



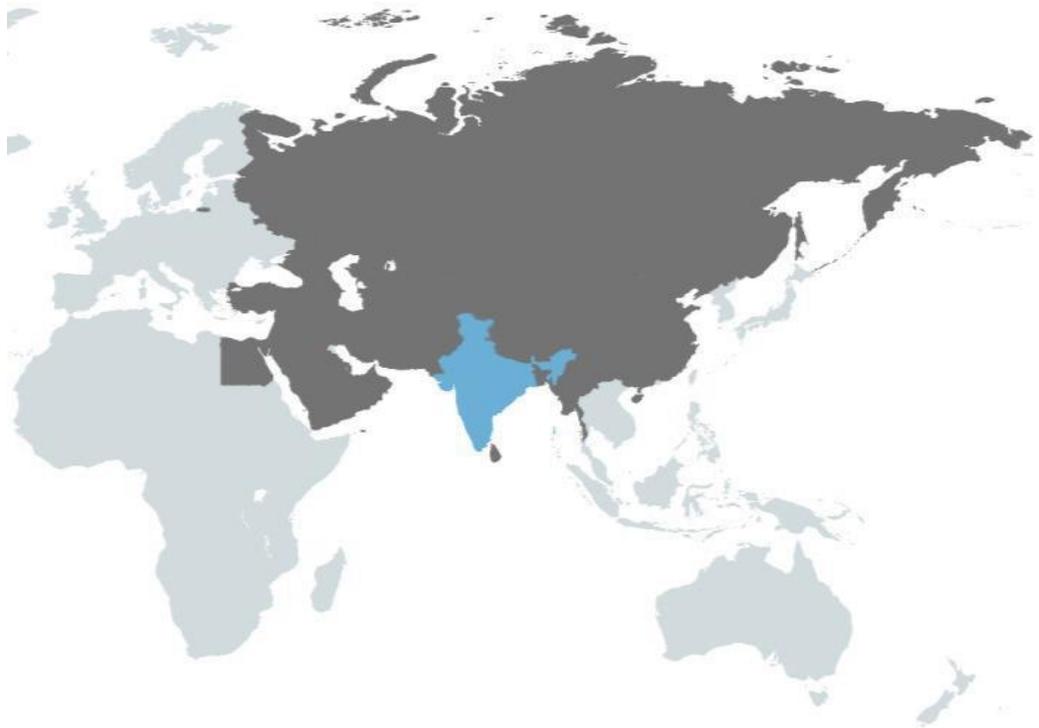
**Delhi Policy Group**

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



# INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

## JANUARY 2021



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Delhi Policy Group  
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## DPG India Strategic Review

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### DPG INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

The DPG India Strategic Review (ISR) is a monthly survey of key developments, trends and policies pertaining to India's immediate and continental neighbourhood. It is compiled by a research team which is led by Sanjay Pulipaka, Senior Fellow, and includes Research Associates Mohit Musaddi, Sanket Joshi, Shreyas Deshmukh and Anushka Nair. The ISR is based on open source official statements, reports and publications. Your comments and feedback may be addressed to Mohit Musaddi at [mohit@dpg.org.in](mailto:mohit@dpg.org.in). To subscribe, please [click here](#).

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*World map*

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## Overview: Political Instability and Vaccine Diplomacy

*Sanjay Pulipaka and Mohit Musaddi*

The year 2021 has begun with multiple challenges associated with political transitions. In the aftermath of a violent mob attack on the US Capitol, the Biden administration has taken over the reins of power in Washington. In India's neighbourhood, Nepal has been going through a painful process of political instability, with the survival of the caretaker government being tested on a daily basis. The most destabilising development has been a coup by the Myanmar military after the Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy (NLD) secured a spectacular victory in the November 2020 elections. The political crisis has continued in Pakistan and prospects of a peace process in Afghanistan remain bleak. Meanwhile, India continues to confront China's aggression along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

### India and China: Long Road to Disengagement

It has been approximately ten months since India and China have been locked in a tense stand-off at the LAC in Ladakh. There were [reports](#) in mid-January that there may be some withdrawal of PLA troops from the depth areas. However, such withdrawals were not considerable and seemed to be guided only by the need to manage the harsh winter in the Himalayas.<sup>1</sup> Indian troops continue to withstand the difficult conditions and LAC winters and "there is no compulsion now to cede ground".<sup>2</sup>

On January 24, India and China held the [9<sup>th</sup> meeting](#) at the Corps Commander Level at the Moldo-Chushul border meeting point.<sup>3</sup> India has reportedly insisted that any disengagement will have to be a "simultaneous and step-by-step effort by both sides".<sup>4</sup> The two sides are expected to hold the 10<sup>th</sup> round of the Corps Commander-level talks at an early date. India has expressed the hope that future military-level talks and diplomatic discussions will result in "a workable and sequential [roadmap](#) for disengagement, de-escalation and de-induction".<sup>5</sup>

On January 28, India's External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar listed [eight principles](#) to restore the bilateral relationship to good standing, including adhering to all bilateral agreements in entirety maintaining peace and tranquillity on the LAC, and managing differences and divergences.<sup>6</sup> The fact that senior Indian leaders are enunciating the principles that should ground the India-China bilateral relationship suggests that the process of normalisation will be a long road ahead.

The Indian government has [instructed airlines](#) not to fly Chinese nationals to India from a third country.<sup>7</sup> The decision was taken in response to [China's step in November 2020](#) to "suspend entry of foreign nationals... from some countries including India, due to the pandemic".<sup>8</sup>

## Troubled Transitions in the Neighbourhood

In Myanmar, hopes of a stable political process have been quashed by the military. Various international actors validated the November 2020 elections in Myanmar as free and fair, but the Myanmar military seems to be adamant that there was voter fraud. As a result, on February 1, the Tatmadaw said that it has taken "control of the country in a [coup against](#) the civilian government" and detained State Counsellor Suu Kyi along with other leaders of the NLD.<sup>9</sup>

Nepal's political crisis seems to be deepening with the expulsion of caretaker Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli from the Nepal Communist Party (NCP). It seems increasingly likely that this political instability will persist until elections, scheduled for April-May 2021.

Beijing's involvement is evident in the political processes in Nepal and Myanmar. A team of senior officials from China arrived in Nepal within days of PM Oli dissolving parliament, seeking to keep PM Oli at the helm. Nay Pyi Taw's political crisis intensified weeks after Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit.

