



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:

Foreign Minister of China Wang Yi met with Acting Foreign Minister of the Taliban Amir Khan Muttaqi on the sidelines of the 3rd China Xizang Trans-Himalaya Forum for International Cooperation on October 5, 2023. Source: MOFA PRC

PMLN Leader Nawaz Sharif, brother Shahbaz Sharif and daughter Maryam Nawaz during a rally in Lahore on October 21, 2023. Source: X/@pmln_org

Ferry service between Nagappatinam in India and Kankesanthurai near Jaffna in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka flagged off on October 14, 2023. Source: X/@MEAIndia

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India's Strategic Neighbourhood

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

AFGHANISTAN

Humanitarian Crisis

Two earthquakes struck Afghanistan's western province of Herat on October 7, a third on October 11, and a fourth on October 15. The earthquakes claimed more than 4,000 lives and destroyed thousands of houses. The latest disaster is another blow to a country already reeling under a severe humanitarian crisis.

International aid agencies already working in Afghanistan rushed in for rescue and relief. UN agencies announced the deployment of teams to the region, including the World Food Programme to distribute food and the UN Children's Fund, which provided shelters, blankets, water and psychosocial support.¹

Despite this support, the response to the latest disaster brings out two larger issues being faced in providing humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan. The first is the Taliban's policies that have hindered the working of international agencies. Although the government has limited capacity to respond, the Taliban increasingly demand a say in how aid is delivered and to whom. This has led donors to question whether their resources will reach the most vulnerable Afghans.² A report from the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan has warned that the Taliban are benefiting from international aid through the establishment of fraudulent nongovernmental organisations.³

The Taliban's ban on female aid workers has increased the barriers to aid provision. Although there is some flexibility now being shown by the Taliban on women working in the health sector, their numbers are insufficient to provide adequate services. As a mark of moral outrage against the Taliban's policies, Western donors and international financial institutions, including the World Bank, have ceased, paused or greatly reduced funding to development programs.⁴

The second issue is that global attention has shifted away from Afghanistan to the Ukraine war and the recent Israel-Hamas conflict. USD 3.23 billion funding appeals under the Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan 2023 are only 34 per cent funded, with food security plans being only 29 per cent funded.⁵

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 90 per cent of the Afghan population is affected by poverty, while 29 million of the country's nearly 41 million inhabitants rely on aid.

Afghanistan is facing a potential human catastrophe, but it is unlikely that international donors will step up with the level of assistance required.

Taliban's Turn to China

With relations deteriorating between Kabul and Islamabad, the Taliban is now turning to China for economic support. While China does not formally recognise the Taliban, last month, it appointed a new ambassador to Afghanistan – becoming the first country to do so since the Islamic militants took power.

October saw a series of meetings between officials from Afghanistan and China. On October 2, Afghanistan's acting Foreign Minister, Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, met with the special representatives of China and Pakistan for Afghanistan, Yue Xiaoyong and Asif Durrani. During the meeting, mutual relations, common interests, and threats to Afghanistan, Pakistan and China were discussed.⁶

On October 5, China hosted an international forum on Trans-Himalayan regional cooperation in the Tibet autonomous region. Muttaqi, who was also invited, met the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the sidelines of the forum. According to a Chinese readout of their meeting, Wang was quoted as saying, "China stands ready to continue to help Afghanistan develop its relations with neighbouring countries and be better integrated into regional economic cooperation."⁷

During the meeting, Muttaqi assured Wang that the Taliban will not tolerate terrorist activities targeting China in Afghanistan. He said, "We have done a lot of work to combat terrorism, and we take security threats against China like a challenge to our own. We will not allow any activities that would harm the security and stability of China to happen in Afghanistan."⁸

Taliban officials attended the third Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing from October 17 to 18. Afghanistan has shown interest in joining the Belt and Road Initiative, with plans for a road through the Wakhan corridor, a thin, mountainous strip in northern Afghanistan, to provide direct access to China.⁹ In May, China, Pakistan and Afghanistan agreed to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan.

Close ties between China and Afghanistan serve the interests of both countries. Beijing could potentially play a significant role in boosting the Afghan economy. Afghanistan is sitting on deposits estimated to be worth USD1 trillion or more, including what may be the world's largest lithium reserves.¹⁰ China has long been eyeing these reserves but has been held back primarily by security concerns. If the Taliban can deliver on the safety of Chinese citizens in Afghanistan, investments could pick up.

