killed IRGC Quds Force Gen. Qassem Soleimani. Iran issued a warning after the strikes, saying, "We are warning all American allies, who gave their bases to its terrorist army, that any territory that is the starting point of aggressive acts against Iran will be targeted."

Hajizadeh said on Friday that Iran's January attack made the U.S. feel "somewhat threatened."

"By assassinating Lt. Gen. Soleimani, [the US] wanted to show that they killed a symbol of Resistance, and they were sure that Iran would not respond to their attack," he said. "But we responded to them by an attack on Ain al-Asad base in Iraq."

Hajizadeh bragged about Iran's "great achievements" in missile and defense, and its newfound success in launching a military satellite, which the U.S. had said Iran is using for nuclear missile technology.

"[Iran's] satellite launch vehicle and others launched before it incorporates technologies identical to, and interchangeable with, ballistic missiles, including longer-range systems such as intercontinental ballistic missiles," U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Saturday.

"I have to say that the obstacles have been removed from our path and from now on we will move faster," Hajizadeh said on Friday. Although he did not elaborate on what those "obstacles" consisted of, it could be a reference to the nuclear agreement the U.S. withdrew from in 2018, which Iran has also been turning away from.

Iran also recently bragged about its expanded missile range, and threatened to "destroy" U.S. warships if the U.S. Navy threatens Iranian gunboats. The saber-rattling comes just days after President Trump issued a similar warning in authorizing the U.S. Navy to "shoot down and destroy" any Iranian gunboats threatening U.S. warships.

Trump's directive came a week after 11 Iranian gunboats harassed six U.S. warships conducting joint operations in international waters of the Arabian Gulf. (Source: American Military news)

Ww3 Nuclear plot: Iran may use corona virus crisis for secret nuclear weapon gain

Dr. Pupak Mohebbi an expert from Iran International, noted Tehran could use the confusion and restriction of travel on corona virus to acquire more nuclear material. "Now the hot topic of corona virus in Iran. "It definitely has had an impact on Iran's policies, at all levels and not just the nuclear accords." "Whether this is good or bad for the West is currently uncertain. "This is because of the concerns of further spread of corona virus. "If IAEA cannot have its investigators in Iran at the moment it may cause problems. "It won't be easy for the IAEA to know the scope of Iran's nuclear activities during this time and ultimately this could cause a lot of issues in the future."

Bushehr nuclear power plant shut down to get new fuel

Reza Banazadeh the head of the nuclear plant told that Iran's nuclear power plant near the southern port city of Bushehr has been shut down for periodic maintenance, as its reactor is going to receive fresh fuel. He noted that one-third of the fuel used in the plant's reactor will be replaced. He also highlighted the precautionary measures taken in the plant following the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, saying the pandemic has not done any harm to the activities of the power plant.

U.S. to Argue It Never Left Iran Nuke Deal, in Bid to Force Arms Embargo

Secretary of State Pompeo's reported move is 'part of an intricate strategy to pressure the United Nations Security Council to extend an arms embargo on Tehran'

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is reportedly laying the groundwork to present a legal argument to the United Nations that the U.S. remains a "participant state" in the Obama-era Iran nuclear accord that President Donald Trump unilaterally pulled out of in May 2018. Pompeo's reported move is "part of an intricate strategy to pressure the United Nations Security Council to extend an arms embargo on Tehran," according to an article in the New York Times.

The Times explained that at a moment when both Russia and China have expressed interest in restarting conventional arms sales to Iran, the move will allow the U.S. to reactivate UN sanctions on Iran in the event the UN Security Council does not extend the arms embargo. If the U.S. can reactivate the "snapback" provision of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal it could restore the UN sanctions on Iran that were in place before the accord - which are binding for all UN member states, which includes Russia and China. The arms embargo, which will begin to expire in October, was part of a UN Security Council resolution that approved the nuclear accord, and suspended years of UN-imposed sanctions.

The Times notes that Pompeo's strategy may also be to further discredit the 2015 nuclear deal if the move fails, which the administration believes will force Iranian leadership into negotiating a new accord. Critics were quick to point out the various times Pompeo and other administration officials, including U.S. Special Representative for Iran Brian Hook, had publicly stated the U.S. had exited the deal. U.S.-Iranian relations have been bitter since the Islamic Revolution toppled the U.S.-backed Shah of Iran in 1979 and ushered in an era of theocratic rule. Tensions flared up after Trump pulled out the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and reimposed U.S. sanctions that have crippled the Iranian economy.

Worsening tensions, a Jan. 3 U.S. drone strike in Iraq killed Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's elite Quds Force. It also killed Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who founded Iraq's Shi'ite Kataib Hezbollah militia after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion.

U.S. renewed a waiver for Iraq to continue importing Iranian electricity, a State Department official said, but this time for a shorter period of 30 days, adding that Washington would be reassessing whether to renew again once a 'credible government' is formed in Iraq.

"The Secretary granted this brief extension of the waiver to allow time for the formation of a credible government," a State Department official said, referring to U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and added that the waiver would expire on May 26.

Ties between Washington and Baghdad have been strained as the United States said it was disappointed that Iraqi forces have failed to protect the U.S. forces stationed in Iraq. They have come under multiple rocket attacks this year alone, for which the United States blames the Iran-backed militia. The State Department official said the waiver granted by Pompeo applied only to electricity and referred to the Treasury Department for transactions related to Iranian natural gas imports. (Source: Haaretz)

India has planned genocide of Muslims

For what it is worth, the notion that India will organise a Rwanda type genocide in Kashmir and Assam appears to be far fetched. Apart from other factors, the sheer scale involved is too large. The last time it was allowed to happen was in East Punjab after Partition. Hindu and Sikh mobs, up to five thousand strong, were given a free hand to kill at will. It took them four months to empty the province of Muslims. The total number killed was estimated to be around one million, including those who died of disease. The rest escaped to Pakistan.

In this case, we are looking at a total of about 25 to 30 million Muslims. They have nowhere to go. To kill them all or even a substantial number of them will require a huge operation spread over years. This is not within the realm of possibilities in modern times (the killing of six million Jews by the Nazis is a myth). More than that, unlike Germany, India is a divided country. Not all parts of her support BJP's extreme vision. Her army is a professional force that will be most reluctant to participate in any such atrocity.

There will be other, both internal and external factors that will bear on the issue. It will be very foolish if Modi government were to attempt any such thing. Even if he did, it wouldn't have much traction. Most likely, he is only aiming to reduce Muslim majorities in the two states along the lines of what China did in Manchuria, Inner Mongolia and is now attempting to do in Sinkiang.

India should be placed on religious freedom blacklist: US panel

(30 Apr. 2020) Al Jazeera News

India protests as US Commission on International Religious Freedom puts it on 'countries of particular concern' list.

A US government panel has called for India to be put on a religious freedom blacklist over a "drastic" downturn under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, triggering a sharp rebuttal from New Delhi.

In an annual report published on Tuesday 28 April, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) said India should join the ranks of "countries of particular concern" that would be subject to sanctions if they do not improve their records.

"In 2019, religious freedom conditions in India experienced a drastic turn downward, with religious minorities under increasing assault," the report said.

The bipartisan panel recommends but does not set policy, and there is virtually no chance the State Department will follow its lead on India, an increasingly close US ally.

But the lower ranking for the ally amounts to a stark show of disapproval of India's divisive new citizenship law, which the United Nations has called "fundamentally discriminatory".

Trump declined to criticize the law during his February visit to India, where his meeting with Modi was punctuated by the worst violence in decades in New Delhi, in which 53 people, mostly Muslims, were killed.

'Allowed violence against minorities'

The commission, by contrast, is empowered as an independent arbiter to look only at nations' religious freedom records, apart from their relationship with the US, Vice-Chair at USCIRF Nadine Maenza said.

Beyond the citizenship law, Maenza said in an interview, India has a broader "move toward clamping down on religious minorities that's really troublesome".

It called on the US to impose punitive measures, including visa bans on Indian officials believed responsible and grant funding to civil society groups that monitor hate speech.

The commission said Modi's Hindu nationalist government, which won a convincing election victory last year, "allowed violence against minorities and their houses of worship to continue with impunity, and also engaged in and tolerated hate speech and incitement to violence."

It pointed to comments by Home Minister Amit Shah, who notoriously referred to mostly Muslim migrants as "termites," and to a citizenship law that has triggered nationwide protests.

It also highlighted the revocation of the autonomy of Kashmir, which was India's only Muslim-majority state, and allegations that Delhi police turned a blind eye to mobs who attacked Muslim neighbourhoods in February this year.

The Indian government, which has long been irritated by the commission's comments, quickly rejected the report.

"Its biased and tendentious comments against India are not new. But on this occasion, its misrepresentation has reached new levels," Foreign Ministry spokesman Anurag Srivastava said.

"We regard it as an organisation of particular concern and will treat it accordingly," he said in a statement.

The State Department designates nine "countries of particular concern" on religious freedom - China, Eritrea, Iran, Myanmar, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

The commission asked that all nine countries remain on the list. In addition to India, it sought the inclusion of four more - Nigeria, Russia, Syria and Vietnam.

Pakistan, India's historic rival, was added by the State Department in 2018 after years of appeals by the commission. In its latest report, the commission said Pakistan "continued to trend negatively," voicing alarm at forced conversions of Hindus and other minorities, the abuse of blasphemy prosecutions and a ban on the Ahmadi sect calling itself Muslim.

Citizenship law 'tipping point'

India's citizenship law fast-tracks naturalisation for minorities from neighbouring countries - but not if they are Muslim. Modi's government says it is not aimed at Muslims but rather providing refuge to persecuted people and should be commended.

But critics consider it a watershed move by Modi to define the world's largest democracy as a Hindu nation and chip away at independent India's founding principle of secularism. Tony Perkins, the commission's chair, called the law a "tipping point" and voiced concern about a registry in the northeastern state of Assam, under which 1.9 million people failed to produce documentation to prove that they were Indian citizens before 1971, when mostly Muslim migrants flowed in during Bangladesh's bloody war of independence. "The intentions of the national leaders are to bring this about throughout the entire country," Perkins told an online news conference.

"You could potentially have 100 million people, mostly Muslims, left stateless because of their religion. That would be, obviously, an international issue," said Perkins, a conservative Christian activist known for his opposition to gay rights who is close to President Donald Trump's administration. Trump has hailed Modi and himself called for a ban on all Muslim immigration to the US when he campaigned for president. But for the first time in years, India has been facing substantial criticism in the US Congress(SOURCE: NEWS AGENCIES)

Indian Navy 'prepared for immediate deployment' amid china's increased activities in region

In January, Indian Navy Chief Admiral Karambir Singh confirmed the constant presence of seven to eight People's Liberation Army Navy warships in the Indian Ocean Region at any given time. Speaking at the Raisina Dialogue, the admiral warned: "If anyone operates in our region, they have to notify us first". The Indian Navy on Tuesday asserted its war preparedness while stating that it has continued to maintain its operational vigil in the Indian Ocean Region by carrying out regular maritime surveillance missions by day and night.

The statement comes against the backdrop of movements of a Chinese aircraft carrier and warships through the Miyako Strait as part of a journey to the South China Sea. The Dornier squadron of the ENC, INAS 311, operating from the air station, has been undertaking regular maritime surveillance missions. Additionally, all other air assets have been kept mission-ready and prepared for immediate deployment should the need arise. The statement also mentioned the preparedness of the navy to support country's civilian authorities to maintain the supply of essential goods during the unprecedented 40-day lockdown in the country.

US State Department Clears Lightweight Torpedo, Harpoon Missile Sales to India

By Franz-Stefan Gady

The U.S. Department of State on April 13th 2020, cleared the possible sale of 10 AGM-84L Harpoon Block II air-launched missiles and 16 MK 54 lightweight torpedoes and related equipment for service on the Indian Navy's Boeing P-8I Neptune advanced maritime patrol/anti-submarine warfare (ASW) aircraft at an approximate combined cost of \$155 million.

The Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) notified U.S. Congress of the possible sales, which are still subject to congressional approval.

The proposed sales “will support the foreign policy and national security of the United States by helping to strengthen the U.S.-Indian strategic relationship and to improve the security of a major defensive partner, which continues to be an important force for political stability, peace, and economic progress in the Indo-Pacific and South Asia region,” a DSCA statement reads.

“The proposed sale of this equipment and support will not alter the basic military balance in the region.”

The AGM-84L Harpoon Block II is an all-weather, over-the-horizon, sea-skimming anti-ship/land-attack missile. “The Harpoon missile system will be integrated into the P-8I aircraft to conduct anti-surface warfare missions in defense of critical sea lanes while enhancing interoperability with the United States and other allied forces,” according to DSCA. “The MK 54 Lightweight Torpedo will provide the capability to conduct anti-submarine warfare missions. India will use the enhanced capability as a deterrent to regional threats and to strengthen its homeland defense,” a separate DSCA statement notes. Included in the sale are also three Mk 54 exercise torpedoes. “India intends to utilize MK 54 Lightweight Torpedoes on its P-8I aircraft.” As I explained previously:

The P-8I is equipped with some of the most modern U.S. anti-submarine warfare (ASW) technology including a Telephonics APS-143 OceanEye aft radar system and a cutting-edge magnetic anomaly detector. The APS-143 is not present on the original P-8A Poseidon in use by the U.S. Navy. The aircraft is also armed with U.S. weapons systems including Harpoon Block-II missiles, [and] MK-54 lightweight torpedoes [next to others]. The aircraft are all data-linked with Indian submarines in order to have the capability to pass on information about enemy vessels.

The Indian Navy's P-8I squadron (Indian Naval Air Squadron 312A) is stationed at naval air station Rajali in southern India and consists of eight aircraft. The Indian government and Boeing concluded a \$2.1 billion contract for the purchase of eight P-8I aircraft in 2009. The Indian Ministry of Defense (MoD) placed a \$1.1 billion follow-on order for four additional P-8Is in 2016.

The Navy is expected to begin receiving the second batch of four aircraft this May. Additionally, the MoD approved the purchase of six more P-8Is in June 2019. (Source: The diplomat | Asia Pacific)

Costs More Than a Su-57? Tejas Single Engine Light Fighter

The Indian Air Force is set to finalise a deal to purchase 83 Tejas Mk1A lightweight single engine fighters, which will mark the second major order for the aircraft following a prior order for 40 jets. The Tejas began development in the early 1980s, and following massive delays and almost 40 years of work the aircraft was accorded final operational clearance (FOC) by India's aviation certifying authority in February 2019. The fighter is from a comparable weight range to the Swedish Gripen and Pakistani JF-17 fighter, and is considerably lighter than higher end single engine designs such as the American F-16 Fighting Falcon and Chinese J-10 Firebird. While touted as an indigenous program, many of the Tejas' core systems are purchased off the shelf from foreign suppliers including an American F404 engine - the same as that designed to power the F-20 Tigershark light fighter in the 1970s, an Israeli sensor suite and electronics, and Russian air to air missiles.

Development of a lightweight and low cost indigenous fighter has been pursued by a range of countries from Sweden to Taiwan from a number of reasons - allowing them not only to tailor the jet to the needs of their armed forces, develop high end technologies domestically and pursue their own design philosophies, but also because manufacturing jets domestically is usually a great deal cheaper than importing them at market prices. Considering the highly ambitious plans India has to expand its fighter fleet, which will require the induction of over a dozen new squadrons in the near future, a low cost lightweight indigenous jet would provide an effective means of doing so while remaining within the limits of the country's defence budget. The only issue with this is that India's Tejas, largely due to its reliance on very costly foreign technologies, is very far from a low cost fighter - with the recent order costing the Defence Ministry \$62.7 million per airframe.

Purchasing the F404 and Israeli sensors and electronics at export prices, which are the most costly parts of the jet, the Tejas cannot be manufactured as a cheap indigenous platform as Pakistan's JF-17, Taiwan's Ching Kuo and Brave Eagle, China's J-10 and JL-15 or America's F-16 are. Using the American F-35A as an example of the discrepancy in the prices of domestically produced and exported fighters, the jet is being purchased by the Air Force for around \$80 million each but is being marketed for export for around \$200 million each. Similarly, while Russia's Su-57 is currently the most costly non-Western fighter being marketed for export, with an estimated export price of around \$110 million, it is being purchased by the Russian Air Force for just \$35 million each. Compared to the prices Russia and the U.S. respectively are purchasing the Su-57 and F-35A, both state of the art fifth generation designs which are considerably heavier and more sophisticated

than the Tejas, the Indian fighter appears to present the country with much less value for money than previously thought.

India is now the world's third largest military spender

India's military expenditure grew by 6.8% in 2019 as the country climbed up the rankings from fourth spot.

SNEHESH ALEX PHILIP | 27 April, 2020

New Delhi: With an expenditure of \$71.1 billion in 2019, India has emerged as the third largest military spender in the world, just behind the US and China. In a report published, Swedish think-tank Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) said India's expenditure grew by 6.8 per cent from 2018 and the country climbed up the rankings from its earlier fourth spot. Titled Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2019, the annual report said India's tensions and rivalry with Pakistan and China were among the major drivers for its increased military spending. China, which is second on the list with an expense of \$261 billion, saw a 5.1 per cent rise in its defence spending. This is the first time that the two Asian states have featured among the top three military spenders.

India's expense rise : India's military expenses have risen significantly over the past few decades. Over the 30-year period between 1990 and 2019, its spending grew by 259 per cent. In 2010-19 decade, the expenses grew by 37 per cent, the report said. However, the country's military burden fell from 2.7 per cent of the Indian GDP in 2010 to 2.4 per cent in 2019. Its rival Pakistan's military expenditure rose by 70

per cent over the decade to reach \$10.3 billion, with the burden rising from 3.4 per cent of GDP in 2010 to 4 per cent in 2019.

World expenses : According to the report, total global military expenditure rose to \$1,917 billion dollars in 2019 a 3.6 per cent rise over 2018 and the largest annual growth since 2010, said the SIPRI report. The US' military spending grew by 5.3 per cent to a total of \$732 billion, accounting for 38 per cent of the global spend. The increase in US spending in just 2019 was equivalent to the entirety of Germany's military expense for the year. "The recent growth in US military spending is largely based on a perceived return to competition between the great powers," Pieter D. Wezeman, senior researcher at SIPRI, said in the report. Russia and Saudi Arabia rounded off the top five largest spenders, all of whom accounted for 62 per cent of the global expenditure. (Source: The Print)

PAKISTAN

Pakistan is leading the way with its welfare state the world can learn from its innovation

By Lord Nigel Crisp

More than 50 years ago countries as far apart as Indonesia, Tanzania and Guatemala began to train local people as community health workers who can provide some treatments themselves and, as importantly, help their neighbours and communities prevent disease. The idea took off and spread through low- and middle-income countries with Pakistan, for example, establishing a programme of Lady Health Workers. Health improvement starts in the community and if you tackle challenges at the source, whether it be health, education or skills training, it will have major health and economic benefits later. The community health worker model has been so successful that many years later it was picked up in high-income countries with New York, for example, now having a well-established network.

This community-based approach allows health, education and other social issues to be tackled together in a holistic fashion. Girls and boys who are healthy, for example, are more likely to get a good education and go on to be productive members of society and live healthy lives. The strongest systems work across sectors, breaking through barriers to drive programmes and solutions that touch on health, education, economic livelihoods and beyond.

This is why we should all be looking with particular interest at the work underway in Pakistan to build a sustainable welfare state. Called Ehsaas, which in Urdu literally means 'empathy', the new initiative is one of the most comprehensive welfare programmes ever undertaken by a national government, with an underlying ambition to create a social safety net for Pakistan that could transform the lives of millions. It is enormously wide-ranging and ambitious.

Despite some progress since the turn of the millennium, a quarter of people in Pakistan still live in poverty, with rates of rural poverty more than double those in urban areas. With one of the fastest growing populations in the world, Pakistan will have to create a million new jobs each year just to keep up with the number of young people entering the job market.

Educational attainment is some of the worst in the region and health indicators are not promising, demonstrated by the fact that Pakistan is one of only two countries where the wild polio virus remains endemic. This is the context in which Ehsaas is seeking to end the cycle of poverty faced by many Pakistanis.

Acknowledging that no single area will unlock this ambition alone, Ehsaas encompasses 134 policies that range from tackling corruption to creating educational opportunities to providing the elderly with

decent homes. The programme is led by Dr Sania Nishtar, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister of Pakistan on Poverty Alleviation and Social Protection, who has been mandated by Prime Minister Imran Khan to work in partnership across multiple federal ministries that these policies will be driven by, as well with provincial governments who have devolved powers including on education and health.

Without a multi-sectoral approach, it would not be possible to create the welfare state envisioned by Ehsaas. The launch of a countrywide public consultation was particularly important as it was the first time a public policy in Pakistan had been developed in this way and demonstrates a new level of openness and transparency. Ehsaas's impact will hopefully go much further than the borders of Pakistan.

It will provide many lessons for low-, middle- and high-income countries. As I argued in my book *Turning the World Upside Down*, development should not be seen as one-way exchange between the rich and the poor. We can and must all learn from each other. The UK's and other European welfare states that developed in the 20th century covered all sectors and have been very influential; but now our policy makers can learn from Pakistan's more integrated and cross-sectoral approach with its emphasis on governance and empowerment and greater understanding of the role that gender and other factors play.

Too often we are stuck in our silos and not taking this system wide approach. We should seek to learn from the innovative approaches that Ehsaas plans to take to lift children out of poverty, to ensure girls get the same shot as boys in school and to ensure that millions of young people have both the skills training and a social safety net.

This includes empowering the most marginalized women through the latest mobile technology and monitoring school attendance using biometric identification. There is a long road ahead to achieve the ambitions set out in the Ehsaas programme, which is still in its infancy. Whatever the eventual outcome, it is encouraging to see a country with Pakistan's potential setting its ambitions so high.

As with the community health worker system that turned global health on its head, the breaking down of silos is a vital step in building a welfare state in Pakistan but also provides a blueprint for how other countries can ensure essential services for all.

