



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



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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. To subscribe, please [click here](#).

Cover Image:

Taliban security personnel during a parade organised to celebrate the second anniversary of their return to Power, Kabul, August 15, 2023.

Source: Voice of America

Pakistan President Dr. Arif Alvi administering the oath of Mr. Anwar-ul-Haq Kakar as the caretaker Prime Minister of Pakistan, Islamabad, August 14, 2023. Source: X/ @PresOfPakistan

The 13th Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on the Bhutan-China Boundary Issues was held in Beijing from August 21-24, 2023. Source: MOFA of PRC

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India's Strategic Neighbourhood

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

AFGHANISTAN

Two Years of Taliban Rule

On August 15, the Taliban marked the second anniversary of its return to power with a public holiday and celebrations across the country. The spokesman for the Taliban, Zabihullah Mujahid, said in a statement, "On the second anniversary of the conquest of Kabul, we would like to congratulate the mujahid [holy warrior] nation of Afghanistan and ask them to thank Almighty Allah for this great victory. Now that overall security is ensured in the country, the entire territory of the country is managed under a single leadership, an Islamic system is in place, and everything is explained from the angle of Sharia [Islamic law]."¹

When the Taliban took over the country in 2021, there were some expectations that this government would be different from the brutal and repressive regime of the 1990s. Much of that notion now stands disabused.

Human Rights

There is a complete suppression of human rights, with women being driven out of public spaces. Over the last two years, the Taliban have issued 80 edicts, 54 of which directly target women and girls.² Two years into the Taliban rule, women have been banned from going to parks, gyms, beauty parlours, and public bathing houses. In the latest decree, the Taliban has banned women from visiting Band-e-Amir National Park in Afghanistan's central Bamyan province.³

Girls have been stopped from pursuing education beyond the sixth grade. Women are prohibited from working outside the health and education areas. Even in these areas, the Taliban has ordered foreign and local non-governmental organisations to suspend female staff, claiming that some workers have failed to adhere to the regime's strict dress code.

While much of the attention is focused on women's rights, the Taliban also systematically targets former officials and minority groups. A United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) report released on August 22 has

recorded credible instances of serious human rights violations. The report, covering the period from the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan on 15 August 2021 to 30 June 2023, documented at least 800 instances of extrajudicial killing, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and ill-treatment and enforced disappearance carried out against individuals affiliated with the former government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and its security forces. This is despite the announcement by the de facto authorities of a "general amnesty" for former government officials and former members of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces.⁴

The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, said, "I urge the de facto authorities to carefully consider the findings of this report and to uphold their obligations under international human rights law by preventing further violations and holding perpetrators to account." However, the Taliban, as usual, rejected the UNAMA report. Zabihullah Mujahid wrote on X, "The recent report of the U.N. representative in Afghanistan, which says that more than 800 people of the previous administration were killed and tortured by the forces of the Islamic Emirate, is not true and far from reality."⁵

Humanitarian Crisis

Afghanistan remains in the grip of a severe humanitarian crisis. In the two years of Taliban rule, the number of Afghans needing humanitarian assistance has grown from 18.4 million in 2021 to 28.3 million, or over two-thirds of the population in 2023, while child malnutrition has nearly doubled to 3.88 million.⁶

A report by the International Federation of Red Cross stated that 15.5 million people in the country suffer from severe food insecurity, while 2.7 million people are facing famine.⁷ The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) has expressed gratitude to India for donating 47,500 MTs of wheat to Afghanistan. Still, the scale of the crisis and funding constraints mean that a very large section of the population remains vulnerable.

The WFP, in a statement released on September 5, said that it must drop another 2 million hungry people from food assistance in Afghanistan this month due to a massive funding shortfall. This action means that 10 million people in the country will be cut off from the agency's support this year.⁸ Due to funding constraints, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is likely to end the financial running of 25 Afghan hospitals by the end of August.⁹

Prior to the Taliban takeover in 2021, foreign aid was responsible for 43% of the country's GDP and 75% of its public spending. Much of this has dried up over

the Taliban's repression of human rights. More than halfway through the year, the 2023 Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan has less than a quarter of the funds it needs, and with international attention fading, the easing of the humanitarian situation is unlikely.¹⁰

Diplomacy

As of 2023, no country has formally recognised the Islamic Emirate, though Taliban-appointed envoys are accredited in nine countries. The Taliban claim they have sent diplomats to at least 14 countries, and efforts are underway to take charge of other diplomatic missions abroad.¹¹

While the Taliban still have not gained official recognition after two years in power, most of the world's governments have taken a pragmatic approach to engaging with them on issues of human rights and regional security. On July 30 and 31, a U.S. delegation led by the Special Representative for Afghanistan, Thomas West, met with senior Taliban representatives led by interim Foreign Minister Maulvi Amir Khan Muttaqi in Doha, Qatar.

