



**Delhi Policy Group**

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



# INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

## JANUARY 2024

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Deependra Singh Hooda



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**Delhi Policy Group**

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

### INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

The ISR features an assessment of key developments, trends, and policies pertaining to India's immediate and continental neighbourhood, and is authored by Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.), Senior Fellow for Military Strategy. The research team includes Shreyas Deshmukh, Research Associate. Your comments and feedback may be addressed to Shreyas Deshmukh at [shreyas@dpg.org.in](mailto:shreyas@dpg.org.in). To subscribe, please [click here](#).

### Cover Image:

*Pakistan Foreign Minister Jalil Abbas Jilani and Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian meet at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamabad on January 29, 2024. Source: X/@ForeignOfficePk*

*India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S Jaishankar and Minister for Foreign Affairs of Nepal, Mr. N.P. Saud co-chaired the 7th meeting of the India-Nepal Joint Commission on January 4, 2024 in Kathmandu. Source: X/@DrSJaishankar*

*Indian Foreign Secretary Vinay Mohan Kwatra called on the King of Bhutan Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, on January 30, 2024 in Thimphu. Source: X/@Indiainbhutan*

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# India's Strategic Neighbourhood

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

## AFGHANISTAN

### Humanitarian Crisis

The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan continues unabated. According to a recent report released by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 23.7 million people—more than half of Afghanistan's population—will require humanitarian assistance to survive in 2024 as the country continues to reel from decades of war and grapple with climate-induced crises, recurrent natural disasters, entrenched poverty, and barriers to women's participation in public life.<sup>1</sup>

The OCHA has further stated, "Afghanistan endured its worst drought in 30 years last year, compounding the challenges it now faces in its third consecutive year of drought-like conditions, something which has kept levels of food insecurity in Afghanistan among the highest in the world." 30 out of 34 provinces are grappling with severe or extremely poor water quality, and desertification has affected over 75% of the land in northern, western, and southern regions.<sup>2</sup>

A report by the Al-Biruni Institute, "Surviving the Crisis: A Socio-Economic Assessment of the Middle Class in Kabul," shows that the level of family debt in Afghanistan increased by 67 per cent in 2023 compared to 2021. Eighty per cent of families have an income of less than one dollar per day per family member, and the unemployment rate among men has increased to 31 per cent and among women to 8 per cent.<sup>3</sup>

Restrictive Taliban policies have negatively impacted donor contributions. The humanitarian system is facing a severe funding shortage, according to UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths, forcing UN agencies to make "increasingly painful" decisions to cut life-saving food, water, and health programming. Griffiths characterised the situation as a "wake-up call" as aid workers must "ruthlessly" restrict assistance to only those most urgently in need.<sup>4</sup>

## Human Rights

On January 22, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) released a report on Afghanistan's human rights situation from October to December 2023.<sup>5</sup> The report delves into the complexities surrounding gender-based violence, highlighting an unclear legal framework and a preference for traditional dispute resolution methods. These methods, typically controlled by men, often prioritise mediation over legal prosecution, leaving many survivors without adequate recourse.

The plight of women and girls receives particular attention, with the report illustrating ongoing restrictions on their rights, especially in areas of employment, education, and freedom of movement. These restrictions are often compounded by requirements related to marital status or the presence of a male guardian.

Another grave concern is the targeted violence against the Hazara community, a predominantly Shia group, which has been subjected to bombings and targeted killings. This indicates a worrying trend of sectarian violence. The report also sheds light on the dangers posed by unexploded ordnance, which continue to cause casualties, including among children.

The report highlights the significant challenges being faced by Afghans who have been forcibly expelled from Pakistan. It underscores the difficulties in reintegrating into Afghan society, which is already grappling with its own economic and security problems. These challenges are exacerbated by the limited support and resources available to these returnees, making their reintegration process particularly strenuous and fraught with hardship.

In terms of the administration of justice, the report critiques the actions of the de facto authorities, highlighting issues such as corporal punishment, arbitrary arrests, and the treatment of former government officials and media workers.

Finally, the report addresses the state of freedom of expression in Afghanistan, noting significant limitations on public access to information and ideas, indicating a concerning restriction on civil liberties.

