



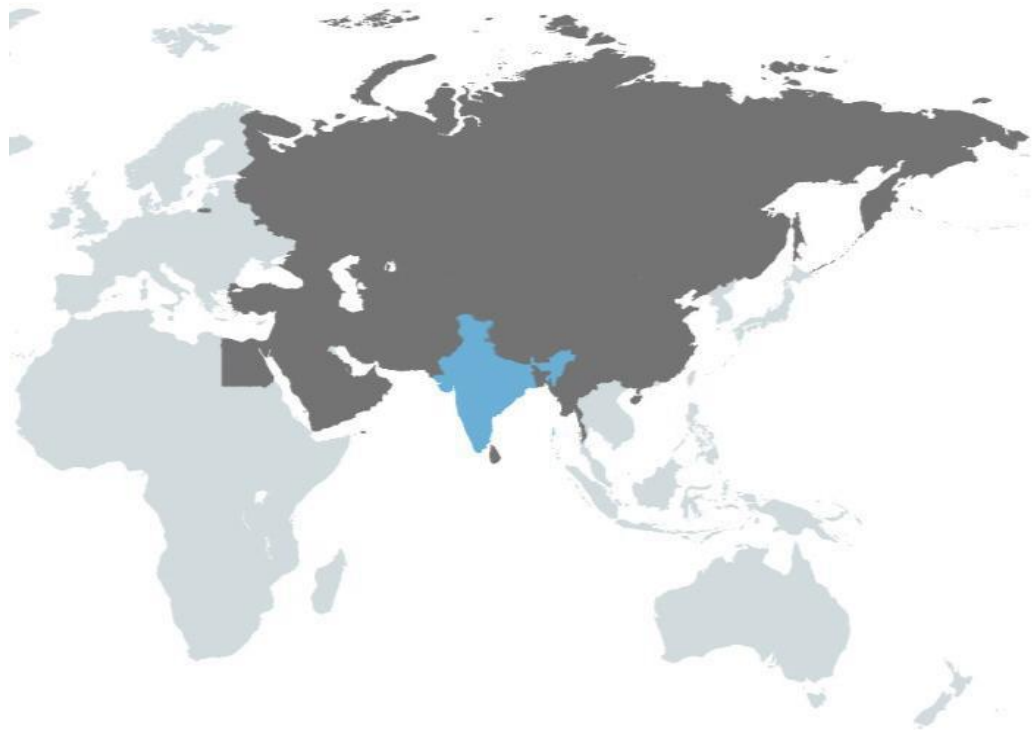
Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

DECEMBER 2022



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DPG 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 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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India's Neighbourhood - The Arc of Instability

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

Afghanistan

Deteriorating Human Rights

The human rights situation continues to deteriorate as the Taliban seeks to impose its regressive and harsh ideology on the population. In November, Afghanistan's supreme leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada, ordered judges to fully enforce aspects of Sharia law that include public executions, stonings, floggings, and the amputation of limbs. Since then, public floggings have been carried out in stadiums in the presence of officials and members of the public.

On December 7, A man convicted of murder was shot by his victim's father in the Taliban's first public execution since their return to power in August 2021. A Taliban spokesperson said the man was killed at a crowded sports stadium in southwestern Farah province.¹ UN experts are deeply aggrieved about a public execution and that flogging has resumed in Afghanistan and have called on the de facto authorities to immediately halt all forms of torturous, cruel and degrading forms of punishments.²

On December 20, the higher education ministry issued a letter instructing Afghan public and private universities to suspend access to female students immediately. The Taliban justified its decision, saying such restrictions have been done to preserve "national interest" and women's "honour".³ Protests by women against the Taliban ruling have been violently dispersed.

In continuing restrictions on women, local and foreign NGOs have been ordered to stop female employees from coming to work. The Ministry of Economy has sent a letter stating that non-compliance will result in the licenses of the NGOs being revoked.⁴ The ministry has cited the nonobservance of Islamic dress rules and other laws and regulations as reasons for the decision.

