

Asia

North East Asia

➔ **China (internal)** Amid mounting international pressure on Beijing over Muslim camps in Xinjiang, China invited diplomats from twelve mostly-Muslim countries, and foreign media from six, on tightly managed tours in Xinjiang late Dec-mid-Jan including in Kashgar, Hotan and Karakax; EU delegation visited Urumqi and Kashgar 11-13 Jan. Senior Xinjiang official 6 Jan said China would welcome “unbiased” UN inspection visit, so long as officials “refrain from interfering in others’ internal affairs”. U.S. senators 17 Jan re-introduced Uighur Human Rights Policy Act, which reiterates calls for sanctions under Global Magnitsky Act against Chinese officials affiliated with camps and would establish investigative positions in U.S. govt. 37 international NGOs 30 Jan called for UN Human Rights Council to adopt resolution condemning Chinese human rights violations at session opening late Feb. Kazakhstan 21 January raised concerns with Beijing over reports of ethnic Kazakhs being held under house arrest in Xinjiang after being freed from camps (see Kazakhstan).

➔ **China/Japan** Japan and China held security talks amid ongoing maritime tensions. Japan and China 26-27 Dec held first annual meeting of their Maritime and Aerial Communication Mechanism, established June 2018, in Beijing; reportedly discussed opening previously agreed-to hotline, but no new agreements announced. Countries expected to hold security dialogue 1 Feb. Addressing parliament 28 Jan, Japanese PM Abe said he will continue to improve relations with China but also wants to bolster defence capacity. Japanese media 6 Jan reported plans to add five new patrol boats to Japanese Coast Guard’s fleet, citing trespassing of Chinese vessels in Japanese waters around disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, and illegal fishing by North Korean vessels in Japan’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Beijing 2 Jan said Chinese research ship which was seen sailing near Japan’s southernmost point, Okinotori island, 18 Dec, prompting Japanese protest, was conducting “marine scientific and research activities” on “high seas”. Beijing disputed Okinotori’s status as an island generating an EEZ. U.S. held joint naval drills with Japan off west coast of Kyushu in East China Sea 11-12 Jan, and flew two B-52 bombers over area 28 Jan.

➔ **Korean Peninsula** North Korea and U.S. tentatively agreed to second summit in Feb, and held significant working-level talks with South Korean involvement to lay groundwork; however, optimism tempered by substantive differences between sides. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in annual televised address 1 Jan pushed to revive dialogue with U.S. and move forward on collaborative projects with South Korea; emphasized potential for progress in talks with both Washington and Seoul as long as existing agreements are implemented. Kim declared that North Korea is not currently building, testing, using, or proliferating nuclear weapons; also warned U.S. against “attempts to unilaterally enforce something upon us” (meaning unilateral denuclearisation) and “imposing sanctions and pressure”, and warned against restarting U.S.-ROK joint military exercises or U.S. deploying strategic military assets to South Korea. Kim visited China for fourth time 7-10 Jan, reportedly

agreeing with President Xi to “push for continuous new development of China-DPRK relations”. North Korea’s senior representative in talks with U.S., Gen. Kim Yong-chol, arrived in Washington 17 Jan for first round of talks with Sec State Pompeo since Oct. U.S. VP Pence 20 Jan said U.S. will lay out expectations for North Korea to “take concrete steps to begin to make real the denuclearization that Kim Jong-un committed to”. U.S. representative to working-level talks Stephen Biegun met with North Korean delegation in Sweden 19-21 Jan to prepare for summit; South Korea’s chief nuclear envoy took part in trilateral discussions. South Korean conservatives began to express concerns over U.S. aims in North Korea dialogue: that U.S. may be seeking deal with Pyongyang centered on its inter-continental ballistic missile capacity and freezing its nuclear weapons program but accepting its possession of nuclear weapons at existing levels. Deliveries of humanitarian aid to North Korea began after UN granted sanctions waivers to several international NGOs.

