



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



DPG POLICY BRIEF

2022 In Perspective: India's Regional Challenges

Author

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Cover Photographs:

Afghan women protest against a new Taliban ban on women accessing university education on December 22 in Kabul. Source:CNN

Outgoing Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa hands over the baton of command to the newly appointed Army Chief General Asim Munir (L) on 29 November 2022. Source ISPR

Indian Army boat patrol in Pangong Tso Lake. Source ANI

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Afghanistan

Afghanistan continued to face a severe humanitarian crisis brought on by years of conflict, economic sanctions, recurring drought, and extreme poverty. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) estimates that a record 28.3 million people will need humanitarian and protection assistance in 2023, up from 24.4 million in 2022 and 18.4 million in 2021.

India maintained a people-centric policy in Afghanistan, stressing its strong historical and civilizational linkages with the Afghan people. It made generous contributions, donating 50 tonnes of medical aid (including life-saving medicines and 500,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines) and 40,000 tonnes of wheat, with another 10,000 tonnes to follow. In addition, India resumed work on 20 projects that were stalled after the Taliban takeover in August 2021. To coordinate the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance, India deployed a technical team at its Embassy in Kabul.

India and the world could do much more for Afghanistan, but for the Taliban's growing disregard for human rights, particularly their crackdown on equal rights for women and girls. Women have been increasingly shut out from public life and banned from entering parks, gyms, and public baths. In March, girls were barred from attending secondary schools, and a December diktat has forbidden them from university education.

Public punishments have made a return to Afghanistan, with floggings being carried out in sports stadiums. The first public execution occurred on December 7 in western Farah province before hundreds of spectators and many top Taliban officials. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs has voiced its concern over these developments and emphasised the "importance of the establishment of an inclusive and representative government that ensures equal rights of women and girls to participate in all aspects of society, including access to higher education."

Another area of concern is the spillover of terrorism from Afghanistan. While the Taliban is engaged in a brutal no-holds-barred campaign against the Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-K), it continues to shelter numerous terrorist groups.



A United Nations report of May 2022 pointed out that the “relationship between Al-Qaida and the Taliban remains close and is underscored by the presence, both in Afghanistan and the region, of Al-Qaida core leadership and affiliated groups, such as Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS).” The report further noted that several thousand Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) fighters are present in Afghanistan. Other foreign groups include the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Jaish-e-Mohammed, Jamaat Ansarullah, and Lashkar-e-Taiba.

India has repeatedly emphasised that no terrorist organisation should be provided sanctuary or allowed to use the territory of Afghanistan. With global attention focused on the Russia-Ukraine war, External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar cautioned that the world should not forget the situation in Afghanistan and pointed out the need for a coordinated global response to the problem of terrorism from Afghanistan.

Looking ahead to 2023, India will continue to assist the people of Afghanistan with humanitarian support, while engaging with the Taliban to safeguard its national security interests. However, any deepening of ties with the Taliban appears unlikely, given Afghanistan's deteriorating human rights situation. India will also be keenly watching the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan, which seems to be fraying over cross-border attacks launched by the TTP against Pakistani security forces.

Pakistan

2022 has been a year of political turmoil, economic instability, and a worsening internal security situation in Pakistan. The ouster of the Imran Khan government in April 2022 has led to a vitiated political atmosphere marked by large anti-government rallies led by Imran. Despite being out of power, Imran's party, Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI), remains popular with the masses and has won stunning victories in byelections held in Punjab, Sind, KP, and Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir.

A feature of Imran's campaign has been his direct attacks on the Pakistan Army leadership, accusing it of being responsible for his ouster and for acting against him. The pressure on Pakistan Army was evident when the Director-General of Inter-Services Intelligence (DG ISI), Lt. General Nadeem Anjum, appeared before the media in an unprecedented press conference. The DG ISI revealed that before his ouster as Prime Minister, Imran had asked Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa to do "illegal and unconstitutional" acts.



Some of the ruling coalition's unpopularity is a result of the steps taken to tackle the economic situation in the country. The IMF had set strict preconditions on Pakistan to revive the stalled \$6 billion bailout package. The resulting hike in fuel and power prices has not gone down well with the public, but there was no option with the government as it sorely required the IMF loan.

In the last 12 months, the State Bank of Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves have declined by \$11.6 billion from \$17.7 billion to \$6.1 billion, the lowest level of reserves since April 2014. Inflation hit a record high of 27.26% in August, before easing slightly to 23.8% in November. According to a local media report, the poverty rate in Pakistan has spiked by 35.7%. The economic woes in Pakistan were exacerbated by the devastating floods that caused damages and financial losses estimated as over \$30 billion.

In August, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved a \$1.2 billion loan for Pakistan. However, the 9th IMF review mission, which would have approved the next loan tranche of \$1.1 billion, was held up over some of the IMF conditions that the government considers as being too harsh on the people. However, without IMF support, Pakistan could find it difficult to secure lending from other nations and lenders like the Asian Development Bank, putting the country at risk of default.

Amidst the political and economic crisis, Pakistan faces a worsening internal security situation. According to data from the South Asian Terrorism Portal, deaths of security forces personnel in terror-related incidents in 2022 have risen by 65% compared to 2021 and are more than double the deaths in 2020. In a recent interview, Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah stated that the number of TTP fighters in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region was between 7,000 to 10,000.

