



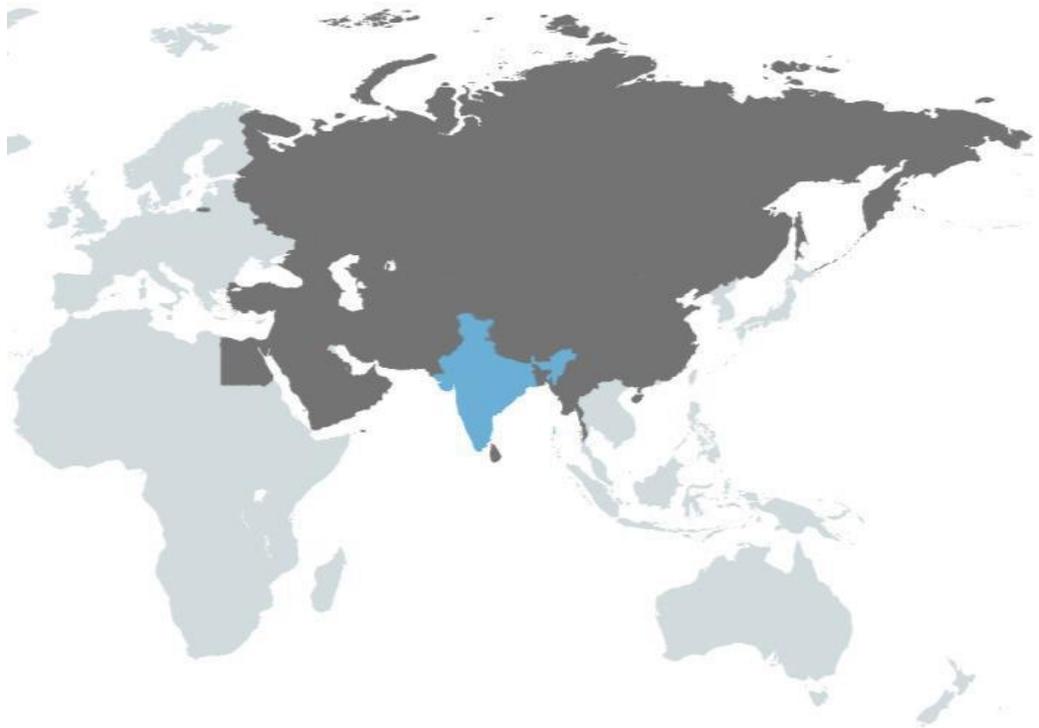
**Delhi Policy Group**

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



# INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

## AUGUST 2020



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Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

## 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, Antara Ghosal Singh, Sanket Joshi, Shreyas Deshmukh, Libni Garg 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: Complex Asymmetry and New Equilibrium

*Sanjay Pulipaka and Mohit Musaddi*

### India-China: Complex Asymmetry

The Himalayas are witnessing an asymmetric contest. In such a contest, it is likely that the dominant power will emerge victorious. Alternatively, the smaller power may prevail by inflicting pain on its adversary using guerrilla tactics and insurgency. While the India-China dynamic is defined by asymmetry, the above presumptions are not applicable. The Chinese military is superior to India, and yet, there is a perception that, in a short war, India may have a fighting chance to give as good as it gets. If the war becomes long-drawn, it will dent China's image as an emerged superpower. On the other hand, it is unlikely that India has the capability or the desire to inflict pain on China by fomenting a full-scale insurgency in Tibet and Xinjiang. Given such a complex asymmetry, the bigger power, China, is either waiting for an opportune moment to scale up the gains made in Ladakh or is seeking to consolidate existing gains. The challenge for India, therefore, is to attempt to restore the *status quo ante* by operationalising risk-taking tactics, such as demonstrating an appetite for a wider conflict.

The events of the past few weeks clearly demonstrate that China has no intention of de-escalating the stand-off in Ladakh. Even as diplomatic and military negotiation have been taking place, China has attempted to further encroach on Indian territory. On August 29-30, "PLA troops violated the previous consensus... and carried out [provocative military movements](#) to change the status quo."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Beijing has often issued rhetorical statements followed by actions that further consolidate its position on the ground. For instance, in early August, after the fifth round of military-level talks, [Chinese officials](#) said that the two sides "should always place the boundary issue in an appropriate position."<sup>2</sup> It is not clear as to what "appropriate position" implies. Similarly, the Chinese Ambassador in Delhi remarked on August 26 that the Galwan clash was an "unfortunate incident" and "a brief moment from the perspective of history".<sup>3</sup> However, Indian news reports have suggested that there has been increased activity of the Chinese Air Force in the region.<sup>4</sup> On August 29-30, there have been fresh PLA transgressions on the ground in Pangong Tso.

India has sought to communicate to China at various levels that it has no intention of letting the current status-quo become a new normal. On August 8, at [the meeting of infantry commanders](#) present at the DBO, the Indian military officials “insisted that the PLA troops camping near the ‘...Y Junction’ area in Depsang plains should refrain from blocking the Indian patrols.”<sup>5</sup> While on August 8 India’s External Affairs Minister (EAM) hinted that India and China could overcome differences if “some kind of an equilibrium” can be reached,<sup>6</sup> the Indian Prime Minister deployed more assertive language. In his Independence Day address on August 15, [Prime Minister Modi said](#) “[T]here have been misadventures along the border... the army of the country... have given a befitting reply”.<sup>7</sup> He also went on to say that “[T]he world has seen what our brave *jawans* can do in Ladakh, what the country can do to defend its resolve”.<sup>8</sup>

India reiterated its position of restoring the status-quo ante during various meetings, such as the [Indian Ambassador to Beijing’s](#) meeting with senior officials from the Chinese Central Military Commission (CMC) as well as the 18<sup>th</sup> meeting of the official level Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India China Border Affairs (WMCC). Simultaneously, Delhi has scaled up its military presence to convey to Beijing that it is prepared for an escalation. In August, India deployed a sizeable number of troops with shoulder-fired missiles to counter the presence of the Chinese Air Force in the region.<sup>9</sup>

Further, the Government of India has also approved measures to [fast-track long-pending defence acquisitions](#). Delhi is reportedly seeking to weaponise its Israeli drones, acquire two additional Israeli-made Phalcon AWACS systems and indigenously manufacture Russian Kalashnikov assault rifles.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in August, the Ministry of Defence cleared procurements worth Rs.8,722 crore (approx. USD1.17 billion) of “basic trainer aircraft, naval guns and specialised anti-tank ammunition”.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, India is looking to boost defence manufacturing as there are growing concerns on the prudence of emergency defence purchases.

After a ban on Chinese mobile applications in July, Delhi has [continued to impose restrictions](#) on Chinese economic activities during August. Various Chinese entities such as think tanks, business platforms agencies and advocacy groups have reportedly been placed under prior security clearance for visas.<sup>12</sup> This has been done to ensure that the Chinese outreach into think tanks and other business forums can be curtailed. Moreover, Delhi is also reportedly “reviewing the [presence of China’s Confucius Institutes](#) in [Indian] universities”.<sup>13</sup> Confucius centres have been subject to controversy across the

world as they are believed to be “extensions of the Chinese government that censor certain topics and perspectives...and use hiring practices that take political loyalty into consideration”.<sup>14</sup> These measures suggest that the Chinese engagement in India seems to be much more multi-dimensional and deeper than the Indian engagement in China, which again is indicative of the asymmetry between the two. There is a similar multi-dimensional, sustained engagement by China in India’s immediate as well as extended neighbourhood.

