

## ➤ EDITOR'S NOTE

The global action is primarily centred in Afghanistan. The USA completed withdrawal on August 30. As Taliban fighters watched the last US planes take off, they fired their guns into the air, celebrating victory after a 20-year insurgency. Many Afghans remain fearful of Taliban rule and the ensuing instability. There have been sporadic killings and other abuses in areas under Taliban control despite their pledges to restore peace and security. A day after US troops left, US President Biden in his address said, "Last night in Kabul, the United States ended 20 years of war in Afghanistan, the longest war in American history. We completed one of the biggest airlifts in history with more than 120,000 people evacuated to safety." "I believe this is the right decision, a wise decision and the best decision for America", he added. Americans have left a large amount of military equipment. Initial indications are that a lot of them are physically unusable. There seems to be some kind of a tacit understanding between the Americans and the Taliban, and the USA will continue to be a significant player in the region despite no boots on the ground.

Meanwhile, as the Taliban begin the process of governance, they are initially making reassuring statements. They have promised to respect women's rights, give amnesty to their opponents, and prevent Afghanistan becoming a terrorist haven, with an aim to assuage fears of Afghan people, and to reassure the world powers.

Hectic parleys are on in many regional capitals. China, Russia, Pakistan and Turkey are key players. China is attempting to cosy up to the Taliban. Beijing sees itself as having finally bet on the right horse in Afghanistan. However, there are serious debates in China as to what is the best strategy to deal with its poor, unstable, and

destabilising neighbour. China believes that the Taliban are here to stay and are no longer as radical and extremist as it was 20 years ago. It may be a golden opportunity for China to expand its influence and replace the United States. Yet there are others who understand Afghanistan's fame as a "graveyard of empires", and advocate caution.

Turkey wants to formalise its presence in a post-American Afghanistan. They are trying to negotiate with the Taliban, using Qatar and Pakistan to win support. Yet, they want to work closely with the Europeans. Moscow on the other hand is following a dual track approach of both containment and engagement. Taliban spokesperson claimed that they have "very good relations with Russia". It is not a zero-sum game. Like China, Russia is concerned about regional instability in its under-belly depending on how Afghanistan unfolds.

With the closure of Kabul airport, Afghans are lining up on Pakistan border to take a bus to freedom. A refugee crisis could be in the making. Pakistan has been propping and supporting the Taliban for years, yet they are worried about militant fighters from some independent factions infiltrating into Pakistan and launching terror attacks. Pakistan had lost thousands to jihadist violence in the last two decades. The next few months will be critical for Pakistan. Islamabad fears a rise in militant attacks along the Afghan-Pakistan border. While the Taliban tries to reorganise the Afghan army, resurgent rival militant groups, including Islamic State, could up the ante. Pakistan has fenced the entire 2,640 km land border with Afghanistan, lest the Islamic revolution spills into their country. The Durand Line between the two is disputed by Afghanistan.

The Taliban appear to have Iran on edge. Iran is looking for an opportunity to increase its local influence. Shia Islam practising Iran has had serious ideological differences with fiercely Sunni Afghan Taliban. It does have security concerns, and has been bolstering its military deployments on the Afghan frontier.

India had been following developmental diplomacy. It had made substantial investments to win the goodwill of the Afghan people. India's current approach is to keep a listening out watch, make attempts to remain part of any solution, keep engaging with all the

players, but rightly wait till the Taliban comes in full view, and till then, not rush into an 'Afghan strategy'.

Despite COVID still being active in many parts of the globe, and additional waves of newer strains are anticipated, the world has started opening up to movements and day-to-day activities. The Olympics were finally held in Japan.

The Indo-Pacific remains a critical area of global action. While China has been making aggressive display of force and threatening overtures towards Taiwan, the military show-of-force by many countries such as the USA, UK, and France has been on the increase in South China Sea region. The USA has moved a significant number of bombers to Guam. India has been engaged with all the players. It openly supports rules-based regional architecture centred on maritime security. The dialogue between QUAD countries continues to increase. Meanwhile, India continues to balance relations with Russia following strategic autonomy.

India-China stand-off in Eastern Ladakh continues. While after 12th round of Commander Level talks on July 31, 2021, the two sides agreed to disengage from Gogra region, restoring the Line of Actual Control in the area. India and China have now backed down in four of the six flashpoints—the others being Galwan and North and South banks of the Pangong Lake. The stand-off in Depsang and Hot Springs continues. Meanwhile, breakdown in trust has led India and China to further mobilise forces and construct road communications, airfields and defences in respective areas of the India-China border.

This issue of *Defence and Diplomacy* covers some important geopolitical issues. Gp Capt RR Chaudhary writes on India's Integrated Commands (ITC), and the lessons learnt from the USA. The fractious public utterances by some of the serving and retired military officers indicate that a consensus is unlikely to be reached any time soon on the structure, command, and control of the ITCs. Bringing about jointness among the armed forces by restructuring the existing military commands is not a new idea. Some experts believe that creating ITCs is not an important precondition for bringing about jointness. Even the US Government's Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 had been debated for over four years before political consensus could be evolved and the Act passed.

It will be a major reform with far-reaching financial, and security implications. First, the three Services must reach a consensus. There will have to be bureaucratic and inter-ministerial appreciation of the proposal. All this cannot be completed with unrealistic hurried timelines. Creation of ITCs must be thoroughly thought through.

Dr. Ingudam Yaipharemba Singh, who works on national security issues, writes on Aviation Security. Aviation security requires a multilayered three-dimensional approach. With proliferation of drones, and the recent Jammu airport incident, this has become an even more important area of concern and action. Yet such threat has been factored in for some time and needs no knee-jerk reaction. Aviation security is an all-encompassing subject and needs regular reassessment.