Lord Nigel Crisp was Chief Executive of the NHS and Permanent Secretary of the Department of health from 2000-2006. He is Co-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Global Health and Co-chair of the global Nursing Now campaign.

The internationalization of the Pakistan Army

The Pakistan Army is making a concerted effort to relieve itself of its dependency on the US, and it might be working

By Kamal Alam

As the recent National Day military parade shows, the Pakistan Army now has a global diplomatic footprint that is turning into a multi-faceted force that includes defence diplomacy, conflict resolution and peacekeeping, international education and last by no means lest military sales and defence cooperation. It is a sharp contrast to September 11, 2001 when under pressure and isolation threats, the then Chief of Army Staff (COAS), General Musharraf buckled under American pressure.

Almost two decades on, the Pakistan Army has become one of the most international armies in the world more than three dozen militaries from around the world from Latin America to Australia are undergoing training in Pakistan's various service staff colleges, and defence cooperation with emerging BRICS powers is at an all-time high. The diversification also underpins the new geopolitical realities of

the army unlike 2001 it has nothing to fear as its allies and strategic outreach diversifies beyond an old dependence on American equipment and financial aid.

The legacy of American dependency

After September 11, 2001, one could hardly blame Musharraf as he realised the limitations of the army's fighting position after a decade of US sanctions following the Pressler Amendment, Pakistan's military was in bad shape and could not challenge any American threats. The Pakistan Air Force and the two dozen F-16s were hardly in a serviceable condition - its force was almost wholly just trained to fight on its eastern border rather than a counter-insurgency on the Afghan border as the Americans were demanding.

The US has been blackmailing Pakistan for almost three decades on the sale of F-16s, even the ones that Pakistan paid for were not delivered and only after Pakistan agreed to take part in the global war on terror did F16s start arriving after two decades. Even then Pakistan had to go to Turkey and Jordan for the delivery as a more reliable partner albeit with American permission. Pakistan is also yet to take delivery of Bell AH-1Z helicopter the first batch was meant for delivery in 2017.

As of last autumn, it was reported that these latest sales are being blocked and kept in storage after Trump's cancellation of military aid. It is here where American foreign military sales while still in demand are no more a considerable nuisance for Pakistan. Over the last decade, Pakistan has firmly moved away from dependency on American military equipment and towards new international partnerships and self-reliance through an indigenous weapons program.

Pakistan's international training program

Just as the US announced last year it would cut Pakistani military participation in its elite training institution, the Russians signed a historic first welcoming Pakistani officers at their top military academies and colleges. Not only is this a complete reversal of Pakistan's Russia policy but also a new era of Pakistan's defence diplomacy. Similarly, the two have now set up regular training exercises, and Pakistan has bought attack helicopters.

Beyond just being at the receiving end of training, Pakistan had become the first non-Western army to have a platoon commander at the Royal Military Academy of Sandhurst, when Major Uqbah Hadeed Malik became the first Pakistani instructor at the world's premier defence academy.

Under Uqbah's command the finest British officers and international cadets went on to graduate subsequently Uqbah's successor, Major Umar Farooq won the prestigious Sovereign Platoon, the best-trained unit at Sandhurst. Pakistan also has a Lt-Colonel as an instructor at the British Army's Staff College in Shrivenham, again a role customarily given to just British or NATO officers.

Following on from the British Army, it was reported that both the German and Czech armies had shown an interest to learn from Pakistan given its experiences in fighting in Afghanistan. Training and providing conflict resolution expertise of course has been a long tradition of Pakistan, and at the United Nations, Pakistan has consistently been one of the largest providers of training and security. Now Pakistan is turning its training and conflict resolution into a global unit with major repercussions on its international relations and defence diplomacy.

Pakistan goes global in its international alliances

On the 23rd March celebrations, the presence of the Turkish Air Force, Saudi & Bahrain Special Forces, Azerbaijan and Sri Lankan troops in addition to its historical military ally China's air force underlines the international nature of Pakistan military's alliances. The presence of the Malaysian Prime Minister and Azerbaijani Defence Minister were all the more important as the Pakistan Air Force looks to sell its jointly produced aircraft, the JF-17 to the two countries.

Late last year Nigeria became the first country to confirm its purchase of the JF-17 from Pakistan. Earlier Myanmar had also bought the aircraft, although the Chinese rather than Pakistanis executed that deal. South Africa and Brazil have also increased their military cooperation with Pakistan, with recent high profile visits and negotiations for sales and purchases by the Pakistan Army and its air force.

Australia has also increased its cooperation with Pakistan and strengthening its old training relationships. Notwithstanding its relations with the Saudi military, the Pakistanis have also confirmed their security presence to aid Qatar during the upcoming world cup there. Turkey is stepping up its role with Pakistan and again signing its biggest defence deal and furthering air force ties as it seeks to replace US hegemony in the defence trade globally. As Pakistan frees itself from American military dependency, it is forging a global path to provide training, equipment and cooperation to countries previously out of its domain.

ISIS is a threat to South & Central Asian countries

By Mirza Kashif Baig

The attacks of 9/11 brought about a radical change globally. The attack was unique and unanticipated and it took more than a decade for the world to understand the reality of those attacks. If the conspiracy theories are to be believed then it is clear as day that 9/11 attacks were an inside job and so are the reasons. After these, the entire world witnessed the wrath of US either directly or indirectly. In their callous and ambitious approach US administration did not hesitate to kill innocent civilians of its own country and of the world.

They were quick to trace the attacks back to Afghanistan led a conquest against the Taliban and brutally killed the ones defending their motherland, all in the name of keeping of Osama bin Ladin and handing over to USA. The surprising factor in this matter is that America despite its advanced satellite and military hardware was 'mistaken' and in fact they could not trace their wanted man in Afghanistan.

It would have been decent to retract and help re-build the country it had destroyed and this would have been the right course of action if this had been an honest mistake, however, it was not. The attack on Afghanistan was part of a greater plot which then resulted in the attack on Iraq, again in the name of to take control of Iraq's fictional weapons of mass destruction.

In reality Afghanistan was invaded in order to enhance influence in South Asia and Iraq was invaded for its resources. An important aspect in all this was the emergence of a terrorist organization 'Al-Qaeda' which reportedly claimed responsibility for the 9/11 attacks. This organization was not present in Iraq but Afghanistan which resulted in some face saving for US and its naïve allies.

What is even more interesting is that the terrorists of AL-Qaeda while supposedly fighting against US and its allies, were wreaking havoc in the neighboring Muslim countries like Pakistan, and were somehow providing benefit to America. After much orchestrated drama and Pakistan's victory against terrorist factions Al-Qaeda had to go because America could no longer justify why it was not able to eliminate a terrorist organization, despite being a super power and so Al-Qaeda faded away.

But American agenda was not yet complete, hence a new terrorist organization emerged by the name of ISIS, claiming to be fighters of Islam and being led by a man who used to move freely among American controlled prisons in Iraq to recruit followers.

What was not anticipated, this time US, was that the world powers were more aware of their game this time and little time was wasted in pointing fingers towards USA for the birth of ISIS. ISIS was beaten in Iraq by the help of Iranian fighters and in Syria due to the joint efforts of Russia and Iran. ISIS was shipped off to Afghanistan by US support this time to battle the Talibans of Afghanistan in order to strengthen American control in the region and Afghanistan where it has nine sophisticated military bases.

At the moment, ISIS is re-grouping in Afghanistan and is looking to intensify its military operations against the Taliban, by the aid of USA. Taliban and ISIS are very different in their approach. While the Afghan Taliban are fighting against foreign invaders to gain freedom and are limited to Afghanistan only, ISIS is following a global agenda and recognizes no borders.

Their goal is simply to ensure that the American agenda of global domination is carried out. Taliban of Afghanistan are popular amongst their people as they seek to promote the tradition of fending off foreign invaders, a tradition existent in the country for thousands of years. ISIS seeks to eliminate Taliban and gain access to Central Asian countries, majority of the countries of this region, seeks to stand against US and are giving America a tough time.

AFGHANISTAN

ISIS & Taliban conflict

By Interaction Desk

It is estimated that almost 12,000 ISIS fighters are present in Afghanistan at the moment. These fighters are being kept in check by the Afghnani Taliban and both the factions are in the bloody conflict with the Afghan Security forces. This forms a vicious circle of bloodshed which is affecting not only the Afghan people but the neighbouring countries as well.

Fact of the matter is that this conflict could have a devastating spillover effect. ISIS fighters are facing brutal opposition by the hands of Afghan Taliban and as a result they may seek to relocate to neighbouring countries to establish base, develop a stronghold and wreak havoc all across.

Similarly, such a conflict awakens the extremist offshoots of defeated terrorist organizations who view it as an opportunity to revive themselves. This in turn gives rise to terrorism in neighbouring areas. At the moment, the South Asian region is witnessing an economic revival in the form of the CPEC and all other projects that are linked with it.

This is a part of a great One Belt One Road initiative which promises to have global benefits. In the midst of all this economic activity, a terrorist spill over would serve to ruin an otherwise tasty dish. Pakistan while not directly in the line of ISIS activity, should be vigilant as there are still many sleeper factions of TTP remaining in Pakistan.

While we have successfully defeated terrorism on our soil, we must be vigilant cautious to prevent it from raising its ugly head again. Pakistan Institute for Peace and Studies (PIPS) reports that splinter groups of TTP and ISIS serve as the most viable threat to the country's stability. This shows that while we have succeeded in bringing down terrorist attacks, we have not eliminated terrorism entirely.

This claim can be backed by the fact that 595 Pakistanis lost their lives in terrorist attacks in 2018, among these 595, 38% were killed in five vicious attacks in Baluchistan and Khyber Paktunkhwa claimed by ISIS. According to PIPS report 59% of these victims were from Baluchistan.

All in all, the report highlights that 262 terrorists attacks were conducted in 2018, out of which 19 were suicide bombings. Out of these 262 attacks around 171 were planned and executed by TTP and its splinter groups. These facts show that while Pakistan has come a long way, there is long way to go further and that we cannot let our guard down when we are this close to achieving our end goal.

Terrorism is one huge repercussion of this conflict, whereas there are many other factors which are disrupting the region. For instance drug lords are thriving in Afghanistan right now. Terrorist organizations like ISIS and TTP generate revenue by producing and smuggling drugs to neighbouring countries.

This in turn gives rise to crime and terrorism within the region restricting economic growth and social development. ISIS Taliban dispute is threat to other countries of the region as well. For instance, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is gaining strength by supporting ISIS which means that can cause serious problems for Uzbekistan but having Russian support and being a member of SCO would mean that it would not stand alone.

Similarly Turkmenistan, which is already battling extremism at home may be affected severely by such conflicts, and the fact that it refuses to accept help from neighbours and that it has a very small proportion of armed forces, will not go in its favour.

This means that the Afghan conflict must be resolved so that these spillover effects are contained and regional stability established.

Afghanistan's next war

By Mujib Mashal

One Wednesday in March, 11,627 people crossed the Iranian border into the Afghan province of Herat. A sea of young men formed outside an immigration center that could accommodate only 300 people at a time. Some carried backpacks, others large sacks overstuffed with their belongings. One carried a child's bicycle, another a string instrument. One had just two blankets folded under his arm, another a canary in a cage. As the line slowly moved forward, some put down shawls to pray; others found rocks to rest on.

Most of the men were Afghans in their 20s. Their search for a better life in Iran had been abruptly thwarted by the coronavirus, returning them to a border that once took them days to cross in the other direction squeezed into the beds of pickup trucks by smugglers who sped them through deserts at night, leaving some with bruises and others with broken body parts. The least fortunate were left in the desert to rot.

Now, as the men waited to be processed back into a war zone they had tried to escape, health care workers shouting through a megaphone instructed them in how to wash their hands. By the afternoon, the crowd grew impatient and started pushing and shoving to get into the offices where each person would be registered. The police, overwhelmed, responded with force, beating the returnees back into a line that wrapped around the building, zigzagged a couple of times and ended in a sprawling crowd.

Afghanistan shares more than 500 miles of border with Iran, much of it in western Herat Province, now the center of the country's coronavirus outbreak. For years, activity along the border has been a barometer of sorts, reflecting the state of Afghanistan as a whole. When the country gradually devolved into a narco state after the American-led coalition toppled the Taliban in 2001, eventually producing much of the world's opium, drug shipments were smuggled across the western border. Even low-level officials and commanders would return to Kabul after brief postings in border towns to build so-called poppy palaces in the city.

Later, as the war reached a hopeless stalemate and the United States began drawing down its troops after a decade of fighting, a new desperation gripped the Afghan people. The stability and prosperity that was promised with the American invasion evaporated. Hundreds of thousands of people rushed to leave. Many settled in Iran as illegal laborers, making barely enough money to survive and living under the constant threat of arrest but at least safe from bombs. Others continued onward as far as Europe.

In February, however, the cross-border current reversed direction. A surge of suspected coronavirus infections in Iran started sparking fears of a major outbreak. Soon, the number of returnees arriving at the Herat immigration center doubled, then tripled its typical average of about 2,500. From Jan. 1 to April 11, nearly 243,000 people crossed back into Afghanistan from Iran, according to the International Organization for Migration.

Amid the economic crisis, the demand for Afghan day laborers, who work for lower wages than Iranians, dried up. Even under normal circumstances, they couldn't access health care without discrimination. Now they were hearing that the hospitals were overwhelmed. There were also rumors that the Iranian authorities were killing Afghans suspected of being infected with coronavirus.

So they came back to what was left of home: villages sometimes ripped apart by fighting between the Taliban and Afghan security forces, or simply impoverished because of a lack of government services bringing the virus with them. The country's first few cases were detected in people who crossed the border. But quickly, these were outnumbered by others who had never left Afghanistan.

"People don't even want to say hello to us from 50 or 100 meters," said Khaled Sayedkhili, who returned to his village in Parwan Province in March with 14 members of his family. "Yesterday, a relative ran from me as if I was a suicide bomber."

Eight weeks after Afghanistan recorded its first Covid-19 case in Herat; the virus has spread to at least 30 of the country's 34 provinces and killed 30 people, according to official government numbers. But these figures almost certainly understate the virus's reach: Afghanistan does not have the capacity to conduct widespread testing, and it has averaged about 100 tests a day. (The Ministry of Health in Poland, a country with a similar population, said it is conducting 16,000 tests a day.)

Although the government has recorded less than 1,000 cases across the country, local officials in most places are working under the assumption that the virus is deeply embedded in their constituencies. In late March, Ferozuddin Feroz, Afghanistan's health minister, warned that unless stricter social-distancing measures were enforced, 16 million Afghans could be infected and 110,000 could die.

Provincial officials and health care workers, particularly in Herat Province, are preparing, with what little equipment and resources they have, not only for a situation when the death toll starts rising drastically but also for the economic ramifications of shuttered shops and closed government offices outcomes that may tip a country already deeply impoverished, unstable and mired in conflict into a spiral from which it will not recover. "The war has been an economic blow," said Abdul Qayum Rahimi, who was governor of Herat Province from January 2019 until the first week of April, "but trade continues despite fighting. The factories continue; life continues. The virus, it stops everything."

Afghanistan isn't the only country in conflict made vulnerable by conditions that preceded the pandemic. In northwestern Syria, where a million people have sought refuge from the country's nine-year civil war, limited access to clean water for hand-washing means the virus has most likely swept through many displacement camps. Supplies are slow to arrive, and doctors estimate that more than 100,000 people could die.

In Iraq, which borders Iran to the west, the government-imposed lockdown has ravaged the fragile economy already depleted by plummeting oil prices and the country's three-year battle against the Islamic State. In many ways, the Afghan experience is a microcosm of the virus's reach into the most precarious parts of the developing world, where climate change, food shortages, violence and territorial disputes have created circumstances dangerously ideal for the rapid and uncontrollable spread of a disease.

And in what could perhaps be an unprecedented moment in modern history, there may be no superpower left untouched that can afford to offer help. The virus arrived in Afghanistan at a precarious moment, even by the standards of the country's turbulent history. The government is negotiating the terms of a peace deal with the Taliban that has already begun the departure of the remaining American troops, even as the insurgent group continues to attack Afghan forces. Over two weeks in late March and early April, the Taliban carried out more than 500 attacks across nine provinces, which were also among the worst hit by the infection.

Adding to the chaos is a disputed presidential election. In February, Afghanistan's election commission declared the incumbent, Ashraf Ghani, the winner of last September's vote, but his victory was challenged by Abdullah Abdullah, Ghani's longtime political rival. On the same day as Ghani's inauguration, Abdullah also took the presidential oath of office. Last month, the men failed to come to a compromise, so the U.S. State Department announced that it would cut \$1 billion in aid to the government, which relies on foreign funding for 75 percent of its public spending.

The virus now serves as a test of the Afghan government's competence without the United States as its benefactor, which Ghani has recognized as an opportunity to demonstrate his administration's ability to govern. But with a bureaucracy bogged down by political infighting, many of his efforts have come across as hollow and contradictory. (While his administration was calling off small gatherings to slow the spread of the virus, both he and Abdullah invited thousands of guests to their swearing-in ceremonies in tightly packed venues, more than two weeks after the first confirmed case.)

Ingrained long ago into the psyche of Afghanistan's leaders was an over reliance on the United States and its allies. The mission in the country has never had clear definitions of success or failure; the abundance of avoidable deaths among civilians and soldiers rarely brought consequences. Corrupt, complacent and dependent, that system now finds itself contending with a swift-moving infection at a time when its most relied-upon patrons are overwhelmed by the same pandemic and are finally growing weary of the mess they have perpetuated for nearly two decades.

Officials in Herat follow the news from the rest of the world; they can recite the latest death tolls in Italy, in Britain, in New York. The degree to which the corona virus brought rich, technologically equipped Western powers to their knees left many of them in shock a shock that has since been replaced by a fear of what the devastation will look like in a vastly less-prepared place like Afghanistan.

By the time Herat Province confirmed its first case of corona virus on Feb. 22, thousands of people were entering the country at the border. Iranian officials were still claiming that the corona virus would not be a problem for the country, and they were slow to contain the outbreak. Within two weeks, Iran's hospitals were overwhelmed with sick patients. Less than 100 miles south of Tehran, satellite imaging showed mass graves newly dug for corona virus victims. Home to roughly 80 million people, Iran became one of the world's earliest and worst outbreaks.

Ghani's administration, humiliated by the American aid cut, was eager to demonstrate Afghanistan's ability to prevent the virus's spread. "I don't need W.H.O. to come show my nation how to wash their hands," Amrullah Saleh, one of the country's two vice presidents, said in a local-television interview. His sentiment echoed that of Ghani, who has long described the United Nations agencies as inefficient.

Despite the Public Health Ministry's dependence on non-governmental organizations for even the most basic services, Ghani asked the U.N. to take a back seat on corona virus efforts. Saleh went on to call Afghanistan's response to the virus "the role model of management in the third world."

But during a recent visit to the city of Herat, the capital of the province of the same name, which is home to 1.5 million people, local officials appeared to be managing very little. Many businesses were closed, but the streets were still jammed with people and cars. As one senior provincial official said, "We disrupted the economy but not the virus." The official estimated that there were 150,000 day laborers in the city who weren't working because of the lockdown and had no way to feed themselves or their families. People donated generously in the early days, but those donations slowed as the long-term economic impact on businesses became apparent.

Outside the main provincial hospital, which is situated in the center of the city, was a small clinic, where in early April doctors dressed in hazmat suits were seeing as many as 400 people a day who were trying to be tested. A loudspeaker repeated a simple message: Corona virus is dangerous; wash your hands; keep your distance. Most people were turned away and told to come back later.

"I was in contact with someone who turned out positive about two weeks ago," said 27-year-old Faiz Mohamad. He was among the three dozen people gathered at the clinic in the first hour it opened on a recent Saturday. He said he had a headache that wouldn't go away, and he was also coughing. "I have come here three times," he said, "and they have told me there are no kits and I should check back."

The doctor in charge of collecting samples for the tests, Mohamad Shah Alokozai, kept apologizing. He said the clinic already had a backlog of 360 swabs. Testing had stopped for 48 hours, and Alokozai said that while the W.H.O. sent a small batch of kits on a United Nations flight, they would sustain the lab for

only a few days. "There are no kits," he told those showing up every day. "If I take your sample now, I would be misleading you."

Misinformation has added another layer of complexity to the city's corona virus response. Early on, unproved remedies spread online; one claimed that drinking two cups of black tea would make you immune to the virus. Later, a widely circulated rumor held that if you died of the virus, the government would refuse to hand over your body to your family or worse, would burn the corpse. People who were hospitalized started fleeing from health facilities. Shaidahe Hospital, a facility on the outskirts of the city dedicated to treating Covid-19 patients, brought in a police combat unit to guard the building after 38 people escaped in the first days it was open.

In early April, one patient there broke a window, climbed over the compound wall, clambered onto a waiting motorcycle and roared off into the warren of tents in a displacement camp across the street from the facility. A woman rushed out of the hospital to alert the small group of police guards. "Commander, sir, corona escaped!" she shouted. Eventually, the patient was returned after three officers chased him in an armored vehicle and a fourth officer on a motorcycle trailed him through the displacement camp and into a shop, where he tried to hide. They tackled him and took turns holding him down as they looked for handcuffs.

Inside the Shaidahe treatment center, which was a children's hospital before the outbreak, many of the rooms' walls were still covered in posters of newborn babies. The facility has 100 beds, with dozens more in reserve. Of the 68 patients at the center in early April, only 35 had tested positive. The rest, suspected of having the disease, sat around waiting some as long as eight days for their results.

In the women's ward, female patients were confined four to six to a room, a mix of confirmed cases and those who still didn't have test results. They sipped tea and chatted from their beds, which were spaced about three feet apart. Dr. Asif Rahmani, a hospital manager, said the women were put together at the request of their families, so they wouldn't be lonely.