## Afghanistan-Pakistan Ties

Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam Fazl (JUI-F) chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman led an 11-member delegation on a five-day trip to Afghanistan. The JUI-F chief was given a warm welcome and met all the top leaders of the Afghan Taliban.

Significantly, he was taken to Kandahar for a meeting with Taliban supreme leader Haibatullah Akhundzada.

Afghanistan Prime Minister Mullah Hasan Akhund told Fazlur Rehman, "Islamic Emirate will not allow anyone to pose a threat to any country." The Taliban leader also called for a halt to what he called Pakistan authorities' "brutal" policy against Afghan refugees.<sup>6</sup>

In the meeting with Akhundzada, the Taliban leader offered to help jumpstart the peace talks with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). He reportedly offered to use the Taliban's Qatar office for this purpose. The JUI-F chief also allegedly held meetings with Pakistan's most wanted terrorists. Fazlur interacted with TTP chief Noor Wali Mehsud and Hafiz Gul Bahadur, who was once a member of the JUI-F.<sup>7</sup>

Pakistan's foreign office was quick to distance itself from the visit. Foreign Office Spokesperson Mumtaz Zahra Baloch stated that Fazlur Rehman was not visiting Afghanistan as an emissary of the government of Pakistan and that he was there in his individual capacity. On the issue of TTP, she said, "We have no dialogue taking place, nor do we intend to have a dialogue with TTP, which is responsible for several terrorist incidents inside Pakistan and is responsible for the killing of Pakistani civilians and law-enforcement officials."<sup>8</sup>

On January 3, a Pakistan-Afghanistan Joint Committee (PAJC) meeting was held in Islamabad. Mullah Muhammad Shirin Akhund, the acting minister of strategic intelligence in the Ministry of Defense and the acting governor of Kandahar province, led the Afghan delegation to the meeting.

It is reported that the Afghan delegation's 'asks' included the release of containers, among other trade issues, and a slowing down of the refugee repatriation process for the winter months. The Pakistani side made it clear that movement on the core issue of TTP was essential to address other issues and that patience on that count had already run out. It appears that no progress was made as the Afghan side asked for more time to deal with TTP, citing winter as an impediment.<sup>9</sup>

On January 13, Pakistan closed the Torkham border crossing, the busiest trade route between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The closure came after Pakistani officials at the crossing began asking for passports and visas from Afghan drivers under a new policy, prompting a reciprocal ban on Pakistani truckers by the Afghan Taliban authorities.<sup>10</sup> The border crossing was opened after ten days, and Afghan drivers of commercial vehicles have been given visa and passport relaxations till March 31.

The abrupt closure of Torkham is one more step in the hard line taken by Pakistan over the Afghan Taliban's unwillingness to address their security concerns. How far this coercive approach can be taken without completely disrupting bilateral ties is a tricky question for Pakistan's policymakers.

## PAKISTAN

### Political Developments

Pakistan is preparing to go to the polls on February 8. There was a minor flutter on January 5 when a Senate resolution was suddenly passed to postpone the elections on the grounds of difficult weather conditions and adverse law and order situations prevailing in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan. The Senate resolution is non-binding, and all major political parties favour holding the elections on the due date.<sup>11</sup>

After a protracted legal battle, the Supreme Court of Pakistan upheld the Election Commission of Pakistan's (ECP) ruling, stripping former Prime Minister Imran Khan's Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party of its cricket bat symbol. Pakistan's Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa announced the decision on live television, saying the PTI had not held intraparty elections. PTI candidates must now choose individual symbols instead of all running under the cricket bat symbol.<sup>12</sup>

The latest ruling is a blow to the PTI's prospects, with Imran Khan behind bars and disqualified from running in the elections. The party was already reeling from defections, arrests of leaders, and near-blanket censorship of coverage of its poll campaign.<sup>13</sup> The suppression has forced the PTI to primarily rely on social media platforms to rally support for its candidates to circumvent a local media ban and government crackdown. However, even these "virtual" rallies are facing internet disruptions.<sup>14</sup>