➡ **Taiwan Strait** Chinese President Xi renewed calls for reunification, while Taiwan’s allies and Western officials voiced support for Taipei. Taiwan President Tsai 1 Jan outlined conditions for improving relations with Beijing, including latter’s recognition of Taiwan and respect for its freedom and democracy. In 2 Jan “Message to Compatriots in Taiwan” speech, Xi called for unification talks between Beijing and Taipei, citing mainland’s model with Hong Kong; also reiterated possibility of forceful reunification, calling Taiwan’s status non-negotiable. Tsai responded rejecting “one country, two systems” approach. U.S., Canadian, UK and French officials denounced Xi’s rhetoric; EU 3 Jan reaffirmed commitments to developing Taiwan relations and U.S. 10 Jan called on Beijing to “stop its coercion”. U.S. President Trump signed Asia Reassurance Initiative Act into law 31 Dec, containing section reaffirming U.S. commitments to Taiwan. Beijing 2 Jan said act “seriously violates the one-China principle” and “grossly interferes in China’s internal affairs”. Two U.S. warships sailed through Taiwan Strait 24 Jan; Taipei reported China flew military planes near southern Taiwan 22 and 24 Jan, prompting it to send aircraft and surveillance ships. Taiwan’s defence ministry 9 Jan outlined island’s military drills planned for 2019, incorporating tactics to defend against possible Chinese invasion, and held live fire drills 17 Jan.

South Asia

➡ ☞ **Afghanistan** Amid continued intense fighting, U.S. and Taliban late Jan agreed in principle on framework for deal that could lead to wider peace talks, with possible working level teams to flesh out framework in coming month. Earlier in month, amid reports of ordered U.S. troop reduction, U.S. VP Pence 3 Jan said no decision made but potential drawdown would be evaluated. Taliban backed out of planned talks with U.S. early Jan, blaming U.S. for changing original negotiation agenda from withdrawal timeline and counter-terrorism to include intra-Afghan talks, and accused U.S. of bad faith and using influential Islamic countries to pressure Taliban. U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban resumed talks in Doha 20-26 Jan, coming to understanding in principle that foreign forces leave country and Taliban agree to prevent country from becoming platform for international terrorist groups; ceasefire and launch of talks between Taliban and Afghan govt discussed but not yet agreed. During talks, Taliban announced appointment of co-founder Abdul Ghani Baradar as their chief negotiator. In televised address 28 Jan,

Afghan President Ghani spoke of potential for country without international troops. Hostilities continued across country in spite of winter weather, including in provinces of Sar-i Pul, Kandahar, Baghlan, Faryab, Badghis, Balkh and Nangarhar; both Taliban and govt claimed to have inflicted heavy casualties. Newly-appointed Defence Minister Asadullah Khalid 29 Dec promised shift to more offensive stance. Taliban attacks included truck bomb in Kabul 14 Jan that killed four and wounded over 100. President Ghani 25 Jan said 45,000 members of security forces had died since 2014, highest number publicly cited to date. Electoral commission 14 Jan announced full preliminary results of Oct 2018 parliamentary election, claiming 3.6mn votes cast (about 10% of population); protests against alleged electoral fraud continued in several provinces. Ghani and several former heads of security agencies registered as candidates for 20 July presidential election; Ghani's running mate, former intelligence chief Amrullah Saleh, is outspoken critic of negotiations with Taliban.

