



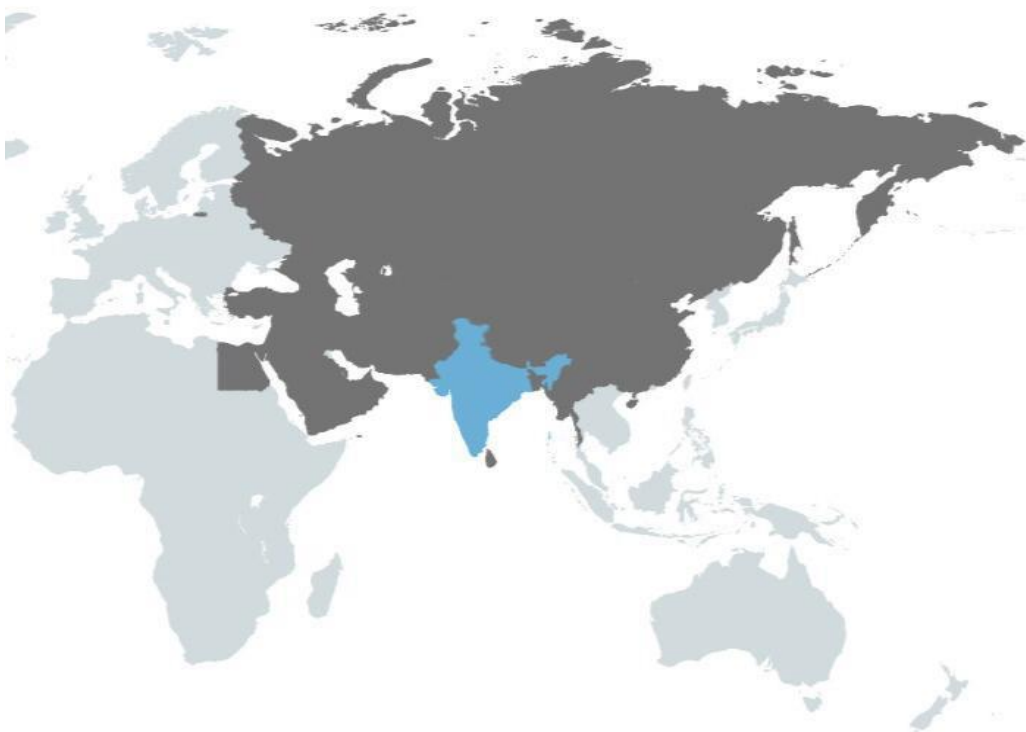
**Delhi Policy Group**

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



# INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

## AUGUST 2022



Volume III, Issue 8 | August 2022

**Delhi Policy Group**

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

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Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

## 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

*The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Delhi Policy Group as an Institution.*

### 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](mailto: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**

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)..... 1

### **Instability, Connectivity and Non-Traditional Security Issues**

Amb. Biren Nanda .....13

## India's Neighbourhood: The Arc of Instability

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

### AFGHANISTAN: ONE YEAR OF TALIBAN RULE

#### Economic and Humanitarian Crisis

On August 15, Taliban fighters staged victory parades to mark one year of their seizure of the Afghan capital Kabul. One small group marched past the former U.S. Embassy, chanting "Long live Islam" and "Death to America." Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid said in a statement: "This day is the day of the victory of truth over falsehood and the day of salvation and freedom of the Afghan nation."<sup>1</sup>

Most citizens in Afghanistan find little to celebrate. The World Food Programme update of August 2 states that Afghanistan continues to face the highest prevalence of insufficient food consumption globally, as 92 percent of households struggle to meet their food needs. Household incomes continue to shrink, while household food expenditure share has increased amidst rising inflation and a global surge in food prices. Female-headed households remain the most vulnerable, with 94 percent reporting decreased income.<sup>2</sup>

The root causes of the humanitarian crisis are primarily economic. Afghanistan's central bank remains unable to access its foreign currency reserves or process or receive most international transactions. This has led to a major liquidity crisis and a shortage of banknotes. Even when funds are transmitted electronically into private banks to pay for humanitarian operations, wages, or remittances, banks' lack of cash means that funds cannot be withdrawn. The severe cut in external funding to support Afghanistan's health, education, and other essential sectors, has resulted in millions of Afghans losing their incomes.<sup>3</sup>

Since June, U.S. and Taliban officials have been in talks for the release of USD 3.5 billion that U.S. President Joe Biden ordered set aside "for the benefit of the Afghan people" out of \$7 billion in Afghan reserves held by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.<sup>4</sup> However, after the discovery of the al Qaeda leader, Ayman al Zawahiri, in Kabul, talks over the release of funds have been suspended.

A top U.S. envoy Tom West told The Wall Street Journal, "We do not see recapitalization of the Afghan central bank as a near-term option. Needless to say, the Taliban's sheltering of al Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri reinforces deep concerns we have regarding diversion of funds to terrorist groups."<sup>5</sup> The hardening of the U.S. position could further add to the economic instability in Afghanistan.