The U.S. side "urged the Taliban to reverse policies responsible for the deteriorating human rights situation in Afghanistan, particularly for women, girls, and vulnerable communities" and "expressed grave concern regarding detentions, media crackdowns, and limits on religious practice."¹² Taliban officials raised the lifting of travel and other restrictions on Taliban leaders and the return of Afghan central bank assets held abroad "so that Afghans can establish an economy unreliant on foreign aid."¹³

Regional Security

On August 25, Vladimir Voronkov, head of the U.N. Counter-Terrorism Office, and Natalia Gherman, executive director of the Counter-Terrorism Committee, briefed the 15-member U.N. Security Council after presenting the 17th report of the secretary general on the threat posed by Daesh (Islamic State) to international peace and security.

The report stated that Nato-calibre weapons were being transferred to Daesh by groups affiliated with the Taliban and Al Qaeda, such as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). "With the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, (U.N.) member states expressed concern over the proliferation of large quantities of weapons and other military equipment within Afghanistan and into neighbouring States," the report added.¹⁴

Voronkov warned that “the presence and activity of some 20 different terrorist groups in Afghanistan, combined with the repressive measures put in place by the Taliban de facto authorities, the absence of sustainable development and a dire humanitarian situation, pose significant challenges for the region and beyond.”¹⁵

In a bid to appease the regional countries, Defence Minister Mohammad Yaqoob Mujahid said in a speech on August 5 that fighting outside Afghanistan is not religiously sanctioned jihad but rather war, which had been barred by Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada. He said, “If anyone goes outside of Afghanistan for the goal of jihad, it won’t be called jihad. If the emir prevents the Mujahideen from going to battle and they still do it, this is war, not jihad.”¹⁶

Despite Akhundzada’s assurance, there is a great deal of scepticism about the ability of the Taliban to control terrorist groups operating on Afghan soil. The 32nd report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the 1267 ISIL (Da’esh) and Al-Qaeda Sanctions Committee of the U.N. 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.”¹⁷

PAKISTAN

Political Developments

Imran Khan and his political party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI), are facing intense pressure. On August 5, Imran Khan was arrested after an Islamabad trial court declared him guilty of “corrupt practices” in the Toshakhana case and sentenced him to three years in prison. The court order stated, “He has been found guilty of corrupt practices by hiding the benefits he accrued from the national exchequer wilfully and intentionally. He cheated while providing information on gifts he obtained from Toshakhana, which later proved to be false and inaccurate. His dishonesty has been established beyond doubt.”¹⁸

On August 29, the Islamabad High Court suspended Imran Khan’s three-year sentence and ordered him to be released on bail. However, the relief was short-lived as a special court established to hear cases under the Official Secrets Act directed that Imran be kept in “judicial lockup” in connection with the cipher case.¹⁹ Imran’s judicial remand was later extended till September 13, meaning that he will remain in jail. The cipher case relates to the leaking of a classified cable sent by Pakistan’s ambassador to the United States, which appeared to show that U.S. State Department officials had encouraged the Pakistani government to remove Imran Khan as prime minister over his neutrality on the Russian invasion of Ukraine.²⁰

Experts are divided over whether the suspension of Imran's sentence means his disqualification by the Election Commission of Pakistan after his conviction in the Toshakhana case is also suspended. Ultimately, the matter may have to be decided by the courts. However, facing more than 100 cases, there is little certainty that Imran can run in Pakistan's upcoming parliamentary elections.