Beijing wants the Taliban to control the Afghanistan-based East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which aims to set up an independent Islamic state in Xinjiang and Central Asia. It is worried about a spillover of terrorism in the restive Xinjiang province.

There are advantages to both countries in the deepening of ties, but China is likely to approach this cautiously till there is greater stability in Afghanistan.

PAKISTAN

Political Developments

Deposed prime minister and proclaimed offender Nawaz Sharif returned to Pakistan on October 21 after spending four years in self-imposed exile. Nawaz's first touchdown was at Islamabad to complete the necessary formalities to make bail, earlier granted by the Islamabad High Court.¹¹

In his address at the homecoming rally in Lahore, Nawaz focused on 'rebuilding Pakistan' as he called for good relations with neighbours and harmony among all constitutional institutions and political players for the betterment of the country. Sharif said, "Pakistan's constitutional institutions, political parties and all other stakeholders need to work together to deal with the challenges we are facing today. Without this, our country will not progress. We will have to figure out why the country is facing such a situation. Let me make it clear that we will have to follow the Constitution to move forward."¹²

Without naming India, Sharif also said, "We cannot progress by fighting neighbours. We have to introduce an effective foreign policy and maintain good relations with our neighbours, especially as without this, the country cannot progress. Pakistan will have to break the begging bowl for good. Even for the Kashmir solution, we will have to work in an honourable way."

The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) hopes that Nawaz Sharif will lead them to victory in the forthcoming general elections, but the legal status of his

previous disqualification from the electoral process is still unclear. However, it appears that his legal hurdles could be eased.

Soon after his arrival, Nawaz Sharif secured an extension in his protective bail from the Islamabad High Court in the Al-Azizia and Avenfield Apartments references, as the Punjab caretaker government, in a contested move, suspended the former prime minister's sentence in the Al-Azizia case under Section 401 of Code of Criminal Procedure. In a similar development, accountability court judge Mohammad Bashir revoked the perpetual arrest warrants of Mr Sharif after his surrender in the Toshakhana case and also granted him bail.¹³

On the other hand, Imran Khan's troubles are mounting. On October 23, a special court established under the Official Secrets Act indicted Imran Khan and ex-foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi in the cypher case for making public the contents of a classified diplomatic cable. Earlier, Imran was convicted and sentenced to three years in prison in the Toshakhana graft case on August 5. The IHC suspended his sentence on August 29, but he remained in jail because he was on judicial remand in the cypher case.¹⁴ If found guilty, Imran faces a minimum of 14 years in jail.

It is not only the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) workers who are unhappy with the preferential treatment being given to Nawaz Sharif. Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) spokesperson Faisal Kareem Kundi sarcastically said, "One blue-eyed boy (Imran Khan) was put in jail; the other one (Nawaz) came from outside." Kundi held Nawaz responsible for the country's destruction, stating, "Bringing a criminal to Pakistan is tantamount to killing justice."¹⁵

The PPP has been raising demands for a level playing field, accusing the caretaker government of giving "special treatment" to the PML-N. The PPP has slammed the Election Commission for not announcing the election dates and made it clear that 'minus-PTI' the result of general elections won't be acceptable to anyone.¹⁶

The PPP and PML-N had come together to form a coalition government after the ouster of Imran Khan. However, as the election draws closer, both parties look to go their separate ways.

Internal Security Situation

On September 29, a suicide bomber attacked the Eid Milad-ul-Nabi procession near the Madina Mosque in the Mastung district of Balochistan. In the blast, 65 people were killed and more than 60 injured.¹⁷ On the same day, at least five

people were killed while 12 sustained injuries when two suicide blasts rocked a mosque located inside the premises of the Doaba police station in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Although no group claimed responsibility for the Mastung attack, it is believed to have been carried out by the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP).¹⁸ There has been a marked rise in IS-KP activities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including a suicide bombing that killed at least 54 people at a political rally held by the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F) in July in Bajaur district.