### **Absence of Human Rights**

The human rights situation in Afghanistan remains bleak, with women and children being the worst affected. Girls and women are increasingly being shut out from public spaces with restrictions on education, work, and unaccompanied travel. Amnesty International's recent report describes the situation of Afghan women as "death in slow motion."<sup>6</sup>

Children's lives have been drastically hit. One-third (33%) of all children are not attending school. More than double the proportion of girls (46%) are not going to school compared with boys (20%) at secondary school age. In addition, 88% of children reported eating less than usual over the last year, and one in ten children frequently go to bed hungry at night, nearly two-thirds of these children being girls.<sup>7</sup>

A recent report by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has documented numerous instances of human rights violations in Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup> There are reports of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, torture, enforced disappearances, and inhuman treatment. The press has been muzzled, and peaceful assemblies are not permitted.

The Hazaras, who constitute 20% of the Afghan population, are being subjected to discrimination and persecution due to their ethnic and religious identity. This community is being targeted both by the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) and the Taliban. It was reported last year that a large number of Hazara families from Daikundi, Balkh, Helmand, Kandahar, and Urozgan provinces were forcibly displaced, and their homes and farms were confiscated.<sup>9</sup> The recent fighting between the Taliban and Mawlawi Mehdi, a rebel leader from the Hazara community, led to the displacement of 27,000 people in the Balkhab district of Sar-E-Pol province.<sup>10</sup>

A similar situation obtains in the Panjshir Valley, where the Taliban are battling the National Resistance Front (NRF) led by Ahmad Massoud. Human Rights Watch has reported that Taliban security forces have unlawfully detained and tortured residents accused of association with the NRF.<sup>11</sup> In Jalalabad, Nangarhar, and Kunar, dozens of suspected members or supporters of ISIS-K

have been tortured and executed, and bodies dumped in canals and city outskirts.<sup>12</sup>

### A Safe Haven for Terrorist Organisations

According to the latest report by the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, the terrorist organisations operating in Afghanistan include the ISIS-K, al Qaeda, Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), East Turkestan Islamic Movement, Jamaat Ansarullah, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and Lashkar-e-Taiba.<sup>13</sup> The Taliban's support for some of these groups is a matter of concern to the neighbouring countries, some of whom, in particular Pakistan, have seen a rise in terror attacks.<sup>14</sup>

The ISIS-K has lost territories in Eastern Afghanistan, and the attacks have reduced. However, it retains the capacity to strike across the country. There have been a series of attacks on mosques, buses, and crowded places, mainly targeted at the Shia community and Taliban officials. On August 11, a prominent Taliban cleric, Sheikh Rahimullah Haqqani, was killed in a suicide attack in a seminary in Kabul. A week later, another suicide bombing at a mosque in the Afghan capital of Kabul during evening prayers killed at least 21 people, including a prominent cleric, and wounded at least 33.<sup>15</sup>



Mourners carry the body of a victim of a mosque bombing in Kabul, Afghanistan, August 18, 2022. Source: Indian Express

The latest United Nations report on the threat posed by the Islamic State states that the organization "views Afghanistan as a base for expansion in the wider region for the realization of its "great caliphate" project." The report goes on to

say: "It is unclear whether ISIL-K can regain control over lost territory in eastern Afghanistan. Should it succeed, it may prove difficult for the Taliban to reverse such gains."<sup>16</sup>

Another United Nations report has indicated that "the relationship between Al-Qaida and the Taliban remains close and is underscored by the presence, both in Afghanistan and the region, of Al-Qaida core leadership and affiliated groups, such as Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent

(AQIS)."<sup>17</sup> The presence of the leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in the heart of Kabul, where he was killed in a U.S. drone strike, indicates the protection that the Taliban were giving him.

### Looking Ahead

It is improbable that the Taliban will make any changes to their policies towards minorities and women, and their continuing support to terrorist organisations like al Qaeda. In their latest edict, the Taliban has banned women from going abroad for studies. In a recent gathering of tribal leaders, officials, and religious scholars in Kandahar, Taliban Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada stated: "We will deal with the international community as per Islamic Sharia...if Sharia doesn't allow it, we will not deal with any other country."<sup>18</sup>

Despite these brave words by Akhundzada, the Taliban desperately seek diplomatic recognition. While no country has recognized the Taliban government, some of the embassies that had evacuated Kabul in August 2021 have gradually returned. India became the 15<sup>th</sup> country to open its diplomatic mission when it deployed a technical team to Kabul in June 2022. In addition, four countries - China, Pakistan, Russia, and Turkmenistan – have accredited Taliban-appointed diplomats, a move that confers a level of legitimacy to the Taliban.<sup>19</sup>

In the last one year, the Taliban have skillfully utilized the humanitarian crisis and the fear of instability spilling over from Afghanistan to garner both funds and some diplomatic acceptability without any move forward on human rights. The Taliban will continue to play these cards to remain engaged with the international community while domestically imposing its harsh brand of ideology on the hapless population.

