



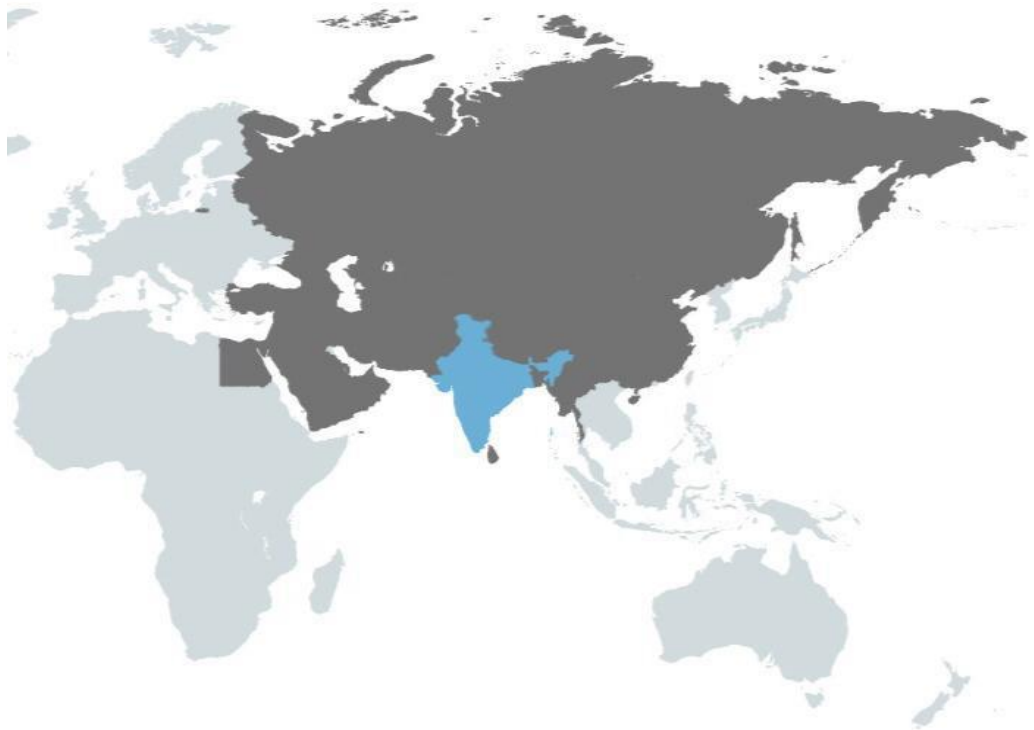
Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

MAY 2022



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DPG India Strategic Review

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Authors

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.), PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM & Bar, Senior Fellow for Military Strategy, Delhi Policy Group

Ambassador Biren Nanda, Senior Fellow, Delhi Policy Group

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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 with chapters by Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.) and Ambassador Biren Nanda. The research team includes Shreyas Deshmukh and Sanket Joshi. Your comments and feedback may be addressed to Shreyas Deshmukh at shreyas@dpg.org.in. To subscribe, please [click here](#).

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World map

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Contents

India's Neighbourhood: The Arc of Instability	1
Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.).....	1
Instability, Connectivity and Non-Traditional Security Issues	13
Amb. Biren Nanda.....	13

India's Neighbourhood: The Arc of Instability

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

AFGHANISTAN

Humanitarian Crisis and the Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan

The latest Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analysis shows that high acute food insecurity persists across Afghanistan. Nearly 20 million people, representing half the country's population, are still experiencing high and critical levels of acute food insecurity between March and May 2022.¹ The persistence of this high magnitude of food insecurity is due to a combination of a successive series of droughts, rising food prices, the impact of decades of conflict and the economic collapse in the country.²

The latest report from the National Bureau of Statistics shows that Afghanistan's per capita income has dropped from \$500 a year to \$ 350, and food aid from UN agencies has not alleviated poverty in the country. As per a local survey, the rate of poverty in the country has exceeded 95 per cent while 56 per cent are seeking to leave the country amid a drop in daily income.³

Despite this massive scale of humanitarian crisis, the Taliban appear unwilling to address global concerns on women's rights, making it difficult for some countries to commit to financial aid. In reality, restrictions on women and girls are only increasing. Even before the events of 15 August, women's labour force participation was meager by global standards at 17 per cent nationwide. With further restrictions being imposed, there is likely to be a drop of 21 per cent in the number of employed women.⁴

