



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

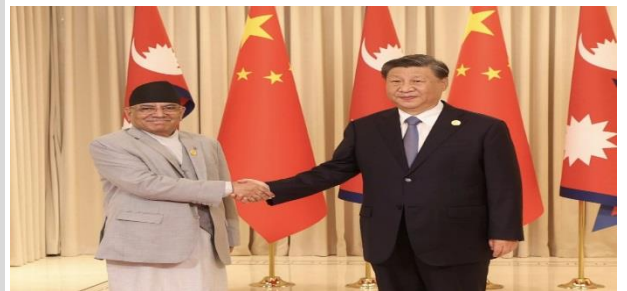


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Author

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ABOUT US

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

Cover Image:

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and French President Emmanuel Macron during the signing ceremony of bilateral instruments to improve cooperation between two countries, September 11, 2023, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Source: X/@albd1971

Nepal Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal meets with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Hangzhou, China, on September 23, 2023. Source: The Kathmandu Post

Maldivian President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih convened a meeting with President-elect Dr Mohamed Muizzu in which he extended congratulations on Dr Muizzu's victory in the 2023 Presidential Elections, October 1, 2023. Source: The Presidents Office, Republic of Maldives

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India's Strategic Neighbourhood

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

AFGHANISTAN

Human Rights and Humanitarian Crisis

On September 20, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) released a report documenting over 1600 cases of human rights violations committed by Afghanistan's de facto authorities. The report covers the period from 1 January 2022 to 31 July 2023, with cases documented across 29 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces.¹

Nearly 50 per cent of these violations comprise acts of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. These violations have occurred despite the issuance of directives from the de facto authorities aimed at better protecting the human rights of detainees and regulating the conduct of security personnel.

Volker Türk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said, "This report suggests that torture is also used as a tool – in lieu of effective investigations. I urge all concerned de facto authorities to put in place concrete measures to halt these abuses and hold perpetrators accountable."

Two years after girls were banned from attending school beyond 6th standard, the United Nations secretary-general renewed his demand for the Taliban to allow teenage girls to attend high school. "This is an unjustifiable violation of human rights that inflicts long-lasting damage on the entire country," Antonio Guterres said on X (formerly Twitter).² 2.5 million girls, 80% of school-aged Afghan girls, are currently out of school.

In the first week of September, a delegation from the 57-nation Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) visited Kabul to discuss restrictions on women. They "held several meetings with Afghan scholars and (Taliban) officials on issues of utmost importance to the organisation such as tolerance in Islam, girls' education and women's work," according to a post-visit OIC statement.³

In his remarks at the 54th Session of the Human Rights Council, Volker Turk stated that human rights in Afghanistan are in a state of collapse, acutely

affecting the lives of millions of women, men, girls and boys.⁴ Despite international pressure on the Taliban to improve human rights, there is little sign of success.

The Taliban's policies and practices have also complicated efforts to respond to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) humanitarian access snapshot for July, "the barring of women humanitarian staff continues to affect the reach of humanitarian assistance to women and children beneficiaries, with additional bureaucratic challenges reported by partners". The snapshot also reports that 56 programmes were temporarily suspended in July due to humanitarian access incidents, including incidents involving interference with the implementation of humanitarian activities, restriction of movement, and violence against humanitarian personnel and facilities.⁵

Compounding the humanitarian crisis is the international community's declining support for Afghanistan. The 2023 Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan remains underfunded. Only 26.8% of the \$3.2 billion required by the plan—an amount which was revised down from \$4.6 billion in early June—has been received.

Foreign Relations

Tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan continue to simmer. On September 6, at least two people, including a Frontier Corps official, were injured when a gun battle erupted between Pakistan and Afghan border forces, shutting the busiest trade crossing between the two countries at Torkham.⁶

The trigger for the exchange of fire was an attempt by Afghan forces to establish a checkpoint in an area. Both sides blamed each other for initiating the firefight. The crossing at Torkham is a key trading point for both countries, but the crossing has been closed several times in recent years, including a closure in February.