On August 9, President Arif Alvi ordered the National Assembly, the lower house of parliament, to be dissolved on Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's advice. Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar, a little-known Baloch politician with close ties with Pakistan's powerful military establishment, was sworn in as the caretaker prime minister. The dissolution paves the way for the next general elections to be held within 90 days in accordance with constitutional provisions. However, the Election Commission created uncertainty over the election dates by announcing a fresh delimitation of constituencies that would be completed by mid-December, beyond the 90-day limit for holding polls.²¹

The PTI filed a petition in the Supreme Court to direct the President to announce the election date within 90 days of the dissolution of the National Assembly and the Election Commission to issue the schedule accordingly.²² The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) appear to have divergent views on the issue of carrying out fresh delimitations of constituencies in the country before the next general elections. The PPP has said the Election Commission of Pakistan is constitutionally bound to conduct the polls in 90 days, whereas the PML-N favours fresh delimitations of constituencies before the elections.²³

There was further political drama when President Arif Alvi triggered a massive controversy claiming that he had not signed two pieces of legislation – Official Secrets (Amendment) Bill 2023 and the Pakistan Army (Amendment) Bill 2023 – after they had become acts of parliament. Alvi claimed he had asked his staff to return the bills unsigned within the stipulated time to make them "ineffective", but his staff did not do so.²⁴ Waqar Ahmed, the secretary to the President, has contested Alvi's claim, stating, "President neither assented to the Bill nor gave a written decision for returning the Bill for reconsideration by the Parliament."²⁵

Economic Situation

Despite the International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan and financial assistance from UAE, Saudi Arabia, and China, the economic situation in Pakistan remains grim. The Pakistani rupee has fallen from 226 to the U.S. dollar in January 2023 to over 300 to a dollar. The rupee's depreciation has led to a severe liquidity

crunch in the oil sector, making it harder to import crude oil and petroleum products.²⁶

Pakistan's exports to nine regional countries dipped 21.1 per cent in FY23, mainly driven by a drop in shipments to China. The country's exports to Afghanistan, China, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India, Iran, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives dipped to \$3.331 billion – just 12 per cent of total exports of \$27.73 billion in FY22.²⁷

Pakistan's inflation rate stayed high at 27.4% in August as reforms set out as conditions for an IMF loan have complicated the task of keeping prices in check and arresting the decline in its rupee currency. Reforms linked to the bailout, including the easing of import restrictions and demands that subsidies be removed, have already fuelled annual inflation.²⁸ The price of petrol and diesel has crossed Rs 300 for the first time, and the hike in power tariffs has led to widespread protests.

Electricity prices have doubled in the last year, and the last week of August saw protests across major cities last week, with people burning utility bills, blocking highways and attacking power companies' offices.²⁹ The severity of the protests is putting pressure on the caretaker government, but it is unable to give any relief without IMF clearance. The government has shared a proposal with the IMF seeking approval for domestic customers to be able to pay electricity bills in installments.³⁰

On July 31, a special ceremony was held in Islamabad to commemorate ten years of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng attended the celebrations as a special representative of President Xi Jinping. China and Pakistan decided to accelerate the second phase of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, hailing the progress on development initiatives in the decade since the project's launch in 2013.³¹

In reality, the CPEC has seen persistent delays, protests in Balochistan, and terrorist attacks aimed at Chinese citizens, the most recent being on August 13 when a convoy of Chinese engineers was targeted in Balochistan. Both China and Pakistan have raised concerns over the slow pace of work, with the Chinese ambassador to Pakistan complaining that Pakistan had destroyed the CPEC.³² It is estimated that China has spent \$25 billion on CPEC in the last ten years, but there has been no improvement in Pakistan's economic situation.

Internal Security Situation

According to data compiled by the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), there were 99 attacks across Pakistan in August, the highest

number in a single month since November 2014. The data showed a month-on-month increase of 83 per cent, compared to 54 attacks reported in July. Balochistan and erstwhile Fata were the regions most affected by violence in August. The former witnessed a 65 per cent increase in attacks, from 17 in July to 28 in August, while there were 37 attacks in the latter, up by 106 per cent from 18 in July. The attacks also increased in mainland K.P., up by 83 per cent from 15 in July to 29 in August.³³

Pakistan-Afghanistan ties are fraying over the Taliban's inability and unwillingness to control the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) from launching cross-border attacks. Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari warned the Taliban, "We will act under international law to defend ourselves. If the Afghan authorities do not act, then action inside can be one of the options, but not the first option."³⁴

