



# Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



# INDIA STRATEGIC REVIEW

## MAY 2024

### *Author*

Deependra Singh Hooda

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**Delhi Policy Group**

Core 5A, 1st Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi- 110003

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### Author

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.), PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM & Bar, Senior Fellow for Military Strategy, Delhi Policy Group

*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 Images:

*Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif meets UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan in Abi Dhabi, UAE on May 23, 2024. Source: Arab News*

*Indian Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra with Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen, in Dhaka on May 9, 2024. Source: India News Network*

*Maldivian Foreign Minister Moosa Zameer during his visit to India on May 9, 2024, held bilateral meeting with India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S Jaishankar. Source: X/@MoosaZameer*

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## Contents

<b>AFGHANISTAN</b> .....	1
The Humanitarian Crisis.....	1
Threat of Terrorism.....	1
Protests over Poppy Eradication.....	3
<b>PAKISTAN</b> .....	3
Political Developments.....	3
Continuing Economic Crisis.....	4
Protests in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir.....	5
<b>STANDOFF AT THE INDIA-CHINA LINE OF ACTUAL CONTROL (LAC)</b> .....	6
Situation at the LAC.....	6
<b>BANGLADESH</b> .....	7
India-China Competition in Bangladesh.....	7
<b>NEPAL</b> .....	8
India-Nepal Border Dispute.....	8
<b>MALDIVES</b> .....	9
India-Maldives Relations.....	9

# India's Strategic Neighbourhood

by

Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.)

## AFGHANISTAN

### The Humanitarian Crisis

On May 10 and 11, heavy rainfall and flash floods struck northeastern Afghanistan. Over half of Afghanistan, 25 out of 34 provinces, was affected by the floods, which killed at least 300 people and destroyed thousands of homes.<sup>1</sup> Unusually high rainfall followed a dry winter, rendering the ground too hard to absorb water, leading to massive flooding. Unseasonably warm temperatures further complicated the situation by melting mountain snow, causing rivers to overflow.<sup>2</sup>

Afghanistan is highly vulnerable to climate change, and climate-related disasters have worsened the humanitarian crisis in one of the world's poorest countries. On average, 200,000 Afghans are affected by disasters each year, but between January and November last year, that figure shot up above 344,000, with 25 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces suffering a disaster.<sup>3</sup>

Afghanistan's economy has significantly declined since the Taliban took over in August 2021. The country's economy contracted by 25% and is expected to remain stagnant. This economic downturn has resulted in high levels of unemployment and acute food insecurity, affecting nearly 23.7 million people. Many households are experiencing high levels of acute food insecurity, with an estimated 15.8 million people severely affected between November 2023 and March 2024.<sup>4</sup>

Some international aid is pouring in, but it is insufficient to address the deteriorating humanitarian situation. The UN is seeking \$3.06 billion for its 2024 Humanitarian Needs Response Plan (HRP), of which only \$512 million (16.7%) is funded as of May 2024.<sup>5</sup>

### Threat of Terrorism

On May 17, a group of foreign tourists walking through a market in Bamiyan, about 180 kilometres west of the capital Kabul, were fired upon by terrorists. In the shooting, three Spanish tourists and three Afghan nationals were killed, and

eight persons were injured, including four foreigners.<sup>6</sup> The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria-Khorasan (ISIS-K) claimed responsibility for the attack, stating, "fighters shot at Christian tourists and their Shiite companions with machine guns."<sup>7</sup>

Recent assessments warn of the growing threat from ISIS-K. The 2024 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community states that ISIS-K is trying to conduct attacks that undermine the legitimacy of the Taliban regime by expanding attacks against foreign interests in Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup> The UN has stated that it considers the group as the "greatest threat within Afghanistan, with the ability to project a threat into the region and beyond."