## PAKISTAN

### Political Instability in Pakistan

The political fight between the ruling government and Imran Khan has escalated dramatically. On August 10, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) leader and close aide of Imran Khan, Shahbaz Gill, was arrested in Islamabad. Gill was taken into custody for inciting the public against the state institutions and attempting to incite hatred in the Pakistan Army while speaking on ARY News.<sup>20</sup> During a telephonic conversation with the channel, Gill had alleged that the government was trying to provoke the lower and middle tier of the Army against the PTI.<sup>21</sup>



Police officers escort the leader of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) Doctor Shahbaz Gill after a court hearing in Islamabad, Pakistan, August 27, 2022. Source: The News

ARY News was taken off the air, the head of ARY News Ammad Yousuf was arrested, and FIRs were registered against producer Adeel Raja, anchorpersons Arshad Sharif and Khawar Ghuman, and the CEO Salman Iqbal. The FIR said that the PTI and ARY News were creating a divide between sections of the armed forces.<sup>22</sup> Imran Khan tweeted, "After the ban on ARY yesterday, they've today arrested @SHABAZGIL. Pakistan is living under a fascist imported government, who doesn't care about the human rights of the people of Pakistan."

On August 21, Imran Khan was booked on terrorism charges for "threatening" a female judge and senior police officers at a public rally in Islamabad. Khan

had threatened to file cases against Islamabad's inspector general of police and deputy inspector general of police and declared: "We won't spare you." He then warned the judiciary against its "biased" attitude towards his party, saying that it should brace itself for the consequences. He also warned additional district and sessions judge Zeba Chaudhry, who had approved the two-day physical remand of Shahbaz Gill, that she would also face dire consequences.<sup>23</sup>

After the rally, Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) banned satellite television channels from broadcasting the live speeches of Khan. The ban was later suspended by the Islamabad High Court Chief Justice Athar Minallah, who said that PEMRA had "exceeded its authority."<sup>24</sup>

After the terrorism charges against Khan, Fawad Chaudhry, a former information minister and a senior leader of PTI, warned of "political and administrative consequences" if Khan was arrested. Another former minister, Ali Amin Gandapur, tweeted, "if Imran Khan is arrested ... we will take over Islamabad with people's power."<sup>25</sup> Supporters of Khan surrounded his home to prevent the police from arresting him.

Imran Khan has been granted pre-arrest bail till September 12, but the political turmoil continues, and it also echoed in the U.S. and the United Nations. Stéphane Dujarric, the spokesperson for Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, said the UN chief was "aware" of the charges brought against Imran Khan and emphasised the "need for a competent, independent and impartial legal process." The U.S. State Department underlined the need to follow "democratic, constitutional and legal principles in Pakistan."<sup>26</sup>

## Economic Outlook

Amidst the political instability, Pakistan's economy continues to stumble. As Pakistan turned 75 on August 14, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif wrote an essay in 'The Economist' citing three critical structural flaws that have prevented economic take-off, stunted growth, and led to repeated boom-bust cycles since the late 1980s. These flaws include a polarized political environment, inadequate investment in education, health, and infrastructure, and an inability to reap the benefits of globalization.<sup>27</sup>

According to data released by the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP), the country's total debt and liabilities increased by Rs11.85 trillion in FY22. The year-on-year growth in debt and liabilities was 24.8 per cent in FY22, compared to a growth of just 7.3pc in FY21.<sup>28</sup> On August 19, the foreign currency reserves held by the SBP were recorded at USD 7.8 billion, enough for just 1.12 months. Prominent businessmen and around 50 representatives from the Pak business and

industrial community at a recent emergency meeting have demanded Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif declare an economic emergency and take urgent steps to avoid a Sri Lanka-like situation.<sup>29</sup>

In what is being seen as an economic lifeline to Pakistan, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) board has approved the release of USD 1.17 billion in funds to the cash-strapped country. Finance Minister Miftah Ismail said that the IMF had also agreed to extend the programme by a year and augment the funds by USD 1 billion. The approval of the IMF board could open other multilateral and bilateral avenues of funding for Pakistan.<sup>30</sup>

Some assistance is also flowing in from the gulf countries. UAE and Saudi Arabia have both committed to invest USD 1 billion in Pakistan. However, it is not clear whether the Saudi announcement of USD 1bn is an investment or the deferred oil facility for Pakistan.<sup>31</sup> Qatar has also announced its "aspiration to invest \$3 billion in various commercial and investment sectors" in Pakistan. In a departure from the past practice of giving large loans that were never repaid, all three countries are now looking to invest in different sectors in Pakistan.<sup>32</sup>

While some temporary economic relief exists in Pakistan, the long-term outlook remains grim.

### **Floods in Pakistan**

Pakistan has been ravaged by floods that have been described as 'apocalyptic.' Since June, heavy rains have battered the country leaving more than 1,100 people dead and over 30 million people affected. One-third of the country is under water, and raging waters have swept away 700,000 head of livestock and damaged more than 3.6 million acres of crops — wiping out cotton, wheat, vegetable and fruit harvests."<sup>33</sup>

Pakistan's Federal Minister for Climate Change, Sherry Rehman, tweeted on August 29, "The crops are gone, lives ruined, livelihoods wiped out, roads swept away, houses destroyed or barely standing ... Where to pump/drain the water? There's water everywhere." Adding to Pakistan's economic woes, the floods are estimated to have caused a damage of USD 10 billion. On August 1, a Pakistan Army Aviation helicopter on flood relief operations crashed, killing the six military personnel on board, including the commander of the XII Corps, Lieutenant General Sarfraz Ali.

