

Asia

North East Asia

➔ **China/Japan** Chinese and Japanese defence ministers 18 Dec agreed in meeting in Beijing to increase communication and enhance mutual trust between two countries; Japan also expressed concern over China's military presence in area around disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Meeting marked first such visit by a Japanese defence minister since 2009. Japanese govt purchased uninhabited island in south between Kyushu and Okinawa, for 16 billion yen (\$146 bn) from private developer, reportedly planning to use it as training facility for both U.S. and Japanese forces.

↓ **Korean Peninsula** During Workers' Party plenum 28-31 Dec, North Korea threatened to resume nuclear and long-range missile tests, blaming continued U.S. "hostile policy"; warned world DPRK will soon possess "new strategic weapon". Kim Jong-un's remarks during plenum came ahead of much-anticipated New Year's Day address, eventually not delivered for first time during Kim's rule since 2012. Report of plenum revealed Pyongyang planning much harder line in 2020, stressed any chance for diplomacy contingent upon Washington making proposals closer to Pyongyang's terms. Ahead of announcement, DPRK further intensified pressure for U.S. to make proposal to implement 2018 Singapore Joint Statement ahead of Kim's unilaterally-imposed end-2019 deadline, warned U.S. to make concessions, up to them what "Christmas gift" they would get; 7 Dec DPRK UN envoy said denuclearisation was off negotiating table. At meeting with ruling party Central Committee senior officials, Kim 22 Dec stressed need for "offensive measures" to bolster DPRK security. U.S. Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun 16 Dec called on Pyongyang to return to negotiations, said it is time to do "our jobs"; National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien 29 Dec said U.S. was prepared to take action if Pyongyang made good on "gift" threat. Pyongyang 7, 13 Dec tested engine used for intercontinental ballistic missiles or satellite launch vehicle, hailed first test as enhancing its "strategic position", second test as bolstering "strategic nuclear deterrent". Meanwhile, U.S. and South Korea remained at loggerheads over cost-sharing for maintaining U.S. troops on Korean peninsula. Fourth and fifth rounds of negotiations brought no progress, Seoul 18 Dec rejected U.S. demands to enlarge scope of costs in existing agreement for South Korea to cover; new round of talks expected in Jan. Amid fears Trump might withdraw troops, U.S. Senate 14 Dec passed provisions prohibiting reduction of total U.S. troops in South Korea below 28,500 unless defence secretary deems it benign for U.S. and key allies' national security interests. South Korean President Moon Jae-in and Japanese PM Shinzo Abe 24 Dec met on sidelines of trilateral summit with China for first time in fifteen months, however no agreement reached.

➔ **Taiwan Strait** Ahead of 11 Jan presidential and legislative election, Taiwanese govt 4 Dec proposed anti-infiltration bill aimed at holding back Chinese influence in Taiwanese business community: prevents anyone from donating to a political party, influencing elections, and other ways that could influence politics. China's Taiwan Affairs Office said that Taiwanese people bill "has already caused alarm and panic

that everyone is treated as an enemy”. Chinese govt 21 Dec revised law to simplify investment procedures for Taiwan companies in effort to entice support for China friendly policies in upcoming election; Taiwanese parliament 24 Dec passed anti-infiltration law to combat Chinese funding activities in national politics. Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen 18 Dec stated in pre-election policy address that Taiwan “must be aware that China is infiltrating and dividing Taiwan’s society in an all-round way”. Taiwanese Defence Ministry 2 Dec announced Taiwan plans to invite U.S. military experts to island to “help consolidate and deepen the security partnership” between U.S. and Taiwan and “ensure peace and stability in the region”. Taiwan’s Aerospace Industrial Development Corporation and U.S.’s Lockheed Martin 17 Dec signed agreement to build F-16 fighter jet maintenance centre in Taiwan. Chinese aircraft carrier 26 Dec sailed north of Taiwan Strait; in reaction to Chinese navy patrol, senior Taiwanese official stated that “by flexing military muscles, China is trying to intimidate non-aligned voters”.

