



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



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Since 2016, in keeping with India's increasing global profile, DPG has expanded its focus areas to include India's regional and global role and its policies in the Indo-Pacific. In a realist environment, DPG remains mindful of the need to align India's ambitions with matching strategies and capabilities, from diplomatic initiatives to security policy and military modernisation.

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Cover Images:

President of India, Droupadi Murmu, at delegation-level talks with Prime Minister of Mauritius, Pravind Kumar Jugnauth, on March 13, 2024. Source: [X/@rashtrapatibhavan](#)

Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, was conferred with the Order of the Druk Gyalpo, Bhutan's highest civilian decoration, by His Majesty the King of Bhutan in a public ceremony at the Tendrelthang, Thimphu, on March 22, 2024. Source: [Prime Minister of India's Office](#)

Several gunmen, dressed in combat fatigues opened fire on people present inside Crocus City Hall, a concert venue in one of Moscow's suburbs, before setting it on fire on March 22, 2024. Source: [TASS](#)

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by

Nalin Surie

There was no respite from the horrors of war and the indiscriminate killing of civilians during the month, be it in Ukraine, Palestine or Sudan.

Ukraine's effort to hold off Russia remained mired in the continuing stalemate in the US Congress, which has prevented supplies of urgently needed ammunition and military equipment. The EU sought to fill the breach by funding ammunition purchased from diverse countries like Brazil, but its own capacities are limited and there is still no agreement within NATO to supply long range weapons to Ukraine. The US, in effect, is the irreplaceable military supplier, but the Biden-Trump match up for the November presidential elections has become a real obstacle that is seriously impacting Ukrainian capabilities. In the meanwhile, Russia continues to bombard Ukrainian targets to keep the pot boiling and inflicting serious damage and loss of life.

The anticipated re-election of President Putin in Russia by a huge margin has only added to Ukraine's woes. The terror attack, claimed by IS-K, on a Concert Hall near Moscow on March 22, that led to a serious loss of life and destruction of the Hall has obviously given rise to anger in Russia. President Putin has, not unexpectedly, accused the Ukrainians of involvement, which Kiev has vehemently denied.

China's support for its partnership without limits with Russia has remained steadfast.

It would appear that any real progress on the battlefield, or in possible negotiations to try and end the war, will have to await the supply of substantial new weaponry and ammunition by the US to Ukraine. Whether Trump and his Republican Party supporters will allow this to happen is unclear at this point in time.

On the Israel-Hamas war, the situation remained grim and heart rending. There are clear indications that the US administration is increasingly frustrated with Israel's refusal to allow humanitarian assistance into Gaza, and guarantee that its planned operations in Rafah will not happen till innocent civilians are taken to safety. This was reflected in the US abstention on UNSC Resolution 2728 (2024) of March 25, calling for an immediate ceasefire and release of all

hostages. PM Netanyahu was expectedly angered by the US knuckle rap and dismissive of the resolution which is unimplementable. Israeli military operations in other parts of Gaza continued, irrespective of the huge loss of life and collateral damage taking place and the looming threat of famine because of ongoing Israeli operations.

Notwithstanding the surprise US abstention referred to above, it is clear that the Biden administration is going to continue to supply all needed weapons and support to Israel in its efforts to release all hostages and destroy Hamas. It remains to be seen, though, whether PM Netanyahu will, as a result, give in to US pressure to allow adequate humanitarian assistance into Gaza and review plans to attack Rafah, where the Israelis claim that a large number of Hamas fighters are based.

The missile attack on the Iranian Consulate in Damascus on April 1, which as usual went un-acknowledged by Israel and where several senior IRG personnel were killed, can only further complicate matters and add to the danger of a wider conflict in the region.

In the meantime, the ongoing internecine conflict between the Sudan Army and the Rapid Support Force in Sudan continued to play havoc. Around 25 million people need humanitarian assistance; more than 8 million (including almost 4 million children) have been displaced by the fighting, of which 1.8 million have sought safe haven in neighbouring countries; and only about 5% funding has been received so far in 2024 for humanitarian assistance projected by the UN. The situation in Sudan is being described as the biggest global hunger and displacement crisis.

