



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

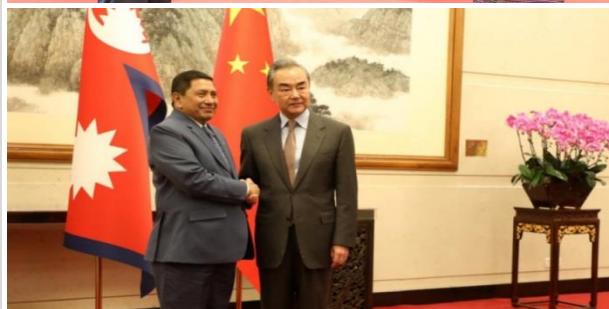


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Author

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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 Images:

Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari administering the oath of the office to the new members of Federal Cabinet on March 11, 2024. Source: X/@PresOfPakistan

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister of Bhutan, DASHO Tshering Tobgay witnessed exchange of several MoUs/Agreements in Thimphu on March 22, 2024. Source: flickr/MEA

Nepal Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Narayan Kaji Shrestha held talks with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi on March 26, 2024 in Beijing. Source: X/@MofaNepal

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India's Strategic Neighbourhood

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

AFGHANISTAN

Terror Threat from ISIS-K

On March 22, armed gunmen stormed the Crocus City Hall in Moscow just as people were taking their seats for a sold-out show by Picnic, a popular rock band. The attackers also set off explosives that ignited a massive blaze. Graphic videos posted on social media showed the gunmen repeatedly firing as they entered the building and shooting people at point-blank range.¹

One hundred thirty-nine people were killed in the attack, which also left hundreds injured. This was the deadliest attack by any group in Russia since the 2004 Beslan siege. Four suspects who were later arrested for the attack are all from Tajikistan. More suspects, including at least one from Kyrgyzstan, have also been picked up. The Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) took responsibility for the attack in a short statement published on Telegram, stating that it was part of "the raging war" with "countries fighting Islam."²

The ISIS-K, based in Afghanistan, poses a threat not only to Kabul but also has the ability to project into the region and beyond. 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 has noted that the ISIS-K is attracting disillusioned Taliban and foreign fighters and has increased its appeal within Tajik networks.³

The UN report also states, "Some individuals of North Caucasus and Central Asian origin travelling from Afghanistan or Ukraine towards Europe represent an opportunity for ISIS-K, which seeks to project violent attacks in the West. Member States noted the existence of current and unfinished operational plots on European soil conducted by ISIS-K."

President Vladimir Putin suggested a link between the attackers and Ukraine when he stated, "They tried to hide and moved towards Ukraine, where, according to preliminary data, a window was prepared for them on the Ukrainian side to cross the state border."⁴ However, the more accepted view is that the perpetrators of the attack were ISIS-K terrorists.

Regional countries, including India, have long expressed concern about the spread of terrorism from Afghanistan. The Moscow attack should spur a comprehensive regional approach to counterterrorism and greater pressure on the Taliban to shun their selective approach and root out all terror groups operating in the country.

Deteriorating Pakistan-Afghanistan Ties

Pakistan has been facing the brunt of terror attacks by groups based in Afghanistan. On March 16, a group of six militants stormed a Frontier Corps' post in the Mir Ali area of North Waziristan. The attack left five security personnel dead. In a subsequent clearance operation against the militants, Lieutenant Colonel Syed Kashif Ali and Captain Muhammad Ahmed Badar were killed. A group affiliated with Hafiz Gul Bahadur, previously a government contractor and a good Taliban-turned-militant leader, claimed responsibility for the attack.⁵

At the funeral of the two officers on March 17, President Asif Ali Zardari asserted that the blood of the martyrs would not go in vain and the country would avenge the deaths. He said Pakistan would not hesitate to strike back if attacked by anyone at borders or inside its territory.⁶ A day later, Pakistan Air Force carried out airstrikes in Afghanistan's Paktika and Khost provinces.