Though Ghani sent more than \$5 million to Herat by mid-March for equipment and supplies, the provincial administration couldn't tap into it because the procurement process required extensive documentation and approval from the central government bureaucratic measures that took weeks to relax. Beds, protective gear, ventilators and medications are among the supplies that have now been ordered, but it's unclear when hospitals will actually receive them.

"A person might walk big, but we will only know their true strength when they face a challenge," said Rafiq Shaheer, a university lecturer and civil-society activist in Herat who is helping with the corona virus response. "We faced the test, and the system didn't work." As for a newly erected hospital that the government had rushed to complete in 18 days, it was impressive, from the tile floors to the slick automated doors.

It even had V.I.P. rooms. But a week after Ghani's office declared that it was officially "delivered for use," the rooms had neither equipment nor patients. Local officials said they were unaware of a plan for how to staff the hospital with doctors and nurses. The Taliban, who have refused a cease-fire that could help the government redirect resources toward corona virus efforts, were quick to seize the opportunity offered by these official failures.

In Nangarhar Province in eastern Afghanistan, local Taliban leaders gathered journalists, doctors and residents in a packed room of a clinic, with little space between those seated. There were some masks and gloves on the table. For the cameras, a medical worker, wearing a full protective suit, raised what looked like a thermometer gun to measure a person's temperature. On closer examination, it was simply a prop, made of plastic and wood, wrapped in white tape.

In early April, Ghani removed Herat's governor, Rahimi, without a clear reason and replaced him with his 33-year-old deputy national security adviser, Sayed Abdul Wahid Qatali. A former mayor, Qatali knew the city well. But when he arrived in Herat, he found a place ill equipped to handle any kind of widespread outbreak that health officials were predicting.

In news conferences, his tone was desperate and his message clear: Herat lacked the resources to feed hundreds of thousands who faced hunger and poverty; the population wasn't taking the threat of the virus seriously. He had no qualms about warning of what was most likely coming. "I am telling you, clearly," he said. "I am busy digging graves."

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Courtesy: The New York Times.

US aid bombshell won't bring peace to Afghanistan

Washington ratchets up pressure on Kabul by making all future aid conditional on the formation of an inclusive government

By M K Bhadrakumar

The principal deputy assistant secretary at the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs (SCA) in the US State Department, Alice Wells, dropped a bombshell on the Afghan government and the country's political elites on April 4 and caught the international donors by surprise, too by linking all aid to Afghanistan to the formation of an inclusive government in Kabul. In a tweet from the SCA account, Wells wrote in a threatening tone: "It can't be business as usual for international donors in #Afghanistan. International aid requires partnership with an inclusive government and we all must hold Afghan leaders accountable to agree on a governing arrangement."

Prima facie, it was a call by Washington to the international community to join the recent move, announced on March 23 by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, to cut back aid to Afghanistan by US\$1 billion and to reduce the aid by another billion dollars in 2021 as well as to initiate a review of all US-aided programs and projects in that country to identify additional reductions, and to reconsider US pledges on the whole to future donor conferences for Afghanistan.

The punishing move on March 23 followed an abortive mission by Pompeo to Kabul on the same day to persuade Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and former chief executive Abdullah Abdullah to agree on an inclusive government. Pompeo's appeals fell on deaf ears. It now seems that Washington's threat to cut back bilateral aid also has been largely ignored by the Afghan elites. Washington is ratcheting up the pressure on Kabul by forewarning that it will prevail upon the international community to join hands with the US by making all aid to Afghanistan conditional on cooperative behavior by the Afghan political elites.

Will such hyped-up US threats work? The high probability is that they won't impress Afghan elites. As for the international community, Washington may have better luck. The US has been the driving force behind marshaling international aid for Afghanistan. Between 2002 and 2015, the US and other international donors pumped about \$130 billion into that country, but most of the money came from the US (about \$115 billion) although more than half of it was spent on security.

At the October 5, 2016, Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, the international donors pledged another \$15.2 billion through the period up to 2020. The unexpectedly high pledges in Brussels reflected a general recognition at that point that if the Taliban gained ground and/or if Afghanistan sank into greater poverty and despair, the region and the world would have a much higher price to pay.

Equally, there was trust in Ghani as someone with a vision for Afghanistan whom major donors could believe in, despite the rampant corruption and political infighting, and the bloody conflict ending a huge number of Afghan lives. Importantly, the US was backing Ghani to the hilt. But four years down the line,

the situation around Afghanistan has changed phenomenally. Despite all the money spent, the security situation has worsened, and the Taliban are now resurgent.

Afghanistan remains a basket case one of the poorest countries on Earth, with 80% of its budget financed by aid. The world community has come to accept that there is no alternative but to reconcile with the Taliban through negotiations and power-sharing. Clearly, the earlier optimism, even if somewhat contrived, has been replaced by donor fatigue, and questions are being asked about where the money will end up. None of the donors believe that Afghanistan could become self-reliant in the foreseeable future.

In such a gloomy situation, Wells' tweet taps into the pervasive donor fatigue and the Western donors might subscribe to the thinking in Washington that they "must hold Afghan leaders accountable to agree on a governing arrangement" before loosening their purse strings any further. However, lest it be forgotten, beyond the club of Western donors, it may turn to be a different story when it comes to the regional states such as China, Russia, Iran or India. Therein lies the rub.

Indeed, no regional state aspires to replace the US and other Western donors. But the point is that the regional states would have a sense of immediacy about the Afghan situation and cannot afford to take a detached view. They will willy-nilly remain engaged with the Ghani government. (In fact, Ghani is well aware of that.)

But the danger here is that as the regional states shed their reserve and get more and more involved, the competitions and rivalries between and among them will spill over into Afghanistan, and the country may become a theater of severe contestation where, in a cacophony of turmoil, primitivism and savagery, a new struggle may erupt.

Does that have to be the final outcome of the 19-year-old US-led war in Afghanistan? The despair and hopelessness in Washington are understandable. Zalmay Khalilzad, the special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation, has reached his limits. Neither President Donald Trump nor Pompeo has personal equations (which former secretary of state John Kerry had in similar circumstances in 2014) with Afghan elites. Besides, Afghan elites are already beginning to look at a "post-American century."

In such a situation, Washington should stop micromanaging Afghan politics. If the US steps aside to the shade, it may help. Leave it to the Afghan elites to work out a consensus. They are quite capable of resorting to their time-honored traditions of consensus-making. The problem at this point is that the US wants to chariot the peace process to a predetermined destination with intra-Afghan talks providing a facade of negotiations. The Afghans don't buy that approach, because, what is there in it for them?

The Brookings Institution, which is wired into the US security establishment and intelligence, floated a "consensus formula" on March 25 co-authored by none other than the think-tank's president John Allen to the effect that Kabul's team for the intra-Afghan talks could be led on the government side by Abdullah, who, nonetheless, "would not be Ghani's delegate ... but as the lead negotiator as well as lead decision-maker on any deal with the Taliban."

Ghani will never agree to such self-serving US ideas. His recent cabinet appointments (which might well have been the immediate provocation for Alice Wells' threatening tweet) underscore that he is "Afghanizing" his cabinet for the first time with appointees drawn from the political spectrum so that it is "inclusive" although not in the way Washington would have liked.

The appointment of Mohammad Haneef Atmar as acting foreign minister, for instance, shows that Ghani has a game plan to sit down across the table with the Taliban with a truly representative team. The US should seriously give a chance to these rites of passage in contemporary Afghan politics instead of playing a spoiler's role. Let Khalilzad have a "time out." He must be pretty exhausted by now.

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CHINA

China's strategic assessment of Afghanistan

By Yun Sun

With the U.S. troop withdrawal in sight, Afghanistan's future seems less certain than ever. As a neighboring state with significant interests at stake, how does China view and prepare for Afghanistan's future?

Since 9/11, the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan has presented a dilemma for China. On the one hand, Beijing instinctively sees American troops in China's "backyard" as a serious strategic threat. However, China believes that it has benefited from the security that the United States has provided there, especially in terms of curtailing the growth and spread of anti-China terrorist groups.

The implication of this dilemma is that China wants the United States to withdraw but only when the withdrawal is responsible and does not leave a chaotic power vacuum that would destabilize the region. The reality, however, is that the American decision regarding Afghanistan will be made in Washington not Beijing and that China must react to whatever moves the United States makes going forward.

The United States and the Taliban signed a peace agreement in Doha on Feb. 29, 2020. The agreement has been met with official optimism in the United States. China, however, is less sanguine about the agreement. Beijing has little confidence in the internal Afghan peace process.

Instead, China expects that the U.S.-brokered agreement will lead to more instability, and that the region eventually will have to seek multilateral alternatives including U.N. peacekeeping operations to escape the abyss.

China's historical posture toward Afghanistan

China's fundamental interest in Afghanistan is stability. Chaos in Afghanistan, from Beijing's perspective, stokes Islamic fundamentalism that threatens domestic security in China, particularly in Xinjiang. If anything, China is not a revisionist power in Afghanistan. Given the choice, China would prefer to see an Afghanistan with internal stability and a functional government that is preferably but not necessarily neutral among great powers.

Having witnessed the quagmire in which Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States were each entrapped, China has always been convinced that Afghanistan is the "graveyard of empires." Traditionally, Beijing believed that it should avoid serious entanglement in Afghan affairs at all costs.

China's overall view of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan is a mixture of conflicting factors. On the negative side, China saw the invasion as the United States establishing a foothold in the heart of the Eurasian continent that could then be used to contain China. Beijing views the ongoing war with the Taliban as the United States "irresponsibly" destabilizing the country and rattling the region.

From the Chinese perspective, 9/11 and the ensuing war in Afghanistan fostered the radicalization of Muslims in the region and directly contributed to the unrest in China's northwest Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. But, on the positive side, the Chinese have viewed America's wars since 9/11 as the best thing that has happened to China since the end of the Cold War a god-sent "window of strategic opportunity" that gave Beijing a decade to build its strength while Washington was distracted, bogged down, and spending trillions of dollars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

While the United States needed China's nominal support for its war on terror, China played up the terrorist threats in Xinjiang, using the global war on terror to justify its policy in the Uighur region. Afghanistan has never been a priority economic partner for China.

Even at the peak of Beijing's "Going Out" strategy (the previous reincarnation of the Belt and Road Initiative that encouraged Chinese companies to explore global markets), few Chinese companies

demonstrated much interest in Afghanistan. The exceptions were firms involved in the Aynak copper mine in 2008 and the Amu Darya oil exploration in 2011.

Any hope of lucrative investments in Afghanistan quickly evaporated with the deteriorating security situation forcing all major projects to a stop. Despite an official narrative portraying Afghanistan as an important link for the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese investment in Afghanistan has been minimal, totaling \$2.2 million in 2016 and a mere \$400 million in all investment stocks by the end of 2017. By contrast, the story in Pakistan is very different: Chinese investment in Pakistan reached \$1.58 billion in 2017²⁰¹⁸, bringing the total investment stock to \$5.7 billion by the end of 2017.

Stagnant economic ties between Beijing and Kabul are primarily due to security concerns. The withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan renders the security situation even more uncertain. For as long as the Afghan peace process has existed, the Chinese have been keenly aware of and concerned with the potential security vacuum in the country and the potential resurgence of even more violence. What China cannot figure out are the sincerity and the scale of the U.S. withdrawal of troops, on which Chinese planning depends.

Beijing will enhance its development aid, diplomacy, capacity building, military assistance, and intervention if the United States completely exits Afghanistan and China has to invest more vigorously in stabilization efforts. However, China is intrinsically skeptical that the United States will abandon its presence and influence in Afghanistan given the country's critical geopolitical location and the high costs the United States has incurred since 2001. A small American military presence remaining in Afghanistan would provide the most concrete payoff to Washington after a 19-year-long war.

Pessimism about the future of peace

China's policy toward Afghanistan is based on its assessment of the security implications of the U.S.-Taliban peace agreement. From Beijing's perspective, the situation doesn't look positive. The internal reconciliation process between the Taliban and the Afghan government will be significantly more difficult than the negotiations between Washington and the Taliban.

A dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban will be incredibly fraught. Early indicators from after Feb. 29 seem to support this view. Disagreements between the Taliban and the Afghan government over releasing Taliban prisoners continue to fester and, while not in violation of the U.S. deal, the Taliban has continued military operations against Afghan government forces.

The disputes around the results of the presidential election in Afghanistan do not help. The ongoing political impasse in Kabul between President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah undermines the government's negotiation strategy vis-à-vis the Taliban. China has officially endorsed Ghani's political victory yet remains convinced of Abdullah's ability to undermine the negotiation process. Although the Chinese see neither Ghani's political advantage or power base adequately challenged by Abdullah, nor the impasse leading to instability within the central government, the "dual-track" politics in Kabul will likely continue.

What China fears and anticipates is that the delicate power equilibrium in Afghanistan may be shattered by the U.S. troop withdrawal. In that event, the Taliban may reject direct peace talks with the Afghan government. In the worst-case scenario, a civil war between the Taliban and what remains of the central government would ensue.

Chinese criticism of US policy in Afghanistan

From China's perspective, the United States has decided on an irresponsible way to exit Afghanistan. In its wake, the United States will leave a mess for Afghans and regional countries to clean up especially if Washington follows through on its threats to significantly cut aid to Afghanistan. Official Chinese media has compared the U.S. - Taliban peace deal to America's "disgraceful" exit from Vietnam in the 1970s.

The United States seems to have delayed its exit from Afghanistan out of concern for not only the implosion of the country but also the reputational damage it would incur for creating that implosion. In the Chinese view, the "peace" the United States has achieved is a "peace" for only itself not a peace for

Afghanistan or the region. The United States plans on leaving Afghanistan having spent \$2 trillion and lost 2,400 soldiers, while the Taliban remains a powerful political force and Afghan security remains perilous.

While China had been expecting President Donald Trump, motivated by his reelection campaign, to push hard for a peace deal with and an American exit from Afghanistan, the most trenchant Chinese concern is that the U.S. withdrawal irresponsibly leaves behind no path to a sustainable peace.

As a result, China and other regional countries will face the inevitable spillover effects of conflict, possibly over the course of many years. The irony of the Chinese position is that, while China opposed the U.S. invasion in 2001 for destabilizing the region and deploying U.S. forces closer to China's borders, it equally criticizes the American withdrawal from Afghanistan.

At the same time, many Chinese observers are skeptical that the United States will completely withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. Beijing remains incredulous that the United States would willingly abandon its strategic presence and influence in Afghanistan as a geopolitical foothold in the center of the Eurasian continent. Trump known for his inconsistency and unpredictability could dramatically reverse his decision in Afghanistan if it suits his interests.

Hedging between Kabul and Taliban

China's primary concern with Afghanistan lies in its security situation and in instability and radicalization spilling over into China. Addressing this challenge requires China to work with both Kabul and the Taliban. As a result, Beijing has consistently supported political inclusiveness and the reconciliation between the two sides. Despite China's prior support of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, its views of the Taliban gradually evolved to differentiate among factions that are anti-United States and factions that promote Islamic radicalization.

Furthermore, a transactional relationship began to emerge given China's need for the Taliban to deny Uighur militants safe havens and the Taliban's need for China to play some advocacy role on its behalf. Starting in 2014, Taliban delegations began to publicly and regularly visit China, culminating in secret talks that China facilitated between Kabul and the Taliban in Urumqi.

On counter-terrorism, China has maintained close ties with Kabul for bilateral security cooperation primarily targeted at organizations associated with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement and the Islamic State. Through military assistance, China helped Kabul build its military mountain brigade in the Wakhan Corridor near Afghanistan's northern Badakhshan province with the primary goal of preventing infiltration by the Islamic State into China. According to Afghan researchers, China provided more than \$70 million in military aid to the Afghan government from 2016 to 2018.

China's relationships with Kabul and the Taliban have given it a special role in negotiations between the two sides. Beijing takes pride in its relative neutrality and proudly proclaims that unlike most of Afghanistan's neighbors and the United States China has never invaded Afghanistan. It has consistently issued visas to Taliban representatives to visit China for meetings, enabling China to play a facilitatory role between the Taliban and Kabul.

In anticipation of the Taliban's strengthened legitimacy, role, and influence in Afghanistan, China will most likely enhance its relations with the organization in the future. China moved over the hurdle of its own non-interference principle in the Afghan case a long time ago, both in the name of mediation and in the effort to protect its interests on the ground. While China continues to support Ghani and his government, Chinese analysts' favorable views of the Taliban have been on the rise.

Pang Guang, a senior Chinese expert on the Middle East and counter-terrorism, called the group "supported by the poor people who make up more than half of the country's population" while, in contrast, saying that the Kabul government "supported by the Americans." In such analysts' view, the peace deal between the United States and the Taliban has strengthened the legitimacy of the Taliban, giving the organization the influence to develop relations with foreign governments especially Pakistan and China.

Although China does not and cannot support a caliphate in Afghanistan as it could pose a direct challenge to China's control of its Muslim population, it does observe that the Taliban's political ideology has shown signs of moderation.

China's approach: multilateral over unilateral

China remains pessimistic about Afghanistan, even after the U.S.-Taliban deal. The biggest challenge for China would be a significant deterioration of the security situation inside Afghanistan if the intra-Afghan peace process falls apart.

Currently, there are several preparatory assessments in Beijing that signal different approaches China might take in the months and years ahead. First, China will prioritize a multilateral approach over a unilateral approach. If the internal security of Afghanistan deteriorates, Chinese strategists have called for a U.N. peacekeeping mission that includes Chinese troops rather than a unilateral intervention by any regional country.

In no scenario does China consider a unilateral intervention an option at this stage. China is not a party or a cause to the internal conflict in Afghanistan. Afghanistan's reputation as the "graveyard of empires" constantly deters China from direct intervention that would undermine its current advantageous hedging position with both the Taliban and Kabul. Due to regional countries' stakes and involvement in the intra-Afghan peace process, a unilateral solution is simply out of question.

Second, in case the U.N. approach turns out difficult or unlikely, China has been testing the water and suggesting that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization step up its role in Afghanistan over the past decade. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a regional organization dedicated to security issues that was founded by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan in 2001. India and Pakistan both joined as formal members in 2017.

The grouping encompasses almost all regional stakeholders and could offer the political legitimacy and regional endorsement that an intervention would require in any new power vacuum created by the American troop departure. Although the Shanghai Cooperation Organization does not have specific military or civilian security capabilities, it has taken on a strong mandate of ensuring regional peace and stability.

Beijing has examined how the Shanghai Cooperation Organization could play a counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics role, but more developments are worth watching for outside observers. Eventually, if Afghanistan stabilizes, China will support the incorporation of Afghanistan into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's security mechanisms and framework. Third, China sees a multilateral security arrangement as the precondition for its enhanced economic development effort in Afghanistan. Chinese experts have repeatedly attributed the failures of two mega-infrastructure projects the Anyak copper mine and the Amu Darya oil project in the last decade to the poor security environment in the country, with infrastructure construction and resource exploration infeasible during an ongoing conflict. Although the economic appeal of Afghanistan is not alone sufficient to attract China, China will not refrain from a bigger economic role when given local reassurances and multilateral support. On the question of "local reassurances," China has received some tacit reassurance from the Taliban about the security and protection of its future projects in Afghanistan such as the extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor via a railway to Kandahar. Details, however, remain elusive.

Fourth, China is uncertain whether Afghanistan will remain a focal point for U.S.-China cooperation, but the hope remains. In the last decade, the United States and China have cooperated on capacity-building programs in Afghanistan, including police training and demining. At first, the Chinese viewed the U.S. military presence and Chinese economic engagement as mutually complementary. The extent to which the United States will remain committed to the future of Afghanistan is a determining factor for the nature and scope of China's efforts in the country.

Last but not least, the U.S. deal with the Taliban undercut India in favor of Pakistan, which could strain ties between New Delhi and Washington. India's goal in Afghanistan is to mitigate the strategic influence

of Pakistan there so that it can't be used as a safe-haven for anti-India terrorist groups, including those that attacked Indian diplomatic missions. As a result, India has opposed the Taliban, seeing it as Pakistan's proxy in Afghanistan.

India has also attempted to turn Afghanistan into an access corridor to Central Asia in an effort to circumvent and outflank Pakistan, including by financing the Chabahar port in Iran near the Afghan border. However, the strategic value of Afghanistan for India is predicated on the presence of the U.S. military in the country. With the pending American withdrawal, India's strategic investment looks to be a largely sunk cost.

For China, India's failure means Pakistan's victory. With the American exit, Pakistan is believed to have significantly more influence over events in Afghanistan, effectively alleviating its strategic vulnerability of being encircled by a hostile Afghanistan to the north and a hostile India to the south. The enhancement of Pakistan's role in Afghanistan will not only indirectly contribute to China's influence but also potentially improve the negotiation positions of both Islamabad and Beijing vis-à-vis Washington. Although China bears a negative and pessimistic view over the internal peace and stability of Afghanistan following the peace deal, there are some silver linings in terms of regional geopolitics.

Conclusion

After two decades of developing ties with both the Afghan government and the Taliban, China has emerged with a special facilitatory role in the peace process. It is pleased to see plans for a U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan yet remains skeptical that Washington will go through with it. At the same time, Beijing is deeply pessimistic about the future of the peace process and a power vacuum left by departing American forces, and is preparing for multilateral engagement down the road to address the issue.

China sees its role in Afghanistan beyond the peace deal as cautious and flexible. It sees its role in Afghan security in three ways: as marginal in the sense that it is not a primary party to the conflict; as indispensable in the sense that China is a great power and a neighboring country that cannot be ignored; and as central in the sense that Chinese investment will be critical for the country's future post-conflict reconstruction and economic development. The Afghan peace process still has a long way to go, and China will not be excluded.

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China-US relations will no longer be the same

By Hu Xijin

It is beyond the Chinese people's imagination that China-US relations have become what they are today. The epidemic outbreak brings new shocks, and the turbulence in relations between the two countries is likely to be more severe. No one in China wants that. Some held the view that China brought this on itself. Those people said China should fully demonstrate its goodwill toward the US and make major concessions in the hope of regaining the trust of the US and putting the relationship back on track.