The outside powers supporting the two factions in Sudan would need to reassess their respective positions and bring about restoration of peace, stability and democracy in the country, not simply on humanitarian grounds but also to ensure long term stability in this critical region and to prevent a Somalia-type situation from emerging.

Chinese Premier Li Qian presented his work report for 2024 to the National People's Congress on March 5, 2024. It was a broad brush document. Li's report suggested that the foundation for China's sustained economic recovery and growth is not solid enough, and hence the focus now is on creating a new pattern of development and promoting high quality development. The major tasks identified by Premier LI included:

(i) growing new quality productive forces, fostering emerging and future oriented industries such as NEV, hydrogen power, new materials, quantum computing, life sciences and digital economy;

(ii) focus on S&T, innovation, transforming traditional industries, regional connectivity, food security, a 700 billion yuan investment in capital goods, modernisation of infrastructure and global governance; and

(iii) defining high quality development as greater efficiency, equity, sustainability and security; innovation led development; and quality over quantity.

President Xi Jinping has defined New Quality Productive Forces as those driven by revolutionary technological breakthroughs, innovative allocation of productive forces, deep industrial transformation and upgradation. This does not imply neglecting or abandoning traditional industries. In effect, a dual plus economy approach.

Chinese plans and approaches have to be taken seriously. India's own approach is not dissimilar.

President Biden delivered an exceptionally robust State of the Union address to the US Congress on March 5, in which he directly challenged his Republican opponent on issues of substance. On the external front, he made it clear that there would be no give on US support for Ukraine in the war against Russia.

On China, he argued that China is not rising and the US falling behind; that was getting it backwards. He clarified that the US was standing up against China's unfair economic practices and for peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. For this purpose, the US has revitalised partnerships and alliances in the Pacific and with India, Australia, ROK, Japan and the Pacific Islands.

Biden stressed that the US had made sure that the most advanced American technology cannot be used in China. He said that the US wants competition with China, not conflict, and that the US was in a stronger position to win the competition of the 21st century against China than anyone else for that matter.

China saw this US approach as an unilateral effort to thwart its development going forward. China has persistently maintained that openness of its economy is a vital and consistent element of its economic policy. This is simply because of the criticality of the world economy and technological developments continuing to being accessible for China. Thus, China spared no effort to woo US and other business leaders at the China Development

Forum on March 24-25, 2024 in Beijing where Xi himself met US CEOs to reassure them about China being a safe and profitable destination for investment, technologies and markets.

The outcome of the local mayoral elections in Turkey came as a considerable blow to President Erdogan in his effort to mould Turkey into a more Islamic entity and to further consolidate his personal power. He had campaigned extensively for his party, but his party lost in virtually all major urban and relatively more secular regions, including in Istanbul (which accounts for one fifth of Turkey's population) where he had been mayor himself, in the capital Ankara, and in Izmir, Adana, Antalya, Bursa, Balikesir, and the 2023 earthquake-hit Adiyaman in the south east.

It is argued that among the reasons why Erdogan's AK Party fared badly is the rampaging inflation resulting from the poor economic policies of his government.

It remains to be seen now whether the secular, opposition CHP can consolidate its power vis a vis Erdogan's AK Party, whose support base in central Turkey and in agricultural areas remains strong. The next presidential elections are due only in 2028.

At its meetings on March 21-22, the EU Council took some important decisions pertaining to Ukraine and Europe's defense and security posture going forward.

The EU is determined to continue providing Ukraine all necessary political, financial, economic, humanitarian and military and diplomatic support for as long as it takes. It also supports the establishment of a Tribunal for the prosecution of crimes against Ukraine.

On defense and security, it is posited that a stronger and more capable EU in these fields will be complementary to NATO and contribute positively to trans-Atlantic security.

The intention is to reduce strategic dependencies and scale up capacities; strengthen the European defense and technological base; and increase readiness. Eight specific measures have been listed. These include: substantial increases in defense expenditure, improved access for the defense industry to public and private finance, incentivising development and joint procurement, enhancing cooperative/ joint defense investment, increased resilience of the European defense industry, and further integration of the European defense market.

A European Defense and Industry Strategy, and a European Defense and Industry Program, are to be drawn up.

European efforts, if effectively followed through, to scale up their own defense and security capabilities, can be a significant factor going forward on the critical issue of European stability. These will need to be carefully monitored. The future course and outcomes of the Ukraine war will have a substantial bearing on this process.

