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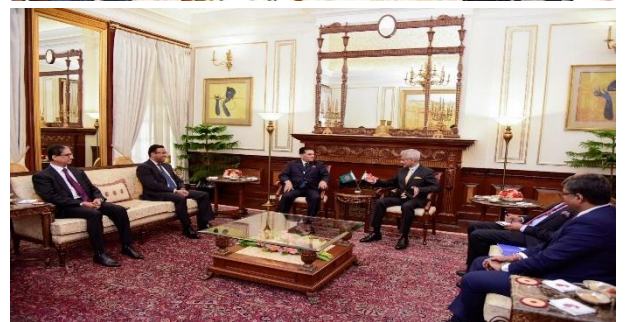
## INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

APRIL 2026

*Author*

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## India Strategic Review

### Vol. VII, Issue 4

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#### ABOUT US

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*The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Delhi Policy Group as an Institution*

#### 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](mailto:shreyas@dpg.org.in). To subscribe, please [click here](#).

#### Cover Images:

1. Deputy Prime Minister of Pakistan Ishaq Dar and Army Chief Field Marshal Asim Munir (at the center) with Iranian delegation at Islambad Airport, on April 13, 2026. Source: [X/@MishaqDar50](#)
2. External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar met Dr. Khalilur Rahman, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the of Bangladesh in New Delhi on April 8, 2026. Source: [MEA Flickr](#)
3. India's Vice President C.P. Radhakrishnan in a meeting with Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Disanayaka in Colombo, April 19, 2026. Source: [MEA/Flickr](#)

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## India Strategic Review

by

*Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)*

### PAKISTAN

#### *Pakistan's Mediation Role in the US-Iran War*

April was a consequential month for Pakistan's diplomacy in its mediation in the US-Iran war. On April 6, Reuters reported that Pakistan had put together a framework for a ceasefire after Pakistan's army chief, Field Marshal Asim Munir, held talks with US Vice President JD Vance, special envoy Steve Witkoff and Iranian Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araqhchi.<sup>1</sup> On April 8, the US and Iran agreed to a two-week ceasefire, and Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz invited delegates from Tehran and Washington to Islamabad "to further negotiate for a conclusive agreement to settle all disputes."<sup>2</sup>

On April 10, US Vice President JD Vance arrived in Islamabad alongside Special Envoy Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner to lead a 300-member US delegation. Facing them was a 70-member Iranian team led by Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi. This was the highest-level direct engagement between Washington and Tehran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Pakistan's mediation team, headed by Prime Minister Sharif, Field Marshal Munir, and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, facilitated three rounds of talks, moving from indirect to direct exchanges. After 21 hours of negotiations, the talks collapsed on April 12 without reaching an agreement. The central sticking points were issues regarding the Strait of Hormuz and the Iranian nuclear programme.<sup>3</sup> President Donald Trump announced a naval blockade of ships from entering or exiting the Strait of Hormuz and intercepting vessels that have paid tolls to Iran.<sup>4</sup>

Hours before the two-week ceasefire was set to expire, President Trump unilaterally announced an extension. On his Truth Social platform, Trump wrote that the extension was based on the "request of Field Marshal Asim Munir, and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif."<sup>5</sup> Sharif thanked President Trump and stated that Pakistan would continue its efforts for a negotiated settlement of the conflict.

The attempt to convene a second round of talks in Islamabad unravelled in the final days of April. After initial reports that US and Iranian teams were returning to Islamabad, it was announced that Witkoff and Kushner were heading to Pakistan on April 25. On the same day, Trump cancelled their trip at the last minute, posting on social media: "Too much time wasted on traveling, too much work! Besides which,

there is tremendous infighting and confusion within their 'leadership.' Nobody knows who is in charge, including them."<sup>6</sup>

Iran's Foreign Minister Araghchi did travel to Islamabad on April 25, meeting Pakistani officials, but explicitly denying any direct talks with the Americans were planned. Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmail Baghaei stated, "No meeting is planned to take place between Iran and the US. Iran's observations would be conveyed to Pakistan."<sup>7</sup>