The growing presence of IS-KP could prove to be a major challenge to Pakistan's security forces, which are already battling a resurgent Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and an uptick in Baloch militancy. According to the Centre for Research and Security Studies report, almost 1,100 people, including 386 security personnel, lost their lives to militant violence in the first nine months of the year. The number of fatalities from terrorist attacks this year has increased, with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan having suffered 92% of all fatalities since the beginning of the year.¹⁹

On October 3, Pakistan's caretaker Interior Minister Sarfraz Bugti announced a November 1 deadline for illegal immigrants to leave the country. The announcement is aimed at the 1.73 million unregistered illegal Afghans living in Pakistan. Justifying the decision, Bugti said, "There are no two opinions that we are attacked from within Afghanistan, and Afghan nationals are involved in attacks on us." He claimed that of the 24 suicide attacks since January, "14 bombings were carried out by Afghan nationals."²⁰

Pakistan's announcement is a new low in its ties with Kabul, which are strained over the Taliban's inability and unwillingness to rein in the TTP. The Afghan Embassy in Islamabad issued a statement asking the government of Pakistan to immediately stop the ongoing harassment against the Afghan refugees, saying it would have a negative impact on the relations between the two countries.²¹

Zabihullah Mujahid, the spokesman for the Taliban administration in Kabul, said on X, "The Pakistani side should reconsider its plan. Afghan refugees are not involved in Pakistan's security problems. As long as they leave Pakistan voluntarily, that country should tolerate them."²²

The United Nations has warned that forcibly deporting Afghans from Pakistan could lead to severe human rights violations – including the separation of families and deportation of minors. There would also be serious implications

for all who have been forced to leave the country and may face serious protection risks upon return.²³

On October 30, Pakistan said that almost 200,000 Afghan nationals voluntarily returned to Afghanistan over the past two months. Bugti told a news conference that individuals who remain in the country past the deadline would be detained and held in designated "holding centres" before being transported to the nearest Afghan border crossing and repatriated.²⁴

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

Situation at the LAC

The 20th round of the India-China Corps Commander Level Meeting was held at the Chushul-Moldo border meeting point on the Indian side on October 9 and 10. Although there was no joint press release, both sides issued almost similar statements.

The Indian Ministry of External Affairs statement read, "The two sides exchanged views in a frank, open and constructive manner for an early and mutually acceptable resolution of the remaining issues along the LAC in the Western Sector, in accordance with the guidance provided by the national leadership of the two countries and building on the progress made in the last round of Corps Commanders' Meeting held on 13-14 August 2023.

They agreed to maintain the momentum of dialogue and negotiations through the relevant military and diplomatic mechanisms. They also committed to maintain peace and tranquility on the ground in the border areas in the interim."²⁵

There was no breakthrough in the disengagement from Depsang and Demchok, and with winter arriving, both sides are likely to remain locked in their positions. Some Chinese experts have hinted that China is unlikely to disengage at the LAC. Speaking to Global Times, Long Xingchun, a professor at the School of International Relations at Sichuan International Studies University, said, "China will not make major concessions to India on border disputes, particularly on territorial issues, due to concerns over India's strategic drift toward the US."²⁶

It was reported that the Indian Army had prepared its winter posture plan, which includes a reduction in the overall number of troops from the forward areas of eastern Ladakh while maintaining adequate reserves in the depth

areas. The LAC would be dominated by using the latest surveillance devices, winter air surveillance operations by helicopters and limited patrolling when required over the next few months.²⁷

The US Department of Defense 2023 report 'Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China' has listed China's infrastructure development along the LAC in 2022. These improvements include underground storage facilities near Doklam, new roads in all three sectors of the LAC, new villages in disputed areas in neighbouring Bhutan, a second bridge over Pangong Lake, a dual-purpose airport near the Central sector, and multiple helipads.

The report notes that in 2022, China deployed one border regiment, supported by two divisions of Xinjiang and Tibet Military Districts with four combined arms brigades (CAB) in reserve in the Western sector of the LAC. China also deployed as many as three light-to-medium CABs in the Eastern sector from other theater commands and an additional three CABs in the Central sector of the LAC. Although some elements of a light CAB eventually withdrew, a majority of the deployed forces remained in place along the LAC.²⁸

During his address at the 22nd session of the Council of Heads of Government of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation at Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar urged the members to strictly adhere to the "principles of international law, respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each other and encouraging economic cooperation."²⁹ This was a thinly veiled swipe at China.

Dr Jaishankar also targeted China's Belt and Road Initiative, saying, "To improve trade within the region, we need robust connectivity and infrastructure. Such initiatives should respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries. The global South should not be saddled with unviable debt arising from opaque initiatives."