Stating that the operation targeted the Hafiz Gul Bahadur group, the Pakistan Foreign Office said, "We have repeatedly urged the Afghan authorities to take concrete and effective action to ensure that the Afghan soil is not used as a staging ground for terrorism against Pakistan. We have also called on them to deny safe havens to the TTP and to hand over its leadership to Pakistan."⁷

Afghan government spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid said that Pakistani aircraft bombed civilian homes, killing eight people. In retaliation, the Defence Ministry of Afghanistan stated that the border forces of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan targeted the military bases of the Pakistan army across the Durand Line with heavy weapons. In the cross-border firing, one Pakistani officer was killed and three soldiers injured.⁸

Amid escalating tensions between Islamabad and Kabul, Pakistan's defence minister, Khwaja Asif, warned the Taliban that his country could block a corridor it provides to allow trade with India if the Afghan government fails to rein in the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP). According to the World Bank, Kabul's trade with India increased 43 per cent to USD 570 million last year, while its trade with Islamabad has shrunk from more than USD 4 billion a decade ago to less than \$1 billion.⁹

Terrorist attacks from Afghanistan into Pakistan have emerged as the most significant source of friction between the two countries. With the Taliban unwilling to crack down on the TTP, tensions in bilateral ties are likely to persist. A recently leaked video clip on social media showed an Afghan Taliban member, identified as Yahya, assisting Pakistani terrorists based in Afghanistan in planning a cross-border attack on Pakistani troops deployed along the border.

Taliban's Regional Engagements

On March 7, JP Singh, the joint secretary of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs for the Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran division, met Afghanistan's foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi. The press release issued by the Afghanistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that India had expressed interest in expanding political and economic cooperation with Afghanistan and enhancing trade through Chabahar port.¹⁰ Spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs of India, Randhir Jaiswal, later affirmed this development and added that the "Indian delegation also held meetings with former President Mr Hamid Karzai, UNAMA officials and members of the Afghan business community."¹¹

Iranian Special Envoy to Kabul, Hassan Kazemi Qomi, announced that the Taliban administration in Afghanistan has committed to a USD 35 million investment in Iran's Chabahar port. In the backdrop of tensions in Pakistan-Taliban relations, the investment in Chabahar is viewed as a strategic effort by the Taliban to secure an alternative route for its trade and to bolster its economy.¹² Later, on March 14, an Iranian delegation held talks in Kabul, which focused on setting up a new customs office and inking an agriculture deal to boost ties between the Taliban government and the Islamic Republic.¹³

Despite not having gained international recognition, the Taliban is being increasingly accepted by the regional countries. The underlying reason for this is the concern over regional security, particularly the threat from the plethora of transnational terrorist organisations operating from Afghanistan. Moreover, there is a pragmatic understanding that a stable Afghanistan under Taliban rule is preferable to a return to civil war or factional chaos.

The downside of an increasing acceptance of Taliban rule is that there is little pressure on Kabul to roll back the growing erosion of human rights, especially the rights of women. In a recent voice message aired on state television, Taliban's Supreme Leader Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada said, "You say it's a violation of women's rights when we stone them to death. But we will soon

implement the punishment for adultery. We will flog women in public. We will stone them to death in public."¹⁴

PAKISTAN

Economic Crisis

After the contentious elections, marked by unexpected results and accusations of manipulation, Pakistan has some semblance of political stability. Shehbaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N) was sworn in as the Prime Minister, while Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leader Asif Ali Zardari took the oath as President. Supporters of Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) continue to protest, but the new Pakistan leadership's real attention is on the country's economic crisis.

In his first speech as Prime Minister, Shehbaz Sharif lamented the country's alarming debt crisis, saying that even the National Assembly's expenditures were being paid through borrowed money.¹⁵ While presiding over a meeting of the Special Investment Facilitation Council Shehbaz Sharif said Islamabad needed another bailout package from the Fund, which he linked to across-the-board structural and economic reforms. He said, "We cannot survive without a new IMF agreement which will span two to three years."¹⁶

On March 20, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) confirmed Pakistan was seeking a 24th medium-term bailout package for a permanent push towards longstanding structural reforms. It said Pakistan "expressed interest in a successor medium-term Fund-supported programme with the aim of permanently resolving Pakistan's fiscal and external sustainability weaknesses, strengthening its economic recovery, and laying the foundations for strong, sustainable, and inclusive growth."¹⁷

In an attempt to stabilise the nation's faltering economy, the newly elected government has embarked on crafting a detailed five-year strategy to rejuvenate key economic sectors. Shehbaz Sharif chaired a high-level meeting on March 14 to prepare a comprehensive roadmap for the country's economic resurgence.¹⁸ However, similar exercises conducted in the past have failed to revive the economy as they have yet to address long-term structural reforms.

Consider the example of the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC). On 20 June 2023, the Government of Pakistan approved the establishment of the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), a facility to act as a "single window" to facilitate investors, establish cooperation among all Government

departments, and fast-track project development.¹⁹ Surprisingly, the military was given a significant role in the new body.