Islamabad's position is also complicated by the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) signed between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in September 2025. The SMDA mandates that an attack on either country be considered an attack on both. On April 11, Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Defence confirmed the arrival of a Pakistan Air Force contingent at King Abdulaziz Air Base in the kingdom's Eastern Province. The deployment reportedly includes 18 JF-17 Thunder and support aircraft, and was concentrated in the Eastern Province, home to Saudi Aramco's headquarters, the Ras Tanura oil terminal, and the Abqaiq processing facility, all of which had been targeted repeatedly by Iranian missiles and drones<sup>8</sup> There were also reports that Pakistan's 25 Mechanised Division (approximately 10,000 troops) had been deployed to the Saudi Arabia-Yemen border.<sup>9</sup>

Pakistan's mediation role has strengthened its diplomatic relevance, but it remains facilitative, as it lacks decisive leverage over either principal party. If the ceasefire collapses, Pakistan risks being blamed by both Tehran and Washington, constrained by its defence commitments to Saudi Arabia, and exposed to sectarian instability at home.

For a deeper analysis of Pakistan's mediation role, refer to DPG Policy Brief Volume XI, Issue 13.<sup>10</sup>

### *Economic Stress*

Pakistan's economy is under stress, simultaneously managing the impact of the Iran war's energy shock, a major debt repayment to the UAE, and pressure from its IMF programme.

On April 23, Pakistan LNG Limited issued a spot tender for liquefied natural gas (LNG) for late April to mid-May, the first such spot tender since December 2023. Pakistan has not received any LNG cargoes since the US-Iran war began on February 28, when Iran shut down almost all shipping through the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>11</sup> Due to a gas shortage, Pakistan's LNG-fired plants, with a capacity of about 6,000 MW, are producing only about 500 MW.

On April 2, Pakistan sharply hiked consumer prices for diesel and petrol, its second increase in less than a month. The price of diesel was raised by 54.9% to PKR 520 and petrol by 42.7% to PKR 458. There was an immediate public backlash, forcing Prime Minister Sharif to announce a reduction in petrol prices by PKR 80 the next day.<sup>12</sup>

Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves came under pressure when the UAE asked Pakistan to repay \$3.5 billion in matured deposits, ending a rollover arrangement that had been in place since 2018. This was in addition to the \$1.3 billion Eurobond payment, which matured on April 8.<sup>13</sup> There was some relief when Saudi Arabia agreed to provide \$3 billion in additional support, on top of extending an existing \$5 billion deposit arrangement. This was directly linked to Pakistan's need to manage the UAE repayment shock.<sup>14</sup>

A report by the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) warns that Pakistan's exports to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries could fall by \$1.5 to \$2 billion if disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz continue. Rising oil prices could add \$4.5 billion to Pakistan's import bill, widen the current account deficit, and further strain foreign exchange reserves.<sup>15</sup> Any disruption to the Gulf labour markets could also hit the remittances from these countries, which account for nearly ten per cent of Pakistan's GDP.

The April 2026 IMF World Economic Outlook projected Pakistan's real GDP growth at 3.6 per cent for 2026, which is less than half the projected inflation rate of 7.2 per cent, underscoring the precariousness of the economic recovery. Pakistan's total outstanding obligations to the IMF stood at SDR 7,138 million as of March 2026, making it the Fund's fourth-largest borrower globally.<sup>16</sup> The IMF's 37-month \$7 billion Extended Fund Facility requires fiscal discipline, tight monetary policy, and avoidance of broad energy subsidies, leaving Islamabad with limited room to shield citizens from high fuel prices.

