



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:

Afghan Refugees leaving Pakistan via Torkham border crossing, November 10, 2023. Source: Human Rights Watch

Group photo after signing the agreement of CWIT investment funded by US International DFC, Colombo, November 8, 2023. Source: US Embassy in Sri Lanka

The King of Bhutan Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi held bilateral discussions on November 6, in New Delhi. Source: X/ @narendramodi

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India's Strategic Neighbourhood

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

AFGHANISTAN

Humanitarian Crisis

Afghanistan is grappling with a severe humanitarian crisis that looks set to worsen. The October earthquakes worsened an already precarious situation in Afghanistan, where more than 29 million Afghans require urgent assistance. With global attention focused on Ukraine and Gaza, funds for humanitarian aid to Afghanistan are reducing.

International humanitarian aid in 2023 will likely amount to around half of its 2022 level, which was roughly USD 3 billion. The Taliban's opium ban will also reduce the earnings of rural households by more than USD 1 billion per year without an alternative livelihood program for farmers, further aggravating poverty and deprivation.¹

Two recent World Bank reports² outline the state of the Afghan economy and the situation of Afghan households. After the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, the economy contracted for two consecutive years, declining by 20.7 per cent in 2021 and 6.2 per cent in 2022. Since April 2023, the country has experienced deflation, which may temporarily boost real wages and household well-being, but it could stifle business growth, leading to higher unemployment and underemployment, complicating economic recovery.

The growth in labour supply has sizably outpaced a slacking demand, resulting in a doubling of unemployment and a one-quarter increase in underemployment. Businesses are constrained by dampened demand, uncertainty about the future, and limited functionality of the banking system. the international payment system is still not restored, as international banks are reluctant to re-establishing correspondent relations.

World Bank projects that in a baseline scenario with limited humanitarian and basic service aid compared to 2022, the economy is projected to remain stagnant at best, with a wide confidence interval skewed towards the downside. Per capita income will decline due to an increasing population. Under this scenario, poverty is likely to remain high, and vulnerability to falling into

poverty is a genuine concern until the economy can find new indigenous sources of growth that address unemployment and job quality challenges.

In this scenario, Pakistan's deportation of approximately 400,000 Afghan refugees will put a massive strain on Afghanistan's ability to deal with the ongoing humanitarian crisis. UNHCR's Representative in Afghanistan, Leonard Zulu, said, "The mass arrivals couldn't have happened at a worse time. We are dealing with many competing humanitarian needs and now huge numbers of arrivals, many without any family support or coping mechanisms here. It makes for a very grim winter and a difficult time ahead."³

Deteriorating Afghanistan-Pakistan Ties

In October 2023, the Government of Pakistan issued an order for all undocumented immigrants, including approximately 1.73 million Afghan nationals, to leave the country. This directive was aimed at the large number of illegal immigrants in Pakistan, with a specific focus on Afghan nationals, who constitute a significant portion of this population. The order warned that those who did not comply would face expulsion.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has been providing critical aid at border crossing points in response to the repatriation of these Afghan refugees. Reports indicate that nearly 375,000 Afghans left Pakistan in the two months following Pakistan's announcement, primarily through the Torkham and Spin Boldak border crossings.⁴

The UNHCR has also expressed concerns over Pakistan's orders, stating that since the announcement on October 3, 2023, an estimated 374,000 people have returned to Afghanistan, mostly in fear and haste.⁵ Mass arrivals back to Afghanistan are adding to the ongoing humanitarian crisis as winter temperatures start to dip – in some locations, the minimum already reaching -4°C.

Pakistan's decision to expel Afghan refugees has sparked further tensions between the two countries. Pakistan says most Afghans have left voluntarily, a claim rejected by Kabul, which has called the Pakistani action "unilateral" and "humiliating." Bilal Karimi, spokesperson for the Afghan government, said, "This is injustice, an injustice that cannot be ignored in any way. The forced expulsion of people is in conflict with all the norms of good neighbourliness. In the long term, there may be many negative effects on the relations and communications between the two countries."⁶

Afghanistan's interim Prime Minister Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund stated that Pakistan's decision to expel refugees violated international laws, and

his deputy Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai warned Islamabad not to force Afghanistan's hand to react over the move. Stanikzai also emphasised the historical nature of Afghan reactions, suggesting that while Afghans often don't show a reaction, when they do, it is significant.⁷

Pakistan justifies its move to expel undocumented Afghans as a response to the unwillingness of the Taliban-led administration to act against militants using Afghanistan to carry out attacks in Pakistan. Pakistan's caretaker Prime Minister Anwar ul Haq Kakar told journalists, "After non-cooperation by the Afghan interim government, Pakistan has decided to take matters into its own hands - and Pakistan's recent actions are neither unexpected or surprising."⁸

The already strained ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan will likely come under additional pressure, and there is little certainty that the expulsion will lead to an improved security environment in Pakistan.