The pressure on Imran continues to mount. On January 30, he was sentenced to 10 years in jail for leaking state secrets. A day later, Imran and his wife, Bushra Bibi, were sentenced to 14 years in prison in a corruption case for retaining expensive state gifts when he was in power.<sup>15</sup>

On January 1, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) said there was little chance the upcoming elections would be free, fair or credible due to "blatant manipulation" and the large-scale rejection of candidacies. The HRCP expressed concern about the overall deterioration in human rights in Pakistan, including what it called the "blatant manipulation of the electoral landscape in



which one political party [PTI] among others has been singled out for systematic dismemberment.”<sup>16</sup>

As the election looms, the Pakistan military's influence on the political landscape is apparent. Pakistan Army is backing Nawaz Sharif, whose earlier convictions have been dropped, clearing the way for him to stand in the elections. In an election rally at Nankana Sahib, Sharif's daughter, Maryam Nawaz, acknowledged that Pakistan's powerful military establishment brought her father back from the UK, where he was in self-imposed exile for four years.<sup>17</sup>

According to a survey conducted in 41 districts across the country during January, most people believe that the ECP and the caretaker government are to blame for making elections controversial due to denying some parties a level playing field.<sup>18</sup> If the elections are perceived as not being free and fair, it could create further political and economic instability in the country.

### **Iran-Pakistan Cross-Border Strikes**

On January 16, Iran launched drone and missile attacks in Pakistan's Balochistan province, targeting Jaish al-Adl, a Baluch militant group believed to be operating out of Pakistan. This attack resulted in the death of two Pakistani children. Jaish al-Adl is a U.S.-designated terrorist group fighting the Iranian regime with the goal of securing political and economic rights for the ethnic Baluch and Sunni in Iran. On December 15, 2023, the group had attacked a police station in the town of Rask, in Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province, killing several police officers.<sup>19</sup>

In response, on January 18, Pakistan conducted missile strikes in Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province, targeting the Baloch Liberation Army and the Baloch Liberation Front, which they suspected of operating from Iran. These strikes reportedly resulted in the death of nine people, including children and women. This series of events marked the first time since the Iran-Iraq war that a foreign country had launched an assault inside Iran.<sup>20</sup>

Further escalation was avoided when Foreign Minister Jalil Abbas Jilani spoke with his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and expressed Pakistan's readiness to work with Iran on “all issues based on the spirit of mutual trust and cooperation.”<sup>21</sup> Backroom diplomacy by Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi also helped to reduce tensions.

On January 29, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian travelled to Islamabad to meet his Pakistani counterpart Jalil Abbas Jilani in Islamabad. In



a joint news conference, Jilani said, "There was an agreement to cooperate to fight terrorism in our respective areas. We need to address and allay each other's concerns with regard to terrorism." He said that Pakistan and Iran had decided to immediately deploy "liaison officers" in their respective Turbat and Zahedan border towns to "further strengthen ongoing security and intelligence cooperation."<sup>22</sup>

While both sides lack the appetite for a full-blown conflict, the spotlight is on how the two countries tackle the common problem of Baloch separatism.

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

### Situation at the LAC

The stalemate continues at the LAC in Eastern Ladakh in the Depsang and Demchok areas. The Indian Army Chief, General Manoj Pande, has described the situation as "stable, yet sensitive." In his address after reviewing the Army Day parade on January 15, General Pande said, "The army is ready and capable of dealing with any situation along the northern borders (with China). We have taken several concrete measures to develop our capabilities in those areas."<sup>23</sup>

Clarifying the Indian thinking of the process to be followed, Northern Army Commander Lt Gen Upendra Dwivedi stated in an interview, "We want the disengagement first, then we will go for de-escalation, and then in the third stage, we will be looking at normal management of LAC ...and then of course that the clarification of LAC and the demarcation. These are the various stages" towards resolution of the standoff.<sup>24</sup>

While the steps outlined by Dwivedi are theoretically correct, there is a long way to go before we can even move to the second stage. On January 25, China's Defense Ministry spokesperson, Colonel Wu Qian told a press conference in Beijing that the responsibility for ongoing political tensions between the two countries "lies entirely with the Indian side."

