



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

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INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

The ISR features an assessment of key developments, trends, and policies pertaining to India's immediate and continental neighbourhood, and is authored by Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.), Distinguished Fellow for Military Strategy. The research team includes Shreyas Deshmukh, Research Associate. Your comments and feedback may be addressed to Shreyas Deshmukh at shreyas@dpg.org.in. To subscribe, please [click here](#).

Cover Images:

China's Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi and Pakistan Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar held the Seventh Round of China-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue in Beijing, on January 4, 2026. Source: [MOFA PRC](#)

The Chargé d'Affaires of the Embassy of Afghanistan in New Delhi, Mufti Noor Ahmad Noor, met with Anand Prakash, Joint Secretary of the PAI Division, New Delhi, on January 12, 2026. Source: [X/@ANI](#)

India's Chief of the Army Staff, General Upendra Dwivedi during his official visit to Sri Lanka witnessed the inauguration of the "Indo-Lanka Wisdom Corner" at the DSCSC library, on January 7, 2026. Source: [X/@adgpi](#)

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India Strategic Review

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

AFGHANISTAN

Worsening Human Rights Situation

On January 4, Afghanistan enacted a new Criminal Procedure Code signed by its supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada. The document was rolled out without public consultation, and has drawn sharp criticism for codifying a coercive, status-based justice architecture rather than strengthening rule-of-law safeguards.¹

At the centre of the controversy is Article 9, which divides Afghan society into four categories: religious scholars (ulama or mullah), the elite (ashraf), the middle class, and the lower class. Under this system, punishment for the same crime is no longer determined primarily by the nature or gravity of the offence but by the social status of the accused. According to the code, if an Islamic religious scholar commits a crime, the response is limited to advice. For the same crime, individuals from the "lower class" could be sentenced to corporal punishment.

The code does not recognise core fair-trial guarantees, such as the right to defence counsel and the right to remain silent. It also places heavy evidentiary weight on confession and testimony while weakening expectations of independent investigation, raising risks of coerced confessions and abuse in custody. It narrows penalties for spousal violence against women and criminalises the movement of women without their husbands' permission.

On religious identity, the code reportedly narrows "Muslim" status to the Hanafi school and labels divergent sects/beliefs as heretical—an approach that materially increases vulnerability for minority communities in Afghanistan (including Shia groups and non-Muslims). The killing of offenders, including individuals who "defend false beliefs contrary to Islam", is deemed permissible with the permission of the "Imam."

While there is widespread criticism of the new code, there is little indication that the international community will take any concrete action to force the Taliban to reverse course on the human rights crackdown.

United Nations Under-Secretary-General Rosemary DiCarlo visited Kabul from January 24-25 to advance UN-led talks on humanitarian aid, counter-narcotics, and the Doha process framework.² During a meeting with Taliban Interior Minister

Sirajuddin Haqqani, Secretary DiCarlo addressed issues including the Taliban's international engagement, cooperation on counter-narcotics, economic stability, and the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance initiatives. DiCarlo also met with Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Taliban's Foreign Minister, to discuss the Doha dialogue framework, underscoring the United Nations' supportive role in facilitating the dialogue. At the meeting, Muttaqi requested the United Nations' assistance in lifting sanctions on Afghanistan's banking sector. The Doha framework remains the basis for future engagement, but UN efforts to promote meaningful and inclusive dialogue involving Taliban authorities, regional actors, women, civil society, and political opponents continue to face serious challenges.

India-Pakistan Dynamics in Kabul's Foreign Policy

On January 6, speaking at a press conference, Pakistani military spokesman Lt. Gen. Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry said the Afghan Taliban is not a government but an armed group that had "occupied Afghanistan." He accused Kabul of violating a 2020 Doha agreement and becoming a "hub for terrorists and non-state actors."³

Chaudhry said the incidents of militant violence in Pakistan had steadily increased since the Taliban took control of Kabul in 2021, adding that many militants involved in major incidents in Pakistan were of Afghan origin. He also accused India of collaborating with Afghanistan-based militant groups to orchestrate attacks inside Pakistan, saying that Islamabad is fully prepared to defend itself against any aggression from either side.

