



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES
मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

Strategic Digest

Vol. 2 | No. 4 | 13 March 2020

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China's Use of Laser Weapons

According to a statement issued by the US Navy, in the third week of February 2020, a PLA Navy destroyer had fired a military-grade laser at one of its P-8 surveillance aircraft flying over the Philippines Sea. The statement noted that the laser beam was not directly seen by US personnel operating the aircraft but was detected by on-board instruments. This is the second time that the United States has highlighted the Chinese military's use of lasers against American aircraft. Earlier, in May 2018, US military officials had claimed that Chinese forces located in China's base in Djibouti have been repeatedly firing military-grade lasers at US military aircraft operating out of America's own nearby base in Djibouti. During one such incident, two pilots aboard a C-130 aircraft even sustained minor eye injury. The United States had



A BBQ-905 Laser Dazzler Weapon.
Source: <http://english.chinamil.com.cn>

thereupon issued a *démarche* to China highlighting these incidents and requesting it to investigate them. China, however, denied at that time any such incident had occurred.

According to a pictorial report published by the *PLA Daily* in December 2015, China has been continuously updating its laser weapons designed for different combat operations. The report also noted that “Blinding laser weapons are primarily used to

blind its targets with laser in short distance, or interfere and damage the laser and night vision equipment, etc.”

Protocol IV of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons prohibits the use of lasers that are specifically designed to cause permanent blindness. Both China and the United States are party to Protocol IV. It does not, however, cover incidental or collateral damage caused while lasers are being used for legitimate military purposes. Under these circumstances, states have no choice but to take protective measures against the use of lasers and begin to use lasers themselves in order to deter others.



WJG-2002 Laser Gun. Source: <http://english.chinamil.com.cn>

The Cobra Gold 2020 Multinational Exercise

The 2020 edition of the Cobra Gold military exercise was conducted from 25 February to 6 March 2020 in Thailand. It saw the participation of 9,630 military personnel from 29 countries. Cobra Gold is the largest multinational military exercise in the Asia-Pacific region. Its stated goals are to improve the capabilities in planning and conducting joint operations, foster cooperation, and enhance interoperability for meeting security as well as humanitarian contingencies.



Source: <https://defpost.com>

Co-sponsored by Thailand and the United States, Cobra Gold began in 1982 to improve coordination between their militaries and thereby strengthen their alliance. Over time, it has been expanded to include other countries in the region, although most participate as observers. Thus, the main participants in the 2020 edition were Thailand, United States, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and South Korea. China as well as India participated in the humanitarian civic assistance exercise.

Each iteration of Cobra Gold involves several distinct activities including Combined Arms Live Fire Exercise, Command Post Exercise, and Amphibious Exercise. The 2020 edition saw the addition of a Cyber Field Training Exercise featuring personnel from Thailand and the United States as well as cyber operators from Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia and Singapore with the aim of fostering cooperation and coordination in defending networks.

Indonesia Enhances Maritime Patrol Capability

Indonesia has agreed to accept the US grant of 14 Boeing Insitu ScanEagle drones and three Bell 412 helicopters to strengthen its capability to conduct maritime patrol operations. It has been estimated that Jakarta would spend about USD 720,000 to integrate the drones and the helicopters with existing defence systems.

ScanEagle is a mini UAV with a range of 1500 kilometres and an endurance of about 28 hours. It can be used for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions, performing sea lane and convoy protection duties, protecting high value installations, and relaying high-speed wireless voice, video and data communications. For its part, the Bell 412 is designed to perform search and rescue, carry out evacuations, and assist in special operations. These platforms will enhance the Indonesian Navy's maritime surveillance capabilities.