### India and the Immediate Neighbourhood – A Marginal Uptick

India’s relationship with its immediate neighbours seems to have been on an upward trajectory in August. On August 15, the Prime Minister of Nepal dialled PM Modi for the first time since May after Kathmandu had controversially updated its political map. [The two leaders](#) looked forward to meaningful bilateral cooperation and underlined the need to prioritise developments in the neighbourhood.<sup>15</sup> On August 17, the Indian Ambassador in Kathmandu and the Nepal Foreign Secretary held a meeting of the [India-Nepal Oversight Mechanism](#) to discuss the “status of the implementation of the ongoing projects”.<sup>16</sup> Delhi and Kathmandu are hopeful that such developments can lead to a meeting of the [India-Nepal Boundary Working Group](#) at a mutually convenient date.<sup>17</sup>

India’s Foreign Secretary [visited Dhaka](#) on August 18-19 and met with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh and the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs.<sup>18</sup> His discussions with the leadership [included matters relating to](#) enhanced connectivity, economic revival, a proposal for an air-bubble between India and Bangladesh, and cooperation in the manufacture of Covid-19 vaccines as and when one is available.<sup>19</sup> However, there was no reported discussion on a water-sharing agreement between Delhi and Dhaka. China has reportedly offered a loan of US\$ 1 bn. to [Bangladesh for management of the Teesta river](#) to help maintain water levels during the dry season, which has raised concerns in India.<sup>20</sup> However, it is unclear if the Indian Foreign Secretary discussed the proposed Chinese Teesta river project during his meetings in Bangladesh.

[Bangladesh has also called on India](#), as a non-permanent member of the UNSC (from January 2021 onwards), to “play a more meaningful role for a lasting solution to the Rohingya crisis”.<sup>21</sup>

Myanmar's upcoming general elections in November 2020 is being preceded by a spike in violence. On July 29, Indian security forces were [ambushed](#) in Manipur's Chandel district and on August 2-3, Myanmar military officials and soldiers were involved in [clashes with the Arakan Army](#) (AA).<sup>22</sup>

Sri Lanka concluded its [parliamentary elections](#) on August 6, with Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa's Sri Lanka People's Party (SLLP) registering a landslide victory.<sup>23</sup> Even though there were initial concerns among analysts that going by past experience, China would be favoured by the Rajapaksa administration; preliminary reports have been encouraging for Delhi. On August 20, Sri Lanka's new Foreign Secretary remarked that the island nation would have a "strategic security-wise '[India first](#) 'policy".<sup>24</sup> He further added that "Sri Lanka will not do anything harmful to India's strategic security interests".<sup>25</sup>

India and the Maldives have [forged several agreements](#) during a videoconference between EAM Dr S. Jaishankar and his counterpart Abdulla Shahid.<sup>26</sup> These include Indian assistance in the Greater Male Connectivity Project (GMCP), a direct cargo service between the Maldives and India, an air-bubble, renewal of the quota for the supply of essential commodities to Maldives and extension of financial assistance by India under a soft loan agreement.<sup>27</sup>

### **Kashmir and Pakistan's Dependence on China**

It has been a year since India abrogated Article 370. Except for an initial spurt of world attention, Kashmir seems to be slowly fading away from the glare of the international community. Not surprisingly, this has generated concern in Pakistan, resulting in shrill rhetoric from its political leaders. On August 6, Pakistan's Foreign Minister [expressed Islamabad's frustration with Saudi Arabia](#) and the OIC for not convening a meeting of its Council of Foreign Ministers on Kashmir and hinted at the possibility of convening an alternate platform of Islamic countries to discuss the Kashmir issue.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, even increased collaboration with China to highlight the Kashmir issue on international platforms has not provided significant gains for Islamabad.

Since assuming office in 2018, Prime Minister Imran Khan's administration has been pushed further towards China in terms of technological, economic and political dependence. On August 5, Pakistan's top economic body approved a [USD6.8-billion project](#) to upgrade its railway lines as a part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).<sup>29</sup> While news reports have referred to

'cost-sharing' between China and Pakistan as the basis for financing the project, there is no clarity regarding the exact financial modalities.<sup>30</sup>

To rival the US Global Positioning System (GPS), Beijing recently operationalised its [BeiDou Navigation Satellite System](#).<sup>31</sup> Pakistan has been an early customer of the BeiDou system and one of the very few countries to use it for military purposes as well. So, while the CPEC has created economic dependencies, satellite navigation is ensuring that Pakistan is getting coupled deeply with China in the technological and military domains.

### **A New Equilibrium – an Arab versus the non-Arab Middle East?**

Beyond Pakistan and Afghanistan, India has been making steady progress in its relationships with the Gulf countries. West Asia is witnessing a marked geopolitical shift and realignment of foreign policy postures. A major development in this direction during the month was the decision of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel to [establish diplomatic relations](#).<sup>32</sup> There is some anticipation that other Arab nations like Bahrain and Oman may follow suit. Moreover, the possibility of non-Arab countries – Turkey, Iran and Pakistan – coming together for common objectives, with the backing of Russia and China, has also been the subject of discussion.<sup>33</sup> However, it is still too early to say if the Middle East will get bifurcated into Arab-American and non-Arab China-Russia spheres of influence. This is because China continues to be a critical trading partner for most Arab countries and is also involved in civil-nuclear cooperation with Saudi Arabia. The fluidity in the geopolitics of the Middle East provides space for a creative economic and diplomatic engagement by India.

### **India and the Major Powers: In Search of an elusive Tectonic Shift**

Over the past few weeks, Moscow and Delhi have made concerted efforts to scale up their bilateral engagement. There is a possibility that the Russia-India-China Summit meeting will be held in November in [Riyadh on the sidelines of the G20](#) meeting.<sup>34</sup> [A BRICS foreign ministers' meeting](#) is scheduled to be held via video conference on September 4.<sup>35</sup> However, Delhi is seemingly uncomfortable about participating in multilateral forums that involve China. Contrary to earlier reports, India will not be participating in the multi-nation [Kavkaz 2020](#) (also referred to as Caucasus-2020) strategic-command post exercises due to be held in September 2020.<sup>36</sup> While government sources have cited the ongoing pandemic as the reason, reports have suggested that Delhi does not wish to participate in military exercises which include China and Pakistan.<sup>37</sup>

There has been some speculation regarding moves to wean Russia away from China. The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated last month that “there is [an] opportunity of involving Russia in US policy against China.”<sup>38</sup> However, this remains a remote possibility for the present, given Russia’s deep economic and technological dependence on China.

Nevertheless, Delhi is keen on drawing Moscow into plurilateral frameworks sans Beijing. On August 4, the Indian Foreign Secretary discussed the proposal for a Russia-India-Japan Track 2 trilateral mechanism with the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister.<sup>39</sup> Russian President Vladimir [Putin is set to visit](#) India later this year for the annual bilateral summit.<sup>40</sup>

India-US relations are poised to retain their importance for Washington. Amidst the upcoming US elections, India continues to receive significant support from across the political spectrum in the United States. On August 13, the United States [introduced a bipartisan resolution](#) criticising China for seeking to alter the status quo along the LAC.<sup>41</sup> On August 15, Democratic Presidential candidate Joe Biden released an ‘[Agenda for the Indian American Community](#)’.<sup>42</sup> The agenda identified the need for reform of immigration laws to provide a roadmap to citizenship for nearly 11 million undocumented immigrants – including [more than 500,000 from India](#).<sup>43</sup> Biden also analysed Washington’s relationship with New Delhi during the Obama presidency and vowed to prioritise the strengthening of the US-India relationship if he is elected President.<sup>44</sup> There was also significant discussion during the month regarding Democratic Vice-Presidential Candidate Kamala Harris’ Indian origins.

