

Asia

North East Asia

➔ **China/Japan** Japan and China continued efforts to improve security relations amid ongoing maritime tensions. Senior Japanese and Chinese officials met in Beijing 1-2 Feb for security dialogue, committing to deepening mutual trust and promote exchanges; reportedly also discussed plans for Chinese President Xi to visit Japan later in 2019. Japanese coast guard apprehended Chinese fishing boat captain suspected of violating fishing laws in Japanese waters 2 Feb. Japan also lodged new complaints with Beijing 7 Feb after Chinese oil drilling vessel was found still deployed in disputed waters of East China Sea (ECS), having previously been sighted nearby in Nov 2018. Japan again scrambled jets 23 Feb to intercept Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) electronic warfare and surveillance plane passing through Tsushima Strait, which connects Sea of Japan, East China Sea and Yellow Sea. U.S. 29 Jan approved sales of two Aegis Weapon Systems to Japan.

➔ **Korean Peninsula** Second U.S.-DPRK summit on denuclearisation in Hanoi 27-28 Feb unexpectedly cut short on second day; U.S. President Trump told press conference that North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's demand for U.S. to lift "all" sanctions was unacceptable, and Pyongyang's offer to destroy only its main nuclear complex Yongbyon did not go far enough; said relationship between leaders was good; no commitment to hold another summit. North Korean foreign minister and vice minister held terse late-night press conference in Hanoi to deny some of Trump's claims, especially request for full sanctions relief; state media mirrored Trump's positive comments about summit atmosphere and leaders' personal relations. In lead-up to summit, U.S. Special Representative for North Korea Steve Biegun arrived in Pyongyang 5 Feb for talks on what the two sides might agree at summit, meeting with Special Representative for U.S. Affairs of the State Affairs Commission of the DPRK Kim Hyok-chol 6-8 Feb. U.S. State Department reported they "discussed advancing Singapore summit commitments of complete denuclearisation, transforming U.S.-DPRK relations, and building a lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula". Further meetings held in Hanoi starting 19 February. U.S. and South Korea 5 Feb tentatively agreed revised Special Measures Agreement, one-year deal under which South Korea is to raise its annual cost-sharing contribution to nearly \$1bn, up from approximately \$800 million during previous five-year agreement. Gen. Robert Abrams, new commander of U.S. Forces Korea, told Senate Armed Services Committee hearing 13 Feb that North Korea remains a threat, saying "despite a reduction in tensions along the DMZ and a cessation of strategic provocations coupled with public statements of intent to denuclearize, little to no verifiable change has occurred in North Korea's military capabilities".

➔ **Taiwan Strait** In CNN interview 19 Feb, President Tsai warned of growing military threat posed by China and confirmed plans to run for second term in 2020 general elections; came after her poll ratings improved in wake of Beijing's strong language on reunification early Jan. Following Tsai's calls in Jan to develop Taiwan's indigenous defence industry, Taiwan News 11 Feb reported govt requests for budgetary approval on new military procurement including domestically produced

drones and missile-equipped ships to support asymmetric warfare strategy against a larger force. Discussing 40th anniversary of U.S. Taiwan Relations Act, Brent Christensen, Director of American Institute in Taiwan and most senior U.S. diplomat in Taipei, 30 Jan said he expected U.S.-Taiwan relations to continue to deepen, including in security cooperation. In statement before Senate Armed Services Committee 12 Feb, Indo-Pacific Commander Admiral Philip Davidson recommended supporting and improving interoperability with Taiwan's military, alongside strengthening partnerships with other regional allies. U.S. conducted its second freedom of navigation operation through Taiwan Strait in two months 25-26 Feb, prompting Chinese protest.

