



# Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



# INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

## JULY 2023

### *Author*

Deependra Singh Hooda

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**Delhi Policy Group**

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

### INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

The ISR features an assessment of key developments, trends, and policies pertaining to India's immediate and continental neighbourhood, and is authored by Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.), Senior Fellow for Military Strategy. The research team includes Shreyas Deshmukh, Research Associate. 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](#).

### Cover Image:

*Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi welcomed Ranil Wickremesinghe, President of Sri Lanka, at the Hyderabad House, New Delhi, July 21, 2023. Source: MEA Flickr*

*Foreign Minister of India Dr S Jaishankar held meeting with Foreign Minister of China Wang Yi in Jakarta on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum, on July 14. Source: X/@DrSJaishankar*

*Founder of Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party, Jahangir Khan Tareen meeting with former Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf loyalists in Lahore prior to announcement of his Political Party, on June 7, 2023. Source: Dawn*

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# India's Strategic Neighbourhood

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

## AFGHANISTAN

### Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan

In its latest report of July 17, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has documented cases of human rights violations in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> The 'de facto authorities' continue to restrict the rights of women and girls. The Ministry of Public Health has announced that only male medical students would henceforth be permitted to take the "Exit Supplementary Exam" to pursue further specialised medical studies.

In May and June, UNAMA recorded instances when the authorities interfered in NGOs employing women. One NGO had its assets seized by officials from Department for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice because it was led by women. Two other NGOs had their licenses suspended by the Department of Economy because of the presence of female employees in their offices.

On July 4, the Taliban administration ordered beauty salons to close within a month, alleging they were offering services prohibited under Shariah, or Islamic law. This move will further shrink access to public places for women while also rendering thousands of women jobless.<sup>2</sup>

Between 15 August 2021 and 30 May 2023, UNAMA recorded a total of 3,774 civilian casualties (1,095 killed, 2,679 wounded). Three-quarters of these civilian casualties were caused by indiscriminate IED attacks in populated areas, including places of worship, schools and markets. Suicide attacks remain a significant concern in Afghanistan even after the Taliban takeover and appear to have increased in lethality, with fewer incidents resulting in higher numbers of civilian casualties.<sup>3</sup>

The restrictions on women working for NGOs have worsened the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Women make up most of the healthcare workers in Afghanistan, and their absence has led to a decline in the quality of care available to patients. Female employment has fallen steeply, leading to increased poverty and hunger, especially among women and children.

Some donor fatigue is also visible. By June this year, only 9 per cent of the \$4.6 billion required for Afghanistan's initial Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) had been received. Due to a lack of funding, the World Food Programme (WFP) had to cut 8 million food-insecure Afghans from receiving assistance entirely. In the health sector, an estimated 7.6 million people will lack access to essential life-saving health assistance if funding levels remain the same.<sup>4</sup>

### Taliban's War on Drugs

In April 2022, the Taliban's supreme leader, Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, issued a decree banning poppy cultivation across the country. There was some initial scepticism, given that the Afghan opium trade generated \$2.7 billion in 2021, equivalent to between 9% and 14% of the country's gross domestic product.<sup>5</sup> However, the ban is now being described as "the most successful counter-narcotics effort in human history."<sup>6</sup>

Satellite photos analysed by researcher David Mansfield show that in the province of Helmand, poppy cultivation has fallen from more than 120,000 hectares in 2022 to less than 1,000 hectares in 2023. Wheat also dominates the landscape of other provinces in the south and southwest – an area that typically grows around 80% of Afghanistan's total poppy crop- and by the end of the season, there were only small pockets of poppy cultivation remaining in the eastern province of Nangarhar, another major opium-producing province.<sup>7</sup>

The Taliban have also ratcheted their efforts against the methamphetamine industry, targeting the ephedra crop in the highlands and ephedrine labs across the country. The Abdul Wadood bazaar in Bakwa in the southwestern province of Farah, a central hub of the ephedra trade, has been shut down. High-resolution satellite imagery shows that there are no ephedrine labs visible in a 400 square kilometre area around Abdul Wadood in September 2022, compared to 174 in February 2020, 126 in March 2021 and 114 in January 2022.<sup>8</sup>

Successful as the Taliban crackdown has been, all effects are not favourable. According to Mansfield, the opium ban has inflicted a significant toll on the Afghan economy, resulting in a loss of \$1.3 billion in net income to farmers and 450,000 jobs at the farm level. There are also fears that the shortage of opium in the international market could lead to drug users switching to far deadlier synthetic opioids like Fentanyl. Of the over 100,000 Americans who died of drug overdoses in 2021, Fentanyl was registered in over two-thirds of those deaths.<sup>9</sup>

India also has reasons to be concerned. Myanmar is the world's second-largest producer of opium after Afghanistan. The production of opium in Myanmar

increased sharply in 2022, rising to 795 metric tonnes in 2022, as compared to 423 metric tonnes in 2021.<sup>10</sup> With the Afghan supply drying up, there could be a further increase in opium production in Myanmar.