There is a looming food security crisis in Pakistan as the floods have damaged rice, cotton crops, and vegetables like onions and tomatoes. As a result, food costs have jumped in Pakistan, with tomatoes surging five times and onions

tripling since last month.<sup>34</sup> While international aid is trickling in, importing food and vegetables from India would make eminent sense. However, Pakistan's obsession with Kashmir is coming in the way of humanitarian needs.



Flood situation in Pakistan, September 1, 2022. Source: Twitter/ @USAID\_Pakistan

On August 29, Prime Minister Narendra Modi took to Twitter, saying, "Saddened to see the devastation caused by the floods in Pakistan. We extend our heartfelt condolences to the families of the victims, the injured and all those affected by this natural calamity and hope for an early restoration of normalcy." While Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif thanked Prime Minister Modi for expressing his condolences, he ruled out any food imports from India.

Addressing a press conference on August 30, Sharif said, "There won't have been problems about trading with India, but genocide is going on there, and Kashmiris have been denied their rights. Kashmir has been forcibly annexed through abolition of Article 370."<sup>35</sup> In response, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) Spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said, "As regards the trade element, we have seen various statements on this matter. At this point, I have nothing further to add to those statements that we have seen from Pakistan." This

exchange virtually rules out any humanitarian assistance from India to Pakistan.

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

### **A Military and Diplomatic Impasse**

The last disengagement along the LAC in Eastern Ladakh had taken place at Gogra in August 2021. In the last one year, despite numerous meetings at the military and diplomatic levels, there has been an ongoing impasse. The situation appears unlikely to change, primarily due to the Chinese intransigence to even accept that the standoff at the LAC has cast a long shadow over bilateral relations.

The Chinese Ambassador to India, Sun Weidong, held a press briefing on August 13 in which he claimed that "the bilateral relations have overall shown a recovery momentum."<sup>36</sup> He stated that China's position on the boundary question is "clear and consistent" and termed the current border situation as "overall stable." In his summing up remarks, Sun said: "It is normal for neighbors, like China and India, to have differences, yet the differences are not the whole story of the bilateral relations, nor should the China-India relations be defined by them."

The Chinese stance is regularly refuted by India. In a media interaction at Bengaluru on August 12, External Affairs Minister Dr. S Jaishankar categorically stated: "We have maintained our position that if China disturbs the peace and tranquility in border areas, it will impact our relations. Our relationship is not normal, it cannot be normal as the border situation is not normal."<sup>37</sup>

During his visit to Brazil, Dr. Jaishankar forcefully repeated India's stance: "Right now, we are going through a very difficult phase mainly because we have agreements with China going back to the 1990s, which prohibit enmassing of troops in the border areas. They have disregarded that."<sup>38</sup> He added: "Relationships are a two-way street. A lasting relationship cannot be a one-way street. We need that mutual respect and mutual sensitivity."

### **Indo-U.S. Military Exercises**

The 13th Edition of the Indo-US Joint Special Forces exercise "Ex Vajra Prahar 2022" commenced at the Special Forces Training School (SFTS), Bakloh in Himachal Pradesh, on August 8. The Indian Army, in a statement, said that the aim of the exercise lasting three weeks was "to share best practices and

experiences in areas such as joint mission planning and operational tactics and also to improve inter-operability between the Special Forces of both the Nations.”<sup>39</sup>

In addition to the Special Forces exercise, it was reported that the Indian and the U.S. militaries would hold a two-week joint high-altitude exercise in Uttarakhand. This is the 18th edition of the annual "Yudh Abhyas" exercise and is scheduled to take place from October 14 to 31. What is of note is that the exercise is to be held at Auli, which is less than 100 km from the LAC in the Central Sector.<sup>40</sup>



India and US Special Forces at Joint Exercise Vajra Prahar 2022. Source: PIB

The main element of U.S. participation will come from the 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 11th Airborne Division, based at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Anchorage, Alaska. This is the same unit that conducted Yudh Abhyas 2021 in Alaska. The 11th Airborne Division paratroopers will be joined by elements from the California National Guard, Washington National Guard, and U.S. Army Special Forces.<sup>41</sup>

Responding to a question about the forthcoming exercise, Colonel Tan Kefei, spokesperson for China's Ministry of National Defense, noted that the "border issue is a matter between China and India, and China firmly opposes any form of external interference by a third party in the boundary issue". He added: "According to the spirit of the relevant agreements signed between China and India in 1993 and 1996, the two sides are not allowed to conduct military exercises against each other in areas near the Line of Actual Control."<sup>42</sup>

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said that it was China that was not sticking to the 1993 and 1996 agreements. He also noted that the India-US exercises are “completely different” from the situation at the LAC and denied that they were “targeting” China or were violative of previous agreements.<sup>43</sup>

While protesting about Indian exercises, China has been regularly holding drills showcasing its military equipment in Tibet and Xinjiang, including a massive exercise involving 10,000 soldiers in August 2021.<sup>44</sup> On August 15, state broadcaster CCTV reported that the Xinjiang command conducted live-fire drills with a “new type of surface-to-air missile” at an altitude of more than 4,500 metres (14,760 feet).<sup>45</sup> Military observers said that from the footage, the weapons appeared to be HQ-17A air defence missiles and that the tests were a show of deterrence in the countdown to the India-US drills.