South Asia

➔ **Afghanistan** Reduced number of major Taliban attacks in urban zones coincided with renewal of U.S. peace talks with Taliban in Qatar, while violence remained high in outlying areas, partly driven by tensions over presidential elections. U.S. 7 Dec resumed talks with Taliban in Doha, three months after President Trump froze negotiations; U.S. Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad 12 Dec announced “brief pause” in U.S.-Taliban negotiations after Taliban attacked medical facility near U.S. Bagram Airfield near Kabul previous day, killing two civilians and wounding 73. Palace spokesperson 28 Dec said that President Ashraf Ghani would name a negotiating team following U.S.-Taliban talks, in preparation for intra-Afghan phase of peace process. Serious security incidents continued across country including Taliban raid on govt outpost in Imam Sahib district, Kunduz province 6 Dec, killing eleven security forces. In Mazar-e-Sharif (north) security forces fought pro-govt militia 14-15 Dec in clash reportedly related to domestic political tensions; Interior Ministry reported it as insider attack where militia member killed nine of his fellow militiamen, Taliban reported it as coordinated militant attack with 24 dead. Taliban 25 Dec abducted 27 Afghan activists from People’s Peace Movement (PPM) taking part in peace march in Farah province (west). Taliban end month increased attacks on Afghan military bases and checkpoints: in northern Balkh province, car bombing 26 Dec killed at least six soldiers; in southern Helmand province, explosion then gunbattle 27 Dec killed ten soldiers; in Takhar province (north) 29 Dec attack on local pro-govt militia officer who escaped left seventeen militiamen dead. Officials 1 Dec reported 113 Islamic State members surrendered in Achin district (east). Independent Election Commission 22 Dec announced preliminary results of 28 Sept presidential elections results, confirming President Ghani’s re-election by a narrow margin pending final results in coming weeks. Ghani’s main opponent Abdullah Abdullah said he would contest preliminary results, including over 300,000 votes he considered suspicious, insisting he would not accept “fraudulent” result, accused Ghani and international community of perpetrating fraud.

➔ **Bangladesh** Security forces continued to arrest alleged members of banned militant groups while relations with India soured. Paramilitary Rapid Action

Battalion (RAB) and police 5 Dec detained two alleged members of Ansar al-Islam (also known as Ansarullah Bangla Team, ABT) in capital Dhaka, 8 Dec arrested four alleged ABT militants in Noakhali district in south, 18 Dec arrested at least four in capital Dhaka. RAB and police 11 Dec arrested four suspected Allahr Dal members in Khulna city south west of capital, three in Dhaka 18 Dec, and five in Khulna district 29 Dec. Relations with India deteriorated after Indian parliament 11 Dec passed law providing citizenship to non-Muslim migrants from Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Pakistan who had entered country before 2015, ostensibly in effort to shield religious minorities fleeing persecution. FM Momen criticised bill, rejected remarks that Bangladeshi Hindus face religious persecution; next day FM cancelled 12-14 Dec visit to India. Dhaka 12 Dec lodged complaint against attack same day on Bangladeshi Assistant High Commissioner's convoy in India's Assam capital Guwahati by demonstrators who opposed granting citizenship to large numbers of Bangladeshi Hindu migrants. To ease tensions India's external ministry spokesperson 12 Dec said "minorities are protected" under Bangladesh's "current govt". Commander of Bangladesh's border guard 22 Nov said more than 200 people detained after illegally crossing over the border with India, many claimed they were Bangladeshi migrants who had fled India after more than two decades of residence because of persecution and fears of deportation. FM Momen 25 Dec said only Bangladeshi illegal immigrants returning from India would be taken back after verification; all others would be sent back. Bangladesh 30 Dec shut down mobile networks along border with India citing "security reasons". Relations with Myanmar remained strained over Rohingya repatriation issues. FM 24 Nov refuted Myanmar's 15 Nov statement holding Dhaka's "non-cooperation" responsible for delayed Rohingya repatriation, strongly denied Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army in country.