The Baloch separatist insurgency has also entered a new phase. 2022 started with an attack in January on a security checkpoint in Baluchistan's Kech region in which ten soldiers were killed. This was followed in February with attacks on two security camps in Baluchistan's Nushki and Panjgur districts. In April, a female suicide bomber of the Baloch Liberation Army blew herself up at the Confucius Institute in Karachi, killing four, including three Chinese nationals.

During Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's visit to China in November 2022, President Xi Jinping expressed his "great concern about the safety of Chinese nationals in Pakistan." The threat is not only from Baloch insurgents but also the locals of Gwadar, who have been protesting for the last two months and have now warned all Chinese citizens to leave the city. The Baloch insurgency



and the ongoing protests could have a broader fallout on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor which has already seen prolonged delays.

India-Pakistan bilateral relations have remained frozen since 2019, when India revoked the special constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir. India has clearly stated that decisions about Jammu and Kashmir are an internal matter and that no other country has any locus standi to comment on them. However, Pakistan remains obsessed with Kashmir, linking normalisation of relations with a resolution of the Kashmir issue. The Indian Home Minister, Amit Shah, has ruled out any talks with Pakistan on Kashmir.

Pakistan's attempts to rake up the Kashmir issue in the United Nations and at the OIC meetings have drawn a sharp response from India. Dr. Jaishankar has stated that a state sponsoring cross-border terrorism, hosting Osama bin Laden, and attacking a neighbouring Parliament does not have the credentials to sermonise before the United Nations. He has also forcefully stated that while India wanted good neighbourly ties, it would not let terrorism be used as a tool to force the country to the negotiating table.

The contrasting positions on Kashmir, India's hardened stance on terrorism emanating from Pakistan, and the political uncertainty in Pakistan mean that bilateral relations are unlikely to see a thaw in 2023. India would be unwilling to engage with a leadership in Pakistan that lacks any stability. Moreover, personal attacks on Prime Minister Narendra Modi by Pakistani politicians have also so vitiated the atmosphere that any diplomatic engagement is improbable.

Situation at the India-China Line of Actual Control (LAC)

In May 2022, the India-China standoff at the LAC entered its third year. 2022 saw some progress in the disengagement process, but outstanding issues remain, and these have resulted in both sides maintaining large forces along the LAC.

Four rounds of Corps Commander level meetings were held during the year, one of which resulted in an agreement to disengage from Patrol Point 15 (PP 15). With this agreement, disengagement in Eastern Ladakh has now been completed at Galwan (PP14), Gogra-Hotsprings (PP 15 and 17), and the North and South Banks of Pangong Tso. At each of these places, buffer zones have been created within which neither side can patrol.

In Eastern Ladakh, the standoff continues at Depsang and Demchok. Until these two areas are resolved, a certain level of tension will remain all along the LAC. This was evident in the clash that took place in December 2022 between



the two armies in the Yangtse sector of Arunachal Pradesh. Hundreds of soldiers fought each other with clubs and batons when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) attempted to intrude across the LAC. Although no deaths occurred and the matter was resolved following a flag meeting, the incident could have quickly escalated.

Both sides continue to build infrastructure to support the additional forces deployed and to enhance their operational capability. China has upgraded its airfields, strengthened air defence, constructed bridges, and improved its roads along the LAC. It is also building a number of border villages, some of which are in the disputed territory with Bhutan.

India too has given a significant push to infrastructure development with the construction of a series of roads, tunnels, caverns, and underground ammunition stores. In the last two years, habitat and technical storage have been constructed, including assets for 22,000 troops and approximately 450 tanks and guns. The Indian Army has also completed the realignment of six divisions from the Pakistan Front to the northern borders. There are plans to transform 500 villages along the LAC under the 'Vibrant Village Programme.'

China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, visited India in March 2022. In a press conference held after he met with Wang Yi, External Affairs Minister Dr. Jaishankar stated, "The frictions and tensions that arise from China's deployments since April 2020 cannot be reconciled with a normal relationship between two neighbours. Foreign Minister Wang Yi spoke about China's desire for a return to normalcy, while also referring to the larger significance of our ties...but restoration of normalcy will obviously require a restoration of peace and tranquillity."

This statement sums up the positions of both sides. While China continues to blame India for the current crisis and wants the situation on the border to not adversely impact the overall state of bilateral relations, this view is entirely contrary to India's stance. Unless China shows greater sensitivity to India's position, relations are unlikely to improve.

Through 2023, we could expect the situation at the LAC to remain unpredictable. Talks may continue at the military and diplomatic levels, but suspicions will remain high regarding the PLA's actions and intentions. Even if there is some limited disengagement of troops from Eastern Ladakh, the infrastructure buildup will continue, and additional forces that were inducted on the LAC are unlikely to thin out.



If the Yangtse incident is any indicator, there could be heightened PLA activity in 2023 in the Eastern Sector. This would open another flashpoint, requiring the Indian Army to adopt a more proactive stance and not remain purely defensive. Unless the PLA shows some restraint, which is currently not visible, the military situation at the LAC and diplomatic ties could both see a continuing downturn in 2023.



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