China's vaccine diplomacy has made slow **progress**. Beijing has [promised vaccines](#) to Malaysia, the Philippines, the UAE, Turkey, Brazil and Mexico.<sup>10</sup> Since July 2020, Beijing has conducted three multilateral dialogues with South Asian countries to push cooperation on fighting COVID-19. In South Asia, China plans to compete with Indian as well as the Western vaccines. Despite Chinese efforts, the vaccine developed by Oxford University and AstraZeneca (also manufactured by the Serum Institute of India) is the most preferred, with pre-orders of more than 2.5 billion doses worldwide.<sup>11</sup> Beijing has responded with a "[smear campaign](#)" against the Indian-manufactured vaccines. Chinese state media has run multiple opinion articles "raising questions about India's capacity to manufacture vaccines" and claiming that "Indians in China were 'embracing' Chinese vaccines".<sup>12</sup>

India's Vaccine *Maitri* programme has, meanwhile, made rapid strides in the Indian subcontinent and beyond. India has gifted the AstraZeneca-developed and Serum Institute of India manufactured vaccines to Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, Bhutan, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Seychelles, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait and Morocco. India has a robust pharma industry and an advanced vaccine production sector. It has a long history of supplying low-cost

vaccines to developing and under-developed countries. The Government of India has already gifted close to six million initial doses of the made-in-India vaccines to countries across the Indian subcontinent (See Chapter 2 for a detailed breakdown of vaccine distribution in the neighbourhood). Most encouragingly, there have been no complaints from its own citizens on India's move to distribute the vaccines abroad. On the contrary, there is an element of pride that India is able to reach out to other countries at a time of crisis.

[UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres](#) recognised India's importance in distributing vaccines to the world, saying "India's vaccine production capacity is one of the best assets the world has today" and expressing the hope that "India will have all instruments necessary to play a major role in ensuring a global vaccination campaign becomes possible".<sup>13</sup>

### India-Arab States: Partnership Beyond Gulf

India's recent trend of upgrading defence ties with Israel continued in January 2021. Delhi and Tel Aviv successfully tested the jointly developed Medium-Range Surface-to-Air Missile (MRSAM). In the Middle East, there have been multiple proposals for trilateral mechanisms involving India and Israel. While in the recent past, there was a suggestion for a trilateral between Israel, India and the UAE, in January 2021, the Ambassador of Morocco to India has suggested a trilateral between [India, Israel and Morocco](#).<sup>14</sup>

During the month, India's Minister of State for External Affairs and his UAE counterpart discussed "the way forward in the [Indian Ocean Rim Association](#) (IORA), under UAE's continuing Chairmanship".<sup>15</sup>

India stepped up its development cooperation with Iran on the [Chabahar port project](#), handing over two 140-tonne cranes to Iran.<sup>16</sup> This was part of the bilateral accord signed between India and Iran in May 2016 to provide USD 28 million "to equip and operationalise the port".<sup>17</sup>

### Afghanistan-Pakistan

In recent months, Afghanistan has seen an [increase in violence](#) against "government officials, civil society leaders and journalists".<sup>18</sup> Newly appointed US National Security Advisor (NSA) Jake Sullivan intends to "[review the February 2020 US-Taliban agreement](#)" to assess whether the Taliban has adhered to its commitment of cutting ties with terrorist groups and reducing violence in the country.<sup>19</sup>

Violence in Pakistan against [religious minorities](#) remains high. On December 30, 2020, the Krishna Dwara temple in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) Province was set on fire. On January 3, 2021, 11 Shia Hazara miners were killed in an attacked claimed by the Islamic state.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) chief Maulana Fazal-ur-Rehman has termed the "11-party movement against the incumbent government of Imran Khan a '[jihad](#)'".<sup>21</sup>

Pakistan's economy situation continues to be dire. There is a [severe energy crisis](#) and power shortage, amidst decreasing oil and gas production.<sup>22</sup>

On January 5, a Pakistan anti-terrorism court sentenced the [Mumbai attack mastermind](#) Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi to "15 years of imprisonment".<sup>23</sup> However, Pakistan's Supreme Court acquitted the accused in the killing of American journalist Daniel Pearl. The Biden administration expressed "outrage" at this decision and Secretary of State Anthony Blinken spoke to the Pakistani Foreign Minister to [express concern](#).<sup>24</sup> Washington's approach towards Pakistan will be tested in the coming weeks, with a Financial Action Task Force (FATF) review of the country for terror financing coming up in February 2020.

## Russia

US President Joseph Biden spoken to his Russian counterpart in a telephone conversation on January 26. The American and Russian readouts of the conversation were strikingly different. While the [White House noted](#) that the discussion revolved around Russia's interference in the 2020 United States election and Aleksey Navalny's poisoning,<sup>25</sup> the [Kremlin focused on](#) the Open Skies Treaty and JCPOA.<sup>26</sup> While there are significant differences and issues in Washington's relationship with Moscow, a direct conversation between the two Presidents in the first week of the Biden administration is encouraging.

The possibility of [CAATSA sanctions](#) being imposed on India for its purchase of the S-400 air defence systems from Russia remains. Washington has reportedly informed Delhi that it is unlikely to escape sanctions.<sup>27</sup> India has said that it pursues an independent foreign policy and has time and again asserted its right to choose its defence supplies based on need. Meanwhile, India will be [procuring](#) 12 Sukhoi-30MKI fighters and 21 MiG-29 from Russia.<sup>28</sup>

A Track II dialogue between counterparts from [India, Japan and Russia](#) was held on January 20 on the potential for economic cooperation in the Russian Far-East.<sup>29</sup>

Russia's relationship with China, which is at a "[historic high](#)", continues to attract attention in New Delhi.<sup>30</sup> Beijing and Moscow have increasingly been using the Russian rouble and Chinese yuan in international trade. [Non-dollar settlements](#) between the two countries were recorded at 25 per cent in 2020, compared to just 2 per cent in 2013.<sup>31</sup> Russia and China are also collaborating in [addressing critical issues](#) "within the UN, SCO, and BRICS".<sup>32</sup>

## United States in Transition

US President Joseph Biden held telephone conversations with UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson (January 23) and French President Emmanuel Macron (January 24). Among the P5 countries, he is yet to have a conversation only with the Chinese President. Washington apparently wants to [delay high-level US-China contacts](#) until it consults with close allies, which China will interpret as a rebuff.<sup>33</sup>

NSA Sullivan has suggested that Washington will [not let off Beijing](#) for its "actions against Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, its crackdown in Hong Kong and threats towards Taiwan".<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Taiwan's de-facto Ambassador to the United States was invited to [attend President Biden's swearing-in](#) ceremony for the first time since 1979.<sup>35</sup> The incoming administration has pledged to continue arms sales to Taiwan. Such developments indicate continuity of US policy towards China.

