



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:

The opening session of the Special Envoys on Afghanistan in Doha, Qatar, on February 18, 2024.

Source: State of Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Pakistan Peoples Party leader Asif Zardari and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz leader Shabaz Sharif, meet in Lahore on February 11, 2024. Source: @MediaCellPPP

India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar met Mr. Anura Kumara Dissanayake, Leader of the National People's Power (NPP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) of Sri Lanka in New Delhi on February 5, 2024. Source: MEA India

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India's Strategic Neighbourhood

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

AFGHANISTAN

International Humanitarian Aid

Even as Afghanistan reels under a severe humanitarian crisis, there is little consensus and clarity on how international aid should be provided. Taliban's clampdown on the rights of women and girls and the attention to the ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza have resulted in visible donor fatigue. The United Nations Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan 2024 has projected a requirement of \$3.06 billion, of which only 2.8 per cent has been funded till now.¹

In August 2023, the World Food Program in Afghanistan removed 18 million people experiencing "serious food insecurity" and 3.4 million people experiencing "critical food insecurity" from its assistance programs because funding appeals had fallen short. These cuts came on top of earlier reductions in June 2023 that removed eight million food-insecure Afghans from assistance and another 1.4 million new and expecting mothers and children from malnutrition treatment because of a downturn in international funding.²

On February 26, 11 of the 15 UN Security Council members demanded that the Taliban rescind all policies and decrees oppressing and discriminating against women and girls, including banning girls' education above the sixth grade and women's right to work and move freely.³ However, differences remain in developing a roadmap that would enable humanitarian assistance while pushing the Taliban to improve the human rights situation.

These differences were evident in the two-day meeting at Doha hosted by the Secretary-General of the United Nations on February 18 and 19. The conference saw the attendance of envoys from over 25 countries and several humanitarian organisations. The Taliban refused to attend, saying participation was "unbeneficial" if the UN did not see them as the sole representatives of Afghanistan.⁴

In a press conference after the meeting, the UN Secretary-General stated that participants have agreed on many issues regarding how to engage with

Afghanistan and the Taliban. He deemed it effective and constructive but added that challenges still exist in the global community's interaction with the Taliban.

Russia supported the Taliban's decision not to attend "as they were offered to take part only in a marginal part of the meeting." Questioning the selection of the invited Afghan civil society members, the Russian delegation refused to engage with them. China's special envoy for Afghanistan, Yue Xiaoyong, also signalled some disagreements. Yue told reporters, "Some of the members also emphasised the need to unfreeze the overseas assets of \$7 billion to Afghanistan - the need to lift the unilateral sanction[s] by the United States."⁵

The outcome of the Doha conference underscores the complexities of international diplomacy concerning Afghanistan. It highlights the challenges in engaging with the Taliban to ensure the country's progress on critical issues. The international community remains at a crossroads, seeking pathways to effectively support the Afghan people while navigating the realities of Taliban control.

Internal Security

The thirty-third report of the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team on the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida was released on January 29.⁶ The report highlights the intricate and evolving landscape of terrorist networks within Afghanistan, their relationships with each other, and the ongoing threat they pose to regional and potentially global security.

Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIL-K) is identified as a major threat within Afghanistan, possessing the capability to project influence regionally. Despite facing territorial losses, leadership casualties, and attrition, ISIL-K continues to target Shia communities, the Taliban, and civilians. While the Taliban claims to have defeated the ISIL-K, terrorist attacks continue. ISIL-K has adapted by recruiting more inclusively, welcoming non-Salafists and even attracting disillusioned Taliban and foreign fighters.

The relationship between the Taliban and Al-Qaida persists, with Al-Qaida operating under Taliban protection in Afghanistan. This relationship includes shared ideologies and operational tactics despite efforts by the Taliban to minimise the visibility of these connections. The efforts to constrain some Al-Qaida activities have reportedly caused tensions between Al-Qaida and the Taliban. Al-Qaida was reported to have established up to eight new training

camps in Afghanistan, with a new base to stockpile weaponry in the Panjshir Valley.

The Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has grown stronger and more autonomous, launching attacks with assistance from the Taliban, Al-Qaida, and Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). With the consent of senior Al-Qaida leaders, AQIS selected approximately 15 commanders to assist TTP with attacks in Pakistan. The Taliban's sympathetic stance towards TTP's goals, along with logistical and material support, underscores the complex interplay between these groups. Despite directives against operations outside Afghanistan, TTP's activities continue unabated, with new bases established for training suicide bombers.

After relocation from Badakhshan Province, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement/Turkistan Islamic Party (ETIM/TIP) is now headquartered in Baghlan Province, with operational networks extending to multiple provinces. The group focuses on training youth in reserve forces and increases female recruitment and training. Regional States have expressed continuing concern for its collaboration with other terrorist groups, especially TTP, in recruitment, training, planning attacks and posing a regional threat.

PAKISTAN

Pakistan Elections

The February 8, 2024, elections in Pakistan were a focal point of national and international attention, not just for the change in political leadership they promised but also for the myriad challenges and controversies surrounding them.

The electoral process was severely impacted by violence, highlighting the fragile security situation in the country. There was a surge in attacks targeting contesting candidates and offices of the election commission. A day before the elections, bombs ripped through two separate political offices in Balochistan, killing at least 30 people.⁷ These incidents were part of a broader pattern of violence that raised concerns over the safety of voters and the integrity of the electoral process.

The election's aftermath was clouded by delays in announcing results, leading to widespread speculations and concerns over the transparency of the counting process. The government's decision to suspend cellular services further exacerbated these concerns, making it difficult for information to flow

freely.⁸ This lack of immediate clarity and open communication channels fostered an environment ripe for rumours and allegations of tampering.

The electoral process had already been tainted by allegations of pre-poll rigging, with the military establishment accused of unduly influencing the outcome in favour of Nawaz Sharif's PML-N. The PTI had been stripped of its election symbol, forcing its candidates to fight the elections as independents. These accusations were not confined within the country; the United States, United Kingdom, and European Union separately expressed concerns about Pakistan's electoral process and urged a probe into reported irregularities.⁹

Amidst calls by Imran Khan for nationwide protests against rigging in the polls, Rawalpindi Commissioner Liaquat Ali Chatha resigned from his office on February 17 after claiming that the results of the elections had been manipulated. Speaking to reporters, Chatha said, "I am taking responsibility for all this wrongdoing." He alleged that the chief election commissioner and a top judge of the Supreme Court were "involved in this."¹⁰ He later retracted his claim, stating that he had made the rigging charges at the behest of ex-prime minister Imran Khan's party, which offered him a "lucrative position."¹¹

The election results revealed a politically fragmented landscape. Independent candidates, many backed by the former Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), secured a notable 103 seats, indicating a significant portion of the electorate's preference for non-traditional party candidates. The Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) won 75 and 54 seats, respectively, with these parties dominating in the Punjab and Sindh provinces. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the majority of seats were won by candidates aligned with the PTI, reflecting the party's strong foothold in the region. Balochistan's preferences were divided, with voters favouring both the PPP and PML-N. These results underscored the regional divides and the complex political allegiances across Pakistan.

In response to the fragmented electoral outcome, the PML-N and PPP decided to form a coalition government after intense political negotiations. Shehbaz Sharif, representing the PML-N, was announced as the prime minister, while former president Asif Ali Zardari would be the coalition candidate for President.¹² On February 26, Maryam Nawaz, the daughter of Nawaz Sharif, became the first woman chief minister of Pakistan's Punjab, securing 220 votes in the 371-seat provincial assembly.

Meanwhile, the PTI announced that its independent candidates will join the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) in a bid to secure a portion of the seats reserved for women and minorities.¹³ These seats are only provided to political parties and

not to independent candidates. The SIC has approached the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), seeking the allocation of reserved seats in the National Assembly and provincial legislatures. The ECP has yet to take a decision on the SIC request.