Shantanu Roy-Chaudhury writes about China's engagement with Colombo, and its strategic implications for New Delhi. Notwithstanding Sri Lankan government statements to remain neutral in its foreign relations with India and China, China's forays into the strategically located Sri Lanka have increased over the past decade and this has been of concern to India. A significant stake in the strategic Hambantota Port has been leased to a Chinese company. China is a major source of military hardware to Sri Lanka. It is also supporting the modernisation of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces. Chinese military exports include a variety of ammunition, missiles, rocket launchers, rockets and bombs. Sri Lanka also has Chinese aircraft, tanks, and naval vessels. China also trains Sri Lankan military personnel. In fact, since the US ended military aid to Sri Lanka in 2007, China has become the biggest donor. Chinese naval vessels have made continued visits to Sri Lanka, despite strong displeasure expressed by the Indian government. China is also proposing to support developmental projects much closer to India in the Jaffna area that could have security implications for India. India and Japan have been working closely to initiate joint developmental projects in Sri Lanka. Indian naval and air force reach over and around Sri Lanka is much more significant than China. Meanwhile Sri Lanka is conscious of the potential debt-trap of Chinese loans, China's known arm-twisting tactics, and also that with significant Tamil population, and ethnic closeness with India, they would have to act in a balanced way.

Rushali Saha writes on cooperation to risk reduction, and military dimensions of US-China strategic competition. The bonhomie of the 1970s started falling apart after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the end of the Cold War. The economic, and in turn, military rise and global power aspirations of China made it a competitor. China benefited a great deal from American technology and investments. The USA wanted a unipolar world but a bipolar Asia. China wanted a bipolar world and unipolar Asia. On this hinge all the geostrategic actions of the two sides. India has serious boundary issues with China. China's rise is thus of concern to India. While the USA needs a strong India to balance China in Asia, India needs external support to take on the fast-growing China. India and the USA also share similar democratic and free world values compared to the autocratic control of its people by a Communist Chinese regime.

Dr. Dilipraj writes about the emerging Digital Yuan. Digital is where the future is for all financial transactions. The rising China also wants to break the hold of the US dollar over the world trade. China is pushing its currency in a big way. It is also taking advantage of the large trade volumes it has with most countries. The BRI projects also can be financed digitally. They also have the tacit support of Russia, though Russia is not a big trade giant like many other countries. How the digital Yuan will evolve, only time will tell. In all cases it has the potential to be a significant player.

Anu Sharma looks at the potential for enhancing India-Iran relations under the new leadership in Iran. India and Iran have had civilisational close links. Iran is also important for India's land connectivity to Central Asia and Europe. Despite a hardliner candidate emerging as the winner in the recent election, the two countries' geopolitical interests see congruence on many counts. India also needs Iranian oil. Meanwhile China is filling the American absence by closing towards Iran, and this is of concern to India. India has also to balance its approach to factor in Israel and US concerns.

Urmi Tat evaluates the India-Nepal economic partnership. The traditional close relations have been facing external influence from China as part of its strategy of regional dominance and to undermine India's position in the subcontinent. Geographically, and culturally, Nepal would find India as a natural partner. However,

having been sandwiched between a rising China and sometimes less accommodating India, Nepal has been finding greater attention and support by pitting the larger neighbours against each other. China has been openly pumping money to prop up friendly political parties. Also, they have been offering developmental assistance. China is supporting building of a rail link between Kathmandu with Shigatse, Tibet, crossing the China-Nepal border at Gyirong-Rasuwa. The link, reportedly will be ready by 2022. It will at best link the land-locked Nepal to another land-locked region of Tibet. India would continue to be a better way for Nepal to be linked with the world. With little big-brotherly support, India should try and get Nepal back into friendlier fold.

Cyriac S. Pampackal analyses the politics of Al-Aqsa crisis. The Abraham Accords have brought in more West Asian and North African (WANA) countries that have normalised their relations with Israel. This impacts the support to Palestine in its conflict with Israel. It deeply affects the domestic politics of the region. The new set of confrontation started on April 12, 2021, when Israeli police imposed restrictions around the Damascus Gate, a popular gathering spot for Palestinian protests during the month of Ramadan. The Al-Aqsa Mosque is the third holiest place of Sunni Islam. It resulted in an open conflict between Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and Hamas and they exchanged thousands of rockets and airstrikes. Reportedly, 255 Palestinian and 12 Israeli lives were lost. Hamas emerged stronger in Gaza politics and Israel saw a change of government, with growing support for the centrist liberals. Even though the situation has de-escalated, the Israel-Palestine question which was side-lined over the years, has re-emerged onto the centre stage in the region.

Lastly, the issue carries two book reviews. Dr. Shalini Chawla reviews Vikram Sood's *The Ultimate Goal*. The author is the former chief of India's external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW). He explains how a country can construct, sustain and control internal and external narratives and use them to strengthen own position. Intelligence agencies invariably play a critical role in this, an often indispensable tool of statecraft. The 'narrative', though his individual perception, explains how intelligence agencies helped shape narratives favourable to their countries' agendas. And the

second book review is by Dr. Gautam Choubey. He reviews, *Reading Israel, Reading America: The Politics of Translation between Jews* (2019) by Omri Asscher. The author tries to decipher and demarcate the literary differences between Israeli and American Jews, and explains the ongoing cultural dialogue between Jews and non-Jews. In the process, he highlights the contours of Jewish identity.

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