➡ **Bangladesh** Allegations persisted of vote rigging in contentious 30 Dec general elections, in which incumbent PM Hasina's ruling Awami League and allies won 288 of 300 parliamentary seats. Dispute threatened legitimacy of govt and prompted concerns of further unrest, although month saw relative calm as thousands of opposition leaders and activists remained in custody. EU, U.S. and UK 1 Jan expressed concerns about electoral irregularities and UN human rights office 4 Jan called on govt to hold those responsible for human rights abuses in run-up to vote accountable, and expressed concern about ongoing "physical attacks and ill-treatment, arbitrary arrests, harassment, disappearances and filing of criminal cases" against opposition. Govt and electoral commission continued to reject all claims of rigging and intimidation. Anti-corruption NGO Transparency International Bangladesh 15 Jan highlighted "irregularities" in 47 of 50 constituencies it surveyed and recommended judicial enquiry; govt alleged NGO had links to opposition Bangladesh National Party (BNP). Police 1 Jan arrested *Dhaka Tribune* newspaper journalist in Khulna (south) under controversial Digital Security Act for allegedly publishing "false information" about voting irregularities. BNP-led opposition alliance Jatiya Oikya Front (United National Front) – which won only seven seats – continued to reject election results with its leader Kamal Hossain 6 Jan calling for foreign mediation to bring about fresh election in meeting with diplomats from some 30 countries including U.S., UK, Canada, Russia and China in Dhaka. Parliament reconvened 30 Jan, with opposition boycotting session and demanding new elections within six months; hundreds took part in anti-govt demonstrations in Dhaka same day.

➡ **India (non-Kashmir)** Maoists 5 Jan shot dead security guard and burnt several vehicles at construction site in Kandhamal district, Odisha state (east); police 15 Jan arrested seven men in connection with killing. Security forces 13 Jan killed Maoist commander Shahdev Rai, alias "Talada" in gunfight in Dumka district, Jharkhand state (east). Maoists rebels 15 Jan shot dead two civilians in Jamui district, Bihar state (north east), reportedly suspected of being police informers. Security forces 29 Jan claimed to have killed five militants in clash in West Singhbhum district, Jharkhand.

➡ **Kashmir** Militant violence continued in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), while uptick in cross-border shelling by Pakistani and Indian

militaries fuelled bilateral tensions. In J&K, army 8 Jan reported it killed one militant during attack on army patrol in Pulwama district (south). Militants 11 Jan killed army major and one other soldier in bomb along Line of Control (LoC, dividing Pakistan and Indian-administered Kashmir) in Rajouri district (south west). Security forces 12 Jan killed two militants in Kulgram district (south); during funeral next day, eleven protesters were injured in clashes with security forces. Separatists 26 Jan held general strike on Indian Republic Day, while govt suspended mobile internet services. Clashes continued between Pakistani and Indian militaries across LoC leading to reciprocal accusations of ceasefire violations. In Pakistani-administered Kashmir (AJK), Pakistani military blamed India for cross-border shelling that killed civilian in Bhimber district (south) 7 Jan and another in Shakhkot sector 9 Jan; meanwhile, India 15 Jan claimed Pakistani cross-border firing killed security force officer. Pakistani army 18 Jan claimed to have killed three Indian soldiers at border post while responding to Indian shelling, and earlier claimed to have shot down Indian spy drones along LoC 1 and 2 Jan; AJK PM Haider 2 Jan warned India was creating “warlike situation” along LoC. Pakistan FM Qureshi 6 Jan denied Indian media reports that Pakistani forces were working with militant group Lashkar-e-Tayyaba to carry out “surgical strike” on Indian posts along LoC. Inflammatory rhetoric added to tensions, with Pakistani foreign ministry early Jan warning India of risks of “strategic miscalculation”, while Indian army chief 15 Jan claimed Pakistan continued to support terrorists and said India would have “decisive success” if forced into war. Qureshi 29 Jan held phone call with separatist leader Mirwaiz Umar Farooq; Indian govt next day summoned Pakistani envoy to complain of “brazen attempt” to subvert Indian sovereignty.

