

Asia

North East Asia

➔ **China/Japan** Amid ongoing diplomatic efforts on both sides, Chinese FM Wang 8 March noted relations improving and both countries would work to “deepen mutually beneficial cooperation”. Beijing 28 March said Japanese restrictions on Chinese technology companies such as Huawei could damage relations. Military exercises and operations continued; Japan Air Force 20 March scrambled jets to intercept Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) electronic warfare and surveillance plane passing through East China Sea, and again 30 March to intercept PLA aircraft flying through Miyako Strait. Japanese island of Iejima 11-14 March hosted U.S. Marines training exercises (see South China Sea), while U.S. flew B-52 bombers in joint training exercise with Japan Air Force over East China Sea 19 March.

➔ **Korean Peninsula** Uncertainty over denuclearisation talks continued following abrupt end of late Feb U.S.-North Korea summit in Hanoi, also setting back inter-Korean ties. Observers blamed unrealistic expectations on both sides, while North Korean Vice FM Choe Son-hui 15 March told press conference in Pyongyang that U.S. President Trump had been prepared to consider sanctions relief with provisions to reapply them if Pyongyang violated commitments, but Sec State Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton blocked move; also said Pyongyang may rethink ban on nuclear and missile tests absent concessions from Washington. U.S. General Abrams told House Armed Services Committee that observed North Korean activities were “inconsistent with denuclearisation”. Following fraught discussions, South Korea and U.S. 8 March signed new one-year Special Measures Agreement, under which South Korea is to raise its annual cost-sharing contribution for U.S. Forces Korea to nearly \$920mn, up from approximately \$800 million during previous agreement; U.S. used opportunity to publicly reaffirm strength of alliance. Inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong thrown into turmoil as North Korean staff 22 March informed South Korea of intent to withdraw from operations, allegedly under direction of Kim Jong-un, leading to concerns of abandonment of key aspect of broader inter-Korean talks; however half of North Korean staff came to work 25 March, reportedly after Trump attempted to reverse sanctions on two Chinese entities accused of doing business with DPRK. Pyongyang 31 March said that 22 Feb break-in at its embassy in Spain was a “terrorist attack” and called for investigation, intimating the possibility of state-level involvement.

➔ **Taiwan Strait** President Tsai 21-28 March travelled to Palau, Nauru and Marshall Islands – three of Taiwan’s seventeen remaining diplomatic allies – to “deepen ties and friendly relations”, making stopover in Hawaii in sign of warming U.S.-Taiwan ties. American Institute in Taiwan 19 March announced new annual U.S.-Taiwan dialogue focused on increasing cooperation, with senior U.S. State Department officials to attend first iteration Sept 2019. Tsai 19 March announced govt had made request to U.S. to buy F-16 Viper fighter jets. U.S. navy 24 March sailed two ships through Taiwan Strait in third freedom of navigation operation in

2019, prompting Chinese formal complaint. Pro-independence former PM Lai Ching-te 18 March announced he would challenge Tsai for nomination for ruling Democratic Progressive Party for presidential elections in 2020, saying Taiwan did not want to be “second Hong Kong or Tibet”.

South Asia

➔ **Afghanistan** Amid major Taliban attacks on security forces and continued political tensions, negotiations between U.S. and Taliban saw some progress, but Taliban’s rejection of govt involvement remains major sticking point. U.S. and Taliban negotiations in Doha 25 Feb-12 March concluded with U.S. envoy Khalilzad and Taliban representatives agreeing “in draft” on U.S. military withdrawal and Taliban assurances to prevent country from becoming platform for international terrorism. U.S. said key obstacle was Taliban demand of three-to-six month withdrawal window, with U.S. suggesting three years. Taliban continued to reject engagement with Kabul, while govt also rejected negotiation formats not controlled by itself. President Ghani 8 March refused to participate in talks not led by govt, including “Moscow track” involving former President Karzai, and 11 March delayed national consultative meeting to 29 April. “Moscow track” meeting remains scheduled for mid-April, involving Taliban and major anti-Taliban factions. Tensions between Kabul and Washington increased with Afghan National Security Advisor Mohib 14 March accusing Khalilzad of delegitimising govt. Hostilities continued, with major Taliban attacks including on Afghan Army HQ in Washir district, Helmand province, killing 50 soldiers 1 March; and in Badghis province 11-16 March, killing twenty and capturing over 100 govt forces. Afghan and U.S. night raids and airstrikes reportedly killed at least 24 civilians in Nangarhar and Ghazni provinces 8-12 March; Ghani 13 March issued orders to abort or wait out operations in case of civilian presence; U.S. airstrike 23 March killed fourteen civilians after insider attack in Kunduz province. UN 24 Feb reported 3,804 conflict-related civilian deaths in 2018. Islamic State-Khorasan Province launched two attacks on urban centres, killing sixteen civilians near Jalalabad 6 March, and eleven Shiite Hazaras gathering in Kabul 7 March. Political tensions continued: Ghani 3 March appointed new commissioners and secretaries for Independent Election Commission and Electoral Complaints Commission; authorities 20 March announced another delay to presidential and provincial elections to 28 Sept, despite govt mandate ending 20 May. In Mazar-i-Sharif, clashes over appointment of new police chief killed at least one 14 March.