Taliban's latest decree, announced at a news conference in Kabul on May 7, calls for women only to show their eyes and recommends that they wear the head-to-toe burqa.⁵ On May 21, the Taliban's Ministry of Vice and Virtue ordered all women television presenters to cover their faces, stating "the decision was final and that there was no room for discussion."⁶ Girls' high schools remain shut, depriving education to almost 850,000 girls.⁷



A TV anchor wears a face covering as she reads the news on TOLO NEWS, in Kabul, Afghanistan, May 22, 2022. Source: The Associate Press

There has been severe condemnation of the Taliban's actions. In a press statement on Afghanistan, the UN Security Council expressed deep concern regarding the increasing erosion of respect for women and girls' human rights and fundamental freedoms in Afghanistan and called on the Taliban to swiftly reverse their policies.⁸ In a typical response, the Taliban has rejected the UN concerns as "unfounded" and stated that "nothing has been imposed on the Afghan people that runs counter to the religious and cultural beliefs of the Islamic society."⁹

It is now clear that the Taliban are going to impose their brand of an extreme ideology that denies an equal status to women. The international community is also in a quandary of how to pressurize the Taliban regime without it exacerbating the humanitarian crisis. The Taliban is exploiting this dilemma.

Taliban's Support to Terrorist Groups

A recent UN report has highlighted the presence of a large number of terrorist groups in Afghanistan that enjoy the support of the Taliban. Some of these groups are of particular concern for India. The 13th report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team has stated that Pakistan-based terror groups such as Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) are maintaining their training camps in Afghanistan.¹⁰

The report mentions that JeM maintains eight training camps in Nangarhar, three of which are directly under Taliban control. LeT, which has provided finance and training expertise to Taliban operations, is said to maintain three camps in Kunar and Nangarhar. The report also points out that the 2020 name change of the Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) magazine from "Nawa-i Afghan Jihad" to "Nawa-e-Gazwah-e-Hind" suggests a refocusing of AQIS from Afghanistan to Kashmir.

Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) constitutes the largest component of foreign terrorist fighters in Afghanistan. The group is estimated to consist of 3,000 to 4,000 armed fighters located along the east and southeast Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas. The TTP has benefitted most of all the foreign terrorist groups in Afghanistan from the Taliban takeover and has conducted numerous attacks and operations in Pakistan. Other terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan include the Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K), Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and Jamaat Ansarullah.

National Security Advisor (NSA), Ajit Doval, attended the 4th Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan at Dushanbe on May 27. A joint statement signed by India, Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan after the event called on the Afghan authorities to "take more realistic steps to eradicate all types of terrorist groups... and ensure that Afghanistan does not serve as a breeding ground, safe haven or source of spread of terrorism."¹¹ However, the reality is that apart from ISIS-K, the Taliban is unlikely to act against other groups with whom it has an ideological alignment.



National Security Advisers of Tajikistan, India, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Kyrgyzstan and China participate in the 4th Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan in Dushanbe on May 27, 2022. Source: Mint

Internal Conflict in Afghanistan

Last month saw a series of deadly bombings by the ISIS-K at mosques in Mazar-i-Sharif, Kunduz, and Kabul. These attacks have continued through May. An explosion ripped through the Ayuob Saber Mosque in Kabul on May 13 during Friday prayers. Fortunately, there were no fatal casualties.¹² On May 25, three consecutive explosions occurred in three minibuses in Mazar-i-Sharif, killing nine people and wounding 15 others. One hour later, five people were killed and 17 others injured after a blast tore through the Hazrat-e-Zekria Mosque in Kabul.¹³ The ISIS-K has claimed responsibility for the Mazar-i-Sharif attacks.

