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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, assisted by Mr. Shreyas Deshmukh, Research Associate. Your comments and feedback may be addressed to Shreyas Deshmukh at shreyas@dpg.org.in. To subscribe, please click here.

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Cover Images:

1. *The eighth Moscow Format consultations on Afghanistan held on October 5, 2026, Moscow. Source: MFA Russia*
2. *The 16th Expert Group Meeting on the China-Bhutan Boundary Issues was held in Thimphu, Bhutan, from October 13-15, 2026. Source: MOFA PRC*
3. *On October 21, Pakistan, Türkiye, Qatar and Indonesia signed the Badr Memorandum of Understanding in Doha. Source: X/@MOD_Qatar*

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India Strategic Review

by

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PAKISTAN

The Makkah Pact and Expanding Defence Partnerships

The Makkah Joint Defence Agreement between Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye is moving towards operationalisation amidst continuing Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia. On October 5, the alliance's Strategic Political and Defence Committee held an emergency meeting in Riyadh. The three countries agreed to activate "deterrence measures" under a mutual defence pact and rapidly deploy forces to the Gulf kingdom to counter attacks by Yemen's Houthis.[1] A Pakistani military spokesman has confirmed that Pakistani forces are already deployed in Saudi Arabia.[2]

On October 27, the Turkish Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee approved a bill to ratify the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement. The text submitted to the Turkish Parliament provides for immediate assistance in the event of an armed attack or military aggression against a signatory. However, the parties would determine the scope and nature of their support following an assessment of the assistance required and the resources available.[3]

Alongside these military arrangements, the three countries are also pursuing joint diplomacy with Iran. On October 26, Saudi Defence Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman, Field Marshal Asim Munir and Turkish intelligence chief Ibrahim Kalin met Iranian leaders in Tehran. Saudi Arabia described the visit as an effort to open negotiating channels to "prevent the return of military escalation". At the conclusion, the four states agreed to continue talks with a view to strengthening cooperation in peace and security.[4]

Pakistan faces a difficult balancing act between its military commitments under the Makkah Pact and its role as a mediator. Its credibility as a defence partner depends on providing meaningful support to Saudi Arabia, yet any direct role against the Houthis would weaken its diplomacy with Iran.

Pakistan also widened its defence-industrial partnerships during the month. On October 21, Pakistan, Türkiye, Qatar and Indonesia signed the Badr Memorandum of Understanding in Doha. The pact seeks to promote collaboration in defence

manufacturing, improve the participating countries' defence capabilities and expand cooperation in technical military training, research and development.[5]

The Badr framework does not establish a collective defence obligation, and its official descriptions identify no specific weapons programme, committed investment or production schedule. Nevertheless, the two agreements show Pakistan seeking to build mutually reinforcing relationships in collective security and defence production.

Political and Security Crisis in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

The confrontation between the federal government and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) came to a head in October. On October 4, more than 5,000 PTI supporters began a march from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) to Islamabad to demand the release of former Prime Minister Imran Khan. Chief Minister Sohail Afridi led the march, which began after two rounds of talks with the government ended in deadlock. The federal government blocked the entrances to Islamabad with containers.[6]

On October 11, President Asif Ali Zardari, acting on Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's advice, proclaimed an emergency and imposed governor's rule in KP under Articles 232 and 234 of Pakistan's Constitution. The government removed Chief Minister Sohail Afridi and his cabinet and transferred executive authority to Governor Faisal Karim Kundi, assisted by an 11-member advisory council.[7] A joint sitting of Parliament approved the proclamations on October 15.

The federal government justified the decision by pointing to a sharp surge in terror attacks across KP, alleging that the provincial administration was obstructing counterterrorism efforts, failing to maintain public order and allowing militant groups space to operate.[8] The PTI has rejected these claims, maintaining that the central government has used the pretext of terrorism to undermine an elected provincial government.[9]

PTI has challenged the imposition of emergency in the Peshawar High Court, seeking restoration of the elected government. Its petition contested both the constitutional grounds for the intervention and the parallel administrative arrangements. On October 20, the Court sought the Attorney General's response and adjourned proceedings until November 10. It also sought responses in separate petitions concerning the detention of Afridi and other provincial leaders.[10]

The militant threat in KP is serious, but removing an elected government does not resolve the underlying weaknesses of Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy. Federal control will give the army greater freedom to conduct operations in the province, but effective counterinsurgency also requires credible local administration and public cooperation. The government's actions could deepen alienation of a population that

has voted for PTI in three successive elections. This could widen the space for militants to exploit resentment against Islamabad.