Following the announcement, at least half a dozen major foreign aid groups have said they are temporarily suspending their operations in Afghanistan. Save the Children, Norwegian Refugee Council, and CARE International said in a joint statement, "We cannot effectively reach children, women, and men in

desperate need in Afghanistan without our female staff." There are concerns that the ban on women will adversely impact the delivery of humanitarian assistance that is crucial for the people of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan has the highest number of people in emergency food insecurity in the world, with 95 percent of the population having insufficient food consumption. A recent United Nations report has pointed out that 20 million people are at risk of facing acute hunger by the end of March 2023.⁵ Despite this humanitarian crisis, the Taliban are unmoved. In response to international criticism, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid has said, "We do not permit anyone to state irresponsible words or make threats about the decisions or officials of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan under the title of humanitarian aid."⁶

Internal Security Situation

The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) continues to stage high-profile attacks to undermine the Taliban's rule and legitimacy. On December 2, gunmen fired at Pakistani Chargé d'Affaires Ubaid-ur-Rehman Nizamani in Kabul while walking inside the embassy compound. Nizamani escaped unhurt, but bullets hit his security guard in the chest and legs.⁷ The ISKP claimed the attack on "the apostate Pakistani ambassador and his guards."



Shahr-e-Naw Hotel in Kabul, after the attack carried out by ISKP on December 12, 2022.

Source: Reuters

Ten days later, ISKP attacked a hotel in downtown Kabul that was frequented mainly by Chinese nationals. Five Chinese citizens were injured in the attack. Following the attack, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs "advised Chinese citizens and institutions in Afghanistan to evacuate from Afghanistan as soon as possible."⁸

On September 5, an explosive device was detonated near the entrance to the Russian embassy's consular department, killing two embassy employees. It is clear that the ISKP is targeting those countries which have the strongest political and economic links with the Taliban. This could have an adverse impact on the Taliban's effort to attract international investment. According to a Reuters report, around 500 Chinese businessmen had entered Afghanistan since the Taliban took over in 2021 to study business opportunities, but after the attack, many were now having second thoughts.⁹

Previously, most ISKP fighters in Afghanistan were ethnic Pashtuns, but the terrorist group is now recruiting a multiethnic force that threatens security in neighboring countries. Earlier this year, ISKP fighters fired several rockets at Tajikistan and Uzbekistan from Afghanistan in what appeared to be an effort to instigate regional conflicts.¹⁰

The first India-Central Asia Meeting of National Security Advisers/Secretaries of Security Councils was held on December 6 in New Delhi. During the meeting, it was "emphasised that the territory of Afghanistan should not be used for sheltering, training, planning or financing any terrorist acts and reaffirmed the importance of UNSC Resolution 2593 (2021), that no terrorist organisations, including those designated by the UNSC Resolution 1267 should be provided sanctuary or allowed to use the territory of Afghanistan."¹¹

Strains in Afghanistan-Pakistan Ties

On December 11, border clashes between Pakistan and Afghanistan killed at least seven people and wounded more than 30 others. The clashes broke out over Afghan forces' intervention during the repair of the fence in the Sheikh Lal Muhammad sector of the border. A Pakistan Army statement said that Taliban border security forces had "opened unprovoked and indiscriminate fire of heavy weapons, including artillery/mortars" against Pakistani civilian areas. The statement said Pakistani troops staged a "befitting albeit measured response" against "the uncalled-for aggression but avoided targeting innocent civilians in the area."¹²

Four days later, one person was killed, and 15 people were injured when Afghan border forces opened fire on a civilian area on the Pakistani side in the Chaman

area. Pakistan summoned Afghanistan's chargé d'affaires in Islamabad and "strongly condemned" the recent unprovoked cross-border shelling by its forces. The Afghan defence ministry blamed Pakistani soldiers for initiating the clash.