South Asia

↑ **Afghanistan** Talks resumed between U.S. and Taliban and month also saw unprecedented talks between Taliban and Afghan political figures in Moscow, however political tensions continued over fallout of Oct 2018 parliamentary elections and upcoming July presidential polls. Following Jan agreement in principle on framework for peace deal, U.S. and Taliban officials resumed discussions in Doha 25-28 Feb; U.S. envoy Zalmay Khalilzad described talks as productive. Taliban representatives and range of Afghan political figures – including former President Karzai and opposition leaders but excluding govt – held unprecedented meeting in Moscow 5-6 Feb, declaring support for talks in Doha, reform of institutions including security sector and withdrawal of foreign forces. Amid ongoing concerns over Taliban's refusal to engage in negotiations with Kabul, and latter's continued insistence that it should have ownership of dialogue, govt 11 Feb held first National Advisory Meeting on Peace in Kabul and announced national consultative meeting to be held 17-20 March, to include representatives from across Afghan society. Hostilities continued across country without significant changes in control of territory; Taliban attacked govt positions including near provincial capitals of Kunduz 4-5 Feb and Farah 14-15 Feb, while govt continued to claim arrest or killing of key insurgents. UN 24 Feb reported 3,804 civilians were killed in 2018, highest total since records began in 2009. Amid continued reports of U.S. troop reduction, acting U.S. Secretary of Defence 11 Feb said there were currently no plans for significant change in troop levels. Political tensions increased after President Ghani 12 Feb removed chair and members of Independent Election Commission and Electoral Complaints Commission, both criticised for problems with Oct 2018 parliamentary elections. Former National Security Advisor and current presidential candidate Hanif Atmar criticised move, which threatens presidential elections set for 20 July, and accused govt of "illegally cleaning govt offices of political opposition".

➡ **Bangladesh** Tensions continued over Dec general election results, with fears political violence could worsen amid planned local elections 10-18 March. Some 74 defeated candidates from Dec election – 66 of them from main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) – challenged results before High Court's electoral tribunal 14 Feb, alleging widespread electoral rigging including with intimidation and ballot box stuffing; with eight successful candidates from BNP-led opposition alliance Jatiya Oikya Front (United National Front) refusing to take parliamentary oath in protest, PM Hasina 12 Feb rejected allegations and called boycott "politically wrong". BNP late Jan announced it would boycott March local

elections, prompting concern over potential for increased violence between govt and opposition supporters. International concern over credibility of elections continued. Hundreds of religious hardliners 12 Feb protested planned religious convention of minority Ahmadiya sect in north and attacked Ahmadiyahs, injuring seven. Intense fighting in Myanmar's southern Chin State between military and Arakan Army caused several hundred to flee across border to Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts, prompting Dhaka to send strongly worded letter to Myanmar 5 Feb expressing concern over security situation, possible new exodus, and impact on stability of area with long history of tensions between different communities (see Myanmar). Bangladesh FM told UN Security Council 28 Feb that it cannot accommodate any more refugees from Myanmar.

➡ **India (non-Kashmir)** In Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra state (centre), suspected Maoist rebels shot dead two civilians 2 Feb and another 6 Feb, reportedly suspected of being police informers. Security forces claimed to have killed ten Maoists in clash in Bijapur district, Chhattisgarh state (east) 7 Feb, and three during gunfight in Gumla district, Jharkhand state (east) 23 Feb. Senior Maoist commander Oggu Satwaji alias "Sudhakar" surrendered to police in Telangana state (centre) 11 Feb.

↓ 🌟* **Kashmir** Deadliest terror attack in over 30 years in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and Indian and Pakistani airstrikes across Line of Control (LoC, dividing Pakistan and Indian-administered Kashmir), first since 1971 India-Pakistan war, led to spike in tensions between India and Pakistan and within J&K, with fears of further escalation. Pakistani-based Jaish-e-Muhammad 14 Feb launched suicide car bomb attack on convoy of Indian paramilitaries in Pulwama district, 30km from capital Srinagar, killing some 45 security personnel. Govt imposed curfew, sent thousands of paramilitary personnel to region, and detained some 200 opposition leaders and supporters of separatist parties. Security forces claimed to have killed two top Jaish-e-Muhammad in Pulwama 18 Feb, and three in Kulgam district 24 Feb; several members of security forces also killed during security operations. Separatists in J&K held strikes in protest at operations; New Delhi 17 Feb removed security protection from five separatist leaders, prompting fears that attack on separatist leadership could further destabilise region. Indian govt accused Pakistan of complicity in 14 Feb attack, with PM Modi warning of "befitting reply" and giving security forces "permission to take decisions about the timing, place and nature of their response"; Pakistan rejected role in attack; both sides withdrew diplomats. Pakistani PM Khan 19 Feb offered to cooperate in investigation but warned of immediate retaliation if attacked. Indian air force 26 Feb claimed to have carried out "pre-emptive" airstrikes on Jaish-e-Muhammad training camp in Balakot in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, claiming to have killed "large number" of militants. Pakistan military denied Indian airstrikes had caused casualties and responded with airstrikes across LoC 27 Feb, claiming to have shot down two Indian planes in Pakistan airspace, and capturing pilot; India claimed to have shot down Pakistani fighter jet in Indian-Kashmir. China and EU urged both nations to show restraint, calling on Pakistan to end support for jihadist groups; U.S. warned further military action by both countries posed "unacceptably high" escalation risks. Supreme Court 22 Feb called on authorities to protect Kashmiris facing intimidation and attacks in Hindu-majority J&K and other northern Indian

