

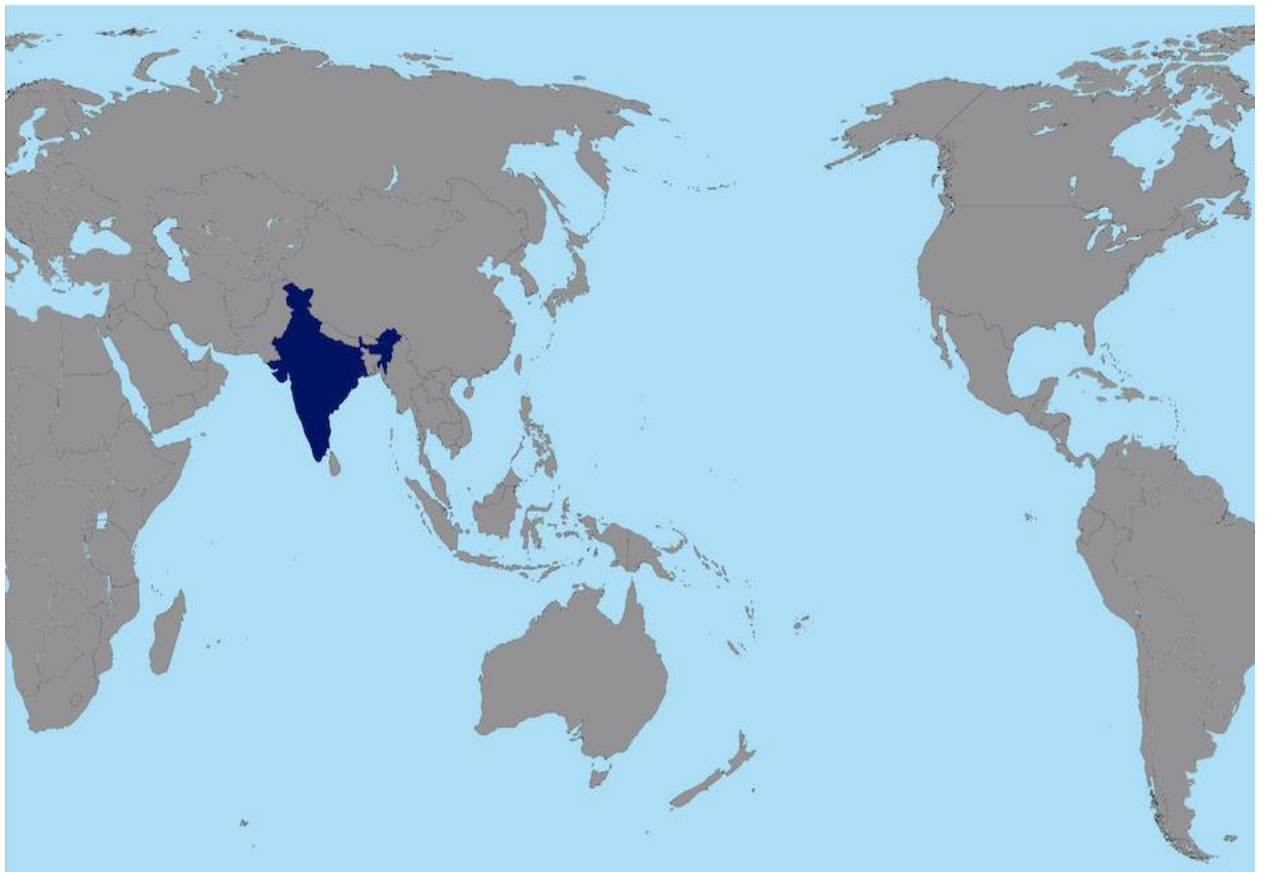


Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



DPG INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR DECEMBER 2020



Volume I, Issue 12 | December 2020

Delhi Policy Group

Core 5A, 1st Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi- 110003

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ABOUT US

Founded in 1994, the Delhi Policy Group (DPG) is among India's oldest think tanks with its primary focus on strategic and international issues of critical national interest. DPG is a non-partisan institution and is independently funded by a non-profit Trust. Over past decades, DPG has established itself in both domestic and international circles and is widely recognised today among the top security think tanks of India and of Asia's major powers.

Since 2016, in keeping with India's increasing global profile, DPG has expanded its focus areas to include India's regional and global role and its policies in the Indo-Pacific. In a realist environment, DPG remains mindful of the need to align India's ambitions with matching strategies and capabilities, from diplomatic initiatives to security policy and military modernisation.

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DPG INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR

This publication is a monthly analytical survey of developments and policy trends that impact India's interests and define its challenges across the extended Indo-Pacific maritime space, which has become the primary theatre of global geopolitical contestation. It is authored by Cmde. Lalit Kapur (Retd.), DPG Senior Fellow for Maritime Strategy, with the assistance of a team of DPG Research Associates comprising Anushka Nair and Angana Guha Roy based on open source reports and publications. Your comments and feedback may be addressed to Anushka Nair at anushka@dpg.org.in. To subscribe, please [click here](#).

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DPG INDO-PACIFIC MONITOR

December 2020

Overview

As vaccination programmes kicked off in the UK, Russia, US, Canada, Israel, Mexico and some Arab nations, a mutant strain of Covid-19 discovered in the UK and South Africa sent the world back into lockdowns and travel bans. At the end of the year, Covid-19 had infected over 83 million people worldwide, including over 20 million in the US and 10 million in India, and claimed more than 1.8 million lives.

The US-China Economic and Security Review Commission published its annual report during the month. The report highlighted the present status of US-China competition, with one section talking of evidence that the Chinese Government had pre-planned the June 15, 2020 incident in the Galwan Valley. Consultations among the Quad countries continued at senior official level. A Russian SSBN demonstrated the continued efficiency of the country's nuclear deterrent by successfully launching a salvo of four SLBMs from the Sea of Okhotsk on December 12, while a joint Russia – China bomber patrol aroused concerns in East Asia. A Chinese underwater glider was found in Indonesian waters off Selayar Island, near the straits connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans, generating concern that China was carrying out underwater surveys to permit usage of these straits by its nuclear submarines.

In Africa, President Trump directed that the majority of US military personnel and assets be redeployed out of Somalia by early 2021. Meanwhile, instability and discord trended upwards in the parts of Africa abutting the Indian Ocean. In Mozambique, near 400,000 people were displaced from their homes and development brought to a virtual halt due to the continuing insurgency in the hydrocarbon-rich Cabo Delgado region. Somalia severed diplomatic relations with Kenya, claiming interference in its internal affairs. Clashes between government and TPLF forces in Ethiopia's Tigray region spilled over into neighbouring Sudan, leaving at least four Sudanese Army personnel dead and over 20 wounded. Separately, the US formally rescinded Sudan's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism, enabling the transitional government to commence reintegrating itself with the world.

A terror attack on an airport in Aden killed at least 20 civilians and wounded dozens more. Israel's Knesset was dissolved after failing to pass the annual budget. Morocco and Bhutan established diplomatic relations with Israel during the month. A virtual ministerial meeting of the participants of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on December 21 resulted in a joint statement acknowledging the prospects of a US return to the JCPOA. The first US-Bahrain Strategic Dialogue took place virtually over two weeks, resulting in a Joint Statement on December 30. In other Middle East developments, India's Chief of Army Staff made the first ever visit by an Indian Army Chief to the UAE and Saudi Arabia, raising prospects for significant developments in military relations with these countries. The Singapore-flagged oil tanker BW Rhine was attacked by an explosives-laden boat at Jeddah's fuel terminal.

Israel deployed a submarine to the Persian Gulf to deter Iran from launching reprisals against it for the assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh last month. An American Ohio-class SSBN reconfigured to carry Tomahawk land-attack missiles was also deployed in the Gulf for a similar mission. The USS Nimitz Task Group moved back into the Persian Gulf, to cover the continuing withdrawal of US forces from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban reached a preliminary deal regarding their peace talks, the first such agreement since the conflict started. This was followed by formation of the Afghan Council for National Reconciliation and its first meeting on December 5.