➡ **Nepal** Govt 28 Jan decided to extend terms of two transitional justice mechanisms on truth and reconciliation and on enforced disappearances by one year, days before their mandates were due to expire on 9 Feb; both mechanisms, formed in 2015, have made little progress on investigating over 65,000 conflict-era cases. UN and nine embassies including the U.S., UK, France, Germany, Australia, and the EU issued joint statement 24 Jan asking govt to clarify future of transitional justice process and to encourage greater public consultation especially with victims. Victims’ groups claim both mechanisms have failed to deliver and require restructuring; govt yet to address calls to amend transitional justice legislation to prohibit amnesty for perpetrators of serious human rights violations. Madhes (southern lowland)-based Sanghiya Samajbadi Forum-Nepal – member of ruling coalition – 5 Jan submitted 11-point memorandum to PM KP Oli calling for current session of parliament to pursue constitutional amendments related to federalism and proportional representation. Tensions between federal and newly-created provincial-level govts continued to increase following 14 Jan tabling of policing legislation in federal parliament; provincial officials claim legislation grants disproportionate authority to federal govt on managing provincial security, reflects distrust of local govt, and dilutes new federal structure.

➡ **Pakistan** Amid economic difficulties and ongoing insecurity, govt’s continued efforts to weaken political opponents prompted creation of formal opposition alliance. Opposition parties led by Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) 15 Jan agreed to form alliance to challenge govt including joint strategy on legislative issues including extension of military courts, whose tenure expires in March. Alliance followed PM Khan’s Tehreek-e-Insaf govt

late Dec-early Jan moves to target PML-N and PPP with investigations and court cases involving money laundering and corruption. Militant violence continued, including: in Balochistan province (south west), Pakistani Taliban claimed attack on paramilitary training centre in Loralai district that killed four personnel 1 Jan, and social worker organising protest in response to attack was killed 12 Jan; bomb blast in Peshawar (north) 5 Jan injured six. Govt 11 Jan announced arrest of five suspects reportedly involved in Nov attack on Chinese consulate in Karachi, alleging it had been prepared in Afghanistan with involvement of Indian intelligence. Govt continued to engage with U.S. around Afghanistan negotiation efforts; U.S. envoy to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad 17-18 Jan visited Islamabad, meeting PM Khan and army chief. Amid economic downturn, talks with International Monetary Fund on potential bailout made little progress, and govt continued efforts to prevent Pakistan being blacklisted by Financial Action Task Force in Sept, presenting its action plan to counter terrorism financing and money laundering.

➡ **Sri Lanka** President Sirisena continued to undermine newly-reappointed PM Wickremesinghe and his United National Party govt, fuelling concerns over political uncertainty and volatility. Sirisena 17 Jan appointed commission of inquiry to investigate corruption and malpractice under national unity govt of 2015-2018; also in late Dec appointed loyalists as secretaries to most ministries and took control of police and govt printing press. Parliament speaker 8 Jan appointed former President Rajapaksa as opposition leader despite resistance from Tamil National Alliance, which argued that his United People's Freedom Alliance cannot be considered opposition since Sirisena is its leader. Uncertainty continued over timing of and which parties and candidates will run in provincial, presidential and parliamentary elections due in 2019 and 2020. In sign of Sirisena's growing closeness to military, army 9 Jan announced Sirisena had appointed Major General Shavendra Silva – whom a 2015 UN report implicated in human rights violations – as Army Chief of Staff. In brief revival of constitutional reform process, Wickremesinghe 11 Jan convened session of parliament and presented report on constitutional reform, proposing devolution of power within framework of a unitary state; no date fixed for debate on report, amid dim hopes that process will produce new constitution. Rajapaksa attacked report as instrument to divide the country and rejected need for new constitution. Economic uncertainty generated by political turmoil continued, with foreign reserves reported to have fallen by \$1bn to \$6.9bn during attempted constitutional coup, but govt continued re-engagement with donors and international financial institutions which had suspended assistance during political crisis. Police 18 Jan announced seizure of 100kg of explosives and 100 detonators following arrest of four Muslim men, reportedly part of newly formed radical group and among those arrested late-Dec for vandalising Buddhist statues in Mawanella town. On four-day state visit to Philippines, Sirisena 17 Jan praised President Duterte's "war against crime and drugs" as "an example to whole world" and promised to replicate crackdown in Sri Lanka.