The border clashes have added to tensions in the ties that were already strained over Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) fighters present in Afghanistan. In an interview with Pakistan's Express News, Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah urged the Taliban government to prevent TTP attacks which he claimed were being carried out from Afghanistan soil, and handover the militants. He warned that failure to do so would prompt Pakistan to take action against militants in Afghanistan.¹³

In a meeting held on January 2, Pakistan's National Security Committee issued a strongly worded statement, "No country will be allowed to provide sanctuaries and facilitation to terrorists and Pakistan reserves all rights in that respect to safeguard her people."¹⁴

The Afghan Taliban, who brokered the failed peace talks between the Pakistan government and TTP, deny the presence of the terrorist group in Afghanistan. The Afghan defence ministry said in a statement that Sanaullah's words were "provocative and baseless." It further stated that Afghanistan was "ready to defend its territorial integrity and independence."

A Doha-based Taliban official, Ahmad Yasir, tweeted, "Syria and Pakistan are not Turkey to target the Kurds in Syria. It's Afghanistan, which is the graveyard of empires. Never think of a military attack on us, or else you may end up with the embarrassing repeat of the agreement with India."¹⁵

While the border clash at Chaman has been resolved, the differences over TTP are likely to persist and result in a further fraying of ties.

Pakistan

A Crumbling Economy

State Bank of Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves hit an eight-year low at \$5.576 billion during the week ended on Dec 30, 2022. Coupled with another \$5.8 billion held by commercial banks, the nation has \$11.4 billion in reserves – enough to pay for just three weeks of imports, traders and economists say.¹⁶

Pakistan has been requesting the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to disburse the next tranche of \$1.2 billion, asking China to roll over \$13 billion in

loans and seeking \$4 billion from Saudi Arabia in addition to deferred oil payments.¹⁷ China and Saudi Arabia appear to be waiting to see whether IMF gives the green light to release the next tranche.

The IMF has delayed the 9th review under the \$7bn Extended Fund Facility for two months after the PMLN-led coalition government failed to comply with the conditions set by the lending agency in the last review. The government has admitted that there were “differences with the (IMF) on several issues.” Minister of State for Finance, Ayesha Ghaus Pasha, informed the National Assembly Standing Committee on Finance that the “IMF has reservations over subsidies for the energy sector as the government kept selling petrol cheaper than the purchase price.”¹⁸

Amid the dwindling foreign exchange reserves, Pakistan will have to repay approximately \$8.3 billion in the shape of external debt servicing over the next three months (Jan-March) of the current fiscal year. Out of \$8.3 billion in outstanding debt servicing, Pakistan will have to get a rollover of \$2 billion from the UAE and refinancing of an outstanding commercial loan repayment of \$700 million to Chinese banks. The principal amount of debt servicing stands at \$5.035 billion in the next three months, while the interest repayment is hovering around \$426.88 million, so in totality, the outstanding amount has gone up to \$5.462 billion.¹⁹

In 2022, the Pakistan rupee plunged nearly 30 per cent compared to the U.S. dollar, becoming one of the worst-performing currencies in Asia. The country is also facing a historic price rise, with the World Bank predicting 23 per cent inflation in the current fiscal due to higher energy prices, the weaker rupee, and flood-related disruptions to agricultural production. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, the country witnessed a record 24.5 per cent inflation in December.²⁰

Adding to the pressure, Cotton production has dropped by more than 40 per cent because of climate change and floods. The foreign exchange-starved country will have to import about 7 million cotton bales to meet the textile industry's demand this season. Only 2.01m hectares could be brought under the crop in Punjab and Sindh against the combined 2.53m hectares target this season. The floods also affected At least 79 per cent cotton area, especially in Sindh.

Internal Security Situation

December saw a series of violent incidents in Pakistan. On December 18, suspected militants who were being interrogated at the Counter-Terrorism

Department (CTD) building in Bannu managed to grab weapons from police personnel guarding them and freed 33 militants who were in the compound. In the ensuing standoff, the militants demanded a safe passage to Afghanistan. The security forces stormed the building, killing 25 militants, while three were arrested and seven surrendered. Three security officers were killed in the operation, while 10, including three officers, were injured.²¹

On December 13, one policeman was killed, and at least six people, including four police officers and two civilians, were injured in a suicide blast in Islamabad's I-10/4 sector on Friday, the police said. The explosion was triggered by a car bomb for which the TTP claimed responsibility. Shortly afterward, the Islamabad police declared a "red alert" in the city, which saw the first such attack in years.²²



Police stand guard along a road they blocked after militants seized a police station in Bannu on December 19, 2022. Source: The News

The U.S. Embassy issued a security alert: "Unknown individuals are possibly plotting to attack Americans at the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad sometime during the holidays." The advisory banned its American personnel from visiting the popular hotel over the holidays.²³ A few other countries, including Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom, have also advised their citizens to restrict their movement in Pakistan.

