



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



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, Sanket Joshi, Shreyas Deshmukh 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. To subscribe, please [click here](#).

Cover Image:

World map

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I. Overview: Co-operation during COVID-19

Sanjay Pulipaka and Mohit Musaddi

Co-operation among nation-states has been a subject of discussion since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. When the virus was initially reported in China, the international community [reached out](#) with medical aid and other assistance.¹ Subsequently, as the epidemic transformed into a global pandemic, governments across the world were surprised by the ferocity of the virus. Many nation-states, especially the major powers, indulged in the hoarding of critical medical equipment. In the midst of this crisis, the World Health Organization (WHO), which is supposed to facilitate international co-operation, was [criticised](#) for acting in a partisan manner.² Nonetheless, there has been significant international co-operation over the past year, especially in vaccine development and distribution. India has emerged as an important hub of vaccine production, and Indian companies Serum Institute of India (SII) and Dr Reddy's Laboratories, among others, have collaborated with foreign firms to manufacture vaccines in India. Moreover, through its [Vaccine Maitri](#) programme, India has supplied 66.3 million doses of the made-in-India vaccines to several countries across the world.³ However, Delhi has [halted exports](#) of the vaccine and prioritised its "domestic vaccine programme" to combat the ongoing second wave of COVID-19 in India.⁴ To help combat the surge, approximately [40 countries](#) have promised assistance in the form of medicines, medical equipment and other related items.⁵ The [United Nations](#) and its agencies have also stepped forward to assist India with critical equipment as well as in scaling up mobile field hospitals.⁶ Essentially, the pandemic experience over the past year has demonstrated the need to strengthen regimes of co-operation and bring in more predictability to deal with global challenges.

United States and Russia

The surge in the number of COVID-19 cases in India has impacted Delhi's interactions with major powers. There was considerable disappointment in India that the US, under the Defence Production Act (DPA), was preventing the export of raw materials required for manufacturing COVID vaccines. After a telephonic conversation between the [National Security Advisors](#) of the two countries on April 25, the US announced that raw materials required for the "manufacture of the Covishield vaccine will immediately be made available for India".⁷ A day later, after a conversation with the Indian Prime Minister, US [President Joe Biden pledged](#) "America's full support to provide emergency assistance and resources in the fight against COVID-19".⁸ He also added that

"India was there for us, and we will be there for them"⁹. Subsequently, the [US has "re-directed"](#) its own order of Astra Zeneca manufacturing supplies" and has delivered relief material such as oxygen concentrators/cylinders and personal protective equipment (PPE) to India.¹⁰

Pandemic co-operation also dominated India-Russia bilateral relations during the month. On April 29, [Russia reached out](#) to India with 22 tonnes of medical supplies, including oxygen concentrators and lung ventilation equipment, to support India's effort to contain the spread of COVID-19.¹¹ Earlier, on April 13, India granted "emergency use authorisation" for the [Russian vaccine Sputnik V](#).¹² Dr Reddy's Laboratories is collaborating with the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) to produce the vaccines in India. As a result, India has become the 60th country to approve the usage of the Sputnik V vaccine. Pandemic co-operation featured in the [telephonic conversation](#) between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on April 28.¹³

In a significant step aimed at institutionalising the bilateral relationship, both leaders agreed to "establish a new 2+2 dialogue at the minister-level comprising Foreign and Defence Ministers."¹⁴ On April 5-6, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey [Lavrov visited India](#) and held discussions with EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar on the need to spur bilateral trade relations, infrastructure projects in the Russian Far East and the "prospect of an additional manufacturing of the Russian military equipment in India".¹⁵ There have also been reports that the "first regiment set of Russian [S-400 surface-to-air missile systems](#)" will be delivered to India by the end of this year.¹⁶ India's acquisition of advanced weapons systems assumes greater importance due to continued tensions in the India-China bilateral relationship.

India-China

India and China agreed in February to disengagement only around the Pangong Tso area. On April 9, during the 11th round of the [India-China Corps Commander level meeting](#), discussions revolved around disengagement "along the LAC in Eastern Ladakh".¹⁷ India's official statement regarding the meeting noted that "disengagement in other areas would pave the way for [the]two sides to consider de-escalation of forces".¹⁸ On the Chinese side, instead of Defence Ministry, the statement was issued by the [PLA Western Theatre Command](#), and it stated, "We hope India can treasure the current positive situation of de-escalation in China-India border regions, abide by related agreements reached by the two countries and the two militaries in previous meetings, meet China halfway and safeguard peace and stability in border regions together."¹⁹ The [Indian Ambassador to China](#) subsequently stressed that there needs to be "respect for mutual concerns and sensitivities and for each other's priorities".²⁰ Meanwhile, [Indian news reports suggest](#) that the "Chinese Army has reinforced

its presence in eastern Ladakh depth areas with permanent accommodations and depots.”²¹

On April 30, China's President Xi [Jinping sent a message](#) to PM Modi offering “solidarity” and expressing willingness “to strengthen anti-pandemic co-operation with India”.²² On the same day, EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar held a [telephone conversation](#) with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi to discuss India's efforts to “meet the challenge posed by the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic in India”.²³ The two Ministers also discussed the “outstanding issues related to disengagement from all friction points along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Eastern Ladakh”.²⁴

China and the Subcontinent

On April 27, China had hosted a foreign minister-level South Asia conference which was attended by counterparts from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka to discuss the COVID-19 situation. FM Wang Yi put forth [proposals to strengthen](#) anti-pandemic co-operation, and the foreign ministers issued a joint statement after the meeting.²⁵ This was the fourth such meeting since the outbreak of COVID-19, following meetings in July and November 2020 and January 2021. In April, Chinese Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe also travelled to [Bangladesh and Sri Lanka](#) and held meetings with the top leadership.²⁶ General Fenghe discussed the possibility of “increasing high-level visits” and “forging closer military relations” with Bangladesh President Abdul Hamid.²⁷ In Sri Lanka, General [Fenghe discussed](#) “China's position on issues concerning its core interests” with President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.²⁸

Simultaneously, China has been piling up pressure on Bhutan by claiming large tracts of land in the Himalayan kingdom. In this regard, Beijing and Thimphu held the [10th Expert Group Meeting \(EGM\)](#) on April 6-9, during which China discussed a roadmap with Bhutan “to expedite... boundary talks” that have been stalled since the Doklam crisis of 2017.²⁹