The Taliban's operations against the ISIS-K have reduced internal attacks, but the regional threat remains high. In the first three months of 2024, ISIS-K has conducted attacks in Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey. ISIS-K claimed responsibility for a March 22 attack on a Moscow concert venue, killing over 130 people and injuring nearly 200. Two January ISIS-K attacks in Kerman, Iran, killed nearly 100 people and were the deadliest attacks in Iran since 1979. ISIS-K's January attack in Istanbul killed one and injured another and was the group's first successful attack in the country since 2017. ISIS-K also targeted Pakistani politicians ahead of general elections in February, resulting in over 75 casualties.<sup>9</sup>

Relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have been strained over attacks by the Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) from Afghan soil. In a press conference held on May 7, Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) Director General, Maj-Gen Ahmed Sharif, stated that the plot that killed five Chinese engineers in an attack on a convoy in Bisham tehsil of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Shangla on March 26 was hatched in Afghanistan. He also said that despite all the efforts by Pakistan and despite raising the issue with the Afghan interim government on a state level, "TTP terrorists are continuously committing acts of terrorism in Pakistan."<sup>10</sup>

In a statement issued on May 22, the ISPR said 29 terrorists have been killed in a series of operations along the Pak-Afghan border over the past month amid a surge in terrorism originating from Afghan soil. It asked the Afghan government to "fulfill its obligations and deny the use of Afghan soil by terrorists for perpetuating acts of terrorism against Pakistan."<sup>11</sup>

In view of the terror threat, regional powers are continuing to focus mainly on keeping problems contained in Afghanistan and seeking to develop transactional arrangements with the Taliban while proceeding cautiously with Taliban requests for formal recognition.<sup>12</sup>

## Protests over Poppy Eradication

On May 3, violent clashes left two people dead in Afghanistan's Badakhshan province following protests over the Taliban's eradication of poppy fields.<sup>13</sup> The opium ban, imposed in April 2022, has devastated the livelihoods of many Afghan farmers who relied on poppy cultivation as their primary source of income.

Efforts to promote alternative livelihoods have faced significant challenges. The lack of viable economic alternatives and the challenging agricultural conditions in many parts of Afghanistan have made it difficult for farmers to transition to other crops or forms of income generation. In 2023, the per-hectare income from wheat was \$770, while opium yielded some US\$10,000.<sup>14</sup> The UN reported that in 2023 alone, the first full year of the opium ban's enforcement, farmers' total income from selling their harvest declined by more than 92% compared to 2022, from \$1 billion to just over \$100 million.<sup>15</sup>

There has been a dramatic drop in poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. British geographic information service Alcis has found through satellite imagery analysis that poppy cultivation has decreased by 85% in the 2023 winter crop season. However, a long-term, countrywide ban would affect an estimated 10 million Afghans, or about one million households and could lead to instability and possibly dissent in the countryside.<sup>16</sup>

## PAKISTAN

### Political Developments

On May 6, a three-member bench of the Supreme Court suspended the order of the Peshawar High Court, which had denied 77 reserved seats to the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) and distributed the seats to other political parties in the assemblies. Following the court's decision, The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) suspended 77 lawmakers elected on reserved seats.<sup>17</sup>

There are 70 reserved seats for women and minorities in the national assembly and another 156 in the four provincial assemblies. The reserved seats are allocated based on the strength of the parties winning the elections. Though all parties got their due share after the Feb 8 elections, the PTI was denied its share because it had not contested as a party in the polls, and the candidates supported by it had joined the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) after winning the polls. The ECP had denied the allocation of reserved seats to SIC and distributed them among other eligible parties.

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) scheduled rallies on May 9 all across the country to mark one year since the arrest of its leader and former Prime Minister Imran Khan. Last year, Imran's arrest had led to widespread violence, including attacks on military installations. The PTI alleges that the riots were a false-flag operation designed and carried out by the establishment to disintegrate the party.<sup>18</sup>

May 9 is also observed as a 'black day' by the Pakistan Army. In a press conference on May 7, ISPR Director General, Maj-Gen Ahmed Sharif, when asked about the possibility of dialogue with the PTI, replied: "If some political mindset, leader or clique attacks its own army, causes rifts between the army and its people, insults the nation's martyrs and issues threats and hatches propaganda, then there can be no dialogue with them."<sup>19</sup>

Imran Khan was sought to be directly implicated for inciting violence on May 9 by the filing of several FIRs against him in different police stations. He is now being acquitted in many of these cases. Local courts in Islamabad have found no evidence in five cases registered against Imran Khan for his role in the May 9 violence.<sup>20</sup> On May 15, Imran was granted bail in a land corruption case involving the Al-Qadir Trust. However, he remains incarcerated due to convictions in separate cases involving the leaking of state secrets and the violation of Islamic law through his marriage.<sup>21</sup>

### Continuing Economic Crisis

Pakistan is in talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on a new loan programme after Islamabad completed a short-term USD 3 billion programme in April, which helped stave off a sovereign debt default. Pakistan will likely seek at least USD 6 billion under the new programme and request additional financing from the IMF under the "Resilience and Sustainability Trust."