Data recorded by the South Asian Terrorism Portal shows a total of 116 terrorism-related deaths in December, a 45 percent increase over the last

month. Commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), General Michael E Kurilla, who visited Islamabad, stated in an interview, "We are concerned by the threats posed by Tehreek-e-Taliban-Pakistan to Pakistani security and stability. During my visit to the GHQ, we discussed opportunities to address this threat."²⁴

2023 could see continuing violence in Pakistan as the TTP intensifies its attacks. Pakistan's Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah has said that the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militant group has between 7,000 to 10,000 fighters in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border area.²⁵ As long as the TTP retains its sanctuaries in Afghanistan, it will continue to remain a significant threat.

India-Pakistan Ties

Relations between India and Pakistan remain frozen. Pakistan continues to rake up the Kashmir issues at the United Nations, while India insists that Pakistan stop its state-sponsored terrorism against India. There was a sharp exchange over these issues at the Security Council.

During an open debate on "Maintenance of International Peace and Security: New Orientation for Reformed Multilateralism" Pakistan Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari called upon the UNSC to implement its resolutions on the dispute over Kashmir. He also opposed India's bid for permanent membership of the Security Council.²⁶



External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) briefing on global Counter-terrorism Approach: Challenges and Way Forward, in New York, December 15, 2022. Source: Twitter/ @DrSJaishankar

External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar hit back strongly. He said, "The question of justifying what the world regards as unacceptable should not even arise. That certainly applies to state sponsorship of cross-border terrorism. Nor can hosting Osama bin Laden and attacking a neighbouring Parliament serve as credentials to sermonize before this Council."²⁷

There were further exchanges on the sidelines of the UN Security Council briefing on 'Global Counter terrorism Approach: Challenges and Way Forward.' Talking to reporters, Dr. Jaishankar recalled former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton saying during a visit to Pakistan a decade ago "that if you keep snakes in your backyard, you can't expect them to bite only your neighbors, eventually they will bite the people who keep them in the backyard." He added that "Pakistan is not good at taking good advice. The world today sees them as the epicenter of terrorism."²⁸

Responding to Dr. Jaishankar's remarks, Bilawal said, "I want to tell India "Osama bin Laden is dead, [but] the butcher of Gujarat lives and he is the prime minister of India." These comments were described by India as "uncivilized" and a "new low, even for Pakistan."²⁹

It is pretty apparent in the current environment that there is minimal scope for any easing of bilateral ties between India and Pakistan.

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

Situation at the LAC

The stalemate continues in Eastern Ladakh, with the issue of Depsang and Demchok still unresolved. The 17th round of the India- China Corps Commander Level Meeting was held at the Chushul-Moldo border meeting point on the Chinese side on 20th December 2022. The joint press release of the meeting contained standard phrases of "frank and in-depth discussion" and exchange of views in "an open and constructive manner."³⁰

The press release also noted, "In the interim, the two sides agreed to maintain the security and stability on the ground in the Western Sector. The two sides agreed to stay in close contact and maintain dialogue through military and diplomatic channels and work out a mutually acceptable resolution of the remaining issues at the earliest."

In reality, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) shows little interest in moving forward on the disengagement process, and its actions on the ground are contrary to its statements on maintaining stability.