➔ **Bangladesh** Political tensions continued in aftermath of Dec 2018 general election and around local elections 10-24 March marred by deadly violence. Seven people shot dead and over a dozen injured in attack on election officials in Chittagong Hill Tracts, Chattogram division (south east) during first phase of polling 10 March; police blamed supporters of local candidate who had boycotted polls. Ahead of 18 March second phase, supporters of two rival Awami League candidates 16 March clashed in Joypurhat district, Rajshahi division (north), killing two. Sporadic violence and allegations of vote rigging in third phase 24 March; post-poll violence 25 March included killing of supporter of independent candidate Pirojpur district; Awami League activists reportedly attacked houses of Hindu community supporting independent candidate Jhenidah district. Main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist

Party (BNP) – who continue to contest Dec election result – and other opposition groups boycotted polls. U.S. 13 March released report on human rights in Bangladesh in 2018, highlighted enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings and “widespread impunity for security forces” alongside restrictions on assembly; FM Abulkalam Abdul Momin 18 March rejected report as one-sided. Hundreds of students 20 March demonstrated in Dhaka after a student was killed by speeding bus, following similar protests in 2018.

➡ **India (non-Kashmir)** Security forces 7 March claimed to have killed three Maoist rebels in Jharkhand state (east) and same day killed a Maoist leader in gunfight in Wayanad district, Kerala state (south west). Police 16 March claimed to have killed two Maoist rebels in Visakhapatnam district, Andhra Pradesh state (south east). Suspected Maoist IED blast 18 March killed one member of security forces in Dantewada district, Chhattisgarh state (east).

➡ **Kashmir** Despite reduction in India-Pakistan tensions, cross-Line of Control (LoC, dividing Pakistan and Indian-administered Kashmir) clashes continued, along with Indian security forces’ repression of separatists within Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). In what it called “goodwill gesture”, Pakistan 1 March released captured Indian pilot whose plane it had shot down 27 Feb, while Pakistan and India High Commissioners returned to their posts 9 March. In first major diplomatic encounter since escalation, delegations from both countries met in Indian border village 14 March to discuss technical modalities of Kartarpur corridor facilitating Indian Sikh pilgrims visiting Pakistan-based religious site; Indian Foreign Ministry said meeting did not represent resumption of bilateral dialogue. Cross-LoC clashes between Pakistan and Indian militaries continued; Pakistan claimed Indian fire killed one civilian 1 March and two soldiers 2 March; India 24 March claimed one Indian soldier killed in cross-LoC clash. Pakistani navy 5 March claimed to have prevented Indian submarine entering Pakistani waters. U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton 11 March called for “meaningful steps” against Jaish-e-Muhammad militant group that carried out Feb terror attack in J&K, and “other terrorist groups operating from Pakistan”. China 13 March placed “technical hold” on UN Security Council resolution proposing to list Jaish chief Masood Azhar as global terrorist. Inside J&K, security forces continued sweeping operations against suspected militants and detained scores of separatist leaders and supporters, particularly targeting Jamaat-i-Islami, which it banned 28 Feb; govt 22 March banned separatist Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front. Police 19 March announced teacher arrested as part of “terror case investigation” had died in custody, leading to large demonstrations in Pulwama district (south) and clashes with security forces. Security forces 29 March claimed to have killed two Jaish “terrorists” and four militants in Budgam, Shopian (west) and Kupwara (north west) districts. Govt 10 March excluded J&K from general elections scheduled to begin 11 April on security grounds; Kashmiri leaders criticised move as extending central govt’s control over state.