Bangladesh hosted India, Bhutan and Sri Lanka for a 10-day UN-mandated counterterrorism exercise '[Shantir Ogrosena](#)' with the US, the UK, Russia, Turkey and Saudi Arabia among the observers.³⁰ India's Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Mukund Naravane attended the [closing ceremony](#) of the exercise in Bangladesh and addressed the participants.³¹ The COAS was in Bangladesh from April 8-12 and [held meetings](#) with the three Service Chiefs of Bangladesh's Armed Forces.³²

Nepal has seen a [surge](#) in the number of new COVID-19 cases, with daily figures rising to 5,000.³³ As a result, cross-border restrictions between India and Nepal

have been reinforced, and [only 13](#) of the 35 entry points are currently open.³⁴ There have also been [ongoing political transitions](#) in the country, with chief ministers of several provinces engaging in power politics to save their respective governments.³⁵ The ruling and opposition parties at the centre have been meeting regularly amongst themselves to determine the fate of Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli.³⁶ On April 17, Nepal's House of Representatives was [prorogued](#) abruptly by President Bidya Devi Bhandari on the pretext of COVID-19 just as the opposition parties were reportedly finalising a no-confidence motion against PM Oli.³⁷

The situation in Myanmar has worsened since the military takeover on February 1. As of April 30, [759 people](#) have been killed and almost 3,500 detained in the crackdown by the Tatmadaw against protests condemning the coup.³⁸ In the run-up to the ASEAN Emergency Summit held on April 24 to discuss Myanmar, Chinese FM [Wang Yi spoke](#) to his counterparts from Thailand and Brunei and hoped for a "soft landing" for Myanmar cautioning against "inappropriate intervention".³⁹ The ASEAN Summit resulted in a [five-point consensus](#) among the ASEAN leaders that focused upon "immediate cessation of violence", "humanitarian assistance", "constructive dialogue... to seek a peaceful solution" and the appointment of a special envoy who would visit Myanmar and "facilitate mediation of the dialogue process".⁴⁰ [India has welcomed](#) ASEAN's initiative and has said that it will "continue to play a constructive and meaningful role aimed at resolving the current situation in Myanmar".⁴¹

Afghanistan-Pakistan

Instability continues to plague the region. On April 14, US President Joe Biden announced that the United States would withdraw all its troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021. On April 16, the [MEA said](#) that India is "closely following the ongoing intra-Afghan peace process...India remains engaged with the Afghan stakeholders and also our regional and international partners regarding next steps".⁴² Subsequently, on April 17, EAM Dr. S. [Jaishankar and his Afghan counterpart](#) Mohammad Hanif Atmar "discussed the role of neighbours in the Afghan peace process".⁴³ Dr. Jaishankar conveyed to his counterpart that "India will stand with the people of Afghanistan".⁴⁴ Delhi does not enjoy geographic contiguity with Afghanistan, which will be a challenge for any proactive engagement in the country.

Russia's role in Afghanistan has also come to the fore as it has adopted a two-pronged approach in Kabul. First, Moscow has [participated proactively](#) in various multilateral dialogues such as the Conference in Afghanistan, which started on April 24⁴⁵ and the [extended "Troika"](#) on April 30 involving the US, China and Pakistan.⁴⁶ Second, Russia has [strengthened its relationship](#) with

Pakistan, as was evident in Russian foreign minister Lavrov's visit to Islamabad.⁴⁷ While [Pakistani media](#) reported that the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov offered full-spectrum cooperation to Islamabad in areas such as construction of gas pipelines, implementing economic corridors and enhanced defence cooperation, [Indian news reports](#) have suggested that such claims are false propaganda.⁴⁸ However, thus far, Moscow has not formally refuted Pakistani media's contention.

Pakistan has been experiencing a series of political protests. Islamist group Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan ([TLP](#)) [has demanded](#) that "Pakistan expel the French ambassador in retaliation for the publication in France of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed".⁴⁹ The Pakistan government has banned TLP and arrested the group's leader, but to assuage extremist factions, it has also called for a parliamentary vote to decide whether the French ambassador should be expelled.⁵⁰ The protests have intensified the country's economic crisis, and Islamabad's attempts to scale up external economic engagement are fraught with new challenges. In the recent past, Pakistan has been attempting to scale up its economic engagement with its immediate neighbours in Central Asia and South Asia. In this direction, last month Islamabad indicated that it is ready to revive economic interactions with India but then quickly backtracked. This month, Pakistan's Foreign Minister stated that [both countries](#) "can sit and talk as two neighbours to sort out our issues".⁵¹

Middle East

In Iran, Beijing is reportedly keen to invest in the Chabahar Port. It is well known that India has been developing the port to ensure greater connectivity to Afghanistan and beyond, into Central Asia and Eastern Europe. However, on India's role in Chabahar, Iranian officials have said that "India currently works... as an operator in this port and the country does not have an [exclusive right](#) over any part of this port... We have always welcomed other countries to come and participate in the development of this port besides India".⁵²

On the economic front, the UAE Ambassador to India noted that the bilateral trade between the two countries has the [potential](#) to "grow from \$60 billion in 2020 to \$110 billion by 2030" and added that the trilateral involving "UAE, India and Israel could benefit the world".⁵³ There was also positive news for India with the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries ([OPEC](#)) [deciding to increase oil production](#), which may lead to a drop in international oil prices. In the non-conventional energy segment, India and the UAE will soon collaborate in hydrogen energy.⁵⁴ India's Larsen & Turbo (L&T) has also won a contract to operationalise a [1.5-gigawatt solar power plant](#) in Saudi Arabia, which will be one of the largest in the world.⁵⁵

Meanwhile, senior diplomatic officials of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have stated that their [country has facilitated talks](#) between India and Pakistan, even though there has been no official confirmation from the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁵⁶ The [UAE separately hosted](#) foreign ministers from India and Pakistan in mid-April.⁵⁷ Even though Dr. Jaishankar and Shah Mahmood Qureshi were in the UAE at the same time, no official meeting was scheduled between the two. However, the fact that a Gulf state may be facilitating conversations between New Delhi and Islamabad suggests that India's relations with the Arab countries have witnessed a steady upward trend in the recent past.