In response to the Pakistani military statement, Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said Kabul condemns these "irresponsible and provocative" remarks and urges the relevant Pakistani institutions to refrain from "unfounded propaganda about Afghanistan." He emphasised that any "statements or threatening language interfering in Afghanistan's internal affairs are completely unacceptable to the Afghan nation."⁴

Pakistan is also exerting economic pressure on Afghanistan, with all border crossings closed since October 2025. The shutdown is impacting border communities on both sides. Pakistan was Afghanistan's largest trading partner, accounting for over half of Afghan exports in 2023, much of its fresh fruit and agricultural produce, and about one-fifth of its imports. The prices of some fruits and vegetables in Pakistan have risen by as much as 400% since the border was closed. Pakistani exports of cement and pharmaceuticals to Afghanistan and fruits to other parts of Central Asia have also been hit, compounding losses for industries that rely heavily on overland trade routes.⁵

Against this backdrop, Taliban-appointed senior diplomat, Noor Ahmad Noor, took charge of the Afghan mission in New Delhi as chargé d'affaires on January 15. In his meeting with officials from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, Noor held detailed discussions on “bilateral political and economic relations, the expansion of trade, facilitation of visa processes and issues faced by Afghan traders, students, and Afghan nationals residing in India.”⁶

After Kabul halted the import of all medicines from Pakistan, India has stepped up to meet the emergency requirements of Afghanistan. The Taliban's Ministry of Public Health said India has provided 18 types of anti-cancer medicines and donated a \$3 million radiotherapy machine to help diagnose and treat cancer patients. Health Minister Noor Jalal Jalali had earlier announced that India would provide vaccines worth \$5 million and a hospital valued at \$500,000.⁷

Despite the closure of border crossings with Pakistan, Afghanistan's trade remained resilient in 2025 as exporters and importers increasingly relied on alternative routes through Iran and Central Asia. Traders have moved cargo through Iran's Chabahar port and expanded their overland shipments via Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan.⁸

PAKISTAN

Foreign Policy Developments

On January 4, Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi held the Seventh Round of China-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue with Pakistani Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Mohammad Ishaq Dar in Beijing. In the joint statement issued after the meeting, the two sides agreed to enhance strategic communication, deepen strategic mutual trust, jointly safeguard their common interests, promote the economic and social development of the two countries.⁹

Both sides agreed to build an upgraded version 2.0 of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, focus on the three key sectors of industry, agriculture, and mining, promote the construction and operation of the Gwadar Port, and ensure the smooth passage of the Karakoram Highway. Beijing and Islamabad pressed for “visible and verifiable” action against terrorist groups based in Afghanistan, and China publicly acknowledged Pakistan's efforts to secure Chinese personnel and projects after repeated militant attacks in recent years. Jammu and Kashmir was also mentioned in the statement in the context of maintaining peace and stability in South Asia.

In a meeting on January 17 between Pakistani Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi and a US delegation led by US Chargé d'affaires Natalie Baker, both sides discussed enhancing bilateral security and border management collaboration. The US agreed to equip Pakistani border security agencies, coast guards and other institutions with modern US-supplied equipment. The two countries also conducted the 13th edition of their bilateral joint counterterrorism exercise, Inspired Gambit 2026, to boost interoperability and share counterterrorism expertise.¹⁰

Media reports indicate that Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are in talks to convert about \$2 billion of Saudi loans into a JF-17 fighter jet deal. JF-17 Thunder fighter jet is a light combat aircraft jointly developed by Pakistan and China and produced in Pakistan.¹¹ Bangladesh is reportedly also considering the procurement of JF-17s. Discussions on the deal were held during Bangladesh Air Force Chief Hasan Mahmood Khan's visit to Pakistan in the first week of January.¹² Reuters reports that Islamabad has held talks with 13 countries, six to eight of which are in an advanced stage, for deals involving JF-17 jets as well as training aircraft, drones, and weapons systems.¹³

Pakistan has joined US President Donald Trump's "Board of Peace", a body composed mainly of invited heads of state and meant to oversee Gaza's rebuilding. Pakistan's statement said it hopes that, with the creation of this framework, concrete steps will be taken towards the implementation of a permanent ceasefire, the scaling up of humanitarian aid, and the right to self-determination of the people of Palestine through a credible, time-bound political process.¹⁴