The new government would inherit a plethora of challenges, with the economic crisis at the forefront. The country grapples with high unemployment rates and skyrocketing prices for basic goods and energy, demanding immediate and effective policy responses. Beyond economic issues, the government must also navigate the political aftermath of the elections, marred by allegations of rigging and a general mistrust in the process. Restoring public confidence and ensuring the stability of the democratic process are paramount for the new administration. However, there is little certainty that a weak coalition would be able to meet these challenges effectively.

Economic Crisis

The economic crisis in Pakistan has been a focal point of concern both domestically and internationally, characterised by a complex interplay of structural weaknesses, political instability, and external pressures.

The soaring inflation rate is one of the most pressing issues facing the country. The State Bank of Pakistan has forecasted that the average inflation in the fiscal year 2024, ending June, would be between 23 and 25 per cent.¹⁴ The inflationary pressure has been driven by a combination of factors, including currency depreciation, increases in energy prices, and supply chain disruptions.

The burden of public debt has continued to grow, consuming a significant portion of the government's budget in debt servicing costs. A report by Islamabad-based think tank Tabadlab has stated that Pakistan's debt profile is "alarming" while the country's borrowing and spending habits were "unsustainable." The 68-page report, titled 'A raging fire: Pakistan's debt crisis', has stated that the country's total debt and liabilities — including domestic and external debt — were at \$271.2 billion.¹⁵

Since 2011, Pakistan's external debt has nearly doubled while the domestic debt has increased six-fold, of which the country would need to pay back an estimated \$49.5 billion in debt maturities in 2024, 30 per cent of it being interest. The report states, "Unless there are sweeping reforms and dramatic changes to the status quo, Pakistan will continue to sink deeper, headed towards an inevitable default, which would be the start of the spiral."

Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves stood at \$8.01 billion in the week ended February 16, 2024, which can only cover 1.5 months of imports.¹⁶ The depreciation of the Pakistani rupee against the dollar by almost 20 per cent in 2023 has further exacerbated the situation, inflating the cost of imports, particularly for energy and raw materials, which are crucial for the country's economy.

The current account deficit, estimated at -2.5 per cent of the GDP, has been another area of concern, reflecting the imbalance between the country's export earnings and import expenditure. Despite efforts to curb imports and promote exports, the deficit has remained a persistent challenge, contributing to the strain on foreign exchange reserves.

In response to the crisis, the Pakistani government Pakistan plans to seek a new loan of at least \$6 billion from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to help the incoming government repay billions of dollars in debt due this year, according to a Pakistani official. Islamabad will seek to negotiate an Extended Fund Facility with the IMF, the official said, asking not to be identified as the discussions are private.¹⁷

The new government faces the daunting task of balancing austerity measures with the need to support economic growth and protect the vulnerable segments of the population. The economic outlook for Pakistan remains challenging, with the need for comprehensive reforms in fiscal management, the energy sector, and governance structures. Political stability and policy consistency will be crucial for restoring confidence among investors and international partners.

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

Situation at the LAC

There was no tangible breakthrough in the 21st round of the India-China Corps Commander Level Meeting that took place at the Chushul-Moldo border meeting point in Ladakh on February 19. The official statement of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs stated that the discussions built on the previous rounds, seeking complete disengagement in the remaining areas along the LAC in Eastern Ladakh as an essential basis for the restoration of peace and tranquillity in the India-China border areas. The talks were held in a friendly and cordial atmosphere, and the two sides agreed to maintain communication through the relevant military and diplomatic mechanisms. They also

committed to maintaining peace and tranquillity on the ground in the border areas in the interim.¹⁸

The Chinese Ministry of National Defense statement was somewhat similar but did not mention disengagement. It stated that “the two sides engaged in positive, in-depth and constructive communication on resolving the issues of each other's concern in the border areas. Both sides agreed to maintain communication through military and diplomatic channels under the guidance of the important consensus reached by the leaders of the two countries and reach a mutually acceptable solution at an early date so as to turn over a new leaf for the border situation.”¹⁹

Meanwhile, military capability enhancement continues on both sides. Indian media reports indicate that Headquarters Uttar Bharat Area, an administrative formation under the Central Command, is being converted into a full-fledged corps called the 18 Corps. With one division and three independent brigades under it, this corps will be in charge of the LAC in the Central Sector. With the raising of the 18 Corps, the Army will now have a total of seven corps dedicated to guarding the borders with China, up from the earlier five.²⁰