During the month, the new US Secretaries of State and Defence, and the new National Security Advisor, held separate conversations with their Indian counterparts. The US Secretary of State underscored "India's role as a [pre-eminent US partner](#) in the Indo-Pacific" and stressed the need to work together to expand regional co-operation.<sup>36</sup> The India-US relationship reached new heights during the Trump presidency, and Delhi will hope for continuity under Biden. However, as the outgoing US Ambassador to India pointed out, India's trade surplus with the US, the *Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan* and the purchase of S-400 weapon systems from Russia are [likely to be worrying points](#) for Washington.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, on India's bid for permanent membership of the UNSC, Washington's new Ambassador to the UN said in confirmation hearings that it is "[an ongoing discussion](#)" with strong arguments for and against the proposition.<sup>38</sup>

## India's and the United Nations: Defining the Agenda

India became a non-permanent member of the UNSC for a two-year term on January 1, 2021. India's Permanent Representative to the UN [said that India](#) would use its tenure to "bring human-centric and inclusive solutions to matters

of international peace and security".<sup>39</sup> On January 12, during a debate on terrorism at the UNSC, the Indian EAM suggested an [8-point](#) action plan to combat terrorism, including the need for "reform of the working methods of committees dealing with sanctions and counter-terrorism". He also emphasised that "enlisting and delisting individuals and entities under the UN sanctions regimes must be done objectively."<sup>40</sup> At a time when the Afghan peace process is delicately poised, India will be chairing the Taliban sanctions committee. This will provide Delhi with some leverage to shape the evolving security situation in its western neighbourhood. Further, the situation in Myanmar will also come up before the UNSC and India will need to exercise some deft regional diplomacy.

## Turmoil in India's Neighbourhood\*

*Mohit Musaddi*

Internal crises to some of India's immediate neighbours have threatened Delhi's efforts to deepen its engagement with them. While instability in Nepal has continued, the Myanmar government has been toppled in a political coup by the military. Bhutan and the Maldives became the first countries to receive the made-in-India COVID-19 vaccines while Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Nepal and Bangladesh have also received shipments under India's Vaccine *Maitri* programme.

### Bangladesh

Bangladesh's Foreign Secretary Masud bin Momen travelled to India on January 28-29 to discuss the entire gamut of the India-Bangladesh bilateral relations. India and Bangladesh [reviewed progress](#) in "areas of defence and security, border management, trade, connectivity, power, energy and co-operation in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic".<sup>41</sup> He also called on EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar and appreciated the Indian government's role in [facilitating co-operation](#) during the pandemic as well as its handing over the COVID-19 vaccines.<sup>42</sup>

Delhi has been assisting Dhaka's fight against COVID-19. Bangladesh became one of the first countries to be gifted 2 million doses of the made-in-India [coronavirus vaccines](#).<sup>43</sup> India has also facilitated a commercial contract of 30 million doses of the Serum Institute of India (SII)-manufactured AstraZeneca vaccines with Bangladesh.<sup>44</sup> In contrast, there have been concerns around the efficacy of China's CoronaVac vaccine, and reports that Beijing wanted Dhaka to share the costs of trials.<sup>45</sup>

Delhi's robust [defence relationship](#) with Dhaka was also evident as a 122-member contingent of the Bangladesh Armed Forces participated in India's Republic Day parade on January 26, 2021.<sup>46</sup> While this was only the third time ever that a foreign military contingent had participated in India's Republic Day Parade, it was a [first for Bangladesh](#).<sup>47</sup> Delhi and Dhaka are celebrating 50 years of the establishment of ties, and Prime Minister Modi is expected to travel to Dhaka in March 2021. Bangladesh and India police have also agreed to enhance their joint work against terrorist entities, including the global terrorist groups, as well as other fugitives wherever they are present and active. During a virtual

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\* In the Neighbourhood, this chapter will deal with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

dialogue, the [police chiefs](#) of both countries “reiterated the need for sharing of real time intelligence and feedback through the designated ‘nodal points’, while appreciating each other’s ongoing action against insurgent groups operating in the region”.<sup>48</sup>



*The Bangladesh contingent at India’s Republic Day Parade, January 26, 2021. Source: Indian Express/ TashiTobgyal*

The Bangladesh Minister of State (MoS) for Foreign Affairs reiterated Dhaka’s close ties with Delhi and dismissed [concerns that China](#) has tried to influence Bangladesh’s relationship with India. He said, China knows the “depth and breadth of our relationship with India... it is the bondage (*sic*) that delivered the very creation and independence of Bangladesh”.<sup>49</sup>

Bangladesh has also been deepening its relationship with Myanmar. Dhaka announced in January 2021 that it will buy [100,000 tonnes of rice](#) in a government-to-government deal from Nay Pyi Daw.<sup>50</sup> Dhaka is also “buying 150,000 tonnes of rice from India’s state-run firm NAFED in a government-to-government deal”.<sup>51</sup> However, concerns over repatriation of Rohingyas have remained. Bangladesh has been [moving the Rohingya](#) Muslims to a remote island in the Bay of Bengal, despite risks of “storms and floods lashing the site”.<sup>52</sup> Dhaka has drawn criticism from international bodies for its “reluctance to consult with aid bodies, including the UN refugee agency, over the transfers”.<sup>53</sup>

## Myanmar

Just as Myanmar was moving towards consolidation of political order, the government has been toppled and State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and other senior leaders have been detained. The Tatmadaw (Myanmar military)

has alleged that the recently concluded elections were rigged. It had earlier [cautioned](#) that it would “take actions” if the government fails to address complaints regarding voter fraud.<sup>54</sup> The Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy (NLD) had secured an [overwhelming majority](#) in the November 2020 elections while the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) had won just over 6 per cent of seats.<sup>55</sup> International observers have [condemned the coup](#) and US President Joe Biden has “threatened to reimpose sanctions”.<sup>56</sup> The Indian MEA said that it was [monitoring the situation](#) closely and has urged on the need to uphold the democratic process.<sup>57</sup> Several countries including Australia, Britain, Canada and the United States have [issued statements](#) urging the military “to adhere to democratic norms”.<sup>58</sup>



People protested against the coup outside Myanmar's Embassy in Bangkok, Thailand.

Source: The Guardian/Reuters

Coincidentally, this development comes only weeks after Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Nay Pyi Taw. While on a five-day tour to Southeast Asia, [Minister Wang Yi](#) was in Myanmar on January 11-12 and met with President Win Myint as well as State Counsellor Suu Kyi.<sup>59</sup> During Minister Wang Yi's visit, China announced a [donation](#) of 3 million yuan (approximately USD 464,000) worth of COVID-19 medical supplies apart from a promise to provide 300,000 doses of the Chinese-produced vaccine.<sup>60</sup> The two sides also signed agreements on economic and technical co-operation as well as a five-year development programme for trade and economic co-operation.<sup>61</sup> Nay Pyi Taw and Beijing also announced that they will conduct a feasibility study for the Mandalay-Kyaukphyu Railway project.<sup>62</sup>

India's developmental initiatives in Myanmar continue. By February, India will supply at least [30 million doses](#) of the COVID-19 vaccine to Myanmar.<sup>63</sup> India and Myanmar also [resumed border trade](#) on January 6 through the Sagaing region for the first time since March 2020 as the area saw a decline in the number of COVID-19 infections.<sup>64</sup> It is still uncertain how the military coup in Myanmar will impact Delhi's relations with Nay Pyi Taw as well as India's connectivity projects in the region.