Even as the Taliban continue to wage a campaign against the ISIS-K, reports have emerged of fresh fighting in the Panjshir Valley after the National Resistance Front (NRF), led by Ahmad Massoud, announced a military offensive against the Taliban in the first week of May. The fighting is primarily in the center and south of Panjshir Province, and both sides are claiming victory. The

Taliban have declared that the situation is "normal and peaceful" while the NRF says that they have caused heavy losses to the Taliban.¹⁴

While accurate information is hard to come by, it is evident that the Taliban are committing war crimes against the civilian population. Numerous videos on social media show incidents of torture and killings, and scores of civilians have fled the area.¹⁵ European Union Ambassador to Afghanistan Andreas Von Brandt said in a tweet that he was "concerned by the reports of killings of civilians and mistreatment in Panjshir."¹⁶

The NRF is not strong enough to pose a major challenge to the Taliban as it lacks any kind of international backing. Neighbouring countries are wary of plunging Afghanistan into any sort of civil war that could result in greater instability. On the other hand, the Taliban's strategy of extreme brutality in dealing with the ISIS-K and the NRF has its limits and will not ensure success and stability. The coming summer months could see higher levels of violence.

India-Taliban Relations

During the 4th Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan at Dushanbe, NSA Ajit Doval stated that "India was and is an important stakeholder in Afghanistan. The special relationship with people of Afghanistan over centuries will guide India's approach."¹⁷ On June 2, J P Singh, Joint Secretary in charge of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran in the MEA, led an Indian team to Kabul. This was the first official visit to the country since the Taliban takeover.

The Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Mottaqi welcomed the delegation and called it a "good start" between the two countries. He thanked India for its recent humanitarian and health assistance to Afghanistan. He stressed that India should resume its stalled projects, activate its diplomatic presence, and provide consular services to Afghans.¹⁸ J.P. Singh also called on acting deputy foreign minister Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai who stated that Afghan-India relations "would not be influenced by other countries' inter-rivalry".¹⁹

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), in a statement, said that the purpose of the visit was to "oversee the delivery operations of our humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan." At a media briefing, responding to questions, MEA spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said, "I think you are reading far too much into this visit. This visit is about our humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan."²⁰ India has already dispatched to Afghanistan 20,000 metric tonnes of wheat, 13 tons of medicines, 500,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine and winter clothing.

While it is necessary to open communication lines with the Taliban, India remains cautious. The Taliban are no different from their previous avatar, which represents an extreme opposition to women's freedoms. It is also not certain whether they can rein in the large number of transnational terrorist groups in the country. Therefore, India's current focus should be on humanitarian assistance.

PAKISTAN

Continuing Political and Economic Instability

The swearing-in of a new government in Pakistan in April has not brought in any level of political stability in the country. The former prime minister Imran Khan has attracted large crowds at his rallies in Peshawar, Karachi, and Lahore, where he called for early elections and accused the current government of being "selected from abroad."²¹

On May 22, Imran Khan announced that he would lead an anti-government "peaceful march" on the national capital, Islamabad, on May 25 to press his demand for fresh elections.²² One day before the march, the government announced that it would not allow Imran's political party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), to spread "chaos and disorder" in the guise of the march.²³

The government rounded up over 1,000 PTI leaders and workers in a crackdown, and Section 144 was imposed in Lahore, the twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad and Karachi, and other major cities in the country. In addition, all entry and exit points leading towards Islamabad were closed down with the heavy deployment of police and containers.²⁴

One day before the march, the Pakistani Supreme Court permitted the PTI to hold its Azadi March protest in Islamabad and restrained the government from arresting its leaders and workers.²⁵ There were violent clashes between the police and PTI supporters, and the army was deployed in the Red Zone of Islamabad.²⁶

Imran Khan addressed the protesters in Islamabad and gave a six-day deadline to the government for announcing elections and dissolving assemblies and warned that if this was not done, he would return to the capital with the "entire nation."²⁷ Following the mayhem, the Pakistan government has imposed a permanent ban on rallies and processions that could spread disorder or create chaos in the federal capital.²⁸



Former Prime Minister of Pakistan and PTI Chairmen Imran Khan addressing his supporters in Islamabad on May 26, 2022. Source: Dawn

Despite his removal from power, Imran Khan retains his support base among the educated middle-class people in semi-urban and rural areas, particularly the youth. Khan's narrative of 'foreign conspiracy' and the return of tainted leaders has been effective in rallying support.²⁹ Whether this would translate into winning the next elections is uncertain, but there is no doubting Khan's ability to continue causing political instability.