International Cooperation and Multilateral Engagement

Speaking at the Raisina Dialogue on April 13, the Indian [Prime Minister suggested](#) that for enhanced global co-operation, there is a need to re-evaluate many global "structures and institutions [which] were created...under the shadow of the two wars".⁵⁸ Similarly, EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar said that [genuine international co-operation](#) and distributive justice requires "global fairness coalitions" with the participation of countries such as India.⁵⁹

At the '[Leaders Summit on Climate 2021](#)' on April 22, PM Modi reiterated India's commitment to a renewable energy target of 450 gigawatts by 2030.⁶⁰ Listing out various initiatives such as International Solar Alliance, the Prime Minister noted that India would be collaborating with countries such as the US to "mobilise investments, demonstrate clean technologies, and enable green collaborations" to combat climate change.⁶¹ Delhi and Washington also launched the "India-US climate and clean energy Agenda 2030 partnership".⁶² Earlier, US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate [John Kerry visited](#) New Delhi to have wide-ranging discussions pertaining to India-US "co-operation to addressing the climate crisis and raising global ambition".⁶³

In the past month, India has been elected as a member of various UN platforms such as the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), and the Executive Board of the World Food Programme. Further, India has also [contributed USD300,000](#) to the UN Women for the year 2021.⁶⁴ With an increased presence in the United Nations, India needs to leverage its position to create sustainable frameworks of co-operation and address health and related emergencies.

II. Political Upheavals in India's Neighbourhood

Mohit Musaddi

Nepal and Myanmar have been experiencing prolonged political transition leading to instability in recent months. While instability has largely remained within the democratic framework in Kathmandu, events in Naypyidaw have turned violent, with more than 700 deaths. In Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, China's economic and defence engagements have registered an uptick. Bhutan's rapid vaccination programme has received significant attention while the Maldives intends to boost tourism through its 'Visit, Vaccinate and Vacation' plan.

Bangladesh

After Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh for the celebration of the country's 50th year of independence, India's Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Mukund Naravane visited Dhaka from April 8-12. The [COAS attended](#) the Army Chiefs' Conclave at the Army Multipurpose Complex, Dhaka and delivered the keynote address on "Changing Nature of Global Conflicts: Role of UN Peacekeepers".⁶⁵ The COAS also attended the closing ceremony of the 10-day military exercise [ShantirOgrose](#) in which the armed forces of Bangladesh, India, Bhutan and Sri Lanka participated.⁶⁶ The [military exercise](#) was designed to "strengthen defence ties and enhance interoperability... to ensure effective peacekeeping operations".⁶⁷

On April 16, India registered a formal [objection with the UN](#) Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) against Bangladesh's claim on a continental shelf in the Bay of Bengal region.⁶⁸ Delhi has raised concerns regarding the co-ordinates used by Bangladesh. Dhaka will reportedly submit a reply to the UNCLCS after examining India's statement.

On April 9, US Special Presidential Envoy for climate, John Kerry, visited Bangladesh and extended an invitation to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to participate in the '[virtual Leaders Summit on Climate](#)', which was held on April 22-23.⁶⁹ Forty world leaders, including those from India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Pakistan, were invited to the Summit.

Russia may soon be manufacturing its Sputnik V vaccine in Bangladesh under a [co-production arrangement](#) as Dhaka searches for other sources of the vaccine apart from India.⁷⁰ On April 29, Bangladesh also approved China's Sinopharm vaccine and hopes to receive 500,000 doses within the next two weeks.⁷¹ As of April 30, India has supplied [10.3 million doses](#) of made-in-India COVID-19 vaccines to Bangladesh.⁷²

On April 17, in the southern coastal town of Banshkhali, Bangladesh, police opened fire on workers at a construction site of a [Chinese-financed power plant](#) and killed at least five people.⁷³ Hundreds of labourers at the site had [staged demonstrations](#) over "unpaid wages, working hours and alleged discrimination".⁷⁴ China's Shandong Electric Power Construction Corporation III ([SEPCOIII](#)) has a [30 per cent stake](#), and there are Chinese nationals employed in the under-construction power plant.⁷⁵ On April 27, the Chinese defence minister, [General Wei Fenghe, visited Bangladesh](#) and held discussions with President Abdul Hamid to increase "high-level visits, deepen co-operation in equipment technology, broaden exchanges in specialised fields and forge closer military relations".⁷⁶ General Wei also met the [Bangladesh Chief of Army Staff](#) Aziz Ahmed.⁷⁷

Sri Lanka

After Bangladesh, the Chinese Defence Minister [travelled to Sri Lanka](#) and, on April 28, held talks with President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and the Sri Lankan Defence Secretary. General Wei discussed "China's positions on issues concerning its core interests" with President Gotabaya, who is also the country's defence minister.⁷⁸ The visit to Colombo was significant as there has been heightened scrutiny within Sri Lanka in recent weeks over "China's role and presence in the country, through infrastructure projects".⁷⁹ A case is ongoing in the Sri Lankan Supreme Court challenging a "Bill, of proposed, special laws to govern the [China-funded \\$1.4- billion Port City](#)" in Colombo.⁸⁰ There is a fear among Sri Lankans that the Bill could result in a "Chinese colony" in Sri Lanka.⁸¹ On April 21, Sri Lankan officials sent back a [China-bound cargo ship](#) that contained undeclared radioactive material and was found to be at the Hambantota Port.⁸²



Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa with Chinese Minister of National Defence Wei Fenghe in Colombo, April 28. Source: The Hindu

On April 12, Sri Lanka and China signed a [USD 500 million loan agreement](#) to “facilitate rapid economic recovery” and “stimulate growth”.⁸³ The loan agreement is part of the USD1 billion agreement between Colombo and Beijing, of which USD 500 million was released in 2020.⁸⁴ It is the second Chinese loan in less than three weeks for Sri Lanka and comes after the Sri Lankan [rupee hit a record low](#) of 202.73 to the USD at the end of March 2021 (lowest in 12 years).⁸⁵

India has reiterated its support for the government of Sri Lanka to “fulfil its commitments on [devolution of political authority](#) including through early holding of elections to provincial councils”.⁸⁶ In March 2021, India had abstained from a UN Human Rights Council ([UNHRC](#)) [resolution](#) that provided the mandate for the body to “collect evidence of crimes” during Sri Lanka's civil war, which ended in 2009.⁸⁷ India, however, made a strong statement urging the Sri Lankan government to “carry forward the [process of reconciliation](#)” and “address the aspirations of the Tamil community”.⁸⁸

On April 13, the Sri Lankan government [banned 11 hardline Islamist organisations](#) such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS) “for their links to extremist activities”.⁸⁹ A special probe panel, which was set up by former President Sirisena after the 2019 Easter Sunday suicide bomb attacks, had “recommended the banning of Muslim extremist organisations who advocate radicalism” in Sri Lanka.⁹⁰ On April 27, the Sri Lankan cabinet [approved the proposed ban](#) on “wearing full-face veils including Muslim burqas in public, citing national security grounds”.⁹¹