India is reportedly assisting Myanmar in releasing 11 Myanmar sailors aboard a South Korean oil tanker seized by Iran on January 4. The Myanmar Ambassador to India met his Iranian counterpart in New Delhi to discuss the issue. Iran had [seized the South Korean tanker](#) as they were allegedly creating "environmental and chemical pollution in the Persian Gulf".<sup>65</sup> Myanmar is also steadily diversifying its defence as its military bought [two Airbus CASA C295](#) worth USD 38.6 million from the Royal Jordanian Air Force to "reduce dependence on Chinese armoury".<sup>66</sup>

## Nepal

Nepal has been grappling with internal political crises in recent months. After Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli dissolved the Parliament and called for fresh elections, rival faction leader Pushpa Kumar Dahal (Prachanda) [expelled PM Oli](#) from the party on January 24.<sup>67</sup> The constitutional validity of Oli's dissolution of parliament, which is currently under review by the Nepal Supreme Court, has been widely disputed. Since Oli has been ousted from the party, the court will also decide as to which faction could retain the party name and symbol.<sup>68</sup>

Meanwhile, Oli has been using foreign policy to boost his chances of being re-elected. In an interview to WION News on January 11, he said that there are [no Chinese check posts](#) on the northern borders of Nepal and that his government "will not allow [the Chinese] to put their military check posts" inside Nepalese territory.<sup>69</sup> Referring to the recent problems between India and Nepal, PM Oli remarked that [Nepal's relationship with India](#) is "far better than before" and that "2021 will be the year when we declare that between Nepal and India – there are no problems at all".<sup>70</sup>

Nepal Foreign Minister Pradeep Kumar Gyawali visited India from January 14-16 for the 6<sup>th</sup> India-Nepal Joint Commission Meeting. The meeting, co-chaired by EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar and FM Gyawali, deliberated on the whole gamut of [Nepal-India bilateral relations](#).<sup>71</sup> The two sides also exchanged views on "international, regional and sub-regional co-operation".<sup>72</sup> On the unresolved boundary situation with India, [FM Gyawali said](#), "Nepal wants to resolve this problem so we can have an undisputed, peaceful state boundary".<sup>73</sup> The Foreign

Minister also met Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and discussed India-Nepal defence ties. Other [areas of discussion](#) included the extension of the Motihari-Amlekhganj petroleum products pipeline, establishment of a new pipeline from Siliguri to Jhapa, a train service to Kathmandu and integrated check posts (ICPs) in Nepalgunj and Bhairahwa.<sup>74</sup>

Even as connectivity projects with India are on an uptick, Nepal has been witnessing a “rare [protest against a Chinese infrastructure](#) project”.<sup>75</sup> Protests have reportedly been held at the Chinese-sponsored Damak Clean Industrial Park. There have been complaints from the locals that adequate compensation has not been paid and there are calls for greater transparency on Chinese investments. There have also been concerns that China is pursuing an “unsustainable development model ignoring the concerns of locals and ecological aspects of infrastructure projects”.<sup>76</sup> It should be noted that the site of the protests is part of Prime Minister Oli’s home constituency. In July 2020, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi had proposed an extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), called the [Trans-Himalayan](#) Multi-dimensional Connectivity Network, to Nepal.<sup>77</sup>

## Bhutan

On January 11, the Government of India released funds amounting to (Rs.) Nu. 850 million to the Royal Government of Bhutan as part of the [early release development assistance](#) requested by Bhutan under the 12th Five Year Plan (2018-2023).<sup>78</sup> For the 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan of Bhutan, the Government of India has committed financial support of (Rs.) Nu. 45 billion (over USD 600 million) comprising (Rs.) Nu. 28 billion for project tied assistance, (Rs.) Nu. 8.5 billion for high impact community development projects (HICDP) and (Rs.) Nu. 8.5 billion as programme grants.<sup>79</sup>

### India’s Vaccine Maitri in the Neighbourhood (as on January 30)

Country	Vaccine	Quantity	Delivery Date
Bhutan	Covishield	150,000	January 20
Maldives	Covishield	100,000	January 20
Nepal	Covishield	1,000,000	January 21
Bangladesh	Covishield	2,000,000	January 21
Mauritius	Covishield	100,000	January 22
Myanmar	Covishield	1,500,000	January 22
Seychelles	Covishield	50,000	January 22
Sri Lanka	Covishield	500,000	January 27
Afghanistan	Covishield	500,000	Yet to be delivered
<b>Total</b>		<b>5,900,000</b>	

*Compiled by the author from open sources. The above figures are gifts from the Government of India. This does not include commercial contracts to deliver vaccines.*

On January 20, Bhutan became the first country to receive the coronavirus vaccine from India. The Government of India provided [150,000 doses](#) of the 'Made in India' Covishield vaccine to Bhutan "as a testimony to the special relationship" between India and Bhutan".<sup>80</sup> In January 2021, India had also delivered a "consignment of COVID-19 [RT-PCR test kits](#) for 50,000 tests" to Bhutan.<sup>81</sup>

## Sri Lanka

EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar was on a three-day visit to Sri Lanka from January 5-7. He held "constructive discussions" with the senior leadership including President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena and Opposition leaders. Dr. Jaishankar reiterated India's longstanding support for the reconciliation process in Sri Lanka and [called for](#) an "inclusive political outlook that encourages ethnic harmony".<sup>82</sup> His discussions included a [review of Indian investments](#) in infrastructure, energy and connectivity. To assist Sri Lanka's fight against COVID-19, India has donated 500,000 doses of the made-in-India Covishield vaccine.<sup>83</sup>



*Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar and his Sri Lankan counterpart Dinesh Gunawardena in Colombo, January 6, 2021. Source: ABC News/Associated Press*

Despite an agreement with India and Japan, Sri Lanka has decided to develop the [East Container Terminal](#) (ECT) on its own.<sup>84</sup> The ECT is a [deep-sea terminal in Colombo](#) harbour and is next to a controversial USD 500 million Chinese-

run container jetty.<sup>85</sup> The tripartite deal between India, Japan and Sri Lanka had been put on hold due to resistance by trade unions and it was unclear if the project would be restarted. The Sri Lankan government will now reportedly offer the [West Container Terminal](#) to India for investments.<sup>86</sup>

## The Maldives

In an interview to The Hindu on January 9, Maldivian President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih said that Male appreciates the “proactive role that India has taken in [economic relief efforts](#) and providing financial assistance to the Maldives”.<sup>87</sup> On January 16, the Maldives President Ibrahim Solih inaugurated the first India-funded project of 2021 in Male to “upgrade the Ekuveni running track”. This is the [eighth Indian grant project](#) in Maldives in the last six months.<sup>88</sup>

Continuing with the recent trend of diversifying relationships, the US and the Maldives conducted their [inaugural defence and security dialogue](#) on January 6 and “reaffirmed their shared commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific region”.<sup>89</sup> Male and Washington agreed on joint activities in 2021 to advance shared priorities such as “maritime security, counterterrorism, [and] humanitarian assistance and disaster relief” (HADR).<sup>90</sup> The US Ambassador to Sri Lanka and the Maldives was in Male for a week from January 3 to “examine [avenues of aid](#) and mutual co-operation” between the two countries.<sup>91</sup>