The Taliban refute Pakistani allegations. The chief spokesman for the Taliban administration has stated that Pakistani officials are blaming Afghans instead of strengthening the security of their country. He said, "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan once again emphasises that it is not in favour of any attack on Pakistan, and we will not allow anyone to use the soil of Afghanistan against Pakistan. However, it is not our responsibility to prevent and control attacks inside the territory of Pakistan."³⁵

The Taliban has also alleged that Islamic State group militants from Pakistan have been killed or captured in Afghanistan in the past year. Zabihullah Mujahid, in an interview with the AFP, claimed that in the past year, 18 people "eliminated by our forces in Afghanistan" were Pakistani citizens while dozens of others were being held in Afghan prisons.³⁶

On August 16, enraged mobs in Jaranwala town of Faisalabad district attacked Christian homes and churches over blasphemy allegations. At least 19 churches and dozens of homes were vandalised and burned down. The incident evoked widespread condemnation from local and international organisations expressing deep concern and calling for the protection of the minorities.³⁷

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

Situation at the LAC

The 19th round of Corps Commander-level talks was held at the Chushul-Moldo border meeting point on August 13 and 14. A joint press release of the meeting stated, "The two sides had a positive, constructive and in-depth

discussion on the resolution of the remaining issues along the LAC in the Western Sector. In line with the guidance provided by the leadership, they exchanged views in an open and forward looking manner. They agreed to resolve the remaining issues in an expeditious manner and maintain the momentum of dialogue and negotiations through military and diplomatic channels. In the interim, the two sides agreed to maintain the peace and tranquility on the ground in the border areas."³⁸

The Corps Commander meeting was followed by Major General level talks at Dault Beg Oldi (DBO) and Chushul on August 18. The discussions aimed to chalking out a roadmap for resolving the existing issues along the LAC, such as Depsang Plains and Demchok, while laying down the ground rules for patrolling and engagement. A defence source indicated that various confidence-building measures and ways to avoid future escalation were also part of the discussion.³⁹

Despite these meetings, there has been no breakthrough in the ongoing standoff at Depsang in the DBO sector and Charding Nullah Junction in the Demchok sector of Eastern Ladakh.

Meanwhile, the development of military infrastructure continues on both sides. A comparison of satellite images from December 2021 and August this year – provided to Hindustan Times by Maxar Technologies – shows the Chinese side has built reinforced bunkers and underground facilities at six locations within an area of roughly 15 sq km in Aksai Chin. This area is approximately 70 km from the LAC opposite the DBO sector.⁴⁰

The Indian Parliament passed the Forest Conservation (Amendment) Bill on August 2. The amendment allows the diversion of forest land for roads, railway lines or "strategic linear projects of national importance and concerning national security" within 100 km of India's international borders or lines of control without a forest clearance under the Forest (Conservation) Act (FCA) 1980.⁴¹

While there has been some criticism of the bill, it would pave the way for 39 strategic road projects spread across 1,545 km, which the Border Roads Organisation could not progress for the want of environmental clearance.⁴²

The infrastructure developments that have taken place on both sides of the LAC are permanent in nature and meant to house additional troops and equipment that have been inducted into the area after 2020. This indicates a hardened posture along the LAC; any return to the pre-2020 status quo is unlikely.

Political Developments

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping met on the sidelines of the BRICS meeting in Johannesburg on August 23. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) statement on the meeting read, "In a conversation with President Xi Jinping of China, Prime Minister highlighted India's concerns on the unresolved issues along the LAC in the Western sector of the India-China border areas. Prime Minister underlined that the maintenance of peace and tranquility in the border areas and observing and respecting the LAC are essential for the normalisation of the India-China relationship. In this regard the two leaders agreed to direct their relevant officials to intensify efforts at expeditious disengagement and de-escalation."⁴³

The Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson's remarks on the meeting had no reference to the situation at the LAC. He said, "President Xi Jinping talked with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit at the latter's request on August 23, 2023. The two leaders had a candid and in-depth exchange of views on current China-India relations and other questions of shared interest. President Xi stressed that improving China-India relations serves the common interests of the two countries and peoples, and is also conducive to peace, stability and development of the world and the region. The two sides should bear in mind the overall interests of their bilateral relations and handle properly the border issue so as to jointly safeguard peace and tranquility in the border region."⁴⁴

These remarks struck a discordant note because there was no mention of the agreement on expeditious disengagement at the LAC. Indian government sources also pointed out that India did not request the meeting but was a result of "a pending request from the Chinese side for a bilateral meeting."⁴⁵

On August 28, the Chinese Ministry of Natural Resources released the 2023 version of the country's "standard map." Many of China's neighbours, including India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Nepal, Taiwan, Russia, and Japan, have rejected the boundaries shown on the map.