Sri Lanka and India will be jointly working against terrorist groups. On April 8, the Director of the Intelligence Bureau of India and Sri Lankan Inspector General of Police met virtually for the first delegation-level ‘[police chiefs dialogue](#). They emphasised the “need for sharing of real-time intelligence and feedback” and decided to “strengthen the existing co-operation mechanisms”.⁹²

India and Sri Lanka had entered into an [air bubble agreement](#), making it India's sixth such arrangement in the SAARC region and the 28th in total.⁹³ However, in light of the surge in new COVID-19 infections in India, Sri Lanka has decided to [postpone the launching](#) of the travel bubble.⁹⁴

The Maldives

In an effort to boost tourism, the Maldives has said that it will adopt a “[3V plan](#) that includes “Visit, Vaccinate and Vacation”.⁹⁵ As the country is heavily dependent on its tourism industry, Male will provide vaccines to its tourists once all eligible residents and nationals have been vaccinated.⁹⁶ The Maldives has so far [received vaccine donations](#) from India, China and the World Health Organization's COVAX scheme.⁹⁷

On April 15-16, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Maldives, Abdulla Shahid, travelled to New Delhi and met India's External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar. The [Ministers discussed the ongoing COVID-19 situation and the vaccination programmes](#).⁹⁸ India also reaffirmed that "the socio-economic development of the Maldives, including the uninterrupted supply of essential medicines", will continue.⁹⁹ India is assisting the Maldives in several developmental projects through professional and financial aid, including the repair and renovation of the [Male Friday Mosque](#), for which India has offered USD1.5 million.¹⁰⁰



Minister of Foreign Affairs of Maldives Abdulla Shahid with
EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar in New Delhi, April 16, 2021. Source: Government of Maldives

The first meeting of the Joint Working Group between India and the Maldives on Counter-Terrorism, Countering Violent Extremism, and De-radicalisation was held on April 8. The two sides [emphasised](#) the need for strong "international co-operation to combat terrorism" and also for countries to ensure that their territories are not used for terrorist attacks.¹⁰¹

Bhutan

In a weeklong period in late March to early April, Bhutan administered the first dose of the Astra Zeneca-made COVID-19 vaccine to [over 60 per cent](#) of its population.¹⁰² All the doses that were administered have been manufactured and supplied by the Serum Institute of India. Bhutan will also help India in dealing with the recent surge in COVID-19. The Motanga Industrial Estate in

Samdrup, Bhutan, will [export 40 metric tonnes](#) of liquid oxygen daily to Assam to help its fight against COVID-19.¹⁰³

On April 6-9, China and Bhutan held their [10th round of expert-level meetings](#) on boundary issues in the Chinese city of Kunming.¹⁰⁴ During the meeting, the two sides agreed to maintain cordial relations at the border and discussed a road map to expedite China-Bhutan boundary talks. Twenty-four rounds of talks have been held between Beijing and Thimphu since 1984, but there have been no talks since the tensions over the Doklam standoff in 2017.¹⁰⁵



The 10th Expert Group Meeting on the China-Bhutan boundary was held in Kunming, China, on April 6-9. Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan

Myanmar

Even as the intensity of violence in Myanmar has come down as of April 30, at least [759 people](#) have been killed by the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military) since the beginning of the coup.¹⁰⁶ [Fresh charges](#) have been levelled against Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, including “breaching a law intended to control the spread of the coronavirus”.¹⁰⁷ She is already facing charges of inciting public unrest, breaking the official secrets act and illegally importing walkie-talkies.¹⁰⁸ However, the junta has continued to [postpone court proceedings](#) against Daw Suu Kyi so that it can continue to keep her under detention.¹⁰⁹ The Tatmadaw had staged a coup on February 1 on the pretext that voter fraud had been committed during the

November 2020 elections. They had assured that fresh elections would be held within one year but have already [gone back](#) on their promise. A Tatmadaw spokesperson said that if the military is not able to “stabilise the country”, the military rule could extend for up to two years.¹¹⁰

A number of sanctions have been imposed on the Tatmadaw, especially by the United States, Canada, the UK and the EU. In April, Washington expanded the [scope of sanctions](#), which included military-controlled gems, timber and pearl enterprises, as well as selected Burmese state-owned enterprises.¹¹¹ The European Union [\(EU\) also expanded its sanctions](#) to include more individuals and military controlled-companies under its ambit.¹¹² However, US oil-and-gas giant [Chevron](#) has reportedly rallied lobbyists to pressure the Biden administration not to impose sanctions that may harm the company's interests in Myanmar.¹¹³ The Chevron group has a long-standing relationship with the state-owned company Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE) that is closely connected to the military generals.¹¹⁴ Meanwhile, the S&P Dow Jones indices [have removed Indias Adani Ports](#) (APSE.NS) “from its sustainability index due to the firm's business ties with Myanmar's military”.¹¹⁵



Southeast Asian leaders met Myanmar's top general Min Aung Hlaing in an emergency ASEAN Summit in Jakarta, Indonesia, on April 24, 2021.

Source: Associated Press

In recent weeks, India has taken a stronger position and condemned the use of violence, stressing the need to restore democracy in Myanmar. Delhi has said that it is ready to play a “[balanced and constructive role](#)” in helping to resolve the

crisis.¹¹⁶ The development comes amidst the worsening of the security situation along the India-Myanmar border, with over 1,000 citizens fleeing to India.

The military offensive during a global pandemic has pushed Myanmar's development and resulted in human and economic loss. The UN's World Food Programme (WFP) has estimated that approximately 3.4 million Burmese citizens may have to depend upon WFP's aid programme due to [job losses](#) and a rise in prices of staples such as rice and cooking oil.¹¹⁷ Moreover, due to the military's "air and ground mortar strikes", at least 24,000 people in Myanmar's eastern Karen border region have been displaced.¹¹⁸ Some reports have indicated that "around 200,000 workers in '[Myanmars garment industry](#)' have lost their jobs since the military seized power".¹¹⁹

On April 16, the opponents of the Tatmadaw formed an [interim national unity government](#) (NUG), comprising members of the ousted cabinet and major ethnic community groups to "end military rule and restore democracy".¹²⁰ The [2008 Constitution](#), which reserved 25 per cent seats as well as key portfolios for Tatmadaw, has also been discarded by the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH).¹²¹

On April 24, leaders from the Southeast Asian states met Myanmar's coup leader Min Aung Hlaing in an emergency ASEAN summit in Jakarta, Indonesia. The summit declared a [five-point consensus](#) that includes "immediate cessation of violence", "peaceful solution in the interests of the people", "provision humanitarian assistance", and the appointment of a "special envoy of the ASEAN chair [to] facilitate mediation [who]... shall visit Myanmar".¹²² However, the Chairman's statement fails to mention a timeline for the mediation process or for cessation in violence. Prior to the ASEAN meeting, on April 22, Chinese Foreign Minister [Wang Yi spoke to](#) Thailand and Brunei's Foreign Ministers (the current and incoming ASEAN chairs respectively) and hoped that the summit would "lead to a good start towards helping realise a 'soft landing' for the Myanmar situation".¹²³