Male owes USD1.4 billion to Beijing but President Solih has remarked that his administration is renegotiating “the terms of ongoing development assistance and economic projects”.<sup>92</sup> Meanwhile, on January 6, China held its [third multilateral dialogue](#) with countries from South Asia virtually to co-operate on “fighting COVID-19” and co-ordinate “economic agendas”.<sup>93</sup> Bhutan, the Maldives and India did not participate.<sup>94</sup>

## India and the Middle East

*Sanket Joshi*

India's strategic partnership with the Gulf countries has strengthened significantly in the past few years. To further deepen [Qatar-India bilateral co-operation](#), Indian External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar visited Qatar towards the end of last month.<sup>95</sup> Dr Jaishankar handed a personal message from the Indian Prime Minister to the Amir of Qatar inviting him to visit India.<sup>96</sup> The EAM also held discussions with Qatar's Deputy PM and Foreign Minister on bilateral as well as regional and international issues of mutual interest.<sup>97</sup> Further, the EAM interacted with business leaders, appreciating their commitment to partnerships while highlighting new opportunities flowing from India's 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat' programme.<sup>98</sup> To diversify its investments portfolio heavily weighted toward North America and Europe, the [Qatar Investment Authority](#) is eyeing countries in the east, including India, China, Malaysia, and Singapore.<sup>99</sup> India-Qatar foreign office consultations are scheduled for February 2020.<sup>100</sup>

Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE, and Egypt restored relations with Qatar at the Al-Ula [Gulf Co-operation Council \(GCC\) Summit](#) held on January 5.<sup>101</sup> These countries had severed diplomatic ties with Qatar in June 2017 and had imposed a blockade. India welcomed the development and expressed the hope that this would give a "boost to peace and stability in the region".<sup>102</sup>



*EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar hands over a personal communication from Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Amir of the State of Qatar, December 28, 2020. Source: Twitter/@DrSJaishankar*

## India-Israel: A Multidimensional Partnership

On the security front, India and Israel successfully tested a [medium-range surface-to-air missile](#) (MRSAM) defence system jointly developed by the two countries to boost their air-defence capabilities.<sup>103</sup> There have been reports that India will purchase the SPICE 2000 air-to-surface system and possibly [1,580 artillery guns](#) from Israel. It must be noted that Elbit has promised to make the artillery guns in India with [70 per cent indigenous components](#).<sup>104</sup>

Apart from defence, Delhi and Tel Aviv have been co-operating in other sectors as well. India and Israel signed an agreement on sharing expertise on [climate resilient infrastructure and](#) training of medical doctors and other health professionals.<sup>105</sup> Further, Tel Aviv appointed an honorary [Consul-General to India's North East](#).<sup>106</sup>

In a significant development highlighting India's growing influence in West Asia, Morocco's Ambassador to India spoke about the possibility of an [India-Morocco-Israel trilateral partnership](#) that can help achieve peace in West Asia as well as promote co-operation in sectors like food security, textiles, pharmaceuticals, fertilisers, and tourism.<sup>107</sup> Other trilateral arrangements with Israel, including an India-Israel-UAE trilateral partnership has also been proposed in the recent past.

## Prospects for India's Defence Exports

To [boost defence exports](#), India has drawn up a list of countries to whom BrahMos and Akash missile systems can be exported.<sup>108</sup> In West Asia, UAE and Saudi Arabia have shown interest in acquiring both missile systems; while Bahrain, Egypt, and Algeria have shown interest in acquiring the Akash missile systems.<sup>109</sup> In another development, Greek scholars urged [India and Greece](#) to forge "strong security partnership to counter Turkey-Pakistan alliance".<sup>110</sup> They also highlighted the prospects of "Greece acquiring weapons systems from India, while expressing optimism about Athens and Delhi jointly developing weapons systems".<sup>111</sup>

## India-GCC Relations

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent global economic contraction has severely affected India's remittances, especially from the Gulf region. Rising crude oil prices and the depreciation of the Indian rupee are unlikely to revive India's remittances in the near future; it is more likely that there will be a [gradual recovery in remittances](#) in fiscal year 2022.<sup>112</sup>

On the energy front, as per the Iraqi oil minister's estimation, [crude prices could rise](#) to around USD 60/barrel in the second quarter of 2021.<sup>113</sup> It must also be noted that, for the first time in 35 years, [no oil was exported from Saudi Arabia to the United States](#) in the first week of 2021.<sup>114</sup>

The Indian Oil Corporation bought its first consignment of Iraq's newly introduced [Basra Medium crude grade](#).<sup>115</sup> However, in a move to meet its [obligations under the OPEC+ agreement](#), Iraq has reduced supplies of Basra crude to Indian refineries by up to 20 per cent, in the coming year.<sup>116</sup>



*India's Minister of State for External Affairs, V. Muraleedharan meets UAE's Minister of State Ahmed Ali Al Sayegh in Abu Dhabi, January 20, 2021. Source: Twitter/@MOS\_MEA*

India and Oman held their Strategic Consultative Group (IOSCG) meeting in Delhi on January 14. Both countries decided to pursue [a future-oriented partnership](#) with agreements in fields such as energy, defence, and technology.<sup>117</sup> In a regional development with ramifications for Indian migrant workers, [Oman has barred expats from jobs](#) in sectors such as insurance, shops and car dealerships, including finance, commercial and administrative positions.<sup>118</sup>

The Indian Minister of State for External Affairs, V. Muraleedharan visited the United Arab Emirates (UAE) from January 19-21. Mr. Muraleedharan held discussions with UAE's Minister of State Ahmed Ali Al Sayegh about [expanding their bilateral strategic partnership](#).<sup>119</sup> The two leaders discussed the way forward in the [Indian Ocean Rim Association \(IORA\)](#) under the UAE's chairmanship.<sup>120</sup> Mr. Muraleedharan inaugurated a centre for [up-skilling](#)

[Indian workers](#) in the UAE.<sup>121</sup> Meanwhile, the Indian Union Cabinet has approved an MoU to boost co-operation with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on [tsunami warning in the Gulf of Oman](#) and the Arabian Sea.<sup>122</sup> Further, India's Export Credit Guarantee Corporation and UAE's Etihad Credit Insurance inked a deal to [enhance trade co-operation](#) between the two nations.<sup>123</sup>

## Regional Security

India, "unequivocally and in strongest terms condemned" the twin [suicide bombing attacks by ISIS](#) in Baghdad, Iraq on January 21 which killed 32 civilians.<sup>124</sup> India also condemned an [attack on the Aden airport](#) in Yemen on December 30 that killed 26 people and wounded 60.<sup>125</sup> Further in the United Nations, India's Permanent Representative highlighted the plight of Yemenis to the Security Council (UNSC), especially of [children impacted by the ongoing famine](#). Delhi appreciated the "role played by Saudi Arabia and...[the] unified GCC in promoting peace, stability and prosperity in Yemen."<sup>126</sup>