BANGLADESH

Political Developments

On October 28, there was mayhem on the streets of Dhaka as over 100,000 supporters of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) clashed with the police during a rally demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and calling for a free and fair vote under a caretaker government.³⁰

In the violence that followed, a policeman was beaten to death, several police ambulances torched, a police hospital was attacked, and the residence of the country's chief justice vandalised. The police launched a massive crackdown in the capital in the evening on BNP supporters involved in arson and arrested BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir.³¹

The incident brought back memories of the three months of unrest the country had witnessed before the general election of 2014 when the BNP and its ally Jamaat-e-Islami had made a similar demand for a caretaker government. Two days before the Dhaka violence, Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Kazi Habibul Awal had said, "We are sincerely committed to resolving any crisis that may arise. We hope to proceed with the election, but the conducive environment we anticipated from the beginning has not materialised."³²

Sheikh Hasina is under pressure from the US and European countries to hold free and fair elections. During her two-day visit from October 16-17, US Deputy Assistant Secretary for South Central Asia Afreen Akhter told reporters, "We believe that it is incredibly important that the elections are conducted in a free, fair, and peaceful manner in support of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's stated commitment to this goal."³³

Last month, the US Embassy in Dhaka announced that it is "taking steps to impose visa restrictions on Bangladeshi individuals responsible for, or complicit in, undermining the democratic election process in Bangladesh. These individuals include members of law enforcement, the ruling party, and the political opposition."³⁴

India is uncomfortable with the US stance as it feels that too much pressure could drive Bangladesh closer to China and encourage the extremist and fundamentalist forces that the Sheikh Hasina government has successfully kept at bay. However, with the economy under stress, anti-incumbency could take root, and India would have to adopt a nuanced position on Bangladesh politics.

BRI Projects in Bangladesh

On October 10, Sheikh Hasina inaugurated the 82-km Padma Bridge Rail Link, the country's largest infrastructure project built under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Yao Wen, who attended the inaugural ceremony, claimed that the project is estimated to directly benefit 80 million people and boost economic growth by 1.5 per cent.³⁵

Bangladesh is the first South Asian country to join the BRI, and in the last ten years, China has released USD 4.45 billion for 35 projects under the BRI. China is implementing 12 highways, seven railway lines, 21 bridges and 27 power projects in Bangladesh. Around 670 Chinese companies have invested in the country.³⁶

During President Xi's visit in 2016, a number of Memoranda of Understanding and agreements were signed between Bangladesh and China. Under the BRI, Bangladesh will receive USD 26 billion for BRI projects and USD 14 billion for joint venture projects, totalling a USD 40 billion package.

On September 21, the embassy of China in Bangladesh launched a report titled "The Belt and Road Initiative in Bangladesh: Achievements and Way Forward." The report brings out that an investment of USD 10.5 billion in ongoing BRI projects could lead to a 2.1% increase in GDP and create 1.86 million employment opportunities. In addition, moderate poverty could dip by 1.8 per cent and extreme poverty by 1.3 per cent.³⁷

Many countries are wary of the BRI debt trap, but Bangladesh has enthusiastically embraced the BRI, seeing it as an essential part of the country's future development.

SRI LANKA

India-Sri Lanka Ties

October 14 marked the start of a ferry service between Nagappatinam in India and Kankesanthurai near Jaffna in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. A direct passenger ferry between the two countries will provide an efficient and cost-effective means of travel for the people of the two countries, boost tourism and trade links and strengthen people-to-people ties.³⁸

Speaking on the occasion, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, "Partnership for progress and development is one of the strongest pillars of our bilateral relationship. Our vision is to take development to everyone, leaving none behind. In line with this vision, projects implemented with Indian assistance in Sri Lanka have touched the lives of the people... India remains committed to working closely with Sri Lanka to further strengthen our bilateral ties for the mutual benefit of our people."³⁹

India-Sri Lanka ties have grown stronger after Sri Lanka sank into a financial crisis in 2022, and India stepped in with assistance of nearly USD 4 billion. However, China still casts a shadow on bilateral ties.

