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HIGHLIGHTS

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I Overview

Pakistan: Intense flare ups on the Line of Control ruled over all other issues bilaterally with India. Relations with Afghanistan showed a similar pattern with major terrorist attacks in Kabul. The downward trajectory in relations with the US continued with no visible sign of an initiative to arrest the trend. Domestically Nawaz Sharif retained the political momentum and also kept temperatures high with frank criticism of the judiciary and its supporters. Moves to ban India centric extremists were back in focus largely as the consequence of a determination that the absence to do so would lead to adverse notice from the Financial Action Task Force.

Afghanistan: The fragile security that underwrites everything else in Afghanistan came dramatically to the foreground as the end of January and the first half of February were punctuated by a series of major terrorist attacks in Kabul and elsewhere. The Afghan government blamed sanctuaries in Pakistan for these latest outrages. Efforts led by the foreign offices and intelligence institutions in the two countries to hammer out some common ground also predictably have not made progress.

II Developments in Pakistan

External:

United States: Amidst the reverberations of the Presidential tweet on Pakistan, friction on the interface with the US continued. On 24th January there was a US drone strike in the Kurram Agency. The Kurram Agency is believed to be the area where the Haqqani network cadres have now based themselves. US Drone strikes on Pakistani territory have declined after the peak in 2010 with 117 attacks. The Pakistan Foreign Office condemned the attack and said that such 'unilateral' steps would be detrimental to cooperation between the two countries in the fight against terrorism. The Foreign Office statement described the strike being on an Afghan refugee camp. Pakistani press reports based on official briefings said that this was the first US drone strike inside Pakistani territory over the past 19 months, as none of the over one dozen attacks by unmanned vehicles reported in the media during this period had drawn official condemnation from Pakistan's Foreign Office. Nevertheless, somewhat unusually the US Embassy in Pakistan issued a statement contradicting the claim that the strike was on an Afghan refugee camp in

Kurram Agency as "false." While the Foreign Office made no further statement, the military's Inter Services Press Relations (ISPR) responded and reiterated that that the strike was on a refugee camp. The sub text to this controversy is obviously that the attack on a refugee camp is a vindication of sorts of the Pakistani position that no more organized terror sanctuaries remain on its territory and any residual element that exists is based in the Afghan refugee camps or localities.

Indonesia: The President of Indonesia after attending the ASEAN commemorative summit and the Republic Day parade in New Delhi paid visits to Pakistan and Kabul. In Islamabad, he addressed a joint sitting of the houses of Parliament and in his speech spoke about the need for dialogue and reconciliation; "We must not allow conflict to continue existing in our countries. We must not allow conflict to continue existing in the world,"; and that dialogue had enabled ASEAN to be the engine of stability and prosperity in the region. In his address, the National Assembly Speaker recalled support of the Indonesian people for Pakistan and said that "They stood shoulder to shoulder with us during the Indo-Pak war of 1965 and did not hesitate for a minute over handing over whatever military resources Indonesia had at that critical time".

Saudi Arabia: A statement from the Pakistan army on 15th February announced that it is deploying troops in Saudi Arabia under an existing bilateral security pact. The ISPR statement says "In continuation of ongoing Pak-KSA bilateral security cooperation, a Pakistan Army contingent is being sent to KSA on training and advice mission". The announcement follows recent visits of the COAS Gen Qamar Bajwa to Saudi Arabia and has also to be seen in the background of the former COAS Gen Raheel Sharif being appointed by the Kingdom as head of a 'multinational Islamic force' based in Saudi Arabia. Deployment of Pakistani troops is however a sensitive issue in Pakistan and in April 2015 the parliament had adopted a resolution of 'neutrality' in the Saudi Yemen conflict. There are also fears in Pakistan that closer visible military engagement with Saudi Arabia carries risks with Iran and increases domestic Shia Sunni strife in Pakistan. What is most unusual about the present decision is the manner of its announcement through the Army rather than by the government. Possibly Saudi pressures are more difficult to bear with the further sharp deterioration in the relationship with the US. From clarifications subsequently in the Parliament it emerges that an additional 1000 troops will be deployed in Saudi Arabia on a 'training' role to supplement the existing 1600 strong deployment. No further details are as yet available.

INDIA: LOC Situation: There have been intense flareups on the LOC since January 2018 following on a year which had itself seen numerous ceasefire violations on the LOC and IB. The most obvious reason ascribed for this is that in a period of general diplomatic freeze, the situation on the LOC is no more than symptomatic of the current state of the bilateral relationship. But there are other reasons also and in particular infiltration attempts and the generally Pavlovian approach of the Pakistan army to do what it can to keep the situation in Kashmir 'hot'. These two factors create an environment where ceasefire violations are inevitable and local and tactical considerations of retribution and counter retribution have a major role in explaining flareups with all their collateral damage for the civilian populations. It is also the case that domestic turbulence in Pakistan and in particular poor civil military equations have impacted the ceasefire and put it under severe strain as is the situation today with all the attendant risks of further escalation.