Pakistan began loading fuel for the second unit of the 1100 MW Karachi nuclear power plant on December 01, 2020. China's Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe visited Islamabad and discussed enhanced defence cooperation as well as enhanced security for CPEC projects. China and Pakistan conducted a two week joint Air Force exercise Shaheen Eagle. Pakistan formally inducted the corvette PNS Tabuk into its navy, and a PN officer assumed command of the Multinational Combined Task Force at Bahrain.

Virtual summit-level meetings between Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and his counterparts from Bangladesh and Vietnam resulted in joint statements and numerous agreements between India and these nations. UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab visited New Delhi in preparation for the visit of PM Boris Johnson in January, 2021. India decided to issue a National Security Directive for the telecommunications sector mandating scrutiny of telecom equipment and resources. India also launched the Australia Economic Strategy Report, its response to the India Economic Strategy Report released by Australia in November 2018.

The Chief of the Japan Air Self Defense Force visited India to enhance cooperation and interoperability between the JASDF and the IAF. INS Kiltan visited Nha Rong port in Vietnam and Sihanoukville in Cambodia as part of Mission SAGAR – III. The Indian Navy conducted a PASSEX with the Russian Navy. The 35th India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol was conducted during the month. The second Project -17A frigate was launched by GRSE Kolkata, while the Indian Navy tested the BRAHMOS anti-ship missile, announced plans to acquire 38 extended-range versions and explored the option of leasing 15-18 F/A-18 aircraft from the US to equip INS Vikrant. Meanwhile, the Chinese blockage on offloading of Australian coal resulted in over 1500 seafarers, including numerous Indians, being stranded on board the estimated 70 ships carrying Australian coal that were at anchor off Chinese ports. China's refusal to permit change of crew generated apprehension that the crew were effectively being held hostage to generate pressure on the Indian and Australian governments.

The 20th meeting of the IORA Council of Ministers and the fifth meeting of the IONS working group on HADR were held during the month. The former resulted in the Emirates Communiqué and the IORA's Solidarity and Cooperation Statement in response to COVID-19.

ASEAN Defence Ministers met and issued a joint declaration on defence cooperation for a cohesive and responsive ASEAN. The ensuing ADMM-Plus meeting resulted in a joint declaration on the strategic security vision of ADMM-Plus. Indonesia stepped up its search for fighter aircraft to replace its ageing F-5s. It also continued negotiations for the acquisition of modified Scorpene-class submarines from France. Myanmar protested China's action of walling off the over 2,000 Km long border between the countries and formally commissioned the ex-INS Sindhuvir submarine as UMS Minye Thienkhatu. There was a warming up of defence relations between the Philippines and the US, with the latter gifting \$ 29.3 million in defence equipment during a visit by Christopher Miller, acting US Secretary of Defense.

In East Asia, Russia announced the deployment of the S-300V4 air defence system to the Kuril Islands. The US notified the sale of two Mk 15, Mod 25 Phalanx CIWS to equip the first of South Korea's KDX III Batch II destroyers. South Korea also indicated its intent to buy 12 MH-60R Seahawk anti-submarine helicopters.

Even as Japan grappled with a surge in Covid-19 infections, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga reiterated his commitment to holding the delayed Tokyo Olympics next year. Japan announced plans to cooperate with China to build

a mammoth facility to produce methane using waste carbon dioxide and hydrogen emitted by existing industrial plants in the Shanxi province. Showcasing technological competition in space, Japan's Hayabusa-2 space probe returned from the asteroid Ryugu with material samples, even as China's Chang'e-5 spacecraft returned with moon samples. Japan approved a record defence budget of \$51.7 billion for fiscal 2021, including two new Aegis destroyers, an indigenous 900-Km range standoff missile that would provide it first-strike capability and the development of a new fighter to replace its F-2s. Japan, France and the US also conducted a trilateral exercise in the Philippine Sea from December 15-18, 2020.

China continued its crackdown in Hong Kong by arresting activist Jimmy Lai on charges under security laws. Strong protests from the US and UK were disregarded. Meanwhile Foreign Minister Wang Yi addressed the Asia Society on December 18, 2020, providing the Chinese narrative on US-China relations and re-stating his standard mantras of win-win cooperation, equity, coordination with the US and the need to constructively manage differences. The aircraft carrier Shandong sailed through the Taiwan Straits into South China Sea, heading for its probable future base at Sanya, in Hainan Province. China also commenced sea trials of its second Type 075 assault ship.

China spelled out its ambition of becoming a global science, technology and innovation hub by 2025 through a press release from the State Council of the PRC. It announced plans to build a manned space station, with the core module being lofted into space in the first half of 2021. China said it had built 580,000 5G base stations in 2020, and would add 600,000 more in 2021. It also claimed its scientists had built Jiuzhang, the world's first light-based quantum computer, while its HL-2M Tokamak fusion reactor began operation. As the year ended, China announced completion of negotiations on its investment agreement with the EU and granted conditional marketing approval for its first self-developed Covid-19 vaccine.

The Australian Parliament passed legislation allowing the central government to override arrangements entered into by states, territories, local governments and universities with foreign governments if they were not consistent with Australian foreign policy. Australia also announced the establishment of the Sydney Dialogue, to discuss pressing issues relating to cyber and critical technology. Australia and the US decided to cooperate to develop air-breathing hypersonic weapon technologies. Australia announced that it would acquire two more P-8A Poseidon aircraft and upgrade the sonar of its Collins-class submarines. The 10th Australian – Indonesia Coordinated Patrol was conducted from December 2-3, 2020.

Papua New Guinea moved closer into China's orbit with the announcement of Chinese aid to develop a fishery park on Daru Island, on the northern shores of the Torres Straits, causing consternation in Australia. PNG Prime Minister James Marape survived in power after successfully wooing back a rebel faction that had earlier defected and reduced his government to a minority.

The US Electoral College decisively confirmed Joe Biden as the next President of the United States on December 14, 2020. US Congress passed the William M Thornberry National Defense Authorisation Act, authorising an expenditure of \$ 740.5 billion for FY 2021. The Act was, however, vetoed by President Trump and at the end of the year, the US Congress was poised to override the veto. The Trump administration terminated programmes that allowed visits and exchanges between the US and China, while sanctioning a number of firms and individuals due to human rights abuses and intimidation of civil society. President Trump signed into law the Tibetan Policy and Support Act, arousing strong protests from China. The US also released a Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability and address global fragility.

President-elect Joe Biden picked Janet Yellen to be his Secretary of the Treasury, Katherine Tai as the US Trade Representative, Anthony Blinken as his Secretary of State, Jacob Jeremiah Sullivan as his National Security Adviser, General Lloyd Austin as his Secretary of Defense, Alejandro Mayorkas as the Secretary of Homeland Security, Avril Haines as his Director of National Intelligence and Linda Thomas-Greenfield as his Ambassador to the UN. The Pentagon announced the appointment of Admiral John C Aquilino to succeed Admiral Phil Davidson as the Commander of the Indo-Pacific command. The US Navy announced that Captain Amy N Bauernschmidt had been chosen as the first woman in history to command a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier.

The US released 'Advantage at Sea', its new tri-service Maritime Strategy. In keeping with the new strategy, the USN stepped up transits of the Taiwan Straits and FONOPs in the South China Sea. It also conducted the CARAT exercise with the Singapore Navy and decided to decommission the fire-ravaged USS Bonhomme Richard.

An elaboration of these and other Indo-Pacific developments in December 2020, with relevant links, is contained in the succeeding paragraphs.

The Global Scene

The British government accepted the recommendation of the independent Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency and [approved Pfizer / BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine](#) for use on December 02, 2020. The UK became

the first country to start a vaccination programme for its public after completing Phase III trials. 91 year old [Margaret Keenan](#) became the first recipient of the vaccine on December 08, 2020. [Vaccination programmes also began in the US](#), Canada, Mexico, Argentina, Israel, Singapore, Switzerland, UAE, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. China and Russia had begun earlier, using vaccines still undergoing late-stage trials.