South East Asia

➡ **Indonesia** Clashes continued in Papua's central Highlands region, including regencies of Nduga, Puncak, Puncak Jaya and Lanny Jaya, as military continued pursuit of West Papua Liberation Army following early Dec killing of at least sixteen

road construction workers and a soldier. Military reported at least one separatist killed in 9 Jan clash, although United Liberation Movement for West Papua said military had targeted civilians and deceased was a civilian; military also reported one soldier killed in attack in Puncak Jaya 18 Jan. United Liberation Movement for West Papua claimed six civilians have been shot dead by military. Military reportedly raided and seized offices of pro-independence West Papua National Committee (KNPB) in Timika (south) 31 Dec and charged three KNPB members with subversion. Spokesperson for office of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet late Jan said govt has agreed in principle to grant access to Papua. Ahead of April presidential election, President Widodo was accused of trying to win over religious conservatives after govt announced radical Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Bashir, linked to 2002 Bali bombings, would be granted unconditional release; following domestic criticism and call from Australia not to show leniency, Widodo said his release would be conditional on him pledging loyalty to state and its secular ideology.

↓ 🇲🇲* **Myanmar** Deadly attacks by ethnic Rakhine insurgent group Arakan Army (AA) prompted fears of escalating violence in Rakhine State, further complicating prospects for improved security and making Rohingya refugee repatriation even more unlikely. AA 4 Jan launched series of coordinated attacks on four Border Guard Police posts in Buthidaung township in northern Rakhine State on Myanmar's Independence Day, killing thirteen police and injuring nine. Military regained control of posts later same day and launched major clearance operations to dislodge AA, including using large number of infantry troops; over 5,000 people displaced. AA, which operates both in north (Kachin and Shan states) and along western border (northern Rakhine and southern Chin states), also blamed for 1 Jan roadside bomb attack on Rakhine Chief Minister's convoy near Mrauk-U, no injuries. Previously, deadly clashes between AA and Myanmar military had been intensifying since late Nov across several townships in northern Rakhine State and southern Chin State. Rohingya militant group ARSA believed to be responsible for ambush on Border Guard Police vehicle that injured six officers 16 Jan; also believed to be responsible for 17 Dec attacks in Maungdaw township, northern Rakhine. These would be first attacks by group since Jan 2018. Unilateral four-month ceasefire in Kachin and Shan State announced by military 21 Dec largely held, however some fighting continued in north, including between rival Shan armed groups in northern Shan State, causing several thousand villagers to flee. UN's budget committee late Dec approved \$28mn in funding for independent mechanism to prepare case files to standard required for any future criminal prosecution of individuals responsible for international crimes against Rohingya. Yangon High Court 11 Jan rejected appeal by two imprisoned Reuters journalists. Parliament 29 Jan approved ruling National League for Democracy party proposal to establish committee on constitutional amendment, against wishes of military; however, military has veto on changes to the charter, so none can be forced through.

↑ 🇵🇭 **Philippines** Voters in Mindanao overwhelmingly ratified Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) in 21 Jan referendum, approving creation of new entity, Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Compared to prior autonomous region, BARMM will have expanded powers, larger territory, budget allocation and parliament; referendum represented culmination of efforts to implement 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro between govt and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), ending over 40 years of armed conflict in

Mindanao. Voting took place in Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, Cotabato City and Isabela City (which voted not to join new region), with turnout reported at over 85%. Election commission declared BOL ratified 25 Jan, with over 1.7mn people voting yes and some 255,000 against. Further vote to take place 6 Feb in adjacent areas including Lanao del Norte province and North Cotabato on whether they want to join BARMM. MILF chair Murad Ebrahim, expected to lead 80-member Bangsamoro Transition Authority that will govern BARMM until Oct 2022 national elections, welcomed result but warned of “huge challenge” of transforming from revolutionaries to administrators; region faces high poverty and threat of armed groups affiliated with Islamic State (ISIS). MILF negotiator Mohagher Iqbal said he hoped splinter groups would recognise popular will for peace. Two days after results announced, double bombing at cathedral in Jolo, Sulu province (which voted against BOL), killed at least 22 people and injured scores 27 Jan; ISIS claimed responsibility. Govt uncertain if it was suicide attack. Authorities believe bombing perpetrated by Ajang-Ajang gang, an Abu Sayyaf subgroup. Military launched ground assault and air strikes against militants in Sulu’s Patikul town. Two people killed in explosion at mosque in Zamboanga City 30 Jan. Attacks by armed groups and clashes with military continued, including encounter with Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters in Maguindanao 15 Jan which left four suspected rebels dead. Clashes also continued between military and Communist New People’s Army (NPA) rebels in different parts of country, killing several suspected rebels. Defence secretary early Jan announced new three-year deadline to end NPA insurgency.