Those people are so naïve to believe that it is China that has ruined the China-US relationship and as long as China fundamentally changes its attitude, bilateral ties can improve significantly. There are profound and complex reasons for the deterioration of China-US relations. The biggest driving force behind the change in US attitude toward China is the constant change of the strength pattern between China and the US. The US does not accept the possibility of China becoming a parallel and equal force. This is the fundamental reason.

Many people say that in the 1980s, the relationship between China and the US was so good. Why can't that atmosphere be recovered? In the 1980s the Soviet Union was the No.1 enemy of the US, and a weak China at that time was the one the US was trying to win over. China's strategic position was as comfortable as India's is today, and the US adopted a broadly supportive policy towards China. Today, the situation is quite different. A stronger China is seen by Washington as its top strategic rival, and some US politicians are even thinking of roping in Russia to contain China.

If, as they imagine, the US were to return to its old attitude towards China, the first thing China needs to do is to turn back the clock of development by more than 20 years, and go further to reassure the US. This means that China must first stop its high-tech progress and let the US take the lead in all-round scientific and technological development. China has to focus only on low-end industries, unable to compete with the US and the West in high-end manufacturing.

These are not enough. It also means that China needs to fully accept US dominance over the Taiwan question. China should also accept international arbitration on the South China Sea issue and dismantle its new facilities on Nansha Islands. Beijing will have to accept the arrangement of Washington over questions of Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong of China. Ultimately, the US would also demand that China impose significant self-limits on its development of nuclear weapons and strategic strike capabilities.

Do you think China can back down on these issues? And where does this end? Did the US let Russia off the hook after the collapse of the Soviet Union? No. Russia inherited the Soviet nuclear weapons, which did not reassure the US. The US has spared no effort to further weaken Russia and squeeze its strategic space. What the US really wants to do is weaken China so that it completely loses its strategic competitiveness against the US. The US won't stop until China is brought to its knees and crippled.

Unfortunately, US strategic vigilance against China is fully activated and the reality is that we can't go back. It's meaningless to look back at the old China-US relations. We have to look forward with the strength of realism, accept the challenges we will face as a great power, and meet the challenges of the future with new will and wisdom.

China's endurance is no longer the same as it was 20 or 30 years ago. We have a unique Chinese philosophy of resistance to pressure. We will not become a second Soviet Union, nor will we provoke the antagonism and confrontation between China and the US from our side. China's way of safeguarding its core interests will be brand new, and we need to surprise history.

The author is editor-in-chief of the Global Times.

AMERICA

Pompeo to Afghan leaders Make a deal with the Taliban or risk full US troop pullout

The stern message, delivered two weeks ago, underscores Trump's concern that the absence of a unified government in Kabul threatens

By Carol E. Lee, Courtney Kube, Andrea Mitchell and Dan De Luce

While President Donald Trump remains fixated on the widening corona virus pandemic, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo traveled to Kabul two weeks ago with a harsh message from his boss to try to save one of the only major foreign policy achievements he has after more than three years in the White House: a peace deal in Afghanistan.

Pompeo delivered a message from Trump to the feuding leadership of the Afghan government, telling them they should resolve their differences and broker a deal with the Taliban or the president could not

only cut \$1 billion in financial aid to Afghanistan but also could pull all U.S. troops out of the country, according to two current senior officials, one former senior official and a foreign diplomat.

The previously unreported troop withdrawal threat underscores Trump's growing concern that the inability of Afghan leaders to form a unified government threatens to unravel his already-tenuous peace deal with the Taliban, which is the first step toward ending America's longest war. Negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban were supposed to follow on March 10, but divisions in Kabul have delayed the effort.

Washington and its allies fear the absence of those talks will scuttle the peace deal, and that the Taliban will take advantage of the internal divisions in Kabul to bolster their position at the negotiating table and on the battlefield, officials said. The State Department did not respond to a request for comment. Officials said the impasse in Kabul has frustrated Trump, who has hoped to highlight an Afghanistan peace deal as an example of a 2016 campaign promise he kept when he faces voters this November.

Before the corona virus pandemic became a myopic focus for the president, Trump had privately pushed aides to come up with a high-profile way for him to showcase the deal that could end the war and even mused that it should win him a Nobel Peace Prize, according to two current and two former senior U.S. officials familiar with the president's comments.

But even then, a senior administration official said, some of the president's advisers were "telling him that this is a slow, winding and ugly road" and he does not want to be the face of the fragile deal. Trump personally signed off on the new hardline message during a meeting with Pompeo before the latter arrived in Kabul on March 23, officials said.

The secretary of state delivered the message in small meetings with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and the country's former Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah, who are trying to stand up parallel governments. In February, Ghani was declared the winner of the September election, but Abdullah disputed the results, claiming widespread fraud. Both men now claim the right to lead Afghanistan and even held separate, simultaneous inaugurations in Kabul on March 9.

Pompeo told Abdullah that he must support Ghani, according to officials. He said the president expects "one team, one fight" out of Kabul, according to the former senior U.S. official. Pompeo also said Ghani and Abdullah would be held responsible if the president's peace deal fails, and noted that Trump has followed through on other threats to withdraw troops and pull financial aid.

A senior administration official said the White House is "hopeful" the president's message that Pompeo delivered is effective. But the two Afghan political rivals remain locked in a feud and have refused Washington's suggestions for a possible compromise, according to a U.S. official and a foreign diplomat from the region. Afghan officials and the Taliban also have struggled to agree on the release of prisoners from both sides.

Last Tuesday, Pompeo said there has been some progress in Kabul since his visit, particularly on the formation of a team to negotiate with the Taliban and on the planned release of prisoners.

"So it's good news," he said. On March 27, Ghani announced a 21-member delegation to negotiate with the Taliban. But the Taliban rejected the team. And after denouncing it as not inclusive, Abdullah on Tuesday embraced the team as "an important step toward facilitating intra-Afghan negotiations."

"Although we have reached no satisfactory agreement to resolve the political crisis in the wake of the rigged presidential election, we are committed to making sure that it does not overshadow peace efforts," Abdullah wrote on Twitter. Yet, a U.S. official briefed on the Afghan political discussions said, "It looks like they are still far apart."

The National Security Council declined to comment. The White House did not respond to requests for comment. Officials said the president's expectations have been tempered in the weeks since the deal was signed. At one point, Trump suggested to aides a possible rally with U.S. troops to mark the beginning of the drawdown, officials said, but the idea never gained traction.

“He likes the pomp and circumstance, “a senior administration official said. But some officials disagreed, with another senior administration official saying a troop rally would have been “tone deaf” because “Afghanistan is still a very volatile place.” The officials said Trump began talking about a Nobel Prize before a deal was even reached. His mentions of it picked up after a deal was reached in January.

In one Oval Office meeting at the time, Trump complained that he hasn't been awarded a Nobel Prize yet, and said if he's not given one for ending the war in Afghanistan then the Norwegian Nobel Committee's process is rigged, according to officials. The Afghanistan peace deal joins a list of efforts for which the president has publicly said he should receive a Nobel Peace Prize.

He's pointed to his North Korea diplomacy, an Israeli-Palestinian peace plan, his Syria policy and even a peace agreement in Africa that the U.S. had a minimal role in brokering. The deal with the Taliban was different, officials said, because it was seen as having more potential for success than other initiatives, such as the denuclearization of North Korea.

Trump spoke with the Taliban's chief negotiator Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar on the phone last month, which one senior administration official said was a “good will” step to encourage the Taliban to adhere to the deal. His dispatching of Pompeo to Kabul to deliver blunt threats is seen as a sign of how much the president wants the deal to succeed. Pompeo said in a statement two weeks ago that the U.S. was “disappointed” in Ghani and Abdullah and that “their failure has harmed U.S.-Afghan relations.”

His threat to cut \$1 billion in aid if the Afghan leaders couldn't reach a governing agreement would essentially mean cutting the lifeline for the Afghan government's security forces. Pompeo also said he told the Afghan leaders that plans under the administration's deal with the Taliban to reduce the number of troops in Afghanistan to 8,600 in coming months would continue.

That drawdown began in early March. Several weeks later, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper announced a 60-day freeze on all Department of Defense personnel movements from overseas, but troops coming back from Afghanistan are exempt from the order.

Trump could use 'nuclear option' to make Saudi Arabia pay for oil war

Trump is considering all options available to him to make the Saudis pay for the oil price war as the crash that followed has done significant damage to the U.S. oil industry

By Simon Watkins

With last month having seen the indignity of the principal U.S. oil benchmark, West Texas Intermediate (WTI), having fallen into negative pricing territory, U.S. President Donald Trump is considering all options available to him to make the Saudis pay for the oil price war that it started, according to senior figures close to the Presidential Administration spoken last week.

It is not just the likelihood that exactly the same price action will occur to each front-month WTI futures contract just before expiry until major new oil production cuts come from OPEC+ that incenses the U.S. nor the economic damage that is being done to its shale oil sector but also it is the fact that Saudi is widely seen in Washington as having betrayed the long-standing relationship between the two countries.

Right now, many senior members on Trump's closest advisory circle want the Saudis to pay for its actions, in every way, understands. This relationship was established in 1945 between the U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Saudi King at the time, Abdulaziz, on board the U.S. Navy cruiser Quincy in the Great Bitter Lake segment of the Suez Canal and has defined the relationship between the two countries ever since.

As analysed in depth in my new book on the global oil markets, the deal that was struck between the two men at that time was that the U.S. would receive all of the oil supplies it needed for as long as Saudi

Arabia had oil in place, in return for which the U.S. would guarantee the security of the ruling House of Saud. The deal has altered slightly since the rise of the U.S. shale oil industry and Saudi Arabia's attempt to destroy it from 2014 to 2016 in that the U.S. also expects the House of Saud to ensure that Saudi Arabia not only supplies the U.S. with whatever oil it needs for as long as it can but also that it also allows the U.S. shale industry to continue to function and to grow.

For the U.S., if this means that Saudi Arabia loses out to U.S. shale producers by keeping oil prices up but losing out on export opportunities to U.S. firms then that is just the price that the House of Saud must pay for the continued protection of the U.S. - politically, economically, and militarily.

As U.S. President Donald Trump has made clear whenever he has sensed a lack of understanding on the part of Saudi Arabia for the huge benefit that the U.S. is doing the ruling family: "He [Saudi King Salman] would not last in power for two weeks without the backing of the U.S. military." Trump has a very good point, as it is fair to say that without U.S. protection, either Israel or Iran and its proxy operatives and supporters would very soon indeed end the rule of the House of Saud.

Aside from just withdrawing all such support from the Saud family right now, there are other options available to the U.S. as interim measures, although some are more practical than others. Early in the oil price war, Trump stated that "I will do whatever I have to do... to protect... tens of thousands of energy workers and our great companies," and added that plans to impose tariffs on Saudi Arabia's oil exports into the U.S. were "certainly a tool in the toolbox."

From a practical volumes perspective, putting tariffs on Saudi oil rather than Russian oil would make sense from two key perspectives. First, the U.S. imports around 95 per cent more oil from Saudi than it does from Russia, so sanctioning Russian oil would have little effect on the U.S.'s supply glut that is overhanging its already-stretched domestic storage facilities.

Second, Russia is in much better economic shape than Saudi to handle any shocks to its oil-related streams of revenue, with a budget breakeven oil price of US\$40 per barrel of Brent rather than Saudi's US\$84 per barrel point. Second, there is also the fact that Saudi currently provides one of the few large-scale sources of sour crude (including the benchmark Arab Heavy) that is available to the U.S., which is essential to its production of diesel, and to which purpose WTI is less suited.

Certainly much of the U.S.'s Gulf Coast refinery system is geared towards using sourer crude, having invested heavily in coking systems and other infrastructure to better handle heavier crudes from the Middle East in recent decades. The other major historical sources of this for the U.S. are not in a position to fill the gap, with U.S. sanctions still imposed on oil imports from Venezuela, Mexican flows unreliable, and Canada's pipeline capacity to the U.S. not able to handle any more exports south until the long-delayed Keystone pipeline is up and running at some point in 2023.

In a U.S. presidential election year, the last thing that a U.S. president wants is increasing diesel prices or shortages making a corona virus - hit economy even worse. It is a fact that since the end of the First World War, the sitting U.S. president has won re-election 11 times out of 11 if the U.S. economy was not in recession within two calendar years ahead of an election whilst presidents who went into a re-election campaign with the economy in recession over the same time-frame won only once out of seven.

This said, it may be that Trump will use the threat of such tariffs on Saudi Arabia, as his mercurial reputation may work to convince the Saudis that he is unpredictable enough to impose such taxes, regardless of the short-term economic consequences. Even as it stands, he needs to do something as around 44 million barrels of Saudi crude are expected to reach the U.S. over the next four weeks, according to oil industry and shipping data.

This is around four times the most recent four-week average, according to EIA records, and it is mostly due to be delivered to the already overwhelmed Cushing delivery point. Republican Senator Kevin Cramer of North Dakota, who has advised Trump on energy issues, has been calling on the White House to take action to stop the very large crude carriers from unloading, and several senators and

congressmen have threatened to vote to withhold military aid to Saudi Arabia. Trump, for his part, has so far only said that he will “look at it,” referring to stopping these new imports.

Given the burgeoning ill-feeling towards the Saudis amongst the U.S.'s two legislative houses from an already high base sources in the Presidential Administration say that a forceful, but private, reiteration of the threat of the 'No Oil Producing and Exporting Cartels Act' (NOPEC) Bill direct to King Salman, circumventing his son Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, might do the trick in convincing the Saudis to dramatically increase the contextually paltry output cut last agreed with the Russians. As highlighted by the pressure for Trump to finally sign off the NOPEC Bill has been growing from the second that the Saudis began the latest oil price war.

Specifically, the NOPEC Bill would make it illegal to artificially cap oil (and gas) production or to set prices, as OPEC, OPEC+, and Saudi Arabia do. The Bill would also immediately remove the sovereign immunity that presently exists in U.S. courts for OPEC as a group and for each and every one of its individual member states.

This would leave Saudi Arabia open to being sued under existing U.S. anti-trust legislation, with its total liability being its estimated US\$1 trillion of investments in the U.S. alone. The U.S. would then be legally entitled to freeze all Saudi bank accounts in the U.S., seize its assets in the country, and halt all use of U.S. dollars by the Saudis anywhere in the world (oil, of course, to begin with, is denominated in U.S. Dollars).

It would also allow the U.S. to go after Saudi Aramco and its assets and funds, as it is still a majority state-owned production and trading vehicle, and would mean that Aramco could be ordered to break itself up into smaller, constituent companies that are not deemed to break competition rules in the oil, gas, and petrochemicals sectors or to influence the oil price.

The Bill came very close indeed to being passed into law when in February of last year, the House Judiciary Committee passed the NOPEC Act, which cleared the way for a vote on the Bill before the full House of Representatives. On the same day, Democrats Patrick Leahy and Amy Klobuchar and most remarkably two Republicans, Chuck Grassley and Mike Lee, introduced the NOPEC Bill to the Senate. Its progress was only halted after President Trump stepped in and vetoed it when the Saudis did what he told them to do (at that point, to produce more to keep oil prices under US\$70 per barrel of Brent), but the option is still available for a relatively quick turnaround on turning it into law.

How Washington's CAATSA threat could backfire

By Omar Lamrani

In the competition to sell arms around the world, the United States and Russia are on a collision course. And in this battle, the former happens to have a trick up its sleeve: the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), a law that gives Washington the ability to impose punitive measures on countries that purchase weaponry from Moscow and, in theory, tilt the playing field in its favor.

In the year to come, however, the CAATSA threat might not land the United States all the arms business it is expecting; indeed, in chafing at America's heavy-handed approach, plenty of middle powers could spurn Washington in favor of other suppliers or even Russia itself.

Trump's 'buy American' push

When Donald Trump took over as U.S. president in 2017, he ushered in a significant shift in the United States' arms exports. While past administrations had typically taken into consideration the interests of the U.S. defense industry when formulating foreign policy, the Trump administration has put the sector at the forefront of its approach.

A few months into Trump's presidency, the United States approved a multibillion-dollar sale of F-16 fighter jets to Bahrain by dropping the previous human rights conditions that had slowed down the deal.

The White House subsequently proceeded with several other big arms sales to Saudi Arabia, overriding not only restrictions imposed by the Obama administration on certain weapons but also pushing past Congress by declaring a national emergency after lawmakers blocked arms sales to Riyadh over the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

The Trump administration formulated the strategy behind these recent controversial arms sales, and others like them, in an early 2018 "Buy American" plan that sought to boost the U.S. arms industry and the wider economy by maximizing the number of successful arms contracts. The initiative also pressed U.S. military attaches and State Department officials to adopt a sales role in peddling U.S. military gear around the world.

Similarly, the United States has also moved to remove restrictions on the sale of certain weapons, such as armed drones, that had previously driven potential customers toward other sellers like China. The heavy focus on arms exports has paid off in terms of sales: Arms exports went from a respective \$33.6 billion and \$42 billion in the 2016 and 2017 fiscal years to a respective \$55.6 billion and \$55.4 billion for the 2018 and 2019 fiscal years.

But the United States is not the only country seeking to greatly expand its arms exports. Russia, the planet's second-biggest arms exporter, is increasingly doubling down on its familiar strategy of promoting arms exports as a means to maintain the health of its domestic arms industry at a time when orders for its own military are facing significant challenges due to its struggling economy.

In this effort, Moscow has leveraged its military involvement in Syria to publicly highlight its equipment's capabilities, sought to link arms sales to its relationship-building strategies and demonstrated a willingness to sell its best and latest equipment to secure deals.

While the United States did not develop CAATSA for the express purpose of promoting American arms exports over Russian ones, it has emerged as a key tool for the administration in that regard.

The CAATSA stick

With both the United States and Russia attempting to secure key arms deals, potential clients often find themselves caught in the middle. This dynamic has manifested itself globally, although it is in the Middle East that the effects of this competition have most come to the fore, particularly with the threat of CAATSA sanctions.

While the United States did not develop CAATSA for the express purpose of promoting American arms exports over Russian ones, it has emerged as a key tool for the Trump administration in that regard. Under CAATSA, the United States has threatened to sanction countries that do not meaningfully reduce their arms imports from Russia.

Washington has since raised the specter of CAATSA sanctions in talks with critical countries that remain dependent on Russia arms, including India and Indonesia in the Indo-Pacific, Egypt and Turkey in the Middle East and Serbia in Europe, among others.

Given the United States' sheer economic heft, this is no idle threat; indeed, Russia has long labeled CAATSA as a tool of unfair competition. The act, however, is in many ways a double-edged sword something that has not escaped key Pentagon and State Department officials who have advised caution in its implementation.

First, countries are particularly sensitive about foreign powers telling them whom to choose to fill their defense needs, especially as the degree of political interference, or lack thereof, is a key facet in any purchase. Understandably, then, such cajoling destroys trust between potential customers and Washington.

Second, many countries, such as India and Vietnam, have a major preexisting arms import relationship with Moscow, making it exceedingly difficult for them to substantially cut purchases quickly, especially as their forces are already familiar with Russian equipment.

For many countries, for instance, there is no competitive alternative to the equipment they buy from Russia (in some cases, even from the United States), as other suppliers cannot offer the same product at the same price point or with the same level of technology transfer.

Finally, by pressing its partners, some of whom already buy heavily from the United States, Washington could end up driving them toward alternative sources, including Europe, China or even their own domestic manufacturers.

All these variables raise the risk that CAATSA sanctions could backfire, driving the targeted country further away from the United States toward Russia or an alternative competitor like China. Turkey is a key case in point, as the country's decade-old tender for the purchase of air defense systems has snowballed into a major irritant between Washington and Ankara, two ostensible NATO allies.

Russia, for instance, enticed Turkey to buy its S-400 missile defense system with offers of significant technology transfer, a favorable price and the prospect of closer relations. But the United States, especially Congress, has sought to strike back, denying F-35 fighters to Turkey and threatening CAATSA sanctions as punishment.

CAATSA is in many ways a double-edged sword something that has not escaped key Pentagon and State Department officials who have advised caution in its implementation.

Spats in the Middle East

Instead of bowing to U.S. demands, Turkey thus far has threatened to move even closer to Russia, exploring the purchase of Russian Su-35 fighter jets as an alternative to the F-35 fighters whose transfer the United States is blocking. Recognizing this possibility and fearing the loss of a major arms contract with Turkey the Trump administration has sought to delay the imposition of CAATSA sanctions as it continues to seek a breakthrough with Ankara.

But with Turkey digging in its heels on the S-400 purchase as Congress ratchets up the pressure, it seems all but inevitable the White House will end up imposing CAATSA sanctions on Ankara. Ultimately, the spat shows how the issue of arms sales, alongside other U.S. quibbles with Turkey, can have a remarkable impact on relations among three critical powers in a remarkably short time.

CAATSA's intersection with the U.S.-Russian competition for arms market share is also playing out in other countries in the Middle East. Russia's advanced weaponry features prominently in Moscow's diplomatic offensive in the Gulf Cooperation Council area, prompting some key Gulf States, like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, to voice interest in such arms. Moscow has also capitalized on its improved relationship with Cairo to seal several arms deals, including a recent contract for Su-35 fighter jets.

Russian success in what are traditionally close U.S. allies could, theoretically, pose a grave challenge to a key U.S. market, but it is unlikely that Moscow will make much headway in displacing Washington given these countries' dependence on the United States as their primary security guarantor, vulnerability to U.S. sanctions and craving for advanced U.S. Equipment.

Because of this dependence, in fact, the United States is likely to be more successful in using the CAATSA threat to shape such countries' behavior than with other states. It is little surprise, then, that the United States has quickly moved to threaten CAATSA sanctions against Egypt if it proceeds with its purchase of Russian weaponry.