↓ **India (non-Kashmir)** Controversial citizenship law sparked widespread protests across country leading to deadly clashes with security forces, while skirmishes between security forces and Maoists continued. Govt 12 Dec passed Citizenship Amendment Act granting citizenship to non-Muslim migrants persecuted in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh who illegally entered India before 2015, ostensibly in effort to shield religious minorities fleeing persecution; critics argue law contravenes secular constitution and its combination with the planned National Register of Citizens could disenfranchise sections of the country's Muslim minority. New law sparked nationwide protests and clashes with security forces, leaving twenty-seven dead and hundreds injured. Thousands detained for defying ban on protests imposed in several states; police in Uttar Pradesh (India's largest state, north) accused of openly targeting Muslims following chief minister's call for "revenge" against protesters 20 Dec, at least 19 killed. Five states and two union territories have announced they will not implement the Act, though federal government says they lack legal power to refuse. In Chhattisgarh state (centre east), police reported security forces 12 Dec killed two suspected Maoist rebels in counter-insurgency operation. Insurgents 19 Dec confirmed death (from illness) of rebel leader Ravalu Srinivas (aka Ramanna), party Central Committee member and historical figure of movement in Chhattisgarh's Bastar district. Police 22 Dec announced surrender of around 450 Maoist sympathisers in Odisha state (east). Suspected insurgents 27 Dec shot dead supervisor of mining company in Jharkand (north east); 28 Dec killed two villagers in Bihar's Lakhisari district (north), accusing them of being police informers.

➔ **Kashmir** Tensions persisted over Indian govt's revoking of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) special constitutional status in Aug and clashes across Line of Control (LoC, dividing Pakistan and Indian-administered Kashmir) continued. In string of cross-LoC clashes, Pakistani military claimed Indian fire killed three civilians in mid-Dec, injured two soldiers 1 Dec; Indian armed forces 18 Dec reported clashes left one Indian soldier dead; Indian army chief same day warned skirmishes could escalate at any time. At least four killed during exchange of fire between Pakistan and India 25 Dec including at least one Indian soldier and two Pakistani soldiers. In Indian-administered Kashmir, suspected Kashmiri militants 26 Nov killed at least two in two grenade attacks, one in Hakura village, south of Srinagar, and the other at the University of Kashmir in Srinagar; security forces killed two suspected militants in Pulwama district 25-26 Nov. New Union Territory administration 25 Nov released two political leaders, one each from People's Democratic Party (PDP) and Democratic Party Nationalist; Police 30 Dec released five political activists, two from Jammu & Kashmir National Conference (NC), and one each from Congress and PDP. New Delhi 27 Dec partially lifted internet shutdown imposed on newly formed Ladakh union territory in Aug, restored internet in north-western Kargil district; internet blackout remained in place in J&K. China 17 Dec postponed bid to hold closed-door UN Security Council briefing same day on situation in Indian-administered Kashmir after UN peacekeeping mission said it was not ready to deliver brief, allegedly because France, U.S., UK and Russia opposed discussing bilateral issue in UN forum. Pakistan media reported 29 Dec Saudi Arabia has decided to convene Organisation of Islamic Cooperation's special meeting on Kashmir in April.

➔ **Nepal** Nepal Communist Party (NCP)-led govt continued push to restrict civil liberties with parliamentary committee 29 Dec passing controversial Information Technology Bill first proposed Feb 2019; legislation, if adopted by full parliament, would criminalise social media interactions including with up to five years' imprisonment; critics claimed move would limit free speech and give govt sweeping surveillance authority. Ruling coalition member Samajbadi Party Nepal quit NCP-led govt after cabinet rejected party leader and Deputy PM Upendra Yadav's calls to amend 2015 constitution to meet long-standing demands of southern plains-based Madhesi including redrawing federal provincial boundaries and ensuring proportional representation in upper house of parliament. NCP reached agreement 18 Dec with Rastriya Janata Party Nepal (RJPN) – another Madhesi-based party – to form electoral alliance in lead-up to March 2020 upper parliamentary polls and potentially paving way for RJPN to join ruling coalition. By-elections held 30 Nov produced mixed results for ruling NCP and opposition Nepali Congress with neither winning significant number of 52 vacant seats at federal, provincial and local levels. Govt's donor relationships received considerable attention with some NCP members 22 Dec expressing concerns about \$500 million U.S. energy and infrastructure grant approved Aug 2017 given competing views about Washington's Indo Pacific Strategy in light of Nepal's existing Belt and Road Initiative commitments with China.