President Trump presided over a “naturalisation ceremony at the White House” on August 26, “where five immigrants, including a software developer from India, were sworn in as American citizens”.<sup>45</sup> Former US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley [invoked her Indian roots](#) at the Republican National Convention on August 24, where she remarked that she was a “proud daughter of Indian immigrants”.<sup>46</sup>

### **India, the United Nations and Multilateralism**

India continues to advocate the need for reformed multilateralism and for organisations such as the United Nations to reflect current realities. In the context of the post-COVID global developments, EAM Dr S. Jaishankar remarked on August 20 that “just when multilateralism was most in demand, it did not rise to the occasion”.<sup>47</sup>

Further, Delhi remains wary of attempts to malign India in multilateral platforms. A month after Pakistan issued a new political map claiming large tracts of Jammu and Kashmir as well as Junagadh, on August 5 Beijing, acting on behalf of Islamabad, ensured that the UN [Security Council conducted](#) an informal, behind-closed-doors discussion on Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>48</sup> India's permanent representative at the UN [summarised the discussions](#) stating "[I]n today's meeting of [the] UN Security Council which was closed, informal, not recorded and without any outcome, almost all countries underlined that J&K was [a] bilateral issue and did not deserve [the] time and attention of [the] Council".<sup>49</sup> On August 24, India's Permanent Mission to the UN hit out at Pakistan for its "litany of lies...after Islamabad's UN envoy claimed to have given a statement in a Security Council meeting not open to non-Council members".<sup>50</sup>

India has demonstrated steady commitment to UN institutions, regularly contributing through grants. In June, India had announced that it would contribute USD10 million to the UN Relief and Works Agency over the next two years. In August, [India contributed](#) USD15.46 million to the India-United Nations Development Partnership Fund.<sup>51</sup> In view of India becoming a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council from January 2021, Delhi is also increasing its diplomatic strength at its UN mission in New York. Reportedly, [at least four new diplomats](#) will join India's Permanent Mission in the coming months.<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

Beijing appears keen on increasing the intensity of power asymmetry by bringing Islamabad and Kathmandu into an undeclared quasi-alliance framework. India, on its part, has been seeking to address the asymmetry by improving relations with neighbours and developing more resilient partnerships through sustained engagement. At the global level, India is seeking to deepen its balancing partnerships with both the US and Russia in order to stabilise its neighbourhood and the Indo-Pacific and to strengthen its defence capabilities, as reflected in recent acquisitions of military equipment. In West Asia, emerging alignments provide an opportunity for India to scale up its presence.

## India and China: Continuing Stalemate

*Antara Ghosal Singh*

Through the month of August, India and China were involved in a series of negotiations to resolve the border stand-off. On [August 02](#), the fifth round of Corps Commander-level talks was conducted to discuss disengagement, which did not mark progress.<sup>53</sup> India “[rejected](#) Chinese demands for further disengagement on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) as untenable... as any further stepping back would mean vacating the Indian posts in the area.”<sup>54</sup> From an Indian perspective, it has become evident that the Chinese side is using negotiations to normalise their incursions.

China has not even implemented the earlier disengagement proposals that both sides had agreed on. For instance, an [Indian Express](#) report noted that the Chinese side had not followed the disengagement process at PP17 and PP17A in the Gogra-Hot Springs area, leaving soldiers from both sides separated by one kilometre.<sup>55</sup> “Because of the Chinese stance... the possibility of further progress at these two points remains slim.”<sup>56</sup> During [the meeting of infantry commanders](#) of the Depsang-Daulat Beg Oldie (DBO) sector of eastern Ladakh on August 8, Indian officials reportedly insisted that the [PLA troops](#) camping near the ‘Bottleneck’ or ‘Y-junction’ area in Depsang Plains since May should not continue to block Indian soldiers from going to their traditional patrolling points (PPs) 10, 11, 11A, 12 and 13.<sup>57</sup> It is well known that the DBO sector is strategically very important as it facilitates easy access to the Tibetan Plateau as well as the Karakoram Pass. Further, the DBO airstrip enhances power projection capabilities. Given its strategic significance, it is estimated that “more than [15,000](#) Chinese troops... have been deployed opposite Depsang, where India has also mobilised matching troops on its side, including an armoured brigade.”<sup>58</sup>

With the Ladakh stand-off showing no signs of easing, Beijing has scaled up its “concerns” on the Kashmir issue, including at international platforms. August 5 marked the first anniversary of the abrogation of Article 370 and the reorganisation of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh as two Union Territories. Responding to a question on the abrogation of Article 370, the [Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson stated that](#) “any unilateral change to the status quo in the Kashmir region is illegal and invalid.”<sup>59</sup> In response, the Ministry of External Affairs said that the “Chinese [side](#) has no *locus standi* on this matter. China is advised not to comment on [the] internal affairs of other nations.”<sup>60</sup> On the prodding of China, the UN Security Council held closed-door informal

discussions on the issue, which did not result in a formal statement. In a press [statement](#), India's Ministry of External Affairs noted "this was not the first time that China has sought to raise a subject that is solely an internal matter of India. As on such previous occasions, this attempt too met with little support from the international community. We firmly reject China's interference in our internal affairs and urge it to draw proper conclusions from such infructuous attempts."<sup>61</sup>

[Indian Ambassador](#) in Beijing Vikram Misri interacted with Liu Jianchao, Deputy Director of the Office of the CPC's Central Committee Foreign Affairs Commission on August 12.<sup>62</sup> He later also met Major General Ci Guowei, Director of the Office of International Military Co-operation of the Central Military Commission ([CMC](#)).<sup>63</sup> These meetings suggest that India is accessing the leadership at various levels in China to convey its displeasure on the Ladakh stand-off. On August 24, the Indian Ambassador outlined New Delhi's position on the stand-off at a [virtual meeting with Chinese scholars](#).<sup>64</sup> In his address, he called for "promoting mutual understanding on the basis of basic principles".<sup>65</sup>



*Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressing the Nation on the occasion of 74<sup>th</sup> Independence Day, in Delhi, August 15, 2020. Source: PM India*

With the lack of progress in negotiations, Prime Minister Narendra Modi used his Independence Day address to reiterate that India will deploy all means to protect its sovereignty. Referring indirectly to Pakistan and China, he [noted](#) "[F]rom LoC (Line of Control with Pakistan) to LAC (Line of Actual Control with China), anyone who has raised eyes on the sovereignty of the country, the Army of the country has responded to it in the same language. Respect for

India's sovereignty is supreme for us. What our brave soldiers can do for this resolution, what the country can do, the world has seen this in Ladakh."<sup>66</sup>

The 18<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC) on India-China Border Affairs was held on August 22; it also did not result in any significant progress. A day later, news reports [stated](#) that "the Chinese side had made a suggestion that both India and China should go back equidistantly from the Finger-4 area. The suggestion is not acceptable to the Indian side."<sup>67</sup> The impasse at multiple rounds of discussions clearly suggests that China does not seem to be interested in withdrawing from the territory on the Indian side of the LAC into which it has intruded.

In the first week of August, India decided to review the functioning of "local chapters of the Confucius Institutes in association with seven local colleges and universities... [as well as] 54 Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) signed between prestigious educational institutions including IITs, BHU, JNU and NITs and Chinese institutions."<sup>68</sup> The Embassy of China in New Delhi in a statement expressed the hope that India would "treat Confucius Institutes and higher education cooperation in a fair and objective manner."<sup>69</sup>

Beijing's actions during the month have indicated that any early restoration of the status quo ante is unlikely and that India must prepare for a long-term stand-off and possible escalations. In fact, the PLA attempted to carry out an escalation on the night of August 29-30 in the South Bank area of Pangong Lake and then again on August 31. However, the Indian Army pre-empted PLA's activity and took appropriate measures.

## India and the Neighbourhood: Showcasing Resilience

*Mohit Musaddi*

### Nepal

India-Nepal relations received a much-needed impetus in August as the two [Prime Ministers spoke via telephone for the first time](#) since May after Kathmandu had updated its political map.<sup>70</sup> During the conversation, Prime Minister K.P. Oli congratulated India for being elected as a two-year non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and [appreciated](#) PM Modi's Independence Day speech where he articulated India's "renewed priority to [the] neighbourhood".<sup>71</sup>

In August, an India-Nepal Joint Working Group explored the possibility of whether the Indian Oil Corporation could [build a petroleum pipeline](#) running into the northern and eastern parts of Nepal to meet growing fuel demand of the Himalayan nation.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, on August 17, the eighth meeting of the [India-Nepal Oversight Mechanism](#) was held through video conferencing.<sup>73</sup> The Ambassador of India to Nepal and the Foreign Secretary of Nepal discussed the "status of implementation of the ongoing projects" and highlighted the need to expedite some projects.<sup>74</sup> Kathmandu also appreciated [India's Covid-19 related assistance to Nepal](#), "including the supply of medicines and medical equipment".<sup>75</sup> Earlier, on August 9, the Indian embassy in Kathmandu, on behalf of the Indian Army, had [handed over 10 ICU ventilators](#) to the Nepal Army to assist them in the fight against coronavirus.<sup>76</sup>