Even as advanced countries began vaccinating their people against Covid-19, a new mutant strain discovered in the UK and South Africa led to countries re-imposing travel bans and some countries going back into lockdown. More than 40 countries in Europe and Asia, including India, [restricted travel](#) from the UK. [Japan banned entry](#) of people from all countries in a bid to prevent spread the more contagious strain. Authorities rushed to reassure people that vaccinations were effective against the new strain. Meanwhile, as of the end of the year, the virus had covered the entire globe, [infected](#) over 83 million people, including over 20 million in the US and 10 million in India, and claimed more than 1.8 million victims worldwide.

France launched [investigation into 76 mosques](#) across the country as part of a crackdown on Islamist separatism. The investigation included going into the activities and finances of the mosques. The French government also [proposed legislation](#) to outlaw a broad array of activity it defines as forms of 'Islamist separatism'. The proposed legislation will be debated in the French parliament in January 2021.

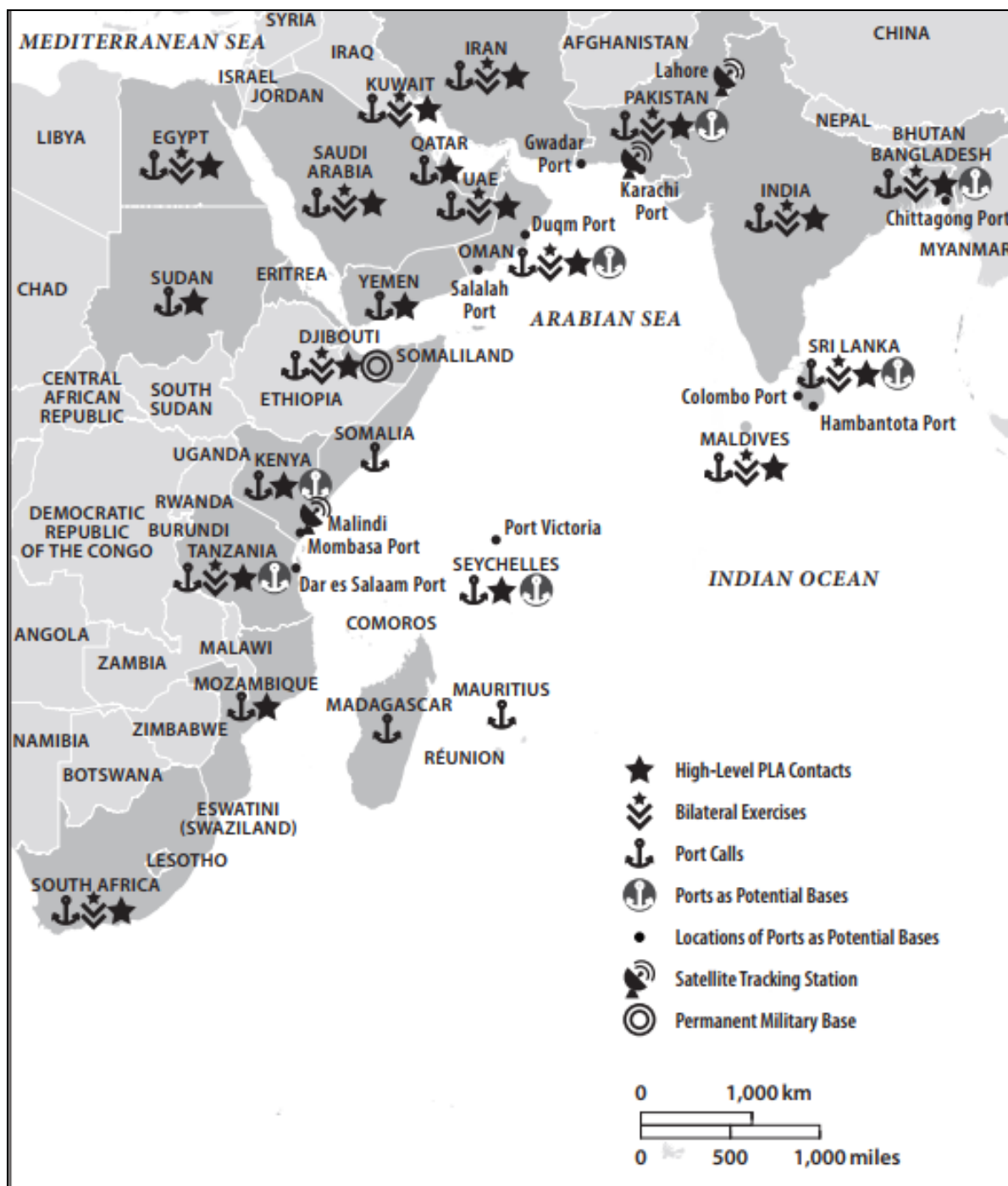
India completed its tenure as the chair of the Council of Heads of Government of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation on November 30, 2020. Vice President Venkaiah Naidu chaired the 19th meeting of the heads of government of the SCO attended by Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan at the level of Prime Minister on the occasion. Pakistan was represented by the Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs. High level representatives of Afghanistan, Iran, Belarus and Mongolia, SCO's four observer states, also attended. Vice President Naidu provided an [overview of priorities and activities](#) during India's chairmanship and described the most important challenge faced by the region as cross-border terrorism. He described terrorism as the true enemy of humanity and the scourge the entire region needed to collectively combat. He also decried attempts to bring bilateral issues into the SCO, thus blatantly violating well-established principles and norms of the SCO Charter safeguarding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states. A [Joint Communiqué](#) issued on the occasion saw India conspicuously refraining from joining other member states from reaffirming their support for China's BRI initiative.

Indo-Pacific Competition

The US-China Economic and Security Review Commission's [annual report to Congress](#) became available on December 01, 2020. The report is divided into five chapters: US-China global competition; US-China economic and trade relations; US-China security, politics and foreign affairs; Taiwan; and Hong Kong. The first chapter covers China's view of strategic competition with the United States; return of the Middle Kingdom; and China's strategic aims in Africa. The second chapter reviews US-China economic and trade relations in the past year; identifies vulnerabilities in China's financial system and risks for the US; and on US-China links in healthcare and biotechnology. The third chapter reviews US-China security, politics and foreign affairs as well as China's growing power projection capability. The report finds that further expansion of military presence in and around Africa would enable to PLA to impede the movement of the USN in the Western Indian Ocean; covers the military standoff on the China-India border (the report says that some evidence suggests that the Chinese government had planned the incident at Galwan Valley, including the possibility of fatalities); and discusses the employment of PLA (N) task forces in the Indian Ocean (it acknowledges that the PLA is working to establish the capability to project power and conduct operations in the Indian Ocean region and Africa). [China's spokesperson said](#), "The so-called commission has always been ideologically biased against China", and "There is no factual basis for the vilification and smear of China in various reports it has fabricated".

Following up discussions at the ministerial meeting in October 2020, senior officials of the [India](#), [Australia](#), [Japan](#) and the [United States interacted](#) through video conference on December 18, 2020. They reviewed ongoing and proposed cooperation in connectivity and infrastructure development and security issues, including counter-terrorism, cyber security, maritime security and humanitarian and disaster relief, with the objective of promoting peace, security, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific. They also underscored the importance of resilient supply chains for an expeditious and sustainable global recovery and the need to ensure safe, effective and affordable access to Covid-19 vaccines.

The Russian Borei-class SSBN Vladimir Monomakh [launched a salvo](#) of four Bulava ICBMs in quick succession from an underwater position in the Sea of Okhotsk on December 12, 2020. The launch was intended as a demonstration of the efficiency of Russia's nuclear deterrent. The dummy warheads are reported to have hit their designated targets in NW Russia, more than 5500 Km away.



Depiction of PLA Power Projection along the Indian Ocean Rim. Source: US-China Economic and Security Review Commission Report, December 2020.

China and Russia held their [second joint aerial strategic patrol](#) of the Asia-Pacific region on December 22, 2020. The patrol covered the airspace over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea and involved four Chinese H-6K and two Russian Tu-95 bombers. A report indicated that such [patrols could become routine](#). Reports indicate that South Korea indicated its [concern](#) over violation of the Korean ADIZ and China agreed to communicate with Seoul on issues that could be regarded as 'sensitive'.