➡ **South China Sea** U.S.-China tensions continued amid reports on China’s military capability build-up and first U.S. freedom of navigation operation of year. U.S. warship USS McCampbell 7 Jan sailed within 12 nautical miles of three disputed Paracel islands controlled by China but also claimed by Taiwan and Vietnam; Chinese military aircraft and ship reportedly warned it to leave and Beijing formally protested exercise; Chinese state media reported China had mobilised intermediate-range ballistic missiles. U.S. official reports released during month outlined China’s military build-up and expanding naval capabilities; Chinese state media also reported on shift, noting “transformational changes” to People’s Liberation Army, boosting size of navy and air force. Chinese state media reported tests of intercontinental ballistic missile with capacity to strike moving warships. President Trump signed Asia Reassurance Initiative Act into law 31 Dec, emphasising importance of strategic relations with regional partners; highlighting Chinese military assertiveness as cause for concern and referring to efforts to counter China’s strategic influence with \$1.5bn authorised for initiative. While U.S. and China continued to exchange heated rhetoric, U.S. Chief of Naval Operations visiting China mid-Jan met with senior defence officials to discuss operational safety and risk reduction during maritime encounters. As ASEAN nations continued to raise concerns about South China Sea tensions and slow progress on Code of Conduct, statement following meeting of ASEAN FMs mid-month “took note of some concerns on the land reclamations and activities”. China late Jan reported it had opened maritime rescue centre on man-made island on disputed Fiery Cross Reef in Spratly Islands. Three Chinese naval ships paid goodwill visit to Manila 17-21 Jan.

↓ **Thailand** Violence in deep south escalated since late Dec with militants attacking symbolic and soft targets, including, for first time in years, Buddhist monks. Militants 8 Jan lynched retired Buddhist teacher in Saba Yoi district,

Songkhla, and used victim's truck as vehicle-borne IED, wounding two soldiers; defence minister blamed main Malay-Muslim separatist organisation Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN). Bomb in Yarang district, Pattani, same day targeted teacher-protection unit, wounding police officer and twelve-year-old girl. Militants 10 Jan killed four Muslim defence volunteers outside school in Yarang district, Pattani. Gunmen shot dead imam in Rueso district, Narathiwat province 11 Jan. Two insurgents killed in gun battle with security forces in Yaring district, Pattani, 12 Jan; one ranger and eight-year-old girl wounded. Six militants on motorcycles attacked police station in Khok Poh district, Pattani province 13 Jan, killing police officer. Security forces 18 Jan killed insurgent suspect in Chanea district, Narathiwat. Insurgents same day detonated two bombs in Pattani, wounding five soldiers and two police. Also on 18 Jan, militants attacked Buddhist temple in Sungai Padi, killing two monks. Three police and three civilians wounded in 25 Jan bombing in Krong Pinang, Pattani. Chief of Thailand's peace-dialogue delegation 4 Jan met with Malaysian facilitator to discuss new framework for talks with BRN. BRN released video and statement dated 4 Jan marking fifteen-year anniversary of renewed insurgency, saying peace possible only if govt is sincere. Chief of delegation 11 Jan said govt would study political decentralisation as possible component of resolution. Royal decree published 23 Jan ordered general election, which Election Commission announced will take place 24 March; announcements calmed rising tensions and some protests after junta mid-Jan said previously promised 24 Feb election would not take place.