Nepal

Nepal's House of Representatives was [prorogued on April 19](#) on the recommendation of the Council of Ministers.¹²⁴ The House was in session since March 7, but no bills were passed due to the political situation in the country. The Supreme Court on March 7 had scrapped the ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) as another Party with the same name existed prior to the NCP's registration in May 2018.¹²⁵ Subsequently, the CPN-UML and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) have been [revived](#).¹²⁶ However, despite differences, the Maoist Centre did not withdraw the support that it had lent to

Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli and his CPN-UML. As a result, there was a hung Parliament, which affected the productivity of the House. Even though the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic was cited as the reason for proroguing the House, there were reports that opposition parties were in talks to [table a no-confidence motion](#) against PM Oli.¹²⁷ However, Oli's opponents will be [wary of the difficulties](#) in filing such a motion against him. According to the Constitution, "if a no-confidence motion, which is filed after two years of appointment of a prime minister, fails, another similar motion cannot be filed for another year".¹²⁸ Therefore, should the motion fail, opponents feel that it will empower Oli even further to take unilateral decisions. Meanwhile, Oli is [looking to make amends](#) with his party leaders after the relationship had soured in recent months. On April 21, Oli met with senior leader Madhav Kumar Nepal for the first time in over a month.¹²⁹

In April, [two projects in Nepal](#) built with grant assistance of NPR 89.2 million (USD747,000) from India were inaugurated.¹³⁰ On April 22, the [Embassy of India in Kathmandu](#) also "gifted 39 ambulances and six school buses" to institutions working in the field of health and education.¹³¹

BIMSTEC

On April 1, EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar participated in the 17th BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Co-operation) ministerial meeting virtually chaired by Sri Lanka. Dr. Jaishankar reiterated '[Indias commitment](#)' to "regional co-operation under the BIMSTEC framework" and highlighted progress in sectors such as counter-terrorism, transport and communication, and tourism, where India is the lead country.¹³² The meeting also "endorsed the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity for adoption at the next BIMSTEC Summit".¹³³

III. India, CARs & PAI: US Withdrawal, Rising Extremism

Shreyas Deshmukh

The events of April in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asian states are transitional in nature, indicative of the emerging geopolitical and security dynamics in the region. These events include US President Joe Biden's announcement postponing the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan to September 11 this year, the mayhem unleashed by the Barelvi extremist political organisation Tehreek-E-Labaik Pakistan (TLP) and the anti-China protests in Kazakhstan. This paper will discuss these developments and provide their wider implications for the region.

Pakistan

The detention of TLP chief Saad Hussain Rizvi by security forces on April 12 led to [protests](#) across major cities in Pakistan.¹³⁴ The arrest was about the TLP's deadline to the government to expel the French Ambassador by April 20. The TLP had started a [sit-in at Faizabad](#) in November 2020 due to French President Emmanuel Macron's statement in support of freedom of expression overriding religious sensitivities after the decapitation of Samuel Paty.¹³⁵ The sit-in was called off after an agreement between the TLP, two state ministers and the Islamabad Deputy Commissioner, according to which the government was to [expel the French Ambassador](#) after parliamentary approval (to be obtained within three months) and to stop all imports from France.¹³⁶



Police and workers of the banned TLP came face to face in Lahore, April 18, 2021. Source: Dawn

CARs stand for Central Asian Republics and PAI stands for Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran

During the recent demonstrations between April 13-20, four people were killed and hundreds were injured, including security forces, as protesters stormed a [police station](#) in Lahore.¹³⁷ Meanwhile, France asked all its citizens to [leave Pakistan](#).¹³⁸ As the situation went out of hand, the government [banned TLP](#) under the terrorism law.¹³⁹

TLP represents the Barelvi sect that constitutes 50-60 per cent of Pakistan's population. The emergence of the TLP as the [third-largest party](#) in the Punjab Assembly polls in 2018 surprised many political analysts in Pakistan.¹⁴⁰ Saad Rizvi, son of late TLP leader Khadim Rizvi, continues to raise the issue of blasphemy, which is closer to the heart of Islamic extremists. This issue is not just helping TLP attract voters but also increasing its cadre base in thousands of madrassas. Until now, followers of the Deobandi sect dominated the political and ideological arena of Pakistan. The rise of TLP could lead to violent competition between the two sects.

The issue of blasphemy has acquired greater political salience in Pakistan. The government has, therefore, been cautious while handling TLP protests. Even though the government banned the TLP, Prime Minister Imran Khan said the government was sympathetic to its TLP cause but did [not support](#) its methods.¹⁴¹ There is apprehension within the Pakistan establishment on acting against extremist entities as opposition parties frequently exploit such situations. On April 19, Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI-F) chief and head of Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), Maulana Fazlur Rehman, condemned the [police action](#) against the activists of the TLP in Lahore and termed it "state brutality".¹⁴² He declared that if TLP activists decided to march to Islamabad, his party would join them in their protest. Such frequent violent protests over political and ideological issues hamper Pakistan's image internationally. They also add to economic hardship as investors are reluctant to invest in the country due to the inability of the government to provide sustained, long-term security.

The data released by the State Bank of Pakistan on April 19 shows that foreign direct investment (FDI) has [declined by 35 per cent](#) during the current fiscal year.¹⁴³ According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Pakistan's [food import bill](#) surged 54 per cent in the nine months of the current fiscal year following the government's decision to allow the import of wheat and sugar to bridge local shortages.¹⁴⁴

The Pakistani leadership is attempting a shift from an emphasis on geopolitics to geoeconomics in its external engagement to overcome economic challenges. Improving trade ties with Germany was the primary agenda of Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi's [visit to Berlin](#) on April 12.¹⁴⁵ Prime Minister Imran Khan, in a virtual meeting with Uzbekistan President Shavkat Mirziyoyev on April

14, discussed the Trans-Afghan Railway Line Project, which would be the first step in linking the Central Asian transport network with the [Pakistani seaports](#) of Gwadar, Karachi and Port Qasim.¹⁴⁶ Pakistan is also deliberating [tariff reductions](#) on products proposed by Uzbekistan under a bilateral preferential trade agreement.¹⁴⁷

In the first week of April, Pakistan formally launched the construction of a [converter station](#) of a Central Asian-South Asian power project (CASA-1000) at Azakhel Bala, Nowshera.¹⁴⁸ Pakistan Railways Federal Secretary announced that the construction of the Main Line-1 [railway project](#) would start in 2021 as the loan case file of USD6 billion has been sent by the Chinese government to its Exim Bank for approval.¹⁴⁹ However, the success of such projects and Pakistan's geo-economic ambitions will depend upon its internal stability as well as long-term stability in Afghanistan.