East Africa

President Trump ordered the US Department of Defense and the US Africa Command on December 4, 2020, to reposition the [majority of the 700 US personnel](#) and their assets [out of Somalia](#) by early 2021. The DoD said that as a result of this decision, some forces may be reassigned outside of East Africa, while remaining forces would be repositioned from Somalia to neighbouring countries in order to allow cross-border operations by both US and partner forces to maintain pressure against violent extremist organisations operating in Somalia.

Mozambique's insurgency was reported to have [displaced](#) close to 400,000 people from their homes in the Cabo Delgado region. US coordinator for counter-terrorism, Ambassador-at-Large Nathan Sales is reported to have [visited](#) the country recently to see how the US can help contain, degrade and defeat the terrorist movement.

Somalia accused Kenya of interfering in its internal affairs and [severed diplomatic relations](#) on December 14, 2020. It recalled its diplomats from Kenya and gave Kenyan diplomats seven days to leave the country. The break occurred a day after Kenya's President hosted the president of Somaliland and decided to open a consulate in its capital, Hargeisa.

Japan [expressed](#) its serious concern over the deteriorating situation in Ethiopia, as well as over the large number of casualties and displaced persons due to military engagements. It hoped that Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front would settle the situation as soon as possible. Meanwhile, a [clash](#) between Sudanese troops deployed at the border and Ethiopian forces on December 16, 2020 left at least four Sudanese Army personnel dead and over 20 wounded. Sudan and Ethiopia [began talks](#) to demarcate their shared border a week later.

The United States [formally rescinded](#) Sudan's designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism on December 14, 2020. It ascribed the achievement to the efforts of Sudan's civilian-led transitional government to chart a bold new course away from the legacy of the Bashir regime and, in particular, to meet the statutory and policy criteria for rescission.

West Asia

Israel's Knesset was [automatically dissolved](#) on December 23, 2020, after failing to pass the national budget, moving the country towards its fourth general election in less than two years. The real reason for the fall of the government,

according to analysts, was Netanyahu's refusal to [relinquish premiership](#) to his coalition partner Benny Gantz in November 2021 as stipulated in the coalition deal.

A virtual ministerial meeting of the participants of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on December 21, 2020, resulted in a [joint statement](#) wherein they re-emphasised their commitment to preserve the agreement and expressed deep regret at the US withdrawal from it. They stressed that UNSC resolution 2231 still remains in force, acknowledged the prospect of a return of the US to the JCPoA and underlined their readiness to positively address this in a joint effort.

Morocco became the fourth Arab nation to [normalise its relations with Israel](#) on December 10, 2020. The [US statement](#) in this regard also recognised Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. Shortly thereafter, [Israel and Bhutan](#) exchanged Notes Verbale on the establishment of full diplomatic relations between them on December 12, 2020. The notes were exchanged between H.E. Major General Vestop Namgyel and H.E. Dr Ron Malka, Ambassadors of Bhutan and Israel respectively to India, at the Embassy of the State of Israel in New Delhi.

In an event seen as a reflection of India's growing strategic ties in the region, General MM Naravane, India's Chief of Army Staff, paid the first ever visit by an Army Chief to the UAE and Saudi Arabia. In the UAE, he [was hosted by his counterpart](#), Major General Saleh Mohammed Saleh Al Ameri and discussed issues of mutual interest and defence cooperation. He [also visited](#) the UAE's Land Forces Institute, Infantry School and Armour School. In Saudi Arabia, he was [hosted by](#) General Fahd bin Abdullah Mohammed Al-Mutir, Commander of the Royal Saudi Land Forces, Lt Gen Mutlaq bin Salim bin Al-Azima, Commander of Saudi Arabia's Joint Forces and other senior defence officials.

The US senate on December 09, 2020, rejected an effort to [block the sale](#) of F-35 aircraft and armed MQ-9B Reaper UAVs worth over \$ 23 billion to the UAE. The Trump administration had notified Congress of the proposed sale last month. Meanwhile the State Department provided notice of the proposed sale of eight Apache AH-64E Longbow [attack helicopters](#) and associated equipment to Kuwait at an estimated cost of \$ 4.0 billion, as well as [spares for](#) Kuwait's Patriot systems for an estimated cost of \$ 200 million. It also notified the sale of [bomb munitions](#) worth \$ 290 million to Saudi Arabia.

The Singapore-flagged oil tanker BW Rhine at Jeddah's fuel terminal was [attacked](#) by an explosives-laden boat shortly after midnight on December 14, 2020. The vessel's [owners said](#) the attack resulted in an explosion and

subsequent fire on board, which was extinguished with the assistance of the shore fire brigade and tug boats. The Saudi Ministry of Energy [confirmed](#) that there were no casualties, and no damage was caused to unloading facilities or to supply lines.

A terror attack on an airport in [Aden](#) on December 30, 2020, left at least 20 civilians dead and wounded dozens more. The arrival hall of the airport was rocked by explosions as officials lined up to receive arriving cabinet members. Government sources attributed the explosions to Houthi rebels. The US [condemned](#) the attack.

Iran claimed that some of those involved in the [assassination](#) last month of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, Iran's top nuclear scientist, had been arrested. It blamed Israel for the killing. Israel deployed a [submarine to the Persian Gulf](#). The USN's Ohio-class submarine USS Georgia was also reported to have [entered the Persian Gulf](#) for a similar mission. The latter has been converted to carry 154 Tomahawk land attack missiles in lieu of its SLBMs. The deployments are intended as a counter to Iran's rhetoric regarding [avenging](#) the assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh.



USS Georgia and USS Port Royal transit the Straits of Hormuz on December 21, 2020.

Source: US CENTCOM

The [US-Bahrain Strategic Dialogue](#) took place on December 30, 2020. A Joint Statement was released by the two governments following the event.

South Asia and Indian Ocean Island Nations

Representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban said on December 02, 2020 that they have reached a [preliminary deal](#) to press on with peace talks, their first written agreement since the commencement of the war 19 years ago. [The US](#) and [UK welcomed](#) the agreement, which codifies the rules and procedures the two sides have been negotiating since the start of the talks in September 2020.

The first meeting of the leadership committee of the Afghan High Council for National Reconciliation took place at the Presidential Palace on December 5, 2020. It was [attended by](#) former President Hamid Karzai, jihadi leaders and speakers of Afghanistan's two houses of parliament. [The US welcomed](#) the formation of the Council and the first meeting.

[Reports indicate](#) that the USS Nimitz task group was moved back into the Persian Gulf to provide combat support and air cover as US troops withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan by January 15, 2021, as ordered by President Trump. The report also indicated that the [US has closed](#) at least 10 bases across Afghanistan since it signed the deal with the Taliban in February 2020.

Pakistan began loading fuel for the second unit of the [1100 MW Karachi nuclear power plant](#) on December 01, 2020, preparatory to the plant being tested prior commencing operations in April 2021.

Chinese State Councilor and Defense Minister [General Wei Fenghe visited Islamabad](#) from November 30 - December 01, 2020. He met Pakistani President Arif Alvi, Prime Minister Imran Khan, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee General Nadeem Raza and Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa. [The two sides discussed](#) regional security, enhanced defence coordination and provision of a secure environment for CPEC projects. A Memorandum of Cooperation between the two armies was also signed.

Chinese Air Force troops were [reported to have departed](#) on December 07, 2020, for the Pakistan Air Force air base at Bholari, in Sindh, to participate in the 9th edition of the Joint Air Force Exercise Shaheen (Eagle).

Commodore Abdul Munib, Pakistan Navy, [assumed command](#) of Multinational Combined Task Force 151 in Bahrain on December 10, 2020. This is the ninth time a Pakistan Navy officer has assumed command of CTF 151. The force is

tasked with suppressing piracy in the Horn of Africa, Gulf of Aden and adjoining ocean space. The corvette [PNS Tabuk](#) was inducted into the Pakistan Navy on December 17, 2020. The ship was built by Romania's Damen Shipyard and had been commissioned at Constanta last month.