## AFGHANISTAN

### *Afghanistan-Pakistan Peace Talks in Urumqi*

The Pakistan-Afghanistan war, now in its third month, continues to overshadow the country's already catastrophic situation. The United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Afghanistan has stated that the conflict had displaced 100,000 people, while another 100,000 people in the Kamdesh and Bargi Matal districts near the border have been completely cut off from humanitarian access by the fighting since February.<sup>17</sup>

To find a resolution to the ongoing conflict, representatives from China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan held a week-long round of informal talks in Urumqi, Xinjiang, from April 1 to 7. Pakistan has conveyed three core demands to the Afghan Taliban during the talks, which are for Kabul to formally declare the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) a terrorist organisation, dismantle its infrastructure, and provide verifiable proof of the action. A Taliban foreign ministry official, Mohammad Naeem Wardak, said Pakistan's insistence on raising its internal security concerns caused China-hosted talks between the two sides to end without a breakthrough. Wardak described Pakistan's position as "unreasonable," saying Islamabad wanted to export its internal problems instead of addressing them at home.<sup>18</sup> In conclusion of the talks, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning stated both countries agreed at the meetings not to take actions that would escalate or complicate the situation. Mao added that China would continue to communicate with both countries and provide a platform for dialogue.<sup>19</sup>

Even as the peace talks proceeded in Urumqi, Pakistan continued military operations along the border. On April 3, Taliban officials said that two civilians were killed and 25 others were injured as a result of Pakistani cross-border strikes in parts of Eastern Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> On April 13, Afghan sources reported that Pakistani border guards fired artillery rounds in parts of Khas Kunar and Nari districts of Kunar province, causing material damage but no casualties.<sup>21</sup> Two days later, Pakistani officials said that three civilians were killed and three others were injured in artillery shelling carried out by Taliban forces in the border areas of Pakistan's Bajaur district.

By the final week of April, the ceasefire was in serious jeopardy. Pakistan launched mortar and rocket attacks on the eastern Afghan province of Kunar on April 27, killing seven people and wounding at least 75. The Taliban's Deputy Spokesperson Hamdullah Fitrat stated that the Sayed Jamaluddin Afghani University in Asadabad, as well as homes, had come under fire, calling the attacks "grave and inexcusable war crimes, a blatant act of brutality, and a provocative action."<sup>22</sup> Pakistan's Information Ministry dismissed the report as a "blatant lie."

The resumption of hostilities suggests that the Urumqi process has produced no credible mechanism for conflict management, and that the durability of any ceasefire depends entirely on the political will of both sides. The structural impasse – Pakistan's demand that the Taliban take "visible and verifiable" action against the TTP, and Kabul's refusal to do so – remains unresolved.

### *Worsening Humanitarian Situation*

Afghanistan is currently managing three simultaneous and compounding humanitarian emergencies: the ongoing conflict with Pakistan along its eastern

border, a mounting wave of returnees from Iran driven by the US-Israel war on that country, and the structural crisis of chronic underfunding and aid withdrawal.

An April 28 report of the OCHA states that due to the Pakistan-Afghanistan conflict, around 100,900 people have now been displaced by the hostilities across Khost, Kunar, Nangarhar, Nuristan, Paktia, and Paktika. Access remains limited across several districts due to security concerns related to the ongoing shelling and explosive ordnance contamination. Due to the fighting, 19 health facilities are closed, suspended or operating at reduced capacity, affecting access to care for approximately 78,000 people.<sup>23</sup>

The Iran war has severely worsened Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis. The return of refugees from Iran has sped up, with a 56 per cent increase in the first quarter of 2025. Families returning from Iran are putting pressure on communities where basic services are already under pressure. John Aylieff, the WFP's Afghanistan country director, has stated that the cost of getting food into landlocked Afghanistan had tripled, with fortified biscuits being rerouted by road through seven countries from Dubai, adding around three weeks to delivery timelines.<sup>24</sup>