This period of political uncertainty comes even as Pakistan is in the grip of a severe financial crisis. The State Bank of Pakistan's latest debt bulletin for the end of March 2022 showed that the total debt and liabilities of the country increased to Rs53.5 trillion, a surge of Rs23.7 trillion or nearly 80 per cent when compared with the statistics before the PTI came to power.³⁰ Interest payments are about 85 per cent of total net revenue receipts, forcing the government to borrow more to meet expenditure on defence, development, provision of subsidies, and running of the government.³¹

Pakistan's forex reserves plunged to \$9.72 billion, their lowest level since December 2019, forcing the government to slap a ban on the import of nearly 800 items in 33 categories, including food products. Information Minister Marriyum Aurangzeb declared that it was "an emergency situation" and Pakistanis would have to make sacrifices.³²

Facing the risk of defaulting on its foreign debts, Pakistan is in talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to resume lending under a \$6 billion loan programme agreed upon in 2019 but in abeyance over a dispute with the previous government over energy subsidies. Although the Pakistan Finance Minister Miftah Ismail had stated that the government would not remove subsidies on power and fuel,³³ the failure to reach an agreement with the IMF led to a reversal of this stand. On May 27, the price of gasoline and diesel was raised by Rs 30 each.

As Pakistan continues to negotiate with the IMF, it has secured a "sizeable package" of around \$8 billion from Saudi Arabia during the visit of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif. The financial package includes doubling the oil financing facility, additional money either through deposits or Sukuks, and rolling over the existing \$4.2 billion facilities.³⁴ While this could provide temporary relief, Pakistan's economy is unlikely to recover unless deep structural reforms are undertaken.

Foreign Policy Moves

Pakistan's new government seeks to reinforce its relations with China and mend its frayed ties with the US. However, there appears to be little change in its attitude towards India.

On May 22, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari visited China and held talks with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi. Earlier, on May 11 Bilawal had held a virtual meeting with Wang Yi. The official readout of both the meetings³⁵ stressed the "ironclad" friendship between China and Pakistan. Bilawal stated that "developing amicable relations with China is the cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy and an inevitable choice for Pakistan," while Wang reiterated his support to Pakistan in "safeguarding national sovereignty, security and dignity and in its commitment to development and national rejuvenation."

Despite these positive statements, there was clearly a great concern for the safety of Chinese citizens and institutions in Pakistan. Wang Yi stressed that over a period of time, "Pakistan has seen a series of terrorist attacks on Chinese nationals, causing heavy casualties. The Chinese government and Chinese leaders attach great importance to this, and the Chinese society and people pay close attention to it. China and Pakistan should take immediate action and adopt firm and effective measures to deal with it."

On April 26, three Chinese nationals were killed in an attack by a female suicide bomber outside the Chinese language centre inside the Karachi University.³⁶

The Chinese Foreign Ministry had issued a strongly worded statement on the incident that the “blood of the Chinese people should not be shed in vain” and demanding that the Pakistani side should “take all possible measures to ensure the safety of Chinese citizens in Pakistan and prevent such incidents from happening again.”³⁷ This is one issue that could put a strain on Pakistan-China ties.

On the invitation of the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari attended a two-day ministerial conference in New York on the threat to global food security triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. During this visit, Bilawal also held a meeting with Blinken on May 18. The brief State Department press release affirmed “the shared desire for a strong and prosperous bilateral relationship” and “underscored the importance of U.S.-Pakistan cooperation on regional peace, counterterrorism, Afghan stability, support for Ukraine, and democratic principles.”³⁸



U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, meets with Pakistani Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari at United Nations headquarters on May 18, 2022. Source: Twitter/ @SecBlinken

Bilawal's participation in the conference relating to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the mention of support for Ukraine in the State Department release could be seen as a shift in Pakistan's earlier position of neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine War. However, much more is required to repair the damage done to bilateral ties during Imran Khan's tenure. It is also doubtful whether much common ground can be found between the two countries beyond a security-centric focus.