The India – Bangladesh virtual summit took place on December 17, 2020. [Seven agreements](#), including for cooperation in the hydrocarbon sector and in agriculture and Indian grant assistance for high impact community development projects, were signed on the occasion. The [Joint Statement](#) encompassed cooperation in the health sector; cultural cooperation; border management and security cooperation; trade partnership for growth; connectivity for prosperity; cooperation in water resources, power and energy; and partnership in the region and in the world.

A virtual summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc on December 21, 2020 resulted in the adoption of India-Vietnam [Joint Vision for Peace, Prosperity and People](#) and [seven other agreements](#). The vision for peace steps up defence and security cooperation for bringing stability to the Indo-Pacific; reaffirms the importance of the South China Sea and the legal framework for management of its disputes; underscores the importance of ASEAN – India cooperation in accordance with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative; commits both sides to strengthening multilateral and regional cooperation and strengthening counter-terror cooperation. The vision for prosperity encompasses bilateral trade and investment aspects, as well as new technologies, sustainable development and climate action. The vision for people seeks to strengthen shared cultural and civilisational bonds and promote people-to-people exchanges. A plan of action for the period 2021-2023 was also adopted.



Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab and External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar address the Press following their Meeting at Hyderabad House on December 15, 2020.

Source: MEA Photogallery/Flickr

The United States [conferred](#) its highest decoration, the Legion of Merit, on Prime Minister Narendra Modi on December 21, 2020. The award recognises his steadfast leadership and vision for India's emergence as a global power and exemplary contribution for the advancement of the India-US strategic partnership and promoting global peace and prosperity.

UK Foreign Secretary [Dominic Raab met](#) India's Minister for External Affairs Dr S Jaishankar in New Delhi on December 15, 2020. His visit marked the latest step by the UK to work with India to "boost trade, promote peace and work together as a force for good throughout the Indo-Pacific". The two ministers [explored ways](#) to "strengthen cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, on countering [terrorism and radical extremism](#) and addressing emerging challenges in the cyber, maritime and space domains". They also [agreed to](#) "prioritise finalisation of a roadmap for upgrading India-UK partnership to the next level". The roadmap will be adopted during the visit of Prime Minister Boris Johnson to India in January 2021. Mr Raab also paid a call on Prime Minister Narendra Modi on December 16, 2020. He handed over an invitation for the PM to attend the G-7 meeting to be chaired by the UK in 2021, which was accepted. Prime Minister Narendra Modi [called for](#) an ambitious and outcome-oriented roadmap covering trade and investment; defence and security; migration and

mobility; education; energy; climate change and health to tap the full potential of the bilateral relationship.

India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar [visited Qatar](#) from December 27-28, 2020. He called on the Amir of Qatar as well as the Prime Minister and Interior Minister, and held detailed discussions with the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. He handed over a personal message from Prime Minister Narendra Modi to H.H. Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani inviting him to visit India at an early date. The invitation was accepted.

India on December 17, 2020, decided to issue a [National Security Directive for the telecommunication sector](#) mandating scrutiny of telecom equipment and resources. The action is expected to result in a list of trusted sources and products that may be used by telecom companies. The policy is to be implemented within six months.

India's much-awaited [Australia Economic Strategy Report](#) (AES) was released on December 18, 2020. The first report of its kind by India for any specific country, the AES [suggests a roadmap](#) for future economic integration between India and Australia.

General Izutsu Shunji, Chief of Staff of Japan's Air Self Defense Force, [arrived in Delhi](#) on December 09, 2020. He called on Shri Rajnath Singh, the Defence Minister, the Chief of Defence Staff, the Chief of Naval Staff and the Vice Chief of Army Staff. He discussed avenues for enhancing cooperation and interoperability between the two Air Forces with his host, Air Chief Marshal RKS Bhadauria, the Chief of Air Staff.

India's Defence Acquisition Council [approved proposals](#) to acquire a range of equipment [including](#) six DRDO designed and developed Airborne Early Warning and Control aircraft for the Indian Air Force; 11 next generation offshore patrol vessels, 38 extended-range Brahmos cruise missiles and ship-borne UAVs for the Indian Navy and 40 new modular bridges for the Indian Army. The value of acquisitions was stated to be approximately Rs. 28,000 crores. Separately, India's Cabinet approved the [export](#) of Akash Surface to Air Missiles and constituted a [committee](#) comprising the Defence Minister, External Affairs Minister and National Security Advisor for faster approval of such exports.



Launch of the Project 17A Stealth Frigate (future INS Himgiri) by Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers, Ltd on December 14, 2020.

Source: Indian Navy

Himgiri, the first of the three Project 17A ships being built by GRSE Kolkata, was [launched](#) by Smt Madhulika Rawat on December 14, 2020. Seven ships are to be built under Project 17A, four by MDL Mumbai and three by GRSE Kolkata. The first ship of the class, Nilgiri, was launched at MDL Mumbai in September 2019. The ships are expected to begin entering service in August 2022.

The Brahmos supersonic cruise missile was [successfully tested](#) in the anti-ship mode against a decommissioned ship on December 01, 2020. The Indian Navy is reported to have moved a Rs 1800 crore proposal to acquire 38 [extended range BrahMos](#) missiles for its Vishakhapatnam class of warships. The missiles would be able to strike targets 450 Km away. Reports also indicate that the Indian Navy has reached an advanced stage in negotiations to [lease 15-18 F/A-18 Super Hornet Block III](#) from the United States for operation from INS Vikramaditya and INS Vikrant. There was no official confirmation. The leased aircraft are expected to fill the gap between the commissioning of INS Vikrant and procured aircraft becoming available.



Indian Naval Ship Shivalik (foreground) and Russian Federation Navy Ship Varyag exercise in the Eastern Indian Ocean on December 04, 2020. Source: PIB

The [Indian and Russian navies](#) conducted a passage exercise in the Eastern Indian Ocean from December 4-5, 2020. Russian Federation Slava-class cruiser Varyag, Udayoy class destroyer Admiral Panteleyev and ocean tanker Pechenga exercised with the indigenously built IN ships Shivalik and Kadmat. The 35th edition of the [India-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol](#) was conducted in the Andaman Sea from December 17-18, 2020. INS Kulish, KRI Cut Nyak Dien and maritime patrol aircraft from both navies participated. INS Kiltan visited [Nha Rong Port](#), Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam on December 24, 2020; and [Sihanoukville Port](#), Cambodia on December 29, 2020, as part of [Mission SAGAR-III](#). The ship delivered 15 tons of HADR stores each for the flood affected people of Central Vietnam and [Cambodia](#).

The [maiden test](#) of the army version of the Barak-8 medium range surface to air missile (MRSAM) jointly developed by DRDO and IAI Israel was successfully carried out on December 23, 2020. The missile destroyed a high speed unmanned aerial target mimicking an aircraft.

Four engineers from Bhutan began [training with ISRO](#) for the launch of Bhutan's satellite next year. The satellite is part of Bhutan's plan to use advanced technology, including ICT and space technology, for developing the country.

The 20th meeting of the Indian Ocean Rim Association [Council of Ministers](#) (COM) was hosted virtually by the UAE on December 17, 2020. All 22 member states and 10 dialogue partners participated. The COM adopted the Emirates

Communiqué and the IORA's Solidarity and Cooperation Statement in response to COVID-19. [The COM](#) welcomed Sri Lanka as the incoming Vice Chair of IORA for the period 2021-2023; agreed to include the French Republic as IORA's 23rd member state, on the basis of Reunion Island; and established two new bodies, the Core Group on Fisheries Management (CGFM) and the Working Group on Science, Technology and Innovation (WGSTI).

The fifth meeting of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium Working Group on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief was held through video conference on December 17, 2020. The Indian Navy chaired the working group, with other participants including Australia, Bangladesh, France, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Maldives, Oman and Thailand.