Terming the discussions as "fruitful", the IMF stated it would "continue policy discussions virtually over the coming days aiming to finalise discussions, including the financial support needed to underpin the authorities' reform efforts from the IMF and Pakistan's bilateral and multilateral partners."<sup>22</sup>

Ahead of the discussions, an IMF staff report had stated that "downside risks remain exceptionally high." The fund noted that political complexities and high cost of living could weigh on policy, adding that policy slippages and lower external financing, could undermine the narrow path to debt sustainability and place pressure on the exchange rate.<sup>23</sup>



According to the IMF, Pakistan requires gross financing of USD 123 billion over the next five years, with the country expected to seek USD 21 billion in fiscal year 2024-25, USD 23 billion in 2025-26, USD 22 billion in 2026-27, USD 29 billion in 2027-28, and USD 28 billion in 2028-29.<sup>24</sup>

Pakistan has been seeking economic assistance from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. After visiting Riyadh in April, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif flew to Abu Dhabi this month for a meeting with UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. After the meeting, UAE's news agency Wam reported that the emirate had allocated "USD 10 billion for investment in promising economic sectors" in Pakistan.<sup>25</sup>

To meet its external financing requirements for 2024-25, Pakistan is trying to roll over a debt of approximately USD 12 billion owed to China, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.<sup>26</sup> Pakistan is also contemplating seeking a five-year extension on the \$15.5 billion debt in the Chinese energy sector. This would involve lengthy negotiations as the consent of the Chinese government and the Independent Power Producers (IPPs) operating in Pakistan is mandatory to alter the existing contracts.<sup>27</sup>

### Protests in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir

Starting May 10, protests broke out in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (PoK) over soaring inflation, high food and energy costs, and heavy taxation. The local population, already burdened by these issues, was further agitated by the increase in electricity tariffs and the removal of subsidies on wheat flour.<sup>28</sup> On May 13, a violent clash between protestors and Rangers in Muzaffarabad led to the death of three civilians and one policeman.

The leaders of the movement called off the protests after the government conceded their demands for a reduction in the prices of wheat flour and electricity and a review of certain privileges. However, there is a simmering discontentment as many residents of PoK have long felt marginalised and underrepresented.

Despite being labelled semi-autonomous, many residents feel that the local government is merely a puppet of Islamabad, lacking real power or authority to make significant decisions for the region. Residents feel politically marginalised with limited representation and influence in the central government. The federal authorities are perceived to manipulate the electoral process and political appointments to maintain control over the region.



The region suffers from poor infrastructure, a lack of investment, and economic mismanagement. The central government's policies are often seen as neglectful of PoK's economic needs, leading to high unemployment and poverty rates. In addition, there is widespread resentment over the federal government's exploitation of local resources without adequate benefit to the local population. For example, electricity generated in PoK is supplied to other parts of Pakistan, but local residents face high electricity tariffs.

The protests reflect the deep-rooted economic and political dissatisfaction in PoK, and unless these are addressed, grievances could trigger further disturbances.

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

### **Situation at the LAC**

The stalemate at the LAC continues, with both sides building up infrastructure and enhancing their military capability along the LAC. The latest satellite imagery from All Source Analysis, a firm that analyses Geospatial Intelligence, revealed the presence of six Chinese Air Force J-20 stealth fighters at the Shigatse airport in Tibet. The J-20 stealth fighter is China's most advanced operational fighter aircraft, and these aircraft are predominantly based in the eastern provinces of China.<sup>29</sup> The deployment of J-20 fighters is seen as a move to counter the Indian Rafale currently based at Hasimara in West Bengal.