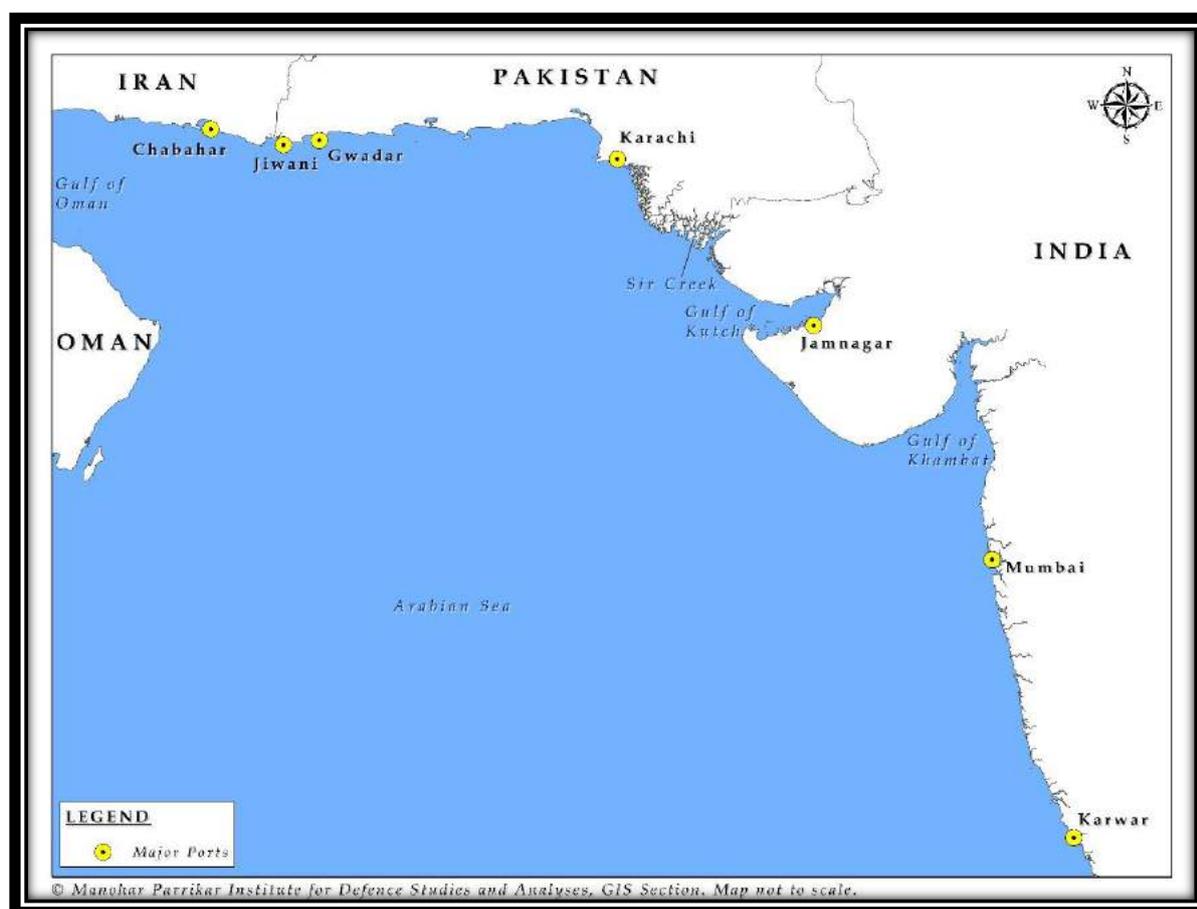


Indonesia had accepted US arms earlier in 2014 and 2015 under the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) scheme. The latest acquisitions come in the wake of the accentuation of security concerns in recent months by China's assertion of maritime claims in the Natuna Sea, which Indonesia views as its own territorial waters. In January 2020, Chinese fishing boats, accompanied by Coast Guard vessels had forced their way into the Natuna Sea, triggering an Indonesian response involving

the deployment of F-16 aircraft and naval ships. That episode also highlighted the need to enhance surveillance and monitoring capabilities, thus making Indonesia more receptive to the US offer of drones and helicopters.

Pakistan Navy Exercise Sea Spark 2020

Exercise Sea Spark is the largest of the naval exercises periodically conducted by the Pakistan Navy to simulate naval warfare and protection of the country's maritime border. During the Exercise, the Pakistan Navy places special emphasis on conventional and non-conventional war games. An important feature is the pitching of the Army and Air Force against the Navy to determine naval capabilities in joint operations in specific threat environments.



Sea Spark 2020 was conducted in the Arabian Sea along the Pakistan Coast from Jiwani to Sir Creek. The exercise involved the participation of all naval platforms and assets of the Pakistan Navy, Special Forces and Pakistan Marines detachments, along with elements of the Pakistan Maritime Security Agency (PMSA), Pakistan Army and Pakistan Air Force. In addition, officials from the Ministries of Defence, Foreign Affairs, Energy, Interior and Finance are also part of the exercise. The hallmark of the 2020 edition was live firing of anti-ship missiles from surface, sub-surface and aviation platforms.

US-Taliban Agreement

On 29 February, the United States and Taliban signed a four-part agreement in Doha, Qatar. The first two parts deal with the respective commitments undertaken by the Taliban and the United States, and the last two relate to intra-Afghan negotiations for a ceasefire and political roadmap. While each of these parts will be implemented according its own timeline and terms, all are supposed to be inter-related, with the first two paving the way for the last two.