states. **This entry was corrected on 2 March 2019 to place Balakot in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, not Azad Jammu and Kashmir, as first reported by Pakistan.*

➡ **Nepal** Concerns about KP Oli-led govt's curtailing of civil liberties continued to grow with two new bills proposed by govt in Feb – one imposing numerous restrictions on content shared via social networks and granting govt sweeping powers to block social media platforms not registered in Nepal; and another barring current and retired civil servants from expressing their opinions on any public or social platforms. Both draft bills were criticised for attempting to restrict freedom of speech, increase state surveillance, and silence dissent. Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) – led by hardline Maoist leader Netra Bikram Chand – claimed responsibility for series of attacks 22 Feb on telecommunications company; attacks included IED explosion in southern Kathmandu valley where one person was killed and two more injured; arson attacks also carried out on company's telephone towers in several districts; attacks came amid reports of CPN growing in strength in some midwestern districts. Parliament 6 Feb formally endorsed legislation extending terms of two transitional justice bodies by one year; differences over future of transitional justice mechanisms reportedly contributing to tensions between the two leaders of the ruling Nepal Communist Party – PM Oli and former Maoist Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal.

➡ **Pakistan** Govt faced tensions with India and Iran following terrorist attacks blamed on Pakistani-based militants, while attacks also continued inside Pakistan. Pakistani-based Jaish-e-Muhammad 14 Feb killed some 45 Indian paramilitary troops in suicide attack in Kashmir, followed by Indian and Pakistani airstrikes across Line of Control (LoC, dividing Pakistan and Indian-administered Kashmir) (see Kashmir). Iranian Sunni militant group Jaish al-Adl – reportedly based in Balochistan – killed 27 Iranian soldiers in 13 Feb suicide attack near border (see Iran); Iranian army 16 Feb accused Pakistan of providing Jaish al-Adl safe haven and warned Iran would retaliate if “Pakistan does not carry out its responsibilities”; relations with Teheran further strained as Saudi Crown Prince 17-18 Feb visited Islamabad, signing investment agreements worth some \$20bn. Landmark Supreme Court ruling 6 Feb condemned Sunni hardline Labaik Ya Rasool Allah's use of violence in Nov 2017 protests, called on federal and provincial govts to prosecute those who violate law, and emphasised constitutional bar on members of armed forces engaging in “any kind of political activity”. Leader of Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (Pashtun protection movement, PTM) killed during demonstration in Loralai city, Balochistan (south west) 2 Feb, with PTM leaders alleging police had beaten him to death; police denied allegation, 6 Feb arrested PTM protesters in Islamabad. Attacks continued inside Pakistan including Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan-claimed attack that killed four police in Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (north west) 12 Feb. In coastal city Karachi, targeted attacks on politicians and sectarian violence increased including killing of Pak Sarzameen Party leader 19 Feb and murder of local leader of Sunni hardline group Sipah-e-Sahaba 4 Feb.

➡ **Sri Lanka** President Sirisena continued actions challenging democratic institutions and human rights provisions in advance of presidential, parliamentary and provincial elections set for late 2019-2020. Sirisena 6 Feb attacked National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in speech to parliament, accusing it of