Closure of Afghan Embassy in Delhi

The Afghan Embassy in New Delhi, India, announced its permanent closure on November 23, 2023. A statement released by Afghanistan's ambassador to India, Farid Mamundzay, said that the embassy's closure was attributed to "persistent challenges" faced in New Delhi. These challenges included a perceived lack of support from New Delhi and allegations that agreements had not been given due consideration since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021.⁹

Ambassador Farid Mamundzay, appointed by the former President Ashraf Ghani's government, had been in London for several months, and most other diplomats at the mission had reached third countries, possibly seeking asylum. The remaining staff in New Delhi were affiliated with the Taliban.

The embassy stated that there was reported pressure from both New Delhi and the Taliban regime in Kabul to relinquish control of the embassy. This pressure contributed to the decision to close the embassy permanently.

The statement from the embassy acknowledged India as a steadfast strategic partner in a sensitive region. India had reopened its embassy in Kabul in June of the previous year after sending a technical team to monitor humanitarian assistance and engage with Afghans.

The closure of the Afghan Embassy in New Delhi reflects the complexities of diplomatic relations in the aftermath of the Taliban's takeover and the challenges faced by diplomatic missions operating under such circumstances.

PAKISTAN

Political Developments

On November 2, the Election Commission of Pakistan announced that general elections would be held on February 8, 2024. The announcement came after the Supreme Court ordered the chief election commissioner to meet the President and decide the date.¹⁰ Although the date is well past the constitutional deadline of Nov. 7, it ends months of uncertainty over the holding of elections.

Meanwhile, troubles continue to mount for Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI). On November 23, The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) annulled the intra-party polls of the PTI held in June last year, giving the former ruling party 20 days to go for a fresh election if it did not want to lose its electoral symbol — bat.¹¹

PTI has decided to conduct intra-party elections within the time frame set by the ECP. Imran Khan will not contest the intra-party polls due to his legal problems, and Barrister Gohar Khan will contest the polls in his stead as a “stopgap arrangement.”¹²

Khan has been languishing in jail since August 5 following his three-year conviction for unlawfully selling state gifts. He was also undergoing a trial in prison for leaking state secrets, or the “cypher” case. On November 21, the Islamabad High Court declared the proceedings held so far as vitiated. While the court agreed to hold the trial in jail for security reasons, the proceedings would be open to the public and media.¹³

In contrast to Khan’s legal troubles, former prime minister Nawaz Sharif was acquitted in the Avenfield Properties case. The Islamabad High Court set aside the ten-year prison sentence handed to Sharif by an accountability court in 2018.¹⁴

With elections approaching, cracks have appeared between two main allies in the last government — Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N). In reply to a question about the reasons behind the end of “political romanticism” between the two parties, PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari said, “We are always in contact with the people while they [PML-N] are in contact with selectors.” He also accused the PML-N of abandoning its “democratic” narrative, which promised the supremacy of the Constitution and a system based on justice and equality.¹⁵

The Pakistani establishment has been working over the past months on the “minus-one” formula to keep Imran Khan out of the elections. While this

appears to be succeeding, the widening gulf between PTI and PML-N could throw up a hung election in 2024.

Internal Security Situation

Data unveiled by the Islamabad-based think tank Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS) reveals that there was a 34 per cent surge in militant attacks, a 63 per cent rise in fatalities, and an 89 per cent increase in the number of injured persons during November as compared to October.

On November 3, at least 17 soldiers were killed in different incidents in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including a militant ambush in Gwadar, a remote-controlled bomb explosion in Dera Ismail Khan and a security operation in Lakki Marwat. A fourth incident, another remote-controlled blast in Dera Ismail Khan, left five people dead and at least 24 injured, including police officials.¹⁶

In the Gwadar ambush, 14 Pakistan Army soldiers lost their lives after militants attacked two vehicles of security forces. The military vehicles came under attack while moving from Pasni to Ormara.