To discuss developments in the Afghan peace process, Foreign Minister Qureshi visited the UAE, Iran and Turkey from April 18 to 23. In Tehran, he held delegation-level talks with his counterpart Dr Javad Zarif and in Istanbul, he participated in a trilateral meeting with the Turkish and Afghan foreign ministers. A [joint statement](#) issued after the trilateral meeting emphasised the urgent need for an immediate ceasefire to end the existing high level of violence.¹⁵⁰ Even during the visit of [Russian Foreign Minister](#) Sergey Lavrov to Pakistan on April 7, Afghanistan was top on the agenda.¹⁵¹ During the meeting with FM Qureshi, Lavrov raised concerns about the rise in terrorist activities and the increasing influence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province (ISKP) in the north and east of Afghanistan.

As the Afghan peace process enters a critical phase, it will be interesting to observe whether Pakistan continues to exert its influence on the Taliban to establish peace on its own terms or whether instability persists.

Afghanistan

Amending the Doha Agreement, which stipulated American troop withdrawals from Afghanistan by May 1, on April 14, President Biden announced that "it's time to end America's longest war" and that all troops [will withdraw](#) by September 11.¹⁵² Other coalition partners like the UK, Australia and Germany announced the withdrawal of their troops as well. India cautiously [reacted to this decision](#), as the official spokesperson of MEA said, "Any political settlement must be inclusive and should preserve the socio-economic and political gains of the past 19 years."¹⁵³ The [Taliban criticised](#) the US announcement as a breach of the Doha agreement, according to which the US was supposed to withdraw its troops by May 1.¹⁵⁴ President Ghani said that Afghan Security forces were capable of defending their country.



Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with Afghanistan High Council for National Reconciliation Chair Dr. Abdullah Abdullah in Kabul on April 15, 2021.
Source: Flickr/US Department of State

However, to revive the intra-Afghan dialogue, the US called on an UN-led regional conference with the participation of India, China, Russia, Pakistan and Iran, with Qatar and Turkey as co-conveners. The conference was initially scheduled to be held between April 24 and May 4. Before agreeing to attend the UN conference, the Taliban put forward more demands, which included the release of 7,000 prisoners and the removal of all UN sanctions. This led to the conference being rescheduled for the end of Ramadan on May 13, 2021. The Taliban, meanwhile, has increased the number of attacks all over Afghanistan, including on some US bases such as those [in Kandahar](#)¹⁵⁵ and [Base Chapman](#) in eastern Afghanistan.¹⁵⁶ After the withdrawal, the US is reportedly planning to keep some of its forces under Central Command within the region to counter any [future threats](#) that emanate from Afghanistan.¹⁵⁷ There have also been reports that the US is exploring possibilities of establishing bases in the CAR.¹⁵⁸ The withdrawal of US troops before creating a conducive environment for peace could push the country into another civil war. The possibility of the Taliban assuming power through military force is also high. Neighbouring countries China, Russia and Iran have expressed concern over the instability in Afghanistan as it could threaten regional security. Therefore, they are likely to use their influence both directly and through their proxies to establish a [favourable government](#) in Afghanistan and protect their interests.¹⁵⁹

Central Asia and Iran

The spokesperson of China's Ministry of Commerce during a [press conference](#) on April 8 dubbed the countrywide anti-China protests in Tajikistan as "malicious hyping by a handful of people".¹⁶⁰ In the last week of March, the protesters rallied against China's increasing influence and economic power in Almaty, Nur-Sultan, Oral, Shymkent, and Aktobe. Activists also denounced the [mass incarceration](#) of members of indigenous Turkic-speaking communities in China's Xinjiang region, including ethnic Kazakhs and Uyghurs.¹⁶¹ In February 2020, [similar protests](#) were organised in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁶² According to a research paper published by the Jamestown Foundation, increasing hostility towards China in the Central Asian Republics could force it to use [private military companies](#) to protect its assets in the near future.¹⁶³

The [ongoing talks](#) in Vienna to restore the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) have raised hopes in the oil and gas consumer market.¹⁶⁴ India's state-run oil refiners are also reportedly looking to seize the opportunity if the US sanctions are eased. Refiners have started [making preparations](#), including drafting commercial terms and putting in place mechanisms to quickly assess crude quality in advance so that they can swiftly enter into contracts for Iranian supply.¹⁶⁵

Defence Update

- | The special forces of India and Kyrgyzstan held a two-week [military exercise](#), 'Khanjar' in Bishkek, with a focus on counter-terror drills from April 16-30. It was the eighth edition of the India-Kyrgyz Joint Special Forces Exercise. "Initiated first in 2011, the two-week-long exercise focuses on high-altitude, mountains and counter-extremism".¹⁶⁶
- | The Minister of Defence of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Lieutenant General Nurlan Yermekbayev, [visited India](#) from April 7-10, 2021. He held bilateral talks with Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on April 9. During the meeting, the two Ministers exchanged views on further strengthening bilateral defence co-operation, including through training, defence exercises and capacity building. They agreed that both sides must look at the possibility of defence industrial collaborations of mutual interest.¹⁶⁷
- | Major General Mohammad Baqeri, the chief of staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, and Colonel General Sherali Mirzo, the defence minister of Tajikistan, signed an [agreement](#) on creating a joint military defence committee on April 8 in Tehran. The new body will promote security co-operation and assist in counter-terrorism.¹⁶⁸

IV. India-West Asia: Energising Partnerships

Sanket Joshi

India's External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr. S. Jaishankar and UAE's Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah met in Abu Dhabi on April 18 to further boost the [India-United Arab Emirates](#) (UAE) strategic partnership.¹⁶⁹ The two leaders discussed "bilateral co-operation with emphasis on post-COVID economic recovery".¹⁷⁰ The UAE's Ambassador to the United States has confirmed that "the Gulf state is [mediating](#) between India and Pakistan to help both countries reach a healthy and functional relationship".¹⁷¹ The presence of the [Pakistani Foreign Minister in UAE](#)¹⁷² at the time of Dr. Jaishankar's visit raised speculation regarding a meeting between the two, but this did not happen.



EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar with his
UAE counterpart Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed in Abu Dhabi, April 18, 2021.
Source: Twitter/@DrSJaishankar

India-GCC Relations

The UAE has reportedly reached out to New Delhi seeking revival of talks on the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) [Free Trade Agreement](#) (FTA) that has been stalled since 2008.¹⁷³ This FTA is likely to give a [fillip to Indian exports](#), especially for electronic appliances and products such as spices, tobacco and leather.¹⁷⁴ In a development highlighting the potential of the [India-Israel-UAE trilateral](#), Israel's Head of Mission in Dubai stressed that "India-Israel-UAE trilateral trade could reach USD110 billion by 2030". Meanwhile, in line with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call to support Kashmiri apple farmers, the Lulu Group has imported large quantities of Kashmiri apples into the UAE.¹⁷⁵

The India-Bahrain partnership also further strengthened as Indian External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar co-chaired the third "[High Joint Commission with Bahrain's](#) Foreign Minister Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani in New Delhi.¹⁷⁶ "Both leaders agreed to [expand bilateral co-operation](#) in energy, infrastructure, health, defence, and digital" sectors.¹⁷⁷ Further, Delhi and Manama "exchanged assessments on the regional situation [and] reaffirmed our close & long-standing partnership".¹⁷⁸ During the month, India and Qatar also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for better co-ordination and co-operation in cracking down on [international narcotics cartels](#).¹⁷⁹

The Hydrogen Economy – New Delhi Dialogue 2021

On the energy front, India hosted "[The Hydrogen Economy](#) – New Delhi Dialogue 2021" on April 15 to discuss emerging hydrogen ecosystems and opportunities for collaboration, co-operation, and coalition for a transition toward clean energy.¹⁸⁰ "India plans to spend USD200 million in the next five to seven years to [promote hydrogen](#) as a source of clean energy".¹⁸¹ In light of this, New Delhi has "asked its state-owned oil and gas companies to set up [seven hydrogen pilot plants](#) by the end of this financial year".¹⁸² UAE's Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) is also set to explore the [potential of the hydrogen market](#) with India.¹⁸³



India Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas, Dharmendra Pradhan, addresses the Hydrogen Economy-New Delhi Dialogue 2021, April 15, 2021. Source: Twitter/@PetroleumMin

Earlier, India had reportedly asked its oil refiners to [review their contracts](#) with Saudi Arabia that are "loaded against the buyer".¹⁸⁴ The OPEC countries and partners have now agreed to gradually [increase their production](#) over the next three months after the US asked Saudi Arabia to keep energy prices affordable.¹⁸⁵ Considering India's intent to diversify crude imports, it must be noted that India has emerged as the [top buyer of US crude](#) in the first quarter of 2021.¹⁸⁶ In another development, Indian officials reiterated New Delhi's intent to resume [crude oil](#)

[import from Iran](#) once US sanctions on Tehran are eased.¹⁸⁷ Meanwhile, India's Larsen and Turbo (L&T) has secured an order to set up a 1.5 gigawatt (GW) [solar plant in Riyadh](#), Saudi Arabia, which will reportedly be one of the largest in the world.¹⁸⁸

Prospects of Petroyuan, China, and the Middle East

In light of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's recent visit to the Middle East, Chinese analysts have speculated the possibility of a "[petroyuan system](#)" that could further internationalise the Chinese currency.¹⁸⁹ "The Petroyuan could gain traction as energy exporters like Russia and Iran, which are subject to US sanctions, look to [limit dollar exposure](#)".¹⁹⁰ However, it remains to be seen if major petroleum exporting countries would be willing to give up the reliability of the US (petrodollar) by making such a move. Further, China is hesitant over its [J-10 fighter aircraft](#) barter deal (weapons for oil) with cash-strapped Iran.¹⁹¹

Success of India's Vaccine Diplomacy

In a major success for India's vaccine diplomacy, 360,000 made-in-India coronavirus vaccines were [exported to Yemen](#) and hailed as a "game-changer" in the fight against the pandemic by UN officials.¹⁹² Meanwhile, considering the growing number of Covid-19 cases in India and subsequent demands to ban commercial export of coronavirus vaccines, the Iranian government has requested India to immediately send 375,000 [COVAXIN vaccines](#) out of the 500,000 it had purchased.¹⁹³

Regional Security

The Suez Canal [reopened](#) after a weeklong blockage, which caused serious [disruption](#) to the global maritime trade [and](#) resulted in an estimated cumulative loss of USD54 billion.¹⁹⁴ Concerned over the incident, Egypt is considering [widening the Suez Canal](#) to prevent future disruptions to this strategically important waterway.¹⁹⁵

On the arms procurement front, the Biden administration is likely to approve arms sales worth [USD23-billion to the UAE](#), including F-35 stealth aircraft and Reaper Drones, as it nears completion of the review of arms deals signed by the Trump administration.¹⁹⁶ However, the fate of arms sales to Saudi Arabia still remains unclear as the Biden administration is in the process of recalibrating relations with Riyadh. After the ongoing review, the "Biden administration plans to [suspend air-to-ground offensive weapons](#) used by fighter aircraft and drones to Saudi Arabia".¹⁹⁷ Further, the United States has reportedly [shifted some of its major military assets](#) from Saudi Arabia.¹⁹⁸ In February, the Pentagon "had

announced [global force posture review](#) of the US military's footprint, resources, strategy, and missions at the directive of President Joe Biden".¹⁹⁹

Major powers and Iran have initiated talks on the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action](#) (JCPOA) in Vienna.²⁰⁰ The United States and Iran have agreed to [establish two working groups](#) to get both countries back into compliance with the JCPOA. "The working groups will try to synchronise Washington's lifting of sanctions and Iran's limiting of uranium enrichment".²⁰¹ The Biden administration has reportedly "signalled its openness to [ease sanctions](#) against Iran's economy, including oil and finance, helping to narrow differences in nuclear talks".²⁰² However, US diplomats have [declined to confirm these reports](#).²⁰³ In light of this, it must be noted that there is visible [discomfort amongst US allies](#) in the region about Washington's return to the Iran nuclear deal.²⁰⁴ The future of JCPOA still remains unclear, but it appears that the US will eventually lift certain sanctions imposed on Iran. This could benefit India as Delhi can resume crude imports from Tehran to diversify its oil basket.