➡ **Nepal** Govt intensified response to Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) following multiple IED and arson attacks by party since Feb including 8 March bombing at a foreign employment agency official’s Kathmandu residence (no injuries). Several CPN leaders and cadres arrested following cabinet 12 March ban on party’s activities; concerns growing about CPN reportedly possessing conflict-era weapons. Govt

softened decision on ban following calls by both ruling Nepal Communist Party and opposition Nepali Congress leaders for dialogue. CPN 25 Mar announced protests against govt crackdown. Madhesi activist and leader of Alliance for Independent Madhes (AIM) CK Raut – arrested various times for controversial secessionist campaign – joined mainstream politics, launched Janamat Party following 8 March agreement with govt that withdrew all cases against AIM cadres in exchange for Raut's commitment to respect Nepal's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Tensions between provincial and federal govts escalated with plan by Province 2 to appoint district-level administrators in parallel to federally appointed officials. Several provincial chief ministers threatened to legally challenge proposed legislation on federal control over provincial security and perpetuation of administrative structures not recognised by 2015 constitution; province leaders claim retaining outdated structures undermines transition to decentralised federal model central to new constitutional project.

➡ **Pakistan** Authorities continued crackdown on militant groups in response to international pressure, following Feb attacks in Kashmir by Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Muhammad and subsequent military escalation with India (see Kashmir). PM Khan's Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) govt 4 March promulgated "UN Security Council (Freezing and Seizure) Order", to streamline procedure for implementation of UN Security Council sanctions against individuals blacklisted by Financial Action Task Force (FATF), which is due to review govt's performance again in June. Interior Secretary 5 March ordered preventive detention of 44 members of proscribed anti-India groups pending investigation, including Jaish leader Masood Azhar's son Hamad Azhar and brother Mufti Abdur Rauf, both mentioned in Indian dossier on Pulwama attack, given to Pakistan on 28 February. Following 4 March meeting by National Security Council, Punjab, Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provincial govts 7 March took over administration of mosques and madrassas affiliated with suspected terrorist groups and seized some assets including hospitals. However, authorities did not arrest Jaish leader Masood Azhar, who was excluded from UN Security Council Resolution 1267 list due to Chinese veto 14 March. Govt responded strongly when opposition Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) chairman Bhutto Zardari questioned its anti-terrorism actions 13 March and demanded dismissal of three govt ministers with ties to proscribed groups, provoking Railways Minister Rashid to issue apparent threat against him. In Balochistan province (south west), Sunni militant and Baloch nationalists increased attacks: three police officers injured in bomb blast in capital Quetta 11 March; two civilians killed in bomb blast in Panjgur town 14 March; in Dera Murad Jamali area, bomb on passenger train killed four 16 March; in Ziarat district, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants 20 March killed six paramilitary officers in attack on guard post. Security forces 21 March rescued four hostages in clashes with Jaish al-Adl militants, part of fourteen Iranian border guards kidnapped 16 Oct.

➡ **Sri Lanka** Month dominated by political manoeuvring ahead of Nov presidential elections, while UN Human Rights Council passed resolution giving Sri Lanka two additional years to fulfil its commitments on reconciliation and accountability. Former defence secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa continued campaign to be nominated as presidential candidate for Sri Lanka People's Front, amid uncertainty over degree of support from his brother, former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, possible bid for a second term by President Sirisena as nominee of Sri

Lanka Freedom Party, and increased lobbying by leftist party Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna for constitutional amendment abolishing executive presidency. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Bachelet 8 March called on Human Rights Council to maintain Sri Lanka on its agenda, noting slow progress in govt's commitments to transitional justice and addressing impunity, and arguing that "lack of accountability for past actions likely contributed" to anti-Muslim violence in March 2018 and to late 2018 constitutional crisis. Human Rights Council 21 March passed new resolution to "roll over" Sri Lanka's commitments on reconciliation and accountability, giving it two more years to fulfil pledges it made in 2015. Even as Sri Lanka co-sponsored resolution, FM Tilak Marapana 20 March challenged aspects of High Commissioner's report to council and rejected key aspects of 2015 resolution, including foreign judges in special court to investigate and try alleged war crimes. Reflecting deep divisions in govt following failed 2018 constitutional coup, Sirisena 27 March rejected resolution as "betrayal" of military and Sri Lankan people, claimed he was not informed and did not approve of its contents.