On November 4, nine militants from Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP), an alleged offshoot of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), attacked the MM Alam airbase in Mianwali. The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) issued a clarification that the attack was largely unsuccessful and "only some damage was done to three already phased-out non-operational aircraft."¹⁷

Satellite images obtained by India Today suggest the likelihood of more damage at the airbase than officially acknowledged by the authorities. The imagery shows at least nine clear signs of damage to the operational sheds at the base on the day of the attack.¹⁸

On November 6, Lt Colonel Muhammad Hassan Haider and three soldiers were killed during an intelligence-based operation in Tirah Valley. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, 47 security force personnel were killed in November, as compared to 27 in October and 29 in September.

Massive protests erupted in Balochistan after four youths were killed on November 24 in a fake encounter by Counter Terrorism Department personnel. One of those killed was Balaach Mola Bakhsh, whose family claimed the encounter was fake since Balaach had actually been in custody. The protest has affected large parts of Makran, with political parties, civil society activists and traders calling for a judicial inquiry into the incident.¹⁹

In a related development, the Islamabad High Court has warned that a case could be registered against the caretaker prime minister and others if they fail to reunite missing Baloch students with their families.²⁰ The court is hearing a case regarding 50 missing Baloch students whom law enforcement agencies allegedly picked up over the past few years from their universities, hostels, or from their homes.

Economic Situation in Pakistan

Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves have witnessed a significant decline, with the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) reporting a substantial drop in central bank forex reserves. The SBP's reserves fell by USD 217 million, reaching a new low of USD 7.180 billion as of November 17, largely due to ongoing debt repayments and challenges in the external financing environment.²¹

The Monthly Economic Update & Outlook report for October released by the Economic Advisor's Wing of the Ministry of Finance has said debt servicing will pose significant challenges as over 91 per cent of all expenses are interest payments. The rise in servicing costs is fuelled by the State Bank of Pakistan's 22 per cent policy rate and a weak rupee.²²

Some short-term relief is visible. After its two-week review of Pakistan's economic situation that ended on November 15, the IMF announced that it had "reached a staff-level agreement on the first review under Pakistan's Stand-By Arrangement (SBA), subject to approval by the IMF's Executive Board. Upon approval, Pakistan will have access to SDR 528 million (around US\$700 million)."²³

Pakistan signed ten bilateral cooperation and investment deals with Kuwait during Prime Minister Anwaarul Haq Kakar's visit to the Gulf country on November 27. Pakistani foreign office said in a statement, "These MoUs will unlock multi-billion dollars of investment from the United Arab Emirates into Pakistan and will help realise various initiatives envisioned under [Pakistan's] Special Investment Facilitation Council."²⁴

A recent report by AidData, a research institute at William and Mary University in the U.S., has stated that Pakistan's cumulative public debt exposure to China stands at \$67.2 billion (19.6 Percent of Pakistan's GDP) for the period from 2000 to 2021. That surpasses the \$46 billion recorded for the same period in the World Bank's International Debt Statistics, based on voluntary disclosures from Pakistan.²⁵

According to the research report, as much as 98 per cent of China's development funding for Pakistan came from "less-than-generous loans", with

only two per cent coming in the form of grants. In terms of the composition of debt from China, since 2018, China has pivoted away from infrastructure lending toward emergency lending in Pakistan, ensuring that the earlier debts taken on by Pakistan for energy, transport, and other CPEC projects can be repaid on time and with interest.²⁶

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

Situation at the LAC

The 28th round of diplomatic talks between India and China to resolve issues and complete disengagement in Eastern Ladakh was held on November 30. These were virtual talks which took place under the framework of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC).

The official statement of the MEA said that the two sides "reviewed the situation along the LAC in the Western Sector of the India-China border areas, and engaged in an open, constructive and in-depth discussion of proposals to resolve the remaining issues and achieve complete disengagement in Eastern Ladakh."²⁷

The MEA noted that both sides "further agreed on the need to maintain peace and tranquility along the border areas, ensure a stable situation on the ground and avoid any untoward incident[s]." The next round of senior commanders' talks was discussed by both sides, who resolved to conduct them "at the earliest to achieve the above objective."

The Chinese Defence Ministry said that its military values its relations with the Indian counterpart and that the 20 rounds of Corps Commander-level talks have helped to ease tensions amidst the eastern Ladakh standoff.

