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Related Categories: International Economics and Trade; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Terrorism; China; India; Japan; Pakistan

THE DIVISIVE HUNT FOR AN INDIAN SEPARATIST

After being on the run from Indian police for a month, Amritpal Singh, a Sikh leader from the Indian state of Punjab known for his support of the Khalistan movement, was finally arrested just two days ago. Singh is the leader of Waris Punjab De, a Sikh-separatist political group that is part of a movement focused on creating an independent ethno-religious sovereign state called Khalistan. The movement has its roots in the events surrounding the 1984 "Sikh Genocide" (also known as Operation Blue Star) where the Indian army waged a pitched battle against Khalistani militants who were murdering civilians in the name of the Punjab insurgency.

Since then, discontent in Punjab has only deepened, exacerbated in recent years by the Hindu nationalist rhetoric of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The hunt for Singh brought matters to a head. Indian authorities, for instance, cut off internet access for almost 30 million people as they searched for the militant leader. These actions, in turn, have been dubbed human rights violations and prompted protests in the U.S., Canada, and the UK. (Time, March 23, 2023; The Tribune, April 24, 2023)

PAKISTAN SEEKS TO PROTECT CHINESE RESIDENTS

Pakistan has witnessed an uptick in terrorist attacks in recent years, many of them targeting Chinese citizens living in the country. The trend has been a drag on efforts by the two countries to strengthen bilateral ties, and Beijing has put pressure on Islamabad to do more to combat such attacks. Islamabad is attempting to do just that. In mid-March, after receiving intelligence about possible attacks, the Karachi police shut down a number of businesses that failed to implement security precautions - some of which, ironically, were Chinese-owned entities. In Pakistan's Punjab province, meanwhile, the government has established Special Protection Units to look out for Chinese nationals on projects relating to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The stakes for Pakistan are high. The country needs to find solutions soon to better protect Chinese workers, or risks losing billions of dollars of Chinese investments. Islamabad's efforts, however, appear to be hampered by a lack of governmental coordination and the negligence of Chinese citizens themselves. (Nikkei, March 29, 2023)

JAPAN'S NEW INDO-PACIFIC PLAN

This year, India and Japan hold the presidency for the G-20 and G-7, respectively. As part of its G-20 presidency, Japan is aiming to deepen ties with developing countries, and last month, the country's Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida, visited India and announced a new \$75 billion Indo-Pacific action plan to counter Chinese influence in the region. Some of the main points of this new plan include investing in developing economies, increased global connectivity, cooperation with Indo-Pacific countries, and "ensuring the safety of the open seas and skies." A key feature of Japan's plan includes more naval drills with India and the U.S., as well as exercises with ASEAN nations and the Pacific Islands countries. Japan's plan underscores an important priority for South and Southeast Asia, one that the Quad alliance (made up of the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India) also seeks to advance: countering Chinese influence. Most recently, the Quad has pushed back against China's efforts to "hijack" the UN agenda on such issues as sustainable development, as well as its control over counterterrorism proposals, given its close relationship with India's regional rival, Pakistan. (CNBC, March 20, 2023)

LITHIUM FIND A MIXED BLESSING IN CONTESTED KASHMIR

The recent discovery of massive lithium deposits in India-administered Kashmir represents a potential blessing for India's growing economy - albeit one that has engendered mixed reactions. The Geological Survey of India estimates that there are around 5.9 million metric tons of lithium located in the southwest of Jammu & Kashmir, with a total value of roughly \$410 billion. On one hand, this is incredible news for India, as lithium is used to manufacture batteries in electric vehicles and other electronic devices, and is in high demand around the globe. As such, India's discovery of deposits will help save billions of dollars that would otherwise be spent on importing the element. In addition, the government hopes the deposits will attract foreign investment, as well as help India meet its goals to transition much of the country's vehicle inventory to electric energy by 2030. On the other hand, however, the extraction of these newfound deposits will require vast amounts of land, potentially resulting in irreversible damage to the local ecosystem and native vegetation, and may ultimately push out indigenous residents. Many Kashmiri locals fear the Indian government will confiscate their land and are pushing for social safeguards, reasonable policies, and a holistic examination of the environmental repercussions before extraction begins. (VOA News, March 29, 2023)