Internal Security

According to the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), September saw the highest count of militant attacks in 2026.[11] Although militant attacks have reduced in October, Pakistan's internal security situation remains under pressure, with violence concentrated in KP and Balochistan.

On October 17, armed men intercepted a passenger vehicle and abducted 20 police recruits returning home from the Kalat Police Training Centre in the Mastung district of Balochistan.[12] The recruits were later rescued after a massive manhunt and search operation.

October 22 saw multiple attacks by Baloch militants around Gwadar city and the Gabd border crossing with Iran. The following day, the military stated that ten militants, including a woman, had been killed in engagements, while one civilian had also died. In a statement by the Inter-Services Public Relations, the military's media wing, Field Marshal Asim Munir was quoted as stating, "We will continue the campaign against Indian-sponsored terrorist outfits to the fullest."[13] New Delhi has repeatedly rejected these unfounded allegations.

Reports of dissension within Baloch insurgent organisations have emerged. According to PICSS, commanders operating under the banner of a Reform Command Council challenged the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) leadership over the concentration of authority and financial accountability. Separately, the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) accused BLA elements of misusing its identity during an armed operation.[14] These developments could create openings for Pakistani security agencies. However, organisational divisions do not necessarily translate into reduced violence. Rival factions may compete for legitimacy, recruits and funding through more spectacular attacks.

The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has sought to exploit the imposition of emergency in KP. In an October 11 statement, spokesman Muhammad Khurasani presented the militant organisation as a defender of the province's political and constitutional rights. The TTP appealed to the people "whose rights have been violated, to support Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan in the field of action to rid themselves of the military establishment."[15]

This was an opportunistic use of constitutional grievances by a group that rejects Pakistan's constitutional order. Its significance lies in the attempt to reach beyond the

TTP's ideological constituency and convert resentment over political exclusion into support for militancy.

AFGHANISTAN

Pakistan-Afghanistan Conflict

The renewed fighting between Pakistan and Afghanistan continued into October. On October 1, Pakistan carried out airstrikes in Afghanistan's Kunar and Helmand provinces, claiming that it had targeted militant hideouts and killed 22 fighters. The Taliban government said civilian homes had been struck. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) confirmed that at least ten civilians, most of them children, had been killed and nine injured.[16] The strikes continued the escalation that began in September, with Islamabad maintaining that cross-border action was necessary to address militant threats originating in Afghanistan.

Border clashes continued through the month. On October 10, Pakistani forces and Afghan Taliban units exchanged fire in the Kurram–Paktia border area. Pakistan claimed that its forces had engaged militants attempting to infiltrate from Afghanistan and that Afghan border posts had opened fire in their support. Islamabad reported that 12 militants and Afghan Taliban personnel had been killed, along with one Pakistani soldier.[17] On October 17, the two sides exchanged fire for nearly four hours along the same stretch of the border. Pakistan alleged that the Taliban had provided covering fire for militants infiltrating into Pakistan.[18]

The latest clash took place at Angoor Adda in South Waziristan on the night of October 27. Mortar shelling killed one civilian and injured five others on the Pakistani side.[19] The Taliban defence ministry said the fighting began after Pakistan carried out four drone strikes on border facilities at Angoor Adda.[20]

Regional efforts at mediation made no headway. The eighth Moscow Format consultations on Afghanistan ended on October 5 without a joint statement because the Pakistani and Afghan delegations could not agree on the draft of the final statement. Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi accused Pakistan of using force and maximum pressure against the group, saying Kabul and Islamabad should resolve disputes through dialogue and diplomacy, not military action.[21] The failure to agree on a joint communiqué exposed the limits of regional engagement in addressing the central dispute between the two countries.

Pakistan, meanwhile, made further dialogue conditional on Kabul's willingness to address militant activity originating from Afghan territory. At its October 23 briefing,

Pakistan's Foreign Ministry said that further talks would be pointless unless the Taliban acknowledged the presence of terrorist groups in Afghanistan and established a credible mechanism to prevent security threats against neighbouring countries.[22] On the other hand, the Taliban accuses the Pakistan military of shifting responsibility for its domestic security failures onto Afghanistan.[23]

The developments show that neither military pressure nor regional diplomacy has bridged the central disagreement. With hardened positions on both sides, any improvement in Pakistan-Afghanistan ties remains unlikely in the near term.