Ceasefire violations and LOC flareups have shown a steadily rising trend since 2013 although media statements that the 2003 LOC ceasefire is now effectively over are exaggerated. Pre-2003 the number of firefights on the LOC was both very much higher and more intense as also across a much wider front than is presently the case. The current flareups on the LOC have been accompanied however by terrorist attacks in J& K on locations and camps of security forces at distances far removed from the LOC. On 10th February, an Army base and family station in Jammu and soon thereafter a CRPF camp in Srinagar were attacked with a number of fatal casualties. The Indian Minister of Defence, Nirmala Sitharaman visiting Jammu after the attack identified the Pakistan based terrorist group the Jaish i Muhammad as being responsible for the attack and said that 'Pakistan will have to pay a price for this misadventure'. She was also quoted as saying that evidence related to Jaish i Muhammad's involvement in the terror attack would be shared with Pakistan: "Giving evidence to Pakistan is a continuous process. It will have to be proved over and over again that they are responsible" and giving evidence to Pakistan would not prevent the Indian Army from responding "appropriately and at a time we deem fit". The Pakistan Foreign Office statement in this regard was on predictable lines with standard key words: "Pakistan strongly rejects the allegations of certain Indian police and defense officials, and media insinuations"; "a well-established pattern, Indian occupation forces launch false flag operation while Indian officials begin making irresponsible statements and leveling unfounded allegations" etc.

Internal:

Major byelection victory for the Ruling Party: The Pakistan Muslim League (N) gained a significant electoral victory in a Multan constituency in the by election to fill the vacancy arising from the unseating (in December 2017) by Supreme Court verdict of Jahangir Tareen. The latter is in effect number two in Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehrik i Insaaf party apart being from a close friend and financier. The PML (N)'s victory by a wide margin is widely described as a being a major 'upset' and is considered significant for the following reasons: Although Nawaz Sharif did not campaign personally in the election, nevertheless the verdict is believed to illustrate his grass roots level popularity in Punjab and that his unseating evokes a sympathetic response; secondly it suggests a relative fading of Imran Khan's appeal as also the organizational disarray in the PTI that a stronghold could not be retained just a few months before the general election.

Criticism of Judiciary: Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has over the month maintained a steady tempo in his criticism of the judiciary over his unseating. His main point is reiterated constantly in public meetings and rallies: The higher judiciary in Pakistan has always played a partisan role against civilian politicians. By implication and often directly reference is obviously to the tole of the Military. This has been a theme constantly echoed and with greater intensity by many of the former Prime Ministers supporters who have spoken on this with even greater abandon. How sensitive the Judiciary is to this is illustrated by the one-month imprisonment ordered for a Senator from the ruling party for contempt of court and a speech against the judiciary. There are other ongoing contempt proceedings against the former Prime Minister and supporters including some ministers. Evidently the groundswell of support Nawaz Sharif receives has further encouraged him in what appears to be a political strategy for the forthcoming election. It possibly is also seen as an effective defensive tactic against the ongoing proceedings against him and members of his family in various accountability and disproportionate assets cases.

Asma Jahangir: The death of Asma Jahangir (11th February) Pakistan's best known human rights anti-military interventions campaigner marks a milestone in the history of its civil society and NGO movement.

Action against Anti India Terrorist Groups: Pakistan Prime Minister Khaqan Abbasi in an interview on 22nd January to a TV channel spoke about the government taking action against charities affiliated to the Lashkar e Taiba (LeT). The reference was seen in the context of the enormous US and other pressures on Pakistan on the latitude LeT affiliates and aliases such as the Jammāt ut Dawa (JuD) have in Pakistan and the manner in which they have expanded their operations. The LeT is formally banned in Pakistan but organizations such as Jamaat ut Dawa and its charity the Falah i Insaniyat Foundation (FIF) are not, although they are formally listed by the United Nations Security Council as terrorist organizations. Concerns about the growth of these fronts acquired an added intensity as the JuD set up a political front the Milli Muslim League to contest elections.

The Prime Minister's reference became clear later in February with the issue of an Ordinance amending Pakistan's Anti-Terrorism Act and providing for inclusion within its ambit of entities listed by the UN as being terrorists. This move is ostensibly to end the ambiguity over the status of the JuD and the FIF by firmly placing them on the list of proscribed groups in Pakistan.

While the move has been one that has been demanded by many countries for some time how it will be implemented remains to be seen. The question also is of the context which led to this decision. The UN Committee which oversees the implementation of the Security Council Resolution that lists terrorist entities (UNSCR 1267) and deals with related compliance issues arising had visited Pakistan in the last week of January 2018. The last visit of the team was in January 2015. Pakistan has had difficulties in the past in explaining the growth in activities of the FIF in view of the financial sanctions imposed by UNSCR 1267. The more immediate factor in explaining the Pakistan move has been the forthcoming meeting of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) in Paris in the third week of February. Pakistan is apprehensive of a reported multi country effort led by the US to get Pakistan included in the FATF's international money-laundering and terror-financing 'grey list'. The Pakistan Foreign Office Spokesperson in his briefing on 15th February disclosed that on 20 January 2018 the US and UK had jointly submitted a letter to the FATF, nominating Pakistan for placement in the Grey List. France and Germany subsequently joined this move. In an earlier meeting the FATF had asked Pakistan to furnish a compliance report on actions taken

against Lashkar-e-Taiba and the JuD at the Paris meeting. The FATF maintains grey and black lists for identifying countries with weak measures to combat money laundering and terror financing. Listing can affect international transactions from the country concerned as those would then become subject to greater scrutiny and increase the cost of doing international/cross-border transactions and ultimately higher cost of doing business locally. Pakistan was last placed on FATF's 'grey' list in February 2012 and stayed on it for three years.