India shares a relatively porous border with Myanmar, and the northeastern states are a corridor for drug traffickers.<sup>11</sup> The ongoing trouble in Manipur, the influx of refugees from Myanmar, and a poorly managed border could see a sharp increase in drug smuggling from Myanmar. According to Union home ministry data, the total seizure of drugs in 2022 has risen to 10 tonnes from 3 tonnes in the previous year.<sup>12</sup>

### Strain in Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations

The growing cross-border attacks by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have led to rising tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan. On July 14, the Chief of Army Staff, General Asim Munir, visited Quetta, where he was briefed on a recent attack on a military installation in Balochistan's Zhob Cantt. After his visit, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) issued a strong statement that warned the Taliban of "an effective response from the security forces of Pakistan."

The statement also expressed concern over the availability of "safe havens and liberty of action" to the TTP in Afghanistan and said, "It is expected that the interim Afghan government would not allow the use of its soil to perpetrate terror against any country, in the real sense and in line with commitments made in the Doha agreement."<sup>13</sup>

On July 17, at the Corps Commanders' Conference, held at the General Headquarters in Rawalpindi, the participants noted that "the sanctuaries and liberty of action available to the terrorists of the proscribed TTP and other groups of that ilk in a neighbouring country and the availability of latest weapons to the terrorists" were impacting the security of Pakistan.<sup>14</sup>

Pakistan's Defence Minister, Khwaja Asif, was equally blunt in his remarks. He accused Afghanistan of not fulfilling the right to be a neighbour and brother country and of not abiding by the Doha agreement. He further stated, "The terrorists who shed the blood of Pakistanis can find refuge on Afghan soil. This situation cannot continue any longer. Pakistan will use all its resources to protect its land and citizens."<sup>15</sup>

The Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, responding to Defence Minister Khawaja Asif, claimed that the Taliban had not signed the peace accord with Islamabad but with the United States. However, he also emphasised that

Afghan soil was not being used to launch attacks on Pakistan, as the two countries were "Muslim and brotherly nations."<sup>16</sup>

The Taliban have also told a visiting Pakistani delegation that Pakistan should pursue the "path of peace" instead of "use of force" against the TTP. It is evident that the Taliban are reluctant to use force against the TTP, which could further strain relations between the two countries.

## PAKISTAN

### Political Situation

Pressure continues to be mounted on Imran Khan and his political party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI). Khan reportedly faces nearly 150 cases across the country since he was ousted in April last year. A Punjab police probe into the May 9 attacks on military and state buildings has found Imran Khan guilty of abetment and other terrorism charges.<sup>17</sup>

On July 24, the Election Commission of Pakistan issued a non-bailable arrest warrant for Imran Khan in a contempt case. The warrant was later suspended, but Imran has been asked to appear in person before the Election Commission on August 2.<sup>18</sup> In a separate case, Pakistan's Supreme Court on Wednesday (July 26) rejected former prime minister Imran Khan's plea seeking a stay on trial court proceedings in the Toshakhana case.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, the PTI continues to hemorrhage, with 57 of Khan's party members – most of them former legislators and other well-known politicians – quitting the party and forming their own, called Tehreek-e-Insaf Parliamentarians. Among the most prominent defectors is Pervez Khattak, who served as the defence minister in Khan's government.<sup>20</sup>

There have been calls from the ruling coalition to ban the PTI. The Pakistan military has taken the more nuanced approach of "political engineering" with which they are familiar. The attempt is to weaken the PTI and Imran's political base through defections and the creation of new parties like the Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party.