As a landlocked country, Afghanistan is acutely dependent on imports, which account for approximately 66% of GDP. Pakistan accounts for roughly 13% of total imports and approximately 27% of food and agricultural imports. The closure of border crossings with Pakistan in November 2025 triggered immediate supply constraints across Afghan markets. Iran is Afghanistan's largest trade partner, and under ordinary circumstances, it would partially offset these disruptions by expanding exports to Afghanistan. However, the war led Iran to impose broad restrictions on food exports to maintain domestic supplies. Thus, Afghanistan now faces simultaneous constraints on supply from its two most important sources, together accounting for more than 42% of its food imports.<sup>25</sup>

International funding is also drying up. UNICEF's Humanitarian Action for Children appeal was only 42 per cent funded as of mid-April, against a \$949 million appeal. UN's 2026 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan is still 89 per cent unfunded.<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile, at least 157 people have been killed across Afghanistan since late March as heavy rains, flash floods and related disasters continue to devastate large parts of the country.<sup>27</sup> On April 5, India dispatched a consignment of relief materials to Afghanistan to support those affected by the floods and an earthquake. This was followed by a delivery of 13 tonnes of tuberculosis vaccines to support the country's fragile healthcare system and expand immunisation coverage among children.

## BANGLADESH

### *Economic Challenges and Reform Debates*

The World Bank's Bangladesh Development Update, released on April 8, states that Bangladesh's economy faces significant challenges, including slowing growth, three consecutive years of rising poverty, persistent inflation, and weak revenue mobilisation, which are further compounded by headwinds from the conflict in the Middle East.<sup>28</sup> The update projects growth to slow to 3.9% in FY26. The national poverty rate increased to 21.4% in 2025 from 18.7% in 2022, adding 1.4 million more poor people in 2025.

The ADB's Asian Development Outlook for April 2026, released on April 10, was marginally more optimistic. The ADB forecast that GDP growth would rise to 4 per cent in FY26 and accelerate to 4.7 per cent in FY27. The growth outlook reflects a recovery in consumption and investment as political uncertainty eases after the general election. However, temporary supply chain disruptions linked to conflict in the Middle East affected activity in the last quarter. Inflation is projected to remain elevated at 9 per cent, reflecting persistently high global energy prices and ongoing supply disruptions.<sup>29</sup>

The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics released provisional GDP figures on April 24, showing that GDP growth slowed to 3.03 per cent in the second quarter of the current fiscal year, compared to a revised 3.53 per cent in the same quarter of the previous fiscal year.<sup>30</sup> An independent assessment by the South Asian Network on Economic Modelling (SANEM) estimated that the Iran war could reduce Bangladesh's GDP growth by up to 3 per cent over two years, and that a sustained oil price above \$120 per barrel could add \$4-5 billion to Bangladesh's annual import bill.<sup>31</sup> The government has thus far resisted fuel price increases, but analysts warn that this position is fiscally unsustainable.

On the political front, the implementation of the July Charter continues to generate tensions. When the 13th Parliament sat on March 12, the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) did not convene the Constitution Reform Council as mandated by the July National Charter (Constitutional Reform) Implementation Order, 2025. BNP leaders argued that the reform council lacks constitutional status and that any major change must proceed through Parliament in accordance with established legislative procedures. In contrast, opposition parties view the referendum as a binding political commitment that should guide immediate implementation.

133 ordinances issued by the interim government were placed before the Parliament for approval in April. The Parliament ratified 113 ordinances, while 20 were repealed or allowed to lapse. The expired ordinances include measures linked to the

referendum/July Charter, enforced disappearances, the Anti-Corruption Commission, Right to Information, judicial appointments, and the National Human Rights Commission.<sup>32</sup> This has raised questions about the BNP government's commitment to implementing the broader reform vision outlined in the July Charter.

Bangladesh's 11-party opposition alliance, led by Jamaat-e-Islami, announced a nationwide agitation programme from April 18 to May 2, pressing for implementation of the referendum verdict in line with the July National Charter. The BNP's reluctance to commit to the July Charter's constitutional reform framework, and the Jamaat-e-Islami's use of this issue to position itself as a more principled force, suggests that the constitutional question will remain a persistent source of political friction throughout the government's tenure.