### Infrastructure Developments along the LAC

In the last week of August, news outlet ‘India Today’ uploaded a news report and a video showing People’s Republic Army (PLA) soldiers and machinery engaging in construction work near the LAC at Hadigara-Delta 6 in Chaglagam. The video, apparently taken by the locals, showed that the construction of a road and helipad is in progress. This area is the last administrative post in Arunachal Pradesh’s Anjaw district and is a four-day walk from the nearest road head.<sup>46</sup> Sources in the Indian Army’s Eastern Command confirmed that the video was shot recently but claimed that the construction was on the Chinese side of the LAC.

This is one area where there is a dispute between India and China about the alignment of the LAC. In 2019, the local Lok Sabha Member of Parliament, Tapir Gao, had claimed that the Chinese army had intruded into India and built a two-km-long road in Bishing village Anjaw district. In response, the Indian Army had put out a statement saying, “There has been no such incursion. The area being referred to in the media report on ‘some electronic channels’, is the area of Fish Tail. There is a differing perception of the alignment of the Line of Control, as in many other areas.”<sup>47</sup>

Notwithstanding the fact that the recent construction is on the Chinese side, the infrastructure mismatch, particularly in disputed areas, needs to be quickly corrected. Moreover, any attempts at incursions by the PLA across the LAC will probably occur in the disputed areas, and the lack of roads would prove to be a significant hindrance for the Indian Army in mounting a speedy response.

While carrying on with their infrastructure development, the PLA quickly objects to any such activity on the Indian side. On August 21, PLA soldiers stopped Indian shepherds from grazing their animals near the LAC in the Demchok area of Eastern Ladakh. Although the matter was resolved after the military commanders of the two sides held a meeting, India needs to be very firm in its stance with regard to the activities of the civil population. China has been rapidly creating civilian border settlements to exert control over the LAC and strengthen its border claims. India must follow a similar strategy.