South East Asia

ASEAN Defence Ministers met on December 9, 2020 and issued a joint declaration on '[Defence Cooperation for a Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN](#)'. Apart from regular aspirational statements on maintaining peace, stability and security in accordance with international law and the need for an effective and substantive Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, they adopted concept papers on developing linkages between the ADMM and ASEAN Chiefs of Defence Forces Meeting and on enhancing Defence Attaché posts among member states; and adopted standard operating procedures for an ASEAN Military Ready Group for HADR and for the ASEAN Our Eyes information exchange to combat violent extremism, radicalisation and terrorism.

The ADMM-Plus meeting the next day issued a joint declaration on the '[Strategic Security Vision of ADMM-Plus](#)'. Addressing the meeting online, India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh [emphasised India's call](#) for an open and inclusive order based upon respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of nations, peaceful resolution of disputes through dialogue and adherence to international rules and laws. He underlined the importance of mutual trust and confidence based on restraint in activities and actions that may further complicate the situation. He also called for a stronger commitment to strengthen the international mechanism to fight terrorism, jointly and vigorously.

Indonesia was reported to be in an advanced stage of negotiations with France for the [purchase of 36 Dassault Rafale](#) multirole fighter aircraft. Defence Minister [Prabowo Subianto had earlier visited](#) the US, Austria, France and Turkey to explore options to replace Indonesia's ageing F-5s. Apart from the Rafales, the options being explored include F-15 or F-18 from the US (a report

indicates that Acting Defense Secretary Chris Miller [agreed to sell](#) Indonesia F-15 and/or F-18 aircraft during his recent visit there), [Su-35s from Russia](#) (although the US has threatened to sanction Indonesia if it goes ahead with the purchase) and 15 [second-hand Eurofighter Typhoons](#) offered by Austria. Indonesia was also reported to be continuing its discussion, begun in 2016, regarding the [acquisition of Riachuelo](#) (modified Scorpene class) submarines with France's Naval Group.

The discovery by Indonesian fishermen of a Chinese underwater drone near Selayar Island in South Sulawesi, near the entrance to the Ombai-Wetar Straits, generated concern that China was carrying out underwater surveys for potential use of the straits by its nuclear submarines. At least [two other](#) similar underwater drones have been found in Indonesian waters in the last two years.

Acting US Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller met Philippine Secretary of Defense Delfin Lorenzana and Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro Locsin Jr in Manila on December 8, 2020. He announced the transfer of \$ 29.3 million in [defence equipment](#) to senior Philippine military officials.

The USN, USMC and Republic of Singapore Navy partnered in the 26th annual Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) [maritime exercise](#) in the South China Sea from December 9-14, 2020.



Commissioning of ex-INS Sindhuvir as UMS Minye Thienkhathu on December 25, 2020. Source: Myanmar Navy

Reports indicate that China is constructing a 2,000 Km long reinforced [fence along its border with Myanmar](#). 659 Km of the fence had been completed by mid-December 2020. [Myanmar has objected](#), pointing to a provision in the 1961 border treaty which specifies that no structures shall be built within 10 metres of the demarcation line by either side. Separately, Myanmar [formally commissioned](#) ex-INS Sindhuvir into the Myanmar Navy on December 25, 2020, on the 73rd anniversary of the Myanmar Navy. The submarine has been renamed UMS Minye Thienkhathu. India's Ambassador to Myanmar was [present on the occasion](#). Meanwhile, Myanmar's Air Force is reported to be [buying](#) two Airbus CASA C295 aircraft from the Royal Jordanian Air Force to reduce dependence on China.

East Asia

Russia announced the deployment of the [S-300V4 air defence system on Iturup](#), in the Kuril Islands, on December 01, 2020. The islands were seized by the Soviet Union during the final days of WW II, and the continuing dispute about their ownership has prevented Russia and Japan from signing a peace treaty formally ending their hostilities.

Even as Japan grappled with a surge in COVID-19 infections, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga [asserted his commitment](#) to "host the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games in the summer of next year as proof that humanity has defeated the pandemic". He said he would spare no effort to bring about games that are safe and secure. The commitment was made in an address at the special session of the UNGA in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on December 04, 2020.

Prime Ministers [Yoshihide Suga](#) and [Narendra Modi](#) delivered addresses at the sixth 'Shared Values and Democracy in Asia' symposium in Tokyo on December 21, 2020. The dialogue is intended to highlight shared values of democracy, tolerance, humanism, freedom and tolerance.

Reports indicate that Japan and China will launch a [joint project](#) to build one of the world's largest methane production facilities in Northern China, using carbon dioxide and hydrogen emitted from industrial production in the Yulin Economic and Technological Zone in Shanxi Province. The two countries hope to establish the technology and prove it to emerging and developing nations. The project is expected to become operational in the mid-1920s.

Signalling intensified competition in space technology, Japan's [Hayabusa 2 space probe](#) landed a capsule in the [Australian outback](#) from the asteroid Ryugu, with about a gram of asteroid samples that scientists hope will provide insight into how life started on earth. The event took place shortly after China's Chang'e-5 mission collected about four lbs of moon rock samples. NASA's OSIRIS-REx had earlier picked up about [two ounces of samples from the asteroid Bennu](#) in October 2020 and is expected to return them to earth on September 24, 2023.

Japan's government approved a [record defence budget](#) totalling ¥ 5.34 trillion (\$ 51.7 billion) for FY 2021. Among the major capability enhancements envisaged include indigenous 900 Km range standoff missiles, [two new Aegis destroyers](#), a next-generation fighter to replace the JASDFs F-2, systems to shoot down aerial threats including drones, space related activities and improvements in cyber-security.

Japan decided to work with both the US and Britain to develop the [successor to its F-2 fighter](#) aircraft. By partnering two countries, Japan hopes to keep one country from exercising excessive influence on the development programme while ensuring interoperability, reliability and cost efficiency. Development of the new fighter is expected to start in 2024, for deployment in 2035 when the F-2 aircraft will begin to retire.



FS Emeraude, USS John S McCain and JS Hyuga participate in a trilateral anti-submarine exercise off Okinorotishima Island, December 15-17, 2020. Source: JMSDF

The JMSDF conducted a [trilateral exercise](#) off Okinotorishima Island, in the Philippine Sea, with the French and US Navies from December 15 – 17, 2020. The anti-submarine exercise [involved](#) the helicopter destroyer JS Hyuga, the Rubis-class submarine FS Emeraude, the Loire-class support vessel FS Seine, the Arleigh Burke-class destroyer USS John S McCain and a P-8A Poseidon from the USN. Separately, Japan's cabinet [approved the decision](#) to add two Aegis-equipped destroyers to the JMSDF on December 18, 2020. The decision will make Japan the largest operator of Aegis destroyers behind the USN.

Lawmakers in Japan's ruling LDP approved a proposal for [Japan to develop its own missiles](#) capable of reaching North Korea on December 09, 2020. Visualised to give Japan "strike capability beyond the reach of its opponents", the proposal is seen as another step away from Japan's pacifist constitution in that it would provide pre-emptive capability.

The US State Department notified its approval of the sale to South Korea of two Mk 15 Mod 25 [Phalanx Close-in Weapons Systems](#) for an estimated cost of \$ 39 million for its first KDX III Batch II destroyer. South Korea's Hyundai Heavy Industries is building three destroyers, [to be delivered every two years commencing 2023](#), at an anticipated cost of \$ 3.3 billion. The destroyers will be an improvement over the KDX III Batch I, with improved combat systems and ABM capability. Another report indicated that South Korea [plans to buy](#) 12 MH-60R Seahawk anti-submarine warfare helicopters and that the order is expected to be signed by the end of the current year. The US also agreed on December 11 to [return 12 sites](#), including some in central Seoul, to South Korea, clearing the way for civilian construction progress. The 12 are among the 80 sites US Forces in Korea had agreed to hand over in 2002.

Taiwan's Foreign Minister Joseph Wu sought the help of like-minded countries such as Japan, Australia, India and the US to [prevent China's expansionism](#). Noting that "defense of Taiwan is our own responsibility and we have the determination to defend ourselves", he said countries could further exchange of intelligence and information about China. He also said that Taipei would highly appreciate an Australian troop presence in the region, but noted it was not what Taiwan was looking for.