### *India-Bangladesh Ties*

Bangladesh Foreign Minister Dr Khalilur Rahman visited New Delhi from April 7 to 9, marking the first senior ministerial visit to India after the BNP government led by Prime Minister Tarique Rahman took office. Indian External Affairs Minister Indian Dr S Jaishankar met with Dr Rahman on April 8 and reiterated India's desire to engage constructively with the new government and further strengthen bilateral ties. The two sides agreed to explore proposals for deepening the partnership through the relevant bilateral mechanisms.<sup>33</sup> Another important development was the discussion on easing Indian visas for Bangladeshi citizens, especially medical and business visas. India indicated that visas for Bangladeshi citizens, particularly medical and business categories, would be eased in the coming weeks.<sup>34</sup> Dr Rahman also met India's National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, with discussions reportedly covering regional and international cooperation.

During his meeting with Petroleum Minister Hardeep Singh Puri, Dr Rahman requested increased fuel imports and fertiliser supplies. Puri indicated that the government of India will consider the request readily and favourably. Bangladesh has also formally asked the Indian government to raise petroleum product exports from state-run Oil India's Numaligarh Refinery via the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline.<sup>35</sup>

In an interview with *The Hindu* after the visit, Dr Rahman stated that he had reiterated the demand for the extradition of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina from India.<sup>36</sup> In November 2025, Bangladesh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs had sent a formal letter seeking the extradition of Hasina and former Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal after they were convicted by a Bangladeshi tribunal. On April 17, Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said the request was being "examined

as part of ongoing judicial and internal legal processes” and that India continues to engage constructively on the issue with all stakeholders.

On 27 April, India appointed former Union Minister Dinesh Trivedi as its next High Commissioner to Bangladesh, replacing career diplomat Pranay Verma.<sup>37</sup> This is a notable appointment because Trivedi is a veteran politician rather than an Indian Foreign Service officer. New Delhi appears to be acknowledging that the Dhaka relationship now requires political handling, not only diplomatic management. Trivedi’s Bengal experience, parliamentary background and proximity to the ruling Bhartiya Janta Party make him a useful candidate at a time when India is attempting to rebuild ties with the BNP government.

India–Bangladesh ties are moving towards a cautious re-engagement. However, a more independent "Bangladesh First" foreign policy and China's continuing influence in Dhaka could limit the speed of normalisation.

## SRI LANKA

### *Economic Situation*

Sri Lanka entered April 2026 confronting what observers described as a "triple blow": the ongoing fallout from Cyclone Ditwah (November 2025), the energy shock from the Iran war, and the general slowdown in global trade. On April 9, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reached a staff-level agreement on the combined fifth and sixth reviews under Sri Lanka's Extended Fund Facility. Subject to Executive Board approval, Sri Lanka would receive about \$700 million, taking total IMF disbursements under the arrangement to about \$2.4 billion. However, the IMF also warned that Sri Lanka is significantly exposed to the Middle East conflict and still has to address Cyclone Ditwah-related infrastructure.<sup>38</sup>

Cyclone Ditwah had severely affected two million people and 500,000 families across all 25 districts, disrupting livelihoods, essential services and the broader economy. Five months later, more than 165,000 people remain displaced.

Due to the sharp increase in fuel prices, the government is absorbing approximately \$63 million per month in losses from subsidised fuel sales even after the 26-30 per cent price increases of March. The government remains committed to the four-day working week and QR-based fuel rationing introduced in March.