Deteriorating Internal Security

Annual reports by Pakistani think tanks show a sharp deterioration in the internal security situation, with the country's western belt again emerging as the main fault line. Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS) characterises 2025 as one of the most violent years since the post-Zarb-e-Azb decline, reporting 1,548 violent incidents (up 29% from 2024) and 3,413 fatalities (up 75%).¹⁵ Security forces' actions also expanded substantially, rising by 63% to 482 operations, reflecting a more kinetic counterterrorism posture. Data compiled by the Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS) also shows similar data with fatalities linked to militant attacks rising to 3,417, up from 2,555 in 2024, marking a 34% increase.¹⁶

The Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) 2025 security report focused specifically on terrorism trends. It records 699 terrorist attacks (up 34%), causing 1,034 deaths and 1,366 injuries, with over 95% of attacks concentrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan.¹⁷ KP experienced the highest number of terrorist incidents, while Balochistan's insurgent violence operations targeted provincial stability and

Pakistan's geo-economic interests, especially projects linked to China's multi-billion-dollar infrastructure and development initiatives.

On actors, 2025 is best viewed as a dual insurgency problem. Islamist groups, particularly the TTP and allied factions, are sustaining a high operational tempo in border districts, while Baloch separatist groups dominate the south through infrastructure attacks and high-impact operations. The PICCS report also flags the residual capacity of transnational actors such as Islamic State Khorasan Province and Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent for sporadic, high-profile violence.

Tactically, 2025 appears to have been a year of militant adaptation as much as militant expansion. PICSS highlights the lethality of "tactical assaults," a resurgence of suicide attacks executed increasingly as complex operations, and an expanded use of commercial quadcopter drones alongside rising IED use and targeted killings. PIPS notes that over 65% of the total recorded terrorist attacks in 2025 targeted personnel, vehicles, convoys, and posts or facilities of security and law enforcement agencies. PICSS also draws attention to kidnappings, which surged to 215 cases, the highest level in over a decade, highlighting militants' growing reliance on abductions for financing, coercion, and psychological impact.

The PIPS report states that while the state response has imposed high militant attrition, Pakistan's internal security environment continues to demand more comprehensive and integrated responses that balance kinetic action with political, social, and economic measures, particularly in Balochistan. In KP, efforts to address militancy have been complicated by political divergences between the federal and provincial governments. Pakistan also needs to recalibrate its Afghanistan policy away from episodic crisis diplomacy toward sustained, structured engagement that survives security shocks.

The think tank reports make no mention of India-centric groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed. While these groups may not be indulging in domestic violence, they remain crisis-accelerants in India-Pakistan relations.

DEVELOPMENTS ON THE INDIA-CHINA LINE OF ACTUAL CONTROL (LAC)

Shaksgam Valley in Focus

There was a diplomatic flare-up between New Delhi and Beijing over China's rapid infrastructure expansion in the Shaksgam Valley. Open-source satellite imagery from November 2025 showed new road alignments, construction support sites, possible cement production units, and ongoing tunnelling activity deep inside the valley.¹⁸

The Shaksgam Valley, also known as the Trans-Karakoram Tract, is a remote Himalayan region in the Karakoram range, strategically located near the Siachen Glacier and the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between India and China. India claims the valley as an integral part of Jammu and Kashmir, viewing it as illegally occupied since Pakistan ceded it to China under a 1963 boundary agreement that New Delhi has never recognised.

On January 9, at a regular media briefing, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal stated that India has never recognised the 1963 China-Pakistan boundary agreement and maintains that it is invalid and illegal. India has also consistently protested to the Chinese side against attempts to alter the ground reality in the Shaksgam Valley and reserves the right to take the necessary measures to safeguard its interests.¹⁹

On January 12, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning rejected India's claim, asserting that Shaksgam "belongs to China," that infrastructure construction there is "fully justified" as activity on its own territory. She said that the China-Pakistan boundary agreement was a legitimate delimitation between two sovereign states.²⁰

Speaking at his annual press conference ahead of the Army Day on January 15, Indian Army Chief General Upendra Dwivedi said, "As far as the Shaksgam Valley is concerned, India considers the 1963 agreement between Pakistan and China as illegal," and "we don't approve of any activity in the valley." However, he also mentioned that the situation along the northern front with China remains stable, with apex-level interactions, renewed contact and confidence-building measures contributing to gradual normalisation.²¹

The developments in the Shaksgam Valley are unlikely to lead to immediate tensions along the LAC but reflect that an unsettled border remains the biggest hurdle in the complete normalisation of ties between New Delhi and Beijing.