South East Asia

➡ **Indonesia** Violence continued in Papua's Nduga regency, site of Dec 2018 killing by separatist rebels of sixteen road construction workers and subsequent security operations. Military 7 March reported three soldiers and seven to ten rebels killed as estimated 70 members of "armed criminal group" with military-grade weapons as well as spears ambushed group of 25 soldiers in Nduga area; West Papua National Liberation Army reported at least five soldiers killed, accused military of burning houses and interrogating villagers, sparking violence. Military 5 March said 600 soldiers to be deployed to finish building trans-Papua highway. Thousands of villagers reportedly remain displaced. West Papua National Committee spokesperson 13 March told session of UN Human Rights Council that military was targeting indigenous Papuans and committing human rights violations; govt spokesperson blamed separatist rebels for displacements. Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) provincial leader jailed for ten years 18 March for role in May 2018 Surabaya bombings which killed 28. Ahead of 17 April presidential and legislative elections, presidential challenger Prabowo Subianto claimed massive irregularities in voter roll, raising questions over credibility of result.

↓ **Myanmar** Arakan Army (AA) ramped up attacks across broad area of Rakhine State and southern Chin State, despite troop surge and vows by military and govt to crush insurgency. Over a dozen soldiers reportedly killed in clashes with AA in Paletwa township, southern Chin State 7 March; AA 9 March attacked police station in Ponnagyun, western Rakhine State, killing nine officers; same day reportedly occupied military tactical operations base in southern Chin State, capturing eleven prisoners and significant equipment; clashed on streets of Mrauk U town in west of Rakhine State 18 March. Six people killed in Buthidaung as army and AA clashed 21 March, shortly after peace talks in capital Naypyitaw with eight northern armed groups including AA. Court in Sittwe 19 March sentenced prominent Rakhine political leader and a co-accused to 20 years prison for high treason, in move seen as likely to fuel tensions. UN and local aid groups report nearly 20,000 civilians temporarily displaced in Rakhine State due to fighting in recent weeks; also reported that 95,000 people affected by govt restrictions on humanitarian aid to area. Govt 14

March announced new fourteen-member committee led by deputy upper house speaker (an ethnic Rakhine) tasked with bringing stability to Rakhine State and facilitating dialogue between govt, lawmakers and local people. Myanmar military 18 March announced appointment of three-member military “investigation court” to look into Aug 2017 ARSA attacks and security response. Bangladesh continued to move ahead with preparations to relocate some Rohingya refugees to camp on Bhasan Char, silt island 30km offshore. International Criminal Court prosecutor’s office visited Bangladesh 6-11 March as part of its preliminary examination of situation to determine whether to move ahead with formal investigation into alleged crimes against Rohingya.

➡ **Philippines** Dozens of suspected militants and several soldiers reported killed and thousands of civilians displaced as army clashed with Islamic State (ISIS)-linked militants in Maguindanao, while govt announced end of peace talks with communist rebels. Several soldiers reported killed in attacks by Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) early March, with fighting escalating as military launched operations against group in Maguindanao 9 March; military 13 March said it had killed some 20 militants in air and ground assaults, including two BIFF leaders and Singaporean national belonging to Indonesian Jemaah Islamiya group; one soldier also killed. Two militants killed 14 March, one believed to be Abu Dar, senior Maute Group leader who escaped Marawi City siege in 2017; two soldiers killed. UN Humanitarian Agency reported over 35,000 fled fighting in Maguindanao, while clashes between military and Maute group in Lanao del Sur 11 and 14 March displaced almost 9,000. Military launched airstrikes and clashed with Abu Sayyaf group in Sulu and Basilan. Clashes continued with communist New People’s Army (NPA), including in eastern Mindanao and Northern Samar, and military reported mass NPA surrenders including in Negros Occidental and Mindanao; fourteen NPA reported killed in Negros Occidental 30 March. President Duterte 21 March announced permanent termination of dialogue with Communist Party of the Philippines, although govt said still open to localised peace talks with NPA rebels. Duterte 4 March approved executive order for implementation of final “normalisation” annex of Bangsamoro peace agreement, including, under security component, decommissioning and disarming of thousands of former MILF rebels and transformation of their camps; other components are development, confidence-building measures and transitional justice and reconciliation. Security officials 12 March warned first meeting of Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao regional peace and order council that Abu Sayyaf is still region’s top security threat, particularly in Sulu. Bangsamoro Transition Authority held inaugural session 29 March. Ahead of 13 May midterm poll, election commission 19 March declared Mindanao “category red” hotspot for risk of “election-related incidents” and “serious armed threats” by rebel groups.