Washington and Moscow will continue to battle for market share as both prioritize arms sales. This competition, however, is assuming ever-higher stakes, especially as the United States is now willing to brandish sanctions as part of the battle. Adopting such a zero-sum approach could help the United States keep countries, especially those highly dependent on it, from pursuing arms from Russia.

But as the case of Turkey highlights, playing hardball could also drive the countries in question even further into Moscow's arms. And with the United States likely to lean on traditional Russian arms customers like India to "buy American" in 2020, it's an approach that's likely to ruffle some feathers with major international players in the year ahead. As the Trump administration has prioritized arms sales as

a central plank of its foreign policy, it is increasingly willing to leverage rewards and punishments to secure major arms deals.

The Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act has emerged as a major punitive measure in the U.S. toolkit to weaken its primary competitor, Russia, and secure more weapons sales. Adopting a zero-sum approach to the market could help the U.S. in some cases, but it could equally work against Washington by driving away key partners.

This assessment is part of a series of analyses supporting Stratfor's 2020 Annual Forecast. These assessments are designed to provide more context and in-depth analysis of key developments over the next quarter and throughout the year.

The US is eager to leave Iraq soon and the corona virus pandemic will accelerate it

Former Iraqi PM-designate confirms the US is planning to leave Iraq 'in two years from now', which suggests Iran is poised to do whatever it takes to drive American troops out of the country

By Ahmed Aboudouh

US fears of an imminent, large-scale attack on its soldiers in Iraq is entirely valid. Iran, with its arms, seems ready to do whatever it takes to drive American troops out of the country immediately. US secretary of defence Mark Esper was very confident in refuting a letter sent to his Iraqi counterparts in January, saying that the US military is preparing for “movement out of Iraq”, after killing the Iranian commander Qassam Soleimani. Both Esper and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, insisted at the time that there had been no decision whatsoever to leave Iraq.

But this seems not to be entirely accurate. According to the former Iraqi prime minister-designate Mohamed Tawfik Allawi, the US has plans in place to leave Iraq in two years from now. Iraqi president Barham Salih had asked Allawi to form a government at the beginning of February to end a long-lasting power vacuum after young Iraqis took to the streets in large numbers, asking for the removal of the government and an end to corruption.

Around mid-February, he held a crucial meeting in his office with the US ambassador Mathew Tueller and other American diplomats, discussing the future of the US-led coalition against Isis in Iraq “great pressure” to withdraw troops from Iraq, and would leave in two years' time. Allawi quickly offered to pen down their withdrawal proposal in an official agreement between the two countries to guarantee US compliance.

The US officials agreed on the principle, but were interested in exploring Iran's position first. Days later, after another meeting between Allawi, the Iranian ambassador to Iraq, Iraj Masjedi, and other Iranian officials, Iran turned down the American offer. According to Allawi, Iranian officials reported that the Iraqi parliament had already voted them out and “must, therefore, leave now”.

The Iranian diplomats were referring to the decision taken in January by the Iraqi parliament urging the government to oust all foreign troops after the targeting of Soleimani and the deputy commander of the Popular Mobilisation Forces, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was killed with him in the same drone strike.

The US State Department refused to comment on “private diplomatic discussions”. The Iranian embassy in London and the spokesman for the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abbas Moussavi, also didn't respond to requests for comment. Allawi reached the one-month constitutional deadline in March without being able to form a cabinet. Perhaps he was the right man in the wrong place. After spending over an hour on the phone with him, I realised how inevitable this failure was.

After all, being the prime minister of Iraq is the most difficult job in the Middle East. A low-profile politician, who lacks charisma but maintains an aggressively strict stand against corruption, Allawi was always seen by the Iraqi political elite as an outsider, despite holding ministerial office twice before.

Allawi accepted the nomination while thousands of Iraqis were protesting since last October against the corruption that has gripped Iraq since the US ousted Saddam Hussein in 2003.

They wanted to topple the government of the incompetent Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi and bring about an end to the sectarian quotas in politics and other basic services. But, despite his biting criticism of the political establishment and some half-baked promises to the downtrodden Iraqis, Allawi was instantly rejected by thousands of protesters as ironically a stooge of the political elite.

Yesterday, the Iraqi intelligence chief Mustapha al-Kadhimi was announced as the third nomination for the PM's office this year. His appointment reflects the scale of paralysis the leadership vacuum has imposed on the country, which stands on the edge of an economic disaster and faces the corona virus outbreak.

When Allawi accepted office, Iran-linked militias were, simultaneously, shelling the US embassy in Baghdad and military bases hosting American troops in the north and west with a fusillade of rockets to force them out. On Monday (6 April), rockets even landed close to the site of the American oil service company Halliburton in Basra province.

As Allawi confirmed to me, Iran has long been aware of the heated discussion within President Trump's administration around the troops' posture in Iraq, and the stark difference between Esper and his Pentagon aides' statements on the one hand, and reality on the other.

With the corona virus hitting Iran hard, Trump imposed even more severe economic sanctions on the country in an attempt to cripple the regime. But, yet on the other hand, his own shambolic management of the outbreak on US soil might have also created a window of opportunity for Iran to apply more pressure on the US to leave Iraq.

The US plans also reflect an eagerness to pull out from the wider region, a strategy which this administration has paved the way for in Afghanistan by signing a peace agreement with the Taliban after 19 years of fighting. But any news about withdrawing US troops from Iraq means utter dismay for the Sunnis and the Kurds. The presence of US forces is for them an insurance policy against a comeback by Isis and, more importantly, it strikes a delicate balance between all Iraqi religious sects and political powers.

The government of Kurdistan (an autonomous region in the north) was determined to maintain the American presence. Allawi told me: "I felt the Kurds were more than ready to grant the US troop's alternative military bases if they are to be driven out by the central government in Baghdad." This means, he says, "Iraq's political rupture for good".

The escalation by US troops and the Iran-backed militias is putting Iraq at risk of an all-out military conflict. This trims down the possible scenarios for the US future in Iraq to only two: all-out war or a departure sooner rather than later. As ambassador Tueller told Allawi in their meeting: "We are not planning to stay here forever." An Iranian success in forcing the US out of Iraq might now seem more feasible.

Doctor's note - Corona virus and heart disease

Heart disease puts people at higher risk of complications from COVID-19, but the virus can also trigger heart problems

By Dr. Sara Kayat

The link between cardiovascular (heart) disease and the COVID-19 virus is an interesting one because it is a double-edged sword. A significant proportion of the population has underlying cardiovascular disease or cardiac risk factors which put them at higher risk of developing more severe symptoms if

infected with the corona virus. But we are also finding that infection with the corona virus can put you at a higher risk of developing cardiovascular disease.

In a study of 191 patients from Wuhan, China, it was found that 8 percent of hospitalised COVID-19 patients had cardiovascular disease. According to mortality data released by the National Health Commission of China, 35 percent of the patients who died from COVID-19 had a history of high blood pressure and 17 percent had a history of coronary heart disease. This suggests that underlying cardiovascular disease can increase the severity of symptoms for those who catch the corona virus, resulting in a higher death rate.

There are three main risk groups these heart patients might fall in to:

1. You are considered to be "high-risk" if you have coronary heart disease. This may mean that you have had a heart attack, a stent or bypass surgery in the past. If you fall into this group, the UK advice is the same as for the rest of the population, which is to stay at home apart from attending to essential needs like grocery shopping, picking up medication from the pharmacy, or doing one hour of daily exercise outdoors.

2. You are considered to be in the "particularly high-risk" group if you are over 70 and have heart disease, or have heart disease at any age but also have lung disease or chronic kidney disease. It also applies to those who have angina that restricts daily life; heart failure; severe heart valve disease; cardiomyopathy; or congenital heart disease. Again, the advice would be no different in that you should stay at home apart from essential outings.

3. However, some heart patients are considered "extremely high-risk" and the UK government suggests that these people be more carefully shielded. This means you should stay at home at all times and minimise contact with people for 12 weeks. You would be considered extremely vulnerable if you have had a heart transplant or if you are pregnant and have significant heart diseases.

It is well documented that COVID-19 can cause pneumonia. However, cardiovascular problems are another complication which can result from contracting the virus. We have learned from other corona virus and influenza epidemics that viral infections can trigger heart conditions such as acute coronary syndromes, arrhythmias and heart failure.

This is due to inflammation - caused by the infection and by the body's immune response to it - developing in the body as a whole and specifically in the blood vessels which can affect plaques (fatty substances which cause the arteries to harden and narrow, restricting the blood flow) in the arteries, leading to cardiac disease.

Studies of COVID-19 patients found that 23 percent of those who were critically ill also suffered from cardiac "injury". The study did not conclude that the virus caused the cardiac injuries, however, just that they appeared together. This cardiac injury was defined as an elevated level of a marker called troponin which is a cardiac enzyme that is released when the heart muscle is damaged.

Abnormally high troponin levels are common in patients with COVID-19 and have also been found to be significantly higher in those who died after contracting the virus. In addition to the raised troponin levels in COVID-19 patients, there have also been reports of ST-segment elevation (STE) being found on electrocardiograms (ECGs).

This is usually a sign that there is obstructive coronary artery disease - an indicator that a heart attack is in the process of happening or has just happened. However, there have also been documented cases where patients with COVID-19 were found to have STE on their ECG and therefore went on to have invasive coronary angiography to confirm and treat the finding of a heart attack, only to find no sign of the disease. These false signs of heart attacks may mean that patients undergo procedures that they did not necessarily need.

Rather than having a heart attack as suspected, these patients were actually found to have myocarditis, which results in similar changes to troponin levels and on an ECG. Myocarditis is the inflammation of the

heart muscle, and while it may be reassuring to find that a patient is not having a heart attack, myocarditis can still cause damage to the heart and result in irregular heart rhythms.

The number of patients with COVID-19 developing myocarditis, and the mortality rate for those who do is yet to be determined, but these reports of STE without obstructive coronary disease proves a challenge for diagnosis and management. It requires hospitals to balance the risks of complicating COVID-19 patients' situations with unnecessary invasive investigations and treatments versus the potential benefit if the patient truly is experiencing a heart attack.

We are likely to understand more about the pathophysiology of COVID-19 and cardiovascular disease with evolving trials and studies, but until then it remains ever-important to follow the government guidelines if you have any underlying health conditions, including cardiovascular disease.

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Source: Al Jazeera News.

Will they bomb the pandemic to death?

Even with the Covid-19 crisis, the US war machine ALWAYS wants more money

By Darius Shahtahmasebi

Despite the impact Covid-19 has had on the global economy, the US is seeking more funding to counter and confront China in the Pacific, as well as enhancing its military preparedness for scenarios involving nuclear warfare. The corona virus outbreak has impacted the global economy in a unique and unprecedented fashion unseen since World War II. Around 63 percent of Japanese businesses have projected a negative impact on their business performance due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Since the start of the outbreak, stock markets have seen drops of over 20 percent, Chinese car sales have decreased by 86 percent and global interest rates have been slashed. Over 16 million Americans have filed jobless claims recently as unemployment runs rampant across the country. The travel industry has all but completely collapsed.

What should we make then of the recent \$20 billion wish list which was submitted to Congress by US Indo-Pacific Command head Adm. Phil Davidson? According to Defense News, this wish list was specifically requested by members of Congress who are looking for a Pacific-focused supply of money to deter China in the Indo-Pacific region.

Think of it as a Pacific version of the European Deterrence Initiative, the Department of Defense fund which covers projects deterring Russian “aggression” in Europe. Until US President Donald Trump announced a cut to this program earlier this year, it's worth pointing out that for a while Trump had quietly done one hell of a job boosting this anti-Russian initiative.

The current wish list is timely, and one could even argue that it is necessary because of Covid-19, not that the US is requesting it in spite of Covid-19. For example, we have already seen the many allegations that China is seeking to exploit the pandemic to expand its mounting influence. As the Lowy Institute pointed out, analysts are concerned that Beijing “will emerge from the pandemic with its global influence enhanced, while America's will be diminished.” The Australian think tank contains a number of commentators who share this concern.

As typical, the US approach is a 'not-on-our-watch' type of mentality which makes clear to the rest of the world that, global recession or not, the US military will continue on its path unabated. I'm not saying that this money could be better spent, but seeing that all of this military spending concerns China and what the US believes to be China's inherently evil actions in the Pacific anyway, I can't ignore the fact that China recently set up a US\$1.9 million China-Pacific Island Countries Anti-COVID-19 Cooperation fund. Beijing also sent medical equipment to French Polynesia when France was caught dragging its feet; as well as providing assistance to the Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu.

Covid-19 or not, nukes are ready

The \$20 billion plan submitted to Congress is more than just an isolated incident of the Pentagon continuing its mission of empire without making any concessions in the face of the global pandemic. Just last week, the US Air Force put in place a service-wide "reset" with the intention of isolating the most essential missions from the Covid-19 crisis. One of these 'essential' missions is the Global Strike Command, which has confirmed that American nukes are ready to fly as and when required.

Hardly surprising, when the commander of the Air Force Global Strike Command genuinely believes that Washington's nukes remain "the foundation of [the] security structure of the free world." I wonder if that includes the nukes the US houses and stores in Turkey, which in all honesty don't seem to contribute too much to global security. As it stands, ICBM crews are constantly rotating to ensure there is always a 'clean team' that can take over as other personnel become sick.

No laughing matter as it turns out, with at least one active military member already dying due to corona virus. The US is also allegedly seeking to upgrade and modernize its nuclear weapons supply in Germany, a move so expensive that it "would be cheaper to build the bomb in solid gold," according to Hans Kristensen, director of the Nuclear Information Project at the Federation of American Scientists.

If the corona virus pandemic can't put a halt to Washington's plans of modernizing its apocalyptic weapons, I'm not sure anything can.

US-Iran war still on the horizon

While the aforementioned points relate to US preparedness for war, there is still an inkling that the Trump administration is using the cover of Covid-19 to push forward ever closer to a hot war with Tehran. This is despite the mounting number of calls from British officials, former world officials, diplomats and European leaders, Human Rights Watch (HRW), and even Joe Biden to ease its maximum pressure sanctions regime on Iran.

Not one to buckle to international pressure, the US deployed its Patriot air defense system to Iraq at around the beginning of April. Iran immediately slammed the move, claiming that the US did not have approval from the Iraqi government to do so. At the same time, the US has also been warning that Iran has been planning attacks on US forces in the region, a claim Iran has also categorically denied.

Just this week, another rocket attack allegedly struck an American oil field service company in southern Iraq, though it is unclear who was responsible. Whether or not Iranian-backed forces are responsible for the attack, I don't expect Washington's rhetoric to change that much in respect of Iran, nor do I expect a waning in its thirst for blood.

Meanwhile, over 16,000 Americans have died as a result of Covid-19. As of writing, the US has the highest number of corona virus cases in the world, surpassing Iran, Italy, and China. I can't help but feel that instead of declaring war on Iran, upgrading and preparing its nukes and requesting more money to go to war with China in the Pacific, perhaps the US could turn its eye to a problem that the US government could conceivably and justifiably exert some influence and control over. Unless the Trump administration is planning on nuking the pandemic to death, it's time the US actually focused on something other than war for a while.

The statements, views and opinions expressed in this column are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of RT.

Source: RT News.

MIDDLE EAST

Inside the Iranian IRGC's secretive drone unit

The head of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps gave a candid and long interview about Iran's new success with drone technology over the weekend

By Seth J. Frantzman

The head of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps drone unit gave a candid and long interview about Iran's new success with drone technology over the weekend. Col. Akbar Karimloo spoke at length regarding new “stealth” drones and the array of vehicles now at his fingertips for waging war across the region.

He said the drones had been tested in operations against Kurdish resistance groups and indicated they have become mature to be used across the Middle East. Iran has pioneered drone use since the 1980s and in recent years has increasingly boasted about new drones that it is delivering to the air force, army, navy and IRGC.

It has often copied existing drones that it captured from the US or that it was able to acquire. For instance it is thought that it copied its Ababil-3 design from a South African drone that is itself modelled on an Israeli drone with a distinctive twin-tail design. After Iran claimed to down a US Sentinel drone in 2011 it reverse engineered parts of it and called its version the Saeqeh.

Its Shahed 129 is a copy of the well-known American predator drone. It also copied the smaller American Scan Eagle which it unveiled and called Yasir in 2013. Since that time Iran took another step and built long distance attack drones that behave like cruise missiles. It exported the technology to the Houthi rebels in Yemen and used 25 drones and cruise missiles in an attack on Saudi Arabia in September last year.

The IRGC now believes its drone arm has become not only mature but a real threat to all Iran's enemies, including Israel, the US, Saudi Arabia and others. It has harassed US ships with drones in the Persian Gulf and it has delivered them to Hezbollah and Syria. In February 2018 Iran flew a drone into Israel from the T-4 base in Syria. Israel shot it down.

Now Karimloo is taking center stage in Tehran as Iran's main drone man. He has spoken about a new “Fotros” stealth drone in recent discussions. The Fotros has been around for years and Iran believes that it can fly up to 2,000 kilometers, meaning it can strike Israel. Karimloo's unit is also receiving new Mohajer-6 drones, the latest IRGC UAV. His interview comes a week after Iran's army and air force said they got new drones.

These included Ababil 3 and Karrar drones. The Ababils now claim to be fitted with anti-tank rockets. The IRGC is boasting of its drone abilities to prove that it is Iran's long arm in the region. It recently showed off wreckage of a US Global Hawk giant surveillance drone that it shot down last June. In the new 4,000 word interview with Tasnim news, Karimloo provided an exclusive look into Iran's drone progress.

Sitting in an office flanked by the IRGC flag and model drones, he spoke at length about his role. Karimloo is middle-aged, balding and wears a large ring on his right hand. He has a crystal-encased model of the Mohajer-6 UAV on his desk. On the wall hangs a photo of him back in his younger years in the IRGC. Today he wears a press dark green uniform with the gold stars indicating his rank.

He says UAVs are the best weapon for today's armed forces. “They will pave the way for increasing ability of our forces in the field. Hey will be the best weapon system in the future.” They are no costly and if you lose them you don't have to sacrifice your own fighters. They can be obtained in the shortest possible time as well. They make intelligence gathering easier and the drone technology has received a

lot of momentum in recent years, he says. He says drones are a good platform because you can put add-ons on them, such as cameras or other devices. However, the communications technology involved is complex and he says it is important to invest in it. "In the field of aviation technology, video and combat systems information, we have achieved communication systems with a range of up to 200 km using relays."

That means that even out of sight the drone can communicate with a tower or antennas or other planes and relay signals back. He says that since 2005 he has worked in intelligence and then with operations and observers for the engineers and artillerymen using UAVs. At some point over the last several years the IRGC decided to create its own independent UAV force. The idea was to put strategic priority on the IRGC's drone element, and not concentrate the new technology only in the hands of the air force. This led to upgrades in the UAV group's role.

Karimloo described at length the difficulty of using a drone that can fly for ten hours and go 150 km when you need to remain in contact over mountainous terrain. "Sometimes we need to fly 200 km in a conflict and need constant coverage so continuity of the signal is important. We use remote sensing relays," he says. He says that the information is coded and has to be decrypted as well.

It appears that Iran pushed its drones to first monitor dissidents and to monitor adversaries in neighboring countries. He says that the resolution of images from drones improved and became more necessary than satellite images. Iran installed new video and imaging technology, he says, including thermal sensors, for its reconnaissance drones. He also says Iran acquired expertise in GIS, a geographic software, and remote sensing.

"There are benefits to this because it enables commanders to plan to operate in complex geography." Now he says Iran is getting full HD images from its drones. He points to the use of combat drones in the Kurdish region as an example of where drone strikes and surveillance has been key. He also says he hopes this year to have a drone operational that can evade radar.

He points to the new Mohajer-6, Ababil-3 and Sadegh as his key drones. The former both have flight endurance of up to 10 hours. He also says he hopes to take delivery of an operational Shahed 149, similar to the US Reaper drone, in the next year. The IRGC also wants a VTOL-style drone, one that can take off vertically with rotors. In his interview he says that Iran is primarily using drones in its southeast and northwest, meaning it is using them against insurgent groups and to monitor smuggling in the Kurdish and Baloch areas. He says drones were particularly useful against the PJAK Kurdish resistance group and Kurdish KDP-I which Iran carried out strikes against in 2018 in Iraq.

Karimloo is candid about problems Iran's new Mohajer-6 has faced. The drone was unveiled in 2019, but he indicates it has faced some problems. He says they have worked to increase the drone's engine. One of the issues he says needs more focus in Iran is training forces to work with drones and increasing the education of cadets so that they will have the specialized skills to work with the technology.

"The UAV arena is a stressful area and requires hard work in the field. If people are not committed with the right expertise we will not succeed." Drone pilots are trained in avionics and mechanics at university he says. The overall message of the long interview is that the IRGC is taking seriously the need to establish both the training and economic infrastructure to support its drones. It wants a reliable system in place to increase their range and armament. Karimloo appears candid about both the successes and shortcomings, more candid than the usual bragging whereby Iran claims its drones can reach anywhere in the Middle East with weapons that it has copied from its adversaries.

Source: The Jerusalem Post.

RUSSIA

Two major Russian arms deals likely next week, weaponry worth \$15 bn in Moscow pipeline

By Ajai Shukla

On Wednesday, the ministry of defence (MoD) will clear the purchase of one, and possibly two, Russian weapons systems, taking orders in the Moscow pipeline to above \$15 billion and underlining Russia's status as India's premier arms supplier. The Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) the MoD's apex procurement body, headed by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh is poised to clear the purchase of the 9K338 Igla-S missile system for a sum of \$1.3 billion. India will buy 800 launchers and 5,175 Igla-S missiles, which fall in the so-called "Very Short Range Air Defence System" (VSHORADS) category. The VSHORADS procurement has been mired in controversy. The Igla-S is a 16-year-old missile system, first built in 2004, which the Russian military replaced in 2014 with the newer, far more capable, 9K333 Verba missile.