Although chastened, Imran continues his tirade against the government and the army. In an interview with MSNBC, he stated, "We are standing on the edge of darkness" with the "total dismantling of our democracy" and an "undeclared martial law in Pakistan."<sup>21</sup> Imran Khan has also vowed that he will create a new political party to contest the upcoming general elections and win them in the event of a possible ban on his current party.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has said that he will hand over the reins to the caretaker set-up before the completion of the assembly's tenure on August 12. Under the Constitution, polls are to be held within 60 days if the National Assembly completes its term. But if the assembly is dissolved prematurely, even by a day, it would give the government 90 days to conduct elections.<sup>22</sup>

Talks are now on between the political parties to arrive at a consensus candidate for the caretaker prime minister. There were rumours that the post could go to Finance Minister Ishaq Dar, but there was emphatic public opposition from Raja Riaz, Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly, Minister Khawaja Asif and another senior PML-N leader.<sup>23</sup> Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has now announced that a neutral person would be selected to lead the interim set-up to make upcoming general elections transparent.

There is speculation that the former Pakistan PM Nawaz Sharif, who has been in a self-exile in London since 2019, may return to Pakistan. Nawaz Sharif was holding the post of Pakistan's premier when he was disqualified by the Supreme Court in 2017 and later barred for life from assuming public office in the Panama Papers case.

In June, Pakistan's National Assembly passed the Elections (Amendment) Act 2023, allowing courts to disqualify parliamentarians only "for a period not exceeding five years." This potentially paves the way for Nawaz to make a comeback to politics.<sup>24</sup>

### **Economic Crisis in Pakistan**

In a report released on July 18, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) stated, "Resolving Pakistan's structural challenges, including long-term BOP [balance of payments] pressures, will require continued adjustment and creditor support beyond the current programme period."<sup>25</sup>

The report notes, "International reserves have declined considerably and stand at about  $\frac{3}{4}$  month of imports (US\$4.2 billion), inflation is at a record high (38 percent in May 2023), and fiscal pressures stemming from the floods and policy slippages have increased, further putting debt sustainability at risk. Social discontent has risen over the deteriorating economic conditions and eroded living standards, and political tensions escalated significantly in May, with political and institutional fissures coming to the fore."

Speaking at a seminar on the state of Pakistan's economy on July 15, eminent economist Dr Kaiser Bengali said, "Any finance minister of Pakistan has only



one very simple task of how to get more loans to repay past loans. That is the only function of the country's economy left. There will, of course, be long statements about revenue generation, development, industrialisation, education, health, etc. But these are all fairy tales because there is no money for anything."<sup>26</sup>

He went on to say, "Since we will not get all loans to pay all our past loans, we will sell our assets. Everything is on sale here. We already have a banking sector that is 80 per cent foreign-owned, we have a telecom sector that is 100 per cent foreign-owned, but more is to come."

In March this year, Pakistan's Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) decided to outsource the cash-strapped country's three major airports—Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad—and land assets at these airports.

The government has, in principle, approved 28 projects worth billions of dollars that would be offered to Gulf countries for investment with the long-term objective of reducing reliance on loans and imports.<sup>27</sup> Pakistan's Cabinet recently approved an ordinance to bypass all procedures and abolished regulatory checks for the emergency sale of state assets to foreign countries. The decision was taken in a bid to sell stakes of oil and gas companies and government-owned power plants to the UAE to raise US\$2 billion to 2.5 billion to avoid a looming default.<sup>28</sup>

In the short term, the economic situation has eased somewhat, with Saudi Arabia and UAE depositing US\$2 billion and 1 billion in the State Bank of Pakistan. China has also agreed to roll over a US\$2.4 billion loan for a period of two years. However, this is only a temporary solution for the government that faces repaying US\$25 billion in debt in the current fiscal year.

### **Worsening Internal Security**

The internal security situation remains grim. In the first six months of 2023, terrorism and counter-terrorism activities have claimed the lives of 642 individuals, surpassing two-thirds of the total fatalities of 980 individuals recorded in the previous year. In the same period, Pakistan has lost 267 security personnel to acts of terrorism. This number is alarmingly close to the total fatalities of 286 security personnel that were lost in the entire year of 2022. If this trend continues, the number of security personnel casualties may double this year compared to the previous year.<sup>29</sup>

The month of July saw a spate of terrorist attacks. On July 2, one major and five security personnel were killed in two separate attacks in Balochistan. On July

12, twelve soldiers of the Pakistan Army were killed in different military operations in the Zhob and Sui areas of Balochistan when heavily armed militants attacked army camps. This was the military's highest single-day death toll from terrorist attacks reported this year.<sup>30</sup>