➡ **South China Sea** U.S.-China tensions continued amid ongoing U.S. military exercises and Chinese and American diplomatic overtures to Philippines. U.S. flew B-52 bombers near contested islands in South China Sea (SCS) 4 and 14 March as part of its “continuous bomber presence mission” based in Guam. Following Jan reports that U.S. Marine Corps is developing conflict capabilities for taking “natural or man-made” island, U.S. Marines 11-14 March conducted training exercises on Japanese island of Iejima. U.S. Sec State Pompeo 1 March said U.S. would defend Philippines from “armed attack” on its ships or aircraft in SCS during meeting with

Philippines President Duterte. Philippines Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana 4 March said current Philippines-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty was vague, risked “confusion and chaos” during crises and needed to be re-examined. Meeting in Beijing, Chinese and Philippines FMs 20 March agreed to finish negotiations for Code of Conduct for behaviour in SCS by 2021 during meeting in Beijing. Chinese vessel 6 March reportedly rammed and sunk Vietnamese fishing boat in disputed waters near Paracel Islands chain; Vietnamese govt 21 March submitted official protest to China, while China asserted sovereignty over Paracel Islands and said Vietnam should stop illegal fishing activities in area. Two former Philippine govt officials 21 March filed case at International Criminal Court against Chinese President Xi for mass island-building causing irreversible environmental damage in SCS and undermining “food and energy security” of surrounding states. Malaysia PM Mahathir 7 March said China should define “so-called ownership” of SCS so other countries can gain benefits, stressing importance of freedom of navigation.

➡ **Thailand** 24 March general election, widely criticised for irregularities, resulted in stand-off between junta and pro-democracy parties, while southern insurgent violence continued, including series of bombings outside conventional conflict zone. Pro-junta Phalang Pracharat Party exceeded expectations, gaining 8.4 million votes and 97 constituency seats, positioning it to lead a coalition govt with PM Prayuth Chan-ocha returning to premiership with electoral mandate. Pheu Thai Party (PT, pro-former PM Thaksin Shinawatra) won 7.9 million votes but most constituency seats (137). Seven pro-democracy parties united to form “democratic front” led by PT and 27 March announced they could form majority in lower house of parliament; final vote count to be reported 9 May together with calculation of party-list seats. King Maha Vajiralongkorn 30 March stripped Thaksin of royal decorations, which observers believe could influence political parties’ decisions on joining a coalition. More than 180 complaints of irregularities lodged with Election Commission (EC). EC halted vote counting on election night, and later twice posted – then removed – tallies marked by inconsistencies, casting doubt on EC’s competence and impartiality; protesters gathered in Bangkok 31 March to demand removal of election commissioners, while online petition demanding commissioners resign reached 830,000 signatures. In southern insurgency, Malay-Muslim militants on night of 9-10 March staged series of bombings in Satun and Phatthalung provinces, north of four southernmost provinces that constitute traditional insurgent area of operations; no casualties reported. Deadly attacks continue in deep south; in Narathiwat, attacks included clash between rangers and several militants in Reusoh district 2 March, one suspected insurgent killed; no casualties in gunbattle next day in nearby Dusongyor; roadside IED wounded ranger in Cho Airong district 11 March; militants 12 March attacked military outpost in Tak Bai, wounding two soldiers and civilian; and on 13 March threw pipebombs at police barracks in Yi-ngo district, again no casualties. Woman killed in IED targeting ranger patrol 14 March, Bacho district. Army officer wounded in ambush in Sungai Padi district, 30 March.

Pacific

↓ **New Zealand** Far-right terrorist 15 March shot dead 50 Muslim worshippers, including four women and four children, and wounded over 40 in attack on two mosques in Christchurch. During attack, which he live-streamed, and in anti-Muslim, anti-immigration “manifesto” posted online, attacker made references to

other far-right extremists, white nationalists and ultranationalists in Europe and the U.S., and historical battles against Muslim armies in eastern Europe.