The restructuring of the Indian Army is part of an ongoing process to strengthen its deployment on the northern borders through a mix of new raisings and redeployment of forces from the western borders. This is supported by a significant push towards improving the road network along the LAC. The 12.04 km long Sela Tunnel, built at an altitude of 13,000 ft from the sea level, has been completed. This will provide all-weather connectivity to the strategically important Tawang Sector in Arunachal Pradesh.²¹

China has been constructing 628 Xiaokang, or “well-off villages” along India's borders with the Tibet Autonomous Region for the past five years. These are located all along the LAC, including the Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh borders. Recent reports indicate that these are now being expanded and occupied by Chinese nationals.²²

There is similar activity on the Tibet-Bhutan border. At least three villages have been built in the disputed areas along the border. Latest satellite imagery shows that these villages have significantly expanded in the last three years. Local officials and state media have admitted that the villages have a dual function – to provide modern housing and defend the border.²³

India-China ties remain strained over the ongoing standoff at the LAC. During the INDUS-X Summit between India and the United States, held in New Delhi, the Indian Defence Secretary, Giridhar Aramane, said that India is standing

against a "bully" in a very "determined fashion." Referring to the situation at the LAC, he stated, "The one thing which helped us very quickly in the entire episode was the intelligence, the situation awareness, which the US equipment and US government could help us with."²⁴

Aramane also stated, "A strong resolve that we support each other in the face of a common threat is going to be of critical importance to us." This is perhaps the most explicit assertion by an Indian official that India and the US need to come together to face a common challenge from China.

External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar had a more nuanced response to India-China relations. Speaking at a media summit organised by the TV9 Network, Jaishankar stated that the rise of India and China is changing the world order. Maintaining an equilibrium in such a situation is complicated. Earlier, the equilibrium was attempted to be maintained through diplomacy, but what happened in 2020 called for a different response.

He said, "The logical thing for us to do, which is what we did, was we moved our forces and in a very big way. So from 2020, you have an equilibrium, one part of which is the military posture in the border areas, one part of it today obviously is the political relationship impacted by this border situation."²⁵

BANGLADESH

India Out Campaign

An "India Out" campaign has begun in Bangladesh, fuelled by allegations of Indian interference in Bangladesh's political affairs, including the recent national elections. The Bangladeshi diaspora and opposition groups have driven this anti-India movement and advocated boycotts of Indian products.²⁶

The campaign has been amplified by social media, with hashtags like #BoycottIndianProducts and involves a mix of grievances and misinformation, including unfounded claims and fake news. The EU Election Observation Mission said that multiple anti-India disinformation campaigns were based on the theme of fears of "Indian influences and anxiety regarding the presence of Indian military personnel inside the country."²⁷

There have been some reports of a drop in sales of Indian products in Dhaka and Chittagong. This suggests that the campaign has had some effect on consumer behaviour regarding Indian goods, such as cooking oil, processed foods, toiletry, cosmetics, and clothing. However, some Indian traders and

vendors have stated that they have not seen any significant impact on their sales.²⁸

Any economic impact of the “India Out” would be felt deeply in Bangladesh, which depends on India for approximately 20 per cent of its imports. These imports include food staples, petroleum products and cotton, which is vital for the garment sector (Bangladesh’s main export item). In contrast, Bangladesh represents only around 3.5% of India's total export market.