V. Russia's External Engagements and Vaccine Diplomacy

Anushka Nair

On April 28, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a [telephone conversation](#) with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The two leaders discussed the “evolving COVID-19 pandemic situation” and President Putin appreciated India's decision to approve emergency use of the Sputnik-V vaccine in India.²⁰⁵ Delhi and Moscow have agreed to “establish a new 2+2 dialogue” at the ministerial level comprising the Defence and Foreign Ministers of the two countries.²⁰⁶ On April 29, [Russia sent aid](#) such as “oxygen concentrators, ventilators and other medical supplies” to India to assist in the country's fight against the coronavirus pandemic.²⁰⁷



Russia sent medical supplies to India on April 29 to help in its fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.
Source: Twitter/@MEAIndia

Russian Foreign Minister's Visits to India and Pakistan

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov travelled to India and Pakistan in April. In New Delhi, FM Lavrov met his counterpart Dr. S. Jaishankar, reportedly to lay the groundwork for President Putin's visit to India for the India-Russia bilateral summit. At a [joint press conference](#), Minister Lavrov highlighted numerous aspects of the bilateral relationship, particularly military-technical co-operation.²⁰⁸ He mentioned that discussions are underway to explore prospects

of manufacturing Russian defence equipment in India. While such co-operation would be welcome under New Delhi's 'Make in India' and 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat' initiatives, there is also the possibility of ire from the United States, which has been targeting Russia's defence manufacturing and sales with heavy sanctions. However, when asked about the delivery of S-400 systems to India, both ministers were non-committal, and [Dr. Jaishankar said](#) the matter would be taken up by the defence ministers of the two countries later this year.²⁰⁹ Subsequent [newsreports](#) have indicated that the S-400 missiles may be delivered by November 2021.²¹⁰ On Moscow's growing proximity with Beijing and the possibility of a Russia-China military alliance, the Russian FM promptly pointed out that speculation around military alliances are not limited to Russia-China, and remarked that talks about 'Asian NATO' too, are now emerging, hinting towards India's increasing contiguity with the United States. There are concerns that India-Russia [ties have plateaued](#) in recent months amid Moscow's growing proximity to Beijing and even Islamabad, and the strengthening of the India-US relationship.²¹¹



Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Indian EAM
Dr. S. Jaishankar in New Delhi, April 6, 2021.
Source: Russian Foreign Ministry

FM Lavrov's visit to Islamabad was the first by a Russian Foreign Minister since ²⁰¹². He met Pakistan's Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and the Army Chief. Discussions in Pakistan were centred largely around the situation in Afghanistan, and Russia's provision of military equipment to help augment Pakistan's counter-terrorism efforts. FM Lavrov also said that Russia would [continue to strengthen Pakistans military agencies](#) by engaging in joint exercises like 'Druzhba' (Friendship) and the 'Arabian Monsoon'.²¹² There are some

concerns in India that Russia could seek closer ties with Pakistan by virtue of its influence in the Afghanistan situation as well as to counter the emerging India-U.S. alignment. It is probable that the visit to Pakistan was part of Moscow's efforts to build and consolidate influence in South Asia, as reflected in its involvement in mediation in the Afghan Civil War.

Vaccine Diplomacy

India authorised the Sputnik V vaccine for emergency use in April, and the current aim is to reach [production of 850 million doses](#) domestically.²¹³ The global outreach of the Russian vaccine has been on the rise, with numerous countries finalising agreements for purchase as well as production.

The Sputnik V vaccine has become a topic for consideration in the European Union as well, where nations are unable to achieve a common stance with regard to purchasing the Russian vaccine, despite delays in their vaccine rollout programmes. While the EU's European Medicine Agency is yet to grant approval to the Sputnik V, Hungary [used its status as an independent member nation](#) and became the first European country to sign a purchase agreement for it.²¹⁴ It later even offered to [help Slovakia test the vaccine](#) after a row emerged, where Slovakia questioned the quality of 200,000 doses it received, and the RDIF demanded that the shipment be returned.²¹⁵ Others, like Austria, France and Germany have [expressed interest in importing the vaccine](#) from Russia, provided it gets EMA approval.²¹⁶

Putin, Presidency and External Engagement

Russian President Vladimir Putin has [signed into law](#) a bill that allows him to potentially remain in his political role till 2036, making him one of Russia's longest serving leaders.²¹⁷ The amendment, which was passed by the State Duma, after several citizens' protests at the time of the nationwide vote on the matter, is a significant overhaul of the constitution, and one that could effectively give Putin the status of 'President for Life'.

On April 21, President Putin [delivered his 17th State of the Nation Address](#) to lawmakers of the Federal Assembly in Moscow, where he spoke of Russia's willingness to harbour good relations with all countries, while mentioning that Russia would respond "quickly and asymmetrically", if its good intentions were taken for granted.²¹⁸ He accused the West of instigating unrest in Belarus, and orchestrating an assassination attempt on Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko, a Kremlin ally. President Putin's speech was replete with unspecific threats against nations of the West, but he stopped short of announcing any concrete military or foreign policy decisions to mitigate the perceived threat to

Russia's position.²¹⁹ Notably, he made no mention of the roughly 100,000 Russian troops positioned at the Ukrainian border, a development which has come under scrutiny. While there has been [speculation](#) that President Putin would use the platform of his annual address as a pretext to send troops into Ukraine,²²⁰ in an unforeseen turn of events, Russia's Defence Minister ordered a [partial withdrawal](#) of the troops deployed near the Ukrainian border by May 1.²²¹ It remains to be seen whether this is a complete redeployment, or whether Russia intends to maintain some military presence in the region.

The United States [announced additional sanctions](#) on Russia on April 15, citing attempted interference in the 2020 US elections and reports of bounties on American soldiers in Afghanistan, among other reasons.²²² Moscow [responded](#) with countermeasures of its own, not only against the United States, but also against Poland, which reportedly demanded the exit of three Russian officials from Warsaw, in a show of support to Washington.²²³

Within hours of President Putin's annual address, Russia announced that it was [expelling 10 diplomats](#) from the US Embassy in Moscow.²²⁴ The diplomats, who have been given till May 21 to leave the country, have been asked to leave in response to US declaration of Russian employees at the Embassy in Washington DC and Consulate General in New York as *persona non grata*. The U.S. Ambassador to Russia has also [left for Washington](#), after the Kremlin announced that it 'recommended' to the Ambassador that he take a break, amid tensions and the back and forth exchange of sanctions between Washington and Moscow.²²⁴ The departure of both Ambassadors from their respective posts is reflective of the new low that Russia-US bilateral relations have reached. Both ambassadors will meet with their respective leaders to discuss developments as they unfold, and these discussions are [likely to affect the possibility of a proposed meeting](#) between Presidents Biden and Putin this summer.²²⁶ There have been reports that the "White House is hammering out the details of an [increasingly likely European summit](#)" between the two leaders.²²⁷

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