Some of the major arms deals in the Middle East approved by the US Department of State since the Abraham Accords

Country	Weapon System	Estimated Cost
United Arab Emirates	MQ-9B Remotely Piloted Aircraft and Related Equipment	USD2.97 billion
United Arab Emirates	F-35 Joint Strike Fighters and Related Equipment	USD10.4 billion
United Arab Emirates	Munitions, Sustainment and Support, and related equipment	USD10 billion
Egypt	Large Aircraft Infrared Countermeasures (LAIRCM) System for Head-of-State Aircraft and related equipment	USD104 million
Kuwait	AH-64E Apache Helicopters and related equipment	USD4 billion
Saudi Arabia	GBU-39 Small Diameter Bomb I (SDB I) Munitions and related equipment	USD290 million
Egypt	Sniper Advanced Targeting Pods (ATPs) and related equipment	USD65.6 million
Kuwait	System Spares for Patriot Configuration 3+ and related equipment	USD200 million

Source: Compiled by the author from [US Defense Security Cooperation Agency](#)<sup>127</sup>

The fast deteriorating relations between Iran and the United States suffered another setback after Tehran informed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) about its plans to [enrich Uranium to up to 20 per cent](#).<sup>128</sup> Former US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo stated that "[Iran is Al-Qaeda's new base of operations](#)", but offered no specific intelligence as evidence to back his statement.<sup>129</sup>

In another significant regional development, the United States designated '[Ansarallah](#)' ([Houthi rebels](#)) as a 'Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT)' entity, a move likely to exacerbate famine in Yemen.<sup>130</sup>

China has ratified an [extradition treaty with Turkey](#) about the return of Uighurs. Uighur activists have urged Ankara not to abide by this agreement as it could potentially put tens of thousands at risk of being detained in internment camps in China.<sup>131</sup>

## India, PAI, CARs and Mongolia<sup>λ</sup>

*Shreyas Deshmukh*

Regional instability in the Western part of the subcontinent continued, with terrorist attacks in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. There has also been a further economic downturn due to structural issues and rampant corruption in these countries. The Central Asian Republics (CARs), Mongolia and Iran have maintained their course to achieve regional integration with their southern and western neighbours by announcing new development initiatives. States as well as non-state actors in the region have been keeping a close watch on the new US administration.

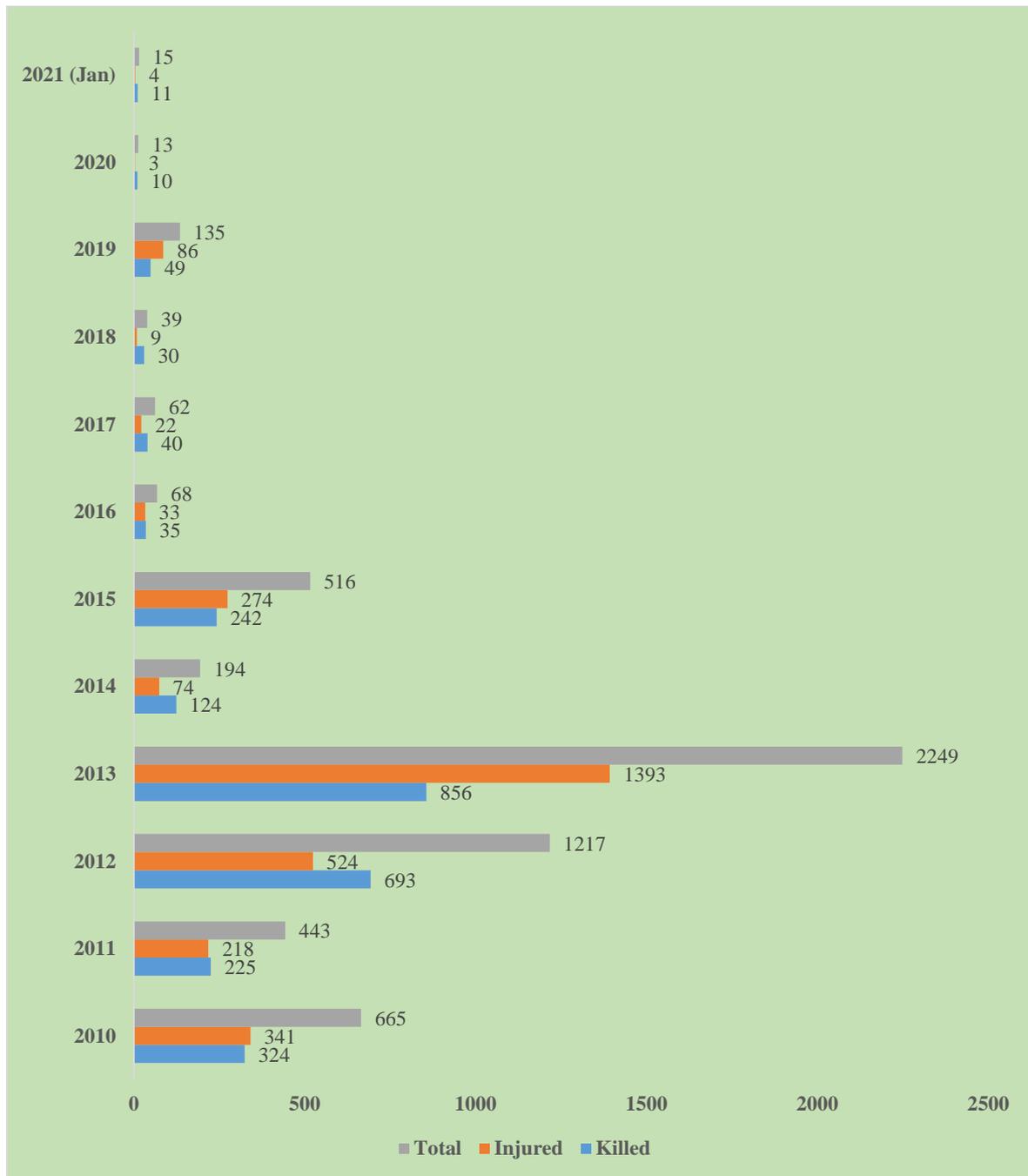
### Pakistan: Growing Fault Lines

Pakistan was rocked by twin terror attacks. The Islamic State (IS) assumed responsibility for the killing of 11 Hazara Shia coal miners in Balochistan on January 3. An attack on a Hindu temple in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by a mob who were incited by a local Muslim cleric on December 30, 2020, once again brought back the issue of the security of minorities in Pakistan. In an unprecedented move, the Pakistan Supreme Court took *suo motu* cognisance of the [demolition of the temple](#), suspended police officials, arrested more than 100 people, and [ordered the reconstruction](#) of the temple.<sup>132</sup>