It should be noted that a tripartite agreement between Nepal, India and Britain for the recruitment of Gurkha soldiers into the Indian and British armies is in place since 1947. However, Kathmandu has officially proposed a review of the agreement. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal had [reportedly](#) sent a letter to London in February 2020 remarking that the agreement has "outstanding grievances".<sup>77</sup> Foreign Minister Pradeep Kumar Gyawali [recently raised the issue](#) again at a virtual conference on August 1, remarking that the treaty is irrelevant as it "isn't appropriate for a sovereign nation to allow its citizens to serve in foreign armies".<sup>78</sup>

Kathmandu is also working on a [new foreign policy document](#) to take into consideration "the world's important major powers as well as [undergoing] geopolitical shifts" in the world order.<sup>79</sup> The document will reportedly be ten pages long and "divided into various sections like bilateral diplomacy; multilateral, regional, economic and public diplomacy, trade, commerce and labour".<sup>80</sup>

In July 2020, PM Oli had stoked controversy by [claiming that](#) the “real Ayodhya lies in Nepal, not in India and that Lord Ram was born in Thori in southern Nepal”.<sup>81</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal had then [issued a clarification](#) that, “the Prime Minister was simply highlighting the importance of further studies and research of the vast cultural geography the Ramayana represents”.<sup>82</sup> Even though the Prime Minister’s “statement was [widely condemned](#) in Nepal and India”, he again raised the issue on August 8 where he [reportedly discussed plans](#) to rename the Chitwan municipality to Ayodhyapuri and carry out excavation work in the area to “gather more evidence” regarding Lord Ram’s birth.<sup>83</sup>

On August 8, External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar also remarked that Gautam Buddha is one of the two greatest Indians “that the world remembers”. On August 9, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal [issued a statement](#) insisting that “it is a well-established and undeniable fact... that Gautam Buddha was born in Lumbini, Nepal”.<sup>84</sup> Soon after, the MEA too [issued a statement](#) on August 9 clarifying that the EAM was referring to India’s “shared Buddhist heritage... [and that undoubtedly] Gautam Buddha was born in Lumbini, which is in Nepal”.<sup>85</sup>

On the issue of boundary settlement, a [series of letters](#) were reportedly exchanged in July between district officers in Dharchula regarding the entry of Nepalese citizens in the territories of Limpiyadhura, Kalapani and Gunji.<sup>86</sup> However, officials have refuted the veracity of the letters.<sup>87</sup> Then on August 4, officials from India and Nepal reportedly held an [informal meeting](#) and “agreed to maintain status quo at the ‘No Man’s Land’ along the border in Champawat district in Uttarakhand”.<sup>88</sup> Delhi and Kathmandu are reportedly also considering a [meeting of the Boundary Working Group](#) at a mutually convenient date.<sup>89</sup>

Yet, it was reported that, in August, [China has moved](#) 150 Light Combined Arms Brigade from Tibet and redeployed it near the Lipulekh tri-junction in China.<sup>90</sup> Other reports have also claimed that the Chinese military is [constructing a surface-to-air missile site](#) on the banks of Mansarovar Lake, near the Lipulekh Pass.<sup>91</sup> This comes at a time when Beijing seems to be making further inroads into Nepal via its trade and connectivity outreach. On August 1, Beijing and Kathmandu had issued press releases commemorating the [65<sup>th</sup> anniversary](#) of the establishment of diplomatic relations.<sup>92</sup>

China and Nepal are [reportedly](#), also preparing an MoU to “re-measure the height of Mount Everest”.<sup>93</sup> The agreement also includes a clause to “promote joint collaboration on various activities in surveying, mapping and geo-

information (*sic.*) management”.<sup>94</sup> While in May 2019, the Government of Nepal had already completed an independent measurement project with plans to announce Mt. Everest’s new height measurement by 2020, a [Joint Statement between China and Nepal](#) in October 2019 created confusion when it proclaimed that the two countries would “jointly announced the height...and conduct scientific researches”.<sup>95</sup>

## Bangladesh

Apart from Nepal, China has also been an active player in Bangladesh. Reportedly, Dhaka has been offered a [loan of USD1 billion from Beijing](#) to manage the Teesta River and maintain water levels during the dry season.<sup>96</sup> A [water-sharing agreement](#) between India and Bangladesh remains elusive thus far.<sup>97</sup> Should the Chinese loan go through, it will be Beijing’s first-ever river management project with Bangladesh.<sup>98</sup>

India-Bangladesh trade has shown signs of recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic in the past few weeks. In August, trade between India and Bangladesh resumed through the Dawki Land Customs Station (LCS). Further, on August 4, the [Indian railways dispatched goods train](#) with onions to Bangladesh while on August 8, cloth, dye and chemicals were transported in a parcel train from Gujarat to Bangladesh.<sup>99</sup>



*A parcel train being loaded with cloth, dye and chemicals in Kankaria, Gujarat for Benapole, Bangladesh, August 8, 2020. Source: Twitter/@WesternRly*

Moreover, on August 18 and 19, the [Foreign Secretary of India visited Dhaka](#) to “take forward [the India-Bangladesh] cooperation on matters of mutual interest”.<sup>100</sup> The [issues discussed](#) during the visit included “enhancing

connectivity, the revival of the economy... [and] cooperation on countering the virus" among others.<sup>101</sup> Apart from meeting his counterpart, the Foreign Secretary also met with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh and the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. [Other points of discussions](#) included a proposal for an air-bubble between India and Bangladesh and addressing Dhaka's requirements for a Covid-19 vaccine, as and when it is available.<sup>102</sup> Delhi and Dhaka are reportedly also in [talks to enhance cooperation](#) on technology development including the use of artificial intelligence, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief management, greater people-to-people engagement and protection of the ecology as well as conservation of resources.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, Bangladesh has also cleared crucial domestic hurdles to fast-track connectivity. On August 18, [Dhaka approved seven projects](#), including the widening of a road in the Chattogram district, which will boost trade with India.<sup>104</sup> India is also set to use the Gomti River for a trial run in the Sonamura-Daudkandi inland waterways protocol route in early September.<sup>105</sup> For the first time, "50MT cement will be transported in a barge from Dhaka to Sonamura" via a 90-km route, out of which 89.5 km falls in Bangladesh.<sup>106</sup> Earlier, on August 6, the Liberation War Affairs Minister of Bangladesh informed the outgoing Indian High Commissioner that [Dhaka would construct a war memorial](#) to honour the Indian soldiers martyred in Bangladesh's 1971 Liberation War against Pakistan.<sup>107</sup> Next year will mark the golden jubilee celebrations of Bangladesh's independence.

At the same time, the Bangladesh parliamentary committee on foreign affairs has [questioned the suddenness](#) of the Indian Foreign Secretary's visit.<sup>108</sup> On August 23, the committee held a "closed-door" meeting and its Chairman later questioned the purpose of the Foreign Secretary's unofficial visit.<sup>109</sup> Subsequently, the Ministry informed the committee that the main objective of the visit was to "convey a message from the Indian Prime Minister to the Prime Minister" of Bangladesh.<sup>110</sup>

## Myanmar

Apart from discussions on bilateral cooperation, the Foreign Secretary also [discussed developments in Myanmar](#) during his trip to Dhaka.<sup>111</sup> In particular, the focus was Bangladesh's expectation that India, as a non-permanent member of the UNSC, would "play a more meaningful role for a lasting solution to the Rohingya crisis, including their early repatriation to Myanmar".<sup>112</sup> The Foreign Secretary is also scheduled to visit Myanmar in the coming months.