A statement by the Pakistan Foreign Office stated that unprovoked firing by Afghan forces had emboldened terrorist elements who are "enjoying sanctuaries inside Afghanistan as confirmed by the UN Security Council's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team in its latest report." The statement added, "Pakistan has continued to exercise restraint and prioritise dialogue in the face of persistent unwarranted provocations by Afghan troops deployed along the Pakistan-Afghanistan Border."⁷

The border was opened after nine days following assurances by the foreign ministry of the Afghan interim government that “the Afghan territory shall not be employed for hostile actions against Pakistan.” However, these assurances have been routinely given in the past and have had little impact.

On the same day as the Torkham clash, hundreds of heavily armed Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants attacked two Pakistani security posts close to the Afghanistan border in the northern district of Chitral.⁸ In the ensuing firefight, 12 terrorists and four soldiers were killed.

The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) press release on the incident said, “Terrorists’ movement and concentration in Gawardesh, Pitigal, Barg-i-Matal and Batash areas of Nuristan and Kunar provinces of Afghanistan had already been picked up and were timely shared with Interim Afghan Government. The statement added that the Afghan government was “expected to fulfil its obligations and deny the use of Afghan soil by terrorists for perpetuating acts of terrorism against Pakistan.”⁹

In his address at the UN General Assembly on September 22, Pakistan’s caretaker Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar said, “Pakistan’s first priority is to prevent and counter all terrorism from and within Afghanistan. Pakistan condemns the cross-border attacks by the TTP, Daesh and other groups operating from Afghanistan.”¹⁰

In a noteworthy development, China became the first country to name a new ambassador to Afghanistan since the Taliban retook power in 2021. On September 13, newly appointed Ambassador Zhao Sheng received a lavish welcome at the presidential palace in Kabul in a ceremony that included acting prime minister Mohammad Hassan Akhund and acting foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi.

Muttaqi said that Zhao’s nomination was a “significant step with a significant message. It also signals to other countries to come forward and interact with the Islamic Emirate.”¹¹ China sought to downplay the appointment with the Chinese Foreign Ministry, indicating that this is part of a routine shuffle. The official statement read, “This is the normal rotation of China’s Ambassador to Afghanistan and is intended to continue advancing dialogue and cooperation between China and Afghanistan.”¹²

Security and economic considerations are driving China’s engagement with the Taliban. Beijing wants the Taliban to restrain the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a Uyghur group that China blames for unrest in its western Xinjiang Province. China has invested in Afghanistan’s mining and energy

sectors and is looking to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor into Afghanistan.¹³

In a statement on September 30, the Embassy of Afghanistan in New Delhi announced its decision to close the embassy and cease operations from October 1. The statement listed key factors for the closure, which included a lack of support from the host government, an inability to fulfil its duties to the people of Afghanistan due to the lack of diplomatic support in India and the absence of a legitimate functioning government in Kabul, and a lack of resources and personnel.¹⁴

PAKISTAN

Political Developments

Cracks have started appearing in the ruling coalition after the dissolution of the assembly last month. The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) have expressed divergent views on the dates of the next general elections. The PPP had been calling on the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) to hold general elections within the 90-day period mandated by the constitution.¹⁵ The PML-N has been favouring fresh delimitations of constituencies before the elections.

On September 21, the ECP announced that general elections would be held in the last week of January 2024. It announced that the initial list for the delimitation of constituencies would be published on September 27. After hearing objections and suggestions regarding the exercise, the final list would be issued on November 30. Polls would be held in the last week of January after completing a 54-day election campaign programme.¹⁶

The PPP is unhappy that there is no definitive date for the election. Faisal Karim Kundi, the PPP Central Information Secretary, said, "The Election Commission has not provided a schedule or a date for the elections, which is inadequate. The PPP believes in conducting elections in accordance with the constitution, even offering to hold them within 60 days. Properly announcing the election schedule and date is a crucial part of the constitutional process."¹⁷

Imran Khan's political party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), criticised the announcement and insisted that the ECP should play its constitutional role to ensure holding polls within the constitutionally mandated period of 90 days.¹⁸ There is also a view that with the overwhelming state pressure being applied against Imran and PTI leaders, the elections could hardly be termed free and fair.