India was the first to lodge a strong protest over the map showing Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh as Chinese territory. On August 29, responding to media queries, official spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said, "We have today lodged a strong protest through diplomatic channels with the Chinese side on the so called 2023 "standard map" of China that lays claim to India's territory. We reject these claims as they have no basis. Such steps by the Chinese side only complicate the resolution of the boundary question."⁴⁶ Hitting out at

China, External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar said, "Making absurd claims on India's territory does not make it China's territory."

With no significant breakthrough in the Modi-Xi meeting, the stalemate at the border is likely to persist.

BANGLADESH

Political Developments

The Chief Election Commissioner of Bangladesh, Kazi Habibul Awal, has announced that the parliamentary election is likely to be held in late December this year. The Awami League (A.L.), led by Sheikh Hasina, has been in power since 2009 but now faces pressure from an unusual quarter.

The Joe Biden administration in the U.S. has announced a series of punitive measures to check Bangladesh's "democratic backsliding" and ensure the forthcoming parliamentary election is free and fair. In addition to the threat of denying visas to anyone who engages in election rigging, Washington has imposed sanctions on a number of serving and retired officials of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a paramilitary force that has been accused of helping Sheikh Hasina's party win past elections.⁴⁷

The U.S. stand has put India in a tricky position. With Hasina at the helm, ties between India and Bangladesh have strengthened since 2009. The main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), is seen as promoting Islamic fundamentalism and is perceived as anti-India.

China has jumped into the fray, with Xi Jinping telling Sheikh Hasina that China supports Bangladesh in "opposing external interference." The Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh, Yao Wen, has said that the upcoming elections were an "internal affair" of Bangladesh and that the "future of Bangladesh should be determined by Bangladeshis" and not outside powers.⁴⁸

Reports have emerged that India has conveyed its concerns on this issue to the U.S. during several recent interactions. New Delhi believes that U.S. pressure on the subject of free and fair elections could push Bangladesh closer to China, a development that can have ramifications for the region.

India has made it clear that it wants a free and fair election process in Bangladesh, but too much pressure could only end up encouraging the extremist and fundamentalist forces that the Sheikh Hasina government has successfully kept at bay.⁴⁹

Arindam Bagchi described the recent media reports about "India's reservations about the U.S. visa policy and pro-activism over Bangladesh" as a "theoretical discussion."⁵⁰ However, considering India's strategic concerns, it is likely that some quiet discussions have taken place between Delhi and Washington.

BHUTAN

China-Bhutan Boundary Talks

The 13th Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on the Bhutan-China Boundary Issues was held in Beijing from August 21 to 24. A joint press release on the meeting stated that "the two sides had candid, friendly and constructive discussions on continuously implementing the MoU on the Three-Step Road Map for Expediting the Bhutan-China Boundary Negotiations." One of the important outcomes of the meeting was the establishment of the Joint Technical Team on the Delimitation of Bhutan-China Boundary which held its first meeting on the sidelines of the 13th EGM. Both sides agreed to keep up the "positive momentum" of the meetings and to hold "the 14th Expert Group Meeting on the Bhutan-China Boundary Issues as soon as possible."⁵¹

India would be closely monitoring the talks as these would also impact the India-China-Bhutan trijunction near the vital Siliguri Corridor, a narrow stretch of land that connects eight states of the northeast to the rest of India. After the Doklam standoff in 2017, China has carried out a massive buildup in this area, some within areas claimed by Bhutan.⁵²

In an interview with a Belgian paper in March this year, The Bhutanese prime minister Lotay Tshering had stirred up a controversy by stating that Bhutan did not have "major border problems" with China and that "after one or two more [boundary] meetings, we will probably be able to draw a line." He also stated that talks on the tri-junction can only start once India and China have "settled" their differences along their borders.⁵³

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