## Instability, Connectivity and Non-Traditional Security Issues

by

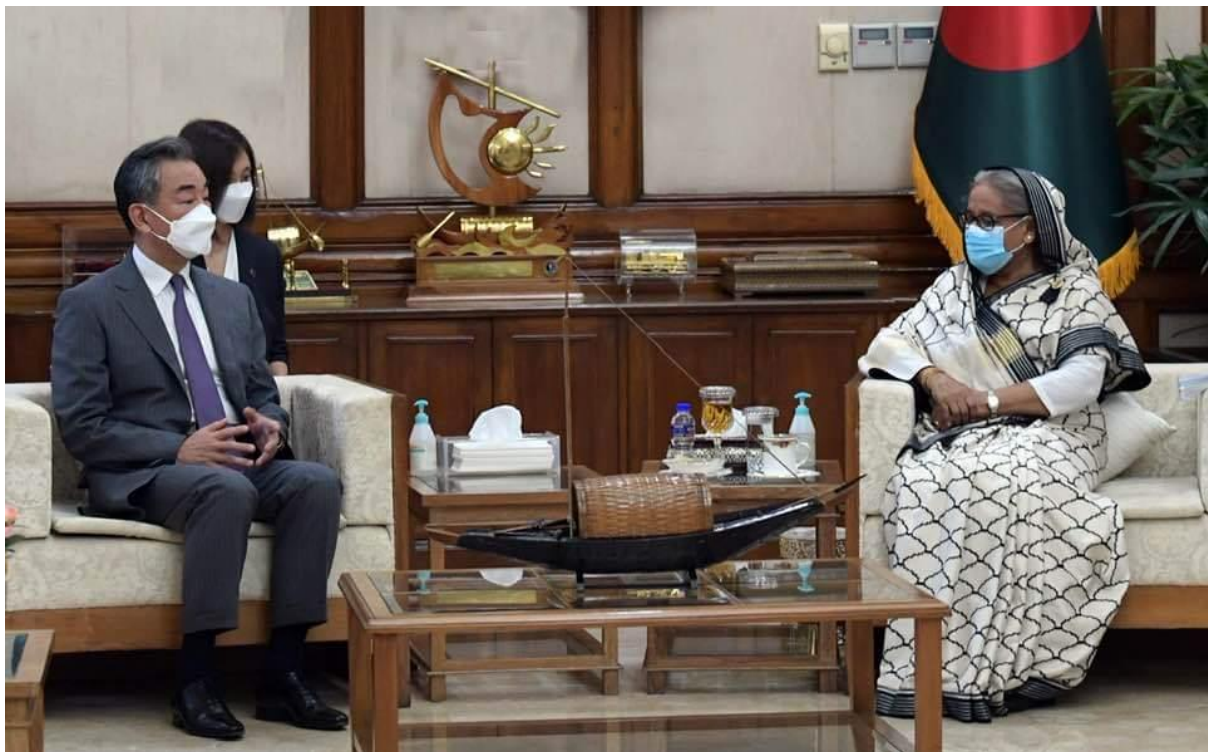
Amb. Biren Nanda

### SOUTH ASIA

#### Bangladesh

Business leaders and officials from Egypt, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Turkey and Bangladesh met under the banner of the D-8<sup>48</sup>, or the developing eight countries at a summit in Dhaka from July 25- 26, 2022. The participants called for cooperation to overcome the problems of dwindling foreign exchange reserves, a growing energy crisis and supply chain disruptions. The D-8 are looking at alternatives for trade financing, a free trade agreement and ways of boosting energy security.

During the visit of the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, on August 7, Bangladesh sought China's cooperation to help repatriate Rohingya refugees to Myanmar<sup>49</sup>.



Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called on Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in Dhaka, August 7, 2022. Source: Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the PRC

With his remarks coinciding with the Wang Yi visit, Bangladesh's Finance Minister Mustafa Kamal<sup>50</sup> has warned that developing countries must think

twice about taking more loans through the BRI. He added that Beijing must be more rigorous in evaluating loans as poor lending decisions have pushed countries into debt distress.

The Indian Oil Corporation has signed an agreement with the Bangladesh Government for the ferrying of petroleum products to the Northeastern states of India through Bangladesh territory.

Maersk<sup>51</sup> successfully completed the first India-Bangladesh cross border logistics of containerized cargo using the inland waterways of the India-Bangladesh Protocol route by transporting 50 containers of Coca Cola Bangladesh Beverages from Kolkata to Dhaka.

## Bhutan

Indian Chief of Army Staff General Manoj Pande<sup>52</sup> paid a two-day visit to Bhutan from July 29 to 30, 2022. During the visit he called upon the Bhutanese King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk and other top civil and military leaders of Bhutan with a view to strengthening strategic ties between the two countries. Issues discussed during these meetings included growing concerns over China's attempts to expand military infrastructure in Bhutanese territory on the Doklam plateau and in adjoining areas, and ways to further enhance bilateral defense cooperation.



COAS Gen Manoj Pande called on His Majesty the King of Bhutan Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk, Thimphu, July 31, 2022. Source: Twitter/ @adgpi

Gen. Pande's visit to Bhutan came days after new satellite images emerged showing China constructing a village<sup>53</sup> east of the Doklam Plateau in an area considered important for India's strategic interests. The strategy to build model villages near the LAC and in disputed territory with Bhutan, and the relocating of populations including ex-servicemen, is part of efforts to further the Sinicization of Tibet and curb separatism in the Tibetan Plateau.

The Army Chief's visit coincided with the government decision to authorize the export of 5000 metric tons of wheat and 10000 metric tons of sugar to Bhutan.

The foreign exchange reserves of Bhutan have shrunk<sup>54</sup> to US dollars 970 million in end December 2021, from US\$1.46 billion in April 2021. In order to conserve foreign exchange Bhutan has banned the import of all vehicles except utility vehicles and construction and agricultural machinery. Bhutan is heavily reliant on the tourism sector to generate foreign exchange, which has been adversely affected by the COVID pandemic.

## Nepal

India is to develop two hydropower projects in Nepal<sup>55</sup> – the West Seti hydropower project and the Seti River hydropower project – nearly 4 years after Chinese companies withdrew from these projects. A formal agreement to this effect was signed on August 19, 2022. The total cost of these projects, which will generate 1200 MW of electricity, is estimated at USD 2.4 billions.

The Nepal Electricity authority has forwarded a proposal to India's Central Electricity authority for the sale of 111 MW of electricity<sup>56</sup> produced through four hydropower plants. At present, Nepal exports 364 MW of electricity to India through market competition.

On August 10, 2022 China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi met his Nepalese counterpart Foreign Minister Narayan Khadka in Qingdao, and pledged US\$ 118 million in aid<sup>57</sup>, announced a series of trade concessions and promised to speed up work on stalled BRI Projects.

The USAID announced on August 22, 2022, that the United States will provide US\$ 15 million in aid to Nepal<sup>58</sup> to tackle its food crisis. The funding is part of the USD 2.76 billion package announced by the US to tackle food shortages at the G-7 summit held in June this year.

## Sri Lanka

On August 1, 2022, Prime Minister Narendra Modi assured newly-elected Prime Minister of Sri Lanka Dinesh Gunawardena of India's continued support to the island nation. On August 22, 2022, India handed over 21,000 tonnes of fertilizer to Sri Lanka.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF)<sup>59</sup> said on August 19, 2022, that it will need "adequate assurances" from Sri Lanka's creditors for a new program as it prepares a visit to Colombo from August 24-31, 2022. The goal of the visit is to make progress on a staff-level agreement for an aid package "in the near term," to help Sri Lanka weather a severe economic crisis.