Hong Kong media tycoon and pro-democracy activist [Jimmy Lai was arrested](#) on December 02 on a charge of fraud relating to the lease of a building that houses his Apple Daily, a pro-democracy tabloid. He was [denied bail](#) the next day as the court deemed him a 'flight risk'. He will, therefore, be held in custody till April 2021, when the case is scheduled to be heard. [Secretary of State Pompeo said](#) the US was appalled by the Hong Kong government's political

persecution of pro-democracy advocates and “The use of courts to silence peaceful dissent is a hallmark of authoritarian regimes and underscores once again that the Chinese Communist Party’s greatest fear is the free speech and free thinking of its own people”. He [followed up](#) by designating 14 Vice-Chairpersons of China’s National People’s Congress Standing Committee, which had cleared the disqualification of Hong Kong legislators, effectively barring them from travelling to the US and jeopardising their US assets. [China summoned](#) the US Chargé d’affaires in Beijing to lodge a strong protest. Meanwhile, [British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab](#) urged the Hong Kong and Beijing authorities to “bring an end to their campaign to stifle opposition” and “prosecution decisions must be fair and impartial, and the rights and freedoms of people in Hong Kong must be upheld”.

China and the EU announced completion of their negotiations on an [investment agreement](#) on December 31, 2020. China also announced conditional marketing approval for its first [self-developed COVID-19 vaccine](#). An address by State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi at a special event hosted by the [Asia Society](#) on December 18, 2020, reiterated China’s narrative of China-US relations. It re-stated the standard mantra of win-win cooperation, equity, coordination with the US and the need to constructively manage differences.

[Beijing’s ambitions](#) to become a global science, technology and innovation hub by 2025 were encapsulated in a press release from the State Council of the PRC. Research fields including artificial intelligence, quantum science, medical science, block chain, information technology, internet of things, materials science, space technology and renewable energy will see more policy support and investment in the coming years.

China’s Chang’e-5 lunar probe [landed](#) on the moon at the preselected landing area 43.1° North and 51.8° East, in the Ocean of Storms, on December 2, 2020. It completed gathering [moon samples](#) the next day, [planted China’s flag](#), ascended back into space and [docked with the orbiter](#)-returner combination on December 6. The return capsule [landed](#) in Inner Mongolia on December 17, with 1,731 gm of lunar samples on board. A lunar sample [handover ceremony](#) took place in Beijing on December 19, 2020, bringing to an end the first mission to collect lunar samples in over 40 years. Separately, China ended its space programme for 2020 with the launch of the [Yaogan 33](#) remote sensing satellite into a sun-synchronous orbit on December 27, 2020. It will commence [construction of a manned space station](#) in 2021. The core module of the space station is expected to be [lofted into space](#) in the first half of 2021.

Authorities in the [city of Kunming](#) claimed on December 4, 2020 they had built more than 9,000 5G base stations across the city in preparation for the 15th meeting of the Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP15), to be held in the city in May 2021. The network will cover conference venues, hotels used by attendees, Kunming's airport, subway stations and high-speed railway stations. China also announced its intention of [adding 600,000 5G base stations in 2021](#), to add to the [580,000 built in 2020](#). In other technological developments, China claimed its scientists had created the [world's first light-based quantum computer](#) called Jiuzhang on December 04. The Chinese computer uses a new method of manipulating 76 photons to do its calculations, unlike that of Google (built last year) that uses superconductive materials. Separately, The HL-2M Tokamak, China's new-generation "artificial sun", [went into operation](#) on December 4 and has achieved its first plasma discharge. Designed to replicate the natural reactions that occur in the sun using hydrogen and deuterium gases as fuels, the apparatus in Chengdu will provide clean energy through controlled nuclear fusion.

The [first train carrying export cargo](#) from Istanbul, Turkey to Xi'an, China, departed Istanbul on December 4, 2020. The train carrying 42 containers completed its 8,693 Km long journey and arrived Xi'an on December 16. China's spokesperson was quick to describe the event as an example of China opening up its economy and offering the potential of its market to the rest of the world. Another report indicated that China-Europe freight trains [to and from Xi'an](#) had made more than 3,400 journeys in the first 11 months of 2020, carrying more than 2.64 million tonnes of freight.

China's ban on offloading of Australian coal resulted in an estimated 70 ships and over 1500 seafarers, including dozens of Indians, being [confined on board](#) off China for a prolonged period while the ships waited at anchor. This includes [two Indian ships](#) stranded off China's Caofeidian and Jingtang ports for over five months. China refused to permit exchange of crew members except at designated ports due to COVID-19 protocols. Crew-members, however, pointed out that they had effectively been in forced quarantine for over five months and could not, therefore, be infected. [China's spokesman claimed](#) there was no link between the stranded crew and its strained ties with India and Australia, but knowing China's penchant for dissimulation, the impression that the crew were being held to generate pressure on the concerned governments gained traction.

The Chinese aircraft carrier [Shandong](#) sailed through the Taiwan Straits and entered the South China Sea on December 21, 2020. The carrier is expected to be based in Sanya, in Hainan Province. A day later, the PLA (Navy) [commenced](#)

[trials](#) of its second Type 075 assault ship, just four months after the first of the class had made her maiden voyage. The ship, the equivalent of the USNs Wasp class LHDs, can carry 30 assault helicopters and 900 troops. Eight of them are reported to be on order.

Southern and Western Pacific

The Australian Parliament [passed legislation](#) on December 08, 2020, to ensure that arrangements entered into by States and Territories, local governments and Australian public universities with foreign governments are consistent with Australia's Foreign Policy. Under Australia's Foreign Relations (State and Territory Arrangements) Act 2020, the Minister of Foreign Affairs has been given the power to prevent prospective foreign arrangements from going ahead as well as to cancel existing arrangements, where it is determined that the arrangement is not consistent with Australia's foreign policy of adversely affects the country's foreign relations.

A [cabinet reshuffle](#) in Australia on December 18, 2020, saw Dan Tehan take over as the Australian Minister for Trade. The previous incumbent, Simon Birmingham had earlier assumed charge as the Minister for Finance. A revised list of the second Morrison Ministry is available at [link](#).

Australia [announced](#) the establishment and hosting of the Sydney Dialogue in the second half of 2021. To be hosted by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and funded by the Australian government, the dialogue is intended to bring together political leaders, industry experts, academics and civil society representatives to discuss the most pressing issues around cyber and critical technology. The 2021 dialogue will focus on the Indo-Pacific and will have India as a core topic, said Australia's Foreign Minister.

The US Department of Defense and the Australian Department of Defence announced a bilateral effort to advance the development of air-breathing hypersonic weapon technologies. "The Southern Cross Integrated Flight Research Experiment (SCIFiRE) is an Allied Prototyping Initiative (API) under the Directorate for Advanced Capabilities within the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering", [said the statement](#).

Australia's Defence Minister Senator Linda Reynolds announced that Australia would [acquire two more P-8A Poseidon](#) aircraft, bringing its total fleet size to 14. She also announced sustainment funding for the current approved fleet of three MQ-4C Triton aircraft, and that Australia's Collins-class submarines would receive [significant upgrades](#) to their sonar systems.

A Royal Australian Air Force F/A-18F Super Hornet [crashed](#) while taking off from the RAAF base at Amberley, near Brisbane, on December 08, 2020. The aircraft's two crew members ejected safely.



HMAS Wollongong and KRI Pandrong on Coordinated Patrol in the waters between Australia and Indonesia. Source: Australian MoD

The [10th Australia Indonesia CORPAT](#), involving HMAS Wollongong and TNI ships KRI Lemadang and KRI Pandrong was conducted from December 2-3, 2020. It covered the waters between Indonesia and Australia.