The Apex Committee, which presides over the programme, is run jointly by the Prime Minister and the Chief of Army Staff. The National Coordinator of the Apex and Executive Committees and Director General of the Implementation Committee are all from the Pakistan Army.²⁰ Some economic experts have pointed out that the presence of the army chief on the apex committee of the SIFC, while the military has direct commercial interests, undermines the confidence that the policymakers will be able to achieve their desired objective.²¹

India-Pakistan Ties

During a press conference in London on March 23, Pakistan Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar expressed an intent to reconsider bilateral trade with India, suspended since August 2019. He stated that Pakistani businessmen want trade with India to resume and that this matter would be seriously examined.²²

Trade between the two countries via the land route has been completely stopped, but some trade is happening via the sea route. From July 2023 to February 2024, Pakistan's imports from India stood at \$138.72 million, while exports were \$0.2 million.²³ In 2018-19, India's exports to Pakistan stood at \$2.06 billion, while imports were \$495 million.²⁴

On March 28, Pakistan Foreign Office spokesperson Mumtaz Zahra Baloch confirmed that the Foreign Office was reviewing a proposal to resume trade with India. The spokesperson said, "Examination of such proposals is a regular exercise in the government of Pakistan, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where we continue to consider all such requests and assess our policy."²⁵

Trade with India will come as a relief to cash-strapped Pakistan, but its resumption will depend on whether Pakistan is ready to take a realistic view of the Kashmir issue and clamp down on cross-border terrorism.

On March 23, Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari raked up the Kashmir issue during his address on the country's Resolution Day. Zardari said, "In our region, one of the main reasons for instability is the Indian illegal occupation of Jammu and Kashmir. We condemn the brutalities, human rights violations carried out by the Indian government against innocent unarmed Kashmiri people. I want to tell the Kashmiris that Pakistan will always stand by them in their just struggle against tyranny."²⁶

Pakistan also raised the issue of Kashmir at the 148th Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Assembly in Geneva. Responding strongly, the Indian representative, Rajya Sabha Deputy Chairman Harivansh Narayan Singh, said, "As regards the Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, they have been and will always remain an integral and inalienable part of India. No amount of rhetoric and propaganda from anyone can override this fact. Instead, Pakistan would be well advised to stop its terror factories that continue to launch countless cross-border terrorist attacks in Jammu and Kashmir while farcically claiming to champion the cause of human rights."²⁷

Currently, there is little appetite among the Indian leadership to engage with Pakistan. If Islamabad continues with its Kashmir rhetoric, there are minimal chances of any breakthrough in ties.

Internal Security

March saw multiple terrorist attacks targeting critical infrastructure and security force installations. On March 20, a group of eight terrorists attempted to enter the Gwadar Port Authority Colony. The attack was thwarted, but two soldiers lost their lives.²⁸ On March 25, Pakistan's second-largest naval air base, PNS Siddique, in Balochistan province's Turbat city, came under an armed terrorist attack. Locals said that over a dozen blasts were heard in Turbat, while the firing, which began around 10 pm, continued late into the night. A Balochistan Frontier Corps soldier and four terrorists were killed in the attack.²⁹

The Majeed Brigade of the proscribed Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) claimed responsibility for both attacks. The Majeed Brigade, which is the suicide squad of the BLA, mainly targets security forces and Chinese interests in Pakistan.

The most serious incident occurred on March 26, when five Chinese nationals and a Pakistani driver were killed after a suicide attacker rammed his explosive-laden vehicle into their bus near Bisham in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The bus was travelling from Islamabad to Dasu, the site of a key hydroelectric dam being constructed by a Chinese company.³⁰

Pakistan was quick to point out that the attack had been carried out by "certain foreign elements" who were the "enemies of Pakistan-China friendship."³¹ The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while asking for a thorough investigation, stated, "China and Pakistan are all-weather strategic cooperative partners and iron-clad brothers, and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) greatly contributes to the socioeconomic development of Pakistan. No attempt to undermine China-Pakistan cooperation will succeed."³²

Despite the official statements, China is very concerned about the security of its nationals working on the CPEC. Power Construction Corporation of China suspended civil works at the Tarbela 5th Extension Hydropower Project in the Swabi district of KP province and laid off over 2,000 workers. Work has also been suspended at the Dasu and Diamer-Bhasha dams, and about 1,000 Chinese engineers working on both projects have stopped operations.³³

Pakistani Foreign Office said the recent Bisham attack would not impact the CPEC. However, increasing attacks on Chinese-related projects could impose caution on Beijing to continue large-scale investments in Pakistan.