The conflict has also impacted bilateral trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan, which fell by 74 per cent from $1.3 billion in 2024-25 to $358 million in 2025-26.[24] Pakistani customs authorities have put hundreds of containers carrying Afghan traders' goods up for auction at Karachi Port, citing high taxes, storage charges and delays that have left the shipments stranded amid prolonged trade disruptions between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Afghan Chamber of Commerce officials have condemned the move, describing it as contrary to regional and international trade laws.[25]

Humanitarian Situation and Human Rights

Afghanistan's humanitarian situation deteriorated as winter approached, despite an improved agricultural season. On October 15, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and World Food Programme (WFP) warned that approximately 19.2 million people, or 38 per cent of the population, would face high levels of acute food insecurity during November 2026–April 2027, compared with 17.4 million projected for the corresponding period a year earlier. About five million people were expected to face emergency levels of hunger.[26]

The agencies attributed the worsening situation to unemployment, high food and transport costs, mass returns from neighbouring countries and declining humanitarian assistance. Border closures and disruptions to shipping through the Strait of Hormuz were adding to the cost of essential goods. Improved harvests had increased food availability, but many households lacked the income to purchase a nutritious diet. At the same time, dramatic funding shortfalls are limiting humanitarian assistance as needs grow.

Meanwhile, the Taliban continued enforcing restrictions on women. In an October 8 statement, UNAMA said it had verified the arrest or detention of at least 52 women and one girl in Kabul and Herat between July and September for alleged violations of dress code and rules concerning male guardians. The grounds for arrest included visible hair, colourful scarves, makeup and appearing in public without a mahram.

UNAMA also expressed concern over verbal abuse, beatings and threats against women, including female shopkeepers.[27]

On October 5, the International Criminal Court (ICC) unsealed arrest warrants against Taliban supreme leader Haibatullah Akhundzada, Chief Justice Abdul Hakim Haqqani, Education Minister Habibullah Agha and Higher Education Minister Neda Mohammad Nadim. The warrants had been issued in July and September 2025. The Court found reasonable grounds to believe that the four bore criminal responsibility for persecution on gender and political grounds.[28]

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid rejected the Court's jurisdiction, stating that Afghanistan "does not recognise any court under the title of the 'International Court,' nor does it attach any significance to its positions."[29] The ICC has no means to enforce the warrant, and it appears unlikely that such actions will bring about any change in the Taliban's behaviour towards women.

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

Face-offs in Arunachal Pradesh

On October 22, the Director General of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), Shatrujeet Kapur, said at a ceremony in Alwar, "In the past few days, a situation arose where face-offs happened at several locations in Arunachal, and it still continues." Civil society groups and local media had been reporting Chinese troop activity in the Taksing area of Upper Subansiri district since June, but this was the first acknowledgement from a senior official.

Responding to media queries, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said the situation along the LAC gets disturbed periodically when Chinese forces diverge from established patrolling patterns. He reiterated that peace and tranquillity along the border remained essential for the development of bilateral relations. He also stated that both countries continued to use existing diplomatic and military mechanisms to resolve outstanding issues and avoid misunderstanding and miscalculation. The two sides had also agreed to discuss ways to improve their understanding of the LAC in appropriate areas for better border management.[30]

On October 29, Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu acknowledged that transgressions had occurred but described the situation as normal. He attributed the transgressions to the undefined boundary and differing perceptions of its alignment, while expressing confidence in the armed forces' ability to safeguard the border.[31]

Diplomatic Exchange Over Ladakh

On October 2, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) assigned standardised names to 28 places and geographical features in Ladakh and formally identified them on the Survey of India map of the Union Territory. The list includes Gogra and Hot Spring, two of the friction points in the 2020 standoff in eastern Ladakh. It also names several locations across the LAC in Aksai Chin. The MHA said the exercise was carried out in consultation with the Union territory administration and aimed at "facilitating their accurate recognition and better awareness among the public at large."[32]

On October 13, China objected to the naming of places. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said that "China has never recognised the so-called 'Union Territory of Ladakh' unilaterally and illegally established by India and firmly opposes India's announcement of so-called standard names." She described the move as illegal and said that it could not change the fact that the relevant areas in the western sector of the China-India boundary have always belonged to China.[33] The MEA rejected the objection the same day, stating that Ladakh is "an integral and inalienable part of India" and that "no amount of denial by the Chinese side can change this established fact."[34]

These developments show that improved political engagement does not automatically remove tensions along the LAC. Diplomatic and military mechanisms remain necessary to contain incidents, but the unsettled border remains a source of friction.