India has sought to downplay the events in Bangladesh. During an interaction with students at the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Mumbai, Dr Jaishankar was asked if India's foreign policy was failing and that it was losing its neighbours like Maldives and Bangladesh to China. Jaishankar replied, “I don't think we should be scared of China. I think we should say, okay, global politics is a competitive game. China is a major economy, it will deploy resources. It will try and shape things in China's way. Why should we expect otherwise? But the answer to that is not to complain about what China is doing. The answer is you are doing it. Let me do better.”²⁹

Despite the opposition campaign, bilateral ties remain strong. Bangladesh Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr Hasan Mahmud visited India from February 7 to 9. During his meeting with Dr Jaishankar, the two sides reviewed the progress in wide-ranging areas of bilateral relations, including cross-border connectivity, economic and development partnership, cooperation in defence and security, power, energy, water resources and people-to-people exchanges.³⁰

Speaking on the “India Out” campaign, Dr Mahmud said, “The anti-India sentiments there are diminishing... Anti-Indian elements are there in Bangladesh, and those who spread that issue try to utilise anti-India sentiments from time to time, but it is diminishing.”³¹

SRI LANKA

India-Sri Lanka Ties

Anura Kumara Dissanayake, leader of the Sri Lankan political party National People’s Power (NPP), visited New Delhi on India’s invitation from February 5 to 10. During his visit, he discussed regional security issues and bilateral ties between India and Sri Lanka with Foreign Minister Dr Jaishankar, NSA Ajit Doval and Foreign Secretary Vinay Mohan.

Dissanayake has taken a pro-India stance. Last year, he was quoted as saying, "We do know that India, who is our closest neighbour, has become a major political and economic centre. So, when we take economic and political decisions, we will always care about how it will impact India."³²

The visit also assumes importance because of the rising popularity of Dissanayake. A recent survey conducted by the Institute for Health Policy, a Colombo-based research institution, shows that Dissanayake is the most preferred candidate to secure the presidential elections, scheduled to be held later this year. As many as 50 per cent of respondents in the survey said they would cast their ballot for Dissanayake, followed by Sajith Premadasa (33 per cent) and President Ranil Wickremesinghe (nine per cent).³³

On February 12, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, along with the President of Sri Lanka, Ranil Wickremesinghe and the Prime Minister of Mauritius, Pravind Jugnauth, virtually inaugurated the launch of Unified Payment Interface (UPI) services in Sri Lanka and Mauritius, and also RuPay card services in Mauritius. The launch will enable the availability of UPI settlement services for Indian nationals travelling to Sri Lanka and Mauritius, as well as for Mauritian nationals travelling to India.

Calling it a special day, Prime Minister Modi said, "Today we are connecting our historical relations in a modern digital way. This is proof of our commitment to the development of our people. Through Fintech connectivity, not only cross-border transactions but also cross-border connections will be strengthened. India's Unified Payments Interface, i.e. UPI, is now performing a new responsibility - Uniting Partners with India."³⁴

MALDIVES

India-Maldives Ties

The second meeting of the India-Maldives core group, held in New Delhi on February 2, led to an agreement between the two countries on the issue of Indian military personnel stationed in Maldives. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs said that both countries had "agreed on a set of mutually workable solutions to enable continued operation of Indian aviation platforms that provide humanitarian and medvac services to the people of Maldives."³⁵

The Maldivian foreign ministry statement said, "Both sides agreed that the Government of India will replace the military personnel in one of the three aviation platforms by 10 March 2024, and will complete replacing military personnel in the other two platforms by 10 May 2024." The statement added,

"Both sides reviewed the existing bilateral cooperation for improving and enhancing the partnership in the fields of defence and security cooperation, economic and development partnership."³⁶

There is some softening of positions by both sides, but uncertainty remains over the future of ties that have been strained over Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu's anti-India stance. The Maldivian opposition has been critical of Muizzu's policies, and the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and the Democrats have decided to move a motion to impeach the President.

Abdulla Shahid, the leader of the MDP, has defended Male's close ties with New Delhi, emphasising that "muddying ties with India is impossible" regardless of the foreign policy changes made by the new government.³⁷ Muizzu, on the other hand, has accused the opposition of being influenced by "certain foreign parties."³⁸

Meanwhile, discounting India's concerns about Chinese research vessels in the Indian Ocean, Maldives permitted Xiang Yang Hong 03, owned by a research institute that reports to China's natural resources ministry, to dock a Male on February 22.³⁹ Chinese claims that its vessels are conducting research "exclusively" for peaceful purposes have been rejected by experts as the data being obtained can be used by the military for submarine operations.

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