BANGLADESH

Run-up to the February Elections

On January 22, campaigning commenced for Bangladesh's first national elections since the 2024 uprising that ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. With the Awami League banned from participation, the February 12 elections pit the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) against a Jamaat-e-Islami-led alliance in what appears to be a bipolar contest.

Pre-poll assessments vary widely. A survey by Eminence Associates for Social Development (EASD) shows that 70% of people intend to vote for the BNP, with Jamaat a distant second at 19%. The BNP is gaining from Awami League supporters, 60% of whom have shown interest in voting for the BNP.²² Another survey shows a much tighter contest with 34.7% of respondents intending to vote for the BNP, while 33.6% favour Jamaat-e-Islami. Support for other parties remains limited, with 7.1% for the National Citizen Party (NCP), 3.1% for the Islamic Movement of Bangladesh, and 4.5% for other parties.²³

BNP's campaign pitch is built around a "reset" narrative after the post-2024 upheaval: restore electoral legitimacy, reassert law-and-order, and make anti-corruption a governing signal rather than a slogan. The party is pairing this with a deliberately deliverables-first welfare agenda—most prominently a "Family Card" (large-scale household support) and a broader package of priority social policies (including agriculture support instruments, health workforce expansion, and education/employability measures) framed as immediate, administratively executable reforms.²⁴ The BNP has also made allegations against the Jamaat on its role in the Liberation War and the use of religion in politics.

Jamaat-e-Islami is campaigning as the "clean governance" alternative, with zero tolerance for corruption and grassroots welfare credibility. The party has proposed a "Smart Social Security Card" and an economic platform that blends social protection with pro-business predictability.²⁵ It is attempting to rebrand itself through symbolic outreach to minorities and an emphasis on women's rights. However, anxieties remain as it has not named any women as candidates.²⁶

Viewing the Jamaat as a consequential player in the next parliament, US diplomats in Bangladesh are seeking to expand their engagement with the party. Audio recordings obtained by the Washington Post show a US diplomat based in Dhaka stating that the country has "shifted Islamic" and predicted Jamaat-e-Islami would "do better than it's ever done before" in the February elections. He goes on to say, "We want them to be our friends."²⁷

New Delhi would be closely watching the elections as the character of the political dispensation that emerges would influence the trajectory of the currently strained bilateral ties.

India-Bangladesh Ties

India-Bangladesh ties remain strained. On January 8, Bangladesh announced that it had asked three missions in India (Delhi, Kolkata, and Agartala) to temporarily suspend visa services due to security concerns.²⁸ The Indian missions in Dhaka have also restricted visa appointments to emergency/humanitarian cases only. This

included urgent medical travel, genuine student needs, and situations where Bangladeshis held pre-booked visa interviews for third countries (e.g., onward travel via India). India has also decided to withdraw the families and dependents of Indian officials posted in Bangladesh amid the security concerns following the increasing activities of extremist elements in the country.²⁹

On January 23, speaking virtually at an event at the Foreign Correspondents Club in New Delhi, former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina attacked Muhammad Yunus, the head of Bangladesh's interim government, as a "murderous fascist" and said Bangladesh would "never experience free and fair elections" under him. She alleged that Bangladesh had been "plunged into an age of terror" after "Yunus and his anti-state militant accomplices" removed her government through a "meticulously engineered conspiracy" in August 2024.³⁰

Responding to Hasina's speech, Bangladesh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it was "surprised and shocked" that India permitted the event, characterising Hasina as a "fugitive" and portraying her remarks as incitement aimed at destabilising the election environment. The statement argued that allowing Hasina to use Indian soil for a political intervention "sets a dangerous precedent" and could "seriously impair" the ability of Bangladesh's future elected leadership to "engage, shape and nurture" bilateral ties. The statement also used unusually harsh language, calling her a "mass murderer" and describing the speech as "hate/inciteful."³¹

Bilateral tensions have also spilt over into the sports field. Bangladeshi cricketer Mustafizur Rahman, who was selected to participate in the Indian Premier League, was released by his franchise Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR). The release followed criticism by a few political and spiritual leaders questioning the KKR decision to buy the Bangladesh player at a time when the Hindu minority was facing violence in Bangladesh.³² KKR stated that the release was carried out on the instructions of the Board of Control of Cricket in India.