The northern parts of Balochistan are Pakhtun-majority areas and have seen relatively less terrorist activity. This is now changing with the TTP stepping up attacks against security forces in this area. The TTP is also attempting to make inroads in the Baloch-majority areas of the province, releasing propaganda videos in Balochi.<sup>31</sup>

Adding to Pakistan's security woes, a suicide bomber from the Islamic State attacked a political rally in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. More than 1,000 people were at the rally for Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F), an ultra-conservative Islamist party that is part of the ruling coalition and known for its close ties to the Taliban in Afghanistan. In the attack, 54 people were killed and approximately 200 injured.<sup>32</sup>

The rising instability in Pakistan's border areas could be exploited by various terrorist groups that have a presence in Afghanistan. The 32nd report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the 1267 ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaeda Sanctions Committee of the UN Security Council notes, "Member States are concerned that TTP could become a regional threat if it continues to have a safe operating base in Afghanistan. Some Member States registered concern that TTP might provide an umbrella under which a range of foreign groups operate, or even coalesce, avoiding attempts at control by the Taliban."<sup>33</sup>

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

### Situation at the LAC

There is no change in the situation at the LAC, with standoffs continuing at Depsang and Demchok. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) shows no inclination to resolve the ongoing confrontation and is continuing with its military infrastructure development. Indian military sources have indicated that the construction of helipads, roads, bridges, and last-mile connectivity has picked up speed in the last couple of months. This activity is visible all along the LAC, from Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>34</sup>

There is similar action on the Indian side, with the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) set to complete 54 projects this year. A 'black-topped' road is being

constructed on the northern bank of Pangong Tso towards Finger 4, even as the Chinese are close to completing the construction of a bridge connecting the northern and southern banks of Pangong Tso. Another important road under construction is the Sassoma-Saser La-Murgo Road which will provide an alternate axis to the DS-DBO route.<sup>35</sup>

The situation at the LAC came up for discussion in two high-level meetings between Indian and Chinese officials. On July 14, Indian foreign minister Dr S Jaishankar met with China's top diplomat Wang Yi in Jakarta on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum. The meeting was briefly reported by Dr Jaishankar in a tweet stating that outstanding issues related to peace & tranquillity in border areas were discussed.

The Chinese side put out a statement that the two sides should "not define overall relations with specific issues. Wang Yi expressed the hope that India would work with China in the same direction to find a solution to border issues acceptable to both sides."<sup>36</sup> Beijing was also "highly concerned with India's recent restrictive measures against Chinese enterprises," an apparent reference to India's rejection of Chinese carmaker BYD's US\$1 billion bid to set up an electric vehicle factory in the country.

On July 24, National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval met Wang Yi (since appointed China's foreign minister) on the sidelines of the BRICS NSAs' Meeting in Johannesburg. In a brief but strongly worded statement, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) stated, "NSA conveyed that the situation along the LAC in the Western Sector of the India-China boundary since 2020 had eroded strategic trust and the public and political basis of the relationship. NSA emphasised the importance of continuing efforts to fully resolve the situation and restore peace and tranquillity in the border areas so as to remove impediments to normalcy in bilateral relations."<sup>37</sup>

A press release by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the meeting brought out that "President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Modi reached an important consensus on stabilising China-India relations in Bali." The two leaders had met last November at the G20 summit dinner in Bali, but at that time, foreign secretary Vinay Kwatra had said that the leaders had only exchanged courtesies. The MEA spokesperson Arindam Bagchi has now clarified that "Prime minister and President Xi Jinping...exchanged courtesies and also spoke of the need to stabilise our bilateral relations."<sup>38</sup>

There is some speculation as to why the Chinese have chosen this time to reveal the "consensus." Irrespective of the reasons, it is clear that the consensus has not resulted in any improvement in relations. Within three weeks of Bali,

there was a serious clash between the two armies at Yangtse. The SCO summit that was to take place in India was held virtually, and China continues to block India's attempts at the United Nations to designate Pakistan-based terrorists as global terrorists.<sup>39</sup>

In the latest row, India withdrew its entire wushu (martial art) team from the World University Games scheduled to be held in Chengdu. The move came after China issued stapled visas to three members of the team from Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>40</sup>

It is quite clear that India will stand firm in its decision that the resolution of the ongoing standoff at the LAC must precede any other steps to normalise bilateral ties.