Ties with India are held hostage to Pakistan's obsession with Kashmir. On May 5, Pakistan's Foreign Ministry summoned India's Charge d'Affaires and handed a demarche conveying Islamabad's categorical rejection of the Jammu and Kashmir Delimitation Commission report.³⁹ A week later, Pakistan's Parliament passed a resolution denouncing the alleged Indian attempt at demographic changes in Kashmir through a delimitation commission.⁴⁰

After a Delhi court awarded life imprisonment to Yasin Malik, one of the foremost separatist leaders of Jammu and Kashmir, in a terror funding case, Pakistan Prime Minister Sharif wrote on Twitter that it was a "black day" for Indian democracy and described Malik as a "valiant freedom fighter". Pakistan's National Assembly and Senate passed a resolution calling on the international community to force India to drop charges against all Kashmiri leaders, including Malik.⁴¹

India has outrightly rejected Pakistan's efforts to "interfere in matters that are internal to India, including the Indian territories under Pakistan's illegal and forcible occupation."⁴² After Bilawal raked up the issue of Jammu and Kashmir during his remarks at a UN Security Council debate, India called these a "pavlovian response aimed to misuse any forum, and every topic, to propagate false and malicious propaganda."⁴³

These exchanges clearly indicate that Pakistan's unrealistic expectations on the Jammu and Kashmir issue and matters that India considers its internal affairs will continue to bedevil bilateral relations. Looking at the political instability in Pakistan, it is also unlikely that the Indian leadership will consider engaging deeply with Pakistan.

Renegotiating with the TTP

Throughout May, there were a series of talks between Pakistan officials and the TTP brokered by the Taliban. It was reported that Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed, the officer in charge of all Pakistani troops in the northwestern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, led the Pakistani delegation in talks with the leaders of the TTP in Kabul.⁴⁴ To facilitate an agreement, Pakistan handed over

two top commanders of the TTP, Muslim Khan and Mehmood Khan, to the Afghan Taliban.⁴⁵

On June 2, the TTP announced that the two sides had agreed to an indefinite ceasefire and to pursue negotiations to end the conflict. Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan's acting Minister for Interior, Sirajuddin Haqqani, reportedly played a key role in the agreement.⁴⁶

Key demands of the TTP include the release of prisoners, presidential pardon to militant commanders, compensation for the dead and wounded, enforcement of Shariah regulation in Malakand, withdrawal of the military from the borders, and reversal of Fata merger into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.⁴⁷ While some of these demands could be accepted by the Pakistan government, two issues remain challenging: the reversal of the FATA merger and the disbandment of the TTP as an armed militant group.⁴⁸

Negotiations between the Pakistani government and the TTP held last year resulted in a month-long ceasefire that broke down in December. The government redlines at that time had been the imposition of Shariah and restoration of tribal areas to their pre-merger status.⁴⁹ How these issues can be navigated remains uncertain.

STANDOFF AT THE INDIA-CHINA LINE OF ACTUAL CONTROL (LAC)

Stalemate in Eastern Ladakh

There is a continuing impasse along the LAC in Eastern Ladakh. The last disengagement of troops took place at Gogra ten months ago, in August 2021. After that, three rounds of Senior Military Commanders have taken place without any headway.

The 24th meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC) was held on May 31. A short handout from the MEA stated that the two sides reviewed the situation along the LAC in the Western Sector and agreed to continue the discussions through diplomatic and military channels to resolve the remaining issues along the LAC at the earliest so as to create conditions for the restoration of normalcy in bilateral relations. They also decided to hold the next (16th) round of the Senior Commanders meeting at an early date to achieve the objective of complete disengagement from all friction points along the LAC in the Western Sector in accordance with the existing bilateral agreements and protocols.⁵⁰

Meanwhile, both sides continue developing infrastructure and strengthening their deployments along the LAC. The latest satellite imagery showed that China was building a second bridge over Pangong Tso in the vicinity of the first bridge that was constructed in January 2022. The new bridge is wider than the first bridge and capable of crossing by tanks. 20 km east of the LAC at Finger 8, the bridge will enable faster movement of troops between the North and South banks of the Pangong Tso.⁵¹

The kind of hype created in the media over the construction of the bridge was perhaps unwarranted. Any new infrastructure development does have tactical implications, and the Indian Army would consider these implications in their operational planning.