Senior Colonel Wu Qian told a press conference in Beijing that the current situation at the India-China border remained generally stable. Under the guidance of state leaders, the two sides have maintained effective communications through diplomatic and military channels and have made steady progress in resolving the remaining issues in the Western sector.²⁸

Colonel Wu said, "China values the China-Indian military relationship. We hope the Indian side works with us to reach the same goal to build stronger strategic mutual trust, properly handle differences and safeguard peace and tranquillity along the borders."

Despite these statements, there appears to be little likelihood of an early breakthrough to resolve the ongoing impasse at Depsang and Demchok. Both sides have prepared themselves for the oncoming winter months. The focus now is on putting in place procedures to avoid any incidents along the LAC.

Several agenda-based interactions have taken place at multiple points along the LAC between local commanders at the levels of brigade and below to ensure adherence to existing border protocols and advance sharing of patrol information to avoid clashes on the ground.²⁹ This is among the various confidence-building measures (CBMs) which were discussed during the 20th Corps Commander-level talks between the two sides.

BANGLADESH

Political Developments

Since mid-October, and in the aftermath of the October 28 BNP protest rally in the capital Dhaka, the country has witnessed a crackdown on the main opposition force, with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) alleging that over 13,000 leaders and workers have been arrested in connection with nearly 300 police cases. Many BNP leaders have gone into hiding to evade arrests.³⁰

Following the October 28 violence, the BNP called for a general strike from October 31-November 2, during and after which clashes broke out between police, opposition members, and ruling party supporters. While there has been violence on all sides, police have been accused of using excessive force in responding to protests.

On November 30, Bangladesh's main opposition officially boycotted the upcoming general elections, removing the only party that could have offered a realistic challenge to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's fourth consecutive term in power.

The BNP, stating that thousands of its members had been arrested in a sweeping crackdown, said it had not applied to contest a single seat on the last day of filing candidate nominations before the January 7 polls.³¹

Earlier, BNP Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi alleged that India has taken a position against the people of Bangladesh by supporting Sheikh Hasina's "authoritarian" government. He said, "The Indian government and their politicians should understand why the people of Bangladesh have burst into anger against them. By supporting an authoritarian government, they [India] have taken a stance against the people of Bangladesh."³²

Russia has accused the United States of attempting to interfere in Bangladesh's politics to ensure support for its "Indo-Pacific strategy." Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said, "We have spoken repeatedly about the attempts by the United States and its allies to influence internal political processes in Bangladesh, ostensibly under the banner of ensuring 'transparency and inclusiveness' in the upcoming parliamentary elections there."³³

With Bangladesh facing both an economic and political crisis, the action could now move on to the streets, even as countries like the United States mount pressure on Hasina to hold free and fair elections.

SRI LANKA

Colombo Balancing Ties with India and China

In an interview with Firstpost, President Ranil Wickremesinghe admitted that Sri Lanka may become a battleground in the geopolitical power struggle between India and China. The issue of Chinese 'spy ships' visiting ports in Sri Lanka in the recent past has aroused security concerns in India. Wickremesinghe, however, asserted that it would not have any negative effect on bilateral ties. He said, "India is worried about its security. Won't do anything to hurt India's security. We have told New Delhi that we will check on research ships."³⁴

Due to its economic dependence on India and China, Colombo seeks to balance its ties with both countries. The 12th Round of Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement (ETCA) negotiations between Sri Lanka and India took place from October 30 to November 1 in Colombo. The visit of the President of Sri Lanka to New Delhi in July 2023 set the stage for a renewed commitment to the ETCA, which had been on hold since 2018. Both sides agreed to comprehensively enhance bilateral trade and investments, especially in new and priority areas.³⁵

On November 8, The U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) announced it has committed more than half a billion dollars to support the development of a deepwater shipping container terminal in the Port of Colombo.³⁶ The terminal is operated by a consortium that includes India's largest port operator, Adani Ports and SEZ Ltd. The US Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Julie Chung, said, "Sri Lanka regaining its economic footing will further our shared vision for a free and prosperous Indo-Pacific."