➔ **Pakistan** Govt and armed forces suffered setbacks in court, fuelling tensions with judiciary, while militant attacks continued. Special court 17 Dec sentenced former army chief and President Pervez Musharraf to death in absentia for high treason and subverting constitution by unlawfully declaring state of emergency in Nov-Dec 2007. Opposition welcomed ruling, but it drew rebuke from armed forces; Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) govt said it would defend Musharraf during appeal for not

being given a chance to defend himself. Courts frustrated PTI gov't's targeting of opposition through anti-corruption National Accountability Bureau (NAB); Islamabad High Court 11 Dec released on medical grounds co-chair and former president of Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) Asif Ali Zardari detained by NAB on corruption charges since June, 17 Dec granted bail to PPP parliamentarians, Zardari's sister Faryal Talpur and former federal minister Syed Khurshid Ahmed Shah. Court granted bail to former Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) Punjab law minister Rana Sanaullah 24 Dec, detained in a narcotics case since July, and to former PML-N finance minister Miftah Ismail 26 Dec, accused of illegally awarding a contract for an LNG terminal. Following PM Khan's visit to Saudi Arabia 14 Dec, PM and FM Qureshi pulled out of summit of Muslim-majority countries in Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur mid-Dec. Riyadh had allegedly expressed reservations over Islamabad joining the summit, which they saw as challenge by Turkey, Iran and Qatar to Saudi-led Organisation of the Islamic Conference. Court 11 Dec indicted Hafiz Saeed, leader of militant group Lashkar-e-Tayyaba for terror financing. Militant attacks continued, notably in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in north west: in North Waziristan district militants 1 Dec killed one soldier in attack on checkpoint, 4 Dec killed two soldiers in clashes; 11 Dec militants killed prominent Shia leader in Lakki Marwat district; 18 Dec two police escorting polio vaccination team were shot dead in Dir district.

➔ **Sri Lanka** Newly elected President Gotabaya Rajapaksa moved to establish his new gov't and consolidate his power, as diplomatic spat with Switzerland intensified over detention of Swiss embassy employee. Rajapaksa 10 Dec issued gazette allocating gov't departments to ministries; following allocation, 155 separate departments now under control of three Rajapaksa brothers in national gov't. Rajapaksa 12 Dec gave assurances there would be no restrictions on media freedom during meeting with heads of media organisations, but said he expected outlets to portray country in good light. In further sign he seeks to return to system of stronger presidential rule, Rajapaksa 16 Dec called 19th amendment of constitution which limits presidential powers "weak" and "inconsistent". Two prominent opposition lawmakers arrested 18 and 26 Dec in separate cases, raising fears of government crackdown. Gov't continued to reverse attempts by previous gov't to investigate political crimes under administration of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa (now PM and finance minister); all complete and incomplete cases by Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery and Corruption, Financial Crimes Investigation Division and Special Investigations Unit set to be reviewed, after demotions and threats to punish key police investigators. Following allegations by Swiss embassy that Sri Lankan employee was abducted, threatened and sexually abused last month by unidentified men seeking information on Sri Lankan political refugees in Switzerland, including lead investigator from Criminal Investigation Department (CID), gov't 1 Dec released statement claiming police investigation disproved allegations made by Swiss embassy and employee. Police held woman at CID HQ 8-10 Dec for questioning before her 16 Dec arrest; Swiss embassy condemned arrest saying "Sri Lanka's reputation as a country that upholds the rule of law is at stake". Swiss gov't 19 Dec announced dispatch of senior diplomat to find compromise with gov't. Tensions with Switzerland aggravated by Swiss Federal Court 3 Dec decision upholding previous judgement acquitting twelve Tamils for fundraising for Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which court deemed a legal organisation under Swiss law.