After the MoD announced in November 2018 that it had chosen the Igla-S over the other two VSHORADS on offer Swedish firm Saab's RBS-70; and the Mistral, offered by European consortium, MBDA Saab shot off four letters of protest to the MoD alleging foul play in testing. However, internal MoD evaluators ruled that testing had followed procedure. In a reply to Saab that Business Standard has reviewed, the MoD wrote the "case has progressed as per provisions of Defence Procurement Procedure (DPP) with level playing field to all the participating vendors." Apparently, the MoD feels the Igla-S met India's needs and Rosoboronexport's price of under \$1.47 billion makes it a value proposition compared to Saab's tag of \$2.6 billion and MBDA's offer of \$3.68 billion.

Russian industry sources say that, when the Indian tender was floated in 2010, they had only the Igla-S to offer since the Verba was not ready. In 2014, when the Russian military introduced the fourth-generation Verba, Rosoboronexport offered to replace the Igla-S with the new missile. But the MoD said the DPP did not permit this change. Consequently, the Indian military will get an obsolescent VSHORADS that will be almost two decades old by the time it enters service, and almost fifty years old at the end of its service life cycle. Furthermore, since the 2010 tender did not specify any "Make in India" stipulations, production of the Igla-S will take place mostly in Russia.

VSHORADS are the ground forces' last defence against attack from enemy ground strike aircraft. At the apex level, the IAF is responsible for air defence, which it does by bombing enemy airfields to prevent combat aircraft from even taking off. Those that do manage to enter our airspace are engaged with the IAF's fighters and missiles. However, some enemy aircraft still sneak through to attack ground troops, who protect themselves with VSHORADS. The MoD is also racing against time to bring before the DAC the long-delayed proposal to build 197 Kamov-226T helicopters for an estimated \$2 billion.

This is being touted as a "Make in India" initiative, with the choppers being built by a joint venture (JV), Indo-Russian Helicopters Ltd (IRHL). The biggest stakeholder in the JV is Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL) with a 50.5 per cent stake, while Russian Helicopters has a 49.5 per cent stake. However, there will be only limited indigenisation. The inter-governmental agreement (IGA) between New Delhi and Moscow permits Russian Helicopters to deliver the first 60 helicopters in flyaway condition. The next 40 helicopters would be shipped as kits from Russia to be assembled in India. Only after that would indigenisation pick up momentum over the last 97 choppers.

The VSHORADS and Kamov-226T contracts will supplement the on-going purchase from Russia of S-400 air defence systems (\$5.43 billion), AK-203 rifles (\$1 billion), Krivak III frigates (\$2 billion), BrahMos anti-ship missiles (\$2.6 billion) and a supplementary order for 18 more Sukhoi-30MKI fighters (\$1.15 billion). This will take the value of on-going arms imports from Russia to \$15 billion far more than any other country, including the US. Washington, however, has created a lever to discourage Indian weapons imports from Moscow. A recent US law Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act

(CAATSA) requires the US government to sanction countries that engage in “significant transactions” with Russian, Iranian and North Korean entities. US president has the power to grant India a waiver from CAATSA. However, without large arms purchases from the US, there is no certainty that that Donald Trump would grant a waiver.

CORONAVIRUS

'Floating petri dishes of disease'

How on earth are cruise liners still at sea, months after Covid-19 struck, killing dozens?

Stephen Corby is an Australian journalist who has written news, features and columns for major national newspapers there, and edited magazines including Top Gear Australia. More than 6,000 people are stuck at sea on ships, some of which set off as late as last month. Now there are criminal investigations and lawsuits underway, accusing blundering cruise firms of corporate manslaughter.

Back in 2017, when humour was still a thing, American comedian Bill Burr made a caustic suggestion as to how we could prevent global environmental collapse, by “thinning out the herd” of humanity. “I would randomly sink cruise ships,” he insisted, straight-faced. “You get 2,500 to 3,000 people to whack, and I think it's a good mix of people to get rid of.”

No-one is laughing about cruise ship passengers dying now, of course at one stage a quarter of all corona virus deaths in Australia, for example, came from a single ship, the Ruby Princess but there is definitely something funny-peculiar about the fact that so many people were still ambling onto these giant, floating virus buffets in March, even after the Diamond Princess debacle in Japan. On February 1, this ship, owned by Carnival Cruises, was advised that a passenger who had recently disembarked in Hong Kong was being treated for Covid-19.

It was almost two full days before the passengers and crew were informed of the danger, and two more days until they were quarantined in their cabins. While it is impossible to know how much the disease spread during that hiatus, as guests hung out in saunas and ate cheek by jowl, what we do know is that more than 700 people ended up infected. At one stage, the Diamond Princess accounted for more than half the world's cases outside of China.

Terrified passengers and staff were trapped on the ship many in windowless cabins as it remained docked in Yokohama for weeks, and 12 people eventually died. Then on March 5th, just four days after the final crew member was evacuated from the Diamond Princess, corona virus tests were being dropped by helicopter onto its sister ship the Grand Princess, off the coast of California.

Frighteningly, 21 of the first 46 people tested were positive, and President Trump was soon suggesting the entire ship should be prevented from disembarking. “I don't need to have the numbers double because of one ship,” he said and nearly 2,000 passengers were eventually quarantined on US military bases.

And yet, despite a tidal wave of ominous stories about cruise ships becoming petri dishes for the virus, 2,647 people piled onto another Carnival ship, the Ruby Princess, in Sydney Harbour on March 8th, for what would become the most ill-fated voyage since the Titanic. That same day, the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta issued a public advisory to “defer all cruise ship travel, worldwide.”

Carnival Cruise Line spokesman Roger Frizzell later pointed out that the company was under no legal obligation to follow that recommendation. “The advisory is not an edict,” he said. Despite how aware the world was of the virus's infectiousness, Ruby's crew had just 12 hours to properly clean a vessel that would be as tall as a 70-storey building if parked vertically.

Let's all do the corona conga

One passenger, Stacie Hunt, 36, says she realised “things were serious” before they even got on the boat. “At the end of the day, we knew what was going on around the world. We knew how quickly it spread in ships,” she said. “People just didn't care.” The Ruby Princess sailed to New Zealand (one of its stops there, in Napier, left behind a cluster of 19 virus cases) and then raced back to Sydney three days ahead of schedule as global authorities began to crack down on ship arrivals.

Despite the fact that doctors on board had already reported sick passengers to authorities, video later emerged of a conga line of kitchen staff dancing through a packed dining room on the last night of the voyage. Authorities would later announce that it was likely a “crew member working in the galley” had started the spread of the virus.

Cruise ships always arrive in Sydney Harbour at dawn, to make the most of its majesty, but the Ruby Princess docked at 2am on March 19th. Three ambulances were waiting on the dock to collect stricken passengers. The circumstances surrounding exactly how the rest of those on board were allowed to waltz off and board domestic and international flights rather than being quarantined is now the subject of a criminal investigation by the Australian police, alongside a Special Commission of Inquiry. More than 600 of the voyage's passengers have since been diagnosed with corona virus, making it the biggest individual contributor to Australia's Covid-19 numbers, and 19 people have died.

Passengers from the ship have also taken the virus to Canada, America and the UK, and lawsuits have been lodged in the US against the operator of the Ruby Princess, alleging officials took a “lackadaisical approach” to safety. Graeme Lake and his wife Karla took the cruise to celebrate her 75th birthday, but both contracted the virus during the trip and she later died.

Graeme says passengers were never told they were at risk, and has vowed to seek justice for his beloved partner. “They made a point of not letting anyone know at all that anyone was sick,” he told Australia's Seven Television. “, we thought, it's fine.”

Armageddon out of here

Incredibly this week, while the boat effectively a crime scene is still quarantined off the coast of Australia, with more than 1,000 crew on board, including 140 active corona virus cases, American Jan Swartz, the president of Carnival Cruises which has seen its share price fall 75 percent this year appeared in a video to announce that the company “remains optimistic that Emerald and Ruby Princess will still be able to offer round trip cruises from Seattle to Alaska in the late summer.”

Carnival has now finally cancelled all of its cruises through late June, and some through the end of the year. The company's chief experience officer declared: “The cruise space is as bad as it gets. It's armageddon.” What does seem alarming is how long the company had known that armageddon was approaching, and the fact that it continued to put both its customers and its staff in harm's way.

Aside from the Ruby, Diamond and Grand Princesses, at least seven more of the Carnival Line's ships have become virus hot spots, resulting in more than 1,500 positive infections and at least 39 fatalities. As of April 9, there were still more than 6,000 passengers at sea on various ships, and some of them may not be able to disembark until the end of April. Clearly, the death toll is yet to be finalised.

Carnival's innovation chief, John Padgett, had been dealing with a manufacturer based in Wuhan and has said that he was made aware of the scale of the coronavirus outbreak in late January. “The biggest thing about that, it's a learning I don't think I'll ever forget... is that we actually had insight into the global situation much earlier than most,” Padgett revealed.

And yet so little was done, not just by Carnival but the entire industry, as University of Chicago epidemiologist Katelyn Gostic points out: “The cruise ship response was definitely lagging behind expert opinion on how big the risks are,” she told Washington Post. “It was sluggish decision-making, and they should have responded earlier.”

Carry on cruising?

Cruising has sailed through tumultuous PR waters before, most notably with the capsizing of the Costa Concordia in Italy in 2012, which killed 32 people. A year later, passengers endured the so-called 'Poop

Cruise' on the Carnival Triumph, after a fire on board led to the ship being stuck at sea for a week with overflowing toilets and hallways flooded with human waste. Despite the lingering stench, Carnival was offering cruises on the same ship just two months later.

No-one died, then, of course, so surely the tsunami of bad publicity that has washed over cruise ships globally will prove more damaging this time around? The industry, which normally carries 30 million people a year, clearly does not think so, with Carnival offering bookings on cruises to Asia on its Diamond Princess as soon as October this year.

Despite a Yahoo poll finding that 83 percent of Australians would not travel on a cruise ship again for fear of catching an infection, 17 percent still said they would. Another poll, on Cruise Critic, found that 75 percent of respondents planned to cruise "as much as" or "even more," as soon as ships start sailing again.

Incredibly, future cruise sales have surged over the past month, with online portal reporting a 40 percent increase in 2021 bookings compared to 2019. And even those people who have had to cancel cruises that would possibly have seen them infected are keen to get back on board, with as many as three quarters of cancellations taking a future credit of 125 percent of their cruise value rather than a 100 percent refund. Perhaps sinking a few ships, as Burr suggested, might be the only way to save people from themselves.

Courtesy: RT News.

Is the virus on my clothes? my shoes? my hair? my newspaper?

We asked the experts to answer questions about all the places corona virus lurks (or doesn't). You'll feel better after reading this

By Tara Parker-Pope

When we asked readers to send their questions about corona virus, a common theme emerged: Many people are fearful about tracking the virus into their homes on their clothes, their shoes, the mail and even the newspaper. We reached out to infectious disease experts, aerosol scientists and microbiologists to answer reader questions about the risks of coming into contact with the virus during essential trips outside and from deliveries. While we still need to take precautions, their answers were reassuring.

Should I change my clothes and shower when I come home from the grocery store? For most of us who are practicing social distancing and making only occasional trips to the grocery store or pharmacy, experts agree that it's not necessary to change clothes or take a shower when you return home. You should, however, always wash your hands. While it's true that a sneeze or cough from an infected person can propel viral droplets and smaller particles through the air, most of them will drop to the ground.

Studies show that some small viral particles could float in the air for about half an hour, but they don't swarm like gnats and are unlikely to collide with your clothes. "A droplet that is small enough to float in air for a while also is unlikely to deposit on clothing because of aerodynamics," said Linsey Marr, an aerosol scientist at Virginia Tech. "The droplets are small enough that they'll move in the air around your body and clothing."

Why is it that small droplets and viral particles don't typically land on our clothing? I asked Dr. Marr to explain further, since we're all getting a mini lesson in aerodynamics. "The best way to describe it is that they follow the streamlines, or air flow, around a person, because we move relatively slowly. It's kind of like small insects and dust particles flowing in the streamlines around a car at slow speed but potentially slamming into the windshield if the car is going fast enough," said Dr. Marr.

“Humans don't usually move fast enough for this to happen,” Dr. Marr continued. “As we move, we push air out of the way, and most of the droplets and particles get pushed out of the way, too. Someone would have to spray large droplets through talking a spit talker coughing or sneezing for them to land on our clothes. The droplets have to be large enough that they don't follow the streamlines.” So, if you're out shopping and somebody sneezes on you, you probably do want to go home, change and shower. But the rest of the time, take comfort that your slow-moving body is pushing air and viral particles away from your clothes, a result of simple physics.

Is there a risk that the virus could be in my hair or beard? For all the reasons outlined above, you should not be worried about viral contamination of your hair or beard if you are practicing social distancing. Even if someone sneezed on the back of your head, any droplets that landed on your hair would be an unlikely source of infection. “You have to think through the process of what would have to happen for someone to become infected,” said Dr. Andrew Janowski, instructor of pediatric infectious diseases at Washington University School of Medicine St. Louis Children's Hospital. “You have someone who sneezes, and they have to have X amount of virus in the sneeze. Then there has to be so many drops that land on you.”

“Then you have to touch that part of your hair or clothing that has those droplets, which already have a significant reduction in viral particles,” Dr. Janowski said. “Then you have to touch that, and then touch whatever part of your face, to come into contact with it. When you go through the string of events that must occur, such an extended number of things have to happen just right. That makes it a very low risk.” Should I worry about doing laundry and sorting clothes? Can I shake viral particles loose from my clothes and send them into the air? The answer depends on whether you're doing routine laundry or cleaning up after a sick person. Routine laundry should not cause worry. Wash it as you normally would. While some types of viruses, like the corona virus, can be tough to clean, the new corona virus, like the flu virus, is surrounded by a fatty membrane that is vulnerable to soap.

Washing your clothes in regular laundry detergent, following the fabric instructions, followed by a stint in the dryer is more than enough to remove the virus if it was even there in the first place. “We do know that viruses can deposit on clothing (from droplets) and then be shaken loose into the air with movement, but you would need a lot of viruses for this to be a concern, far more than a typical person would encounter while going for a walk outdoors or going to a grocery store,” Dr. Marr said.

The exception is if you are in close contact with a sick person. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that you wear gloves when cleaning up after someone who is sick, and take care not to shake laundry and bedding. Use the warmest water setting possible and dry completely. You can mix laundry from an ill person with the rest of the household load. But just leaving laundry to sit for a while also reduces risk, because the virus will dry out and decay. “We know these types of viruses tend to decay faster on fabric than on hard, solid surfaces like steel or plastic,” said Dr. Marr.

So how long can the virus remain viable on fabric and other surfaces? Most of what we know about how long this novel corona virus lives on surfaces comes from an important study published in The New England Journal of Medicine in March. The study found that the virus can survive, under ideal conditions, up to three days on hard metal surfaces and plastic and up to 24 hours on cardboard.

But the study did not look at fabric. Still, most virus experts believe that the cardboard research offers clues about how the virus probably behaves on fabric. The absorbent, natural fibers in the cardboard appeared to cause the virus to dry up more quickly than it does on hard surfaces. The fibers in fabric would be likely to produce a similar effect.

A 2005 study of the virus that causes SARS, another form of corona virus, provides further reassurance. In that study, researchers tested increasingly large amounts of viral samples on paper and on a cotton gown. Depending on the concentration of the virus, it took five minutes, three hours or 24 hours for it to become inactive. “Even with a relatively high virus load in the droplet, rapid loss of infectivity was observed for paper and cotton material,” the researchers concluded.

Should I be concerned about the mail, packages or the newspaper? The risk of getting sick from handling mail or packages is extremely low and, at this point, only theoretical. There are no documented cases of someone getting sick from opening a package or reading a newspaper. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't take precautions. After handling mail or packages or reading the newspaper, dispose of the packaging and wash your hands. If you still feel especially anxious about it, take guidance from the New England Journal study and just let mail and packages sit for 24 hours before handling them.

How much should I worry about contamination if I go outside to walk the dog or exercise? Your chances of catching the virus when you go outdoors is extremely low, provided you're keeping a safe distance from others. "Outdoors is safe, and there is certainly no cloud of virus-laden droplets hanging around," said Lidia Morawska, professor and director of the International Laboratory for Air Quality and Health at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia.

"Firstly, any infectious droplets exhaled outside would be quickly diluted in outdoor air, so their concentrations would quickly become insignificant," Dr. Morawska said. "In addition, the stability of the virus outside is significantly shorter than inside. So outside is not really a problem, unless if we are in a very crowded place which is not allowed now anyway. It is safe to go for a walk and jog and not to worry about the virus in the air, and there is no need for an immediate washing of the clothes."

I've read that when I get home from a trip outside I should remove my shoes and wipe them down. Should I waste my precious disinfectant wipes on my shoes? Shoes can harbor bacteria and viruses, but that doesn't mean they are a common source of infection. A 2008 study commissioned by Rockport Shoes found a lot of gross stuff, including fecal bacteria, on the soles of our shoes. A recent study from China found that among health care workers, half had corona virus detected on their shoes, which is not unexpected since they worked in hospitals with infected patients.

So what should we do about our shoes? If your shoes are washable, you can launder them. Some readers asked about cleaning the soles of their shoes with a wipe. That is not recommended. Not only does it waste a good wipe (they are still in short supply), but it brings germs that would stay on the sole of your shoe or on the ground directly to your hands. You can try not to think about what's lurking on your shoes or you can have a conversation with your family about becoming a shoe-free household. We covered the pros and cons of shoeless living in our article, "Should You Take Your Shoes Off at Home?" If you have a child who crawls or plays on the floor, a family member with allergies, or someone with a compromised immune system, a shoe-free home might be a good idea for general hygiene.

Dr. Janowski said shoes are not a big worry for contracting coronavirus, but it might make you squeamish if you think about where your shoes have been. "If you want to talk about bacteria, we know bacteria love to live on shoes," Dr. Janowski said. "You never know what you stepped in."

Tara Parker-Pope is the founding editor of Well, The Times's award-winning consumer health site.

Courtesy: The New York Times.

INDIA

India's nuclear weapons in the control of Hindu Supremacists

By Dr. Zafar Nawaz Jaspal

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) secured a landslide victory in the 2019 general election in India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi started his second tenure with full confidence and commenced the Hindutva extremist agenda in the country. The Modi government revoked the autonomous status of Indian Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IOJ&K), enacted controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Act, and above all, increased belligerence with nuclear-armed Pakistan.

Since the 2019 Pulwama military standoff, the Modi government has been using the threat of military force usage, including the use of nuclear weapons, to elicit desirable behavior from Pakistan. Indeed, all these irrational acts of BJP government underline how fraught the situation has turned out to be during the last one-year reign of Hindu supremacists in India. These issues raised serious questions about the future of the Indian nuclear stockpile in the hands of a hyper-nationalist leadership.

Narendra Modi led BJP's racist, bigoted, communal, and warmongering statements throughout the 2019 general election were alarming. The BJP campaign labeled as an aberration in the Indian politics, which acted as a catalyst in changing India's nuclear doctrine from non-deployable status to deployed nuclear assets, swapping No-First-Use (NFU) with First-Use (FU) nuclear policy and above all replacing nuclear deterrence with nuclear compellence strategy against Pakistan.

According to an Indian scholar Rajesh Rajagopalan, "Such proposals are ideologically driven short-cuts to demonstrate 'resolve' rather than a careful response to India's strategic problems." Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the chairman of India's National Command Authority (NCA), which is the sole body to authorize the use of India's nuclear weapons in the event of a war. The problematic issue is that he is prone to use armed forces to coerce a nuclear-armed neighbor to gather and sustain the support of the nationalists and Hindu extremist forces in the Indian polity.

He 'beat the nuclear drum to stir up his nationalist base' during the 2019 general election campaign. On April 14, 2019, Prime Minister Modi claimed that he had called Pakistan's 'nuclear bluff by carrying out airstrikes within Pakistan. He said: "Pakistan has threatened us with nuclear, nuclear, nuclear" and then he asked rhetorically, "did we deflate their nuclear threat or not?"

The alarming fact was that the Chairman of India's NCA declared publically Pakistan's nuclear capability bluff and ridiculed its restrained policy in the crisis to avoid the escalation of the conflict. On April 20, 2019, Premier Modi said: "Every other day, they used to say 'we have a nuclear button, we have a nuclear button.' What do we have then? Have we kept it for Diwali?" On the following day, he proudly said, "When Pakistan captured Abhinandan, I said to Pakistan that if anything happens to our pilot, we will not leave you." He added, "Pakistan announced they would return the pilot on the second day, else it was going to be a 'gatal ki raat' a night of slaughter."

The BJP leaders and RSS diehard defense analysts frequently made irresponsible nuclear statements, which demonstrated that there was a wider acceptance for such startling views in the Indian ruling elite. Shyam Saran, India's former Foreign Secretary, raised concern about Mr. Modi's nuclear trigger-happy destabilizing arrogance.

On April 23, 2019, he wrote in his op-ed titled 'Modi should know India's status as a nuclear weapon state demands responsible leadership', "Many norms have been transgressed and several thresholds crossed in the ongoing Lok Sabha election campaign, whether in the communal and sectarian polarization of Indians or the politicization of the armed forces.

Now another threshold has been crossed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his most recent remarks on India's nuclear weapons delivered in a threatening tone." Indeed, the use of nuclear warmongering to compel a nuclear-armed adversary for mustering the political support to win the general election and to alter Pakistan's Kashmir policy was a risky phenomenon in the region. It manifested that Prime Minister Modi and his extremist cohorts were unaware of the futility or limits of nuclear compellence strategy against the nuclear-armed state. The rise of Hindutva populism in the Indian society and the values that underpin the BJP governance viewed by political analysts are an 'end of Indian secularism' and the beginning of Hindu Rashtra.