India is also improving its road network to provide better connectivity to forward areas along the LAC. A road is being built from the Nubra valley to connect with the Depsang plains. This would provide a much-needed alternate axis to Depsang, which is today only connected by the Durbuk-Shyok-DBO road.⁵²

The Indian Army's shift in operational focus toward the LAC is taking concrete shape. Six army divisions have realigned from the Pakistan front towards the northern borders.⁵³ This includes strengthening both defensive and offensive capability all along the LAC in the Western, Central, and Eastern sectors. Regular exercises are being undertaken to prepare for their wartime role.

Both armies have been exercising restraint along the LAC, but mistrust and suspicions about intentions remain. As long as China continues to resist disengagement and de-escalation and thousands of soldiers remain in place, the chances of some local incidents spiralling out of control cannot be ruled out. The PLA commander who attends the next high-level military meeting should consider this.

Instability, Connectivity and Non-Traditional Security Issues

by

Amb. Biren Nanda

SOUTH ASIA

Bangladesh

External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar paid a day-long visit to Dhaka on April 28, 2022. During the visit he called on Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and conveyed Prime Minister Narendra Modi's invitation to visit India at her convenience later this year.

EAM also met his counterpart Dr A.K. Abdul Momen the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh and extended an invitation to him to attend the next meeting of the Joint Consultative Commission to be held in India, prior to the visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.



Foreign Minister of India Dr. S Jaishankar met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina during his day long visit to Bangladesh on April 28, 2022. Source: Twitter/@DrSJaishankar

During the visit the two sides reviewed bilateral ties as well as global and regional issues. Bilateral issues discussed included trade, disbursement of loans for bilateral projects, train services, investment in regional value chains,

cooperation in the power sector and sub-regional cooperation in connectivity and other areas.

On May 22, 2022, the Indian and Bangladesh navies began two days of Joint Coordinated Patrols in the northern waters of the Bay of Bengal. The exercises last took place in October 2020. The exercises will strengthen mutual understanding and enhance interoperability between both navies in countering transnational maritime threats at sea.

Bhutan

EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar paid a two-day visit to Bhutan on April 29-30, 2022, at the invitation of Dr Tandi Dorji the Foreign Minister of Bhutan. During the visit he called on His Majesty, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck the King of Bhutan and H.E. Lotay Tshering the Prime Minister of Bhutan. During the meetings the two sides reviewed the progress made in financial connectivity through the launch of the Rupay card and the BHIM application, the STEM program which places Bhutanese youth in IITs in India and the link up of the Start Up systems in the two countries through the 'National Knowledge Network' of India and the 'Druk REN Connection' of Bhutan. Dr. Jaishankar also revealed that the India-Bhutan SAT was due to be launched shortly.

Apart from this Dr. Jaishankar inaugurated three development projects and handed over the 12th consignment of medical supplies to Bhutan as a gift from the government and people of India.

The Maldives

India's National Security Adviser, Shri Ajit Doval met Mohammed Nasheed Speaker of the Maldivian Parliament, when the latter visited New Delhi to participate in the Raisina Dialogue. Nasheed has often criticized the government of President Solih. At the Raisina dialogue he accused ministers of the Solih government of corruption, but also criticized China for its debt trap diplomacy. In New Delhi while delivering a lecture on "Indian Ocean Security" he accused the ruling MDP government of a failure to deliver on debt restructuring. The Indian outreach to Nasheed acquires added significance in light of India's own expanded strategic engagement with the Maldives.

Nepal

Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid an official visit to Nepal on May 16, 2022. The visit took place on the occasion of Buddha Purnima which marks the birth day of Gautam Buddha. At Lumbini (the birthplace of Gautam Buddha), Prime

Minister Modi offered prayers at the Mayadevi temple and delivered an address at an event organized by the Lumbini Development Trust. He also participated in a foundation stone laying ceremony for the construction of a "Center for Buddhist Culture and Heritage". The center is expected to cost Rs 1 billion and will take three years to complete.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi holds bilateral talks with Prime Minister of Nepal Sher Bahadur Deuba in Lumbini, Nepal on May 16, 2022. Source: flickr/MEA

PM Modi was accompanied on the visit to Lumbini by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba of Nepal. The two prime ministers held bilateral talks on the sidelines of these events. Prime Minister Modi in a speech at the Buddha Jayanti (Buddha's birthday) event in Lumbini said that India-Nepal relations were "unshakeable like the Himalayas".