Myanmar's general elections scheduled for November 8, 2020, have already been preceded by violence and controversy. On August 19, a UK-based

Rohingya rights body urged the international community to [stop support for the elections](#) after “at least six candidates from Rohingya-led political parties” were disqualified.<sup>113</sup> On August 2 and 3, at least ten “Myanmar military officials, soldiers and personnel were killed in clashes with the Arakan Army (AA)”.<sup>114</sup> This also included an immigration officer who was conducting a census for the elections.<sup>115</sup>

Earlier, on July 29, [Indian security forces were ambushed](#) along the India-Myanmar border in Manipur’s Chandel district.<sup>116</sup> A joint squad of three Myanmar-based separatist groups reportedly carried out the attack as part of a campaign against “India’s colonisation of western Southeast Asia”.<sup>117</sup> Some experts have suspected that the border insurgent groups are being aided by an influx of Chinese weapons to impede the progress of India’s Act East initiative.<sup>118</sup> In August 2019, Myanmar’s Commander-in-Chief had presented photographs of the weapons seized during clashes with the insurgent groups as evidence in a meeting with the Chinese special envoy on Asian Affairs.<sup>119</sup>



*State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi will again be a National League for Democracy (NLD) party candidate in November's general election (File Photo). Source: Reuters*

Therefore, there is growing mistrust in Myanmar regarding Beijing’s tactics. Naypyidaw also reportedly [turned down Chinese requests](#) for joint naval exercises and an offer of a submarine from China.<sup>120</sup> Notably, India had

[supplied a diesel-electric Kilo Class submarine](#) to Myanmar in December 2019.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, Naypyidaw “continues to suspend the construction of the Myitsone Dam” and there has been no forward movement on the China-backed rail project to link Muse and Mandalay either.<sup>122</sup> [Beijing’s role](#) in the Yangon mega-city project has also been minimised, and the China-funded Myitkyina Economic Development Zone (MEDZ) in Myanmar’s Kachin state is reportedly in limbo following reservations expressed on the viability of the project by both the government and local residents.<sup>123</sup>

The proposed construction of the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway received a boost after the Supreme Court of India on July 28 stayed the litigation initiated by a defaulting contractor before the Manipur High Court.<sup>124</sup> In August 2016, India had signed an agreement with Myanmar for the “construction and upgradation of 69 bridges of Second World War vintage” as part of the project extending from Manipur to Thailand.<sup>125</sup> The Indian Ambassador to Myanmar had written to the Centre in June 2020 “apprising the Indian government of Myanmar’s expectation of early completion of the project”.<sup>126</sup>

## Bhutan



*From August 19 onwards, the Allay Land Customs Station has been facilitating two-way trade between India and Bhutan. Source: Twitter/@RuchiraKamboj*

Border trade has been [temporarily suspended](#) through the Jaigaon-Phuentsholing border between India and Bhutan after Thimphu imposed a lockdown in order to curb the rise of Covid-19 cases in the country.<sup>127</sup> However,

from August 19, two-way movement of goods began to take place via the [Allay Land Customs Station \(LCS\)](#), which was opened in July 2020 to ease the movement of trucks through other border points.<sup>128</sup> As of September 1, the Himalayan Kingdom has reported 225 cases of COVID-19.<sup>129</sup>

## Conclusion

In August, India's relationship with its neighbours displayed resilience despite the adversities of the recent past. At the helm of such a development was PM Oli's telephone call to the Indian Prime Minister on August 15. Subsequently, meetings of the Joint Working Group and the India-Nepal Oversight Mechanisms were also held. Reportedly, a meeting of the Boundary Working Group between Delhi and Kathmandu is next on the agenda. Similarly, the Indian Foreign Secretary's meetings with the leadership in Dhaka has proven to be fruitful as the two countries explore new avenues of cooperation. He is now expected to visit Myanmar, which is on the cusp of a crucial general election. Moreover, as explained in the next chapter, the new Sri Lankan administration has advocated an 'India First' security approach, while Delhi and Male have signed key projects, that will be critical for Maldives' development. Delhi must expedite economic and connectivity projects in tune with its Neighbourhood First Policy.

## The Maldives and Sri Lanka: 'India First'

*Libni Garg*

### Sri Lanka

In the recently held Parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka on August 5, the Sri Lanka People's Party (SLLP) won a [landslide victory](#), acquiring 59.9% of the total votes.<sup>130</sup> In the Tamil-majority Northern province, voters displayed [support](#) for parties with links to Rajapaksa's SLLP as opposed to the traditionally dominant Tamil National Alliance (TNA) which managed to win only 10 out of the 16 seats it had secured in the 2015 elections.<sup>131</sup> After being sworn in, Prime Minister Rajapaksa affirmed his duty towards the region and maintained that the development of the Northern province would be of prime importance to his government.<sup>132</sup> Declaring that the government "will cater to the needs of all our citizens, irrespective of race or cultural background", he [promised to](#) focus on the "urgent priorities in the Northern Province, with regard to livelihoods, irrigation for agriculture, the upgrading of exports and the improvement of facilities in health and education."<sup>133</sup>

During a telephone conversation on August 6, the Indian Prime Minister [congratulated](#) Prime Minister Rajapaksa on the victory. The two Prime Ministers "reiterated their shared commitment to strengthen the age-old and multi-dimensional India-Sri Lanka relationship".<sup>134</sup>

### Results of Sri Lankan Parliamentary Elections 2020

Political Party	SLLP 	SJB 	ITAK 	JJB	EPDP 	AITC 	Others
Electoral District Seats	128	47	9	2	2	1	7
National List Seats	17	7	1	1	0	1	2
Total Seats	145	54	10	3	2	2	9

Source: [Election Results, Government of Sri Lanka](#)

On August 30, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa [spoke with US Secretary of Defence Mark Esper](#). He congratulated President Rajapaksa on Sri Lanka's

parliamentary elections and his government's successful response to the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>135</sup> During the call, Secretary Esper and President Rajapaksa expressed their desire to deepen the US-Sri Lanka bilateral defence relations and also reiterated their "commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific that ensures the sovereignty of all nations".<sup>136</sup>

It is often perceived that it was under the Rajapaksas' rule that China made big forays into the Sri Lankan economy. With Rajapaksa's party emerging triumphant in the elections, there are now questions regarding the possible stance of Sri Lanka towards India. The Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary [addressed](#) the previous administration's perceived tilt towards China and assured that Colombo would now follow an "India First" approach since it "cannot afford to be a [strategic](#) security threat to India". He added that instead Sri Lanka would "[benefit](#) from India" and also maintained that the leasing of the Hambantota port to China was a "mistake".<sup>137</sup>



*On August 8, the Indian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka congratulated the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka on his party's election victory. Source: Twitter/@IndiainSL*

## The Maldives

Cooperation between India and Maldives in the public health sector has registered significant progress in the recent past. On August 7, the Maldivian minister for health held talks with his Indian counterpart to procure high-quality pharmaceuticals in order to "improve access to quality drugs, upgrade

testing and certification capacities (*sic*)".<sup>138</sup> In an extension of medical aid to the Maldives, India agreed to accept the fourth batch of [150 patients](#).<sup>139</sup>

On August 4, representatives from the Indian High Commission in Male and the Maldivian Ministry of Youth, Sports and Community Empowerment held a discussion regarding the construction of a [swimming pool](#) in Fuvahmulah City under a grant provided by India.<sup>140</sup> Additionally, the Indian High Commission in Male is also partnering with the Maldives Industrial Fisheries Company to [establish](#) fish processing plants and storage facilities under a USD800 million line of credit extended by India to the Maldives.<sup>141</sup> On August 27, a virtual ceremony was held to [inaugurate](#) the Hulhumalé Central Park and Eastside Arrival Jetty renovation projects which are being financed under the Indian grant of USD6.9 million.<sup>142</sup>

On August 13, EAM Dr S. Jaishankar and the Maldivian Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid held a videoconference during which the following [agreements](#) were forged:

- Greater Male Connectivity Project (GMCP): India will provide a grant of USD100 million and a new line of credit of USD400 million to support the GMCP. This will be the largest civilian infrastructure project in the Maldives.<sup>143</sup>
- A direct cargo service between the Maldives and India will be started in [September](#), which “will enhance sea connectivity and provide predictability in supplies for importers in Maldives and exporters in India.”<sup>144</sup>
- An air bubble is to be created between India and the Maldives. The Maldives is the first country in India’s neighbourhood with which the air bubble will come into effect.<sup>145</sup>
- New Delhi renewed the quota for the supply of essential commodities to the Maldives for the year 2020-2021 under the Bilateral Trade Agreement of 1981.<sup>146</sup>
- In order to help the Maldives to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, India will extend in-principle urgent financial assistance to the country through a soft loan arrangement.<sup>147</sup>



*EAM Dr S. Jaishankar in a videoconference with the Maldivian Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid on August 13. Source: Twitter/ @DrSJaishankar*

While receiving cooperation and aid from India, Male at the same time is grappling with debt repayment to its largest creditor, China. Beijing's Exim Bank asked the Solih government to repay an outstanding instalment of USD10 million from a USD127 million loan that was [granted](#) to parliamentarian Ahmed Siyam Mohamed on a sovereign guarantee under the previous administration.<sup>148</sup> The Maldivian Ministry of Finance subsequently [revealed](#) that the loan had been repaid by the Ahmed Siyam Holdings Private Limited (ASH).<sup>149</sup> This development has further shed light on the unprecedented risks faced by China's debtor countries.