Ten days before the meeting at Chushul, a few hundred PLA soldiers attempted to intrude into the Yangtse area of the Tawang sector of the eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh. Yangtse is recognized as a disputed area, and the last face-off in this area occurred in October 2021. However, what was different this time was that hundreds of PLA soldiers were prepared to use force to push their way across the LAC.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute, undertaking an analysis of satellite imagery of the area five days after the incident, found evidence that the Chinese had advanced towards two Indian posts. There was a physical clash as both sides fought each other with rods and batons. An unspecified number of soldiers were injured on both sides before the PLA was forced to retreat to their side of the LAC.

Speaking in the Parliament, the Defence Minister, Rajnath Singh, said, "PLA troops tried to transgress the LAC in the Yangtse area of the Tawang sector and unilaterally change the status quo. The Chinese attempt was contested by our troops in a firm and resolute manner."³¹

As has become almost routine, China blamed India for the clash. The PLA's Western Theatre Command spokesperson, Senior Colonel Long Shaohua, made a statement that the incident occurred when Indian soldiers crossed the LAC and blocked a routine PLA patrol.

This was the most serious incident since the Galwan clash of June 2020 and showed that provocative actions by the PLA along the LAC could quickly escalate. There were some media reports that shots had been fired during the clash.³²

Meanwhile, infrastructure and capability buildup continue at the LAC. On January 3, Rajnath Singh inaugurated the Siyom Bridge near Boleng in the Siang district and also virtually inaugurated 27 projects of the Border Roads Organisation (BRO). Built on the Along-Yingkiong road across the river Siyom, the 100-meter-long steel arch bridge will facilitate faster induction of troops, heavy military equipment, and mechanized vehicles to forward areas along the eastern sector of the LAC.³³

Looking Ahead

The Indian Army Chief, Army Chief General Manoj Pande, has described the situation along the LAC as "stable but unpredictable." He has also stated that there has not been a significant reduction in the Chinese Army's force levels on the LAC.

Commenting on the Yangtse incident, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Wang Wenbin, urged New Delhi to “earnestly implement the important consensus reached by both leaders, strictly abide by the spirit of the agreements and accords signed by both sides, and together uphold the peace and tranquility of the China-India border region.”³⁴ Herein lies the major problem.

The PLA's actions cause the current instability at the LAC, but China is unwilling to acknowledge it and feels that it can continue to put pressure on India without the fear of escalation. Unfortunately, this strategy may have run its course.

Vijay Gokhale, the former foreign secretary of India, has pointed out in a recent paper that the idea of strategic restraint in India has been redefined. He writes, “This has involved a change in risk-taking appetite among the political class, as a result of which the Snow Leopard counter-operation at Rezang La/Rechin La was carried out in August 2022. This was an intentional escalation by India that was not anticipated by China. Thus the Chinese assumption that there will be no immediate backlash to low-level coercion on the LAC because India is risk-averse may no longer be valid.”

The Indian government has demonstrated firm resolve, confidence-building measures along the LAC have broken down, and thousands of soldiers arrayed along the border look at each other with suspicion and mistrust. This makes for a volatile situation that needs to be handled with maturity.

Instability, Connectivity and Non-Traditional Security Issues

by

Amb. Biren Nanda

SOUTH ASIA

Nepal

In a major post-election political upheaval in Nepal, the leader of the Maoist Communist Party of Nepal, Pushpa Kamal Dahal ('Prachanda') was sworn in as the Prime Minister of Nepal on December 26, 2022.³⁵ After the recently held parliamentary elections, Dahal was able to gather support from smaller political parties, including his former opponent Khadga Prasad Oli, a leader of the Marxist Communist Party of Nepal. Prachanda was in a pre-election alliance with the former Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, but walked out after Deuba turned down his demand for the PM's chair.³⁶ The leaders of the CPN-UML, CPN (Maoist Centre), and Rashtriya Swatantra Party have been inducted into the newly formed cabinet as Deputy Prime Ministers.³⁷



Nepal Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal takes the oath of office and secrecy from President Bidya Devi Bhandari, in Kathmandu, December 26, 2022. Source: Nepal Press

A combined session of the two houses of the newly elected Nepalese parliament has been called on January 9th, 2023.³⁸ PM Prachanda and his fragile multiparty coalition will have to face two immediate tasks - reviving the country's economy and maintaining a balanced relationship with India and