With the announcement of the elections, political parties are now looking for alliances. PPP leader Asif Ali Zardari met PML-Q president Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain and discussed election plans, including a proposal to make an alliance and go for seat adjustment in Punjab.¹⁹ Senior PML-N leaders are silent on entering into an alliance with PPP, though its second-tier leadership has expressed its opposition to such an alliance.²⁰

The PML-N has announced that Nawaz Sharif is set to return to Pakistan on October 21, ending his four-year exile in the UK. Sharif left the country in November 2019 on medical grounds following his conviction in a corruption case but never returned. Nawaz's departure took place approximately 20 days after the Islamabad High Court's order, which granted him temporary relief on medical grounds. The caretaker government has announced that Nawaz will be treated according to the law upon returning to Pakistan.²¹

Meanwhile, Imran Khan remains in jail as authorities investigate charges that he had revealed state secrets after his 2022 ouster in the Cipher case. Imran's political future remains uncertain as he is facing more than 150 cases, ranging from contempt of court to terrorism and inciting violence. He was given a three-year sentence on corruption charges in early August, though the Islamabad High Court later suspended the sentence.²²

Economic Situation

On September 20, the World Bank released a report on Pakistan titled "Reforms for a Brighter Future: Time to Decide." The report notes that Pakistan is at a critical decision point. Progress with poverty reduction has ceased, human development outcomes remain dire, while the benefits of growth have accrued disproportionately to a narrow elite. The economy is now sustained by a short-term IMF program, inflation is at record highs, the rupee has depreciated sharply, and foreign exchange reserves remain at uncomfortably low levels.²³

The World Bank noted that poverty in Pakistan rose within the last year from 34.2% to 39.4%, with 12.5 million more people falling below the poverty line of the \$3.65 per day income level. About 95 million Pakistanis now live in poverty. Pakistan has the world's largest number of out-of-school children (20.3 million), including 37% of girls and 27% of boys.

The World Bank has proposed several critical policy shifts required to move beyond the current low equilibrium towards sustainable and inclusive economic development and poverty reduction. These policy shifts include tightly prioritised public spending, a broad-based and efficient tax system, a

market-driven, productive agricultural system that is resilient to climate change impacts, and greater efficiency in the energy sector.

In a meeting with the caretaker Prime Minister Anwaarul Haq Kakar on September 20, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva urged Pakistan to “collect more taxes from the wealthy and protect the poor people.”²⁴ Earlier, the IMF had turned down the government’s proposal to provide some relief to the public on exorbitant electricity bills that had led to protests across the country.

With the IMF loan and support from Pakistan’s Middle East partners and China, the risk of economic default has receded. However, the economic situation remains fragile, and Pakistan could require another IMF programme in early 2024.

Economic policy changes dictated by the IMF could lead to another wave of inflation in the country. Protests and growing discontent across the nation due to rising prices could put pressure on the government to backtrack on these adjustments. The country needs foreign investment, but political instability and a general lack of confidence in how the country is being run could scare off investors. Pakistan may have pulled back from the economic precipice, but risks remain high.