Besides, Modi's re-election for the second term exposed India's reputation as a responsible nuclear weapon state, which would act with restraint and prudence in handling nuclear weapons. The current elected government in New Delhi stridently questions two fundamental pillars of the Indian constitution, i.e., secularism and minorities' equal existence in India, and its decision to deploy nuclear

submarine Arihant at the Arabian Sea drew attention to the risky choices of the Indian right-wing extremist ruling elite that ultimately played into regional strategic instability.

The Modi government chalked out a risky 'Nuclear Compellence Strategy' to pursue its objectives against nuclear-armed Pakistan. "Nuclear compellence is the use of nuclear threats to persuade an adversary to carry out a favorable action." The Modi government's nuclear compellence strategy is the use of nuclear threats and maneuvers to persuade nuclear-armed Pakistan to carry out a favorable action in the Indian Occupied Jammu & Kashmir in particular and submit to its regional hegemony in general.

This strategic mindset was also responsible for introducing India's surgical strike stratagem that is grounded on the concept of preemptive counter force options against Pakistan. According to the Joint Doctrine of the Indian Armed Forces-2017 (JDIAF-2017): "India has moved to a proactive and pragmatic philosophy to counter various conflict situations. The response to terror provocations could be in the form of a surgical strike, and these subsumed in the sub-conventional portion of the spectrum of armed conflict."

The surgical strike stratagem and preemptive counterforce doctrine gives Indian armed forces the choice of time, targets, and scale to the launch, but it equally creates a risky strategic environment in which military planners feel compelled to use nuclear weapons against the adversary. The situation between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan further deteriorated on August 5, 2019, when New Delhi enacted 'The Jammu & Kashmir Reorganizing Act, 2019' that revoked the Articles 370 and 35A from the Constitution of India, which granted special and autonomous status to IOJ&K.

The abrogation of the articles, already largely overridden in practice, was not only a breach of India's Constitution; it was also a violation of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions, which declared Kashmir as a disputed territory. The principle of a plebiscite prescribed in Security Council resolution 47 (1948) and subsequent resolutions reflects the legal recognition of the right to self-determination of the people of Jammu & Kashmir.

Pakistan appealed UNSC to implement its resolutions on the 72-year-old Kashmir dispute. India opposed the holding of the UNSC meeting to camouflage its atrocities in the IOJ&K. On August 16, 2019, the UNSC convened a consultative meeting on the subject and nullified India's claim that annexation of Kashmir was an internal matter of India. It vindicated Pakistan's position that the UNSC resolutions were intact, and thereby a holding of a free and fair plebiscite was the only approach to resolve the protracted Kashmir dispute between the two nuclear-armed states.

The members of the UNSC, other countries, and the representatives of international institutions advised both India and Pakistan to exercise maximum restraint in their policies and resolve the dispute through dialogue instead of the use of the military option. However, the Modi Government closed all doors to a peaceful and negotiated resolution of the Kashmir dispute.

It was neither willing for a bilateral dialogue with Pakistan, nor permitting third-party mediation. It responded negatively to President Donald Trump's statement about his eagerness to mediate or arbitrate between the nuclear-armed neighbors over the Kashmir dispute. Hence, Modi government's state-terrorism to consolidate illegal occupation and to restore the writ of New Delhi in IOJ&K has posed a grave risk to regional and global peace and stability.

India's deployment of nuclear assets at sea and swapping of its NFU with FU nuclear policy testified the change in India's nuclear doctrine and posture. On August 16, 2019, the Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh reconfirmed the swapping of NFU with FU policy. He said, 'Till today, our nuclear policy is 'no first use.'" He added: "What happens in future depends on the circumstances."

The nuclear-capable assets' deployment, especially in the sea, could be accurately decoded as India's nuclear weapons deployment in the Indian Ocean. In simple terms, India shunned 'no first-use' nuclear policy and 'massive retaliation' nuclear doctrine and adopted a strategy of nuclear war-fighting instead of nuclear deterrence.

Notwithstanding, Pakistan's reiteration that nuclear war would be catastrophic and nuclear weapons are the weapons of deterrence and a political choice for ensuring deterrence stability in South Asia, India's Hindu supremacist ruling elite believe in using nuclear threats to compel Pakistan to change its current Kashmir policy.

The Modi government has been compelling Pakistan to forget IOJ&K and discuss the status of Azad Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan for the settlement of long-standing Kashmir dispute. It arrogantly boasted to formulate a plan to take punitive action if Pakistan refused to yield. It was not issuing a mere threat, which was sufficient for deterrence; it was pronouncing both the danger and exemplary use of force that is required for compellence.

Such acts of the Indian ruling elite are enough to prove that fascist individuals have control over the Indian nuclear arsenal, which are prone to irresponsible nuclear behavior. The aberration in Indian politics and change in nuclear posture caused the safety and security problem of the Indian nukes.

The nukes deployment and the aggressive mindset of India's NCA Chairman, Prime Minister Modi, and members such as Amit Anilchandra Shah, Minister of Home Affairs are alarming. On August 18, 2019, Prime Minister Imran Khan tweeted: The world must also seriously consider the safety and security of India's nuclear arsenal in the control of the fascist, racist Hindu Supremacist Modi government. This is an issue that impacts not just the region but the world. On August 30, 2019, he wrote in The New York Times:

"We were not simply up against a hostile government. We were up against a 'New India', which is governed by leaders and a party that are the products of the Hindu supremacist mother ship, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or the RSS". Khan's concerns had logic because religious fanatics are controlling India's nuclear weapons.

The international community, especially the United States, led the western nations to adopt an apathetic approach towards India's hyper-nationalist ruling elite's irresponsible nuclear behavior due to India's geo-politics and geo-economic significance and estimated role in the Indo-Pacific region. Trump administration applauded India's "leadership role in Indian Ocean security and throughout the broader region" to balance China in the Asia-Pacific region.

Besides, the United States and its allies facilitated India's obtaining membership of important technological cartels - Missile Technology Control Regime (2016), Wassenaar Arrangement (2017) and Australia Group (2018). The sanctioning of India's conventional and nuclear weapons qualitative and quantitative advancement has bolstered the Indian ruling elite's revisionist mindset, encouraged its hegemonic aspirations in South Asia, and increased the probability of war between India and Pakistan, which is very destabilizing for the deterrence stability and peace in South Asia.

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Modi once again under Trump's gun, this time re: corona medicine

By Bharat Karnad

On April 4, Prime Minister Narendra Modi revealed on twitter that he "Had an extensive telephone conversation with President. We had a good discussion, and agreed to deploy the full strength of the India-US partnership to fight COVID-19." The PM apparently considers it a matter of great honour to be conferring with the American head of state on almost anything, and loses no time in letting this be publicly known. The reason Trump had called was to ask Modi to expeditiously release for export to the

United States hydroxychloroquine that the Indian government may have stocked up on. In response, the PM reportedly told Trump that his government will consider his request but first examine the consequences of releasing this drug for sale to the US.

Trump is convinced this anti-malaria drug has a future as an anti-corona medicine. He has also to remedy a situation that may see his political goose being cooked because he had initially dismissed the C-virus as a scare conjured up by the Liberal establishment opposed to him. His medical advisers, however, are unanimous in warning that this chemical compound is unproven as solution for COVID-19, and that it is highly toxic when not used under strictest supervision.

Whether Americans, despite being adequately warned, ingest this drug as a prophylactic on the basis of their President's advice and die in vast numbers, is US' concern. What India has to worry about is whether Delhi will ship off this medicine to the US, leaving India high and dry if hydroxychloroquine is discovered, on the off-chance, to actually be a panacea for the corona crisis. With respect to corona, India is still at the low end of the COVID-19 curve largely because of a near complete lack of specialized mass testing.

For all any one knows, the corona may have already afflicted five or ten times as many Indians as the 4,000 patients under care. Five lakh testing kits are only this week arriving, ironically, from China. Even so, in the context of the 1.3 billion population, the disease, it may be fair to conclude, is still in its nascent phase with herd-contagion and spread in the country still to take-off and when it does infections may peak in the next two months or so. Thus, prudence suggests Modi should be cautious, not go overboard in emptying out the country's stock of hydroxychloroquine for America's benefit. Except the option of not sending supplies of this drug to the US is now denied Modi who, in any case, has shown himself to be a little too fearful of alienating the US and otherwise too eager to please Washington. This tendency is what the US and Trump have to-date exploited.

Two days after his conversation with Modi, Trump disclosed to the Press just what transpired in that phone call to the Indian leader. It turns out that far from pleading with Modi, Trump had demanded India forthwith sell to the US its holdings of the anti-malarial drug, or face punitive action. "I spoke to Modi Sunday morning, called him, and I said, we'd appreciate you allowing our supply to come out", said Trump. "If Modi doesn't allow it to come out. That would be OK. But of course, there may be retaliation. Why wouldn't there be?" And retaliation, he hinted, would be that old staple tightening the screws in the ongoing bilateral trade deal negotiations. Consider Trump's proprietorial reference to "allowing our supply to come out". Does this mean that the US government through its embassy and/or via American pharma companies, their subsidiaries or middlemen agencies have already bought off a lot of India's hydroxychloroquine stockpile, and having done so are only awaiting the Modi government's approval for air-freighting it to America?

Whether or not this quinine-containing drug is the answer for COVID-19, India will need it, besides malaria, to treat ailments like rheumatoid arthritis, etc. and so keeping a bigish stock of it to meet domestic need makes sense. In any case, it is India's sovereign right, by way of husbanding its own resources to tackle a pandemic to negate any commercial contracts that spirit away important drugs from the country. The question is will Modi exercise this right, or succumb to American pressure?

Meanwhile, because of America's marked dependence on China for pharmaceutical and medical products Beijing has Washington over the barrel. Indeed, as a March 4 commentary in Xinhua, the official Chinese news agency, put it, China can send the U.S. to "the hell of the novel corona virus pandemic" by banning exports of all medical supplies.

It is not just Trump, but US' attitude vis a vis India generally, that is really at issue here. I have been warning (in my numerous books and in writings over the past two decades) about Washington seeking to imprint US interests and concerns on India's policies, starting in the new Century with the 2008 civilian nuclear deal and, in the Modi era, with the foundational accords (LEMOA, COMCASA, BECA) that

have transformed India into a subsidiary ally. It is a goal successive Indian governments (under Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Manmohan Singh, Modi) have helped Washington realize.

These regimes have acted on the flawed premise that an aspiring India can ride to great power status, as I keep harping, by kowtowing to extant great powers US and China, in the main. It has only earned India kicks up its backside, but Delhi has not been disabused of this view. Then again, if our leaders display no self-respect, it is hardly to be wondered that India will continue to be treated with utter contempt which, incidentally is now reserved, as many West European states find, exclusively for America's allies and friends.

The worm is, however, turning in Europe at least. Emmanuel Macron in France is leading the charge on shaping an autonomous European identity, policies and even a European military freed from the impedimenta of treaty ties to the US. Germany, the economic giant of Europe under Angela Merkl too has finally decided that enough is enough.

The apparent breaking point has been reached with the Trump Administration "confiscating" 200,000 Thailand-made masks ordered by Germany, and arm twisting a German pharma research company reportedly on the cusp of a corona vaccine breakthrough to surrender exclusive rights to it to US companies. It moved the German Home Minister, Andreas Geisel, to equate such actions with "piracy" and to add that "This is no way to treat transatlantic partners. Even in times of global crisis, we shouldn't resort to the tactics of the Wild West."

With treaty allies like Germany being treated with such insensitivity, India can expect only worse. But the Indian government doesn't get it, perhaps, because Modi (like his predecessors in office) instead of being driven by 'India First' imperatives, is casting about, as always, for a safety line from the US which, however, works and has always worked solely on the 'America First' principle.

Diplomacy is the key

Surgical strikes after Uri and at Balakot have not ended terrorism and infiltration has increased despite lockdown. The post-COVID-19 environment may provide a window to restart process

By Ashok K Mehta

For Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the use of surgical strikes has become the new-normal in resolving intractable problems like cross-border terrorism, black money and Jammu & Kashmir. After Balakot, the airstrikes appear to have turned the page in terrorism but in real terms, little has changed. Black money has altered the "colour" and "terrorism" is just on "pause."

The new invisible enemy is COVID-19. Not even a nuclear strike will conquer this pandemic, which only time, more human lives and a vaccine can cure. Preliminary studies are showing how Coronavirus will change the way we live and cohabit. One can only hope that our existential difficulties with Pakistan will ease and end.

The Government and the Indian Air Force (IAF) celebrated February 26 as the first anniversary of Balakot. Exaggerated claims were made to perpetuate the ones made last year without new evidence and factoring the Pakistani perspective. It is too early to begin rewriting the doctrine and call the airstrikes as "game-changer." Claims on behalf of the IAF have been made mainly by former Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal BS Dhanoa, through interviews and parts of an internal IAF report that were leaked to the media.

His successor, Air Chief Marshal RKS Bhadauria, simply reinforced Dhanoa's claims through the same medium at a public event titled, 'Air Power in No War No Peace Scenario,' organised by the Centre for Air Power Studies, which was presided by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh.

The Pakistan Air Force (PAF)'s perspective came from a conference held at the University of Lahore, which was jointly organised by the Centre for Security Strategy and Policy Research and the Centre for

Aerospace and Security Studies (CASS). The event was attended by former PAF Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Kaleem Saadat. A report was published in the British Air Force magazine by Alan Warnes through his interviews with retired PAF officers. The PAF's response to the IAF air strikes was called "Operation Swift Retort."

On the most provocative, emotional and in India even anti-national question of hitting the target, the IAF has stuck to its claim that it hit the target, though the Crystal Maze 142M missile, which was to produce battle damage assessment, could not be fired. Last year, among others who expressed doubts whether the IAF missiles were on target, was Ashley Tellis of the US's Carnegie Endowment and Christine Fair of Johns Hopkins University.

The Air Force magazine was more direct: Bombs aimed at a religious boarding school at Balakot...hit wooded area a few hundred metres away...all bombs overshot their targets. The CASS report refers to the mishit as "tactical error and technical inadequacy." Even so, this was the first time after the 1971 war that the IAF bombed Pakistan at Balakot.

Perhaps carried away, Bhadauria described the bombings as "the most significant air action of the IAF in over four decades." That was a bit unkind to the IAF veterans, who took part supporting the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka for 22 months, and the sterling precision IAF bombings at Kargil for over three months.

Bhadauria further said that Balakot has shown that you can use the IAF and still have "escalation control." He was backed by Army Chief, Gen MM Naravane, who said: "For years we were told that if and when air (force) crosses the International Border (IB), it would escalate to a full-fledged war. Balakot demonstrated that if you play the escalatory game with skill, military ascendancy can be established in short cycles of conflict that do not necessarily lead to war." Elementary, my dear Watson?

In his paper on air escalation control circulated by the US' Stimson Centre in 2003 after Operation Parakram, IAF's Air Commode, Ramesh Phadke, argued that limited air operations against Pakistan in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) were possible with minimal escalation. Reason: IAF to PAF air balance ratio at that time was nearly 2.5 to 1. Today, that ratio has declined to less than 1.3 to 1 (IAF 28 squadrons versus PAF 21 squadrons).

The CASS report further says that the probability of crisis recurrence between India and Pakistan is high and during a crisis, neither side will be able to guarantee controlling or dominating the escalation ladder. PAF Air Chief Marshal Mujahid Anwar Khan told the Air Force magazine that one lesson for India is not to use air power "flippantly."

He said Operation Swift Retort was inevitable to demonstrate both the resolve and restraint and was designed to de-escalate. Pakistan has found wriggle room in explaining its nuclear bluff being called. The CASS report titled, "Deconstructing Balakot" reads: "Pakistan's carefully calibrated response strategy served well in dampening the fears in policy analysis that portray that any attack inside Pakistan's territory would invoke Pakistan's nuclear threshold. However, Pakistan, through its retaliation, Operation Swift Retort after Indian strikes in Balakot, demonstrated that it has valid conventional means of deterrence to raise the cost of aggression."

As someone who has studied Pakistan's military and strategic thought, I do not recall Pakistan seriously threatening the use of nuclear weapons against an enemy airstrike. The four conditions for that were clearly codified by Lt Gen Khalid Kidwai, the intellectual custodian of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. He had said and that has not changed till date that Pakistan would use its nuclear weapons as weapons of ultimate resort in four eventualities: Loss of large territory, especially in Punjab; crippling military attrition; economic blockade; and largescale political destabilisation. None of these conditions was violated by the Balakot airstrikes.

One year on, AFM has said that PAF will be outnumbered but will innovate to outmanoeuvre the IAF. It does not matter what technology the IAF gets, the PAF will have the capacity to defeat it. CASS has said that for the foreseeable future, it will be in retaliatory mode but the threat of the use of force is

essential when Pakistan's support for Kashmir will go beyond political, diplomatic and moral paradigm. Kashmir has been made central to crisis and conflict.

Balakot airstrikes had the potential to escalate and spin out of control. One single factor that enabled the daring and risky operation was a strategic surprise. This is not likely to be replicated. Airstrikes are not the new-normal but a one-off like the ground surgical strikes. Surgical strikes after Uri and at Balakot have not ended terrorism. Infiltration has increased despite lockdown and unprecedented troop density in Jammu & Kashmir. Pakistan's support for Kashmir will not cease and despite the internal constitutional changes in Jammu & Kashmir, the dispute will ultimately have to be resolved politically. The post-COVID-19 environment may provide a window to restart the process.

The writer, a retired Major General, was Commander IPKF South, Sri Lanka and founder member of the Defence Planning Staff, currently the Integrated Defence Staff.

Preparation for a genocide under way in India

By Dr. Gregory Stanton

Dr. Gregory Stanton, founder of Genocide Watch, addressed an audience of Congressional and Government officials at a briefing titled Ground Reports on Kashmir and NRC in Washington D.C on December 12 where he said, "Preparation for a genocide is definitely under way in India."

He said that persecution of Muslims in Assam and Kashmir "is the stage just before genocide," adding, "The next stage is extermination that's what we call a genocide." Dr. Stanton created the world-famous "Ten Stages of Genocide" as a presentation to the U.S. Department of State when he worked there in 1996. According to Dr. Stanton, the ten stages of genocide are as follows:

- The first stage was "classification" of "us versus them".
- The second stage, "symbolization", named the victims as "foreigner".
- The third stage, "discrimination", "classified [the victims] out of the group accepted for citizenship" so that they had no "human rights or civil rights of citizens" and were "discriminated against legally".
- The fourth stage, dehumanization, "is when the genocidal spiral begins to go downwards. You classify the others as somehow worse than you. You give them names like 'terrorists', or even names of animals, start referring to them as a cancer in the body politic, you talk about them as a disease that must be somehow dealt with."
- The fifth stage was creating an "organization" to commit the genocide: the role played by the "Indian army in Kashmir and the census takers in Assam".
- The sixth stage was "polarization", which is achieved by propaganda.
- The seventh stage was "preparation"
- The eighth "persecution", where Assam and Kashmir currently were.
- The ninth stage is "extermination" and;
- The tenth stage is "denial".

Dr. Stanton also drafted UN Security Council resolutions that created the International Criminal Tribunal on Rwanda and the Burundi Commission of Inquiry, two places where genocides had occurred. A former President of the International Association of Genocide Scholars, his research on genocides in Cambodia and Rwanda, and of the Rohingyas, is recognized worldwide.

CJP secretary and Human Rights Defender Teesta Setalvad also addressed the audience via video conferencing and said that the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam was "being used to subvert human rights in Assam. There are laid down guidelines and standard operating procedures to carry out this exercise but none of it is being followed. We have to ask if this exercise is being carried out within the ambit of the constitution."

Setalvad also criticised the Citizenship Amendment Act saying it would "bring untold suffering to people across the country. It will damage, fundamentally and irreparably, the nature of the Indian republic. This is why they, and all citizens of conscience, demand that the government not betray the constitution." Also participating in the Briefing

via video link, Dr. Angana Chatterji, a scholar with UC Berkeley, slammed the crackdown in Kashmir since the Indian government revoked the constitutionally mandated special status of Jammu and Kashmir on August 5. She shared that reports have documented the “inhumane treatment and torture of children, the elderly, and women; illegal detentions, including mass detentions; the denial of the basic needs of life, the curtailment of freedom of speech and movement, the falsification of social facts and their amplification by the state, and the closure of sacred places,” she said. “Cries of pain” of a torture victim were broadcast via a mosque's speaker system. “State forces have raided homes, destroyed property and mixed food with kerosene,” said Dr. Chatterji. Raqib Hameed Naik, a journalist from Jammu and Kashmir said the ongoing lock-down in Kashmir was “one of the worst sieges in the last decade... Officially there are no restrictions, but unofficially the government has imposed an undeclared emergency.” Naik also disputed the Indian government's claim that Indian troops had not killed any Kashmiris since August 5 when the state's special status was withdrawn. “Let me put it on record that, so far, we have been able to document five killings by security forces. The number could be higher, but due to communication blockade and severe restrictions on the movement of the press, we have not been able to get exact figures from the different parts of the valley.” Naik said he had met with “many minors” who were imprisoned “without charges”. The Congressional briefing was organized by three U.S.-based civil society organizations, namely, the Indian American Muslim Council (IAMC), Emgage Action, and Hindus for Human Rights (HfHR).

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MISCELLANEOUS

Corona virus cannot stop Britain's war in Yemen

By Phil Miller

Despite claiming to help tackle the corona virus pandemic, Britain's military and arms industry continue to facilitate bombing one of the world's poorest countries, which is most at risk from Covid-19. The Royal Air Force (RAF) and Britain's largest arms company, BAE Systems, are continuing to support Saudi Arabia's assault on Yemen, despite calls from the United Nations for a ceasefire over fears of “untold human suffering”, Declassified UK has found.

UN officials are warning that Covid-19 could “crush” the remaining 50% of Yemen's healthcare system that functions after five years of aerial bombardment, which has killed more than 100,000 people and seen medical staff repeatedly targeted. Yemen is the world's worst humanitarian crisis and experts were alarmed when the country's first case of Covid-19 was detected earlier this month. Yemeni human rights group Mwatana was told by a despondent resident in the capital of Sana'a: “If corona virus arrives in Yemen, we should just dig our graves and wait quietly for death.”