Tourism, a critical foreign-exchange earner, saw arrivals fall 17.3 per cent in the last ten days of March compared to the same period in 2025, a trend that persisted into April as Gulf aviation hubs faced disruption. Gulf hubs were the last point of

departure for over 30 per cent of tourist arrivals to Sri Lanka in February 2026. Remittances are also exposed. Around 40 per cent of Sri Lanka's remittances originate from Gulf economies. A prolonged Middle East conflict could therefore weaken one of Sri Lanka's most important foreign-exchange inflows.<sup>39</sup>

The broader macroeconomic outlook has consequently weakened. The Asian Development Bank's April 2026 assessment projects Sri Lanka's growth to moderate to 4.0 per cent in 2026 and 4.2 per cent in 2027 after two years of 5.0 per cent growth. It expects inflation to accelerate to 5.2 per cent in 2026, driven largely by the Middle East conflict. Higher energy costs, weaker remittance inflows, and disruptions to trade and tourism are expected to weigh on household incomes and external buffers.<sup>40</sup>

President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's government has so far remained committed to the reform programme, but the politics of recovery remain difficult. Colombo's immediate task is to preserve reform credibility while preventing social fatigue from turning into political backlash.

### *Visit of India's Vice President to Sri Lanka*

Vice President of India, C.P. Radhakrishnan, visited Sri Lanka from April 19-20. During his visit, Vice President Radhakrishnan met with Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayaka. Discussions between the two leaders reviewed ongoing bilateral programs, with particular attention to the progress of India's projects to support recovery from Cyclone Ditwah. Both leaders also discussed the proposed oil pipeline link between India and Sri Lanka.<sup>41</sup>

The Vice President, during an address to the Indian diaspora, announced that the eligibility criteria for OCI Cards would be expanded to encompass 5th- and 6th-generation Indian-origin Tamils (IOTs) residing in Sri Lanka, extending beyond the current stipulation of up to the 4th generation. The Vice President also announced simplification of the OCI process by recognising certificates issued by the Government of Sri Lanka as proof of nativity.

## **NEPAL**

### *Political Developments*

Prime Minister Balendra Shah's first month in office was marked by ambitious governance announcements, legal controversies, and the first signs of friction between expectations and the realities of governance. In his very first cabinet meeting, Shah approved a 100-point governance reform agenda that included downsizing federal

ministries, dismantling VIP culture, and depoliticising civil servants and student organisations.<sup>42</sup>

However, the month was also marred by controversy. The implementation of the Karki Commission report, which recommended action against officials linked to the September 2025 crackdown on Gen Z protesters, proceeded without clear legal grounding. Former Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli and former Home Minister Ramesh Lekhak were arrested, but the courts subsequently ordered their release after 12 days, citing insufficient documentation and concerns about due process.<sup>43</sup> Oli described the detention as unlawful, prejudiced, and vindictive, expressing respect for the court's mandate.

Two ministers resigned from the cabinet within the first month. On April 22, Home Minister of Nepal, Sudan Gurung, tendered his resignation amid escalating controversy over his stock investments and alleged ties to a businessman under investigation for money laundering.<sup>44</sup> On April 6, Labour Minister Dipak Kumar Sah was relieved of his post following allegations that he had leveraged his official capacity to facilitate his wife's appointment to the Health Insurance Board.<sup>45</sup> The resignations have cast a shadow over Prime Minister Shah's image and his party's promises to curb corruption and promote transparent governance.

Despite a near two-thirds majority in Parliament, the Rastriya Swatantra Party's (RSP) reach across Nepal's federal structure remains limited. Nepal's federal system means delivery depends heavily on seven provinces and 753 local governments, many of which are outside the party's direct control or still shaped by older patronage networks. In six of seven provinces, power remains with alliances led by the Nepali Congress and CPN-UML. Shah's administration faces the challenge of translating an ambitious 100-point agenda into governance outcomes through a provincial structure his party does not control.