On March 16, the Election Commission of India announced that national elections will be held starting April 19, and will conclude with the announcement of results on June 4. The dramatic, colourful and massive festival of Indian democracy is thus underway. However, the government does not have the luxury, while the process is on, of ignoring or pushing aside the compulsions of ongoing developments in international political, economic, security and technological matters. Or for that matter, issues of the global commons. This is a challenge, though one that the system is well equipped to handle. Substantial experience has been acquired over national elections since independence.

During the month, there were three particularly noteworthy developments.

The President of India paid a state visit to Mauritius from March 11-13. She was the chief guest at Mauritius' national day celebrations. Her visit was the first at that level since March 2018. In the interim, the Covid-19 pandemic had prevented visits. PM Modi had visited in March 2015, at which time he had announced his SAGAR initiative.

Important MOUs were signed, covering public administration, avoidance of Double Taxation, financial services and good governance. The visit helped underscore the 'special relationship' between the two countries and "a strong commitment by India to further intensify relations with this important partner", according to Foreign Secretary Kwatra.

Importantly, it has been decided to extend the issue of Overseas Citizen of India cards from the 6th generation to the 7th generation of Mauritians of Indian origin.

When asked about the Agalega project, the Foreign Secretary in his briefing explained that it covers development of an airstrip, a jetty and community development projects. It will help build physical connectivity between the Agalega island and the main island of Mauritius. It will also assist in the shared priority of enhancing the maritime surveillance capability of Mauritius.

PM Modi paid an official visit to Bhutan on March 22-23, hot on the heels of the official visit of the PM of Bhutan to India earlier in the month. The visit was his third, and substantive. Detailed discussions were held with their Majesties King 4 and King 5, and with PM Tshering Tobgay.

The meetings were described by the Indian Foreign Secretary as “very productive”, enabling an “extensive and exhaustive review” of bilateral relations and identifying the work going forward.

PM Modi announced that India would provide Rs. 10,000 crores assistance for Bhutan’s 13th Five-year Plan. This is double the amount provided for the 12th plan.

An overall vision statement on the development of bilateral relations was issued, and another on partnership in hydro power. The joint statement stresses that the bilateral relationship is an example of exceptional neighbourly ties and that both sides will pursue their transformative partnership, including on connectivity.

Seven MOUs were entered into, including on supply of petroleum products, space cooperation and connectivity (rail links).

In a very special gesture, the King of Bhutan, in a public ceremony, conferred Bhutan’s highest civilian order, The Order of Druk Gyalpo, on PM Modi. This was the fourth such conferment and the very first to a foreign leader. The significance of this gesture at this stage in bilateral relations cannot be underestimated.

In his briefing on the visit, India’s Foreign Secretary Kwatra explained that the core fundamentals underlying the bilateral relationship are shared values, trust (which is very crucial), mutual respect, close understanding and sensitivity to each other’s interests and concerns.

The recent substantial uptick in relations with Bhutan following the spate of high level visits bodes well for the relationship going forward.

The Foreign Minister of Ukraine, Kuleba, paid an official visit to India on March 28-29, in a belated effort to break the ice and reach out to those countries that have kept a distance from the war in Ukraine while maintaining a position of broad principle that this is not an era of war. He held detailed discussions with India’s External Affairs Minister and the Deputy National Security Adviser.

The ministers focused on strengthening bilateral relations in trade, investment, S&T, defense, agriculture, and health. It was agreed that for this purpose both sides would make an effort to hold the 7th Inter-Governmental Commission meeting later this year. They also had a comprehensive discussion on the ongoing war in Ukraine and efforts to achieve a peaceful settlement.

Kuleba's visit would have provided the government of India a much better appreciation of the ground situation in the war in Ukraine and the latter's ability to hold off the Russian war effort. Given their knowledge of the history of India's relations with the former Soviet Union and now with Russia, as also India's nuanced position on Russia-Ukraine relations, the Ukrainian side would not be really surprised at our stance on the war.

The new government in New Delhi that will assume office following the elections will inherit a difficult, complicated and complex set of foreign and security policy challenges, but also a strong foundation for India to pursue its core national, security and development interests.



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