BANGLADESH

India-Bangladesh Relations

India and Bangladesh are taking steps to revive institutional engagement, although political differences continue to constrain a broader improvement in relations. On October 5, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Humaiun Kobir said Prime Minister Tarique Rahman had never ruled out a bilateral visit to India and expressed confidence that outstanding problems could be addressed through dialogue. However, he also reiterated Dhaka's expectation that India prevents individuals residing on its territory from making political statements or undertaking activities aimed at destabilising Bangladesh.[35]

An important development was the resumption of the Joint Working Group on Trade, which met in New Delhi on October 8-9 after a three-year gap. Bangladesh sought the removal of restrictions on its exports through Indian land ports, withdrawal of anti-dumping duties on jute products and polyethene terephthalate (PET) film, and

simpler product certification procedures. India, in turn, sought the removal of restrictions on cotton yarn and other exports through specified Bangladeshi land ports, and easier market access for products from its northeastern states.[36]

Water sharing remains the most urgent bilateral issue. On October 8, Water Resources Minister Shahid Uddin Chowdhury Anee reiterated Bangladesh's preference for a new or revised Ganges agreement containing a guarantee clause to safeguard dry-season supplies. He expressed hope that an arrangement could be completed before the existing treaty expires on December 12, 2026.[37] However, there has been no progress on the treaty renewal with India maintaining that river-related discussions should proceed through the Joint Rivers Commission.

Both governments recognise the need to restore practical cooperation but political distrust remains. The Ganges treaty presents an immediate test for both sides.

Economic Situation

The World Bank's October Bangladesh Development Update, released on October 6,[38] confirmed that the economy remains in a prolonged slowdown. Real GDP growth fell to 3.4 per cent in FY26, continuing a downward trend since FY23. Private investment contracted, and private sector credit growth fell to a 33-year low of 4.5 per cent in June 2026, reflecting weak business confidence, banking sector vulnerabilities, and energy supply disruptions. It estimated that an additional 2.1 million people had fallen into poverty in FY26.

The report notes that longstanding vulnerabilities in the financial sector, chronic weaknesses in domestic revenue mobilisation, persistent energy sector bottlenecks, and declining public investment have reduced the economy's resilience and constrained its growth potential. It singled out the banking sector, energy supply and domestic revenue collection as the area most in need of urgent reform if the economy is to return to private investment-led growth.

Banking distress remains a major obstacle to recovery. Non-performing loans rose to 33.2% of total loans in June 2026, up from 30.6% in December 2025, undermining credit availability and investor confidence. Revenue collection stood at only 8.3% of GDP, limiting the government's capacity to support investment and vulnerable households. Strong remittance inflows and improving foreign exchange reserves provided some relief but could not compensate for these domestic structural weaknesses.

The one positive development came on October 29, when the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution extending Bangladesh's preparatory period for graduation from Least Developed Country (LDC) status by three years, to November 24, 2029. The extension prolongs eligibility for LDC-specific trade preferences, including duty-free

and quota-free access and favourable rules of origin in participating markets. These advantages are particularly important for the garment industry, helping exporters remain competitive and protecting employment and foreign exchange earnings.[39]

The extension gives the government valuable breathing space, but the underlying economic challenges remain. Failure to translate the additional preparation period into sustained reforms would leave Bangladesh facing the same vulnerabilities in 2029.

SRI LANKA

Iranian Vessels and US Sanctions

The presence of Iranian vessels off Sri Lanka's coast has created a difficult humanitarian and diplomatic problem for Colombo. In August, the US Treasury announced secondary sanctions under which anyone providing services to sanctioned vessels risks losing access to the US financial system. On October 4, Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath said approximately 19 Iranian vessels were among ships stationed outside Sri Lanka's territorial waters. He denied that Washington had issued directives or pressured Colombo, but confirmed that the government had not supplied sanctioned vessels and cautioned private service providers to exercise due diligence.[40]

The US Embassy reiterated that supplying fuel, food or other provisions to sanctioned vessels could expose companies and individuals to sanctions risks. Sri Lanka's Foreign Ministry maintained that these measures formed part of Washington's global sanctions policy rather than restrictions directed specifically at Colombo.[41] Nevertheless, the potential consequences for maritime service providers complicated assistance to crews reportedly running short of essential supplies.