## India, CAR and PAI<sup>1</sup>: Pakistan Updates Relationships

*Shreyas Deshmukh*

### Kashmir, OIC and Pakistan's Conundrum

It has been a year since the Indian Parliament enacted "[The Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act 2019](#)"<sup>150</sup>, which forced Islamabad to realign its foreign policy. To counter India and regain lost leverage, Prime Minister Imran Khan launched an intense diplomatic campaign. While its relations with traditional allies such as Saudi Arabia and UAE have soured in recent months, Pakistan, with the help of China, has been able to gain limited ideological support, witnessed in various diplomatic statements from Turkey, Malaysia, and Iran.

After India's decision to change the status of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), Pakistan has repeatedly requested Saudi Arabia to call a Foreign Ministers' (FMs) meet of the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation (OIC). This would have reinforced Pakistan's stand on Kashmir that it is an issue of *Ummah* (the Islamic community) and thus, all Islamic countries must support it. However, its failure to persuade Saudi Arabia, even after a year of diplomatic outreach, has frustrated Islamabad, contributing to a [rift between the two](#).<sup>151</sup> On August 5, 2020, the Pakistan Foreign Minister said, "I am once again respectfully telling OIC that a meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers is our expectation."<sup>152</sup>

Pakistan's decision to turn down Saudi Arabia's request for [support in the Yemen conflict](#) in 2015 as well as improving relations with Turkey left Riyadh unhappy.<sup>153</sup> However, Pakistan has often tried to mend relations. In 2017, Islamabad allowed its former Army Chief Raheel Sharif to head a Saudi-led coalition in 2017 "formed to combat terrorism".<sup>154</sup> Further, Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman was accorded a grand welcome in Islamabad in February 2019. Pakistan's political and military leadership keep [visiting Riyadh](#) for consultation on issues of mutual bilateral interest.<sup>155</sup> After the controversial statement by FM Qureshi, the Chief of Army Staff General Bajwa [visited Riyadh](#) on August 16 to avoid a further rift with the royal family.<sup>156</sup> Indeed, Pakistan can ill afford Saudi Arabia's ire at the moment.

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<sup>1</sup> PAI stands for Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran; CAR stands for Central Asian Republics



*General Qamar Javed Bajwa, Chief of Army Staff (COAS) of Pakistan met Prince Khalid bin Salaman bin Abdulaziz, Deputy Minister of Defence Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on August 18, 2020. Source: ISPR*

Following [failed attempts](#) to persuade its traditional allies to build pressure on India, Pakistan has turned towards regional countries in an effort to gather support by attempting to mend ties.<sup>157</sup> Imran Khan's call on Bangladesh Prime Minister Shaikh Hasina on July 22 and the [Maldivian President](#) Ibrahim Mohamed Solih on August 10 were projected by Pakistani media as an indication of India being isolated in the region.<sup>158</sup> While PM Khan briefed Prime Minister Hasina on Kashmir, the subject was not discussed with President Solih. Pakistan's attempt to create a regional pressure group using the Islamic card has largely been unsuccessful, even in the past. In May 2020, it was the Maldives and the UAE which thwarted Pakistan's attempt to set up an [informal group](#) of OIC envoys at the UN on Islamophobia.<sup>159</sup> Ultimately, Pakistan has had to rely on China to [generate favourable optics](#) on the Kashmir issue.<sup>160</sup> On August 5, the UNSC members held an informal closed-door session on J&K, during which almost all countries reportedly underlined that it was a bilateral issue.<sup>161</sup>

On August 4, Pakistan also launched a new political map showing Manavandar and Junagarh (which are part of the Indian State of Gujarat) as part of its own territory. MEA [released a statement](#) calling it a "political absurdity, laying untenable claims to territories in the Indian State", and further said that such

“assertions have neither legal validity nor international credibility.”<sup>162</sup> The [joint statement](#) of the second round of the China-Pakistan Foreign Ministers’ Strategic Dialogue conducted on August 22 also had references to Kashmir, which was again [rejected by India](#).<sup>163</sup>

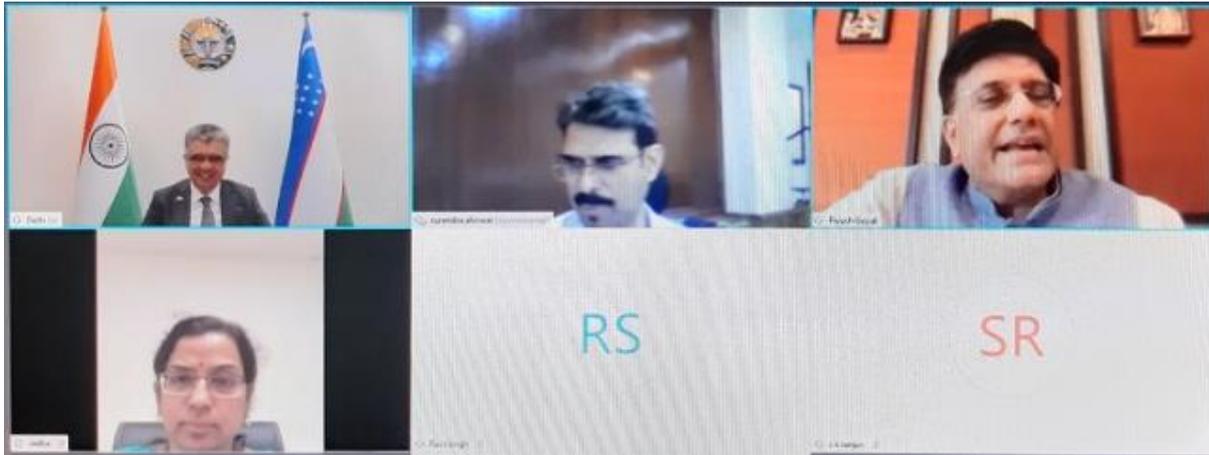
## India-Afghanistan

While Pakistan is trying to generate global attention on the Kashmir issue, the international community seems to recognise the need for a stable Afghanistan as a critical factor to maintain peace in the region. However, the Afghan peace process did not progress in August due to the stalled process of [prisoner release](#) and the intensified clashes between the Afghan National Defence Forces and the Taliban in a different part of the country.<sup>164</sup> The US Special Representative, Zalmay Khalilzad, has [remarked on August 19](#) that the Afghan peace process has entered into a “hopeful stage”.<sup>165</sup> The Indian leadership is in constant touch with the Afghan dispensation. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Afghan President Dr Ashraf Ghani discussed the evolving security situation in the region via a telephone conversation on August 3. Further, on August 20, the Afghan Foreign Minister [spoke to India's External Affairs Minister](#), Dr S Jaishankar, and discussed bilateral issues including Indian investments in Afghanistan.<sup>166</sup>

## India in Central Asia and Iran

Recently, India and Central Asia have been discussing ways to increase two-way trade and investment as the current figures are [significantly below potential](#).<sup>167</sup> One such avenue is the development of aviation links across the region. In August, representatives of IndiGo expressed a desire to develop [flight networks](#) to Russia and the Central Asian countries over the next few months. IndiGo already operates passenger and cargo charter flights to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.<sup>168</sup>