The Taliban has agreed to ensure that Afghan territory is not used either by its



Source: <https://www.washingtonpost.com>

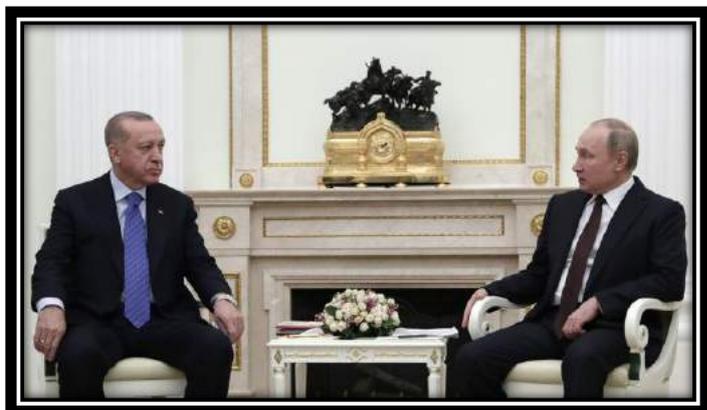
members or by other individuals and groups to threaten the security of America and its allies. In this regard, it has undertaken to instruct its members not to cooperate with those posing such a threat as well as send a clear message to the latter that they have no place in Afghanistan, not host them on Afghan territory, not provide them legal documents, and prevent them from recruiting, training and fundraising activities.

US commitments include: reduction in the number of American and allied troops to 8,600 in the first 135 days, and a complete pull out by April 2021; work with all relevant sides to release all combat and political prisoners over a period of three months; review US sanctions against the Taliban with the goal of removing them by 27 August 2020; initiate diplomatic efforts with the aim of getting the Taliban removed from UN Security Council sanctions by 29 May 2020; request the UN Security Council to endorse this agreement; and, refrain from the threat or use of force against Afghanistan as well as intervention in its internal affairs. In parallel, the United States also signed a Joint Declaration with the Ashraf Ghani government on the same day in which it reaffirmed support for all Afghan institutions including the security forces, expressed readiness to conduct military operations against al Qaeda, ISIS and other international terrorist groups, and facilitate discussions between Afghanistan and Pakistan to ensure that neither feels threatened by the actions of the other. For its part, in the Joint Declaration with the United States, the Ghani government endorsed the US-Taliban deal and pledged to participate in negotiations with the Taliban for a comprehensive ceasefire and political roadmap.

The first warning that all may not be well came when the Ghani government demurred from releasing the entire first tranche of 5000 Taliban prisoners. That appears to have caused the Taliban to attack Afghan government forces in Helmand province, which, in turn, led US forces to carry out air strikes against the Taliban. This initial hiccup has, however, since died down with Ghani issuing a decree to release about 1500 Taliban prisoners. The Taliban has reportedly agreed to hand over 1,000 government troops.

Meanwhile, a political crisis has begun to brew in Kabul with both Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, the two main contestants in the presidential elections held in September 2019, holding parallel presidential swearing-in ceremonies. This state of affairs is likely to further strengthen the bargaining position of the Haqqani-Taliban network and their backers across the Durand Line.

Russia-Turkey Ceasefire Agreement on Idlib



Source: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/03/05/turkey-russia-agree-ceasefire-in-syrias-idlib-a69535>

On 5 March, Russia and Turkey signed a ceasefire agreement on Syria's Idlib after talks between Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin in Moscow. Under the terms of the agreement, a 12-kilometre security corridor will be established between the rebel-held area of Idlib and the forces of the Assad regime and it will be jointly patrolled by Russian and Turkish soldiers.

The situation in Idlib had been festering since 15 December 2019 when the Assad regime's forces backed by Russian air strikes launched an effort to take over this last rebel-held region in Syria. Because of Turkey's support for the rebels and the presence of Turkish forces, the Assad regime could not ultimately succeed although it did manage to push the rebels back and capture several towns and villages in the southern part of the province. The situation came to a head on 27 February when 35 Turkish soldiers were killed in a coordinated ground and air attack by Syrian government forces. Turkey responded the very next day with Operation Spring Shield, targeting Syrian forces through drone and air strikes. Although Turkey took care to avoid directly targeting Russian camps, there was nevertheless a fear that the fighting might degenerate into a direct confrontation between the Russian and Turkish forces in Syria.

While the situation remains fragile, Turkey's gambit appears to have paid off for the time being with Putin agreeing to a ceasefire. Nonetheless, the likelihood of the



Source: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1613996/middle-east>

status quo continuing for long is bleak given that Russia and the Assad government have the upper hand when it comes to military escalation as well as progress in the peace process. The Assad government wishes to take over northwest Idlib and the Kurdish-controlled northeast

Rojava region before embarking upon negotiations for a comprehensive peace deal. Russia and Iran support this position of the Assad regime. Turkey, however, opposes such a denouement because any serious escalation in the fighting will worsen the already fragile refugee situation inside its territory.

Cooperation between Russia and Turkey in Syria has entered the last lap. If Turkey continues to resist the Assad regime's quest to retake Idlib, it might soon find itself confronting Russia that too at a time when its ties with the United States and NATO are strained.