The IMF has estimated Sri Lanka's total bilateral debt at USD 6.2 billion at the end of 2020, besides USD14 billion in international sovereign bond debt. Sri Lanka has asked Japan to invite the main creditor nations, including China and India, to talks on bilateral debt restructuring.

On August 22, 2022, the Sri Lankan police confirmed the detention of three students<sup>60</sup> under the anti-terrorism law. The Sri Lankan police has arrested a leading protest leader Joseph Stalin, the secretary of the Sri Lanka Teachers' Union. The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka said it was deeply concerned at the use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) on suspects that did not fall within the definition of the act. On August 22, 2022, Sri Lanka announced that it would soon replace the controversial Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) with a new security law, amid international condemnation over Colombo's use of the draconian counter-terrorism law to detain student activists.

Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe has reached out to his predecessor Gotabaya Rajapaksa to facilitate his return to the country. The former president is presently staying in a hotel in Bangkok. According to media reports the former President may return to Sri Lanka in September.

Chinese ballistic missile and satellite tracking ship Yuan Wang 5 was docked at the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka on August 16-22, 2022. The ship was initially scheduled to arrive at the port on August 11, but was delayed in the absence of permission by the Sri Lankan authorities. Sri Lanka had reportedly urged China to postpone the visit due to India's reservations.



Chinese vessel Yuan Wang 5 arrived at Hambantota port, on August 16, 2022.

Source: The New Indian Express

The clearance was granted by the Sri Lankan Ministry of Defence for vessel's visit for replenishment purposes. The Sri Lankan foreign office said in a statement that security and cooperation in the neighbourhood are of utmost priority in handling the issue. It also said that the Sri Lankan government had engaged in high-level consultations via diplomatic channels with all parties concerned to resolve the matter in a "spirit of friendship, mutual trust and constructive dialogue"<sup>61</sup>.

## Maldives

The President of Maldives Ibrahim Mohamed Solih<sup>62</sup> paid a official visit to India from August 1-4, 2022, at the invitation of Prime Minister Modi. During the visit President Solih met with the President Draupadi Murmu and held delegation level talks with PM Modi. The Governor of Maharashtra Mr Bhagat Singh Koshiyari and Foreign Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar called on the Maldives President.

PM Modi reaffirmed India's "Neighborhood First Policy" while President Solih reaffirmed his government's "India First Policy". President Solih thanked India for the vaccine assistance received in fighting the pandemic. The two leaders welcomed engagement between the two countries in fisheries, infrastructure, renewable energy, tourism, health and IT.

Both leaders participated in the virtual pouring of concrete in the USD 500 million Greater Male Connectivity Project being built with Indian assistance. The two leaders reviewed progress in projects related to social housing, the

provision of water and sewage facilities, restoration of a mosque, construction of the Gulhifalhu port and the Hanimaadhu airport.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi welcomes H.E. Mr. Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, President of the Republic of Maldives in New Delhi, August 2, 2022. Source: MEA flickr

President Solih and PM Modi agreed on energizing cooperation in maritime safety, HADR and Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). PM Modi announced the supply of the second Landing Assault Craft, and the replacement CGS Huravee. The two leaders also welcomed the progress made in the construction of 61 infrastructure projects for the police across the Maldives.

## SOUTH-EAST ASIA

### Myanmar

On August 22, 2022, the leader of Myanmar's military-installed government announced the extension of its mandate to rule for another six months in preparation for an election which will be held next year<sup>63</sup>. A court controlled by the military junta sentenced Aung San Suu Kyi for 6 more years in prison for alleged corruption.

According to information gathered by the UN Independent Investigative Mechanism<sup>64</sup> and published in its Annual Report on Myanmar, the security

forces and other armed groups are guilty of gender based and sexual violence against children. The reports also states that the Rohingyas have faced decades of systematic discrimination in Myanmar, and have been victims of targeted violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State. Violent attacks on Rohingyas in 2017 triggered an exodus of an estimated 745,000 Rohingya, including more than 400,000 children, to Bangladesh.

## Singapore

On August 22, 2022, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong<sup>65</sup> warned of the scope for miscalculation over tensions in the Taiwan Strait, which he said were unlikely to ease soon, amid deep suspicions and limited engagement between the United States and China. In a televised address ahead of the city-state's national day on August 9, 2022, Lee said Singapore would be buffeted by that intense rivalry and tensions in the region, and should prepare for a future less peaceful and stable than now. "Around us, a storm is gathering. US-China relations are worsening, with intractable issues, deep suspicions, and limited engagement," Lee said.

India and Singapore held their 16<sup>th</sup> round of foreign office consultations<sup>66</sup> on August 19, 2022. The two sides reviewed bilateral relations and emphasized the importance of political exchanges to realize the full potential of the partnership. They discussed enhancing cooperation in trade and investment, start-ups and innovation, fintech, smart cities, infrastructure, skill development, tourism and connectivity. As Singapore is India's country coordinator for ASEAN, both sides also discussed India-ASEAN engagements.