Wu said, "It is unwise and inappropriate for the Indian side to link the boundary issue with overall relations. This approach is against the shared interests of the two countries. We hope the Indian side can work with the Chinese side towards the same goal, enhance strategic mutual trust, properly handle differences, and safeguard peace and tranquillity in the border areas."<sup>25</sup>

Despite India having made it clear that Chinese military actions at the LAC are responsible for the "abnormal" state of ties, China continually attempts to

downplay the border situation. Unless Beijing displays greater sensitivity to the Indian position, improvement in relations is unlikely.

## BANGLADESH

### Political Developments

Amidst a poll boycott by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and a low voter turnout of 40 per cent, Sheikh Hasina returned to power. The US State Department has said that elections in Bangladesh were not "free or fair" and "noted" that Awami League won the polls. It has expressed concerns over the arrest of opposition activists, condemned the violence during the elections, and regretted that all parties didn't participate in the polls.<sup>26</sup>

Irrespective of the manner in which the elections were held, most countries have embraced the new government. New Delhi would be happy to see the return of Hasina as India-Bangladesh cooperation has deepened under her regime. Hasina's administration has cooperated with India on key security issues, including counterterrorism efforts and controlling anti-India extremist elements.

Mao Ning, spokesperson of the Chinese foreign ministry, said that China is ready to work with the new Bangladesh government to carry forward the friendship. She reiterated that China would promote "high-quality" Belt and Road cooperation and pursue greater progress for China-Bangladesh Strategic Partnership of Cooperation.<sup>27</sup>

Ambassador of the European Union (EU) to Bangladesh Charles Whiteley said the EU is eyeing a "step change" in its relations with Bangladesh in the next five years, deepening the ties in core areas.<sup>28</sup> German Ambassador Achim Tröster has said that he is "happy" to see the election day was "rather peaceful" and that Germany is a reliable partner of Bangladesh.

The challenge to the Hasina government could come from street protests by the BNP and an economic headwind. Of these two challenges, the financial situation is more serious. The World Economic Forum's latest Global Risks Report notes that rapid inflation, debt crisis, severe commodity price shocks, human-made environmental damage, and geopolitical contestation of resources are the top five risks for Bangladesh over the next two years.<sup>29</sup>

Due to a shortage of gas, 60 per cent of gas is being supplied against the total demand, disrupting production in industries such as ceramics, steel, and textile. Inflation is running at 10 per cent, and foreign exchange reserves have

fallen to less than \$20 billion from a peak of \$48 billion in August 2021. If there is political instability, it could hamper the government's steps in dealing with the economic situation.

## NEPAL

### India-Nepal Ties

Dr S Jaishankar visited Nepal from January 4-5 at the invitation of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Nepal, N P Saud. The two Ministers co-chaired the 7th meeting of the India-Nepal Joint Commission, which reviewed the entire spectrum of bilateral cooperation, including developmental partnership.<sup>30</sup>

During the visit, a number of agreements were signed between the two countries. Both nations committed to the implementation of High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) in Nepal, with the budgetary allocation for such projects increasing from NPR 5 crore to NPR 20 crore.

An agreement on Long-Term Power Trade outlined a commitment to progressively increase power export from Nepal to India to 10,000 MW within the next decade. Both countries will take all necessary measures to encourage mutually beneficial investments in Nepal's hydropower generation sector and transmission infrastructure.

The visit also witnessed the joint inauguration of three 132 kV cross-border transmission lines connecting India and Nepal. These included the second circuit of the Raxaul-Parwanipur line, the second circuit of the Kataiya-Kusaha line, and the New Nautanwa-Mainhiya lines.

Furthermore, India announced a substantial financial assistance package to support the reconstruction efforts in the aftermath of the Jajarkot earthquake, totalling approximately NPR 1000 crores, with a significant portion provided as grant assistance.

Some opposition parties criticised the HICDP agreement, alleging that it is against the Nepali people's sovereignty and sovereign rights. Former prime minister and senior leader of CPN (Unified Socialist) Jhalnath Khanal said, "An unimaginable anti-national agreement has been reached to allow foreign embassies to directly implement plans worth Rs 200 million." Raghuji Pant, leader of the main opposition party, CPN-UML, asserted that the agreement would allow undue political influence, behaviour and interference.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the reaction from some members of the opposition, Dr Jaishankar's visit reaffirmed India's "Neighbourhood First" policy, prioritising Nepal as a key partner. It emphasised cooperation on various fronts and aimed to strengthen further the close historical and cultural ties between the two nations.