The attack in Hazara was followed by a country-wide protest led by the Majlis-i-Wahdat-i-Muslimeen organisation, who refused to bury their dead until the Prime Minister gave them written guarantees about their security and promised to address [other demands](#).<sup>133</sup> Due to international pressure and depiction of the [plight of minorities](#) through social media,<sup>134</sup> the government has been trying to act against extremist elements. However, just as the authorities aim to address the extremism through education reforms, there was immediate pushback from religious organisations. On January 1, [Mufti Muneebur Rehman](#) a leader of Deobandi organisation Tehreek Tahaffuz-i-Masajid-o-Madaris launched a campaign against the legislation aimed at the management, supervision, and administration of Waqf properties.<sup>135</sup> He stressed that [the law](#) has been imposed against Islamic institutions.<sup>136</sup> To provoke the population and pit the Barelvis against Deobandis for political gain, the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman declared the opposition's struggle [against the government](#) a *jihad*.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>λ</sup> PAI stands for Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran and CARs stands for Central Asian Republics



*Total casualties of sectarian violence in Pakistan from 2010 to 2021 (January). Data does not cover casualties of attacks on religious minorities and other terrorist incidents. Data Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal*

In the last few years, the number of major sectarian attacks has gone down in Pakistan. The reason could be military operations that were launched against extremist terrorist organisations like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) after the Peshawar school attack in 2014. However, in August 2020, different splinter groups of TTP have once again [joined hands](#).<sup>138</sup> Incidents like the recent attack on the Hazaras and the killing of Maulana Adil, a Sunni religious scholar on October 10, 2020, indicate the government’s inability to take firm action against

the instruments of radicalism.<sup>139</sup> In light of current trends, there is a possibility that Pakistan may witness another cycle of sectarian violence.

### Pakistan's Economic Situation

Poor legal performance and mismanagement of the energy sector has been an international embarrassment for Pakistan in the recent past.

A Washington-based asset recovery company Broadsheet LLC claimed that the Pakistan Government owed it money. Earlier in 2002, this firm helped General Pervez Musharraf's government to track down foreign assets purchased by Pakistanis through allegedly ill-gotten wealth, for which it was not paid. The companies' claims against Pakistan were upheld by an arbitration court and on January 1, the United Kingdom High Court gave an award of [over USD28 million](#) and ordered the withdrawal of money from the Pakistan High Commission's account if not paid by the government.<sup>140</sup> The next day, the Pakistan federal cabinet [approved the payment](#) to the firm.<sup>141</sup>

In another incident, on January 16, a Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) [plane was seized](#) by Malaysian authorities due to a British court case over the jet's lease, as PIA failed to pay the monthly lease amount to the aircraft leasing company.<sup>142</sup> Following the incident, PIA was forced to pay [USD7 million](#) to the company.<sup>143</sup>

The countrywide electricity blackout on January 9 revealed the fragile energy infrastructure of Pakistan and crippling shortages in LNG supply.<sup>144</sup> Excessive dependence on the spot market for its LNG supply has triggered energy security concerns. Further, Dubai-based Emirates National Oil Company (ENOC) has backed out of its commitment to provide LNG cargo to Pakistan for the [month of February 2021](#).<sup>145</sup> The failure to secure subsidised, assured LNG supply has resulted in increased power tariff and dwindling foreign currency reserves.

To maintain healthy currency reserves, the Pakistan government has already borrowed [USD 5.7 billion](#) in the first half of the current fiscal year.<sup>146</sup> Weak energy infrastructure has made it difficult for Pakistan to attract FDI and resulted in heavy reliance on projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). On January 16, the Chinese iron and steel conglomerate became the first foreign enterprise to [establish its plant](#) in the Rashakai Special Economic Zone under CPEC with a planned investment of USD 50 million.

Energy security, skilled workforce, and diversification of the market base for import and export are some of the pressing needs that Pakistan's leadership has to address to avoid possible economic collapse in the future.

## Afghanistan

There has been increased violence in Afghanistan after the resumption of the second round of peace talks in Doha on January 5. Targeted attacks against civil society members, government employees, women [judges](#),<sup>147</sup> and a [mob attack](#) on a radio station in Kunduz<sup>148</sup> suggest that the country may be heading towards the civil war era of the 1990s.<sup>149</sup>

There has been very little progress in the peace talks as the Taliban insists on finalising the structure of the future whereas the current government in Kabul is keen on an immediate ceasefire. Meanwhile, the US has stuck to the timeline agreed with the Taliban and has completed the [drawdown of troops](#) level to 2,500 by January 15.<sup>150</sup> This has added to the pressure on the Afghan National forces and resulted in incidents like the one in Nimroz province where 18 civilians were mistakenly killed in an Air Force attack on January 9.<sup>151</sup> Such unfortunate events have [increased resentment](#) against the government and fuelled Taliban propaganda.<sup>152</sup>

The UN Security Council (UNSC) sanctions, Coalition Support, and the Afghan Special forces are the only deterrent factors keeping Afghanistan out of the Taliban's reach. While the credibility of the Afghan government is getting dented, the Taliban has systematically acquired international recognition, and once the sanctions are lifted, it is likely to become a legitimate political force. For Taliban, greater control on Afghanistan is contingent on the lifting of sanctions and the withdrawal of US troops. Interestingly, the incoming US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, [while speaking to](#) his Afghan counterpart on January 22, "made clear the United States' intention to review the February 2020 US-Taliban agreement, including to assess whether the Taliban was living up to its commitments to cut ties with terrorist groups, to reduce violence in Afghanistan, and to engage in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government and other stakeholders."<sup>153</sup>

Under these circumstances, and on the background of increased [China's espionage activities](#) in Afghanistan,<sup>154</sup> India's selection to chair the [Taliban Sanction Committee](#) at the UNSC<sup>155</sup> and an unannounced visit by the Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval to Afghanistan on January 13 have been crucial events. During his stay in Kabul, Mr Doval held "[extensive conversations](#) [with the Afghan leadership] on issues of strategic mutual interest, including on synchronizing efforts to combat terrorism".<sup>156</sup>



*Indian National Security Advisor in a meeting with Dr Abdullah Abdullah, Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation, January 13, 2021. Source: Twitter/ @DrabdullahCE*

## Mongolia and Central Asia

India's co-operation in the field of energy with the CARs and Mongolia in January has steadily improved. The Indian Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas & Steel [interacted with](#) his Mongolian counterparts on January 8 and reviewed bilateral co-operation in hydrocarbon and steel. They also discussed approvals for the expeditious implementation of the greenfield Mongol Refinery Project, built under a Line of Credit provided by India.<sup>157</sup> The Indian Cabinet has approved the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Uzbekistan for co-operation in the field of solar energy on January 21.<sup>158</sup>

## Iran

As US President Joe Biden is reversing some of the major foreign policy and [national security decisions](#) introduced by the Trump administration,<sup>159</sup> [Iran is hoping](#) that Washington will re-join the JCPOA and withdraw sanctions.<sup>160</sup> It will take weeks for the new administration to evaluate the state of affairs and draft policies. If the US does return to the JCPOA, it will boost India's ambitions of North-South connectivity through Chabahar.