## Thailand

External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar and Mr Don Pramudwinai, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Thailand, co-chaired the 9<sup>th</sup> India-Thailand Joint Commission Meeting<sup>67</sup> held in Bangkok from August 16-18, 2022. Topics discussed included, trade, tourism, joint exercises, defense mechanisms, physical connectivity, ICT, cyber security, geopolitical aspirations in terms of a free, fair and open Indo-Pacific and neighborhood issues. An MOU on health and medical research cooperation and another on cooperation between the state broadcasters of the two countries were signed during the visit.

Dr S. Jaishankar also called upon the Prime Minister of Thailand, Prayut Chan-o. There was a discussion on the enhancement of bilateral ties and on multilateral cooperation during the meeting.

## Philippines

On August 5, 2022, Prime Minister Modi called Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos and conveyed his best wishes for a successful tenure as President of the Philippines and highlighted the important role the Philippines played in India's vision for the Indo-Pacific.

The 4<sup>th</sup> India-Philippines Strategic Dialogue<sup>68</sup> was held in Manila on August 18, 2022. The meeting was co-chaired by Mr Saurabh Kumar, Secretary (East) in the Ministry of External Affairs and Under Secretary Department of Foreign Affairs, Philippines, Theresa Lazaro.

During the meeting the two sides discussed Defense and Security cooperation. They also exchanged views on regional and global issues of mutual interest as well as ASEAN related matters. The two sides agreed to expand cooperation in agriculture, trade, pharmaceuticals, fintech, education, defense and security, people to people ties, space, development cooperation and civil aviation. Both sides have agreed to fast track preparation for a bilateral maritime dialogue.

## Vietnam

The third edition of the India-Vietnam bilateral army exercise "Ex VINBAX 2022"<sup>69</sup> was conducted at Chandimandir from August 1-20, 2022. The theme of this exercise was the deployment of an Engineer Company and a medical team for Peace Keeping Operations.

## Laos

Laos' economy is on the verge of collapse<sup>70</sup> due to a spiraling debt crisis. Inflation has hit a 22 year high at 23.6%. Foreign and domestic debt is more than US \$ 14.5 billion and Laos is on the brink of default. Laos owes half of its foreign debt to China, which has lent money for infrastructure, hydropower and railway lines. Laos was also hit hard by the pandemic.

## ASEAN

ASEAN Foreign Ministers engaged with 30 countries in a series of meetings held in Phnom Penh from August 2-5, 2022. India participated in the annual ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AIFMM), the 12<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' meeting and the 29th ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Ministerial meeting<sup>71</sup>.



55<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Foreign Minister's meeting, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, August 3, 2022.

Source: ASEAN.org

The following are the broad outcomes of the Foreign Ministerial meetings in Phnom Penh. First, India reaffirmed its commitment to ASEAN centrality as a pillar of the regional, multilateral and global order. Second, ASEAN reiterated its commitment to strengthening the dialogue partnership with India. Third, India and ASEAN deliberated on the commemoration of 30 years of the ASEAN-India Dialogue Partnership and the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Strategic Partnership, and agreed to enhance cooperation in a diverse areas ranging from agriculture to fintech. Fourth, the EAS exchanged views on growing geopolitical challenges. Fifth, the ARF adopted statements on preventive diplomacy and the preservation of the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone. Sixth, ASEAN and India agreed to work together on countering terrorism and the rise of radicalism and in exploring synergies in working together within regional frameworks.

International issues, notably Ukraine, Myanmar and the crisis in the Taiwan Strait, dominated attention. The ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting set the stage for ramping up the pressure on Myanmar at the ASEAN summit in November.

On Ukraine<sup>72</sup>, the United States got little traction – the Joint Communiqué of the ASEAN FMs' meeting called for compliance with International Law and the UN Charter and an immediate cessation of hostilities, but did not name Russia. Singapore alone in ASEAN has chosen to join Western sanctions against Russia.

The growing Taiwan crisis has caused deep concern within ASEAN. Southeast Asian countries do not want to be in a position of having to choose between China, their major trading partner, and the United States, which has been their major security partner for stability in the region. ASEAN Ministers called for maximum restraint and for upholding the principles of the UN Charter and the TAC. ASEAN offered to facilitate peaceful dialogue between all parties, including through ASEAN-led dialogue mechanisms.

## WEST ASIA

Shipping and Waterways Minister Sarbananda Sonowal paid a three day visit to Chabahar port in Iran<sup>73</sup>. He visited the port on August 20<sup>th</sup> to review progress on the project and handed over six mobile cranes to Indian Ports Global. He held discussions with Iranian Deputy Minister and managing director ports and maritime organization, Dr Ali Akbar Safaee, on unlocking the trade potential between Central Asian countries, South Asia, the ASEAN, Korea and Japan.

## MULTILATERAL

In an implied criticism of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, India has described it as "an affront to common security"<sup>74</sup>. India's Permanent Representative to the UN told the UNSC on August 22, that common security was only possible when countries respected each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

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

[www.delhipolicygroup.org](http://www.delhipolicygroup.org)