## BHUTAN

### Elections in Bhutan

Bhutan's liberal People's Democratic Party (PDP), led by Tshering Tobgay, formed a new government after winning the parliamentary elections. The PDP won 30 seats in the 47-member National Assembly, with the rest of the seats going to the Bhutan Tendrel Party (BTP).

Tobgay became prime minister for the second time; his first tenure was from 2103 to 2018. The new government faces an economic crisis. Bhutan has had an average growth rate of a mere 1.7 per cent in the last five years. It faces high inflation and youth unemployment (29 per cent), and its business and tourism sectors have yet to recover from COVID-19. The country's borrowings and imports have increased, revenues have dwindled, and foreign reserves have reached US\$ 467 million—just US\$3 million above the minimum threshold.<sup>32</sup>

Bhutan needs India's continuing support for its economic recovery. Vinay Mohan Kwatra, the Indian foreign secretary, visited Bhutan from January 29 to 31. He held wide-ranging discussions on all aspects of the bilateral relationship, including development partnership, the 13th Five Year Plan, cooperation in energy, trade, technology, connectivity, infrastructure, and economic ties.<sup>33</sup>

In 2020, China and Bhutan negotiated a three-step roadmap to demarcate borders and signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2021. Twenty-five rounds of border negotiations have also been held. Despite a change in the government, talks with China are likely to continue, even as Thimphu keeps Indian strategic interests in view while discussing the boundary in the Dokalam area.

## MALDIVES

### Tensions in India-Maldives Ties

Amidst a diplomatic row with India over derogatory remarks by his ministers against Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu embarked on a five-day visit to China. The two countries agreed to elevate China-Maldives relations to a comprehensive strategic cooperative

partnership and signed 20 key agreements. China is now the Maldives' biggest bilateral creditor, ahead of other countries, including India and Saudi Arabia.

A joint statement issued during the visit stated: "The two sides agree to continue firmly supporting each other in safeguarding their respective core interests. China firmly supports the Maldives in upholding its national sovereignty, independence and national dignity, respects and supports the Maldives' exploration of a development path that suits its national conditions, and firmly opposes external interference in the internal affairs of the Maldives."<sup>34</sup>

On his return from China, Muizzu struck a defiant note, saying, "We may be small, but this doesn't give them the license to bully us."<sup>35</sup> While he did not name any country, the reference was apparently towards India. Muizzu has also set March 15 as the deadline for India to withdraw its military personnel from the Maldives.<sup>36</sup>

In a continuing pro-China tilt, Maldives announced that a Chinese research vessel, whose activities in the Indian Ocean had previously raised red flags, has been granted permission to dock at Malé port.<sup>37</sup> Although the foreign ministry said that the vessel would not conduct any research in Maldivian waters, the activities of Chinese research vessels in the Indian Ocean have been a long-standing security concern for India.

The opposition is criticising Muizzu's anti-India stance. The Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and the Democrats addressed a press conference in which they stated, "The current administration appears to be making a stark pivot towards an anti-India stance. Both the MDP and the Democrats believe alienating any development partner, and especially the country's most long-standing ally, will be extremely detrimental to the long-term development of the country."<sup>38</sup> The two parties have decided to initiate impeachment proceedings against President Muizzu.

On January 18, External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar met his Maldivian counterpart Moosa Zameer in the margins of the NAM Summit in Uganda's Kampala. Zameer posted on X, "We exchanged views on the ongoing high-level discussions on the withdrawal of Indian military personnel, as well as expediting the completion of ongoing development projects in the Maldives, and cooperation within SAARC and NAM. We are committed to further strengthening and expanding our cooperation."<sup>39</sup>

The future of India-Maldives relations appears to be in flux, influenced by the Maldives' growing alignment with China and the resulting redefinition of its

ties with India. The outcome of these developments and their impact on regional dynamics will be crucial to observe in the coming months.

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