Later in the month, Sri Lanka facilitated the evacuation of 40 Iranian sailors suffering medical emergencies from commercial vessels offshore. Announcing the operation on October 25, the Foreign Ministry said the sailors were brought ashore at Galle, received treatment, and returned to Iran. The operation followed a request conveyed through the Iranian Embassy.[42]

Colombo is trying to distinguish between resupplying sanctioned vessels and rescuing their crews, describing the evacuation as a response to distress calls carried out in line with its international obligations and its neutrality. That position will be harder to sustain if the vessels remain off its coast for an extended period.

Cancellation of Colombo Logistics Hub

On October 15, China Merchants Port Holdings (CMPH) announced it would terminate the South Asia Commercial and Logistics Hub project at Colombo Port. The proposed $392 million development was a joint venture in which the Chinese company held a 70% stake, with Access Engineering and the Sri Lanka Ports Authority holding 15% each. The partners agreed to terminate the shareholder, concession and lease agreements and wind up the project company.[43]

China Merchants attributed the decision to changes in the project's implementation environment and timetable, as well as commercial considerations. Under the settlement, the Sri Lanka Ports Authority will pay $21.9 million to the project company for distribution among shareholders, in addition to distributing its remaining cash. This represents a settlement of invested funds rather than compensation payable solely to the Chinese company.

The cancellation is a setback to the planned expansion of Chinese involvement in Colombo's logistics infrastructure. However, CMPH continues to operate a $500 million container terminal at Colombo and the Hambantota port under a 99-year lease.[44] The development therefore points to the commercial and implementation difficulties facing a particular investment rather than a wider Chinese withdrawal. The logistics hub is now open to competitive bidding, which gives other investors an opening at a strategic location in Colombo Port.

MALDIVES

President Muizzu's State Visit to Pakistan

President Mohamed Muizzu paid a state visit to Pakistan from October 20 to 22, the first by a Maldivian president in eleven years. The visit coincided with the sixtieth anniversary of diplomatic relations. Muizzu held talks with President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, while Pakistan's military chief, Field Marshal Asim Munir, also called on him.

The two governments exchanged 20 Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) covering defence, maritime security, cybersecurity, policing, health, education, agriculture, tourism and connectivity. Of particular strategic significance were separate MoUs on defence cooperation and maritime security. The two leaders also agreed to raise bilateral trade from $13 million to $200 million within two years.[45]

During the talks, Prime Minister Sharif set out Pakistan's position on Kashmir and on the Indus Waters Treaty, which India has held in abeyance. President Muizzu did not publicly endorse Pakistan's position on either issue. He did, however, repeat his call for the revival of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which has been dormant largely because of India-Pakistan tensions.[46]

In the Maldives, the visit drew criticism from the opposition. Former president Mohamed Nasheed said Muizzu had travelled to Pakistan "without due consideration," and had once again placed the Maldives in the middle of disputes between India and Pakistan.[47]

A week before the visit, India had approved a request from the Maldivian government to roll over the ₹3,000-crore currency swap facility. In addition to the currency swap facility, India has subscribed to two long-term Treasury bonds worth $250 million and $100 million.[48]

The visit reflects President Muizzu's effort to widen the Maldives' external partnerships under the "Maldives First" policy. In practical terms, Pakistan can offer the Maldives little economically. Current trade of $13 million shows how small the base is, and the Maldives continues to depend on India for financial support. However, the defence and maritime security agreements merit close watch by India.

BHUTAN

Boundary Talks with China

Bhutan and China held the 16th Expert Group Meeting on their boundary dispute in Thimphu from October 13 to 15. According to the joint press release, the delegations "reviewed the positive progress made in the China-Bhutan boundary negotiations in recent years" and held discussions to "take forward the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding on the Three-Step Roadmap for Expediting the China-Bhutan Boundary Negotiations."[49] The fourth meeting of the Joint Technical Team on delimitation and demarcation took place alongside the talks. According to the joint statement, the technical discussions produced "positive understandings" on the roadmap for the next phase.

The official statements are brief, but they suggest that the talks are moving forward. The lack of public detail makes it difficult to judge how close the two sides are to an agreement, but the pace of meetings in recent years points to sustained momentum, driven largely by Beijing.

For India, the central concern remains the implications of any settlement in western Bhutan, particularly around Doklam and the India–Bhutan–China tri-junction. Changes in this area could affect Indian interests adjoining the sensitive Siliguri Corridor.

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