China is continuing its large-scale investments in Sri Lanka. On November 27, Sri Lanka approved a proposal by China's Sinopec to build a \$4.5 billion refinery, making it the largest single investment in the island nation since a crippling economic crisis last year. The cabinet approval cleared the state-owned refiner to finalise project details and sign an agreement with the government before it starts building the export-oriented refinery at Hambantota in the south of the country.³⁷

China is also "prioritising" the extension of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) to Sri Lanka. The CMEC is the newest of the six land corridors under the BRI and has assumed prominence in place of the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) corridor, which has largely stalled. A statement by President Wickremesinghe's office stated that countries such as Sri Lanka, which are participants in the BRI, "are prepared to embark on the second phase of the initiative, which is expected to make a more substantial economic contribution."³⁸

BHUTAN

Strengthening India-Bhutan Bilateral Relations

The King of Bhutan, His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, accompanied by senior officials from the Royal Government of Bhutan, visited India from 03-10 November 2023. During the visit, His Majesty and Prime Minister Narendra Modi held discussions on the entire gamut of bilateral cooperation and regional and global issues of mutual interest.

His Majesty conveyed appreciation for India's support in Bhutan's socio-economic development, while the Indian Prime Minister reaffirmed India's commitment to Bhutan's development based on Bhutan's priorities.³⁹

Both sides expressed satisfaction with the progress in the construction of the Punatshangchhu hydropower projects and the export of surplus power by the Basochhu hydropower project through the Indian Energy Exchange. The existing India-Bhutan energy partnership in hydro was agreed to be extended to non-hydro renewables like solar, as well as green initiatives for hydrogen and e-mobility.

Several agreements were made to enhance bilateral cooperation on trade, technology, connectivity, education, and people-to-people connections, including the development of cross-border rail links and trade routes and the designation of immigration checkpoints.

The visit comes in the backdrop of the 25th Round of Boundary Talks between China and Bhutan, which was held in Beijing on October 23 and 24. China has been mounting pressure on Bhutan by building roads and settlements in the disputed areas of Western Bhutan. This sector is considered strategically important by India because any settlement would also involve fixing the disputed tri-junction between China, Bhutan, and India in the Doklam plateau.

MALDIVES

Indian Military Presence in Maldives

Union Minister of Earth Sciences Kiren Rijiju attended the swearing-in ceremony of President Mohamed Muizzu in Male on November 17. An official statement made public by the President's office after Muizzu's meeting with Rijiju stated that the Government of India had been requested to withdraw its military presence from the island nation.⁴⁰

The statement read, "The President noted that at the Presidential Election held in September, the Maldivian people had given him a strong mandate to make the request to India and expressed the hope that India will honour the democratic will of the people of the Maldives."

At a press conference, Undersecretary for Public Policy Mohamed Firzul Abdul Khaleel said that there are 77 Indian military personnel stationed in the archipelago at present. Of those, "24 individuals are involved in helicopter operations, 25 are engaged in the operations of a Dornier aircraft, 26 are assigned to a second helicopter's operations, and an additional two individuals are responsible for the maintenance and engineering works of these aircraft."⁴¹

Firzul further noted that the current administration will begin efforts to alter and amend the provisions in the agreements with India made detrimentally towards the Maldives. He said the government is now working to collect information and documents pertaining to the agreements.

According to Indian sources, the two governments would discuss "workable solutions" for continued cooperation through the use of Indian military platforms, as this serves the interests of the people of the Maldives.⁴² However, Muizzu appears firm in carrying through his campaign promise of removing Indian military personnel from the country.

Muizzu is known to have pro-China leanings, and India would have to look at a new approach in its dealings with Male.

RUSSIAN NAVAL PRESENCE IN INDIAN OCEAN

The Russian Navy held drills with Myanmar in the Andaman Sea from November 7 to 9. Two anti-submarine ships, Admiral Tributs and Admiral Panteleyev of the Russian Pacific Fleet, participated in the exercises with a frigate and a corvette from Myanmar's Navy. Days after the Myanmar drills, the same Russian warships docked at Bangladesh's Chittagong Port in the Bay of Bengal – the first such visit in 50 years. The Russian embassy in Dhaka called it a "huge milestone for Russia-Bangladesh relations."⁴³

After that, Russian ships conducted a two-day naval exercise with the Indian Navy. Although India did not issue any statement, Moscow's defence ministry said, "The purpose of the exercise is to comprehensively develop and strengthen naval cooperation between Russia and India." Moscow further added that the drills will help the two navies "jointly counter global threats and ensure the safety of civilian shipping in the Asia-Pacific region."⁴⁴

Although Russia has limited resources to project naval power in the Indian Ocean, and its presence is mainly symbolic, India would be watching the development closely. Concerns could arise over the deepening naval cooperation between Russia and China. Both countries have held regular naval exercises in the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. If these exercises get extended to the Indian Ocean, it could present a challenge to India.

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