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

Situation at the LAC

Despite regular meetings at the military and diplomatic levels, a stalemate continues in Eastern Ladakh at Depsang and Demchok. India and China held the 29th meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC) in Beijing on March 27, but there was no breakthrough.

The Ministry of External Affairs issued a brief statement: "The two sides had an in-depth exchange of views on how to achieve complete disengagement and resolve the remaining issues along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Western Sector of India-China border areas. In the interim, both sides agreed to maintain regular contact through diplomatic and military channels and on the need to uphold peace and tranquility on the ground in the border areas in accordance with existing bilateral agreements and protocols."³⁴

The Chinese statement about the meeting did not talk about 'complete disengagement.' It stated that both sides should "continue to consolidate the previous disengagement outcomes." It also said, "The two sides agreed to focus on the relevant issues on the ground along the border, reach a solution acceptable to both sides as soon as possible, and promote the transition of the border situation into a normalised phase of control and management."³⁵

A normalised phase of border management is not possible till Chinese troops remain at Depsang and Demchok. Indian External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar has made this very clear numerous times. During an interaction with the Indian diaspora in Kuala Lumpur, he said, "My first duty to Indians is to secure the border. I can never compromise on that. There is a Line of Actual Control. We have a tradition of not bringing troops to that line. Both of us have

bases some distance away, which is our traditional deployment place. And we want that normalcy."³⁶

War of Words over Arunachal Pradesh

On March 9, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the Sela Tunnel, the world's longest twin-lane tunnel, in Arunachal Pradesh. The strategically significant tunnel, constructed by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) at a height of 13,700 feet, aims to enhance military mobilisation towards the LAC by connecting Guwahati to the vital Tawang sector. This infrastructure project is significant for India as it ensures all-weather connectivity and reduces travel time to Tawang by at least ninety minutes.³⁷

On March 11, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin, responding to a question on PM Modi's visit to Arunachal Pradesh, said that the "Zangnan [Chinese name for Arunachal Pradesh] area is Chinese territory". He stated, "China never recognised the so-called Arunachal Pradesh illegally set up by India and firmly opposes it. Relevant moves by India only complicate the boundary question. China is strongly dissatisfied with and firmly opposed to the leader's visit to the eastern section of the China-India boundary. We have made solemn representations to India."³⁸

Additionally, Mao Ning, another spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, criticised India's move to station 10,000 additional troops along the border, deeming it counterproductive to easing tensions. Mao Ning reiterated China's commitment to working with India to safeguard the peace and stability of the border areas and stated that India's increase in military deployments in border areas does not help to calm the situation in the border areas or to safeguard peace and safety.³⁹

India has firmly rejected China's objections to the development projects in Arunachal Pradesh. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson, Randhir Jaiswal, stated that Arunachal Pradesh was, is, and will always be an integral and inalienable part of India, emphasising that objecting to such visits or India's developmental projects "does not stand to reason." The MEA made it clear that China's objections would not change the reality of Arunachal Pradesh's status as part of India.⁴⁰

This episode underscores the persistent tensions in India-China ties that do not show signs of moving towards normalisation as long as the border standoff continues.

NEPAL

Political Realignment

On March 4, Nepal's Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' terminated a nearly 15-month partnership with the Nepali Congress due to major differences between the top leadership of the two parties. Prachanda formed a new alliance with former premier KP Sharma Oli's Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist).⁴¹ The new coalition includes the Rastriya Swatantra Party and the Janata Samajwadi Party.

On March 13, Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal secured the vote of confidence in the House of Representatives. Dahal received 157 votes in the 275-member parliament. A total of 110 lawmakers voted against while a member abstained.⁴² This is the third time he has secured a vote of trust in the parliament since becoming prime minister in December 2022. On the same day, President Ramchandra Paudel removed three province heads on the government's recommendation, as they were appointed under the quota of the Nepali Congress when the party was in the ruling coalition.⁴³

There is much speculation about the break-up of the old coalition. Some of the reasons cited include the growing rift between the Congress and the Maoist Centre, especially after Maoist candidate Champa Karki lost the elections to the National Assembly from Koshi Province, and Congress chief Sher Bahadur Deuba's reluctance to replace finance minister Prakash Sharan Mahat, who had strained relations with the prime minister.⁴⁴ Chinese influence is also being seen as a factor in bringing Nepal's two largest communist parties together.