Recent reports indicate that China has built a road across the Aghil Pass, located at a height of 4,805 m, and entered the lower Shaksgam Valley. The roadhead is now less than 30 miles from the Siachen Glacier.<sup>30</sup> The extremely difficult high-altitude terrain currently rules out any military threat to Siachen from the north, but further road development would have to be closely watched. India has registered a protest with China over this road construction because it considers Shaksgam Valley to be part of Indian territory.

A May 16 report by Washington think tank Center for International and Strategic Studies reveals that China is constructing and expanding hundreds of "xiaokang" villages along its disputed border with India. These villages, often accompanied by military and dual-use infrastructure, are a critical "grey zone" tool enabling China to assert and defend its claims near disputed areas. Commercial satellite images show that China is making rapid and significant progress in these border villages despite the harsh environment.<sup>31</sup>

India also has a "Vibrant Village Programme" designed to uplift the socio-economic conditions of 662 villages within a 10-kilometer radius of the border.<sup>32</sup> However, India must significantly enhance its capacity to keep pace with the rapid buildup of "xiaokang" villages.

The situation at the LAC continues to adversely impact bilateral ties. In an interview with PTI, Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. S Jaishankar said that India's relations with China are not normal because the peace and tranquility in the border areas has been disturbed. He hoped for a resolution of the remaining issues, which mainly pertained to "patrolling rights and patrolling abilities."<sup>33</sup> A commentary in Global Times criticised Dr. Jaishankar's remarks. Chinese experts said that the "patrolling rights" remarks seek to incorporate the currently disputed areas into Indian territory, severely infringing upon Chinese sovereignty.<sup>34</sup>

Dr Jaishankar has also emphasised the importance of Indian companies gradually reducing their dependence on Chinese imports and shifting towards local procurement. Speaking at the Confederation of Indian Industry's (CII) annual business summit, he said, "If peace and tranquillity in the border areas are disturbed, would you do business with someone who has barged into your turf? If a country has gone back on written agreements and is doing something on our borders, how can we then say that the business world will continue as normal."<sup>35</sup>

## BANGLADESH

### India-China Competition in Bangladesh

India's Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra visited Bangladesh on May 8-9. During this visit, he called on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Foreign Minister Dr. Hasan Mahmud and met with his counterpart Masud Bin Momen. The bilateral meeting discussed issues related to security, water, trade and investment, power and energy, defence, connectivity, and sub-regional cooperation.<sup>36</sup>

After his meeting with Kwatra, Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud told reporters that India has expressed interest in financing Bangladesh's Teesta project. The Teesta River Project is a comprehensive initiative to harness the river's water resources for various purposes, including irrigation, flood control and power generation.

The Bangladesh government has been collaborating with China on the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project (TRCMRP). Power

Corporation of China has done a feasibility study based on the Teesta River and submitted the TRCMRP report, which was approved on May 30, 2019.<sup>37</sup>

India's offer to finance the project stems from several concerns about China being granted the Teesta River Project. The project site is near the Siliguri Corridor, an area of immense strategic importance for India. There are worries that Bangladesh's increased economic reliance on China could give Beijing leverage over Dhaka, potentially affecting India's regional strategic and economic interests. China has already invested heavily in Bangladesh under the Belt and Road Initiative, and further investments could deepen this dependency.

In early May, Bangladesh and China conducted their first joint military exercise, "Golden Friendship 2024." The exercise was based on United Nations peacekeeping and anti-terrorism operations and included activities such as bus hostage rescue and terrorist camp clearance, reflecting a focus on practical, integrated training approaches.<sup>38</sup>

China is Bangladesh's largest arms exporter, accounting for 72 per cent of all arms imported by Bangladesh in the 2019-23 period.<sup>39</sup> In 2022, Bangladesh inaugurated a submarine base at Cox's Bazar, constructed with Chinese assistance at a cost of \$1.21 billion. This facility can accommodate six submarines and eight warships.

Bangladesh will have to delicately navigate its diplomatic position as it seeks to balance India's strategic interests while safeguarding its development priorities, which depend on Chinese economic support. So far, Dhaka has shown adeptness in balancing its relationships.