protecting only criminals' rights and blaming alleged NHRC procedural delays for Jan death of two Sri Lankan UN peacekeepers in Mali; NHRC expressed "deep concern" at "unjust criticism". Sirisena also alleged Constitutional Council bias following Council's rejection of his nominees for judicial positions; charges repeated by former President Mahinda Rajapaksa and supporters, in apparent campaign to weaken public support for 19th amendment, which re-established Constitutional Council and independent commissions such as NHRC, and set term, age and nationality limits on presidency. In bid to maintain support of Tamil National Alliance (TNA), following collapse of hopes for new TNA-backed constitution, PM Wickremesinghe 14-16 Feb visited Northern Province with ministers and TNA MPs, promising to expedite economic development initiatives. UK 11 Feb announced intention to present draft resolution "rolling over" terms of existing UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolution for Sri Lanka, with UNHRC meeting starting 25 Feb; major protests 25 Feb by Tamil groups in northern province rejected extension of UNHRC process, called for international justice for wartime abuses. In 14 Feb Joint Commission meetings with Sri Lanka, EU reiterated "need to repeal and replace the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA)" with new legislation "in line with international standards" and urged Sri Lanka to "maintain its moratorium on executions".

South East Asia

➡ **Indonesia** Tensions continued in Papua province, while reports of terrorist activity highlighted concerns over return of foreign fighters elsewhere. In Papua, NGO Humanitarian Volunteers for Nduga 20 Feb said hundreds of students had fled fighting in Papua province's Nduga district since Dec, although military continued to reject reports that it had fired on civilians during search for rebels suspected of Dec killing of road construction workers. Military reported that suspected separatists had opened fire on aircraft carrying military personnel and govt officials in Nduga 28 Jan, killing one soldier. Video of Papuan police threatening suspected petty thief with a snake early Feb provoked outrage; UN human rights officials 21 Feb called for independent probe into "alleged killings, unlawful arrests, and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of indigenous Papuans" by police and military in West Papua and Papua provinces, noting concern over "culture of impunity and general lack of investigations into allegations of human rights violations". Police apologised, said those involved being disciplined. Police 11 Feb announced that counter-terrorist unit Densus 88 early Jan arrested man at Jakarta airport suspected of intending to travel to Syria to join Islamic State (ISIS), having previously served jail term for helping 2002 Bali bomber. Police announced that govt had sent counter-terrorist unit to Philippines, whose govt claimed that attackers in 27 Jan bomb attack in Jolo, Philippines, were Indonesian couple, although Jakarta denied (see Philippines).

➡ **Myanmar** Deadly clashes between military and Rakhine and Rohingya armed groups continued in overlapping areas of northern Rakhine State, with both communities caught in crossfire, with fears conflict will escalate ahead of monsoon season in April/May. Rakhine State govt late-Jan granted permission to police and military to carry out household search operations in seven townships to search for members of Arakan Army; authorities have charged dozens of young men with unlawful association for having contacts with group. Intense fighting between

military and Arakan Army in southern Chin State's remote Paletwa township early Feb caused several hundred Rakhine and Chin villagers to flee across border to Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts, prompting Dhaka to send letter to Myanmar 5 Feb expressing concern over security situation and possible new exodus. Bangladesh FM told UN Security Council 28 Feb that it cannot accommodate any more refugees from Myanmar. Attempted IED attack on military convoy in Ann township 4 Feb, some distance from Arakan Army's normal area of operations, prompted concerns over possible expansion of attacks to other parts of Rakhine State. Govt statements on destroying Arakan Army, and reports and photos of Rakhine civilian casualties, seen as likely to further alienate many Rakhine and harden their support for group. Indications continued that Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army militant group also becoming more active, with several small attacks in Maungdaw area in Jan and Feb bearing hallmarks of group. With ethnic peace process moribund, four Ethnic Armed Organisations constituting Northern Alliance – Arakan Army, Kachin Independence Organisation, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and Ta'ang National Liberation Army – said they offered military a ceasefire during meeting with govt's National Reconciliation and Peace Centre in China 25 Feb. Parliament 19 Feb formed joint committee to amend 2008 military-drafted constitution ahead of 2020 elections, despite opposition from military MPs; committee began work 25 Feb; military has veto on any amendments.