India-Pakistan Relations

India-Pakistan relations remain in deep freeze. In what has become an annual ritual at the United Nations General Assembly, Pakistan’s caretaker Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar raked up the issue of Kashmir and Hindutva. In his address, Kakar acknowledged the Kashmir dispute and said, “The UNSC must secure implementation of its resolution on Kashmir, the UN Military Observer Group should be reinforced, and global powers should convince New Delhi to accept Pakistan’s offer for mutual restraint on strategic and conventional routes.”²⁵

Kakar also said, “We must counter all terrorists without discrimination, including the rising threat by far-right and fascist groups such as Hindutva-inspired extremists threatening genocide against India’s Muslims and Christians alike.” Later, at a press conference, Kakar defended using the word ‘genocide’, saying, “Genocide is a suitable word to describe it if it is committed, not to call it a genocide will be a crime,” he said. “India has been using it as a tool for systematic elimination of the people of Kashmir.”²⁶

Kakar's remarks drew a sharp response from India. Petal Gahlot, India's first secretary at the United Nations for the second committee of UNGA, reiterated that matters pertaining to Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh are "purely internal", and Pakistan cannot comment on India's domestic matters.²⁷ She pointed out that Pakistan had the "world's worst human rights records" and reminded Pakistan of its "glaring example of systemic violence against minorities" – the attacks on churches and Christians in August.

Ms Gahlot also listed three steps Pakistan must take to ensure peace in South Asia: "First, stop cross-border terrorism and shut down its infrastructure of terrorism immediately. Second, vacate Indian territories under its illegal and forcible occupation. And third, stop the grave and persistent human rights violations against the minorities in Pakistan."

The exchange at the United Nations reflects the almost irreconcilable differences that mark the state of bilateral ties between India and Pakistan.

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

Situation at the LAC

Stalemate persists at the LAC despite 19 rounds of Corps Commander-level talks and meetings at the diplomatic and political levels. With no de-escalation in sight, both sides are continuing with infrastructure development at a furious pace.

On September 12, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh inaugurated 90 infrastructure projects of the Border Roads Organisation (BRO), completed at a cost of Rs 2,941 crore. The BRO projects include 22 roads, 63 bridges, one tunnel, two airstrips, and two helipads across ten border States and Union Territories of northern and northeastern regions. The Defence Minister also laid the e-foundation of Nyoma airfield in eastern Ladakh, which will be developed at a cost of Rs 218 crore for wide-ranging strategic air assets.²⁸

Approximately 300 BRO projects have been completed in the past three years, amounting to Rs 8,000 crore. Lieutenant General Rajeev Chaudhry, the chief of the BRO, has stated that in another two to three years, India will beat China in border infrastructure.²⁹ This assertion is very ambitious, but there has undoubtedly been a significant push since 2020 to improve the infrastructure along the LAC.

India-China border tensions are also spilling over into control over the water resources of the Yarlung Tsangpo, which flows into Arunachal Pradesh as the Brahmaputra River. In 2021, the Chinese Government announced it would seek to exploit the hydropower potential of the lower reaches of the Yarlung Tsangpo. Reports indicate that China's mega project, with a planned capacity of 60 gigawatts, will supersede both in size and capacity the 'Three Gorges Dam,' currently the world's largest hydroelectric facility.³⁰ A 2023 paper by the Lowy Institute mentions that eleven Chinese dams were already built or planned on the Brahmaputra.³¹

On September 6, Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu informed the state legislative assembly that the Centre has proposed constructing a large barrage on the Siang River to counter the potential threats from the Chinese dam on Yarlung Tsangpo.³² He was possibly referring to the proposal to build a 10 GW Upper Siang multi-purpose storage project at Yingkiong. New Delhi is also reviving 12 hydropower projects in Arunachal Pradesh at a cost of \$15.3 billion.³³

Bilateral water governance remains limited. In 2002, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the two countries to share hydrological data on the Brahmaputra during the flood season. A similar MOU was signed for the Sutlej in 2005. Both the MOUs have expired, and their renewal could be affected by the ongoing tensions between the two countries.³⁴

The strain in bilateral relations was evident when President Xi Jinping declined to attend the G20 Summit in New Delhi. The China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, a think tank affiliated with the Ministry of State Security, accused India of taking advantage of its role as the host of the G20 Summit to promote its own agenda and harm China's interests.³⁵

The think tank said, "In addition to causing diplomatic turmoil and public opinion turmoil, India's actions in hosting meetings in disputed territories have also 'stole the spotlight', sabotaging the cooperative atmosphere of the G20 meeting and hindering the achievement of substantive results." The think tank also said India has been trying to use the issue of debt restructuring to attack China and has frequently cooperated with the United States and the West in hyping the "debt trap" theory. Some of these remarks could shed light on the reasons for Xi's absence in New Delhi.