China.³⁹ Although India's relations with Nepal improved under the leadership of Sher Bahadur Deuba, Prime Minister Narendra Modi maintained a close relationship with Prachanda and he was the first foreign leader to congratulate him.⁴⁰

The 16th edition of the India-Nepal joint training exercise "Surya Kiran-XVI" was conducted at the Nepal Army Battle School from December 16 to 29, 2022.⁴¹ This annual exercise aims at enhancing interoperability in jungle warfare & counter-terrorism operations in mountainous terrain and HADR.⁴²

Bangladesh

In the background of the upcoming parliamentary elections scheduled for 2023, the political environment in Bangladesh has started heating up. Twelve political parties of the BNP-led 20-party coalition have formed a new alliance to launch a movement alongside the BNP and released a 10-point demand on December 22, 2022, that includes national polls under a caretaker government.⁴³ During the month of December 2022, BNP held countrywide protests which resulted in clashes between police and protesters.⁴⁴

A visit by the US Ambassador to Bangladesh to the family of an alleged victim of "enforced disappearance" vitiated the relations between two countries. Further it became an international issue as the chief spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the US is trying to influence the domestic processes in Bangladesh.⁴⁵ The Foreign Minister of Bangladesh AK Abdul Momen warned external powers not to interfere in the internal affairs of Bangladesh.⁴⁶ The State Minister for Foreign Affairs Md. Shahriar Alam in a telephonic call with US Deputy Secretary of State, Wendy Sherman said on December 22, 2022, that "(US) Ambassadors need to understand the political history of Bangladesh before making any public statement".⁴⁷

On December 22, 2022, during a bilateral ministerial meeting in New Delhi, Union Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal and his Bangladeshi counterpart Tipu Munshi agreed to start negotiations for a free trade agreement (FTA). They also discussed the settlement of trade in Indian rupees in the background of depleting the foreign exchange reserves of Bangladesh.⁴⁸

Earlier the 18th Meeting of the Joint Working Group (JWG) on Security and Border Management between India and Bangladesh was held on December 5-6, 2022. Bilateral issues such as border fencing, developmental works within 150 yards of the International Border, illegal border crossing, cooperation in checking insurgency, combating terrorism, organized crimes and smuggling were discussed during the meeting.⁴⁹

Three warships of the Indian Navy led by Eastern Naval Commander Vice Admiral Biswajit Dasgupta participated in the maiden International Fleet Review (IFR) hosted by the Bangladesh Navy at Cox's Bazar on December 7, 2022. The three ships which represented the Indian Navy were the Guided Missile Destroyer INS Kochi, the Anti-Submarine Warfare Corvette INS Kavaratti and the Offshore Patrol Vessel INS Sumedha. The other five participating ships were from China, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and the US. On the sidelines of the IFR, Vice Admiral B Dasgupta called upon Admiral M Shaheen Iqbal, the Chief of Naval Staff of the Bangladesh Navy. He also held bilateral interactions with the Chief of the Navy of Iran and heads of delegations from Maldives, Myanmar, RoK, Thailand and the US. This was the first International Fleet Review to be hosted by Bangladesh.⁵⁰

Bhutan

The 720 Megawatt Mangdechhu Hydroelectric power project was handed over to the Druk Green Power Corporation of Bhutan by India on December 27, 2022.⁵¹ With the completion of this India assisted project, Bhutan's electrical power generation capacity increased by 44 percent and currently stands at 2,326 Megawatts.

The Indian Railways is planning to start construction on a 57 km broad-gauge line connecting Kokrajhar in India to Gelephu in Bhutan.⁵² The project is estimated to cost around US\$ 129 million and will be constructed under the BBIN and BIMSTEC 'Master Plan for Transport Connectivity'.