Sri Lanka

Speaking to the media, Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, said that the 21st amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution to curb Presidential powers is being discussed with the Attorney General's department and will be submitted to the cabinet for approval. The 21st amendment will annul the 20th amendment, which gave unfettered powers to President Gotabaya Rajapaksha. The amendment is likely to reduce the presidency to a ceremonial position and will likely hand over key powers pertaining to governance to the Prime Minister and his cabinet.

India continued to provide relief supplies to Sri Lanka, which is reeling under an unprecedented economic crisis. On May 21, India provided 40000 liters of diesel to Sri Lanka under a credit line facility. An Indian ship laden with urgent relief supplies including rice, medicines and milk reached Colombo port on May 22. India has extended assistance amounting to US\$ 3.5 billion to Sri Lanka this year.

Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe appointed Maldivian Speaker of the Parliament Nasheed as "coordinator for securing foreign aid for Sri Lanka. Nasheed subsequently appealed to Indian Banks and the business community to help finance debt restructuring for Sri Lanka.

On May 19, Sri Lanka flagged to creditors that it would not be able to meet its payment obligations unless its debt is restructured. This is the first time in its history that Sri Lanka fell into default on its payment obligations.

SOUTH-EAST ASIA

US-ASEAN Summit

An ASEAN-US Special Summit – the first ever was held in Washington D.C. took place on May 12-13, 2022. At the Summit ASEAN and the United States committed to establishing an 'ASEAN-US Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' and agreed to work together on: (1) fighting the COVID 19 Pandemic (2) strengthening economic ties and connectivity (3) promoting maritime cooperation (4) enhancing people to people connectivity (5) supporting sub-regional development (6) leveraging technologies and promoting innovation (7) addressing climate change (8) and preserving and building trust.

The 'Vision Statement' issued at the end of the summit reaffirmed a shared commitment to the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and called for Myanmar to implement the 'ASEAN Five Point Consensus'. The "Joint Vision Statement" relegated the Ukraine crisis to the penultimate paragraph of the document. The US and ASEAN will "continue to reaffirm respect for sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity," and reiterate a call for "compliance with the UN Charter and international law". ASEAN underlined the importance of an "immediate cessation of hostilities and creating an enabling environment for a peaceful resolution". Clearly ASEAN does not regard the Ukraine crisis to be an existentialist threat it is made out to be and the primary threat to ASEAN's security comes from a rising and assertive resident power in the Indo-Pacific.

The US initiative to convene a summit with ASEAN leaders was well received. The Biden administration has ruled out unfettered trade liberalization and has launched the 'Indo-Pacific Economic Framework.' This framework is intended to advance resilience, sustainability, inclusiveness, economic growth, fairness, and will focus on common regional standards around digital trade and data flows, labor standards and carbon emission reductions and competitiveness for regional economies. Through this initiative, the aim is to contribute to cooperation, stability, prosperity, development, and peace within the region.

Of Asean's 10 members, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam came on board. The others who joined were Australia, India, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand, with all participating economies accounting for 40 per cent of the world's GDP, according to the White House.

After President Trump withdrew the US from the TPP, Washington's economic disengagement from the region had enabled China to grow its economic footprint in Asia unhindered. The 'Indo-Pacific Economic Framework' is being viewed by the region as a chance for the US to 'regain a foothold in the region', both economically and politically. On the other hand there is some unhappiness in ASEAN about the lack of a trade opening to the United States.

India – ASEAN

ASEAN plans to hold a maritime naval exercise with India to enhance security and promote solidarity between the ASEAN and India. The decision was made during the ASEAN Defense Senior Officials Meeting (ADSOM) held on May 17, 2022 at the Cambodian Defense Ministry in Phnom Penh. The exercises will commemorate 30 years of ASEAN-India relations.



ASEAN defence senior officials' meeting, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, May 17, 2022.

Source: Borneo Bulletin

Cambodia

Prime Minister Naendra Modi had a virtual meeting with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen on May 18, 2022. The two leaders discussed a range of bilateral issues including trade and investment, human resource development, defense and security, development cooperation, connectivity, post-pandemic economic recovery and people to people ties.