## NEPAL

### India-Nepal Border Dispute

The India-Nepal border dispute resurfaced in May after the Nepal government announced the printing of new Rs 100 currency notes featuring a map that includes the disputed territories of Lipulekh, Kalapani, and Limpiyadhura. The decision was finalised during cabinet meetings in April and May 2024 and awaits approval from Nepal's central bank, Rastra Bank, before production begins.<sup>40</sup>

The origins of the boundary dispute can be traced back to the Treaty of Sugauli, signed between the British East India Company and Nepal in 1816. This treaty

delineated the Kali River (Mahakali in Nepal) as the boundary, with all territories east of the river belonging to Nepal.

The treaty did not clearly define the Kali River's exact source. India asserts that the river originates in Kalapani, while Nepal claims it starts from Limpiyadhura.

The dispute escalated after New Delhi issued a political map in November 2019 that placed the contested area within India's territory. In May 2020, Nepal released a new political map incorporating Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura and formalised this action through a constitutional amendment by the Nepalese Parliament.<sup>41</sup>

Dr Jaishankar has asserted that Nepal's 'unilateral' move won't change the status quo or ground reality of the territories in question.<sup>42</sup> Chiranjivi Nepal, an economic advisor to Nepal's President, resigned following his remarks criticising the cabinet decision. He had stated, "Nepal being in dispute with India over certain parts of territory is one thing, but printing in the currency a map that is different from what the international bodies, including two neighbours, have recognised is unwise."<sup>43</sup>

Both countries have expressed a willingness to resolve the dispute through dialogue. Periodic talks have been held at various levels, but no concrete resolution has been reached so far. Both countries need to treat this issue with greater seriousness.

The decision to print new currency notes is also being seen as political opportunism, coming at a time when there is continuing instability in the coalition government. On May 13, the Janata Samajbadi Party (JSP) withdrew its support and quit the coalition government. This forced Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' to go in for a vote of confidence, the fourth time within 18 months of taking office. On May 20, the vote of confidence was pushed through despite protests from the main opposition, the Nepali Congress.<sup>44</sup> While Prime Minister Dahal remains in chair, the divide in Nepali politics looks set to deepen.

## MALDIVES

### India-Maldives Relations

Amidst strained India-Maldives ties, Maldivian Foreign Minister Moosa Zameer visited India on May 9 and held a bilateral meeting with India's External Affairs Minister, Dr S Jaishankar. In his opening remarks, Dr Jaishankar said, "As close and proximate neighbours, the development of our ties is obviously based on

mutual interests and reciprocal sensitivity." Zameer wrote in a post on his X account that the discussions "reflected on our long history of bilateral partnership shared by mutual respect and understanding. We exchanged perspectives on increasing engagement and exchanges between the Maldives and India, both bilaterally and in the international arena."<sup>45</sup>

Commenting on the derogatory remarks made by the former ministers—Mariyam Shiuna, Malsha, and Hassan Zihan—about Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Zameer said that they should not have been made and that proper action was being taken to ensure that this did not happen again. He added that economic cooperation with India has been integral to the Maldivian economy, and the people have benefited from the debt and numerous grants received from the Indian government.<sup>46</sup>

On May 6, Ibrahim Faisal, Maldives' tourism minister, appealed to Indian tourists to return to the island nation. In a PTI news interview, he said, "Our people and the government will give a warm welcome to Indian arrivals. As the tourism minister, I want to tell Indians to please be a part of Maldives' tourism. Our economy depends on tourism."<sup>47</sup> The plea comes after Indian tourists to the Maldives dipped by 42 per cent in the first four months of 2024 compared to the same period in 2023.

Meanwhile, India has withdrawn all its military personnel operating the three aviation platforms in Maldives and replaced them with civilian staff ahead of the May 10 deadline set by President Mohamed Muizzu for the complete withdrawal of Indian military personnel from his country.<sup>48</sup> The Indian External Affairs Ministry has said it is ready to provide training to Maldivian pilots to operate the Indian Dornier aircraft if a formal request is made by the Maldives government.<sup>49</sup>

Some thaw is visible in India-Maldives ties, but a reset in relations will require the Maldives to abandon its pro-China stance and adopt a more balanced foreign policy.

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**Delhi Policy Group**  
Core 5A, 1st Floor,  
India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road  
New Delhi - 110003  
India

[www.delhipolicygroup.org](http://www.delhipolicygroup.org)