Sri Lanka

The Indian Chief of the Naval Staff (CNS), Admiral R Hari Kumar visited Sri Lanka from December 13 to 16, 2022.⁵³ During the visit, CNS called on President Ranil Wickremesinghe, Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena and Minister of State for Defence Premitha Bandara Tennakoon.⁵⁴ He has also visited Sri Lankan defence establishments to review various bilateral defence cooperation initiatives. Indian Naval Ship Sahyadri, a multi-role missile frigate made a port call at Colombo on 13 December. The ship participated in the 'Maritime Partnership Exercises' with the Sri Lanka Navy.



Indian Chief of Naval Staff Admiral R Hari Kumar met Vice Admiral Nishantha Ulugetenne, Commander of Sri Lankan Navy on December 13, 2022. Source: Twitter/IndiainSL

The 'Joint Secretary heading the Indian Ocean Division in the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, visited Sri Lanka where he held a meeting with the Shipping and Aviation Minister Nimal Siripala on December 20, 2022.⁵⁵ The measures that could be taken to further develop cooperation in the maritime sector in the Indian Ocean region were discussed at the meeting.⁵⁶

To promote trade between the two countries, Sri Lanka has accepted the Indian Rupee as a designated foreign currency. Meanwhile, the Bank of Ceylon opened its first Nostro account in INR with the SBI branch in Chennai on December 21, 2022.⁵⁷

On December 19, India's National Investigation Agency arrested nine Sri Lankan nationals from the special camp for Tamil refugees at Tiruchirapalli for their alleged involvement in the smuggling of drugs and arms to revive the activities of the terror group, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).⁵⁸

Maldives

A Maldivian court sentenced former president Abdulla Yameen to 11 years in prison and fined him \$5 million on December 25, 2022 after finding him guilty of corruption and money laundering charges related to receiving a bribe from a private company,⁵⁹ He lost power in 2018 but has been declared presidential

candidate for the 'Progressive Party of the Maldives' (PPM) for the elections due in 2023. One of Yameen's loyalists and former State Minister for Finance and Customs Commissioner Abbas Adil Riza asked his party workers to attack the Indian High Commission in Male in response to the sentence.⁶⁰ Later he was arrested by the Police. Yameen and his 'Progressive Party of the Maldives' (PPM) have been running an 'India Out' campaign, opposing the role of India in infrastructure development in the Maldives.⁶¹

The 6th Joint Staff talks between India and the Maldives were held in New Delhi on December 20, 2022.⁶² During the talks issues related to existing bilateral defence relations and new initiatives were discussed.

On December 8, 2022, the Maldives Monetary Authority signed a Currency Swap Agreement with the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) under the SAARC Currency Swap Framework. The swap facility will allow the MMA to make multiple drawals up to a maximum limit of US\$200 million from the RBI.⁶³

A two-week 'Capacity building' programme for civil servants of the Maldives and Bangladesh was conducted from December 13, 2022 onwards at the National Centre for Good Governance (NCGG), Mussoorie.⁶⁴ Twenty seven civil servants from Maldives and thirty nine civil servants from Bangladesh took part in these two programmes. India is helping neighbouring countries to build capacities of their civil servants to meet the emerging challenges in governance and assured public service delivery in order to improve the quality of life of the people.

SOUTHEAST ASIA

Myanmar

The political instability in Myanmar remains a concern for the region and India, and it is also affecting India-backed projects.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, the **Chief Minister of Myanmar's Rakhine State government** said in his opening address on the **48th Rakhine State Day** that one of the **Indo-Myanmar Friendship Projects** - the **Sittwe Port**- would be opened soon for direct trade between India and Myanmar.⁶⁶ India has maintained continuity in its policy towards Myanmar, at the UN and abstained from the UNSC resolution on Myanmar put to vote on December 22, 2022. The resolution demanded an immediate end to violence and the release of all political prisoners.⁶⁷ The Indian Permanent Representative to the UN, Ruchira Kamboj observed that quiet and patient diplomacy is required to bring stability to Myanmar.