New Delhi would closely monitor Oli's return, as the former prime minister is known for his critical stance towards India. However, Prime Minister Dahal has adopted a positive approach towards India, which could continue. At the same time, China could renew its push to implement the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Nepal.

Nepal and China signed the BRI framework agreement in 2017, but its implementation has yet to start due to serious reservations on the Nepali side. On March 26, during the delegation-level talks between Minister for Foreign Affairs Narayan Kaji Shrestha and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in Beijing, the two sides agreed to sign the BRI implementation plan "as soon as possible."⁴⁵

The new government's survival and ability to implement effective governance remain uncertain. The fragile nature of the current coalition, primarily formed

out of convenience rather than shared ideological commitments, may not bode well for its longevity.

BHUTAN

India-Bhutan Ties

Prime Minister of Bhutan, Tshering Tobgay, visited India from March 14 to 18. Prime Minister Tobgay called on President Droupadi Murmu and held bilateral talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. According to the joint statement, both sides reviewed the progress in various areas of bilateral partnership, including infrastructure development, connectivity, energy, hydropower cooperation, people-to-people exchanges and development cooperation. India has also committed to stepping up support for Bhutan's 13th Five-Year Plan, including considering a request for the Economic Stimulus Program.⁴⁶

This was Prime Minister Tobgay's first overseas visit since assuming office in January 2024. Earlier, on March 13, the Indian cabinet approved the signing of MoUs between India and Bhutan on cooperation in energy efficiency, energy conservation measures, food safety, and the supply of petroleum, oil, lubricants, and related products.

The reciprocal State visit of Prime Minister Modi to Bhutan took place from March 22 to 23. During the visit, the Prime Minister received an audience with Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, the King of Bhutan and Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the Fourth King of Bhutan and held talks with the Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay. Prime Minister Modi was conferred the Order of the Druk Gyalpo, Bhutan's highest civilian decoration, by the King of Bhutan in a public ceremony at Thimphu.⁴⁷

In a joint statement, both sides agreed to "continue with our close coordination and cooperation with each other on issues relating to our national interests" and promote "connectivity in its broadest form, physical connectivity through rail links, roads, air, waterways, trade infrastructure for seamless cross-border movement of goods and services, economic as well as digital connectivity."⁴⁸

A joint vision statement on the "India-Bhutan Energy partnership" was also released by the Prime Ministers of both countries in which two leaders "noted the stellar contribution of clean energy partnership in the development of the hydropower sector of Bhutan, and in providing energy security to the region."⁴⁹

These visits come against the backdrop of increasing Chinese pressure on Bhutan to arrive at a boundary settlement that could be unfavourable to India.

By strengthening ties with Bhutan, India is sending a message about its commitment to regional stability and its readiness to invest in long-term partnerships and counterbalance the strategic challenges posed by China's assertive regional policies.

MALDIVES

Foreign Policy Direction

Male's tilt towards China is becoming evident. On March 5, The Maldivian Defense Ministry announced that it had signed an agreement with Beijing "on China's provision of military assistance" and that the deal would foster "stronger bilateral ties." There were no details of the assistance to be provided, but the ministry said the deal was "gratis" – or given for free.⁵⁰

Speaking about the agreement, President Mohamed Muizzu said, "To obtain the different forms of training required by the Maldives' military and to be granted various non-lethal military equipment free of charge, that is what this agreement is about. These things are being done so that we can stand on our own two feet so that we can have our autonomy and independence."⁵¹

This development comes even as the first batch of Indian military personnel stationed in the Maldives manning a helicopter gifted by India have departed from the island nation after handing over the helicopter's operations to an Indian civilian crew. On March 7, a Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) spokesperson announced that MNDF will have operational authority over the helicopter and the civilian crew that will pilot it.⁵²

On Mar 6, President Muizzu announced that he would not renew an agreement with India to conduct hydrographic surveys. He stated, "We decided not to renew the agreement entered into with the Indian government to scan and acquire all insights and sceneries of our underwater body. All these underwater details are the property of our heritage."⁵³

In an interview with local media 'Mihaaru,' President Muizzu adopted a somewhat reconciliatory tone. He requested debt relief measures from New Delhi while stating that India would continue to remain the Maldives' "closest ally." He further claimed that he has "not taken any action nor made any statements" that may strain the relationship between the two countries.⁵⁴

The reality is that ties between India and the Maldives are getting strained over President Muizzu's pro-China stance, and mere words are insufficient to bring them to an even keel.

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