A first [meeting of the India-Uzbekistan National Coordination Committees](#) was held on August 24 to monitor the implementation of mutually agreed projects between the two countries.<sup>169</sup> In the meeting, both sides reviewed the ongoing and planned economic and trade cooperation, including the status of negotiations for concluding a Bilateral Investment Treaty and a Preferential Trade Agreement.<sup>170</sup> Moreover, negotiations between India and Uzbekistan for trade in agricultural products are at an [advanced stage](#).<sup>171</sup> The Ambassador of Uzbekistan to India held a [videoconference](#) with the Indian Minister for Commerce and Industry on August 12, in which the prospects of co-operative development between Uzbekistan and India in trade and investment were discussed.<sup>172</sup>



*The Ambassador of Uzbekistan to India held a video conference with the Indian Minister of Commerce and Industry on August 12, 2020. Source: Uzbekistan National News Agency*

In Iran, Indian exporters have been [facing problems](#) as the Central Bank of Iran has slowed the allocation of the currency against which Iranian traders were buying commodities from India.<sup>173</sup> According to traders, exports to Iran may stop if the issue is not resolved.<sup>174</sup>

## Conclusion

As China continues to push for the Belt and Road Initiative in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia, its assertive approach has created a [backlash in the region](#).<sup>175</sup> At the same time, India's relations with the CARs have steadily improved. Moreover, the telephonic conversations between Delhi and Kabul and the subsequent [release](#) of six Indian captives in July 2020 indicate the strong support that India enjoys in the region.<sup>176</sup>

A year of intense efforts by Pakistan to attract the attention of the international community towards Kashmir has failed to gather momentum. Instead, it has only dampened Islamabad's relations with its partners and consequently, increased its dependency on China for diplomatic as well as economic support.

## India-West Asia: Changing Alignments

*Sanket Joshi*

The Turkish government, under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has placed a greater emphasis on the pursuit of an Islamist identity. This is evident in the conversion of the Byzantine-era monument 'Hagia Sophia' to a mosque. Further, the Islamist identity is also apparent in Turkey's reported support of [radical Islamic organisations](#) in the Jammu and Kashmir, Palestine, Libya, among others.<sup>177</sup> On August 5, the Turkish Foreign Ministry Spokesperson stated, "India's decision to abrogate special constitutional status of [Jammu and Kashmir](#) (J&K) has further complicated the situation and has not contributed to the peace and stability in the region. Kashmir issue should be resolved through dialogue and relevant UN resolutions".<sup>178</sup> The spokesperson of India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) described these remarks on J&K as "factually incorrect, biased and unwarranted" and asked Turkey to "refrain from interfering in [India's internal matters](#)".<sup>179</sup>



*US President Donald Trump addresses the media while announcing the 'Abraham Accord' between Israel and the UAE, August 14, 2020. Source: Twitter/@WhiteHouse*

In a historical milestone in [Arab-Israeli relations](#), the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel established full diplomatic ties on August 13, with Tel Aviv "suspending" the annexation of parts of the West Bank.<sup>180</sup> Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994) had previously signed similar peace agreements with Israel. [Bahrain, Oman and Egypt](#) welcomed the peace deal known as the 'Abraham

Accord' while Turkey severely criticised it and threatened to [suspend diplomatic relations](#).<sup>181</sup> Iran termed it as a "strategic act of idiocy by Tel Aviv and Abu Dhabi".<sup>182</sup> India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) welcomed the [peace agreement](#) between "two key strategic partners in West Asia" and called for "resumption of direct talks between Israel and Palestine towards a peaceful two-state solution".<sup>183</sup>

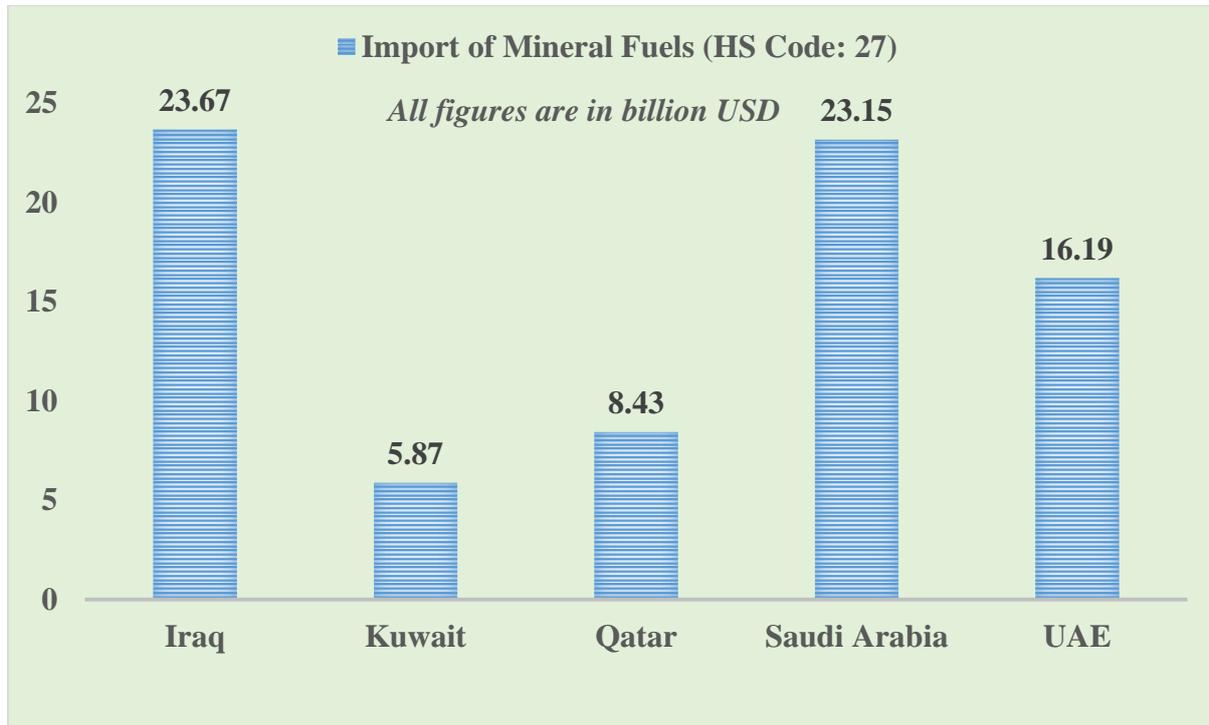


*Israel signs an agreement with the Government of Uttar Pradesh on water cooperation to jointly establish the 'India-Israel Bundelkhand Water Project', August 20, 2020. Source: Twitter/@IsraelinIndia*

On August 20, Israel signed a water cooperation agreement with the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh to jointly establish the '[India-Israel Bundelkhand Water Project](#)'.<sup>184</sup> Tel Aviv and Delhi have also signed a three-year [cultural agreement](#) to strengthen people-to-people relations.<sup>185</sup> Reportedly, India is also in talks with Israel to finalise the long-pending deal of two [Phalcon](#) airborne warning and control systems (AWACS) for approximately USD1 billion.<sup>186</sup>

India-Saudi Arabia bilateral relations are also on an upward trajectory. Recently, Saudi Arabia's Ambassador in Delhi described India as the "[most important strategic partner](#)" to the Kingdom.<sup>187</sup> He emphasised Saudi Arabia's determination to "partner India in its growth story towards becoming a USD5 trillion economy by 2025 and USD10 trillion by 2030".<sup>188</sup>

In a related development in West Asia, India's Sherpa to G-20, Suresh Prabhu, called for further strengthening [India-Qatar bilateral trade](#) by increasing gas import and reducing carbon emission in the country.<sup>189</sup>



*India's imports of mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation from select Gulf countries in 2019-20. Source: Department of Commerce, Government of India*

While India's relations with Arab countries have been strengthening, it should be noted that China has also been active in the West Asian geopolitics. Saudi Arabia reportedly [expanded its nuclear programme](#) with China's assistance.<sup>190</sup> On August 1, the UAE started operations at the Barakah [nuclear power](#) plant.<sup>191</sup> Concerned by the development, US intelligence agencies are scrutinising Saudi Arabia's ability to produce nuclear fuel that may eventually put the Kingdom on the path of developing nuclear weapons.