India has been protesting the docking of Chinese spy vessels in Sri Lankan ports, citing security concerns. In August 2022, Colombo allowed a Chinese spy ship Yuan Wang 5, to anchor at the Hambantota port despite India's verbal protest. A similar situation arose over the visit of Chinese research ship Shi Yan 6 to Sri Lanka. Last month, both India and the US had flagged concerns about the planned visit to Sri Lanka. At that time, Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe had said, "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."⁴⁰

Colombo granted permission to Shi Yan 6 to dock at Colombo port from October 26 to 28 for "replenishment." While there were initial expectations for the vessel to engage in research collaborations with Sri Lankan agencies, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs clarified that only resupplying would occur, with no research activities to be conducted during this time.⁴¹

Facing an economic crisis, Sri Lanka is not in a position to resist pressure from China, which is its largest bilateral creditor. On October 11, Sri Lanka said it reached an agreement with the Export-Import Bank of China covering about USD 4.2 billion of outstanding debt, while talks with other official creditors have stalled. Sri Lanka hopes the EXIM deal will help it get past the first review of an International Monetary Fund program and secure a second IMF tranche of about USD 334 million.⁴²

BHUTAN

Bhutan-China Boundary Talks

The 25th Round of Boundary Talks between China and Bhutan was held in Beijing on October 23 and 24. Sun Weidong, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of China, led the Chinese delegation, while Dr Tandi Dorji, Minister for Foreign Affairs and External Trade of Bhutan, led the Bhutanese delegation.

A joint press release stated that the two sides held in-depth discussions on the boundary negotiations and agreed to build on the positive momentum. During the talks, the two leaders of the delegations signed the Cooperation Agreement on the Responsibilities and Functions of the Joint Technical Team (JTT) on the Delimitation and Demarcation of the China-Bhutan Boundary. The JTT was established during the 13th Expert Group Meeting to assist the Expert Group in the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on the Three-Step Roadmap.⁴³

In separate meetings with the Bhutanese Foreign Minister, Chinese Vice-President Han Zheng and Foreign Minister Wang Yi urged the kingdom to resolve the border issue and set up official diplomatic ties with Beijing. Dorji was quoted by Xinhua as saying, "Both sides have firm determination and a sincere desire to demarcate their boundaries and establish diplomatic relations at an early date."⁴⁴

Wang said China was ready to conclude boundary negotiations and establish diplomatic relations with Bhutan "as soon as possible" and that both these steps "fully serve the long-term and fundamental interests of Bhutan."

Earlier, in an interview with The Hindu newspaper on October 7, Bhutanese Prime Minister Lotay Tshering stated, "Theoretically, how can Bhutan not have any bilateral relations with China? The question is when, and in what manner." He did add that it would be in Bhutan's interest to make sure both India and China are happy with the decisions it makes.⁴⁵

India is closely watching these talks because any settlement would also involve the fixing of the disputed tri-junction between China, Bhutan, and India in the Doklam plateau, where Chinese and Indian troops had a tense 73-day standoff in 2017. China claims 89 sq km in Doklam, an area that India considers strategically significant because of its vicinity to the Siliguri Corridor, a narrow strip connecting the rest of India with the Northeastern states.

China has been mounting pressure on Bhutan by building roads and settlements in the disputed areas of Western Bhutan. It wants Thimpu to concede Chinese claims in this area in exchange for territories in Northern and Eastern Bhutan. How Thimpu navigates India's strategic concerns would have regional implications.

MALDIVES

Indian Military Presence in Maldives

President-elect Mohamed Muizzu, who will take office on November 17, has said he will work to return Indian military personnel from its shores "as soon as possible." In an online interview with Reuters, Muizzu said, "I will be holding frank and detailed diplomatic consultations with India to work out details of sending back military personnel from the Maldives as soon as possible." The focus is not on the actual number of military personnel here, it is on not having any at all in the Maldives. We will discuss with the Indian government and find out a way forward for this."⁴⁶

On relations with India, Muizzu said, "I'm sure our friends in the Indian leadership will agree that we have a shared interest in creating a reservoir of respect which will be beneficial not just for the Maldives and India, but also for the stability and security of the Indian Ocean region as well."

The number of Indian troops in Maldives is not known, but in 2021, the Maldivian Defence Force had said that around 75 Indian military personnel were based in the country to operate and maintain the Indian aircraft.⁴⁷ In the run-up to the elections, Muizzu's coalition had taken a strong position against India's influence in the Maldives. The rhetoric may now tone down, but Chinese influence in the country could increase.

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