South East Asia

➔ **Indonesia** In Papua, military 18 Dec reported two soldiers shot dead by some ten suspected rebels in ambush in Intan Jaya regency. NGO Human Rights Watch reported police arrested at least 110 people for raising banned Papuan national flag at start of month around independence commemoration 1 Dec, charged 20 with treason. Police 18 Dec reported they arrested and were interrogating eight suspected Islamic State (ISIS) militants in Jayapura and Sentani, Papua province, suspected of planning attack and having links to Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD, responsible for several attacks in Indonesia). Police officer killed in suspected terror attack in Central Sulawesi 13 Dec, reportedly carried out by Islamic militant group Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT). Police anti-terror unit early Dec arrested six alleged militants in West Nusa Tenggara province, suspected of ISIS and JAD links. Govt 26 Dec announced plans to revive “truth and reconciliation” commission as way to bring closure over past human rights violations.

➔ **Myanmar** Moves toward international accountability for crimes against Rohingya ramped up with State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi personally leading the country’s defence at Hague-based International Court of Justice in genocide convention case brought by Gambia in Nov; meanwhile clashes continued between Arakan Army (AA) and military. Speaking before court 11 Dec, Suu Kyi denied genocide but acknowledged for first time possible war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by military, and stated that govt and military were investigating crimes and convening courts martial, also claimed govt was taking steps to improve lives of over 600,000 Muslims remaining in Rakhine State. Suu Kyi’s appearance attracted international criticism, amid increased pressure for further sanctions from West; U.S. 10 Dec added Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing, Deputy Commander-in-Chief Soe Win and commanders of two Light Infantry Divisions to its sanctions list. Suu Kyi’s leading defence role received positively within Myanmar, helping consolidate domestic political support ahead of Nov 2020 elections. UN General Assembly 27 Dec approved resolution strongly condemning human rights abuses by govt against Rohingya and other minorities, Myanmar UN ambassador called resolution “another classic example of double-standards (and) selective and discriminatory application of human rights norms”. AA and military continued to clash across central and northern Rakhine State, Chin State’s Paletwa township, and northern Shan State, with risks of further escalation. AA leader’s wife and two children 4 Dec detained in Chiang Mai (northern Thailand), after Myanmar revoked their passports and requested extradition; AA leader early Dec said AA would not be deterred by family members’ arrest. AA continued apparent tactic of kidnappings striking political targets; 11 Dec abducted National League for Democracy chairman in northern Rakhine State’s Buthidaung Township “for questioning”; he was later reported killed in army shelling. Ongoing clashes between govt and AA 2-6 Dec left over six dead, including children, notably in Mrauk-U and Kyauktaw townships; UNICEF 12 Dec called on all conflict parties to respect civilian nature of schools and for commitment from govt.

➔ **Philippines** Fighting between armed forces and Islamist groups Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and pro-Islamic State (ISIS) Dawlah Islamiyah Torayfie Group (DITG) continued in Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in south, while communist rebels clashed with armed forces in

several regions. Military early Dec clashed with BIFF and DITG militants in Maguindanao province, notably Shariff Aguak and Shariff Saydona Mustapha municipalities; army mid-Dec said troops had seized almost a dozen BIFF camps in area; suspected Islamist militants 22 Dec launched simultaneous bomb attacks against security forces and civilians in Upi town in Maguindanao province, Cotabato city, and Libungan town in neighbouring Cotabato province, wounding at least 22 including eight soldiers. Implementation of Bangsamoro peace process continued with working groups inside Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) focusing on drafting priority legislation, such as election code or local govt code. BTA's Intergovernmental-Relations body, expected to settle disputes between national and Bangsamoro govts, held first meeting 16 Dec to discuss its terms of reference. As part of peace process implementation, decommissioning of Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) combatants continued, with up to 9,000 members laying down arms since late Sept. Martial law in Mindanao, implemented since 2017, expired 31 Dec but state of emergency remained in place. Court in capital Manila 19 Dec sentenced five to life in prison for planning murder of 58 people including members of rival clan and journalists in Maguindanao in 2009. Clashes between communist New People's Army (NPA) members and armed forces continued early Dec notably in Luzon in north, Visayas in centre and Mindanao in south. Labour secretary and former chairman of govt panel for negotiations with communists, Silvestre Bello III, and founder of Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) Jose Maria Sison talked about potential opening to resume peace talks in Europe 7-8 Dec. Govt and CPP 22 Dec declared holiday ceasefire 23 Dec-7 Jan.