Despite these concerns, the Yemen Data Project says that last week the Saudi-led coalition launched 106 air strikes. The Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect has described such attacks as “indiscriminate bombing of civilians”. Declassified UK has found that while the recent sorties were underway, British arms industry giant BAE Systems flew a cargo plane (tail number G-JMCM) from its Typhoon fighter jet factory at Warton Aerodrome, England, to the RAF's Akrotiri air base in Cyprus on 15 April 2020 where it refuelled and stayed overnight.

The cargo plane then proceeded to Ta'if, near Mecca in Saudi Arabia, the following day. BAE staff at King Fahad Air Base in Ta'if service a fleet of Typhoon fighter jets used by the Saudi air force to bomb Yemen.

Britain's war in Yemen

How BAE Systems and the UK military help Saudi Arabia bomb Yemen. A few hours after landing in Ta'if, the BAE freighter returned along the same route to Warton, arriving on 17 April. A plane spotter logged the flight on an internet message board and a fellow enthusiast remarked: “The weekly Saudi aircraft spares supply flight (what else?) continues unabated by any Covid-19 pandemic that grips the world.”

When asked by Declassified UK about the purpose of last week's flight from Britain to Ta'if, a BAE spokesperson would only say: "We provide defence equipment, training and support under government to government agreements between the UK and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. ot sraeppa atad thgilF " Ta'if flight is a weekly event. The model of aircraft used by BAE, a -Akrotiri-confirm that the Warton .freighter, can hold eight large cargo containers on its main deck 300-Boeing 737

Declassified UK has also found that in April alone BAE has advertised at least five vacancies for expatriates to help support the Saudi air force. BAE employs about 6,500 people across Saudi Arabia, of which approximately 30% are expatriates. The job adverts include one for an instructor to train Saudi Arabian military pilots how to fly Hawk jets at King Faisal air base in Tabuk, close to Jordan. Pilots must learn to fly the Hawk before they can master the more advanced Typhoon jet, which is active over Yemen.

The other four vacancies are in Ta'if where Saudi Arabia's Typhoon fleet currently requires a new "simulator instructor pilot", an "armament technician supervisor", a "logistics control engineer" and a "capability insertion engineer". When asked about such job adverts, a BAE spokesperson told Declassified UK: "We comply with all relevant export control laws and regulations in the countries in which we operate. Our activities are subject to UK Government approval and oversight."

Flying the flag

The British military and the UK's largest arms company work closely together at all levels of Saudi operations. BAE is assisted in Saudi Arabia by about 100 serving UK military personnel, mostly drawn from the RAF, under a scheme known as the Ministry of Defence Saudi Armed Forces Projects (MODSAP) which earns the UK government £60-million per year from the Saudi regime.

Without Britain's technical expertise, the Saudi air force would be out of service in less than a fortnight, according to a former BAE employee who spoke to Channel 4 Dispatches. In addition to Ta'if and Tabuk, other MODSAP sites include the Saudi capital of Riyadh, Khamis Mushayt near the border with Yemen, Jubail and Dhahran on the Gulf coast, and Jeddah on the Red Sea coast.

The MOD told Declassified UK it would not specify how many of its personnel are at each site "for reasons of operational security" and did not answer our questions about whether it was appropriate for the RAF to continue its support for Saudi Arabia's air force during a pandemic. In March 2019, Britain's defence minister Mark Lancaster told Parliament that RAF personnel "provided routine engineering support" for Saudi military planes "including aircraft engaged in military operations in Yemen".

He added that they have also "provided generic training support" to Saudi pilots, but the RAF did not monitor how their students went on to use the skills they learned. The MOD claims its role does not amount to "direct support" for Saudi sorties in Yemen because RAF personnel "do not prepare" Saudi aircraft for operations, either by "loading" weapons or planning attacks.

However, the government has admitted that UK personnel store and issue weapons for use by the Saudi air force, load weapons for its training missions and participate in training exercises with the Saudi air force. Three RAF personnel are also embedded in the Saudi Air Operations Centre.

Hours after the BAE cargo plane landed in Ta'if on 16 April 2020, Sir John Lorimer, a British Army general who deals with the Middle East, had a "warm, productive discussion" with the chief of Saudi Arabia's armed forces. Sir John described his Saudi counterpart as a "friend" and criticised Yemen's Houthi rebels on Twitter for not engaging in a ceasefire during the pandemic.

The UK also has a close relationship with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), another key member of the coalition that is bombing Yemen. Last week, an RAF transport plane flew from Cyprus to Al Minhad air field in Dubai UAE's biggest city where the RAF has a permanent presence. The UAE has also hired British mercenaries to assist its Presidential Guard unit which has fought in Yemen.

'Cruel irony'

While helping to bomb Yemen, both the RAF and BAE are assisting Britain's National Health Service (NHS) to tackle Covid-19 in the UK. The RAF has described Covid-19 as a "national crisis" and made

helicopters available to help NHS Trusts in Scotland reach Covid-19 patients in remote parts of the country. This week, an RAF plane collected surgical gowns from Turkey.

BAE is supplying protective visors and ventilators to the NHS, claiming it wants to “help in any way” to stop Covid-19. Some BAE staff, who make parts for the Typhoon fighter jet, have been diverted towards printing 3D face shields for healthcare workers in the UK.

British-Yemeni lawyer Rehab Jaffer told Declassified UK that BAE's actions were a “cruel irony”. She said: “In the midst of a pandemic, they make breathing apparatus for one nation, whilst sending military aid to another, for use against a country that is suffering the world's worst humanitarian crisis.” “It is clear now, more than ever, that BAE Systems are not concerned with 'defensive' security, but rather with fuelling warfare.”

Although Britain's support for Saudi Arabia's air force is particularly controversial during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is a long-standing arrangement that has survived several scandals already. MODSAP was created to facilitate the Al-Yamamah arms deal between Britain and Saudi Arabia signed by Margaret Thatcher in 1985, which was the biggest ever arms export deal concluded by the UK.

The Al-Yamamah deal was marred by allegations of bribery that Britain's Serious Fraud Office attempted to investigate until the then Prime Minister Tony Blair intervened to halt it after threats from the Saudi regime that Riyadh would make it easier for terrorists to carry out atrocities on British soil if it went ahead.

British military documents show MODSAP is regarded as a “key priority for UK Defence overseas engagement and constitutes a major component of the UK's Middle East Strategy” and there are considerable efforts to make sure staff are well looked after.

Under the MODSAP scheme, British military personnel stationed in Saudi Arabia receive healthcare to NHS standards from BAE and are issued with BUPA Gold private medical insurance. In 2014, BAE employed six British and three South African doctors to provide healthcare to MODSAP personnel, their spouses and children at facilities in Riyadh, Dhahran, Ta'if and Tabuk. BAE employs so many expatriate staff in Saudi Arabia that it has built vast compounds to accommodate them and their MOD counterparts.

The Salwa Garden Village in Riyadh has 73 units available to MOD personnel, including a “super executive villa”, and BAE's Sara compound near Dhahran has 952 residential units with 25 set aside for the UK's MOD. Facilities include schools, swimming pools, a bowling alley, squash and tennis courts. This degree of investment has seen Saudi Arabia become BAE's third largest market after the US and UK. BAE has sold £15-billion worth of arms to Saudi Arabia since the conflict with Yemen started in 2015, according to Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT).

The company's annual report published in April 2020 noted: “Saudi Arabia has a strong commitment to defence and security spending driven by regional security instability”. In 2019, CAAT successfully obtained a Court of Appeal ruling preventing UK ministers from granting new export licences for weapons that might be used in the bombing of Yemen. The British government has appealed to the Supreme Court.

Special Forces

In addition to the MODSAP scheme, UK military personnel also serve in Saudi Arabia's National Guard (SANG), an elite unit known as the “white army”, which protects the ruling House of Saud and has been active in Yemen. Under an arrangement known as SANGCOM, the UK military has earned £2-billion since 2010 to “modernise” the guard's communication equipment, Declassified UK has previously revealed.

Around 74 MOD personnel were stationed in Saudi Arabia working on the SANGCOM project in 2019. Their work has included “advice to the National Guard at all levels of command... for the full spectrum of military operations on the southern Yemeni border”. Britain's Special Boat Service (SBS) is also believed to be fighting on the ground in Yemen, directing Saudi air strikes and working alongside child soldiers. Five SBS commandos were reportedly injured in these operations in 2019.

In 2018, the SBS deployed to Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti from where they boarded ships and escorted them through the Gulf of Aden in case of attacks from Yemen's Houthi rebels. The MOD refuses to comment on UK Special Forces and the extent of their role in Yemen remains highly classified. However, the Special Boat Service Association, a charity which helps veterans, said in its 2018 annual report that a "high proportion of injuries" sustained by its members on unspecified missions "are classed as life changing". The injuries ranged from "damaged limbs, disfigurements, amputations and PTSD, one severely injured member who will be on a ventilator for the rest of his life and two members with acute brain injuries, again requiring lifetime care and support". It is likely that at least some of these injuries were sustained during SBS operations in Yemen. DM

Phil Miller is a staff reporter for Declassified UK, an investigative journalism organisation that covers Britain's real role in the world.

Source: Daily Maverick's.

The Corona virus pandemic will forever alter the World Order

The United States must protect its citizens from disease while starting the urgent work of planning for a new epoch

By Henry A. Kissinger

The surreal atmosphere of the Covid-19 pandemic calls to mind how I felt as a young man in the 84th Infantry Division during the Battle of the Bulge. Now, as in late 1944, there is a sense of inchoate danger, aimed not at any particular person, but striking randomly and with devastation. But there is an important difference between that faraway time and ours.

American endurance then was fortified by an ultimate national purpose. Now, in a divided country, efficient and farsighted government is necessary to overcome obstacles unprecedented in magnitude and global scope. Sustaining the public trust is crucial to social solidarity, to the relation of societies with each other, and to international peace and stability.

Nations cohere and flourish on the belief that their institutions can foresee calamity, arrest its impact and restore stability. When the Covid-19 pandemic is over, many countries' institutions will be perceived as having failed. Whether this judgment is objectively fair is irrelevant. The reality is the world will never be the same after the coronavirus. To argue now about the past only makes it harder to do what has to be done.

The coronavirus has struck with unprecedented scale and ferocity. Its spread is exponential: U.S. cases are doubling every fifth day. At this writing, there is no cure. Medical supplies are insufficient to cope with the widening waves of cases. Intensive-care units are on the verge, and beyond, of being overwhelmed. Testing is inadequate to the task of identifying the extent of infection, much less reversing its spread. A successful vaccine could be 12 to 18 months away.

The U.S. administration has done a solid job in avoiding immediate catastrophe. The ultimate test will be whether the virus's spread can be arrested and then reversed in a manner and at a scale that maintains public confidence in Americans' ability to govern themselves. The crisis effort, however vast and necessary, must not crowd out the urgent task of launching a parallel enterprise for the transition to the post-coronavirus order.

Leaders are dealing with the crisis on a largely national basis, but the virus's society-dissolving effects do not recognize borders. While the assault on human health will hope fully be temporary, the political and economic upheaval it has unleashed could last for generations. No country, not even the U.S., can in a purely national effort overcome the virus. Addressing the necessities of the moment must ultimately be coupled with a global collaborative vision and program. If we cannot do both in tandem, we will face the worst of each.

Drawing lessons from the development of the Marshall Plan and the Manhattan Project, the U.S. is obliged to undertake a major effort in three domains. First, shore up global resilience to infectious disease. Triumphs of medical science like the polio vaccine and the eradication of smallpox, or the emerging statistical-technical marvel of medical diagnosis through artificial intelligence, have lulled us into a dangerous complacency. We need to develop new techniques and technologies for infection control and commensurate vaccines across large populations. Cities, states and regions must consistently prepare to protect their people from pandemics through stockpiling, cooperative planning and exploration at the frontiers of science.

Second, strive to heal the wounds to the world economy. Global leaders have learned important lessons from the 2008 financial crisis. The current economic crisis is more complex: The contraction unleashed by the corona virus is, in its speed and global scale, unlike anything ever known in history. And necessary public-health measures such as social distancing and closing schools and businesses are contributing to the economic pain. Programs should also seek to ameliorate the effects of impending chaos on the world's most vulnerable populations.

Third, safeguard the principles of the liberal world order. The founding legend of modern government is a walled city protected by powerful rulers, sometimes despotic, other times benevolent, yet always strong enough to protect the people from an external enemy. Enlightenment thinkers reframed this concept, arguing that the purpose of the legitimate state is to provide for the fundamental needs of the people: security, order, economic well-being, and justice.

Individuals cannot secure these things on their own. The pandemic has prompted an anachronism, a revival of the walled city in an age when prosperity depends on global trade and movement of people. The world's democracies need to defend and sustain their Enlightenment values.

A global retreat from balancing power with legitimacy will cause the social contract to disintegrate both domestically and internationally. Yet this millennial issue of legitimacy and power cannot be settled simultaneously with the effort to overcome the Covid-19 plague. Restraint is necessary on all sides in both domestic politics and international diplomacy. Priorities must be established. We went on from the Battle of the Bulge into a world of growing prosperity and enhanced human dignity. Now, we live an epochal period. The historic challenge for leaders is to manage the crisis while building the future. Failure could set the world on fire.

Mr. Kissinger served as secretary of state and national security adviser in the Nixon and Ford administrations.

World War C” presents a host of challenges for Central Asia

By Andrew Korybko

Central Asia is at risk of collapse if the socio-economic consequences of World War C aren't addressed after much-needed remittance flows from Russia were abruptly cut off as a result of that country's emergency quarantine measures, which in turn could inadvertently make the already impoverished population there much more susceptible to criminal and terrorist influences unless Russia, China, Pakistan, Turkey, and the US coordinate their existing efforts to turn Central Asia into the connectivity crossroads of the super continent so as to give the region's people credible hope for the future.

Political analysts are scrambling to predict what the COVID World Order will look like upon the end of World War C, but few (if any) to the best of the author's knowledge have addressed the consequences that global pandemic will have on Central Asia despite the landlocked region's strategic position

between Russia, China, Afghanistan, and Iran, among other important players in close proximity such as Pakistan and Turkey.

This part of the world is usually stereotyped in most of the public imagination simply as “The 'Stans”, which people assume are underdeveloped, sometimes energy-rich, authoritarian states. That impression is largely true, to be honest, but there are three more important details to know about the region.

Central Asia faces serious internal and external Hybrid War threats stemming from simmering ethno-regional tensions within and between “The 'Stans” (despite tremendous progress in resolving these issues over the past few years since the passing of former Uzbek President Karimov in 2016) and the lingering possibility that fundamentalist Islamic ideologies from abroad might one day become more appealing, respectively.

The region also has the very promising potential of serving as the connectivity crossroads of Eurasia by virtue of its geostrategic position, though the hitherto lack of progress that's been made on this front up until recently is why millions of economic migrants left for Russia to support their families back home through remittances. Therein lies the most immediate trigger for a chaotic chain reaction of consequences in the region stemming from World War C since these much-needed remittance flows have been abruptly cut off as a result of the emergency containment measures implemented by Moscow over the past few weeks, which will surely have very serious ramifications in Central Asia.

According to the World Bank, remittances accounted for the following percentage of GDP by relevant country: 33% for the Kyrgyz Republic; 29% for Tajikistan; and 15% for Uzbekistan. Most dangerously, the first two countries (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) have a history of violent unrest, with the first suffering two Color Revolutions in 2005 and 2010 and the second a civil war from 1992-1997.

The fact that their economic lifelines have been cut off bodes extremely negatively for their future stability, as it does for Uzbekistan's as well though the latter has a history of being able to better manage these sorts of threats. Still, Uzbekistan would be adversely affected by any outbreak of instability in its two fragile neighbors, and it shouldn't be forgotten that ISIS is trying to carve out a caliphate in Afghanistan, one which it intends to expand into Central Asia one day.

There's a risk that the already impoverished populations of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan might become more susceptible to criminal and/or terrorist influences the worse that their economic situation gets as a result of the abrupt shutdown of remittance flows from Russia.

Russia and China can't afford to see Central Asia collapse as one of the most dramatic consequences of World War C since this would directly endanger their own security. Apart from the obvious threat that a growing black hole of instability would pose for them in the sense of becoming a new terrorist hotspot, the collapse of the region could cause millions of refugees to flee to Russia due to the extensive chain migration networks that they've established there since the dissolution of the USSR.

This could in turn catalyze an unprecedented Migrant Crisis in the Eurasian Heartland which could also likely lead to the fleeing masses transforming into a swarm of “Weapons of Mass Migration” in terms of how destabilizing their sudden influx into Russia would be.

There's no silver bullet solution to this dark scenario, but it would nevertheless be helpful if the regional states and the stakeholders in their stability (Russia, China, Pakistan, Turkey, and even the US as explained by the author in his piece titled “The US' Central Asian Strategy Isn't Sinister, But That Doesn't Mean It'll Succeed”) coordinated their efforts in order to ensure that Central Asians' immediate socio-economic needs are met.

Russia, China, Turkey, and the US could follow in the EU's footsteps after the bloc allocated €48 million to Tajikistan for this purpose and extended an earlier €30 million loan, whether they do this jointly or on their own bilaterally with each of the three relevant countries (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan).

Without taking care of people's pressing socio-economic needs, there's no way to guarantee that they won't become politically and/or religiously radicalized throughout the course of World War C as their living standards continue to plummet as a combined result of their own countries' emergency

quarantine measures and the abrupt shutdown of much-needed remittance flows from Russia for the same reason.

This short-term solution won't suffice for anything longer than the duration of the crisis and its immediate aftermath since what's urgently required is visionary thinking aimed at reducing these geostrategically positioned countries' dependence on remittances, especially since not all migrants might return to Russia after the crisis.

The Eurasian Great Power might be compelled to limit migration flows in the coming COVID World Order, both for self-explanatory health reasons but also to provide newly unemployed Russians with the opportunity to replace Central Asian workers in jobs that used to ironically be described as the ones that "Russians don't want to do" (the same as how the jobs occupied by Latin American migrants in the US are described as the ones that "Americans don't want to do").

It's for this reason why all interested stakeholders should invest in turning Central Asia into the connectivity crossroads of the super continent, which was already an uncoordinated plan in progress prior to the onset of World War C.

The existing projects are the Eurasian Land Bridge between China, Kazakhstan, and Russia and the Middle Corridor connecting China and Turkey through Central Asia and the Caucasus (via the Caspian), while N-CPEC+ (the proposed northern expansion of CPEC connecting the global pivot state of Pakistan and Russia through Afghanistan and Central Asia) is a promising prospective one that might even see some American investment per what was explained in the previously hyperlinked article about the US' regional strategy.

Should tangible progress be made on these projects, then they could provide some limited employment opportunities to Central Asians in the short-term but also limitless other ones in the long one upon completion.

Whether as merchants, laborers in newly created factories (likely built by foreign investment), or service industry employees, the common denominator linking together these connectivity corridors is that they provide credible job opportunities to Central Asians that could in turn reduce the likelihood of them becoming susceptible to criminal and/or terrorist influences.

The priority focus for all interested players must be on crafting long-term solutions that replace the lost remittance flows from Russia with a plethora of local job opportunities that ultimately culminate in the gradual diversification and development of the Central Asian economies. It's a daunting task that won't be accomplished right a way, but it's the best strategy to pursue.

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Featured image is from OneWorld.

Westerners should embrace use of masks

American society's attitude toward whether people should wear masks to prevent the spread of the corona virus epidemic is changing. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is reportedly reviewing its guidelines on wearing masks and recommendations that masks be worn in public might be included.

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti on Wednesday advised everyone in the city to wear non-medical face coverings when going out. He is the first American mayor to make such an appeal. Such changes are welcome. Since the outbreak of the corona virus epidemic, many Western medical staff and institutions have insisted there is no need for healthy people to wear masks in public.

They only recommend the use of masks by medical workers, patients and those who look after patients. This has raised several questions: Since masks are effective in protecting medical workers, why do ordinary people not need them? Where is the boundary?

Finally, US and European societies have paid attention to whether Asians' willingness to wear masks has in part contributed to China and other Asian countries' effective job in containing the epidemic. Some medical professionals in the US and Europe have called on the public to change their perception of masks. Mainstream media outlets such as The New York Times and CNN also published articles about the role of masks in Asians' epidemic fight.

Masks can help prevent people from being infected. The suggestion is scientific and Asian countries have a lot of experience in this regard. However, excessive cultural confidence has hindered the US and European countries from giving due attention to the experience of their Asian counterparts. Now, some people in these countries have felt regret. An article on CNN asked how many infections might have been avoided if people were asked to wear masks from January.

The epidemic started in South Korea, Japan, and European countries such as Italy, almost at the same time. Despite similar social structures in these countries, why has the situation in South Korea and Japan not been worse? One of the most important reasons is that people in the two countries don't refuse masks.

Besides not trusting Asian experiences, the masks' role was also downplayed because of a shortage. Strengthening people's stereotyped perception about masks could help reduce the use of masks so that more can be reserved for medical staff.

However, the situation is rapidly deteriorating. You will suffer losses if rules are not obeyed. The huge loss of lives has forced people to reflect on wearing masks. It's foreseeable that changes in appearances of cities in the US and Europe will soon take place. More and more people will wear masks to protect themselves in supermarkets or on subways.

This is a lesson. Modern science including modern medicine originates in the West. Chinese people worshipped "Mr. Sai" of the West, a term referring to science, more than 100 years ago. However, when it comes to wearing masks, the West has failed to meet the demands of the epidemic fight and acted against science. More reflections should be made.

The West should attach greater importance to and respect the experiences of non-Western societies and be modest culturally and politically. The Western elites cannot view the world from a West-centric perspective anymore. As a matter of fact, the West has no longer been at the forefront of many human explorations. Westerners should face up to this change and keep pace with the times, which will be beneficial and important to them.