The two leaders reviewed the robust development partnership between both countries including capacity building programs and quick impact projects under the Mekong Ganga Cooperation framework.

Prime Minister Modi also highlighted the historical and civilizational links between the two countries and expressed satisfaction at India's involvement in the restoration of the Angor Wat and Preah Vihear temples in Cambodia which depict the cultural and linguistic connect between the two countries.

Prime Minister Hun Sen thanked India for providing 3.25 lakh doses of the Indian manufactured covishield vaccine to Cambodia under the 'Quad Vaccine Initiative'.

The two leaders complemented each other on the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Cambodia being celebrated this year. As part of these celebrations Prime Minister Modi invited His Majesty the King of Cambodia and Her Majesty the Queen Mother to visit India at a mutually convenient time.

Prime Minister Modi also congratulated Prime Minister Hun Sen on Cambodia assuming the Chairpersonship of the ASEAN and offered India's full support in this regard.

Indonesia

India's External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar spoke to the Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi on developments related to the G-20. Indonesia is presently holding the presidency of the G-20. Several G-20 leaders have conveyed to Indonesia that it would not be possible for them join the G-20 summit if Russia is invited. So far Indonesia has stuck to its position that Russia would be invited.

The virtual meeting came a day after Indonesia announced that it would lift a ban on the export of palm oil. Indonesia the world's top palm oil exporter had announced a ban on exports of palm oil on April 28 this year.

Myanmar

Cambodia is planning to invite the Myanmar junta's Defense Minister to next month's ASEAN Defense Minister's meeting in Phnom Penh. The representatives of the Myanmar junta led by Zaw Zaw Soe, the Deputy Director General of the Department of International Affairs in the Myanmar Ministry of Defense participated in the ASEAN Defense Senior Officials Meeting (ADSOM) held in Phnom Penh on May 17, 2022.

General Yawd Serk the Chairman of Restoration Council of the Shan State held peace talks with the military junta in Myanmar on May 19-20, 2022. Seven of the ten signatories to the "Nation-wide Cease fire Agreement" participated in the peace talks – the 'Restoration Council of the Shan State', the 'New Mon State Party', the 'Karen National Union/the Karen National Liberation Army', the 'Democratic Karen benevolent Army', the 'Arakan Liberation Party', the 'Pa-O National Liberation Organization' and the 'Lahu Democratic Union'.

Separately, Myanmar's shadow 'National Unity Government' (NUG) engaged for the first time with leaders from the Arakan Army (AA). NUG Foreign Minister Zin Mar Aung held a two-hour meeting via video-conference with Chairman of the United League of Arakan (ULA) General Tun Myat Naing and discussed the current political situation in Myanmar. Additionally, the current activities of the 'National Unity Government' were discussed between relevant ministries from the two sides. If talks between the NUG and the AA are successful it could result in the resumption of fighting in the Rakhine State.

On May 4, 2022, a Myanmar military court rejected an appeal by Aung San Suu Kyi against a five-year sentence imposed for corruption. The Nobel laureate was convicted of accepting a bribe of US\$ 600,000/- in cash and gold bars – a charge she has denied.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman, Zhao Lijian told reporters on May 16, 2022, that China and the ASEAN will conduct face to face negotiations on the "Code of Conduct" in the South China Sea during the second half of the year.

Multilateral

On May 12, 2022, India abstained from a UNHRC resolution which updated the mandate of the Commission of Inquiry to probe alleged war crimes in areas of Ukraine that were occupied by Russian security forces. The resolution passed with 33 votes in favor, 12 abstentions and two against.

The Indian envoy said that the priority should be the evacuation of innocent civilians from areas witnessing intense fighting. He reiterated India's call for an immediate cessation of violence and the need for dialogue to end the conflict. The statement also expressed concern at the global economic fallout of the conflict. "We continue to emphasize that the contemporary global order is anchored on international law, UN Charter and respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty of all States. We call for respect for and protection of the human rights of people in Ukraine and reiterate our abiding commitment to the global promotion and protection of human rights," Pandey said, echoing India's stated position on the Ukraine war.

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Delhi Policy Group
Core 5A, 1st Floor,
India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road
New Delhi - 110003
India

www.delhipolicygroup.org