On December 30, 2022, a Myanmar court sentenced Aung San Suu Kyi to 33 years on corruption charges.⁶⁸ Suu Kyi was detained on Feb. 1, 2021, when the military seized power from the elected government. The sentencing of Aung San Suu Kyi will tighten the hold of the military junta on the political process in the country. Earlier on December 22, 2022, Thailand hosted talks between ASEAN countries on developments in Myanmar.⁶⁹ Foreign ministers of Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam's deputy foreign minister joined the talks but Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore did not send their representatives. Therefore, no concrete result emerged from the meeting.

China and Pakistan continued to exploit instability in Myanmar in order to achieve favorable outcomes and increase their presence in Myanmar. During the last week of December, the Chinese special envoy to Myanmar, held meetings with representatives of seven of Myanmar's ethnic armed organizations and junta leaders.⁷⁰ Earlier, on November 29, 2022, Colonel Imran Khan of the Pakistan Army visited Naypyitaw to discuss military cooperation with the junta.⁷¹ Pakistan is providing training to the Myanmar Air Force on precision targeting in air operations and on the JF-17 jet fighter. Myanmar bought 16 JF-17s from China.

ASEAN

The month of December was eventful from the perspective of defence cooperation between India and other ASEAN countries. The Indian and Indonesian Navies conducted the 39th edition of the Joint Coordinated Patrol from December 8 to 19, 2022.⁷² The Indian side was represented by Indian Naval Ship INS Karmuk, a Missile Corvette and Indonesia was represented by KRI Cut Nyak Dien, a Kapitan Pattimura Class Corvette.

India's Vice Chief of Army Staff Lieutenant General B.S. Raju, visited Malaysia from December 8-10, 2022. During the visit, the Vice Chief met the Deputy Chief of the Malaysian Army and the Chief of Staff of the Malaysian Armed Forces and discussed issues related to closer coordination and cooperation between the two countries on strategic issues.⁷³

WEST ASIA

Israeli President Isaac Herzog known for his "love for India" visited an exhibition in Jerusalem featuring Indian deities.⁷⁴ President Herzog described "India and Israel as natural allies united by a fundamental commitment to democratic ideals upon which the two nations were founded". In India, Israel's Ambassador Naor Gilon slammed Israeli filmmaker Nadav Lapid for his controversial remarks describing the film 'Kashmir Files' as "vulgar

propaganda”.⁷⁵ Tel Aviv expressed confidence that “the friendship between Israel and India is strong enough to survive the damage inflicted by Lapid”. The film, ‘Kashmir Files’ depicts the 1990 exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the Kashmir Valley, owing to atrocities perpetrated on the community.

Meanwhile, marking the ‘International Day of Solidarity with the People of Palestine’, Prime Minister Modi reaffirmed India’s unwavering support for the Palestinian cause.⁷⁶ India reiterated its call for direct negotiations between Israel and Palestine for a two-state solution that would lead to a lasting peace between the two sides.⁷⁷

Prime Minister Narendra Modi extended “Hanukkah” greetings to Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.⁷⁸ PM Netanyahu is planning a visit to India in 2023.⁷⁹

Iran

Meanwhile, amidst anti-Hijab protests in Iran, India abstained from a resolution calling for the removal of Iran from the UN Commission on the Status of Women.⁸⁰

At the UNSC briefing on non-proliferation, India’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations, , called upon P-5+1 and Iran to “continue dialogue and diplomacy for an early resolution of differences and return to the full implementation of the JCPOA” (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), aimed at curbing Iran’s nuclear programme.⁸¹ The US, however, argued that the Iranian nuclear program was “not on its agenda” as Tehran had “killed the opportunity for a swift return to mutual compliance with the JCPOA”.⁸²

UAE

As part of the deepening of the India-UAE partnership, External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar addressed the ‘India Global Forum’ in Abu Dhabi on December 12, 2022.⁸³ Dr. Jaishankar shed light on the relationship between “globalization”, “rebalancing, and multi-polarity” adding that “far from witnessing an end of history, we are seeing a return of history”. He called upon India and the UAE to play a key role in shaping the global order. Further, the Union Minister of State for Science and Technology Dr. Jitendra Singh addressed the ‘Abu Dhabi Space Debate’ on December 5, 2022.⁸⁴

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