➔ **Philippines** Month saw second phase of plebiscite on new Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) and appointment of interim regional govt, while military campaign against militant groups continued. Following Jan plebiscite in Mindanao creating BARMM, Lanao del Norte province and parts of Cotabato province 6 Feb held plebiscite on whether to join entity: 63 out 67 villages in North Cotabato voted to join, while majority-Christian Lanao del Norte province voted against allowing six municipalities, all with strong Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) presence and in favour of joining BARMM, to do so, raising concerns over potential tensions and exclusion of major MILF camp from BARMM area. Lanao del Norte hit by three explosions on eve of plebiscite, no casualties. Duterte 22 Feb led swearing in of 80 members of Bangsamoro Transitional Authority (BTA), 41 of them appointed by MILF and 39 by govt, with MILF chair Murad Ebrahim chief minister. Military continued campaigns against militant groups and pursuit of individuals suspected of involvement in 27 Jan Jolo church bomb attack, reporting some suspects killed and some surrendered. Interior minister 1 Feb said Indonesian couple carried out attack assisted by Islamic State (ISIS) and Abu Sayyaf, Jakarta denied. Three suspected Abu Sayyaf militants and five soldiers killed in 2 Feb clash in Sulu province's Patikul town, reportedly involving around 100 Abu Sayyaf. In clash with Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) in Maguindanao 3 Feb, military reported eight militants killed. Interior minister 7 Feb said Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan believed to be new Abu Sayyaf leader. Abu Sayyaf also continued to target civilians and threatened to kill three civilian hostages. Military continued campaign to end communist New People's Army (NPA) insurgency, with several soldiers, police and NPA fighters reported killed in clashes during month. NPA also reportedly killed several civilians and freed some hostages. President Duterte again offered to reopen peace talks with Communist Party of the Philippines, in return for stopping attacks on security forces and taxation which govt terms extortion.

➔ **South China Sea** Marking second U.S. freedom of navigation operation of 2019 in South China Sea (SCS), U.S. warships sailed through disputed Spratly islands

11 Feb, passing within twelve nautical miles of Second Thomas Shoal and Mischief Reef, administered by Philippines and China respectively; Beijing responded reiterating its “indisputable sovereignty” over islands and claimed its navy identified and expelled the warships. U.S. stealth aircraft conducted operations in Philippine and East China Seas 26 Jan-6 Feb; followed Jan reports that U.S. Marine Corps is developing conflict capabilities for taking “natural or man-made” island. China continued push for military combat readiness toward maritime forces, with Central Military Commission Vice-Chair 3 Feb calling for further development of Coast Guard. Media 21 Feb reported that China concluded previously unannounced drills in SCS over 34 days, involving naval, air and missile forces. U.S. and UK navies held joint maritime security and logistics training in SCS 18 Feb, their third naval collaboration in region in three months. Philippines defence minister 4 Feb said announced ramp for planned construction on Thitu Island in Spratlys will be completed early 2019. Using satellite imagery, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 6 Feb reported increased numbers of suspected Chinese fishing militia, Coast Guard and navy vessels around island Dec and Jan. Indonesia 22 Feb outlined plans to build Integrated Marine and Fisheries Centre in its Natuna Islands and station naval patrol boats as part of effort to establish new fishing zone and assert sovereignty over area.

➡ **Thailand** While country prepared for 24 March general election, MARA Patani umbrella group of Malay-Muslim separatist fronts suspended moribund peace-dialogue process with Bangkok. After Thai dialogue chief General Udomchai Thammasaroraj refused to meet group in Kuala Lumpur 3 Feb, saying he would only meet with MARA Patani chief Sukri Hari, MARA released statement condemning what it called “hidden agenda” and Udomchai’s “unacceptable attitude”, and suspended participation in process until after election. Several killed in continuing violence in deep south. Incidents included: security forces killed two suspected militants in Chanae district, Narathiwat, 11 Feb, believed to be involved in 18 Jan slaying of two monks in Sungai Padi district; gunmen killed two Muslim farmers in Yaha district, Yala province 14 Feb; bombing killed ranger and wounded two other people in Bannag Satar, Yala, 26 Feb; and two plainclothes police officers were abducted from tea shop and executed in Cho Airong, Narathiwat 27 Feb. Shock announcement 8 Feb that Princess Ubolratana, older sister of King Maha Vajiralongkorn, would stand for PM for recently formed Thai Raksa Chart Party, which is aligned with former PM Thaksin Shinawatra, roiled political landscape. Move prompted speculation that king had broken with ruling National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), however he issued statement hours later quashing her candidacy. With election widely viewed as a contest between pro- and anti-junta parties, NCPO 20 Feb filed criminal charges against popular leader of anti-junta Future Forward Party, for critique of junta posted on his Facebook page in June 2018, potentially disqualifying him and his party from election.