## **SRI LANKA**

### **President's Visit to India**

Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe undertook an official visit to India from July 20-21. During the visit, Wickremesinghe expressed his "profound appreciation for the solidarity and support rendered to Sri Lanka in what was undoubtedly the most challenging period in our recent history."<sup>41</sup>

The two countries signed five memoranda of understanding relating to specific areas, which included a cooperation memorandum on the economic development of projects in the Trincomalee District, one on renewable energy, an energy permit for a solar power project, an agreement for UPI (United Payments Interface) acceptance, and an agreement on animal husbandry.

The two leaders also discussed the politically sensitive issue of Sri Lankan Tamils, which is of particular concern to New Delhi. In his meeting with Wickremesinghe, Prime Minister Modi said, "We hope that the government of Sri Lanka will fulfil the aspirations of the Tamils. Will drive the process of rebuilding for equality, justice and peace. Will fulfill its commitment to implement the 13th Amendment and conduct the Provincial Council Elections. And will ensure a life of respect and dignity for the Tamil community of Sri Lanka."<sup>42</sup>

The 13th Amendment, which guarantees power devolution to the provinces and meets Tamil aspirations, is resisted by the Sinhalese political establishment. Days after Wickremesinghe returned to Colombo, Sri Lanka's ruling party, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), rejected the implementation of the 13th Amendment stating that President

Wickremesinghe has no moral right to implement the amendment without obtaining a fresh mandate from the people.<sup>43</sup>

Notwithstanding some unease over the Tamil issue, India's support during the recent Sri Lankan economic and political crisis has left a mark. At a time when its citizens were faced with severe shortages of food and fuel, India stepped in with approximately \$4 billion. This has strengthened India's position as a strong regional partner.

### **Sri Lanka and the Indo-Pacific**

On July 28, French President Emmanuel Macron held discussions with his Sri Lankan counterpart in the first-ever visit by a French leader to the island nation. President Macron reaffirmed France's willingness and commitment to supporting Sri Lanka in its economic recovery. As the fourth-largest creditor to Sri Lanka, France pledged its assistance in the debt restructuring process, aiming for a positive outcome for the country.

In a Twitter post following the discussions, Macron stated, "Sri Lanka and France are two nations in Indian Ocean sharing the same goal: an open, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific. In Colombo we confirmed it: strong as in our 75 years of diplomatic relations, we would open a new era to our partnership."<sup>44</sup>

A day after President Macron's visit, Japan's Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi was in Colombo. Hayashi expressed his desire to continue actively cooperating with Sri Lanka, which is located at a strategic juncture along the sea lanes of the Indian Ocean and is an important partner in realising a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)."<sup>45</sup>

Sri Lanka is seen as an important country in the Indo-Pacific, and India, Japan, and France have stepped up their efforts to counter Chinese influence in Colombo. However, given Sri Lanka's economic ties with China, it is unlikely to ignore foreign policy sensitivities in Beijing, at least in the short term.

## **MALDIVES**

### **Political Developments**

Maldives goes to the polls on September 9 to elect the next president of the country. The contest is between the candidates of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM). Maldives is a nation with strategic importance due to its central location in the Indian Ocean, and

elections in the country are seen as a contest of influence between India and China.

President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih of the MDP, who came to power in 2018, has strengthened cooperation with Delhi and adopted an "India first" policy. India is financing the Greater Male Connectivity Project, linking all the islands within the Maldivian capital's administrative region. India was a key provider of COVID-19 vaccines to the Maldives through its Vaccine Maitri policy and is currently helping build a police academy in the country's southernmost island, Addu.<sup>46</sup>

Abdulla Yameen of the PPM was the President from 2013 to 2018, and his government leaned heavily towards China. The PPM is spearheading an "India out" campaign with the narrative that the current government is selling the country's sovereignty to India. In April of this year, Solih issued an executive order banning the "India Out" movement to prevent a deterioration in India-Maldives bilateral relations. However, Yameen supporters have continued with "India out" rallies.<sup>47</sup>

Complicating the presidential race is the decision by former President Mohammed Nasheed to quit the MDP and form a new party named Democrats. Nasheed is attempting to unite the opposition to support a joint candidate against Ibrahim Solih.<sup>48</sup>

While Solih currently appears in a strong position, the forthcoming elections will be closely watched as the outcome will have significant geopolitical consequences.

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## ENDNOTES

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