Development work of the Chabahar port complex has continued. On January 7, the Vice President of Iran Es'haq Jahangir [inaugurated](#) four major development projects including the construction of a Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre and storage tanks for petroleum products worth over USD 214.2 million in Chabahar Port.<sup>161</sup> The port also received its [first shipment](#) of

unloading and loading equipment worth USD 8.5 million from India as part of an agreement between the two countries.<sup>162</sup>



*Chabahar port has received its first shipment of port equipment from India on January 17, 2021. Source: IRNA*

### Defence Updates

- Pakistan successfully conducted a [test flight](#) of its indigenously developed Fatah-1, a guided multi launch rocket system, on January 7. The weapon system can deliver a conventional warhead up to a range of 140 kilometres.<sup>163</sup>
- Pakistan conducted a [flight test](#) of the Shaheen-3 surface-to-surface ballistic missile, having a range of 2,750 kilometres. The flight test is aimed at revalidating the various design and technology parameters of the weapon system.<sup>164</sup>
- On December 30, 2020, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) announced starting the production of [JF-17 Thunder Block 3](#) fighter jets, while also acquiring 14 dual-seat JF-17 aircraft from China. The JF-17 Thunder Block 3 of the PAF will be operational with a new radar system.<sup>165</sup>
- General Qamar Javed Bajwa, Chief of Army Staff (COAS) of Pakistan [visited Qatar](#) on January 29. During the visit, he met the Emir of Qatar, Defence Minister, and his counterpart. During the meetings, matters of mutual interest, defence and security co-operation, and regional geopolitical environment were discussed.<sup>166</sup>

## Russia

*Anushka Nair*

In the recent past, the Russian Foreign Minister's statement on India's role in the QUAD, and the cancellation of the India-Russia annual bilateral summit have led to speculations about deterioration in the relations between the two countries. However, while addressing his annual press meet on January 18, the Russian Foreign Minister said that the bilateral relationship is strong. He also reiterated that [Russia would continue its efforts](#) to diffuse tensions between India and China, particularly through the Russia-India-China (RIC) troika.<sup>167</sup>

India-Russia defence ties have continued to maintain positive momentum. Ignoring US warnings of sanctions under CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act), India has put together a team of military personnel to travel to Russia and undergo [operational training programmes](#) on the S-400 missile systems for which India had finalised a USD 5 billion deal in 2018.<sup>168</sup> So far, Turkey and China have both faced sanctions for procuring S-400 missile systems from Russia.



*The Russian S-400 missile defence system. Source: Hurriyet Daily*

In continuation of the Indian Foreign Secretary's initiative, the [India-Russia-Japan Track 2 Dialogue](#) was hosted in January 2021.<sup>169</sup> Given that China currently accounts for nearly 70 per cent of foreign investment for the

development of Russia's Far East, the India-Russia-Japan co-operation as well as India's [announcement of USD 1 billion](#) as development assistance is a step in the right direction.<sup>170</sup> A key component to this strategic balancing would be the construction of the Vladivostok-Chennai Maritime Corridor, which will act as an efficient shipping link.

Apart from defence and economic ties, India-Russia space co-operation has also received impetus in the past few weeks. [Two flight surgeons](#) from the Indian Air Force will soon travel to Russia for hands-on training and experience on space medicine for India's Gaganyaan space mission.<sup>171</sup> They will join the [four Indian cosmonauts](#) who have been under training at Moscow's Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Centre since February 2020.<sup>172</sup>

On COVID-19 co-operation, the Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) has issued the [necessary permits](#) for Russia's Sputnik V vaccine to undergo phase III clinical trials in India.<sup>173</sup> [The trials](#) are currently ongoing and are expected to yield positive outcomes.<sup>174</sup> Russia's domestic vaccination efforts are already underway, with President Putin hailing the [Sputnik V](#) vaccine as "the best in the world", and urging his government to increase the scale of vaccinations administered domestically.<sup>175</sup> The Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) has also listed an [Indian scientist](#) as part of an Advisory Board on the Sputnik V vaccine, meant for experts to exchange opinions and significant findings.<sup>176</sup>

Despite co-operation across various sectors, the India-Russia relationship continues to be affected by third-country dynamics. On January 19, Washington's outgoing Secretary of State Mike Pompeo termed Russia and China as a [threat to BRICS](#) partners India and Brazil.<sup>177</sup> Official responses to the former Secretary's tweet have not been issued in Delhi or Moscow.

At the same time, Moscow's relationship with Washington has continued to deteriorate. Months after the United States, under the Trump administration, withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty (OST), the Russian [Foreign Ministry announced](#) on January 15 that Moscow too would initiate proceedings to exit the agreement.<sup>178</sup> The [Russian statement](#) says that after Washington left, it could not obtain sufficient assurances from the remaining Treaty members that were NATO allies that data collected from reconnaissance flights under the OST would not be passed along to the United States.<sup>179</sup> The OST has become the second major casualty among the arms control accords in recent years, after both Russia and the United States left the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019.

Focus soon shifted to the New START, aimed at nuclear arms control, and soon to expire, on February 5, 2021. However, a statement from the White House has

explicitly stated the Biden administration's intention to seek [a five-year extension](#) of the treaty.<sup>180</sup> The Russian Foreign Minister too, stated at a [press conference](#) that Moscow is ready to keep the pact alive with an extension before the termination date.<sup>181</sup> As the White House statement said, the renewal of this treaty is particularly crucial at this point, with ties between the two being labelled as 'adversarial' in official communications, and the New START being the only remaining significant arms control accord between Moscow and Washington.<sup>182</sup>

With Russia's relationship with Washington turning hostile, Russia's relationship with China has been steadily strengthening. The [Russian Ambassador in Beijing](#) said that the RDIF is in talks with China's Tibet Rhodiola Pharmaceutical to discuss the possibility of producing the Sputnik V vaccine in China.<sup>183</sup> Moscow and Beijing also managed to maintain a steady volume of bilateral trade through the pandemic-hit months of 2020, and the Chinese Foreign Minister was quoted as saying that bilateral ties between the two countries have reached a "[historic high](#)", and that 2021 would be a significant year in the relationship.<sup>184</sup> Moreover, as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, a China-Europe freight train, bound for Moscow departed China's Guangdong province on January 20, and will [reportedly](#) complete its journey in 15 days, cutting transportation time between the two countries by two-thirds as compared to the previously used sea route.<sup>185</sup> Trade settlements between the two countries are increasingly made in local currencies, with [non-dollar settlements](#) recorded at 25 per cent in 2020, as compared to 2 per cent seven years ago.<sup>186</sup>

India's relationship with Russia has thus far remained unaffected by Moscow's relationship with Washington or Beijing, despite concerns that the CAATSA sanctions will impact the relationship. However, the recent phone call between Biden and Putin is a positive development. While the conversation did not result in any new development, it has triggered anticipation that the bilateral relationship may witness some improvement. Such a development would have long-term implications on Asian geopolitics.

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