BANGLADESH

Diplomatic Engagements

Prime Minister Narendra Modi invited Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina as a guest for the G20 summit in New Delhi. In a bilateral meeting, the two leaders discussed the entire gamut of bilateral cooperation, including political and security cooperation, border management, trade and connectivity, water resources, power and energy, development cooperation, and people-to-people ties.³⁶

Sheikh Hasina requested the Indian Prime Minister ensure uninterrupted essential goods supplies to Bangladesh. In December 2022, Dhaka sought assurance of annual supplies of 45 lakh tonnes of wheat, 7 lakh tonnes of onion, 30,000 tonnes of lentil, 20 lakh tonnes of rice, 15 lakh tonnes of sugar, 10,000 tonnes of garlic and 1.25 lakh tonnes of ginger.

Bangladesh-India trade is about \$14 billion, and essential commodities comprise a major part. On multiple occasions, supply shortages have sent the prices of certain goods spiralling in Bangladesh.³⁷

After attending the G20 summit in New Delhi, President Emmanuel Macron was in Bangladesh, becoming the first French president to visit Bangladesh in over three decades. The visit aimed to "consolidate" France's Indo-Pacific strategy and counterbalance a "new imperialism" in a region where China's influence is increasingly being extended.

Macron told Sheikh Hasina, "Based on democratic principles and the rule of law, in a region facing new imperialism, we want to propose a third way -- with no intention to bully our partners or to lead them to an unsustainable scheme."³⁸ Hasina said Macron's "push for strategic autonomy aligns with our own foreign policy."

Another important visitor was Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who arrived in Dhaka on his way to the G20 summit. This was the first visit to Bangladesh by any Russian foreign minister since the independence. Lavrov criticised the Indo-Pacific strategy of the US and its allies as an "expansionist drive" on the part of NATO and announced Russia's support for Bangladesh in the ongoing dialogue with Myanmar on the repatriation of the Rohingya refugees.³⁹

SRI LANKA

Chinese Spy Ships in Sri Lanka

In August 2022, Sri Lanka permitted the Chinese missile-tracking ship Yuan Wang 5 to dock at Hambantota Port. At that time, India had voiced its security concerns and lodged a verbal protest with the Sri Lankan government against the ship's visit. China had responded, saying it was "completely unjustified for certain countries to cite so-called 'security concerns' to pressure Sri Lanka."⁴⁰

A similar situation appears to be emerging with the Chinese research vessel Shi Yan 6, which is scheduled to reach Sri Lanka on October 26. Both India and the US have expressed concern about the planned visit of the Chinese ship to Sri Lanka.

Considering India's sensitivities, the Sri Lankan government is set to unveil a new standard operating procedure (SOP) for visits by foreign ships or aircraft, including military assets. The SOP, which will include guidelines and details about the type of vessels to be allowed into Sri Lanka's ports and territorial waters, is expected to be formally announced by authorities in Colombo soon, people familiar with the initiative in both Sri Lanka and India said on condition of anonymity.⁴¹

Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe referred to the SOP while participating in the annual Indo-Pacific Islands Dialogue organised by Carnegie Endowment in New York this month. He said, "Recently, we had discussions with India, and we've now taken on all the amendments. So, any ships that come in now are according to an operation procedure which we have done together with India. I can't see any ship that's a threat coming in through that operating procedure."⁴²

Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Ali Sabry has said that Colombo has not given permission to a Chinese vessel to dock in October, adding that negotiations are going on.⁴³ The progress of these negotiations will be closely watched by India.