➔ **South China Sea** Amid ongoing tensions over South China Sea (SCS), Japanese Defence Minister Tarō Kōno speaking at Doha Forum 15 Dec criticised China for “engaging in unilateral and coercive attempts to alter the status quo” based on assertions that are “incompatible with the existing international order”; also said Japan is “concerned about China’s rapid enhancement of its military power without transparency, including its nuclear and missile capabilities”. Japan’s Nikkei Asian Review 28 Nov reported Japanese officials are concerned China is trying to implement code of conduct that would require U.S. and Japan to request China’s approval before executing military drills with ASEAN countries, saying it would “tie ASEAN’s hands with rules that are convenient for Beijing, and to eliminate or restrict outside influence on the South China Sea”. During lecture in Singapore, Vietnam’s deputy foreign minister Nguyen Quoc Dung 17 Dec stated he hopes China will show restraint during Vietnam’s 2020 ASEAN chairmanship; also called China’s actions in SCS alarming to both Vietnam and other countries who feel they might be threatened by China in the future. Commander of U.S. Pacific Fleet Admiral John Aquilino 13 Dec criticised China’s involvement in SCS and announced that U.S. is “in competition with the People’s Republic of China”; also suggested partnership with “like-minded nations” will keep nations in region secure. Malaysia 12 Dec filed claim with UN to extend its continental shelf in northern section of SCS; Beijing condemned Malaysia’s actions as infringing on China’s sovereignty and violating international law. Jakarta 25 Dec sent diplomatic note to China protesting alleged Chinese Coast Guard vessel incursion into its exclusive economic zone off the Natuna Islands; Chinese govt spokesperson 26 Dec claimed that zone was part of China.

➔ **Thailand** Domestic political tensions increased as Electoral Commission (EC) recommended constitutional court dissolve opposition Future Forward Party (FFP),

whose leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit stepped up calls for public protests, while militant attacks in deep south continued at relatively low level. Junta-appointed EC 11 Dec recommended constitutional court dissolve FFP for \$6.3mn loan from Thanathorn to FFP during general election which it said violated law against parties accepting cash “from illegitimate sources”. Thanathorn 11 Dec called for supporters to take to streets in Bangkok in opposition to govt; several thousand people demonstrated next day in largest public protest since 2014 coup; Thanathorn pledged larger protests beginning Jan. Constitutional Court 25 Dec accepted EC request to rule on FFP loan case, as well as sedition case against Thanathorn; decisions expected 21 Jan. Violence continued in deep south. In Sungai Padi district, Narathiwat province, militants 27 Nov bombed section of railway track; no casualties. In Saiburi district, Pattani province, gunmen 1 Dec shot dead Muslim woman travelling with her child on motorcycle, and 12 Dec fired on ranger base, causing no casualties. In Thepha, Songkhla province, IED wounded five police 12 Dec. Paramilitary rangers mistakenly killed three civilians 16 Dec in Rangae district, Narathiwat; two rangers charged with murder 20 Dec. Benar News 2 Dec reported meeting between Thai officials and Barisan Revolusi Nasional in German capital, according to source from Malaysian team facilitating moribund peace dialogue between Bangkok and MARA Patani, who said Malaysia not informed of Berlin meeting and did not “recognize” it.

Pacific

↑ **Papua New Guinea** Bougainville Referendum Commission (BRC) 11 Dec announced result of non-binding referendum held in autonomous region Bougainville in late Nov/early Dec in which 98% of voters backed independence from PNG; turnout reported at 87%. Referendum, delayed twice in 2019 due to lack of funding, is part of 2001 Bougainville Peace Agreement which ended decade of conflict on island over revenues from mining and its environmental impact. BRC 11 Dec issued statement declaring referendum process “informed, free of fear and accessible”. National govt and autonomous Bougainville govt set to begin post-referendum consultations prior to process of ratification in PNG parliament.