On the regional security front, on August 14, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) rejected a resolution to extend the arms embargo on Iran. Thus, President Trump is likely to re-impose unilateral "snapback" [sanctions on Iran](#).<sup>192</sup>

In a significant development, President Trump has removed certain restrictions on America's ability to sell unmanned aerial systems (armed drones) to foreign countries. The US has re-interpreted the '[Missile Technology Control Regime \(MTCR\)](#)' and will allow export of armed drones that fly at less than 800 km per hour.<sup>193</sup> This policy change could be perceived as a reaction

to China's rising drones export in West Asia. As China is not a party to MTCR, it "[faces little competition](#)" in the sale of such weapons.<sup>194</sup> The US is also looking to increase the sale of [armed drones](#) to India.<sup>195</sup>



*India's External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar co-chairs India-UAE Joint Commission Meeting with UAE's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, August 17, 2020.*

*Source: Twitter/@DrSJaishankar*

In the economic realm, the 13<sup>th</sup> session of India-UAE [Joint Commission Meeting](#) (JMC) on trade, economic and technical cooperation was held on August 17, co-chaired by the foreign ministers of both nations, during which Delhi invited external investments in infrastructure projects.<sup>196</sup> On August 17, India's Finance Minister also held a bilateral meet with her UAE counterpart. The discussions focused on UAE's investment in the ambitious [National Infrastructure Pipeline](#), and cooperation to integrate financial transactions was explored.<sup>197</sup>

In terms of investments from the Gulf, the [Oman-India Joint Investment Fund II](#) (OIJIF) acquired 1.63 per cent stake (worth around INR42 crore/USD5.6 million) in Mumbai-based DCB bank.<sup>198</sup> Reportedly, [Qatar Investment Authority](#) is also in talks with Reliance to invest INR11,200 crore (about USD1.5 billion) in JioFibre.<sup>199</sup> Meanwhile, [India's Ambassador to Egypt](#) said that "bilateral trade between the two nations has reached USD4.53 billion in the fiscal year 2019-20 despite the Covid-19 induced economic crisis".<sup>200</sup>

India's 'Vande Bharat Mission' (VBM) has entered the fifth phase of repatriation. Until mid-August, more than 1 million (10 lakh) Indians have been [repatriated](#)

[from abroad](#).<sup>201</sup> One hundred and five flights will reportedly be operated from the UAE to various [destinations in India](#) in this phase of VBM.<sup>202</sup> India has also signed an [air-bubble agreement](#) with Qatar to facilitate flights between the two countries beginning August 18.<sup>203</sup>

On August 4, the massive explosion caused by “Ammonium Nitrate” stored at the city’s port devastated Lebanon’s capital Beirut. Since then, violent clashes have erupted against corruption in the government, leading to the resignation of PM [Hassan Diab](#).<sup>204</sup> On August 31, diplomat Mustapha Adib was tasked with [forming the next government](#) of Lebanon.<sup>205</sup> On August 14, India delivered 58 metric tonnes of emergency [humanitarian aid](#), including medical and food supplies to Lebanon, thus demonstrating its humanitarian assistance capability in distant locations and at short notice.<sup>206</sup>

## India-Russia: Exploring Avenues for Cooperation

*Anushka Nair*

On August 4, the Foreign Secretary of India held a telephone conversation with the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister to discuss scheduled high-level bilateral exchanges for 2020, including the BRICS and SCO frameworks, and the India-Russia Summit, due to be held later this year.<sup>207</sup> In recent past India called for greater Russian participation in the Indo-Pacific framework. In an attempt to facilitate greater Russian involvement in the Indo-Pacific, the Indian Foreign Secretary [discussed a proposal](#) for a Russia-India-Japan trilateral grouping.<sup>208</sup>

The developments in the past few weeks have indicated a firm commitment from Russia towards the Russia-India-China (RIC) grouping. Reports suggest that Moscow is planning a RIC Summit on the sidelines of the G20 Summit scheduled for November 2020 in Riyadh.<sup>209</sup> Reportedly, a RIC Defence Ministers 'Dialogue could also be on the agenda in the near future.<sup>210</sup> Moreover, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar are scheduled to [visit Moscow](#) in September 2020, for meetings within the SCO framework.<sup>211</sup> The former is expected to be in Russia from September 3-4 for a RIC Defence Ministers 'Meet, while the latter is scheduled to attend the SCO foreign ministers 'meeting on September 10.<sup>212</sup>

An Indian tri-service contingent was also scheduled to participate in Russia's multi-nation strategic-command post exercises [Kavkaz 2020](#) (also called Caucasus-2020). However, on August 29 news reports have indicated India has pulled out of the exercises due to the ongoing pandemic.<sup>213</sup> Kavkaz 2020 will be held in Astrakhan in southern Russia from September 15-26, and at least 18 countries, including China and Pakistan, are expected to participate.<sup>214</sup>

On August 23, the Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu inaugurated the [Sixth International Military and Technical Forum Army-2020](#) in Moscow, which is the world's largest arms exhibition.<sup>215</sup> The India Pavilion at the forum was inaugurated by the Indian Secretary (Defence Production) and the Indian Ambassador to Russia.<sup>216</sup>



*Indian Secretary (Defence Production) and the Indian Ambassador to Russia inaugurating the India Pavilion at the [Sixth International Military and Technical Forum Army-2020](#) outside Moscow on August 23. Source: [Twitter/@IndEmbMoscow](#)*

Apart from defence, Moscow and Delhi have also increased cooperation in other sectors. In August, four Indian Air Force (IAF) cosmonauts completed their first phase of training at the Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Centre (GCTC) in Russia for India's first-ever crewed mission to space, scheduled for 2022.<sup>217</sup> Moreover, the Rosatom State Atomic Energy Co-operation [announced on August 11](#) that "it had begun manufacturing a set of steam generators" for the Kudankulam nuclear power plant located in Tamil Nadu, India.<sup>218</sup> Russia is constructing six VVER-1000 nuclear reactors at the site, and is reportedly in talks with India "to construct six more at a new site that is yet to be identified".<sup>219</sup>

To increase the India-Russia collaboration in the shipping sector, the Russian Deputy Minister for Industry and Trade and the Indian Minister of State for Shipping and Chemical and Fertilisers on August 21 explored the possibility of [joint ventures](#) in the civilian shipbuilding industry.<sup>220</sup> Enhanced Indo-Russian cooperation in ship design, building, repair, logistics and waterways could benefit maritime links which the two countries have already sought to strengthen through the revival of the Vladivostok-Chennai shipping links, and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), linking Mumbai and St Petersburg via the Indian Ocean.<sup>221</sup>



*Baltic Shipyard, Saint Petersburg, Russia. Source: Wikimedia Commons*

On August 11, Russia became the world's [first nation to register a vaccine](#) for Covid-19, when President Vladimir Putin announced that the Russian health ministry had approved the Adenovirus-based vaccine, named 'Sputnik-V'.<sup>222</sup> While the West has voiced concerns over the legitimacy of this vaccine, owing to the short time frame in which it was announced, Indian companies do not appear to share that concern. The Indian Ambassador in Moscow has reportedly had a productive [discussion](#) with the CEO of the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), on the possibility of India producing the Russian vaccine domestically.<sup>223</sup> Further, the Indian Ambassador stated that Indian companies have already [sought details from the RDIF](#) regarding specifications of Phase 1 and 2 clinical trials of its Covid-19 vaccine.<sup>224</sup> The RDIF chief also shared in an interview that Moscow is keen on producing the Sputnik V vaccine in India as India has both the capability and the know-how of Russian technology to commence large-scale domestic production of the vaccine.<sup>225</sup>

While large-scale testing of the Russian vaccine is yet to begin, a Russian Minister has reportedly forecast that Russia will be able to produce 1.5-2 million doses of the vaccine per month by the end of the year with a long-term target of 6 million doses per month.<sup>226</sup> However, apart from Covid-19, Russia and India must work to expand collaboration in other dimensions of the pharmaceutical sector as well to boost trade.



*Sputnik V vaccine samples developed by the Gamaleya Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology, in Moscow, released by the RDIF. Source: Reuters*

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