FATF concerns primarily are on the existing capacities of the FIF and the JuD to carry on and expand their activities despite the UNSC listing which places restrictions on their financial transactions. The issuing of the Ordinance formally proscribing these organizations is therefore a last-ditch effort to stave off the relisting of Pakistan in the FATF 'grey' list. The outcome of the FATF meeting will be known in the next few days.

III Developments in Afghanistan

Internal Security: Since the dramatic US Presidential announcement of 'no more' Pakistan in January, Afghanistan witnessed a fresh wave of violence. There were three major attacks in Kabul- on the Intercontinental hotel (21st January), by an ambulance filled with explosives (27th January) and the attack on an Afghan Army base (29th January). These, at the very least underline that whatever the ultimate prognosis of the US's new Afghanistan Pakistan policy may be, the grind would remain a very hard one. These high-profile attacks get so much attention that there is a relative obscuring of the Afghan army's fierce fighting with the Taliban also taking place in the provinces. There have been terrorist attacks in other parts of Afghanistan with the Islamic State claiming responsibility for one in Jalalabad.

While it may be tempting to see this cluster of major attacks as a direct response to President Trump's tweet, the latest wave of terrorist violence had in fact begun before the tweet with the attack on 28th December on a Shia education centre in Kabul and on 31st December on a funeral in Jalalabad. In the backdrop of this flareup and possibly as a result of US pushing, Pakistan and Afghanistan had two rounds of security related talks in Kabul and Islamabad respectively. These centered around the negotiation of an Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS). This idea emerged with the current wave of attacks and following Afghanistan accusations of bases in Pakistan from where these attacks were planned and launched. The point evidently is of Pakistan's keenness to engage on Afghan concerns as a means of convincing the US of its bonafides. These two rounds on the APAPPS have somewhat predictably failed to make progress.

The Afghan Interior Minister Wais Ahmad Barmak and the head of National Directorate of Security (NDS) Masoom Stanekzai visited Islamabad in early February and later told a press conference in Kabul that Pakistan had agreed to cooperate in the probe and promised "practical steps" against the militant groups behind the attacks in the Afghan capital. This claim was, however, immediately challenged by the Pakistan embassy in Kabul. The episode illustrates the levels of mistrust between the two as equally the mood of denial in Pakistan regarding events in Afghanistan.

Pak COAS in Kabul: The Army Chief Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa attended the 'Chiefs of Defence Conference' in Kabul on 13th February. Others who participated are the US Central Command commander Gen Joseph Votel, commander of Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan Gen John Nicholson, and the military chiefs of Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. A ISPR release described the Pakistan COAS as having reassured Kabul and Washington that Pakistan's counter terrorism operations are targeting elements that could be carrying out attacks in Afghanistan and called for a reciprocal action against the sanctuaries from where attacks against Pakistan are being directed. He is also quoted as having said that all terrorist sanctuaries had been eliminated from Pakistan's soil, and a "residual signatures of the terrorists who take advantage of the presence of 2.7 million Afghan refugees and absence of effective border security coordination, are also being traced and targeted through the ongoing operation Radd-ul-Fasaad". The position that Pakistan is now rid of all terrorist groups bar those sheltered by Afghan refugees in Pakistan has increasingly acquired a mantra like status in official statements of Pakistani positions.

Pashtun Long March in Pakistan: Following the extrajudicial killing of a 27-year-old model hailing from FATA's South Waziristan Agency, in a fake 'police encounter' in Karachi on 13 January, a street level protest gained traction and attracted enormous attention as a 'Pashtun Long March'. The core of the protest was formed by the Mehsud tribe of Pashtuns. The demonstrations began in Karachi and were initially directed at demanding action against the police officer who had ordered the killing and who has otherwise notoriety as an 'encounter specialist' with frequent claims of killing 'terrorists' and criminals. The protest thereafter spread to Tank and Dera Ismail Khan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, where the Mehsuds live in large numbers, adjacent to their ancestral villages in South Waziristan. A 'long march' to Islamabad thereafter led to a ten day sit in Islamabad ending finally on 10th February. Demands made expanded to a clearance of landmines, compensation for those killed by security forces, end to enforced disappearances and recovery of the so-called 'missing persons' etc. The police officer in question has been suspended and is apparently on the run.

The sit in and protest remained nonviolent and without political affiliation. It is described as significant as the first time that Pashtuns had protested specifically for their rights in Islamabad. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's statements of support to the protestors added another dimension to the protest given the poor state of Af Pak relations. President Ghani's statement linked the current protests to the older tradition of nonviolent resistance of Badshah Khan and as a movement against terrorism and extremism.

(The views expressed are personal)