NEPAL

Prime Minister's Visit to China

Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal "Prachanda" visited the People's Republic of China from September 23 to 30. According to the 13-page joint statement on the visit, the Nepali side reiterated its firm commitment to the One-China principle, recognising the Beijing government as the sole legal government

representing the whole of China, and that the Nepali side is against “Taiwan independence.”⁴⁴

Both sides “agreed to finalise the text on the BRI Implementation Plan at an early date” and “expressed readiness to deepen and solidify Belt and Road cooperation.” The two sides agreed to undertake a joint inspection of the China-Nepal boundary and bring into force the Agreement between the Government of China and the Government of Nepal on the Boundary Management System as soon as possible.⁴⁵

The visit was hailed as being of “great significance to advancing the China-Nepal Strategic Partnership of Cooperation Featuring Ever-lasting Friendship for Development and Prosperity.” However, some areas of divergence remain.

China is pushing for Nepal to join the Global Security Initiative (GSI), the Global Civilisational Initiative (GCI), and the Global Development Initiative (GDI) launched by China. While Nepal supports the GDI, it has refused to join the GSI and GCI. In an interview before his China visit, Dahal said, “We cannot wade into security-related issues. It is our stated policy not to be under the umbrella of any side. Ours is a non-aligned foreign policy. We have said that the American Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) and the State Partnership Program (SPP) are security initiatives and that we are not taking part in them. Having said that, we cannot join other security arrangements.”⁴⁶

Beijing is also frustrated at Nepal’s lack of progress in advancing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Chinese embassy in Nepal has claimed that the Pokhara International Airport, built with a loan provided by China’s Exim Bank, is a part of the BRI. However, Nepal’s foreign minister clarified that BRI projects are still under consideration, and not a single project has been executed.⁴⁷

Beijing also sees efforts by India and the US to strengthen ties with Nepal as a direct challenge to China’s regional dominance. A \$500 million aid grant from the US to Nepal under the Millennium Challenge Corporation is seen as deeply rooted in the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Strategy aimed at containing China.⁴⁸

MALDIVES

Presidential Elections

On September 9, The Maldives held its presidential elections, mainly a contest between President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih and Mohamed Muizzu, a Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) member. With eight candidates in the fray, Muizzu secured over 46% of the votes, and Solih received 39%. None of the

contestants secured more than 50% of the vote for an outright win, and the elections moved to a second round on September 30. In the second round, Muizzu won the presidential runoff, securing 54% of the vote.⁴⁹

Mohamed Muizzu embarked on his political career in 2012 when he assumed the role of Minister of Housing and Environment during the administration of President Waheed as a member of the Adhaalath Party. He continued serving as a cabinet minister under President Abdulla Yameen's administration. Muizzu gained prominence for his pivotal involvement in overseeing several significant infrastructure projects, most notably the iconic Sinamalé Bridge. Following the incarceration of former president Abdulla Yameen on corruption charges, Muizzu was nominated as the presidential candidate by the opposition coalition of the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) and People's National Congress (PNC).

The election had become a virtual referendum on which regional power, India or China, will have a greater influence in the Indian Ocean archipelago state. The outgoing President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, who came to power in 2018, had strengthened cooperation with Delhi and adopted an "India first" policy.

The opposition PPM-PNC alliance is viewed as pro-China and had led an "India out" campaign. Muizzu had promised that if he won the presidency, he would remove Indian troops from the Maldives and balance the country's trade relations, which he said were heavily in India's favour.⁵⁰

During his presidency, Muizzu's mentor, Abdulla Yameen, had borrowed heavily from China for construction projects and spurned India. Muizzu had told a meeting with Chinese Communist party officials last year that his party's return to office would "script a further chapter of strong ties between our two countries."⁵¹

Muizzu's win could lead to a rebalancing of relations with China and potentially reduce India's influence in the Maldives. However, Male will still find it difficult to ignore India's interests while crafting its foreign policy.

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