## MALDIVES

### *Political Developments*

President Mohamed Muizzu suffered a significant political setback in April. Voting was held on April 4 for local council elections and a constitutional referendum for a government-backed proposal to hold the presidential and parliamentary elections on the same day in 2028. The constitution referendum was defeated by a margin of roughly 68.5 per cent to 31.5 per cent.<sup>46</sup>

In the Local Council and Women's Development Committee (WDC) elections, the ruling People's National Congress (PNC) won 584 seats, while the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) won 563. In local councils alone, the opposition MDP did better, winning 289 council seats against PNC's 280. The overall seat count understates the scale of the PNC's defeat. The ruling party won just six of 52 seats across the five cities, which account for more than half the Maldivian population, and the MDP holds working majorities in every city council.<sup>47</sup> The result does not immediately overturn Muizzu's national mandate, but it narrows his political space.

On April 14, the President accepted the resignations of 10 cabinet ministers, including the defence, foreign affairs, health, tourism and local government ministers. The cabinet was subsequently reduced from 20 ministries to 15 in the most extensive restructuring of the administration since Muizzu took office. The government described the move as a reform to "run the government in line with the will of the people."<sup>48</sup> However, it is clear that the move was triggered by the ruling party's drop-in support in the April 4 elections.

### *Chinese Spy Ship at Male*

Chinese research vessel Shi Yan 6 arrived at Malé on April 24. The Shi Yan 6 is a dual-use PLAN vessel, officially designated as a scientific research ship, whose real purpose is to collect data on ocean currents, seabeds, and geology to support submarine operations. The vessel had entered the Indian Ocean Region via the Sunda Strait before anchoring at the Maldivian capital.<sup>49</sup>

India responded the following day by deploying INS Kalpeni to Gan, Addu Atoll, the southernmost atoll of the Maldives, in what the Indian High Commission in Malé described as a visit that "underscores our deep-rooted friendly ties and multi-faceted defence cooperation."<sup>50</sup> The proximity of the Chinese vessel's docking to India's response deployment—both occurring within 24 hours—reflects the accelerating maritime competition in the Indian Ocean.

For India, the Shi Yan 6's presence at Malé is a reminder that President Muizzu's administration, despite the economic pivot back towards New Delhi driven by debt compulsions, has not abandoned China's strategic engagement in the archipelago. Managing this triangular dynamic is a key challenge for Indian diplomacy.

## BHUTAN

### *Bhutan-China Border Talks*

Bhutan and China held the 15th Expert Group Meeting on their boundary dispute in Beijing from March 30 to April 1. The meeting was co-chaired by Hou Yanqi, Director General of the Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, and Letho Tobdhen Tangbi, Secretary for International Boundaries of Bhutan. Both sides acknowledged progress in recent years and engaged in what official readouts described as "frank and constructive discussions in a friendly atmosphere" on implementing the Three-Step Roadmap signed in October 2021.<sup>51</sup>

Separately, on the sidelines of the 15th meeting, the third meeting of the Joint Technical Team on Delimitation and Demarcation of the China-Bhutan Boundary was held to discuss boundary alignment in areas where there are no disputes. That implies the two sides are doing technical work on portions of the boundary that may be ready for alignment, leaving the harder disputed sectors for later.

On a question from the press, MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal gave a restrained answer, "Whenever there are talks between Bhutan and China, or between any of our neighbouring countries, we keep a close watch on all such developments. And if any action needs to be taken, we take appropriate steps accordingly."<sup>52</sup> New Delhi's concerns are on the boundary settlement in the disputed Doklam plateau, which overlooks the strategic Indian Siliguri Corridor. The Bhutanese government has consistently reassured India that no settlement will compromise Indian security interests. Still, as the Three-Step Roadmap advances, New Delhi will need to precisely define what those interests require.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "Pakistan Says Ceasefire Efforts Underway as Iran War Continues | Arab News." <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2638953/amp>.
- <sup>2</sup> "US-Iran War: After 15-Day Ceasefire Deal, Pakistan PM Shehbaz Sharif Invites US, Iran For Talks In Islamabad On Friday." <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/us-ran-war-after-15-day-ceasefire-deal-pakistan-pm-shehbaz-sharif-invites-us-iran-for-talks-in-islamabad-on-friday-11325951>.
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