The backlash in Bangladesh prompted the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) formally asking the International Cricket Council (ICC) to move Bangladesh's Men's T20 World Cup 2026 fixtures from India to co-host Sri Lanka on player-safety grounds. The ICC said it was "not feasible" to switch fixtures so close to the tournament, which starts on February 7, and added that there was an "absence of any credible security threat." With the Bangladesh team refusing to travel to India, they have been removed from the tournament and replaced by Scotland.³³

The sporting episode reveals that domestic narratives and sentiment in both countries have hardened, raising the political cost of normalisation in ties, even after the Bangladesh elections.

NEPAL

Political Churning Ahead of the General Elections

January marked the formal opening of the election window for the March 5 House of Representatives polls. The Election Commission brought the Election Code of Conduct into force on January 19 and began receiving first-past-the-post nominations across 165 constituencies. Of the 275-member House, 110 will be elected through proportional representation and 165 through the direct system.³⁴

On January 14, the Nepali Congress (NC) formally split as negotiations between the two factions, led by general secretaries Gagan Thapa and Bishwo Prakash Sharma, and party president Sher Bahadur Deuba, failed to reach an agreement. Two days later, the Election Commission recognised the Thapa-led NC and stated that the Deuba faction could register a new party if it did not wish to come under the newly elected leadership.³⁵

The Deuba camp moved immediately to legal remedies, but the Supreme Court declined to grant interim relief against Thapa and issued a show-cause notice to the Election Commission, effectively preserving Thapa's leadership's standing for the campaign period while summoning both sides for discussions.³⁶ The new Congress leadership has accelerated its consolidation by declaring Thapa its prime-ministerial candidate.

On January 14, the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) decided to withdraw organised crime and money laundering charges filed against former home minister and Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) chair Rabi Lamichhane in various district courts.³⁷ The decision has been challenged in the Supreme Court, but raises questions over whether “new politics” is being normalised through elite bargains rather than accountability.

Meanwhile, there is increasing frustration among the Gen Z activists who forced a change in government through street protests in September 2025. They argue that there is no end to corruption, and those responsible for firing on the protestors have not been brought to justice. So far, the government's anti-graft agency has filed one significant corruption case, and the politicians who were in power during the protests remain untouched and are preparing to contest the upcoming elections.³⁸

In this political churn, supporters of Nepal's former royal family gathered in the capital, Kathmandu, on January 11 to demand the restoration of the monarchy. Protesters said the country needs the return of the monarchy to stabilise governance.³⁹

As Nepal heads toward elections, there is an unsettled air, with shaky alliances, low political trust, and a constant worry that street anger could flare and derail the calm.

SRI LANKA

Foreign Policy Developments

India's Chief of the Army Staff, General Upendra Dwivedi, visited Sri Lanka from January 7-8, where he conferred with key military and governmental figures, including the Commander of the Sri Lanka Army, the Deputy Minister of Defence, and the Defence Secretary, addressing topics such as cooperative training, capacity enhancement, defence education, and regional security matters.⁴⁰

In an interview with journalists, India's High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, Santosh Jha, stated that India is awaiting Sri Lanka's response to India's proposal for a comprehensive project report on land connectivity between the two nations, initially suggested by Sri Lanka. India has also begun implementing a 450 million US dollars assistance package to help Sri Lanka recover from Cyclone Ditwah, moving from emergency relief to reconstruction of damaged roads, railways, bridges and housing. The package was announced during a visit to Sri Lanka by Indian External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar in December.⁴¹

China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, briefly visited Sri Lanka on January 12. He met with Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath and expressed China's intention to increase exchanges of governance experience with Sri Lanka, broaden cooperation in various areas, and further strengthen the strategic cooperative partnership between the two nations.⁴² Herath requested Chinese assistance to help rebuild key infrastructure damaged by Cyclone Ditwah.

After the devastation caused by Cyclone Ditwah, Sri Lanka is looking to both India and China for recovery assistance. While India has stepped in with a \$450 million aid package, China has yet to announce any long-term support.

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