Papua New Guinea moved closer into China's dubious economic embrace following the announcement that the Fujian Zhongong Fishery Company had signed an MoU with the PNG government to build a \$ 200 million 'comprehensive multi-functional fishery park' on Daru Island, on the Northern shores of Torres Straits. The announcement generated [disquiet in Australian strategic circles](#), which described Daru as a remote, underdeveloped and small community beset with numerous health and social issues and opined that there are no known commercial fishing grounds in the vicinity. [Another report](#), however, said that the proposed port is right in the middle of the Torres Strait rock lobster fishery. China may have decided use its own fishing fleet to catch rock lobsters, instead of importing them from Australia.

PNG's Prime Minister James Marape [survived in power](#) after the country's Supreme Court had, on December 09, 2020, ruled that the sitting of parliament on November 17 was the result of an '[unconstitutional, invalid and ineffective](#)' ruling by Speaker Job Pumat. The court had directed that parliament reconvene on December 14, 2020. The opposition, however, was unable to table a vote of no-confidence as 18 MPs who had earlier defected went back to the government.

USA

The Electoral College [decisively confirmed](#) Joe Biden as the next president of the United States on December 14, 2020. The electors gave Biden 306 votes to Trump's 232, ratifying his November victory and bringing an end to President Trump's refusal to concede. Ironically, Trump had won by the same margin in 2016.

The US [Congress officially passed](#) the William M Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 on December 14, 2020. The Act passed both the Senate and the House with more than the two-thirds majority required to override any presidential veto. The 1480 page act authorises an expenditure of \$ 740.5 billion for the coming year. President Trump, however, [vetoed the bill](#) on December 23, objecting to some provisions related to the removal of Confederate base names and troop levels abroad, as well as the broad immunity provided to internet platforms for content from users they publish on their sites. As of the time of writing, the US House of Representatives had passed the Act again with a veto-proof majority. Senate action was awaited.

The United States [terminated five programs](#) which allowed US government employees to travel to China using foreign government funds, on December 4, 2020. These include the Policymakers Education China Trip Program; the US-China Friendship Program; the US-China Leadership Exchange Program; the US-China Transpacific Exchange Program and the Hong Kong Educational and Cultural Exchange Program. It said that these five programs fully funded by the PRC were soft power propaganda tools providing carefully curated access to only CCP officials, but not the people. The US also [imposed sanctions](#) on PRC and CCP officials or individuals active in China's United Front Work Department activities, on the grounds that the front intimidates members of the academia, businesses, civil society groups and Chinese diaspora committees who speak out against human rights abuses taking place in Xinjiang, Tibet and elsewhere in China. On December 18, 2020, the US added Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation (SMIC), China's largest manufacturer of computing chips, to an export [blacklist](#). It followed up

by [adding another 77 Chinese firms](#) to the Entity List, on the grounds that they enabled human rights abuses or supported militarisation and other unlawful maritime claims in the South China Sea.

Secretary of State Pompeo delivered a speech on the [Chinese Communist Party on the American Campus](#) at the Georgia Institute of Technology on December 09, 2020. The speech focused on how the Chinese Communist Party is “poisoning the well of our higher education institutions for its own ends, and how those actions degrade our freedoms and American national security”.

The US Department of State [released](#) the US Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability on December 18, 2020. The [strategy](#) commits the US to strengthen fragile states and empower reform-minded governments, people and society. It outlines four goals to guide US efforts: prevention, stabilization, partnerships and management.

President Trump [signed into law](#) the Tibetan Policy and Support Act (TPSA) 2020. He also signed the [Taiwan Assurance Act](#), aimed at deepening Taiwan-US relations. The TPSA makes it official US policy that decisions regarding the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama are exclusively within the authority of the current Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people and cannot be interfered with by China. It formally recognises the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) and contains provisions to protect the Tibetan environment and water resources, including the River Brahmaputra. China’s spokesperson [responded](#) with “reincarnation of living Buddhas including the Dalai Lama must comply with Chinese laws and regulations and follow religious rituals and historical conventions”.

The Third Annual [US-Australia Energy Security Dialogue](#) took place through video-conference on December 10, 2020. The Joint Statement released on the occasion talks of the commitment of both countries to strengthening their energy security and that of their partners; support to all countries to lawfully access and develop offshore resources in their EEZs free from harassment and coercion, including in the South China Sea; and commitment of both nations to foster an environment for fair energy trade in the Indo-Pacific.

As part of the continuing [US outreach to Indonesia](#), acting US Secretary of Defense Chris Miller met Indonesia’s Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto, Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi and Chief of Defence Staff Air Chief Marshal Hadi Tjahjanto in Jakarta on December 07, 2020. Discussions focused on the bilateral partnership and securing a free and open South China Sea and Indo-Pacific region.

The US State Department approved the possible sale of 155mm ammunition, accessories and related equipment worth \$ 132.2 million to [Australia](#); a Field Communication System and related equipment at an estimated cost of \$ 280 million to [Taiwan](#), and US Security Assistance Office support services to include advisory support to [Saudi Arabia](#) for an additional five years, at an estimated cost of \$ 350 million.

President-elect Joe Biden picked Janet Yellen to be his Secretary of the Treasury, Katherine Tai as the US Trade Representative, Anthony Blinken as his Secretary of State, General Lloyd Austin as his Secretary of Defense, Jacob Jeremiah Sullivan as his National Security Adviser, Alejandro Mayorkas as the Secretary of Homeland Security, Avril Haines as his Director of National Intelligence and Linda Thomas-Greenfield as his Ambassador to the UN.

The Pentagon announced the appointment on December 03, 2020 of [Admiral John C Aquilino as the Commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command](#). Admiral Aquilino, who is currently the Commander of the US Pacific Fleet, will replace Admiral Phil Davidson, the current commander, who is expected to retire. The appointment, which [could be reversed](#) by the incoming Biden administration, is subject to confirmation by the Senate.

Reports indicate that [Captain Amy N Bauernschmidt](#), USN, has been chosen as the [first woman in history to command a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier](#). She has earlier served as the Executive Officer of USS Abraham Lincoln and the Commanding Officer of USS San Diego.

According to the US Indo-Pacific Command, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) [failed to show up](#) for the virtual Military Maritime Consultative Arrangement (MMCA) Work Group and Flag Officer Plenary Session with the US Indo-Pacific Command scheduled for December 14-16, 2020. The US and PRC have met regularly since 1998 for the MMCA as a consultation mechanism to strengthen military maritime safety, improve operational safety in the air and at sea and reduce the risk between the two militaries. China, however, [blamed the US](#) for arbitrarily reducing the length of the meeting, changing the nature of the talks and trying to force China's participation without an agreed upon agenda.

The US Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard released a new tri-Service maritime strategy titled '[Advantage at Sea](#)' on December 17, 2020. The document focuses on five themes: generating integrated all-domain naval power; strengthening alliances and partnerships; prevailing in day-to-day competition; controlling the seas; and modernising the future naval force. It calls on the three services to "operate more assertively to prevail in day-to-day

competition". The strategy effectively replaces 'A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower' published in 2015.

The Israeli Missile Defence Organisation and the US Missile Defense Agency demonstrated a [multilayered air defence system](#) using the Iron Dome, David's Sling and Arrow weapon systems. The systems were deployed against cruise missile, UAV and ballistic missile targets. The development is considered significant in view of the threat posed by Iran and growing Arab-Israeli cooperation.

USS Mustin conducted a routine [transit of the Taiwan Straits](#) on December 19, 2020, followed by USS John S McCain and USS Curtis Wilbur doing [another transit](#) on December 31, 2020. The Chinese [Defence Ministry spokesperson](#) described these as provocative actions sending erroneous signals to Taiwan Independence forces and actions that severely jeopardised peace and stability across the Taiwan Straits. USS John S McCain conducted a Freedom of Navigation Operation [off the Spratly Islands](#), in the South China Sea, on December 22, 2020, challenging restrictions imposed by China, Taiwan and Vietnam. China, meanwhile, [claimed](#) it had tracked the ship and [expelled it](#) from the region.

After determining that the cost or repair could exceed \$ 3 billion and take 5-7 years to complete, the US Navy decided to [decommission USS Bonhomme Richard](#) (LHD 6) due to the extensive damage it had suffered in the fire on board in July 2020.



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